Secondhand Chinoiserie and the Confucian Revolutionary: Colonial America's Decorative Arts "After the Chinese Taste"

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SECONDHAND CHINOISERIE AND THE CONFUCIAN REVOLUTIONARY: COLONIAL AMERICA’S DECORATIVE ARTS

“AFTER THE CHINESE TASTE”

by

Kiersten Larsen Davis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Visual Arts

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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ABSTRACT

SECONDHAND CHINOISERIE AND THE CONFUCIAN REVOLUTIONARY: COLONIAL AMERICA’S DECORATIVE ARTS “AFTER THE CHINESE TASTE”

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This thesis explores the implications of chinoiserie, or Western creations of Chinese-style decorative arts, upon an eighteenth century colonial American audience. Chinese products such as tea, porcelain, and silk, and goods such as furniture and wallpaper displaying Chinese motifs of distant exotic lands, had become popular commodities in Europe by the eighteenth century. The American colonists, who were primarily culturally British, thus developed a taste for chinoiserie fashions and wares via their European heritage.

While most European countries had direct access to the China trade, colonial Americans were banned from any direct contact with the Orient by the British East India Company. They were relegated to creating their own versions of these popular designs and products based on their own interpretations of British imports. Americans also
created a mental construct of China from philosophical writings of their European contemporaries, such as Voltaire, who often envisioned China as a philosopher’s paradise. Some colonial Americans, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, fit their understanding of China within their own Enlightenment worldview. For these individuals, chinoiserie in American homes not only reflected the owners’ desires to keep up with European fashions, but also carried associations with Enlightenment thought.

The latter half of the eighteenth century was a time of escalating conflict as Americans colonists began to assert the right to govern themselves. Part of their struggle for freedom from England was a desire to rid themselves of the British imports, such as tea, silk, and porcelain, on which they had become so dependent by making those goods themselves. Americans in the eighteenth century had many of the natural resources to create such products, but often lacked the skill or equipment for turning their raw materials into finished goods. This thesis examines the colonists’ attempts to create their own chinoiserie products, despite these odds, in light of revolutionary sentiments of the day. Chinoiserie in colonial America meshed with neoclassical décor, thereby reflecting the Enlightenment and revolutionary spirit of the time, and revealing a complex colonial worldview filled with trans-oceanic dialogues and cross-cultural currents.
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I am grateful for the many people whose contributions and support have been invaluable in the production of this thesis.

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The grant money from the Department of Visual Arts which allowed me the opportunity to travel both to England and the American east coast has also been a significant contribution to this project. These research trips gave me a much greater understanding of the extent to which chinoiserie was produced in both England and America during the eighteenth century, how the Americans were influenced by the English styles, and where and how such designs and products would be displayed in colonial homes. I was able to see the objects firsthand and conduct research in libraries that contained primary sources to which I would not otherwise have had access without the grant. I am also indebted to my sister-in-law’s wonderful parents, James and Anita Mumford, for being such gracious hosts during my stay in Philadelphia.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

In 1492 the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) set sail from Spain under the financial support of Ferdinand and Isabella in search of a direct western route from Europe to the Indies. The Orient held a fascination for Europeans ever since Marco Polo (1254-1324) had published his stories of exotic lands and peoples in the thirteenth century. Travelogues filled with fantastical and often unbelievable tales of the Orient circulated throughout Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and had sparked a widespread interest in exotic peoples of distant and nearly inaccessible lands. However, this European fascination with the East was more than simply literary intrigue. Marco Polo brought exotic goods with him that caught European eyes and soon had widespread demand throughout the continent. Countries fought for the upper hand in trade with China. If Spain could succeed in finding a quicker route to the Indies, then they would gain economic supremacy in Europe.

Columbus found the exotic when he landed near American shores in the Bahamas. He promptly declared himself in the Orient, and named the native inhabitants of this new land “Indians.” Although his discovery of a New World led to widespread colonization rather than trade, Columbus’ legendary mistake was inspired from the onset by a fascination with the exotic Orient and a desire to establish trade with the East. Europeans were attracted to the ancient learning and long-standing culture of the Orient, which they simultaneously tried to emulate and exploit to assert their own superiority.\footnote{Hugh Honour, \textit{Chinoiserie: The Vision of Cathay} (London: John Murray Ltd, 1961), 8-15.}
Their relationship with natives of the New World, on the other hand, was usually one of exploitation only. Plantations were built across the Americas as European nations sought to reap the benefits of the rich natural resources that America had to offer. Slaves were brought from Africa, adding another exotic culture that the European Americans exploited. Rather than seeking to incorporate cultural trends of the Native Americans and Africans, Europeans who settled in America sought to continue European, especially British, trends. This included bringing the British taste for the Orient overseas with them. Thus, by the early eighteenth century, Chinese motifs from both imports and local-made furniture and décor were widespread throughout the English colonies.

These designs created “after the Chinese taste” continued to be popular as the revolutionary sentiments that led to America’s Declaration of Independence began to escalate in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The growing conflict with England involved the colonial desire for both self-government and economic autonomy. Concurrent with the push for independence was the spread of Enlightenment thought, with its emphasis on reason, rational morality, and the individual, in both Europe and America. Mingled with these revolutionary sentiments and Enlightenment ideas in America was the colonial construct of an idealized China, received primarily via England and France, and its reflection in the decorative arts of the day. This thesis explores how both the colonial struggle for economic independence and Enlightenment thought found expression in Chinese-style products and motifs in late eighteenth-century America.

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3 “After the Chinese taste” was a common eighteenth-century designation indicating that design books would include the Chinese style, or that an advertising craftsman could create chinoiserie. For some examples of the usage of this term see Ellen Paul Denker, *After the Chinese Taste: China’s Influence in America, 1730-1930* (Salem, Massachusetts: Peabody Museum of Salem, 1985), 5.
The Chinese influence had become so standard in European fashion by the eighteenth century that many twenty-first century viewers of colonial American period rooms in museums and restored homes scarcely notice that many of the decorations, while primarily imitating English and French interiors, are inspired by Asian sources. A modern viewer might think of such items as blue-and-white porcelain tea services and silk bed curtains as culturally English, and therefore an expected part of a fashionable colonial American home. Such items were common in Europe, but only because they were highly desired when they first came as exotic luxuries. Chinese porcelain thrived in European trade markets, as Westerners did not have the knowledge or resources to make these luxurious items until the eighteenth century. Additionally, Chinese tea had become so integrated into British culture by the eighteenth century that it had become an absolute necessity.

The market for Chinese goods had grown so much by the seventeenth century that Europeans began producing their own versions of Chinese wares and designs to meet demand. These European versions of Chinese goods are termed “chinoiserie.” Chinoiserie is a broad term, encompassing primarily Chinese-inspired designs but also

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5 Oliver Impey, *Chinoiserie: The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), 47-48. Impey describes how Chinese tea was still a European novelty in the mid-seventeenth century, with around 20,000 pounds of tea being imported from England by the century’s end. However, Impey notes that by the 1770s “some ten and a half million pounds were coming to England alone.” This shows a significant increase in the English cultural dependence on tea.

6 Honour, 8-15. Chinoiserie was created in all parts of Europe during the eighteenth century, and was especially popular in Russia, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Germany, Great Britain, and France. This thesis will focus on the English and French chinoiserie because it had the most influence in colonial America.
including Japanese, Islamic, or any other motif or combination of cultural designs deemed exotic by the western world. Europeans did not often try to distinguish between motifs and styles from different eastern cultures. Raymond G. O’Connor notes that “the spread of Chinese art…throughout East Asia produced a similarity of art styles which, to many Westerners, reflected one cultural pattern and, therefore, one classification of peoples.”

For this reason, studies on chinoiserie generally do not evaluate authenticity of original Chinese sources, but rather focus on how the European objects reflect the Western perception of the East. According to Hugh Honour, chinoiserie is “the expression of the European vision of Cathay.”

To that, Oliver Impey adds his definition of chinoiserie as “the European idea of what Oriental things were like, or ought to be like.” Chinoiserie refers, then, not just to the arts produced “after the Chinese taste,” but its accompanying perceptions as well.

Chinoiserie designs often appeared on traditional Chinese media, such as silk and porcelain. Such products, however, could evoke associations with exotic and far-distant lands even when they were covered in patterns that were not Chinese. The term “chinoiserie” thus encompasses Chinese-inspired media, such as silk and porcelain, as well as decorative motifs. Objects made in China specifically for a European export market catered to European tastes and reinforced the European vision of the Orient as exotic, fantastical, and mysterious. Europeans in turn applied this mental construct of Eastern culture to their own creations of chinoiserie.

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8 Honour, 7-8.

9 Impey, 9.
Colonial America was in a unique situation with regards to their perception of the Chinese style. While Europeans, including the English, had direct trade with China, the American Colonists were limited in their cultural contacts by the monopoly of the British East India Company over the China trade. Chinese designs and goods were primarily British, and sometimes French, import to America, and their removal from their actual origins caused them to lose much of their European association with escapism and the mystical land of Cathay. Hugh Honour argues in his book *Chinoiserie* that European incorporations of Oriental designs were simply a reflection of Europe’s own Western values and aesthetics. Honour eloquently describes the European vision of China thus:

This lofty ideal was only made the more desirable by being set against a background as fantastically exquisite and as elegantly bizarre as Watteau or Boucher could conjure up. In the vision of a country where be-whiskered, pigtailed mandarins in dragon-encrusted robes were philosophers and where the *Analects* of Confucius were discussed beneath bell-fringed roofs of jade pavilions, eighteenth-century Europe could recognize an enchantingly distorted picture of its own culture.¹¹

The chinoiserie of England and France which was transferred to America thus had more to do with the European imagination and a fantastical Western romanticism of the Far East than with an accurate representation of China. Products with Chinese designs were produced for Europeans by Europeans. Honour even suggests that the goods China sent directly to Europe were created specifically for a European export market, and thus catered to European tastes instead of accurately reflecting their own Chinese culture.¹² It is no wonder, then, that the American chinoiserie, being twice removed from China

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¹¹ Honour, 22.

¹² Ibid., 35.
through the original export designs of the Chinese trying to please Europeans that were in turn replicated in an even more western way by Europeans, looked more European than Chinese. Chinese motifs were incorporated into mainstream Palladian architecture and Chippendale-style décor in America with little thought of their authenticity or exoticism. Although these designs were still called Chinese and may have been inspired by a Chinese precedent, they were British in every other way, and that is precisely why Americans used them.

While the use of chinoiserie was a fashionable statement by those trying to emulate what was popular in Europe, for some, the vision of China alluded to education and enlightenment. In an America where philosopher-merchants and landowners became the new aristocracy, undercurrents of Chinese thought meshed with the Enlightenment ideals of the founding fathers. The French philosopher Voltaire, who greatly influenced Enlightenment thinkers in America, viewed China as an ideal Utopian land. Honour notes that, “in Voltaire’s hands Confucius was converted into an eighteenth-century rationalist and the cumbrous and decadent Chinese empire transformed into a Gallic Utopia.”13 It is possible that some revolutionary Americans made similar associations when incorporating Chinese motifs and goods into their homes and fashions. Colonists had publications and travel journals available to them which attested to the enlightened nature of China’s government, and to the great contributions of Confucius.14 These periodicals

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13 Honour, 24.

give some insight into the American idea of China and the associations objects created in the “Chinese taste” may have evoked, as discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis.

From its European foundations, the early history of America was one of a developing country striving to thrive under the controlling hand of a mother nation before breaking free of its own accord. The latter half of the eighteenth century was a particularly exciting time for the colonial Americans as they sought independence from England while asserting their ability to govern themselves. Americans drank Chinese tea, just like any English man or woman, but they protested British political and economic oppression by throwing it all overboard during the infamous Boston Tea Party of 1773. At the same time, colonial Americans were trying harder than ever to keep up with British fashion by creating Chinese-style goods themselves. Thus, there were two sides to the American desire for chinoiserie: loyalists and patriots alike displayed chinoiserie in their homes as an attempt to replicate English styles, but for some patriots the Chinese-style goods could also evoke associations with rebellion and democracy. Similarly, both loyalists and patriots developed a taste for neoclassical design in the eighteenth century, but much scholarship links neoclassical designs and architecture to American democratic ideals.\(^\text{15}\) Neoclassical décor may have been a popular fashion for some colonial Americans, while for others it contained deeper associations with democratic classical cultures. Likewise, chinoiserie, which often accompanied the décor of neoclassical

\(^{15}\) Most art historical survey books clearly make the connection between neoclassical décor in America and democratic ideals. Allan Greenburg notes that, “as they constructed their settlements and buildings, Americans looked beyond colonial and English precedents to create a more personal architecture. It is not surprising that, led by men like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, they turned to the rich legacy of classical forms, particularly the architecture of the ancient Roman republic and the independent city-states of the Italian Renaissance.” See Allan Greenburg, *Architecture of Democracy: American Architecture and the Legacy of the Revolution* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2006), 34-36.
homes, may have evoked associations with an idealized democratic perception of China for some American patriots.

This thesis explores the theme of chinoiserie in colonial America during the period surrounding the Revolutionary War. While many books and articles have been written on chinoiserie and its existence in colonial America, and others have evaluated art with revolutionary sentiments, no one has yet attempted to evaluate chinoiserie in light of these revolutionary ideals. A. Owen Aldridge and Adolph Reichwein have studied the connections between eighteenth-century European and American perceptions of China and their relation to contemporary literature promoting Enlightenment ideals.16 However, their literary analyses do not consider the possibility of similar connections in eighteenth-century material culture.

In order to limit the scope of this thesis, I have chosen to focus primarily on architectural design and interior décor in a sampling of prominent homes in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, namely Battersea (1768), Monticello (1768-1809), Gunston Hall (1755-1759), China’s Retreat (1792), the Samuel Powel House (1765), and the William Paca House (1763-1765). I will also include applicable discussion of other elements of the American attempt to replicate the Chinese style and goods, such as those industries connected with the manufacture of silk, porcelain, and furniture. Ultimately, this thesis will expand the traditional associations of revolutionary sentiments and Enlightenment ideals in eighteenth-century America beyond a fascination with classical and renaissance styles to suggest a more complex worldview filled with multiple trans-oceanic dialogues and cross-cultural currents.

In this work, I apply art historical theories and methodologies to decorative arts, paths which have not traditionally crossed. Art historians often prefer to look at the cultural and theoretical implications of painting, sculpture, and architecture. However, the decorative arts play an important historical role as aspects of visual culture that were accessible to a broad range of social groups and classes. Jules Prown has done much to develop theory in the study of material culture—a broad field in which he includes both the traditional “high” arts and everyday decoration. According to Prown, the decorative arts in particular are a great indicator of social and historical ideals because they are less self-conscious than high art. They can provide a wealth of latent meanings and values because they are not so carefully manipulated as painting or sculpture. Prown argues that materials are like silent utterances that reveal something about the culture from which they came. He explains, “that man expresses his human need to structure his world through forms as well as through language is a basic premise of the structuralist approach to material culture.”

