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Blue-and-White Wonder: Ming Dynasty Porcelain Plate

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Abstract

This authentic Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) plate is a prime example of early export porcelain, a luminous substance that enthralled European collectors. The generous gift of Joyce P. Bishop in honor of her daughter, Kimberly Bishop Connors, Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate is on loan from the Reeves Collection at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. The plate itself is approximately 7.75 inches (20 cm) in diameter, and appears much deeper from the bottom than it does from the top. Gradually sloping forms are what make the dish so deceptively shallow. In fact, from the reverse, it appears closer in shape to a soup-plate. The lip of the bowl is shaped in a barbed pattern, with gentle waves and peaks creating a textured edge. The whole of the plate is evenly shaped, indicating it was shaped on a potter's wheel and not by hand. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Ming Dynasty, China, porcelain, Wanli Emperor

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

Comments

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Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/ming-blue-and-white-plate/>

Blue-and-White Wonder: Ming Dynasty Porcelain Plate

By Laura Grace Waters

This authentic Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) plate is a prime example of early export porcelain, a luminous substance that enthralled European collectors.



Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate, Hard-paste porcelain, Wanli Period, c. 1573-1619, 7.75 in. diameter. Gift of Joyce P. Bishop in honor of her daughter Kimberly Bishop Connors, '92, on loan from Reeves Collection, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia.

The Plate

The generous gift of Joyce P. Bishop in honor of her daughter, Kimberly Bishop Connors, *Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate* is on loan from the Reeves Collection at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. The plate itself is approximately 7.75 inches (20 cm) in diameter, and appears much deeper from the bottom than it does from the top. Gradually sloping forms are what make the dish so deceptively shallow. In fact, from the reverse, it appears closer in shape to a soup-plate. The lip of the bowl is shaped in a barbed pattern, with gentle waves and peaks creating a textured edge. The whole of the plate is evenly shaped, indicating it was shaped on a potter's wheel and not by hand.



Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate, detail of underside showing floral sprays.

Purely decorative motifs of flower sprays line the exterior of the plate, divided into two groupings – one on the underside of the lip, and the other on the exterior wall of the basin. The decoration on the lip and in the basin shows two different landscapes. While the central medallion is a singular scene, the lip is decorated with repeating cranes and wetland flora.



Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate, detail of lip showing wetland plant.



Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate, detail of lip showing wetland plant.



Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate, detail of lip showing wetland plant.



Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate, detail of lip showing lotus.

There is no visible pattern to the repetition, but there are several distinct plants, including a common lotus motif that is found often in porcelain. The cranes crouch in the shallow water, their beaks poised just near the surface as they hunt. The medallion portrays two deer in a wooded landscape of limited perspective. Like the cranes on the lip, the two deer are in search of food. Near the base of a pine tree, they are searching for *lingzhi*, a fungus or mushroom that makes the consumer immortal.¹ The patterning of their coats marks them as two separate entities, one with the dappled dots of a young fawn or yearling, and the other with the plain coat of an older deer.



Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate, detail showing younger deer.



Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate, detail showing older deer in center and *lingzhi* in upper right corner.

They are framed by spiky grasses and woodland plants, as well as a scholar's rock formation at the bottom center. Each of the decorative objects shares a meaning: long life. The cranes have long been Chinese symbols of longevity and good fortune. The *lingzhi* also has a place in Chinese lore as mentioned, and the deer are often associated with them. Because deer eat *lingzhi*, they too symbolize long life. Even the pine tree behind the deer is an emblem of longevity, or *shou tai*.²



Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate, detail showing stylized scholar's rock formation.

The *Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate* dates to the reign of the Wanli Emperor, spanning circa 1573-1619.³ This period spans the growth of the export porcelain trade from relatively modest to massive, but the plate itself is an example of earlier work less affected by Western tastes. It is emblematic of several larger trends of *kraakporselein*, an export porcelain so named by the Dutch for its arrival to Europe on Portuguese *carrack* ships.⁴



Plate, porcelain. Ming Dynasty, Wanli Period, c. 1575-1620. Diameter 8 in, 20.3 cm. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edward L. Bishop III, Reeves Collection, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia. This similar plate is one that helps date the Mig Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate featured in the cabinet.

It is not heavily paneled, like *kraak* at the height of its export is, which implies its production outside of this period. Several other plates with strikingly similar compositions assist in dating, including another dish in the Reeves Collection, dated by Thomas V. Litzenburg Jr. to the Wanli Period⁵, a dish in the collection of Hugh M. Moss, LTD which Adrian M. Joseph attributes to the 16th century⁶, and a third that Duncan Macintosh dates to 1560-1570.⁷ Together, these dates hint that this specific plate was made between the beginning of the Wanli Period and the turn of the century – a time when Chinese porcelain was generating immense interest in Europe.



This map shows the provinces and important cities of the Ming Dynasty c. 1580. This image is reproduced under Creative Commons and can be accessed [here](#).

