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ART REVIEW

The ‘Monstrous Beauty’ of Pretty Porcelains

A show at the Met offers a feminist revision of Chinoiserie, a decorative style that swept through Europe in the age of empires and seeded stereotypes of Asian women.

By Aruna D’Souza
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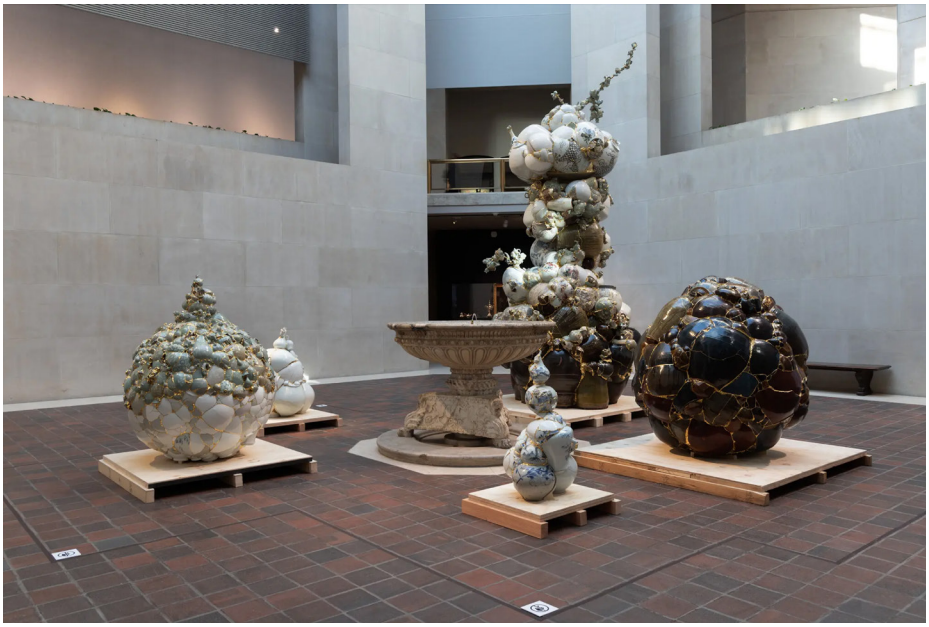


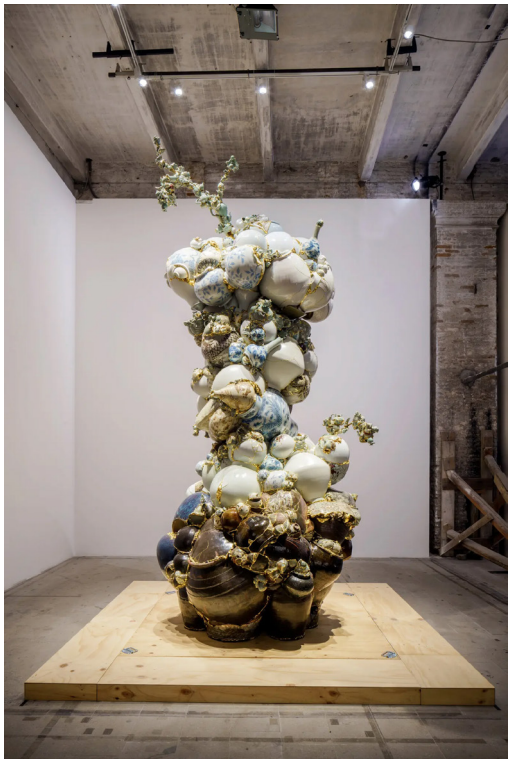
Five “translated vases” by the Korean artist Yeesookyung transform discarded porcelain to rethink ideas about Chinoiserie and its stereotypes. The works are on view at the Met exhibition “Monstrous Beauty: A Feminist Revision of Chinoiserie.”

