

## From China to Sicily. The Taste of Chinoiserie in Eighteenth Century Europe

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### Abstract

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The article offers numerous examples from Italian art and, above all, from the art of Southern Italy and Sicily, that demonstrates how the encounter between European and Chinese art generates the coexistence of two expressive registers and the incorporation of Oriental themes in the Western style. The Chinoiserie in Eighteenth Century Europe is a hybrid style, an assemblage of two cultures and a fusion of artistic elements that comes both from the East and the West. This is revealed by some examples which are analysed in this paper: the Chinoiseries by François Boucher or Jean-Baptist Pillement; the Chinese room by the Venetian painter Gian Domenico Tiepolo in Villa Valmarana near Vicenza; the numerous Chinese rooms in Italian courts, from Turin to Naples; the *Casina cinese* (“little Chinese palace”) in Palermo. The contribution concludes with an analysis of the Prince of Biscari’s palace and collections in Catania, which are still little investigated in this regard.

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### 1. Introduction

“What about [...] Jupiter against the lightning rod?” was the question Karl Marx was wondering in a passage of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* quoted by Enrico Castelnuovo at the beginning of Marxist art historian Francis Klingender’s *Art and industrial Revolution* (Castelnuovo, p. XI). The question has wider implications than those concerning the relationship between art and technology. What happens to a specific expressive and formal system in front of radical changes brought about by the encounter with other cultures? What happens to a formal tradition when it faces with the discovery of a new symbolic and iconographic system? What happens to a given paradigm, such as that of Western art and tradition, compared to another, like the Eastern one? In short: what happens to European art when it meets Chinese art?

The following examples, relating to Italian art and above all to the art of Southern Italy and Sicily, demonstrate how the encounter results in a mixture, in the coexistence of two expressive registers, in the incorporation of Oriental themes in the Western style.

If on the one hand the “other” is recognized as such, on the other it is immediately assimilated into an ancient cultural tradition, ready to acquire elements from an “other” and millenary tradition. China captured European cultural interests during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, producing an imaginative form of art called Chinoiserie, which blended Chinese and European elements combining Chinese figurative motifs with European art.

Chinoiserie, which is an assemblage of two cultures and a clear fusion of artistic elements that come both from the East and the West, constitutes a hybrid: European artists and artisans assimilated determined Chinese artistic forms and techniques creating a hybrid style, which was the result of their fascination with the Orient.

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Hugh Honour was the first person who wondered himself why chinoiserie came to be so different from original Chinese art objects. He found the answer: Chinoiserie was the manifestation of an interpretation of Chinese art made by Europe; it is the expression of the vision that Early Modern Europe had of the East and of China in particular. The “Vision of Cathay” – title of Honour’s book - is nothing more than that: a manifestation of an idealized vision of the Chinese Empire that led not to a philological imitation of actual Chinese art, but to an imaginary ‘idea’ of it and of China in a broad sense. It is a European interpretation of Chinese culture. Europe wanted to understand Chinese artistic traditions through a process of cultural blending (Honour, p. 11) which had as consequence an inextricable union between European style and Chinese subjects.

Starting from Honour’s book, many scholars developed interest in this subject and started to focus on it (Impey; Jarry; Davis; Jacobson; Sullivan 1984; Sullivan 1989; Morena).

As Sullivan said: “it is clear that Chinoiserie has very little to do with China. The arrival of Chinese arts and crafts in the seventeenth century worked no transformation in French art; rather, the exotic imports were themselves transformed beyond recognition into something entirely French. Chinoiserie is, more than anything else, a part of the language of Rococo ornament. Even Watteau [1684-1721], who certainly saw Chinese paintings and claimed on occasion to be painting in the Chinese manner, merely played with pseudo-Chinese motifs in a decorative way. So far as we know, he never examined Chinese paintings for what he could learn from them, nor did any European painter or critic in the eighteenth century say anything interesting or perceptive about them” (Sullivan 1984, p. 2).

