

Qualia as Value and Knowledge: Histories of European Porcelain

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ABSTRACT

Porcelain is, today, a familiar material of dishes, figurines, vases, and tiles. As commodities, they are enregistered social indexicals, so that the aphorism fits: you are what you drink, eat, or in this case eat on—or know how to admire as collector or connoisseur. This does not yet tell us, however, what qualities are picked out as shared by object and user, on what axis of social distinction. I argue that this everyday material, exactly because of the varied qualities it has been presumed to embody, has been swept up in changing regimes of knowledge, in economic strategies, and in making political and ethical discourses persuasive. In European history over the last few centuries, it has been embedded in diverse axes of differentiation, enlisted and changed not only as sign but also as material in strikingly different ontological projects.

Porcelain is, today, a familiar material of dishes, figurines, vases, and tiles that are judged kitsch or very fine, depending in part on their provenance, age, brand, delicacy, and decoration. As commodities, they are enregistered indexicals that signal social identities. The aphorism fits: you are what you drink, eat, or in this case eat on—or know how to admire as collector or connoisseur. The qualities presumed to belong to the objects are projected onto the user/appreciator. This does not yet tell us, however, what qualities are picked out as shared by object and user, on what axis of social distinction. What values are instantiated by such constructed resemblances and what qualities are thereby opposed, ignored, or erased? I argue that this everyday material, exactly

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because of the varied qualities it has been presumed to embody, has not been limited to signaling person-types (identities). Rather, it has been swept up in changing regimes of knowledge and value, in economic strategies, and in making political and ethical discourses persuasive. Over time, it has been embedded in diverse axes of differentiation, enlisted and changed not only as sign but also as material in strikingly different social and ontological projects.

I first noticed porcelain as an ethnographic puzzle during the Cold War. A major eastern European lament at the time was the shortage of high-quality goods. As Krisztina Fehérvári (2013, 35) has argued, state socialism in the 1970s and 1980s was much like a disreputable brand: in contrast to supposedly efficient western capitalism, consumer goods produced in the eastern zone of Europe were assumed—in both east and west—to be shoddy, ugly, unfashionable, and unavailable. They reflected badly on those who made and used them. Why, then, did Hungarian emigrés of my acquaintance in the United States flock to Hungary for highly decorated porcelain plates, bowls, and figurines made there by the Herend manufactory? Nor was this a tribute to one producer. Other Hungarian porcelain was also desired. And friends in Austria (the *west*) were eagerly buying blue-and-white porcelain dinnerware made by Meissen, in *east* Germany. In what seemed an unlikely reversal, people in the west were searching out a luxury product from the east. The issue was less a matter of brands than demand for a specific material. What exactly “is” porcelain, I wondered, and found surprisingly many answers, sedimented in 500 years of European discourses.

The entanglement of materiality and discourse in this way is not unusual. The western tradition of conceptual opposition between language and the “real” material world, between mind and body, signs and things, is therefore currently under revision. The goal now is to grasp the conventional cultural meanings of, say, a porcelain plate taken as a sign in a specific social order, while simultaneously analyzing how the plate’s undeniable material qualities—say, its hardness and nonporousness—are themselves semiotically achieved through an institutionally and ideologically guided formulation that provides categories for objects and materializes particular qualities in them that shape how the plate is known, used, and actually produced. Reciprocally, changing embodied uses of the plate-object transform what category it “counts as” and the qualities it is presumed and seen to display. This means that the qualities of objects are not fixed; their construal is a semiotically mediated, open-ended, historical process. What seems like the “discovery” of some qualities and the denial of others is the stuff of conflicts that enable novel and contingent sociopolitical conse-

quences. A realist (philosophical) reading of Peirce's semiotics can put such observations to work in empirical analyses.¹

Accordingly, my aim is to look closely and over a long historical stretch at the different formulations of porcelain as a category (type) and as an existing, materialized substance (token), enlisted in various European projects and not easily constituted (entextualized, objectified) as a singular "it." Primarily, my essay concerns the semiotics of porcelain. But since porcelain originated in China, in some ways this story resembles as well the colonial histories of commodities circulated over vast expanses. Semiotic analyses of enregisterment have paid most attention to the signaling of person-types as social identities. Until recently they have paid too little attention to other kinds of differentiation, related to the contingent qualities of substances. The circulation narratives, on the other hand, have often assumed that the mobile materials—foodstuffs, textiles—are stable and have self-evident qualities, though perhaps diversely interpreted.² Drawing on both kinds of narratives, I argue that it is through the enregisterment of qualities it has been variously presumed to instantiate—in objects—that the material currently known as porcelain has participated in quite different social institutions, embedded in diverse regimes of knowledge and value. It has contributed to the persuasiveness of political and ethical discourses, while also playing a role in regional and national economic competition. Certainly, formulations of porcelain's qualities provide clues to the social identities of its users, owners, and appreciators. But well beyond that, they have mediated interests and values and production processes, shaping contingent historical consequences.

The small ethnographic puzzle I posed at the start led me into many areas of scholarship that touch on this material's complex history.³ Instead of a chro-

1. In linguistic anthropology these oppositions were questioned via critiques of Saussurean structuralism and the *langue/parole* distinction, treated as a remnant of the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy. Attempts to formulate a political economy of signs seemed to be a contradiction in view of these deeply layered oppositions, and exacerbated by splits within anthropology of the 1970s between so-called materialist and idealist approaches (Sahlins 1976). Works on culture and language by Gramsci, Althusser, and Raymond Williams provided inspiration to refuse or undermine these dichotomies through a move to ideology as both discourse and practice: see, for instance, Silverstein (1979), Hill (1985), Gal (1989), Irvine (1989), and Woolard and Schieffelin (1994). Keane (2003, 2005) connected a semiotic perspective with studies in material culture.

2. It is important to note the exceptions, and thanks to a reviewer who pointed out that Anne Meneley (2014) and a few others have studied the circulation of commodity foodstuffs and how they are transformed as part of the process of their mobility.

