

Chinese Blue and White Porcelains

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Dish with double-happiness, bat and floriated design, *baimiao* and double-line sketching with color filling. Daoguang Reign, 1821-1850

People who are interested in Chinese porcelains all know that blue and white (also known as Underglaze blue or Qinghua in Chinese) is one of the most appreciated porcelain styles across times and regions. The style is artistic simple and plain, however extremely versatile in

expression through color contrast and layers. Compared to other polychrome or monochrome glaze styles, blue and white seems to be more tightly related to Chinese ancient culture, and better understood by people around the world. That might be why the influence of Chinese blue and white on porcelain making can be easily viewed not only in oriental countries like Japan, Korea, but also in many Western countries.

Definition and history

Blue and white, applied with cobalt glaze on the clay body and covered with transparent glaze, belongs to underglaze porcelain decorative style. There is only one high-temperature firing required. Several advantages are commonly associated with blue and white porcelain are – the color is bright and fresh, and the image sharp; painted images covered with glaze never fade away; cobalt material is naturally abundant and easily available in China or imported; blue painting set off on the white ground reminds us the simple-but-elegant style of Chinese traditional water ink paintings.

The history of blue and white porcelain dates back as early as Tang Dynasty (618 AD – 906 AD). It was an unprecedented event when blue and white ware was mass fired by kilns typified by Jingdezhen Kiln in Yuan Dynasty (1279 – 1368 AD). During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368 – 1912 AD), Chinese blue and white achieved its height both in terms of quality and quantity, its status of being one of the most appreciated porcelain styles never diminished.

Color and motifs

Despite of its short reign the Yuan government put extra focus on porcelain making. In 1278, ‘Fuliang Porcelain Bureau’ was established in Jingdezhen Kiln, which oversaw the porcelain industry. This created a favorable condition for the development and prosperity of Jingdezhen Wares. Like other porcelain styles, blue and white from Yuan Dynasty often had large sizes and heavy bodies, exemplified by those jars and *meiping* vases. Because of the blue and white porcelain, brush painting directly on clay body had finally become one of the most important techniques for porcelain decoration. Brush painting is a flexible way to easily create various patterns and designs. Typical motifs from this period included plants, animals and sundry-treasure (*zabao*) patterns. What also popular were subjects concerning historical events and peoples, which had important influence to figure painting in Ming and Qing dynasties. Although often desirable in a full layout and in multiple layers, the motifs are always blended into one integral whole with unconstrained beauty.

Chinese blue and white porcelain entered into its golden period during the Yongle (1403-1424) and Xuande (1426-1435) reigns in early Ming Dynasty. It was renowned for its exquisite glaze, rich color of blue, numerous designs and elegant motifs. Application of the glaze materials imported from Persian created unique color of blue often dotted with naturally formed black blue or silver gray spots. This special effect, considered

impossible to be imitated, disappeared during the late part of Chenghua Reign (1465-1487), when the importations of glaze materials were cut off. Domestic glaze with lower iron content was used instead, however failed to bring out those unique spots as well as the fresh, pure tones of the blue from the Yongle and Xuande periods. Up until the Hongzhi Reign (1488-1505), Ming blue and white porcelains were typically light in weights and petite in sizes, which deviated from those in Yuan Dynasty. For example, there were almost no large porcelain pieces made in Chenghua period. When it came to the late part of the Ming Dynasty such as Jiajing (1522-1566) and Wanli (1573-1620) reigns, blue and white porcelain reverted back to the big and heavy styles of the Yuan Dynasty that demanded complicated techniques to fire. Jiajing Reign witnessed the initial use of the glaze originated from Yunnan (known as “*hui blue*”). With a hint of purple, this type of blue glaze is unrestrained strong and bright. The glaze materials experienced significant changes by late Wanli Reign when colors became darker for most of the objects, more so for the larger pieces.

The typical motifs seen on Ming blue and white porcelain include cloud and thunder pattern, eight-treasures, the eight diagrams (*bagua*), ancient coins, Sanskrit and Persian characters, etc. In addition, we also see entire scenes similar to that of landscape scroll paintings. Provincial porcelain even displays the sceneries with the calligraphy of poetic descriptions. This reflects the impact of Ming Dynasty scholar’s paintings on porcelain decorative arts.

