The Global Reach of East Asian Art: Past and Present

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The City of Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World. Anne Gerritsen. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 354 pages. ISBN 9781108499958.

Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting: Kano Hōgai and the Search for Images. Chelsea Foxwell. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 281 pages. ISBN 9780226110806.

Most of us are used to seeing artworks in museums, hanging in frames or displayed in glass cases. Or, more likely, we view art online, scrolling through images on a screen. This denaturing of art—the divorce of the object from its context, the isolation of the final product from the human world where it was made and sold—has conditioned us, however, to forget that art is a precipitate of history. The relatively small things we see in museums or online, the painting, the statue, or the vase, are embedded in a network of human activity and relations which, in many ways, is the real story of the piece, beyond the immediate aesthetic properties it possesses.

Two recent books on East Asian art bring this historical valence back into full communication with individual artworks. Both focus on

different periods, places, and genres: Leiden University Chair of Asian Art Professor Anne Gerritsen's *City of Blue and White* on pottery in pre- and early modern Jiangxi, and Chicago University Associate Professor of Art History Chelsea Foxwell's *Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting* on the fin-de-siècle phenomenon of *nihonga* ("Japanese-style painting") in Meiji Japan. The two books show that every work of art is part of a truly borderless and diachronic exchange of goods, influences, tastes, materials, and ideas. In their own way, and even more when read as a set, the *City of Blue and White* and *Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting* remind readers that context—both local and global—should be considered as much a part of any artwork as color, line, and form.

Of the two books, *City of Blue and White* is more resolutely place-conscious. Gerritsen has set out to record the history of a particular place, Jingdezhen (景德鎮), which is situated on Lake Poyang (鄱陽湖) in southeast China. The lake provided pottery makers of Jingdezhen access to the Yangtze River, allowing merchants to deliver their pottery throughout imperial China and, as transportation and trade networks improved, to the rest of the known world. Blessed with an abundance of kaolin clay and nearby stands of trees, Jingdezhen supplied the materials needed for making and firing pottery. Conversely, long-distance trade brought to Jingdezhen the highly-prized cobalt which was used to decorate Jingdezhen porcelain in the elegant style for which it would be known worldwide: blue and white.

Gerritsen tells the story of Jingdezhen, the city of blue and white, as a place virtually defined by its most famous product, how its meaning, and the ways its revenues were distributed among artisans and day laborers, changed over time. She is also concerned with the city's global history, foregrounding the place, and above all, the people within it. Jingdezhen was of course a place where beautiful ceramics—still shown today in museums or treasured by private collectors around the world—were designed and made. But it was also a place where people worked in a very labor-intensive, often back-breaking, production process, where the local environment paid, and still pays, the price for all those centuries of artistic creation. "China"

is a name for the kind of porcelain ware that this Chinese city, and others, produced. However, in the course of producing china, China was also transformed, physically, demographically, socially, and culturally, making the history of the city of blue and white an ongoing dialectic between people and pots, and between the local and the global.

Gerritsen's beautifully illustrated volume is divided into twelve short chapters. Chapter one begins with a modern-day view of "the shard market of Jingdezhen," where entrepreneurial locals who have come into possession of largely unprovenanced pieces—some whole, many broken—of Jingdezhen pottery gather to sell their wares. This shard market is in many ways a reflection, and a refraction, of the centuries-old market for Jingdezhen pots. Firing porcelain is a delicate art, and variations in temperature, clay content, moisture, and, yes, luck can lead to successful pieces, or just broken ones. The successful ones found their way into homes, palaces, or museum collections, while the failures were tossed out, buried here and there around Jingdezhen. It is largely these failures which are excavated and sold in the Monday morning shard market.

This contemporary interaction of people and goods at the Monday market is not anomalous, but rather represents the history of Jingdezhen in microcosm. As Gerritsen shows for example, "the history of Jingdezhen's porcelains is […] the history of a web of connections that linked geographical spaces, natural resources and human skills" (18). Much of that "web" found a hub in imperial power, and the wares were in demand as both "local tribute (*tugong*)" and "court tribute (*chaogong*)" (25). Apart from the political economy, or at least running in tandem with it, "the growth of commercial structures that facilitated the distribution of goods throughout the empire" helped "the culture of tea drinking spread rapidly to other regions during the Song [Dynasty]" (35).

Tea requires teapots, teacups, and a range of other ceramic implements which vary with fashion, preferences, trends, and styles. As these moved across the economy, buoyed by religious and intellectual exchanges, producers were always chasing a market in constant flux. People

make goods, these in turn shape what people do. Buddhism, urbanization, and other broad cultural changes provided new uses for, markets for, and devotees of wares, locking Jingdezhen blue-and-white into the Chinese economic and social array.

