Trading Art and Ideas: China and Early America

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This exhibit searches to analyze how much influence American and Chinese art indeed had on one another following the start of their trade – in the 18th and 19th centuries. The onset of trade generally brings new ideologies, designs, and cultural ideas that can be acquired or rejected, which can be seen in America and China throughout the artworks in this exhibit of “Trading Art and Ideas.”
This oil on canvas portrays the Salem woman, and daughter of a shipping merchant, Harriet Low. In an attempt to take down gender barriers in the Chinese-American trade system, Low and her aunt disguised themselves as men and snuck into American factories in Canton, China. Successful in her endeavors of infiltration but unsuccessful in impact, Low and her aunt were forced to leave with the threat of stopping trade with America’s Russell & Company. In her journals documenting her experience, Low claims to be partly happy to leave Canton, but resented having to follow Chinese tradition and authority. Revered for her efforts towards gender equality, a bronze water fountain dedicated to Low remains in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

This work of art, in its style, represents American portraiture. The portrait is meant to illustrate a realistic, candid perception of Harriet Low. The method of oil on canvas is consistent with American – or Western– portrait techniques as well. The portrait design remains muted and simplistic, emphasizing Low’s way of dress and position in society.
With the assistance of the Asian Export Art Visiting Committee and an anonymous donor, the exhibit, Trading Arts and Ideas: China and Early America, brought the porcelain-covered bowl and saucer to the viewers' eyes. The dish set catches the attention of many due to its beautiful features. The bowl and saucer both have a floral design of interconnected vines and pink flowers. In the center of the set, the artists depicted two Chinese women sitting in a scenic setting. One can see a woman wearing an orange cloth kneeling in front of a woman in a pink fabric on the bowl. On the saucer, both women are exhibited standing near a tree amid conversation. The artists finish off the set by encompassing the edges of the plate and saucer with gold lining.

The floral design of the bowl consists of lotus flowers connected by green vines. The artists’ usage of lotus flowers is a standard design seen in many Chinese fine arts. Within Chinese culture and Buddhism, individuals believe that the Lotus flowers symbolize purity due to their ability to grow perfect and unsullied in muddy water. Along with the quality of purity, the flower is depicted to carry an essence of feminine beauty. Porcelain glass sets give attention to feminine beauty by using lotus flowers, light colors, and paintings of women in the style of the dishes.
The tea set shown consists of three teacups, three teaspoons, one sugar cube grabber, one sugar holder, one bowl, one milk/cream holder, and one teapot. In England, a factory called “New Hall China Factory” manufactured the pictured tea set. The British took such a strong interest in Chinese tea set designs that a factory was created solely dedicated to making Chinese porcelain. Opening a trade relationship with China brought great influence on the British and the Western world in terms of producing more ornate household objects.

Drinking tea and “gossiping” prevailed as the status quo in British society after trade with the Chinese. Before trade, drinking tea was only a past time for the wealthy. After seeing Chinese designs, intricate porcelain tea sets became incredibly desirable as they were seen as another way of illustrating wealth. These misty teal teacups with petals of pink and orange give a very refreshing view of spring. The curve of the handle indicates beauty for one who drinks from this cup. Women of the 19th century favored simplicity in the design of their tea holders. Drinking tea and admiring the beauty of tea sets became a common past time.
The piece shown is the Moon-gate bed, just one of many that fit the popular Ningbo bed style in China and Japan during the 19th century. It is very decorative with intricately carved designs and covered by a canopy top that springs from the bed frame. One of the legs on the bed frame contains a carved man’s face, while women’s faces are engraved on the other three legs. The circular corner pieces have small landscape scenes of various traditional Chinese motifs. The piece is unique because it was crafted entirely by joinery using butterfly pegs and has no nails or screws.

The traditional philosophy of Feng Shui is the practice of arranging furniture in a space in order to create a better connection with nature. This philosophy also emphasizes the importance of the bed and its representation of the person who occupies it. Along the back sides of the bed frame, various traditional motifs are carved or painted to represent values of Chinese culture. Each of these motifs displays the theme of peace and calmness. Some of these include the endless knot, representing good fortune, and the peach, representing longevity.
Contrasting American and Chinese Art

The portrait of Harriet Low and the Ningbo bed has many differences because of the cultural differences between the Chinese and Americans. The Ningbo bed is very ornate, rigid, and has extreme detail in each carving line, while the portrait is more flowing and simple.

Taking a closer look at the portrait, one can see that the subject, Harriet Low, is resting her arm on a wooden side table. Compared to the Chinese Ningbo bed, the American side table shown in the portrait is incredibly plain and unembellished. While the side table is used solely for its functionality, the Ningbo bed has a role for functionality as well as for art and meaning. The bed’s design characterizes the Chinese preference for the ornate, while the side table represents America’s upcoming preference for simplistic mass production. Chinese and American furniture and portraits roughly seemed to stay the same following the Chinese-American trade, with trace amounts of influence, but other items had a more significant impact on each other.
Comparing the Fine Arts from China with Dishes from England

After China introduced porcelain to the trade market, the demand for porcelain dishes and fine arts grew immensely in Europe. In particular, the dishes' delicate designs and quality glass productions became a significant component of luxury consumption. With high demands, European nations like England started producing their porcelain and by the 18th century mastered the technique of fine china. While original Chinese fine art was accessible to only the upper class of society, porcelain in England catered to the middle class as it imitated expensive china.

The fine arts from China and the tea set from England share many similarities from material to design. Both pieces are made out of porcelain. It took time for Britain to copy and understand how to make porcelain teapots and teacups like China that would not break under intense heat. Based on the design, China has influenced Britain to bring nature into their home as one sip from brewed tea leaves. The covered bowl and saucer illustrate beautiful vines and lotus flowers. The tea set from England also adorns their set in beautiful pink and orange flowers. Essentially, the femininity exuding from these pieces describes the culture being done by both the Chinese and British.
Works Cited


