

Chinese Ceramics



Pottery, porcelain and ceramics are three easily confused terms to describe the earthenware production in China.

Pottery can be any object made from porous clay and baked at a temperature ranging from hot, direct sunlight to baking, or firing, in a kiln at a temperature of about 1,000 degrees Celsius. It is usually neither hard nor stable. In order to produce ideal results, before firing, pigments or colors were supposed to be applied to pottery. After firing, it can also be painted with almost any colors.

Porcelain, on the other hand, is made from a mixture of special clays, often kaolin, which is made from decomposed crystals of granite, and fired at a very high temperature of 1,350 degree Celsius, at which kaolin becomes white. It is hard and much more durable than pottery. After firing, porcelain can be painted in a rainbow of colors and glazed, and then fired at a low temperature to seal the color and harden the glaze. Even the word "china" is often used to describe fine Chinese porcelain.

Ceramics is actually the general art of heating common clay to create an ornamental object. All pottery and porcelain are considered ceramics.

As early as 8,000 years ago, Chinese tribes were making artifacts with clay. The "Yangshao" Culture was noted for its distinctive pottery painted with flowers, fish, animals, human faces and geometric designs. Around 3500 B.C. the "Lungshanoid" Culture was making white pottery and eggshell – thin black pottery.

Nobody quite knows when porcelain techniques were invented. We believe that porcelain was first made during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-22A.D). The oldest existing porcelain that has been found is thought to date back to the 7th century. This porcelain is known as White Ding. The discovered artifacts are ivory-colored and make a clear sound when they are struck, which has led some historians to conclude that they really dated from the middle of the 9th century.

Du Fu, a famous Chinese poet from the Tang Dynasty, praised the fine porcelain cups and jugs of his time. His findings indicated that early Chinese porcelain was unglazed and covered in pictures of flowers and fish.

Porcelain styles clearly changed during the 10th century with the arrival of Indian Buddhism. The porcelain produced in the Song Dynasty (960-1280) is described as "blue as the sky, bright as a mirror, fragile as paper and sonorous as a plaque of jade- stone". The oldest pieces of porcelain found on the market today originate from this period. But they are exceptionally rare, extremely expensive, and can not be taken out of the country. Chinese porcelain making has a rich and varied history. There was a beautiful cracked porcelain style of the Song and Yuan dynasties. It was probably during the Yuan Dynasty that "blue and white" porcelain made its first appearance. This porcelain had blue decorations on a white background. It was made of kaolin clay and mixed with a type of cobalt blue imported from overseas.



Chinese porcelain making did not reach its artistic peak until the latter part of the 15th century during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). This was largely due to the discovery of a new glazing technique that allowed the artists to use lots of different color on the object after it had been baked. The new development was called "the five colored porcelain" method, but the number of colors used was not necessarily five. Another invention was mono-colored porcelain in ferrous red, black or dark blue.

The birth of color during the Ming Dynasty fired the imaginations of future artists. During the reign of Emperor Kang Xi in the early Qing Dynasty, porcelain makers started to paint more complicated pictures on their wares: human figures, religious scenes and landscapes began to replace the earlier scenes of flowers and fish.

Although the vases or bowls usually found in antique shops are mainly from this period, the history of Chinese porcelain does not end with the Qing Dynasty.

The porcelain made after 1911 never quite rekindled past glories. By the end of the 18th century making had already started to decline, although there is some marvelous 18th century rose, eggshell and porcelain on the market.

Most porcelain objects like vases and bowls are usually moulded by hand rather than by wheel. They are left to dry in the air, glazed and finally fired. In the porcelain business this process is known as single firing and oven is called "the grand tea".

The capitals of pottery and porcelain have been Yixing in Jiangsu Province and Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province respectively. From these two capitals, pottery and porcelain has been exported from very early times. During the Song Dynasty, large quantities of porcelain were exported via the Silk Road. The Arab believed that blue and white porcelain would turn black if poisonous food were served on it.

Nowadays, the Yuan-Ming cobalt blue and white style is popular everywhere in the world and has become the most favorite porcelain in more homes than any other styles ever created by potters of Chinese history.