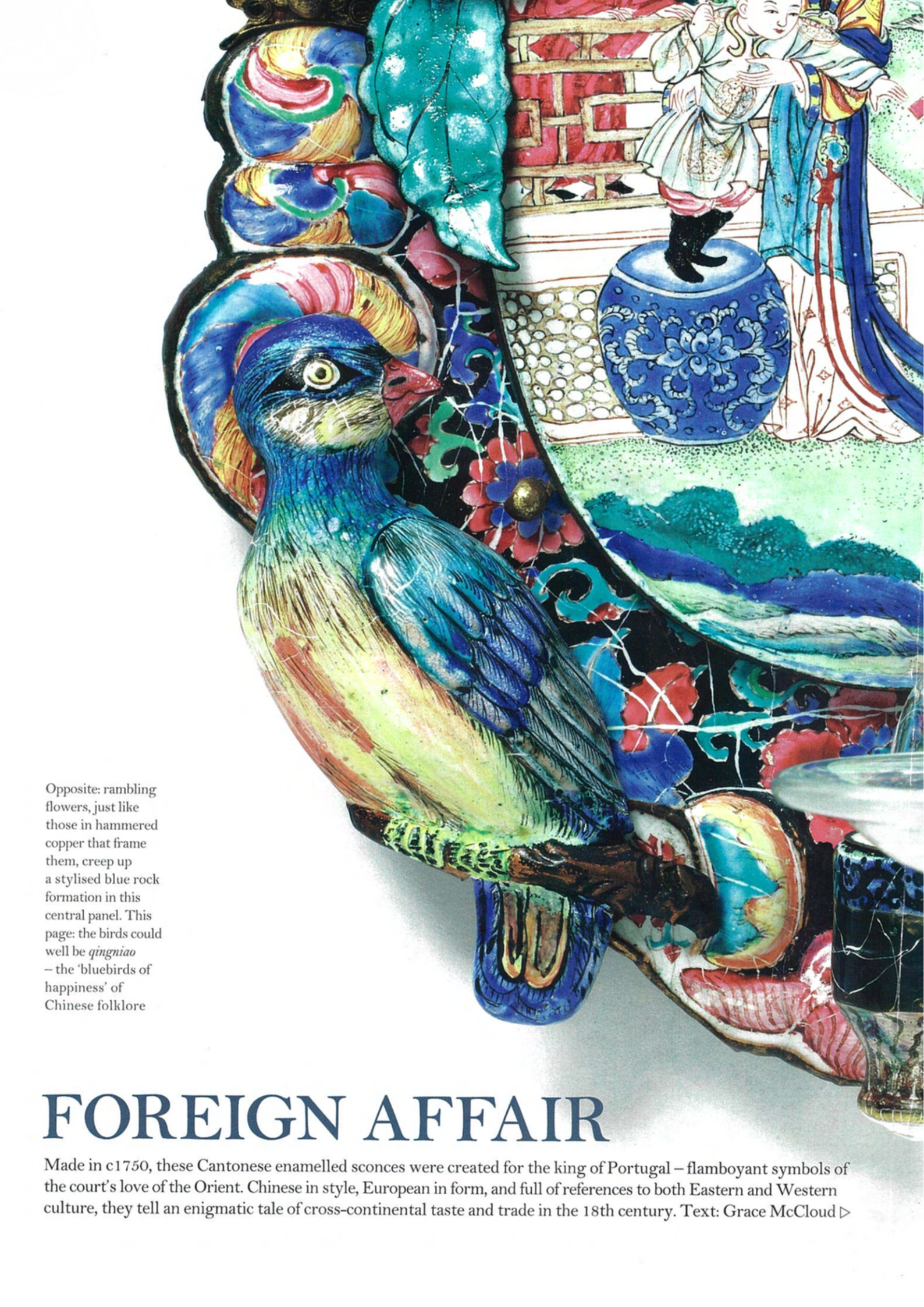




Opposite: rambling flowers, just like those in hammered copper that frame them, creep up a stylised blue rock formation in this central panel. This page: the birds could well be *qingniao* – the ‘bluebirds of happiness’ of Chinese folklore

FOREIGN AFFAIR

Made in c1750, these Cantonese enamelled sconces were created for the king of Portugal – flamboyant symbols of the court's love of the Orient. Chinese in style, European in form, and full of references to both Eastern and Western culture, they tell an enigmatic tale of cross-continental taste and trade in the 18th century. Text: Grace McCloud ▷