3. In addition to the studies cited in the text, I note the historical work on material culture, global studies of design, and art historical scholarship on the "minor" arts that have all contributed to a rich literature on porcelain from which I have benefited. Older writings that address the amateur collector are worth reading as evidence of the kind of interest shown in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The porcelain companies produce gorgeous catalogs for their exhibitions that are informative of marketing strategies. General histories of porcelain, ceramic techniques, and collecting were essential starting points (Dillon 1904; Gleeson 1988;

nology, I present here several chronotopic sketches of “porcelain,” chosen to juxtapose key changes in the institutions and categories in which it was embedded, and the qualities formulated, attributed, and wrought. Properties we can now discern (in retrospect) and impute to this substance emerged only when circumstances and interests incited (re)analysis or interfered with it. The sketches are neither complete nor a progress narrative in which we now know what porcelain really “is.” On the contrary, controversies around “it” as material, label, and sign continue.⁴ For this very reason, a comparative view is useful in showing how qualities are changed as they are recontextualized, and as axes of differentiation are recast in what one might call the material’s interdiscursivity or translations.

Enregistering Materiality

Analysis of linguistic registers has long encompassed objects and substances. Speakers regularly perceive the co-occurring features of a register as including more than speech, and see register features as naturally “belonging together,” resembling each other, even when they are different in modality (sound vs. sight vs. touch), and most relevant here, vary in media (speech vs. food vs. objects as in clothing or other decoration). One early example was Dick Hebdige’s study of the way “Mod” and “Ted” youth styles in Britain in the 1960s were matters not only of music, but also of dress, speech, and objects. In all these realms, the styles of Mods shared qualities that contrasted with those of Teds, as seen by the youth themselves (Hebdige 1979; see also Eckert 1989; Agha 2011).⁵ Moreover, expressive registers were perceived to display the attributes of their stereotyped speakers or situations of use—and vice versa—for those in the know. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) showed, distinctions in the qualities of object-types diagram differences in people types, for those who can take them up. The making of these links—enregisterment (Silverstein 2003)—can be studied through (meta)discourses, narratives, and through justifications that explain them, since discourses regiment the associations, as do institutions and practices.

A key point is that no register stands alone. Enregisterment always relies on axes of differentiation along which are placed—by convention—types of peo-

Carswell 2000; Pierson 2007, 2012, 2013), as were exhibit catalogs (e.g., Seipel 1997) and cultural studies of particular periods in Europe when porcelain was especially briskly marketed, aesthetically influential (as in *chinoiserie*), or where it was a subject of controversy (e.g., Porter 2010; Schmidt 2015).

4. A brief internet search of “porcelain” revealed ongoing debates about what it is, what qualities it does or does not have, whether it is a separate category of ceramic or not, and so forth. I return later to issues related to the label itself.

5. The work of Heinrich Wölfflin ([1888] 1979) on art styles in Europe was a similar approach.

ple, objects, modes of action and events, all as contrasting in attributed qualities. Porcelain objects, like any objects, are enlisted in registers as part of this semiotic process of differentiation (Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal 2013). Much of the story below recounts the different axes of differentiation into which porcelains have been recruited, within specific institutional contexts, and the quality distinctions that they come to instantiate and signal via the discourses of the time. Those qualities are reanalyzed and changed when taken up by new institutions and ideological frameworks that thereby endow the objects with the power that the objects in turn materialize. It is important to get a more technical sense of this semiotic mediation.

The qualitative contrasts defining axes of differentiation rely on a particular Peircean notion of “quality.” In addition to his distinction among signs according to the way they represent objects—as index (by contiguity), icon (by similarity), and symbol (by convention)—Peirce also proposed that signs differ in their “degree of reality.” Qualities are mere potentials (Firsts) like color, or hardness. They can be experienced only if they are embodied in some real-time material occurrence or object (Seconds). And real-time instantiations of abstract qualities are necessarily shaped by conventions (Thirds), that is, by cultural categories. *Qualia* are the embodied, conventional, and experienceable forms of abstract qualities; what I have been calling imputed or attributed qualities. The qualia of experience are not inherent in objects; they are the result of the way persons, relying on conventional discourses (interpretants), embedded in institutions, take up objects and experiences (Chumley and Harkness 2013). It is the construal of the same qualia in many different experienceable objects and events that results in iconic (resemblance) relationships.

Importantly, Nancy Munn (1986) showed that contrasts in qualia of sense experience, occurring across many modalities and media, are swept up in wide-ranging systems of cultural value. They motivate people to action. In Munn’s ethnography, for instance, many Gawa practices—from ways of eating, to cleaning, to building canoes—aimed to increase the highly valued qualie of “lightness” in things, bodies, and activities while avoiding its opposite, “heaviness.” The acquisition and use of porcelains in the European past likewise rests on (changing) conventions that allow the construal of qualia that fit with—or modify—existing axes in regimes of value.

Webb Keane (2003) emphasized a further implication of Peirce’s approach, in a sense the flip side of Munn’s insights. Qualia are properties of real-time objects or events that, inevitably, have many more properties than are taken up in a particular conventional axis of contrast. This provides potentials for

future engagements, what James Gibson (1979) called *affordances* (see also Manning 2012). While Munn's Gawan social actors make canoes that are valued as "light," these vessels as existing objects (Seconds) also afford opportunities for encounters in new circumstances that, as one can see in retrospect, afford the semiotic construal of other properties—say, colors and smells—for other projects than the enhancement of lightness. In this way, attributed qualities of objects do not preexist semiosis, they are the *result* of semiotic processes. As I argue, there is a productive open-endedness to the use and handling of existing objects over time: new interpretants (i.e., ideologically motivated uptakes) reformulate the category that an object instantiates and the qualities it is taken to display in the context of institutions that, animated by projects built on regimes of value, (re)construct object-type classifications.

My discussion is pieced together from the scholarly literature on various aspects of porcelain objects in circulation over centuries. But my methodological strategy differs from the "tracking" of commodities. I do not engage the gift/commodity problematic nor that of exchange; my focus is on Europe, not global commodity networks (Foster 2006). Although colonial encounters, where distant perspectives collide, proved instructive (Thomas 1991), I have also drawn on Jane Schneider's (1978) reconstruction of desire for cloth and colors in Europe and Sidney Mintz's (1986) for sugar. This is a story of porcelain's diverse qualia in situated, institutionally mediated engagements. It asks how regimes of value create demand by transforming objects and materials through changes in the cultural category they "count as" and in the institutions and forms of expertise responsible for their valuation and authorization (Appadurai 1986; Myers 2002). These concerns are crucial in the "moments" I recount in Europeans' handling of porcelain and its contingent effects.

