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Miegunyah Student Project Award Project Report 2021

This report is the outcome of a 2021 Miegunyah Student Project Award, and is the result of independent research undertaken by the student.

I acknowledge that this essay was written on stolen land, the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and that sovereignty has never been ceded. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and I'd also like to extend that respect to any First Nations readers.

### **A History of the World in a Plate: From Japan to China, From Britain to Australia**

In the Russell & Mab Grimwade 'Miegunyah' Collection, there is a delicatious and colourful Chinese Imari plate in a floral lotus pattern (Fig.1). This 20-centimetres-wide plate was made by G.M & C.J Mason, an English potter in Staffordshire, and is clobbered in cobalt, iron-red, turquoise and burnt orange. Although in the entire Grimwade collection this lotus plate is quite inconspicuous, it not only has its own position in the collection but contains an infinite space across time and space. This essay aims to demonstrate the story of this plate, which was produced around 1813 to 1820, and to reveal the tangled connection between the object and its history. This essay has three sections. Firstly, discovering the historical background about the development of the Imari-style, from Japanese Imari to Chinese Imari. Secondly, using visual analysis to elaborate the evolution of the pattern on the plate. Finally, this reconstructs the position of this lotus plate in the Grimwade collection.



Fig.1 G.M & C.J Mason  
*Lotus Plate* 1813-1820  
ironstone  
The University of Melbourne Art Collection.  
Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

## I. From Japanese Imari to Chinese Imari

The name of Imari porcelain is derived from Japan in the middle of the 17th Century. In the 1590s, captured Korean potters<sup>1</sup> brought Chinese technology to Japan and found Kaolinite, the essential clay mineral to produce porcelain, in the area of Arita. From then, the porcelain industry in Japan officially began. From the 1650s to 1690, China entered the war period of the transition from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) and further coupled with the maritime prohibition policy during the early Qing Dynasty, the production and export of Chinese porcelain greatly decreased. The East India Company was compelled to import porcelain from Japan, which promoted the development of the Japanese porcelain industry.<sup>2</sup> There were two main types of porcelain in Japan: the ‘Sakaida Kakiemon (柿右衛門)’ style (Fig.2) and the ‘Kinrande (金襴手)’ style (Fig.3). These porcelains produced in Arita are called Imari in Europe because they were exported from the port of Imari (Fig.4, 5).



Fig.2 *Octagonal bowl with birds and flowers*, 1700-1800  
porcelain, gilt, enamel (Kakiemon ware)  
National Gallery of Victoria Collection  
Purchased with funds donated by Pauline Gandel, 2018



Fig.3 *Plate with Flower Design* 1700-1800  
ironstone, enamel (Kakiemon ware)  
The Ishii Collection

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<sup>1</sup> The Korean potters were captured in the war Japanese invasions of Korea (1592–1598).

<sup>2</sup> For the trade records of porcelain trade between China and the Dutch that have declined year after year, see Volker, pp. 51-55, 124, 131. For the trade record of the continuous growth of porcelain trade between Japan and the Dutch, see: Yamawaki, pp.372-78.



Fig.4

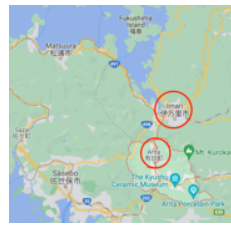


Fig.5

From the end of the 17th century to the 18th century, China entered a period of stability and prosperity. The revitalisation of imperial kilns in Jingdezhen was strongly supported by the emperor Kangxi. In order to gain a larger overseas market, the workers in Jingdezhen began to imitate the Japanese Imari style, not only because ‘the quality is better than Japan’<sup>3</sup> but also ‘the price is much cheaper’<sup>4</sup>. These products soon entered the European market through the East India Company and were called Chinese Imari.<sup>5</sup> There are two reasons that made China Imari extremely competitive in the European market. Firstly, the material costs were much lower in China than in Japan. Japanese potters needed to import cobalt and other pigments from China, so the basic cost was higher than China.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the large production scale and higher technical quality in Jingdezhen decreased the average cost per product, while the situation in Japan was the opposite.

