

# Plagiarism at the Potteries

## Where's China in the Chinoiserie Decoration on British Pearlware?

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As my husband, Lee and I were enjoying an English pearlware jug we had just added to our collection, I began to wonder just where the decorator had found the originals of his designs. The decoration was clearly chinoiserie, which Webster defines as “a style in art (as in decoration) reflecting Chinese qualities or motifs; *also*: an object or decoration in this style.”

Chinoiserie was all the rage in eighteenth-century England, and it decorated everything from furniture and mirror frames to pottery and patch boxes. It was an interpretation of Chinese designs, not an exact copy. But what, exactly, were the painters of English pottery interpreting, and how did the designs reach them in the first place?

# Chinoiserie and English pottery

Tea drinking was at the height of fashion in eighteenth-century England, and the fact that tea originated in China meant that tea wares were particularly well suited to chinoiserie. Forms, as well as decoration, took on an eastern theme. Because of the great cost of tea during this period, only the wealthy could afford it; thus fancy tea wares were of porcelain were made for those with bigger purses.

Tea was so popular, that the less well-off stretched their budgets to afford it. Today, if we can't afford a dinner service from Tiffany, we might buy something equally pretty but not as refined at Target; thus it was in the eighteenth century. The potters and

decorators of lesser wares, such as earthenware and delft, began to copy Chinese styles. These humble ceramics, produced in great quantity and at a low cost, took on a naïve interpretation of Chinese designs. Often painted by women and children, the lines are bold and the colors bright and often used in a quirky manner. The decoration was underglaze, which required fewer firings than the enamels used on more expensive wares.

Lee and I began collecting English pearlware with underglaze polychrome chinoiserie decoration about fifteen years ago. We were captivated by the folksy quality of the decoration, and have puzzled over the exact design

sources for many of these pieces. Were they copying a drawing by an artist in the factory, or did they have an actual piece of Chinese porcelain in front of them? Perhaps they had a transfer-printed dish with a "Nanking" design, or a drawing taken from a Worcester or Meissen teapot, in which case they were making a copy of a copy.

With these questions in mind I showed our humble little English jug to James Galley and Paul Vandekar, two specialists in Chinese export porcelain, and asked if they thought we could match all of the design elements to those on Chinese export. Here are the results of that exploration. ■

## The Ground

We started from the ground up. The "ground" area, depicted by groups of colored lines on our jug seemed to derive from the lines on these Nankin plates. This stylized "ground" appears on almost all pearlware with chinoiserie decoration.





## The Stone Bridge

The bridge is one of the most common motifs in chinoiserie: often it has a figure crossing it, but on our jug it does not. The circles that appear in the English version are most likely trying to imitate the stonework on the bridge in the Chinese plate.



## The Lattice-work Bridge or Fence

The second bridge is in a lattice-work pattern, and a fence in a similar pattern is seen here on a Canton platter.



## The Peony

What about that oversized flower in a tree that appears to be growing out from behind the bridge? It's a tree peony, and appears on this Chinese export platter made about 1775 for the Italian market, as well as this plate from approximately the same date, and is another common motif on Chinese porcelain.





## The Rock(?)

Beneath the pagoda to the left of the spout is a huge projection coming out of the ground. We have always thought of it as a rock formation, and, although we couldn't find anything exactly like it on any Chinese porcelain, we did find some designs that might have been interpreted into this strange phenomenon.



## The Birds and Trees

The birds and the trees are easy to trace back: the English painters copied the Chinese fairly directly. The birds are similar on both types, and are usually portrayed in a V-formation with each bird done as a simple curved V. The trees, too, are similar on Chinese porcelain and English pearlware.



## The Border

The borders on English pearlware are always interesting and different. Seldom do we find two borders alike on pieces with similar decoration. But it is easy to see the Chinese influence on the diapered border on this jug, alongside a border on a Nanking platter.



## The Cottage

Houses appear frequently on both Chinese porcelain and English pottery. But there is one other type of house which seems to be English in origin, rather than Chinese. This is a simple cottage, usually with a window on one side and a door on the other. Then we noticed three examples (and there must be many more) of Chinese porcelain with the same house. Here are two of the English versions, with the two examples from Chinese dishes.



All Chinese porcelain is from the collections of James Galley and Paul Vandekar.  
All English pottery is from the collection of Hanes & Ruskin.

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