Wunderkammern

Porcelain bowls first came to Europe via Arab trade routes. They were brought from China by way of the Indian Ocean, through the Red Sea, and then overland. Elite Italians had some familiarity with them by the 1400s when the doges of Venice received bowls from visiting Middle Eastern dignitaries, as did Charles VII of France and Lorenzo de' Medici. In China the bowls had been produced in high volume for a millennium, part of regional commerce with Southeast Asia. They were extraordinarily rare in Europe and notably different from local pottery (Ayers 1985). A few paintings of the Italian Renaissance—by Mantegna 1501, by Bellini 1514—prominently picture blue and white bowls. Scholars have been able to identify these as matching the colors and exact pat-

terms of Chinese porcelain wares of that period. Tellingly, the paintings place the bowls in sacred scenes, as used by the Magi and in a rich feast of Greek gods, testifying to their perceived place in valued social events. The bowls certainly indexed the rulers who displayed them to visitors and, through the paintings, displayed them to a wider audience. Somewhat later, as such bowls reached northern monarchs in larger numbers—the Habsburgs in Prague and Vienna—they were shown at nonedible meals of display (*Schauessen*).

What qualia of rulers' identities did porcelain bowls and vases convey? Arguably they were signs of great political reach, establishing the fame of the ruler in the eyes of select audiences, since porcelain objects were evidence (the material index) of far-reaching diplomacy, gifts or booty from Ottoman rulers or other distant potentates. In sixteenth-century statecraft, porcelains indexed trade networks and flows in/out of the treasury, distinguishing those with and those without rich connections (Smith and Findlen 2002, 4).

Porcelain's ontological properties at that time made it part of yet another regime of value. News reached Europe of rare medicinal clays reputed to be effective against fevers and the plague. The recipe for porcelain was understood to be a combination of such clay with equally rare conch shells, lending porcelain medicinal qualia of a wondrous kind (Kerr 2004a, 2004b). These formulations distinguished porcelain from European wares. Other properties were materialized when forms of interaction with porcelain objects were transformed by new technologies. For instance, trade with China had existed since Roman times, but ceramics were rarely part of the long overland route that brought silks and spices to medieval Europe. It was when Portuguese mariners opened a sea route to China around 1517 that the weight of ceramics was perceived an advantage and the reliably nonporous surface of porcelain became pragmatically known and consequential. Porcelain was used as ballast by Portuguese and later Dutch and English vessels. Being immune to water damage, it traveled well and protected more delicate and valuable cargo, like silk and tea.

Portuguese merchants brought shipments of porcelain to Lisbon by the 1550s, sparking a vogue for it among nonaristocratic elites across the continent. It was no longer so rare, nor a sign of far-flung diplomacy. What values formed the source of the demand? In addition to royal courts, porcelain was prominent in the institution of the *Wunderkammer*.⁶ Also known as a cabinet/chamber

6. Some scholars distinguish between the royal *Schatzkammer* (treasury) and *Kunstkammer*, which highlighted paintings, and the *Wunderkammer*, which had a more various content, as discussed here, and was not necessarily aristocratic. Yet the similarities are more striking, and it is not clear that the owners made such distinctions; differences of size and richness seem more important (see Impey and MacGregor 1985).

of curiosities or *studiolo*, these collections were owned by universities, cities, and individuals high in church, state, commerce, and scholarship. The first cabinet was established in Vienna circa 1550, the last and most renowned lasted in Dresden until 1721, but they existed from Uppsala to Petersburg, London to Seville and Rome. Bankers, pharmacists, botanists, medical doctors participated. It was the scene for the practice of natural philosophy. The cabinets varied in size and focus, but all included porcelains. They were crammed as well with what now seems an odd array: corals, antiquities, monstrous births in bottles, coins, stuffed birds, huge jewels, unicorns' horns, armadillo skins, a two-handed fork, "the head of a rat from the Indies," "quinine bark from South America," other products and artifacts of the New World or any distant place, pieces of stone that looked like landscapes, highly wrought metalwork and machines.

As in the case of aristocratic porcelain, the qualia of collections were understood as qualia of their owners, but on different axes of value. The cabinets were to be "theaters of the world" (Gschwend 2004). The diversity and excess of contents was taken as index and icon of the owner's vast and diverse knowledge. Collectors vied with each other in the degree of expertise their collections exhibited. Cabinets were "spectacles of learning," not of power and conquest (Swan 2007). By the 1560s there was a manual—by Quiccheberg, a Flemish physician—for creating a collection. In 1594 Francis Bacon recommended the practice as a way to contribute to "your wisdom" by amassing books, and a garden of plants, beasts, birds, and fish that would create "in small compass a model of the universal nature made private" and a "huge cabinet" for "whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine has made rare in stuff, form or motion; whatsoever singularity, chance and the shuffle of things hath produced . . . instruments and vessels" (cited in Impey and MacGregor 1985, 1). The catalogs of the objects themselves suggest that the principles of selection and evaluation were diversity, universality, and rarity—a way to encompass the unknown macrocosm by collecting its microcosmic tokens. Historians have noted that the encyclopedic desire for "strange things" (*frembden Sachen*) undermined any rigid system of classification (Kemp 1995).

Nevertheless, the naming of cabinets as chambers of "curiosity" and "wonder" is revealing. "Curiosity" was a way of knowing. "Wonder" was the ontological property attributed to objects that evoked it. Curiosity had been a blasphemous violation of Christian belief, but gained respectability in the 1500s. It became an admired form of intense attention to phenomena and their causes (Daston 1995). Christian wonders had been matters to view with passive awe, but in a more secular framework wonder became a property attributed to an

object for its active “capacity to generate in the spectator surprise, delight, admiration” to “convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention” (Greenblatt 1991, 51, 42). The cabinets dazzled viewers with “wonder” in this sense. Each object, too, was to “evoke the same gasp of admiration and surprise . . . enlisting the rare, the bizarre and the richly various.”

Items were admired that seemed to migrate between poles: liquid/solid, secret/accessible. Most especially, the classical dichotomy of the world into natural/man-made (*naturalia* and *artificialia*) was crucial. “As a habit of understanding, the Aristotelian opposition between art and nature still framed the mental world of early modern Europeans . . . [but it was] wonders moving between art and nature [that] fascinated the proprietors of the collections” (Daston and Park 1998, 265). Objects were chosen that violated these conventional classifications, throwing into relief the convergences of art/nature. Nowhere was this boundary more blurred than in the elaborate workmanship and hidden properties, the mysterious causes, of the collected items (Daston 1995, 398). Proof of a mutual imitation by art and nature provided provocative examples for Bacon and Descartes to argue that nature could be explained, just as mechanical objects could be.

