Blue and White in Oil

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

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Ceramics at SUNY New Paltz

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Introduction – Artist Statement

Depictions of ceramic objects in European and American oil paintings are appropriated onto porcelain forms that look like stretched canvases. I explore the relationship between east and west through re-interpretation of western artifacts based on my own projection without permission. Collectively, they are an obnoxious attempt to insert my identity into a history that had already identified and fetishized “me”. My identity retold in sculptural forms are grand, inflated, boastful, and full of insecurity.

Historical Background — Blue and White Ceramic Objects in Oil Paintings

Chinese porcelain did not reach the western world until the late 16th century due to the limited commodity exchange between the west and far east.[1] With porcelains' entrance into western societies, they started to appear in western art forms like oil paintings. The depictions of these Chinese ceramic objects in oil paintings provided a window to understand how the far east was interpreted by the western world.

Fig. 1. The Feast of the Gods. Giovanni Bellini and Titian. Oil on canvas. 1514/1529. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 2. The Adoration of Magi. Andrea Mantegna. Tempera on Panel. 1495-1505. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA.

Two earliest depictions were in *the Feast of the Gods* by Bellini (Fig.1),[2] where three blue and white porcelain bowls were placed among the Pagan Gods and *Adoration of the Magi* by Andrea Mantegna (Fig.2),[3] where a blue and white bowl was a gift to Christ. Bellini and Mantegna depicted

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[1] Robert Finlay, "Introduction: The Pilgrim Flask of Philip II," in *the Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2010), 4.
[2] Giovanni Bellini and Titian, "*The Feast of the Gods*," 1514/1529, National Gallery of Art, Washiongton, D.C.
[3] Andrea Mantegna, "*The Adoration of Magi,*" 1495-1505, Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA.

Chinese porcelain as treasures suitable for deities because of its exceptional rarity in Italian collection in 16th century.[4]

Beginning in 17th century, European factories started producing imitations of Chinese blue and white porcelain. These more affordable domestic wares combining with the increasing Chinese exports gave rise to the Chinoiserie style— European products that take Chinese iconography, either directly or based on European imagination. David Porter remarked that the Chinoiserie taste was "simply to enjoy a delicious surrender to the unremitting exoticism of total illegibility".[5] However reducing to Chinese culture, Chinoiserie needed such imagination and imitation because the Chinese cultural experience was only available through these artifacts.

Figure 3. Still life with a Nautilus Cup. Willem Kalf. Oil on Canvas. 1662. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

The same projected fantasy of Chinoiserie can be seen in depictions of Chinese porcelain in Dutch Golden Age paintings where the illegibility of the Chinese export porcelain made it interchangeable with anything foreign. In Willem Kalf's *Still life with a*

[4] Jane Hwang Degenhardt, "Cracking the Mysteries of 'China': China(ware) in the Early Modern Imagination," Studies in Philosophy 110 (Winter, 2013), 143.
[5] David Porter, "Chinoiserie and Aesthetics of Illegitimacy," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 28 (1999), 28.

Nautilus Cup, a Ming sugar jar, a Persian rug, a Façon de Venise glass and a nautilus cup shared the same exoticism to the Dutch painter (Fig. 3).[6] Kalf reduced these objects to a symbol of foreignness and a product of conquest to depict a dream of wealth.[7]

Fig. 4. Marriage A-la-Mode II ('Tête à tête'). William Hogarth. Oil on Canvas. 1743. National Gallery, London.

The glorified perceptions of Chinese porcelain were immediately followed by an effort to belittle its aesthetic value. David Porter analyzed the roles of Chinoiserie objects in 18th century English literatures. In common depictions, a pleasure derived from Chinoiserie implied superficiality and the lack of true taste.[8] In *Marriage A-la-Mode II ('Tête à tête')* by William Hogarth, a collection of Chinoiserie vessels appeared on top of the fireplace behind two figures (Fig. 4).[9] *Marriage A-la-Mode* is a series of scenes depicting an upper-class marriage union and its corruption. All ornaments are meant to appear as second-rate, especially the Chinoiserie clock with a Buddha that holds candles.[10] These ornaments were not appropriate based on the Greek and Roman aesthetic logics. They collectively symbolized a moral degradation of the two figures.

