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From the curious to the “artificial”: the meaning of oriental porcelain in 17th and 18th- century English interiors

Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding

- 1 From its first modest arrival in English interiors in the early 17th century to its role in the 18th-century craze for *chinoiserie*, oriental porcelain always held a significant place in interior decoration. Its function and status varied according to the place where it was displayed, from cabinets of curiosities to china closets and the tea-table. Chinese and Japanese porcelain also carried a set of different, sometimes antithetical meanings according to the type of collectors who acquired them and the way they were organised and arranged in the home. *Chinomania* was closely associated with women in the modern period, which led to gendered perceptions of porcelain, with the china closet becoming a metonymy for woman. In this essay, I trace the evolution of oriental porcelain in English interiors and unearth the symbolic, semiotic and cultural meanings of its presence in English men and women’s collections by bringing new material and new approaches into research on *chinoiserie*. I first examine the cultural and stylistic meaning of 17th-century porcelain collections to show that the fascination for porcelain items was grounded in their ambiguous status as curious, natural and artistic objects. I then turn to the case study of the furnishings of Colworth House in Bedfordshire to analyse the social function of porcelain as a signifier of taste, conspicuous consumption and status. This is followed by an interpretation of porcelain along gendered lines, in which I suggest that porcelain functioned as a memento and a fetish. Lastly, I offer a reading of the china closet which can be construed, I argue, as a feminine, rococo and “artificial” space that epitomises the perceived characteristics of porcelain in the 18th century.

Curiosity, nature and art: the meaning of porcelain collections in the 17th century

- 2 The foundation of the East India Company in 1600 made direct trade with China possible and led to an increase in English imports of Chinese wares. Although Chinese porcelain started to reach England in higher quantities at that time, they continued to be considered as precious exotica worthy of display in cabinets of curiosities. Most Chinese porcelain imported in the 17th century consisted of *blanc-de-Chine* and blue and white ware. Brown Yixing stoneware was also imported, as well as monochrome-glazed porcelain¹. In the middle of the 17th century, direct trade with China was hampered by wars of succession within the Chinese empire, which led the East India Company to find other indirect ways of buying Chinese porcelain, and also, from 1657, to turn to Japan for more supplies in porcelain. The imports of Japanese overglazed enamelled porcelain in England provided collectors with porcelain ware of a new type: colours and new compositional patterns hitherto unknown entered English interiors². Europe’s long-lasting fascination for porcelain can be ascribed to its beauty, its exotic provenance and the secrets surrounding its fabrication. Indeed, the manufacture of porcelain remained a mystery until the 18th century in Europe, when the alchemist Johann Böttger first succeeded in creating a porcelain body of the same type as that made in China for the Meissen factory. Until that time, porcelain had been thought to come from shells. The original Italian term *porcellana*, meaning “conch shell”, reflects this long-held belief³. At the end of the 17th century, speculations about its composition still ran high, as is shown by Captain William Dampier’s remark on the origin of porcelain:

The *Spaniards* of Manila, that we took on the Coast of *Luconia*, told me, that this Commodity is made of Conch-shells; the inside of which looks like Mother of Pearl. But the *Portuguese* lately mentioned, who had lived in *China*, and spoke that and the neighbouring Languages very well, said, that it was made of a fine sort of Clay that was dug in the Province of Canton. I have often made enquiry about it, but could never be well satisfied in it. (Dampier 409)

- 3 The association between porcelain and shells was further evidenced in the common practice of displaying shells and porcelain together in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Duchess of Portland had a famous collection of shells and of unique pieces of porcelain, an association which contributed to blurring the boundary between *naturalia* and *artificialia*⁴.
- 4 Porcelain first occupied a non-functional status in the cabinets of rarities and curiosities of English aristocrats⁵. The famous collector John Tradescant published in 1656 the first catalogue of his collection, which listed “idols from India, China and other pagan lands”⁶. He also possessed porcelain, some mounted with silver and gold. In the 17th century, rare and precious porcelain items were often mounted with expensive metalwork, a practice that was common throughout Europe. The Duchess of Cleveland’s collection, which was sold in France in 1672, contained very fine Chinese and Japanese pieces, according to the *Mercurie Galant* in July 1678 : “l’élite des plus belles porcelaines que plusieurs vaisseaux de ce pays [l’Angleterre] y avaient apportées pendant plusieurs années de tous les lieux, où ils avaient accès pour leur commerce.” The Duchess’s finest porcelain pieces were gilt-mounted : “il y en avait d’admirables par leurs figures, par les choses qui étaient représentées dessus et par la diversité de leurs couleurs. Les plus rares étaient montées

d’or ou de vermeil doré et garnies diversement de la même manière en plusieurs endroits”⁷. The adding of expensive, luxurious silver or gold mounts to the porcelain body of an object visually reinforced the latter’s precious status in the cabinet of curiosities. It also celebrated the transformative powers of artistic creation. Not unlike the popular mounted nautilus cup that stood in cabinets of rarities and curiosities, mounted porcelain held the reference to its artistic manufacture together with the allusion to its natural origin. The perceived shell-like substance of the object had undergone two transformations: it had first been moulded and fired by Oriental craftsmen to be turned into a piece of porcelain, and had then been further transformed and enhanced with precious metal by European craftsmen. Porcelain wares thus fitted into larger collections which included *naturalia* and *artificialia*, classical works of art, antiquities as well as more unusual curiosities. Although the passion for collecting porcelain was already closely connected to the realm of the feminine in the 17th century, it would be wrong to assume that men did not collect oriental porcelain. On a visit to a Mr Bohun on 30 July 1682 at Lee in Kent, John Evelyn noted the couple’s joint appreciation of Chinese and Japanese wares. The house possessed a lacquered cabinet, and it is likely that the lady’s cabinet which gets mentioned, was a china closet:

