

A HIDDEN TREASURE AT PALÁCIO DA AJUDA IN LISBON: THE IDM MONOGRAMMED SET OF CHINESE PORCELAIN OF PRINCESS MARIA DA ASSUNÇÃO

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ABSTRACT

In 1862 a set of silver and porcelain pieces was discovered at Palácio da Ajuda which was omitted from the inventories, during the preparations for the marriage of King Luís I of Portugal to Queen Maria Pia. Shortly afterwards it was disclosed that the porcelain services had belonged to Princess Maria da Assunção and were hidden because of her escape in 1833 to Santarém during the civil war. However, doubt persisted as the services could have belonged to her brother, Prince Miguel. The purpose of this article is to reinforce the fact that they belonged to Princess Maria da Assunção, through a new iconographic and symbolic reading of the porcelain pieces and based equally on archival sources and bibliography.

KEYWORDS

China | Jingdezhen | Canton | Portuguese Royal Family | Necessidades Palace

INTRODUCTION

The Orient is sometimes seen superficially through a Western lens, such as the iconographic reading of Chinese porcelain pieces exported to the Western market in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries specifically commissioned for a specific personality, such as a table, dessert and tea service bearing bearing the IDM monogram (first letters of "Infanta D. Maria", related to Princess Maria da Assunção) that belonged to the Portuguese Royal House.

The services are in the Ajuda National Palace – except for a cup that is in the Vila Viçosa Ducal Palace – and, according to historiography, it has been rumoured to have belonged to the Princess Maria da Assunção (1805-1834) because of the initial of her first name¹, as well as a tea and coffee service and other everyday silver objects.

The historical facts known about the services were scarce and recently a doubt has been raised indicating that the porcelain services could have belonged to her brother, Prince Miguel (1802-1866).

However, after reading a newspaper article, unknown in historiography, about the discovery of the porcelain services and silver pieces in the Ajuda Palace in 1862, during the wedding preparations of King Luís I of Portugal (1838-1889), it was confirmed that this is a set that, indeed, belonged to the Princess Maria da Assunção.

This confirmation was further reinforced by an iconographic reading of the paintings on the porcelain pieces and indicates that they were made for a young woman of marriageable age. This study was also complemented by archival documentation and specific bibliography².

THE DISCOVERY AT AJUDA NATIONAL PALACE

In July 1862, King Luís I of Portugal (1838-1889) got engaged to Princess Maria Pia of Savoy (1847-1911) and decided to move into the Ajuda Palace³. In September, as the building's ground floor⁴ was being inspected, boxes containing a set of Portuguese silver and Chinese porcelain pieces were discovered hidden probably in a ceiling⁵.

1. We would like to thank the Director of the Ajuda National Palace, Dr José Alberto Ribeiro, the curator of ceramic of the Ajuda National Palace, Dr Cristina Neiva Correia, and the former Director of the Vila Viçosa Ducal Palace, Dr Maria de Jesus Monge, for all the support regarding this article.

2. The porcelain and silver pieces are held by several museums, the following acronyms have been, therefore, used for the respective inventory numbers: MNAA refers to National Museum of Ancient Art; PDVV to Vila Viçosa Ducal Palace; PNA to Ajuda National Palace; PNP to Pena National Palace; and PNQ to Queluz National Palace.

3. On the 27 September 1862, King Luís was married by proxy in Turin to Princess Maria Pia of Savoy, who became Queen Maria Pia. The Queen embarked for Portugal and the marriage was ratified on 6 October of the same year in the Church of São Domingos in Lisbon.

4. The ground floor was partially remodeled by the architect of the Royal House Joaquim Possidónio Narciso da Silva (1806-1896) for the monarchs' quarters and for new reception rooms (Silva, 1865).

5. In the original text the word used was *desvão*, which means a space between the ceiling and the roof or a hiding place.



Fig. 01. Portrait of Princess Maria da Assunção, from 1816, attributed to the French painter Nicolas-Antoine Taunay (1755-1830), at Queluz Nacional Palace, inv. PNQ 255A/2 (source: Wikimedia Commons).



Fig. 02. IDM monogram on one of the tea bowls; PNA, inv. 49283 (photo by António Cota Fevereiro).

