



## THE STORY OF IMARI DESIGN

On her tour of the British porcelain factories, **Willa Latham** pauses to marvel at this often-encountered decorative style

Originally a traditional Japanese style, Imari found a special place in British porcelain design. Even today, an updated version is produced by the last surviving original English porcelain factory in Derby, but this style has a long and complicated history.

The story starts more than 400 years ago in 1616, when kaolin, the clay necessary to produce porcelain, was found in the hills near the port of Imari in the Arita area of Japan. Soon, kilns were churning out imitations of blue-and-white Korean porcelain; Imari, on the south-western coast of Japan, is just a ferry-ride away from Busan in Korea, and it is likely that Korean potters helped the Japanese develop this industry.

**ABOVE FROM TOP** Two English Imari plates: a Chelsea English plate c1750 (faithful copy of Japanese style) and a Coalport plate c1820 (mixing in English flowers and fantasy birds); examples of the 'teapot race': an early 18th-century Dutch Delft teapot, a mid 18th-century Chinese Imari teapot, and an English Worcester outside-decorated teapot from a few years later. **FACING PAGE, FROM TOP** Spode serving dish, c1812; Coalport John Rose teacup and saucer with Regency Imari pattern no. 128, c1815.

There wasn't only cultural exchange with Korea, though. In China, the early Qing era brought several decades of war and chaos before the new Kangxi Emperor had established himself. The huge Chinese porcelain export from Jingdezhen was interrupted as the kilns were damaged, creating a gap in the global porcelain market for Japan to fill. It also drove Chinese refugees to Japan, taking many skills with them and teaching the Japanese how to use overglaze colours on porcelain. Soon, the Japanese would add beautiful colourful images to their porcelain.

An abundance of this colourful Arita ware left the harbour of Imari on Dutch East India Company ships; by this time, Japan had isolated itself from the world and only traded through the Dutch East India Company. And this is when the porcelain started to be called 'Imari'. Initially, the style was what we now call 'Kakiemon': sparse but elegant paintings, usually nature themed, in a rusty overglaze of red, yellow, green and fresh blue. Later, a denser style was developed in underglaze blue, with warm overglaze reds and gilt. For the export market, the Japanese added the Chinese 'Kraak' style of dividing the design

elements into panels, which was popular in Europe. At the same time, Dutch traders introduced designs from the Netherlands to be copied. You can sometimes find very European-looking images on Japanese Imari: hunting parties, or a Dutch vase of flowers. And, of course, it didn't take long before the first earthenware producers in Delft started to imitate this new Japanese fashion: the first emergence of European Imari.

By the 18th century, China had stabilised and the kilns in Jingdezhen were fired up again. Even in those days, the Chinese had phenomenal capacity for cheap mass-production that brilliantly absorbed any desired style. Soon, Chinese output of imitation Imari eclipsed the Japanese market. Huge quantities were now exported from China to Europe, and these were as Japanese as they were Chinese, with the occasional Indian or European element thrown in, too.

And it didn't stop there. Europeans, by now familiar with East Asian porcelain, demanded similar designs from their own new factories, and this saw the emergence of beautiful German, French and English porcelain, both in the Kakiemon and the Imari styles. In Britain, Chelsea made some wonderful designs, and Worcester started nothing less than a teapot race with China. If a new teapot was designed in Worcester, a couple of years later (as it took about two years to travel by boat) it would appear, slightly updated, in China; but then it wouldn't take long before a new version was created in Worcester.

And why imitate something if you can't adapt it to your own taste? Early British porcelain makers faithfully copied the designs they received from China, and you can find wonderful imitations from Worcester or Spode. But Imari soon developed its own very British elements, while many East Asian elements got distorted. Dragons, kylins and hibiscus trees were commonplace in East Asia but, in England, the painters didn't always know what they were copying, creating entirely new grotesque beasts, and trees with large flowers stuck onto them. Cranes would become storks; the odd lion appeared; and in the famous 'Finger and Thumb' pattern, the morning mist turned into a strange, shadowy hand. Then, the occasional English rose popped up, and first neoclassical and then Victorian decorative scrolls, ribbons and festoons, followed by French 'Sèvres' birds. Chamberlain Worcester even put an American eagle in an Imari design to celebrate the newly formed United States.

And so, Imari had become a truly British style, exported all over the world as Britain had taken over China's role as global potter... but now you know where it really began.

*Willa Latham*

Read Willa's blog [gentlerattleofchina.com](http://gentlerattleofchina.com), follow her @gentlerattleofchina

### IMARI OR KAKIEMON?

What to look for...

- Both originate from Arita in Japan, shipped out of the harbour of Imari
- Kakiemon usually contains elegant nature-themed images in rusty red, green, yellow and fresh blue
- Followed by the more decorative Imari, in underglaze cobalt blue and liberal overglaze red and gilt, and also other colours
- The Chinese Kraak-style compartments were added to European export porcelain, not to the Japanese domestic market
- Chinese Imari imitations usually don't have gilt, as this was not available in China
- British makers quickly started imitating it – and added the gilt again
- Gradually, the British added English roses, birds, festoons, ribbons – anything you can imagine!

