



FROM LEFT Fragonard's *The Swing*, a rococo masterpiece, The Wallace Collection; Bow figure c1760, £325; Chelsea-Derby-style frill vase, £450, both *Gentle Rattle of China*.



The Thrill of Rococo

This light-hearted style was brought to Britain in 1740 and was quickly embraced by the elite, says Willa Latham

When talking about British porcelain, I've made reference to the various styles of the late 18th and early 19th centuries: rococo, neoclassical, Georgian and Regency. And readers have asked about these terms – what are they and how do they differ? So let us pause to take a closer look. When British porcelain emerged in the mid 18th century, rococo was the prevailing art style. Today, we often use the term rococo for a style that could be described as 'bling', usually something way over the top with too many frills or cherubs. But, in the 18th century, rococo was a sophisticated style full of charm, elegance and excitement.

The name derives from the French word *rocaille*, meaning rocky terrain, or a rock garden, and also used for the pebble or shell-covered interiors of the grottoes that wealthy landowners created on their estates as spaces for intimate entertainment. *Rocaille*, both in its natural form and in the design of these strange grottoes, has a beauty that feels more like an organised chaos full of graceful shapes that let your imagination wander freely. In the preceding baroque era, design had been carefully considered: perfectly symmetrical

shapes, deep colours and lots of ornamentation with gilt and precious stones. Beauty was supposed to express the perfection of God, so you couldn't afford to do anything too unpredictable or playful. Shapes had gravitas and were ordered, as if firmly placed on Earth by the heavy hand of God.

Although rococo is sometimes referred to as 'late baroque', it is a rebellion against baroque: playful, asymmetric, unpredictable, and often filled with a sense of movement up into the sky as if flying away into the clouds. Heavy reds and greens were mostly replaced by soft pastel colours, and fanciful birds and insects appeared on porcelain, sometimes in unpredictable places. Contrary to previous art styles, rococo was not spearheaded by architects, but by the artisans who created the captivating array of furniture, silverwork and porcelain that embody its aesthetic.

Emerging in France in the 1730s, rococo developed among the elite as a way to entertain themselves and have some light-hearted enjoyment. This was also soon

ABOVE Derby figures of Jupiter and Juno riding the sky in their chariots, c1765; Worcester plate with 'fancy birds' set in rococo scrolls, c1770, £245, *Gentle Rattle of China*.

after the start of the Enlightenment era, a time when art became more secular and the all-powerful grip of the Church was questioned. Playfulness became fashionable and unpredictable curves stimulated people's coffee-infused brains. Some called the cavorting amorous couples and erotic cherubs superficial, illogical or scandalous. But to the young 18th-century nobility, this was a delightful break from fixed rules, full of light-hearted fun, grace and youthful love. After centuries of domination by the Church over all aspects of life including the arts, what was not to love about this new and exciting art form?

French and Walloon Huguenot refugee artisans brought rococo to Britain in the 1740s, and their British counterparts quickly took notice. Much of this cultural exchange happened at Slaughter's Coffee House in St Martin's Lane in London, where artists and craftsmen had been meeting for decades to share ideas and designs. Around 1735 they had started St Martin's Lane Academy, the forerunner of the Royal Academy of Arts. But it wasn't just British artisans who met at Slaughter's; there were politicians and scientists, as well as a host of foreign immigrants.

Imagine Thomas Gainsborough and William Hogarth discussing the principles of art, while Benjamin Franklin and Richard Price quietly play chess in the background. The furniture designer Thomas Chippendale, who had his workshop across the road, reads the latest chapter from his seminal guide to furniture design, still widely used today. Josiah Wedgwood discusses the latest developments in the natural sciences with Joseph Priestley and Captain James Cook, as Italian artist Antonio Zucchi is arguing with French political agitator Jean-Paul

Marat... And all of this is fuelled by a generous supply of coffee and brandy.

This is where British rococo was born and, once porcelain factories started to establish themselves across Britain, beautiful rococo pieces followed. Elegant, airy figures were placed on bases with elaborate scrolls; bizarre frill vases embodied the height of unpredictability and frivolity; and what had been humble dinnerware before, now received finely scrolled shapes, often copied from silver dishes.

The 18th century was an era of excess just for the few, however – a pleasure reserved for royalty and the top layer of nobility. Everyone else would make do with much simpler designs, not only because they didn't have the money, but they wouldn't dream of competing with those who had real power in society.

This wasn't to last, though; deep political shifts in European society, including Britain, would change people's sensibilities in the later 18th century. And apart from that, well, don't we all get bored of any style after a while? At some point, all of this ornamentation would be abandoned in favour of something else, something more restrained, yet equally elegant... but that's for next time!

Willa Latham

Read Willa's blog gentlerattleofchina.com, follow her @gentlerattleofchina