

The peregrinations of porcelain

The collections of Duchess Eleonora d'Aragona of Ferrara

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The Medici of Florence have long been recognised as having the largest collection of Chinese porcelain in the fifteenth century, but this article reveals that Eleonora d'Aragona, Duchess of Ferrara had the largest in Italy at this time. In fifteenth-century Europe, porcelain did not come directly from China, but rather through trade and diplomacy with foreign courts, thus its peregrinations gave rise to entangled histories and reception. Taking porcelain as a case study, this article argues that studying collecting through the lens of trade and diplomacy provides new interpretations of, and demands new approaches to, the history of collecting.

It has long been claimed that the Medici were the owners of the largest collection of Chinese porcelain in fifteenth-century Europe. By the death of Lorenzo de' Medici in 1492, fifty-two items were recorded in his inventory.¹ Archival evidence, published here for the first time, disputes this generally upheld claim, demonstrating that Eleonora d'Aragona (1450-1493), Duchess of Ferrara had over 170 pieces – surely the largest known collection in Italy at that time. Eleonora's porcelain has been overlooked in the literature, and yet it is significant not only for its sheer volume, but also for what it tells us about the circulation of goods in the fifteenth century. This article explores the importance of Eleonora's porcelain collection in relation to global networks, diplomacy, and cross-cultural exchanges, as well as the local habits of collectors. The historical circumstances of how precious items came from afar, were presented as gifts, and then circulated again within and outside of Italy, is interpreted here within phenomenological concerns around the agency of things and anthropological approaches to the gifting and mobility of objects.² The documents shed light on how objects were mobile, circulating and travelling long distances through trade and diplomacy, while such artefacts could also be arrested in time when placed in a collection or a domestic space. This complex relationship between mobility and stasis points to the latent sociability of objects and how their modes of exchange contributed to their value, their symbolic meanings, and their agency. The placement of Chinese porcelain in a collection, however, also led to material engagements, fostering possibilities for the viewer to engage in knowledge exchange – both informed and misinformed – about the wider world.

During the fifteenth century, Chinese porcelain made its way into Italy through a circuitous route, travelling through Central Asia via the silk roads, and then into the courts of the Mamluks and Ottomans; from there it was often proffered in diplomatic exchanges of gifts in order to broker alliances with European powers. The value of porcelain thus lay in the fact that it had come from afar; its journey told tales of diplomatic entanglements, mercantile routes, and travel. Its initial reception in Italy would have been accompanied by ritual, and those privileged enough to attend the diplomatic gift exchange would have felt honoured to have set eyes on such a prized item. Once in a collection, such as that of Eleonora d'Aragona, a porcelain vase would be shown off to visiting dignitaries and rulers, and would also have acted as a source for further artistic invention. Porcelain could be embellished with metal mounts produced by a local artisan, while it also inspired copies during its peregrinations. As blue and white porcelain travelled across the globe, imitation ware was soon to follow in its tracks. From Iznik to Damascus and finally to Spain and then Italy, potters sought to replicate both its material and design motifs.³

Many luxury objects in the late fifteenth century circulated as commodities at one point or another in their lifetime, but we should not assume too quickly that these objects were merely neutral monetary commodities. Robert Finlay's extremely detailed account of porcelain in world history demonstrates the rich history of the ceramic, but as Pierson argues, we need to be wary of thinking about porcelain in terms of a history of passive recipients receiving a commodity in a universalizing manner. Rather, consumption, use, and engagement with porcelain varied depending on the location of appropriation.⁴ Porcelain, a global product, is thus also about the local. As stated by the editors of the volume on *Global Design History*, objects are local, but 'they capture in their material folds processes and ideas' that are often outside the local.⁵ Indeed, while objects are mobile and can cut across boundaries, they sometimes – as Lieselotte Saurma-Jeltsch has argued – 'get entangled in altered "stories" but in turn alter the stories of their new environment.'⁶ Chinese porcelain, hardstones, and precious gemstones were sought by rulers across the world, but while these products demonstrate shared interests, their reception might be rather different. Recent literature reflecting the 'global turn' has stressed the vital role played by other cultures outside Europe in shaping the products of a Renaissance European culture.⁷ Turkish carpets, Syrian metalwork, silks, and ceramics, among other items, demonstrate fascinating global networks, which allowed for these

items to be produced and consumed across wide geographic areas and reveal the international scale of manufacture, trade, and supply.⁸ But consumption was also linked to the everyday and could be merely parochial, with meaning shifting according to context. Collecting in fifteenth-century Italy, as argued here, was thus a result not only of developments in humanist learning and the rebirth of classical culture, but it also coincided with the expansion of trade and diplomatic routes which brought novel objects into Italian élite households and ultimately led to new approaches to collecting and engaging with the material world.

Arresting mobility: Chinese porcelain in the 1493 Inventory

Innovative approaches to inventories have given new insight into how individuals engaged with objects, the range of people who had access to collectible material, and the social and cultural significance (apart from the monetary worth) of things.⁹ Inventories can also raise more questions than can be answered, as they sometimes tell us only half the story, recording objects at a particular moment in time, without necessarily revealing their varied lives. As Eleonora d’Aragona’s collections have been dispersed and her porcelain has not been traced, this article pieces together the evidence that does exist, recorded in an inventory of 1493 (partially included here as an appendix).

Eleonora d’Aragona, Duchess of Ferrara was the daughter of King Ferrante d’Aragona of Naples. Eleonora moved to Ferrara in 1473, when she married Duke Ercole d’Este of Ferrara and soon after began renovating her apartments in the Castel Vecchio and building new ones in the gardens of the castle. These spaces included two *studioli*, two chapels, as well as various rooms, which served multiple functions, from bedrooms to entertaining spaces.¹⁰ Eleonora had an impressively large and varied collection including hardstone vases, sculpture, ceramics, and paintings by artists such as Bellini and Mantegna.