- 5 Went to visit our good neighbour, Mr. Bohun whose whole house is a cabinet of all elegancies, especially Indian; in the hall are contrivances of Japan screens, instead of wainscot; [...] The landscapes of the screens represent the manner of living, and country of the Chinese. But, above all, his lady’s cabinet is adorned on the fret, ceiling, and chimney-piece, with Mr. Gibbons’ best carving. (Bray ed. 173)
- 6 The inventory for the years 1688 and 1690 at Burghley House in Lincolnshire, the property of John Cecil, Fifth Earl of Exeter, also shows that both Chinese blue-and-white wares (some mounted) and Japanese porcelains were purchased and proudly displayed in the interior as a testimony to the family’s wealth and taste. The inventory of Lord Exeter’s Dressing room, for instance, records porcelain arranged over the chimneypiece on shelves or tiers of shelves: “China over ye Chimney were 2 Doggs, 2 Lyons, 2 Staggs, 2 blue & wt Birds/ 1 heathen Godd with many Armes/ 2 figures with Juggs at their backs.”⁸
- 7 The presence of ornamental porcelain in English interior was paralleled by that of everyday porcelain used as delicate vessels for tea drinking⁹. Imports of functional porcelain reached England in the middle of the 17th century when the aristocracy took to tea-drinking. Still-life paintings offer records of the growing use of porcelain dishes for tea-drinking or eating. One of the earliest references to the use of porcelain dishes for the table was recorded by John Evelyn in his diary on 19 March 1652 on the occasion of a supper he had at a Lady Gerrard’s: “Invited by Lady Gerrard I went to London, where we had a greate supper; all the vessels, which were innumerable, were of Porcelain, she having the most ample and richest collection of that curiosities in England.” (Bray ed 219-220) The second half of the 17th century saw transformations of the use and arrangement of porcelain in England. Previously reserved for display in cabinets of curiosities, porcelain came out of the latter to stand on the tea-table or to be part of an interior’s ornamental furnishings. In the last decades of the 17th century, porcelain collections were progressively allocated a specific space in the china closet (or china room) where innumerable pieces of porcelain were displayed on various mantelpieces, shelves and stands fixed to the walls¹⁰.
- 8 Female aesthetic agency had a decisive influence on this new disposition of porcelain. Queen Mary of Orange in particular, an avid collector of porcelain in Holland, played a

major role in disseminating this trend in England. In 1686, at a time when Mary was still in Holland before the English crown was offered to her and her husband William in 1688, the Swedish architect Nicodemus Tessin described the Princess's country estate of Honselaersdyck (not far from the Hague), as “very richly furnished with Chinese work and pictures”. When she arrived in England, the Queen displayed her collection in specific china closets and rooms in the new Royal Palace of Kensington House recently acquired by the sovereign, and in the Water Gallery, her private apartments built along the Thames. Kensington Palace boasted 7,800 porcelain items in total. The inventory made on 6 April 1697 for Mary's “Old Bedchamber” by Simon De Brienne, “Keeper of His Majesties Wardrobe”, recorded an immense number of figures, jars, porcelain dishes, among which plates and cups. One shelf above the entrance door displayed on one single row “two elephants with whomen [sic] on them in gold mantles on the [...] shelf / [...] two five cornered deep saucers of coloured China / [...] two fine small platts of green gold and white / [...] two large eight square white candle cupps with flowers of blew red and green on them/ [...] / two large white fine figures being women each with child [...]”¹¹. Daniel Defoe thought the Water Gallery “the pleasantest little thing within doors that could possibly be made”(Defoe 183), and described the Queen's collection of porcelain and delftware:

Her majesty had here a fine apartment, with a sett of lodgings, for her private retreat only, but most exquisitely furnish'd; particularly a fine chints bed, then a great curiosity; another of her own work, while in Holland, very magnificent, and several others; and here was also her majesty's fine collection of Delft ware, which indeed was very large and fine; and here was also a vast stock of fine china ware, the like whereof was not then to be seen in England; the long gallery, as above, was fill'd with this china, and every other place, where it could be plac'd, with advantage. (Defoe 183)

- 9 The decoration of these china rooms followed the then fashionable baroque style. As Charles Saumarez Smith explains: “Mirrors were used to extend the sense of space, and japanned wood lent an air of exoticism. In particular, Queen Mary was responsible for introducing the idea of filling an interior with imported porcelain”(Smith 23). The collection followed a principle of accumulation, which led to spatial saturation with porcelain:

Concentration obviously made for greater show — and so it became increasingly frequent to set aside, in mansion or palace, special galleries and halls for exhibition purposes. About the walls would be niches, shelves, or console tables backed by mirrors to increase the effect, while in the center of the room were more tables, together with pedestals and cases, all arranged so as to show off the items to maximum advantage. (Rigby 191)

- 10 In these rooms, exoticism was thus staged through the baroque use of mirrors and endless perspectives of rows of porcelain which provided onlookers with a sense of defamiliarisation and displacement through a projection into an imaginary ornamental Far East, as revealed in Daniel Marot's engraving for the Queen's apartment rooms.¹² With the disappearance of the baroque style in the 18th century, porcelain collections underwent further transformations, moving from a single room into a china cabinet, namely a glass-fronted cabinet which could be carved in the so-called “Chinese Chippendale style”, a reference to the *chinoiserie* furniture designed by Thomas Chippendale in the 1750s.¹³ The china cabinet (or closet) replaced the often lacquered cabinets of the previous century. The new century also saw the 17th-century elitist, aristocratic practice of collecting porcelain expand and reach the middle ranks of society.