Decorative arts are among the materials men and women have used throughout history to give structure to their worlds. Thus, the objects themselves have the ability to show how individuals have formed meaning in their surroundings, and repeated styles and motifs across a spectrum of objects can reveal the values of the cultures that created and used them.

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Prown privileges “interpreting information encoded in objects” in order to help us understand the culture from which they came, which is one aspect of my approach.\textsuperscript{21} However, I am also interested in examining the objects within their historical contexts by investigating the worldviews of those who created and used these materials. Theoretical approaches to the study of material culture in the decorative arts have only begun to be explored. Prown’s influential writings have had much to do with their serious consideration as an important art form and social indicator. However, because the decorative arts fit into fields of design and interior décor, the vast majority of publications on Colonial American décor simply document and define styles and rarely give possible theoretical reasons for the preference of one taste over another.\textsuperscript{22}

In addition to incorporating Jules Prown’s theories on material culture, this thesis also fits within current trends of American art scholarship, which have tended to favor the broadening of boundaries and cross-cultural interactions that have shaped American art, and how these encounters have in turn influenced arts across cultures, seas, and political borders.\textsuperscript{23} The arts of every culture have been shaped in some way by outside influences from other cultures.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 7.


\textsuperscript{23} Wanda Corn first notes that this trend toward expanding the canon of American art to include “transatlantic influence and exchange” in her 1988 evaluation of scholarship in American art (her essay was reprinted ten years later in *Critical Issues in American Art*, as cited below). John Davis wrote a new update on the state of scholarship five years after Corn, wherein he reiterated these same ideas of placing American art in a “global context.” However, this interest in America’s place in light of global issues and
interactions. Chinoiserie exists because of the popularity of eastern goods in a western market. The study of chinoiserie in America becomes complicated by the mode of the materials reaching the country. There was no straightforward trans-Pacific exchange between China and the American colonists. Until Americans established independence and sent their first mercantile ships to China in 1784, all products reaching America from the Orient came via England and France. The Chinese sometimes did create products especially for an American market, but these goods came through the British East India Company. More common in America, however, were products made in the “Chinese style” by British companies. Ultimately, America’s vision of China was significantly defined through British translation. Americans created secondhand chinoiserie, based primarily on British copies of Chinese goods originally created for a Western market. As could be expected with so many obstacles and interpreters, American chinoiserie was hardly Chinese. However, these products provide insight into the trans-oceanic dialogues that have shaped American culture for hundreds of years.


24 Impey, 48.

Scholars have only seriously focused on chinoiserie as a unique cultural phenomenon since the 1960s. Hugh Honour’s breakthrough book entitled *Chinoiserie* was among the first to investigate nonwestern influences in European 18th century decorative arts. Other works dedicated to chinoiserie have been written since then by Oliver Impey, Madeline Jarry, and John Sweetman. The 1984 exhibition entitled *Rococo: Art and Design in Hogarth’s England* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London was one of the first museum efforts to prominently feature chinoiserie. All of these histories of the European interest in the Chinese style and its manifestation from generation to generation address America only insofar as it relates to European trends, or as an extension of Anglo culture. However, historians of American art are no longer content to look at America as another British cultural center. While certainly primarily influenced by English culture, American Colonists had unique experiences and interactions apart from the British that shaped their art and its reception.

Several Americanists have looked at the theme of chinoiserie in American decorative arts. The first time chinoiserie in America appears to have been a topic of discussion was in 1969 at a Williamsburg Antiques Forum, where the theme was “The Oriental Impulse in Early America.” However, most of the lectures presented at this forum primarily addressed European chinoiserie and treated America as an extension of

26 Honour’s book was published in 1961. He shifted his focus from the study of classical designs in decorative arts to looking at Chinese influence in rococo and neoclassical arts.

27 Impey’s book was published in 1977, while Jarry’s was published in 1981. Sweetman’s book was the first to look at Islamic influences in European arts, but his focus was still on Europe’s interpretation of the exotic “other” associated with the Orient. Sweetman also addressed America more directly than either Impey or Jarry. For Sweetman’s perspective see John Sweetman, *The Oriental Obsession: Islamic Inspiration in British and American Art and Architecture 1500-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

European culture rather than a unique entity. In 1976, the Seattle Art Museum featured an exhibition entitled *China’s Influence on American Culture in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, which focused mainly on Chinese export porcelain for the American market and didn’t note any colonial attempts to copy the Chinese designs. Another exhibition entitled *After the Chinese Taste: China’s Influence in America, 1730 to 1930* was held in 1985 at the Peabody Museum of Salem to commemorate 200 years since the foundation of the America-China trade. The first two chapters of the exhibition catalogue cover the eighteenth century, listing various aspects of chinoiserie that appear in furniture and décor with some of their British design influences. None of these American histories are comprehensive, and they all argue for the existence of Chinese-style designs and their sources without inquiring into what sort of implications such styles would have for an American audience. While this thesis by no means attempts to document a comprehensive history, it does examine the differences in American chinoiserie from its European counterparts, and seeks to provide a logical explanation of why such differences would exist.

Ultimately, this thesis does not respond to one specific scholar or group of scholars. While I draw on the research and writing of American decorative arts, my argument is new. Many scholars have noted the existence of chinoiserie in colonial

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31 Denker, v.

32 Ibid., 1-26.
America. That point has been well proven in decorative arts histories, museum
catalogues, and periodicals. Clay Lancaster has researched how Americans have
incorporated Japanese influences, although his studies focus primarily on the nineteenth
and twentieth centuries, and only briefly touch on the eighteenth century for
background. Nobody has yet gone beyond the documentary to a theoretical explanation
for the existence of such designs beyond their continuation of a popular European style.
This thesis seeks to create a dialogue on this subject, delving into the social and historical
events of the time in order to find answers to such questions as: was chinoiserie different
in America than in Europe, and if so, why? What image of the Orient did Chinese-style
motifs conjure up in the eighteenth-century American mind? What beyond the desire for
fashion, prompted revolutionary Americans to include these designs in their homes, when
they had so many other prevalent styles from which to choose? My arguments expand the
traditional neoclassical explanation for enlightenment design in America by examining
another style, the Chinese, that mingled with the classical in everyday decorative arts.

The second chapter of this thesis examines the European tradition of chinoiserie
and how it came to be both a fashion and an important commodity among colonial
Americans. This section explores some of the differences and similarities between
chinoiserie in England and America, and tries to account for some of the discrepancies. It
also highlights how and why the designs changed or took on more subdued tones in an
American setting. Americans’ taste in chinoiserie requires an exploration of the

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33 Clay Lancaster first addressed the topic of Japanese influence in American art in a brief article
1983). Pages 5-15 of the book’s second edition are dedicated to eastern influences in Europe before the
nineteenth century, while pages 37-41 discuss the Japanese influence in prerevolutionary America. The
remainder of the book is dedicated to the Japanese styles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
implications and complications of creating art in the Chinese taste when Americans were banned from the China trade by the British East India Company, and were thus relegated to creating secondhand copies of English versions of Chinese art.\textsuperscript{34} This argument sets a foundation for the later chapters on the ideological implications of Chinese designs in America and the practical economic considerations of creating these products.

The third chapter describes chinoiserie in terms of Enlightenment sentiments associated with the American Revolution. Did American revolutionaries have a political reason for choosing particular motifs when they knowingly incorporated what they believed to be Chinese designs into their homes? Popular periodicals circulated in eighteenth-century America indicate that leading patriots during the Enlightenment were fascinated with the idea of China as a philosopher’s paradise.\textsuperscript{35} This section of the thesis connects the American perception of China with the Enlightenment ideals behind the American Revolution as a justification for the incorporation of Chinese designs into the home décor of leading patriots.

The fourth chapter takes a Marxist approach to the production of chinoiserie and explains how one major aspect of the American Revolution was the revolutionaries’ need to assert economic autonomy from England. Americans provided England with natural resources necessary to create goods in the Chinese taste, such as kaolin and silk, but they lacked the skill and training to make their own finished products and thus relied on cultural imports from Europe.\textsuperscript{36} However, in the mid eighteenth century, there were many

\textsuperscript{34} McClure, 1.

\textsuperscript{35} Honour, 22-35.

prominent revolutionaries persuading their fellow colonists to find ways to manufacture their own “refined” products. Americans were encouraged to buy furniture and household items from local craftsmen rather than import them from England.\textsuperscript{37} The increasing effort of artisans to keep up with style by creating fashion in the Chinese taste despite complications from the British government thus reflects the revolutionary spirit.

The war for American independence was more than just a political or military conflict. Americans also fought to establish economic autonomy from England during this time. Being primarily culturally British, colonists sought to create for themselves those imported goods from Europe on which they had become so dependent. They fought taxes and bans to produce their own silk, porcelain, tea, and other elements of chinoiserie.\textsuperscript{38} An examination of the designs and production history of chinoiserie wares during the latter half of the eighteenth century as presented in this thesis sheds light on the \textit{zeitgeist} of the American colonies during that exciting era of escalating conflict.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} American interest in producing Chinese-style wares despite obstacles is recorded in sources such as Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, \textit{American Porcelain: 1770-1920} (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989) and Frances Little, \textit{Early American Textiles} (New York: The Century Co, 1931). An example of a primary document wherein prominent revolutionaries agreed that Americans should discover and use natural resources to produce these kinds of goods can be found in the preface of the first transactions of the American Philosophical Society. See Philadelphia Historical Society, \textit{Transactions}, v.
CHAPTER TWO

BRITISH CHINOSIERIE IN COLONIAL AMERICAN FASHION AND DÉCOR

The classical and renaissance influences in the latter half of the eighteenth century in America are unquestioned. Nobody doubts Thomas Jefferson’s indebtedness to the writings of Palladio in his designs for Monticello (Fig. 1). The rotunda and columns are obviously derived from classical precedents. However, few individuals notice the more subtle features Jefferson borrowed from the Chinese designs of the Britons Thomas Chippendale (1718-1779) and William Chambers (1723-1796), such as the railings below the dome and surrounding the walkways (Fig. 2). The inclusion of these motifs was just as much a conscious choice on Jefferson’s part as the classical framework which they surround. A closer look at Monticello and other eighteenth-century estates along with their designs and décor can reveal that Chinese and classical influences in eighteenth-century America harmoniously coexisted, without any seeming incongruence between the two.

Not only did the Chinese influence exist alongside neoclassical designs in America, it became a fairly prevalent style. Robert A. Smith notes in the summary of his Williamsburg Antiques Forum lecture that the Chinese influence and resulting chinoiserie in America “…constituted a formidable current of outside influence second only to that from the Graeco-Roman past.” Although chinoiserie was common in fashionable eighteenth-century colonial homes, it subtly blended with the neoclassical décor. Perhaps this is why chinoiserie in Europe has been studied in more depth than its American

39 See Allan Greenberg for a good survey on neoclassical architecture in early America.

counterparts. The flamboyant European aristocratic pleasure pavilions and garden follies employing Oriental design tend to be more distinctive. In fact, they are often the antithesis of rational, enlightened thought. One case-in-point is the magnificent alcove, door, and fireplace from the Chinese bedroom in the English estate Claydon (Figs. 3 through 5), all of which were designed around 1760.\textsuperscript{41} These elaborate rococo designs, with their fanciful heads of “Chinamen” and excessive fretwork, had niches that were designed to contain “mandarins and pagods (sic), and twenty things from China that are no use in the world.”\textsuperscript{42} Such decadence of design and execution would never be tolerated in America, especially in a private space like a bedroom. An ideal example of a contemporary American counterpart to Claydon is the Chinese parlor from George Mason’s Gunston Hall (1750-1760). The restrained fretwork and moldings in Gunston Hall’s fireplace, doorways, and windows (Figs. 6 through 8) were quite possibly the most elaborate examples of the Chinese-style in eighteenth-century America. The rest of Gunston Hall is mostly neoclassical. Furthermore, Gunston Hall’s Chinese room is one of two major parlors in the home, and as a public space it is much more ornate than any private rooms or studies throughout the house.

While these differences could be attributed in part to the relative lack of craftsmen trained in rococo design in America, some ideological factors played into the American restraint. William Buckland (1734-1774) (Fig. 9), the designer and master carver of Gunston Hall, was trained in London before coming to America. He not only had “the most important and comprehensive collection of architectural books in Virginia,”

\textsuperscript{41} Francis Lenygon, \textit{Decoration in England from 1660 to 1770} (London: B.T. Batsford, 1920), 71, 84, and 124.

\textsuperscript{42} “Passages from the Diary of Mrs. Lybbe Powys” (1760) quoted in Lenygon, 23.
comprising fourteen design books published in England, but he had also seen firsthand the execution of these elaborate designs. Buckland would have had the skill and training of the English rococo carvers, but designing the home of a patriot American statesman required him to use some restraint. While chinoiserie in England had an aristocratic rococo flair, in America such designs may have coincided with the rational Enlightenment ideals of the anti-impêrials.

Americans in the eighteenth century were not interested in emulating the extravagant pleasure pavilions built by European monarchs and aristocracy. They would create their share of such frivolities in the nineteenth century, after establishing themselves as a thriving nation. In his history of American furniture in the Queen Anne and Chippendale styles, Joseph Downs notes that, “eighteenth-century colonial furniture at its best is recognized for the soundness of its conception, its appropriate ornament subservient to form, and its functional purpose. In general it is more sober in design than

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43 Bennie Brown lists and categorizes Buckland’s library: “Among his fourteen architectural titles were design books such as James Gibbs’s Book of Architecture (1728), and Abraham Swan’s Collection of Designs (1757) and British Architect (1745); encyclopedic works such as Isaac Ware’s Complete Body of Architecture (1756); books on mensuration and mathematical application such as William Salmon’s Palladio Londinensis (1734), and Edward Horppus’s Practical Measuring (1736); pattern books such as Batty Langley’s City and Country Builder’s and Workman’s Treasury of Designs (1740) and Ancient Architecture (1742), Robert Morris’s Architectural Remembrancer (1751), Abraham Swan’s Designs in Carpentry (1759), and Thomas Lightoler, William and John Halfpenny, and Robert Morris’s Modern Builder’s Assistant; or, System of Architecture (ca. 1757). Perspective was represented by John Joshua Kirby’s Practice of Perspective (1761), and two cabinetmaker’s books: Thomas Johnson’s One Hundred and Fifty Designs (1761), and Thomas Chippendale’s Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director (1754).” See Bennie Brown, “Architectural Books in Colonial Virginia,” in American Architects and their Books to 1848, ed. Kenneth Hafertepe and James F. O’Gorman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 26.

44 One of these more extravagant “pleasure pavilions” that has been built is Louis XIV’s Trianon de Porcelaine (1670). George IV’s Royal Pavilion at Brighton (1815-1823) is a later example, but gives an excellent idea as to the extent to which these palaces could strive to emulate the Orient.

