

Conference Paper

Issues in Attribution and Expert Assessment of the Decorative Porcelain Objects

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Abstract

This paper explores the main issues in professional attribution and methodology for the expert assessment of decorative porcelain works. Expert assessment of such works consists of a range of examinations, including studies of technological peculiarities, marking of items, stylistic, heraldic and epigraphic analysis. The history of Russian porcelain is heavily influenced by various trends in European art, as well as events in Russian history. In each stage of development of locally produced porcelain, marks on the items were used in different way and presented a different range of information. Interpretation of these marks provides an important source of attribution and establishment of provenance and, therefore, is of vital importance for any professional working with Russian porcelain. This article provides information on the porcelain markings from the establishment of first porcelain factories in eighteenth-century Russia during the imperial period, before discussing markings on Soviet porcelain and, finally, giving examples of contemporary marks used by modern Russian factories.

Keywords: attribution, expertise, porcelain, decorative plastic, sculpture, decoration, brand names, hallmarks, author's signatures

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1. Introduction

The problems of the development of human material environment attract increasingly wider attention. The material world of objects encodes a lot of valuable information about the era in which such objects are created, and the social relationships that determine the entire lifestyle of the people who had created these objects and who are using them.

Any private collection or museum repository provides a special place for the ceramic objects, with porcelain objects being particularly interesting. Porcelain is the most exquisite and perfect type of ceramics widely represented by various utilitarian objects, decorative small sculpture and larger sculptural works.

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2. Materials and Methods

When performing an evaluation of porcelain items, many experts believe that only one method of authentication is possible: the connoisseur approach that allows to perform expert assessment by using historical experience reflected in multiple books and articles on the history of porcelain. Thanks to the extensive research and reference information, contemporary experts have an opportunity to research comprehensively all artistic and technological aspects of porcelain works thus providing deeper and better evaluation of such objects.

The evaluation method applied to the ceramic works includes pinpointing all characteristic features (physical characteristics, functional features, stylistic features, time and place of production) that may help an expert to perform attribution, authenticate an object and determine its artistic, historical and cultural value.

Attribution of porcelain objects based on their function is performed mostly by assessing their exterior. Over several centuries of the development of porcelain art, two areas have emerged: on the one hand, mass production focusing on everyday utilitarian items (tableware, various household items, sanitary items); on the other – original works by artists, including small decorative objects, porcelain sculpture, panels, architectural details and other items used to decorate public and private buildings.

Typically, researchers can easily determine utilitarian goals of the majority of objects. However, some items that are no longer in use in everyday life (for example, compotiers, ice-creamers, wine bottle coolers and monteiths that used to be included in ceremonial and everyday porcelain sets [1]) require an expert to possess certain knowledge on the history of material culture.

The study of materials and production technologies of the porcelain objects is based on the knowledge of the composition of porcelain mixture and glaze. Based on this, there is a distinction between hard-paste and soft-paste porcelain, as well as the bone china, a type of soft-paste porcelain. Biscuit porcelain is often used in porcelain sculpture: it is an unglazed porcelain possessing matte appearance and translucency.

Also, at this stage of evaluation an expert assesses visible technological peculiarities: for example, distortions in shape, indentations or black spots. The so-called production defects may either point to an imperfect production process typical for early stages of production (black spots can be caused either by the presence of iron contamination in a poorly purified porcelain paste) or to the defective firing process (uneven translucency, traces of melted glaze, clumps of burned and sooty mass stuck to the bottom, cracks and holes). During the 18th century, artists skilfully masked the noticeable defects, such

as black dots and caverns on the surface of porcelain objects, by covering them with the pictures of flowers and leaves.

Technological parameters include the type of decorations and the techniques used. The main decoration techniques are sculptural and pictorial. Sculptural decorations are made as plastic relief ornaments or, alternatively, by embossment or etching. Decorations may be produced separately and glued during firing; alternatively, they may be cast simultaneously with the object.

Pictorial decorations are created by painting with underglaze and overglaze colours. Overglaze painting is made by enamel colours with a brush or a pen over the glazed surface after the firing. It is fixed by firing, but not fused with the glaze, so that the colours are raised over the object's surface. Apart from the enamel pigments, overglaze painting utilizes muffled colours that resemble glaze in their chemical composition. Painted images may be changed or corrected.

Underglaze painting is made on the raw surface using a brush or a pen before the glaze coating and firing stages. During the firing the colours fuse with the glaze and become long-lasting; the images does not wash off and are corrosion resistant. Underglaze painting is made in advance and cannot be changed.

Porcelain objects may be decorated by non-mechanical techniques (decalcomania, transfer decoration) by using printed designs (decals) – that is, drawings with ornaments or thematic scenes subsequently dry-transferred on the porcelain surface. Such decoration can be applied by an aerograph using special stencils.