The Archivio di Stato in Modena contains inventories and account books belonging to the household of Eleonora during her tenure as duchess, from 1473 to 1493.¹¹ The only complete inventory was taken at her death in 1493 (Guardaroba (G) 114) and this is the only book that lists her collections of porcelain and provides a detailed record of her art collection. This 1493 inventory is organized around categories of goods, rather than by room, and thus provides no information on how her collections were displayed.¹² The inventory begins with textiles and tapestries and progresses to ceramics (including the list of porcelain), then

liturgical-related objects (altar frontals, *ancone*, vessels for the Eucharist), works of art (paintings and sculpture), books (she had an extensive library for a woman of her time) and finally silverware, among numerous other items. Eleonora's inventories and account books were mostly written by her *guardorabiere* Gironimo Zigliolo, a courtier belonging to a family who were well ensconced within the Este court. Gironimo was renowned as being knowledgeable about materials and objects and was often used as a buying agent by the Este.¹³

The list of Eleonora's collection of porcelain in the 1493 inventory is organized largely by colour, beginning with green porcelain ('porzellana verde'), amounting to seventeen pieces. This probably refers to a celadon glaze, which gave the ceramic its colour green and was highly prized in China for its similarity to jade and its subtle decoration.¹⁴ Vases with celadon glaze were also listed among Lorenzo de' Medici's collection; one of them survives in the Bargello in Florence.¹⁵ Descriptions of these vessels tend to be limited to shapes, which ranged from vases to plates to water jars. One vase was described as a pumpkin,¹⁶ probably referring to its shape as there is a blue and white vessel described in the same manner, although it could have referenced the rib-like qualities of a pumpkin that would have appealed to touch. Indeed, even though celadon is monochrome, a surprising amount of decoration could be applied through low relief. Such pieces were prized in Italy not only for their subtlety of decoration but also for the way the material felt when touched, an element that would be important in the viewing and handling practices of the *studiolo* where attention to materials played a role.¹⁷ Other pieces were indicated to be all white ('schieta'), while a few items have no identifying colour. The 'white' porcelain might be describing *qingbai*, a glaze carrying a light tinge that ranged from bluish grey to bluish green, produced during the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1206–1368) dynasties. The famous Gaignières-Fonthill vase is an example of this type, first belonging to the King of Hungary who added the now-lost silver-gilt and enamelled mounts when he gifted the piece to Charles III of Anjou, upon his accession to the throne of the Kingdom of Naples in 1381.¹⁸ Although these wares date earlier than Eleonora's time, it was not uncommon for vessels to make their way into European collections at a much later date, because of the circuitous routes they took as (often recycled) diplomatic gifts.

The blue and white porcelain in Eleonora's inventory is more varied and in some cases the compiler has provided further information on the decoration, the casing, the shape, or the function: one small blue and white porcelain vase, for instance, is described as being used for rose water. This could simply indicate the shape of the vessel or suggest that porcelain served a functional role, rather than being confined to display. An inventory relating to a Venetian merchant who died in Damascus in the fifteenth century confirms the use of porcelain as a receptacle for ginger, for example, and evidence from the sixteenth century in Ferrara indicates that some porcelain pieces were indeed moved from one room to another to serve the duke.¹⁹ In 1499, the porcelain vessels brought back to Portugal for King Manuel from the 'King of Calicut' were described in terms of their capacity to hold spices and liquids: 'a porcelain pot [with] fifty pouches of musk, six porcelain bowls as large as large drinking vessels . . . and six deep porcelain containers, each of which can hold 10 *canadas* [approximately 15 litres] of water.'²⁰ In the Asian context, vessels' shapes were altered to accommodate new dining practices.²¹ It is likely that in Europe the perceived magical properties of porcelain worked in tandem with the beliefs in the medicinal properties of the spices it held, alluded to in contemporary images of the Magi who often carry their gold, frankincense and myrrh in receptacles in a range of materials, including Chinese porcelain (Fig. 1).

Numerous vases, flasks, and bowls in blue and white porcelain are mentioned in Eleonora's inventory – 156 pieces in all. Some vessels appear to have been stored stacked on top or within each other, such as eighteen small bowls 'inside each other'.²² The inventory indicates how stacking solicited a physical engagement with the material as the compiler had, in one instance, initially written down one soup bowl, only to cross out the 'one' and replace it with a 'four', as he would have picked up the largest bowl only to reveal three inside it.²³ This stacking was also used as a means to pack porcelain when shipping, as one Chinese source from the twelfth century notes 'the small pieces are packed in the larger till there is not a crevice left.'²⁴ Little attention in the inventory is paid to describing the patterns on the porcelain, except for one piece which is singled out for its iconography: a vase with two lion heads on either side.²⁵ The recording of the iconography here might indicate that the animals were easily describable and familiar – at least within the compiler's cultural framework. It might have also have been perceived as relevant in light of the patron, since the word 'lione' plays on the name 'Lionora'.