45 Lancaster, “Oriental forms in American Architecture 1800-1870,” 183-193. The entire article maps significant examples of architectural chinoiserie in nineteenth century America, the most notable of which is P.T. Barnum’s 1848 manor, Iranistan, modeled after the royal pavilion at Brighton.
its English contemporaries with an ever-new interpretation of pattern.” I would argue that Downs’ observations apply not just to furniture, but to all elements of colonial décor and design as well. As members of an emerging country, Americans wanted something more practical than the flamboyant contemporary styles of the English aristocracy. They also needed to establish their own identity before taking on other guises, and so their incorporations of chinoiserie result from copying English fashion rather than from firsthand observation of other “exotic” lands. When colonial Americans built and decorated their homes, they tended to stick to conservative copies of tried and tested English and French styles; and, as in any good, comfortable eighteenth-century European home, they added a few touches of the familiar exotic.

The Chinese style in America appears in such decorative elements as textiles, wallpapers, porcelain, furniture, and home design. Chinoiserie was a major force in colonial American design, and Chinese-inspired objects influenced many people’s everyday lives. This style was not incongruous with the emerging neoclassical trends of the later eighteenth century. Research into how the Chinese and neoclassical styles fit together gives insight into how these decorative arts reflect a colonial American worldview.

Chinoiserie in Textiles

Textiles with Chinese designs were one of the simplest and most pragmatic elements that Americans could utilize to incorporate European fashion into their practical Georgian homes. While in London in 1758, Benjamin Franklin was so taken with the British fashion for Chinese-style printed cloth that he sent his wife to buy some for their

46 Downs, xii.
own home. Many American homes followed this same desire to exhibit this European vogue for Chinese patterned textiles in their homes. Pattern books containing chinoiserie designs which were published in London circulated in America. By the mid eighteenth century, popular Chinese “copperplate calicoes,” such as the reproduction example in Figure 10, exhibiting patterns ranging from Chinese gardens to pastoral European landscapes to scenes of General Washington as victor, were mass-produced in England to be purchased by the wealthiest American patrons. Americans could thus be transported to China via Europe by sitting in their upholstered easy chairs.

Silk was a product, originally from China, but later produced in England that the colonists enjoyed. In many of the colonies the wealthiest merchants and statesmen could afford fine silks from England. As Catherine Calvert of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation states:

> Virginians were as anxious to follow fashion as their fellows in London; many had been educated in England and continued ties based on trade and family relationships that kept them up to date. Those with money to spend collected enormous stashes of silver and finely worked mahogany, bales of silks, and buckles for their shoes.

John Singleton Copley’s (1738-1815) portrait of Elizabeth Watson (Fig. 11) shows the prestige of wearing fine imported silks, as it displays both Mrs. Watson’s husband’s

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48 Florence M. Montgomery, *Printed Textiles: English and American Cottons and Linens, 1700-1850* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), 265-266. Montgomery mentions books such as Edwards and Darley’s *New Book of Chinese Designs Calculated to Improve the Present Taste* (London, 1754), Paul Decker’s *Chinese Architecture, Civil and Ornamental* (London, 1759), and Jean Pillament’s *A New Book of Chinese Ornaments* (London, 1755) as popular eighteenth century books that were circulated in America that would have influenced American textile design. She also notes that designs from John Stalker and George Parker’s *Treatise of Japanning and Varnishing* (Oxford, 1688) were not used exclusively for furniture decoration and would have been incorporated into textiles as well.

49 Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 74.

50 Ibid., 19-20.
wealth and his position as a prosperous merchant. The porcelain vase Mrs. Watson holds is another status symbol, again reiterating that her husband has easy access to expensive imported goods. According to Margareetta M. Lovell, many husbands and fathers in eighteenth-century America were concerned enough with the “social signifiers of physical presentation” that they ordered the clothing for their wives and daughters themselves. Lovell goes on to explain that silk was among the more prominent materials for husbands to purchase. Although raw silk was often cultivated in America, particularly in the southern colonies, it would be shipped to London to be woven into fabric and sent back to America to be sewn into dresses or men’s coats (see Figs. 12 through 14). London was still the major fashion center for the colonial Americans, and dresses made from British silk meant that the wearer and his or her family had taste and means.

“Exotic” Wallpapers

Wallpaper with Chinese prints was another popular British and French import. Although few examples of colonial wallpaper survive, eighteenth-century letters and advertisements indicate that it was a popular commodity. The hand painted eighteenth-century chinoiserie wallpaper (Figs. 15 through 17) purchased in France by Henry


52 Lovell points out several examples of colonial American men interested in the clothing of their female relatives, including George Washington, who ordered a sack of silk from London for his bride Martha Custis in 1759. See Margareetta M. Lovell, Art in a Season of Revolution (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 81-82.

53 Ibid.

Francis DuPont in the twentieth century for his Delaware home-turned-museum, Winterthur, is an excellent example of the types of wallpapers Americans would import from Europe.55 This example fits the general formula for all chinoiserie wallpapers of its period, depicting an idyllic landscape and quaint, exotic Chinamen peacefully reposing or philosophizing. Since no known American had ever been to China, depictions such as those in wallpapers were the illustrations of the Chinese landscape and people with which the Americans were most familiar.

Samuel Powel of Philadelphia is one colonist who enjoyed seeing these familiar exotic scenes in his home. Powel redecorated his house after returning from a European grand tour around 1769. Besides redesigning his garden by placing various exotic plant species and citrus trees in it, Powel also had the most skilled Philadelphian craftsmen create all-new furniture for him. To top off his new décor, Powel hung imported European Chinese-style wallpaper in the parlor (Figs. 18 through 20).56 This wallpaper boasted to visitors that Powel could afford the latest in European interior fashion. Europe was the closest Powel would ever get to China. The Chinese wallpaper was thus a reminder to Powel of his European tour, and would have had associations with the types of interiors he encountered while abroad in popular salons and private homes. Powel’s house was a popular retreat for many American revolutionaries, and its décor may have influenced them as well. George Washington was among the popular guests at the

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55 Due to the delicate nature of wallpaper, and the fact that such décor later fell out of vogue and was therefore discarded in later centuries, few examples of eighteenth-century chinoiserie wallpapers survive. Du Pont bought his wallpaper in France in 1928. Although brought to America at a later date, Du Pont’s wallpaper is authentically eighteenth-century and in excellent condition, providing a relevant example of the types of wallpapers painted in England and France and purchased by colonial Americans. For more information of how Du Pont’s purchase compares to the general vogue for collecting chinoiserie wallpaper in both the eighteenth century and the 1920s see Ida McCall, “Asian Inspired,” Winterthur Magazine (Winter 2008): 36-39.

Powels’ home, and even used their house as his military headquarters during the Revolutionary War after Lord Howe forced an evacuation of Philadelphia in 1777.57

Samuel Powel’s cousin, Robert Morris, soon followed his relative’s example by ordering Chinese wallpaper from Europe for his home. Morris’ wallpaper depicted an enigma of Chinese culture that Europeans had recently discovered how to emulate, and that Americans were just beginning to figure out—the Chinese pottery-making industry, illustrating “the washing and beating of the clay to the shaping and decorating of the finished pieces.”58 As a financer of the American Revolution, Morris would have had influence in Revolutionary circles.59 Perhaps it is no mere coincidence that Morris’ wallpaper depicting the pottery-making process was ordered around the same time that the first American porcelain manufactory was established. His taste for European fashion would have had an impact on popular design, and may have had something to do with the push for Americans to create such fashionable products independently of England.

Porcelain and Blue-and-White Wares

Ever since its initial introduction into Europe, Chinese porcelain was a popular commodity among the Europeans, who finally discovered the secret to porcelain production in the beginning of the eighteenth century. Factories quickly appeared across the continent and Britain to replicate these popular blue-and-white wares. Porcelain figurines produced in English factories at Bow, Plymouth, and Chelsea were also popular

57 Halsey and Tower, 120.
58 Ibid., 122.
mantelpiece decorations in America.\textsuperscript{60} Two statuettes depicting William Pitt from the Chelsea factory were displayed on Samuel Powel’s mantle (Figs. 21 through 23).\textsuperscript{61} These complemented his chinoiserie wallpaper and memorialized contemporary heroes. William Pitt was celebrated in both England and in America for insisting on the repeal of the 1765 Stamp Act. The English admired Pitt for having prevented a revolution for some time, and the Americans appreciated Pitt’s influence in the reinstatement of their liberties.\textsuperscript{62} Through the medium of china ware, William Pitt was immortally transformed into a hero for American liberties.

Only the wealthiest of American colonists could afford this china produced in European factories. Those same merchants and statesmen who could afford Chinese-style silk and calicoes from Europe could also afford a few luxuries of blue-and-white ware.\textsuperscript{63} One of the most extravagant of these imports would have been the mantelpiece composed of blue-and-white Delft tiles, now reconstructed, from the Governor’s Palace in Williamsburg (Fig. 24).\textsuperscript{64} Of note is the type of landscape on these tiles. The tiles appear Chinese only through their medium and coloring. The details of the landscapes are all Dutch. This is the type of imported chinoiserie consisting of non-Chinese designs in the Chinese medium of porcelain would set the precedent for later American-manufactured examples.

\textsuperscript{60} Halsey and Tower, 130.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{63} Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 47, 64-65.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 49.
Americans struggled greatly to create their own porcelain manufactory. The impetus for domestic production of porcelain and the resulting 1770 establishment of the American manufactory of Bonnin and Morris in Philadelphia will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four. Although few examples from Bonnin and Morris’ American China Manufactory survive, the motifs on the examples we do have show the colonial American taste for English chinoiserie. Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen notes in her book *American Porcelain* that these early examples reflect the “reigning English style.” She goes on to state that “the few extant porcelains from the…factory of Gousse Bonnin and George Anthony Morris in Philadelphia virtually duplicate English shapes; their decoration of underglaze blue-and-white painted or transfer-printed designs is in the prevailing rococo and chinoiserie modes.”

It seems likely that the American China Manufactory of Bonnin and Morris primarily used the china coming from the Bow factory in England as their major model. For example, the Bow sweetmeat dish in Figure 25 appears to have been a model for the Bonnin and Morris pickle dish of Figure 26, although the Bonnin and Morris example has a much more “traditional” design than the chinoiserie figures on the Bow porcelain. This is not to say that Bonnin and Morris craftsmen did not include any chinoiserie motifs in their porcelain. The fruit basket in Figure 27 depicts a typical picturesque European landscape, but it does include some elements of chinoiserie such as its blue-and-white composition, the boat and palmlike trees in the upper left, and the layout of the landscape.

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65 Ibid, 4.
66 Ibid.
67 Spargo, 79.
with two land masses in the upper left and lower right sides separated by water.\textsuperscript{68} The scene in a Bonnin and Morris gravy boat (Fig. 28) also appears mostly European or colonial American, with the house rooftops only slightly flared in the Chinese style, and a Chinese bridge in the foreground. These minor references to the Chinese emulate those popular wares imported from England which display motifs and styles reminiscent of an English interpretation of the Orient.

**The Art of Japanning**

Besides ceramic and textiles, another technique that Europe gleaned from the Orient was the art of japanning. Japanning, which was the Europeans’ term for imitation lacquerwork, was a fairly well-known and practiced skill by colonial craftsmen in the early eighteenth century. Ellen Paul Denker from the Peabody Museum of Salem estimates that japanned furniture from England appeared in the American market in the 1690s.\textsuperscript{69} The first recorded japanner in America is Nehemiah Partridge of Boston in 1711.\textsuperscript{70} One scholar of early American decoration, Esther Stevens Brazer, notes that between 1711 and 1770, eight or nine more people claiming skill in japanning resided in Boston, which seems reasonable given that the 1730s and 1740s is considered the “golden age of japanning in America.”\textsuperscript{71} Few examples of eighteenth-century japanned furniture survive as its delicate surface did not hold up well in harsh weather, and much of the

\textsuperscript{68} Frelinghuysen, 72.

\textsuperscript{69} Denker, 3.

\textsuperscript{70} Brazer, 95.

lacquerwork was revarnished as it became unfashionable in later centuries.  

Most examples of surviving japanned furniture in America are high chests of drawers in both the William and Mary and Chippendale styles (see Figs. 29 through 37). One excellent surviving japanned high chest from the early eighteenth century decorated by a Boston craftsman (Figs. 36 and 37) shows how furniture with a typical English build could be transformed into a magical Chinese paradise, exhibiting mystical creatures and overgrown botanical wonders reflecting an imaginary China copied from popular design books.

A chair owned by Robert Assheton, a wealthy Philadelphia merchant (Fig. 38), a dressing table (Fig. 39), and a mirror owned by Francis H. Bigelow of Cambridge (Fig. 40) all attest to the variety of japanned furniture and creativity of colonial craftsmen in implementing these unusual oriental motifs. Records from colonial Williamsburg indicate that japanning was a popular technique in Virginia as well. Two eighteenth-century craftsmen in Williamsburg, Elkanah Deane and Peter Hardy, advertised themselves as japanners. Norman Askins, from the Williamsburg Department of Architectural Research, notes that japanners had a distinct trade, as their craft was set apart from cabinet making.

Americans did not have to hire professional japanners, however, to incorporate lacquer furniture into their homes. Do-it-yourself books on japanning were published in

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72 Denker, 3.


75 Ibid., 10.
England in the late seventeenth century, which guided amateur colonists in this Oriental-inspired craft.\textsuperscript{76} John Stalker and George Parker’s 1688 \textit{Treatise of Japaning and Varnishing} was one such handbook that was widely circulated in the American colonies.\textsuperscript{77} This book not only had a written guide on the art of japanning, but included drawings of chinoiserie motifs for the amateur to copy (see Figures 41 and 42 for examples).\textsuperscript{78} The attempts of American craftsmen and amateur furniture finishers to keep up with the chinoiserie coming from England exhibits their desire to stay in touch with their European roots by creating the popular designs themselves.

The Boston Huguenot Jean Berger was inspired to create his own design book based on Stalker and Parker’s treatise. Berger’s book, created in 1718, reflects the general types of designs seen in Stalker and Parker’s pamphlet, although Berger’s drawings do not copy any specific pictures from the London book (Figs. 43 through 47).\textsuperscript{79} Little is known about Berger’s early life. Historians have only traced his associations with the French community of Boston.\textsuperscript{80} It is possible that Berger had some unidentified French sources for his designs. At any rate, Berger’s simple drawings indicate the fanciful

\textsuperscript{76} Brazer, 96.

\textsuperscript{77} Hecksher notes that the designs in Parker and Stalker’s treatise seem to have no direct influence on the japanned furniture in America, although the pamphlet was “cited in publications on Boston japanned furniture of the 1730s and 1740s,” and had a renewed popularity late in the eighteenth century after Americans established trade with China. Hecksher also suggests that the designs in the treatise likely influenced pottery more than furniture. See Hecksher, 183.

\textsuperscript{78} John Stalker and George Parker, \textit{A Treatise of Japaning and Varnishing: Being a Compleat Discovery of those Arts: with the Best Way of Making All Sorts of Varnish ... :together with above an Hundred Distinct Patterns of Japan-work ... : Curiously Engraven on 24 Large Copper Plates} (Oxford: Printed for and sold by the Author, 1688).


