

ORIENTAL ART AND THE ORIENT IN LATE RENAISSANCE AND BAROQUE ITALY

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The oriental works of art that found their way into northern Europe during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries inspired important decorative styles, and there is a considerable literature on their history. Little or no attention has been given, on the other hand, to those which drifted into Italy during the same period, for on Italian decorative art the Orient exercised only a limited influence, chiefly on Medici porcelain in the sixteenth century, on Venetian lacquer in the later seventeenth and eighteenth, and on porcelain in the eighteenth.¹ Yet the subject has its own fascination. Until the second half of the seventeenth century, Italy was the power-house of the dominant cultural and religious orthodoxies of Europe, and a study of the reception accorded to the Orient by its highly developed, highly narcissistic civilization has the same piquancy as a study of the reception accorded to the Jesuits in China. Moreover, for historians of oriental art an investigation of the ways in which oriental objects reached Italy and a discussion of the evidence which Italian sources provide for the dating of certain classes of object is of considerable importance. This study attempts both these subjects. Its core is an assembly of references to oriental works of art in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century catalogues and inventories of Italian collections. These have been translated, with comments where necessary, and whenever possible the objects they describe have been identified and illustrated. This material, never previously collected and largely unknown to historians of oriental art, is set out chronologically, and interwoven with some account of the movements of thought which provoked or were stimulated by the appearance of these objects in Italy. It is my hope that this arrangement will reproduce faithfully patterns and directions of acquisition and comment and at the same time be serviceable to those who wish to use this essay as a quarry for source-material. Collecting was one of the activities which expanded significantly during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, attaining to an intellectual purposefulness and respectability from which it has since greatly declined. Printed catalogues of collections of objects first made their appearance in the middle

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¹ For an account of Chinoiserie in Italy, see H. Honour, *Chinoiserie, the Vision of Cathay*, London 1961.

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of the sixteenth century and their steadily increasing scope and bulk are sufficient proof of their importance in Late-Renaissance and Baroque eyes.²

Until the second half of the sixteenth century the learned men, and under their influence the aristocracy of Italy, were chiefly interested in gathering relics of classical antiquity, or in buying works by more or less contemporary artists. But towards the middle of the century this narrow range began to be enlarged in consequence of the Scientific Renaissance, for a new interest in the direct study of nature led several Italian *litterati*, principally physicians like Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) and Michele Mercati (1541-1593)³ to form cabinets of scientific specimens as visual aids to the investigation of the physical world. As more information about the countries of America and Asia percolated into Italy through the medium of news-letters and travel narratives and above all through Ramusio's great collection of voyages, first issued at Venice in 1550, men like these began slowly to comprehend that Europe was only one continent among several. Interest was now stimulated in the artefacts of remote regions, though that interest was ethnographical rather than aesthetic.

But Italian scholars were necessarily limited in their collecting of oriental objects by the lack of any direct contact with India and the Far East.⁴ Chinese porcelain had, of course, long been known and esteemed in Venice,⁵ but even there not many pieces seem to have been current,⁶ and in the rest of Italy porcelain was probably rarer still.⁷ An interesting survival is a large celadon dish in the Museo degli Argenti, Florence (Pl. 25a), traditionally said to have been presented to Lorenzo de' Medici by the Sultan of Turkey. From the middle of the sixteenth century, porcelain was the object of much interest to scholars, partly because of its beauty, partly because the mysterious myrrhine vases of the ancients were believed to have been porcelain, partly because of its reputation as a touchstone against poison, and partly because the technique of its manufacture was unknown. The great Aldrovandi owned a Ming bowl

² The standard work on the history of collecting and museums, D. Murray, *Museums; their history and their use*, Glasgow 1904, is more useful for its bibliography than as an exposition of the subject.

³ For Mercati see his *Metallothea*, ed. G. M. Lancisi, Rome 1717-19. There is a note on the manufacture of porcelain from shells, in which Mercati believed, on p. 305 of vol. i.

⁴ For the few 16th-century Italian travellers in India and the Far East, see P. Amat di San Filippo, 'Biografia dei viaggiatori italiani e bibliografia delle loro opere' in *Studi bibliografici e biografici sulla storia della geografia in Italia*, Rome 1875.