Two vases belonging to Eleonora were set in gold mounts, while another had gold (gilt copper) embellishments around the mouth and added feet.²⁶ Mounting porcelain was a common practice in Europe, dating back to the fourteenth century at least. As early as 1365 Louis, Duc d'Anjou, had a blue and white Yuan dynasty porcelain bowl richly mounted with silver-gilt and enamel; the footed mount included six busts of apostles, while the silver rim was enamelled with hunting scenes, with gilt knobs set with pearls, garnets and even serpents tongues (probably fossilized shark's teeth).²⁷ The presence of serpent tongues also alludes to the belief in the apotropaic qualities of porcelain, as attested by a text, *Libellus de notitia orbis* (*On Knowledge of the World*) from 1402 that noted that it 'absorbs all the impurities, etc. of the poison and purifies it entirely.'²⁸ Porcelain's material qualities were also described in an inventory of 1532 of Florimon Robertet as 'so sound that if some evil people should soil it with poison to harm anybody it would instantly break of itself and fall into pieces rather than tolerate the evil beverage which was meant to injure our inside.'²⁹

The 1465 inventory of Piero di Cosimo de' Medici lists a porcelain cup decorated in gold, while Isabella d'Este's porcelain was all mounted.³⁰ Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* (see Fig. 1) provides a representation of how metal mounts were used for embellishment on similar types of objects, as the two hardstone vessels, one of which has had a metal lid added to it, while the other has had a metal knob added. While certainly decorative, they would have enabled easier handling of the vessels as well as adding material value. The porcelain cup full of coins, closest to the viewer, has its lid removed, held beside the receptacle to show off the coins. The use of such vessels to display coins is documented at a feast in 1492 at the Medici palace, where Lorenzo's coins and medals were exhibited in a large damascene vase.³¹

The addition of mounts was certainly not exclusively a European practice, and may have come from Islamic tradition. Metallic mounts were prevalent in Iran, Ottoman Turkey, and the Mughal Empire in the early modern period, where porcelain was collected in large quantities and was often exchanged as part of intercultural diplomacy.³² The addition of mounts could transform an object's shape, form, and function and could also serve to repair a broken piece, such as a maiolica dish mentioned in Eleonora's inventory, repaired with copper.³³ In some cases, precious and semi-precious stones were inlaid on the sides of the vessel to enhance value. Examples of this type can be found in the collections formed at the Topkapi palace

in Istanbul.³⁴ Two of these pieces, virtually identical, are now in the British Museum (Fig. 2) where shallow grooves added by (presumably Ottoman) jewellers allowed for the jewels to be mounted on the sides of the bowl. In this case, the object has undergone not only a visual transformation but also a material one. It is practices such as these that have led Stacey Pierson to argue that these objects undergo a shift in cultural identity. In the case of Fig. 2, the object is no longer only a Chinese bowl, but an Ottoman one, and therefore becomes part of the local material culture of that region.³⁵ Such mounts provide new ways to consider and reconsider the reception of Chinese porcelain. By enhancing these pieces with expensive mounts, as was the case with other rare objects such as hardstones, ostrich eggs, and coconuts, a further sense of ownership and value was added to the object. In the case of porcelain, it fused local metalwork with a rare material made in a foreign style.

While it has often been claimed that the blue and white motif provided the main appeal of the product in Europe, as well as in Ottoman and Mamluk contexts, the addition of mounts and, in the case of Ottoman interventions attaching jewels that would alter the smooth surface, signals an interest in transforming the object into something else. In so doing, the pattern and imagery was often obscured, and in such instances we are reminded not only of the mobility of these objects, but also their mutability. Something as hard, yet delicate as that of porcelain, could still be transformed into something new, relevant to the ‘local’ while simultaneously carrying associations of the ‘foreign’.

The problem of language

There is of course a problem of vocabulary. Scholars have been right to assume that some early references to porcelain may not, in fact, refer to Chinese porcelain but rather to materials of similar appearance. Ceramics inspired by porcelain motifs were widespread in Italy and abroad and there was also a common misconception of how porcelain was actually made.³⁶ In Eleonora’s case, the compiler has made sure to distinguish ‘porcellana’ from other ceramics, such as maiolica and damascene ware. While the list of porcelain in the inventory is mostly divided and categorized, so that the long list of porcelain is then followed by maiolica and other ceramics, there is some mixing. For instance, at what appears to be the end of the list of porcelain, we move on to maiolica, yet, the compiler has stumbled over some more porcelain, and thus we have ‘Tre piadene grande di porzellana azura’ sandwiched in between two entries for maiolica

(105v). Following the maiolica are ceramics ‘da Pesaro’, such as *albarelli*, but again, inserted in this list, we find one large vase of porcelain.

It is crucial to note that the compiler Gironimo Zigliolo was an accomplished *guardarobiere* and relied upon as a shrewd agent to procure goods by the Ferrararese court as well as discerning patrons such as Isabella d’Este. This is in contrast to some compilers of inventories who might be called in to fulfil only that one purpose, rather than officiate regularly on the comings and goings of particular items. Indeed, throughout the Este accounts, Gironimo’s name appears as an individual eager to have his name associated with his responsibilities in maintaining and tracking the Este treasures, from counting and recording every pearl on individual jewels to weighing the silverware.³⁷ It is thus essential to take a specific approach to understanding inventories and interpreting vocabulary and terms, which might reflect quite different levels of knowledge depending on the compiler and the reader. Errors of transcription have appeared in the secondary sources publishing Lorenzo de’ Medici’s inventory of porcelain, which was taken after his death in 1492 (although known only from a 1512 transcription). The inventory describes a cupboard with seven shelves, where his porcelain was kept. In the literature, these items are often all recorded as porcelain, while a closer look reveals there was actually a mix of porcelain and non-porcelain items. This is partly due to the imprecise way in which it is recorded in the inventory, for the compiler has listed the items on the shelves and then written in the right margin a curly bracket with the words ‘di porcellana tutte’. However, among the named ‘porcellana,’ are bowls made out of cane, clay vases and earthenware jugs.³⁸