The wealthy middle class emulated the gentry by acquiring oriental, and later in the century, English porcelain, at shops owned by so-called “Chinamen” and “Chinawomen”, or at public auctions selling pieces imported by the East India Company.¹⁴ The taste for Oriental objects was not exclusive to women; men could also show a keen interest in porcelain along with their taste for classical antiquity and objects of *virtú*. The collection of porcelain at Drayton House, John Germaine’s estate, testifies to the owners’ taste for china in the early 18th century. Germaine and his first wife, the Duchess of Norfolk, had acquired porcelain together, while Germaine’s new wife, Lady Betty, was also a fervent porcelain collector and continued to enlarge the collection, as shown in the 1710 and 1720 inventories.¹⁵

Porcelain as social signifier

- 11 The detail of the possessions of the Antonie family at their estate at Colworth House in Sharnbrook (Bedfordshire) in the 18th century, recorded in successive inventories, provides an interesting illustration of men’s taste for porcelain. Marc Antonie was steward to the Duke of Montagu. In 1715, he bought the Colworth estate from John Wagstaff, citizen and mercer of the City of London, who had previously bought it from the Montagus. The Antonies had invested money in the South Sea stock, which resulted in the family’s financial collapse when the South Sea Bubble burst. After Marc Antonie’s death in 1720, the 1723 inventory was made with a view to selling the furniture to get the family out of debt. The presence in the inventory of porcelain dishes and basins exported from China reflects how the fashion for porcelain was connected to the ever more fashionable practice of drinking another Chinese product, tea and, to a lesser degree, coffee. The inventory records a “cheany & Teatable” in the North Parlour, advertised for £ 6 14s, and in the Hall “10 little Cheany plates that sold for £ 1 5s, 6 larg [sic] Cheany Dishes £ 1 15s, 4 Cheany Basons, Cheany mugs and Delf Dishes, Cheany Cassters and Cheany”.
- 12 The second inventory of 1771 was made after the death of Marc Antonie’s youngest son, Richard, on 26 November 1771. Richard Antonie had inherited the estate in 1768 after John’s death, Marc Antonie’s eldest son. He first established himself as a draper and then moved on to Jamaica in 1748 where he owned a sugar plantation. The furnishings of the house listed in the 1771 inventory were mostly purchased by Richard and some pieces by John Antonie. They give a good indication of the type of furnishing found in the 1760s in a country house, and, as James Collett-White points out, “reflect what a country gentleman with London connections might have purchased and collected”. (Collet-White 37)
- 13 Ornamental and functional porcelain figures prominently in the inventory. Antonie had an unusually large collection of china. In the two parlours and three of the four principal bedrooms were 125 pieces of ornamental china. The inventory does not mention the provenance of the pieces and it is highly probable these porcelains were not all of Chinese origin, but would have also come from continental centres such as Delft, Meissen and France, and also from English porcelain factories such as Derby, Worcester and Bow. Non-functional porcelain was completed by a huge number of porcelain plates and dishes which were kept in the “china closet”. Two “dragon china” dishes and “Nankeen basins” get mentioned in the inventory, which confirms the presence of Chinese export porcelain in Antonie’s collection. The taste for Chinese-styled indoor and outdoor decoration, which blended authentic Chinese wares with *chinoiserie*, gained momentum in the century, reaching a peak in the 1750s and 1760s¹⁶. Antonie had a particular liking for

chinoiserie, as he commissioned a gate or possibly a low fence of oak railings to be made in the Chinese style, which he mentioned in his notes: “Richard Antonie made a New China Work the front of his house.” It thus appears very likely that he would have collected Chinese porcelain to complement the Chinese theme set up outside his house.

14 Rooms served as objective correlatives of the owner’s taste, with furnishings functioning as material and artistic signifiers of taste, wealth and social status. The best parlour was used as a drawing room but also as a dining parlour where Antonie would have received his guests. The room contained a mahogany dining table, a mahogany card table and a mahogany tea table, a teakettle, a lamp and a mahogany stand, “twenty-one pieces of ornamental china and two jars” which possibly stood in the fireplace, a picture of Hercules, “Two Views of a Temple”, “Two flower pieces” “two small landscapes”¹⁷. The association of porcelain with the tea-table confirms the fashion for tea-drinking and its sociable function, and that the parlour was a place of social gathering where the private domestic interior acquired a social function of public display. By displaying his collection in the parlour, Antonie aimed at showing his taste and social status to visitors. The paintings of floral compositions were probably Dutch still lifes, while the paintings depicting classical landscapes and the heroic mythological figure of Hercules referred to scenes inspired by Antiquity.

15 Antonie’s collection defines the owner’s social and cultural identity. Genre and still life paintings may hint at a former draper’s sensitivity to Dutch art, while his interest in oriental wares reveals his taste for the exotic, reflecting, maybe, his own adventurous life and stay in the exotic West Indies as much as his fashionable taste for modish *chinoiserie*. Lastly, his gentility is confirmed by his appreciation of classical pictorial subjects. At a time when vast fortunes were being made through trade, the newly rich attempted to emulate the nobility. The collecting and conspicuous consumption of art came to play an active part in shaping the gentlemanly status of the wealthy middle class. Money acquired through commerce was transformed, symbolically “laundered”, as it were, through the acquisition and display of curiosities and artwork. As Barbara Benedict remarks, connoisseurship demanded a collection of both *naturalia* and *artificialia*, which represented the owner’s scientific interest in nature’s wonders as well as his artistic discernment:

This eighteenth-century vogue of what might be termed “virtuosoship” blurs the lines between improvement of the estate, a social obligation of the gentry, and mercantile accumulation. [...] Eighteenth-century folk with money to spare collected not only objects of high culture, but also those of nature and the exotic. Curio cabinets typically included objects from cultures distanced by time, space, or cultural composition [...]. (Benedict 75)

16 The possession of unique and rare pieces was a sign of distinction in taste and a mark of social status:

Such accumulation advertises wealth and space: collections testify to class. The collector, moreover, gets to possess what others wonder at and admire, so that the collection is designed to stimulate envy. It also grants the collector authority: [...] gentlemen would “dress up in Chinese costumes” to show visitors their oriental collections. (Benedict 77)

