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“Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain” by Cinta Krahe

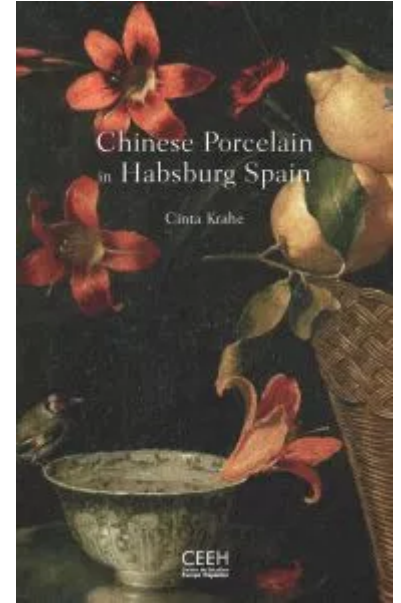


Detail of *The Child Virgin Asleep*, Francisco de Zurbarán, c. 1655

Here at last a book to unearth the untold story of Chinese porcelain in Spain at the time when both countries first started trading. Early relations between China and Spain remains an understudied subject, and the glaring absence of a monograph on Chinese porcelain in Spain has finally been redressed with the magisterial *Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain* by Cinta Krahe. Habsburg Spain (1516-1700) coincides with the late Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1644-1911), a period of great accomplishment in Chinese ceramics.

It would be hard to lavish too much praise on the marvelous book; it is likely to remain unsurpassed.

The book is an elaboration of a doctoral dissertation for Leiden University; Krahe was obviously well aware of how much was missing. Not only has she exhaustively tackled the topic but exhausted it: the historical background, typology and decoration, the various aspects of trade, shipping and transportation, and finally the pieces' reception and their social and artistic status. She has systematically scoured every possible source, considered every possible aspect, with the result that everything previously clouded in mystery comes out as revelation. The scholarly attention was matched by Spanish publisher Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, which evidently spared no effort to source and produce high quality reproductions. The visually stunning color plates will delight both art aficionados and the most demanding ceramic connoisseurs as well as the curious general reader.



Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain by Cinta Krahe (Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2016)

It would be hard to lavish too much praise on the marvelous art book: self-contained and self-sufficient, it is an insight into the material culture of the Spanish Golden Age, a period of flourishing arts and letters.

As far as the reception of Chinese porcelain is concerned, Krahe structures her studies according to four sources: archives, archeological excavations, paintings and the shipwreck of the *San Diego* galleon (in the cataloguing of which Krahe herself had a leading role).

Silver and gold coming from America made the bulk of the wares imported at the time, followed by a vast array of other goods: pearls and precious stones, dyes like cochineal and indigo, all kinds of textiles, ginger, tobacco, sugar, cocoa... Porcelain, plentiful and cheap, seems to have been treated as a relatively minor item.

Most of the ceramics are blue-and-white *kraak* porcelain made in the official kilns of Jingdezhen, the most numerous dated to the Wanli reign (1572-1620). Decoration is divided into panels while still adopting Chinese themed designs: floral, landscapes, even scholarly subjects. A second category seems to come from Southern provincial kilns, generically labeled as Zhangzhou—and formerly known as Swatow—after the ports from which these ceramics were mainly shipped.

Chinese export porcelain was of a lesser quality to that destined for the domestic market, and of course much inferior to the porcelain for the Chinese imperial household. But it was nevertheless superior to the earthenware, metal-glazed ceramics known and produced in the West and Islamic Near East —Europe did not technically achieve true porcelain until the 18th century.

Porcelain occupied a peculiar status: often regarded as curios or exotica, it ranked well behind silverware, which was valued much higher. It remained out of reach of the common people but was regarded as a relatively lowly commodity among the elite who could afford it:

The Spanish classified Oriental art objects as *bujerías*, or knick-knacks (*miudezas* in Portuguese), and listed them as such in documents, porcelains being lumped together with lacquered writing desks or boxes, semi-precious stones, jewelry, fans, ivory, and so on... Sometimes porcelain and other exotica were even referred to as *bagatelas*—‘mere trifles’.

This low status in comparison contrasts starkly with the high regard granted it in northern Europe.

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Porcelain nevertheless soon appears in the inventories of the royal family; these pieces came via the Portuguese, as the two royal families intermarried, even before the

Portuguese established a base in Macau in 1557. These inventories relate that the Habsburg King of Spain, Philip II had

the most important collection of Chinese porcelain in contemporary Europe, consisting of just over 3000 pieces.

Regrettably, none of the pieces coming from the royal family has survived, due in no small part to the destruction by fire of the Alcazar Palace in 1734 and the sack of the succeeding Royal Palace by Napoleonic troops during the Peninsular War.

The royal family throughout the period collected porcelain, as did all the Grandees, houses like Medina Sidonia, Medinaceli, Hurtado de Mendoza, and the Prince of Éboli (Ruy Gómez de Silva, very close to Philip II), appear as major collector of oriental artifacts including porcelain, a practice followed by merchants like Tomás Mañara, the leading architect Juan de Herrera (who built El Escorial palace-monastery) and the great humanist Benito Arias Montano, editor of the Polyglot Antwerp Bible, the most important publishing project of 16th-century Europe.