The Idea

There are few antiques that stir the modern imagination in the way of Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) porcelain. The words “Ming vase” are enough to conjure up images of swirling blue patterns on a pearly ground, accompanied by an understanding of value that almost defies explanation. Interestingly enough, this modern-day conceptualization of Ming porcelain as a mystical, exotic, and generally fascinating object mirrors European conceptions of the 14th-17th centuries. While the Portuguese were the first to establish a solidified trade with the Far East, shipping porcelain by 1499, porcelain had in fact made it to Europe in earlier centuries.⁸



Caravane sur la Route de la soie (Caravan on the Silk Road), from Atlas Catalan by Cresques Abraham, c. 1375. This atlas, a product of the mostly Jewish cartographic school of the Spanish island of Majorca, shows evidence of overland trade routes like the fabled Silk Road that brought Chinese goods to Europe even during the Medieval period.

The word “porcelaine” is referenced as early as the 14th century inventory of the Frenchman Jean, Duc de Berry, and the existence of overland routes, as well as the practices of re-trading and diplomatic gift-giving, made it possible for the occasional piece to find its way into the prized collection of a wealthy European.⁹



Kunst- und Raritätenkammer, by Frans Francken the Younger, 1636. This painting shows the privileged position porcelain held among other objects of study and collection, especially within the Flemish *kunstkamer*. Near the bottom right, a single porcelain cup rests next to exotic shells and accomplished works of art.

When these early porcelains arrived, they were considered “near-miraculous objects,” and even plainer ones were valued so much that they were kept in places of honor, or decorated with jewels and precious metals. ¹⁰



Pair of Vases in the Form of Twin Fish, collection of the Walters Museum, Baltimore. Original Chinese porcelain vases with French ormolu mounts, mid-18th century. This is an example of European-mounted Chinese porcelain.



Kangxi (c. 1654-1722) Porcelain, adorned with French bronze mount, 1710-1720. Collection of Musee des Arts Decoratifs, photograph by World Imaging. This image is reproduced under Creative Commons and can be found [here](#). Another example of European-mounted porcelain, this again shows the tendency to embellish exotic artifacts, even a century after the arrival of the Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate in Europe.

While it had been made in China as early as the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the process for making porcelain was not discovered in Europe until 1708, and the mystery of what porcelain was only made it more desirable. ¹¹ Because of the conception of porcelain as near-miraculous, it found a place in many a curiosity cabinet, *Wunderkammer*, or *Kunstkammer*. ¹² For example, the inventories of the collection at Schloss Ambrass in 1596 specify the presence of porcelain; the term again appears in the 16th century cabinet of Francois I Fontainebleu and the estate inventory of Florimont de Robertet. ¹³ In 1599 Thomas Platter remarked upon several pieces in Walter Cope’s London *Wunderkammer*, and just a few years later Robert Cecil, First Earl of Salisbury, kept a total of 194 “chyna” objects in a special “Cabonnett” room. ¹⁴ Still-life paintings placed

porcelain objects alongside natural wonders and exotic imports, like nautilus shells and oranges.¹⁵ Their rarity made them indicators of status that aristocracy especially coveted, and Henry VIII's (1491-1547) inventory specified his owning four pieces of porcelain, while the 1598 inventory of Philip II of Spain catalogued over 3000 pieces.¹⁶



Still Life with a Silver Jug and a Porcelain Bowl, Willem Kalf, c. 1655-1660. Oil on canvas, h 73.8cm × w 65.2cm. Collection of the Rijksmuseum. Paired with an ornate silver pitcher and full of exotic citrus – which were still new to Europe – the porcelain bowl in this painting is a clear indicator of the owner's wealth and status.

While aristocracy and collectors were given or could purchase porcelain in the early days of its availability in Europe, lower classes were largely out of luck.¹⁷ This began to change as, following the Portuguese, other European countries recognized the value of the porcelain trade and sought direct connection with the Far East. By the end of the 16th century, the Dutch, having founded the Dutch East India Company (VOC), began to seriously challenge the dominance of the Portuguese over the market.¹⁸ Both Holland and Great Britain attacked competing vessels – principally Portuguese, but also Spanish – in an attempt to secure more trade capital and sabotage competitors.¹⁹



Dish, anonymous, c. 1600-1624, porcelain with underglaze blue, h 9.7cm × d 50.5cm. Collection of the Rijksmuseum. This example of kraakporselein, or kraak, is typical of the ware at the height of its production, and is representative of most of the pieces of export porcelain brought by East India Companies to European markets.

In the midst of all this is the *Ming Dynasty Blue-and-White Plate* featured in the Gettysburg College Wonders Cabinet. Following its arrival in Europe, the porcelain trade continued to pick up. However, the increased availability of it meant it slowly lost its elite status, and eventually, when Europeans themselves learned how to make it, the mania for Chinese porcelain as a collector's object had largely passed. When it comes down to it, though, specific dates and interpretations don't seem to matter. Porcelain is still porcelain, and it still carries with it that special something. True, it is more widely available today than it was in the days of the *Wunderkammer* and *Kunstammer*, and there are differences in the ways we treat and use it. But the notion of Ming Porcelain remains a special one, one that conjures images of times past and far-off lands.



Chenghua doucai 'chicken cup,' Ming Dynasty. This image is reproduced under Creative Commons and can be accessed [here](#). In 2014, a cup like this one sold for 30 million USD at a Hong Kong auction in 2014.

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