The earliest documented Ming-porcelain in Europe:
A gift of Chinese porcelain from Ferdinando de’ Medici (1549-1609) to the Dresden court

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The collection of East Asian porcelain in Dresden owes its existence to Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland (1670-1733). A great and insatiable collector, he had by 1727 amassed more than 24,000 pieces of Oriental porcelain to be displayed at the Japanese Palace, the world’s most spectacular “Porcelain Palace.”

In fact the most exquisite pieces of Chinese porcelain had first arrived in Dresden more than 100 years earlier.

In 1590, the Grand Duke Ferdinando de’ Medici of Tuscany (1549-1609) gave sixteen pieces of Chinese porcelain as a gift to the Elector Christian I of Saxony (1560-1591). Eight of these are to be seen in the Dresden Porcelain Collection (fig. 1) and at least two, the famous phoenix-shaped wine jug and the small crayfish-shaped vessel, are recorded in the 1579 inventory of the Medici collections. They, therefore, represent the earliest documented Ming porcelain in Europe. These pieces of Chinese porcelain were of course not the first to appear in Europe. A very early “German” example is the famous Chinese celadon-bowl, a Longquan piece (10th-14th century), which was mounted in typical Gothic style in the Rhineland c.1435. It is now in the Treasury (the Schatzkammer) in Kassel, Germany. It belonged to Duke Philipp von Katzenelnbogen, who went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (1433-1434) and bought this bowl in Akka, the town situated at the Mediterranean end of the trade route from China via Baghdad and Damascus.

In the 15th and 16th century Chinese porcelain was collected throughout the Near East, Persia, the Ottoman Empire and Egypt. Important collections were formed in the Ardabil-Shrine by Shah Abbas in Persia and by the Ottoman rulers in the Topkapi Sarai in Istanbul. From these countries Chinese porcelain was traded all over Europe, especially to Italy, as Italian merchants had long plied a vigorous trade with Egypt, Syria and Turkey.

Depictions of Chinese porcelain in Italian painting show how highly it was valued. For example, it was considered precious enough to be presented as a gift by the Magi to the Christ Child and for the gods and goddesses of antiquity to feast from.

Andrea Mantegna’s Adoration of the Magi, painted 1497-1500, shows the first wise man offering a blue and white cup full of pieces of gold. The cup is of a rather unorthodox shape, but its decoration would do for a contemporary Chinese piece.

The famous Feast of the Gods by Giovanni Bellini, in the National Gallery Washington, is dated 1514. It was painted originally either for Isabella d’Este or for Alfonso d’Este. The scene is based on a passage in Ovid, and may commemorate the marriage of Alfonso to Lucrezia Borgia. The gods are shown feasting and dining from Chinese porcelain, with the three blue and white bowls depicted bearing the scrolling decoration typical of 15th century Chinese porcelain.

It would not have been difficult for Bellini to have seen Chinese porcelain. Porcelain could easily have
reached Venice as a gift from the Sultan of Cairo to the Doges and other prominent figures between about 1442 and 1451 in the Doge Pasquale Malpiero of Venice received twenty pieces of porcelain as a gift from the Egyptian Sultan Al-Hakim and, in 1490, porcelain was received by the Doge Agostino Barbarigo. As both he and his successor Lorenzo were painted by Bellini, the artist certainly must have had access to the Palazzo Ducale.

It was not only the gods who dined from Chinese porcelain. According to Vespasiano da Bisticcio’s Lives of Illustrious Men, written between 1482 and 1498, a 15th-century Florentine scholar, Nicolaio Nicoli, was so cultured that he ate “from the most beautiful antique porcelain” mentioned in the record of Lorenzo il Magnifico (1449-1492), including pieces sent as diplomatic gifts, for example, some 20 pieces given by the Egyptian Sultan to Lorenzo in 1487.

In the 16th century, Cosimo I (1519-1574) and his son Francesco I (1541-1587) excelled as art collectors and collectors of porcelain. In 1553, the inventory of Cosimo’s collections featured more than 400 pieces of porcellana, of the blue and white and the green caldonino type.2

Cardinale di Medici, Francesco I, collected porcelain in Rome. An alchemist with a wide interest in the arts, he is regarded as the inventor of Medici porcelain along with his imperial collaborator Bernardo Buontalenti (1536-1608).3 It is difficult to know from the 1571 inventory, in which 163 pieces are recorded, if those referred to as porcellane were made of ceramic, Medici porcellana, or, on the other hand, Chinese.4 For example, the inventory reads, un vaso grande di porcellana, renuto da li Medici... It could be Chinese, but, unfortunately, we do not know for sure because the descriptions are too vague.

