

An Ocean Odyssey, the Adventure of Chinese Ceramics

The Collection of Ambassador and Mrs Charles Müller

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PRESS RELEASE

This exhibition aims to place the choice pieces in Ambassador and Mrs Charles Müller's collection of Chinese export ceramics in their historical context by including a range of navigational instruments, prints and ancient books, primitive sculptures and models of boats. This is made possible thanks to generous loans by various museums of Geneva – the Barbier-Mueller Museum, the Bibliothèque de Genève, the Conservatory and Botanical Gardens library, the Ethnographic Museum, the History of Science Museum, the Martin Bodmer Foundation, – and by collectors. The journey through the exhibition concludes with a reconstitution of the deck of a junk laden with spices and jars, tin ingots, bronze rings and gongs recovered from the depths of the oceans and lent by the archaeologist Franck Goddio and the European Institute of Submarine Archeology (EISA).

The exhibition opens with a selection of enamelled stoneware objects, illustrating the trading network China built up from the first to the sixteenth century. Right up to the Tang dynasty (618-907), the Chinese developed a coastal trade in silk products and manufactured goods in exchange for raw materials, such as ivory, pearls, rhinoceros horns, cinnamon and other aromatic woods. Ceramics were not explicitly part of this organized trade; earthenware objects arrived by chance, probably taken aboard the junks by their owners. The arrival of Persian and Arab dhow trading vessels (model) in Canton at the beginning of the Tang dynasty acted as a stimulus to international trade. It was at this point that China began systematically to export ceramics to the Near East, Indonesia and the Philippine archipelago. At this time the cargo included coloured stoneware and celadons, as well as monochrome stoneware or *sancai* terracotta. This export trade gathered pace during the Song dynasty (960-1279), when Chinese trading vessels seized the initiative over Persian and Arab fleets (model of junk). The policy of expanding trade and developing the ceramics industry continued in the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). After an initial period during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) when sea trade proper was effectively banned and only permitted under the tribute system, thus boosting lucrative smuggling operations, restrictions were lifted in 1567 and official trade was able to pick up once again.

The section of the exhibition devoted to the ceramics manufactured under the Mongol Yuan and Ming dynasties expands to cover porcelain produced by the private *Minyao* kilns. The Yuan dynasty encouraged the production of celadon export stoneware, white porcelain and the first blue and white porcelain and pieces from this period found their way as far afield as the Philippines and the Middle East. A few rare pieces even reached courts in Europe. It was during the rule of the Mongols that European merchants first began to make inroads into Central Asia and China. One of these was the famous Marco Polo, who claimed even to have been given an official position under the Mongol emperor Khubilai Khan. On his return to Venice in 1295, Marco Polo dictated to Rusticello da Pisa the chronicle of his voyages, *Il Milione*, a version of which is displayed here dated between 1483 and 1484. This provided the first eyewitness and detailed descriptions of the peoples and lands of the East and was to have a profound influence on Renaissance Europe, especially on the great seafarers of the time, such as Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama. In the fifteenth century, Portugal was in the forefront of a trans-oceanic expansion in commercial links, made possible by the invention of astronomical instruments and improvements to sea charts, examples of which are on display. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to

transport Chinese blue and white porcelain in the holds of their caravels and later carracks, followed by the Dutch, who arrived in Asia almost a century later. The opening of the Dutch trading post at Banten in 1597 marks the start of their expansion in Asia, which was put on a more formal footing in 1602 with the establishment of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). This organization was able to profit from a near monopoly of the spice trade and enjoyed a stranglehold on porcelain, which found a ready market in Southeast Asia as well as in Europe, where examples of Chinese porcelain arrived in their thousands, becoming articles in everyday use at all levels of Dutch society and often being used simply as decorations.

The variety and quality of the monochrome ceramics gathered together in a room specially set aside for them in the exhibition reflect the health of the trading links between China and Southeast Asia from the tenth to the fifteenth century. Glazed celadon stoneware, "bluish white" porcelain and white porcelain were among the most highly prized objects from the Malay Archipelago to the Middle East until blue and white ware appeared in the fourteenth century. Chinese or European mariners came into contact with some highly developed societies or city-states on their voyages, but they also came across animist tribes in the interior or on small, isolated islands. These more unpredictable encounters are conjured up by a number of so-called "primitive" wood sculptures from Sumatra and Borneo.

Transformed into a bridge of junks filled with jars, porcelain and spices, the last room takes the visitor on an enthralling voyage across the seas. On one side a map of the Pacific Ocean, drawn up by the official cartographer of the Dutch East India Company: the first to show part of the Australian coast with the name of "*Nueva Guinea*". On the opposite side is a magnificent view of Fort Batavia, built in Java by the Dutch in 1619, which was soon to become an important trading centre and military outpost, as well as the headquarters of the VOC, the hub of the spice and Chinese porcelain trade. Junk sails, ropes and other accessories contribute to making the visitor feel decidedly out of his element.



The town and fort of Malacca with dutch vessels in the harbour
Dutch print
Private collection