## 2. Europe

During the Eighteenth century, European focus on China is evident at any levels: in 1735 the Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Du Halde published in Paris his *Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique, Et Physique De L'Empire De La Chine Et De La Tartarie Chinoise* (Du Halde); in 1759 Paul Decker edited in London the book *Chinese Architecture, Civil and Ornamental with engravings* (Decker) which had significant references to chinoiserie; *The Pagoda* at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London, a Chinese-style building built by William Chambers (Bald), was highly admired and replicated all over Europe; Ming Dynasty’s pieces of furniture are one of the categories mentioned and promoted by Thomas Chippendale in his book *The Gentleman and Cabinet-maker* which promotes the production of Chinoiserie furniture and the knowledge of Chinese decoration (Chippendale); in 1743 Austrian empress Maria Teresa had two Chinese cabinets at the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna; Great Britain introduced the ‘Jardin Anglo-Chinois’, i. e. the Anglo-Chinese garden (*Chinese Whispers*); even in Italian Opera, Chinese characters started to appear: it is the case of *Le cinesi* (The Chinese Women), with music composed by Christoph Willibald Gluck and ‘libretto’ by Pietro Metastasio (1735, revised 1749) and *L'ero cinese* (The Chinese Hero) edited by Metastasio himself.

The popularity of Chinoiseries increased at the half of the Eighteenth century, when famous French Rococo painters, such as François Boucher (1703-1770) or Jean-Baptist Pillement (1728-1808), started to insert these objects in their paintings as Rococo style elements.

In 1742, François Boucher was commissioned by Beauvais’ tapestry manufacture to draw six tapestries, titled *La Tenture chinois*, or *The Chinese Series*, representing Chinese society’s ordinary life scenes. Boucher’s tapestry series included scenes of feasting, fishing, dancing in “Chinese style”. Two examples are a *Chinese Marriage* and an *Audience with the Emperor*, inserted in rococo pastorals that he had the chance to know from his study of Italian landscapes and Flemish painters (Perrin, pp. 598-604; Adelson, p. 333). These drawings constitute a highly idealized visual representation of China and Chinese society, and they can be seen as a consequence of the promotion campaign of China made by Jesuits during the Seventeenth century (Guy, p. 21). Boucher himself was a collector of Chinese and Chinese-inspired prints, porcelains, pieces of furniture and other curious items; his curiosity for these objects brought him to design Chinoiseries. His *Chinese Series* represent an example of perfect osmosis between French rococo and Chinese art. They contributed to generate a spread of this kind of phenomenon, also because the commission for their realisation came directly from king Louis XV, who wanted to make a gift to Chinese emperor Kien-Long (Perrin, pp. 598-604).

Many porcelain factories, tapestry manufactories and paintings reproduced Boucher’s works (Honour 94; Ching-Oxtoby), contributing to spread this sort of Chinese imagery. The current studies about chinoiseries focus on the role played by the Rococo style in the transmission of the Chinese iconography and in the contribution for the reaching of high levels of richness in ornament and decoration (Jackson).

This was made through the large use of engravings made by Jean-Baptiste Pillement, painter and illustrator, best known for his engravings representing chinoiserie scenes, who adapted in these works traditional Rococo ornament into his own idea of Chinese patterns suited to English and French taste. Pillement's engravings were imitated throughout Europe and contributed to the spread of the chinoiserie fashion. Therefore, what happened in this context was the melting of stylistic tendencies or better the transmission of a foreign model through the use of a European style: the Rococo style.

Rococo style was certainly suitable to embrace Chinese art's characteristics and to be possibly influenced by that: "The appearance of Chinese art in Europe caused a fundamental change in aesthetic tastes. One may debate how accurately Europeans of this time understood Chinese art - clearly chinoiserie was not the same as Chinese art - but the change in European aesthetic tastes was real. The classical style, which had emphasized that beauty was the result of regularity, uniformity, simplicity, and balance (i.e., that beauty was geometrical), gave way to new aesthetic standards that prized irregularity, asymmetry, variety, and delightful complexity" (Mungello, p. 109).

