



Room of a Thousand Porcelains

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*Figure 1. The Porcelain Room,
2007, Seattle Art Museum*

Teeming with more than one thousand magnificent European and Asian pieces, the Seattle Art Museum's Porcelain Room, which opened in May 2007, was conceived to blend visual excitement and a sense of wonder with an historical concept. (fig. 1) The lion's share of porcelain on display here is eighteenth-century European, combined with eighty-seven Chinese porcelains and thirty-nine of Japanese origin. In tribute to porcelain's beauty and honored tradition, this integrated architectural and decorative scheme evokes a time when porcelain was a highly treasured art and valuable trade commodity.

The story of European rooms filled floor to ceiling with porcelain begins in the seventeenth century when control of the East-West maritime trade shifted from the Portuguese and Spanish to the Dutch. Costly porcelain began to flood into Europe when the Dutch, with their larger and faster ships, entered the Eastern trade and catered to the captivated European market. Integrating porcelain into interior design in palaces and great houses, from Queen Mary's gallery at Kensington Palace to Czar Peter the Great's porcelain room at his palace, *Monplaisir*, in St. Petersburg, became a symbol of power, prestige, and pure pleasure.



Figure 2. Porcelain Room, c. 1710, Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin. Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg.



Figure 3. One wall, Porcelain Room, Seattle Art Museum.

One of the most famous of the grand porcelain rooms is in the Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin. (fig.2) Built around 1710 by the Elector of Brandenburg-Prussia Frederick III for his wife Sophie Charlotte, this baroque extravaganza has been wonderfully restored with the aid of historical documents. The modern-day porcelain room in Seattle references but does not copy the baroque-styled porcelain rooms of the past. (fig.3) The shallow niches, twelve inches deep, and the use of Amiran® anti-reflective glass accommodate the concept of a room with walls covered with porcelain,

almost like wallpaper, rather than standard museum casework filled with porcelain. Like Charlottenburg, our room features niches alternating with mirrors as well as a frieze, but the general design of the room and the gilded but simple brackets on which the porcelain is displayed are meant to be harmonious with a contemporary, rectilinear building.

Most European porcelain rooms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had coved and ornately decorated ceilings. Creating an illusion of looking up into a light-filled sky populated with allegorical figures, the fresco ceiling painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770) crowns the Porcelain Room and

completes the sense of standing in a palatial space, not a museum gallery. The Porto family, famed for their military valor, commissioned the painting, c. 1757, for their palace designed by Andrea Palladio (1508–1580), in the town of Vicenza. Tiepolo's oil sketch for the fresco is featured on a wall in the room.¹

Behind the scenes: how we did it

The endeavor of creating a porcelain room in today's time, in a modern building, was a challenge and a great odyssey. The opportunity for creative new installations arose in 2004 when the Seattle Art Museum began construction on a much-needed expansion of



Figure 4. Photoshop® image of one wall.

our downtown building.² Following years of displaying selections from the Seattle Art Museum’s premier collection of eighteenth-century European porcelain in discrete settings—on a tea table, in a period cabinet, or in a museum case—it was time to try something different. A modern day porcelain room grounded in history, but updated to the twenty-first century offered an exciting prospect.³

We designed the layout of the porcelain on a computer in Adobe® Photoshop® (fig.4), which provided great flexibility and reduced the need for excessive handling of the fragile objects. The actual installations are remarkably close to our computer-generated designs.⁴ (fig.5) Life-sized versions of the computer designs served as templates for the two preparators who installed the porcelain. (fig.6) Because it was impossible to put labels for the porcelain on the walls of the room, the versatile computer images also became the printed guidebook to the pieces on display. (The Porcelain Room Guide is available in the room for visitors, for sale in our

museum shop, and available online at SeattleArtMuseum.org, Online Publications.)

Earthquakes are an issue in Seattle. The challenge to design and manufacture custom mounts for every piece of porcelain in the room was undertaken by our internationally recognized mount-making department—two expert craftsmen worked exclusively on this project for eleven months. (fig.7) Fiber optic lighting softly illuminates the porcelain in the niches.