Standards in materials and decoration in Jingdezhen had declined steadily during the late Ming and particularly during Wanli, but a new innovative impetus arose during the period known for Chinese ceramic scholars as Transitional, from 1620 to 1683, when Jingdezhen lost imperial patronage and instead it adapted to the specific demands in shape and ornament from European importers, among them the Spanish.

There are some peculiarities in the porcelains imported into the Spanish market. One is the decoration of the so-called pilgrim flask with the armorial coat of Castile and Leon. This emblem is obviously taken from the reverse of a Spanish silver coin or piece of eight at the time of Philip II, as rightly pointed out by Shelagh Vainker of the Ashmolean Museum—silver, after all was the major commodity introduced by the Spanish in exchange for Chinese goods.

Another is a distinctive shape, the bell-shaped cups, relatively tall and slender, with a raised foot-ring hollowed out that were called *jícaras*, after the Nahuatl term for the vessels (original gourds or the equivalent) meant to drink chocolate. This drink became a craze in Spain, first among the royals and upper crust of the society but it soon spread to

the common people. Krahe notes that it was the Spanish princess Anne of Austria who introduced the fashion of drinking chocolate to the French court when she married King Louis XIII in 1615; it later spread to the rest of Europe.

The archives, especially the Archivo de Indias in Seville, the descendant of the seat of the House of Trade (1503) and Consulado (1543), yield a remarkable wealth of information, as well as the inventories and records of acquisitions from the venerable institution of the “*almoneda*”, an auction held after someone’s death to pay off the deceased debts. Some include very detailed descriptions of types, shapes and even price tags.

The archeological finds include the wreck of the *San Diego*, not strictly speaking a Manila galleon, for which it has all too often been mistaken, but rather a vessel owned by two Spanish merchants based in Manila and plying the Southeast Asian trade. A merchant ship, it was requisitioned and armored in haste to face the Dutch fleet on their way to attack Manila (disrupting the Spanish China trade was a major objective of the Dutch in entering Asian waters). Although the Dutch were repelled, the *San Diego* was breached and sunk with three hundred hands and a valuable cargo which constituted a veritable microcosm of the international trade of the time. Housed in part in Madrid’s Museo Naval, the cargo contained Chinese ceramics, mainly of the Zhangzhou type (obviously for Southeast Asian markets), but also Spanish, Mexican and Burmese ceramics, among many other trade goods, including weapons.

A special source of images is particularly compelling, that of paintings of the period representing Chinese porcelain: genre paintings and in particular still-lives by Juan van der Hamen, Antonio de Pereda and the great Francisco de Zurbarán and his son Juan. Several images linger: in one by Francisco de Zurbarán, depicting the refectory of a Carthusian monastery, a Chinese blue-and-white bowl is displayed casually together with tin-glazed earthenwares from Talavera. The Chinese bowl’s decoration is very much like the real ones while the glaze is remarkable different from local wares. One can sense the



A *jicara*, Jingdezhen, Kangxi reign (1662-1722)

casualness with which these pieces are displayed, none meant to stand out among the other elements in a realistic composition. In another charming painting also by Francisco de Zurbarán, a Chinese bowl holding flowers is by the Virgin Mary, asleep as a child. This *kraak* bowl, the author Krahe notes, is similar to one from the *San Diego*, dating around 1600, and also reproduced in the book.

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The paintings of the period representing Chinese porcelain are particularly compelling images.

Chinese porcelain, indeed, is normally represented side by side with other wares of widely diverse provenance: glass from Venice, silverware, ceramics from Spain, Mexico and elsewhere, evoke a global world.

In addition to these insights into the material culture of Spain's Golden Age, the book also provides much information on the Chinese economy and ceramic developments at this remarkable time. And as far as Transitional period ceramics are concerned, Krahe updates the scholarship and ceramic types and decorations. The author notes that:

The history of Chinese porcelain in Habsburg Spain did not occur in isolation. It had to be considered within the broader context of the Habsburg empire, and the entirety of Spain's material culture of this period, particularly with regard to the Spanish taste for exotic imports. It was a story that required an interdisciplinary approach.

Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain is painstakingly annotated and referenced, with an extensive bibliography and a valuable appendix with translations of the relevant archival materials. In its exhaustiveness, it is likely to remain unsurpassed but is nevertheless also a stepping stone for more specific research in some particular areas.

This book is a fascinating work of interpretation and reconstruction that will satisfy the most demanding connoisseurs and belong in every library on Chinese art and on the contacts between East and West.

Juan José Morales is the co-author of the *Silver Way: China, Spanish America and the Birth of Globalisation, 1565-1815*. His writing has also appeared in *Caixi*, *China Daily*, *The Diplomat* and *The Jakarta Globe*. He is a former member of the committee of The Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong.