

Mainly objects?:
Gendering Armorial Porcelain Wares
By Kate Smith

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Figure 1. Chinese porcelain plate decorated with the arms of Charles Raymond and his wife, Sarah Webster. c.1760. Private collection. Image courtesy of Georgina Green.

Chinese porcelain services specially commissioned by individuals and families to include their coats of arms within the decorative scheme were distinctly fashionable and popular in eighteenth-century Britain, particularly among those with East India Company connections. Armorial porcelain services feature in various *East India Company at Home* case studies, including [Osterley Park and House](#), [Valentines Mansion and Gardens](#) (see figure 1) and the [Shugborough Estate](#).¹ This case study takes a closer look at armorial wares and questions the identity politics embedded in porcelain pieces decorated with coats of arms.

¹ Pauline Davies and Yuthika Sharma, “A jaghire without a crime”: East India Company and the Indian Ocean Material World at Osterley 1700-1800’, *The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857*: <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/osterley-park-middlesex/> (2013); Stephen McDowall, ‘Shugborough: Seat of the Earl of Lichfield’, *The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857*: <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/shugborough-hall-staffordshire/> (2013); Georgina Green, ‘Valentines, the Raymonds and Company Material Culture’, *The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857*: <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/case-studies-2/valentines-mansion/> (2012).

British houses first included Chinese armorial porcelain services at the turn of the eighteenth century.² Obtaining these wares was notoriously difficult as many different people were involved in the ordering, production and transportation processes. The only means of acquiring armorial services were by placing a commission through a supercargo officer involved in trade with China, working with a dealer who had connections to a supercargo, or (for those based in India) through engaging with country trade between India and China.³

Supercargoes were particularly important to armorial porcelain commissions. As individuals who worked for the East India Company, they were responsible for dealing with Chinese merchants in Canton. They oversaw the purchase of bulk commodities for the Company, such as tea. Alongside negotiating purchases and supplies, supercargoes executed private trade and were well placed to fulfill commissions for particular objects such as porcelain services decorated with heraldic symbols. In placing a commission the supercargo would pass on written instructions and sketches to Chinese decorators often based in Canton, who would then paint the necessary armorial design onto a series of porcelain forms obtained from the ceramic factories in Jingdezhen, which (by the early eighteenth century) had long produced forms to European tastes.⁴

Working from written English instructions and sketches, Chinese decorators made mistakes (a point perhaps overly noted by historians). Dolphins replaced birds and bear claws transmuted into clumps of grass, reworking the coat of arms and creating entirely new meanings.⁵ Nevertheless, these services proved particularly popular with East India Company directors, captains and supercargoes, who had the connections and wealth necessary to commission them. Robert Finlay estimates that in the eighteenth century more than half of all

² David Sanctuary Howard argues that no large armorial services were made before the turn of the eighteenth century. See David Sanctuary Howard, *Chinese Armorial Porcelain* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1974), p. 36.

³ Thanks to Meike Fellingner for alerting me to the importance of country trade in armorial porcelain service commissions.

⁴ Sarah Richards, *Eighteenth-Century Ceramics: Products for a Civilized Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 58.

⁵ Robert Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2010), p. 28.

East India Company directors, captains and supercargoes purchased armorial dinner and tea services.⁶ In total English buyers commissioned around 5,000 armorial sets, with some going to regiments and societies.⁷ Families such as the Lascelles and the Beckfords, who gained fortunes through their involvement in Caribbean slavery and the slave trade, also commissioned these wares.⁸

Surviving examples inform us that these armorial services were extraordinarily elaborate, with some containing more than 500 pieces.⁹ Services included not only dining ware such as plates, dishes, hot-water plates, soup tureens and sauce boats, but also items for large entertainments (such as punch bowls), decoration (pierced baskets and vases) and the tea table (coffee and chocolate pots, teapots, teapoys, caddies, milk jugs, spoon trays and sweetmeat dishes, cups and saucers).¹⁰ Commissioning a complete service thus involved a substantial outlay of money. A service (including shipping and custom duties) cost around £100 (roughly £11,000 today) in the early eighteenth century.¹¹ Although it took around three years (from order to delivery) for these services to arrive, the difficulties undertaken in obtaining them were perhaps one of their most desirable features. At the same time, bearing coats of arms, these exclusive objects were able to provide families with a sense of name, identity and lineage.