Cardinale Ferdinando (1549-1609), a son of Cosimo I, was his greatest collector of porcelain. His collections of Greek and Roman sculptures, bronzes and paintings were housed in the Villa Medici in Rome and are the prototype for the opulence and splendour of Renaissance collecting.

Ferdinando was a passionate collector of porcelain. Again we do not know if the porcellane mentioned in the inventories and lists was majolica, Islamic or Chinese but it seems that there were numerous pieces of Chinese, because in October 1571 the Cardinale gave 80 pieces of porcellana di l’Inde (probably Chinese porcelain) to his cousin Ippolita, Duchess of Bracciano. In 1587, Ferdinando became Grand-duke of Tuscany and moved his collections from Rome to Florence, where they were housed in the Palazzo Pitti.

His collection of Chinese porcelain seems to have grown to more than 500 pieces by 1590, when (on the 26th February) Cardinale Ferdinando gave 14 pieces of Chinese porcelain to Christian I of Saxony.

The Saxon electors of the 16th century aimed to turn Dresden into a princely city and to establish themselves as rulers of European importance. This meant modernisation, particularly in the cultural field, and modernisation meant Italianisation.5

Towards the middle of the century the Elector Moritz (1521-1553) went on a journey to Italy and had his portrait painted by Titian in 1547. His successor, Elector Augustus (1526-1586), created even closer links with Italy and after his death in 1586 Christian I became the Elector, but ruled only until 1591.

All these Saxon electors made great efforts to attract Italian artists, architects, craftsmen and musicians across the Alps to Dresden6 and there was a steady migration of artists from Florence especially. The aristocratic architect Rosso di Lino, who came from Tuscany and was educated with Cosimo Medici, worked in Dresden and went on diplomatic missions to Florence, Ferrara and Mantua in 1572. On his return he brought gifts for the Elector Augustus, which initiated an exchange of presents between the two courts.

For their part, the Medici sought good relationships with those German princes who could provide them with skilled mining and artillery specialists. In 1587, the Medici sent three works by the great sculptor Giovanni da Bologna (1529-1608) to the Dresden court. One, his famous figure of Mercury (mercurio in the gallese) is still one of the artistic highlights of the Green Vault in Dresden.

Christi I loved everything Italian. He studied the language and Italian etiquette with the architect Carlo Thiti, who served as Saxon envoy to Florence in 1585. He was particularly fascinated by the sophisticated Italian equestrian technique and in 1587 sent envoys to Italy to bring back Italian horses. An inventory of 1595 confirms his enthusiasm for such matters, recording many hippological works in both Italian and French. Inspired by Florentine architecture he built the most magnificent stables of the day in the castle at Dresden for his 128 horses.

As an art collector Christian’s ambition was to enlarge the Kunstkammer to make it of European importance, and he was assisted in his ambition when, in 1590, a gift of Chinese porcelain arrived at the Dresden court from the Medici. This was the very first real porcelain to appear in Dresden.

There is a registro dei doni (register of gifts), which was kept at the Medici court in Florence by the mastro di costi Giovanni del Maestro.7 He packed three boxes for the Dresden court: one with items made of gold and silver and paintings - it would be interesting to see what the description quod de l’Inde a fregio e possè (four paintings from India with figures and landscapes) actually meant, or, alternatively, what a box schiudino tendo della Cina, de l’Inde (a small, round Chinese box from India) looked like. It seems, that “from India” in this context and period just means “from the Far East”, meaning “exotic” as in English “Indian style” and in German “Indisch”.

In addition, the meostre di case added – and inventorialed – an extra box containing classic Italian gourmet fare. We read in the register about caiso Pampaneola, ap dolce, different kinds of prassutto, sotami di Frenze and sotami di Lombardia, rare delicacies like a bitte dolche sulatte (salted teas). To wash all this down there was good wine, numerous bottles of Greco di 48 anni, Vino Falangio di Solco or Triballano di Passo.

