

LMA PhD Conference "Classical Heritage and Its Interpretation"

Inese Brants

Contemporary Metamorphosis of the Cobalt Blue Porcelain Underglaze Painting Tradition.

Abstract

The value of tradition in the contemporary attitude of mind. Performances and installations of Ai WeiWei.

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Conclusion: Fascination of the cobalt blue and neverending creative possibilities.

Key words: contemporary tradition, cobalt blue, underglaze painting, creative possibilities.

The value of tradition in the contemporary attitude of the mind. Performances and installations of Ai WeiWei

Classical tradition of porcelain painting art can be interpreted in the Greco-Roman cultural context. Depictions of mythological subjects and images in certain artistic styles are likely to reflect only some of the most often used porcelain painting techniques but they fail to give a proper idea of the origin and development of porcelain painting tradition, development and contemporary manifestations.

New porcelain painting technologies have been coming from the East. Classical porcelain painting art is considered to have been imported from China and further adjusted to the local ceramic painting tradition in each respective country.

Two striking events in world art that are closely linked with historical traditions and contemporary art illustrate two absolutely different viewpoints on the meaning of the classical tradition.

A Qianlong dynasty porcelain vase from the 18th century discovered during a house clearance in Pinner (London), was recently sold at Bainbridge`s auction house for a world record –breaking price of 43 million pounds. Leaving Western society in philosophical contemplation on classical values and their commercial price after 70 years, the ancient vase will be returned to China, the country of its origin. *1

The conceptual Chinese artist Ai WeiWei`s performance „Smashing of a Han Dynasty Urn” was shown in photographs (1995) where he was seen in three positions: 1) He was holding a 5,000-year old urn of museum quality. 2) The urn was in free fall. 3) The urn hit the ground and broke into pieces. WeiWei`s face remained impassive during the performance. Breaking of a pot – demolition like that is a cliché in art or in cinema. But it is a direct provocation as well. It is an insult to cultural values and traditions, history, art connoisseurs, museums and art collectors. WeiWei`s violence was turned against the society`s cultural and historical values. But what is really valuable? WeiWei challenges this notion, saying that ”The passage of time does not change the object`s true identity. A utilitarian vessel made in a million copies remains a utilitarian object. A pot is a utilitarian household object, not art.”

Similar ruthless revisionism applies to „Coca Cola Vase” (1997) as well. An Iron Age pot was clobbered with the acrylic painted Coca Cola logo.

Ai WeiWei`s objects dissect and challenge China`s past and present, ruthlessly exposing finely crafted mythologies about art, civilization, connoisseurship and monetary value. *2

Today`s use of cobalt in the traditional underglaze technique of porcelain decoration offers a wide range of applications: copying, quotation, transformation, individual quests and exploitation of various subjects and motifs both in the artists`s hand painted pieces and extravagant solutions with advanced technologies.

Cobalt blue – paint and survival of the blue & white concept

High-fired ceramics from China, first brought to Iraq by sea in the 8th century, were a stimulus for this change. In the early 9th century, Iraqi potters began to imitate elegant white bowls imported from China. They

used the local yellow clay, which they masked with an opaque white glaze. Soon they began to add new forms and decorations of different types in blue, green and metallic lustre. Once Iraqi potters were able to successfully imitate Chinese whiteware, they began to treat the white surface of their ceramics as a blank canvas. Painting into the glaze in cobalt blue was a local innovation which resulted in the world's first concept of Blue&White ceramics.

Artefact of the China blue & white, the Allbers effect. China Blue & White porcelain expansion all over the world.