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[6] Willem Kalf, *Still life with a Nautilus Cup,* 1662, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.
[7] Norman Bryson, "Abundance," in *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 127.
[8] Porter, "Chinoiserie and Aesthetics of Illegitimacy," 49.
[9] William Hogarth, *Marriage A-la-Mode II ('Tête à tête')",* 1743, National Gallery, London.
[10] David H Solkin, "The Fetish over the Fireplace: Disease as 'genius loci' in Hogarth's Marriage A-la-Mode," *The British Art Journal* 2 (Autumn 2000), 30.

From the 18th century onwards, Chinese influence had been greatly integrated in European ceramic production. Exact identification cannot be made because these wares appeared not as a type of ceramics but as ceramics. The lack of their significance to the painters could also be derived from the status of still-life in art history. In *Portrait of Comtesse d'Hausonville*, by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, four ceramic vases appear behind the figure (fig. 5).[11] Their placement was to satisfy the composition of the painting.[12] Their origins were not of concerns to the subject matter. Ingres, famously, disregarded the importance of any genres except the history paintings. He expressed, "the government has no obligation to encourage any genre other than history painting. Genre strictly speaking — scenes of family life, modern scenes, fruits and flowers, still life, etc.—should be left to private individuals, to collectors."[13] However insignificant these ceramic objects' identities were for Ingres, he still depicted them in incredible detail. His high regard of "absolute exactitude" allowed a viewer to confront the depictions of these vessels as one would the vessels themselves, less cloaked by the lens of the painter.[14]

Figure 5. Portrait of Comtesse d'Haussonville. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Oil on Canvas. 1845. The Frick Collection, New York.

[11] Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Portrait of Comtesse d'Hausonville*, 1845, The Frick Collection, New York.
[12] Andrew Carnduff Richie, "The Evolution of Ingres'Portrait of the Comtesse d'Hassonville," *The Art Bulletin* 22 (Sept., 1940), 123.
[13] Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, *Art in Theory 1815-1900* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 470.
[14] Harrison, Wood and Gaiger, *Art in Theory 1815-1900*, 184.

When the Chinese influence was apparent in a depicted ceramic object, it could either symbolize a generalized foreignness as seen in Kalf's work, or be understood as a degradation of aestheticism as seen in Hogarth's work. Often, however, these depictions bore ambiguities because the intended western gaze saw no significance of the objects' identities. When viewed by new unintended audiences, such as myself, they generate new messages. My porcelain sculptures will communicate these messages back to a western audience through a scope that emphasizes the eastern influences on the artifacts of western art history.

Methodology

Form of paintings

The forms of blue and white objects depicted in oil paintings are the forms of the paintings themselves — thin smears of paints on top of primed canvases stretched over wooden structures. Historically, these “forms” were to be understood not as objects but as images. These blue and white depictions exist as abstract images rather than tangible objects. They do not carry a material history but a history of their gaze. It is crucial to replicate them not as their implied forms of bowls, cups, urns, vases or tiles, but as forms of paintings so that they will still be understood as images.

Material and Process

1. To create each stretcher bar, a 6-part laser cut birch wood press mold is used. On a drywall, initial mold piece is secured with clamps. All other pieces follow with the same procedure until clay is pressed into all four layers of the mold to make one bar. A total of four bars will be made together and covered to dry slowly. Once they are close to leather hard, they are taken out of the molds to avoid breaking due to shrinkage.
2. The canvas will be made from a combination of slab-rolling, hand rolling to be as compressed as possible. While leaving the slab on the fabric, cut out the exact pattern needed to fold onto the stretcher bars.
3. Spray water onto the canvas and slide four bars into position to make sure all four bars lock into each other. The porcelain canvas is then folded back onto the

stretcher bars to be compressed. To ensure the flatness of the canvas, it needs to dry very slowly with very little handling.

4. To create the drawing in the front, dry wall pieces are glued together to fill the void of the back so that two boards can sandwich the porcelain to be flipped.
5. To bisque the canvas, the image faces down on a shrink slab of the exact size with long preheat and slow firing. Once bisque, the pieces are much stronger so that they can be handled without any support.
6. Various glazes are used and among them one important glaze is a clear glaze that does not have any movement when fired to cone 6.

Installation logic

Two Columns

A ceramic vessel can be understood in terms of its rim, body and foot. *Blue and White Vases in John Singer Sargent's 'the Daughters of Edward Darley Boit'* took imageries from the painting, *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, but separated each vase into three different panels — rim, body and foot. Such dissection of the vessel follows the logic of its potter instead of the logic of its painter. Their placement also echoes the display of the original painting in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston where two vases were placed on each side of Sargent's painting framing the painting. In-between my depictions, however, the "vases" frame an empty space or a passage way to the rest of my work (fig. 6).