⁵ Marcantonio Michiel, *Notizia d'opere di disegno pubblicata e illustrata da D. Jacopo Morelli*, ed. by G. Frizzoni, Bologna 1884, lists (p. 159) in 1532 'Vasi e Piadene de porcellana' in the house of Andrea Odoni, a virtuoso with a taste for the exquisite and highly wrought, as appears from Michiel's

account of the rest of his collection. In 1530 (p. 174) he noted in the house of Antonio Foscarini that 'li molti vasi di terra sono porcellane', and in 1528 in the house of Giovanantonio Venier (p. 186) that 'Item vi sono molti vasi di porcellana' and in the house of Giovanni Ram in 1531 (p. 209) he saw 'Item porcellane, e infinite altre galanterie'.

⁶ For porcelain in medieval and early Renaissance Italy, see A. Lane, 'The Gaignières-Fonthill vase; a Chinese porcelain of about 1300', in the *Burlington Magazine*, ciii, 1961, pp. 124-32; B. Kriztinkovics & M. Korach, 'Un antico documento sulla porcellana cinese in Europa', in *Faenza*, liii, 1967, pp. 27-30; A. I. Spriggs, 'Oriental porcelain in Western paintings', in *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, xxxvi, 1964-66, pp. 73-87.

⁷ No porcelain is mentioned for instance by Michiel (*op. cit.*) in his notes on Lombardy and Venetia.

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which was posthumously published in his *Musaeum Metallicum*⁸ (Pl. 26a). It is well known that several attempts were made in sixteenth-century Italy, and especially at the Medici court, to discover the secret of making porcelain, and it is probably true to say that of all the objects valued by medieval Italian taste only porcelain enjoyed an uninterrupted vogue into the Renaissance.

During the 1550's two celebrated Italian scholars, Cardan and Scaliger, fought a literary war in which the nature of porcelain, its place of origin and technique of manufacture formed a skirmish. Both based themselves principally on the authority of Duarte Barbosa, whose book had been published in translation by Ramusio in his first volume. Cardan identified the myrrhine vases of the ancients as porcelain, and asserted that the differences between Pliny's description of myrrhine vases and modern wares were merely the consequence of vulgar commercial exploitation:

Who does not see that these were pottery and of that kind which we today usually . . . call porcelain? For it is certain that porcelain is likewise made of a certain juice which coalesces underground, and is brought from the East. But ours is paler and has no scent, and those which are most transparent are most approved, and please us by their leaves and pictures; there is no trace of crimson. In all these things they differ from the ancient myrrhine vases. But changes in the times and in the workmen and custom brought this about. For the price created abundance, and as they studied to increase production, since the nobler material was wanting, they substituted another, and on this account the painting of them was thought up to mend their poverty, so that honour and sincerity departed from these vessels. For the material is either poorer or not the same, or altogether more impure, or not so well worked, or the vessels themselves are dug up before time from cupidity of gain by men impatient of delay. But whatever the cause, the price, region and material and the method of manufacture show that they are the same as myrrhine vases, nor is it less magnificent to dine off these than from gilt and silver vessels.⁹

Scaliger, though he agrees with Cardan's identification of porcelain with myrrhine vases, attacks him for vilifying the work of modern times, an interesting attitude in a sixteenth-century classical scholar:

Who does not hold in the highest esteem that workmanship which renders a material not transparent of its own nature pellucid instead of opaque. Therefore, Cardan, let us be advocates for the arts and abilities of our age, by whose industry the material has been made both purer and to show more excellence in the artist. . . . In the first place the paintings, which by themselves scarcely show, appear delightfully to the eye if held up to the light: the remaining spaces will allow the eye to pass through. . . . We know this, because we found not a few still remaining among the miserable remnants of the ancient ruin of the Scaligers. Wherefore we discovered a third quality. Having obtained fragments of one of these, we have often struck fire with our own hand by rubbing two little pieces

⁸ U. Aldrovandi, *Musaeum Metallicum*, ed. B. Ambrosini and M. A. Bernia, Bologna 1648, p. 231.

