# The intricate legacy of chinoiserie explored in Monstrous Beauty



The Metropolitan Museum of Art's latest exhibition, titled Monstrous Beauty, delves into the intricate history of chinoiserie—an artistic movement that thrived in 17th and 18th century Europe, characterised by the imitation of Chinese aesthetics across various domains including home decor, gardens, architecture, and literature. The exhibit explores the significant impact of chinoiserie on modern conceptions of womanhood and femininity, presenting an argument that reshapes traditional narratives around these themes.

Curated by Iris Moon, Monstrous Beauty reveals that chinoiserie initially resided within the male sphere. Wealthy collectors, referred to as “princely” collectors, compiled luxurious artifacts in carefully arranged cabinets. However, as the aesthetic seeped into mainstream commerce, women began to engage with it in increasingly prominent ways. Moon identifies Mary II, who reigned alongside her husband William from 1689 until her death in 1694, as a pivotal figure in this transition.

“Mary II really personalized the language of chinoiserie,” Moon explained. “She makes this consumption of exotic luxury goods a part of her power and presence.” Mary, while residing in the Netherlands, developed a substantial collection of ceramics influenced by chinoiserie, and upon becoming queen, she brought this collection back to England, thus introducing a new aesthetic to her homeland.

Mary II’s influence extended beyond the mere accumulation of goods. Moon recounts, “She goes to Holland as a teenager with William, discovers this treasure trove of luxury objects that are being acquired through the Dutch East India Company, and develops her own taste.” Mary’s engagement with chinoiserie allowed her to symbolically “give birth” to a style that profoundly shaped women's experiences in England.

The exhibition posits that, despite Mary’s need to navigate personal struggles, including a series of miscarriages, her legacy was not solely defined by her biological status. “I wondered what would it mean to shift that narrative of giving birth, from giving birth biologically to giving birth to a style,” said Moon. This notion asserts that Mary’s embrace of chinoiserie enabled women to redefine their domestic spaces through the inclusion of porcelain vases and decorative items.

Chinoiserie's proliferation introduced a plethora of fantastical imagery into women's lives, showcased in the exhibition through items like elaborate tea sets, which played a crucial role in integrating tea into British culture. Tea consumption evolved from a foreign luxury into an everyday habit, an evolution described in the exhibition's catalogue. “Consumption and taste naturalized this foreign commodity into a fully English habit,” Moon observed, highlighting the transformative nature of chinoiserie.

This burgeoning taste for porcelain, however, was not without its critics. Notably, writer Daniel Defoe expressed concern over this new consumerism driven by women, labelling it a "fatal excess" that could lead families into financial strife. His patriotic argument emphasised a preference for British-made products over foreign imports.

Chinoiserie also shifted the prevailing standards of artistic beauty at the time, moving away from the traditional depiction of the nude female form to a collection of whimsical and sometimes monstrous porcelain figures populating middle-class dining settings. “You could get away with saying more uncomfortable and weird things right at this miniature scale,” Moon noted, as she reflected on the genre's capacity to challenge artistic norms and expand creative expression.

Monstrous Beauty also bridges historical themes with contemporary artistry, showcasing modern works by artists such as Jennifer Ling Datchuk and Lee Bul. Datchuk’s piece, Pretty Sister, Ugly Sister, critiques beauty standards through porcelain plates adorned with hair in contrasting styles, while Bul’s sculpture, Monster: Black, offers a striking visual commentary on the historical styles of chinoiserie. “They’re meant to be a critical lens on to the past, in dialogue visually with the historical works of art,” Moon explained.

Throughout her curation of this multifaceted exhibition, Moon admits to her complex relationship with chinoiserie. “I don’t actually like chinoiserie,” she revealed. “I’ve always gravitated to the neoclassical.” Nevertheless, she acknowledges the necessity of examining this historical aesthetic, particularly as it resonates with her identity as an Asian American woman. “I knew I was going to have to confront it on some level and ask why I felt such discomfort around this style,” she stated, encapsulating the broader conversations that chinoiserie continues to provoke.

Monstrous Beauty thus stands as a rich exploration of chinoiserie's legacy, highlighting its role in the evolution of consumer culture and identity formation for women, while also encouraging dialogue around its place in contemporary art and aesthetic values.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.metmuseum.org/press-releases/monstrous-beauty> - This press release from the Metropolitan Museum of Art introduces the exhibition Monstrous Beauty: A Feminist Revision of Chinoiserie, which examines the history of chinoiserie through a feminist lens. It highlights how chinoiserie shaped modern conceptions of womanhood and its impact on European culture.
* <https://www.elledecor.com/life-culture/a64432086/met-exhibition-monstrous-beauty-chinoiserie/> - This article provides further insights into the exhibition, discussing how Monstrous Beauty blends historical works with contemporary pieces by artists like Yeesookyung and Lee Bul. It highlights the feminist critique of traditional narratives around femininity.
* <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/monstrous-beauty-a-feminist-revision-of-chinoiserie> - The official exhibition page at The Met provides detailed information about Monstrous Beauty, including its focus on recasting negative stereotypes through female empowerment and featuring nearly 200 historical and contemporary works.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_II_of_England> - This Wikipedia entry on Mary II of England offers context about her life and reign, which is relevant to understanding her influence on introducing chinoiserie in England and how it became part of her royal presence.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinoiserie> - The Wikipedia page on chinoiserie provides historical background on this artistic movement, detailing its spread across Europe and its characteristic motifs and influences.