This case study examines the identity politics that Britons embedded in armorial porcelain services during the long eighteenth century. It considers how family names were displayed and bolstered as a result of owning dinner plates bearing a particular coat of arms. It also asks whether the plates, dishes and sauceboats that made up lavish armorial dinner services actively shaped other identities. Principally, it asks, were armorial services gendered? If so, how, and why? While many scholars have explored the relationship between women and porcelain in the eighteenth century, I suggest that armorial porcelain allows us to consider

⁶ Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art*, p. 27.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Howard, *Chinese Armorial Porcelain*, p. 75.

⁹ Ibid, p. 97.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art*, p. 28.

the relationships that contemporaries conceived as existing between men and this highly prized translucent material.¹² In exploring these questions, this case study investigates the place Chinese porcelain held within British culture and the ways in which British citizens used Chinese porcelain to perform specific cultural work.



Figure 2. Tureen from armorial Chinese porcelain service, Qianlong reign (1736-96), c.1765-70. Basildon Park, National Trust. Image courtesy of Kate Smith.

While the arguments explored below could be examined through the Osterley, Shugborough or Valentines service, this case study focuses on a different set of wares – those purchased by Francis Sykes of Basildon Park, Berkshire in the 1760s (see for example figure 2).¹³ Sykes worked at the East India Company's

¹² For more on the ways in which literary scholars have examined eighteenth-century representations of the relationship between women and porcelain see Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1997); David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹³ See Davies and Sharma, "A jaghire without a crime": East India Company and the Indian Ocean Material World at Osterley 1700-1800'; McDowall, 'Shugborough: Seat of the Earl of Lichfield'; Green, 'Valentines, the Raymonds and Company Material Culture'.

Cossimbazar factory in Bengal between 1751 and 1761 (rising to chief of the factory in 1760) and then served between 1764 and 1769 as Resident at Murshidabad and as also as chief of the Cossimbazar factory from 1766 onwards.¹⁴ From the scant documentary sources left by Sykes, it is difficult to interpret exactly why and how he purchased his armorial service. By situating his acquisition within the wider context of porcelain consumption and use, however, this case study suggests that East India Company men were keen to purchase armorial porcelain services for their country houses and town houses because Chinese porcelain acted as an important emblem of elite masculinity, while also signalling their place within East India Company hierarchy to their associates and the world at large.

As Henry French and Mark Rothery remind us, in this period gender identities were not absolute. Nevertheless contemporaries ‘believed in the existence of such all-embracing behavioural norms – even though they could not agree precisely on what these might be’.¹⁵ Elite men thus ‘conceived their gender identity by reference to a number of competing stereotypes, rather than in relation to a single, “hegemonic” form’.¹⁶ French and Rothery’s study suggests that certain attributes remained constantly significant for elite men throughout the period from 1660 to 1900, namely autonomy, honour, reputation and self-control.¹⁷ For East India Company officials keen to join, re-join or consolidate their position within Britain’s elites, armorial porcelain allowed them to enact and signify many of these attributes. The design of armorial wares, the modes by which they were acquired and their practices of use all allowed East India Company men to display and maintain their reputation, autonomy and honour. Armorial wares showed their lineage, as well as their relationship to networks of influence in spaces (such as the dining room) of male sociability. Is it possible then to understand Chinese armorial wares as distinctly male? If so, how did

¹⁴ John Sykes, ‘Sykes, Sir Francis, first baronet (*bp.* 1730, *d.* 1804)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/64747>, accessed 8 May 2014]

¹⁵ Henry French and Mark Rothery, *Man’s Estate: Landed Gentry Masculinities, c. 1660-c.1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 14.

¹⁶ French and Rothery, *Man’s Estate*, p. 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3 and p. 37.

these wares shape British material cultures and does this change our understanding of Chinese porcelain and its role in British material cultures more generally?

