

# Representing Women: Female Imagery in Qing Society and Decoration on Porcelain in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

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During the so-called Transitional Period (1620-1683), producers of Chinese porcelain expanded their repertoire of decoration; female representations became increasingly central in transforming the visual habits of porcelain's potential customers—both domestic and international. The three objects from the Dresden State Art Collections (SKD) to be discussed in this short essay serve as examples that indicate a range of different types of female images were prevalent in porcelain decoration. However, it was not unique to the porcelain industry to exhibit women in various ways that were visually appealing to the viewer. The profusion of female images was a cross-media phenomenon in daily aesthetics that flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Compared to earlier cases representing goddesses and court ladies, female imagery became more nuanced under particular social and cultural circumstances. This essay ultimately seeks to illuminate the issue of how this circulation of female images affected the social norms associated with women in Qing society.

Three selected objects—a dish, a saucer, and a jar—are blue and white porcelain and produced in Jingdezhen during the Kangxi period (1662-1722) (figs. 8.1-8.5). The dish is decorated with a scene from the popular drama, *The Romance of the Western Chamber* 西厢记 (fig. 8.1).<sup>1</sup> The elder woman sitting at the center of the scene is Madam Cui, mother of the main figure, Cui Yingying. Suspecting a secret dalliance between her daughter and Zhang Sheng (Zhang Junrui), Madam Cui interrogates Yingying's maid, Hongniang, who kneels in front of her. On the rim are six reserves in diaper background, in which a wide range of flowers (peony, plum flower, lotus, and a chrysanthemum spray) are featured. The rim's base is decorated with three flower sprays; a Chenghua (1465-1487) reign date is inscribed on the base, probably placed there to intentionally fake a much earlier date for the piece's production (fig. 8.2).<sup>2</sup>

The saucer is decorated with a scene of two beauties flanking a flower pot in the center (fig. 8.3). The foreground is filled with schematic rocks and plants, indicating landscape. Two tall trees frame the central scene, while branches extend over the heads of the two female figures. The central motif of two beauties with a flower spray is repeated on the rim in eight reserves. The ladies are called “Long Eliza,” a term translated from Dutch “Lange Lijzen,” which signifies the elongated women figures as decora-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Romance of the Western Chamber* is a romantic story of the beauty, Cui Yingying, and the scholar, Zhang Junrui. It was first written by the poet and scholar Yuan Chen 元稹 (778-831 AD) as a short story during the Tang dynasty. In the Yuan dynasty, the story was adapted and expanded by Wang Shifu 王实甫 (active 1295-1307), and named *Xixiangji* 西厢记 [Romance of the Western Chamber].

<sup>2</sup> Dating provided by the Dresden State Art Collections indicates this dish is from the Kangxi period yet there is a clearly inscribed Ming dynasty Chenghua reign date on the base, which is almost two centuries earlier in the fifteenth century than the Kangxi period in the late seventeenth century; further, the Kangxi period is in the Qing dynasty.

tion on porcelain. Four continuous flower sprays decorate the rim base of the saucer, and a six-character Kangxi date is inscribed on the foot (fig. 8.4).<sup>3</sup>

One jar has a complex decoration program in which the body is divided into four registers by three narrow bands (fig. 8.5). The lower section hosts eight, leaf-shaped panels, each containing different kinds of flowers or animals. Four flowers—peonies, chrysanthemums, plum flowers, and peach blossoms—alternate with elephants, tigers, lions, and *qilin* 麒麟. The middle section is decorated with four big panels against blue ground. Each section depicts a scene of a female beauty in their daily lives. Some are standing on bridges, enjoying scenes of fish and flowers, etc. Others are assembled in pavilions, chatting, playing chess or performing musical instruments. The shoulder of the jar features eight *ruyi* 如意-shaped panels, inside of which are ancient bronzes, jade and other so-called *bogu* 博古 (antiquities or relics) motifs. The neck of the jar is surrounded by panels filled with geometric motifs, while the cover is decorated with what seems to be narrative scenes.

Comparing the pictorial program of the three porcelain objects, the way women are represented differs in each. On the *West Chamber* dish, female figures are depicted in a narrative context (fig. 8.1). They are fictional. The decoration on the rim emphasizes the atmosphere of a female world, in contrast to another example of a *West Chamber* plate, where the beginning of the story with Zhang Sheng visiting the temple is depicted (fig. 8.6). The decoration on the rim of this Zhang Sheng plate instead contains auspicious Buddhist symbols, which complement the central narrative. The saucer emphasizing the “long Eliza” motif, on the other hand, features a repetitive pattern to reinforce the generic image of stylized beautiful women (fig. 8.3). Instead of fictional or generic women, the jar offers some convincing moments of the real world to entertain or satisfy consumers (fig. 8.5).