\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 141.
designs of those who had never been to China, with their strange, stylized people, birds, plants, and architecture. Berger was a japanner himself and well known among the Boston craftsmen and other japanners.\textsuperscript{81} With so few surviving examples of eighteenth-century japanned furniture, it is difficult to tell how much of an impact Berger’s design book had on an American audience, although it does indicate the type of work produced by those creating American versions of European chinoiserie.

**William Chambers, Thomas Chippendale, and American Chinoiserie**

The influence of William Chambers and Thomas Chippendale in dictating American taste for the Chinese cannot be overestimated. Both Chambers *Designs for Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils*, published in London in 1757, and Chippendale’s *Gentleman and Cabinet-maker’s Director* of 1754 were widely circulated throughout the colonies. Chippendale’s book was especially popular, and its influence can be seen in numerous chairs and tables created in the colonies, such as in a third quarter of the century china table from Portsmouth, New Hampshire (Figs. 48 and 49). While the American craftsmen did not usually make exact copies of these designs, they frequently drew on them for inspiration.

Other less prominent British design books available to Americans that included Chinese-style designs included Matthais Lock and Henry Copland’s *New Book of Ornaments* (first published in 1752) and Thomas Johnson’s *New Book of Ornaments* (published in 1762).\textsuperscript{82} A whimsical adaptation of a design for a chimneypiece from Lock

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 138.

\textsuperscript{82} Heckscher, 179, 193.
and Copland’s book appears on the plates of a Virginia stove (Figs. 50 and 51). The plants surrounding and held by the figure on the stove plate appear a little less exotic to a western audience than the tufts of foliage held by the figure in the original design, showing how chinoiserie in American reality was more subdued than in the European imagination. The Carpenter’s Rules of Work, in the Town of Boston, which was printed in 1774, was the first American furniture book with Chinese designs, and this work was indebted to its British predecessors. It is no wonder that so many adaptations of the Chinese style appeared in pre-revolutionary America with so many design sources showing the colonists what characterized “Chinese” furniture.

Numerous examples still survive of eighteenth-century colonial American homes with Chinese Chippendale stair rails. Thomas Jefferson was one architect who incorporated designs from both Chambers and Chippendale. He had copies of both design books in his library, and his indebtedness to those books appears in some of the décor of Monticello (Fig. 1). Jefferson had a predilection for Chinese-style latticework combined with neoclassical architecture, and he looked to Thomas Chippendale’s designs (Fig. 52) when creating drawings for fences and railings in Monticello (Figs. 2 and 53). Jefferson also encouraged Chippendale’s Chinese latticework in his designs for friends’ homes, such as in the stair rail of John Banister’s Petersburg, Virginia estate, Battersea (Figs. 54

83 Ibid., 193.


85 See James D. Kornwolf, Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial America, Vol. 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), for some of these examples, especially those stair rails from Sotterly (p. 776) and Bohemia (p. 780). Also note the reconstructed bridge from Paca House in Annapolis which has similar Chinese Chippendale fretwork (p. 738).

John Bannister had many associations with fellow Virginian Jefferson, including sitting with him in the Williamsburg Assembly from 1769-1771, the Virginia Convention in 1776, and in the Continental Congress. Bannister not only shared political tastes with Thomas Jefferson, but the two seemed to have similar tastes in architecture and design as well. Battersea, like Monticello, has a Palladian framework and incorporates chinoiserie in the railings and moldings.

Jefferson also looked to Chambers’ publication when designing garden pavilions. His notebooks indicate that for some time in 1771 he planned to build a couple of Chinese pagodas on his property (Fig. 56). Although no documentation can be found explaining why Jefferson abandoned his Chambers-inspired design, the Tuscan style pavilions which were eventually built still hint of the Chinese style through their decorative Chippendale fretwork (Fig. 57). Perhaps Jefferson reverted to a more Italianate style in his garden structures to better match the rest of the house. Jefferson was, after all, known for his practical nature. He was not one much given to frivolity, although he could appreciate elements for their simple aesthetic value. After visiting Monticello in 1782, the French Marquis de Chastellux noted that, “Mr. Jefferson is the first American who has consulted the Fine Arts to know how he should shelter himself

87 Kornwolf, 689.
89 Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson Papers (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2003) [Database on-line].
from the weather.”\textsuperscript{91} Jefferson incorporated his Chinese designs in a conservative, tasteful way.

It is easy to overlook the simple Chinese elements of Monticello in light of the overwhelming Palladian influence of the structure. Jefferson was not a well-traveled man by the time Monticello underwent the first phase of its construction. He began construction on the building in 1768, some sixteen years before his first European travels.\textsuperscript{92} However, Jefferson was well-read. He always preferred to learn trades from books rather than practice or experience.\textsuperscript{93} His architectural scholarship was no exception to this trend. Almost all of Jefferson’s architectural ideas came from books and drawings. It is no wonder, then, that the chinoiserie elements Jefferson incorporated were so subtle. Coming straight from British designers, they are hardly Chinese. The fretwork of Monticello adds simple aesthetic value without drawing outlandish attention to itself. Jefferson’s use of chinoiserie is important to note because his home was a public building in addition to his private residence. Jefferson built his home “with a national audience in mind,” as his southern hospitality required him to keep visitors and entertain guests there.\textsuperscript{94} Jefferson’s tastes would have been known to many land-owning Americans who came to see the wonders of the nationally famous politician, architect, inventor, and collector.


\textsuperscript{93} Cunningham, 8.

\textsuperscript{94} Ferguson, 1.
Chinese-Themed Homes and Gardens

Although most eighteenth-century colonial American buildings were of typical Georgian style, a few examples have been recorded of attempts to create entire buildings favoring a Chinese design. For example, the James Reid house, which was once in Charleston but no longer exists, was recorded to have been built “after the Chinese taste,” although the extent to which the house actually looked Chinese is debatable. Most houses in America that had any remote references to Chinese design came from the drawings of Chambers and Chippendale. It is likely, then, that James Reid’s house was hardly Chinese at all. Norman Askins notes eight surviving examples of Williamsburg homes with Chinese latticework on exterior porch railings, one fence in the Chinese taste, and one existing garden bridge in a similar style. He also mentions four homes in Williamsburg with surviving chinoiserie designs on the interior stair railings and trim.

Gunston Hall in Fairfax County, Virginia, designed by the Englishman William Buckland for the residence of the patriot and later Constitutional Convention delegate George Mason, further displays the growing vogue in America for romantic designs after the style of Chambers and Chippendale. William Buckland began designing the interior of the home in 1755, and the Masons moved into Gunston Hall in 1758. After the building’s completion, Mason would hold grand parties, and entertain important visitors such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Even Martha Custis’ children would

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95 Askins, 8.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 12.
98 Frederick J. Griffiths, Gunston Hall: Home of George Mason, Lorton, Virginia (Lorton, Virginia: Board of Regents, Gunston Hall, 1963), 2.
come to Gunston Hall to learn dancing. Thus, this home would be a significant fashionable center among revolutionary groups, and its décor would have been well known in those circles.

Having been trained in England as a carpenter-joiner, Buckland came to America after George Mason’s brother, Thomson, hired him for a four year indenture. Buckland created two major parlors, one in a rough Palladian style and one in the Chippendale Chinese taste (Figs. 58 and 6). Although the Chinese parlor has the most apparent influences of chinoiserie, even the rococo Palladian parlor contains niches for the display of China and porcelain vases. The Chinese designs in the Chinese parlor of Gunston Hall are most apparent in the moldings and woodwork. William Buckland and his chief carver, William Bernard Sears, also created several Chinese Chippendale chairs for this parlor (Figs. 59 through 61), carrying the Chinese theme throughout the rest of the room’s décor.


101 Taylor, 4.

102 Although all existing sources on Gunston Hall (including Griffiths, Taylor, Biggs, and Kornwolf) indicate that the Palladian room was a tea and game parlor and that the Chinese room was the dining room, the functions of both these rooms were thought to have been the reverse by the Gunston Hall director and staff when I visited in 2007. Thus, the images I have of Gunston Hall have the Chinese room decorated as a dining room, whereas now the dining table has been moved to the Palladian room, and the Chinese room has been turned into a regular parlor. For the purposes of this paper it should be enough to surmise that both rooms were an important part of the home’s public space and both would have been accessible to visitors, despite their specific functions.

103 Lewis, 22.

One aspect of the entire design of Gunston Hall is an emphasis on restraint, order, and symmetry. This is not surprising, given that such features were a major focus of neoclassical home design and décor.\textsuperscript{105} Practicality was another important feature in colonial homes, but even that sometimes was lost in favor of classical symmetry. This emphasis on order was so great that at Gunston Hall William Buckland had a false door built to keep the number of portals off both sides of the entryway equal. As a visitor enters the building from the street, the two public parlors appear through the two doors on the right, and the private spaces are on the left. The Chinese parlor door sits directly across the hallway from the false door and the Palladian parlor is located across from the private rooms. The Chinese and Palladian parlors are also accessible to each other through two doors, placed on both sides of the fireplace (see Fig. 6). Two evenly-spaced windows on the wall opposite the Chinese parlor’s entrance further demonstrate the emphasis on order given to the room (Fig. 8). This order is not kept so strictly in private spaces, but is an essential character of the publicly visible parts of many eighteenth-century American estates.\textsuperscript{106}

The neoclassical need for order extends beyond the architecture to include aspects of the chinoiserie décor in the Chinese parlor. The three triangular “pagodas” for displaying porcelain above the fireplace and doors leading to the Palladian parlor give the room a sense of balance and stability (Fig. 6). While the classical crown moldings from the exterior of the home extend into the Palladian and Chinese parlors (Figs. 8, 58, and 62), the Chinese-patterned woodwork above the door and window frames (Fig. 7) and the lattice-work below the mantle of the Chinese parlor reflect the Chinese-style drawings of

\textsuperscript{105} Greenberg, 43.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
Thomas Chippendale (see Fig. 52 for illustrations of similar fretworks). Despite the exotic associations of such designs, they are not any more ornate or elaborate than the classical fretwork. While an overly-elaborate incorporation of chinoiserie might evoke monarchical associations with European palaces, the restrained, orderly nature of Chinese motifs used by patriots in colonial America indicates that for them chinoiserie suggests more democratic ideals. Hence the Chinese aspects of the room are just as geometrical and symmetrical as the neoclassical designs.

Gunston Hall was not the only application of restrained chinoiserie in a neoclassical home. After finishing his indenture in Virginia, William Buckland moved to Annapolis where he designed the home of William Paca, a statesman and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Paca’s home is Palladian in design, but it contains Chinese fretwork stair railings on the second floor and a simple Chinese garden bridge (Fig. 63). The current bridge at the William Paca House is a reconstruction based on a portrait of Paca in his garden by Charles Wilson Peale (Figs. 64 and 65). The bridge in the painting and its reconstruction has geometric fretwork reflecting the same order and love of geometry apparent in neoclassical patterns. Although simple when compared to the more elaborate, ornate designs that appear in both Palladian and Rococo estates in Europe, Paca’s Chinese bridge reflects the European sentiments of China as filled with wonderful gardens, and a desire to bring the imagination of the East to the West. Paca’s Chinese bridge is located in the lower tier of the garden, farther from the main house than the vegetable and herb garden. While the latter garden was meant to be practical, the former was built for pleasure. A Chinese bridge, with all its associations of happy Mandarins, makes the perfect fit for a space designated for play and repose. This somewhat romantic
desire to emulate the East in garden structures such as William Paca’s bridge can be compared to some American colonists’ desires to copy designs that reflect their admiration of the classical past. Such a conclusion seems reasonable given that the chinoiserie in colonial America contains the same formal emphases on order and restraint as neoclassical elements of design, and that these neoclassical features usually provided the framework for the inclusion of chinoiserie elements.

This love for geometry and symmetry, apparent in the combination of chinoiserie with the neoclassical elements of the architecture and décor of both Gunston Hall and the William Paca House, reflects the principles of an orderly, enlightened mind. The décor of these structures demonstrates how chinoiserie could coexist with Palladian styles in homes built for progressive thinkers such as George Mason and William Paca. These homes exhibit how connections between the love of classicism, the Enlightenment, and the development of American democracy can extend to include the influence of the colonial American perception of China on these ideals.

Probably the most superb example of an American work of architecture with the most actual Chinese influence was “China’s Retreat” built in 1796 at Croydon, near Philadelphia, for Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest (Figs. 66 and 67). The home’s owner had the advantage of traveling to the Orient in his younger years as an employee of the Dutch East India Company before becoming an American citizen in 1784. He had brought to America the largest collection of Chinese art objects that the colonists had seen to date, including a series of magnificent watercolors and fans, with

108 Ibid.
which to decorate his home. However, it is important to note that all the craftsmen who worked on van Braam’s home were native Philadelphians who had little or no experience in any Chinese style. Clay Lancaster notes that, “Mr. van Braam’s commission for a Chinese house had been imperfectly understood by his Philadelphia builders, who condescended to make but few changes in their usual procedure.” The only Oriental elements of this house were the sliding windows and cupola surrounded by a Chinese fretwork balustrade that no longer exists.

Despite the building’s scarcity of actual Chinese features, Contemporary visitors to van Braam’s house saw it as the epitome of the Chinese style. One visitor, Moreau de Saint Méry, wrote that “the furniture, ornaments, everything at Mr. van Braam’s reminds us of China. It is even impossible to avoid fancying ourselves in China while surrounded at once by living Chinese [i.e. the servants], and by representations of their manners, their usages, their monuments, and their arts.” As Mr. van Braam had actually been to China, his Chinese taste would have appeared authentic to Americans. His home is quite tame, however, when compared to the pavilions in the Chinese style built in Europe. The American builders simply could not execute something nearly as elaborate as van Braam had planned. Perhaps they couldn’t quite catch the vision, having never seen a Chinese building, an exotic European garden pavilion, or any kind of structure that was created with the main purpose of evoking associations with Oriental escapism. The cupola, which


was the most defining Chinese feature of the building, would not have been too unusual for the builders, as numerous examples of similar more European-style turrets appear atop Georgian buildings.

**Conclusion**

The taste for chinoiserie was ubiquitous in America, although Americans understood little about China itself. Norman Askins takes all examples of records of designers of chinoiserie in Williamsburg into account along with the few surviving examples to conclude that he, “would not hesitate to suggest [that] more chinoiserie designs were executed in Williamsburg than is apparent from the records.”\(^{113}\) This vogue for including Chinese designs and products inspired by English precedents in America was thus more widespread than what records indicate. The fashion for items in the Chinese style greatly escalated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe. It is reasonable, then, to surmise that the Americans would frequently incorporate this aspect of European fashion as a reminder of the culture from which they came, so long as the practical purposes of a building’s function had been met. These touches of chinoiserie on mainstream neoclassical Georgian homes seem to be the general formula for many colonial structures whose owners, including both loyalists and patriots, wanted to simultaneously be practical and in vogue. Of particular interest for this paper is the fact that so many American revolutionaries incorporated Chinese designs into their homes. Given the philosophical underpinnings of the American Revolution in Enlightenment ideals, it seems reasonable to surmise that these patriots also incorporated chinoiserie into

\(^{113}\) Askins., 11.
their homes because of its philosophical associations, as will be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

THE AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION
OF A CHINESE PHILOSOPHER’S PARADISE

Marco Polo (1254-1324) was the first to spark the imagination of westerners about the fantastical land of Cathay in the early fourteenth century. His exotic and bizarre tales of what he both saw and heard generated a far-fetched vision of eastern culture in European minds. After the Chinese Ming dynasty cut off relations with the West in 1368, Europeans’ understanding of China was limited to the accounts of Marco Polo for nearly the next hundred and fifty years. Finally, by the end of the fifteenth century, Portuguese sea traders were allowed into that land which had garnered such an aura of mystery and fascination for the Europeans.

