

“Passeurs”: Chinoiseries

This cultural blindness, or at the very least short-sightedness, affected Europe-based artists in a similar way. The craftsmen making furniture in the Chinoiserie style, the highly decorative mode originally vaguely inspired by Chinese motives, were also not capable of knowing/seeing the original pieces which were being exported from China into Europe, even when they were actually in the presence of one of them. One of the most notable importers of these objects in France was Edmé Gersaint (1694–1750), a famous Parisian figure for whom Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) painted a celebrated shop sign, a work that is now considered to

be one of the greatest masterpieces of the Rococo period. In October 1739, the magazine *Le Mercure de France* announced that Gersaint was changing the nature of his business. Before 1739, his shop had not been particularly specialized in its official description, but he nevertheless sold mostly items such as decorated furniture, prints, frames, and paintings. His new commerce was specialized for the “curieux,” i.e., people with inquisitive minds, and consisted in strange things from nature (like shells and corals) and also all kinds of functional and decorative objects. Of these objects, Gersaint was most famous for his choice of Chinoiseries. In this new business, named “La Pagode,” he sold, among many other things, cabinets imported from China like



Figure 1.2 Anonymous, *Storming the Encampment at Gadan-Ola* 御題格登鄂拉斫營之戰，平定準部回部得勝圖 (or 清人畫平定伊犁回部戰圖冊). Ink and color on paper, 52 × 90.3 cm. Photo courtesy of Palace Museum, Beijing.

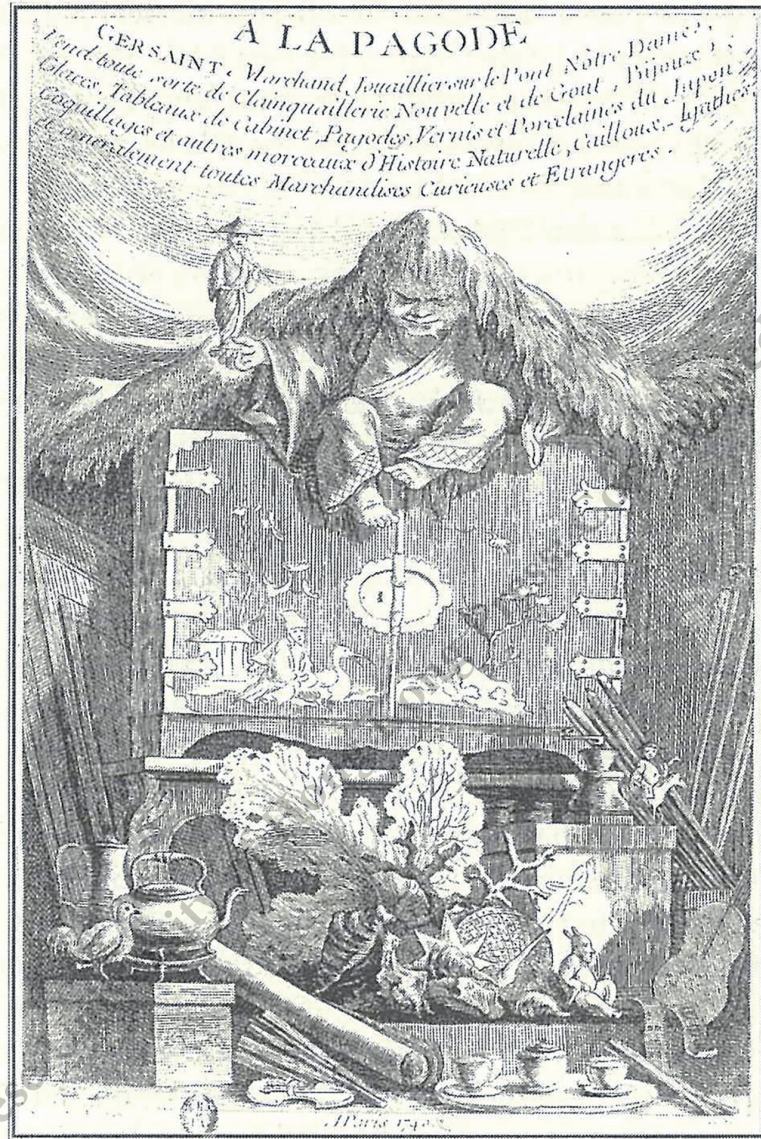


Figure 1.3 *A La Pagode*, from a design by François Boucher (1703–1770), engraved by the count Anne-Claude de Caylus (1692–1765), 27.9 × 18.5 cm. Advertisement published in the October 1739 issue of the magazine *Le Mercure de France*. The inscription reads: “At the Pagoda, Gersaint, Jeweller Merchant at the Pont Notre-Dame, sells all sorts of objects new and old, jewels, mirrors, paintings for cabinet furniture, pagodas (author’s note: even though the word also came to mean a tiered building in French, throughout the 18th and most of the 19th centuries, it primarily meant a small statuette representing a Chinese man or woman), lacquerware and porcelains from Japan, shells and other pieces of the nature world, stones, semi-precious stones, and assortments of all curious and foreign merchandise.” Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.