In this regime of value/knowledge, porcelain was good to think with, and so contributed to natural philosophy. It came from a distant land that, partly due to its production of porcelain, was admired as a higher, richer civilization (Boogaart 2003). And no European was quite sure what porcelain was. Controversies raged about its composition. Some speculated that it was a precious stone, or a liquid that solidified after decades underground. The theory that it was made of crushed shells was long popular. The Italian source word in the European languages (*porcellana*) meant cowrie shell, a substance from the Indian Ocean, classified as natural. But Henry VIII’s inventory mentioned a “porsellan glas” bowl, hence artificial. Others thought the bowls were made of mud, stone, or “marvelous liquid” (Kerr 2004b, 46). True to their interest in practical knowledge, collectors tried repeatedly to make porcelain themselves, but failed. This ignorance of its “causes” added to its wonder.

Treated in concert with materials deemed to be natural such as nautilus shells, coconuts, and rhinoceros horns, porcelain bowls too were fitted with elaborately wrought “mounts” of gold or silver, making them unusable as bowls but creating the kind of nature/artifice hybridity desired by philosophy. The mounts, made of precious metals, were signs of the great value attributed to porcelain and, some have suggested, an additional form of hybridity in being a way to appropriate foreign objects via European workmanship. The mounts

often included the names of the European owners. In the process the delicate objects were punctured and drilled, yet—to the surprise of collectors—remained intact. This was seen as evidence that porcelain itself fused contradictory qualities. A Portuguese observer in 1563 said of it: “so fine and transparent that the whites outshine crystal and alabaster . . . [they] dumbfound the eyes, seeming a combination of alabaster and sapphires” (cited in Finlay 2007, 426). Contemporary observers noted its great fragility and thinness, yet extreme hardness and durability; glossy shine as of colored silks, yet flawlessly white. Translucent like gauze or silk, yet stiff. Likened to egg shells, but also to metal.

Porcelain was seen as quite unlike any European product. It thus added tangible evidence to an existing axis of differentiation in which the advanced knowledge of China contrasted with the ignorance of Europe. The new natural philosophy called for sensory engagement as a route to understanding materials, making the noted material properties of porcelain from China an intellectual stimulation, and the question of its composition a provocation. It is noteworthy that earlier interpretations were not dropped but “translated” so medicinal wonder was recast as a wondrous tactile property and sound resonance (when tapped) that, among vessels, only Chinese porcelain manifested.

Commerce, Luxury, and Imitation

The scholarly collectors who studied and gifted curiosities in *Wunderkammern* did not always admit that money was involved in their acquisition (Meadow 2002; Smith and Findlen 2002). But one collectors’ item—porcelain—had always been bought and sold as well as gifted in China as in Europe.⁷ Rather than gift versus purchase, the more revealing contrast is between the treatment and understanding of porcelain as “specimen”—a rare token of the empirical world that requires explanation—and its treatment as “merchandise”—a product made for marketing. The two categories were related, a point to which I will return. But they were embedded in different institutions. The *Wunderkammer*—with the forms of knowledge, expert identities, and practices of valuation just discussed—enregistered porcelain as a curious material specimen, in contrast with substances whose composition was understood. Coexisting with the *Wunderkammer* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the institution of the East Asia trading company that treated porcelain as merchandise. The companies had their own practices and expert discourses of value and axes of differ-

7. Moreover, it was an admired “rarity” in the contemporary categorization, unlike items from Africa that Europeans derogatorily labeled “fetish” (Pels 1998); both rarities and fetishes could be commodities.

entiation. They shared the categorization of porcelain as merchandise with Europe's pottery industries, with which they competed fiercely to supply a market in ceramics.⁸

European imports from Chinese kilns, mostly from the “porcelain city” of Jingdezhen, reached gargantuan proportions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Wrestling control of Asian trade from the Portuguese, the Dutch in 1602 captured two Portuguese vessels and auctioned their porcelain cargo in Amsterdam. The profits and sensation that resulted are reputed to have persuaded the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to enter the porcelain market (Finlay 1998, 168, 182). The VOC eventually imported in subsequent decades an estimated 43 million pieces of porcelain; the English, French, Swedish, and Danish companies shipped at least 30 million, and there were millions not recorded because “privately” traded.⁹ In accounting for this volume, the standard histories cite demographic increase in Europe and active marketing that addressed the growing “middling classes” in Britain and the Low Countries. At the start of the seventeenth century, most of Europe was eating from dishes of wood, coarse pottery, or pewter; by the end of the eighteenth century porcelain was in common use. The newly enlarged classes of artisans, traders, and professionals did not copy the aristocracy, as often assumed; they led in patterns of consumption (Berg 2005, 4). Even the “working poor” participated: In 1700, a third of such households in Amsterdam owned at least one piece of Chinese porcelain; the median was eleven pieces (McCants 2007).

8. In the study of Chinese imports, the decoration of the surface has been a major issue. By contrast, in this essay I focus on reactions to a narrower definition of the materiality of porcelain, leaving decoration aside. Decorations have varied from single color, to the famous blue and white, to multicolored; from depictions of naturalistic or abstract flowers and plants to people, gardens, and landscapes; to writing of various kinds. Vessels and wares with all these kinds of decoration have received the sorts of comments about their material that I am discussing. A major theme in the literature that I do not take up has been the mutual influence in design between China and regions receiving Chinese wares that also made their own ceramics—southeast Asia, Japan, India, east Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Mexico—and among all these. Chinese potters adapted designs from others or those requested by clients. Who copied whom; what motifs were invented where, and taken up by whom: this is fascinating and also well understood (see Finlay 1998, 2010; Carswell 2000; and the disputes with younger scholars who question the generalizations about “global culture” of porcelain: Gerritsen and McDowall 2012, Pierson 2012, among others). My contribution asks different questions.

9. Constituting about 5 percent of the VOC's shipments during this period, porcelain yielded annual profits of 80–100 percent (Jörg 1982, 93). European trade with China in porcelain as in everything else involved multiple layers of agents and entrepôts, and was often mediated through India and other colonial venues. Changes in China of course influenced what the companies could import. According to Robert Finlay's (2010) account, the Ming dynasty after the 1550s was relatively open to trade, but after their defeat by the Qing in 1644 there was a virtual stoppage of porcelain from Jingdezhen, which did not resume until the 1680s. During this hiatus, the companies imported from Japan, where potters had learned Chinese techniques. Meanwhile, in Europe, realignments of maritime power away from the Iberians followed the British victory over Spain (1588) and Dutch independence from Spanish Habsburg rule after the Thirty Years' War (1648), all of which deeply affected the trade in porcelain.

