"Blue Willow": Apples or Oranges?

by Susan Ferguson

Apples or Oranges? Those huge 'balloons' swaying over the Chinese temple... to me, they were always the most implausible thing about this historic and beloved pattern. (Fig 1) Like a dozen elephants in the room, nobody noticed. When Robert Copeland was writing his book, *Spode's Willow Pattern*, he attempted to find out just what they were. On page 39 of the Third Edition he included this footnote:

> III The author must here record his thanks in particular to Phyllis Edwards and Dr Edmund Launert, who have tried to identify the different botanical species shown on Chinese landscape designs. Unfortunately, the liberties of the artists, both Chinese and British, are such as to make firm identification misleading and impossible.

Nevertheless, Copeland came down on the side of the "oranges" when he described the giant, perfectly round gumdrops on the tree behind

Figure 1. 1917 Willow Pattern, Wikipedia

the main teahouse. This is the fruit that was mentioned in the original *Story of the Willow Pattern* published in 1849. But in a 1917 in re-telling the tale, a poem redefined them:

> Chinese temple, here it stands,
> Seems to cover all the land,
> Apple tree with apples on
> A pretty fence to end my song

I found A. W. Coysh on the fence. He was pretty indecisive when he wrote, "The number of so-called 'apples' has no significance".

Connie Rogers, in her 2004 book, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of British Willow Ware*, points out that one of the principal features of the"Standard Willow" pattern is "a large orange (or apple) tree..." thus, confirming my proposition for an "oranges" vs. "apples" debate.

Warming to a challenge, I thought I'd try to settle this dispute and identify the tree that towers over the temple.

Can Source Prints Help?

Size! Depending on the dish, the individual fruits on the "Willow" pattern could be as high and as wide as a temple doorway. What kind of Chinese tree produces such incredibly huge fruit? I went looking.

In 1668 the Dutchman, Johannes Nieuhof, produced engravings of Chinese plants that he had seen in his travels. This image of a Chinese cotton tree (Fig 2) illustrated super-sized cotton balls — compared to the size of the figures underneath the tree.

Figure 2

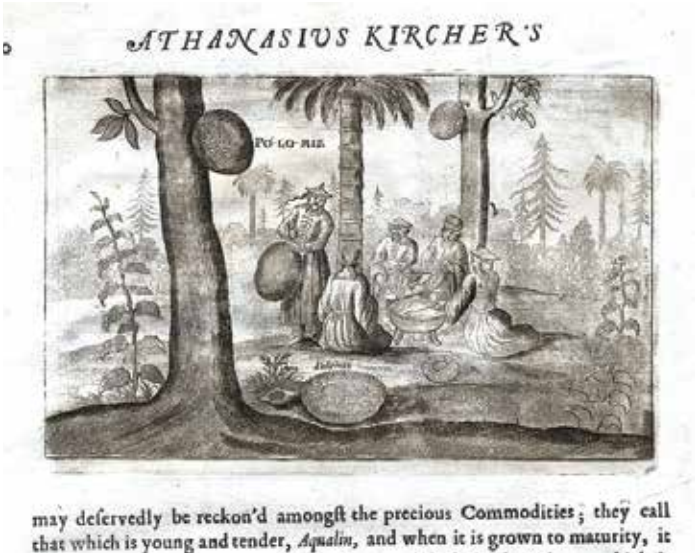


Figure 3

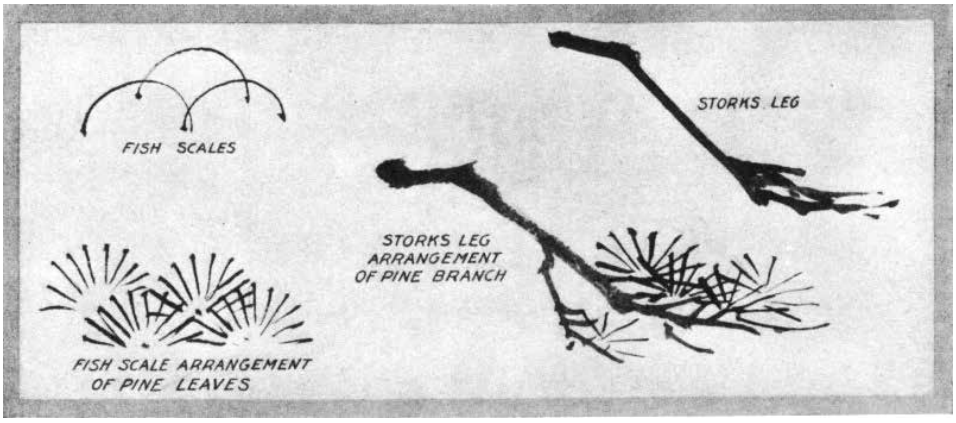


Figure 4

Could this be it?