⁹ G. Cardan, *De Subtilitate*, Paris 1550, fols. 100v-101r. Dedicated to Ferrante Gonzaga, Duke of Guastalla.

together. We shall add a fourth created by the superstition and imposture of merchants. For they say that it cannot bear poison, but breaks apart. They are made in this fashion. Eggshells and the shells of umbilical shellfish (named porcelains, whence the name) are pounded into dust, which is then mingled with water and shaped into vases. These are then hidden underground. A hundred years later they are dug up, being considered finished, and are put up for sale. . . . They are buried every year and the dates are marked in calendars, from which they know when to dig up those which are mature. The best are brought from the region of China.¹⁰

These legends about the manufacture of porcelain were accepted and repeated by many Italian literati even after the publication of an accurate account in the Italian translation of Alvaro Semmedo's *Imperio de la China* (Rome 1643; the Spanish original was published at Madrid in 1642). Yet some thirty years before 1643 the Florentine merchant Francesco Carletti (c. 1573-1636), relating his adventures in the Orient to the Grand-Duke Ferdinando de' Medici, had contradicted all such stories as fabulous:

It is all nonsense to believe that porcelain is made of so many and such different substances as many have said, for it is purely earth of that quality which it has pleased God to create in the country of Dajam, in the said kingdom of China, which earth is extracted from its mines, so to speak, in abundance, as happens here in these countries with the earth of which pottery is made at Montelupo and elsewhere.¹¹

But Carletti's account of his travels was only printed in 1701. Earlier still, in 1580, as we shall see, that acute and well-informed Florentine, Filippo Sassetti, had copied into a private letter a fairly accurate description, taken from a Portuguese book, of the preparation of kaolin for porcelain.

The earliest surviving piece of Chinese porcelain for whose importation into Renaissance Italy we have any published record, came, like the first printed evidence about its manufacture, from a Portuguese source. A blue and white bowl, now in the Museo Civico at Bologna, was presented in 1554 by King João III of Portugal to the Papal Legate, Pompeo Zambeccari, Bishop of Sulmona from 1547 to 1571, a member of a noble Bolognese family.¹² In 1562 the saintly Frei Bartolomeu dos Martires, Archbishop of Braga, shocked by the plate he saw on the dinner table of Pope Pius IV, recommended the use of porcelain dishes, which, he said, were much cheaper, being commonly employed in Portugal, where they were imported from the Indies. The pope therefore asked the Cardinal Infante Enrique of Portugal to send him some porcelain, which he then distributed among his cardinals, keeping a dinner service for himself.

Beurdeley¹³ has suggested that this anecdote reveals a scarcity of porcelain in sixteenth-century Italy; rather perhaps we should suppose it was not in common use at the tables of the great. The appetite for it increased insatiably with the increase in direct trade between the Far East and Europe. Cosimo I

¹⁰ J. C. Scaliger, *Exotericarum Exercitationum Liber Quintus Decimus, de Subtilitate, ad Hieronymum Cardanum*, Paris 1557, fols. 135v-136r.

¹¹ Francesco Carletti, *Viaggi*, ed. C. Giorgioli, Florence 1878, p. 268.

¹² Published by Sir John Home, 'A Ming bowl at Bologna', in *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, xiii, 1935-36, pp. 30-31.

¹³ M. Beurdeley, *Porcelaine de la Compagnie des Indes*, Fribourg 1962, p. 118.

12. The Signor Marchese keeps other porcelain vessels of various sorts among the most prized things of his house; these he may some day resolve to leave to the Museum; or to have listed among the treasures of his gallery.

Of vessels and other artefacts of wood and other vegetable substances (pp. 288-90)