How were these objects encountered? What qualia were formulated, imputed, and indeed actualized that provoked the impressive demand? The mass imports were not of the highest quality by Chinese standards, yet they were seen as luxuries in Europe. In classical and Christian thought, however, luxury was fraught with moral danger. It was corrupting and decadent, a sin of debauchery like gluttony and lust: a vice of the rich that encouraged disorder among the poor. In the eighteenth century, however, a redefinition of luxury emerged that had far-reaching economic and moral consequences. Arguably, the tokens of porcelain and a reconceptualization of the category to which they belonged played a key role.

The early success of the VOC made the Dutch the first to engage in the widespread consumption of porcelain, but there was little discussion of it. For the Dutch, dealing with luxury was more a matter of practice than discursive theory (deVries 2003). Calvinism and republicanism taught moderation, or at least its appearance, and these were not violated as long as novel purchases were seen as matters of “comfort,” not display, the opulence of interiors not exteriors. This was the practice of what Jan deVries calls “new luxury” as opposed to the “old” one linked to sin and corruption. For the middling sorts, “comfort” included “interior decoration and dining culture.” Compared to the usual eating utensils, imported porcelain was easier to clean, colorful, and much more resistant to chipping. The range of quality and quantity could signal fine degrees of differentiation among middling purchasers (deVries 2008, 124–31). Once again, porcelain signaled an identity, indeed, a new middling category of household type. To do so, it was seen to display newly construed qualia, resulting from different engagements with the objects themselves and hence different materializations: porcelains had never before been in everyday use. But if ease of cleaning and handling were crucial, an aesthetic aspect linked to interior decoration is also evident.

Dutch still-life paintings of the mid-seventeenth century were also bought in large quantities, and like porcelain signaled very fine gradations of affluence. Moreover, Chinese cups, bowls, and plates were ubiquitous in the celebrated, high-end paintings of Willem Kalf, Abraham van Beijeren, and others. The paintings’ key quality, as Roland Barthes remarked, is “sheen”: a glossy finish. This echoes the visual style, but not subject matter, of van Eyck’s (1390–1441) legendary oil technique, long treasured in Low Country churches. The apparently naturalistic details of the still-life paintings were praised by contemporaries with a revealing lexicon: the style of the “fine” painters (*fijnschilders*) of Leiden was “neat” or “smooth” (*nette* or *gladde*) in contrast to a coexisting manner

of “loose” or “raw” (*losse* and *rauw*), recognized as foreign.¹⁰ The importance of a perfect, shiny finish—for porcelain as much as for painting—underscores our own period’s observation that the paintings’ “glazed surface itself was as marvelous as any object” (Wood 1995, 349) and that the painters seemed to be vying with the potters in rendering these visual effects (Alpers 1983, 114–15). Indeed, the pottery and the paintings, I suggest, were valued in accord with the same long-familiar aesthetic distinctions: neat, smooth, fine, and glossy.

The Dutch still lifes were valuable in a different sense as well. They put a distant world of food, drink, and objects within seemingly tactile reach in a country then dubbed the “warehouse of Europe.” Cleansed of their actual sources in the tropics and the sordid activities—slave trading, piracy—involved in acquiring them, they offered the viewer beautiful merchandise (Hochstrasser 2007). Their “neatness” (*netticheyt*) and imitative detail, wrote a contemporary, “gives sweet nourishment to the eyes . . . makes them linger. . . . And through the insatiable eye makes the heart stick fast with constant desire” (cited in Wood 1995, 350). It is unclear if the desire here is for the painting or for the porcelain that it depicts—both were liquid assets (Alpers 1983, xxii). For another contemporary, that was the happy point: the paintings “delight the eyes . . . and fill them with desire; and through this the painter will sell his paintings all the better” (cited in Sluijter 1991, 183).

A similar sense of “delight” and “desire” for merchandise proved more troubling to British thinkers. In contrast to the Dutch, they produced much discourse about it. When Britain’s East India Company (EIC) overtook the VOC in trade, around the start of the eighteenth century, debates about the meaning and morals of “superfluous” “excessive” material goods inspired the so-called luxury debates in which Mandeville, Hume, Hogarth, and Adam Smith—among others—redefined the old luxury and constructed ethically acceptable pleasures for avid consumption.

Adam Smith was personally abstemious. In the great scheme of life he found luxuries “contemptible and trifling.” But he asserted, in seeming contradiction, that for the wealth of nations, “consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production.” By way of resolving the contradiction, he rejected the distinction between luxury and necessity that organized the debates. The debauchery of the rich in eating, drinking, and keeping retainers, he argued, is different from the temperate use of objects, even those that are unnecessary (De Marchi 1999).

10. Vermeer and Rembrandt exemplify the contrast; Rembrandt, the “rough” one, was seen as having a Venetian style (Alpers 1983).

He proposed a specific pleasure that drives consumption, one that is not morally repugnant. Observing his society, Smith suggested, “What pleases these lovers of [imports] is not so much the utility, as the *aptness* of the machines which are *fitted* to promote it [i.e., promote utility]” ([1759] 1984, 180, my emphasis). Things give pleasure because of the convenient, pleasing way in which they are suited to whatever task they accomplish. “It is the ingenious and artful adjustment of those means to the ends for which they were intended that is the principal source of [our] admiration” ([1759] 1984, 182). This notion of a separate pleasure provided by fitness, aptness, and ingenuity subverted the moral danger of consumption and opened the way for questions of economic advantage across social ranks, with eventual consequences for the way policy makers and shoppers thought about capitalist commerce and acquisitiveness.¹¹

This argument was designed to rethink luxuries in general. But it is striking how well porcelain provided experiential evidence for the principle, making it persuasive in an everyday and embodied way. As people remarked, porcelain withstood the heat of boiling water, even direct fire, making it ingenious for the popular new practices of drinking hot tea, coffee, and chocolate—those other great imports—for which, people said, European ceramics were ill fitted. Porcelain’s impermeable surface did not retain impurities that would have adulterated those delicate flavors, and so served its purpose more aptly than European crockery. In short, these properties were materialized in a very particular set of institutional and ideological settings in which porcelain objects were put to novel uses that—reciprocally—allowed their recategorization as ingeniously useful and therefore “not luxuries” in the corrupting sense. They were also seen as results of advanced Chinese technology. Indeed, among the imports, it was porcelain that defined China to British shoppers, witness its commonest name in English.

