COHEN&COHEN
CHINESE EXPORT PORCELAIN AND ORIENTAL ART



Chinese porcelain figure group
Qianlong period circa 1750-55

Dutch or Chinese Market

Height 9.75 inches; 25 cm

Provenance: Collection of Nelson & Happy Rockefeller; Espirito Santo Collection, Lisbon

A rare Chinese export porcelain figure group of a standing Dutch couple, the man with splayed feet in preparation for dancing, both decorated in bright famille rose enamels, on a rectangular base.

This is a well known example of such a figure group, being illustrated in Michel Beurdeley's 1962 book Porcelain of the East India Companies. This group is one of the oddest, rarest and most famous types in Chinese Export Porcelain. They do not fit with most other such figures made for export and their market is unclear. Though it would seem that these are made for the Dutch Market (and some were clearly exported to Europe) they may also have been made for the entertainment of the Chinese.

Almost certainly they were made as matching pairs: the first, as here, shows the couple preparing to

dance with the man's feet parted and his arms guiding the woman’s shoulder; the second group shows them whirling in the middle of the dance.

The twirling pose is very likely to have been influenced by a model of a dancing couple that was first made for the Meissen factory and then copied by the Chinese as well as by Bow, Chelsea and Derby. First modeled by Johann Friedrich Eberlein in 1735 for Meissen it was reworked by Johan Joachim Kändler and listed in his Taxa of 1743 as "Harlequin and a maiden doing a Polish dance, possibly a Mazurka". There are very few examples of that group known but when the wreck of the VOC ship Geldermalsen was salvaged in 1985 five damaged examples were recovered, which had lost their enamels due to the corrosion of salt water, and enabled dating to 1752.

This group is in a naïve style and would have amused the Chinese who were known to find European activities very curious.

A most interesting aspect of these groups is the combination of European and Chinese influences: the costumes are in typical eighteenth century European fashion, but decorated with prunus and other flowers in Chinese style. The plinth provides another clue that indicates these groups might have been popular with the Chinese market and not made purely for export, as this style is sometimes found on pieces made for the domestic market.

Perhaps they were "curiousities for those interested in the physiognomy, costumes and social habits of Westerners" as suggested by Sargent (1991). There exist books with illustrations of European figures that were made for the Chinese Court and the Emperor Qianlong encouraged the use of European scenes and figures on certain Imperial items.

A slightly earlier version of this standing couple, on a flattened base and with different moulds for the faces is also recorded (see Cohen & Cohen 2018, No 55). The faces and clothing on this earlier version is the same as found on kneeling figures of Europeans carrying a porcelain vase with a Imperial Qianlong mark, which is further evidence that these figures may have originated in porcelain workshops making wares predominantly for the Chinese market.

The British Museum has on display an identical model as this one - including the unusual circular rimmed hat on the man - but in blanc-de-chine, and without any of the polychrome enamelling. It is described there as Dehua porcelain but the polychrome examples indicate that it must have been made in Jingdezhen.

The National Museum of Ireland in Dublin has a white version of the slightly earlier version.

References: Beurdeley 1962, this example, p21, colour plate V and Cat 2, p149; Du Boulay 1963, p82, No 116, an example; Beurdeley & Raindre 1987, fig 284, an example but the picture appears reversed; Sargent 1991, p220, cat 106 an example of the standing couple; p222, cat 107, the dancing couple; Cohen & Cohen 2002, p44, cat 30, an example of the earlier Tyrolean Dancers modeled after Eberlein, Kändler; C&C 2006, p26, a standing couple and p28, a dancing couple; C&C 2008, p40, a pair of couples fully matched; p42, another dancing couple; C&C 2012, p48, the Tyrolean group with illustrations of a range of models; C&C 2018, No 55, the earliest group.