‘(The price) have reached so high that we dare not and must not accede to it lest we shall be reproached in future with not having been able to see that such work would be worth only half the price in Holland. Therefore, we have decided to suspend contracting in general and to ask for further instructions.’<sup>7</sup>

In addition, Japanese Imari had many other problems, such as slow production and being easy to break.<sup>8</sup> As a result, from around the 1750s, Japanese Imari retreated from Europe while

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<sup>3</sup> Vainker, p. 200.

<sup>4</sup> Krah, p. 1197.

<sup>5</sup> The instructions given by the British East India Company to the captain of Loyal Bliss in 1712 clearly said: ‘20,000 cups drawn in Japanese patterns, ... 20,000 plates are the same as above.’ See: Madsen and White, p. 159. In 1734, a letter from the Dutch East India Company mentioned: ‘Porcelain should not only be blue as stated, but also be colored in a second way...like colorful Japanese porcelain.’ See: Jörg, p. 157.

<sup>6</sup> Maeyama, p. 719.

<sup>7</sup> Volker (a), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Xiong, ‘A Study on International Ceramics Competition between Ancient Chinese and Japanese’, pp. 119-21.

Chinese Imari came to dominate the European market, alongside the blue-and-white porcelain and the luxury family-rose porcelain.<sup>9</sup>

Chinese Imari mainly evolves from the style of Kinrande but Chinese potters did not completely imitate Kinrande.<sup>10</sup> Through continuing to use its underglaze of blue and white and overglaze of iron-red with gold, the Chinese potters painted the traditional Chinese motifs instead of the Japanese-style, such as traditional Chinese architecture, landscapes and flowers, or other motifs taken from ancient Chinese drawing books. Meanwhile, in order to improve production efficiency, Chinese potters would simplify the patterns. In addition, the overall colour of Japanese Imari is warmer, while the cold and warm tones of Chinese Imari are basically balanced.<sup>11</sup> However, for the Western market in the 18th century, both Japanese Imari and Chinese Imari became representatives of the oriental aesthetics without strict distinction. The intertwined decorative styles of China and Japan further extensively influenced the exploration of the porcelain styles produced by European countries, such as Meissen in Germany, Slavery in France and the Staffordshire potteries in Great Britain, including Mason.

## **II. The Mason Ironstone China Plate**

Before starting his career in ceramic manufacturing, Miles Mason worked in London as a Chinaman, where he played a key role in the circle of the dealers. Partly because of the East India Company's crackdown on dealers' price-cutting, and partly because of the Napoleonic wars, porcelain imports collapsed and the price increased; therefore, Miles Mason moved to Staffordshire to set up his own manufacturing plant by cooperating with other established pottery factories. Based on the stamp 'Mason's Patent Ironstone China' marked on the bottom (Fig.6), this lotus plate in the Grimwade collection was made in 1813-1820, at the beginning stages of Mason's work.<sup>12</sup> It was made using a new material — ironstone — a kind of strengthened earthenware, which was registered by Charles James Mason, Miles's second son,

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<sup>9</sup> There is no trade record between Japan and the Dutch East India Company after 1757, and the next time Japanese porcelain did not enter the European market until the end of the 19th century.

<sup>10</sup> Kinrande was actually a kind of porcelain with red background and golden line that was introduced to Japan during the Ming Dynasty, and later incorporated local characteristics in Japan, giving Kinrande a more colorful style.