Women, porcelain and pleasure

During the eighteenth century porcelain remained synonymous with women. As Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace argues, throughout the period, a variety of authors wrote of fine china or porcelain to denote women and their weaknesses.¹⁸ China



and porcelain ‘made it possible for people to talk about women and their qualities in a particular way.’¹⁹ Scholars such as David Porter assert that porcelain was significant in providing a space in which different ideas about women, desire, sensuality, novelty, temptation and exchange could come together, ‘giving form through its very materiality to fears and pleasures which, in the absence of a suitable substitute, might otherwise have remained hauntingly inchoate.’²⁰

Figure 3. Vase. Porcelain painted in underglazed blue. Jingdezhen, China. 1700-10. C.712-1910. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

In the early decades of the eighteenth century, for example, writers such as Alexander Pope and Joseph Addison used ‘china’ as means through which to discuss female sexuality, desire and subjectivity. In these texts, authors frequently conflated women’s bodies with the material qualities of porcelain. Delicate, translucent, fragile and breakable – porcelain could be equated with

¹⁸ Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, p. 53. Also see Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England*, p. 141.

¹⁹ Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, p. 53.

²⁰ Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England*, p. 139.

characteristics that increasingly came to define a specific view of femininity. Here women came under the male and female gaze as objects of desire. Kowaleski-Wallace argues, however, that what was principally at stake in these discussions was not women as objects of desire, but rather the issue of female desire itself.²¹ Chinese porcelain provided an acceptable space in which to discuss worries that women possessed and expressed tangible desires of their own. More worryingly still they engaged with the market in order to satisfy those desires, supposedly buying up porcelain in their droves.

Elizabeth Chang notes that discussions regarding women and porcelain must also be understood in class terms. She asserts that ‘only wealthier kinds of women were held to possess the leisure necessary to build an impressive collection of imported porcelain’.²² Nevertheless, women from the genteel and middling classes also actively engaged in and took pleasure from purchases of china.²³ In representations depicting the relationship between women and Chinese porcelain then, commentators gestured towards the threatening nature of class mobility implied by middling women purchasing and owning these wares.²⁴ Importantly, it must also be remembered that over the course of the eighteenth century, renderings of women and their relationship to and with porcelain steadily shifted. Porter understands these shifts as undergoing three stages. First, in the early decades of the eighteenth century, women were particularly linked to porcelain in terms of commoditized desire.²⁵ Women were frequently portrayed as entering the marketplace to purchase or view porcelain goods at all costs, and such representations often eroticized such desires, understanding them as unbridled passions and lusts. Second, porcelain came to be increasingly portrayed within domestic settings. Here, porcelain was often linked to subversive female agency. While painters such as Hogarth used broken

²¹ Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, p. 56.

²² Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 75.

²³ Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* [1998] (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 169.

²⁴ Hence women of middling or low social status who desired porcelain wares were critiqued for spending precious family money in the pursuit of personal desire. See for example John Gay, ‘To a Lady on Her Passion for Old China’ (1725).

²⁵ Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England*, p. 136.

jars to signify illicit liaisons and sexual acts, painters could also highlight female resistance and subversion by showing thrown and broken ceramics.²⁶ Finally at the turn of the nineteenth century, ceramics brokered women's submersion in domestic and maternal roles. Here, women were shown lovingly pouring tea from teapots to signify both matriarchal control and love.²⁷

If then, as scholars such as David Porter and Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace suggest, Chinese porcelain (and other forms of ceramic ware) were consistently linked to women in the eighteenth century, how can we begin to understand the relationship between men and porcelain wares? More particularly what was armorial Chinese porcelain and how was it understood within this culture? Three key avenues of enquiry can be used to consider these questions – acquisition, design and use. By examining the modes by which armorial porcelains were purchased, the designs with which they were decorated and the way in which they were used, this study suggests that armorial wares were distinctly male – carrying a different set of connotations and meanings to other porcelain pieces.

The Basildon Park Service



Figure 4. Basildon Park, Berkshire.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 143.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 149.

