Cultural Diffusion in Art: America and China

Curated By Jonathan Ham, Mary Nguyen, Lily Segal, and Cynthia Li
How Does Art Show Cultural Exchange?

文化交流是如何在艺术中体现的？

The Age of Imperialism during the 18th and 19th century connected world cultures like never before. The arrival of American merchants on Chinese land led to significant cultural exchanges that heavily influenced the art at the time. Art and design are a medium of historical study just as significant as any textbook or book. Through looking at the fine art, furniture, and homeware created during the age of imperialism, one is able to see the crossover of Western and Chinese cultures. This exhibit will explore the effects of cultural diffusion on art through looking at stylistic decisions, subject choices, and reception. By the end of the exhibit one will see that history is written through the brush strokes, carvings, and colors that we find in an era's art. This exhibit is ordered chronologically by date: first enter the portrait and fine art room and then enter the furniture and food room.
Guan Zuolin (Spoilum) Active 1765–1810, Guangzhou, China

**Silk Merchant Eshing, 1809**
Oil on canvas
26 5/8 x 20 1/2 inches (67.628 x 52.07 cm)
Gift of Thomas W. Ward, 1809. M364

Artists in Guangzhou, China

**Papaver (Poppy), about 1823**
Opaque watercolor on paper
16 x 14 inches (40.64 x 35.56 cm)
Museum purchase in honor of Dr. H. A. Crosby Forbes, made possible by the generosity of many donors, 2013 E82056.42

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This painting perfectly displays the influence of American art on Chinese art. The image displays a portrait of a silk merchant named Eshing. Eshing's life as a Merchant meant that he was always interacting with Western traders, which inevitably exposed him to Western culture. It is no surprise then that the painting displays this notion of cultural exchange between the West and China.

The painter was a prominent Chinese artist by the name of Spoilum. While traditional Chinese art focused on painting on silk or paper, Spoilum was one of the first to use oil on canvas. This is a direct display of how Western art influenced Chinese art because utilising canvas and oil were western styles of painting. Additionally, the posing of the subject directly mirrors that of great American and European portraits. The painting, though, still remains true to its Chinese roots. It is refreshing to see that Spoilum did not white-wash the merchant and had him remain in his traditional Chinese garb. In this painting -- as well as the other objects -- one can see how different styles from the two cultures are able to come together and make a crossover piece.
This painting uses traditional Chinese Opaque watercolor techniques to present the beauty of poppy flowers, which was a completely different style compared to the last portrait: Silk Merchant Eshing. The delicate brushstroke precisely demonstrates the traits of the poppy plant. The bright colors of the flowers contrast with the dull tone of the paper, which further emphasizes the allure of poppy. However, the gorgeous painting is an ironic example of the corrupt trading between America and China in the 1800s.

The seedpod of poppy flowers produces sap that becomes the source of opium, which is a powerful drug. Opium was popular in the late 1700s and 1800s in China because European and American merchants began importing a large amount of opium to finance trade with China. The drug ended up causing a mass addiction known as the “Opioid Epidemic,” where millions of Chinese people became addicted to Opium. As a result, Western traders acquired millions of exquisite Chinese artworks by supplying the Chinese with Opium. This Chinese painting was painted around 1823 which was exactly during the time period that the Chinese lifestyle was heavily influenced by opium. The anonymous painter from Guangzhou took a artistic approach to reflect on the lives of the Chinese during this time. Therefore, the painting shows cultural diffusion because the events of the subject matter that this artist chose to pursue was directly influenced by American merchants.

Artists in Guangzhou, China

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Artists in Jingdezhen, China

**Plate with the American Ship Friendship**, about 1832

Porcelain 1 1/4 x 10 inches (3.175 x 25.4 cm)

Gift of Miss Mary Pickering Nichols, about 1914 E62500

Artists in Ningbo, China

**Moon-gate bed**, about 1876

Satinwood (huang lu), other Asian woods, and ivory 102 3/8 x 101 3/16 x 66 1/8 inches (260 x 257 x 168 cm)

Gift of Robert W. Sarnoff, 1977 E80259
Artists in Jingdezhen, China

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The art on the porcelain plate portrays Western influence of global trade on Chinese art. The center of the porcelain plate showcases the image of an American ship labeled, “FriendShip Salem.” *Friendship*, was a merchant ship constructed in Salem that was used for voyages in the East Indies trade. As Americans were eager to enter trading relationships with China, the *Friendship* aided the American colonists into creating cultural and economic exchanges with the Chinese. Surrounding the *Friendship*, shows traditional Chinese art which displays the diffusion of Western and Chinese art. The symbolic representation of the centered image of the *Friendship* depicts the relationship between China and America through the artist’s perspective. The artists who created the art and porcelain are from Jingdezhen, China, a city known for its important production of porcelain. By centering the American symbol of maritime voyage and economic trade, the well known porcelain producers and artists show acceptance of American influence and cultural exchange. Through art and porcelain, the Chinese artists illustrate the beginnings of American-Chinese relationships and cultural exchanges that began with the assistance of the American ship, *Friendship.*
The Moon-gate bed is an example of how the Western eye expanded the scope of how Chinese art can be appreciated, by perceiving the architectural genius of Chinese craftsmen as art. This created a Western culture of collecting Chinese furniture as antiques: furniture that was not used for its practical purpose, but as an artistic display.

The Moon-gate bed was created by highly skilled Chinese craftsmen who assembled wooden pegs and butterfly-shaped wedges in a way that would hold the bed’s 53 individual parts together. The idea that screws and nails were not necessary in constructing furniture, architecturally fascinated Westerners and led to the notion of the Chinese craftsmen-artist relationship. This fascination led to the Moon-gate’s display as an antique and art piece at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, “where it wowed thousands of visitors with its jaw-dropping design and elaborate inlay.” What is to be noted is how the Western eye ultimately led to the appreciation of Chinese craftsmanship as art -- leading to Westerners collecting Chinese furniture as art antiques.

Artists in Ningbo, China

Moon-gate bed, about 1876

Satinwood (huang lu), other Asian woods, and Ivory 102 3/8 x 101 3/16 x 66 1/8 inches (260 x 257 x 168 cm)
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The purpose of this exhibit is to showcase how America and China are connected artistically and culturally as a result of trading between the two countries during the Age of Imperialism. The four objects that are displayed in this exhibit fully reflect the relationship between America and China. The portrait uses Western style techniques to display a Chinese subject and his culture, the Chinese watercolor painting and painted plate display the influence of American culture on the subject matter. And lastly the reception to the moon gate bed shows a newfound Western appreciation for Chinese architecture as art.
Works Cited