The dragon lady, the courtesan, the submissive beauty — these enduring stereotypes of Asian and Southeast Asian femininity circulated in Europe and America centuries before the vast majority of Westerners had ever laid eyes on a real flesh-and-blood woman from those parts of the world.

A major, and maybe surprising, source of these tropes? The Chinese porcelain dishes and figurines that first arrived in Europe by sea in the 16th century, brought by traders who originally used them as ballast for shipments of spices. People went mad for the translucent, lustrous, white material, so unlike the clunky stoneware they were

accustomed to. They were equally fascinated by the cobalt-blue decorations that spoke of places, people, gods and other wonders they could only dream of. The wares kicked off a vogue for "Chinoiserie" — a decorative style seen in furniture, textiles and fine art that swept Europe until the 19th century.

An intriguing exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Monstrous Beauty," brings together more than 200 objects from the 16th century to today, including works by seven contemporary Asian and Asian American women. It is billed as a "feminist revision" of Chinoiserie, asking us to look at these porcelain objects not simply as pretty curiosities but as vehicles for long-held racial and cultural stereotypes about the East, especially when it came to Asian women. All those innocent-seeming pagodas, dragons, bamboo stalks and graceful women, the show argues, had an outsized influence on the West's image of Asia precisely because they had become so common that people hardly paid attention to them.

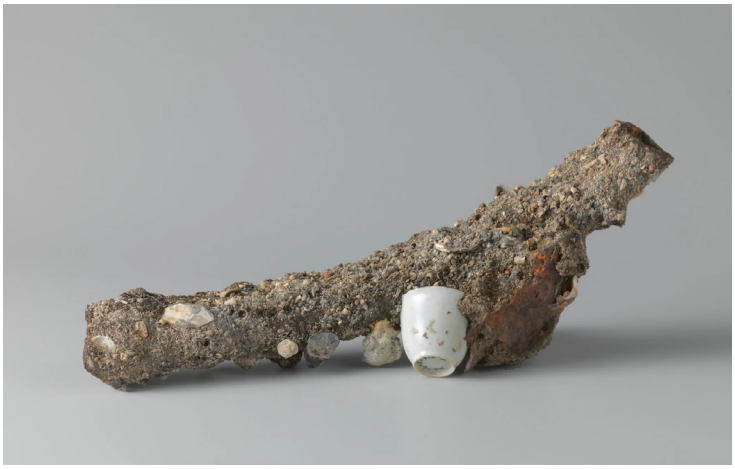


Yeesookyung's "translated vase," 2017, in which signs of breakage are honored by being covered in gold. She does not simply restore the original objects but transforms them into sculptures that are by turns disturbing and gorgeous.

The show opens, spectacularly, with five monumental "translated vases" by the Korean sculptor and painter Yeesookyung. The artist glues together pieces of discarded porcelain and covers the cracks with gold leaf in the manner of Asian practices of repair in which breakage is honored as part of an object's history. But Yeesookyung's sculptures don't simply repair the broken vessels, much less honor them: She transforms them into bulbous, hybrid forms, half weird, half gorgeous and even sublime — monstrous beauties, indeed. An apt opening salvo for an exhibition that aims, as an opening statement suggests, "to shatter the lure of the exotic."

The earliest objects brought to Europe were made for markets other than Europe, but as the Portuguese, the British and Dutch East India companies and other traders sensed that there was a profit to be made, they began commissioning Chinese manufacturers to cater to Western tastes in both the types of objects they made and their designs. The craze triggered a race to discover porcelain's closely guarded recipe. (The secret ingredient, the Europeans finally discovered in the mid-18th century, was kaolin, a white clay.)

King Augustus II of Poland became so obsessed with discovering the formula that he was said to have succumbed to "porcelain sickness." He once gave the Prussian king a regiment of dragoons (elite soldiers) in exchange for a cache of 151 Chinese-made vessels, an example of which, a fine jar adorned with dragons and flowers, is on view.