For some contemporaries, however, that source and its technology were precisely the problem. First, technology: English potters were devastated by the success of “china.” By the early 1700s many craftsmen proposed patents to copy it, but none succeeded. In another tactic, French Jesuits missionaries in China

11. The arguments about “comfort” and “ingenuity” versus moral corruption have remained foundational oppositions of capitalist consumer desire. But there were other issues: Hume, for instance, stressed the importance of luxury as an aesthetic sensibility, displaying the character of the buyer. This became more important in the nineteenth century, as a matter of romantic sensibility; see my discussion of Herend’s buyers. I have focused on Smith’s argument because romantic sensibility has been thoroughly discussed by many scholars. It differentiated, “ordered,” or ranked the middling sort, creating distinction (Berg and Eger 2003). Porcelain was doubtless important for this argument as well, not only in the number and thinness of the items purchased but in small differences in the way crockery was displayed and used. Like Smith and Hume, Hogarth and other contemporaries replaced moral judgment of import luxuries with such aesthetic ones.

were documenting methods of porcelain manufacture to bring back to Europe. For Britain, the balance of trade steeply favored China, which accepted only bullion in exchange for British imports of tea, silk, and porcelain. Mercantilist critics of the EIC feared the supposedly deleterious economic effects of such trade. Yet tea was hard to replace. High tariffs on imported porcelain were a handy solution. In this climate, Josiah Wedgwood created and cleverly marketed a ceramic product—“creamware”—that approximated china but was cheaper. It was much publicized, became a success, and was eventually exported all over Europe, the colonies, and even China as an example of a distinctly English product. Tariff protection, technical and manufacturing innovations, and new commercial practices created a thriving ceramics industry in Staffordshire. What historians have called the European “consumer revolution” was launched by ceramics (Berg and Eger 2003; Berg 2005; deVries 2008). Adam Smith had advised just this kind of “imitation”—not copying a foreign product but replacing it by creating one that is more ingenious (and cheaper) in achieving a similar effect.

Yet, the source of the product was crucial. The Staffordshire wares were marketed as innovations because of English genius, not Chinese.¹² European evaluation of China in the course of the eighteenth century moved from awe to contempt. Porcelain and its manufacture were taken as icons of China and helped create this switch. English ceramic manufacture, many observers remarked, relied on “new techniques, scientific instruments, and machines.” Chinese porcelain, by contrast, was made by hand, in a supposedly stagnant country, under “appalling conditions.” The sense of anxious competition was acute and coexisted with fascination. In 1720, Daniel Defoe, who had himself been a potter and was a strong critic of the EIC’s imports, depicted Robinson Crusoe commenting on Chinese porcelain: “if we had the same clay, we should soon outdo them, as much as we do in other things.” The problem was not lack of know-how, this implied, but merely a lack of raw materials. Voltaire suggested the same thing in 1764: “we go to China looking for clay, as if we had none” (all citations from Gerritsen and McDowall 2012). By 1767, Wedgwood, basking in the success of his new material, saw himself as turning the tables on the Chinese: “Don’t you think we shall have some Chinese missionaries come here soon to learn the art of making Cream-colour” (cited in Berg 2003, 242).

12. We might see this as “nation branding” since creamware and other imitations of Chinese products soon were seen as “typically English.” Similarly and famously the copying of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain imports by the potters of Delft rendered blue-and-white pottery (not porcelain) a typical product of Delft, and emblem of everything Dutch.

Taken to be a category of merchandise, porcelain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was not a “curious” object of wonder and display. It was engaged in technical innovation as model. It was enlisted in economic and ethical discourses about consumption by virtue of the properties that it materialized in new institutional and ideological contexts. Even when not discursively formulated, porcelain-as-material was an aesthetic focus, as in practices like painting that domesticated the foreign objects.¹³ The qualia that were now conjured as distinctive of porcelain—impermeability, hard surface for easy cleaning, ability to withstand fire and high heat—emerged out of ideologically mediated and embodied experiences of ceramic vessels in everyday use. The experts doing the valuation of the qualia were artisan-potters in northwestern Europe and buyers among the “middling sort.” Unlike the scholars with cabinets, the buyers were mostly women—porcelain was soon made iconic of femininity—who took it into household contexts. The qualia constituted a (contested) axis of differentiation that organized materiality along with much else: luxury versus necessity; delicate/glossy versus rough; stagnant China versus European progress; women versus men.

Secrecy or Exhibition

Given the evident “civilizational” stakes and market competition, discovering the secret of Chinese porcelain was a coveted achievement in the eighteenth century. England boasted creamware; further to the east, the absolutist monarchs of central Europe lavishly funded alchemical experiments to discover the means of making porcelain, especially when they were financially strapped. Famously, the court of Augustus II, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, became the first to succeed, in 1709, at Meissen near Dresden. Why was this particular achievement so important for monarchs? Although Meissen porcelain was soon exhibited as merchandise, its more revealing significance, I suggest, was as quite a different object-type: an arcanum, a repository of secret knowledge.

Since the sixteenth century, as I have noted, European ruling elites had incorporated porcelain into extravagant diplomatic exchanges of highly wrought silver and gold, gifts that established political relations and maintained aristocratic family ties. Most rulers bought porcelain from importers, paying in gold

13. There were other practices that might be read as “domesticating” of Chinese porcelain by Dutch importers, thereby changing the objects themselves: specific shapes were ordered for use as butter dishes and beer tankards that Chinese kilns had never produced, and with instructions that, notwithstanding the specifically Dutch uses, the patterns should be “Chinese-looking,” which meant “neat” designs (see Jörg 1982).

and silver; thus porcelain gifts made a double demand on their treasuries. For some, the competition among royal houses in amassing porcelain became an obsession. Augustus II wrote in 1726 that he had a *maladie de porcelaine*, having by that time spent enormous sums on about 24,000 pieces from Asia (Syndram and Weinhold 2009). Echoing mercantilist criticism of the EIC, porcelain was called the “bleeding bowl of Saxony.” But Augustus’s interest in producing porcelain in his own workshops predated the mania. Having a porcelain factory would free up more gold for military expenditures.