This study will probe these themes by focusing on a single service, which belonged to Francis Sykes in the late eighteenth century and was probably used at his country estate, Basildon Park in Berkshire. The son of a prosperous and well-established yeoman farmer, Francis Sykes became an important East India Company official. While in India he maintained a substantial household, which (like Henry Russell, featured in the [Swallowfield Park](#) case study) shaped his later experiences of British country house living.²⁸ Writing to his mother from Murshidabad in September 1767, Gerard Gustavus Duccarel (1745-1800) described how he was working in the service of Francis Sykes and had found that his employer had little patience for the hot climate. Sykes and his party had thus 'removed for the summer to a pleasant country house about 7 miles from the City in the middle of a beautiful plain'. A fine grove of tall trees meant that those resident were able to 'play at bowles there in the middle of the day without the least inconvenience, and spread our tables either there, or in the house, as the variety is more or less agreeable'.²⁹

Francis Sykes first came to practice country living in Britain on his return to England in 1761. On this visit Francis took two years to purchase Ackworth Park, near Pontefract in Yorkshire. Originally from Yorkshire, Sykes used his residence there to reconnect with family and acquaintances in the West Riding area, particularly the powerful Monckton family with whom he forged a closer alliance when he married the Hon. Elizabeth Monckton, eldest daughter of the 2nd Viscount Galway, in 1774. After his second return to England in 1768, Sykes consolidated his place as a member of the landed elite in 1771 when he purchased Gillingham Manor Estate in Dorset (primarily to acquire political influence) and Basildon Park in Berkshire. In June of that year, Sykes wrote to Harry Verelst from Basildon about his 'delightful situation in a large house with many servants and no one to keep me company at present but my two dear little

²⁸ Margot Finn, 'Swallowfield Park, Berkshire', *The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857*: <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/case-studies-2/swallowfield-park-berkshire/learning-to-furnish/> (2012).

²⁹ Gloucester Record Office, Letter from Gerard Gustavus Ducarel to his mother, 18 September 1767, D2091/F11. Many thanks to Sir John Sykes for this reference.

boys'.³⁰ Despite his seeming contentment in 1771, by 1776 Sykes had begun to employ a fellow Yorkshireman John Carr (1723-1807) to oversee the rebuilding of Basildon. The Palladian villa with wings that he created still stands today (see figure 4).



Figure 5. Scalloped-edge plate from armorial Chinese porcelain service, Qianlong reign (1736-96), c.1765-70. Basildon Park, National Trust Collections. Image courtesy of Kate Smith.

Sykes's rapid accumulation of wealth in India enabled him to purchase and then rebuild Basildon Park. As noted above, he worked for the East India Company in Bengal between 1751 and 1761 and then again between 1764 and 1769, returning to England with an estimated fortune of between £250,000 and £500,000. [For more on Sykes's work in India see [The Indian Seal of Sir Francis Sykes](#) case study, written by Sir John Sykes] Current catalogues suggest that it was during his second stint on the subcontinent that Francis Sykes commissioned and purchased an armorial porcelain service.³¹ This dating seems

³⁰ British Library, European Manuscripts Collection, Letter from Francis Sykes to Harry Verelst, 21 June 1771, F218/108, ff. 7-8. Francis Sykes marked the letter as being sent from 'Baseldon'.

³¹ *Basildon Park, Berkshire* (Warrington: National Trust, 2002), p.19.

likely as on his return to India Sykes would have had the necessary contacts, wealth and position to order an armorial service, the commission probably being carried out through country trade. Such timing is also made more plausible by his being granted arms in 1763. His purchase followed the grant (1763) but preceded his baronetcy (1781).

The armorial porcelain service probably commissioned and completed for Francis Sykes between 1764 and 1769, is one of the few objects in the present-day Basildon Park collection, which links the house to its eighteenth-century past. To learn more about the purchase and return of part of the service to Basildon in the 1980s listen to this interview with Neil Shaw (House Steward, Basildon Park) and Sir John Sykes (descendant of Sir Francis Sykes): <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/basildon-park-recordings/>. It is also possible to view the service in the dining room at Basildon Park, for more details about opening times see <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/basildon-park/>.

Acquisition

How did Francis Sykes originally acquire this service and how did those modes of acquisition mark these objects out as distinctly different from more feminized goods? As examined above, eighteenth-century Britons routinely conflated women with porcelain. In such confluations commentators made much of the modes of acquisition – the worryingly public act of shopping. Entering the marketplace to purchase ceramic objects meant engaging in increasingly complex shopping practices staged in specialized, enclosed spaces. Ceramic and glassware dealers invited shoppers to enter their shops (rather than haggle at a window), browse their displays, and socialize with shop assistants who would readily produce a further selection of wares for their perusal.³² Nevertheless it must be remembered that it was not women alone who enacted these practices in these public retail environments. Both women and men participated in shopping practices, suggesting that both women and men were skillful shoppers