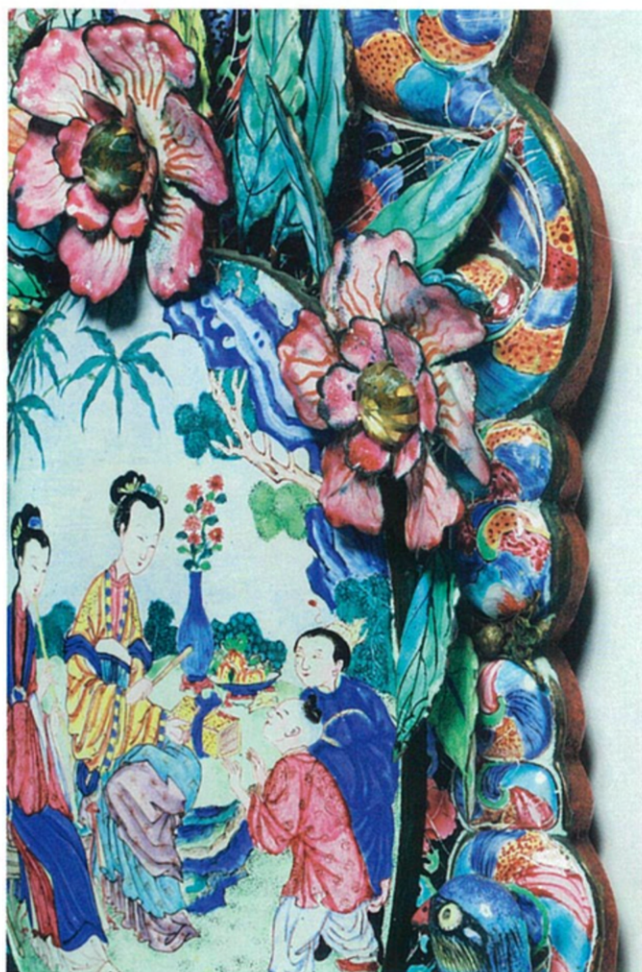
FOR NEARLY 100 years, in Britain at least, we have been 'on grid', so it's hard to imagine a world that once all but stopped spinning come sundown: supper by guttering candlelight; no book at bedtime, save for the rich. It's a truism, of course, to say that it hasn't always been like this, but one worth remembering when looking at the development of artificial lighting over the centuries. In the 1750s, for example, when this pair of enamelled wall sconces is thought to have been made, burning candles, preferably beeswax – far superior to the 'smoakie light/ That's fed with stinking tallow' (so says Leonatus in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*) – would have spoken volumes about prosperity and status.

And what of their display? The two seen here, which are for sale at Ronald Phillips during London's Masterpiece fair this month, are thought to have been made in Canton for the king of Portugal, midway through China's Qianlong period (1735–1796). Their wooden backboards, about 40cm high, are adorned with enamelled copper and repoussé mouldings in the shape of leaves and rosy flowers resembling anemones set with cut-glass jewels. Three-dimensional birds, with oil-slick feathers and peachy breasts, perch on copper branches – virtually the only surfaces not enamelled – either side of the candle-holders (these glass ones are modern replacements). Each sconce is fitted with a central oval panel painted with scenes of courtly Chinese life, and at the very top, sharp-clawed beasts are crested by fans of decorative enamel. What these fearsome creatures are meant to be isn't clear. They may represent tigers, leopards or Chinese lion dogs, but Thomas Lange, researcher at Ronald Phillips, thinks they could be owls – Western symbols of wisdom – their unwonted ferocity explained by Chinese folklore, which instead sees them as harbingers of death.

If contemporary standards are anything to go by, the fixtures quite likely formed part of a set – possibly of as many as 12, which would have meant as many candles too (if not more; Lange thinks the originals could very well have been double-branched). But with very few relevant comparisons (there's a similar pair in the Hermitage, though without the moulding, for example), they exist in their own league. What is certain, however, is that together, lining the walls of a banquet hall, their glossy oranges, teals and indigos reflecting the crepuscular glimmer of candlelight, they would have made a grand impression, particularly given that the majority of sconces in this period were wooden, a few fitted with costly backplates of brass or copper for extra lustre. Fit for a king (for who else ▷

Top: intellectual and musical pursuits comprise the main theme in this central oval panel, which depicts a lesson taking place in a bucolic garden.

Right: enamels from this period often took inspiration from ceramic wares; it's likely that the pink enamel flowers were informed by *famille rose* pottery





could afford such splendour?), these were designed explicitly as dramatic statements of wealth, rank and taste.

And taste here is key. For at the time these were made, chinoiserie was the height of fashion in Europe, and Portugal was one of the few countries (along with Britain and the Netherlands) able to trade in the Chinese city of Canton. In the early 16th century, the Portuguese were the first Western nation to forge Asian trade routes. Around 200 years later, following the establishment of the Dutch VOC and our own East India Company, all things Chinese were flooding the European market, their gracefulness and stylistic frivolity well-suited to the Continental courts. Mirrors, blown in England, were shipped to the East (at vast expense) to be painted, then back again to be sold. Merchants went positively potty for blue-and-white porcelain, which in turn inspired the Chinese scenes of tin-glazed delftware. Local artisans, afforded a monopoly by the Qianlong Emperor's restriction of foreign trade to this southern seaport, began creating objects specially for export – such as these fixtures – though often with Christian or heraldic subject matter.

As the market grew, so did the demand for recognisably European forms, and merchants began supplying craftsmen with prototypes in silver or wood. This might explain the curiously European flavour of these sconces. For while their charming central panels are emphatically Chinese, showing children perching on blue-and-white pots, or taking part in a lesson beneath the trees – the fixtures themselves are distinctly Continental in shape, and could well have been based on a faience template. At this point, the Cantonese were familiar with enamels on copper, the technique having been brought to China from Limoges by French Jesuits. Certainly it's known that the same artists decorating pottery would have also been in charge of painting what they called *yang ci* – 'foreign porcelain'. In this case, judging by the crudeness of some of the work (take the decorative patterning) in comparison to the sophistication of the central panels, it's likely that more than one hand was at work.

But the most interesting thing about these sconces is that their history is a puzzle, some pieces of which can be fitted with context, others merely guessed at. Tantalisingly, on the back of each one is painted a handful of Chinese characters. Nobody has yet worked out what they say. Made in China, perhaps? ■
Masterpiece is at South Grounds, The Royal Hospital Chelsea, London SW3 (masterpiecefair.com), 30 June-6 July. Ronald Phillips, 26 Bruton St, London W1 (020 7493 2341; ronaldphillipsantiques.com)

Top: its cheeks striped and spotted, its forehead stippled with green, this taloned creature displays the breadth of techniques used by Cantonese craftsmen.

Left: the blue, pink and black patterning that surrounds the central oval is likely to have been painted by an artisan trained in decorating *famille noire* pottery