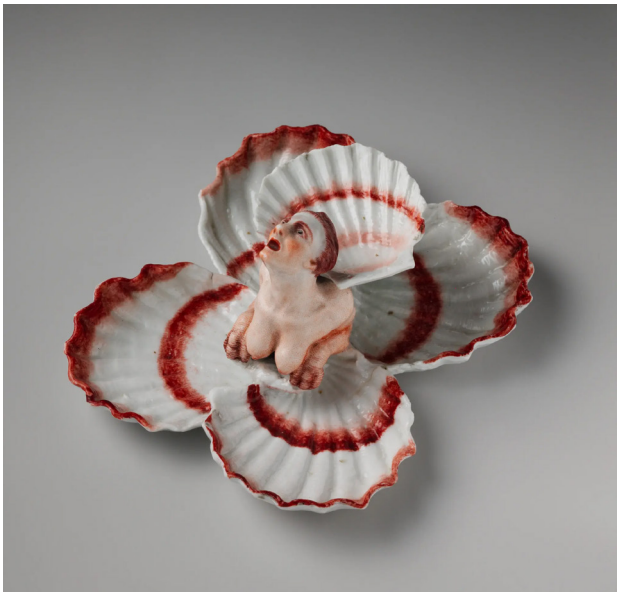
When the shipwreck of the Dutch ship Witte Leeuw was discovered in 1979, divers found an odd relic: Sediment and shells had fused the ship's cargo, which included both peppercorns and porcelain.

Capitalism was a dangerous business back then, as attested to by a strange relic in the first gallery, recovered from the shipwreck of an early-17th-century Dutch trading vessel. Over 350 years some of the lost cargo — a glowing white porcelain cup, peppercorns — became fused with shells and sand, like the bone of a sea monster.

Mermaids and sirens — myths rooted in both erotic pleasure and the fear of death — show up frequently in early Chinoiserie, including a cup and saucer made around 1700 for the Dutch market showing a creature playing a violin to a besotted sailor with an emblazoned warning to "beware the siren." Cute. Less cute is an Italian-made sweetmeat dish — imagine taking a bonbon from one of the five scallop shells surrounding a screaming harpy, clawlike hands clutched at her sagging breasts.

The Europeans who sought to replicate Chinese porcelain weren't driven by simple appreciation but by a desire to dominate. A tulip vase from around 1725 made by a Vienna workshop directed by Claudius Innocentius Du Paquier, the second European firm to discover the secret recipe, includes a vignette that shows the entrepreneur declaring "No longer, China, shalt thou say thy arts are unknown/Behold thou shalt be conquered by the European spirit."

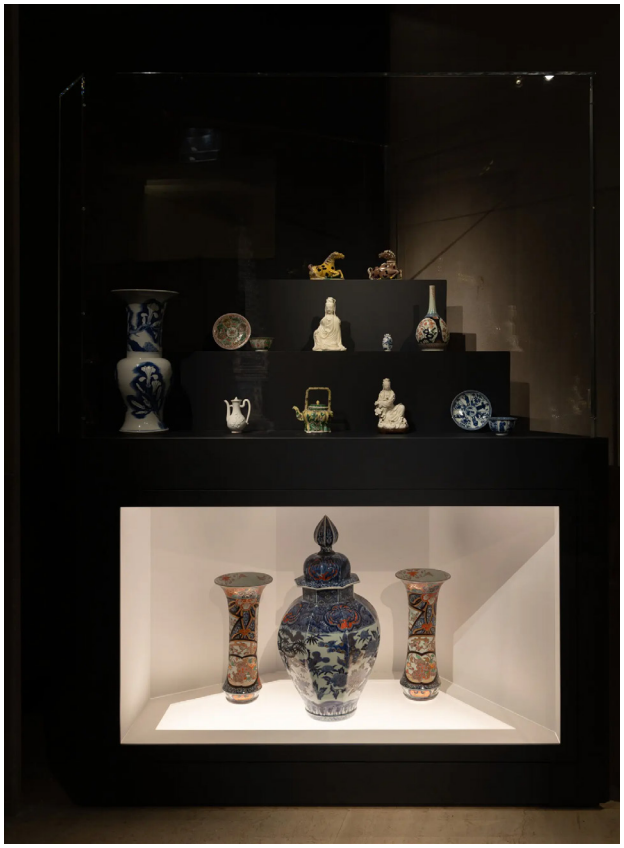
For all the testosterone-fueled competition, the style itself soon came to be associated with the feminine, in no small part thanks to collectors like Queen Mary II, who was by turns credited and blamed for turning women into voracious consumers of the wares. A