The three objects differ in their strategies of representing women. Interestingly enough, the types of female representations circulate across media on their surfaces and are also seen on contemporary paintings and prints. While female figures were a frequent subject in the history of Chinese painting, the mythical and virtuous aspects had long been the main emphasis; these include themes such as those in Gu Kaizhi’s *Nymph of the Luo River* 洛神賦 and paintings of court ladies, which flourished from the Tang dynasty (618-907) onward. *The Romance of the Western Chamber* 西廂記, a famous romance tale featured on the Dresden porcelain under consideration, had begun to appear on ceramics in the Song Dynasty (960-1279).<sup>4</sup> During the seventeenth-century transitional period, narrative scenes became a major aspect of decoration on porcelain.<sup>5</sup> However, besides these idealized and easily recognizable characters, female images gradually transitioned from representing literary and religious figures to functioning as pure ornamentation. Similar to the plate with the “Long Eliza” motif, a bowl from the Porzellansammlung (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden) is also decorated with twelve beauties in stylized lotus-petal shaped panels; it dates from the Kangxi period (fig. 8.7). The beauties stand in a garden and hold a fan or flower; the scenes have no narrative context. Another example from the same collection also uses a similar decorative pattern, with alternating flower and beauty motifs, evoking the impression that the beautiful women are another form of floral decoration (fig. 8.8). The female figures are not portraits of contemporary individuals, but in fact they are generic beautiful women types as part of the object’s ornamentation program. It is as if each gesture of a beautiful lady on the surface represents visual pleasure for its consumer. This rhetoric explains the proliferation of such images on commercial objects.

<sup>3</sup> The Kangxi period corresponds to 1662-1722.

<sup>4</sup> Wen-Chin Hsu, “Illustrations of *Romance of the Western Chamber* on Chinese Porcelains: Iconography, Style, and Development,” *Ars Orientalis* 40 (2011): 39.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Little, *Chinese Ceramics of the Transitional Period: 1620-1683* (New York: China House Gallery, China Institute in America, 1983), 11.

Scenes of the everyday life in the female domain did not only circulate in the commercial world. A new type of painting, ‘the beautiful women painting’ (*meiren hua* 美人畫), as coined by James Cahill, also enjoyed great popularity in the Qing dynasty (1644-1912).<sup>6</sup> Different from former court lady paintings, where emphasis was on the depiction of daily activities of elite life, Qing beautiful women paintings abandoned the birds-eye-view of an external observer and created instead an intimate, internal perspective for the viewer. The women depicted were schematized beauty icons, such as Mang Huli’s 莽鶴立 *Seated Lady Holding a Fan* (fig. 8.9). Such representations of a female sitter—holding a fan and sitting on the bed in her boudoir—were typical for the so-called *meiren hua* genre of Chinese painting. This particular work, however, cannot be generic, as a painter of great repute such as Mang Huli would not have produced a painting conforming to this trend. This painting might rather have meant to be a portrait of a court lady or a gentry woman, since Mang was once asked to paint a portrait of the Kangxi emperor (who reigned from 1662-1722).<sup>7</sup> If so, the reserve which was used in imperial or upper-class portraits was replaced with a touch of intimacy. Additionally, other works further removed the mythic halo of the goddess and brought idealized heroines into the mundane world. A festival scene of women and children is depicted in an applied mural (tieluo) in the Forbidden City’s Bower of Purest Jade dated to the same period; the figures are an extension of the room’s architectural space (fig. 8.10). Such illusionistic depiction, enabled by the technique of perspective, erases the boundary between the real and the pictorial world. The figures are therefore more tangible to the viewer.

These stylistic, iconographic, and functional transitions in the female form were a result of multiple factors. First, beginning in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (seventeenth century), courtesan culture developed in the Jiangnan area, which inspired studio artists in the city of Suzhou and its surrounding area to depict a new type of female figure distinct from those in popular literature and mythical tales. The taboo of representing worldly women, and the moral label attached to such depictions, seemed to be removed under new circumstances. To consume beauty, as embodied in the beautiful women motif, had become publicly accepted as a common, cultural norm. Second, as trade with Europe (and America) rapidly increased, the need for new, appealing motifs diversified the decorative scenes and pushed commercial artists to turn to popular romantic literature for inspiration. Third, during the age of expanded exchange between China and Europe in the eighteenth century, ‘realistic’ or naturalized depictions of the female form from Europe became familiar to Chinese artists. Techniques of perspective and illusion proved to be the new aesthetic standard, as evident in their wide application in the domains of court painting and architecture. By comparing an undated scroll by an anonymous painter (ca. 1720s), *Finishing the Coiffure*, with a work by Gerard Dou dated to 1667, James Cahill connects the daily scenes in Chinese painting from the late Ming dynasty to seventeenth century Dutch genre painting (figs. 8.11-8.12).<sup>8</sup> This conceptual bridge suggests affinities between seventeenth-century Dutch painting and works depicting courtesans of the same period in China. And it offers us an explanation for the sudden boost of the representation of quotidian female themes in painting: women in domestic settings was one of the frequent themes in genre painting of the Dutch Golden Age. Something similar seems to have happened in Chinese painting of the same period (for different reasons).