Figure 1.4 Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702–1789), *Portrait of John, Lord Mount Stuart, later 4th Earl and 1st Marquess of Bute*, 1763. Pastel on parchment, 114.9 × 90.2 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

the one displayed on a publicity card, for his shop designed by the other great painter of the Rococo period in France, François Boucher (1703–1770) (Figure 1.3).²⁰ However, one can wonder what happened to these made-in-China original pieces of furniture, and therefore made by Chinese craftsmen (even though many of those were made for export and somehow adapted to foreign taste), when they were dismantled and reassembled into a Chinoiserie piece, and therefore remade in Europe by European craftsmen. Of course, even when some craftsmen

could be fascinated by these Chinese or Japanese pieces of furniture and could even have the desire to copy accurately all of their characteristics, their clients, who could require nothing but the arabesques of the Rococo style, would probably not have let them do so. Epistemological blindness and cultural short-sightedness were therefore not the sole responsibility of the makers, but it remains that European eyes in general could only see the forms coming from China through the prism of their own visual culture. Sometimes however, accurate reproductions of

Chinese visual elements can be found in the case of artists pursuing “trompe-l’oeil” painting, the sort of absolutely accurate optical reproduction of reality that is only permitted to the most technically accomplished painters.

A striking example of the possibility of exact reproduction of a Chinese motive can be found in a portrait painted by the Swiss artist Jean-Etienne Liotard (1702–1789), who dedicated many pages to accurate “trompe-l’oeil” painting in his own treatise published in 1781.²¹ This painting shows a great English aristocrat who, like many of his peers, enjoyed collecting things coming from faraway places and especially from the “Orient.” Let us not forget that the “Orient,” for the Europeans of the 18th century, was much nearer than the conception we have of it today. Liotard himself, an arbiter of all things exotic for his patrons, chose the name of “Le Turc” because he had lived in the Ottoman empire and dressed up for a while, like many of the female nobility of the time, in Turkish attire. The sitter of this beautiful portrait made in pastel (a portrait of Lord John Mount Stuart, the first Scotsman to be appointed prime minister in England) is depicted standing up in front of a folding screen with Chinese motives on it (**Figure 1.4**). One could easily disregard this object as being one of the many such Chinoiserie elements decorating the apartments of the European aristocracy, but a more attentive scrutiny reveals that it is in fact a scene that would be only familiar to a Chinese viewer: Wu Song killing the tiger, a passage from the universally known Ming dynasty novel titled in English *Outlaws of the Marshes* (*Shuihuzhuan* 水滸傳). Even if this episode might have been known by some European sinologists at the time (and we can assume that the Jesuits were aware of its existence), there was no available translation of that book in 18th-century Europe. No European craftsman

specializing in Chinoiserie could have known about that story, let alone adapt it unto a folding screen. Although there can be no certainty as to where the folding screen itself was made, we can, however, be absolutely certain that it is a Chinese image, made in China without having been submitted to any modification by the Chinese export industry which was producing objects designed for the outside world in already very important quantities. To emphasize the fact that Jean-Etienne Liotard could not even have attempted to study Chinese motives because he was simply not interested, and to also show that a similar complete lack of interest for other cultures was still the most common attitude among Chinese literati painters, it will be interesting to compare the Swiss artist’s point of view with the one of his exact contemporaries, the Chinese painter and theorist Shen Zongqian already mentioned.

It is amusing to see that these theorists gave, both in the same year of 1781, very negative judgments on each other’s pictorial traditions. Liotard, who gave to Rococo Chinoiserie quite a considerable place in his portraits, liked what he must have seen of genuine Chinese images (although they probably would only have been figurative representations on ceramics and furniture and not paintings), but clearly saw them as belonging to a purely decorative realm: “What gives to Chinese painting its appeal is that it is smooth, clean, and neat, even though it is made by a people having only a smattering of knowledge on art.”²² We have seen that Shen Zongqian expressed a similar marked disdain in a quote mentioned earlier on the “violent contrasts of light” made by his contemporaries (although Shen Zongqian’s presence at court probably allowed him to see Jesuit paintings, it is, however, impossible to know with any kind of certainty how much he knew about “Western technique”). And yet, the Swiss artist, master of a

Box 1.3

Representations of nudes cannot be found in traditional Chinese literati painting, but the idea of the nude itself was not particularly repellent to Chinese painters in the 18th century, and the appearance of European images in the Middle Kingdom seems to have created the precondition to a wider acceptance of this new element. In his treatise, Shen Zongqian even mentions the possibility of using a nude body to represent physiognomies more accurately: “There is also another school of thought saying that the beginner can use at first a naked body to [understand and] fix the bone structure, and then only paint the garments. It is also a good technique to start your work. It is, however, still necessary to use contour lines everywhere; but this merely complies with the methods previously mentioned.” (又一說凡初學者，先將裸體骨骼約定，後施衣服，亦是起手一法。但幾處最要勾勒之筆，仍不外上所言耳。*)