One key way to identify Chinese porcelain was not through its decoration but through the material itself. While on a surface level, blue and white ware made in Syria or Spain could resemble the motifs found on porcelain, the material was rather different. Porcelain’s translucency was due to the fact it was made from a white clay known as kaolin, available only in China at this time, in contrast to earthenware which feels heavier and if chipped, reveals a darker colour. Primary sources reveal that some viewers were aware of these differences, while others were clearly not. An artist in Herat in the fifteenth century was said to have attempted to make porcelain and came close but a contemporary noted that ‘the colour and translucence were not as they should have been’.³⁹ A Chinese ambassador to Herat in 1414 also noted that the ceramics

made there were ‘extremely fine’ and ‘beautiful’; however, they ‘do not match the light, blue, clear and sparkling ones of China. If such a vessel is hit, it makes no sound. The nature of clay is like this.’⁴⁰

Eleonora’s inventory makes distinctions between all different types of ceramics, which suggests that the compiler knew how to distinguish them; yet language still remains a problem for reading and interpreting inventories. The unknown or confused provenances of certain types of objects, as Elizabeth Rodini suggests, reveals a paradigm of cultural composites, objects that ‘defy association with a particular site of production’ within a culture that placed emphasis on mobility and ‘material circulation’ rather than fixed categories.⁴¹ For example, in Eleonora’s inventory four pieces of blue and white ‘damascene porcelain’ (‘dasmachino di porzellani’) cause problems, and is a similar term we find referenced in other sources of the time. Is this damascene pottery that looks like porcelain? Or is it porcelain with motifs that would have appeared ‘damascene’ to Italian viewers? By the end of the fifteenth century the interests in Chinese ceramics – that is blue and white – and its high price and rarity, gave rise to imitations. An alchemist, Maestro Antonio attempted to replicate the material in fifteenth-century Venice, while in the sixteenth century ‘work in all sorts of porcelain like that called Levantine’ was reportedly available in that city.⁴² In 1462 a shop in Florence was selling damascene variants, and in 1493 another shop records large quantities of ceramics from Damascus. The Florentine merchant-banker Filippo Strozzi and Duke Ercole d’Este both bought ‘Damascene porcelain’ and ‘counterfeit porcelain.’⁴³ Terms such as *alla domaschina* or ‘damascene’ could refer to a technique or a style, rather than a point of manufacture, further complicating the issue.⁴⁴

It seems likely that the reference to ‘dasmachino di porzellani’ in Eleonora’s inventory is not describing authentic Chinese porcelain, but some form of blue and white ware, and probably referring to decoration and material rather than provenance. A drug jar in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (Fig. 3), dating from the first half of the fifteenth century provides a provocative example of this fusion of motifs and what might be understood as ‘damascene’ ware. The *albarello* was made in Syria, most likely Damascus, and yet contains an emblem of the *florin*, indicating that it was created for export to Florence.⁴⁵ The floral scrolls and flying birds are typical of Syrian wares inspired by Persian pottery and Chinese porcelain, yet the *florin* points to Italian consumers.⁴⁶ Meaningful interchanges of this kind occur repeatedly

on ‘damascene’ metalwork, where European armorials appear on objects that stylistically appear Syrian. Damascus was not, of course, the only place producing blue and white ware. Ottoman pottery manufactured in Iznik and pottery produced under the Timurids in Iran came in a variety of shapes and sizes, often displaying adapted chinoiserie motifs to suit local tastes, demonstrating the interlacing of cultural styles.⁴⁷ It is probable that Ottoman and Timurid wares were also described as ‘damascene’ or ‘alla domascina’. Within Europe, Spain was producing lustreware and blue and white ceramics that were inspired by Middle Eastern and Chinese products, often referred to as ‘alla moresca’.⁴⁸ The porcelain received by Lorenzo de’ Medici from the Mamluk Sultan Qaitbay was described by some contemporaries as ‘alla moresca’ which has generally been translated as ‘Valencian vases’ although Piero Dovizi da Bibbiena described these same gifts in a letter to Lorenzo’s wife Clarici Orsini as porcelain, underlining the problems of primary sources but also the uncertainty of Renaissance viewers.⁴⁹

Vocabulary that references the place of manufacture can be extremely misleading in Renaissance documents, as is demonstrated by the use of the terms ‘Indiana’, ‘alla Indiana’ and ‘dell’Indie’ for a wide range of objects that sometimes came from India, but often referred to items from Africa, China, Japan, the Levant, the New World, and sometimes Europe.⁵⁰ While ‘damascena’ could imply blue and white ware, indicating various styles of pottery made in Damascus, it was also used to describe a variety of objects employing interlacing motifs associated with the Middle East, found on leather, armour and metalware.⁵¹

The problem of vocabulary thus points to a larger epistemological confusion over the origins of things circulating within an expanding world of global connections. While an inventory such as Eleonora’s points to the compiler Gironimo’s attempts at ordering these things into a system, it also highlights the problems of doing so systematically. Indeed, much of the so-called ‘Veneto-Saracenic’ metalwork today is still catalogued with question marks around its origins – Venice? Syria? Cairo? Alexandria?⁵² Our own reading of historical documents as a means to identify objects as originating in one particular place of manufacture might also be missing the point. Further research into the reception of particular pieces will certainly shed light on encounters by early modern viewers with objects and the range of knowledge in determining origins, but such confusions also suggest that we should be looking at these goods with new categories in

mind, rather than trying to fit them within the geographical categorizations that are legacies of nineteenth-century preoccupations with nation states and borders.