In China the Blue&White decoration originated in the period of Mongol rule (1271 – 1368), when China was open to outside influences. It was created by applying designs in cobalt to a white porcelain body. The blue pigment used, is a cobalt compound, which was painted onto the porcelain body before glazing and firing. Blue&White was very successful at first in export markets and later in China itself. For centuries Jingdezhen in southeast China was the world's largest producer of porcelain. The city was renowned for the high quality and innovative nature of its products. In 1606, 10.000 workers were required and 3.000 kilns are said to have been there. Several factors contributed to the city's prominence: abundant local supplies of raw materials, a vast, highly organized labour force, imperial patronage, and advanced ceramic technology. The workshops at Jingdezhen produced numerous porcelain wares, but Blue&White became Jingdezhen's staple product and made the biggest impact across the world. Jingdezhen was the first ceramic center in the world to use the technique of white porcelain painting with an underglaze blue in large scale production. Its introduction marked a revolution in the history of ceramics, as it became the most widely imitated of Chinese wares.

Chinese twin vases of Blue&White porcelain, inscribed and dated 1351 belong to the Yuan dynasty. The inscriptions state they were presented to a Daoist temple in Yushan district, 120 km southeast of Jingdezhen and played an exceptional role. They are a keystone in the definition of the 14th century style and mark its peak. The importance of the vases is that the motifs they displayed were fully developed by the time of their manufacture and were used in conjunction with many other designs on other pieces.

These vases illustrated typical cobalt underglaze painting with the use of traditional Chinese motifs:

- 1) flora - chrysanthemum, fern / plantain, peony, lotus, spiked lobed leaves;
- 2) fauna – dragons (four clawed), elephants, phoenixes;

3) miscellaneous – auspicious objects, cloud scrolls, flames, lotus panels, serpentine waves. *3

The particular fascination of Blue&White during the Yuan dynasty is the way in which colour was used. It is not only that the complex designs were executed with consummate skill and assurance –for in painting ceramics there is no going back, no possibility of correcting a mistake – but the awareness of the subtle play between contrasting areas of Blue&White. The interplay of contrasting light and dark areas and the manipulation of tonal values seem to have been an empirical discovery and do not appear to have any immediate parallel in other arts in China, e.g. painting. The artists had hit upon the so-called „Albers” effect, centuries before it was codified. Joseph Albers, scion of Bauhaus, discovered that all colours are radially affected, even totally changed by the colours that surrounded them. Furthermore, their tonal value can be altered totally by the light or dark areas around them. It was this latter proposition that the Yuan artists exploited with such phenomenal success.*4

In the meantime, Chinese porcelain artifact had been adapted in Europe and became a stable idea of porcelain visual image.

Porcelain underglaze painting and adapted tradition – Chinoserries. Meissen Onion pattern and famous backgrounds of Sevres - Roi de Bleu.

„The overriding irony is that the West was so enamoured of imported Chinese Blue&White ware in the 17th century that Meissen began to make it in the early 1700s. By the mid-century it was copied everywhere in Western Europe. Today few factories in Europe make Blue&White ware and China continuously exports it to Europe once more..,(Andy Christian, Ceramic Review, Issue 244, July/August, 2010, p.42.)

The famous Meissen **Blue Onion pattern** has always retained its basic ingredients – exotic flowers and fruits that no one in Europe was familiar with. The experts are still at odds as to which floral forms figured in its inception. The pattern also termed „Shakiako,, is made up of bamboo, plum blossom, trailing plant, chrysanthemum and peony. Blue&White painters at the Manufactory were originators of „Blue Onion,, because that is the name they gave it. The Blue Onion pattern was created in 1730 by Johann Joahim Kandler. Onion pattern has been replicated and faked everywhere like no other design, a further indication of its great fascination. It is still in use in hand painted and engraving printed variations. *5

English copperplate decals and cobalt printed ceramics.