I wanted this to be the answer. Would this satisfy you? After a while it didn't convince me.

Athanasius Kircher, a German polymath (1601-1680), also described Chinese botany and he made this engraving (Fig 3) of a Chinese jackfruit tree. Well, I Googled "jackfruit" just to be sure and found that this engraving was faithful to the actual size of the fruit. At this point, I really thought I'd nailed it. The tree wasn't an apple or an orange!

The DNA of the "Standard Willow" Pattern

I then began to think about the virtual DNA of the "Willow" pattern. Every author I've read said that the English tried to copy blue and white Chinese painted porcelain patterns. So maybe I could go back, way back — before the time of the "Chinese originals" that had inspired Spode — back to find the "heritage" fruit from which this tree sprang.

I had a crazy idea. Could the "Blue Willow's" apples/oranges be a stylized version of another Chinese tree altogether?

Eventually, I would end up confirming my theory by tracing the stylistic relationships between a series of beautiful examples: a 15th century blue and white porcelain tea bowl, a Chinese jade carving, a silk textile, and an ancient Chinese vase — and eventually down to some of the earliest extant copper plates and pull-sheets from "Willow" transferware pots. But first...

The Code of Chinese Painting

A short digression into the nature of Chinese brush painting and blue and white Chinese porcelain: a Chinese master, with black ink and the simplest of brush strokes creates whole mountain ranges interspersed with forests and fog, and peppered with temples, water falls, pack animals and tiny figures. It's a discipline that hasn't changed for centuries. Only a few short strokes are needed to describe, in a coded shorthand, the needles of a pine tree — and how they spring from a central nodule. This is a page from a book (Fig 4) illustrating the rules for the overlapping needles and boughs. They only need to be repeated over and over to bring the whole tree to life.

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 5. 18th c Worcester porcelain blue and white "Cannon Ball" painted cup - Underglaze blue crescent mark.

Worcester porcelain painters used this same shortcut when they began to imitate Chinese blue and white porcelain. The similarity is hard to miss (Fig 5)

It took years for me to start connecting the dots between the two-dimensional abstraction of a pine tree and the "Blue Willow" apple/orange.

Then last November when I saw this amazing piece of Chinese carved jade (Fig 6) in The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

I understood: The same shorthand that I had seen in two dimensions could also be translated into three-dimensions. There were the sprays of lines coming from a central point and the jagged branches. And then the jade carver used overlapping ovals that signified the bunches of the needles. Wow.

I noticed this same conceit on this ancient, blue and white porcelain vase, also in The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. (Fig 7)

Notice how the porcelain painter has made the needles radiate from a center point and then unified them with a diluted shade of blue, defining the bunches of foliage.

This next Chinese bowl (Fig 8) from the British Museum, dated 1426-1435, shows again how many short strokes symbolize a sprig of needles. They look like balls. Repeated in clusters of three's, four's and five's, we read pine tree.

When Chinese silks, delicate porcelains, paintings, wallpapers and carved precious stones arrived with the officers of naval vessels returning home from China; English and European elites quickly acquired what was called, The Chinese Taste. Almost immediately these items became part of the design of the wealthiest interiors.

The pine tree, seen on porcelain and jade, also appeared on items such as this painted silk bed cover (Fig 9) from Canton, its ball-shaped needles and swaying branches, all in scale with the perching white crane on its trunk. c1760-1800

Figure 10

Connecting the Dots

If you live in California, you've seen this Chinese Pine Tree (Fig 10) in your neighbors' front yards. Unlike the tree in Spode's "Willow," it doesn't grow so high that it overshadows the houses. However, I have included it here as a reminder that the trees we've seen so far weren't figments of the Oriental imagination. Their compact size complemented diminutive Chinese gardens. In their homeland, severe pruning dwarfed the wild, ancient pines and they became the famed and priceless bonsai.

