Medici Porcelain: A Case Study for Examining the Artistic and Commercial Relationships in the Early Modern World

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The Medici family hold an unparalleled position in Italian and world history as adept merchants, shrewd politicians, and generous sponsors of the arts. Its members were noted for their patronage of eminent artists such as Donatello and Michelangelo. However, amid the numerous paintings and sculptures that the Medici commissioned, it is easy to overlook other “minor” arts that they also patronized. During the reign of Francesco I de’ Medici (Grand Duke 1574-87), Italian craftsmen manufactured the first pieces of soft-paste porcelain in Europe. Although Medici porcelain derived from Chinese blue-and white porcelain and Italian maiolica (a type of earthenware), its production signaled a shift from mere consumption to personal manufacture. The invention of Medici porcelain was thus a decisive turning point in the European response to porcelain as a medium. Unfortunately, very little information exists regarding direct Chinese-Italian porcelain commerce in the early modern era (c. 1500-1800 CE). Therefore, it is likely that this flourishing trade was conducted through intermediaries such as merchants trading to and from Constantinople. Understanding how Chinese porcelain was brought to Italy and who brought them can shed light on the specific forms and decorative styles that impacted the Medici products. These pieces present an intriguing case study for examining porcelain’s role as a barometer of international political power, in addition to its prevailing role as an indicator of elite status.