
The Human Image in Museums: a Fancy Fantasy of Chinoiserie

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Augustus II, King of Saxony from 1709 to 1733, once wrote in a letter, "Are you not aware that the same is true for oranges as for porcelain, that once one has the sickness of one or the other, one can never get enough of the things and wishes to have more and more?"¹ The European obsession with porcelain began centuries before Augustus II when the explorer Marco Polo brought a vase from China back home to his native Italy, where they called it *porcellana*, Italian for a type of shell because the translucent surface of the vase so resembled the white perfection of a shell. That pale translucency, contrasted with the durability of porcelain, would entrance Europe and incite a massive influx of porcelain goods from China—a trade that endured for the next few centuries because the process of how to make porcelain remained a closely guarded secret in China until Augustus II helped patronize the European invention of porcelain.

In his lifetime, August II was reported to have commissioned the creation of over 35,000 pieces of porcelain.² Evidence of this history of global production, the European craze for porcelain, which later continued in America, can be found in museums of the Western World today. Here the remnants of Augustus II's sickness can be seen—displayed often as treasure troves of materiality. Museums like the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, and the Art Institute of Chicago place vast quantities of European porcelain on display. When I first began working with the European Decorative Arts collection at the Art Institute of Chicago and walked through our galleries, I was struck by the number of human faces and figures staring back at me. Perhaps because decorative arts as a category denotes objects such as chairs, ceramics, glasswork, and textiles, human images are not the first visual motif to come to mind. However, the collection is replete with faces such as these—interlocked China men and women wearing fanciful hats. Or this figure—heavily stylized and grinning broadly astride a crowing rooster. Seen through a contemporary lens, this imagery can be jarring for visitors. *Are they offensive images? Are they positive or negative portrayals? Who is represented and how do historical hierarchies of political*

1. Edmund de Waal. *The White Road: Journey into Obsession*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. November 1, 2016.

2. Samuel Wittwer. *The Gallery of Meissen Animals: Augustus the Strong's Menagerie for the Japanese Palace in Dresden*. Hirmer Publishers. June 19, 2006.

power inform this kind of imagery? These faces and figures can act as rich sites for unpacking issues like the complex transmission of visual motifs and the creation of Otherness in domestic settings.

Yet art museums have rarely taken advantage of the opportunity to contextualize this material in multiple ways—instead often relying upon one-dimensional narratives, which can lead to misconceptions and missed opportunities for deeper engagement. Within our contemporary moment, as museums shift to become more visitor-centered³, as conversations about representation, diversity, and inclusion have become questions at the forefront of the field—the lack of rigorous contextualization of historical objects featuring difficult human imagery is a critical issue. This paper argues for a re-thinking of these objects’ display and interpretation through multiple perspectives, offering a range of museological strategies for engaging the public based on museum case studies, visitor research, and the political, cultural, and scientific histories of European porcelain.

The most common way museums have chosen to explain these images has occurred through a narrative of style. Specifically, the decorative elements of European porcelain are often described within the terms of Chinoiserie, a stylistic movement referring to “Chinese-style” decoration. Take for instance, this label from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which describes a lidded jar created in Delft around 1660:

The decoration of this large lidded jar is based on Chinese models. The scenes are distributed randomly over the body of the jar and differ widely in size. The result is a free, European interpretation of Chinese motifs, a style called *chinoiserie*.

This label typifies a few drawbacks of stylistic description, which connects this lidded jar to traditional Chinese porcelain and Chinese motifs but is not displayed anywhere near actual porcelain from China. Thus making this stylistic comparison is only relevant to visitors who have prior knowledge of Chinese porcelain. Furthermore a description of style alone does not always explain why Chinoiserie became so popular during this period, how images of China were disseminated to European artisans, or acknowledge the ways in which Chinoiserie created fantasies of another world. Chinoiserie has always been an expression of European fantasy—an imagining of the Far East for which cultural complexities were notably absent. Within the field of European Decorative Arts, style has often been a predominant narrative due to the field’s origins in connoisseurship and the general art historical tendency towards formalism. And although style can be one important method of engaging visitors with objects, it does not provide enough context for explaining the complex implications of Chinoiserie.