But obtaining gold directly was a bolder plan. In 1701, Johann Friedrich Böttger, a young alchemist, claimed he had used a “philosopher’s stone” to turn base metal into gold. Augustus, at war with Sweden and with expenses in Poland, put Böttger to work. Earlier, Augustus had hired Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus, a German nobleman, to investigate porcelain. Tschirnhaus had studied in Leiden, and with the Royal Society in London; he was a member of the Academy of Sciences in Paris. He specialized in optics and geology, the first useful in creating mirrors for attaining high temperatures in firing ceramics; the second in selecting clay. By 1704, Böttger’s trials were under Tschirnhaus’s supervision. One an alchemist, the other a natural philosopher, the two represented divergent directions in the study of nature. But they met on the grounds of artisanal experimentation. In addition to its metaphysical claims, alchemy was an exemplary form of craft knowledge, indispensable to thinking about laboratory process in natural philosophy. Failing at gold, the two produced porcelain. Like the philosopher’s stone of alchemy, porcelain was widely called an arcanum, a mystery. Made of ordinary “base” materials, both substances were noble results achieved by “transmutation,” an alchemical term for changes made by secret knowledge said to be available only to certain kinds of people.

This was precisely its added value for monarchs. The command of such metamorphosis, it was said, showed that the forces of nature were at the disposal of the princely patron. Alchemy specialized in the control of a passage from chaotic materiality to perfect form—surely an ontological claim. The evident change in qualia during the making of porcelain was striking: dark, wet, soft clay turned by intense heat into a hard, white, translucent body. As Glenn Adamson suggests: “When alchemists referred to their practice as *Ars Magna*, the royal art, they were announcing its true purpose, which was to discover absolute truths that were comprehensible only to the most elite practitioners and patrons. In this sense alchemy was a fitting accompaniment to absolutist court culture, which was premised on the union between spiritual and worldly authority in a hereditary ruler. Through alchemy, princes were able to demon-

strate their inherent right to power” (2010, 25). The secret of porcelain materialized the legitimacy of one’s identity as ruler.

Augustus’s workshops were guarded with maniacal care; Böttger was held prisoner; reports of his experiments were strictly controlled, but were stolen anyway (Bothe 2009). In subsequent decades, artisans who knew how to make porcelain or could steal the recipes were in great demand. They were paid handsomely by princes to establish porcelain factories. By 1800 there were a dozen in the German lands, and many in the rest of Europe (Savage 1958). Secrecy about recipes and materials was common among potters of the time everywhere; for those without alchemical theory, the knowledge was a high-tech industrial secret because porcelain factories made profits. Meissen porcelain soon produced enough income for Augustus II to inspire the popular label “*weisses Gold aus Europa*” (white gold from Europe).

The pun reminds us to ask again what exactly porcelain “is”: it poses the issue of lexical reference, an aspect of the relationship between discourse and materiality. In my account, I have relied on European uses of a single term. But this leaves open the question of what objects were picked out by that label. Once porcelain was apprehended as a ceramic, it was compared to the ancient technique of earthenware, in which clay is molded and then hardened at high temperatures. In Europe, glazing had long enhanced earthenware with a thin layer of liquefied glassy materials. This partially seals the surface. The advanced Italian practice of tin-based glazing was known as *maiolica*, yielding a ceramic with a shiny coating covering a thick, dark body that crumbled when broken. By contrast, the imports broke cleanly; there seemed no separate glaze. European experiments created more experience with porcelain, this time with the goal of reverse engineering. In these attempts referents abounded: the Medici court in the 1580s created white vessels out of glass, calling them Medici porcelain; in the 1640s, potters in Delft put a white lead glaze on earthenware, calling it *Hollandsche porselein* or *delft*. In 1717 a French Jesuit returned from China bringing samples of clays and reporting on manufacture in a famously detailed report—a kind of industrial espionage. The French Academy declared in 1727 that porcelain can be made in two ways. *Porcelain paté tendre* (soft-paste porcelain) was glass heated with certain other substances to just below its melting point. “Hard paste” porcelain, by contrast, was made with the materials brought from China, a clay (*petuntse* ‘white bricks’) and a stonelike substance (*kaolin*, also from a Chinese term). At very high kiln temperatures, a single firing fused the two substances (Pounds 1948). In England, “bone china” was created; in Saxony *Jaspisporzellan* was said to match imports in all but color (Syndram and Weinhold 2009).

The Putnam/Kripke account of reference would call these naming practices a linguistic division of labor: an expert baptism affixes a label to a referent, and each subsequent instance of the referent is linked to the original baptism by an indexical chain, not by repeated assay of its qualities. Alchemists, potters, and other artisans, as they experimented with Asian ceramics and innovated in their practices, were the experts who authorized names. But no institution vigilantly protected a link between a term and a formula or process; patents were vague. Many craftsmen claimed for their products the title of porcelain. Diverse ingredients, craft procedures, and outcomes marched under the same label. Despite baptisms, the imputed properties of “porcelain” varied substantially, as we have seen, by time, place, institutional categories, and ideological-ontological frameworks. Even when Europeans agreed that the “true” porcelain of Meissen matched the Chinese wares, there were differences in composition, if only because Meissen clays were sourced in Europe. Moreover, the concept of “true” or “hard-paste porcelain” was a European invention. Chinese terms distinguished a rough, sun-baked pottery from vessels made with the same materials (*petuntse* and *kaolin*) by the same people and kilns, but fired at various higher temperatures. This produced gradations of hardness, but no chasm that would isolate a “true” form (Liu 1999). In sum, the term “porcelain” does not refer in any coherent way across the multiplicity of baptisms, except through striking ideological denials. What porcelain “is”—as object-type (category), existent object, and material—shifts over time, as do its conjured qualities. Despite (or because of) the label, to figure out what porcelain is requires tracking sociohistorical translations/transformations and enregisterments.

Through the equation of Meissen-ware with imports as “true” porcelain, Meissen gained market value and became not just a scientific achievement, but also a triumph over Chinese technology. Competition with Chinese wares declined, replaced by a contest among the various European factories. Porcelain objects were no longer tokens of secret knowledge but public embodiments of national modernity at the international exhibitions of the nineteenth century. They were not ordinary merchandise, however, but the special category of “art”—that fraught Western concept. Sometimes it was called decorative art (i.e., lesser), more often industrial art because it was seen as scientific. A designer at Sèvres noted at the end of the nineteenth century: “whether a ceramicist is a painter or a sculptor . . . to obtain a successful result he must also be a chemist” (cited in Adamson 2010, 19). The factories usually represented the states that supported them. Hungary, on the eastern periphery of the Habsburg Empire, was a late entrant to porcelain competition. Herend was its first factory, estab-

lished around 1840 under the protection of the Esterházy family. The Viennese court and the Hungarian state supported it intermittently with subventions. Its significance as standard-bearer was evident when it took part in the First Hungarian Industrial Exhibition in 1842. Herend was picked out for comment by Kossuth Lajos, journalist, fervent modernizer, and soon to be (1848) leader of the War for Independence against Habsburg rule. Kossuth praised Herend porcelain, writing: “our home product can adorn even the most splendid table” (Balla 2003, 43).

