

ARTICLE

Why Were There No Great Chinese Paintings in American Museums before the Twentieth Century?

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Abstract To understand the major shift in Americans' attitudes about Chinese art between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is essential to know not only what the American collectors thought, but also the social history of these collectors and their agents. Since the advent of the field of material culture studies, scholars have begun to look at museum objects, whether as art or not, from the perspective of different lives—that of their makers and users. It seems that the lack of “great” Chinese paintings in American museums before the twentieth century may be due to the fact that the nineteenth century American collectors and their Chinese agents differed from their twentieth century counterparts in what they regarded as “great,” what they thought was “Chinese,” and what they defined as “paintings.”

INTRODUCTION

America has been interested in China well before 1911, the year of its inception as a modern nation. Yet only at the turn of the twentieth century did American museums and individuals begin to collect great Chinese paintings. The art of painting has had a long and storied prominence throughout Chinese history, so why were Americans neglecting to collect important works—including imperial ceramics, sculptures, and archeologically excavated objects such as bronzes and jades—prior to this period? It was through the efforts of Ernest Fenollosa, Charles Freer, John Ferguson, and Westerners with similar interests that objects now considered as Chinese art finally came to be acquired and studied by American museums.¹ Once exemplary Chinese art entered American collections, the objects acquired by Western museums before the twentieth century came to be deemed, by curators and connoisseurs, less representative of “authentic” Chinese culture

because they were thought to be made for a targeted audience, American merchants in China.²

Discussions on the history of Chinese art in American museums often explain the differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century Americans' perceptions of what constitutes Chinese art as a progression from ignorance or misunderstanding to enlightenment (March 1929; Cohen 1992). British scholars such as Nick Pearce (2011) and Frances Wood (1996-1997) have offered more thoughtful and convincing explanations about similar patterns in collecting Chinese art in Britain.

This article asks: Why not earlier? The shift in the types of Chinese art collected in America and Britain cannot be explained solely by changes in Westerners' knowledge about China. As Arif Dirlik has pointed out, there was also a phenomenon of “self-orientalization” on the part of the Chinese, who had their own agendas with regard to how they wanted the West to understand them (Dirlik 1996). Recent studies of cross-cultural interactions have rein-

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forced the notion that exchanges of culture always involve multiple parties. This essay will examine three case studies to demonstrate the complex and evolving nature of Chinese and American interactions in the collecting and display of Chinese objects from the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. It is here proposed that historically important Chinese paintings were made available to and collected as artistic forms by Americans only after the notion of a distinctive Chinese art was actively defined by the Chinese themselves at the turn of the twentieth century, precisely at the time that the modern Chinese nation was being constructed.

NATHAN DUNN'S CHINESE MUSEUM

Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum no longer exists, and the fate of the collection remains unclear, yet it is a good example of America's earliest institutional interest in Chinese art. When it opened in 1838 there were other collections of Chinese art, most prominently those owned by the East India Company and the Salem Museum, which has subsequently been reorganized into the present-day Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.³ Dunn's museum was specifically established for the purpose of educating the public about Chinese culture. E.C. Wines, the author of the museum's catalogue, pointed out that Dunn's Chinese Museum differed from the collections of the East India Company and those in the Salem Museum, which consisted of "curiosities from the Orient" and came chiefly from India, while Dunn's art came from and was intended to instruct visitors about China (Wines 1839). This is confirmed by the charter of the Salem East India Marine Society, which stated as one of its objectives: "To form a Museum of natural and artificial curiosities, particularly such as are to be found beyond the

Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn." The charter also listed another of its purposes as supporting the widows and children of deceased members with the funds of the Society. The education mandate was written in at a later date.⁴

Nathan Dunn, a Philadelphia merchant, traveled to China after a failed business venture. He spent 14 years away from the United States, including eight uninterrupted years in Canton, China, and established a successful business, through which he earned enough to pay off his debts; he subsequently retired as an enlightened gentleman of means. His Chinese Museum, which opened in Philadelphia in late 1838, closed after three years. The collection was then moved to London in 1842 and was exhibited in a building at Hyde Park Corner. After Dunn's death in 1844, the collection toured England with William B. Langdon, and was probably dispersed into other collections thereafter.⁵ Jean Gordon Lee, formerly of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, reports that the collection was sold at public auction in London by Christie and Mason in December 1851 (Lee 1976). Our knowledge of the museum is based on written descriptions and illustrations in the two separate catalogues published for it: *A Peep at China*, written by E.C. Wines for the Philadelphia museum; and *Ten Thousand Chinese Things*, by William B. Langdon, for the London exhibition.

