Boston Curators

Interdisciplinary Group Project-Art, Trade, and Imperialism
This Exhibit examines several pieces of artwork constructed in the United States and China in the 18th and 19th centuries. Both America and China had influence over each other both culturally and artistically during this time frame. All items in this exhibit are meant to speak for themselves and also show the discourse between the two countries though chronologic progression. Following the footage of our exhibition, audiences will learn the artistic characteristics of Chinese art and further connect the artistic and cultural relationship between China and America.
The image depicts a Tilt-Top Tea Table, supposedly constructed out of mahogany around 1770, at this time, “prior to the Revolutionary War, American had already become enamored with Chinese products, especially tea and porcelain”. We can see exactly what sort of influence this aspect of Chinese culture had on American society, to specify this tip-top table for was utilized for tea.

Not much is known about the artist who constructed this particular Tilt-Top Table and surprisingly, just as little about the person who gifted this table to the PEM. However, it seems the concept behind the table is historically the same. Because of its foldable nature, it was designed to have elaborate patterns to be viewed while not in use (can't be seen here). The table takes up less space and was only used as “occasional tables of the kind used for tea and similar occasions”.

Artist in Salem or Essex County, Massachusetts
Tilt-top tea table, about 1770
Mahogany
27 1/2 x 31 inches (69.85 x 78.74 cm)
Anonymous gift, 1938
123544
This piece of fine art is a headdress from Qing Dynasty by a Chinese artist. Headdress, also known as Dian Zi, were designed for noble women in Qing Dynasty for special occasions and “traditional festivals” [3]. The headdress on display at PEM is carefully designed and carved with patterns of auspicious clouds, cranes, bamboo, and flowers [4]. These symbols represent good fortune and joy since ancient time in China. In addition, the use of colorful gemstones, valuable pearls, and precious kingfisher feathers for decoration adds more value to this headdress. This high level of decoration shows that the headdress on the left side was likely to belong to a woman from imperial families.

Artists in China
Headdress with cranes, clouds, bamboo, orchid, and fruit, Qing dynasty, about 1800
Kingfisher feathers, imitation pearls, coral, semiprecious stones, copper alloy with gilding, and silk threads
11 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 9 inches (29.21 x 31.75 x 22.86 cm)
Gift in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Austin Cheney by their daughters Ruth C. Krumhaat, Marjorie B. C. Shaw, Elizabeth C. Buckley, and Mabel C. Smith, 1984
E75225.A

It’s worth noting that the headdress is a gift in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Austin Cheney by their daughters to the PEM. It’s really interesting to see how this precious piece of headdress is preserved in the PEM in a good condition after traveling through hundreds years and coming to a different country.
This oil on canvas portrait captures Wu Bingjian, or Houqua, in about 1835. Houqua was revered for being fair and honest, the leader of the cohong, “the powerful guild of Chinese traders authorized by their government to oversee the business dealings of merchants at Canton.” Houqua had an immense influence on Western traders, often assisting and guiding them with kindness. As a result, many pieces of art were made of him and can be found in the US and throughout the UK.

This piece of art was made by artists in Guangzhou, China. It should also be noted that the work was gifted to the PEM by the Bradford children in honor of their parents. This speaks to the impact of Chinese art on American culture as a whole, as well as the subjects’ still well upheld reputation.
The bowl was a gift from the Conger Collection to the PEM in 1991. This artwork represents Chinese artists’ great achievement in portraying ceremonies and celebrations of royal wedding and poetic evocation of seasons. Since the bowl was designed for a ceremonial purpose, it was more likely to be an item displayed in front of others rather than being used as a daily food-serving item.

This is a fine bowl with a number of roundels of floral design, which was approximately made around 1821 to 1850 by anonymous artists from Jingdezhen, China. The bowl was made of porcelain with “transparent glaze and polychrome overglaze enamels”, which was a unique handcrafted technique among Asia, especially in China.

Artists in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, China
Bowl with floral roundels, Qing dynasty, Daoguang period, 1821–50
Porcelain with transparent glaze and polychrome overglaze enamels
2 1/2 x 5 3/4 inches (6.35 x 14.605 cm)
Gift of the Conger Collection, 1991
E76796
Comparing Pieces

Artistic Relationship between China and American

The artwork on the top right corner is a bowl with flower roundel. The headdress on the bottom right is a hat designed for noble women in the 18th century. Although these two pieces are different types of artworks on gallery, they demonstrate characteristics of ancient Chinese art during the Qing dynasty. During the Qing Dynasty, there’s a growing number of trade and exchanges between China and America. Both of the artworks above are created in the 18th century and are given as gifts to the PEM later in the 20th century. They are carefully designed by Chinese artists and are carved with floral patterns. These designs are symbols of higher social class in ancient China. Together they reflect the artistic influence of Chinese art on American culture.
Comparing Pieces Pt.2
Cultural Relationship between China and America

Through both the oil-on-canvas painting of Wubing Jian and the constructed Tilt-top table tea set, we can infer that Americans admired Chinese culture and respected it immensely. Starting from the 18th century, in which we can see how tea, a very important commodity in Chinese culture, is admired and demanded around the world, even in America where furniture like Tilt-Top Tables were constructed for its specific tea occasions. During this time, we can also see the Americans respect for Chinese culture with the painting of Wu Bingjian. Paintings like these allowed the U.S to diversify its culture, including other important historical figures from other cultures. Together both pieces reflect the cultural influence of China on the United States.
Bibliography

2. Ibid.