<sup>11</sup> Zhao, 'The Combined Power of Commerce and Art', pp. 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Godden, p. 136.

in July 1813.<sup>13</sup> From then on, the Masons started their own business from the production of oriental style ironstone ware. Compared with the under-glazed cobalt with over-glazed enamels by hand, Mason started to experiment with the transfer print technology in their production. This Grimwade plate was still only made with an under-glaze printed outline and then coloured by hand.<sup>14</sup>

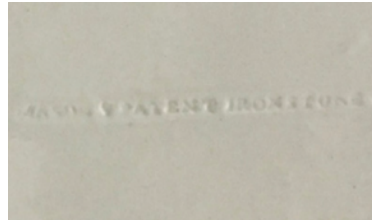


Fig.6

The pattern on this plate is a very popular one of Mason's products. This pattern, or similar patterns with willow, have been used on a lot of tableware. However, the definition of this pattern is controversial. The ceramic expert Geoffrey Godden considered this pattern to be Japanese in his monograph *Masons China and the Ironstone Wares*.<sup>15</sup> While it is marked as a chinoiserie pattern "Waterlily", in Mason's pattern book published by The Mason's Collectors' Club,<sup>16</sup> it should be a 'Lotus' motif that was very popular on Chinese export porcelain from 1710 to 1745.<sup>17</sup> Most of the earlier versions of this lotus shape can be traced back to the Kangxi to Qianlong period, such as a plate in the Liechtenstein Princely Collection (Fig.7) or even other earlier plates in private collections (Fig.8, 9). This floral lotus also became the object of imitation by overseas ceramic manufacturers. For example, another Staffordshire potter, John Turner, used the shape of the lotus and willow as early as 1800-1805 (Fig. 10). Mason had used both patterns based on the collections in the V&A museum (Fig. 11). This Mason lotus pattern was also imitated by contemporary peers, such as another Staffordshire potter, Hicks and Meigh (Fig. 12).

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, the Ironstone technology was invented as early as 1800 under the patent name "Turner's Patent", however, putting the word 'China' on the stamp promoted Mason's ironstone products quickly spreading in the market and become an iconic brand. See Tharp, 'The Origins of Ironstone'.

<sup>14</sup> Which later, instead by the transfer print technology and finally made the ironstone popular in people's daily lives.

<sup>15</sup> Godden, p. 232. See Plate 36.

<sup>16</sup> Lewin, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> Zhao, 'The Combined Power of Commerce and Art', p. 26.



Fig.7



Fig.8



Fig.9

Fig.7 Jingdezhen  
*Imari Plate with Lotus Blossoms* 1736-1795  
 ironstone, enamels  
 Liechtenstein Princely Collection

Fig.8 Jingdezhen  
*Chinese Export Imari with Lotus Design* 1735-1796  
 ironstone, enamels  
 Private Collection

Fig.9 Jingdezhen  
*Chinese Export Imari with Lotus and Willow Design* 1735-1796  
 ironstone, enamels  
 Private Collection



Fig.10



Fig.11



Fig.12

Fig.10 John Turner  
*Lotus table set* 1800-1805  
 lead-glazed ironstone  
 Private Collection

Fig.11 C. & J. Mason  
*Lotus Plate* 1813-1825  
 lead-glazed ironstone  
 V&A Collection  
 Given by Mr T.B. Illidge

Fig.12 Hicks and Meigh  
*Lotus Plate* 1815  
 lead-glazed ironstone  
 Private Collection

Moreover, the blooming lotus in the Grimwade collection is surrounded by a Chinese traditional ‘melon and fruit pattern with colored flower’ that can also be traced back to a classic plate. This renowned plate is *The Parasol Lady* (Fig.13, 14) designed by Amsterdam porcelain designer Cornelis Pronk around 1736 (during the Qianlong reign). There is an export variation version (Fig.15) decorated with a similar surrounding border as the Grimwade one. Chinese potters replaced the complex original design with a Chinese pattern they were familiar with. Mason, furthermore, not only appropriated this design but also gave the ‘melon and fruit’ pattern a richer colour incorporating the styles from different periods in the details compared with Pronk’s variation. Pronk’s variation plate is more Qianlong style. For example, the pomegranate with two blooming seeds is a style of the Kangxi period. The shape of the fingered citron is more abstract, closer to the style of the late Kangxi period. The form of the melon is full and round, with numerous black spots on it, which is also the style of the Kangxi era.



