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THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF CHINA PAINTING

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"You may break, you may shatter the vase if you will,

But the scent of the roses will hang round it still."

Thomas Moore, 1779-1852

Have you inherited a china vase or plate awash with lush roses and hand-painted by one of your ancestors before World War One? Lucky you. You are already part of the wonderful world of porcelain painting which began in China 2,000 years ago and continues throughout the world today.

Most American homes could not afford fine china until mass production during the Victorian age. The Mayflower held no trunks packed with porcelain dishes when it landed in Massachusetts in 1620. Individual dishes were rare and families ate out of communal serving bowls in the Colonial America of three hundred years ago. Isolated settlers carved wooden plates out of crosscut pieces of small logs when they had time to think of such niceties. A few wealthy families in the coastal regions used silverware. But for the next two hundred years, common household articles were made of pewter and earthenware.

Porcelain was born in Ching-te-Chen, an unwalled Chinese city located in the central Kiangsi province, during the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD). The city is so far off the beaten path that it is still backward today. Throughout all of its history, no matter what political upheavals occurred, the pottery workers continued to experiment with clays, kilns, glazes, and

decorating until they developed the fine white porcelain products of the T'ang dynasty from 618-906 AD. In the early 18th century, during the height of the trade with the East India Company, one million people were employed in the production of porcelain fired in its three thousand kilns.

The British established the East India Company in 1600 to manage the clipper ships that transported the imports, much of them fine porcelain products and teas, from Asia to an eager England. The East India Company was dissolved in 1858.

Today Chien-te-Chin still has 220 factories producing porcelain products. One-fourth of its 400,000 people make porcelain. The skills are handed down through the family. Hundreds of smokestacks dot this "burning city" whose workers labor under an ever-present pall of smoke from the wood and coal still used to fire the kilns.

Some observers still rate this Chinese porcelain as the best in the world because of its fine white china clay and talented porcelain artists. They describe the ware as "white as jade, lustrous as a mirror, thin as paper, and resonant as a chime."

Europeans regarded porcelain as more precious than gold and began importing it from China in the 16th century. A white

porcelain bowl belonging to Queen Isabella was mounted in 22 carat gold weighing 344 grams in 1503. The high price of Chinese porcelain was an inducement to try to imitate it, but it was not until 1709 that Europeans produced a true porcelain at Meissen near Dresden (now in East Germany).

Augustus the Strong, the king of Poland at that time, gets the credit for the discovery. He had imprisoned the alchemist Johann Friedrich Boettger and ordered him to make gold out of base metals. Boettger did not succeed in making gold, but he did mix the locally occurring earths - kaolin, feldspar, and quartz - to make a porcelain similar to the Chinese product. Augustus then established the famous Meissen Porcelain Factory where Boettger and the artists who assisted him were kept under guard for years so other rulers would not kidnap them and learn their secrets. Meissen china became the rage of Europe.

Eventually the secrets slipped out, porcelain making spread throughout Europe, and the porcelain "craze" was on. English factories produced their first porcelain product in the 1740s and added bone ash and soapstone to improve the product. The bone ash made the porcelain harder and less likely to chip. The soapstone made porcelain more tolerant to temperature changes - appealing to a tea-drinking country.

An unknown poet summed up the mania for porcelain china in these words: "China's the passion of his soul,

A cup, a plate, a dish, a bowl

Can kindle wishes in his breast,

Inflame with joy, or break his rest."

Mme de Pompadour, the mistress of the French King and the benefactress of the French porcelain factory at Sevres, remarked pointedly that "to have money and not to buy porcelain is to be a bad citizen of France."

A seventeenth-century English poet, Robert Wilde, asserted that porcelain was:

"... a piece of Christ, a star in dust,

A vein in gold, a china dish that must

Be used in Heaven, when God shall feed the just."

Feminists can cite the art of porcelain painting as a factor promoting the liberation of women. Henry Doulton, the son of the founder of the English pottery at Doulton in 1815, was the first pottery manufacturer to encourage women to become creative china painters. He encouraged his employee, Hannah Barlow, who became internationally famous as a porcelain artist. His grateful female employees wrote, "We, the Lady Artists, desire to

express our obligations to you for elevating so large a number of our sex and making arrangements for our comfort."

John Bloomfield, landowner in northern Ireland, discovered a native white clay deposit on his property in the 1850s and established a pottery which developed the famed Belleek china, eminently collectible from the first and still produced today.

The Tucker China Factory in Philadelphia produced the first American porcelain in 1826. As china factory workers immigrated to America from Europe in the 19th century, they established hundreds of small china factories. Lenox, Inc. and Pickard China still survive today.

The Industrial Revolution and its attendant mass production techniques enabled the china factories to turn out millions of products. They needed thousands of porcelain artists to paint their wares. Because of the social restrictions of the Victorian age, this was one of the few jobs acceptable for proper young women who could choose to work in the factories or paint at home. Even women who did not need to work outside the home embraced the art of china painting. It was a way to express their artistic talents and to beautify their homes, the Victorians' refuge from the Industrial Age. The Arts and Crafts movement in both Europe and the United States starting in the

1880s reinforced the individual efforts of crafters and artists to delight in their work and create beauty in everyday life.

(Does this sound familiar?)

Two world wars in this 20th century, with bombing of European cities and the consequent destruction of many porcelain factories, almost destroyed the porcelain industry. The Great Depression of the 1930s also dampened the demand for fine and expensive porcelains.

Now, however, porcelain manufacture and the art of porcelain painting has rebounded throughout the world. Two international organizations based in the United States have contributed to that rebirth - The World Organization of China Painters, with its international headquarters and museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and the International Porcelain Artists, Inc., in Dallas, Texas.

Some art critics refuse to recognize porcelain painting as a fine art. Pauline Salyer, porcelain artist and the founder and still the guiding light of the World Organization of China Painters, does not mince words: "Anyone who says that is just plain dumb. Porcelain painting is the oldest continuous fine art form -and the most difficult one -in the world."

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If you wish to collect hand-painted china, frequent your neighborhood garage sales, flea markets, and antique stores.

If you wish to learn china painting, please contact the following organizations for clubs and teachers near you:

The World Organization of China Painters
3111 Northwest 19th Street
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 73107
telephone: (405)521-1234

International Porcelain Artists, Inc.
7424 Greenville Avenue
Suite 101
DAllas, Texas 75231
telephone: (214)692-5037