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## Chinese Export Porcelain and Porcelain Cabinets

### Abstract

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century Chinese porcelain was brought in large quantities via sea routes to Europe. Porcelains were not only in use as tableware, but also became rarities and showpieces. As seen in China cobalt blue decorated porcelain was used for room decoration. Shortly before 1700 first “Porcelain Cabinets” came into vogue. Especially in the German-speaking world, interior design with Asian porcelains, figurines, lacquer and paintings was very popular throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

KEYWORDS: export porcelain, porcelain cabinets in Vienna, Schönbrunn, 18<sup>th</sup> century, *chinoiserie*

Architects and craftsmen cannot have had an easy time with the patroness Maria Theresa. “It gave her great pleasure to build without understanding anything about it, and the house in Schönbrunn that she commissioned to be built according to her taste bears witness to this.”<sup>1</sup>, says a diplomatic report about the empress.

There was indeed a great boom in building and furnishing activities during her reign, from 1740 to 1780, not only in Schönbrunn, but also in several imperial palaces and chateaux – Belvedere, Hetzendorf, Schloss Hof, Schönbrunn, Laxenburg, Innsbruck, Pressburg (Bratislava) – and more.

A striking feature of them all is a fondness for “*indianische Kabinette*” – “Indian cabinets”. All these interiors contain at least one room with *chinoiserie* motifs, Chinese export wallpapers, lacquers, miniatures and East Asian porcelain. Hence I shall endeavour here to outline the timeline leading to the Schönbrunn porcelain cabinets.

Because of the close connections of the House of Habsburg to Portugal and, later, the Netherlands, in other words the great trading countries from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese porcelain was always available; although not in great quantities, nevertheless, preserved and documented objects can help us to narrate a kind of European “history of porcelain”.

The first pieces verified as coming from Portugal can be found in households from the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards; even though many pieces are listed in 17<sup>th</sup>-century inventories – 220 pieces are mentioned in the Ambras inventory of 1666 – relatively few have survived, since porcelain was used as everyday tableware.<sup>2</sup>

A recommendation has been preserved made by the archbishop of Braga, Bartolomeu dos Mártires (1514-1590): “In Portugal we have a kind of table ceramic that is like to silver in elegance and purity, and I can only recommend everyone to favour it above all other tables services, and to ban silver from the table.”<sup>3</sup>

From then on Chinese porcelain most probably played a major role as tableware at court.

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<sup>1</sup> Witt-Dörning 1978:111 (the envoy of Frederick the Great at the Viennese Courts was quoted here, Count of Podewils).

<sup>2</sup> Seipel 2000: 272.

<sup>3</sup> Seipel 2000: 273.

Court etiquette ordained that only hors d'oeuvres were to be served on small porcelain plates, while the main dishes were presented on large silver-gilt plates. This corresponds to the plates that have been preserved. It was not until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, hence under Maria Theresa<sup>4</sup>, that complete table services were ordered and decked.

Decorating rooms with porcelain was a very different matter, however; evidently a strict distinction was kept between everyday tableware and decorative porcelain. In China itself, bright ceramics were part of interiors, on one hand for aesthetic reasons – the dark wood of the furnishings combining with the wall textiles and bright porcelain corresponded to the aesthetic sensibility for colour – on the other hand in order to bring more light, more brightness into the room. The custom can also be observed in Islamic regions of Asia, as demonstrated from the 15<sup>th</sup> century on by the “*Chini khaneh*” in the Ardabil shrine, or the niches decorated with ceramics in the residential part of the Topkapi Serai in Istanbul. One of the first European examples is the so called “pyramid vault” in the De Santos Palace in Lisbon with Chinese porcelains, built around 1630.

These grandiose rooms were created in the period prior to 1640, thus approximately at the same time as the East India Company began to ship porcelain in great quantities to Europe. The company started in 1602, trade concentrated at the beginning on spices and tea, then rapidly shifted to textiles and porcelain. While only little porcelain came to Europe at the start – in 1614 this amounted to no more than around 70,000 pieces and not always of the best quality – the quantity increased to double the amount in the 1640s.

The end of the Ming Dynasty in China in 1644 – most furnaces near Jingdezhen were destroyed in a civil war situation – brought with it a collapse of the porcelain market, which could only be stopped by increased imports from Japan, Persia and native production in and around Delft.

The quantity of imported porcelain did not increase until after the mid-century – England started trade relations with China and the porcelain export via Canton around 1650; meanwhile, wares from Japan gained in significance. As early as 1661, more than 90,000 pieces of porcelain were exported from Japan, which does not imply that all the works were necessarily Japanese: Chinese wares were sold to Japan and then – to compensate for shortages – traded to Europe through the VOC (Dutch East India Company). In Nagasaki not only Dutch merchants had their trade centre at Dejima, also their strong Chinese rivals were established in Nagasaki and dominated Japanese trade.

