

Chinese ceramics

The first pottery was made in China about 10,000 years ago, hailing the beginning of the Neolithic period. The finely painted and sophisticated pottery of the Yangshao (c. 5000 – 3000 BC) and Longshan (c. 3000-1800 BC) cultures is particularly well-known. By the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) manufacturing techniques had greatly improved and fine glazed stonewares were being produced. Some of most remarkable ceramics of the Tang dynasty (AD 618-906) are those with so-called *sancai* 三彩, three-colour glaze, showing influences from the Middle East as a result of trade and exchange along the Silk Roads. This was also the time when high-fired porcelains were being developed. Song dynasty (960-1279) wares were prized both at the time of their production and in later centuries. They are often considered to be the highest achievements in ceramic art.

During the Yuan dynasty (AD 1279-1368), production intensified in the town of Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, south of the Yangtze River, which produced most of the porcelain used at the imperial court until its decline in the early 20th century. Jingdezhen produced the porcelains decorated in underglaze blue which has been so popular among Europeans during the past 400 years.

At the beginning of the Ming dynasty (AD 1368-1644) 'reign marks' identifying the emperor of the time began to appear. In later periods, reign marks from earlier times were sometimes used, often as a mark of respect to the wares of previous dynasties but occasionally deliberately to deceive. During the Ming, the range of ceramic types and glazes greatly increased. In the Qing dynasty (AD 1644-1911) overglaze enamel decoration on porcelain was perfected and in the West names such as *famille rose* and *famille verte* were used to describe these palettes.

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