16. A noble salt-cellar from Goa, in the shape of a most pleasing tower, made of wood, no less light than cork, but so elegant and well-polished, that it yields in nothing to ebony, which it resembles very closely in the hollows there are in it. It is divided into four parts. The first, which serves as a square base to support the others, is hollowed out above to hold the salt and is no different from our commonest European salt-cellars. The second part rests on this base, and is a large cylinder which is hollowed out at the top in a manner which would allow it to be used as a salt-cellar by itself. The other two parts, consisting of a cupola, intended to hold pepper, with its lid, are fitted into this. The whole of this fabric seems as if it were made of jewels, for on the outside it is encrusted with little pieces of mother-of-pearl and gajanda, or as we would say, nautilus shell of Aristotle's second species, set in a certain very black paste whose dark colour sets off all the better the brightness of the glittering fragments. Equally black is the varnish used in its hollows; this not only makes the wood resemble the most highly polished ebony, as was noted above, but makes the surface so bright that you can see yourself in it, showing your reflection extremely well, like the mirrors which are used in the East Indies, of which a large and majestic example is preserved in the domestic Gallery of the Marchese, where the place of pure crystal is taken by the finest black varnish alone, spread, like that of the salt-cellar, over the wood. . . . All the edges of this tower are set with gold in most beautiful ornaments. The best *ébéniste* of Europe perhaps could not make a finer. It is a most treasured gift from the Most Serene Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici, to whose liberality in respect of Indian objects the Marchese also owes the above-mentioned mirror, and likewise a most splendid

17. Knife-case of the same material and manufacture, containing fourteen knives of the finest blades, with handles most excellently carved; this is also preserved in the Gallery . . . and may some day be transferred to the Museum.

The salt-cellar, obviously derived from a European type, was probably made in Goa for European custom.

27. A casket of Indian wood, representing two lutes joined together by their handles, and painted with varnish of a jujube [? purple-black] colour, is worth mentioning here, not for the material, which belongs to another place . . . but because it contains

28. A Chinese balance. . . . P. Menestrier of the Company of Jesus, a scholar of prodigious learning and memory, returning from the Collegio Romano, visited the Museum on passing through Bologna and specified three sorts of its weights for me.

Curiosity about China was lively in the still scientifically-minded Florence of the second half of the seventeenth century. On 31 January 1665 the famous savant Lorenzo Magalotti (1637-1712) and the equally celebrated antiquary

and historian of classical art Carlo Dati (1619-76) caught the Jesuit Father Johann Grüber, who has already been encountered as an informant of Kircher and a visitor to Settala's museum, in Florence on his way from Vienna to Rome. They put him through a series of questions, and Magalotti recorded Grüber's answers in a *Ragionamento* published at Florence in 1697. On the subject of Chinese gardens Grüber said,

they are extremely ordinary things, being hardly more than mere walled meadows for use in playing ball. They have no scented flowers other than carnations: the roses are fine, but without scent, tulips, hyacinths and anemones are not known, not even by name. For the rest the great abundance of water makes the gardens lovely and delightful; it is true that they use no great artifice in showing it off, letting it issue forth as Mother Nature sent it out of the ground. All I have seen that is fine in this way is in the King's garden, where there is a very great sheet of water that falls down a precipice of bronze adorned with relics of trunks and divers leaves, the Chinese being most excellent masters in the art of founding, whence they have splendid trains of artillery and other military weapons obtained by casting.

Of Chinese drinking vessels he remarked:

Ordinary persons drink from earthenware; the nobles from gold and silver rather crudely engraved with the burin, and the great lords from rhinoceros horn, either smooth or worked with carving, with gold mounts enriched with jewels.⁶⁴

A pair of Chinese rhinoceros horn drinking cups, mounted in silver in Western Europe during the second half of the seventeenth century, are now in the Museo degli Argenti, Florence (Pl. 31a-c). Their date of acquisition is not known, but very probably they once belonged to the Grand-Duke Cosimo III (1642, reigned 1670-1723) or one of his family. P. Giovanni Filippo de Marini, a Jesuit missionary in Tongking, whence the Chinese obtained their supply of rhinoceros horns, wrote an interesting account of these cups in 1665.

The gravest mandarins of China, for greater splendour and pomp on the tables they set before their guests and at banquets do not give bowls of glass to drink from, but only cups, worked with graceful carvings, of the hard horn of this animal [the rhinoceros] esteeming that wine drunk in these will make men drink more freely and with the more enjoyment that he who drinks therefrom is free from all suspicion of poison. In order then to know which is the most perfect of the said horns, they put them through a test similar to that customary when it is desired to know which is the most powerful among magnets. With a string they hang up a sword in the air, and if when the horn is twirled and brought near it the sword twirls too and follows the movement, the horn is fine and good, but if it stays still, it is not a good one and little esteemed. Others do not make this experiment,

⁶⁴ Lorenzo Magalotti, 'Relazione della China cavata da un ragionamento tenuto col Padre Giovanni Grueber della Compagnia

