

Chinese Influence On English Porcelain And Furniture

By Mrs. J. H. SUN (王國秀, KUO-SIEU WONG)

SINCE the establishment of the East Indian Company, trade between England and China grew rapidly. By the eighteenth century, stimulated by the prevailing notion of French "Chinoiserie," the English vogue for oriental novelty knew no bound. Among the decorative articles from China, which were sought after by the English in that period, porcelain stood foremost in the list; lacquer-work furniture held a second place.

The very name china indicates the origin of porcelain. The English traders of porcelain were known as chinamen. Much of contemporary literature described the enthusiasm of the society ladies who adopted the "Chinese taste." The lady of the eighteenth century, fluttering with her hoop like a whirlwind, could hardly turn around in her rooms without upsetting things such as tea table, flower pots and china jars. The husband was obliged "to move about his house with the greatest caution and circumspection for fear of hurting some of the brittle objects."

From the latter part of the seventeenth to the first decade of the eighteenth century all porcelain was imported from the East. Encouraged by the growth of the manufacture of porcelain on the Continent, some English men began to make serious attempts to produce china in England. All the porcelain made in England before the discovery of Kaolin in Cornwall about the middle of the eighteenth century, was either not true china, or made from materials brought from abroad. At first, all imitations were based chiefly on Chinese porcelain. Some fragments of porcelain discovered from the excavation at Bow in 1868 are typical specimens of Chinese influence exerted on the English porcelain industry. Some of the illustrations are:—"A knife-handle in white glaze porcelain" painted in blue under-glaze with flowers in Chinese style; a cup and a saucer "with fluted border, painted and gilt with a pair of partridges, and conventional foliage in oriental style." The ambition of the manufacturers was to copy the Chinese models as closely as possible. The oriental blue and white ware was set up as the most favorite specimen. Some of the specimens of the collection of the K'ang Hsi and Ch'ien Lung porcelain now shown in the Preliminary Exhibition, such as "(No. 226) a watering pot with raised decoration of chrysanthemum petal in under-glaze blue"; and "a goblet of pure white with decoration of banana and leaves, and linear squared spiral ornament (No. 248)", would be the kind of models much sought after by the English porcelain makers of the 18th century. From the same collection, "(No. 198) a bowl decorated with twining sprays of peonies in cloisonné enamels over a yellow ground," and "a vase of pure white with raised decoration of clouds and bats (No. 246)"

would be the adored objects of the ladies of the English society of the 18th century.

Later on, the factories of Bow, Worcester and Chelsea in England began to produce genuine porcelain. But Chinese designs and colour were still dominant. The pet designs consisted of Chinese landscape, figures and birds. In the K'ang Hsi, Yung Cheng and Ch'ien Lung collection of the Preliminary Exhibition, "(No. 239) a pair of small wine cups decorated with bamboos and sparrows in cloisonné enamel," "(No. 194) a large round washer decorated with fish turning into dragons in under-glaze blue," "a pair of high stemmed wine cups decorated in cloisonné enamel with roses and picture of two quails" and "a handled pot decorated with landscape painting in blue materials enclosed in panels over brocated ground in cloisonné enamel, (No. 245)" would be the kind of specimens much admired by the English connoisseurs and eagerly copied by the English manufacturers of the same period.

Turning now to oriental furniture, we find that the mania for it came to England with Queen Mary and King William at the end of the 17th century, when Bed-rooms were being furnished and decorated entirely in the so-called "Chinese taste." One of the most prominent furniture designers in the 18th century, Thomas Chippendale, presented a great number of Chinese designs in his "Gentlemen and Cabinet-makers Directory." He regarded the Chinese manner as the only suitable style for cabinets to hold porcelain. In his design for cabinets, chairs, tables, beds, shelves, screens and mirror-frames, he adopted Chinese pagodas, mandarins, dragons, bells as ornaments. The art of lacquering became dominant during the period when the vogue for Chinese furniture was at its height. Oriental lacquer-work furniture was extensively imported. Like porcelain, lacquer-work occupied a prominent place in the wealthy and fashionable homes. Most of the lacquer cabinets manufactured in England were decorated with Chinese figures and foliage. The English artist produced them entirely on the basis of Chinese models. English furniture began to be lacquered at home in black, green, blue, gold and red. Quite a number of collections of furniture made in England in the 18th century indicated Chinese influence. The lacquer footstool, painted with golden flower designs (No. 2) now shown in the Preliminary Exhibition, reminds us of English vogue for lacquer work furniture in the 18th century. However, the English did not develop lacquer manufacture to such a degree as they did in porcelain industry. Toward the end of the 18th century, the English enthusiasm for Chinese furniture abated, but an indelible trace of Chinese influence was thus left in the history of English decorative arts.