### 3. Italy

During the Eighteenth century, East Asian-inspired art was relevant in European cultures.

Collectors' cabinets were full of objects with Chinese and oriental origins; European factories attempted to imitate Chinese materials and decorative motifs; Chinese iconographic subjects guided the European artistic production; "Chinese rooms", increased in aristocratic and even royal palaces, where Chinese models, which were present in Europe since long time, were elaborated again and "translated" with European style.

Most relevant Italian rococo artists used to experiment on the Chinese iconographic repertory, actually using the European engravings. The Chinese room in the Villa Valmarana ai Nani, near Vicenza, is an evocation of China (fig. 1).



1. Frescoes in the Chinese Room in the Villa Valmarana ai Nani (Vicenza, Italy) by G.B. Tiepolo (1757)

Its frescoes show scenes and characters made with a Chinoiserie style, taken from Pillement's engravings (fig. 2) and realized in 1757 by the Venetian painter Gian Domenico Tiepolo. They have been admired also by Goethe during his voyage to Italy in 1787 and appreciated in his *Italian Journey* as "delicious things [...] full of joy and beauty". Tiepolo, after Pillement's engravings, imagined for his frescoes four openings which look out on an imaginary and extraordinary landscape populated by strange animals and wired birds, accompanied by characters of the Celestial Empire and traditional porcelains (Morena, p. 138; Impey, p. 171).

In opposition to this Chinoiserie taste, the building owned a Gothic Pavilion as well, which expressed the reuse of stylistic tendencies of previous centuries. Different cultures, Eastern and Western, seem to coexist on the same level.



2. *A New Book of Chinese Ornaments Invented & Engraved by J.-B. Pillement (1755)*

One of the first Chinese rooms created in Italy is the “Salottino cinese” (1732-1736) in the Royal Palace in Turin (fig. 3), made by the Messina-born architect Filippo Juvarra (1678-1736) at the Savoy court for the Duke Vittorio Amedeo II. This Chinese cabinet is significant not only because it is one of the first interior design projects ever made in Italy with a Chinese taste, but also because it shows a large use of original and precious Chinese lacquer panels decorated with gilt birds and foliage on red and black backgrounds, which were bought in Rome in 1732 directly by Juvarra himself. These panels were combined with other imitations of Chinese originals made in 1736 by Pietro Massa, a Piedmont painter, who blended these objects with Rococo decorative elements (Johns, pp. 279-280). Oriental floral motifs are here mixed with western decorations.



3. The Chinese Room in the Royal Palace of Turin by F. Juvarra (1731-1736)

This small Chinese room is only one of the Chinoiserie chambers executed during the Eighteenth century in the Turin's Royal Palace and in the other villas and buildings owned by the Savoy family.

The same Chinoiserie taste existed in Naples, where Bourbons wanted to flaunt to have the same taste of the other European royal courts.

In the Royal Palace of Portici, the Bourbon King of Naples Charles VII had built for his wife, the Queen Maria Amalia of Saxony, the *Salottino cinese* (1757-1759), a famous porcelain cabinet decorated with cartouches, festoons and scenes populated by figurines made in "Chinese style" (fig. 4), which had been moved in 1866 to the Capodimonte Palace in Naples.



4. – 5. The Chinese Cabinet of the Queen Maria Amalia of Saxony in Naples (1757-1759)

It consists of white porcelain panels, decorated in high relief with festoons and ordinary life scenes, in a chinoiserie style (fig. 5), designed by Giuseppe Gricci, a Florentine sculptor who moved to Naples in 1738. This *Salottino* can be seen as a real reinterpretation of Chinese art themes and ornamental and decorative techniques, and not just as example of a simple insertion of Chinese lacquers on the room walls, as it was in the Royal Palace in Turin.