17 Through his material possessions, Richard Antonie represented his refined and fashionable taste as well as his gentlemanly status. Despite the idea found in the literature, newspapers and essays of the time that porcelain was mostly consumed by women, men continued to show interest in porcelain and to choose exceptional pieces to

display in their cabinets or interiors. Such *virtuosi* often bore the brunt of angry champions of classicism, who saw porcelain collecting as an effeminate and dangerous practice. William Hogarth’s satirical painting *Taste in High Life*, shows that chinamania at its worst affected both men and women. Be that as it may, famous collectors continued to buy delicate and precious oriental porcelain. Horace Walpole acquired several pieces of blue and white porcelain for the decoration of his Strawberry Hill estate, especially a Chinese blue-and-white basin made famous by Thomas Gray’s poem *Ode on the death of a favourite cat; drowned in a tub of goldfishes* and by Bentley’s accompanying illustration¹⁸. At the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, William Beckford, a famous and eclectic collector of objects of *virtú*, also acquired oriental porcelains. He mostly purchased Chinese, and Japanese contemporary porcelain wares (without necessarily knowing the difference), which he then commissioned James Aldridge to transform with silver-gilt mounts.¹⁹

Gendering porcelain: of mementoes and fetishes

- 18 Several meanings can be ascribed to the presence of porcelain in English interior decoration. Oriental porcelain can be construed, I suggest, as a memento for men and a fetish for women. Porcelain was the material emblem of long-distance travels, and more symbolically, of what was perceived as commercial successes resulting from the Anglo-Chinese trade. Porcelain acted as a narrative object that visually told a story. Numerous export porcelain plates and dishes represented East India Company vessels moored in Canton or sailing along the Chinese coast, or imaginary Chinese landscapes and everyday scenes that provided the basis for *chinoiserie* design used by European porcelain factories for the decoration of their wares.²⁰ English ceramic makers also decorated their vessels with images based on illustrations from travel books, such as Johan Nieuhof’s famous 1673 *Embassy from the East India Company*. Analogous to sea-narratives and travel books which were highly popular in the 17th and 18th centuries, the iconography on oriental porcelain traced one episode of an imaginary journey to China or Japan while porcelain itself was the tangible evidence of an actual journey to Canton. By viewing oriental porcelain, or by gazing at images of China or at *chinoiserie* vignettes, the viewer was reminded of the commercial voyages that had been undertaken to acquire these commodities, while he could slip into the role of traveller and explorer and let his imagination wander along the distant shores of the Far East, the “Terra incognita and undiscovered provinces” mentioned by Parker and Stalker in their 1688 *Treatise on Japanning and Varnishing*²¹. Porcelain wares functioned as mementoes of the (East India Company’s) commercial endeavours that had been necessary to bring these commodities back to England. A Chinese porcelain sauceboat in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, decorated with two cartouches depicting English ships departing Plymouth in the background (a floating English flag planted on the ground identifies the English coast) and arriving in the Pearl River in the foreground (a pagoda and a typical Chinese rock identify the Chinese coast) is one of numerous examples of how designs worked as travel-narratives (**figure 1**). The distance between the English coast and the Chinese one, rendered by the use of perspective in the scene, acquires a temporal dimension as it stands for the actual duration of the voyage and that of the written narrative. If not all men were merchants who had actually gone to China, they could picture themselves as potential merchants or adventurers and explorers. Porcelain could

appeal to merchants' dreams of exploration and wealth, but also appealed to the scientific and exploratory nature of the connoisseur and virtuoso.

- 19 If the function of porcelain as travel narrative played the role of a memento for male audiences, it played the role, I argue, of a fetish for female audiences. Freudian interpretation of the fetish underlines the role of the fetish as a marker of an absence or a lack.²² By invoking this lack, the fetish also disavows it and makes the absent object present. In William Burnaby's *The Ladies' Visiting Day* dated 1701, the female character Lady Lovetoy laments over a lack, namely the impossibility for women to travel to the East. The purchase of exotic goods is presented as a replacement of voyages to China:

Fulvia: I wonder your Ladyship, that has such a Passion for those Parts of the World, never had the Curiosity to see 'em.

Lady Lovetoy: Alas! The Men have usurp'd all the Pleasures of Life, and made it not so decent for our Sex to Travel; but I manage it as *Mahomet* wou'd ha' done his Mountain [...] Every Morning the pretty Things of all these Countries are brought me, and I'm in love with every Thing I see. (Burnaby 16)

- 20 Touching and getting porcelain produced a mode of pleasure which enabled imagination and reality to coalesce, fulfilling women's escapist desires of travel and exploration. Porcelain objects, released from their utility function, acquired a symbolic meaning, representing a distant nation worshipped in the form of material artefacts. While the tactile presence of the object underpinned the separation and geographical distance between female collectors and China, it also simultaneously connected them. The presence of Chinese porcelain was a clear reference to male commercial ventures and exploratory forays into foreign lands that were denied to women. Consuming Chinese artefacts, among which porcelain, worked as a fetishistic practice that eluded the necessary mediation of the male-gendered Anglo-Chinese trade.
- 21 In the 18th century, the china closet became a typically female preserve. In 1778, Mrs Philip Lybbe Powys recorded seeing Lady Dashwood's china closet on her visit to Kirtlington Park in Oxfordshire: “Lady Dashwood's china-room the most elegant I ever saw. 'Tis under the flight of stairs going into the garden: it's ornamented with the finest pieces of oldest china, and the recesses and shelves painted pea-green and white, the edges being green in mosaic pattern”(Climenson 198). Female handicraft often accompanied the artistic set up of china closets and it was not uncommon to adorn cabinets with shells, porcelain and fossils. For example, Mrs Delany, in a letter to Mrs Dewes dated 22 September 1750 reported being busy decorating the shelves of her china closet with shells: “I am making some little brackets such as Mr. Bateman's, but instead of gilding them I cover them with shells; I design to have eight of them for my closet, to hold little pieces of China.”(Llanover 2:415) In essay number 38 of the periodical newspaper *The World*, a wealthy merchant married to an aristocrat describes his wife's shell and china museum:

