The Impact of Maritime Trade on Culture

The exchange of culture through art.

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In trade based economies, trade often impacts culture as well. In the 18th and 19th century, various Chinese ports were connected to the port in Salem, Massachusetts, which led to a cultural exchange. This exhibit is meant to highlight the exchange of cultures between Asia and the West.

Through the exploration and juxtaposition of these individual pieces, we hope to show the impact that trade had on the art and culture of the time period.
This plate depicts a union between the “sea and the Heavens”. Within it, blue images of a Portuguese ship, galleon, fish, a mountain range, and various other sea creatures can be found. Centered in the dish is the Chinese compass, symbolic of maritime culture and navigation. On the rim of the porcelain plate, the artist uses motifs of Heaven and Earth, along with other earthly elements such as fire, water, and wind.
Silk Merchant Eshing

This portrait was painted by revered Chinese artist, Spolium, who was known for his western-style portraits of foreign merchants and paintings on glass. The painting depicts the Cantonese silk merchant Eshing, who was described by William Trotter as “the most intelligent and best informed person in China.” The painting depicts Eshing as serious and wise, his posture tall as he sits in his navy blue Chinese robes, almost waiting to be asked a question.

Guan Zuolin, oil on canvas, 1809.
Painted Side Chair

This chair was created in Salem, with gorgeous and intricate designs flowing throughout it. From the carved bow and plume splat on the back to the vines trailing the legs, the detailed handiwork that was put into this chair is clear to see, and it shows the importance of art even within the furniture that people used in their everyday lives. Furthermore, the strong royal blue that makes up the cushion draws the eye and exemplifies the connection that this chair has to maritime culture.

Artist in Salem Massachusetts, wood, paint, and reproduction upholstery, about 1795
Tea Production in China

This painting depicts the different aspects of the production and trade of tea. It shows workers tilling fields, tending to tea bushes, sorting tea leaves, packing tea into crates, negotiations between merchants and finally the loading of tea crates onto boats with the blue water running throughout. This scene shows a Chinese landscape but trade is insinuated by the British ships in the background, portraying the importance of the trade conducted on each country.
Cultural Advancement

The dish and the artwork both convey the systems that work together in creation of a final product. The oil painting from Guangzhou, China shows the stages of tea production in which many laborers dedicate their work to one stage of a overarched process of making tea to export to England and the Americas. The artists even included British ships on the dock ready to complete the trade. While the porcelain dish from the artist in Zhangzhou, China a century earlier, illustrates the relationship between the Heavens and Earthly elements.

Viewers of both pieces of art can see the elevation of society from admiration of the relationship of nature to the praising of human nature. Artist now showcase the interconnectedness of the human experience instead of the Heavens. There had been so much technological progress that now the advancements of humans is something to marvel at and embrace through art.
The Importance of Maritime Trade

Throughout the exploration of this exhibit, the differences in culture and time periods may display different representations of culture and exchanges of art across continents, but they all convey the same message of interconnection between societies with the ocean acting as the bridge. While each piece is different, the theme of blue weaves itself into the story that they tell, and shows the significance of maritime trade on cultures throughout the world.