³² Claire Walsh, 'Shop Design and the Display of Goods', *Journal of Design History*, 8:2, (1995), p. 172.

and perhaps enjoyed shopping as a particular pursuit. Men certainly took advantage of new practices of browsing, which allowed shoppers to peruse certain goods, often with no purchase. For example, in his 1796 *Scarborough Guide* James Schofield described how 'Shopping, especially for articles of foreign elegance, is a very usual amusement among the ladies, who are not unfrequently [sic] attended by the gentlemen'.³³ In 1791, Charles Bowden Topham also delighted in the experiences of shopping and noted that Mr Kennedy's shop in London 'entertained me for an hour'.³⁴ Yet despite men's enjoyment in shopping and browsing, it was women out a-shopping on whom commentators focused.³⁵ Troublingly present in city streets and ceramic shops, women engaged with and interrupted the 'real' (male) business of the market.

In contrast to purchasing through retailers, individuals acquired armorial porcelains through commissioning processes that required contacts and patience. Armorial porcelain services could be commissioned in England through connections to supercargos involved in trade with China or in India by East India Company officials with access to country trade and thus access to merchants in Canton. In placing a commission the supercargo or merchant would pass on instructions to Chinese decorators often based in Canton, who would then paint the necessary armorial design onto a series of porcelain forms obtained from the ceramic factories in Jingdezhen. The commissioning process marked armorial wares as distinctly different to those purchased in shops. Even individuals who placed commissions with British manufacturers such as Wedgwood did not have to engage in the extended processes demanded for armorial wares.³⁶ Rather than the instant gratification of a shop purchase, families who wanted to purchase Chinese armorial wares had to meet elite masculine ideals by displaying self control, patiently waiting for up to three years. In commissioning such wares it

³³ J. Schofield, *The Scarborough Guide*, 2nd edn, Thomas Lee and Co., Hull, 1796, p. 63.

³⁴ C. B. Topham, *A Tour Through Ireland*, W. Corbet, Dublin, 1791, p. 52. Thanks to Anna Moran for pointing me to this source.

³⁵ Kate Smith, 'Sensing Design and Workmanship: The Haptic Skills of Shoppers in Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of Design History*, 25:1 (March 2012), p. 2.

³⁶ For example of this see Kate Smith, *Material Goods, Moving Hands: Perceiving Production in England, 1700-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming), p. 59.

was also necessary to possess the correct reputation and be able to call on business and political contacts.



Figure 6. Plate with cut edges from armorial Chinese porcelain service, Qianlong reign (1736-96), c.1765-70. Basildon Park, National Trust. Image courtesy of Kate Smith.

The material record of the Sykes service – the pieces now situated at Basildon Park – remind us that the commissioning of these items was likely more complex than most. For instance, while some of the plates have scalloped edges possibly created through press-moulding (see figure 5), others have cut octagonal edges (see figure 6). These differences in form suggest that Sykes commissioned the service in two distinct stages. It is possible then that while he commissioned the first part of the service during his time in India, he may have completed the second commission once returned to Britain. If Francis Sykes commissioned the first part of the service through country trade, he would have used one of the two ships that traded between Bengal and China each year.³⁷ Alternatively he might have used another contact who was well connected with the China trade. During his later period in Bengal (1764-9) Francis Sykes had men in his employ, such as the son of Thomas Pattle, who had such connections. Thomas Pattle had

³⁷ During this period there were never more than two ships each year that completed this trade. Many thanks to Meike Fellingner for her notes here.

worked on board East India Company ships as 3rd and 2nd mate during the 1730s and by the 1760s was wealthy enough to act as Principal Managing Owner to the *Speke*, which travelled to both China and India in the late 1760s. Perhaps Sykes ordered the services through Thomas Pattle? It is difficult to identify how exactly Sykes acquired these wares as his bank records, which might highlight payments to particular individuals, only begin in 11 November 1769 when he began to bank with Goslings. Nevertheless, despite such ambiguity in the historical record, the modes of acquisition required to purchase armorial wares marked these pieces out to contemporaries as distinct from other porcelain wares on the market and I suggest marked them as distinctly male. Commissioned by men from men, these wares were linked to the homo-social ideals of the East India Company and eighteenth-century trade.

