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CURRENT & COMING | *By Carolyn Kelly*

In conversation with....Shirley Mueller, Chinese export porcelain collector

October 5, 2009 | Shirley M. Mueller is a passionate collector and scholar of Chinese export porcelain who has written numerous articles on the subject (see below). We recently spoke to Mueller, who is as a



lender to the current exhibition at the

Bard

Graduate Center *Dutch New York Between East and West: The World of Margrieta van Varick* about her collection and what motivates this pursuit. For more on the exhibition see **this article** from our September 2009 issue.

How did you get interested in Chinese export porcelain?

In the early 1990s I was a neurologist, seeing patients and working 80 hours a week-I was never really relaxing. But then I found that when I read about Chinese porcelain I could relax, which led me to join the American Ceramic Circle, and I'm now on the board, but I remember going alone to the first meeting and not knowing anyone, just being driven by this desire to know more about porcelain. From there I began going to all kinds of conferences and even received some private tutorials from staff at Percival David in London. It became a driving force-kind of like medicine-except I didn't *have* to do it, and that was the difference. It was, and continues to be, a wonderful outlet, and has provided so much joy in my life. For me, collecting has been an intellectual pursuit-trying to figure out puzzles-but whether somebody takes that route or simply appreciates beauty or enjoys the community of people, in my mind all are valid reasons for collecting.

Could you give an example of the type of puzzle you try to solve?

What I have been working on for about four or five years is the development of the teapot form in Chinese export porcelain: what happened in the 1600s and 1700s, how the form changed, why it changed, and any documentation having to do with that. I've written three or four papers related to the subject. My current project is an analysis of fake and authentic Order of the Cincinnati service pieces. These were commissioned by Major Samuel Shaw beginning in 1785-a service was given to President George Washington, and another Shaw had made for himself-however in the 1970s a blank service was sold and then painted to look like the original Order of the Cincinnati pieces. This has caused a great deal of confusion about which is which, and has caused some collectors to pay enormous prices for pieces that are fakes. Chinese export porcelain doesn't go for as much as paintings, but I think the last Order of Cincinnati plate sold for \$96,000, which is no small change. Another topic I am planning to research is Eli Lilly, founder of the pharmaceutical company, and his collection of porcelain. He was the major founder of and large contributor to the Indianapolis Museum of Art, which is arguably the 11th best Chinese collection in the United States-largely due to him. I'm interested in studying his collecting habits around the 1940s to find parallels with collecting practices today.

Tell me about your own collection.

My task is more to learn than to enjoy the beauty of individual pieces. I collect Chinese export porcelain dating from 1600 on. There are about 270 pieces, most of which are pouring vessels. I have about ten earlier examples that I bought outside of my range, as all collectors probably do, which have nothing to do with my collection, and I think that the Chinese export will hold its value better than these because earlier pieces can be often more easily suspect.

In teapots I have about eighty examples, which are displayed chronologically, which would be difficult to do in a museum, but it allows me to see how changes evolved. For example, in the first part of the 1700s there will just be one perforation for the tea to strain through; about 1723 there are three; and then around 1750-60 there are up to seven, which shows a technological advance that would have appealed to



European taste.

Can you tell me about the pieces from your collection in the Margreita van Varick exhibition?

I've loaned two tea caddies and a Yixing teapot that are both representative of the kinds of things recorded in van Varick's inventory. I found the tea caddies when I was in Haarlem in the Netherlands with a study group. On a break, I visited some shops to see if I could find some porcelain, but there was nothing. At the last shop I started talking with the dealer and he invited me to see his private collection, which was displayed in his home-among them these tea caddies. I asked if he would sell them, and he said he would rather see them go to a private home than to a dealer, so we struck a deal. They have tea leaves painted on them. They have the distinction of having been portrayed on the ceiling of the Porzellankammer of the Oranienburg Palace outside of Berlin, where Louise Henriette, Princess of Orange, kept her collection that was said to include 18,000 pieces of porcelain. The ceiling painting was destroyed in World War II, but there are pictures of it. I discovered this connection after reading an article ("Porcelain in the Clouds: Oriental ceramics depicted on the ceilings at Charlottenburg" by Phillip Allen) in the Oriental Ceramics Society of London's publication about four or five years ago.



Articles by Mueller for further reading:

"Chinese Export curiosities." *Oriental Art*, vol. XLVI, no. 1 (2000), pp. 16-27

"Surface Silver Decoration on Chinese export porcelain: A Survey." *Oriental Art*, vol. XLVII no. 3 (2001), pp. 56-64.

"Surface Silver Decoration on Chinese export porcelain: An Analytic Approach." *Oriental Art*, vol. XLVIII no. 4 (2002), pp. 43-46.

"Seventeenth Century Chinese Export Teapots: Imagination and Diversity." *Oriental Art*, vol. 36 no. 7 (October 2005), pp. 59-65.

"Eighteenth Century Chinese Export Teapots: Fashion and Uniformity." *American Ceramic Circle Journal*, vol. XIII (2005), pp. 6-16.

"Lifting the Lid: Early Chinese export teapots." *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, vol. 71 (2006-2007), pp. 89-93.

"Revelations of the Ca Mau Shipwreck: Chinese export porcelain teapots on the Cusp." *American Ceramic Journal*, vol. XV (2009), pp. 4-9.

"The Neuropsychology of the Collector" in *Collectible Investments For The High Net Worth Investor*, ed. Stephen Satchell (Academic Press, 2009), pp. 31-51.

Mueller recommends:

Chinese Export Porcelain in North America by Jean McClure Mudge (Clarkson Potter, 1986).

Images from above: Yixing teapot, China, 1680-90. Tea caddies, China, c. 1640. Ceiling of the Oranienburg Palace (and detail), 1697. *Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg*.