I came to this conclusion—that museums have been failing to holistically engage visitors with

3. Peter Samis & Mimi Michaelson. *Creating the Visitor-Centered Museum*. Routledge. 2017

these kinds of objects—by chance. From a visitor research study conducted in the fall of 2017, I found that unexpectedly visitors were most intrigued and confused by the Art Institute’s collection of Asian-influenced European Decorative Arts. I and a team of associates undertook this large-scale study to prepare for the future reinstallation of the Art Institute’s permanent galleries of European Decorative Arts, which comprises a collection of decorative objects made from approximately 1500 to 1900. These galleries have historically undergone significant changes—in terms of location within the museum, the content of the collection, and integration or lack of integration with other art forms. In preparation for this reinstallation, we aimed to better understand visitors’ perceptions and prior knowledge of European Decorative Arts and the impact of our current installation.

To assess visitors’ perceptions and prior knowledge of European Decorative Arts, we used a front-end visitor study methodology referred to as Personal Meaning Mapping (PMM). John Falk, Director of the Institute for Learning Innovation, refers to this approach as a constructivist methodology that measures visitors’ changes in understanding based on extent, breadth, depth, and mastery.⁴ Random visitors were intercepted and asked to read the phrase, European Decorative Arts, which was printed in the center of a blank piece of paper, and to write down whatever phrases came to mind. After walking through as little or as much of the permanent galleries as they wished, visitors were asked to edit, add to, remove, or elaborate on anything they had written before with a blue colored pencil. Visitors answered additional questions during the pre and post meaning mapping sessions through extensive interviews; additionally, a printed survey concerning interest in potential content and demographic information was collected at the end of each interview. Systems of randomization were implemented to avoid interviewer bias.

Overall 50 personal minds maps were collected in December of 2017—from which 533 independent key terms were collected.⁵ After collecting the raw data, we coded our results to better organize and understand recurring patterns. The following codes were used to organize the key terms: type of art, media/material, properties, content, style/qualities, personal, preference, context, and artists. Overwhelmingly visitors thought of media and materials when faced with the phrase European Decorative Arts. Of those 553 terms, 225 or 41% belonged to the Media/Material category. The next most popular category was Context with 105 or 19% of terms referring to some kind of context. We found that most visitors’ perceptions of European Decorative Arts did not change much after walking through our galleries with one exception. During the Pre-PMM phase, visitors were more likely to mention central and Mediterranean European countries and the Renaissance Period when thinking of historical context. The terms “castles” and “old” appeared frequently. In contrast, during the Post-PMM phase, visitors mentioned “influence” the most as you can see here in these word clouds. The interviews revealed that visitors were most concerned with

4. John Falk, Theano Moussouri, & Douglas Coulson. “The Effect of Visitors’ Agendas on Museum Learning,” *Curator: The Museum Journal*. May 24, 2010.

5. All specific information related to this visitor study cannot be circulated publicly for confidentiality reasons. I will be showing slides and images of the data collected for the presentation, but these images also cannot be circulated publicly.

cross-cultural influence, particularly the influence of East Asian cultures.

This finding indicates one of the most significant changes in visitors' thoughts after walking through the European Decorative Arts galleries—a greater interest in the global connectedness of early modern Europe. And although our collection's strengths include English Gothic art, German glass, and Irish silverware, visitors most noted a strong desire to learn more about this international exchange with Asia, particularly as it relates to understanding what exactly is European about European Decorative Arts. As one visitor noted, "Orientalism: a lot of blue-and-white china; there's a little Buddha, it was surprising to see; not enough context about how this influence happened." There were other points of misinformation, as some visitors seemed to think that these were objects made in Asia while others assumed that these were works made by Europeans but did not know how or why they were producing Chinoiserie.

Additionally, after thinking about this issue through a contemporary lens, some visitors were unwilling to engage further, like this visitor whose only comment about our galleries was "colonialism—that's pretty much it." This is not meant as a criticism of the study's participants; rather it demonstrates why we need to address these issues clearly and in relevant ways. The lack of contextualization spurred this comment, underscoring the importance of addressing the subject so visitors can engage more deeply within appropriate contexts and learn how to navigate difficult human imagery.