The first groups to try to record an accurate depiction of China for the Europeans were the French, Italian, and Spanish Jesuit missionaries, beginning in the late sixteenth century. Surprised by the vast discrepancies between the account of Marco Polo and the China they saw, the Jesuits felt the need to set the record straight. The Jesuits provided the first scholarly writings about China and translated the first Chinese works into Latin and French in the late seventeenth century, thereby giving Europeans, and later

114 Honour, 8-9.
115 O’Connor, 36.
116 Ibid.
117 The Spanish missionaries began preaching in the Philippines in the mid-sixteenth century and made occasional expeditions to China. In 1583, the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci established a mission in southern China. Ricci also founded a mission in Pekin in 1601. Ricci’s assistant was the French Jesuit Nicolas Trigault. Ricci and Trigault were the first European missionaries to gain admission to the Chinese imperial court after learning Chinese and studying Chinese classics. See A. Owen Aldridge, Dragon and the Eagle, 15.
118 Honour, 5.
Americans, the opportunity to read primary Chinese sources. The Jesuits also initiated
the study of China at the University of Paris in the seventeenth century. The Jesuits
were responsible for making the writings of Confucius (551-479 B.C.) accessible to a
western audience by having them translated into Latin in the year 1687. This
translation first came to the attention of Americans through the scholar, statesman, and
good friend of Benjamin Franklin, James Logan, who purchased the Latin work in
1733.

Since the writings of Lao Tzu (c. 600-300 B.C.) had not been translated into any
western languages by the eighteenth century, Americans during the Enlightenment were
relegated to studying solely the words of Confucius to obtain a vision of Chinese
philosophy. “Thus,” Adolph Reichwein points out, “Confucius became the patron saint
of eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Only through him could it find a connecting link
with China.” However, Confucius was not seen as a religious figure in eighteenth-
century America. Practically everything published about Confucius from the
Enlightenment generation in America focuses on his moral ethics rather than his religious
ideas. As a result even “other Americans who did not posses Confucius in their

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119 Reichwein, 85.
120 Ibid., 84-85.
121 The book entitled Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, sive Scientia Sinensis Latina Exposita was translated by a group of Jesuits all born in the 1620s, including “the Sicilian Prosper Intoretta, the Austrian Christian Herdtrich, the Hollander Francis Rougemont, and the Belgian Philip Couplet,” and was edited by Couplet. The book contains only three of the nine works attributed to Confucius, comprising “the ethical segments of the whole.” See A. Owen Aldridge, Dragon and the Eagle, 23-24.
122 Ibid., 23.
123 Reichwein, 76-77.
124 Ibid., 77.
libraries [such as Thomas Paine] came to regard him as a symbol of rectitude, comparable to Socrates as he was portrayed by some liberal thinkers in France.”

Confucius was transformed into a classical philosopher, fitting with the neoclassical thought of the eighteenth century, through the transliterations of French philosophes. It was these translations and moral commentaries on Confucius, coupled with travel journals mostly written by Jesuit missionaries, that informed Europe’s, and hence, America’s, vision of China during the eighteenth century.

The most comprehensive writings on the connection between Americans’ perception of China and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment come from the works of A. Owen Aldridge, who taught comparative literature at the University of Illinois. Aldridge’s book *The Dragon and the Eagle* is dedicated to the subject of China in eighteenth-century American literature and thought. In this volume, Aldridge discusses numerous examples of colonial Americans who included references to China and European writings on China in their own works. Among the more prominent figures Aldridge discusses as having shown an interest in China are Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, members of the order of Cincinnatus, and members of the American Philosophical Society. He lists many other examples of correspondents and less well-known individuals who sympathized with the revolutionary cause who wrote admiringly of China and Confucius. Additionally, Aldridge includes an appendix listing the fourteen eighteenth-century American-authored imprints concerning China of which

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126 Ibid., 24.

he is aware, and notes that still others could also have been published.\textsuperscript{128} I will rely extensively on his studies in addition to eighteenth-century primary documents for the arguments set forth in this chapter.

While Aldridge’s works present many convincing arguments relating to the American vision of China via literary analysis, the author’s lack of knowledge regarding decorative arts in the eighteenth century comes out in his statement that “no evidence exists that the European fascination for Chinoiserie…expanded to America before 1784.

After the initiation of trade relations, however, porcelain, painting, tapestry, furniture, and other objects were regularly imported and displayed.”\textsuperscript{129} The numerous examples of American chinoiserie created prior to the foundation of the American-China trade as documented in the previous chapter contradict Aldridge’s statement. Indeed, my study of these Chinese-style objects suggests that visual material as well as the literature discussed by Aldridge parallels the American imagination of China with the American Enlightenment.

**Confucius, Voltaire, and Figures of the American Enlightenment**

The eighteenth century was an exciting time intellectually for both Europe and America, as Enlightenment attitudes became paramount among educated individuals. This time was characterized by optimism in the ability of human reason to understand the universe. In America, the Enlightenment became associated with moral virtue, especially

\textsuperscript{128} Unfortunately, most of Aldridge’s evidence is more anecdotal than statistical, as we have no way of knowing the exact number of colonial Americans who were influenced by Chinese ideas or European writings on China. However, Aldridge gives convincing evidence based on his many examples to conclude these influences were a factor in many colonial Americans’ thoughts and writings. For more of these examples beyond those included in this thesis, see Aldridge, *Dragon and the Eagle*.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 267.
among individuals such as Benjamin Franklin, George Mason, and Thomas Jefferson. English intellectuals, such as Isaac Newton and John Locke, influenced the American colonists with their emphases on science, empiricism, and the effects of environment on human development. The American colonists also had access to the writings of the French philosophers, such as Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These French intellectuals advocated reform through such ideas as those in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1762) wherein Rousseau argued that the rulers are responsible for keeping the people they governed satisfied, and that if the government breaks this contract, then the people have a right to revolt and form their own government. This emphasis on individual rights and reform helped shape the patriotic spirit in colonial America that developed during the second half of the eighteenth century. The American Revolution, which resulted in the establishment of a democratic government, was a realization of the ideals developed by French and English thinkers of the Enlightenment.

Another aspect of the European Enlightenment that spread to America was the philosophy of deism, or the idea that belief in God could be advocated by principles of reason and that a divine figure had created the world like a watch that he had set in motion to run itself without intervention. Both Locke and Voltaire advocated this religious philosophy, which spread to America through the influence of these European

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philosophers. While the religious deism of many American founding fathers is still a debated topic, deistic thought comes across in the writings of such prominent revolutionaries and Enlightenment figures as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, James Madison, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. Deism in conjunction with Enlightenment thought in America is significant in the study of chinoiserie when one considers that the Western understanding of Chinese history was promoted by influential philosophers, such as Voltaire, to help validate this belief.

Voltaire became one of the most influential Sinophiles of the eighteenth century whose construction of China reached Americans. Aldridge uses the writings of Voltaire to classify the eighteenth-century experts on China into three categories: “the merchants, who had been there, talked mainly about the sharp dealings of Chinese traders; the clergy, who had also been there, complained about being persecuted by other orders; and the learned men of Paris, who had never been there, expatiated endlessly on the religion, government, economy, and origins of the Chinese people.” Voltaire belonged to this third group. He extrapolated a plethora of information about China from travelogues and diaries and used such ideas primarily in his arguments supporting deism. His first introduction to Chinese studies and the writings of Confucius came from his education at a Jesuit university. One of Voltaire’s primary theses about China was that the Chinese had a longstanding and virtuous culture superior to that of the ancient Hebrews or current Europeans. He expressed this idea in his statement that the Chinese “have perfected

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134 May, 116-132.


136 Ibid., 164.

137 Reichwein, 88.
Moral science, and that is the first of the sciences (mais ils ont perfectionné la morale, qui est la première des sciences).”\textsuperscript{138} Aldridge argues in his essay on “Voltaire and the Mirage of China” from The Reemergence of World Literature that Voltaire often used his knowledge of China’s ancient culture to undermine any attempts to establish a chronology of the Bible, thereby promoting deism.\textsuperscript{139} Voltaire also bases the superiority of Chinese culture on its ability to convert even the conquerors to ancient Chinese laws and systems.\textsuperscript{140} The French philosophe greatly admired his mental construct of a China where civilization always overrules the so-called “barbarism” of conquering nations.

Voltaire also admired his understanding of the Chinese governmental system, which, despite having an emperor, to him seemed closer to American democracy than to European despotism. According to Voltaire, the Chinese emperor could only enact laws that were approved by tribunals, whose members were appointed “after several severe examinations.”\textsuperscript{141} As a result, Voltaire states, “it is impossible for the emperor to exercise an arbitrary power.”\textsuperscript{142} This need to check power in a governmental head was of great importance to the Americans as they thought of ways to set up their new government. Their interest in balancing powers became most evident in their drafting of the constitution, wherein the president, like Voltaire’s ideal emperor, is subject to a body, or congress, in the development of laws. The American model obviously does not match


\textsuperscript{139} Aldridge, \textit{Reemergence of World Literature}, 164.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 146-147.

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 153.

\textsuperscript{142} Voltaire quoted in Aldridge, \textit{Reemergence of World Literature}, 153.
Voltaire’s construct of the Chinese system exactly, but it does share some similar ideals. Furthermore, in an article on agriculture from his *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, Voltaire describes a ceremony wherein the Chinese emperor sows his own seeds along with his subjects each spring.\(^{143}\) This idea of a ruler becoming a subject fit well with American democratic ideals, especially considering that several of the country’s first presidents were farmers both before and after their governmental service.\(^{144}\) The Chinese emperor, according to the writings of Voltaire, thus stands out in stark contrast to the idea of a British king who taxes while ruling and doesn’t give back to his subjects in the colonies.

As a product of the Enlightenment, Jefferson also read the writings of Voltaire and agreed with his associations of a Chinese style with a philosophical utopia.\(^{145}\) Jefferson’s library also contained the *History of China* written by Pere Du Halde, a Jesuit missionary who was considered to be one of the foremost experts on Chinese culture after having lived there for many years.\(^{146}\) Du Halde’s work contains an extensive description of the life of Confucius and depicts the philosopher as an ethical and moral genius.\(^{147}\) Du Halde also notes that China’s longevity as an empire evidences its greatness.\(^{148}\) Such an idea must have appealed to a man who was searching for the best possible government systems. In 1771, Jefferson included two translated works of Chinese fiction on a reading list “of the best books on general subjects available in America at that time,” which he

\(^{143}\) Voltaire obtained such information for his own writings primarily from Jesuit sources. See Aldridge, *Reemergence of World Literature*, 154.

\(^{144}\) Some of these early president-farmers included George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison.

\(^{145}\) Gilreath and Wilson, 55, 132.

\(^{146}\) Ibid., 26.


\(^{148}\) Ibid., 620.
compiled for his brother-in-law, Robert Skipworth.149 Among the two hundred or so volumes Jefferson recommended to Skipworth were the titles *Chao-Shih-ku-erh, or The Little Orphan of the House of Chao* and *Hau Kiou Choaan*.150 He thus deemed some Chinese literature to be equal to classics of western culture. Jefferson was also an active member of the American Philosophical Society that earnestly tried to cultivate ideas for the betterment of America. He would have been familiar with the Society’s call for independent American production, including the production of goods originating in China, which the Society believed would thrive in an American climate, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Benjamin Franklin was another avid Sinophile active and highly influential in eighteenth-century America. Franklin summed up his sentiments about China in an article on maritime observations published in the 1786 *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* by the statement, “the Chinese are an enlightened people, the most anciently civilized of any existing, and their arts are ancient, a presumption in their favour.”151 Franklin often looked to the Chinese in his philosophical writings, although his most comprehensive commentary on Chinese culture was a work of fiction. In the same year that Franklin wrote his maritime observations, he also published in *The Columbian Magazine*, an “armchair voyage” documenting his imaginary travels to

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149 Aldridge, *Dragon and the Eagle*, 95.

150 According to Aldridge, “the first of these had been translated into English by Bishop Thomas Percy from Du Halde’s collection, and it had previously been adapted by Voltaire in his very successful drama *L’Orphelin de la Chine*. The second work had also been edited by Percy, partly from an English translation by James Wilkinson and partly from a text in Portuguese that he translated himself.” See Ibid.

China.\textsuperscript{152} Although he never had the opportunity to visit China during his lifetime, much evidence exists that he took a great interest in the country and admired its culture and government long before his fictional account from 1786. For example, he published an essay entitled “The Morals of Confucius” in several installments in his 1738 edition of the \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette}.\textsuperscript{153} Furthermore, an unidentified correspondent once wrote to one of Franklin’s editors that Franklin was “very fond of reading about China.”\textsuperscript{154} Franklin also looked to the philosophies of Confucius when forming his own habits. Franklin’s “Art of Virtue,” wherein he would daily list infractions on the qualities he felt most important for obtaining moral virtue was likely inspired by the Confucian statement, “after we know the End to which we must attain, it is necessary to determine, and incessantly to make towards this End, by walking in the Ways which lead thereunto, by daily conforming in his Mind the Resolution fixt on for the attaining it, and by establishing it so well that nothing may in the least shake it.”\textsuperscript{155} No doubt Franklin’s conception of China and Confucian virtue that inspired his own habits also had an effect upon his peers. Franklin’s laudatory vision of China had much to do with the celebration of that country that appeared in other American periodicals and arts created in the Chinese taste.

\textsuperscript{152} Aldridge, \textit{Dragon and the Eagle}, 76.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{154} Aldridge argues that the correspondent is Benjamin Vaughan. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 26-27.
Illustrations of China in Popular American Literature

Articles in periodicals circulating throughout the American colonies encouraged the construction of an “enlightened” China in the colonial mind. For example, the “Extract of a Letter from Xo Ho, a Chinese Philosopher at London, to His Friend Lien Chi, at Peking,” written by Horace Walpole and published in 1758 in the New American Magazine, reflects the idea of China as a philosopher nation.156 The very fact that the fictional Xo Ho is labeled a philosopher fits this stereotype. In the letter, Xo Ho is especially critical of British governmental practices. He begins by explaining to his friend that the English are fickle in their respect for their monarch, either loving him or despising him depending on whether or not they like the current ministry. Xo Ho also states his astonishment at the succession of British government officials, who are placed in positions based on availability rather than previous experience or ability. He implies a superior governance in China by the statement, “Reason in China is not reason in [the British] Council. An officer of the treasury may be displaced, and a judge can execute his office.”157 Colonial Americans had misgivings about the English government when the British parliament was given direct power to tax them in 1724.158 These apprehensions were realized several years after the publication of the letter from Xo Ho when in 1764 the British parliament began to put the law into practice by levying taxes in the colonies.


without the approval of any colonial representatives for the first time.\textsuperscript{159} The fact that these criticisms had been put forth in this article by a Chinese philosopher strengthened the American association with China as an enlightened nation with a government superior to the English, both in philosophy and practice.