Above all, Gerritsen stresses throughout the *City of Blue and White* that Jingdezhen was not a passive, end-of-the-line recipient of all of these changes in Chinese life, but was always negotiating its place among the flows of time. This is not just in the scope of China, but within the truly global context of trade. We moderns may be prone to thinking that world commerce began with the 1947 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), but in fact the long-distance circulation of goods goes back, in certain regions of the world, to at least the Bronze Age. In chapter three, Gerritsen "considers the spread of ceramics produced in the Chinese empire to destinations within Eurasia, East- and Southeast Asia, and throughout the Indian Ocean during the 13th and early 14th centuries," highlighting "the intricate ways in which local knowledge about making and selling things feeds into and is fed by global patterns of consumption" (39–40).

This discussion shows us that what happened in China didn't stay in China. It couldn't. The world is always globalizing, and global exchanges are always worlding the goods—artistic and otherwise—which, in one way or another, are bound to enter that worlding-globalizing circuit. Art is born global, especially the most local art, and in particular, art within the East Asian corner of global trade orbits. A wonderful map on page 45 shows the "systems of exchange in thirteenth-century Eurasia."

Gerritsen's work allows us to see that the Mediterranean Sea, dominated by the city-states of Italy at the time, was linked to the vast flow of thought and material touching at dozens of way stations and ports of call across thousands of miles of sea and land. Jingdezhen was keyed directly into this clockwork of exchange, not so much a Wallersteinian division-of-labor world system of proto-capitalism as a locally-negotiated chain of buyers, sellers, and transporters moving people and their things and ideas as far as transportation technology would allow.

But globalization was different in the past. Now, there is a welter of rules, laws, agreements, and conventions. Then, imagination was key. People wanted what they dreamed of, and this was often filled with exotic images and things of places far away, thanks to, among others, Marco Polo's "The Description of the World" (47). By firing the imaginations of the wider world, the Jingdezhen potters were able to fire their kilns at a profit.

As time passed, however, the remote world became gradually more concrete, more known. The strongest chapter in this exquisite volume is chapter six, where Gerritsen uses a 1402 Korean map to show the globalization of knowledge that helped form the world we know today (116). This map extends from the Korean peninsula and part of Japan all the way across China and India to Arabia and Europe. Thus, the cartographer's gaze and the reach of Jingdezhen porcelain, enter a changing world where knowledge was sharpening the contours of the artwork and applying new market pressures on producers at the source.

In the same chapter, Gerritsen also introduces an illustrated manuscript from late 14th-century Persia (120). In this illustration is a beautiful blue-and-white vase, much like the Yuan Dynasty Meiping vase depicted on the photographic plate on page 123. "China," in both senses of the word—and by extension Jingdezhen—was very much a part of the imagination vocabulary of distant Persia. The city of blue and white was also in Joseon Dynasty Korea (124–28), in Palawan Island in the Philippines (128–31), and in 1460s Italy (131–33), as well as in collections as far afield as Ireland (131). We find Chinese blue-and-white porcelain everywhere today because it was everywhere a thousand years ago.

How Jingdezhen changed in response to this worldwide integration is the subject of much of the second half of *City of Blue and White*. Taxing the pottery trade and situating the Jingdezhen pottery production within the imperial frame were ongoing negotiations in their own right. The political situation in China—civil war, benign dictatorship, imperial decline—impacted local business throughout Jingdezhen's existence as a ceramics stronghold. Meanwhile, the depletion of resources in the area,

and the environmental degradation which came with burning much of the surrounding forest stock in the kilns, were the more local components of Jingdezhen pottery's global story. In addition, the "*yi tiao bian fa*" or "Single Whip Reforms" of the 16th century, during the Ming Dynasty, pushed forward the silverization of the Chinese economy (178–79). This brought Jingdezhen into yet another exchange network, one centered on the new Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Americas (179). The division of labor—or, as Gerritsen cites China scholar Kenneth Pomeranz as characterizing it, the "labour-absorbing" system—had always been a feature of Jingdezhen pottery production (182–84). In part, monetizing the economy disrupted this system, and provided more opportunities for local embezzling and grift. World circuits of exchange may make us think of ocean vistas, sailing ships, and colorful bazaars, but pottery-making at Jingdezhen was largely grunt-work, overseen by managers who were not always entirely on the level. Daily frustrations of working in a group were another local component to the world-famous city of blue and white.

