

Collecting Chinese Export Porcelain

by Nancy N. Johnston

Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries the Chinese catered to the almost insatiable European demand for porcelain. Made specifically for the western world with distinctive forms and decoration tailored to this market, the “designs and styles [of Chinese export porcelain] were not what the Chinese would have created for themselves,” according to Carl Crossman of Northeast Auctions and author of *The China Trade* (1972) and *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade* (1991), reserving the finest goods for their native and Imperial markets. Though small amounts filtered into the American colonies, the American market for Chinese export porcelain was finally opened with the 1784 voyage of *The Empress of China*, financed largely by Philadelphia’s Robert Morris.

The task of charting price data is daunting unless one can follow a single acquisition. Michael Cohen, of Cohen & Cohen Gallery in Surrey, England, shared one such history with me. He recently repurchased for £50,000 a pair of exceptional *famille rose* vases made for the European market. He first purchased the vases in 1977 for £3,200. The compounded rate of return on the vases is 9.60%. “Had the vases been masterpieces,” he says, “the rate of return would have been even greater.”

Everyone interviewed for this article agreed that the American market is on fire. According to Crossman, “Anything with an American flag or American eagle, in superior condition, is highly sought after.” He added, “Porcelain belonging to significant early Americans is also in demand, such as plates owned by Elias Hasket Derby.” Derby was the most important merchant of the late eighteenth century and was one of the first Americans, after the Revolutionary War, to use his family crest on his own service of export porcelain.

Villanova, Pennsylvania, dealer Elinor Gordon, a respected authority on Chinese export porcelain, remembers selling a plate with the seal of the Order of the Cincinnati to a collector in 1964 (Fig.1). “I thought it was fantastic, a masterpiece,” she says, “but my late husband, Horace, believed I had paid too much. As a result, I sold it for \$2,600, exactly the price I had paid.” In March 2001 the plate sold at Northeast Auctions for \$44,850. In this instance, the compounded rate of return was 8%.



Fig. 1: Plate, China, ca. 1785. Porcelain with overglaze enamel decoration of the Order of the Society of the Cincinnati, Chinese. Courtesy of Northeast Auctions, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Fig. 2: Covered “toddy” jug with portrait of George Washington, China, ca. 1805–1812. Porcelain, partially painted and gilded. H. 9 in. Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York.

A significant piece of American historical export was recently handled by Stuart Feld of Hirschl & Adler Galleries in New York City. Considered a masterpiece, this cider jug, with its figure of George Washington, is one of only six known to exist (Fig.2). Although the selling price is undisclosed, it is believed that this rare jug set a price record for the American export market.

Determining what constitutes Chinese export porcelain is generally straight forward and most often evident in the European-influenced form and decoration. The intended market for large sculptures of animals can be more challenging. While generally accepted as being for the export market, some examples were also made for the domestic Chinese market. The challenge is that animals are representatives of themselves, without the typical decorative design elements seen on plates, jugs, and other forms of Chinese export porcelain. In July 2005, at Christie’s auction house in London, Michael Cohen and his wife, Ewa, set a world record by purchasing a pair of roaring leopard biscuit porcelain figures for an astounding \$4.145 million (including buyers premium) (Fig. 3). They sold the pair later that year to a Texas collector for an undisclosed amount. Michael Cohen notes “Although the leopards are officially considered porcelain made for the export market, their fine detail suggests they may have been made for the Kangxi emperor, circa 1700.”

As with any market, specialists will help guide you in learning about what constitutes Chinese export porcelain and the best examples for you to consider, regardless of the price range. Says Cohen, “The finest pieces still prove to be the best investments.” Time will tell whether the recently intense interest from collectors in China in acquiring porcelain made for the mainland will expand to include porcelain made for export as well. In the meantime, Cohen agrees, “America remains the strongest market for Chinese export porcelain.”

Nancy N. Johnston is a private consultant and broker for antiques and art, and a regular contributor to Antiques & Fine Art Magazine.

Fig. 3: Pair of Kangxi leopards, China, ca. 1700. Porcelain. L: 39 in. Courtesy of Cohen & Cohen, Surrey, England.