A short story from a 1789 edition of \textit{The Massachusetts Magazine} also illustrates the American association between China and philosophy. The tale recounts the adventures of the Chinese Emperor Tching-Ouang who sends out a proclamation inviting his subjects to teach him the meaning of philosophy. After several disappointing encounters with self-professed philosophers at court, the emperor decides to travel the length of his kingdom to find the ideal sage. Tching-Ouang repeatedly meets with individuals who have the guise of a philosopher, but are lacking in characteristics the emperor would deem belonged to a truly enlightened individual. While some of these individuals have too much pride and despise humanity, others teach useless ideas, while some do not practice the virtues they teach. The emperor climbs mountains and travels to villages throughout the kingdom, but almost to no avail. He eventually finds enlightenment when he happens upon the humble abode of the aging Tsouy, but only after a long and arduous journey. Tsouy possesses all the virtues of the ideal philosopher, including modesty, kindness, and practicality.\textsuperscript{160} The philosophical emperor in this story represents the antithesis of the American vision of British despots in the eighteenth century.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{160} “Tsouy; or the Philosopher: A Chinese History,” \textit{The Massachusetts Magazine} 1, nos. 8 and 9 (August-September 1789): 496-500, 550-553.
The author of the short story of Tsouy the Philosopher portrays the events surrounding the emperor’s arrival to Tsouy’s home, shortly after despairing about his inability to find a true philosopher anywhere in his kingdom:

New researches are made: and each is more ineffectual than the former. Tching-Ouang, not a little chagrined, resumes the road to his capital. His favourites would fain console him under this disappointment. ‘August Sire,’ said they, ‘you must now be convinced, that this phenomenon of human nature can have no existence. If there were a Philosopher, a single Philosopher on the globe, we should certainly have found him. This object of your sublime researches must be a mere chimera.

It is decided then that a Philosopher must be an imaginary being; and that the ‘Sublime son of Heaven,’ must absolutely leave this illusion to the sons of earth.

During this conversation…they approach a kind of hamlet, the situation of which is charming beyond description. At a small distance, in the bottom of the valley, they perceive a house, the agreeable plainness and simplicity of which attract their notice…

They direct their steps towards this rustic retreat, whose sweet environs displayed the unobtrusive charms of modesty and artless nature; while all around seemed to evince in some degree that active goodness, which is the character of Heaven. Flocks of sheep were feeding near the houle: some great trees were disposed in arbours, that passengers might recline under their refreshing shade; nor were basons of transparent water wanting, to allay the weary traveller’s thirst.161

This passage has significant parallels with the chinoiserie created in America in the decades surrounding the story’s publication (see, for example, Figs. 17, 27, 42, and 45). The wallpapers from the Winterthur Museum (Fig. 15) and the Powel House (Fig. 20), for example, contain landscapes fitting the idyllic description of Tsouy’s abode. The architectural designs in these wallpapers carry a sense of “modesty” and simplicity through their symmetrical structures and orderly geometric fretwork fences, as seen in the detail of the building from the Winterthur wallpaper (Fig. 17). The figures in the scenes peacefully interact, with no sign of conflict apparent in the wallpaper illustrations. The surrounding landscapes appear rural and natural, their “artless nature” akin to the “sweet

161 Ibid., 550.
environs” surrounding Tsouy’s home. Such landscapes can also be found in American porcelain, such as the Bonnin and Morris plate and sauceboat (Figs. 27 and 28) with their more “westernized” versions of Chinese landscapes, and japanned furniture (Fig. 30).

Indeed, almost all landscapes depicted in American chinoiserie come across as charming and peaceful. While many of these landscapes contain fantastical creatures or botanical wonders, they never include evidence of war or want. The figures are usually shown content and reposing (Figs. 17 and 46), or as happily industrious (Fig. 47). Such images perpetuate the idea of the Chinese philosopher’s paradise as illustrated by the tale of the emperor and Tsouy. However, these chinoiserie landscapes also often contain references to America. The outdoor scenes painted on the Bonnin and Morris porcelain (Figs. 27 and 28), for example, have Chinese motifs, as discussed in the previous chapter, but the homes look distinctly colonial American. Furthermore, the garden from the William Paca house is a reconstruction of a paradisiacal setting with a Chinese bridge located in the colonial American city of Annapolis (Fig. 63). Such visual cues reinforce the concept of an American understanding of an idyllic philosopher’s paradise worthy of emulation.

**Figures of the Western Enlightenment Reflected in Chinoiserie**

Not only did many chinoiserie wares reflect American ideals of an enlightened China, but some were even created to celebrate contemporary western heroes of the Enlightenment. In the previous chapter I noted the two English porcelain statuettes of William Pitt on the mantle in Samuel Powel’s parlor (Fig. 21). As already noted, Pitt was celebrated in America for his influence in the repeal of the Stamp Act. The Boston patriot
Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, whose portrait, interestingly, also hangs in the Powel house, celebrated Pitt’s deeds by the statement, “To you [William Pitt] grateful America attributed that she is re-installed in her former Liberties. America calls you over again her father; live long in health, happiness and honor, be it late when you must cease to plead the cause of liberty on earth.” The porcelains produced in England for the Powels reflect this laudatory view of William Pitt. The statuette in Figure 22 depicts Pitt receiving the gratitude of an America personified as an adoring Indian. Pitt’s gesture appears a bit condescending toward the Indian figure, but he nonetheless graciously bestows his enlightened western viewpoint on the young nation. The porcelain in Figure 23 shows Pitt as a great orator, surrounded by books and documents, highlighting his learnedness. There is no doubt that both of these figurines were intended to celebrate Pitt within the context of scholarly values surrounding the Enlightenment.

In addition to these two figures of Pitt, Powel also had statuettes of John Wilkes (Fig. 68) and Mrs. Catharine Macaulay (Fig. 69), also from the Chelsea porcelain factory. Wilkes, like Pitt, was another member of British parliament who championed the causes of the American colonists, especially between the years 1768 to 1770. Pauline Maier argues that the American colonists were satisfied with their representation in the British parliament as long as Wilkes wielded an influence among the government. When “Wilkes’s struggle against the apparent arbitrariness of the King’s government failed” the Americans began to become disillusioned with their voice in government as

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163 Halsey and Tower, 132-135.
164 Pauline Maier, “John Wilkes and American Disillusionment with Britain,” The William and Mary Quarterly 20, no. 3 (July 1963): 373.
they “saw their own prospects frustrated.” Wilkes, who had a close connection with the Boston Sons of Liberty, was thus another champion of American liberties, so long as he was able to support the American cause. Wilkes’ emphasis on liberty is reflected in the statuette from the Powel House, where his figure rests on a pedestal containing scrolls labeled ‘Bill of Rights’ and “Magna Charta.” Furthermore, the child at Wilkes’ feet sits next to a volume of *Locke on Government* and upholds a “liberty cap.” Wilkes was memorialized as a celebrated figure of the American Enlightenment to be displayed in the Powel home through the medium of English-manufactured china ware.

The figurine of Catharine Macaulay fits well thematically with the other statues on the Powel mantle. Macaulay (1751-1791) was a popular British liberal writer, historian, and reformer of the eighteenth century. Macaulay was especially beloved by the Americans for her republican histories of England and for endorsing Americans’ political stance in supporting the Declaration of Independence. Her own words are inscribed on the pedestal upon which her representative figurine leans: “Government a Power delegated for the Happiness of Mankind conducted by Wisdom, Justice, and Mercy.” Also, the side of the pedestal contains the names of more of “England’s greatest defenders of constitutional liberty.” Although the medium of porcelain comes originally from China, the design of Mrs. Macaulay’s figurine is neoclassical. Her

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165 Ibid.

166 Halsey and Tower, 134-135.


168 Halsey and Tower, 133.

169 Halsey and Tower list these names as Sidney, Milton, Hampden, Locke, Harrington, Ludlow, Marvel, and John Dickinson. See Halsey and Tower, 133.
drapery and stance are reminiscent of classical statues, while the stepped fret at the base of the figurine represents another classical motif. The figure of Macaulay holds her quill and leans on her histories of England, highlighting her emphasis on the written word. Everything about all four statuettes from the Powel House mantle reflects Enlightenment scholarship and its connection to American patriotism. Through these figures, the medium of Chinese porcelain becomes further associated with the revolutionary ideals in America.

**Enlightenment, Location, and the Public-Private Space**

One consistent aspect of chinoiserie in colonial America is that it appears mostly in the social spaces of homes. Such designs hardly exist in churches or government buildings. However, homes were powerful signifiers of popular values. As Allan Greenberg states, “The basic building block of American governance is the citizen, and the basic unit of American architecture is the citizen’s home.” American homes seldom had elaborate decoration in the private chambers, and the fanciest designs, which would include chinoiserie, were reserved for the public parts of a home, such as the parlors, main staircases, and outdoor embellishments. The fact that Gunston Hall’s parlor is decorated in the Chinese style has significant meaning when one considers that a parlor was an important social and intellectual space for the discussing of ideas. While much of Enlightenment thought was absorbed and recorded in private studies and libraries, it was spread and popularized in parlors and dining rooms. Perhaps George Mason’s Chinese décor, with its geometric fretwork and symmetrical order evocative of Enlightenment ideals, would have sparked conversation about China akin to the ideas of Benjamin

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170 Greenberg, 32.
Franklin or Voltaire. Having read periodicals describing China as a philosopher’s paradise, Mason and his guests might have discussed politics, virtue, and government with the shadow of the American construct of China hanging over them expressed through the décor.

It seems likely that Mason would have carried the same associations with China as his revolutionary peers. Chinese designs often carried undertones of a philosopher’s utopia. Mason was “one of Virginia’s most learned men,” and delighted in his studies and scholarship.\(^{171}\) His revolutionary associations placed him well within the circle of other American Enlightenment philosophers. Significantly, he chose to place himself and his guests in a setting evoking associations with China. It seems reasonable to assume, then, that Mason viewed China as a philosopher’s paradise. In this sense, Mason’s Chinese dining room could be seen as a personal anti-monarchical statement.

Homes were also part of a processional public space, with the most prominent plantation houses in Virginia purposely visible from the river and the main roads.\(^{172}\) Gunston Hall is an excellent example of this concept. The house is situated on a hill and peninsula alongside the Potomac River. It has two main entrances which feed into the same hallway. One entrance was for guests arriving by boat, and the other for those travelling by road. Dell Upton claims that the approach to a colonial home, including the various barriers along the way, the home’s location, and the placement of public and private spaces within the structure were designed to “create a processional landscape that


was meant to impress as one moved through it.” Gunston Hall, Battersea, and Monticello all have aspects of chinoiserie in striking areas along that approach.

After negotiating the approach and entering the home, Gunston Hall’s Chinese parlor represented one of the more intimate of the public spaces, reserved for other wealthy landowners invited to enjoy Mason’s hospitality. These were the people who likely shared ideas and tastes with Mason. Their idea of China as a utopia for enlightened thinkers could be reinforced as they visited Mason and his family in Gunston Hall’s Chinese parlor.

Battersea, like Gunston Hall, was located both alongside a major waterway, the Appomattox River, and a main road leading into Petersburg, Virginia, although the roadside entrance was given prominence in the building’s design. The Chinese stair rail visible from the doorway would have suggested the host’s taste and wealth to John Bannister’s guests. The Chinese fretwork from Battersea only continues up to the first landing of the stairway. Once the family turns the corner to the space only meant for the Bannisters to see, the design becomes simple and unembellished. The Chinese fretwork was thus specifically included as a social status symbol, showing off Bannister’s cultural knowledge.

Monticello has Chinese fretwork in the most public of all three of these homes’ spaces, located along the outside of the building. However, unlike Gunston Hall or Battersea, Monticello’s prominent location allowed the building to see the surrounding community and landscape without being seen, making its architecture still somewhat reserved for Jefferson’s visitors. Even though Monticello was concealed until Jefferson’s guests reached the top of the hill, it was surrounded by vistas of the Blue Mountains, the

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173 Ibid., 80, 84.
lowlands, and other plantations. Thus, “the entire landscape of Piedmont Virginia was…focused on Thomas Jefferson at Monticello.”

In some ways, the placement of Monticello made it a kind of Panopticon, where Jefferson could observe his vast surroundings without being seen unless directly approached. As Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, the act of surveillance endows the observer with power over the surveyed. Monticello conveys a sense of intellectual power. Even the approach up the hill to the structure imbues visitors with the phenomenological sense of approaching a kind of mental apex. As that journey culminates, the visitors finally become privy to Jefferson’s intellectual power as they get their first glimpse of Monticello and the surrounding landscape. The view of the house combines associations of classical learning in the Palladian structure with the American idea of the Chinese as embodied in the fretwork. One cannot doubt that educated visitors to the home of one of the most notable American intellectuals would take some time to reflect on Jefferson’s personal expressions through his private architecture. The chinoiserie included on the exterior of Monticello thus became a public expression of Jefferson’s regard for Chinese culture through its inclusion in the private space of his home.

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174 Ibid., 86.


176 Ibid.
Conclusion

Much evidence exists of associations between a European understanding of China and Enlightenment thought in Colonial America. As pointed out by A. Owen Aldridge, eighteenth-century publications connecting the western perception of China with Enlightenment ideals had some impact on several of America’s leading figures of the Enlightenment. The visual aspects of chinoiserie through architectural design and decorative arts reinforce these established literary connections. Since most American scholars who were Enlightenment thinkers also had revolutionary sentiments, it seems reasonable to surmise that for them China and its associations in art through the creation and display of chinoiserie also evoked revolutionary ideals. The fact that so much chinoiserie appears in homes of American patriots supports this idea. These same individuals who lauded China as a philosopher’s paradise often had elements of chinoiserie in their décor. This phenomenon suggests that chinoiserie served a double function in colonial America similar to that of neoclassical decoration, as both a comfortable, fashionable style reminiscent of contemporary European trends, and as a symbol of an Enlightened, ideal culture with a governmental system that was older and superior to that of the European monarchies. Through its manufacture, to be discussed in the next chapter, and associations with revolutionary thought, chinoiserie in colonial America may have carried associations with the American desire for independence.
CHAPTER FOUR

PRODUCTION OF CHINOISERIE WARES IN THE ECONOMIC STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

The preface to the first volume of the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, published in 1771 and presided over by Benjamin Franklin, states a hope that tea, which was “so much in use amongst us, and now become so necessary a part of our diet, might be found in America.”