Nevertheless, Jingdezhen overcame these local difficulties and entered a silver-denominated Golden Age as rapidly-enriching Europe began to buy up porcelain wares like never before. Globalization was turning into Europeanization, and Europe was making a fortune off of the shift. A 1615 still life by Dutch painter Floris Claesz van Djick (1574/1575–1651), for example, shows a variety of local produce—breads, cheeses, and fruits—in Chinese porcelain vessels and on Chinese porcelain plates (212–13). China, and china, were becoming mainstays of the European worldview.

Today, Europeans and others from far abroad have reversed the circuit in many ways, visiting the Jingdezhen markets in person and searching for treasures in the accumulated material history of the city of blue and white (227–32). These "fragments of a global past" (chapter 12, 227 ff.) are also reminders of an uncertain future. Jingdezhen has yielded its pride of place as Chinese porcelain to "Chaozhou, in Guangdong" (232). But the people of Jingdezhen remain where their forebears labored, still working in pottery, in addition to several other key industries. Contemporary residents

inhabit, in their own way, the multi-layered history and present of a city which has, from antiquity, been cached within global circulations, which, Gerritsen stresses, are always human, never just about goods and objects of art themselves. (238)

It is in this tension between the local and the global, the material and the personal, and the individual and the wider bands of political belonging and differentiation that *The City of Blue and White* is read most fruitfully in concert with Chelsea Foxwell's *Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting.* Unlike Jingdezhen pottery, or much of the Chinese economy as a whole, Japanese art and life tended to be shyer of global networks. For sure, the Japanese archipelago was never completely cut off from world exchange. Even during the so-called *sakoku*, or "closed country" period of the latter half of Edo, Japan remained attuned to the goings-on in Asia and beyond through Korean embassies, trade with Chinese and Dutch merchants, and the increasing supply of books spreading among the highly literate Japanese population.

And yet, the events of the 1850s—the arrival of American naval vessels and the ensuing breakdown of the Edo order, culminating in civil war and the installation of the emperor as head of government following a coup d'état—suddenly inserted Japan into full participation in the world economy. The problems of "globalization," to use the term anachronistically again, then befell Japanese artists and handicraft makers. On the one hand, they now had to take into consideration the market tastes far beyond the ones they had previously known, while on the other, they had to figure out, in the process, what was meant by "Japanese" in the blossoming foreign demand for "Japanese" things.

Adding to this confusion was that one of the most powerful champions of the "Japanese" style of art was an American, Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), then teaching philosophy at the University of Tokyo. Fenollosa was enamored of the artworks that many in Japan had begun to see as hopelessly outdated—Buddhist statuary, for example, which lay broken and discarded until he chanced upon it, claimed it, and restored it, physically

and reputationally, as great creative accomplishments. He had a sense of what he wanted Japanese artists to produce for the West, but he also was learning about Japanese art history at the same time. Hence, the nihonga, or Japanese-style paintings, and other "Japanese" works of art which Fenollosa and his collaborator, Okakura Kakuzō (aka Okakura Tenshin, 1863–1913) encouraged Japanese artists to make were palimpsests of influences, guesses, senses of the art markets at home and abroad, and individual artistic and creative inspirations. All of this was done while artists triangulated the past of Japanese art, the present mish-mash of art styles flowing in from Europe and the United States and a rapidly-changing China, and the projected future of a style of naturalistic art that Fenollosa thought was Japanese, or, to put it the other way, a style of Japanese art that he thought was naturalistic.

As Foxwell explains, the influx of foreign art in the early Meiji period caused a turbulence of categories, expectations, and styles.

> Under the prevalence of a developmentalist, even Darwinian, paradigm that foresaw native Japanese painting as succumbing to Western modes of representations, the term nihonga reflected a certain view of temporality and authenticity: one in which the hope of preserving authentic Japanese art was tied to the act of segregating Japanese painting from the globally engaged practice of painting at large. This verbal reframing of existing Japanese painting had another effect as well: it inserted a symbolic separation between the painting of the Meiji era and past painting. The result was a mirroring in Japan of the contemporaneous Western appraisal of Japanese painting as bifurcated between an authentic premodern corpus (Japanese painting) and a corrupt modern corpus (Japanese-style painting, or consciously Japanese painting). With the birth of nihonga, the originally Western fear about the death of authentic Japanese art took on a complex life within Japan. (2)

Foxwell's book, perhaps even more lavishly appointed with color illustrations than Gerritsen's volume, proceeds in six chapters to track this

strange "mirroring" of Japanese and Western—whatever those labels might have meant or might mean today—art and artists, dealers and collectors, markets and exhibitions.

The main character in Foxwell's beautifully written historical narrative is Kano Hōgai (1828–1888), a member of the Kano line of official artists to the Edo shoguns. He was steeped in knowledge of Japanese and Chinese art, but, as an artist in his own right, wanted to break free from much of the mannerism (as he saw it) of the lineage system. Hōgai, whose patron was Ernest Fenollosa, also contended with the shifting sands of art tastes in places he had never visited, brokered as those tastes were by Fenollosa and his own strong preferences and grand visions for Japanese art.