Today, porcelain—the high-fired, durable, white-bodied ceramic—is ubiquitous in our daily lives, from tableware to bathroom fixtures to space shuttle tiles. It is difficult to convey the exalted position that early porcelain held in the world of art and trade. By creating a beautiful visual experience that draws visitors into the room, we have the opportunity to tell the intriguing stories associated with the history of porcelain: from porcelain’s invention in China to maritime trade and Europe’s mania for collecting, as well as the intrigue that surrounded Europe’s discovery of the secret formula to produce this prized commodity, which at times was as precious as gold.



Figure 5. The wall installed.

A new take on displaying our collection

Forgoing the standard museum installation arranged by nationality, manufactory, and date, our porcelain is grouped by color and theme. One pair of niches glows with vibrant red glazes and decoration. Another pair displays traditional blue-and-white porcelain from China, Japan, and Europe. (fig.8) The large dish with a dragon motif represents Chinese export ware produced during the late Ming dynasty that inspired a tremendous European craze for

porcelain. (fig.9) The Dutch called this ware *kraakporselein*, probably named for Portuguese carracks, large sailing vessels that transported porcelain to Europe. *Kraak* porcelain covered the walls of early European porcelain rooms.

Another pair of niches features the theme West meets East. Here we explore cross-cultural tastes as reflected in the Western collecting of Asian porcelain and the international circulation of decorative motifs. (fig.10) The square bottle dating from the early eighteenth century best illustrates this theme. (fig.11) It is Japanese porcelain in the form of a Dutch glass gin bottle. The porcelain bottle was

Figure 6. Installation of the porcelain using to-scale versions of the computer images.

Figure 7. Installing the porcelain with custom mounts.



sent to Holland, where it was painted by a Dutch artist, in a Japanese decorative style derived from Chinese Ming and Qing examples. The painting depicts a phoenix and hibiscus flower alternating with a crane in flight above chrysanthemums.

As vast sums were drained from European royal coffers to buy Asian porcelain, aristocratic patrons all over Europe funded research projects to reproduce the elusive formula

for Chinese and Japanese porcelain. Augustus the Strong of Saxony finally claimed that honor. Under his aegis, an unlikely pair—a gentleman scientist, Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, and a renegade alchemist, Johann Friedrich Böttger, who had been attempting to turn heavy metals into gold—collaborated to produce a formula for porcelain. The German Meissen tea canisters of high-fire stoneware (1710–13) and porcelain (1715–20) represent their search for high-fire techniques and, at long last, their success with a porcelain formula that could compete with Asian porcelain. (fig. 12) The early ware contained alabaster and is known today as Böttger porcelain. Eventually, their formula evolved into what

became known as hard-paste porcelain, a mixture of kaolin and a feldspathic porcelain stone. In the second decade of the eighteenth century, a millennium after the Chinese first produced a white, thin, translucent ware, Europe's first true porcelain factory was established at Meissen, Germany. Its porcelain was popularly known as "white gold."

Early porcelain was the domain of emperors and kings. In the niches featuring blue glazes (fig. 13), many combined with other enameled colors and vibrant gilding, we find a pair of deep-blue bowls that bear the imperial mark for the Kangxi emperor (1654–1722). (fig. 14) Single-color glazes, which are extremely

demanding in their composition and firing, represent the greatest achievement in porcelain production during the Qing dynasty. The French flower vase (*cuvette*), decorated with a vibrant *bleu céleste* ground color, was the centerpiece of a garniture of five vases that belonged to Madame de Pompadour (1721–1764), the influential mistress of Louis XV (1710–1774). (fig. 15) They were displayed at Saint-Ouen, one of her residences near Paris. Madame de Pompadour was a great patroness of the arts and powerful sponsor of the Vincennes manufactory.

The first established porcelain manufactories in England were underway in the mid-1740s. They produced a formula that com-

bined quartz and a fine clay, vitrified by glass frit and lime. This type of white-bodied translucent ware is known as soft-paste porcelain. The English nobility never embraced the idea of establishing porcelain manufactories for prestige. Artisans and merchants in private commercial businesses developed porcelain enterprises in England as an important part of the trade in luxury goods. Three coffee cups, now recognized as English 'A'-marked porcelain, are proof that intriguing mysteries constantly emerge in the world of porcelain study. (fig. 16) Made of hard-paste porcelain, they were created in the mid-1740s, a quarter of a century before anyone believed that the British were making a hard-paste ware. The



Figure 8 (opposite). Blue-and-White niches.