An Italian sweetmeat dish from the Doccia Porcelain Manufactory, circa 1750-60, shows a terrifying harpy at the center of an array of scallop shells. Mermaids, sirens and other monsters were frequent themes in early porcelain designs.

section devoted to her includes the impressively sized vases and ewers she commissioned from Dutch artisans, as well as tapestries, furnishings and wallpapers made to set off her collections.

In the later 17th century, porcelain became ubiquitous in the form of tea sets, made to enjoy another lucrative import from Asia, and the centerpiece of the feminized ritual of the tea party. There are lots of dragons, tigers and flowering bamboo, elegant Asian women and figures that might have walked straight out of a comic opera adorning the examples on display.

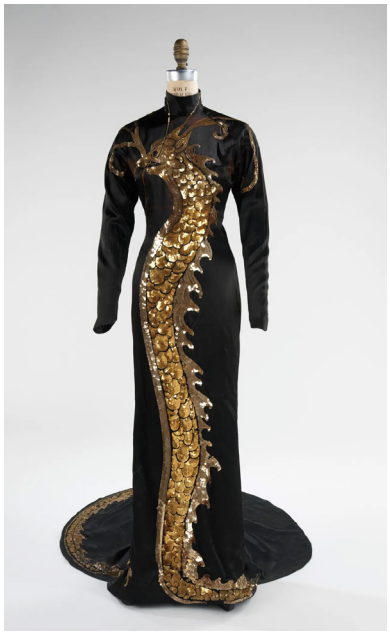


Installation view of "Monstrous Beauty" at the Met. On the bottom shelf is a "dragoon jar," so named because Augustus II once traded a regiment of dragoons for a cache of fine porcelain.

But the charm and humor are accompanied at times by an easily overlooked, casual racism: A teapot made by the Meissen porcelain manufactory, the oldest in Europe, shows grinning, caricatural figures in a tropical landscape — two Chinese, one European, and another black-skinned with a feathered headdress. An accompanying tea caddy depicts a subservient Asian woman washing the feet of a European man.

Figurines were an important vehicle for transmitting ideas about Asian women. European manufacturers portrayed them as actresses, musicians, goddesses, mothers and representatives of Asia in depictions of the "four continents" (Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas), a popular theme in countries that were intent on colonizing the whole world.