Designing the service

It was not only a question of the spaces and systems through which individuals purchased ceramics, of course, but also what they bought. Although men who enjoyed purchasing ceramic goods may have ‘regarded it as a slightly female, perhaps even deliciously feminine preoccupation’, the question of how and what was purchased is important.³⁸ Examples exist of men *and* women purchasing dynastic items, yet it was largely men who involved themselves in the purchase of large dynastic and/or expensive items, such as dinner services.³⁹ Hence purchasing certain *types* of ceramics, such as dinner services, may not have been regarded as ‘deliciously feminine’ but rather as a distinctly masculine pursuit. Armorial services were particularly dynastic items, not only due to their expense and size but also because they bore coats of arms and thus familial identities. For example, the Basildon porcelain service features decorative motifs rendered in the famille rose colour palette and combines flowers and butterflies with

³⁸ Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (Yale University Press: New Haven & London, 2009), p. 277.

³⁹ M. Finn, ‘Men’s Things: Masculine Possession in the Consumer Revolution’, *Social History*, 25:2, 2000, p. 142; Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 278.

colourful birds.⁴⁰ At the top of the plate the Sykes coat of arms is included (see figure 7). The College of Arms granted Francis Sykes his arms in 1763, eighteen years prior to his being created baronet in 1781.



Figure 7. Plate from armorial Chinese porcelain service, c.1765-70, Basildon Park, National Trust. Image courtesy of Kate Smith.

The tradition of arms originated on the battlefields of medieval Europe as men in full armour sought to challenge their enemies. Unable to recognize friend from foe amidst the legions of plated metal, men took to wearing distinctive coats over their armour to ease identification. The colours and patterns that made up these ‘coats of arms’ then came to be displayed in other ways, both on the battlefield in flags and shields and away from the battlefield upon the clothes and accessories of civil life.⁴¹ Coats of arms bred their own distinctive heraldic language, communicating lineage and affiliations. These symbols came to include a shield often adorned with a helmet and crest above.

⁴⁰ ‘Famille’ is a French term to describe the palette of enamel colours used on Chinese porcelain. Famille rose colours (as opposed to famille verte colours) came into common use in the early 1720s and remained popular throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Early eighteenth-century wares can often be dated by observing the distinction between famille verte and famille rose. As the name suggests, famille rose colours contained hues of pink and allowed for more intricate designs to be painted.

⁴¹ Iain Moncreiffe and Don Pottinger, *Simple Heraldry* (Edinburgh and London: John Bartholomew and Son Limited, 1978), p. 10.



Figure 8. Detail of coat of arms from original grant of arms. 1763.
Image courtesy of Sir John Sykes.

The arms displayed on the Sykes armorial service can be deciphered through the rules of arms and heraldry: (The design of the arms can be understood more clearly from viewing the original grant of arms featured in figure 5). The centre of the arms is occupied by a 'shield', which features an argent (an eagle with

wings outstretched – possibly an allusion to Sykes’s meritocratic rise) between two ‘syke’s’ (the heraldic form of fountain), which are the blue and white circles. On the left the ‘canton gules’ (the red-coloured square) features a caduceus (Mercury’s wand with two serpents and wings, emblem of merchants among others). Above the ‘shield’ sits a helmet (not depicted in the service) and above that a mantling (represented by the wreath of silk), which is adorned with a ‘crest’, in this case a woman dressed in head scarf, robes and beads and holding a rose. Significantly this female figure was described as “A demy lady of Bengal in the compleat dress of that kingdom, holding in the dexter hand a rose”.⁴² The motto included on a ribbon banner beneath the shield reads ‘He is wise who is industrious’.