Figure 9. Large dish with dragon, c.1610–20, Chinese, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Jingdezhen, hard paste. Bequest of Joan Louise Applegate Dice, 91.40

deposits of kaolin clay necessary for the production of hard-paste porcelain had not yet been discovered in Britain at this time, but it has long been known that a twenty-ton load of kaolin was transported from the Carolinas in America to London in 1743–44. An early patent, registered in London by Thomas Frye and Edward Heylen on December 6, 1744 for a porcelain formula, describes this clay: "The material is an earth, the produce of the Chirokee nation in American, called by the natives *unaker*." Recent analyses have confirmed that the chemical make-up of 'A'-marked porcelain

is the same as this patent.⁵

In addition, research has identified the hand of an artist who painted floral decoration on both 'A'-Marked and early English Chelsea porcelain.⁶ More and more these mysterious wares fall into the camp of a short-lived porcelain enterprise of Heylyn and Frye before they established the Bow Porcelain Manufactory of New Canton in 1747. Only about forty porcelains, including these cups, have been recognized as being part of the rare group of wares produced under this patent. Our cups reflect a continued European interest in Asian-style ornamentation; the cup with enameled black panels alternating with flowers is in the *famille noire* style inspired by Chinese porcelain decorated with a black ground color, which was produced during the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722). The Japanese Kakiemon-style quail pattern, with its



Figure 10 (opposite). West meets East niches.

Figure 11. Square bottle, early 18th century, Japanese, Arita, hard paste. Dutch decorated, c.1720–35. Gift of Martha and Henry Isaacson, 76.99



characteristic palette of orange-red, blue, yellow, and brown, is the design source for the center cup. The white cup reflects the influence of Chinese Dehua porcelain, called *blanc de chine* in the West, with relief-molded decoration of *prunus* (plum blossoms). Asian-inspired forms and decoration are also evident in the early wares of the English Worcester Manufactory. The inverted baluster form of a vase (fig. 17) comes from a Kangxi original and the flowering plant motif is painted in a Chinese *famille verte* palette.

Birds, bugs, and beasts inhabit another pair of niches in the Porcelain Room. The figures of birds, recorded at the Bow factory as herons, are actually depictions of the mythical phoenix. This pair of lively porcelain phoenixes arose victorious from the fire of the Bow Manufactory kilns about three years after Bow was established. As the only known pair, they are extremely rare. (fig. 18)

Because porcelain could be molded and cast into lively sculptural, asymmetrical curving shapes, it was the perfect medium for the rococo style. Porcelain in this style, displayed in the niches between the doorways of the Porcelain Room, embodied the essence of European taste in the mid-eighteenth century. These are the only niches in the room based on style, rather than color or theme. Featured in this section is Meissen's version of Father Time, who strides relentlessly along, appropriately bearing a watch holder formed in an amorphous rococo shape. (fig. 19) He also carries one of his familiar attributes, a scythe. This personification of Father Time came from early confusion between the Greeks' word for time,

Figure 12. Hexagonal tea canister, c.1710–13, German, Meissen, unglazed Böttger stoneware; Hexagonal tea canister, c.1710–13, German, Meissen, Böttger stoneware with black glaze; Hexagonal tea canister, c.1715–20, German, Meissen, Böttger porcelain. Gifts of Martha and Henry Isaacson, 69.177, .178, .183.





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Figure 13 (opposite). Blue niches.

Figure 14. Bowls, 1662–1722, Chinese, Kangxi period, Jingdezhen, hard paste. Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection, 37.72.1–2.

Figure 15. Flower Vase (cuvette), 1755–56, French, Vincennes, painted by Louis-Denis Armand l'ainé (active 1745–83), soft paste, Purchased with funds from The Guendolen Carkeek Plestcheeff Endowment for the Decorative Arts, 99.8.

Figure 16. Coffee cups, c.1744, English, 'A'-marked porcelain, Frye and Heylyn's first patent, hard paste, Dorothy Condon Falknor Collection of European Ceramics. 87.142.127–129.