Fig.13



Fig.14



Fig.15

Fig.13 Cornelis Pronk  
*Design of Plate with design of ladies with parasol* 1734-1736  
 paper watercolor (paint) ink  
 The Rijks Museum Collection

Fig.14 *Dish Depicting Lady with a Parasol* ca. 1734-1737  
 Porcelain painted with cobalt blue under and colored enamels over transparent glaze (Hizen ware; Imari type)  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection  
 Dr. and Mrs. Roger G. Gerry Collection, Bequest of Dr. and Mrs. Roger G. Gerry, 2000

Fig.15 Jingdezhen  
*Plate with design of ladies with parasol and melon-flower border* 1735-1796  
 Porcelain painted with colored enamels over transparent glaze  
 Private Collection

In conclusion, this lotus pattern is decorated in a very typical traditional Chinese ornamentation following the style of Chinese Imari. In comparison, another popular pattern from Mason contains typical Japanese elements (Fig.16, 17): Japanese baskets, chrysanthemums and other traditional Japanese patterns. However, the shape of the flower in the background also belongs

to the traditional Chinese painting language. In the Mason syntax at the beginning of the 19th century, one of the popular porcelains in Europe was 'Imari', a convergence of Chinese and Japanese styles. In other words, most Chinese Imari goods present Japanese aesthetics in the overall visual style but were decorated with Chinese elements for the specific patterns.



Fig.16



Fig.17

### III. The plate as a fragment of Australian history

This delicatized Mason plate, produced in Staffordshire, in central England, arrived in Australia across the ocean through a long, circuitous journey and was finally written into the Grimwade Collection catalogue in 1989.<sup>18</sup> Although Grimwade had collected porcelains, ceramics and ironstone ware, including Chinese and European objects, his main interests in the collection were photography, printmaking and other artworks related to Australian history and natural science.<sup>19</sup> As a single plate (even not a set), this plate is inconspicuous in Grimwade's collection. Although it is limited to finding the specific record of Russell and Mabel's original purchase of this plate temporarily, in this section, this essay aims to elaborate that this plate collected by the Grimwade is a historical fragment reflecting the material culture and lifestyle of the Australian colony.

As earthenware, ironstone is more expensive than ordinary earthenware but cheaper and stronger than porcelain. The ceramic industrialisation, the invention of ironstone and the use of transfer print technology both reduced the price of wares to a certain degree and made them suitable for ocean freight. In particular, Mason's patent ended in 1827, and ironstone became radically popular in British daily life as common tableware. According to statistics, in the 19th century, Australia's ceramic market rarely exceeded 2 per cent of British ceramic exports,<sup>20</sup> of

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<sup>18</sup> In the Grimwade Collection catalogue published in 1976 and 1987, there is no record of this plate. In the 1989 catalogue, this plate is listed at the decorative art section.

<sup>19</sup> Museum of Art, p. 1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Brooks, pp. 56-57.

which 80 per cent were ironstone manufactured in British Staffordshire potteries.<sup>21</sup> As well, Mason exported large amounts of products to other British colonies, including North America and New Zealand.<sup>22</sup> For the wealthy class in the colonies, Australia's fashion was almost synchronized with that of Britain.<sup>23</sup> According to Sarah Hayes's research on the earliest groups of settlers in Melbourne, taking the Martin family as an example, who lived at their Viewbank homestead from 1844 to 1874, Staffordshire porcelain represented by Mason had become an essential part of the daily life of the 'established middle class'.<sup>24</sup> Influenced by British tastes, the colourful tableware, particularly transfer-prints, were quite popular among the wealthy middle class in the Australian colony.<sup>25</sup> They were regarded as a tool for the middle class to represent their identity, especially Mason's ironstone, which was evaluated as 'the top-of-the-range ironstones' among similar products exported to Australia.<sup>26</sup>

