

## Making China in China

I am writing this from a building in the north east corner of Vancouver, hard up against the train tracks of Vancouver's industrial harbour. This is the edge of the city, it's oldest part and not co-incidentally the territory of the city's original Chinatown. In this neighbourhood some two dozen blocks of shops and offices carry on a 100 year old mandate to supply the public with furniture, giftware, food, herbs and medicine, clothing, news, music, art supplies, and any other commodity that China can produce. Germaine to this essay are the stores selling porcelain. At a guess there are about 50,000 square feet of retail space in Vancouver's Chinatown devoted to porcelain.

The appearance of these stores remains consistent from decade to decade. We see the same blue and white vases in the window, tea sets in their personal boxes, big bowls, small bowls, dishes, and of course, rows and rows of figurines. One has the impression that nothing has been sold since we were children. Predictable and calm, these shops don't promote the idea that we should be in style and they don't exploit our anxiety that all the good stuff will be sold out. Forever, their shelves hold the same type and amount of material. If something leaves it is replaced with something identical. This is a different kind of retail; something like an archive, or a museum.

These stores resemble museums because they work with the classical and the traditional, but in contrast to museums they don't cherish and hold, nor do they worry about quality or provenance. They operate on the principle of extreme replaceability receiving a flow of goods from China's many porcelain production centres, chief among them JingdeZhen in central China, where the Imperial Kilns were established over 1000 years ago. This city alone, half the size of Vancouver in population, produces one million pieces of porcelain a day and has done so every day since the Imperial era. This is a fact that requires a pause. Not only to register the astonishing quantity of breakable things being produced and handled, but to form a picture of what this output requires in physical and material terms; the number of bodies, hands, brushes, wheels, kilns, moulds, bags of plaster, tonnes of clay, vats of glaze, rows of shelves, and sheer focused attention that is mustered day after day in order to deliver the goods. Rest again, and then imagine what follows production; the parallel business of selling, packaging, crating and shipping the stuff to domestic and foreign markets. Most of this ware stays in China. Just a trickle comes to Vancouver, yet it courses through the shops in an enormous turnover. It is an illusion that these shops sit as still as museums. The stock is like water in a river, continually replaced but continually the same.

Arriving on his first trip to JingdeZhen with replicas of Matisse's "Henriette", a most respected image from Europe's artistic legacy, the artist, Paul Mathieu, hazarded a way to mingle this strange (in China) form with the most regular of the city's artistic production. He simply submitted the heads to the skill pool he found in JingdeZhen passing each bust around as piece-work to various painters, while giving only a casual indication of the segment they were to fill. They chose the pattern. They chose the colours. In this way he effectively abandoned the object, as well as his judgment, to the concentrated resource he found there, acknowledging that the wet end of each brush was but the tip of a line of skill extending centuries into the past. In JingdeZhen an artist can use all the services available on a piece by piece basis. This includes mould-making, casting, firing, painting, glazing, everything. Even the beautiful silk-lined boxes used for packing the pieces are custom made and delivered within hours. Although the availability of labour means that an artist can develop a work by changing it during production, most JingdeZhen artists don't use the trades in that way. Their interest is not in process but in reliable repeatability and they know how to produce an object efficiently with very little variation or failure. Mathieu must have appeared very odd, going from place to place with his bubble-headed cast

asking everyone to have a go at it, behaving as though he didn't have a clue.

Nevertheless, the Matisse head came back. Not only did it make its way home but it arrived sporting a wicked collection of designs picked up as it was trawled around the town. While each section of work is conventional, the accumulation of motifs is brazen, a scramble of half a dozen patterns normally dedicated to one form only; a vase, a teapot, a bowl. While Mathieu's approach to the decoration comes across as some kind of aesthetic promiscuity, there is in fact a covert conservatism at work. Most of these patterns were developed in the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1912) for a western market. In China, they are painted in enamels referred to as "foreign colours" because they are done in a palette carried to China by the Jesuits two centuries ago. In a beautifully convoluted exchange, the foreign colours were developed in Europe in an attempt to copy the traditional Chinese "five colours" of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) (iron, cobalt, chrome, and manganese). Because mineralogical differences between China and Europe made an exact replication of the five colours impossible, the "foreign colours" were substituted and floated by the Jesuits, at which point a subtle hybrid was born when the colours came back to Europe rendered in exquisite Chinese patterns. The enthusiastic reception of this "chinoiserie" obscured forever their European genes and these decorative objects became firm signifiers of the exotic.

It is apparent that Matisse himself was attracted to this imported houseware, positioning Chinese (Oriental) vases and bowls in his paintings to speak of reverie, and of the vastness of the world beyond one's home. There were several trade fairs of Eastern and Oriental material in Paris during Matisse's career and while it is unknown whether he personally visited these exhibitions, their influence is recorded in his work as a graphic record of Europe/Asia trade of the time.