According to British art historian Hugh Honour, the *Salottino cinese* in Naples is “the most elaborate example of Italian chinoiserie decoration” (Honour, p. 90). It is a refined example of Chinoiserie style in Southern Italy but it is - as usual - a result of various influences: the Chinoiserie style, the Rococo style - with scrolling curves, mirrors and gilding, white and pastel colors, asymmetry and decorative exuberance - and the style of Capodimonte Porcelain Factory, that King Charles established near Naples in 1743.

The Capodimonte Factory after producing lots of porcelains and moulded figurines and representations of Pulcinella, traditional Neapolitan mask, started to portrait Chinese characters, without any sort of contradiction with their tradition. Then, even in the Chinese cabinet of Capodimonte the styles are actually mixed: Chinese figures stand next to Rococo mirrors; the lamp, characterized by perfect Capodimonte style floral decorations, is juxtaposed to the walls which are decorated with panels made in Chinoiserie style; the ceiling is made with stucco which is painted so to imitate Chinese porcelain decorations.

The same team made a similar room in Spain at the Royal Palace of Aranjuez, which contributed to the diffusion of the Chinoiserie taste in the Bourbon Spanish court: in 1760, the Capodimonte Factory, with Gricci himself, moved to Madrid to be transformed in the Real Fabrica del Buen Retiro.

#### 4. Sicily

During the Eighteenth century, Chinoiserie motifs similar to those found on chinoiserie furniture and porcelain also appeared on Sicilian walls of aristocratic buildings for the will of noble families, with pagodas, birds, floral designs, and exotic imaginary scenes.

##### 4.1 Palermo

In Palermo there are several examples of this type: “Palazzo Valguarnera Gangi (fig. 6) where one of the two parlors on the sides of the majestic dance hall, between roccaille wooden volutes that support shelves with Chinese porcelains, displays paintings with shrubs, exotic flowers, long-feathered birds and figures of women dressed ‘à la Chinoise’” (Mauro & Sessa, p. 402) made between 1756 and 1757 (Palazzotto 2008, pp. 536-538); “in Villa Airoidi, in the so-called Gallery ‘à la Chinoise’, colored stucco corners represent scenes and landscapes that develop vertically, according to the oriental fashion” (Randazzo, p. 409), made in the last two decades of the Eighteenth century (Palazzotto 2008, p. 549).



6. Chinoiseries in Gangi Palace in Palermo (1756-57). 7. Chinoiseries in Villa Airoidi in Palermo (1780-90)

In these two buildings there is a collection of original Chinese porcelain (fig. 7), preserved with other traditional artworks: figures and puppets in white porcelain (Blanc de Chine); blue-and-white porcelain vases, plates and bowls; Chinese little bronzes; lacquer tables; artwork in ivory and Chinese fans.

The most important example of Chinoiserie in Sicily is the *Palazzina cinese* or *Casina cinese* (“little Chinese palace”) inside the park of La Favorita (Parco della Favorita) in Palermo: a royal summer residence of Ferdinand I and his wife Maria Carolina during the exile period spent in Sicily by the House of Bourbon-Two Sicilies. The building was realized in Chinoiserie style by the architect Giuseppe Venanzio Marvuglia, on commission of the King Ferdinand III of Naples and I of Sicily, and it was completed at the beginning of the Nineteenth century, with its paintings and its garden.

