

Book Review

Cinta Krahe, *Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain*. Madrid, Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2016. ISBN 978-84-15245-51-3. 600 pp., 345 col. illus. €50.

The reception of Chinese manufactured goods in early modern Europe has proved a productive area of research for scholars of related disciplines over the past decade. This might be explained in part by the recent re-emergence of China at the centre of the global economy, at a time when the anthropology-inspired 'material turn' has begun to inform the practices of cultural and art history in interesting ways. Porcelain is a natural target for such studies; its durability has ensured its disproportionate survival within our major repositories, which are now, increasingly, making their collections publically available online. Yet in comparison to our knowledge of imported items in early modern Dutch, French, Portuguese and English collections, it is startling that Spain, a hugely important commercial and colonial power in East Asia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, has remained relatively ignored.

The stated aim of Cinta Krahe's new book, *Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain*, is 'to make a modest start at rectifying this situation, offering an eclectic survey of hitherto unknown or untapped sources, as well as a large collection of new data'. It is a remarkable fact that not a single piece of Chinese porcelain imported into Habsburg Spain (1517–1700) has survived in the royal collections there, but Krahe presents us with four categories of source material to fill this gap: archival documents, excavated porcelain shards, objects recovered from the wreck of the *San Diego* (which sank in Philippine waters in 1600), and paintings from the period that depict porcelain. To this is added a more general introduction to the Spanish-Chinese trading context, and a survey of the major types of porcelain found in Habsburg Spain.

Judged by its own modest objectives, this book must be considered a spectacular success. Krahe has assembled a veritable treasure trove of archival documents mined from repositories throughout Spain,

including inventories, appraisals, dowry receipts, wills, estate partition documents and letters, many previously unknown or unpublished. These documents vary greatly. Some contain evocative descriptions of royal residences, such as that of Gil González Dávila from 1623: 'Nearby is the treasury (*guardajoyas*) and the rare objects from the world's riches. There are no words to explain what these are The richness of the writing desks, crystal vases and other [vases] from China, scents from India and multitude of precious stones...'. Others are meticulously recorded inventories, such as that of the 2,774 pieces of porcelain confiscated from the trader Juan Vangel by the Duke of Medinaceli in 1656, and sent to Philip IV. Krahe has not only translated the relevant documents into English, but also carefully transcribed the original texts and included these as appendices (which cover over 200 pages in the second half of the book). This book is also the first attempt to survey the shards of Chinese porcelain excavated across Spain, and on this account alone it represents a major contribution to future scholarship.

Yet some aspects of this book leave me less enthusiastic. I am all for using paintings to provide additional information, but we should not treat these as unproblematic inventories of actual objects. Antonio de Pereda's mid-seventeenth-century *Two Figures at a Table with Utensils* is a work of the imagination; can we really say that 'some of the pottery vessels [depicted therein] *might* be Chinese' (my emphasis)? A partially hidden blue-and-white dish in another of Pereda's paintings is described by Krahe as 'decorated on the rim (probably with ducks among aquatic plants)'. Can a decoration, which *hasn't* been painted, 'probably' depict ducks? What does that mean? Errors and inconsistencies in Chinese also rankle. Traditional and simplified Chinese characters are used indiscriminately, and names are misspelled (e.g. Nanzhang for Nanchang). The inscription on p. 202 contains the character *zao* 造 (not *zhi* 製). The partial character on the dish from the Monastery of Pedralbes is *jia* 嘉 (as in Jiaping 嘉靖 reign, 1522–66) – not, as Krahe suggests, the same as that on the Lisbon example.

Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain is a little like some of the *escaparates* (display cabinets) it features: extremely rich in content but lacking a little in analysis. It is a beautifully-produced monument to years of archival research, and it will surely be the foundation upon which much future scholarship is built. But that scholarship will need to engage more deeply with the themes (and rich historiographies) that Krahe identifies but never fully explores: porcelain and gender, the role of the gift, conspicuous consumption and social status, etc. Why did Spain not experience the kind of mania for Asian goods that others have observed

in the Dutch and English contexts? How can we account for the complete absence of *chine de commande* shards in Spanish excavations? My hope is that the author herself will revisit these themes and questions in her future work, and help to situate Habsburg Spain within the context of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Sino-European contact more generally. This book is certainly an excellent first step towards that goal.

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doi:10.1093/jhc/fhy012