

Art as Artifact: Exchange and Appropriation in the Global Circuit

During the Age of Exploration, Indian Ocean trade routes crisscrossed the globe, stretching from Europe to East Asia. At each port of call, sailors unloaded material goods ranging from the commonplace to the curiously exotic. But more importantly, maritime commerce brought forth *cultural* treasures, snippets of ideas that inspired new modes of artistic expression. This intellectual exchange influenced the evolution of blue-and-white porcelain, “the most revolutionary technical and decorative innovation of the Mongol regime in China.”¹

Elegant and pure, blue-and-white ware was not only beautiful in its own right, but also represented the fusion and fluidity of multiple regional styles. Three ceramic pieces on display at the Davis Museum are particularly striking: “*sea sculpture*” (ca. 1725, Qing dynasty China); *Delft vase* (late seventeenth century, Netherlands); and *spouted ewer with curving handle* (late seventeenth century, Safavid Persia). By studying these objects’ formal qualities, we can analyze their dual purpose as both valuable commodities and singular works of art with culturally constructed identities.²

¹ William Sargent, “Blue-and-white ceramic,” in *Oxford Art Online*, last modified May 26, 2016, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.ezproxy.wellesley.edu/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000009347>.

² Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 68.

Figure 1: “Sea sculpture” (cluster of teacups) from Ca Mau Shipwreck, porcelain, Qing dynasty

Dimensions: 14.9 x 21.6 x 17.78 cm



The Ca Mau “*sea sculpture*’s” formal characteristics provide clues which expose its unique geographical journey. The work comprises four stacks of porcelain teacups, which are fused tightly together due to their retrieval from a shipwreck (hence their contemporary classification as a “sculpture”). Jagged contours dominate the piece: rough shards protrude outwards at all angles, while several individual teacups are cracked, allowing viewers a glimpse into their shadowy interiors. The sculpture is oriented horizontally and displays other signs of degradation, such as a hardened residue, ranging in color from yellow to pink, that clings to the outer surface. Adorned with dark blue underglaze paint, the teacups feature a *jardiniere* pattern characterized by swirling vines and stylized flower motifs.³

Taken from a broader point of view, the “*sea sculpture*” projects an aura of turmoil: it calls to mind the vision of a peaceful garden whose gentle flowers were suddenly uprooted by a cruel and powerful force. This idea is complementary to the historical narrative of the object, which describes how the Ca Mau, an early eighteenth century merchant vessel, suddenly caught fire and sank en route from Jingdezhen, China to Batavia, Indonesia.⁴ The pleasing yet

³ Davis Museum label.

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“apolitical and unhistorical character” of the floral designs on the teacups, coupled with the knowledge that Jingdezhen was the uncontested porcelain capital of imperial China, suggests that these ceramics were mass produced and intended specifically for export to European markets.⁵ Furthermore, since the Ca Mau’s intended destination, Batavia, was utilized as a port by the Dutch East India Company, evidence of the porcelain shards confirms the worldwide proliferation of blue-and-white ware during this period.

Although indicative of a failed trading voyage, the Ca Mau wreckage highlights the demand for luxury porcelain by consumers, who were enthralled by its practicality in the kitchen and by the aesthetic appeal warranted by its “smooth, white, gleaming” exterior.⁶ In the seventeenth-century Dutch republic, a major consumer of Chinese porcelain, port cities like Amsterdam blossomed into “[clearing houses] for international bulk and luxury trade,” accompanying an economic upsurge that encouraged “middle-class investment in domestic furnishings”.⁷ As affluent burghers developed a taste for Chinese porcelain, their naming conventions evolved, illustrating the chain of global interactions that added to each item’s cultural narrative. For instance, East Asian ceramics designed for shipment to Europe were referred to as *kraak*, from the Dutch term for the *caracca*, a type of Portuguese trading ship. *Kraak* vessels featured ornamentation “divided into panels on the wide border, and a central scene depicting a stylized landscape.”⁸ Over time, Dutch artists began to manufacture imitative

⁵ Lothar Ledderose, “The *Geldermalsen*,” in *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 97.

⁶ Lothar Ledderose, “Export Porcelain,” in *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 89.

⁷ Mariet Westermann, “Costly and Curious, Full off pleasure and home contentment,” in *Art & Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2001), 24-31.

