

# BLUE ON GOLD

## The Porcelain Room in Santos Palace

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**PART OF THE HISTORY** of the importation of porcelain from China to Portugal between the early 16th century and the first part of the 17th century is recorded in Santos Palace, the current French Embassy in Portugal. 263 china dishes are preserved in the Porcelain Room of this former royal palace, purchased in 1629 by the Lencastre family and decorated between 1664 and 1687 by José Luis de Lencastre. The dishes displayed on the ceiling and walls represent rare evidence of the palatial decorative adornment of a noble home belonging to one of Lisbon's leading families. They form a representative sample of Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) porcelain production from the reigns of emperors Hongzhi, Zhengde, Jiajing, Longqing and Wanli (16th and early 17th century). A dozen Qing Dynasty pieces (17th and 18th centuries) were later added to the ceiling as replacement elements.

The Lencastre collection marks a temporal record beginning in the 16th century after the opening of the Cape Route to navigation. Via the sea connection from the Mediterranean to the eastern Indian Ocean, Lisbon supplied Chinese porcelain to the European trade route, profoundly altering the trade of products from the East. The porcelain began arriving in the city in large quantities and its consumption became more widespread. As objects of ostentation and luxury, Chinese porcelain gave those who acquired it a status of affluence and Eastern exoticism and the fashion rapidly expanded to other countries. The collection also illustrates the first cultural and commercial relations between Portugal and China and the history of Portuguese presence in the Far East. Portugal's arrival in India is represented by the pieces from the Hongzhi reign (1488-1505), undoubtedly brought during the first journeys and acquired in the Indian Ocean by indirect means. The pieces from the Zhengde reign (1506-1522) mark the period of the first Portuguese contacts with Chinese territory and those from the Jiajing (1522-1566) and Longqing (1567-1572) reigns, in turn, mark the periods of withdrawal from and becoming closer to China and the establishment of the Macau trading post. The collection also indirectly tells the story of porcelain's globalisation throughout Western Africa, Europe, Central



and South America, during the 16th century, a time when the Portuguese were the only Western intermediaries in its distribution. In addition to written information that came from the East, the decoration of Ming porcelain also contributed to spreading the image of a distant empire which had populated the European imagination since the Middle Ages.

The facts mentioned above have been further developed by several studies. However, there is other less well known and recently discovered historical and artistic circumstances that are linked to the porcelain collection at Santos Palace: its relationship to the manufacture of Portu-

guese earthenware of that time and its aesthetic influence on European faience, a phenomenon that originated in Lisbon and lasted almost to the present day.

The secret of porcelain manufacture was unveiled in Europe at the beginning of the 18th century. Previously, European potters were limited to working with fine polychrome glazed clay, known as faience. It is not difficult to imagine the impact that Chinese porcelain had on Lisbon potters at the beginning of the 16th century. They were, in effect, the first European potters to have full access to this blue and white china and to witness the growing demand for it and the large profits it made, reasons enough to give rise to their desire to copy it. This process was not, however, immediate. The representation of decorative elements alien to Western culture in the oldest specimens attracted little interest, but the introduction of figurative motifs from Chinese painting into porcelain decoration at the end of the Jiajing period began to inspire Lisbon potters. It is, therefore, not surprising that the first documentary reference to faience manufacturing in Lisbon “in the style of Chinese porcelain” dates from 1572. Also documented is the existence, around 1580, of a number of potteries in the parish of Santos-o-Velho, where Santos Palace is located, which would have produced examples of blue and white earthenware with decoration copied from Chinese porcelain. This Lisbon earthenware (and the similar productions from Coimbra and later Vila Nova de Gaia) was the first luxury ceramic product to succeed Chinese porcelain. From the last decades of the 16th century, the Portuguese faience was taken by the Portuguese to the north of Europe, Africa, Asia, Central and South America and by the 17th century it was well known in the European colonies in North America. Marketed alongside Chinese porcelain on the Portuguese trade routes, it became the first globally consumed European earthenware.

It would not be foolish to assume that the examples from Santos Palace, owned by the Lencastre family, served as models of inspiration



for the area’s potters. The careful placement of Ming dishes in the ceiling of the Porcelain Room shows the value and status that was attributed to them. Moreover, José Luis de Lencastre owned the pottery on Rua da Madragoa, just meters from the palace. Registration of this pottery appears in the books of Santos-o-Velho parish of 1672, and it is also included in the list of family property, although it is not known since when. It is therefore very likely that the porcelain which is currently exhibited at the MNAA served as a direct model for the manufacture of the above mentioned faience. While under the family’s ownership, the pottery also produced tiles for the outbuildings and gardens at Santos Palace between 1715-17 and 1744-50.

In 1980, the restoration of the Porcelain Room was followed by Daisy Lion-Goldschmidt, a researcher at the Guimet Museum, who prepared the first study of the collection, sharing one of the most important and well preserved collections of Chinese Ming Dynasty porcelain with the international scientific community. Santos Palace has been home to the French Embassy in Portugal since 1909, integrating the French historical and artistic heritage.

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