Figure 6.Blue and White Vases in John Singer Sargent's 'the Daughters of Edward Darley Boit'

Southeast wall

Passing between the two depicted vases, to the right, seven panels are installed on the southwest wall. They appropriated imageries from 7 different paintings which all depicted blue and white ceramic vessels. The choice to select these paintings is a reflection on the process of cultural appropriation where the intended perception of the content is dismissed over the authority of the appropriator (fig. 7).

Figure 7. Install of Southwest wall of Thesis Exhibition

Northeast wall

While using the depiction of blue and white in oil paintings to understand the relationship between east and west, another context started to emerge — the relationship between art and craft.

Art history is a history of images. The development of the painting medium is a constant improvement for better dissemination of images. Walter Benjamin theorized the value of a work lies on a polarity between cult value and exhibition value.[15] A work's cult value is its value by existing while the exhibition value is its value when it is seen.

[15] Walter Benjamin, "the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 7.

Benjamin contributed painting medium surpassing the fresco and mosaic to its enhanced mobility to complement the exhibition value. The exhibition value of a painting is its ability to be understood as an abstract image. Later craft theorist, Glenn Adamson, concluded a key difference between art and craft, art asserts itself as autonomous while craft is to be understood as supplemental. “It [craft] lies beneath notice, allowing other qualities to assert themselves in their fullness”.[16] Adamson used the analogy between a painting and its frame: the painting asks to be understood as autonomous while the frame cannot be understood in its entirety without the framed painting.

My work is in a craft material to make vessels; yet their form denies any functionality of vessels and can only be looked at. The rejection of any understanding of these ceramic objects other than the images they construct was my rational to create all the works on the southwest wall but is subverted on opposing wall.

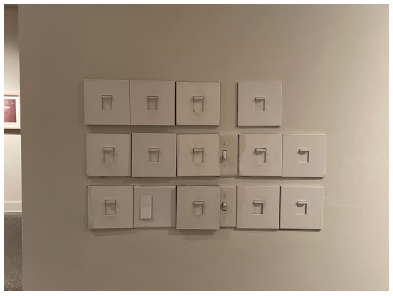

Figure 8. Light switches in the Dorsky Museum

The two pieces on the northeast wall cannot be understood as autonomous because of their additional functions outside its constructed images. The QR code within the *Blue and White Vase in Henri Matisse’s ‘Studio Interior’* functions as a portal to the entire digital collection of my resources (madebyyage.com/blue-and-white-in-oil). Another motif in the work is to mimic and bring attention to the light switches where the work was installed next to (fig.8 & 9).

[16] Glenn Adamson, “Craft as Supplemental,” *Craft* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 57.

Wind Chime of 10 Most Expensive Artwork sold in 2019 Auction is another work that took imageries of 2019's most expensive art work in U.S auctions to assemble into a wind chime. Even though it is hang like a wall piece, its function was to make sound. Transforming all these expensive works to an instrument is a subversion of their value as imageries.

Figure 9. Northeast wall of Thesis Installation

End column

Right next to the wind chime, *Untitled (Studio Debris)* is leaning against a column. This piece should be seen last because it is lower than eye level and the furthest from the entrance of the gallery. This piece serves as a conclusion to all my exhibited pieces.

On the side facing the columns, I epoxied test tiles. And on the other side, it was a blue and white drawing of the test tiles. While the previous pieces evaluate the gaze at ceramics from art history, this piece aims to gaze at ceramics from within the ceramic production.

Test tiles are made to produce ceramic objects. They are items within the ceramic production, not necessary to be understood or even seen outside of the discipline. Creating an image from all my test tiles replicates my experience of looking at these ceramic objects as a craftsperson. The piece then becomes a gaze of me as the craftsperson to my material process (Fig. 10 & 11).

Figure 10. The front of Untitled (Studio Debris)

Figure 11. Back of Untitled (Studio Debris)

Conclusion

Two components made up my thesis exploration: the research is to gain knowledge but the works are a place to possess and fetishize that knowledge. My research looks for depictions of ceramic objects in oil paintings. My making is an

obnoxious attempt to insert my identity, into a history that had already identified and fetishized “me”. *Blue and White in Oil*, this thesis exhibition, is based on how ceramics are looked at historically and questions how it could be looked in contemporary art.

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