Made in America? Chinese Influence on American Art

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Does the United States live up to its legacy as a “melting pot?”

Although this metaphor represents the cultural integration of immigrants into American society, the current integrity and extent of cultural assimilation are contentious.

Looking back towards the 18th and 19th centuries, one can also reattribute the phrase “melting pot” towards the culturally infused artwork of the immigrants.

New England trading hubs such as Salem, Massachusetts, collected Chinese works of art out of curiosity, interest, and potential exploitation for self-benefit.

Our intention through this exhibit is to explore the details of traditional Asian artwork and to determine whether the motives of New England’s local artists were oppressive or simply inspired.

The first piece is a traditional Chinese porcelain plate, followed by three Asian-inspired works of art.
Lotus Lily Dish
Jingdezhen, China
Circa 1573-1619

In Chinese culture, porcelain is a form of creative expression depicting symbols for wealth, knowledge, and good luck.¹ Exported worldwide, porcelain promotes economic and cultural exchange between China and other countries. This form of fine art has become synonymous with “china” in western culture because it originated in China during the Shang Dynasty.

The outer curved edges of the plate resemble the natural structure of a lotus flower, a religious representation of the ultimate purity of the heart and mind.² On each outer petal, a tri-swirl pattern, similar to the Buddhist triskelion symbol, which represents rebirth,³ surrounds the center character. While the translation of the center character is unknown, it sits in the obconical receptacle, the part of the flower that spreads its seeds. Through both spiritual meaning and aesthetic beauty of design, Chinese artwork certainly inspired curious New England artists.
Inspired New England artists, such as this unknown artist based in Salem, took inspiration from the Chinese porcelain and subsequently created their own tea set.

Composed of a teapot, teacups, saucers, a bowl, and a sauceboat, this set combines American and Chinese cultures. Interestingly, sauce boats are normally associated with European and American culture, yet in this set, the artist decided to include the boat in a seemingly Chinese porcelain style arrangement.

Glazed on each piece, a large pink lotus flower contrasts heavily with the deep-red mahogany wood table. While in Chinese culture, these flowers are considered sacred, does this artist’s rendition accomplish the same meaning? Through this set, the artist has created an example of cultural diffusion in the form of artistic expression that incorporates both Chinese and American elements.
Fascinated by unique Asian traditional clothing, members of the New England elite had access to foreign garments. In this oil painting, Kettle portrays two caucasian children adorned in Chinese and Indian outfits. On the left side of the portrait, the older boy is dressed in a Chinese government official garb with signature color and missing shoulder seams. The child on the right is also decorated in an elite style of dress. Indian in origin, the dress is complemented by gold bangles and a turban aigrette completed with a jewel and blue feather.

Both children are weaning traditional belts. While the older child wears a black leather strap around his waist, the younger child wears a traditional Indian patka. This style of the sash is made of a combination of cotton, silk, and interwoven embroidery.

Is there meaning beyond “dressing up” the two children in “exotic” attire? Does Kettle’s painting represent an appropriation or appreciation of traditional Chinese and Indian clothing?
This mahogany dining chair is an example of Palladianism, a Renaissance-inspired European architectural style that became popularized in New England during the late eighteenth century. The flood of Chinese art into America during this time period resulted in the addition of Asian-inspired ornamentation by an American artist about 50 years after its initial production.

This specific chair displays multiple important aspects of Chinese culture such as good fortune, religion, and everyday life. Additionally, the crest below the velvet seat of the chair is English in origin and includes two lions, which symbolizes British Royalty. Whereas the Asian decorations evoke emotions of peace, the seal imposes a sense of power. The chair is an embodiment of the exchange between Chinese, American, and European ideas.
Two individuals can be seen conversing in the plaza of a large temple exchanging ideas. A fisherman is displayed sitting under a serene willowing tree. Both of these depictions and surrounding floral patterns are representative of common activities signifying comfort and connection with nature.

The chair’s seal has noticeable elements that compare to the Royal Seal at Buckingham Palace in London.

A similar Boston side chair without decorations.
According to the “melting pot” theory, cultures from all over the world come to America to create a society made up of the best aspects of each culture. However, based on the art studied in this exhibit, it appears that in certain situations, American artists may be appropriating Asian traditional culture rather than appreciating it.

As seen in Tilly Kettle’s oil painting, there is no apparent reason for these children to dress in Asian attire. Instead, it is more likely that Kettle painted the piece to create a narrative of Americans viewing Asian imports as goods to be treasured rather than historically admired.

On the other hand, the implementation of Asian art in the American tea set incorporated the Chinese symbols and porcelain techniques to create a piece that combines the two cultures while acknowledging the elements of Chinese culture.

In a similar fashion to the porcelain set, the adorned chair combines two distinct cultures. The intention of the chair is unclear whether it is appropriating Chinese culture or blending the two American and Chinese cultures in an honest manner.
Works Cited


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