The registry of the box with gifts of porcelain includes 14 pieces. Most of the Chinese porcellanes are not specifically referred to, the register just says something like uno schiudino di porcellana (one porcelain bowl). But, some of the porcelain mentioned in the 1779 Medici inventory can be identified from the packing list. There is the boccali di porcellana de l’Inde o modò di drago, dorato e dipinto (a porcelain jug in the shape of a dragon, with gold and colours added), which can be identified as the phoenix ewer. The inventory of the Roman guardiano di Ferdinando has due boccali e mescirobe di porcellana o modò di drago, e una o modò di cocodrillo.8 It seems that originally there were two phoenix-shaped vessels. The cocodrillo-shaped vessel...
for a dragon. Thus, in the 1595 inventory, we read of the Dresden Kunstkammer: I Poscil von Porcellane wie ein Dricke Vergüldet, auch grän und blau geferbett. (one porcel- lain jug like a dragon, with gold, the colours green and blue). For reasons connected with the technicalities of firing, the legs of the bird rest on a plinth moulded with a relief evoking rocks and clouds. Its beak serves as a spout and the handle is in the form of a branch. The colours of the email sur biscuit are bright green, turquoise and subargent for the feathers and clouds with which the phoenix is surrounded.

The head and breast of the bird are painted yellow, with traces of gold. It seems from the description in the old inventory that the yellow enamel was entirely covered with gold. There are no traces of gold on the “green and blue” enamelled parts of the bird. It seems that there is only one comparable form of phoenix-carafe in public collections in the Thäl-Museum, Cincin-nati.24

Normally one does not especially emphasise restoration on porcelain, but the phoenix-carafe has a very special repair on the neck of the bird. (fig. 4) It is documented that the damage occurred between 1590 and some time after 1619. The entry for the carafe in the Dresden Kunstkammer inventory of 1619 reads: I Poscil von Porcellane wie ein Dricke Vergüldet, auch grän und blau geferbett. (one jug made of porcelain like a dragon, with gold, and colours green and blue). Added in another hand, but from the style of writing written somewhat later, the remark is zberben und geleemt (broken and glued), making it a truly historical work of repair.

The little crayfish-vessel is only about 12 cm high. The crayfish is perched on a lotus pod and a brown lotus leaf, with a lotus pod on its back where the vessel can be filled, in the form of a small flower enamelled in bright turquoise. It is decorated in yellow, green, brown and turquoise. Again the yellow-glazed parts show traces of gold-leaf (fig. 5).

In the description of the Medici-collection for 1579 it says: ...vrwo mancherley thierlein gemacht (numerous fine porcelains, vessels for drinking, bowls, shaped as little animals).31 This vessel was not part of the Dresden Kunstkammer, but of the porcelain collection of Augustus the Strong, and featured in the 1721 inventory of the Dresden Kunstkammer: Ein Thee-Kanne in Form eines grünen und Vergüldet Knobbel, mit einem gelben Deckel, worauf ein Brunnes Frösche. Die Kanne ist mit vergüldet Messing beschlitzen. (Teapot in the shape of a green and gilt crayfish, with a yellow lid, on which is sitting a small frog. The pot is mounted with gilt brass.) There are no remains of the mounting mentioned in the inventory.

This type of crayfish vessel seems to be more commonplace, because there are several of them in other European public collections.32

A typical form is the Dresden piece and still surviving relates to a famous Kunstkammer-collection, being part of a so-called Hainhofer Kunstschrank, Hainhofer cabinet.33 Philipp Hainhofer (1578-1647) was the inventor of these special cabinets, in which porcelain was kept and displayed. He was a man of remarkable talent and activities and provides a link between Kunstkammer-collecting, the Medici, Dresden and the Chinese crayfish vessel. Hainhofer was a wealthy trader in luxury goods from Augsburg, Germany, and had business contacts all over Europe. He mainly collected coins, gems and ethnographics. His Kunstkammer in Augsburg became very famous and attracted many distinguished visitors including various German princes, the King of Denmark, Archduke Leopold from Austria, Gustavus Adolphus, King of Sweden, various Medici princes and travelling English aristocrats. Among the latter was the most distinguished English collector of the time, Thomas Howard, second Earl of Arundel, of whom Hainhofer proudly reports, that he “came to see my curiosities.”