Indeed, it is worth asking to what extent China was even understood as a knowable, identifiable place for most viewers of Chinese porcelain in the fifteenth century? Did beholders of these vessels make associations with the markets and courts of the Ottomans and Mamluks, that is in Turkey, North Africa, and Syria, rather than a specific point in Asia? In a fourteenth-century guide for merchants, Damascus is mentioned as a place to acquire spices, textiles, rose water, porcelain, and painted vases.⁵³ Even in the seventeenth century, porcelain appeared in the context of Africa rather than Asia, depicted in the painting of Africa from Jan van Kessel's *Four Continents* (1661-1666).⁵⁴ This confusion over geographic provenance is evident in descriptions of the Katzenelnbogen Bowl, a celadon piece, which still has its original fifteenth-century mounts housed in Kassel. In a 1483 inventory it was recorded as an 'Indian' ceramic while in 1594 it was noted it was 'brought back from the orient' by count von Katzenelnbogen.⁵⁵ The association with India is indicative in the explanation provided by a sixteenth-century Portuguese cleric who noted that porcelain 'comes from India and is made in China'.⁵⁶ A rare primary source from 1447 reveals that the three pieces of porcelain presented to Charles VII of France by a foreign ruler were described as 'de Sinant' meaning China, but in a German inventory of 1594 the origin of a porcelain vessel is described simply as from the 'Orient', revealing varied levels of knowledge.⁵⁷ Fifteenth-century viewers of porcelain might have recalled tales from Marco Polo who discussed 'the most beautiful vessels and plates of porcelain . . . made in great quantity in a city . . . called Tingiu' (Tongan, near Quanzhou), but it is not clear that they would have known where this was exactly.⁵⁸ By the later sixteenth-century, this had changed, as European cultural understandings of China were much more articulated, reflected in cartographic representations of Asia as well as in Jesuit and other missionary material that had clear descriptions of Asia, circulating in print.⁵⁹

Gifts, embassies, and the peregrinations of porcelain

Chinese ceramics were transported along the silk roads accompanied by other precious items, sought by European consumers, such as diamonds, gems, silk, and spices.⁶⁰ The collecting culture of Renaissance Italy, while certainly closely tied to humanistic enterprises more traditionally associated with the European roots of the Renaissance, was also connected to the larger circulation of goods. This culture was fascinated

with rare and precious materials, stories and narratives of the provenance and circulation of luxury items and thus connected to diplomatic and mercantile activities.⁶¹ The increased interest in collecting such luxury objects might have been novel for Europeans, but it was not so for Eastern rulers. Indeed, foreign courts – from the Mamluks and Ottomans in the Mediterranean, to the Aq Qoyunlu and the Timurids of Central Asia and Persia to the rich empires in India and China – had collections that certainly outshone those of Europe. Eastern courts' access to raw goods such as gems and their manufacture of luxury objects such as ceramics and metalwork meant that they served as models worthy of emulation.⁶²

Much of the recorded Chinese porcelain coming into Italy in the fifteenth century was sent from the Mamluk sultans. The Mamluks' control over the spice trade in the fifteenth century meant that they had luxury objects in abundance, traded along the silk roads, which they presented as diplomatic gifts as a means of brokering territorial and commercial deals. Lists of lavish gifts from textiles to ceramics, and slaves to camels were frequently compiled to track the numerous objects given by the Mamluks and received from courts all over the world. For example, the Mamluks received Chinese porcelain from Yemen in the hundreds (400 or 500 items in some lists) but in their gifts to European courts the Mamluks never exceeded thirty pieces at a time.⁶³ Placed in perspective, European access to these goods was rather limited. Despite this (or perhaps because of it), gifts such as porcelain making their way into Italy at this time were highlighted as noteworthy.

Chinese porcelain was presented by the Mamluk sultans to Doge Foscari in 1442, to King Charles VII of France in 1447, to Doge Malipiero in 1461, to Catherine Cornaro of Cyprus in 1470, to Doge Barbarigo in 1490, and to the Signoria of Venice in 1498 and 1508.⁶⁴ The importance of porcelain in gift-giving is underlined in Giovanni Pontano's *De magnificentia*, where the well-known Neapolitan humanist notes 'sometimes art makes an acceptable gift . . . There are some that prefer the tiniest little vase of that material which they call porcelain to vases of silver and of gold even though the latter are of higher cost.'⁶⁵ Pontano proceeds to remark on the rarity of a giraffe given to King Ferrante d'Aragona by the 'Sultan of Syria' (Mamluk), demonstrating that porcelain was often one of many rare gifts – accompanied by ceremony, ritual and embassy – and carried these associations with it as it made its way into collections.

Paintings from the fifteenth century of the Magi – the ultimate example of gift-givers – have long been studied as evidence of the cross-cultural associations with gifts. Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* (see Fig. 1) generally dated to the late 1490s or early 1500s, offers a close-up example of this ritual of gift-giving, where the artist combines his interest in materials with his antiquarian pursuits, to deliver an image that places the viewer in the role of a privileged member of this intimate ceremony. Access to the Christ child thus also allows access to privileged viewership of these precious objects. The black Magus on the right holds an agate or alabaster vessel, while the other turbaned king holds a brightly orange-hued vessel, possibly made out of jasper. The blue and white bowl full of coins might be one of the earliest representations of Chinese porcelain in Europe.⁶⁶ The attention to touch and the act of holding these objects is pronounced in the painting. These objects would have found a suitable home in the collections of Isabella d'Este, Marchesa of Mantua (she was Mantegna's patron) and certainly in her mother Eleonora d'Aragona's *studioli*. Indeed, the objects painstakingly portrayed in the painting may even have been showcasing Isabella's collections, as her inventory of 1542 reveals that she owned porcelain as well as precious hardstones, similar to those on show in the painting.⁶⁷ Two porcelain pieces were in a cabinet in her *grotta* and are described as in the shape of cups placed in mounts with feet and with rings for handles. Another was placed in a cabinet on the right of the 'antedetta grotta', also in a gold mount with feet described in the shape of a bell. A fourth vase in a third cabinet is described as porcelain 'of various colours *alla moresca*' also placed in a gold mount with feet and handles. Eleonora was also a patron of Mantegna, owning at least two paintings by him, and relations between Mantua and Ferrara were very close through marriage and shared collecting interests.⁶⁸ Eleonora died in 1493 and the porcelain cup in the painting might even be a piece that her daughter, Isabella had recently inherited from her mother, as Mantegna painted the work around this time.