Willow pattern is a decorative subject engraved by Thomas Minton for Thomas Turner and introduced in Caughley, England, 1780. There are many different versions of the pattern, the more familiar of which was introduced only in the early 19th century. The Chinese scene represented there is an English invention. The storyline is based on an ancient Chinese legend about two lovers who turned to pigeons to be together forever. This legend now attached to it, was written in 1900 by the English author, Ernst Bramah. Willow pattern was produced in underglaze transfer-printing on English pottery and porcelain. It was used extensively from 1800 onwards by Josiah Spode, Wedgwood, Davenport and others. Chinese examples on porcelain are younger and were copied from English prototypes. *6

Contemporary ceramic artists and cobalt blue decoration

Robert Dawson refutes traditional views on decorative patterns. He twists and wraps familiar shapes, fades designs into blurred oblivion, adds unusual perspectives and covers the comforting regularity of traditional British pottery with frenetic abstract formations. In „Perspective Willow,, , he uses a traditional Willow pattern and twists it at angle that one would view it at eye level. In „Willow Pattern Uncertainty,, the willow pattern is blurred and milky, as though it has blended into itself as a result of too many washes. The references are not so abstracted as to be unidentifiable, and as such, it is not an attempt to completely break from the past. It is just an exploration of the artist's relationship with those who have come before him. *7

Canadian ceramist Leopold L. Foulem created pieces that transcend the category of ceramics even as they draw upon its rich history. He takes a conceptual approach to his art. Foulem borrows stylized utilitarian elements from ceramic history. He merges iconic forms with hints of Blue&White or other popular patterns to form his own distinctive combinations. These provocative pieces are meant to be viewed in the abstract, as representations rather than functional objects. Foulem produces works that engage a recognizable tradition of utilitarian ceramics while at the same time deliberately canceling out the properties of utility.

The pattern as a cultural sign is a culmination of three centuries of European fascination with, and large scale appropriation of the Oriental. It also represents a popular idea of traditional Chinese culture, made accessible to millions of English and European diners through mass produced tableware. *8

30 Gallon`s Staffordshire Jar. Staffordshire jar is not intended for use but this tour de force of Staffordshire pottery illustrates a typical 19th century ceramics of the Blue&White transfer-printed earthenware. Design depicted typical European style landscapes. In transfer printing, a design was printed onto paper and then transferred to the unglazed surface of a pot. The technique transformed the Staffordshire industry and market for cheap earthenware pottery worldwide.

Blue decal printed ceramic ware from Staffordshire, found in a Riga supermarket gave evidence that the English Blue&White transfer-printed decoration was still in use.

English artist, writer, curator and educator Paul Scott is a seminal figure in the history of printing onto ceramics. In his works, he explored and interpreted English underglaze Blue&White copper plate printing techniques and used this characteristic English technique in his own art. For conceptual interpretation of his subjects, Paul Scott made use of rural landscape motifs. Being fond of the countryside in the north of England, he delicately combined classical 18th century landscape with details from contemporary urban environment and outlined a vision of industrialization and ecological threats to the environment. In his own terms Scott made his contribution by bringing together the vintage and the modern. The idea of wild and natural landscape, was challenged by Scott, who always criticized our ill-considered interference in nature and its excessive exploitation.

His ceramics has a power to make people feel uncomfortable while posing questions about their complacency over the loss of industrial skills, closing of factories, pollution of nature and other social issues. Paul Scott used printed decal fragments, showing parts of the closed Spouda ceramics factory, thus drawing attention to its famous past. Most of the pottery factories in Stock-on-Trent that Bernard Leach criticized in the 1930s as being „ the home of industrial devil”, are gone now. All the skill, technology and craft that these „devils” had, disappeared with them.
*9

The products of the ceramics industry, mostly cheap crockery printed with traditional pattern, have been taken up by many artists who were attracted by their rich social history and also because they are intriguing on their own account. Caroline Slotte used commercially produced plates printed with the conventional landscape engraving as her starting point. Carefully cutting through areas of the dishes, she created a multi-layer of scenes reminiscent of a stage set, in which one layer is almost indistinguishable from another. Like the landscape engravings, Slotte`s layers have parallels with the mysteries of life. Vintage ceramics with underglaze transfer printing here serves as an excellent way for the demonstration of the possibilities provided by laser technology. * 10