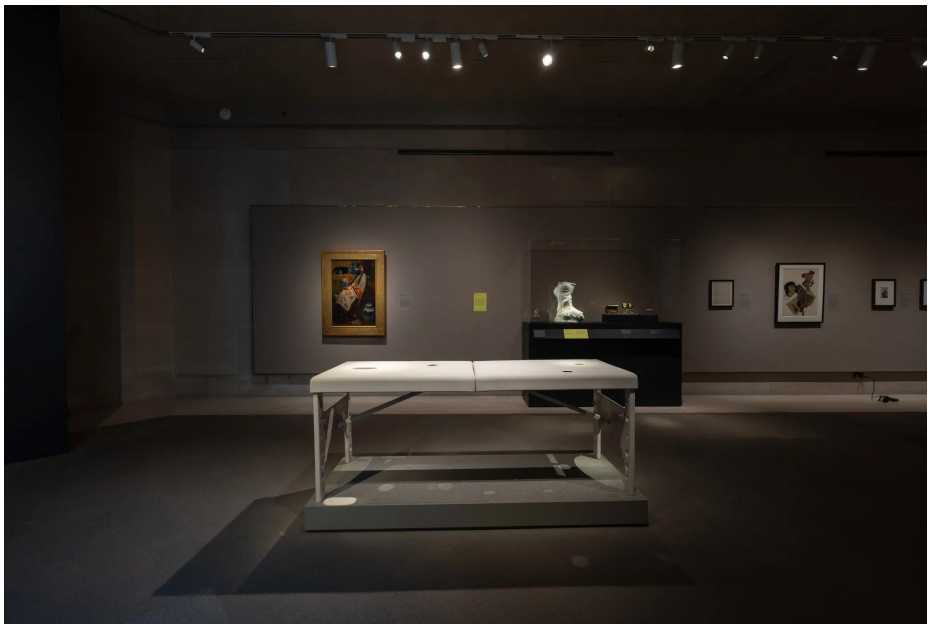
These images did not simply "other" Asian women — they also offered European women alternative ways to see themselves, outside the restrictions and expectations placed on them by their own cultures. This was the case when it came to reverse painted mirrors — in the early 18th century, European merchants shipped mercury glass to Canton (now Guangzhou), where they were decorated with images of beautiful Chinese women; as time went on, people would commission portraits of English women in the same manner.



A silk evening dress from 1934 reflects the role of "Dragon Lady" that Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American star in Hollywood, was often cast as.

All of these motifs — not only humans, but mermaids and monsters, dragons and manticores, exotic beings all — were projected onto the real-life Asian women who began immigrating to Europe and America in the 19th century. More recently, the cyborg has been added to the list. An illuminating moment in the last section of the show pairs shoes made for bound feet with Lee Bul's "Untitled (Cyborg Leg)" from 2000, a porcelain sculpture that looks back to that centuries-old Chinese cultural practice and forward to our robot future.

This section also features the American-born Anna May Wong, the first Chinese American film star in Hollywood. Her career was shaped by stereotypes. The Hays Code prevented her from kissing a white actor onscreen, so she couldn't be a leading lady — instead, she was often cast as the "Dragon Lady," a racialized femme fatale. Among the works on view are her black,



Patty Chang's "Abyssal," a full-size massage table made of unglazed porcelain. It recalls the murder of Asian spa workers in Atlanta in 2021, a crime that tragically revealed the long history of aligning Asian women with sexual availability and violent death.

form-fitting evening dress from 1934, emblazoned with a gold-sequined dragon running from shoulder to hem, and an evening coat she had made in England, modeled after male warrior costumes from Chinese opera. In a life bound by limiting images of Asians, she found ways to assert her power.

The exhibition is far from perfect — the curator, Iris Moon, has brought a lot of ideas and objects into the space, and takes every opportunity to interpret them, which overcomplicates an otherwise refreshing take on the decorative arts. The exhibition is also so intent on avoiding the standard line on Chinoiserie, which focuses on the race to understand the technology of porcelain, that it fails to explain that technology at all.

But the closing work in the show, "Abyssal" by Patty Chang, a full-size massage table made of unglazed porcelain, reminds us of the urgency of the questions the show raises. The sculpture recalls the murder of six Atlanta spa workers in 2021, a crime that tragically revealed the long history of aligning Asian women with sexual availability and violent death. When "Monstrous Beauty" closes, the piece will be sunk into the Pacific Ocean, where it will be overtaken, perhaps, by coral and sediment, becoming a distant relative of that fragment recovered from the 1613 shipwreck that brought porcelain to the West.

Monstrous Beauty: A Feminist Revision of Chinoiserie

Through Aug. 17, Metropolitan Museum of Art