The gifts from the Magi represented in the painting certainly had close ties to real gifts that had long been mediators between courts across the Mediterranean in the fifteenth century, such as the frequent embassies from Tunisia, the Mamluks and the Ottomans at the Aragonese court in Naples. Throughout the 1480s, Eleonora's father, King Ferrante of Naples exchanged gifts with Sultan Qaytbay of Cairo. In 1483, for example, European travellers to Cairo reported on a shipload of military equipment that Ferrante had

sent, which included complete sets of armour including helmets, brassards and gloves as well as halberds, axes, swords, daggers, bows, catapults and gunpowder.⁶⁹ In the 1480s, Italian ambassadors reported on the frequent and continued presence of Ibn-Mahfuz, the Mamluk ambassador who received an annual provision from Ferrante as well as clothing. Battista Bendedei, the Ferrarese ambassador who was also often resident in Naples, noted that Ibn-Mahfuz ‘has stayed here many times, so much so that he is very familiar with the king and duke.’⁷⁰ Ferrante’s own illegitimate son even lived in Cairo for over ten years.⁷¹

Eleonora was witness to foreign embassies either in person or through descriptions in letters. A Turkish embassy in Naples in April 1483 is documented by numerous reports from ambassadors (including the Ferrarese orator) who recorded the peace negotiations between Turkey and Naples, following the incursion in July 1480 when Turkish troops invaded Otranto in the Kingdom of Naples. After a procession through the streets and a special reception in the Castel Nuovo, the Turkish ambassador and his company presented various gifts including silver, textiles, Turkish dogs, and horses.⁷² In 1489 King Ferrante wrote to his daughter Eleonora about the gifts of vases of silver, brocades, silks, and dogs he received from the Turkish ambassadors visiting Naples.⁷³ Gifts such as these, then, were bound up in complicated relations that included access to trade routes, acquisition of luxury goods, religious wars, and territorial struggles. Close proximity to North Africa and to Turkey meant that Naples had opportunities to acquire porcelain and other rarities through diplomacy. It is no coincidence that the oldest reference to Chinese porcelain in a European collection comes from Naples, in the will of Queen Maria of Naples and Sicily, dating from 1323, while excavations have also unearthed porcelain in Puglia.⁷⁴ Visitors to Naples in the 1490s also remarked on tables full of porcelain in the Castel Capuano, the residence of the Duke of Calabria in Naples.⁷⁵

Eleonora d’Aragona’s account books are full of payments for a wide range of goods, but there is no record of purchase of porcelain. We do, however, have archival evidence for the acquisition of one piece in Eleonora’s collection – a soup plate or basin – which she received as a gift from Diomedes Carafa, Count of Maddaloni in Naples. The lack of documentation of payments in any of her account books for the remainder of the porcelain suggests that those items were given as gifts, some of which she probably brought with her when she moved from Naples to Ferrara in 1473. The piece of porcelain sent by Diomedes Carafa to Eleonora was described as ‘scotellina di porcellana’ in a letter (probably referring to a small *scudella*, a

basin usually used for broth) and this may correspond to the entry for a small celadon basin in her inventory.⁷⁶ Diomede had been Eleonora's tutor and was the godfather of Isabella d'Este. A well-known collector and humanist and a key councillor to King Ferrante of Naples, Carafa was an influential figure for Eleonora, dedicating his treatise on good governance to her.⁷⁷

Eleonora kept close ties to Naples, attested by regular correspondence. She travelled south in 1477 to attend her father's second marriage to Giovanna d'Aragona and while she was at Naples, Eleonora bore her son Ferrante d'Este.⁷⁸ At the coronation of her father's new wife, the court received an embassy from the Sultan of Tunisia, while Eleonora was still present.⁷⁹ Eleonora may easily have been the recipient of gifts from the sultan, not only as daughter of the king but also as Duchess of Ferrara in her own right. When she returned to Ferrara she left her children Beatrice and Ferrante in Naples in the care of the Duchess of Calabria, Ippolita Sforza, and thus the channels of communication were fairly open during this period, as she kept abreast of news of her children in the south. Many of the letters between Eleonora and the Aragonese court centre on the purchase or commissioning of objects, suggesting that goods circulated frequently between these courts. In the early 1480s, Alfonso d'Aragona wrote to his sister, Eleonora about the war with the Turks in Otranto and sent her earthenware jugs from there.⁸⁰ It appears that porcelain could also be bought in Naples, as in August 1487, when a payment was made to Giuliano de Mazo for five 'scodelle di porcellana di color celeste'.⁸¹ The sheer amount of porcelain in Eleonora's collections suggest it was built up over time and very likely was received through various routes: mercantile and diplomatic as well as inherited and gifted between friends and family.

Conclusion

In Renaissance archival sources, porcelain is often listed as being displayed among other materials, such as hardstones, maiolica, glass, metalware, and gems.⁸² This fascination with a range of materials was connected to intellectual investigations about the world, alluded to in humanist treatises and evident in the types of artefacts found in the *studiolo*. Eleonora's inventory reveals the connections pursued by collectors between materials such as porcelain, hardstones, and glass, suggesting that material (rather than simply the object's origin) could be an organizing factor. The attention devoted by contemporaries to the material make-up of porcelain, its translucency, its properties – even the sound it made – underlines the emphasis on

a close material engagement with the ceramic. Part of the appeal of collections was the interest in comparison, whether it was painting to sculpture, or in the case of porcelain and hardstones, the comparison of materials, the way they looked and felt, and evidence of the craftsman's manipulation.