The revival of the great manufactories and the export-oriented inter-cultural opening during the rule of the Kangxi emperors since 1662 inundated the market with lower-quality wares as well, so that in 1682 a letter from the VOC complained that trade in porcelain now yielded only losses.

The VOC rapidly lost its monopoly status, rivals sprang up not only in England, furthermore many independent merchants imported and traded on their own account. One of these financially robust groups, stemming mostly from Antwerp and Ghent, chose Ostend as its home port, from where 2-3 ships a year reached their trading headquarter in Canton. The trade of the so-called “Asiatic Company” was very successful, too successful, since it was invested with a privilege from Emperor

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<sup>4</sup> In this point I cite a not yet published lecture by Michael Pölzl, who is doing research on Viennese court ceremonial.

Charles VI. In the tough negotiations for the Pragmatic Sanction, authorisation was suspended at first for seven years and then finally revoked in 1731.

This period marked a turnaround in export wares from China. While previously moulds were the main products made “on demand” in China – the first European models were being produced as early as 1635 – now both moulds and decorations could be ordered: the new business model was called “China for the West” and was operated primarily by the English side. Extensive tableware and decorative pieces such as we can see in the Imperial Silver Collection in the Hofburg now accounted for a major part of the export wares, besides tea and textiles. Trade within Europe was at first operated in auctions lasting days and weeks, porcelain was then circulated throughout Europe via wholesale merchants, distributors and agents, often to satisfy specific orders and requirements.

Decorating rooms with tableware in the broadest sense enjoyed a tradition even before porcelain, whether metalwork, particularly pewter, on the mantelpiece of a burgher’s house, or silver and gold hollowware on an aristocratic show buffet. Wherever East Asian porcelain was available, namely in the Netherlands, metal plates and other tableware were replaced earlier by the white gold. Pictures of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch interiors show Kraak plates as a finishing touch to the top of a room towards the ceiling and as fireplace decoration. Shortly before and around 1700, porcelain finally became widespread in the German-speaking regions, in combination with large-scale mirrors in state and ceremonial interiors.

The first phase of the porcelain cabinet was shaped by the grand ceremonial rooms in Oranienburg and Charlottenburg. Both are recorded in views; Charlottenburg has been relatively well restored. A photograph from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century gives us an excellent view of the Baroque porcelain cabinet of Charlottenburg. A whole number of such rooms arose at this time, the majority of which have not survived and had to make way for modernisation shortly after being created. Large plates dominate in both rooms, which are attached to the wall in rows above and next to each other in accordance with the architecture.

Two Viennese cabinets from after 1700 follow this fashion, one in the Schönborn summer palace of 1715 – likewise preserved solely in an engraving – and at the same time in the Palais Harrach. The album “*Schönbornsche Schlösser und Gärten in Wien und Niederösterreich*” (Schönborn Palaces and Gardens in Vienna and Lower Austria) is preserved in the Wien Bibliothek (Vienna Municipal Library); it is by an unknown artist, who more or less exactly reproduces the “porcelain and mirror cabinet in the garden near Vienna”. At first glance, the observer cannot quite credit that the objects are of Chinese porcelain, the decorations seem too schematic. But this is the very strength of the graphic rendering – the octagonal decorations of the Kraak plates are excellently characterised.

As far as I know we have no documentation at all of the Hofburg’s “*Indianische Kabinett*” of 1702 designed by Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach for Leopold I, nor of one set up in 1713.

We unfortunately do not know what the Hofburg cabinet of 1702 looked like. Following the fashion of the time, we shall probably be correct in assuming that large plates were likewise used as dominating decorative element. Such Kraak plates of Habsburg provenance are in the MAK Asia Collection. We cannot prove of course whether they came from one of the porcelain cabinets, but it might be possible. Here we might mention the porcelain room in Eggenberg Palace in Graz, which being created in its present form around 1760 most probably derives in its arrangement from an earlier room – an assumption based on the fact that Johann Seyfried von Eggenberg acquired a great number of exotic treasures already in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The porcelain pieces now on show are of Chinese and Japanese origin from the time around 1700 (Kangxi period).

The second “type”, if we may call it this, is not so much dominated by porcelain as by large mirrors – probably much more valuable than Asian porcelain, which was glutting the market. The new technical process discovered in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century in France using mercury and tin enabled the manufacture of large mirrors; the *Galerie des Glaces* in the Palace of Versailles set up in 1678-1686 became a model for many other mirrored rooms.

In 1708 Prince Eugene commissioned such a mirror cabinet to be installed in his City Palace in Vienna, which, as Helmut Lorenz has shown, was of great significance and exemplary for the Central European region.<sup>5</sup>

A drawing by Salomon Kleiner informs on its appearance. A small room with only one window is brightened by large-format mirrors, the golden wall decoration acts as mirror frame, the filigree wall decoration subtly blends in with the porcelain frugally displayed on consoles. This creates a unified composition of porcelain and golden relief decoration.