By introducing scenes of women’s quotidian experience, the moral implications that surrounded earlier female depictions began to disappear. Instead, a sense of intimacy made female beauty more

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6 James Cahill, *Meiren Hua: Paintings of Beautiful Women in China*, chap. in *Beauty Revealed: Images of Women in Qing Dynasty Chinese Painting*, ed. J. Cahill (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2013), 9-21.

7 Yu Jianhua, *Zhongguo meishu jia renming cidian* 中国美术家人名词典 [Biographical Dictionary of Famous Chinese Artists]. (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishers, 1981), 928.

8 James Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 82.

tangible, to the extent that such paintings were used to advertise and promote sexual favors in the pleasure industry (**fig. 8.13**). When courtesans and prostitutes began to be freely represented to the public, however, it was not as if it came about quickly or in a moment of whim. The long road to general acceptance by the public had already been built through previous eras through a flourishing of commercial imagery, as the examples discussed in this essay highlight.

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**Fig. 8.1** Dish. Blue and white porcelain. Made in Jingdezhen, China. Kangxi Period (1662-1722), Qing dynasty. H. 3.1 cm, D. 27.0 cm, D. footring 14.6 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 1386. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.



**Fig. 8.2** Dish (base). Blue and white porcelain. Made in Jingdezhen, China. Kangxi Period (1662-1722), Qing dynasty. H. 3.1 cm, D. 27.0 cm, D. footring 14.6 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 1386. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.



**Fig. 8.3** Saucer. Blue and white porcelain. Made in Jingdezhen, China. Kangxi Period (1662-1722), Qing dynasty. H. 6.5 cm, D. 34.8 cm, D. footring 19.4 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 1257. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.



**Fig. 8.4** Saucer (base). Blue and white porcelain. Made in Jingdezhen, China. Kangxi Period (1662-1722), Qing dynasty. H. 6.5 cm, D. 34.8 cm, D. footring 19.4 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 1257. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.



**Fig. 8.5** Covered Jar. Blue and white porcelain. Made in Jingdezhen, China. Kangxi Period (1662-1722), Qing dynasty. H. 110.7 cm, H. without lid 96.2 cm, D. 48.0 cm, D. footring 29.8 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 1018. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.





**Fig. 8.6** Dish. Blue and white porcelain. Made in Jingdezhen, China. Kangxi Period (1662-1722), Qing dynasty. H. 3.5 cm, D. 27.5 cm, D. footring 16.0 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 1385. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.



**Fig. 8.7** Bowl. Blue and White Porcelain, Jingdezhen, China. Kangxi Period (1662-1722), Qing dynasty. H. 11.8 cm, D. 24.0 cm, D. footring 9.3 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 1922a. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.



**Fig. 8.8** Vase. Blue and white porcelain. Made in Jingdezhen, China. Kangxi Period (1662-1722), Qing dynasty. H. 30.0 cm, D. 10.5 cm, D. footring 6.9 cm. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Porzellansammlung, Inv. No. PO 7059. © Porzellansammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Foto: Adrian Sauer.



**Fig. 8.9** Mang Huli 莽鹤立, *Seated Lady Holding a Fan*, 18th c., hanging scroll, ink and color on silk; 168.9 × 111.1 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. W. James Anderson, Mrs. Samuel Bell, Jr., Mrs. Richard Drayton, and Charles T. Ludington, Jr., in memory of their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Townsend Ludington, 1970-259-2. © Philadelphia Museum of Art.



**Fig. 8.10** Yao Wenhan 姚文瀚 (active ca. 1760-1790) and atelier. Interior scene, Yucui Xuan 玉翠轩 (Bower of Purest Jade), 1751, wall hanging, ink and colors on paper, 30.5 × 48.6 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. After Liu Lihong, "Shadows in Chinese Art: An Intercultural Perspective." In Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu and Ding Ning, eds., *Qing Encounters: Artistic Exchanges between China and the West* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015), 206, fig. 6.



**Fig. 8.11** Leng Mei 冷枚 (ca. 1670-1742 or after), *Beautiful Woman at Dressing Table with Attendant*. Collection unknown. After James Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 83, fig. 3.13.



**Fig. 8.12** Gerald Dou, *Young Woman at Her Dressing Table*. d. 1667. Oil pigments on canvas. 75.5 × 58 cm. Museum Boijmans Van Beuvingen, Rotterdam. After James Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 83, fig. 3.14.



**Fig. 8.13** Hua Xuan 华烜 (act. ca. 1736), *Eight Beauties on the Balcony of a Brothel*. d. 1736. Framed panel painting, ink and colors on silk, 56 × 131 × 2 inches. Private collection. After James Cahill, Chen Fongfong, Nancy Berliner and Sarah Handler, eds., *Beauty Revealed: Images of Women in Qing Dynasty Chinese Painting* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2013), 113, cat. 26.