The service affirmed (as did Basildon Park itself) Francis Sykes’s newfound social status on returning to England. It did so through embodying Sykes’s recently granted arms and thus the Sykes family’s legitimate place within the established elite. Naming and asserting a family name were powerful acts, but they were not solely male acts. In her studies of eighteenth-century New England material culture, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich reminds us of the often-complex ways in which names, objects and property came to be inherited in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.⁴³ In this context women, such as Hannah Barnard and her descendants were able to establish matrilineal descent through bequeathing a cupboard bearing Hannah’s maiden name.⁴⁴ Similarly, while coats of arms may be understood solely as a male preserve, it is important to remember that marriages to women who carried the family name could be and were represented upon the arms (see figure 1). When men took their wife’s family name, such alliances allowed family names and fortunes to continue. Despite these strategies, however, coats of arms were (and are) primarily considered a

⁴² As cited in John Sykes, ‘The Indian Seal of Sir Francis Sykes’, <http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/eicah/case-studies-2/the-india-seal-of-sir-francis-sykes/the-indian-seal-of-sir-francis-sykes-the-owner/>.

⁴³ See for example Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, ‘Hannah Barnard’s cupboard: female property and identity in eighteenth-century New England’, in Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel and Fredrika J. Teute, *Through a glass darkly: reflections on personal identity in early America* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 263.

⁴⁴ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of An American Myth* (Vintage Books: New York, 2002), p.141.

male preserve, highlighting as they do the ideal of patrimony. The designs decorated onto armorial wares thus marked them as distinctly masculine, an identity that was further reaffirmed through use.

Using the service



Figure 9. Plate from armorial Chinese porcelain service in the dining room at Basildon Park, c.1765-70. Basildon Park, National Trust. Image courtesy of Kate Smith.

Armorial services did not simply contain dining wares. These elaborate ensembles often contained dining, decorative and tea table wares. While dining wares might have been more recognizably masculine, tea wares were distinctly feminine. Women became linked to tea drinking practices and the ceramic accoutrement that accompanied them. Women's engagement with the display of objects and practices at the centre of tea drinking, allowed for further connotations of women and porcelain.⁴⁵ Amanda Vickery takes issue with this reading and warns that 'The tea table has received disproportionate attention in the history of consumerism, though the focus has been narrow and often unquestioning.'⁴⁶ Vickery argues that the tea table has primarily come to be understood a site of female control, in which women encountered the regulating force of the female

⁴⁵ Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, p. 68.

⁴⁶ Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 271.

and male gaze. In contrast, Vickery has sought to clarify the social reach of tea drinking practices (a 'universal habit' by 1760), as well as the importance of the tea table, which she highlights as a key site of female sociability during this period.⁴⁷ For Vickery the tea table simultaneously acted as a sign of female gentility and 'the very headquarters of female opinion, a byword for feminine confederacy, gossip and slander'⁴⁸, at the same time it was also 'a forum for business dealings in the widest possible sense'.⁴⁹

In contrast to the drawing room and its focus on female sociability and tea drinking, during the eighteenth century families living in country houses increasingly came to define dining rooms as masculine spaces. At the turn of the eighteenth century saloons started being used principally for dancing, rather than gathering and eating and substantial houses started to contain a grand dining room. Mark Girouard argues that in the middle decades of the eighteenth century the 'dining room was always one of the best and biggest rooms in the house.'⁵⁰ After dinner women would enter the drawing room to brew coffee and tea, waiting for the men who would join them later. As the century progressed, the period of 'withdrawing' became longer and longer as men wished to spend more time in homo-social conversation and drinking at the dinner table. In consequence, 'the dining room began to be thought of as a mainly masculine, and the drawing room as a mainly feminine room'.⁵¹ By the end of the eighteenth century, these separate spaces were further demarcated by the inclusion of a room in between the dining room and drawing room.⁵² This space acted as a buffer, allowing greater aural privacy for homo-social practices. While Mark Girouard notes how gendered spaces became increasingly important in country houses during the eighteenth and (to a certain extent) the nineteenth centuries, by the end of the nineteenth century such demarcations had begun to dissolve. Similarly, Juliet Kinchin has suggested that the dining room also emerged as a

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 272.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 274.

⁴⁹ Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter*, p. 208.

⁵⁰ Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 203.

⁵¹ Girouard, *Life in the English Country House*, p. 205.