In this apartment there is a cabinet of most curious workmanship, highly finished with stones, gems, and shells, disposed in such a manner as to represent several sorts of flowers. The top of this cabinet is adorned with a prodigious pyramid of china of all colours, shapes, and sizes. At every corner of the room are great jars filled with dried leaves or roses and jessamine. The chimney piece also (and indeed everyone in the house) is covered with immense quantities of china of various figures; among which are Talapoins and Bonzes, and all the religious orders of the east.²³

- 22 In 18th-century civic humanist discourses, porcelain was critically viewed as a fetish worshipped by female idolaters.²⁴ The unfortunate husband compares his wife's closet to an oriental temple, filled with "Talapoins and Bonzes and all the religious orders of the east "incarnated in "various figures" of china worshipped by his wife. The materialistic cult of porcelain was predominantly denounced by men as a fetishistic practice enmeshed in sensuousness and material pleasure, recalling Lord Shaftesbury's distrust of the aesthetic lure of oriental artefacts: "The *Indian* figures, the *Japan*-work, the *enamel* strikes my eye. The luscious colours and glossy paint gain upon my fancy [...]. But what ensues? – Do I not for ever forfeit my good relish?"(Shaftesbury 229) Women's *chinamania* was thus assimilated to an unenlightened and idolatrous taste that was contrary to the disinterested search for truth in beauty.

Reading the china closet

- 23 The china closet and, by extension, the Lady's dressing room where oriental porcelain was displayed, were often compared to an oriental temple, but were also seen as an emblematic temple of femininity. The female closet where porcelain, shells and sometimes books, were stored served as an instrument of female sociability, an intimate gynocentric space where women could exchange their knowledge and expertise. The visits paid by women to their respective homes often led to the inspection of the china closet and fuelled discussions on porcelain. Lady Dashwood, for example, asked for Mrs Philip Lybbe Powys's opinion on oriental porcelain displayed in her china closet at Kirtlington Park: "Her Ladyship said she must try my judgment in china, as she ever did all the visitors of that closet, as there was one piece there so much superior to the others. I thought myself fortunate that a prodigious fine old Japan dish almost at once struck my eye"(Climenson 198). The china cabinet functioned as a female museum, as was explained in an essay from the *World*:

You are not to suppose that all this profusion of ornament is only to gratify her own curiosity: it is meant as a preparative to the greatest happiness of life, that of seeing company. And I assure you she gives above twenty entertainments in a year to people for whom she has no manner of regard, for no other reason in the world than to shew them the house. [I am] continually driven from room to room, to give opportunity from strangers to admire it. But as we have lately missed a favourite *Chinese* tumbler, and some other valuable moveables, we have entertained thoughts of confining the shew to one day in the week, and of admitting no persons whatsoever without tickets.²⁵

- 24 The exchange and display of porcelain allowed women to circumscribe an artistic practice and field of expertise of their own. It gave them authority in the realm of domestic interior decoration as well as in that of scientific knowledge. In her analysis of the Duchess of Portland's collection of porcelain and shells, Stacey Sloboda has shown how the collection and display of *naturalia* -shells- and *artificialia* -porcelain- connected natural history to art, and argued that porcelain occupied an intermediary position, as both exotic curiosity and manufactured object, "complicat[ing] the binary of "raw" imperial specimens versus "cooked" Western objects of connoisseurship" (Sloboda 467). The china closet decorated with shells thus merged natural history and decorative arts. It can also be read, I suggest, in terms of narration and architecture. Women read exotic stories on the surfaces of oriental porcelain but the authority they exerted over the display of porcelain wares also transformed them into authors. David Porter has argued

that the decorative patterns of transitional porcelain wares of the Ming and early Qing dynasties often represented women in ideal garden scenes. He proposes to read these scenes of female communities evolving in peaceful natural surroundings depicted on Chinese porcelain as contemporaneous analogues of female utopias and Sapphic literary works that developed in English literature in the last decades of the 17th and early 18th centuries. Porcelain surfaces read by elite women nurtured their dreams of female academies, retreats and friendly communities.²⁶

- 25 Drawing upon my previous suggestion that porcelain worked as a fetish for women, I propose another, albeit not contradictory, interpretation for the presence of oriental porcelain in Georgian closets, one that shifts from the paradigm of reading to that of writing, and adds to literary utopias the genre of travel-writing. What if the practice of arranging porcelain and shells in artful and pleasing combinations worked as the symbolic construction, or weaving – a typically female-gendered activity – of a narrative? The accumulation of porcelain on brackets fixed to walls has sometimes been compared by art historians to embroidery. The various rows and tiers of porcelain formed a pattern on the wall that conveyed the visual impression of mural embroidery²⁷. Embroidery works as a productive metaphor of writing, just as the disposition of the china closet draws together the textural and the textual. Oriental porcelain from China and Japan, together with shells, functioned as material vehicles of narratives of discovery, exploration and foreign commercial ventures in an age of global exchanges. It may not appear incongruous to think of the arrangement of porcelain collections as similar to the narrative aesthetic of japanned furniture, as a form of imaginary story-telling unfolding along the shelves of the cabinet. The frequent presence of shells in the china closet offered a symbolic threshold to escapism and adventure, setting sail, as it were, for imaginary visions of the exotic typically found in sea-narratives. The china closet conjured up Dampier's *Voyage Round the World* and thus provided occasions for telling the story of how the objects had been acquired. We can imagine that Joseph Banks' voyages which supplied the Duchess of Portland with exotic shell specimens, or Elisabeth Montagu's brother's commercial voyages which brought her oriental porcelain from China, would have constituted stories connected to the furnishing of their china closets that would have been shared within female sociable circles.²⁸ The fiction constructed by the china closet was thus of a hybrid nature, as it wove together travel narratives and romances.

