

“White gold” – concerning the beginnings of European porcelain

Chinese and Japanese porcelain was once an extremely valuable and desirable product in Europe, which was already being imported in the Middle Ages. It was called “white gold”, because it commanded value comparable to this precious metal and was often used as its substitute (e.g. as a gift). At that time, porcelain was viewed as a synonym of luxury and its possession testified to the splendour of the house; only the wealthiest people — mainly royalty — could afford it.

Porcelain is the finest type of ceramics. The formula of its manufacture was developed in China as early as the 7th century. In the modern era — in connection with the fashion for Orientalism — porcelain gained such great popularity, that a great effort was made to discover how it was manufactured: one of the most guarded secrets of the East. Initially, half-measures were used to obtain faience: a type of ceramics differing from the mineral composition of porcelain clay, but bearing the closest resemblance to it after firing. Through the use of a similar form, and characteristic cobalt under-glaze decorations on a white background, producers attempted to give it the appearance of original Chinese porcelain. The 2nd half of the 17th and the 1st half of the 18th centuries was the period in which the greatest number of porcelain imitations were manufactured in Europe.

The first product of this kind was the so-called Medici porcelain, which was made in Florence in the 16th century. However, these vessels had an original form and resembled Chinese porcelain only in its colour scheme. Around 1600, in the French city of Nevers, the production of faience in the Italian tradition began, which — due to the then contemporary fashion trends — adopted the Chinese cobalt-white colour palette and stylistics in the middle of the 17th century. The history of the famous Delft faience — also produced since the beginning of the 17th century — was similar. At the beginning of the factory’s operation, a characteristic collection of decorative motifs was developed, depicting landscapes or genre scenes, most often cobalt patterns on a white background (patterns of Dutch ceramics recognizable to the present day). In line with the increasing fashion for Chinese products in the 2nd half of the century, Delft faience started to resemble such products through the shape of its vessels and decorations, modelled on those from the Far East, although still retaining local features. In the following decades, the trend for this type of product resulted in the establishment of other production facilities of porcelain imitations, which vied with one another in the field of ideas for production techniques and designs of crockery.

The real breakthrough was the invention of a technique for making European porcelain by Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus in 1708. Von Tschirnhaus’s research was continued by his collaborator, Johann Friedrich Böttger (an alchemist who, before embarking on the research into the production of the “white gold”, had conducted experiments on transmutating other metals into gold). In 1710, under Böttger’s supervision, porcelain production commenced in the first European factory founded by Augustus II the Strong — *Kursächsische Manufaktur* — at the Albrechtsburg castle in Meissen. Saxon (or Meissen) porcelain was met with great appreciation from the very beginning and has been since produced almost continuously to the present day.

See also:

[Chinese porcelain salt shaker](#)

[“Hydria” apothecary vase](#)

[Teapot with lid](#)

[Porcelain vase with a wooden base](#)

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