As with the Schönborn cabinet, we are of course curious about the porcelain installed here, and the answer is easier this time: besides typical Chinese forms, there are eye-catching features such as hexagonal covered vases, a Japanese form from the time around 1680-1700 with colourful figural decoration. Porcelain from the Kakiemon workshop near Arita was much in demand at royal European courts and correspondingly expensive. Hence contemporary porcelain was used and not, as so often, older, large-scale porcelain.

Maria Theresa had this room transferred to the Lower Belvedere in 1753, where it is still preserved today.

As mentioned at the beginning, around 1742 Maria Theresa started re-organising diverse residences, renovating rooms, also exchanging objects from one building to another.

In Hetzendorf Palace the Chinese Salon was installed from 1742-45, with all-round panelling and decorative elements of lacquered panels and – with relatively frugal placement – steatite figures, no porcelain! Such figures came from China and were evidently much treasured for their vitality. Steatite, also called soapstone, is of low hardness and is easy to carve. Since it is mixed with other minerals it occurs in many nuances of colour, a perfect opportunity for a skilful carver. This room shows a very distinct change in style and taste as a successor to Prince Eugene’s cabinet. Instead of the overwhelming profusion of porcelain, the small figures are subordinated in optics and colour to the golden Rococo ornament.

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<sup>5</sup> Hellmut 1987: 223-235.

Such figures were produced in the period after 1700 and brought to Europe in great quantities; we find individual pieces in the collections of the Federal Museums; they were often acquired from art dealers, which unfortunately obscures their provenance.

At the same time – 1742-46 – Schönbrunn went through the first major reconstruction phase, and was altered yet again in another building phase around 1760. Originating in this period were the preserved Chinese Cabinets, the focus of these observations.

If we compare the Schönbrunn cabinets with the Golden Cabinet transferred to the Belvedere, we are of course immediately struck by an aesthetic correlation. The spatial impression is dominated by spacious mirrored areas; however, the wealth of forms is limited, and narrow lacquered panels are set in between. Mirrors and lacquered panels are framed by golden ornaments with pedestals, providing a support for blue-and-white porcelain objects.

The painter Franz Heinrich<sup>6</sup> produced a watercolour more or less exactly a hundred years after the Round Chinese Cabinet was created thus we cannot say for sure that it shows the 1760 status. But: the picture is so exact that we can precisely identify porcelain objects that are still in existence. And it shows a uniform spatial composition that leaves nothing to chance. Both in furnishings and porcelain arrangement there was a designing hand.

An attempt at dating indicates Chinese porcelain from the period around 1700 to 1730; the two hexagonal fireplace vases at the side of the console table resplendently supplement the wall decorations – they also derive from the time shortly after 1700.

Hence historical material was used, no longer quite modern; the individual vessel forms were no longer existent in sufficient numbers. Therefore a symmetrical arrangement can be identified only by each mirror frame or lacquered panel.

The introduction of photography<sup>7</sup> consolidates the documentation of the Round Chinese Cabinet.

A photo by Raimund Freiherr (Baron) Stillfried (1839-1911) dated shortly before 1887, probably 1885, documents an appearance of the room's furnishing that is still very uniform.

However, a further photo by Josef Wlha (1842-1918) prior to 1901 shows a new arrangement that completely altered the traditional placement of the blue-and-white porcelain. Why did this happen?

Thus, in the period between 1885 and 1900, an existing concept was totally destroyed; against all tradition, porcelain works from Asia and Europe were intermixed, the uniform blue tone became polychrome, lacquer works were added. Further changes can be identified in a photo from 1911.

A remarkable feature is that one piece of porcelain is missing, therefore we can detect a wire nail, a screw, which evidently even then "secured" the Schönbrunn porcelain. But this was such a botched-up job that we may justifiably assume that many porcelain works were destroyed in the process.

Is this the reason that those responsible had to mix in non-appropriate porcelain? The 20<sup>th</sup> century, too, tampered further with the erstwhile showpiece cabinet: another re-grouping of the ceramics took place, as shown by comparisons between the

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<sup>6</sup> Image in: Ottillinger and Hanzl 1997.

<sup>7</sup> All mentioned photos are included in the photo collection of the Museum of Applied Arts Vienna.

historical photos and the present status – here I cite Jorinde Ebert's inventory of 2009. Floor vases, too, were evidently replaced; Kangxi Period vases can be detected in the watercolour around 1860; now we find vases in *famille rose* from the 19<sup>th</sup> century instead.

The porcelain cabinet – or, better said: the porcelain cabinets in Schönbrunn Palace – are the last of a type of interior design that became the epitome of the prestigious ceremonial room of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. And they are the sole surviving of all those porcelain cabinets once boasted so richly by Vienna.

Accordingly, in the context of the ongoing major conservation project, it deserves to be restored to the state that does justice to its significance, and doesn't perpetuate the destroyed state (status) of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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