Porcelain decorations may include various elements, i.e.: ornaments, portraits, landscapes, battle and genre scenes. When researching thematic or portrait images on porcelain objects, the experts can better pinpoint the time of its creation, especially when an item features a copy of a famous artwork or a portrait of a celebrated contemporary (an army leader, a writer etc.), celebrated beauty, or typical portraits of book characters or even characters from fashion magazines. Detailed knowledge of visual materials (paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs) is extremely important, because such portraits could be painted on porcelain items only after the originals were created.

Gold is used in decorating the most expensive items, either covering the large surfaces completely, or used only for fine details.

Stamps and signs present on an object may help determine its provenance and time of production, as well as the names of the masters and artists who participated in its creation. Factory stamps, hallmarks, signs of author signatures are the important factors in authenticating porcelain objects.

A stamp is a graphical sign usually found on the exterior bottom part of an object. The technology of its making (with paint, underglaze, overglaze, “in the paste” etc.), its type and colour are all important parts of an attribution process.

In Russia the need to use stamps was felt immediately after the emergence of the first porcelain factories. The first stamps were non-standardised; therefore, they differed widely in their size, placement and style.

The first stamp in the history of Russian porcelain was applied to the test cup produced by Neva Porcelain Manufacture in 1745 by the order of Christian Hunger, Saxon master invited to manage the first Russian porcelain production. The cup’s bottom was marked with the time and place of its making.

In the 18th–19th centuries the government passed several decrees specifying the rules of porcelain stamping. These decrees prescribed that the stamps should include a name of the factory’s owner and its location; the stamps had to be in Russian even if the blanks were purchased from European manufacturer and already bore producer stamps. Since 1857 stamps could be made using only red colour.

These requirements clearly influenced Russian porcelain stamps, although they were not always strictly followed by smaller producers. Many bent and broke the rules in various ways; therefore, porcelain objects made in Russian Empire feature many stamps of various appearance.

Traditionally, several types of stamping were used in Russian porcelain. Overglaze stamping was very popular: such stamps were made over the fired glaze. Underglaze stamps were also used – these are usually better preserved because they were applied before the glazing.

The content of the stamps varied widely even for the same producer and factory. During the first years of production, many used simple stamps featuring only one or several letters; later they switched to more complex arrangements including abbreviations featuring owners’ names, ornaments and coat of arms. The stamps could include not only abbreviations but also full surnames of factory owners.

Usually expensive porcelain objects intended for export were decorated with stamps featuring national symbols, including Russian national emblem. The use of national emblem was a privilege allowed only to those manufacturers who were officially recognized as a “Supplier of His Imperial Majesty’s Court”.

The honourable title of a “Supplier of His Majesty’s Court and Grad Ducal Palaces” was introduced in 1856, and since 1862 manufacturers, artists and craftsmen who worked

on commissions for the Imperial Court were allowed to use national emblem on their shop signs and products [2].

Apart from the Russian national emblem, stamps could also include tsarist symbols. For example, the most frequent element of the stamps applied by the Imperial Porcelain Factory was an imperial crown used since the accession of Pavel I and till the October revolution of 1917.

Also, stamps often included special marks to identify the commissioner of a set or an object. For example, Imperial Porcelain Factory used the mark “ПК” to distinguish the items commissioned for the court office. The factory of Kornolov brothers used the mark “ПО ОСОБ. ЗАКАЗУ” (by special commission) [3].

Such marks also could include various numbers, letters, signs, numbers stamped in a paste on the side parts of the bottom or elsewhere on an object, often difficult to find. Usually such marks were purely utilitarian, used for record-keeping to mark a concrete series of objects, an experimental porcelain paste, an amount of gold used in decoration, and so on.

Monograms were often used, typically consisting of the owner’s initials; objects made by the Imperial Porcelain Factory utilized monograms made of the monarch name’s first letter and his official number.

For the highest quality items complex stamps were designed, which included floral ornaments and patterns. For example, the factory stamps of Khrapunov-Novyi in the latter half of the 19th century, and the Dulevsky Factory since the mid-19th century, began to include entire flower baskets with the name of the factory owners both on the basket itself, as well as on floral ornaments.

The stamps of Russian porcelain factories utilized an extremely wide range of symbols. Imperial commissions did not prohibit the owners to express their individuality. This was reflected in the use of unique factory symbols that registered its production and location. For example, the stamps of Gardner factory, together with the signs describing the items’ provenance and factory location (“Въ Вербилкахъ”, “Въ Москве”), included initials and surname of factory owner (“Ф.Б. Гарднер”) both in Russian and in foreign languages; an image of a horseman; as well as the signs of materials utilised (“Опакъ”) [4].

In extremely rare cases the objects can include the name of porcelain masters, either as initials or as full surnames. For example, items produced at the Yusupov factory sometimes include the signature of master A.-F.Lamber, a talented painter of Sèvres manufacture who contributed greatly to the factory success and to the increase in quality of its production. Objects produced by the Imperial Porcelain Factory feature

the names of the masters since the mid-19th century. The more famous the master, the more valued were the works signed by his name.

After the 1917 October revolution, the porcelain factories were nationalized, and all stamps with the imperial symbols disappeared. Their only remnant was a two-headed eagle but without the tsarist symbols, which, for some time, continued to be utilized by the stamps of Imperial Porcelain Factory.