How do I now, exactly, connect the dots? I have to show you that there is a visual path from the early Chinese paintings of pine trees to the stylized "oranges" of the blue and white "Standard Willow" pattern of the 19th century. So here is, briefly, how I hypothesize this has happened:

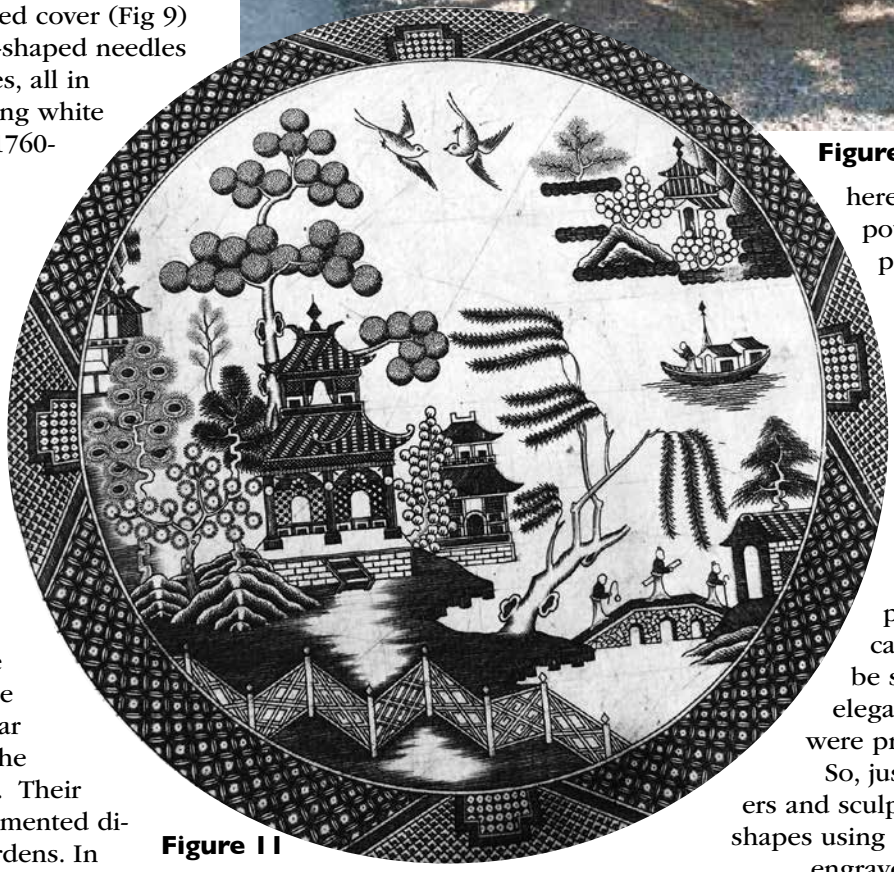
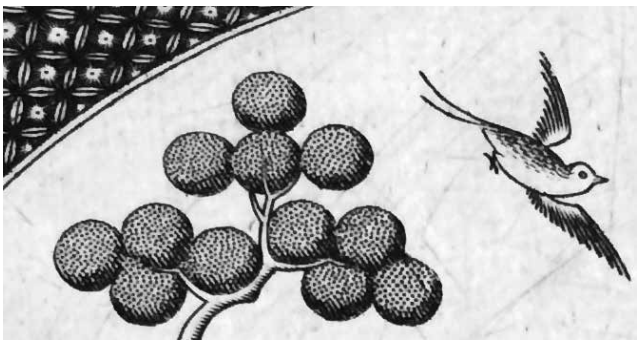


Figure 11



Detail from Figure 11

Here, Copeland gave me a clue in his *Spode's Willow Pattern and Other Designs after the Chinese*. I paraphrase: When Spode and other potters began producing the earliest "Willow" design, the engravers' art was still primitive. Many technical problems had still to be solved before the final, elegant stippling techniques were produced.

So, just as Chinese painters and sculptors created abstract shapes using short strokes, so English engravers relied on the tools they had at hand. They used lines, like the ones in woodcuts. Copying the Chinese ovals, they added punched dots inside to give them texture. For very dark, shaded areas, they used cross hatching. The dots held the color and let it spread slightly to create the secondary tone. Fig 11 is a pull from a Wedgwood "Rag Book" showing a close up of the pine tree

Figure 12

Figure 8

boughs.

Notice how the shading on the undersides and right sides of each oval gives each of them the look of a 3-dimensional ball.

This method created a template for the pine tree 'balloons' to come. As the plates and platters became bigger, so more white space had to be filled (Copeland). Islands in the sky and sampans became more numerous. And the tree behind the temple grew and grew and the abstracted pine needle bunches became bigger than doorways and more numerous.

Somewhere along the line, the ancient ancestor (Fig 12) of the family tree — like this bonsai — was lost and people forgot the heritage. Those early dotted circles did, indeed, look like oranges. (Or apples.) But they were just the engravers code for pine.

Author's Note: *I owe a special thanks to Judie Siddall and David Hoexter for helping me find these answers in The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and in the front yards of their Palo Alto neighborhood. It was their enthusiasm that encouraged me to write this article.*

Figure 9