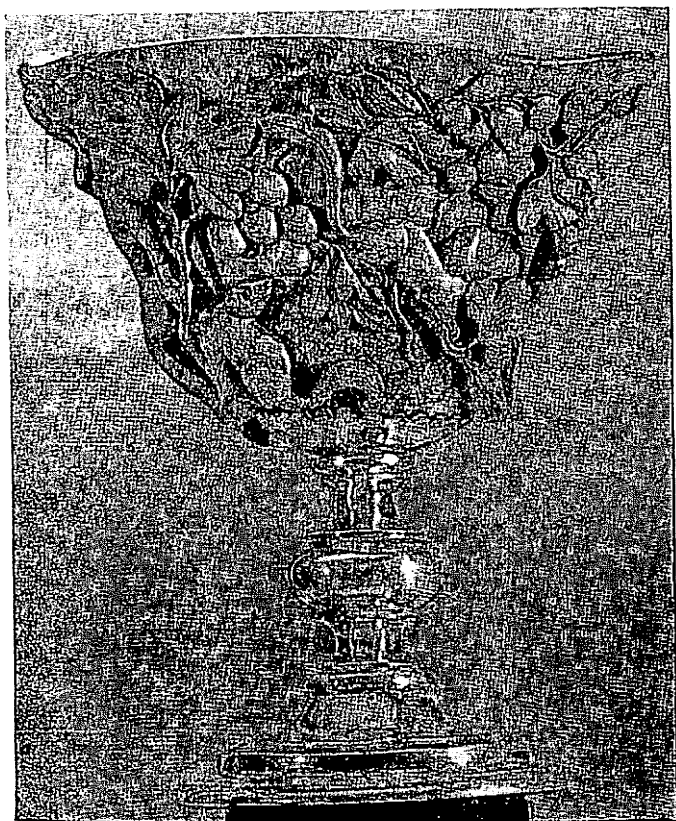
di Gesù', in *Notizie varie dell'Imperio della China*, Florence 1697, pp. 64, 46.



a



b



c



d

a, b, c—Three views of a rhinoceros-horn cup, Chinese, 17th century. Foot European, *c.* 1700. Florence, Museo degli Argenti (*p.* 261)

d—The Emperor Aurungzebe. Engraving by B. Picart after an Indian miniature, probably executed in the Deccan, *c.* 1710 (*p.* 274)

but reckon its excellence by certain spots of gold which begin in the middle and run as if they were veins to its extremity. When such a horn is found with all due qualities, they spend many hundreds of scudi on it. The Tonkinese, rather than working cups in it, use it rather to make handles for their scimitars and knives so as to have a counterpoison in this form always ready in any accident, and they glory in employing a material of such great value for a nobler use than that of the Chinese on their tables.⁶⁵

Grüber also told his questioners that

in China there is no crystal, but a great abundance of glass, and he told us especially of rice glass,⁶⁶ which is beyond a doubt more brittle than any other, but all the more easy to work. Its paste melts and boils immediately as soon as it is put in the furnace, and the thinness to which they bring the very beautiful vessels they form of it is a thing incredible. Instead of iron tools they use rods of thick glass like those artisans among us who work the nicest and most delicate works of crystal by the lamp. . . .

Grüber made only two other remarks of artistic relevance:

They have most beautiful cloths of spun gold, and make very elegant works of drawn gold. But above their art is stupendous in gilding and silvering straw by fire with several leaves of gold and silver, of which straw silvered and gilt they make marvellous works.⁶⁷

At the end of the century porcelain was still being collected with the eagerness of past generations. The inventories of the Gran Principe Ferdinando de' Medici (1663-1713), taken in 1697 and 1713, disclose that he owned great quantities of it.⁶⁸ Second only to porcelain in popularity came lacquer.⁶⁹ Kircher remarked in 1667,

Europe has already learnt how elegant, pleasing and shining it is from the boxes which are yearly brought from China.

He explains that many workmen had tried to find the secret of imitating it, but that none had attained perfection until

at last there came to Rome from the order of St. Augustine, P. Eustache Jamart . . . who knew how to prepare the varnish so skilfully, either by his own invention, or from a communication of the discovery by others, that I do not know if it does not seem in any way different in brightness and polish from things dyed by Chinese craft.⁷⁰

Jamart obligingly communicated his recipe to Kircher, who prints it in his book.