American artist Mollie Hache offered her own version of cobalt underglaze painting. She freely manipulated with the baroque pattern interpretations in shape and design. In the interpretation of baroque pattern underglaze Holly Hatch used the Korean Mishima sgraffito technique with cobalt slip instead of the underglaze painting technique. As a result, the plasticity of brush painting was replaced by a drier and more straight-lined drawing with a stylistic reference to ancient engravings. Furthermore, the design is engraved on the surface of unfired porcelain and not transferred from copper plate engravings, or with silk screen decals. *11

From the mid-19th century, the history of English ceramics made attempts to bring fine art and Studio practice together with varying degree of success. Coexistence of studio pottery and ceramics industry manifested individual artists' attempts to combine ceramic art, craft and manufacturing methods.

Unique objects were produced as a result of the collaboration between Ken Eastman, maker of large stoneware abstract slab-built vessels, each an exercise in single-handed individuality, and Royal Crown Darby, a bone porcelain factory making highly decorated figurines and tableware in a two centuries old tradition. Ken Eastman managed to create modern porcelain forms, absolutely antihistorical in their aesthetics, which did not correspond to any existing Darby concept.

Ken Eastman was inspired by the factory's pattern books and its use of modern transfer technologies to effect what were once complex hand paints. Eastman experimented with the application of transfer decoration to bone china shapes. Elements from patterns with leaves and petals adjusted to the scale of Eastman's pieces were especially increased. Oversized Blue&White decal-prints successfully keep balance between the bold, abstract forms and the intricacies of the unmolested Darby transfers. Eastman-Darby work put the factory into prestigious cultural context of which it had been largely unaware and from which it had been excluded.* 12

Czech designer Maxim Velchovsky makes ceramics with a quirky twist. Combination of the opposites in his work is a comment on the extreme commissions and a certain reverence of Eastern countries for Western culture. In the Soviet era Lenin's head was one of the more produced porcelain wares in the Czech porcelain factories. In „Ornament & Crime,, Lenin's head is decorated in cobalt underglaze with „Onion pattern ,, copperplate decal fragments of porcelain factory Čehsky Porcelain AS Dubi,, traditional tableware designs. * 13

Ceramic work entitled „McDonald's,, made by Shanghai based Chinese artist and designer Li Lihong is one of the series of works which takes the form of McDonald's famous „golden arches,, logo; one of the most

recognised brand emblems in the world and an acknowledged symbol of globalised consumer culture. Li juxtaposes this iconic form with traditional Chinese ceramic decorative motifs and techniques. Through this combination of themes, styles and formats from different cultural epochs and traditions Li opens up a dialogue about the ways in which traditional culture interacts with modern life and an increasingly globalised culture.

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The pattern created on Rosalinda Davis' jugs is in the area that would normally be disposed of during the fettling process. These pitchers by Rosalinda Davis have a very bulbous shape reminiscent of the antiques. Historic reference is an intentional challenge to the idea of collectables of Blue&White from through a bastardization of the decoration process: she places the decoration on the seam that would normally be removed in the casting process. This nonconformity questions conventional ideas of beauty and value. *15

In the still life of Ginta Stavrovska „Roses and Porcelain,, the cobalt decoration on the plate subordinated all the painting's color. It is the Blue&White porcelain artifact, not its colour versions that has created the associative visual image of porcelain in the collective consciousness for many centuries. Cliche of the Blue&White decoration sends a direct informative message about the materiality of the displayed object. Any dark blue decoration on white background is associatively perceived as porcelain or similar ceramics product.

Damien O`Sullivan`s pro-aesthetics attempts to diminish the disparity between the impersonal aesthetics of medical aids and their very human function. In this series he produces casts, braces and crutches out from porcelain decorated with floral pattern. The result is more poetic than practical; the fragile strength of the porcelain is alien to human body, but the delicate floral patterns reflect the beauty of healing process. Upon healing, the objects are not cast aside but displayed in china cabinets: the scars of our mortality are presented as things of beauty.