The last part of this paper outlines suggestions for how art museums can help visitors in this dexterous navigation of visual culture. First, a rethinking of the geographic collection areas of encyclopedic museums must be addressed. Historically such institutions are organized by geographic and chronological boundaries, like European Painting & Sculpture, Medieval Art, Chinese Art, and African Art. However, some of the most compelling and instructive displays of objects serve as interstitial spaces, areas on the margins of these boundaries. For instance, to return to the Rijksmuseum's label, which I criticized earlier for writing about models of traditional Chinese porcelain without actually displaying Chinese porcelain, a complete global history of porcelain cannot exist without curating porcelain from East Asia and Europe together. Key transitional works—like this ewer from the Art Institute's collection—can highlight how China also produced porcelain for the sole purpose of export to Europe, where objects could be fastened with silver mounts like these to satisfy consumer tastes. Together, these objects can tell a much more complete global story of a material that shaped the world.

Second, to further contextualize these objects within the political and visual discourses of the time, I suggest that museums juxtapose porcelain with relevant collections of prints and drawings. Most artisans who created porcelain in the European factories of Meissen and Du Paquier never visited East Asia. Like many Europeans, they constructed their image of China and the Far East from the numerous prints circulating throughout the period. Prints often derived from encyclopedias and travelogues written by travelers, traders, and Jesuit missionaries who had ventured to China and brought back tales, some true and others truly outlandish. To understand the origins of the

highly imaginative figures decorating porcelain—to understand Chinoiserie, one must analyze early modern prints, like this selection, from the 1667 book *China Illustrata*, written by Athanasius Kircher, the Jesuit missionary and scholar. Considered one of the most popular and widely read books about China in the 17th century, the tome provides a cultural account of the country, describing everything from religious practices to the native flying tortoises. Prints such as these can also address the shifting relationship between China and Europe and consequently the effect on visual culture. From the beginnings of the production of European porcelain with the establishment of the first European manufactory, Meissen in 1710, to the last of the great porcelain empires, Europe's relationship to China remained in flux. British accounts detailing the moral and economic virtues of China can be found in various writings such as this 1691 account of the essayist William Temple who called China “the greatest, richest, and most populous kingdom now in the known world.”⁶ Conversely China was also described as a land embodying duplicitous extremes, a place of great riches yet excessive immorality. Many scholars studying this period point to the expulsion of the Jesuit missionaries from China in the early 1700s as a critical moment in the relationship between Europe and China—and a possible tipping point in terms of negative portrayals of the Far East, not simply a land of fantasy but a land where fantasy permits excess and lascivious, silly, and frivolous behavior immortalized in prints and porcelain from the period.

To further address the political dynamics between cultures of the early modern world, and how these dynamics materialized in objects like porcelain, I suggest that museums contextualize collections of European Decorative Arts within the historical impact of empire. Take for instance, these figurines, which are displayed in a cabinet at the Art Institute with no contextualization except for the title of these works, their media, their date of creation, and their country of origin. They were produced by the Meissen manufactory in 1710 and represent a type of figurine set produced and replicated for a consumer market. The collectible figurines are allegorical representations of the four continents. These figures are not inscribed but early modern Europeans would have recognized them by their visual markers: America wearing little clothes and sitting on an alligator amidst a bounty of land, Asia resting on top of a camel and holding a diffuser of incense, Europe astride a horse donning a crown, scepter, orb and cross near a globe of the world, and Africa skin painted black on top of a lion and wearing an elephant head as a hat. Like the four seasons and four cardinal directions, Europeans during this period believed that the world made up of four continents: America, Asia, Europe, and Africa. This porcelain set can be contextualized as a European map of the world, as a process by which porcelain figurines became fixed visual representations of entire continents, and a result of the impetus for collection and classification spurred by the Enlightenment and the consolidation of empirical power. Although it would be temporally anachronistic to think of these objects in terms of postcolonial theory, museums can contemplate how the construction of empire led to the production of figures like these and include interpretive materials like timelines

6. William Temple, Of Heroic Virtue, in *The Works of Sir William Temple*, 3: 328.

and historical maps to give visitors a stronger idea of time and place.