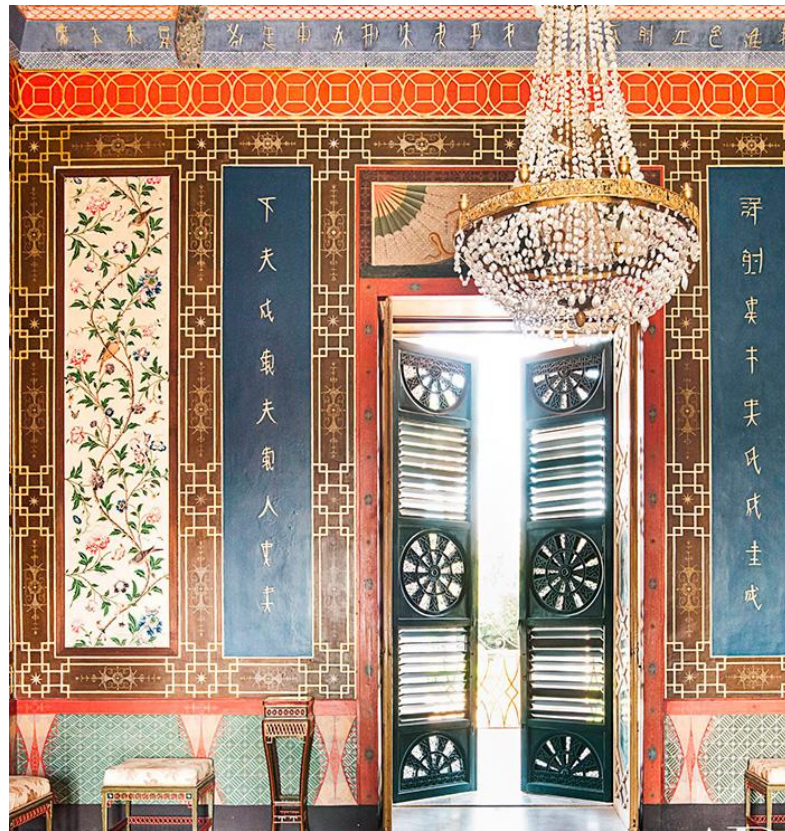
In the same place there was already a “casina di delizia alla Chinese”, owned by Benedetto Lombardo and Lucchesi Palli, Baron della Scala, who had entrusted Giuseppe Venanzio Marvuglia with the task of building his home. The surprise of the Eighteenth-century visitors to see Lombardo’s wooden house was remarkable: “Now who meant that the Lombardo’s Casena had to meet so much luck at the Monarch of the Sicilies [...] a casena is this made entirely of wooden frames, the balconies of tables attached to the big wooden cats with rope, made round, and with a Chinese style and taste, with the domes of each bell hanging and ringing in the wind and therefore it is called Villa delle Campanelle” (Or chi lo volea dire che la Casena di Lombardo dovea incontrare tanta fortuna presso il Monarca delle Sicilie... una casena è questa fatta tutta d’ossatura in legno, I balconi di tavolini attaccati alli gattoni di legno con corda, fatta rotonda, e dalla foggia e gusto cinese, con le cupolette di ciascuna campanella che pendono e suonano al volo dei venti e perciò viene chiamata Villa delle Campanelle) (Villabianca). Still in *Guida istruttiva per Palermo e I suoi dintorni* (An informative guide to Palermo and its surroundings) the author Gaspare Palermo noted: “On the facade hang countless bells, which sound agitated by the wind” (Nella facciata pendono innumerevoli campanelli, che suonano agitati dal vento) (Palermo, p. 738).

The “Casina cinese”, re-built by Marvuglia, is crowned by the acme of chinoiserie: a pagoda-like roof (fig. 8). All its rooms were decorated in Chinese style by Sicilian artists and the walls of the audience chamber were covered with Chinese-made painted silk textile panels (Civiletto, pp. 31-39).



