

## CGS Master's Research Proposal

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the craze to collect blue-and-white china known as “Chinamania” swept across Victorian England. Discussed extensively in domestic manuals, advertised profusely in design periodicals, and highly satirized in the pages of *Punch* magazine, the notion that Victorians should collect china was circulated everywhere. At the same time, such individuals as George Du Maurier critiqued Chinamania through cartoons in *Punch* magazine, warning that china collectors of both genders suffered from a disease that rendered them ill-functioning members of Victorian evangelical society. Nonetheless, the fervour to collect remains unexplained in these illustrative sources and in current historical scholarship. By studying Britain's obsession with china, my project will contribute significantly to the historical understanding of England's nineteenth-century middle-class culture by situating Chinamania within the major Victorian discourses on domesticity, consumerism, industrialization, and gender identity formation.

By examining a broad spectrum of sources ranging from illustrations, satirical articles, how-to collecting guides, collectors' memoirs, and home manuals, to domestic periodical advertisements, museum collections records, and design treatises from archives such as *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals*, my research will reveal the nuances between china collecting, industrialization, gender, social mobility, and consumerism. For middle-class men and women, collecting china offered both social mobility and a way to conform to their society's ideals of masculinity and femininity. With the classification of decorative china as fine art during the museum movement of the 1850s and the abundance of china produced by English industrialists, middle-class men could afford china and therefore gain entry into Fine Arts Clubs, joining upper-class members in their noble pursuit of art preservation. In addition, the development of railway afforded both urban and rural middle-class women the opportunity to shop in metropolitan areas and take advantage of subscription-based shopping clubs, in their common effort to emulate the interior design of upper-class homes. It is precisely this contradictory narrative between simultaneous encouragement and dissuasion to collect as illustrated in the *Punch* cartoons, which depicted collectors as frail and effeminate, that justifies an examination of Chinamania.

My research contributes to the recent scholarship on gender and culture that re-examines traditionally accepted historical principles of the Victorian era. Specifically, my project will build on the research of Erika Rappaport, who examines how Victorian society changed to accommodate female shoppers in the public sphere, and Deborah Cohen, who argues that the home was a battleground for design authority between husband and wife. By examining Chinamania, I aim to challenge the separate spheres ideology, which proclaimed that men belonged to the public while women were relegated to the home. I will argue that the late-Victorians could not in fact maintain separate spheres prescriptions. With the advent of consumerism, women visibly entered the public sphere. Men, meanwhile, subliminally exercised authority over the private with the propagation of their design opinions, especially those on china, and through their accompanying moral values in advertisements and domestic manuals that molded popular trends in home furnishing. My research will also argue that decoration with china was central to the mainstream aesthetic by considering major nineteenth-century developments that exercised immense public influence like national museum collections, the availability of cheaper English manufactured china, and British foreign policy with China and Japan that dictated the value of oriental originals. In order to fully realize this project it will be necessary to visit the Victoria & Albert Archive in London. The V&A holds the original records of the Museum of Ornamental Art whose collections greatly influenced Victorian style by combining middle-class ideals of utility and morality with Aestheticism. By drawing on the history of material and print cultures, my methodology provides a unique contribution to understanding the concept of gender in the nineteenth century. Therefore, the result of my research will greatly contribute to the understanding of Victorian culture and the ways consumer culture has far-reaching ramifications within an established society.

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