Rococo in the china closet

- 26 The china closet can also be read in terms of architecture, as a monument to the idea of rococo. If natural science was given pride of place in the space of the closet, the feminine accents of the rococo style also sprang up in the curvaceous lines of rocks, shells and porcelain dishes completed by glittering ornaments. Shells and porcelain have traditionally stood for women, as the well-documented comparison between women and porcelain throughout the 18th century testifies.²⁹ The china closet, either a simple cabinet or a room, can be understood as a sign of the feminisation and rococo-isation of interior decoration. The idea of rococo pervaded 18th century European culture and, despite contrasted views of scholarship about its periodisation, may be seen to emerge in the early 18th century and evolve until the late 1760s.³⁰ The rococo style has been assumed to have reached England in the decorative arts in the 1740s but the new hybrid genre of the

novel, characterised by its interplay of various literary sources and genres (romances, drama, biographies, histories) has also been identified with the idea of rococo.³¹ The aspect of the china closet adorned with shells, a result of female handicraft, may not strictly correspond to the lavish rococo interior decoration of a French 18th-century boudoir, but signals, I am suggesting, the rococo-isation of English interiors. Arguably, the scantiness of surviving evidence about the display of female china closets, glimpsed through examples in female correspondence or diaries, only leads to hypothetical interpretations. However, the numerous satires on the fashion for female china closets found in the periodical press of the period help reconstruct a practice that must have been popular among the aristocracy and wealthy middle classes. I propose here to examine the rococo aesthetic of the female china closet by crossing contemporary references to real china closets with an analysis of two periodical essays, the first from *The Spectator* published in 1712, the second being the essay previously cited (*The World*, 38), published in 1753. This comparative study will enable me to show the evolution of the rococo’s imprint on English interiors.

- 27 In Joseph Addison’s *Spectator* essay number 37, dated 12 April 1712, the fictional *persona* of Mr. Spectator recounts his visit to an aristocratic widow’s library. The essay aligns Leonora’s reading tastes with female chinamania, depicting the lady’s library, in the narrator’s eyes, as a hybrid and counter-natural piece of furniture decorated with Chinese porcelain:

At the End of the Folio’s (which were finely bound and gilt) were great Jars of China placed one above another in a very noble piece of Architecture. The Quarto’s were separated from the Octavo’s by a pile of smaller vessels, which rose in a delightful Pyramid. The Octavo’s were bounded by Tea dishes of all shapes, colours and Sizes, which were so disposed on a wooden Frame, that they looked like one continued Pillar indented with the finest Strokes of Sculpture, and stained with the greatest Variety of Dyes. That Part of the Library which was designed for the reception of Plays and Pamphlets, and other loose Papers, was enclosed in a kind of square, consisting of one of the prettiest Grottoes that ever I saw, and was made up of Scaramouches, Lions, Monkeys, Mandarin, Trees, Shells, and a thousand other off Figures in China Ware[...]. I was wonderfully pleased with such a mixt kind of furniture, as seemed very suitable both to the Lady and the Scholar, and did not know at first whether I should fancy my self in a Grotto, or in a Library.³²

- 28 The narrator’s seeming approval of the chinoiserie-styled library is deceitful, as criticism is further unleashed in the essay when Mr Spectator provides a full list of Leonora’s books, most of which belong to the romance category of the previous century, for which the narrator has but the utmost contempt. The noble classification of books according to their subjects and genres, expected in the library of a woman of polite learning, has given way to a predilection for the ornamental. Serious books, such as Newton’s *Works*, sit next to Mme de Scudéry’s romance *The Grand Cyrus*, merely for the sake of elegance. Leonora appears to have had more care for the pretty disposition of exotic Chinese decoration in and around her library than for the perusal of scholarly books, most of which are in fact “counterfeit books”, mere *trompe-l’œil* furniture, such as “The Classick Authors in wood”³³. This stratagem points to Leonora’s desire to appear educated when, so Mr Spectator has it, the furnishings of her library rather reflect the vanity of her mind, an image which follows the Lockean conception of the mind as an empty cabinet to be furnished with ideas³⁴. Behind this unfavourable portrait of a female aristocrat fossilised in her rural retreat, whose decorative skills denote her taste for fantasy and imaginative literature, lies a political attack against the Tory party³⁵. Seen as unproductive, idle and turned

towards the past, the party of the landed interests, represented by Leonora, betrays its vacuity in Mr Spectator’s Whiggish prose which favours the century’s new commercial order and praises the benefits of social interaction(s). Leonora’s library reflects her own lack of interaction with the real world outside her enclosed estate, which leads her to revel in the artificial worlds of romances. The useless delight of reading romances finds resonance in the sensuous pleasures offered by Chinese porcelain, appreciated for its texture and colours. As Ros Ballaster explains in her analysis of *The Spectator* essay: “female reading is revealed to be nothing more than a form of conspicuous consumption, form without matter” (Ballaster 48) Indeed, the presence of porcelain tea dishes implies that romances are consumed in the same fashion as tea and that they produce nothing but a lethargy of the mind. The great, empty Jars of China may further reinforce this point and stand as a metaphor of Leonora’s social vanity and intellectual hollowness.

