

**By Richard Lingner**

Assistant Director, Editorial & Interpretation, Curatorial Department

As I enter my 10th year living and working here in Singapore, I'm not sure where my home is. I grew up in the US, born in Massachusetts but before I was school-age, our family moved to Pennsylvania. I lived there through 4th grade, then we moved back to Massachusetts. I went to college in Wisconsin (BA, psychobiology, Beloit College). Then moved around: Massachusetts; California – Monterey Bay south of San Francisco; Minneapolis;



Richard amidst the kitsch of his cubicle

Massachusetts; Cleveland – 2 years of graduate school (MA, art history) plus work at Cleveland Museum of Art; Boston – PhD programme; Philadelphia after I dropped out (work at The Rosenbach museum); Massachusetts – assistant curator at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. And then to Singapore.

But ok, I consider Massachusetts my "home" – born and raised (mostly) in Worcester, I spent much of my adult life in Cambridge, just outside of Boston.



**Family in Western dress.**  
China, Dehua, late 17th century.  
Porcelain. ACM, 2000-03472,  
Gift of Frank and Pamela Hickley

For this *Home, and Away* project, I've picked one of the figure groups from the Chinese Dehua porcelain in our Ceramics Gallery. But all the Dehua figures remind me of the ceramic figures my parents and grandparents had around the house when I was growing up.

The clay around Dehua is especially good for moulding; it's pure and soft. Although production began earlier and continues today, the most popular pieces produced at Dehua are the white figures made in the 17th and 18th century. Westerners who came to love and collect these creations called them "blanc de

China" – white from China. The religious figures – Guanyin most especially – are best known, but many other subjects and forms were produced. Potters pressed or poured the clay into moulds: bodies, arms, legs, heads, attributes, etc. separately, then all would be attached together.

The ceramic figurines I remember from home are called Hummels. Figurines and groups decorated the top of my parents' bureau in their bedroom. They were about the closest thing to "art" we had at home. My grandparents also had them – my father's parents, both descendants of German immigrants to the US. I mention my German heritage because Hummel is a German company.

Hummels are based on sketches made by Berta Hummel (1909–1946), who became Sister Maria Innocentia Hummel after she entered a convent and took her vows in the early 1930s. She made sketches in charcoal and pastel of children she taught at the convent school. The sketches were made into postcards and communion souvenirs by Catholic publisher Ars Scala (Munich); these caught the eye of a porcelain manufacturer. Porzellanfabrik W. Goebel, in what is now the town of Rödental in Bavaria, began producing them in 1935.



**Hummel figures, 1950s**

From left: Little Helper; School Boy; Little Gardener; Little Goat Herder; Girl in Apple Tree; Coquettes; Going to Grandma's; Soldier Boys

I knew none of this history until recently, but googling got me up to speed. During World War II, Hummels became popular souvenirs for American soldiers to bring back home. (Nobody in my family was in the war.) They were also sold in department stores in the US. In the 1970s – my high school and college years – a collectors market developed. Today there's an active international collectors club. Maybe I should get my dad to sell them on eBay?

Is it crazy to compare these Hummel figures to 17th- and 18th-century Dehua porcelain – historical treasures collected by museums worldwide? I myself find

the Hummels maudlin – overly sentimental depictions of children. Sort of like Thomas Kinkade ("the painter of light") paintings, but not as bad. Maybe I'm too jaded. Hummels are collected in specialty museums – one in Illinois and another in Germany – but most serious art historians consider them kitsch. I certainly do. But then, would I want to display Dehua porcelain in my apartment? The religious subject matter is not to my taste; the monochrome of the figure groups perhaps (at least to me) masks their similarly saccharine spirit. Maybe I'd display one of the theatre cubes.



**Theatre scenes.** China, Dehua, 18th century. Porcelain. ACM, 2014-00447

Let's think about high and low art. These categories have been muddled and discredited for a while now in the art world. Maybe back as far as Marcel Duchamp and his toilet (*Fountain*, 1917 – a "readymade" artwork; just a urinal he bought, signed, and displayed as a work of art). Judgments of quality are suspect. In this post-modern age, anything can have merit, all preferences and interests must be accommodated. Hummels, after all, are moulded and painted to exacting standards, details added by specially trained artists, all production still approved by the convent of Siessen, where Berta Hummel herself was a nun.

When I stop to take a look at the Dehua porcelain display at ACM, my thoughts drift back to the little boys and girls crafted in porcelain, sitting on my parents bureau many years ago. I'm not immune to the appeal of "low" art and kitsch. But I have not asked my dad to save those Hummels for me.