A good case study of such a display can be found in The British Museum's Enlightenment galleries. These galleries help visitors understand how the Enlightenment informed the existence of institutions like the British Museum. The seven themes presented illustrate the principles of the movement: trade and discovery, religion and ritual, ancient scripts, classifying the world, art and civilization, the birth of archaeology, and the natural world. These themes are all linked to an era of great discovery and progress, as well as an era that helped cement and presuppose ideas supporting the worst of humanity, slavery and colonization. Understanding this duality and displaying the impetus to collect objects as a phenomenon linked with the emergence of imperialism can help museums both contextualize art with difficult human imagery and acknowledge the terrible consequences of empire.

To concretize the relationship between Europe and China, sharing the voices of artists, thinkers, and important figures from the period would also allow visitors insight into a time where European identities were influenced by porcelain. For example, in the 18th century, it was a fashionable practice for English women to whiten their hands with toxic lead or arsenic to match the color of their skin with their white porcelain tea sets. Josiah Wedgwood, the businessman and founder of Wedgwood ceramic manufactory, took advantage of this in the production of his own ceramics. He once wrote in the 1770s—"I hope white hands will continue in fashion and then we may continue to make black teapots⁷—with the idea being that a woman's white hands would look striking next to his black matte ceramics, which are pictured here. Wedgwood was a savvy businessman who tailored his products to the taste of the British consumer market, but he also thought continuously about the legacy of China and the artistic standard that Chinese porcelain set, writing in a letter in the 1770s: "Don't you think we shall have some Chinese Missionaries come here soon to learn the art of making Creamcolour?"⁸ Referencing his own ceramics as creamcolour, Wedgwood's words also reveal something quite interesting: how the exchange between Europe and China was not one-sided. With the last set of porcelain figurines, we saw how Europe had created a map of the world and an image of China. But it's equally important for visitors to understand that China had also influenced how Europeans created art and lived their lives. That women would whiten their skin with poison to match the white of their porcelain tea sets. That creators were driven by standards of artistic practice set in China. Fantasy works in so many ways, and we see here how the fantasy of China informed the visual language of European art and even European appearances. Including the voices of people from this period in art museum displays not only humanizes objects but also creates vivid narratives that bring the complex cultural tensions of an era to life.

Finally, I would like to suggest that museums consider the incorporation of scientific and technical narratives into permanent gallery collections to tell the story of materials such as porcelain. In many ways the story of porcelain is one of scientific discovery and experimentation.

7. Chi-Ming Yang, "Ladies, Pugs, and Porcelain," Presentation at the Chicago Humanities Festival, December 13, 2013.

8. Josiah Wedgwood, Letter, 1767, quoted by Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 81.

Albeit one produced under extreme duress, as King August II, porcelain's main patron, imprisoned the alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger to incentivize him to produce greater results, which he eventually did by discovering the clay mineral compound needed to produce porcelain with the help of the scientist Ehrenfried von Tschirnhaus. For visitors to understand the materiality of porcelain, the white translucency that first drew Europeans to a Chinese vase, the use of analog or digital interactives that detail the process of making porcelain and allow the public to touch and discover can provide a different method of engagement. For example, these interactive drawers at the Victoria & Albert Museum allow the public to interact with the different stages of creating a ceramic—providing visitors with another way to approach objects.

The story of porcelain is one of global intrigue, obsession, and discovery. To present porcelain objects through the narrative of style alone does not help visitors engage with this vibrant and important history. Furthermore, the difficult and complex human images of Otherness remain fixed visual markers of Otherness. As museums shift to an inclusive model of making meaning and engaging with visitors, the discussion of how to contextualize difficult human images will only become more important, as these images exist across collection areas, geographies, and time periods. Only by changing the museum into a multi-vocal space capable of expressing multiple perspectives can visitors begin to engage with these objects in a productive and ultimately transformative dialogue.