

GLOBAL INFLUENCES IN REMOTE NEW SPAIN

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The Spanish outpost of El Presidio de San Francisco was isolated as New Spain's northernmost military settlement in Alta California. Its military and civilian settlers crafted some items locally, but relied on shipments from San Blas, Mexico for the bulk of their supplies. Despite this seclusion, ceramic artifacts uncovered during excavation projects reflect the global influences this military post witnessed. Porcelain and majolica remains are used in a discussion of how household materials were this community's link to the world abroad.

El Presidio de San Francisco was considered an isolated outpost of Colonial New Spain. Settled in 1776 by the Anza party, *El Presidio* was described as “borderlands ... on the fringes of civilization” by historians Langelier and Rosen (1992:12-13). Resources were limited in this community and they “lacked dependable seaborne and overland supply lines” (1992:13). Shipments from the supply center in San Blas, Mexico usually took three and a half months to arrive, but were often delayed due to inclement weather. These shipments were scheduled once a year, but that rate also was highly variable. Residents of *El Presidio* reacted to the lack of consistent resources by creating some items locally, but for items like fine ceramics such as porcelain and majolica they depended on these shipments. It is through the analysis of these types of excavated ceramics discovered at *El Presidio* that this remote community's provincial boundaries blur. Not only were these wares prepared abroad, but their manufacturing techniques and design styles represent influences that transcend geography and time.

The history of unglazed earthenware manufacture and use dates back thousands of years, but the emergence of fineware has been documented in China as early as AD 618-907 (Gates 2004:1). Chinese porcelain is created using the feldspar derivatives of white kaolin and petuntse. The formed vessel is fired at extremely high temperatures, fusing the design and glaze to the paste. The resulting ware is delicate but durable and is often characterized by its translucence (Gates 2004:1).

Trade networks broadened with increased use of the Silk Road trade routes. It was through these exchanges that porcelain was introduced to central Asia during the ninth century. During this time, China presented Persia with porcelain gifts, impressing local

potters with their wares. Persian potters sought to imitate the manufacture of porcelain (Silk Road Foundation 2004:1). Instead they created lead and tin-glazed earthenware. This ceramic is characterized by a soft paste, to which a lead-base glaze is added. Tin gives a white or cream opaque appearance to the finished products. The viscosity of the glaze preserves the line quality of applied polychromatic designs (Lister and Lister 1982:14).

Influences were not uni-directional. Also during this time, Islamic beliefs and design patterns appeared in China. Mosques and Islamic traditions in present day Xi'an are indicative of this impact. Chinese potters also began to incorporate Arabic calligraphy in their work and made use of high-quality cobalt extractions from central Asia (Asia Society 2004:1).

Having had an established presence in North Africa since the fifth century, Arabian potters shared their new technologies with ceramic producers in countries from Egypt to Morocco. Tin-glazed earthenware proliferated in these Muslim countries.

When the Moors invaded Spain in the 700s, they brought with them these cultural traditions. Tin-glazed earthenware, now considered “Spanish Majolica,” was documented in Spain by AD 1000 (Goggin 1968:5). As Spain entered the New World after 1492, they brought with them these same manufacturing techniques and design styles. Majolica production in Mexico and Guatemala is documented by the late 1500s (Goggin 1968:6).

Spain's empire expanded north from Mexico and west to the Philippines. In Alta California, Spain advanced using their tri-partite system of presidios, missions, and pueblos. As such, *El Presidio de San Francisco* was established. As mentioned, this new

community often needed supplies. Shipments from San Blas, Mexico carried majolicas fashioned in Persian manufacturing and stylistic traditions. Fragments of these majolicas are found on the Presidio of San Francisco and include remnants of the Puebla Blue-on-White, Wavy Rim, and San Elizario Polychrome design patterns (Figures 1 and 2). The characteristic tin-glaze of majolica is clearly Persian, but the designs also show mid-East influence. The use of blue in these styles may be linked to Persia, as that color is associated with luck in Muslim communities (Lister and Lister 1982:88). Fragments of Monterey Polychrome reflect Persian influence as well (Figures 3 and 4), in that their curvilinear floral medallion may be seen as a modification of the Persian palmette motif (Lister and Lister 1982:16). Additionally, the wispy patterns of these majolicas mimic the brushstrokes of Arabic calligraphers (Lister 1982: 53, 58) and the dot decorations on Puebla Blue-on-White and San Elizario majolicas is a Persian pottery technique used to occupy space on vessels outside of the main design (Lister and Lister 1987:187).

Similarly, porcelains from China were transported from Canton to the Philippines, then to San Blas, and finally north to San Francisco. The characteristic white paste and delicate but durable quality of porcelain are clearly Chinese (Figure 5), but the cobalt designs may have been created using minerals from areas in the eastern Mediterranean (Lister and Lister 1982:88). Moreover, Goggin argues that the floral decorative motif adorning Tumacacori majolicas (Figure 6) is Chinoiserie in origin (1968:199).

The reasons these ceramic traditions flourished across time and geography may vary. Lister and Lister contend that Spanish colonists in the New World undoubtedly made use of native earthenware vessels, but that the disadvantages of using unglazed ceramics provided the motivation to create vessels akin to glazed wares from Spain. They also argue that the materials used to create lead-glazed earthenware were both practical and plentiful in the New World. Lead fuses at low temperatures and was widely available to the settlers. Tin was also available, but potters were forced to refine their search for lighter-toned paste clay in order to more accurately reproduce Sevillian vessels (Lister and Lister 1982: 81-83).

El Presidio de San Francisco's presence in New Spain was far removed from the Spanish colonial epicenter in Mexico. Resource deliveries were limited

and often disrupted due to the distance of *El Presidio* from San Blas, Mexico some 1,500 miles away, and because of unstable supply routes. Yet, the ceramic household goods the settlers used reflect a much more complex interaction. The majolicas and porcelains they enjoyed were the result of Arabic and Chinese design and manufacturing influences that, over time, spanned the globe.

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Figure 1: Wavy Rim Majolica.

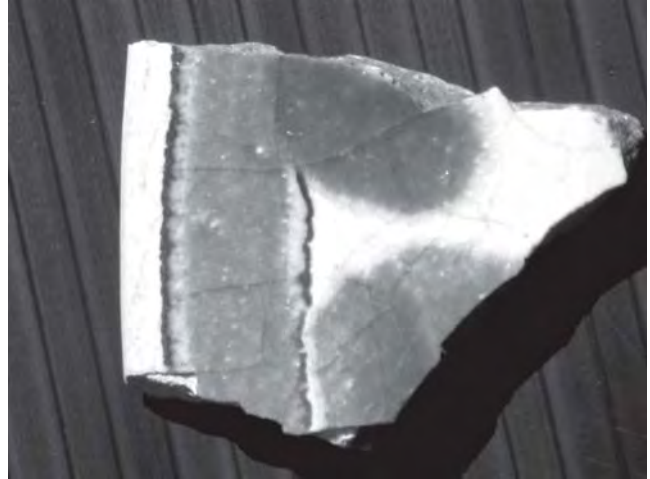


Figure 2: San Elizario Majolica.



Figure 3: Monterey Majolica.



Figure 4: Monterey Majolica.



Figure 5: Chinese Porcelain.



Figure 6: Tumacacori Majolica.