Tea cultivation was just one of the many goals Americans were working toward. The drinking of tea required many accessories, and products such as porcelain tea services and tea tables became necessary materials in fashionable colonial homes. Although tea tables, which were “important social centerpieces” and often created after the Chinese taste, were easily manufactured by skilled American craftsmen, both porcelain and tea had to be imported from England. American patriots thus began to realize by the mid-eighteenth century that their fight with England was not just political. They also needed economic autonomy if they ever wanted complete freedom from their mother country. This push for Americans to create products of their own accord, especially those fashionable goods that included chinoiserie, reflects the American revolutionary spirit.

Some revolutionary Americans saw America as the next China. The preface from the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* goes on to state, “If we may trust to the report of travelers, this country…very nearly resembles China…in soil, climate,

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179 Greene, 73.
temperature of the air, winds, weather, and many natural productions.”\(^{180}\) The preface continues its comparison by stating that Philadelphia has a similar climate to Peking, and that America has potential to cultivate the same natural resources as China in the production of popular goods such as teas, silks, and porcelain. The preface ends with the mission statement that farmers, philosophers, and craftsmen should continue to experiment with the cultivation of these resources “to attain one end, namely, the advancement of useful knowledge and the improvement of our country.”\(^{181}\) The ideas from the American Philosophical Society are significant because many of the prominent American patriots were members of this group, including Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. These patriots saw great potential in their new land to produce the products of the “old world.” One of their earliest quests was to imitate those goods imported to them from Europe via China in order to gain their independence as a useful and wealthy world nation.

The male members of the American Philosophical Society were not the only individuals advocating that Americans create their own products. Women wielded great influence in the trend towards independent American production. Although men participated in the establishment of social mores, women had the power to accept or shun individuals in their society through home and party invitations. Margaretta M. Lovell notes that “if birth was a primary (but in America not necessary) ingredient of gentility, performance was its absolute (and necessary) essence. Therefore enactment, including costume [and such]…were essential social markers.”\(^{182}\) Halsey and Tower note that


\(^{181}\) Ibid., iv-xix.
women were often more committed to the revolution than their husbands.\textsuperscript{183} This is significant because hostesses were responsible for inviting guests to their homes and assemblies. They thus made American-manufactured goods fashionable by not only purchasing, displaying, and wearing such items themselves, but also by encouraging others to support the cause of American independence by only inviting those who supported American production as well.\textsuperscript{184}

English imports were increasingly frowned upon in patriot circles, especially as the revolutionary conflict heated during the mid-1770s.\textsuperscript{185} For example, although the wealthy Samuel Powel brought Chinese wallpaper back to Philadelphia from England, Powel’s uncle and fellow revolutionary, Samuel Morris, warned him not to purchase any furniture abroad. On May 18, 1765, shortly after the enactment of the inflammatory Stamp Tax, Morris wrote a letter to Powel expressing the current American sentiments against British imports stating that, “household goods may be had as cheap and as well made from English patterns. In the humour people are in here, a man is in danger of becoming invidiously distinguished, who buys anything in England which our Tradesmen can furnish.”\textsuperscript{186} Morris’ letter reflects the social stigma that surrounded buying English goods among patriotic circles, especially when American craftsmen were trying to create and sell the same kinds of products. Although joiners and carvers existed in abundance in America and could make ample examples of furniture from English design books,

\textsuperscript{182} Lovell, 91.

\textsuperscript{183} Halsey and Tower, 89.

\textsuperscript{184} Halsey and Tower base this argument primarily on a letter dated October 25, 1774 from a Boston Loyalist printed in the London \textit{Middlesex Journal}. See Halsey and Tower, 89-90.

\textsuperscript{185} Downs, xxix.

\textsuperscript{186} Samuel Morris quoted in Halsey and Tower, 119-120.
manufactories of some goods created “after the Chinese taste,” such as silk and porcelain, were not easy to establish on American soil. Often, eighteenth-century Americans complained of the impediments the British placed in the way of American production of such goods. The British also created obstacles in colonial access to their imports through measures such as the Stamp Act.

A letter from “A Pennsylvania Planter” published in the August 1, 1771 Pennsylvania Gazette, for example, reflects the resentment many Americans felt towards the British controlling their industry and imports:

It is sincerely to be lamented, that the mechanic Arts and Manufactures cannot be encouraged by our legislature with the same Propriety that they promote the liberal Arts and Sciences; but it happens some how, that our Mother country apprehends she has a Right to manufacture every Article we consume, except Bread and Meat; our very Drink [i.e. tea] is to come through her Hands, or to pay her Support; in these Circumstances it cannot be doubted, that she would take great and insuperable Offence, at any Colony Legislature that should attempt to encourage domestic Manufactures; the smallest Proof of her Resentment that might be expected is, that she would disable them…from doing any Business, till they had reversed the Vote; were it not for this Impediment, we might expect to see the mechanic Arts soon arrive at great Perfection in this Provence.187

The author of this letter felt that the English promoted their own imports at the expense of American development. Americans understood that their dependence on English imports greatly inhibited their ability to govern themselves. Their economic reliance made their political subjugation to England almost unbreakable. Americans needed to break Britain’s stronghold over their economy and establish industries of their own before they could seriously consider their political freedoms. As stated by Joseph Downs, “the restrictions of commerce between the colonies and the limitations of their industries

finally became a major cause of the Revolution.”\textsuperscript{188} Americans began to grow resentful of English control of products which they had become so dependent upon to continue their comfortable lifestyles, including not only tea, but silk and porcelain as well.\textsuperscript{189} Thus, some of the earliest revolutionary sentiments in America appear in the desire to discourage the consumption of British imports. The most famous act inspired by these sentiments was the 1773 Boston Tea Party, but other measures, such as the establishment of American manufactories in order to produce alternatives to the English products also resulted from the Americans’ attempt to pull British fingers out of their economy.

For some Americans, making fashionable goods at home was a way to defy the British. As noted in the second chapter, do-it-yourself books on japanning were available for Americans to decorate their own furniture. The technique of \textit{lacca povera}, or “using paper cutouts as a basis for japanned designs” became popular among genteel ladies in the New England colonies.\textsuperscript{190} These women not only encouraged American production of fashionable goods by inviting those who supported American industry into their homes, but they also chose to decorate furniture themselves rather than have japanned furniture imported from England. Thomas Jefferson was an excellent example of a do-it-yourself American, designing his own chinoiserie railings at Monticello from drawings in Thomas Chippendale’s \textit{Director} (Figs. 52 and 53). His entire home and many of the contraptions within attest to Jefferson’s creative energy and belief in self-sufficiency.\textsuperscript{191}

\textsuperscript{188} Downs, xxix.

\textsuperscript{189} “Letter to the Public from A Pennsylvania Planter,” 58.

\textsuperscript{190} Impey, 118.

American furniture makers also became skilled in certain aspects of Chinese-style design that they received via England and incorporated into their local styles. The ball-and-claw foot that appears on so many colonial tables, chairs, and chests comes from a Chinese motif representing “a dragon grasping the pearl of cosmic perfection” and “the guardian of purity from evil” ([Fig. 70]). In America, this motif often came to resemble the foot of a bird of prey, such as an eagle’s claw. The ball-and-claw became so prominent in colonial America that modern furniture historians can tell where a certain piece of furniture was made, or sometimes even the exact craftsman who made it, by subtle variations in the ball-and-claw design from place to place or craftsman to craftsman. Colonists were faced with attractive alternatives to imported English furniture, given the skill that developed among eighteenth-century American craftsmen.

Another way in which colonists tried to imitate British fashions on their own was by establishing American manufactories for such goods. For example, not only were chinoiserie wallpapers imported from Europe, as in the example from Samuel Powel’s home, but some wallpaper manufactories from the homeland advertised wallpapers that contained “Mock India Pictures…all the entire manufacture of this country,” or “China fig.” as part of their inventories. However, with the exception of furniture and wallpaper, most American efforts to produce chinoiserie were not as simple as copying

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192 Denker, 2 and Greene 156. Greene notes that the ball-and-claw motif originally came to Europe through its design on Chinese porcelain in the 16th and 17th centuries, and is “known to have been adopted for use by London silversmiths as early as 1581.” See Greene, 66.

193 Greene, 66.

194 Ibid., 156-157.

European designs “after the Chinese taste” out of books. Often, Americans lacked the training and equipment needed to produce goods on their own.

Ironically, England depended on America’s natural resources and climate for much of her raw materials to produce chinoiserie wares, such as kaolin for porcelain and raw silk, but America still depended on the English for the finished product. The war for Independence thus became not just a fight over whether or not the British parliament had the right to enforce laws in America without colonial representation, but also a consumerist struggle, where Americans were seeking to break free of their dependence on England by trying to create their own fashionable goods, including chinoiserie wares, without having to import such products from their mother country.¹⁹⁶

Silk Production

As one so taken with European styles, especially the European vogue for the Orient, and as founder of the American Philosophical Society with its goals to discover America’s resources and production potential, Benjamin Franklin was also a major player in rallying for American industrial autonomy from England. Franklin pushed for independent American silk manufactories.¹⁹⁷ In the preface to the first publication of the American Philosophical Society he asks, “Is there not reason to believe that, if experiments were made on our own Silkworms, and such as are most useful were propagated, this country might, in a few years, produce plenty of Silk?”¹⁹⁸


¹⁹⁷ Little, 147.

Colonial America already had several centers for raw silk production by the time this statement was published in 1771, the first of which was established in early seventeenth-century Virginia under the reign of James I. After an unsuccessful attempt at raising silkworms in England begun in 1608, King James discovered that the climate of the American south was more amicable to the cultivation of the mulberry trees necessary to keep the silkworms alive. The first shipment of silkworms to Virginia arrived in 1613, and by 1619, the first crop of raw silk was harvested in America. The English were so excited by the prospect of not having to import silk from other nations that the Virginia assembly passed a law in 1619 that required every man to annually plant six mulberry trees on his property for seven years, and by 1662 all Virginia landowners were expected to plant ten trees for every one hundred acres owned.

When the English established a colony in Georgia in the 1730s, they reasoned that it would be another profitable area for producing raw silk. Georgia would ultimately become the largest provider of silk of all the American colonies. Several settlers in South Carolina also set up silk farms. A 1739 engraving from “Charles Town” claims

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202 Ibid.


205 Hertz, 716-717.
that the city’s “Silk is preferable to any.”\textsuperscript{206} The cultivation of raw silk was thus a significant economic factor in the establishment of the southern colonies. Even some of the New England colonies tried to grow mulberry trees, although their efforts were never as successful as those of South Carolina and Georgia.\textsuperscript{207}

Despite Americans’ familiarity with the cultivation of mulberry trees and raising of silkworms, James I created laws in the seventeenth century that allowed the Americans only to supply their raw silk to England, while denying them the right to process the cocoons into cloth.\textsuperscript{208} The machinery needed to produce the material remained a well-guarded secret in Europe, and magistrates in England forbade any production in America throughout the eighteenth century as well.\textsuperscript{209} England was heavily dependent on raw silk from American plantations, as stated by the verse:

\begin{quote}
Where Wormes and Food doe naturally abound  
A gallant Silken Trade must there be found.  
Virginia excels the World in both—  
Envie nor malice can gaine say this troth.\textsuperscript{210}
\end{quote}

Since Americans were forbidden to spin their own silk, women would commonly raise the worms themselves and ship the raw material to England to be spun into cloth which would be shipped back for them to make their own dresses.\textsuperscript{211} In an effort to encourage Americans to weave their own silk garments, Benjamin Franklin sent a series of images

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{206} Downs, xxi.
\textsuperscript{207} Klose notes nurseries of mulberry trees established in 1660 in Long Island and New Haven, and states that “Benjamin Franklin encouraged silk production in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and silk was produced there from 1771 until the Revolution.” See Klose, 225.
\textsuperscript{208} Brockett, 26-27.
\textsuperscript{209} Little, 127-30.
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 130-46.
\end{footnotesize}
de picting the Chinese process of silk production to his Sinophile friend Ezra Stiles of Yale, who had already attempted to manufacture silk in New England. While living in America in 1775, Franklin also wrote to an Italian friend of Thomas Jefferson who was living in Virginia, Philip Mazzei, advising him to begin a silk manufactory in America. Although Mazzei appears to have not acted on Franklin’s encouragement, the fact that Franklin persistently solicited individuals to create chinoiserie products such as silk and porcelain attests to Enlightened Americans’ taste for Chinese styles and knowledge that they must create such fashions of their own accord if they ever wanted to really break free from England. Finally, by 1789, after the Revolution, Americans could purchase silk manufactured on their own soil after the first American silk manufactory was established in Connecticut. They were no longer dependent on English imports for silk.

The American China Manufactory

If America wanted to be autonomous from England while simultaneously keeping up with her fashions and habits, then Americans had to learn to produce their own porcelain as well as silk. Benjamin Franklin, in his usual manner of pushing American independence, likewise encouraged the development of an independent American porcelain manufactory. He sent home many samples of china from England in hopes that his efforts would aid in production. Furthermore, a statement form the American Philosophical Society notes that certain clays in America “have answered well to

\[212\] Aldridge, *Dragon and the Eagle*, 86.

\[213\] Ibid., 87.

\[214\] Little, 130-46.

\[215\] Frelinghuysen, 8.
burning, as to induce one to hope that, in time, a porcelain, equal to that brought from China, may be made here.\textsuperscript{216} Eighteenth-century Americans were aware that they had access to the raw materials necessary for porcelain production. Several British porcelain manufacturers ordered their clays from America, including Josiah Wedgwood, who obtained kaolin, a fine clay essential to porcelain production, from South Carolina, and Richard Champion, who ordered clay from Charleston for his manufactory in Bristol.\textsuperscript{217} The secret of Chinese porcelain production had only been discovered in Europe in 1708, but by 1738, Americans began experimenting with creating porcelain at home.\textsuperscript{218} While Americans had a large supply of natural kaolin, they were lacking in skilled labor and proper kilns.\textsuperscript{219} For the most part, buying imported porcelain from England appeared the most economical way for colonists to stay in fashion. As the demand for china ware continued to increase, American patriots realized that porcelain was one supply among many for which they were dependent on the English, and that they must create their own china if they were to break that dependence.

Physician Benjamin Rush was another patriot who wanted America to create its own porcelain. In 1768, while undergoing medical training in Edinburgh, Rush wrote to the American painter Thomas Bradford (1745-1839) about his desire that America should have its own porcelain manufactory:

\begin{quote}
Go on in encouraging American manufactures. I have many schemes in view with regard to these things. I have made those mechanical arts which are connected with chemistry the particular objects of my study, and not without hopes of seeing
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{216} Philadelphia Historical Society, xi-xii.


\textsuperscript{218} Frelinghuysen, 4.