According to local lore, Herend started by supplying replacement pieces of Meissen tableware for the Esterházys. Herend certainly courted Hungarian aristocrats, naming patterns of china after them, gifting entire services to royalty, as was done by other manufacturers in other countries. The owner himself was ennobled at the end of the nineteenth century. He supported a Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest, to which the factory then contributed its own pieces. A strong commercial reputation was built on museum display and on exhibiting at world fairs from Chicago to Petersburg, every year from 1851 through 1873, and even in the many economically difficult years to the 1940s. The prizes and reviews gained there were used in marketing, appealing to the national pride of a bourgeoisie at home, but also to a pan-European elite clientele. Advertising was in multiple languages, even in the communist period; foreign sales have always been a considerable portion of Herend’s business.¹⁴

Following Chinese practice, Meissen, Sèvres, and other factories including Herend also produced figurines. The Europeans recreated miniatures, in porcelain, of marble and bronze sculptures highly ranked among the “old masters” of European fine art or in popular national lore. Novel designs were also commissioned from celebrity artists (Balla 2003). Early twentieth-century collecting of these figures and of tableware by prosperous and aspiring middle-class households in Hungary was routine (Hanák 1992). We could call this yet another creative translation: the bourgeois buyer takes up—in iconic miniature—the (imagined) earlier practices of aristocracy. It expanded the market, allowing age, provenance, and authenticity to be invoked to rank the pieces as well as the status of owners, as was also the case in western Europe. Museums and aca-

14. As Tony Bennet (1988) and others (e.g., Nenadic 2015) have pointed out, the international exhibitions were organized around a lineup of nation-states, ranked by the prizes given and by categories of material so that, for instance, ceramics and porcelain makers competed with each other, but also could network. László Molnár (1967) is a good example of communist-era advertising/informational publication; the text is in Hungarian, English, German, and Russian. Balla (2003) notes that in the Cold War period Herend made up 50 percent of the foreign income of the ceramics industry—that is, out of eight to ten other firms.

demic experts lent institutional authorization to collectors' sensibility and "taste," both of which were key principles of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century middle-class distinction.

Figurines entailed into existence another quality of porcelain: plasticity. In contrast to other ceramics, so it was now noted, porcelain could render accurately and in miniature the facial details of full-size sculpture and the textures of lace or the lithe movements of animals. Past eras of museum art, echoed in porcelain, also lent a sense of age to a material that, ironically, had been hailed in earlier decades as a feat of technological modernity. Herend, like Meissen and other European producers, also drew attention to what had been a taken-for-granted aspect of porcelain for millennia: craft process. In the early twentieth century, the English words "hand painted" became part of Herend's trademark, printed on the bottom of wares, distinguishing each piece from the mass of machine-produced ceramics. Porcelain was enlisted in a familiar axis of differentiation, one that can be quickly sketched as traditional versus new, hand-made versus mass-produced, old-regime aristocracy versus modern world.

Inside Hungary, bourgeois taste was being revived in the 1990s, in contrast to the "socialist generic" aesthetic of mass production and synthetic materials (Fehérváry 2013). Porcelain—with the qualia I have noted—certainly participated in that recuperation, as evidenced in a book with porcelain depicted on virtually every page and titled *A régi tárgyak vonzásában* (Under the spell of old objects). It was written by Eszter Szűcs (1989), then editor-in-chief of the country's main magazine of interior design. Porcelain's position in these late twentieth-century contrasts casts light on the puzzle I posed at the start. For those in the West, ironically, the source of their Herend or Meissen porcelain in what they imagined to be a backward and inefficient socialism was not a demerit at all. It rather evoked the past all the more, along with the imagined artisanal values that could no longer be assured elsewhere, or not at affordable prices.

Conclusion

How then does the materiality of porcelain matter? Yes, "you are what you eat on"; social indexicality and its identity effects are important. But to explore fully how the associations between types of materials and types of personae are signaled, the analyst must turn to processes of enregisterment and hence the axes of differentiation on which indexicality depends. Those axes—constituted by attributed qualities (qualia)—provide semiotic organization not only for identity projects but also for many other kinds of differentiation: matters of philosophical distinction (nature/artifice), capitalist morality, technological

innovation. The categories of objects (types) formulated in the projects of social institutions regiment embodied engagements with existing objects (tokens), and in such engagements—guided by ideological regimes of value—the qualia of materials are constituted. That is, material qualities are themselves achieved, they are the outcomes of semiotically mediated events of encounter with existing objects. At the same time and reciprocally, imputed qualities (qualia) shape further interactions in which qualia and categories can be reanalyzed, changed, becoming interdiscursively available for other institutions and categories, entailing other imputed qualities. Thus the properties of objects are not fixed; their construal is open-ended; they do not preexist semiosis but are constituted—materialized—through semiotic processes.¹⁵

The juxtapositions I have presented were chosen to highlight this dynamic of qualities entailed, emergent, and transformed. Certainly, porcelain's qualities have been taken as indexical (and iconic) of diverse identity types—scholars, royals, alchemists, middle-class shoppers, and collectors. But the examples also show that the indexing of personae is embedded in wider projects of value: how a material known as porcelain—with diverse qualia—has been recruited as evidence in early modern forms of knowledge, as persuasive exemplar in enlightenment debates about luxury, or key participant in economic competition.

In this hurried tour through Europe, I have tracked what writers in several different eras have made of a material that, with different pronunciations, they dubbed “porcelain”: how they compared it to other materials, and how their understanding was regimented by the institution in which it played a part: in *Wunderkammer*, import market, absolutist monarchy, or exhibition; and the object type it was taken to instantiate in that institution: specimen, merchandise, arcanum, art. These are not mutually exclusive categories, nor hierarchically or even temporally organized. They focus attention on the interests and projects that embraced porcelain. Finally, working back from the label “porcelain” and its described referents has allowed a glimpse of the heavy semiotic work it took for participants to constitute as “the same thing” a material that was understood as embodying many different values and qualities across contexts and eras, and whose material composition varied and changed dramatically. Though porcelain is a good example, this is a general interdiscursive—translational—process and a very common one.

15. As the first reviewer of this essay insightfully suggested, it is probably our own ideological commitment to a naturalist epistemology that suggests the qualities were always there, just waiting to be discovered and taken up.

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