During the Kangxi (1662-1722), Yongzheng (1723-1735) and Qianlong (1736-1795) reigns in early Qing Dynasty, Chinese porcelain making reached its historical climax, coinciding with the significant economic prosperity and social advancement. All the techniques and styles that existed in the Ming Dynasty were reinvigorated, this was particularly true in “the porcelain capital” Jingdezhen. Blue and white ware was still one of the most favorite varieties at the time. The examples produced during the Kangxi Reign, most accurately reflect the sophistication of these periods. For example, the color blue reveals a nature of sapphire blue and is highly bright and pure. Additionally, the craftsmen were skillful with the application of the same blue glaze to create various shades and multiple layers. Because of this people use “multicolored blue and white” to praise Kangxi blue and white. The colors of Yongzheng blue and white include pure blue and blues with shades of gray and purple. Imperial wares typically contained pure blue with a gradual fade to white at the image edges. Provincial wares often contained grayish blue while the purplish blue was usually retained to simulate the Ming wares. The blue glaze faded a little on the edges during the early part of the Qianlong Reign. In the mid part of the reign, the blue glaze could be divided into two styles according to its dark and light shades, and the dark blue was often with some visible black spots. Later in this period, the color was deep and solid. From mid to late Qing Dynasty, except Daoguang Reign (1821-1850) maintaining a stable blue with a little gray hue, other periods with their blue and white imperial wares all went through a transition from bright pure blue to muted, grayish blue that was usually featured with provincial wares.

The typical motifs of the imperial blue and white porcelain during Qing Dynasty include arabesque, medallion flower, cloud and thunder pattern, dragon, phoenix, foaming wave, and phoenix tail, etc. The provincial wares were often decorated with the motifs such as flowers and plants, birds, landscape sceneries and historical figures and stories. It was much more popular to use the motifs with lucky connotation in this period than in Ming Dynasty, such as peony, peach, pomegranate, pine tree, bamboo, plum blossom, lotus flower, crane, mandarin duck, magpie, deer, bat and fish, etc. Calligraphy of essays and poems became a popular decorative way for Qing blue and white porcelain.

Drawing techniques

Drawing techniques consistently and continuously evolved during Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. For the first time Yuan artisan decorated the blue and white ware by using thin lines to create individual sections, then filling different patterns with different painting skills. For smaller objects, artisan usually applied double-strokes to form the outline of each part of the image, and then briefly colored in for effect. For larger objects we observe the combination of these and other techniques including outline drawing without filling color (*baimiao*), heavy stroke outline drawing and direct painting with no outline set first.

During Ming Dynasty, different drawing techniques were applied to imperial and provincial wares. We often see those early Ming imperial wares decorated with thick sketch lines filled with blue color by applying small

strokes. The pieces from mid and late Ming periods, we see the double lines filled with color, while the double lines are very thin and the solid color is relatively light blue. Provincial wares used similar techniques but with less constraint – those sketch lines were often overlapped and the filled color frequently overflowed the outline margins.

Qing blue and white inherits the painting skills of Yuan and Ming periods, but created its own styles. During this time, only small differences are discernible between imperial and provincial wares. While the double-line filled with color was still a basic technique to sketch outlines, artisans tried hard to maximize the effect of color and hues. It appears there is some regular arrangement for the thick strokes (especially while treating the image details) on the imperial ware of the Qianlong period. Various painting skills were inspired from traditional scroll painting styles *Xieshi* (realistic painting) and *Xieyi* (freehand brushwork). During the Kangxi Reign, scenery decoration on blue and white porcelain became quite popular due to the influence of scholar's landscape painting. Guangxu Reign (1875-1908) created detailed floral painting on porcelains, inspired by traditional realistic brushwork. The use of *baimiao* was popular for provincial wares after Qianlong Reign. While the drawing line during Qianlong in Jiaqing (1796-1820) reigns was delicately fine, and the motif layout was usually full and complex, after Daoguang reign the line became relatively thicker and the motif was laid out sparsely.