The King was amazed, and the set was not included in any inventory and none of the Royal Household's former employees knew about it ("Achado valioso", 1862: 2). However, after a short time, it was discovered that the two sets belonged to the Princess Maria da Assunção (1805-1834)⁶ [fig.01] as it was assumed that it had been hidden in 1833, when the liberal army invaded Lisbon and the infanta together with her brother, Prince Miguel (1802-1866)⁷, and the absolutist troops fled to the city of Santarém during the civil war ("O achado d'Ajuda", 1862: 2)⁸.

The Chinese porcelain set should be the table, dessert and tea sets with the IDM monogram [fig.02] at the Ajuda National Palace⁹ and one of the cups at the Vila Viçosa Ducal Palace¹⁰.

6. Her full name was Dona Maria da Assunção Ana Joana Josefa Luísa Gonzaga Francisca de Assis Xavier de Paula Joaquina Antónia de São Tiago de Bragança e Bourbon.
7. His full name was Dom Miguel Maria do Patrocínio João Carlos Francisco de Assis Xavier e de Paula Pedro de Alcântara António Rafael Gabriel Joaquim José Gonzaga Evaristo de Bragança.
8. The valuation of the services was approximately one *conto de réis*.
9. PNA, inv. 49274; 49283 and 50394.
10. PDVV, inv. 2853.

The silver tableware could be a set of silver pieces with the IDM and IDMA monograms belonging to the four different museums: National Museum of Ancient Art¹¹, Ajuda National Palace¹², Pena National Palace¹³ and Queluz National Palace¹⁴.

The silver pieces with the IDMA monogram are: a perfume burner (Queluz National Palace – PNQ, inv. PNQ 1855); a pair of candlesticks (PNQ, inv. PNQ 1837 and 1838); a tray (Ajuda National Palace – PNA, inv. 7942); a teapot (PNA, inv. 10705); a sugar bowl (PNA, inv. ° 10704); a coffee pot (Pena National Palace – PNP, inv. PNP1306) and a creamer (PNP, inv. PNP1333)¹⁵.

The silver pieces with the IDM monogram are: a salver (PNP, inv. PNP1328); a perfume burner (PNP, inv. PNP543); a basin (PNP, inv. PNP554) by the silversmith João Baptista Pereira; a ewer (National Museum of Ancient Art – MNAA, inv. MNAA 876)¹⁶ and a lamp for two candles with a green silk shade (PNQ, inv. PNQ 217A)¹⁷, but the latter was mentioned in 1854 in the orphanological inventory of Queen Maria II (1819-1853)¹⁸ at the Necessidades Palace in Lisbon (February 2019: 152) and would certainly not have been in the boxes discovered in 1862 at the Ajuda Palace.

We therefore have a set of pieces that belonged to Miguel and a second set of pieces belonging to Maria da Assunção, which we need to investigate in more detail. The fact that both had their first names beginning with the letter M and used the same IDM monogram has naturally led to certain confusions and raised certain doubts.

On the 5 October 1910, after the establishment of the Republic, most of the silverware and one of the cups from the tea service were at Necessidades Palace (APNA, 1911: 652v.).

The porcelain services have representations taken from Chinese literary works, which we'll go into next. The services at Ajuda Palace had the following types and respective quantities: 2 soup plates; 4 dinner plates; 6 dessert plates; 7 plates with a curved edge¹⁹; 3 plates with a flat edge²⁰; 1 sweetmeats dish²¹; 1 elliptical platter; 5 saucers; 5 tea cups (PNA, inv. 49274) (Vila Viçosa Ducal Palace – PDVV, inv. 2853); 5 tea bowls (PNA, inv. 49283) and 1 bouillon cup²² (APNA, 1911: 1196v. a 1198).

These services show some signs of use as the same can be noted in other nineteenth century oriental porcelain services from the same palace. Curiously, the oldest European porcelain services show obvious signs of intensive use, and some are also missing several individual pieces, indicating that they were broken at the service of the Portuguese Royal House²³.

11. MNAA, inv. MNAA 876.

12. PNA, inv. 7942; 10705 and 10704.

13. PNP, inv. PNP543; PNP554; PNP1306; PNP1328 and PNP1333.

14. PNQ, inv. PNQ 217A; PNQ 1837; PNQ1838) and PNQ1855.

15. The tray, the teapot, the sugar bowl, the coffee pot and the creamer bear the hallmark of the goldsmith António Gomes da Silva from Lisboa and were a set (Godinho, 1991: 273-275). The goldsmith António Gomes da Silva was registered in 1798 and left for Rio de Janeiro at the same time as the Portuguese Court, where he also had his workshop. There, the goldsmith Inácio Luís da Costa made the crown of the Kings of Portugal (PNA, inv.4863) in gold, silver, velvet and iron (Godinho, 1991: 128-132).