He is, however, quick to add that this is no more than a kind of trick, only acceptable for painters who are just beginning in the practice of their art. It was still essential for Shen Zongqian to learn the techniques of figure painting through close scrutiny of the works of the “Ancients” (*Guren* 古人), a good knowledge of the tradition being far more important in his eyes than the power of observation we cannot separate nowadays from our idea of a painter of the human figure. But the possibility of using a nude body was accepted for the first time in a theoretical text on painting written by an artist widely acknowledged to be an orthodox painter and thus supposedly not open to novelties.

* Chapter “On Figure Painting” 人物瑣論, in Yu Anlan 于安瀾, *Hualun Congkan* 畫論叢刊 (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe 人民美術出版社, 1937), 379.

certain kind of exoticism in the eyes of his patrons, was often seen by his friends as a kind of “Chinese painter,” a judgment grounded of course on their complete ignorance of Chinese aesthetics.²³

Mixing up without concern all kinds of references and traditions, an impression of respect for these far-away artists and craftsmen on behalf of Liotard is, however, still clearly discernible in his writings. Similarly, the rather negative judgment Shen Zongqian passed on foreign painting must be understood in the wider context of his treatise where a certain measure of openness is still discernible: as a matter of fact, we can see that he did not reject right away certain European pictorial practices like the observation of a nude body to depict figures more accurately (**Box 1.3**). However advanced the possibilities for mutual comprehension have been during the 18th century, it is all the same certain that they were all

but destroyed by the middle of the 19th century. This rejection was conditioned by the disasters of colonial expansion on behalf of Europe and the results of the Opium War out of which the treaty ports, like Hong Kong and Shanghai, were created. Even though the epistemes of Euro-America and China were slowly changing and preparing the advents of the intense exchanges we are witnessing today, on the surface, only very isolated events were showing the future prospects of cross-cultural fertilization and what it could hold, like the China trade paintings produced by Chinese artists in Guangzhou, Macao, and Hong Kong in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Until not so long ago, China trade paintings were not considered to deserve any kind of serious investigation as most art historians saw them as mere craft products and therefore not worthy of the attention one would bestow, for instance, on literati painting (the stereotypes

Box 1.4

The neo-Confucian worldview of both the School of Mind (*Xinxue* 心學) and the School of Principle (*Lixue* 理學) is often described as a form of dualism because it relies on the pairing of the two concepts of *qi* 氣 and *li* 理, the first being matter, from the most subtle to the most solid, and the second its organizing principle. Comparatists of philosophy, like François Jullien, have preferred to avoid altogether using the idea of “dualism” to describe neo-Confucian philosophy, because this term is too reminiscent of its application in Euro-American philosophy where it

describes the worldview of Platonism and Christian thinking. Since there is no world of forms/ideas that would be separate from the here and now in Chinese philosophy, François Jullien has used the concept of monism to describe it, emphasizing the way *qi* and *li* cannot in reality be separated from one another, the way the world of ideas has been separated from the material world in the so-called West.

* François Jullien, *Procès ou Création: Une Introduction à la Pensée des Lettrés Chinois* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

attached to “craft” are still very present in the discipline of Chinese art history, but things are changing quickly and even China trade paintings are nowadays given the attention of scholarly studies). This situation, and the historical conditions that accompanied them, have probably hidden how much many of the earliest aspects of cross-cultural fertilization have been important for the future of Chinese art.

Conditions of Passage

One of the most important ways to understand through what kind of “breach” two epistemes could begin to slowly seep through one another will be to demonstrate that a kind of dualism (Box 1.4), naturally generated inside the Chinese episteme but generally absent from literati painting and its theory, could let Chinese portrait painters adopt quite naturally the ideas of European portrait painters, thus creating the opportunity for the adoption and exchanges of more and more ideas. It is possible to show that the embracing of these new ideas was originated by the creation in China of a new ontological Subject which, throughout the 17th and 18th

centuries, and independently of the European episteme, allowed for greater flexibility and the embracing, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, of ideas that were earlier foreign to the Chinese pictorial tradition, like the notion of *mimesis* (i.e., imitation of nature) or the use of oil painting, this “erasive medium” (Box 1.5). But before moving on to an attempt to describe how the European and Chinese epistemes have changed and started to converge, it is important to explain the conditions necessary for any kind of cross-fertilization to take place. To do so, I will turn to Edward Said in a quote used by another essential author for the understanding of cross-cultural exchanges, Lydia H. Liu:

First, there is the point of origin, or what seems like one, a set of initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse. Second, there is a distance traversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into new prominence. Third, there is a set of conditions—call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances—which then confront the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however