Trade, As An Entrance

A closer look at how trade acts as the entrance for America and China to build solid relationships on politics, economy, art, and culture.

Exhibition Curated by HAOYU LIU, MENGXUE LU, RUOBING YANG
Exhibition Overview

This exhibition brings together some of the works in China and Salem to present this remarkable relationship between the two countries. By providing works from the 1700s to mid-1800s and organizing them functionally, the exhibition orients viewers to understand how trade led to influences in politics, economy, culture, and art. The artworks highlight the mutual acceptance and appreciation established between the two countries since the 1700s. Whether from a western or eastern perspective, the audience shall learn the extensive impact that both cultures made on each other. Thenceforward, we aim to pursue a world with open-mindedness.

Wubingjian, known as Houqua, represents the ties between politics and economy that initiated by trade. Friendship functions as the physical drive for trade to prosper, leading to cultural exchanges. The communications between the two nations build upon the appreciation for a tea culture through the tea trade, though differs in details. After being introduced by trade, culture influences embed in art as one may apply western cultures and ideas to a traditionally Chinese art form, or vice versa.
The painting displays a great example of a meeting of arts as an oil canvas painting is traditionally a form of western painting that is imported to China. The art piece on display is a portrait of a regal navy robe wearing Chinese man nobly seated as he gazes towards the viewer. The name of the man is Houqua, not only was he the richest man during the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods, but he was also the representative of the thirteen factories of the Guangzhou merchants. Houqua is known to have been a key representative in China's political system, being responsible for duties a modern Minister of Trade would be responsible for. Houqua was also known to have had ties with powerful western contemporaries and political figures such as James Matheson and William Jardine. Furthermore, Houqua was seen as someone who had business and political dealings in both China and the western world; he played roles such as the Chinese governor of customs, the Chinese representative of the East India company, ally of American Democrat Caleb Cushing. Houqua clears the barriers for trade between the two countries. As the trade proceeded, more and more products that symbolized the trade relationship between the two countries began to appear.
Plate with the American ship Friendship  
about 1832  
Artists in Jingdezhen, China  
Porcelain  
1 1/4 x 10 inches (3.175 x 25.4 cm)  
Gift of Miss Mary Pickering Nichols, about 1914

Merchants like Wu Bingjian use large cargo ships designed for their capacity but not for speed, such as this Salem ship Friendship. This ship makes such significance that it is being depicted on artifacts.

As a gift intended for Miss Mary Pickering Nichols, this porcelain plate was produced around 1832 in China and eventually arrived in the United States around 1914. The plate displays a seamless mixture of American and Chinese culture through the accentuation of the American flag's colors and traditional Chinese elements. As with much of the picture, the illustrator primarily uses black lines. However, through the use of the color red that heavily contrasts with the rest of the image, the artist emphasized the American elements particularly. Meanwhile, the side of the plate exhibits daily life in China through a distinguished style of delineating delicate details and using highly saturated blue, yellow, red, and green paints. At the center of the plate, the Salem ship named Friendship is illustrated to show its glory through the firing of its cannon. As such, the artwork encompasses the process of how an economical relationship between America and China grew to become one of cultural. Later in time, tea culture became the essential connection for the two nations.


Minor revision by Akhil Sathish Nair
Among all items traded, tea was the prominent product that most practically connects the trade relationship. Along with the tea, the related products of tea appear widely. The Tilt-Top Tea Table was sculptured using mahogany by an anonymous artist and was sent as a gift to the Peabody Essex Museum in 1938. The design of the tea table is a strong neoclassical style that puts emphasis on simplicity and elegance, the triangular base design and the engraving located in the middle help emphasize such ideas. This was further advanced through the usage of mahogany as it creates a noble temperament without complicated elements or exaggerations. The additional tea set’s red-pink color patterns help to highlight the elegance of tea culture.

The point of emphasis from this artwork is that since China was the first country to grow its own tea and have an established tea culture, the appearance of such tea tables in America suggests of a strong trade relationship between the two countries. As such, it demonstrates that trade not only brings economic exchanges but also the exchange of a country’s way of life. The tea culture adopted from China was integrated into American culture and has become an inseparable part of many people’s lives. The integration and shaping of tea culture into American culture can also be seen as historically, people in China do not use teaspoons when making tea, whereas in the artwork, a small teaspoon can be identified next to each teacup. With the deepening of trade exchanges, the trade between the two countries not only exists in economics, but also in religious and ideological aspects.
Madonna and Child
1690-1710
Artists in Dehua, China
Porcelain
15 x 3 1/2 x 3 inches (38.1 x 8.89 x 7.62 cm)
Museum purchase, made possible by an anonymous donor, 2001

With the frequent material trade, the cultural exchange developed significantly, even to the psychological world of religion. The Dehua figure of the Madonna and Child contains a female figure standing on top of a cloud and holding a small boy in her arms. The female figure was modeled after the figure of the Chinese goddess of Mercy, "Guanyin", as she is often depicted to be standing on a cloud holding a child. Although the figure was modeled after the Chinese goddess, the figure has many European features such as curly hair, non-Chinese headdress, a holy cross on her breasts, etc; furthermore, the child figure is shown to be holding a Christianity related object. As such, the figure is considered to be the Christian Holy Mother, the Virgin Mary, and on her arms is the infant Christ.

This artwork is a brilliant example of the meeting of cultures as Chinese elements and Western elements are heavily used to create the figures. The figure being modeled after Guanyin while dressed up as Virgin Mary represents that in Buddhism and Christianity, they respectively play similar roles, thus it demonstrates how religions around the world share common ideas and themes.
So... Why Does Trade Matter?

Trade allowed for China and America to develop their relationship on a political, economical, cultural and artistic front. To look into each one specifically, it was through the help of politicians that trader were able to conduct businesses smoothly and efficiently. Therefore, to promote trade and their business, several traders directly joined politics to reform and influence. An example of such is Houqua, who joined the department of trade and collaborated with American officers to revise trade laws.

On the economic front, trades allowed for both countries to receive economic benefits and improve their respective economies. An example of such is, the tea trade not only brought income into China, but also raised consumption levels in the United States.

On an artistic and cultural level, the strength of the trade relationship would define and refine the artworks and cultural practices of the time. For example, the tea culture in America, Chinese-made plates of the ship Friendship with Chinese style drawings, ceramic sculptures resembling Christian figures and Buddhist figures were inspired as the trade relationship became stronger. Though they may differ in art styles, they both represent cultural integration. Overall, trade allowed for not only the exchange of goods but also the exchange of ideas and cultural aspects.
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