Porcelain, Portraits, Upholstery, and Upholding Western Standards:
A Look Inside the Peabody Essex Museum

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Our Exhibit

As visitors pass through the many exhibits of the Peabody Essex Museum, they travel between culturally divided collections entitled “Asian Export Art”, “Indian Art”, “African Art”, and more. Viewers are encouraged to awe at the culturally-specific intricacies of the exotic displays; however, European and American stylistic influence lurks throughout each art exhibit. What’s striking is the unexpected imagery of the American eagle in Chinese porcelain art, or French fleur-de-lis medallion patterns in Indian crafted seats. Art history museums are naturally inclined to dramatize the exotic allure of their culture collections, however Western colonial roots still hold their prominence in hidden displays of Eastern art. While the art from 17th and 18th century Western Maritime trade in the East reflect the imposed superiority complex of the colonizers, it’s more interesting to unpack the equally ‘hidden’ economic and diplomatic motives of China and India during this time. Each of our pieces reflect these clever design tactics from Eastern artists that attract European consumers. As viewers walk through our exhibit they can witness the deepening structure and complexity of Eastern and Western relationships through calculated and meaningful cultural diffusion, present first in merchandise (to gain a profit) and then in gifts (to appease trade/political partners).

The ports of Salem, MA, that allowed for the influx of Chinese and Indian art brought about evidence of Eastern artists adopting Western style as both a facet of colonization and a crux of capitalism. While the museum passerbys may overlook these riveting details when strolling through beautiful “Asian Export Art” collections, the Peabody Essex Museum excels in providing educational context that begs for further inspection. Upon second glance, you’ll discover how the blending of cultural practices in art has long existed and how it came to be.
This porcelain plate dating back to 1743-1745 was created by a Chinese artist in Jingdezhen. It is all the more interesting, then, that the subject of the design is undeniably Western. While there are elements of intricacy and design commonly associated with the East, and China specifically, it is clear that the focus of this plate is to appeal to a Western recipient. The sides of the plate include scenes inspired by “oriental” art: mountains and trees painted in a style traditionally associated with Chinese art, and structures sporting traditional Chinese architecture. Such an allusion to Eastern delineation is in sharp juxtaposition to the European subjects exhibited in the center of the plate. It is well known that Westerners have imposed their culture, religion, and ways of life on Asian countries for centuries. However, certain products of Asian origin reveal the possibility that Asian proprietors purposefully changed their product matter in order to appeal to the tastes of Westerners and turn a larger profit. As the global marketplace for art and houseware grew, Eastern artisans and specialists adopted a downright capitalist quality by adjusting their merchandise to attract and flatter European and American consumers.
The “Punch Bowl,” made sometime between 1800-1815 by an unknown Chinese artist, depicts a ship under construction to “celebrate the importance of shipbuilding to the young American economy.” This bowl catered to a Western audience, having been designed to attract European and American sailors in the prospect of souvenirs. Symbols of the United States’s independence and overall greatness were popular during this time.

Artist: (Unknown) from China
Medium: Porcelain
Date: 1800-1815
“Punch Bowl”

The bowl was tilted upwards, showing the Western style boat in construction, however on the other side of the bowl (the side pointed away from the audience’s point of view, facing the floor) there was a bald eagle holding armor of the American flag. In the “Chinese Art” section there are multiple American flags created by Chinese artists. It is entirely possible the museum hid this clear symbol of American influence to present a more “exotic” collection of art. Through this misrepresentation, the Peabody Essex museum changes the past to display Chinese art as more mysterious and foreign than it actually was in Salem during this time.
"Shuja-ud-Daula and His Sons"

This ornate painting is unique in that while it depicts a royal family of India, it was actually painted by a British artist named Tilly Kettle in 1772. The painting’s realism, use of depth and dimension, and elaborate detailing are thus very Eurocentric artistic characteristics that were not widely used by Indian artists of the time. This portrait was created primarily because the British East India Company (EIC) strongly encouraged that their Eastern trading partners, such as Shuja-ud-Daula (the Mughal governor), move away from sending traditional cultural gifts to the British king and opt instead to send Western-style portraits. The fact that the Mughal governor went along with this discreet erasure of Eastern culture by his British trading partners is very indicative of capitalism’s insidious nature. Shuja-ud-Daula knew that in order to maintain strong financial and diplomatic relations with powerful Western states, his country would need to slowly move towards—or else be forced to adopt—Western cultural practices and styles. The relentlessness of capitalism eventually did lead to British colonization of India, but it is very possible that the Mughal governor believed that simply embracing Western culture in increments, such as by having this portrait created, would be enough to appease the West, particularly the EIC.

Artist: Tilly Kettle
Medium: Oil Painting
Date: 1772
Royal Blue “Side Chair”

Commissioned by the nawab (Mughal governor) of Arcot, Muhammed Ali Khan Wallajah, this royal blue ornate chair was given as a gift of diplomacy to the British Navy Commander-in-chief’s wife, Lady Harland. Crafted around 1770 from artists in Visakhapatnam, India, the chair employs a harmonious blend of Euro-traditional styles with Eastern ornate detailing and materials. Made of ebony, inlaid ivory, cane, and lacquer for structure, the deep royal blue velvet cushioning and flowering design directly targets European consumers. While the inlaid fleur-de-lis medallions are a traditional symbol of French society, leading historians to predict its original creation was an intended gift to the French dignitary, the chair was ultimately presented to Lady Harland in 1772. This was likely done as a political tactic once British Navy fleets solidified their power over France in the East Indies during the late 18th century. This chair suggests that East Asian manufacturers not only adopted Western style for direct trading and economic gain, but likely did so to establish advantageous diplomatic relations with their colonial counterparts. The blending of cultural creations was used as yet another ploy for capitalist gain against their conquerors.

Artists: (Unknown) from Visakhapatnam, India
Medium: Ebony, Ivory, Cane, Lacquer, Velvet
Date: 1760-70
In an era where most of our material goods don the label “Made in China” and manufacturing is heavily concentrated in Asia, it is more important than ever that we consider the Western world’s history of trade and goods with the East. In our exhibit, entitled “Porcelain, Portraits, Upholstery, and Upholding Western Standards,” we aim to provide visual proof not only of the expectations imposed upon Asian countries, but also of the remarkable response from Asian artisans and manufacturers who beat Western consumers to the punch. Easterners produced goods that appealed to the Eurocentric world on their own terms before it was forced on them and, in this way, launched a dynasty of industry that continues today. Whether it be to gain an economic edge, or to acquire political favor, Asian artisans dictated the future of capitalism by taking advantage of a system meant to exploit them. Eurocentric standards of beauty, wealth, culture, and morality have been forced on cultures around the world for hundreds of years, and Asian countries are no exception. They did, however, beat Westerners at their own game, especially in the realms of artistry and trade, leaving European and American industries reeling to this very day.
Sources Cited:


“Side chair, about 1770.” *Asian Export Art Collection.* Peabody Essex Museum.