From West to East: an Orienting Industrialization during the Nineteenth Century

By presenting an evolution of Western (U.S) industry setting in the Eastern land (China), the exhibition introduces the roles of Industrialization, Imperialism, and Capitalism in nineteenth-century China, inspired by an old Chinese saying, “learn from the foreign skill to overpower the foreign.”

By Rachel, Riley, Nora, Kelly
Exhibition Insight

The encounter of Eastern and Western culture was a collision of ideas – art, in the specific, displayed variance of cultural images by traveling overseas. In the prevalent period of foreign trade, art productions symbolized the revolution of capitalistic ideology and the evolution of the industrial era. This exhibition selected four diverse artworks from Peabody Essex Museum, including a portrait, an oil painting, a sewing machine, and a plate, to demonstrate the fusion between two different cultures.

As the Industrial Revolution induced many new forms of painting in the United States, China somehow followed the same approach later in the nineteenth century. Raising the questions – To what extent does art assimilation reflect China’s stance to the United States? To what time does art illustrate the temporal or permanent impact of Imperialism in the Industrial age?

This exhibition includes an assortment of nineteenth-century China export arts, focusing on the industrial influence from the West (U.S) to East (China) under global industrialization. By unraveling four distinct art pieces, the exhibition examines the progression of Industrialization, Imperialism, and Capitalism positioned in nineteenth-century China, inspired by an old Chinese saying, “learn from the foreign skill to overpower the foreign.”

We invite you to think through generations from different cultural backgrounds, reviewing the post-industrial effects of imperialism by employing art. For more information on the art pieces, please visit https://www.pem.org/explore-art/asian-export-art for the source.
Relationship Insight

LEARN FROM THE FOREIGN

Trade
The “Friendship Plate” signifies the start of international trade and the prevalence of global industrialization in China. Though the plate was produced in Chinese handcraft, the image conveyed a positive expectation towards industrial development in the United States.

The oil painting portrays the large involvement of foreign factories in Guangzhou, which promoted the Western market in China. Moreover, China gained the opportunity to assimilate the techniques and knowledge of the industry through productions in foreign settlements.

Industrialization
The sewing table represents the initial industrial step that China took through Western exportation – it is a combination of the Western manufacture and the components from Chinese tradition. Such production marks the beginning of cultural merging.

Wu bingjian was a representative of accomplishing great and successful business by grasping the Western industrial market. The portrait of Wu bingjian is then a milestone for Chinese industrial revolution, empowering the Chinese market through the lessons from Western experience.

Imperialism

TO OVERPOWER THE FOREIGN

Learning Capitalism
Porcelain Plate (1832)

The Western Industrial Revolution switched its weight from nationally to globally in the nineteenth century, China being one of the destinations. Therefore, a variety of goods were transporting between two globes, carrying cultures along with trades. This plate, made by artists in Jingdezhen, highlights the cultural compilation of China and America by displaying Chinese porcelain manufacture and the image of an American ship. The ship stands with an American flag in the air, carrying human figures in traditional Chinese clothing awaiting the prospects. “Friendship” in English sits on top, reflecting both the ship image and a wish on successful tradings between two countries. In response to international trading, this plate held a vision of cultural affiliation and a symbol of commercial cooperation at the beginning of Chinese industrialization.

Artists in Jingdezhen, China
Plate with the American ship Friendship, about 1832, Porcelain
Frame 1 1/4 x 10 inches (3.175 x 25.4 cm)
Photo by Dennis Helmar
Sewing tables were furniture production in the first industrial revolution. This sewing table, made by artists in Guangzhou, consists of lacquered wood, ivory, and gold, with reproduction silk bags. The panel of this sewing table describes the view of the sailing vessels at a port. Even though the painting did not show the merchants themselves, this painting implies how busy merchants are boarding their commodities and meeting their clients onshore, which symbolized the prosperous trade. Additionally, although the Guangzhou artists made this table in China, the sewing table was brought by people from England to China. After the industrial revolution in the mid-18th century, the large-scale production of the textile industry promoted the invention and development of sewing machines, which the West later exported to China through extensive trades. It is clear that, although sewing machines were a foreign concept to the Chinese at that time, they managed to master the production and incorporate their elements.
Sunqua, under the influence of Chinnery and his Western art form in the 19th century, belonged to the group of export artists in Guangzhou, who marketed to on the need from the West and therefore created loads of various Western paintings.

View of the Foreign Factories in Guangzhou, by Sunqua, was one of many pieces in his collection of oil paintings in Guangzhou harbor. This art piece stands out with its detailed portrait of the foreign factories through realistic touches on Western industrial engagement.

Sitting in front are the numerous marine crafts, transporting commodities into and out of mainland China by the harbor. In the back, a dozen of foreign factories stand side by side, as the flags are rising upfront in distinct colors (U.S). The crowded image of the Guangzhou harbor in the nineteenth century was then a representation of the industrial emigration from the West to the East, or in other words, the extension of the national market, leading to a matured factory and industrial structure in China.
In the nineteenth century, the Second Industrial Revolution and Imperialism evoked artists' passion for art and led to artistic movements. Meanwhile, around 1825, Chinnery brought the western technique of realistic oil painting to China, and Chinese artists began to emulate his "Howqua's portrait." Accordingly, a Chinese artist painted Wubingjian’s portrait by imitating George Chinnery’s art practice in other Howqua’s portraits.

Wubingjian, mostly known as “Howqua” among foreign traders, owned a Jardine Company that sold tea, which once monopolized China's foreign maritime trade. Howqua’s success and affluence appear in the portraits from clothing and house decoration, being almost the emperor standard in the 19th century. The most intelligent marketing approach and brand strategy from Howqua utilized his portrait to create an exclusive brand image. This strategy facilitated the maintenance and expansion of his brand as an "emotional bond" with western companies in international trade. From there, Howqua completed the leap between culture and commerce, presenting an optimal collision and fusion of culture, art, and commerce during the industrial age.
https://collection.pem.org/portals/collection/#asset/119091

https://collection.pem.org/portals/collection/#asset/61979

https://collection.pem.org/portals/collection/#asset/52494


https://collection.pem.org/portals/collection/#asset/119054