The case study of the Martin family shows that Mason's chinoiserie pattern may have been used for the formal weekday dinners of the adult members of the family held in the dining room.<sup>27</sup> Even the much colourful Mason's table setting would be specially used for Sunday dinners or the reception of guests.<sup>28</sup> The pattern is an expression of fashion. According to popular styles in different periods, the patterns of the tableware would be iterated by the family. Most of the first-class porcelain or silver tableware was left to future generations or sold by auctions, while ironstone wares were discarded in the daily renewal process. The same archaeological evidence appeared in Andrew Wilson's study of Sir John Jamison at Regentville in Sydney.<sup>29</sup> The fragments of Mason ceramics that appeared in the archaeological excavations of Jamison's residence have proved that wealthy Australian families in the 1820s were already using porcelain products from Britain as a symbol of taste in their daily lives. Over time, in the 19th century, this ironstone with transfer prints tableware played a significant role in most household tableware in Australia.<sup>30</sup> In addition, according to Alasdair Brooks's statistics on

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<sup>21</sup> Logan, p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> Haggard and Adams, p.88.

<sup>23</sup> Allen, 'The Archaeology of Nineteenth-Century British Imperialism', p.44-60.

<sup>24</sup> Hayes, 'Gentility in the Dining and Tea Service Practices of Early Colonial Melbourne's "established middle class"', p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> Brook, p. 157, and Lawrence, p. 22. 2003

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence, p. 13. 1998

<sup>27</sup> Hayes, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> Wilson, 'A Failed Colonial Squire', p. 127.

<sup>30</sup> Brooks, p. 157. This is particularly striking in Australia, as opposed to the biscuit tableware that has become popular in Britain and the United States.

Australian porcelain brands in the appendix of his ground-breaking work *An Archaeological Guide to British Ceramics in Australia 1788-1901*, Mason became a well-known brand until it was sold and renamed Francis Morley & Co. (1845-1858) in the middle of the 19th Century.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, its history as a 'Mason' stage is invaluable for revealing the material and cultural life of wealthy white Australians in the early 19th century. In other words, this plate not only tells the history of British ceramics consumption and trade in Australia but also a part of the early material and cultural history of Australia as a colony. Therefore, in coherence with Grimwade's interest, this plate has become a unique dimension in his collection as part of 'cultural material dating from the colonial period in Australia'<sup>32</sup>.

There are definitely other possibilities as to why Grimwade collected this plate. For example, because of Grimwade's personal interest. First, as a man who was obsessed with botany and the natural world, this plate is decorated with oriental plants and flowers. Second, as a fashionable upper-class Australian, the interest in British art was always part of his life. Third, examining the entire Grimwade collection, he expressed his interest in Chinese art through a series of Chinese figurines. Therefore, this plate could also be seen as a continuation of that exotic oriental collection. Moreover, we cannot ignore the role Mab Grimwade played in the acquisition of the decorative art collection.<sup>33</sup> Was this plate bought at an auction house in the UK and then brought back to Australia, or was it bought in Sydney or Melbourne? Whether, or to what extent, Russell was influenced by, for example, influential collector Alfred Felton and John H. Connell? Or what role did art dealer Joshua McClelland, who was keen on oriental art, play in the Grimwade collection? A further study is required to answer these questions based on potential primary sources.

In conclusion, I want to add that in choosing this plate as the topic of this project, it is not only about a certain people or a country, such as China, Japan, Britain, or Australia, but because it represents the continuous exploration of the material world by mankind for hundreds of years and the continuity of cultural exchange and integration between humans. It has created an infinite memory space, witnessed the history of Australia and also witnessed the history of humans.

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<sup>31</sup> Brooks, pp. 69-71.

<sup>32</sup> Rachel and Aders, p. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 1. A possibility as a decorative object for Mieguyah.

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