The porcelain in Eleonora's inventory of 1493 marks a particular moment in the history of these ceramics. By the end of that decade, Vasco da Gama had discovered the sea routes to Asia and increasingly from this point onwards, porcelain began to appear more frequently in European households. Eleonora's son, Alfonso d'Este, would have Bellini incorporate depictions of porcelain into the painting designed for his *camerini*, integrating these vessels into a coherent literary and visual programme.⁸³ By the early sixteenth century, customized Chinese porcelain made its way into Portugal sporting European arms and inscriptions, reflecting a new type of composite object. A century later (in 1598) 3,000 pieces of porcelain were recorded in an inventory of King Philip II of Spain, demonstrating the extent to which global trade routes had opened up the world on a mass scale.⁸⁴

Through its peregrinations, porcelain left fascinating traces as it made its way across cultural boundaries, as an agent and intermediary in diplomatic exchanges, trade negotiations, and artistic production, intricately bound up with both local and global concerns. The fifteenth century was a period fraught with both warfare and religious conflict and ripe with productive exchanges in mercantile, intellectual, and artistic spheres. It was often objects and materials such as porcelain that mediated, coming to represent the points of contact between a wide range of individuals. Porcelain could serve as tools for diplomatic manoeuvring; it occupied a common ground for the collecting tastes of Italian princes, dukes and kings, and Ottoman and Mamluk sultans; it served as a form of material memory of the initial encounter and exchange, but also inspired interest in new objects. That is, porcelain influenced trade and mercantile activity and gave rise to translation and replication, as it was copied and mimicked in new materials. Such objects occupied an important place in Italian collections, where attention to, and knowledge of, rare materials became part of an expanding understanding of the world, and the beholder's place in it. Yet the fragility of porcelain and its susceptibility to breakage over time also provides a metaphor for the very limits of knowledge, evident in the confusion over the origins of many of these artefacts.

Renaissance collecting, as traditional literature would have it, was linked to a particular patron's tastes, reflecting a rediscovery and revival of a local antiquity, a pursuit often restricted to a male élite. The presence of Chinese porcelain in Eleonora d'Aragona's collections prompts us to ask new questions and to seek new understandings of what it meant to collect in the late fifteenth century. Indeed, porcelain points to the very mobility and mutability of objects, indicating interests that were far-ranging and situating European collections within a global setting. When compared to courts outside of Europe, however, the meagre fifty-two items of porcelain in the Medici collections underscores the parochial nature of Italian collections and the limited availability of luxury goods in Europe at this time, while also raising larger historiographical questions about the history of collecting.

Appendix

Eleonora's collection of porcelain, transcribed from Archivio di Stato di Modena G114, dated 1492

The transcription below includes suggestions in brackets with original spelling.

(fol. 105r)

Doe orne de porzellana verde

Tri Doe frescatori d[i] porzellana verde

Tri piatelli d[i] porzellana verde

una ingustara d[i] porzellana verde

uno vase facto d[i] una zucha di porzellana verde

uno vasseto a modo d[i] una ampollina d[i] pōzellana v/[er]de

una ornella piccola piccola d[i] porzellana verde

~~Una~~ scutelle Quatro d[i] porzenella [porzellana] verde d[i] luna in laltra

Uno scotellino d[i] porzellana verde

Doe anzelle piccole d[i] pōzellana schiete

Diece vasi d[i] porzellana bianca e azura facti a fogia d[i] ingustar[e]

Dui fiaschi cu' [m]li manichi d[i] porzellana azuri e bianchi

Uno fiascho d[i] porzellana azura cu' [m] il manicho e pipio

Dui vasi d[i] porzellana bianca e azura dorati a foghia d[i] ingustara

Uno vaso amodo una Zucha d[i] porzellana bianca e azura

uno vaseto d[i] porzellana bianca e azura cu'[m] busi da meter' [mettere] aqua rosa

Uno vaseto piccolo amodo bochaleta bianco e azuro d[i] porzellana

Uno vaseto cu[m] una pœ bocha e uno pipio a modo una pignata

Una ancella d[i] porzellana bianca e azura

Uno vaso d[i] porzellana bianca e azura cu[m] due teste d[i] lione dali Lati

Due ancelle grande d[i] porzellana bianca e azuro

Una urna d[i] porzellana bianca e azura lavorata d[i] straforo

Uno vaso d[i] porzellana bianca e azura fornita il pede e la boca d[i] Ramo dorato

~~Quindese pi~~ Sedese piadene bianco e azuro d[i] porzellana in lequale sono due Lavorati d[i] bretino de
biancho

(fol. 105v)

Sedese piadene piu piccole d[i] porzellina bianca e azura

Desedotto scudelloti d[i] porzellana bianca e azura d[i] luna in laltro

Dui frescatogli piccoli d[i] porzellana bianca e azura uno ffeso: lalt[ro] roto e

e biretine

Quattro scudelloti bianchi e azuri lavorati d[i] dasmaschino d[i] porzellani d[i] li quali ge ni e uno incolata[?]