Typical images of Soviet era feature crossed sickles and hammers, stars, ears of wheat, an image of the globe and other elements that were present in the stamps of almost all factories. Apart from the Soviet symbols, the stamps of propaganda pieces may include slogans and appeals: for example, "To help the starving". In 1930s the objects produced by Leningrad Porcelain Factory were marked by two numbers, 5 and 10. They marked the anniversaries of the revolution.

Unlike old Russian porcelain stamps, Soviet stamps were of a higher level of quality, with clear images, regular patterns and identical letter size.

The stamps included abbreviations that featured not only the new names of the factories but also of various organizations based on the factories, or the organizations that sold the porcelain objects. This is why we find among them such signs as Mosoblgorospetstorg, Glavunivermag, abbreviations ТД (trade house) and many others.

Before the revolution, each factory designed its own export stamps. Some used French inscriptions; others utilized arabesques or other decorative elements for clients from eastern countries. The factory of Kornilov brothers marked their export items with the sign "Made in Russia". The Soviet porcelain stamps began to include words in Latin alphabet with the country name: USSR or SOVIET UNION. Rare hand-made elite objects could additionally include words "Handmade original". The stamp "Torgsin" (meaning "Trading Syndicate") also appeared at this time.

In Soviet era stamps also indicated the level of picture complexity and the item's quality grade. Leningrad Porcelain Factory used stamps of different colours to indicate the items' quality grade: red for the first class, blue for the second and green for the third. The full version "1-й сорт" (1st grade) was rarely used. Typically, the stamp included the grade's number with a letter "с" (for sort, grade): "1 с", "2 с", "3 с". The groups (ranging from 6 to 15) were marked by the signs "6 гр", "7 гр" etc., or by the sign "ВНЕ ГР" (not belonging to a group) for the high-quality items manufactured according to the standards beyond the 15th group.

After the USSR introduced the quality seal, the items receiving this distinction were marked by the stamps also featuring this seal.

In 1960s–1970s the stamps of the Soviet factories began to include images of animals, birds and mythological creatures. Their choice for any manufacturer was usually historically determined. For example, the famous Dulev bird appeared on Dulev Factory items after in 1958 its sculpture A.Sotnikov was awarded a golden medal for his work *Sokol* (*Hawk*). As for the squirrel image, it is used in the factory stamps of Sysert Porcelain Factory as a typical representative of Ural fauna.

The Ural Factory of Ceramic Works in the town of Sysert, transformed in 1960 from the Promkooperator workshop, initially did not use any symbols in its stamps. The squirrel symbol appeared in 1966 and exists to this day.

In 2004, the factory changed its ownership model and brand, which led to the creation of a new stamp designed by the Russian-German design bureau. The new stamp included a logo featuring phoenix tail and a motto “LEGE ARTIS” (from Latin, “by the laws of the art”). An image of a legendary phoenix bird, as a symbol of rebirth, of being burn down and reborn from the ashes, symbolised the rebirth or Russian porcelain.

Another stamp appeared to mark the elite porcelain objects, church items and altarpieces after the factory was purchased in 2006 by the Ekaterinburg diocese. At the middle of this stamp is the orthodox cross on top of the abbreviation “РПЦ” (Russian Orthodox Church); below is the factory name – “Sysert Porcelain” [5].

The study of factory stamps, brands, signs, signatures, emblems, monograms etc. should be supplemented by the epigraphic analysis (the study of signs found on the items in terms of their style, spelling typical for a concrete period etc.) and stylistic analysis (painting manner, choice of colours, content of images, ornamental features, sculptural shapes etc.)

Often, we find items that lack any direct or indirect indicators of their provenance; in this case the study of shapes and types of decoration help to determine time and place of their production.

For example, the study of the decorative style used in objects produced by “Sysert Porcelain” LLC helped to determine the use of elements belonging to the tradition of folk Ural and Siberian household painting. The stylized folk paintings appeared on porcelain items in 1970s as a result of the search for new themes and more modern decorative techniques. Based on such motives, the items of the experimental laboratory chose floral elements well suited for porcelain objects, as well as the technique of “spread brushstroke”. Since then, handmade painting, and its central element of “Sysert rose” made in two-colour brushstroke technique, became a signature trait of Sysert porcelain production.

Gradually handmade painting has been enriched by various elements: grass, large and small leaves, branches with berries and tendrils. The images include wild berries and flowers: wild strawberries, arrowwood, wild chamomiles and forget-me-nots, violets, garden roses and irises. Exquisite colour effects are produced thanks to the use of lustres. The artists mastered the use of fine-stroke painting. Thus, stylized folk painting has become a new decorative trend and has brought recognition to the works of this well-known Ural factory.

3. Conclusions

To sum up, the success of expert evaluation of porcelain objects is based on such elements as: expert's personal practical experience, his/her skills acquired through constant work with the objects, and the entire range of sources that help to authenticate the item.

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