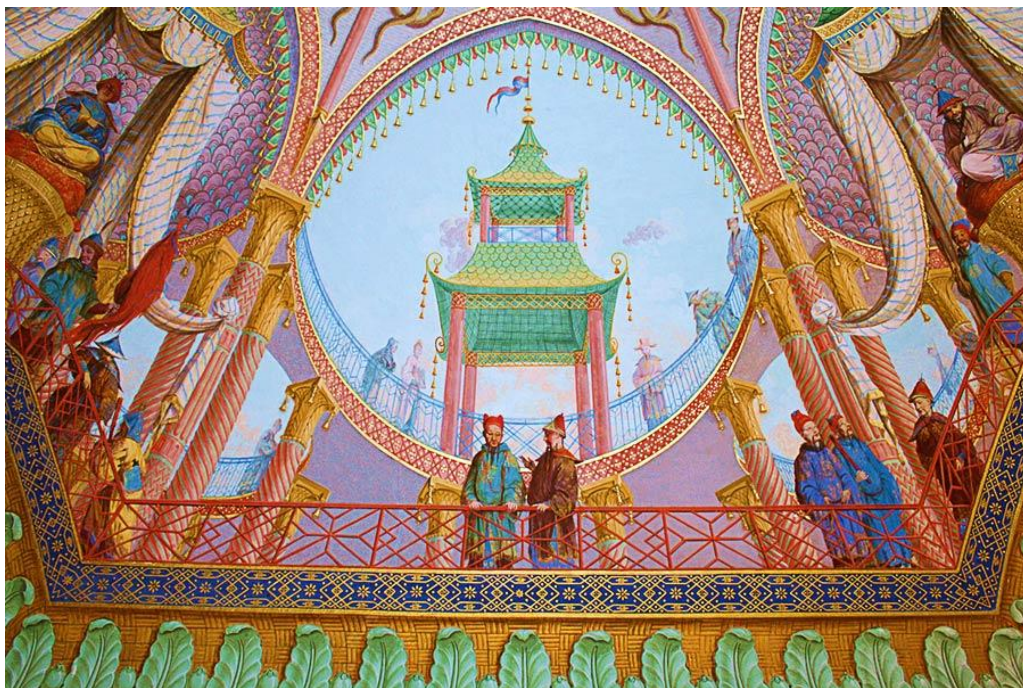
8. The *Casina Cinese* in Palermo by G.V. Marvuglia (1799)

The will of adopting a more sincere closeness to Chinese culture is evident even in the use of specific decorative motives, such as also decorations with dragons as subjects or bands of Chinese calligraphy on the walls (fig. 9).



9. Silk textile panels in the *Casina Cinese* in Palermo

The frescoes were designed by the painters Giuseppe Velasquez (or Velasco) and Vincenzo Riolo, in collaboration with other artists: Elia Interguglielmi, Rosario Silvestri, Raimondo Gioia, Giuseppe Patania and the Neapolitan painter Benedetto Cotardi (Davì, 75-85) (fig. 10).



10. Frescoes in the *Casina Cinese* in Palermo



The huge iconographic repertory used on this case actually comes from Western models, highly diffused in Europe through engravings, in particular drawings made by William Chambers (1723-1796), with representations of characters dressed with Chinese clothes (fig. 11-12). Chambers, the architect of King George III in London and one of the founding members of the Royal Academy, published in 1757 the first of his three treatises in which he admires the mixture between nature and art evident in Chinese gardens and in pleasure grounds: it is *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils*, a large *folio* volume with twenty-one engravings and explanatory texts (Yu, pp. 674-675). He also introduced some artificial elements in the Kew Gardens in London. The most famous part of it was a *Chinese pagoda* indeed, which was imitated all over Europe (Wittkower, pp. 20-25). In the Forties of the Eighteenth century, the young Chambers took part in three trading voyages to China. He was the first European to methodically study Chinese architecture, gardens, domestic objects and Chinese costumes. Chambers' detailed observations and drawings laid the ground for a more integrated and intelligent view, which is reused in Palermo's *Casina cinese* (Davì & Mauro, pp. 100-105).



11. Frescoes in the *Casina Cinese* in Palermo



12. *Designs of Chinese buildings, furniture, dresses, machines, and utensils* by William Chambers (1757)

The result is a hulking mass of Chinese pagodas and swooping roofs, Chinese characters, ornamental patterns and Chinese furniture.