16. The ewer is at Queluz National Palace since 10 January 1989.

17. At the Queluz National Palace there is a tureen (PNQ, inv.no. PNQ 1635) without the original base (replaced by another in gold metal) with the monogram MA that may also have belonged to the Princess Maria da Assunção.

18. Daughter of King Pedro IV of Portugal (1798-1834) and mother of King Luís. King Pedro IV was the brother of Princess Maria da Assunção and Prince Miguel.

19. They are 16 cm in diameter.

20. They are also 16 cm in diameter.

21. It is 18cm long and 15cm wide. The 10 dishes with a diameter of 16 cm and this sweetmeats dish were classified as relish dishes.

22. Referred to as a sugar box in the republican inventory.

23. As we can see from the quantities of pieces described in the republican inventory of the various tableware services. The inventory was carried out between 1911 and 1914 (APNA, *Republica Portuguesa. Serviço de Justiça. Autos cíveis d'arrolamento dos bens moveis existentes no Paço d'Ajuda, que era habitado pela ex-rainha D. Maria Pia e por seu filho D. Affonso*).

HIDDEN MEANINGS IN THE SET OF FAMILLE ROSE PORCELAIN BEARING THE IDM MONOGRAMME

Regarding the monogrammed, unmarked, porcelain pieces from the collections at Ajuda Palace and Vila Viçosa Ducal Palace, dated, probably, from the early years of the nineteenth century, they belong to the *famille rose* palette.

The *famille rose* porcelain is characterized by the decoration of polychrome motifs painted over the glaze with a greater intensity of pink and carmine enamels, the colors which, due to their alleged introduction to China by Jesuit missionaries (Bellemare, 2022: 147-168) at the end of the seventeenth century, were nicknamed *fangcai* (literally foreign color).

However, the manufacture of the polychrome enamels commenced in the fourteenth century during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), after the Mongol invasions into Europe opened up trade between Europe and China, resulting in the transportation of wares and a transfer of *cloisonné* technology to the East (Xiaoping, 1990: 30-38). During the Qing dynasty, the technique and use of enamels were later adapted to the porcelain decoration for a very limited and extraordinary production of pieces which, due to their exorbitant cost, were only intended for the imperial court. The entire process of decoration, painting over the glaze and firing was carried out by court officials in the imperial workshop (Ko, 2017: 13-47) in the Forbidden City in Beijing, who perfected the technique through the multiple layers of glazes that came directly from abroad, producing pieces that were unsurpassed for their chromatic and iridescent quality.

During the reign of Yongzheng (1722-1735), Kangxi's successor, the pink and carmine colors were favored over the translucent porcelain called *wucai* (five colors) that combined green, red, yellow, blue, and purple, which was in vogue at the time. In fact, the type of *famille rose* porcelain reached its peak of perfection in Jingdezhen under the leadership of Nian Xiyao and Tang Ying. At this time, this production was already using locally synthesized glazes (Ying, 1899: 19-23).

The pieces destined for the imperial court maintained high levels of execution, decorated predominantly in a pink tone based on enamel plus colloidal gold. Valuable pieces are known from the period of emperor Qianlong, son of Yongzheng, some of them with motifs inspired by the work of Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), an Italian-born Jesuit missionary who became one of the most influential painters at the Chinese imperial court under the name of Láng Shining.

However, the typical porcelain pieces of *famille rose*, even considering the most exquisite, were never representative of the taste of the Chinese elite (Forbes, 1982). Specifically intended for export, a considerable number of *yangcai* (literally foreign colors) porcelain services with armorials from European noble families were commissioned in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, in the city of Guangzhou, called Canton by European merchants and officials, it became common to produce this type of porcelain with polychrome decoration, whose characteristics consisted of the representation of medallions with human figures in oriental garb. Very popular in European circles, it was part of a family of porcelains that came to be called *fencai*. Today, the term *fencai* (literally soft colors), which only appeared in official Chinese porcelain archives at the beginning of the twentieth century, is the most common used term to replace *yangcai*.

