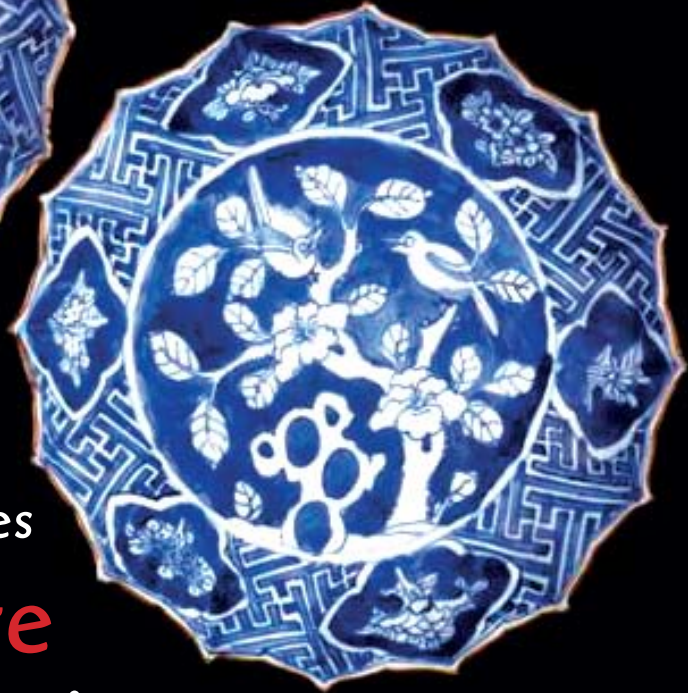




Pair of Early Ming plates



Chinese Porcelain Treasures **Blue and White** **Wares** of the Ming Dynasty

By Siobhán Cool

For more than a thousand years the world has enjoyed a love affair with the aesthetic designs and pristine forms of blue and white ceramics. The most significant wares of this genre and, arguably, the most iconic and valuable then and now, are the blue and white porcelain wares of China's Ming Dynasty.



Dragon vase

The Chinese tradition of decorating porcelain with cobalt blue underglaze traces back to the Song Dynasty (960–1279), but the designs and firing process were further developed during the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), with porcelain from this period being exquisitely refined and meticulously worked. Blue and white porcelain ultimately reached its zenith in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), an era of sophisticated perfection in all artistic endeavours.

The essential characteristics of the blue and white wares are the brilliant white translucent Chinese porcelain and the cobalt oxide of Kashan in Persia (modern Iran). The patterns were painted on unfired wares with water-thinned underglaze made of cobalt.

Painting required extreme dexterity as the highly porous and absorbent, blotter-like surface of the unfired object was unforgiving and allowed the artisan no room for error. Once the decoration was finished, the ware was covered with a fine layer of clear glaze and fired at 1400°C, thus vitrifying the object (transforming the paste into porcelain and fusing the glaze and underglaze). Whilst the Chinese had a domestic source of cobalt, it tended to fire a dirty greyish tone and, whenever possible, was willingly replaced with 'Mohammedan' blue, as Persian cobalt was known in China. The imported cobalt produced a deeper, warm, almost purple-blue hue that was richer than and clearly distinct from the local grey-blue underglaze. It is difficult to ascertain the precise period when cobalt from Persia was introduced to China through the Silk Road but trade in this commodity was well established by the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. The supply of Persian cobalt was disrupted, however, when the first Ming emperor, Hong Wu, passed an edict preventing Chinese from travelling outside the country and consequently, Persian cobalt became difficult to obtain for a time.

Before the Song Dynasty, porcelain decoration was limited to glazing (either one solid colour or variegated colours) and incising lines into wares before firing. During the first half of the Song Dynasty (Northern Song Period), there was great

impetus for the manufacture and design of porcelain. Blue and white porcelain decoration, inspired by the traditional silk and paper art of Imperial Court painters, made its first naïve appearance, although decoration remained subtle because the Chinese believed the ware's beauty was in the perfection of its form and glazing rather than in the decoration itself.