Porcelain shapes

To understand blue and white from the perspective of shape is relatively simple. Most shapes tend to be standardized, are elegant focused on the taste of scholars and reflect the nobility of imperial ware. Although the shapes are not limited to bottles, jars, plates bowls, vases and other variations, it is rare to see pieces that do not fit these general categories. When porcelain makers were developing the more avant-garde colors and shapes during the Kangxi, Yongzheng and especially Qianlong reigns, the shapes of blue and white porcelain remained relatively consistent. One explanation for this phenomenon is that the aesthetic beauty of blue and white was not considered inherently consistent with the artisans' exploration for new styles.

Influence on other styles

However the evolution of blue and white porcelain is not independent of other porcelain styles. Its long lasting popularity is attributed to the natural aesthetic appeal as well as the techniques developed for production. These techniques were eventually modified to create underglaze monochrome and polychrome styles. For example the underglaze red style during the Yuan Dynasty and the Yongle of Ming Dynasty, the red-green glaze and the black-green glaze popular during the Ming and Qing dynasties. From the many surviving pieces, we can see examples where blue co-exists with other colors such as red, green, and yellow. While blue sets the basic color tone and image outline, other colors create a complement or contrast to enhance the decorative nature of the piece. In addition to the typical blue and white, we also see blue and yellow (appeared in Xuande period of early Ming Dynasty) blue and green (celadon) and blue and cream (popular for provincial wares during Qing Dynasty). Blue and white not only impacted the existing porcelain styles but also gave rise to many new styles including Doucai (Chenghua Reign) and Blue-and-white wucai (*Qinghua wucai*) (Jiajing, Wanli reigns). Doucai refers to the technique of applying underglaze blue and other overglazed colors, creating vivid contrasts. This requires two firings, first with the application of blue and a layer of transparent glazing and the second after the application of other colors. Underglaze blue-wucai also involves a double firing process where blue is not the primary color, but used in conjunction with other various colors. Furthermore, Famille-verte and Famille-rose that first appeared in Kangxi Reign seem to be the pure overglazed styles and are unrelated to blue and white, however, they are the evolving products of color glazed porcelains actually introduced by Blue-and-white wucai and Doucai.

Due to the large production in Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, we still see many provincial and imperial blue and white preserved. The major auction houses sold many Ming and Qing imperial wares for prices over \$50,000. In Hong Kong prices have eclipsed \$100,000. Recently, because of its simplicity and elegance, provincial blue and white has become more sought after just like earlier monochrome porcelains from the Song and Yuan dynasties. Prices for these provincial wares have also been escalating. As values rise for provincial

pieces, an increase in replications has appeared on the international market. Therefore it is important for collectors to gain some knowledge in this special category. Given that the color changes over various periods are subtle and difficult to identify, many motifs repeatedly appeared, it's quite a challenge to be able to appraise an object. It is this author's intention to clarify a few important issues related with authentication.



Pitcher with interlaced flower design. Xuande Reign, 1426-1435



Brush pot with landscape design. Kangxi Reign, 1662-1722



Meiping in interlaced peony design, late 18th / early 19th century, Jingdezhen ware



Jar with interlaced peony design, Yuan Dynasty

元	YUAN	1271—1368年
明	MING	1368—1644年
洪武	Hongwu	1368—1398年
建文	Jianwen	1399—1402年
永樂	Yongle	1403—1424年
洪熙	Hongxi	1425年
宣德	Xuande	1426—1435年
正統	Zhengtong	1436—1449年
景泰	Jingtai	1450—1456年
天順	Tianshun	1457—1464年
成化	Chenghua	1465—1487年
弘治	Hongzhi	1488—1505年
正德	Zhengde	1506—1521年
嘉靖	Jiajing	1522—1566年
隆慶	Longqing	1567—1572年
萬曆	Wanli	1573—1620年
泰昌	Taichang	1620年
天啟	Tianqi	1621—1627年
崇禎	Chongzhen	1628—1644年
清	QING	1644—1911年
順治	Shunzhi	1644—1661年
康熙	Kangxi	1662—1722年
雍正	Yongzheng	1723—1735年
乾隆	Qianlong	1736—1795年
嘉慶	Jiaqing	1796—1820年
道光	Daoguang	1821—1850年
咸豐	Xianfeng	1851—1861年
同治	Tongzhi	1862—1874年
光緒	Guangxu	1875—1908年
宣統	Xuantong	1909—1911年

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