Some of the scenes represented can be traced to well-known Chinese subjects of porcelain decoration, such as the representation of the *wéiqí* (literally encircling board game) disputed by two men in one of the saucers (*zhadou*) (PNA, inv. 49281) [fig.03], while others belong to the decoration from well-known scenes of the *Romance of Western Chamber* which were recurrent in other porcelain pieces.



Fig. 03. Saucer; 3x13Ø cm; PNA, inv. 49281 (photo by António Cota Fevereiro).

At that time, the decoration of scenes related to *Western Chamber* had reached great popularity. The extent of this success is thus described in *Tao Ya*, a commentary on porcelain, written by the scholar and art collector, Chen Liu (Hsu, 2011: 66):

“The pottery painters of the Kangshi period were very skillful. Porcelains produced in the private kilns (kehuo) are decorated with drama themes from *Shuihuzhuan* (the Water Margin) and *Western Chamber*.

The brushwork on the drawing of private kiln porcelains is simple and full of rustic delight. This kind of effect is difficult to achieve”.

The *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiangji*) has come to be regarded as one of the most popular and influential stories in classical Chinese literature²⁴. The final version in drama form, dates from the end of the thirteenth century, by Wang Shifu (Shifu, 1995), although its content had been reformulated from a short prose tale, written by a poet who lived during the Tang dynasty, Yuan Zhen (779-831), entitled *The Story of Yingying* (little oriole). The novel has also been translated as *Story of the Western Wing*.

Briefly, the narrative focuses on the love relationship, and on the rational archetypes of the Confucian philosophy of the current society, between a young academic, with few economic resources, Zhang Sheng, and the beautiful Cui Yingying. Unparalleled in terms of the psychological verisimilitude of moral behavior during the Tang dynasty, the classic version of the drama, written by Wang Shifu, during the Yuan dynasty, in 21 (or 22) acts, focuses, however, on the freedom of each one to choose the partner that suits him or her and against pre-arranged marriages. Both characters, in the drama, reside temporarily at Pujiu (Universal Salvation) Temple, near the Tang dynasty capital of Chang'an in the Shanxi province.

Thereafter, the novel underwent multiple reprints, during the three hundred years of the Ming dynasty. However, when it comes to adaptation in porcelain decoration, themes linked to the romance re-emerge intermittently during the Ming, but more significantly, throughout the Qing dynasty (Yibin, 2002: 68-81). After the devastation caused by the war, the imperial kilns of Jingdezhen, from 1683 onwards, resumed working activity, largely restructured and under new prospects for production, and tried to reach increasingly appealing themes for decoration.

Although many of the decorative scenes concerning *Story of the Western Wing* have been recognized in porcelain, some have not been properly studied²⁵. In general, the iconographic themes pre-established by woodcut prints, during the Ming dynasty, allow for the identification of some scenes, while others reflect a probable change in the perception of the literary text, still displaying stylistic innovations aimed at a foreign clientele, and therefore remaining somewhat obscure.

One of the saucer dishes (*zhadou*) (PNA, inv. 49279) [fig.04] has a representation of two figures, facing each other: the male figure is standing with a fan in his hand while the female figure is sitting on an elegant rickshaw. Although it is more common to see the male figure riding a horse, there is no doubt that this is the sad farewell of the pair of lovers, when Zhang Sheng is forced to leave Yinying for the capital to pursue his academic studies²⁶.

Of great interest is the animal and flora decoration pattern on the borders of the saucer dishes, the teacups and tea bowls inside rims and the elliptical platter [fig.05,06]. The theme of plants and insects had been extremely popular in painting, reaching a high level of naturalism by the Song Dynasty (960-1279). However, a printed manual of Chinese painting, compiled during the early years of the Qing Dynasty, *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* (*Jieziyuan Huazhuan*), an important early example of color printing, made available ready-made models for painters learning the techniques of landscape and natural life painting. The models' adaptation to painting on porcelain, through sketchy and spontaneous brushwork, was also a reminder of the fleeting existence in the natural world while conveying traditional good wishes and blessings.

The crab, *xiè*, which we see represented in the set, is particularly favored because its name is a homophone of *xié*, meaning harmony, a condition further intensified when there are two crabs. The fact that they are also associated with rice stalks (*hé*), forms the rébus *xiéhé* for peace with harmony because the *hé* of rice stalk is a homophone of peace, *hé*.