Figure 17. Fluted vase, c.1752, English, Worcester, soft paste, Kenneth and Priscilla Klepser Porcelain Collection, 94.103.1

chronos, and their old god of agriculture, Cronus, who carried a scythe. During the Renaissance, artists added wings to Father Time and gave him an hourglass, an attribute not included in the Seattle example's figure. Instead he would have carried a modern "hour-glass"—a timepiece—in the watch holder.

An illustrious past enriches the present

The Porcelain Room weaves together several grand collecting traditions in Seattle. Dr. Richard Fuller, founder and director of the Seattle Art Museum for forty years (1933–73), established the museum's original Asian porcelain collection. The story of European porcelain at the Seattle art Museum begins with one



Figure 18 (above). 'Herons', c.1750, English, Bow, soft paste, Gift of Martha and Henry Isaacson, 69.396.1-2

Figure 19 (right). *Father Time*, c.1745, German, Meissen, hard paste. Model by Johann Friedrich Eberlein (1695-1749), Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry C. Isaacson, 91.103



enterprising woman, Blanche M. Harnan. In the mid 1930s, Mrs. Harnan became interested in European porcelain, and in the 1940s and 50s she developed study groups of Seattle women to research and purchase examples of the great porcelain manufactories of Europe. They met monthly, orchestrated talks by experts, had informal exchanges of information, and most importantly, were privy to the shipment of barrels of porcelain on consignment from the dealer, William Lautz of New York, to be divided up among the eager members. The stated goal of the Seattle Ceramic Society was to acquire eighteenth-century European porcelain worthy of exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum. They convinced Dr. Fuller to have an exhibition from their collections in 1949, when 100 pieces of English and Continental porcelain were on view. In 1953 an exhibition of 300 works from the collections of twenty Society members went on view in the museum. The following year, Mrs. Harnan became the unsalaried Honorary Curator of European Porcelain.

Many of the Seattle Ceramic Society collections are now represented in the Porcelain Room. Especially noteworthy is Martha Isaacson's, whose gift of approximately 350 objects provided the foundation for our collection of European porcelain. The Society, however, did not accept gentlemen, so some European porcelain in our room represents holdings formed by individuals with a passion for porcelain who collected independently. Notable among these was Kenneth Klepser, who amassed a comprehensive 260-piece collection of English Worcester porcelain. The Isaacson and Klepser gifts made the Porcelain Room possible.

We created the Porcelain Room to be a beautiful installation of art. It also offers us the opportunity to exhibit a substantial quantity

of porcelain in a vibrant, historically based setting, and to tell the story of a time when the art of making white, translucent porcelain was considered a magical process. For visiting connoisseurs, it serves as open storage. In the past, many visitors to the museum strolled by the European porcelain installations with barely a glance. Very few people pass this room without being instantly intrigued and then irresistibly captivated by the tempting splendor within.

Notes

- 1 *The Triumph of Valor over Time*, c. 1757. Fresco transferred to canvas. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Italian, Venice, 1696-1770. Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. 61.170.
The Triumph of Valor over Time (preparatory sketch), c. 1757. Oil on canvas. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Italian, Venice, 1696-1770. Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. 61.169.
- 2 The Seattle Art Museum is one museum in three locations: **Seattle Art Museum** downtown, **Seattle Asian Art Museum** at Volunteer Park, and the **Olympic Sculpture Park** on the downtown waterfront. The downtown expansion project, designed by Allied Works Architecture, Portland, OR, and New York, NY, entailed construction of a new 16-story building that seamlessly connects to a renovation of the existing museum (1991) designed by Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates.
- 3 Jennifer Hing, the architect for the Porcelain Room, is with LMN Architects of Seattle, the Architect of Record for Tenant Improvements for the expansion project.
- 4 SAM exhibition designer, Paul Martinez, and I worked for several months on the computer designs.
- 5 Ross Ramsay and Anton Gabszewicz, "The Chemistry of 'A'-Marked Porcelain and its relation to the Heylyn and Frye Patent of 1744," *Transactions*, English Ceramic Circle, Vol. 18, Part. 2 (2003).
- 6 Errol Manners, "'A'-marked Porcelain and Chelsea; a connection," *Transactions*, English Ceramic Circle, Vol. 19, Part 3 (2007).