Even Neoclassical painters like Velasquez and Riolo proposed exotic motifs in their paintings, in which the Chinoiserie style is expressed by the use of subjects which were thought to be typical of Chinese culture, with clear colonial-era European mentality. Therefore, as sentenced by Honour about the Trianon of Versailles - the first Chinoiserie building in Europe, built in 1670-1671 following Le Vau's design - the "Casina" in Palermo "was intended to have a Chinoiserie appearance" (Honour, p. 71).

According to Honour: “Various styles were employed to decorate the rooms of La Favorita - one is painted to resemble a Roman ruin, another is Moorish, but chinoiserie predominates throughout the house” (Honour, p. 182). Actually, if we look at the whole building, we can observe that other rooms are featured by different styles and they combine Chinese references, neoclassical elements and Pompeian taste: on the second floor there is the *Ercolana Room*, featured by an empire style, and the queen’s room, made in neoclassical style (Mauro). Then, there is the *Turkish Room*, furnished by triangular sofas, and decorations like stylized suns and half-moons. Neoclassical stuccos are combined with chinoiseries and Pompeian painting in the first example of eclectic building in Palermo, with an arrangement of neoclassical, gothic and Chinese architectural and decorative motifs.

In addition to that, Palermo’s *Casina cinese* owns Italian gardens, symmetric and regular, quite different from the Chinese garden described by Chambers: “The Chinese Gardeners take nature for their pattern; and their aim is to imitate all her beautiful irregularities” (Chambers, p. 12); but: “The Chinese are therefore no enemies to strait lines; because they are, generally speaking, productive of grandeur, which often cannot be attained without them: nor have they any aversion to regular geometrical figures, which they say are beautiful in themselves, and well suited to small compositions, where the luxuriant irregularities of nature would fill up and embarrass the part they should adorn” (Chambers, p. 14)

Palermo, with his examples of Eighteenth century chinoiseries, was ready to welcome a Chinese Room even in the Real Palace, decorated with frescoes in Chinese style made by Giovanni Patricolo (1835), and a *Salottino cinese* (1858-1859) in Palazzo Mirto, residence of the Lanza Filangeri family, commissioned to Giovanni Lentini and Giuseppe Velasco (Palazzotto 2002, p. 33; Sebastianelli & Paternò, pp. 261-271; Alaimo; De Luca; Landino)

#### 4.2 Catania

In Catania, at the half of the Eighteenth century, there was Prince Ignazio Paternò Castello, V of Biscari, who was an eclectic man, one of the most significant figures in the cultural life of Catania, antiquarian and collector passionate about art and archeology. He ordered in 1764 to the architect Francesco Battaglia (1701-1788) to build the *Birds Gallery* and the *Don Quixote Room* (Mancuso 2010, pp. 97-106) in his urban palace, with decorations on the ceilings and on the walls representing oriental scenes and a precious collection of porcelains imported from China, India and Paris (Colle, p. 36; Palazzotto 2008, pp. 544-546). The walls and doors of the *Birds Gallery* (fig. 13) are adorned with a profusion of naturalistic motifs, including a splendid variety of posturing birds, set within a framework of chinoiserie and cartouches. The stucco-works in the ceiling are Chinese scenes in white and light-blue that shows on one hand a Sicilian interpretation of the Rococo style, on the other the diffusion of the Chinoiserie taste with the purpose to imitate the royal European commissions. The *Bird Gallery* and the *Don Quixote Room* are two “of the finest examples of Chinoiserie in the entire island” (Morena, p. 205).



