

Art

The Met reveals feminist take on porcelain that 'has always elicited a strong reaction'

In a new exhibition, the 'monstrous' history of chinoiserie is used to discuss ideas of women and femininity



'There's very few people who feel neutral about chinoiserie.' Photograph: Peter Zeray/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Peter Zeray

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Chinoiserie - the European practice of imitating Chinese aesthetics - flourished throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, touching areas ranging from home decor to gardens, architecture and even the literary arts.

The Met's fascinating new exhibit, *Monstrous Beauty*, takes an innovative look at the practice by showing the significant role it played in shaping modern womanhood, and offering compelling arguments about how it can revise our ideas of women and femininity.

According to Iris Moon, who curated *Monstrous Beauty*, chinoiserie was first a part of the male domain, as “princely” collectors would fill up neat cabinets with artifacts designed within the aesthetic. But as chinoiserie became more popular and moved more into the realm of everyday commerce, it was women who began to most spectacularly partake in it.

Moon identifies Mary II, who ruled England alongside her husband William from 1689 to 1694, as a key player in the transition of chinoiserie from male-led collections to the stuff of everyday women.

“Mary II really personalized the language of chinoiserie,” she told me. “She makes this consumption of exotic luxury goods a part of her power and presence.”

It was while living in Holland that Mary first came upon chinoiserie, developing an extensive collection of the ceramics. When Mary was installed as queen following the Glorious Revolution, she brought this collection back with her, shepherding an entirely new aesthetic to England.

“She goes to Holland as a teenager with William, discovers this treasure trove of luxury objects that are being acquired through the Dutch East India Company, and develops her own taste,” said Moon. “By the time she comes back to England to become queen, she makes sure to bring back all of her stuff. She makes this consumption of exotic luxury goods a part of her power and presence.”



📷 Photograph: Eileen Travell/Photo by Eileen Travell , courtesy of The Met

Monstrous Beauty advances the interesting argument that Mary, who had a series of miscarriages but did not give birth to an heir before her death from smallpox at age 32, birthed something quite different: namely, a style that women throughout England were profoundly influenced by.

“I wondered what would it mean to shift that narrative of giving birth, from giving birth biologically to giving birth to a style,” Moon said. “We think of her as giving birth to chinoiserie as a way that women can shift their space by occupying it with all these porcelain vases and lacquers and things.”

Through the popularization of the porcelain figures that were a mainstay of chinoiserie, the aesthetic filled women’s lives with images of fantastic beings - goddesses, monsters, sirens and even cyborgs. This contributed to the way that womanhood was constructed in Europe, with consequences down to the present-day.

“The ability to acquire luxuries positioned women as consumers and gave them a kind of power,” Moon said. “It was thought of as this unruly desire for foreign goods that didn’t conform to a set standard.”

Beyond figurines, one of the ways that chinoiserie was brought to the homes of middle class women was through elaborate tea sets - Monstrous Beauty features numerous beautiful and elaborate teapots, plates, cups with saucers, tumblers, caddies and more.

As the exhibition’s catalogue explains, this was in fact a primary way in which tea became synonymous with the British way of life. “Consumption and taste naturalized this foreign commodity into a fully English habit, a process of domestication that took place in parallel with the transformation of porcelain from a coveted luxury good to a part of daily life,” Moon said.



📷 Doccia Porcelain Manufactory - Two sweetmeat dishes ca 1750-60. Photograph: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

But not everyone was happy about what women were doing to English consumerism. Daniel Defoe denounced the newfound economic energy of women.

“Defoe complains about the fact that Mary created this trend for buying porcelain,” Moon explained. “He called it a fatal excess, and said that these women were going to drive their families to financial ruin. He had a whole patriotic discourse about how you should be buying British products, not foreign goods.”

Women’s pursuit of porcelain affected more than just the British taste for tea or home decor. Moon makes the interesting point that prior to the era of consumerist chinoiserie, the standard of artistic beauty was the nude female body. Against this dominant aesthetic, chinoiserie brought all sorts of

fanciful forms - middle-class dining tables could suddenly be home to elaborate porcelain figurines striking dramatic poses, as well as monstrous creatures, like dragons, chimeras, manticores and others. Moon argues that these pieces shifted the aesthetics of the fine arts and opened up newfound creative potential.

“You could get away with saying more uncomfortable and weird things right at this miniature scale,” she said. “What kinds of associations did people make in seeing these figurines while they were eating? I want to reclaim the historical language that had been applied to chinoiserie around the monstrous as a form of artistic empowerment.”



📷 Photograph: Eileen Travell/Photo by Eileen Travell, courtesy of The Met

Bringing these aesthetic debates to the present, *Monstrous Beauty* also showcases contemporary works that Moon sees as springing out of the legacy of chinoiserie. One such piece is Jennifer Ling Datchuk’s take on how hair plays into beauty standards, *Pretty Sister, Ugly Sister*, which shows two porcelain plates sprouting black Chinese hair that has been bleached blond and dyed blue. The hair on one plate is copiously long, the other cropped short. Another standout piece is Lee Bul’s remarkable sculpture *Monster: Black*. “It’s precisely because these works are not chinoiserie that they can illuminate these historical styles,” said Moon. “They’re meant to be a critical lens on to the past, in dialogue visually with the historical works of art.”

While Moon is an expert in chinoiserie and has curated a wide-ranging and complex show into its history and contemporary importance, she is not necessarily a fan. “I don’t actually like chinoiserie,” she told me with a smile. “I’ve always gravitated to the neoclassical.” Yet, she felt that, as an Asian American woman, it was something she had to examine.

“I knew I was going to have to confront it on some level and ask why I felt such discomfort around this style. Curating this show, I asked, how do I negotiate my own self in relation to this history of the exotic. And I’m not alone. Chinoiserie has always elicited a strong reaction, from its very inception. There’s very few people who feel neutral about chinoiserie.”

Monstrous Beauty: A Feminist Revision of Chinoiserie is on show at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in [New York](#) until 17 August