Foxwell explicates the changes in Japanese art during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the context of Hōgai and his world, showing how the paintings that he would have studied and the paintings that he himself produced reveal a fully aware group of artists. Hōgai was first among them, putting all their talent and ability into play in finding a foothold in a rapidly changing world. The creation of a new government-sponsored art school, the Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō (Tokyo School of Fine Arts) (1887), and the Japanese government's desire to showcase its civilization—torn between the old and the new, the "decadent" old style and the "too Western" (some thought) new style—at exhibitions in Japan and in the West, all created a new dynamic for Japanese artists. These artists now had to contend, not just with a patron or a discerning collector, but with a nebulous "public," in Japan and in far-flung places like Boston and Vienna, who were insisting on images that the artists themselves did not necessarily wish to produce. Hōgai's spirited, sometimes even ironical, responses to these conflicting demands, and the ways in which he deployed the full measure of his creativity to navigate what was in many ways an entirely unfamiliar landscape, make Foxwell's book a true delight.

As Hōgai shows, the constant of "Japanese" art was change. Words and images, and even artworks, changed meaning as the artistic contexts of Japan changed. In one arresting example, the significance of eagles

shifted dramatically when, as Foxwell argues, Japanese artists realized that the majestic raptor was the symbol of the United States, so they began to produce eagle statues and eagle paintings in the hopes that Americans would buy them. Americans, for their part, were much more intrigued by the "Japanese" artistic context of eagles, and also of falcons and hawks (158), and this somewhat comical folly of well-meaning cross-purposes produced new visual environments for these birds in Japanese art, as well (163). On and on it went, the merry-go-round of artists trying to figure out what publics wanted, and of publics trying to figure out what artists were up to, all mediated by "experts" and transcultural explicators like Fenollosa and Okakura, subject to interventions by governments with entirely different agendas than the promotion of the fine arts.

What Foxwell concludes in *Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting* thus echoes what Gerritsen shows throughout *The City of Blue and White*: cultural exchange and artistic production are always open, ongoing, and dynamic. Space or time has no boundaries. This becomes even more pronounced when, as in the case of China and Persia, or Japan and the United States, the linguistic and other cultural apparatuses are widely variant. As Foxwell writes, drawing on an earlier consideration of historian and theorist Hayden White's views on literature (206–07),

> [...] typical export art is founded on unclosable cultural and knowledge gaps between producer and consumer. But knowledge is power, and as Arjun Appadurai notes, the gaps that sustained nineteenth- and twentieth-century export art hurt the producer. [...] Such gaps are endemic to the world of global trade, yet the case of export art is peculiar in that any producer who succeeds in bridging the gap through knowledge of consumers and their preferences is likely to fail once the consumer decides that the new, more informed piece of export art is no longer an authentic reflection of the so-called native culture. As we have seen, this voyeuristic desire for the cultural groundedness of the object and for the non-Western culture that is unaware of its Western

> spectators is of a piece with the general desire for exhibition art that is oblivious to the viewer and to the fact of its public display. Yet here is where the situation takes a further turn: Japanese painters, craft makers, and arts officials became intensely aware both of the history of Japanese painting and of the need to visualize Japaneseness. The result was the category of artistic production that became known as *nihonga*. (210)

In this roiling clash of styles and visions, Japanese painting as we know it today was born, for the first time it might be argued, at the very cusp of Japan's full-fledged entry into the global networks that had long helped define the artistic output of Jingdezhen.

Also explicated in *The City of Blue and White*, the historical and artistic truth that national art forms are always-already global, given the nature of human networks of interaction and exchange is what emerges from *Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting*. Artists work in a particular setting, of course, and chronology and context delineate, but do not define, a given artist's or workshop's output. Globalized trade presents opportunities and challenges, but the creativity of producers is continuously reshaping the globalizing, transnational forces at play. Because even the most well-known "national" art forms are unchecked by national and cultural borders, a transnational approach rooted in historical accuracy and detail seems the best way to write the history of art. Foxwell and Gerritsen have succeeded in showing how this approach uncovers art history to all the original tributaries—cultural, commercial, material, intellectual, and more—which combine in the creativity of the artist or atelier.

Making Modern Japanese-Style Painting and *The City of Blue and White* both stand alone as sensitive and informed investigations into the history of East Asian art. But because they remarkably complement one another in their probing of the tensions and harmonies between the local and the global, it is recommended that they be read together. Globalism may be a recent ideology, but the global context of art is as old as human exploration and exchange.

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