13. The *Bird Gallery* in Biscari Palace in Catania

Something really interesting about the birds painted at Palazzo Biscari is that the ornithological design source was not oriental but Italian. More specifically an important source was the book *La Storia Naturale degli Uccelli*, a treatise written by Saverio Manetti, Lorenzo Lorenzi and Violante Vanni and published in Florence between 1767 and 1776 (Bennett). Visitors of Palazzo Biscari were not only impressed by the variety of painted bird images on the walls (fig. 14-15), but also by the dozens of Bow porcelain birds which were displayed on small shelves incorporated into the carved woodwork, throughout the hall. Even if the source was Italian, the Bow porcelain birds revealed a strong connection with China, because some of these objects made in Bow were actually imitations of imported Chinese and Japanese porcelains, and had in some case the inscription “Made at New Canton”.



14. Bird in the *Bird Gallery* in Biscari Palace in Catania

15. Birds in the *Don Quixote Room* in Biscari Palace in Catania

The 1893 sell at auction inventory of Biscari collection of paintings and art objects shows various items and vases generically defined as oriental; some Chinese vases and several Chinese porcelains are described as it follows: “Lot consisting of a Chinese pagoda, [...] and four small porcelain bijou holders decorated in gold and different colors” (no. 536); “A gravy boat, four cups with saucers, a cup and a Chinese imitation plate, two glasses [...] and a leaf-shaped plate” (no. 537); “Beautiful service for nine people in porcelain decorated with colored landscapes on a blue and gold background. China. Pieces 13” (Mancuso 2014, pp. 117-119).

The presence of these objects in Biscari collection is not a surprise, not only because it corresponds to a certain interest for China that the Prince expressed also in his private library, rich of books concerning the history of China, including descriptions of the Jesuit missions and Oriental travels, but also because of the large diffusion on Western markets of Chinese pottery that the prince Ignazio wanted to collect and asked for to his correspondents. Perhaps, at some point the prince had the chance to take direct relations with China, as long as on September 30, 1785 Francesco Cassini, a correspondent from Livorno, proposed him to become a partner of “an expedition to China through Portugal” leaving from Naples, city where they wanted to establish a sea company for commerce with China.

We actually do not have certainties about the possibility that the Prince accepted the proposal, but we can easily ensure that the Chinoiserie in the Biscari Palace are another example of this typical mix of styles: the Rococo style of the Salon and the taste for the antique, both expressed in the objects collected by Biscari and preserved in his museum, as well as in the building renovations carried out for his will in his Palace, such as in the Princess Apartments, commissioned by Ignazio V of Biscari for his wife, with pavements made using ancient Roman marbles.

In his “The Last Days of Chinoiserie” chapter, Honour demonstrates hostility towards the use of the expression “neoclassical chinoiserie”: the principles of simplicity and symmetry promoted by the neoclassical movement were in opposition to the ones of grace and ornamentation typical of Rococo and of Chinoiserie (Honour, pp. 176-177). However in the Biscari Palace, at the half of the neoclassical age, the taste for antiquities was mixed with Chinoiserie.

Once the taste for Chinoiserie and the praxis in their use was established in the most important European courts, all the Royal or aristocratic families started to adapt their taste to the passion for the exotic, out of simple curiosity or a spirit of emulation, so to show their status and to appear trendy in front of distinguished guests. It was basically a passion like any other, comparable to the fascination for the antique and to other fashions, which did not have, at least in Southern Italy and Sicily, those political nuances that existed in those forms of “orientalism” which have been read as forms of Western style for dominating and restructuring the Orient (Said, pp. 1-28).

Chinoiserie was essentially a taste which could take root because of the widespread diffusion of objects imported from China, because of their availability on the market, because of the writings that divulged descriptions and images of them, and because of the desire for novelty on the part of certain collectors, according to well-known dynamic characterizing the formation of taste (Haskell 1987; Haskell 1976). Then, Chinoiserie was not the expression of a desire to dominate, but rather the result of the inability to fully understand an “other” form of art which had to be incorporated by Europeans into their own styles, so to be understood.

The coexistence of styles and the curiosity for oriental artistic techniques in Western art demonstrates openness to an “other” world (Lach & Van Kley, I, p. 244) and reveals the true intent of clients and artists: making on their own a different culture through a syncretic spirit.

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