- 29 Beyond the political tonality of the essay and its misogynistic stance, what I am concerned with here is the artistic construction of Leonora’s library that I interpret as announcing the rococo spirit which was to thrive in later decades in the English decorative arts, and which I consider to be a sign of the feminisation of art which marked interior decoration throughout Europe. Mr. Spectator, for all his severity towards Leonora’s artistic and literary tastes, cannot deny the beauty of the library, which has become a decorative artefact rather than a sanctuary of knowledge. He indeed succumbs to the charm of this library-turned-closet which offers an aesthetic of wonder and seduction and leaves the narrator “wonderfully pleased”, with a mixed feeling of delight and stupor. Leonora’s library is similar to an architectural folly where artifice, both ornamental and moral, reigns supreme. Serious books either serve to preserve beauty patches or stand as harmonious *trompe-l’œil* decorations which symbolically reveal that the depths of knowledge have been reduced to a flat decorative surface. Porcelain and female handicrafts unite to produce what may be seen as a counter-model to neo-classicism in the form of a rococo-inspired miniaturisation of architectural features. The imitation of monumental colonnade, for example, shines through the assemblage of tea dishes that visually conveys the image of a miniaturised sculpted pillar. The essay underlines the duality of the library, which mingles erudition and decoration, imaginative literature and intellectual writings and, more importantly for our demonstration, which blurs the boundaries between art and nature.
- 30 The striking image of the grotto and the reference to grotesque decoration unite porcelain and the natural world. Grottoes were connected to nature in the modern period and were traditionally associated with natural retreats where hermits studied and meditated. In the 18th century, man-made grottoes constituted important features of English landscape gardens and were considered, as Janice Neri explains, “as outdoor rooms in which the inhabitants could enjoy pleasing views of the surrounding landscape [...] yet also offered an outdoor sanctuary to enjoy quiet and solitude contemplating the beauties of nature and human ingenuity” (Laird 173). The poet Alexander Pope had created his own grotto in his property near Twickenham where he withdrew to read and write. In the essay, Leonora has used Chinese porcelain for its shell-like textures, its various colours and the natural subjects of Chinese porcelain figures to transform her library into a miniaturised grotto. The grotesque aspect of the library reveals the rococo spirit that was to flourish in the mid-century. Indeed Mr Spectator’s inability to circumscribe Leonora’s artful construction - is it a grotto or a library? - underlines some of the principles of the rococo idea, namely ambivalence and playful instability. The very

hybridity of Leonora’s grotto-cum-study library corresponds to the spirit of the rococo, typically hovering between the serious and the playful, the deep and the shallow, the domestic and the foreign, the artistic and the natural, the savage and the civilised, or, to use Levi-Strauss’s terms, the “raw” and the “cooked”.³⁶ The image of the porcelain-made grotto framing the library through the arrangement of porcelain wares underscores the century’s dual perception of Chinese porcelain and, by extension, of chinoiserie decoration as “artificial”, a term I borrow from Batty Langley’s definition of the new irregular type of English garden that emerged in the early 18th century.³⁷

- 31 Visual interplay of surfaces and textures, preference for the small and the pretty, articulation between art and nature and unstable duality, all principles of the rococo style, are to be found in the “artificial” jewelled lady’s cabinet in the *World’s* essay dating from the period of high rococo decoration in England:
- 32 [It’s] a cabinet of most curious workmanship, highly finished with stones, gems, and shells, disposed in such a manner as to represent several sorts of flowers. The top of this cabinet is adorned with a prodigious pyramid of china of all colours, shapes, and sizes. At every corner of the room are great jars filled with dried leaves or roses and jessamine.³⁸
- 33 Leonora’s orderly, yet colourful and textural composition has evolved into a more confused assemblage which aims at evoking nature in a pointedly artificial and artistic manner, using *trompe-l’œil* decoration to imitate flowers through a *bric-a-brac* of shells, porcelain and precious stones. Apparent disorder, or irregularity, was found in other artistic media of the period. It appeared as a central feature of the new genre of the novel, exemplified by Fielding’s works or Richardson’s epistolary novels. Asymmetry was also a guiding principle in the theory of the English landscape garden. The structural variety and disorder of porcelain display may thus be seen as one further strand of the idea of rococo.
- 34 Furthermore, the presence of *naturalia* –shells, stones and gems– as ornaments evokes, once again, the decoration of grottoes, and contributes to blurring the boundary between inside and outside in the lady’s apartment, allowing the outside world to step into the domestic sphere. Mrs Delany, an avid collector of shells who also crafted a number of garden rooms and grottoes between 1730 and 1750, considered “the beauties of shells [...] as infinite as of flowers” (Llanover 1: 485). The description of the lady’s closet in the essay contains both shells and flowers, on top of porcelain whose dual “artificial” status connects to nature. While the cabinet reads as a miniaturised grotto, this domestic, female space more generally stands as an emblem of nature, as it offers a miniaturisation of the outside world conceived as an imaginary garden filled with flowers. The china and shell closet could thus be seen as bridging indoors and outdoors.
- 35 The intersection of nature and art at work in the female closet is in line with William Hogarth’s definition of the line of grace and beauty in his treatise *The Analysis of Beauty*, published the same year as *The World* essay (1753). William Hogarth uses the images of the shell and the skin to theorise the line of beauty, which has been associated with the idea of rococo, and places visual and tactile sensations at the core of his aesthetics. He states in his treatise that “[t]he skin [...] tenderly embracing and gently conforming itself to the varied shapes of everyone of the outward muscles, [...] is evidently a shell like surface [...] formed with the utmost delicacy in nature [...]”. (Hogarth 55) The visual appeal of the glazed surfaces of porcelain and the mother-of-pearl of shells was analogous to the tactile eroticism conveyed by the image of caressing the skin. The description emphasises the sensualist aesthetic of the female closet, grounded in English empiricist epistemology,

which was based on sensations and emotions.³⁹ The fragrance of flowers, the delicate, lustrous textures of porcelain vessels and shells, the shining colours of gems, call for sensorial reactions to this feminine interior. The female closet functions as a material metaphor of female social identity where the visual, the tactile and the olfactory all work together to create an idea of femininity as a cultural artefact. The china closet thus testifies to the prettification of culture in the 18th century.⁴⁰ If baroque decoration signified grandeur and princely displays, often carrying with it a political message, china rooms bespoke the cult of the small and the pretty, the reign of the feminine and the sensuous.

