

In pursuit of white gold

Willa Latham begins her series on the history of British porcelain with a closely guarded secret...



The story of British porcelain starts over 3,000 years ago in China. By around AD100 the Chinese were making hard, high-fired pottery containing kaolin clay and petuntse rock, a material we now call stoneware. They kept improving it for many more

years until one day, in about AD800, they achieved the perfect translucency that we associate with porcelain.

Soon they had built huge 'dragon ovens' that could fire up to 23,000 pieces at a time. The city of Jingdezhen in southern China became, and still is, the centre of this colossal industry, bellowing out fire and smoke and creating towering mounds of pottery waste. A lively trade emerged, first to the Islamic world, then onwards to Europe. Marco Polo brought a small, beautifully textured jar back to Venice in 1295. Because of the wonderfully smooth, translucent surface of this material, the Venetians called it *porcellini*, or little pigs, which was also their word for cowrie shells. And so, porcelain became a thing in Europe.

Small consignments of these coveted blue and white pieces would find their way along the Silk Route to Europe. Then, in 1507, the Portuguese started the organised trade of porcelain in ships called *carracks* – hence the name kraak ware, which is applied to this early Chinese export porcelain. In 1602, the Dutch ransacked some of these vessels, selling off the contents to all the nobility of Europe. This strategic move created a huge demand and prompted the Dutch VOC to establish its own trade links with China. The English East India Company followed suit a bit later.

Blue and white wares became all the rage in Europe. Look closely at the still lifes of the Dutch 17th-century masters and you will see beautiful blue and white kraak bowls, plates, chargers and jugs. Once Europeans had seen real porcelain, they couldn't get enough of it! But the Chinese recipe for porcelain was a closely guarded state secret. So what do we do if we can't have something? We imitate! And so, a beautiful, tin-glazed soft earthenware, now called Delftware, was developed to satisfy demand: it was cheap and looked just like the kraak ware that was so fashionable.

However, the Europeans' desire to make their own real porcelain sparked a mad dash to secure the recipe. Competition was so fierce that Europeans threw alchemy at their attempts to create this 'white gold'. And this is where the story becomes really bizarre. Augustus the Strong, King of Poland, kept a young alchemist called Johann Friedrich Böttger in protective custody – basically locked in a dungeon in Meissen, near Dresden – to make gold. In 1704, when Böttger's experiments had produced no results, the



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP A

Ming dynasty, Chongzhen period (1627–1644) kraak ware dish; a Meissen saucer, c1756–1780; Delftware tin-glazed earthenware dish, c1660.

frustrated Augustus employed a famous scientist, Graf von Tschirnhaus, to work with him. But Von Tschirnhaus had very different plans: he was not looking for mere gold; he was looking for white gold.

Finally, in 1708, after four years of hair-raisingly dangerous and noxious experiments (which Edmund de Waal brilliantly describes in his book, *The White Road*) Von Tschirnhaus and Böttger created their first piece of porcelain, using a combination of alabaster and locally mined kaolin. This was the beginning of European porcelain. Soon the Meissen factory was established and it is still in operation today.

But this is not the only crazy part of the story. While the alchemists were busy in Meissen, a French Jesuit father, Père d'Entrecolles, was moonlighting as a spy in the porcelain factories of Jingdezhen. In 1712, a detailed account of Chinese porcelain production was published in a book. A Jesuit father, welcomed to China as a man of religion and integrity, divulging the country's most closely guarded secret is pure James Bond! Yet he certainly helped speed things up, and France started making soft-paste porcelain at St Cloud. This contained vitreous material which resulted in a beautiful, perfect body – although not as strong as the Chinese and Meissen hard-paste porcelain. St Cloud gave way to Vincennes, which became Sèvres, also still in operation today. Meanwhile, in Britain, the English East India Company was busy importing Chinese porcelain on a vast scale, and it wasn't until the early 1740s that porcelain production came to these shores. The British may have been late to the game, but, as always, once they arrived on the scene they were highly innovative... but that's for next time!

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