



LEFT: In a Georgetown drawing room, one of a pair of 18th-century lacquered chinoiserie cabinets holds a collection of export porcelain. BELOW: Legendary couturier Coco Chanel was fond of chinoiserie and decorated her apartment, seen here, circa 1937, with Coromandel screens.



For an instant jolt of exoticism to suit any style, this ageless and romantic form of decoration is practically peerless

Chinoiserie in Decorating

FAMOUS FOR CAPTIVATING ENTIRE ROOMS WITH ITS “all eyes on me” presence and dreamy decorations, chinoiserie has star quality. Intriguing, alluring, playful, and glamorous, it has that special something, the X factor that invites closer inspection. And it is no passing fad. Popular since the cultures of Europe and Asia first began to fraternize centuries ago, chinoiserie still holds court today.

Lasting Appeal

“You can go for broke with rococo or extract elements, such as a simple modern coffee table in lacquered linen with a Chinese foot, and add a lantern,” says designer

Charlotte Moss. “That’s the strength of chinoiserie—it is adaptable. I use chinoiserie motifs for every client.”

Over the years, the style and its trademarks—narrative figures, graceful pagodas, and nimble foliage—have exerted quite an influence. As trade placed Asian wares before Western eyes, the delicacy of these forms launched a powerful fascination. Through the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, chinoiserie resonated in the baroque, rococo, and Regency periods. In the 20th century, pioneers such as Frances Elkins and Billy Baldwin embraced it.

Today, designers use chinoiserie to inject lyrical spice into the rooms they create. “The beauty of chinoiserie is its

BY GARRETT LANE

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decorating



In designer Kelly Wearstler's dining room, an ornamental convergence of fretwork, lacquered surfaces, and gold-trimmed details brings a chinoiserie motif to life.

highly opulent sense of the exotic. But the core elements are classic and timeless, making it possible to mix chinoiserie with all sorts of styles," says designer Kelly Wearstler. "The elaborate decoration and intricate patterns in chinoiserie can be reinterpreted in a modern way by injecting opulence into day-to-day living, without going over-the-top or eschewing practicality. It has the curious ability to transport you to another place."

Evolution of the Style

Carefree depictions of life in another land formed the roots of chinoiserie. Its popularity stands as part of a broad phenomenon. "Chinoiserie does not just apply to furniture. It has touched everything from porcelain to tapestries to architecture," says furniture designer Raymond Goins, whose studio is renowned for original chinoiserie and chinoiserie restora-

tions. "The style is actually a Western creation, born of the need and demand for exotic products featuring motifs and images of the Orient."

Goins explains that the infatuation, coupled with shipping limitations, sparked a new movement. "People were so enthralled with stories of Cathay [a medieval vision of China]

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that they were unwilling to wait for items to arrive via the trade routes. Consequently, Europeans struggled to make their own versions of Asian furniture and wares," says Goins. "European artisans often focused on themes of hunting, fishing, gardens, social settings, and farming." Interest was so great, in fact, that craftsmen tried it on everything from

tea caddies to sconces to cornices.

Modern Legacy

Given chinoiserie's history, the progressive interest seems natural, new forms inevitable. "Applications and

themes vary widely. Some of the finer examples are executed with varying motifs on panels, highboys, and occasional tables," says Goins.

Compelling and far-reaching, generations of chinoiserie have spawned furniture, ceramics, fabrics, wallcoverings, and accessories, providing a vast selection for decorators to use when channeling the old magic. ♦

For details, see Sourcebook, page 123.

know your chinoiserie

Furniture designer Raymond Goins is well-versed in the history and craftwork of chinoiserie. His studio, R.L. Goins, carries impressive credentials. "Having painstakingly restored and even reproduced these objets d'art, I truly share the passion for this eternal craft," he says. Here are Goins' tips for understanding and appreciating the style.

Chinoiserie vs. Japanning

People often confuse the two. Chinoiserie applies to the painted landscapes, embroidered tapestries and silks, and carved figurines that depict Cathay (a medieval vision of China). Japanning is the process of layering lacquer. As trade brought lacquered furniture into Europe, European craftsmen began to produce their own recipes for lacquer and added their own chinoiserie designs.

Beneath the Surface

When purchasing a piece, pay attention to the fine points, such as:

- Fancifully painted figures with fluid and natural brushwork
- Wild and exotic insects and animals with exaggerated and sometimes human features
- Romantic floral or graceful garden settings
- Brilliantly honed lacquered finishes with deep layers

For bonus images and additional chinoiserie insights from Raymond Goins, visit SouthernAccents.com.



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