- 36 I will end on the “artificialness” of porcelain as a symbol of an English Enlightenment ideology of politeness. As mentioned earlier, porcelain bridges nature and culture since it requires the natural substances of kaolin and petuntse to be extracted from the earth, fired in kilns and then painted before being transformed into highly elaborate artefacts. The lustrous, glazed and painted body of porcelain underscores the manufacturing processes that led to the “raw” being “cooked”. The fragility of porcelain also points to the precarious state of this cultural artefact. In the 18th century, this “artificial” duality worked as a productive emblem of the cult of politeness, hence its presence in numerous conversation paintings representing social groups gathered at the tea-table, using porcelain dishes and sipping tea. The social ritual of tea-drinking created a form of sociable commerce between individuals, inviting them to “polish” themselves through cultural interactions with one another. William Hogarth’s *Strode Family* provides a good example of the integration of differences. The painting depicts the wealthy city magnate William Strode seated at the tea table with his aristocratic wife Lady Anne Cecil, inviting Reverend Arthur Smith to quit his solitary reading to join the conversation over tea while the empty seat awaits Colonel Strode to complete the tea party. The tea table gathers the representatives of various social groups: trade, religion, the military and the gentry all sit “symbolically” together during tea-drinking. Porcelain, manipulated by guests and hosts alike at the tea table, may be read as a metaphor of the cultural friction occurring through their different personalities, their various occupations and interests during this social ritual.⁴¹ A polished object in which nature dissolves into culture, roughness into smoothness, exoticism into domesticity, other into self, porcelain thus appeared as the perfect emblem of the fragile social edifice of *concordia discors* praised in 18th-century English culture.

Figure 1



Sauceboat, porcelain, painted in famille rose enamels and gold with coat of arms, China, Qing dynasty, Qianlong reign period, ca. 1745. Inv : FR.61- 1978.

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NOTES

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17. Collett-White 48.

18. The poem depicts the drowning of Walpole’s cat Selima while attempting to catch a goldfish in the porcelain tub. For a study of Walpole’s ceramic collection, see Timothy Wilson, “‘Playthings Still?’ Horace Walpole as a Collector of Ceramics,” in Michael Snodin and Cynthia Roman, eds., *Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill* (New Haven, CT: Yale U.P, 2009).

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24. I draw here upon William Pietz’s anthropological study of the history and origin of the term “fetish”. See his articles on the subject, “The Problem of the Fetish, I,” *Res* 9 (Spring 1985), and “The Problem of the Fetish, II: the Origin of the Fetish,” *Res* 13 (Spring 1987).

25. *The World* No. 38 (20 September 1753).

26. See Chapter 3 in David Porter’s *The Chinese Taste in England*, 57- 93.

27. Catherine Lahaussais uses the expression “broderies de porcelaine” in Antoinette Hallé, *De l'immense au minuscule. La virtuosité en céramique*, (Paris : Paris musées, 2005) 48.
28. For a study of the Duchess of Portland's passion for conchology, see Beth Fowkes Tobin, “The Duchess's Shells: Natural History Collecting, Gender, and Scientific Practice”, in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, eds., *Material Women, 1750-1950* (London: Ashgate, 2009), 301-325.
29. See Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the 18th Century* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 20-29; David Porter, “Monstrous Beauty: Eighteenth-Century Fashion and the Aesthetics of the Chinese Taste.” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 35.3 (2002): 395-411. Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding, “Frailty, thy Name is China: Women, Chinoiserie and the threat of low culture in 18th-century England”, *Women's History Review*, 18.4 (Sept 2009): 659-668; Stacey Sloboda, “Porcelain Bodies: Gender, Acquisitiveness and Taste in 18th-century England”, in John Potvin and Alla Myzelev, eds., *Material Cultures, 1740-1920* (London, 2009), 1-36.
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31. See chapter 4 in Parker's *The Idea of Rococo*, 96-106. For a study of history of the rococo and its presence in English decorative arts, see Michael Snodin ed., *Rococo Art and Design in Hogarth's England* (London: V&A Publication 1984) and Charles Hind, ed., *The Rococo in England. A symposium* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986).
32. *The Spectator* no. 37, 12 April 1712.
33. *Ibid.*
34. “The senses at first let in particular ideas, and furnish the yet empty cabinet, and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them.” John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) Book II, Chapter II, section 15.
35. Alain Bony, *Léonora, Lydia et les autres : Etudes sur le (nouveau) roman* (Lyon: PUL, 2004), 9-12.
36. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le cuit*, (Paris : Plon, 1978).
37. Batty Langley, *Practical Geometry*, (1726), 101.
38. *The World* No. 38 (20 September 1753).
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40. Philippe Minguet, *L'Esthétique du rococo*. (Paris : Vrin, 1966).
41. See Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding, “Dragons, clochettes, pagodes et mandarins”, 103-119.

ABSTRACTS

The present article seeks to analyze the presence and the symbolical meaning of oriental, and in particular Chinese, porcelain in English interiors in the 17th and 18th centuries. It examines how porcelain, through its dual status as both a natural and artificial artifact, and its exotic association with the Far East, contributed to the development of the rococo in the decorative arts in England and became a metonymy for women and the female material world.

Le présent article analyse la présence et la signification symbolique de la porcelaine orientale, et particulièrement chinoise, dans les intérieurs anglais au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècle. Il montre que par son statut à la fois naturel et artificiel, et par l'exotisme extrême-oriental auquel elle fut associée, la porcelaine orientale contribua à nourrir le courant rococo dans les arts décoratifs anglais et devint une métonymie du féminin et de l'univers matériel féminin.

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Mots-clés: porcelaine, rococo, chinoiserie, Chine, thé, curiosité, oriental

Keywords: porcelain, rococo, chinoiserie, China, tea, curiosity, oriental

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