Blue&White decal decoration symbolized not only the recovery process, but clearly revealed the identity of the material. * 16

Ground is a monochrom surface colour on porcelain, the surface to which painted and gilded decoration was often added. Cobalt grounds and ground colours were first employed in China during the Ming dynasty, and were introduced in Europe at Meissen soon after 1720. Grounding was soon established as porcelain colouring technique in nearly all porcelain factories. Dry ground-laying is done by painting a thin coating of (turpentine) oil over the area to be colored and then padding it with fine silk to produce an even surface. The colour powder is then dusted on and adheres to the oiled surface.

One of the most famous cobalt grounds is the *Bleu de Roi* (French), a rich cobalt blue grounding colour first developed at Vincennes in 1749 and later used at Sevres and other European porcelain factories. Painted and gilded decoration was often added to the cobalt blue colour on the porcelain surface. Today the ground-laying with dry powdering was changed for more convenient spraying technique.

According to the porcelain painting classical tradition the ground-laying technique was generally used only for decorative design and it is not considered to be a real painting technique.

Combination of underglaze and overglaze painting techniques was known from Japanese Imari porcelain. Innovation of the so-called „Propoganda porcelain”, appears in the attractive use of communist slogans on the pre-revolution time porcelain production. The plates with ready made different shaped reserves in cobalt groundings were overpainted with the communist slogans in jovial colours. The innovation consists in terms of background inclusion into total composition and it becomes a natural part of painting. *17

Portrait is the favourite genre of porcelain artist Nelli Petrova from St. Petersburg Imperial Lomonosov Porcelain Factory. Pilots' portraits are painted on the cobalt background with overglaze in special reserved areas of blue ground. Sprayed cobalt underglaze here perfectly symbolizes the dark polar sky. *18

Tatjana's Tcharina's „Conference” pears are located on the cobalt underglaze background painted by brush. Painting melted in the glaze and reached particular qualities for the applied colour and painting in general. *19

In one of the Porcelain Painting Symposia in Zvartava Inese Brants organized cobalt painting workshop. Cobalt painting inglaze technique was also used in Riga Porcelain Factory where cobalt ground-laying with spray method was familiar. Rich cobalt background painted by Helena Henrihsone was applied with a brush on the glazed porcelain vase surface and fired at high temperature in electric kiln. In the time of firing process, painting melted in the glaze and looked like rich underglaze cobalt painting.

Tatiana's Afanasyeva's plate „Roofs of St. Petersburg”, is inspired by the artist's native town, which features in many of her creations with its individual character and changeable mood. Porcelain, underglaze cobalt painting together with polychrome overglaze painting, platinum lustra and tooled silvering and gilding demonstrates a maximum of the porcelain hand painting surface pleasures and artistic qualities. *20

Conclusion.

Cliche of the Blue&White concept still exists in people's mind. Cobalt is still one of the most stable and most popular ceramics colours. Saturated cobalt blue continues to fascinate many artists, producers and consumers. In the contemporary porcelain painting art, we can recognize Blue&White concept from diverse technical dimensions. Despite the wide range of art concepts, different interpretations of historical techniques, such as underglaze hand painting, copperplate decal printing, modern silk screen and digital decal prints, wet ground application or air-spray ground-laying surprisingly coexisted. Despite the new technical inventions, such as digital transfer prints that have rejected manual decoration in the porcelain industry for ever, in the ceramic art and porcelain painting manual techniques are still in use. They represent the mixture of hand painting and old printing technique with high-tech laser technologies.

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Additional information on Professional activities about author:
Inese Brants

2003 – Master F Arts, Latvian Academy of Arts.

2003 – Art Pedagogy base course, Music academy of Latvia.

From 2009 – Doctorate studies, Latvian Academy of Arts.

Research work is about porcelain painting techniques overglaze.

Employment:

From 1995 Head of the Porcelain Painting and Ceramic Studio, Riga Children`s and Youth Center of creation „Laimite”.

From 1995 – Porcelain Painting Symposia and Porcelain Painting master class leader at Latvia Artist`s union creative centre Zvartava.