⁶⁵ P. Gio. Filippo de Marini, *Historia et relatione del Turchino e del Giappone*, Rome 1665, pp. 41-42.

⁶⁶ See J. Ayers, 'Chinese glass', in *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, xxxv, 1963-64, pp. 17-27, for other references, including one to glass made of rice from Martino Martini.

⁶⁷ Magalotti, *op. cit.*, pp. 68, 69.

⁶⁸ These unpublished inventories, of which transcripts are in my possession, are too extensive to be published here, and will be discussed elsewhere.

⁶⁹ For export lacquer, see M. Boyer, *Japanese Export Lacquers from the Seventeenth century in the National Museum of Denmark*, Copenhagen 1959.

⁷⁰ Kircher, *China*, pp. 220-2.

The inventory taken in 1706⁷¹ of the museum of Cardinal Flavio Chigi (1641-93), which was kept in the casino of the Chigi gardens, shows that the by now conventional pattern of interest in oriental objects was unaltered in late seventeenth-century Rome. Of the thirty or so certainly oriental artefacts listed, twelve were Chinese or Japanese lacquer, the customary assortment of boxes, bowls and inkstands. There were several books in Chinese, as usual European works in Jesuit translations, Euclid, the life of Christ, a compendium of astronomy. Two embroidered Chinese slippers, with a tuft at the point, three Chinese fans and a pair of large porcelain flasks added their unsensational if miscellaneous attractions. Of greater interest are the 'three pictures woven of little rods of glass of China, one broken'. It is possible that these may have been screen panels. Screen panels of glass rods with pictures painted on them are known, but only from the late nineteenth century and miserably poor in quality. A 'piece of Chinese cane, in the form of a vase, with figures hollowed out in it' was clearly a bamboo brush-pot of a well-known genre in which distinguished work was produced. 'A shell of mother-of-pearl, with decorations and Chinese characters', another 'with a Japanese painting on it in red lacquer' and a nut 'with Chinese paintings' evidence the continuing popularity of such objects, however humble in their own country, with European collectors. A 'Chinese hat made of roots of grass', a 'beaker of Japan, made of roots of grass and silvered inside' and a 'little beaker of Japanese wood, silvered within' complete appropriately the oriental collection of a cardinal who was fond of ivory-turning.

If Chinese porcelain and lacquer were highly prized by all and if Chinese architecture with its stately bridges and Great Wall imposed respect on many Chinese painting and sculpture were generally despised. Probably most Italians would have agreed with Giovanni Gherardini (1654-c. 1704) a Modenese painter whom the French Jesuit Bouvet recruited in Paris for the service of the Emperor K'ang-hi. At the end of his gay little relation of his voyage out to China in 1698, Gherardini, having just reached Canton, dismisses Chinese art with cavalier contempt:

That is pretty much the idea one should form of Canton. It hardly has the air of Paris or of Turin. Long live Italy for the fine arts: the Chinese have as little knowledge of architecture and painting as I of Greek or Hebrew. Yet they are charmed by fine drawing, by a lively and well-managed landscape, by a natural perspective, but as for knowing how to set about such things, that is not their affair. They understand far better how to weigh silver and to prepare rice.⁷²

Of course in considering most, though not quite all European criticism of Chinese art before the late nineteenth century, it must be remembered that

⁷¹ Published by G. Incisa della Rocchetta, 'Il museo di curiosità del Card. Flavio I Chigi', in *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria*, lxxxix (ser. 3, vol. xxx), Rome 1966 (1967), pp. 141-92. The oriental objects appear on pp. 147, 149-50, 154-5, 157-8, 160, 163-4, 168-9, 180-2, 184.

⁷² Giovanni Gherardini [sic], *Relation du*

voyage fait à la Chine sur le Vaisseau l'Amphitrite, en l'année 1698, Paris 1700, pp. 78-79. For Gherardini and other European artists in China see the bibliography in Thieme-Becker, s.v. Gherardini, and G. Loehr, 'Missionary-artists at the Manchu court', in *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, xxxiv, 1962-63, pp. 51-67.