Hainhofer’s truly original achievement lies in his pieces of multi-purpose furniture, his great cabinets, intended to be miniature Kunstkammern. He had them custom-made by Augsburg artisans and tried to sell them to kings, princes and dukes. In Italy they were usually called stippe tedesco, and it was a Hainhofer cabinet in which the Medici kept their porcelain at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.

The cabinet containing the little crayfish-vessel was given to the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus. This cabinet has a story too. When Swedish troops entered Augsburg in 1632, the Lutheran councilors wanted to welcome the protestant King with a spectacular gift. They bought the cabinet from Hainhofer and presented it to him. In 1649 it was given to the University of Upsala, where it now stands in the most splendid room of the University building.

Many of these objects have survived, including some of the porcelain, and the most spectacular and inter- esting piece is a vessel shaped as a crayfish, which is very similar to the example in Dresden.

In his travel reports we read his enthusiastic descrip- tions of the Dresden Kunstkammer and tied – in the first room, the i gemisch, the Medici porcelain gifts: vieiliter schione Porcellani, wie trengescheit, schaken und mancherley thierlein gemacht (numerous fine porcelains, vessels for drinking, bowls, shaped as little animals).34

The porcelain from the Medici gift was displayed in the Dresden Kunstkammer in a very spectacular cabinet which has unfortunately been lost. There is a descrip- tion in a 1732 inventory which says that the precious porcelain items were kept in Ein wtigen von Lessing Wolck Werk dorthi selbst. Ein Indischen Trosh von Holz mit Lügwerkwerk und Gold gesteht haben die Hertzage von Weymar, Churfürst Joh. Georgen dem Ersten, zu Stettin, zum Neüen Jahre ao: 1616. verehren lassen. (A box made of Indian lacquer, placed on a wooden stand. The treasury was decorated with lacquer and gold and was given at New Year 1616 to Johann Georg I, Elector of Saxony, by the Duke of Wurtem.)

Ewers in bizarre shapes like that of a phoenix, or a crayfish, were not only collectors’ items in princely collections in Europe. It seems that they were originally made in Southern China, probably in the province of Fujian, for the South-East Asian market. Like many Ming ceramics they were preserved there over the centuries and used and appreciated as ritual objects.

As late as the end of Second World War in 1945 crayfish ewers, almost identical to those in the European Kunstkammern of the 16th century, were used among the Kabalah and Muruts peoples of the uplands in
the interior of Sarawak and Kalimantan for rice wine, barok, in ceremonies associated with fertility and head hunting. These crayfish vessels used in Indonesia are now in the Museum in Sarawak.

The third piece of biscuit porcelain is a very small figure of the Chinese God of literature, Guixing, shown standing in a boat. This vessel is recorded in the figure of the Chinese God of literature, Guixing, shown standing in a boat. In the 16th century it is referred to in the old Dresden inventory as a Schüssel von Porcellana, inwendig weiß, und außen gemalt mit blettern und wie ein Schifflein gußgezert. (A high porcelain bowl, painted in blue and leaves and a small ship.)

The bowl has a beautiful calyx-like shape. On the outer side it shows a river landscape with high mountains, pagodas and high building. On one side there is a boat containing a gentleman, while, on the opposite side, the sails of a large sailing ship with two masts are being hoisted by the crew. Sailors are sitting in the crow’s nest. There are high wooden structures in the bow and stern on which sailors are standing. The inside of the bowl is decorated with a rim of herons and water plants, the blatter and the bottom with a small sailing boat among lotus blossoms. The decoration, freely executed in different shades of dark cobalt blue, is characteristic of the Jiajing period.

One of the Dresden porcelain collection includes a huge 15th century blue-and white melon-shaped globular jar from Vietnam or Annam. (fig. 9) According to Reidelmeister this jar was also part of the aforementioned Medici gift. He relates it to the entry in the Dresden inventory to Achtzehn Porcellana inwendig mit Blau und auswendig mit guldenten kinrande, (An octagonal porcelain bowl on the inside painted with white and on the outside with blue leaves).

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It seems that because of the gilding they were very much sought after in Europe and hence are found in several old collections. There are many kiriwaka-pieces in the Kunstkammer Collection at Schloss Ambras near Innsbruck, Austria. A 1596 inventory of the Ambra collection, thus made a little later than the Dresden inventory, records numerous bowls decorated (geschmelzt) with gold or blue and white (ploiu und weis). Some of the kiriwaka bowls found in European collections were mounted with 16th century German mounts. Most are marked on the base with the characters wan (fer ou tong) (May ten thousand blessings gather together).