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 6.
a china manufactory established in Philadelphia in the course of a few years. Yes, we will be revenged of the mother country. For my part, I am resolved to devote my head, my heart, and my pen entirely to the service of America, and promise myself such assistance from you in everything of this kind that I shall attempt through life.\textsuperscript{220}

Rush’s extreme disdain for America’s dependence on England comes out boldly in this statement. His letter seems to indicate that he has participated in experiments to create porcelain himself. Rush was one of many Americans who were willing to support America’s indigenous industries. Rush’s wishes for American porcelain were realized a little more than a year after he wrote his letter to Bradford.\textsuperscript{221}

After much effort, a porcelain factory was finally opened in Philadelphia in January of 1770 by Gousse Bonnin, a recent immigrant from England, and George Anthony Morris, a Philadelphia native.\textsuperscript{222} One month before the factory’s opening, Bonnin and Morris placed an ad in a local newspaper stating that, “the Proprietors of the China Works…have proved to a certainty, that the clays of America are productive of as good Porcelain, as heretofore manufactured at the famous factory in Bow, near London, and imported into the colonies and plantations, which they will engage to sell upon reasonable terms.”\textsuperscript{223} The American manufacture of porcelain was supported by several prominent Philadelphian patriots. Benjamin Franklin received a shipment of it from his wife while in England and responded, “I...am pleased to find so good a Progress made in


\textsuperscript{222} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{223} Advertisement from the \textit{Pennsylvania Chronicle}, dated December 1, 1769, quoted in John Spargo, \textit{Early American Pottery and China} (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing, 1926), 76-77.
the China Manufactory. I wish it Success most heartily." Individuals such as Franklin optimistically celebrated the opening of Bonnin and Morris’ American Porcelain Manufactory as taking the American colony one step closer toward independence.

Although met with initial enthusiasm, the American Porcelain Manufactory struggled economically from the onset. Unfortunately, Bonnin and Morris had to close their doors in 1772 because they lacked the resources to produce porcelain cheaply enough to compete with English imports. Moreover, their struggles were met with resentment. A letter from August 1771 published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* notes that the English have fought against American porcelain production by lowering prices on imports to be cheaper than the American counterparts, and also laments the fact that Americans do not give the American Porcelain Manufactory enough support to enhance American autonomy. In a plea to gain patronage for the Bonnin and Morris manufactory, the anonymous author of the letter writes, “The Manufacture of China Ware in this Province, certainly deserves the serious Attention of every Man, who prays for the Happiness of his Fellow-subjects, or that the very Semblance of Liberty may be handed down to posterity.”

The author of this letter not only appealed to the American desire for autonomy from England. He also knew that the porcelain factory could not survive unless the colonists thought it was economically viable. In order to appeal to the practical senses of American consumers he remarks on how the British conspire against American industry in order to keep the colonists dependent on their rule:

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224 Frelinghuysen, 9.

225 Ibid., 10-11.


227 Ibid., 58.
The use of China is introduced, and well established; Custom has rendered it some how necessary; we must and will have it, whatever the Consequence. No less than Fifteen Thousand Pounds Worth of China has been imported into this Province since the first of April last; if this Clay be paid for, there are Fifteen Thousand Pounds of Gold and Silver less in the Province than we should have had, if the same Ware had not been imported, but manufactured amongst us; add to this annually, the immense Sums that are sent away for every Species of Dry Goods, etc. and the Amount will be very alarming. No Man of common Sense will venture to say, that the Province can long endure such enormous Taxes. Every Thing that is alienable must soon change its Owner; the Property will be transferred to the other Side [of] the Atlantic. We must certainly investigate some method of saving Cash; we must manufacture some Things for ourselves; no Manufactures are so ill fitted for Exportation as Glass and China; nor can be made with more Propriety at Home. These we should make, and many Things besides, else we shall soon be a ruined People. Our Mother Country has left no Measures untried, which may crush our Manufactures, check the spirit of Patriotism, and keep us in the Chains of Subjection: Obsia Principiis, is her Maxim; she would nip us in the Bud. The China Manufactory has supplied us with cogent Proof of this melancholy Fact. 228

The writer explains to colonists that they need to invest their money in American industry or else they will lose all of their assets to the English. He also shows his patriotic spirit and disdain for England by describing their trade practices as selfish. Many Americans, like the author to this letter, saw the failure of the American Porcelain Manufactory as yet another example of how the English were determined to keep Americans under their subjection, no matter what the costs or losses to the colonies.

Another reason that the porcelain manufactory was failing, according to the author of the letter, was because Americans felt that they were getting better quality goods for cheaper prices in the English imports. The author responds that people with such a mentality remind him of “a certain Islander, who could never consent that his Son should go into the Water, ‘til he had learned to swim; if we do not encourage imperfect

228 Ibid.
Works, we shall never get perfect Ones.”[229] The writer then continues with the argument that buying English imports drains money from the American economy, ultimately resulting in such an impoverishment that all productivity in America would cease to exist.[230] Although the author’s alarm may seem a bit extreme, his warning does reflect the patriotic concern for supporting American industries as part of the effort for independence from England.

The American China Manufactory from 1770 to 1772 was the only successful attempt to create an American porcelain manufactory in the eighteenth century. The chinoiserie wares created there (as in Figs. 26, 27, and 28) stand as material witnesses to the American struggle for economic autonomy. Aside from practical considerations and English competition that led to the company’s demise, the initial encouragement and reception reflects an American desire for independence.

**True Autonomy and the Beginnings of the America-China Trade**

The American quest for independence didn’t end in 1783 with the Treaty of Paris. Though the British acknowledgement of a separate American nation was certainly a major political step for America, Americans were still largely economically dependent on Europe at that time. They had come to rely on a lifestyle which they could not maintain with their resources and limited knowledge of production. That is why they quickly sought to establish trade with China. The 1651 Navigation Act restricting American merchants from sailing to the Orient was broken when the Americans were no longer

[229] Ibid., 59.
[230] Ibid.
under British jurisdiction. Not surprisingly, China was one of the first nations with which Americans established a trade relationship once they were free to traverse Asian waters. The newly established nation wasted no time in sending a ship to China as soon as possible. With high hopes the Americans sent the *Empress of China*, the first trading vessel to travel from America to China, from New York on George Washington’s birthday in 1784. This was a landmark event for American patriots. A poem by Philip Freneau, a major deist patriot poet active during the American Revolution wrote a poem celebrating the departure of the *Empress of China*. His verse entitled “On the First American Ship That Explored the Rout to China and the East-Indies, After the Revolution” reflects the general air of excitement America felt over breaking the monopoly of the British East India Company as a result of their Revolutionary war victory:

> With clearance from BELLONA won  
> She spreads her wings to meet the Sun,  
> Those golden regions to explore.  
> Where George forbade to sail before.

> Thus, grown to strength, the bird of Jove,  
> Impatient, quits his native grove,  
> With eyes of fire, and lightning’s force  
> Through the blue aether holds his course.

> No foreign tars here allow’d  
> To mingle with her chosen crowd,  
> Who, when return’d, might, boasting, say  
> They show’d our native oak the way.

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232 Aldridge, *Dragon and the Eagle*, 100.

233 Ibid., 101.
To that old track no more confin’d,
By Britain’s jealous court assign’d,
She round the STORMY CAPE shall sail
And eastward, catch the odorous gale.

To countries plac’d in burning climes
And islands of remotest times
She now her eager course explores,
And soon shall greet Chinesian shores.

From thence their fragrant TEAS to bring
Without the leave of Britain’s king;
And PORCELAIN WARE, enchas’d in gold,
The product of that finer mould.

Thus commerce to our world conveys
All that the varying taste can please:
For us, the Indian looms are free,
And Java strips her SPICY TREE

Great pile proceed!—and o’er the brine
May every prosperous gale be thine,
‘Till, freighted deep with eastern gems,
You reach again your native streams.”

Freneau notes the Americans’ hope that the Empress of China’s voyage would prove a successful start at foreign relations for the new nation. In fact, the voyage of the Empress of China involved the French and the Dutch in addition to the Chinese. Since the Americans were entering unfamiliar waters upon arrival in Asia, they relied on a French trading ship to guide them to Canton, and a Dutch vessel to help them home, although part way through the return voyage they “discovered to their mortification that the Dutch captain was also sailing for the first time in China seas.” Despite such setbacks, the Empress of China returned to New York after a nearly fifteen month journey in May of 1795.

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234 Philip Morin Freneau, Poems Written between the Years 1768 & 1794 (Monmouth, New Jersey: Printed at the press of the author, 1795), 291.

235 Aldridge, Dragon and the Eagle, 102.
1785 filled with teas, silks, and porcelain, among other goods. Freneau’s allusions to the desire Americans have to be free of trade with England in his poem were realized in part by the successful return of the *Empress of China*. Even if Americans could not establish a successful porcelain manufactory or yet produce quality silk in large quantities, at least they did not have to support English industry to obtain the items for which they had developed such a strong preference.

Americans were overjoyed at the major gesture of autonomy in the establishment of the America-China trade. The *Pennsylvania Packet*, a Philadelphia publication, noted the trade victory shortly after the ship’s return:

As the ship has returned with a full cargo, and of such articles as we generally import from Europe, a correspondent observes, that it presages a future happy period of our being able to dispense with that burdensome and unnecessary traffick, which heretofore we have carried on with Europe—to the great prejudice of our rising empire, and future happy prospects of solid greatness.

The Treaty of Paris had broken the British East India Company’s monopoly over the China trade in America, allowing one of the world’s oldest empires to directly influence its newest nation. Within six years after the *Empress of China*’s first voyage, American traders had “sent twenty-eight ships to Canton.” Jean McClure notes that, “with this number [America] was buying one-seventh of her total imports from China, making great gains for her seacoast merchants and employing her best men and ships in the trade.”

Europe had paved the way in creating an American market for Chinese goods. Any chinoiserie Americans created from 1785 onward was influenced by direct contact with

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236 McClure, 1.
237 Ibid.
238 Ibid., 15.
239 Ibid.
China, as well as an English translation of the Orient. The beginning of the trade with China marks the beginning of a new heightened American vogue for the Chinese style, which would accelerate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, characterized by more extravagant, escapist designs inspired by both a direct association with China and the wares that China created to cater specifically to an American export market. These new designs had greater exotic associations for Americans than the shadows and hints of the Chippendale-inspired Chinese motifs amid Palladian structures of the colonial period. Also, the Enlightenment associations with a philosopher’s China were lost in the nineteenth century, as the revolutionary reformist ideals of the eighteenth century gave way to the Industrial Revolution realism of the nineteenth century. While once constructing China as an idyllic paradise, Americans became disillusioned after experiencing the less romantic port cities and commercial aspects of Chinese culture.

China also became more exotic for Americans throughout the nineteenth century. Rather than a comfortable reminder of European trends, chinoiserie after the return of the Empress of China was able to reflect that distant land more directly. Some contact has to be made with “the other” in order for it to be exoticized. When another culture remains distant, as in the relationship of China and America prior to the establishment of the China Trade, then individuals have no point of reference with which to establish difference. The pitting of one’s own culture against another creates notions of exoticism; thus, the establishment of a direct line of connection between America and China allowed Americans to face the difference of Chinese culture based on their own experiences rather than through the European imagination.
Conclusion

Although the vogue for chinoiserie greatly escalated in the nineteenth century, its roots began with the importation of Chinese styles from Europe to America prior to the war for independence. A taste developed for Chinese-style goods, such as tea, silk, porcelain, and furniture in the American colonies during the eighteenth century. Americans’ demand for such items contributed to their economic dependence on England, since they often lacked the resources to create the products themselves. Furthermore, the English often implemented taxes and bans that kept the Americans buying British imports instead of locally crafted goods. However, by the mid-eighteenth century Americans began to fight back. Those patriots who realized the need for economic autonomy in order to support political independence pushed for Americans to create their own manufactories, despite the various obstacles. English imports were increasingly frowned upon in revolutionary social circles. Although some of the American manufactories lost in their fight against English imports, their struggle for existence reflects the revolutionary spirit that spread throughout the colonies. The establishment of venues for independent American production of chinoiserie wares and the foundation of a direct China trade after the war reflect American desires for independence in the late eighteenth century.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Decorative arts can reveal much about the values and interests of the culture that created them. As already much discussed in American art scholarship, American patriots during the Age of Enlightenment included neoclassical designs in their architecture and home décor because they admired the philosophies of the ancient Greeks and Romans. These same revolutionaries also developed tastes for goods and designs from the Orient, called chinoiserie, which they incorporated into their neoclassical homes. Apart from a compliance with fashion, however, their reasons for using chinoiserie have remained virtually unstudied. A number of leading patriots who incorporated these goods and designs superimposed Enlightenment ideals on an understanding of Chinese culture that they had received via Europe.

Recent scholarship demonstrates a clear connection between American revolutionary philosophy and the European interpretations of Confucius which were read by American patriots. I contend that these same connections found in the literature extend to the decorative arts. In this thesis I have explored not just the use of chinoiserie in colonial American life, as have past publications, but I have expanded the social-historical context to suggest probable motives eighteenth-century American revolutionaries would have for including these items in their homes. Past scholarship attributes the creation and use of chinoiserie in colonial America to emulation of popular English fashion. This is certainly a valid explanation, but it is oversimplified. This thesis expands the associations of chinoiserie beyond the realm of fashion to include possible intellectual and political pursuits for the inclusion of chinoiserie in American homes. I
have done this in part by building on literary perceptions of China in Enlightenment America and Voltaire’s connection of ancient Chinese philosophy with Enlightenment thought, as expounded by A. Owen Aldridge and others. The literary evidence links revolutionary Americans’ admiration of China with contemporary writings. This thesis extends this connection for the first time to the visual arts.

Some colonists, such as Benjamin Franklin, promoted China as an ideal civilization. Franklin and his peers hailed Confucius as a great enlightened thinker. In addition, some American writers emphasized the importance of philosophy to the Chinese and described China as a philosopher’s paradise. Visual illustrations of an idyllic China in chinoiserie designs on japanned furniture and painted wallpaper parallel the literary descriptions. In addition, Americans developed a taste for Chinese goods, such as silk and porcelain, even celebrating leading champions of the American cause in porcelain statuettes. This thesis suggests that these and other physical manifestations of Chinese culture through the decorative arts likely reflected Enlightenment ideals for some Americans.

The patriotic call for American economic independence also found expression in chinoiserie goods. Many Enlightenment thinkers who celebrated Chinese culture promoted American independence by encouraging the colonists to manufacture fashionable goods themselves, including Chinese porcelain and silk. These patriots were motivated by a desire to rid themselves of forced trade with England by becoming less dependent on British imports to maintain their lifestyles. The chinoiserie manufactured in America in the eighteenth century, in an attempt to meet colonial demand for it, became a tangible reflection of America’s fight for independence.
This thesis argues that the popularity of chinoiserie designs and wares among some revolutionary American colonials went beyond the desire to be fashionable. Producing their own chinoiserie wares provided a means to express their own economic independence. In addition, American writings of the day connected ancient Chinese philosophy with the republican ideals of the Enlightenment. Some leading patriots who embraced neoclassical design and décor because they saw it as embodying Enlightenment thought likely adopted designs and goods “after the Chinese taste” for the same reasons.
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