⁵² Ibid., p. 233.

highly masculine space in middle-class homes during the nineteenth century, but shifted in nature at the turn of the twentieth.⁵³

As they made up the greatest number of pieces within porcelain services it is often dinner plates – the mainstay of dining room activities – rather than tea services that survive in armorial ware collections. The long survival of these particular pieces might also suggest that they were highly valued by the families who owned and inherited them. With such a predominance of dining wares, the material record might confuse our understanding of the roles played by these porcelain wares. Armorial porcelain services were often more than simply dining services. Nevertheless, as dining services, these wares played important roles. They reasserted masculine identities based on connections, networks and the necessity of reputation within East India Company worlds, to those that joined them around the dining table. In sitting there within such spaces men were not only able to claim the status of a separate dining room, but also the status begot through symbols of lineage and patrilineal descent. These wares then came to play important roles in the performance of gender identities that spanned across the established elite and the East India Company set.

Conclusion



Figure 10. Plate from armorial Chinese porcelain service, Qianlong reign (1736-96), c.1743. Shugborough, Staffordshire. National Trust. Image courtesy of Kate Smith.

Recent research on the 208-piece Qianlong-period porcelain dinner service brought to England by

⁵³ Juliet Kinchin, 'Interiors: nineteenth-century essays on the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' room', in Pat Kirkham (ed.), *The Gendered Object* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 12.

Commodore George, later Lord Anson (1697-1762) in 1744 and now housed at the Shugborough Estate in Staffordshire, challenges the different ways in which previous historians have envisaged armorial services.⁵⁴ Traditionally the Shugborough dinner service has been understood as having been presented to George Anson by European merchants in Canton in recognition for his and his crew's courageous involvement in extinguishing a fire that threatened to engulf the city in 1743. In this interpretation the dinner service has come to represent 'the ultimate triumph of this level-headed, courageous and determined commodore over the dithering, deceitful and obstructive Chinese mandarins, as well as the gratitude of the European merchants towards their champion'.⁵⁵ Stephen McDowall's research demonstrates the inaccuracy of this depiction of Anson's time at Canton, recognizing it as a partial reading of what was 'in reality, a highly contested episode'.⁵⁶ Contemporary accounts also call into question the idea that Anson acquired the service while in Canton, as a gift from European merchants. It seems more likely that, like other British officers, Anson commissioned and purchased the service while at Whampoa between July and September 1743.⁵⁷ Rather than emerging from accounts penned by eighteenth-century writers, it seems that the incorrect link between the Canton episode and the dinner service first emerged in a series of articles published in *Country Life* in 1954.⁵⁸

While McDowall's research is of interest in substantially changing traditional interpretations of the Shugborough service particularly, and Sino-British relations in the mid-eighteenth century more generally, what is of more interest here is that the story of the service as a gift given by oppressed European merchants to their champion was compelling to twentieth-century audiences and remained so until McDowall's recent reinterpretation. In the traditional account of the Shugborough service the object became intrinsically associated

⁵⁴ Stephen McDowall, 'The Shugborough Dinner Service and its Significance for Sino-British History', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37:1 (2014), pp. 1-17.

⁵⁵ McDowall, 'The Shugborough Dinner Service', p. 1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

with a tale of imperial masculinity. That audiences were willing to invest in an interpretation, which recounted men gifting an armorial dinner service to a man as a marker of his seeming courage, fortitude and resourceful nature, tells us much about what twentieth and twenty-first-century audiences expected armorial wares might have been and done in the eighteenth century. In this rendering armorial porcelain is introduced as an object intimately tied to undertakings that reinforced conceptions of masculinity and domination, as well as homo-sociability in the eighteenth century. In this story armorial porcelain appears as the male-object par excellence.

In considering the meaning of armorial porcelain services to eighteenth-century British society, this case study has also understood these global luxury goods in distinctly masculine terms. While the material – porcelain – was primarily conflated with women and the feminine during this period, this case study has suggested that by examining the modes by which individuals acquired armorial wares, their design and their use it becomes clear that certain porcelain wares may have been associated with other gender identities. Acquired through East India Company networks maintained through rigorous adherence to certain codes of reputation, honour and connection, these wares provided contemporaries with evidence of an individual's ability to call on others and demand service and respect. The inclusion of designs (armorials), which demonstrated a family's name, lineage and status were also important. Finally their use in spaces primarily understood as masculine – dining rooms – further served to mark these wares as specifically gendered. While women were continually conflated with the fragile and delicate qualities of porcelain, not all porcelain wares were understood as feminine. Men acquired expensive and exclusive armorial porcelain services to perform and mark a particularly elite form of masculinity.