Sesanta doe scutelle d[i] porzellana bianca e azura

Due scutelle bianche d[i] porzellana schieta

Dodese busolli piccoli d[i] porzellana bianca e azura

Uno bambino

Cinq' piadene d/ maioliche in lequale ge ne e una rotta a puntata cum lo ramo

Tre piadene grand[e] d[i] porzellana azura

[followed by a long list of maiolica]

(fol. 106r)

[list of ceramics 'd[i] lavoriero da Pesaro' and 'd[i] Carrara']

Uno vaso d[i] porzellana gran[de]

[followed by more vessels from Pesaro and Carrara and four glass flasks]

(106v)

[Blank]

(fols 107r-v)

[Boxes made from cane, including some boxes 'ala morescha' and an ivory chess box; list of various vessels made out of metals, glass, and crystal]

[This is followed by pages full of various textiles including tapestries, bed and window coverings, triumphal cart coverings, altar frontals, and carpets, velvets, cushions, and other materials]

(fol. 127v)

[A list of various metal vessels and candlesticks]

(fol. 128r)

[glass, metal and chalcedony vessels]

Uno v fiasco di porzellana cum dui maniche col suo coperto

[The inventory continues with Eleonora's art collection and library as well as textiles, altar crosses and a variety of vessels]

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Notes and references

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- ⁶⁶ R. Lightbown, *Mantegna. With a Complete Catalogue of the Paintings, Drawings, and Prints*, (Oxford, 1986) pp. 445-6, Cat. 43, D. W. Carr, *Andrea Mantegna, the Adoration of the Magi*, (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum), 1997, A. Nagel, *Some Discoveries of 1492: Eastern Antiquities and Renaissance Europe*, (Groningen, 2013).
- ⁶⁷ A. Luzio, *Isabella d'Este e il sacco di Roma*, (Milan, 1908) pp. 416-8.
- ⁶⁸ Lightbown, op. cit. p. 477, cat. 166 (note 65).
- ⁶⁹ Behrens-Abouseif, op. cit. p. 106 (note 48).
- ⁷⁰ Quoted in Meli, op. cit. p. 245 (note 48).
- ⁷¹ F. Forcellini, 'Strane peripezie d'un bastardo di Casa d'Aragona', *Archivio storico per le province napoletane*, vol. XXXIX (1914), pp. 172-214, 68-98, 454-94, 767-87, H. S. Hurlburt, *Daughter of Venice: Caterina Corner, Queen of Cyprus and Woman of the Renaissance*, (New Haven and London, 2015) pp. 82-3.
- ⁷² Archivio di Stato di Milano (ASMI) Sforzesco Potere Estere (SPE) 241.
- ⁷³ ASMO Carteggio Principi Esteri (CPE) 1245/1.
- ⁷⁴ Whitehouse, op. cit. pp. 67 and 73 (note 26), Massing, op. cit. pp. 390-1 (note 20).
- ⁷⁵ Marin Sanudo and an anonymous correspondent both comment on large quantities, see B. de Divitiis, 'Castel Nuovo and Castel Capuano in Naples: the Transformation of Two Medieval Castles into "all'antica" Residences for the Aragonese Royals', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 76, no. 4 (2013), p. 464, 469.
- ⁷⁶ D. Harris Cohen and C. Hess, *Looking at European Ceramics. A Guide to Technical Terms*, (Malibu and London, 1993) p. 65.
- ⁷⁷ B. de Divitiis, *Architettura e committenza nella Napoli del Quattrocento*, (Venice, 2007) p. 16, J. D. Moores, 'New Light on Diomedes Carafa and his 'Perfect Loyalty' to Ferrante of Aragon', *Italian Studies*, vol. 26 (1971), pp. 1-23. Letters between Eleonora and Diomedes Carafa can be found in ASMO CPE 1248.4 (Maddaloni). For Diomedes as collector see Clark, op. cit., chapter 1 (note 12).
- ⁷⁸ G. Pardi, 'Diario ferrarese dell'anno 1409 sino al 1502 di autori incerti', *Rerum italicarum scriptores*, vol. 24.7, no. vi (1928), p. 344.
- ⁷⁹ G. Passero, *Giornale del Regno di Napoli*, (Naples, 1785), p. 38.
- ⁸⁰ 'pignatellj et pignate de terra dotranto.' ASMO CPE 1246.2. Letter from Alfonso to Eleonora of 9 January 1481.
- ⁸¹ G. Filangieri, *Documenti per la storia, le arte e industrie per le provincie napoletane raccolti e pubblicati. Indici degli artefici delle arti maggiori e minori. Dalla Lettera H alla Lettera Z*, (Naples, 1891), p. 101.

⁸² This is evidenced in Eleonora's inventories, as well as her children, Isabella, Alfonso, and Ippolito d'Este. For Alfonso, see Marchesi, op. cit. pp. 203-34 (note 19). For the originals: Biblioteca Ariostea Giuseppe Antonelli, 963, VI (the pages are not numbered). For Ippolito see ASMO AP 770 24R. For other examples, see P. Venturelli, *Esmailée à la façon de Milan: smalti nel Ducato di Milano da Bernabò Visconti a Ludovico il Moro*, (Venice, 2008); A. Venturi, *L'arte Ferrarese nel periodo d'Ercole I d'Este I*, *Deputazione di storia patria per l'Emilia e la Romagna*, vol. III, no. VI (1888), pp. 91-119; Finlay, op. cit. p. 70 (note 4).

⁸³ A. Ballarin, *Il camerino delle pitture di Alfonso I*, (Padua, 2002); Marchesi, op. cit. (note 19); J. Carswell, "'The Feast Of the Gods': The Porcelain Trade Between China, Istanbul and Venice", *Asian Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1993), pp. 180-5; A. Colantuono, 'Dies Alcyoniae: The Invention of Bellini's Feast of the Gods', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 73, no. 2 (1991), pp. 237-56.

⁸⁴ Finlay, op. cit. pp. 4-5, 13 (note 4); Whitehouse, op. cit. p. 63 (note 26).

Captions

Fig. 1. Andrea Mantegna, *The Adoration of the Magi*, The Getty Museum, Los Angeles, c. 1495-1505.

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Fig. 2. Porcelain bowl, Ming, 1522-66, with Ottoman semi-precious stones mounted in gold and silver to form floral designs. © The Trustees of the British Museum, PDF, A.794.

Fig. 3. Drug jar painted in blue, Damascus (?), Syria, first half of the fifteenth century, Musée des Art Décoratifs, Paris. Photo (C) Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Benjamin Soligny / Raphaël Chipault.