For his part, Mathieu is exquisitely aware of this exchange as one of thousands of small swaps made between artists from different worlds, a tendency especially evident in the decorative arts. His knowledge and devotion to the history of ceramics helped generate the JingdeZhen project and when he speaks about the work he says without sentiment that ceramics as a field is nothing less than "the memory of humankind"; a material record of the world's cultural process. His arrival in China, with Matisse's "Henriette" under his arm, indicates how willing he was to submit to that history, exposing his habits and ideas to a thorough scouring in JingdeZhen, a city of ruthless production. JingdeZhen is much greater than any one artist. Mathieu's presence there, while a huge novelty to many of the inhabitants, will hardly make a difference to the way things are done. His intention to submit is borne out by how passive he is as the organizer of this heap of forms, patterns colours and references. It's all a scramble, a problem for anyone who expects the units of meaning to hook up properly

As for Henriette the Vase, this is a lot of history to take on by herself, although she looks as lovely and bulbous as ever even with flowers coming out of her throat. Encouraged by the territory exposed by the Matisse vases, Mathieu sought to spread the ideas across other forms and began borrowing moulds from the factories. The territory, to be precise, is a place where neither originality nor replication rules. The forms that constitute the "standards" in China's ceramic industry; replicas of Michaelangelo's David, classic vase shapes, images of Bhudda, objects which are turned out in their many millions, are disordered or misused by Mathieu in ways that refresh them. But because both the forms and the decorations come not from his hands but from those of an artisan who has performed the same job countless times we also hesitate to call them original.

Maybe this is a semantic ruse. After all, it is Mathieu who conceived the plan and paid the bills. Both intellectually and materially he is the owner, or the author of the work. It is his original work. But it is important to note that he rejected almost none of the work he commissioned. Flower motif and trailing decoration, painting blue and white, carved surfaces, painted replicas of photographs, the services provided by the artisans of JingdeZhen will vary in the quality of execution just as they do in any area of craft. Mathieu did not seek the best in the pool nor did he distinguish the varying abilities by separating them from one another. It's as though the quality doesn't count, it's the range that matters.

Even things that broke in the kiln are glued back together with gold or bright red enamel. This project has no word for "mistake" a perverse attitude in that the work avails itself of an extraordinary skill pool and tradition yet assumes no apparent criteria for judgement. The artist is uncoupling significant binaries; skill from value; form from use; culture from tradition, and he is making these breaks, literally, at the point of manufacture, not at the point of use or ideation, which would be the choice respectively, of design and of art.

At every opportunity the artist eschews the accepted role of the forms and patterns. Pressing clay into the mold for a face should produce a hemisphere, but avoiding this expectation allows the artist to see Buddha's face from behind and use it as a bowl instead. Another loony idea has clusters of little heads, cast as full spheres, behaving as legs for these big faces. Pressing clay into a group of smaller molds makes faces which are themselves used as moulds. Accordingly, these mates are painted in reverse; decoration on the convex side, facial features on the inside and the finished pairs rest there, cheek by jowl, in a confusion of which is which, who's on top and what came first; the mould or the cast?

In the *Social Life of Things* Arjun Appadurai makes a claim for a methodological fetishism that grants an almost anthropomorphic will to objects " even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context". This isn't a mistake; some kind of academic voodoo. It is an attempt to say that material has influence, and that it shows us what to do. Commenting on Appadurai's rejection of the more familiar fetishisations; those of the subject, the image, the word, Bill Brown says" These (Appadurai's) are questions that ask less about the material effects of ideas and ideology than about the ideological and ideational effects of the material world and transformations of it. They are questions that ask not whether things are but what work they perform- questions, in fact, not about the things themselves but about the subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts. These may be the first questions, if only the first, that precipitate a new materialism that takes objects for granted only in order to grant them their potency- to show how they organize our private and public affection".

The word affection gets our attention here. I suddenly wonder what affection Mathieu's pieces have organized for themselves. Did anyone love them in China? I ask that especially of those who worked on them. But I ask it of viewers here as well. What will the art world make of their intense craft identity? For that matter what will the ceramic people do with them, can they overlook the cracks and the farmed out labour? Finally, I try to imagine these dishes in the porcelain shops of Chinatown, waiting there on shelves with all the rest, hoping to attract someone's eye. They almost fit, but in fact they are relatively useless and their lack will be deduced rather quickly. They are difficult as bowls and their images are so far from home that they're rendered senseless.

Is this their job then, to shift and move? To join a group; of art or design or craft and then quit? Quit before we fire them. Are they designed to mis-fit? I imagine so. Because as they slip from one category to another they leave a trace, an afterimage of our expectation of things. And as we fall into the gap between what they are and what we hope they will be we are moved ever so slightly from our accustomed position. If we move like this again and again, let's say a million times a day for a thousand years, we might become broad, we might become deep; building bit upon bit like a great and ancient culture.

1) Arjun Appadurai "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value" in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), p.5

2) Bill Brown "Thing Theory" in Things, ed. Bill Brown. The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p7