In 1589 the Medici recorded I scodella bimachi dipinta d’oro e verde (a porcelain bowl painted with gold and green), while in the 1595 Dresden Kunstkammer inventory it is referred to as I Scussel von Porcellana aufwendig mit grün und guldenten bemalten Blattern und innenweis blau gemalt (porcelain bowl, inside white, outside painted blue.).

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However, the jar has twelve rather than eight panels. Each is decorated with alternating stylised lotus flowers and scrolls and so called ‘singing flowers’ or ‘precious image flowers’ (a kind of stylised lotus flower with the features of peonies, such as in the ships of the leaves). This kind of flower first appears in Chinese art during the Tang dynasty, and we find it on several of the good pieces of Annamese blue and white porcelain. Generally

examinations. On the small lamp the element of water is suggested by waves and little aquatic plants moulded around the foot and there are traces of gilding. No comparable piece is known in any other public collection. Of the blue and white porcelain, three pieces of the Medici-porcelain gift to the Dresden court are still in the Porcelain Collection. A small lidded bowl is painted with fish and water plants, the lid with stylised flowers, the knob shaped as a little lion. Inside the bowl we find two characters gu – a reference to old jade and the appreciation of it by the Chinese. The vessel can be dated into the Jiajing-period (1522-1566). This bowl cannot be identified in the Italian inventories, because they are not detailed enough. But it is referred to in the old Dresden inventory as Schüssel mit rödiget gemaldet mit fischen, abluf. mit eignem terine. (Bowl with lid painted with fish, on top a little animal).

The second blue and white porcelain is a charming bowl painted with a pair of ducks in a riverside landscape. The bowl is probably No. 15 on the list: Eine Schüssel von Porcellana, innen weis, und außen gemalt mit achtb blau gemalt, (one porcelain bowl, inside white, outside painted blue.). The bowl is decorated with a rim of herons and water plants, the blatter and the bottom with a small sailing boat among lotus blossoms. The decoration, freely executed in different shades of dark cobalt blue, is characteristic of the Jiajing period.

There are comparable pieces are in the collection of the Topkapi Sarai Museum, Istanbul. Two more bowls must also be mentioned. They were also made in China in the Jiajing era and are called kiriwaka, after the Japanese for “gold brocade style” because the décor refers to a textile woven with gold thread. One of the Dresden kiriwaka bowls has a coral red exterior and the other a green glazed exterior and both are ornamented in gold with lotus-blossoms and tendrils. Unfortunately much of the gold has disappeared. The splendid kiriwaka bowls were very much appreciated in Japan and used in the tea ceremony. By 1616, there were hundreds of kiriwaka-pieces of various shapes and designs in the inventories of the collections of Japan’s shoguns. They were probably for practical use in the tea-ceremony. The splendid kiriwaka was not only fashionable in Japan, shards from them have been found in Fostat, Cairo, and in remote Spanish outposts in Peru and New Mexico.
the decoration derives from Chinese Jingdezhen models, but is different in major respects. Themelon shape also looks very Vietnamese and owes nothing to Chinese influence.18

The most important documented piece from this group is the very rare jar in the Topkapı Sarayi Museum collection, which is inscribed and dated 1450. The Vietnamese inscription in Chinese characters (to be read from left to right, unlike in Chinese) says: “pointed for pleasure by thecroftswomans Bui of Ninh-" 
zhu the eighth year of Thai-Hoa” (chín, do GiaGreat

Dinary). Nín zhi hu is Annam, and Tai Ho reign in Annam from 1443-1450, so this group can be dated around 1450.19

The manufacture of blue and white porcelain in Annam was highly developed in the 15th century and Annamese wares were exported in large numbers to Southeast Asia, but not generally to the West. Again we find the phenomenon that wares like the animal-shaped pieces at that time? It was of course their rarity and in what was so attractive and so fascinating about these wares? It was perhaps their rarity and in what was so attractive and so fascinating about these wares? It was perhaps their rarity and in what was so attractive and so fascinating about these wares?

Looking at the group of porcelain again we wonder

Figure 8, Bowl painted with ships

Figure 9, Melon-shaped jar, Annamese, 15th century
State Art Collections Dresden, Porcelain Collection

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