24. In China it used to be said that only the Confucius books could rival the *Western Chamber* reprints.

25. The first study in the West on the decorative theme of the *West Chamber* in Chinese porcelain that we know of is due to Craig Clunas (Clunas, 1983: 69).

26. This representation freely copies the illustration of the woodcut print "A feast with tears" in the *Guanhuatang diliu caizi Xixiangji*, from the early Qing dynasty (1644-1911). National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 04. Saucer; 3x13Ø cm; PNA, inv. 49279 (photo by António Cota Fevereiro).



Fig. 05. Saucer and tea bowl; PNA, inv. 49279 and 49283 (photo by António Cota Fereiro).



Fig. 06. Platter; 2,5x25,7x19,7 cm; PNA, inv. 50394. Palácio Nacional da Ajuda, 82228 DIG, Lisbon, photo by Gonçalo Barriga, 2023 (source: Museu do Oriente, Lisbon).

The frog, *qingwa*, is associated with humidity and fertility, with an association to Nûwa, the first ancestral female entity, and to the moon, where its eggs hatch and the tadpoles fall to earth transformed into dew. It is a constant symbol of prosperity. Around it, we see the five-petalled crimson flowers on the bare branches of the plum tree (*Prunus mume*), which symbolize winter and the desire for the early blossoms in spring.

Butterflies, which represent summer, convey various other blessings based on the similarity in sound of the name (*húdié*) with *fúdié* (*fú*-blessings, and *dié*-to pile up). Just as popular is the representation of tree peonies, with flowers of dense curling petals. They symbolize wealth and honor, known as *fùguìhua* (*fù*-fortune, *guì*-top post, *hua*-flower), and represent the spring season.

Less usual is the animal which resembles a conch. It should be a freshwater river snail, or "paddy field" snail as it's called in Chinese writing. A common food in southern China, the snail may have an association with a woman of marriageable age. Many oral traditions across Asia, Europe and America tell of the transformation of a freshwater snail into a woman, after it has been captured and taken to a man's house. The Chinese version that has been most studied dates to the Jin dynasty (265-420), highlighting the importance of female virtues in the domestic sphere (Ting, 1978: 68-69), although other versions emphasize their celestial quality and shamanic abilities. The dragonflies (*qingting*) circling nearby is a harbinger of summer with the qualities of delicacy and lightness of being, "a symbol of instability and evanescence" (Lai, 1971: 53). They also represent such ideals as those honored in the structured Confucian world where the importance of family name and reputation were elements of an ordered society.

Another interesting drawn insect is the praying mantis. Its stealth movements have made it a symbol of meditation and contemplation. Also, it reflects the autumnal season. It moves towards the clump of yellow blooming narcissus (*Narcissus tazetta*) (Krahl, 1987: 61), which are not often seen on porcelain decoration. Its name in Chinese (*shuixian*) means water fairies and is associated with the Eight Immortals and longevity, symbolizing the arrival of spring. Nearby, a caterpillar (or silkworm) conveys the natural order of things through transformation and metamorphosis, the active principles (*bianhua*) of both Daoism and Chinese Buddhism, such is the changing and the sequence of the four seasons.

Two of the most popular and loved insects in Chinese culture are also represented in the borders, the cricket and the katydid. Their songs are greatly admired. While the katydids, known as *guoguo*, a name that sounds like *guó* (country, state, or nation), with their chorus of chirping sound, announce the coming abundance as '*envoys from ten thousand states are paying tribute to the emperor*' (Shixiang, 1993), the stridulation of the cricket symbolizes courage and fighting spirit. Furthermore, heard during the hot days of summer, the sound, like a spinning wheel, serves to remind people of the coming autumn and winter.

CONCLUSION

Often, our fascination with the Orient is generally limited to first impressions and a superficial taste for *chinoiserie*, and we rarely delve into its symbolism and iconography, particularly that which was painted on utilitarian services in China and exported to the Western world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Through the reading undertaken of the iconographic details and referred symbolic hidden meanings, and Chinese literature representations present as central motifs in the decorations, it is the authors' opinion that the porcelain set monogrammed IDM which was discovered at Ajuda Palace may indeed have belonged to Princess Maria da Assunção, as there are hints of a possible commission for a young woman of a marriageable age underlying the context of good omens.

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

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