The Influence of Culture and Economics in Art

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All of the featured works involve Intercultural elements that tie the art to both Asia and the US. These objects are not objects that are given to America at random. There are intercultural relationships in these artworks that makes them more valuable to be preserved in an American museum. The relationship between China and America during the 18th and 19th centuries was built economically on trade between the two nations. The demand for artwork between the two countries led to a cultural exchange as Westerners adopted Chinese practices and Chinese craftsmen adopted Western practices. These artworks were made with selling to the West in mind as they adopt Western styles and subject matter and mix it with traditional Chinese style and subject matter. This led to both countries learning about the other countries culture, and adopting useful craft techniques from the other country.
The collection of Fine Arts in the museum includes the porcelain on the right, known as Mr. Nobody.

As we can observe, the name of the artwork is not random. His figure is bodiless, as his legs are connected at the level of the head. In his hands there is a bottle and a cup, while his long hair is covered by a sizeable hat. What is capturing the audience’s attention the most, nonetheless, is the combination of blue and white colors, which make up the porcelain. Although the original porcelain, as presented in the Peabody Essex Museum, was created by an unknown Chinese artisan in Jingdezhen,[1] his inspiration must be credited to a London Delft figure made in 1682.[2] The latter artwork itself consisted of a chinoiserie landscape,[3] combining blue and white, shades which are said to have been of great significance in the Chinese ceramics throughout the Tang dynasty, and which originated from the rare for China cobalt ores imported from Persia, thus making the porcelain a luxury item for the time.[4] But where was the idea rooted in the first place?

From what we know, Mr. Nobody depicts a European gentleman and trader, and is one of the first such representations in Chinese porcelain.[5] In reality, the original artwork was inspired by the frontispiece of an Elizabethan play published in the 1950s, which mocked class inequality in England.[6] In the play, Nobody is always blamed for Somebody’s deeds, and this way the writer speaks of the human habit of denying guilt.[7] This topic is still relevant today, and was puzzled in 2012 by Michael Lin who threw an exhibition of hundreds of mass-produced replicas of Mr. Nobody, a collection aiming at the revival of the trade history between China and the West.[8] Mr. Nobody became Everybody,[9] and this idea highlights the globality of his figure. Like Michael Lin, who was born in Tokyo, raised in the US, and is now a resident of Shanghai and Brussels,[10] Mr. Nobody is the incarnation of the interrelated ideas in three major continents of the world: Asia, America, and Europe.
Teapot Imported from Jingdezhen, China - around 1750

This Chinese Teapot features a depiction of the Passion of Christ story (the Crucifixion of Christ). Despite being a story primarily taught and worshipped in the West, the art is depicted in a Chinese Style rather than in a Western style. This blend of Western subject matter with a Chinese art style shows the cultural influences the art trade between China and the US had on one another. The art is mostly gray with the exception being little pieces of gold coloring for the metallic objects in the story being told, such as on the nails on the crucified individuals or the helmets and weapons of the Romans. This is unusual because in Western religious artwork gold is usually reserved for a halo or light around Jesus or other holy figures heads rather than something less significant to the piece like the metallic objects in a story. This teapot was created in Jingdezhen, China in around 1750. Jingdezhen is famous for its fine porcelain and ceramics for a 1000 years.
Painted in England by the English Artist: Tilly Kettle, the painting features two boys adorned in traditional Asian garments. The mixing of European and Asian culture emphasizes the spiritual kinship shared among these cultures regarding chinese trade. The luxurious fabrics detailed in the painting encentuate the children's wealth and class, placing a high value on the physical elements that make up chinese culture and stresses the importance of chinese trade for interculturalization. Donated to the PEM in Salem in the 21st century, it furthermore highlights the gravity of interculturalization among Western and Eastern societies—China and Europe and China and the US alike, that heightens the spread of cultural contagion. Demonstrating how the mixing of Asian and Western cultures is among the core societal values in the US, all made possible by the Chinese trade.
First, this is a sewing table. China was famous for its silk and silk was made on the sewing table. People spend hours on the table daily trying to turn natural silk taken from animals and turn it into real silk. Second, it uses Lacquered wood, ivory, and gold to build the table. All three are expensive ingredients that were only available for the royal families. It also uses red and yellow as the main colors. Only the royal family were allowed to use yellow and red at that time. You can see that from the Chinese king’s cloth. It was given as a gift to Mr. Francis B. Lothrop, who was a wealthy man from Massachusetts. On the front of the table, the maritime silk road and lots of boats were carved there. It shows that the maritime Silk Road is what connects China and the Western world together.
The Cultural Effect on Arts

These two objects have an interesting relationship. The Mr. Nobody uses a traditional Chinese way of art—porcelain to portray a European character. The painting uses oil painting, a form of western art, to portray two English boys in asian clothing. This idea makes the cultural exchange between different parts of the world even clearer. Both works accentuate the ideals of the opposite cultures and demonstrate how both benefit from interculturalization made possible by virtue of the Chinese trade.
The relationship between these two objects is that these two arts are both made in Jingdezhen. Jingdezhen is known as the “Porcelain Capital” and it manufactures thousands of pieces of porcelain every year. The selected pieces of art are not the best porcelain. Good porcelain is light, shiny blue and displays clear images, but the color on the selected objects are a little blurred. However, these objects are special because they show western culture through traditional Chinese art. The Jingdezhen porcelain industry was certainly booming during the 18th and 19th Century as the demand for Chinese porcelain was increasing in the United States. This not only meant that Jingdezhen artisans would increase their output of artwork made at this increased demand, but they would tailor their art specifically to Westerners by featuring Western values or traits in the art. The economic boost Jingdezhen experienced from the US’s interest in Chinese porcelain caused Jingdezhen artists to familiarize themselves with Western culture in order to create artwork that would sell well in the US. This is a clear example of the economic and cultural aspects of artwork impacting one another.
[1]“Mr. Nobody,” Peabody Essex Museum | Shop, link.
[3]“Figure of Mr. Nobody,” The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, link.
[9]Cate McQuaid, “‘Michael Lin’ connects the ancient, contemporary.”
[10] Ibid.
Thank you!