⁸ Jeffrey Munger and Alice Frelinghuysen, “East and West: Chinese Export Porcelain,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, last modified October 2003, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ewpor/hd_ewpor.htm.

pieces, causing a decline in the demand for *kraak* ware. European porcelain was significantly cheaper than imported blue-and-white for two reasons: locally sourced materials were cruder, and thus less valuable, than the fine-gauge, white-firing kaolin clay found in Jingdezhen; and Dutch merchants could avoid paying import taxes on the products.⁹

Figure 2: *Delft vase*, tin-glazed earthenware, Netherlands

Dimensions: 55.2 x 38.1 x 38.1 cm



The *Delft vase*, which serves as a second case study of blue-and-white ceramics, illustrates the *kraak* organizational system mentioned above. The vase, about two feet in height, is made of tin-glazed Delftware and painted in bichrome pigments reminiscent of the “*sea sculpture*.” In contrast to the wreckage of the *Ca Mau*, however, *Delft vase* boasts smooth, uninterrupted contours enhanced by a raised lip that gracefully curves outward and a tapered, hexagonal base with softened edges.

As viewers walk around the object’s rounded central panel, they become absorbed by a continually unfolding story set in a garden interspersed with spindly trees and brush. The scene is dominated by several large, extremely detailed animal

⁹ William Sargent, “Blue-and-white ceramic,” in *Oxford Art Online*, last modified May 26, 2016, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.ezproxy.wellesley.edu/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000009347>.

figures, including a komodo dragon standing imperiously by itself, along with a camel, turtle, and rhinoceros, all of which carry men dressed in traditional Chinese attire.¹⁰ A sense of proportionality is clearly missing from the panel: all of the animals are similar in size, and their limbs are stylized, implying that the artist never observed them directly. Although Delftwork “only superficially [resembles] porcelain,” manufacturers employed iconography clearly labeled as “foreign” to cater to European consumers’ orientalist stereotypes.¹¹

In addition to maritime trade routes that linked East Asia to northern Europe, transcontinental overland networks facilitated material exchange. For instance, during the period of politico-economic stability known as the Pax Mongolica (1227-70s), the vast empires of Safavid Persia and China shared technical knowledge on ceramics manufacturing. As a result, “East Asian elements...[were absorbed] into the existing Perso-Islamic repertoire,” generating a “new artistic vocabulary” that unified the abstract geometry and curving calligraphic styles found in Islamic art with symbolic motifs from Chinese blue-and-white design.¹²

¹⁰ Davis Museum label.

¹¹ Lothar Ledderose, “Export Porcelain,” in *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 90.

¹² Suzan Yalman, “The Art of the Ilkhanid Period (1256-1353),” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, last modified October 2001, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ilkh/hd_ilkh.htm.

Figure 3: *Spouted ewer with curving handle, fritware, Safavid Persia*

Dimensions: 25.3 x 16 cm



A third example of earthenware pottery, *Spouted ewer with curving handle*, demonstrates the effects of Perso-Islamic mutual appropriation. The ewer (a type of pitcher) is molded from fritware or stone-paste, a medium synthesized from ground glass and clay, which was coated with a clear alkali glaze underlain with cobalt blue paint. Much like *Delft vase*, *Spouted ewer* has smooth, gentle contours and almost undetectable connections between the handle and the stout body. The vessel features a teardrop-shaped

cavity that gradually narrows towards the top, forms a spherical bulb shape, and then flares outward into a cupped opening. Also significant are the long, linear spout, covered in regularly spaced cross hatching, and the thin, delicately molded handle painted with a palm-frond pattern. Within the cobalt detailing, chrysanthemums are encircled by vine-like tendrils in an arabesque design.

While the onion-bulb shapes and bold curvature within this piece harken back to traditional Persian art styles, the hash marks on the ewer's spout originate in the Chinese character *shou*, representing longevity.¹³ The use of this symbol is ironic, as the piece was preserved in pristine condition for centuries before its acquisition by the Davis, certainly a

¹³ "Spouted Ewer with Curving Handle," Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, 2013, <https://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/165530>.

testament to longevity. Furthermore, ewers of this general shape were previously molded from metal within the Safavid empire, so replacing the original medium with fritware was likely an attempt to mimic the appearance of imported porcelain.

The blue-and-white ceramic pieces "*sea sculpture*", *Delft vase*, and *spouted ewer* all possess dual identities: they exist as material objects, but transcend their physicality to become curiosities with multilayered cultural biographies. These case studies reflect the unification of regional trends—whether East Asian, Middle Eastern, or European in nature—into a shared artistic narrative during the early modern period. Commercial transactions and cultural interactions helped establish, and strengthen, the far-reaching global connections that we enjoy today.

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