The Yuan emperors, interested in profitable international commerce, encouraged the expansion of the porcelain industry for trade with the Middle East, the Indies and the West. Sombre decoration was replaced with richly hued decoration painted in underglaze cobalt and designed to appeal to important export customers. Imperial Court painters, working in the academic style of past periods, also exerted great influence on porcelain decoration since the technique of underglaze painting allowed for graduated wash tints similar to ink paintings. Blue and white compositions at this time were typically dense, arranged in borders, horizontal lines and panels and occupied virtually the entire surface of the porcelain. Various motifs included dragons, phoenixes, peonies and stylised landscapes. Over time, this heavy stylisation gave way to more floral lines.

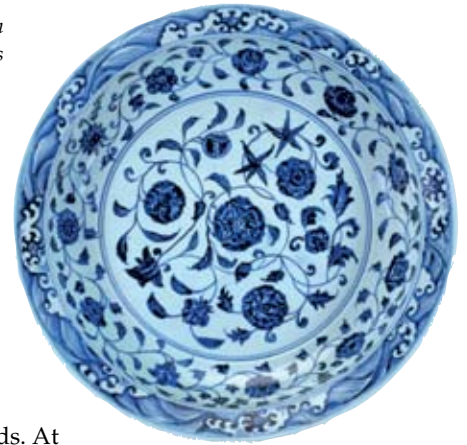
Blue and white porcelain enjoyed its golden age during the Ming Dynasty under an Imperial Court that encouraged the quest for perfection in the porcelain industry. Jingdezhen, a city in Jiangxi province, was already the epicentre of Chinese porcelain production, but in 1369, Hong Wu, the founder of the Ming Dynasty, brought the city's kilns under the control of the Imperial Court and strictly monitored porcelain production. By 1400, the shapes and decoration of the Ming porcelain had become elegant and balanced, with an absence of the overcrowding seen in earlier periods. Designs were planned, although not rigidly, and thus have a lively energy and sense of movement. Some designs contain elements of Islamic art, which made an exciting juxtaposition of Chinese and Middle Eastern stylisations. The most exquisite pieces were made for the Imperial Court but even simple domestic objects for the common market could be decorated in blue and white. Many academics consider that the blue and white porcelain produced during the 15th century are the finest of the Ming Dynasty.

Ming blue and white wares were coveted by foreign royalty in the Middle East and Europe, where large collections were amassed. The Ottoman sultans kept a stunning collection of Chinese porcelain at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul; Queen Mary filled her palace at Hampton Court with beautiful pieces of blue and white wares; and the King of Poland, Augustus II, famously built a dedicated *Porzellanschloss* (Porcelain Palace) in Dresden for his magnificent collection of Ming porcelain. This was ultimately augmented by the porcelain produced in his factory at Meissen, the first true porcelain manufactured in Europe.



Early Ming vase

Large blue and white dish with floral scrolls



Ming blue and white wares were the first Chinese porcelain to be exported in volume to Europe and sold at auctions in Amsterdam, where it was known as *kraakporzellan*, from the late 16th century onwards. At this time, Chinese porcelain was greatly coveted but was prohibitively expensive and so was largely unobtainable for most people. The ceramic industries in Europe, Japan, Siam, Vietnam and Persia produced imitations of the Chinese blue and white wares to satisfy the European and Middle Eastern demand. Undaunted by the fact that they could not make genuine porcelain, European potters, in particular, adapted their existing earthenware products to resemble the finished porcelain wares as best they could. Dipping the earthenware in an opaque white tin glaze, painting stylised Chinese patterns (*chinoiserie*) in cobalt on top of the tin glaze and firing it so the cobalt pigment would sink through the tin glaze, gave the effect of the Chinese underglaze designs. Thus the ceramics known as *faïence*, *maïolica*, *delftware* and *majolica* were developed.

Ironically, the European ceramics that had first set out to copy the Chinese blue and white porcelain became more popular than the original objects: delftware evolved and took on a European style and, when it was ultimately produced, true porcelain from Meissen and soft-paste porcelain from Sèvres were collected more zealously than Chinese porcelain. The Chinese porcelain export market suffered not only due to this competition but also due to political unrest and trade disruptions between East and West during the decline and aftermath of the Ming Period.

During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), classic pieces and patterns of blue and white from the Ming Dynasty were reproduced and enhanced, as they still are today in China and around the world, ensuring that blue remains the ceramic lover's favourite colour.

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Photos courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum



Blue and white betel box