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Sugar Bowl

RISD Museum

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I'm Caroline Frank. I teach American Studies at Brown University. I work on global trade and the early social history of global interaction in the United States and the Colonial era.

Today I am looking at a piece of export porcelain ware with the coat of arms of the State of New York hand-painted on the front of it.

The shape of the pot and its design motif painted on it, it's hand-painted by a Chinese painter in...most likely in Canton, where the American merchants were traveling to do business, the only port that was allowed to be open in China at that time for foreign business. Within Canton, a merchant could find several studios of Chinese painters who would fulfill private orders. So this porcelain is a private order porcelain.

It arrived in Canton with some blue underglaze decoration on it, some standard blue underglaze decoration, and then sat on the shelf of the studio waiting for somebody to come along and order the particular design that he wanted painted on it.

Some of these studios that painted porcelain were employing up to about a hundred people; they were quite large. It was a booming business right around 1800. Many people, many Americans, also...looking for porcelain painted with their favorite motif.

So on a piece such as this sugar bowl, you see first a neoclassical form, not an East Asian form, and you see a neoclassical design brought, perhaps, on a piece of paper, a bookplate or an illustration from a newspaper or a book, that was given to the Chinese painter.

Why is this object valuable today? It is emblematic of an earlier period in the United States' history, an early period—in fact the earliest, when American mariners took to the seas and went as far as they could to do business.