

Chinese Export Porcelains

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Guides to Historical Artifacts

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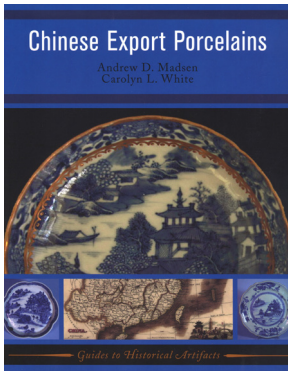
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Chinese Export Porcelains

Andrew D. Madsen and Carolyn L. White. 2011. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, California. 157 pp. \$94.00 (hardback), \$27.50 (paperback or e-book).

Reviewed by Robert Mazrim, Illinois State Archaeological Survey, Prairie Research Institute, University of Illinois.

While there is a reasonably large body of art historical literature concerning Chinese porcelains, there are few reference works that are relevant to the study of samples retrieved from domestic archaeological contexts. French

colonial and pre-Civil War American sites in the Midwest, for instance, consistently produce a small variety of Chinese porcelain, albeit in limited amounts. However, the relative value and presumed social significance of these goods demands a level of attention that at least approaches that afforded the more ubiquitous Queenswares of the period. Madsen and White's book will provide a new desk reference on the subject.

The first third of this book focuses on the historical context for European consumption of Chinese porcelain, the nature of the industry in China, and the European distribution system in Canton. There is some interesting material here, providing an important perspective on this commodity as it entered the international system of exchange and consumption. The authors (and publisher) present the volume as a "guide" to Chinese porcelain, and indeed, the bulk of its pages (in Chapter 4) are devoted to "datable motifs on eighteenth and nineteenth century Chinese export wares."

I found this chapter title a little unfortunate, as it promotes the simplistic "ceramics-as-clocks" approach that a detailed study such as this easily transcends. The work appears exhaustive, however, and the limited types of porcelain found in eighteenth and nineteenth century contexts in this researcher's area of focus (the central Midwest) were all present and accounted for. The book also makes it abundantly clear that the range of porcelains found on the eastern seaboard far exceeds those found in Midwestern contexts.

The book reads as an extended journal article (think *Historical Archaeology* circa 1990), and most analysts will probably skim the more detailed discussions. A close read will be rewarded however. The concise investigation of the factors that produced the rise of consumption of Chinese porcelain in Holland and then England, as well as those that led to its decline, are important considerations alongside the mechanisms of other mass produced products that entered the same markets during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

My experience of using the book as a guide was problematic. I found what I was looking for, but only after a careful combing of the descriptive text and much squinting at small, poorly-reproduced, black and white images. If, as suggested in Chapter 1, the "heart" of this volume (the first in a series of guides to historical artifacts), is to provide a type guide for collectors and archaeologists, then more attention and expense should have been applied to more legible imagery.

Book Review

We have been waiting for a new, handy summary of Chinese porcelains for a number of years, and this overview certainly deserves a place in any research library associated with historical archaeology. It is well researched and carefully articulated, and should also play an important role in the classroom. However its presentation does not measure up to the scope of its content. Artifact guides must be as attractive as they are smart.