Dunn's biographies acknowledge that he intended a cross-cultural understanding between the Americans and Chinese. Dunn, who wanted to show "China in miniature," was a Quaker who did not participate in the opium trade. He eventually brought his museum to London in order to educate the British about Chinese culture and convince them to end the opium trade. Dunn held the respect of Chinese merchants. Admission fees for the museum

were donated to charity. Wines's descriptions of the objects were never condescending, nor were they romanticized. On the subject of paintings, which can be presumed to be the China trade paintings of the period, and which received the most negative responses from viewers of the time, Wines wrote that, among the viewing public, there was a "prevalent error respecting the inability of Chinese to produce perspective." He attempted to correct this misconception:

Though light and shade are certainly a good deal neglected here, and the perspective is not perfect, yet the picture is by no means deficient in this regard; and the drawings of individual objects are extremely accurate (Wines 1839).

From the contents of the catalogue and other contemporaneous writings, we can conclude that Dunn's own ideas about museums and collecting reflected those prevalent during his era in American history. At the time of the opening of Dunn's Chinese Museum, natural history museums predominated in the United States. Dunn is recorded to have worked with one of Charles Wilson Peale's sons, Titian, on installing his Chinese exhibition in Philadelphia. Dunn's close association with the Peale Museum Company in Philadelphia is an indication of his affinity with Charles Wilson Peale's ideas about museums. Charles Wilson Peale, artist and naturalist, was the most well-known museum proprietor of the late eighteenth century.⁶ Our concept of the early American museum is based on Peale's own, as represented in his self-portrait, now in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Peale's painting of his collections presents his hierarchical worldview: his portraits of prominent people on the topmost level; then stuffed and preserved birds and animals; and finally, on the lower level, fossil remains.

Records suggest that Dunn relied heavily on the use of Chinese agents to complete his collection. During the period Dunn lived in Canton, the rest of China was off limits to foreigners; this restriction was based in law and had been enforced since the time of the Qianlong emperor in the eighteenth century. Dunn himself claimed to have had access to Chinese people and objects that was unparalleled for a Westerner. According to E.C. Wines, Dunn was never interested in illicit commerce, and as a result benefited from the help of Chinese contacts:

This fact was well known to the officers of the government, and even to the Emperor himself, and created a strong prejudice in his favour. He always treated the dignitaries of the Crown and other gentlemen of distinction with the consideration due their rank and standing. This tended still further to secure their friendship and cooperation. It was by availing himself of facilities thus obtained, that he was enabled to complete his Collection, and the extensive and powerful influence he had secured in high places, enabled him, when ready to embark with his treasures, to overcome obstacles which would otherwise have been insurmountable (Wines 1839).

Through these reports, we can infer that Dunn had assistance from and access to the best for his collecting pursuits. The records don't state whether the objects Dunn collected were acquired for him based on his specifications or whether they were provided by his discerning Chinese friends. John Haddad's descriptions of Dunn's activities in Canton name two individuals of elevated status who may have helped Dunn. Houqua and Tingqua were both members of the *hong*, an association of Chinese merchants with rights to conduct business with foreigners. Although little is known about these

two men, we can surmise from what we know of commerce in Canton at the time, as well as from later business activities in city ports such as Shanghai, that these men were often not simply businessmen; they were men of social and political standing.⁷

Little information exists about Chinese merchants who facilitated business between foreigners and locals before the mid-nineteenth century. We know even less about the nature of the industries that generated the objects collected by American merchants. What kind of workshops produced the paintings, furniture, and other luxury goods that Americans wanted to purchase? Who were the artists and craftsmen? What were their motivations in making the works? Because of many art historians' biases against objects made for daily use and export, Dunn's Chinese Museum and other collections of Chinese art and artifacts from that same period were not highly regarded in later museum collections. The studies of Chinese export wares that do exist often consisted of descriptive information narrowly focused on connoisseurship issues for a small audience of collectors of early American art.

The advent of the field of material culture studies has ushered in new perspectives on how these objects might be more effectively and variously defined and categorized. Recent studies suggest that Chinese artists and craftsmen may not have been making things solely for Western customers (Clunas 1984; 1987). On the contrary, they also produced works for local markets and created an industry that had an impact on other regions that provided materials for the crafts. As for the China trade paintings that used newly imported materials, such as oil or gouache, many present day scholars consider these works as having been appropriated by the Chinese artists as their own (Clunas 1997; Wan 2007).

HOW SHOULD WE NOW UNDERSTAND NATHAN DUNN'S CHINESE MUSEUM?

Nathan Dunn and his Chinese agents were fundamentally merchants whose commercial transactions involved the exchange of commodities such as tea and spices in bulk, also goods used in daily life, such as silk, ceramics, or furniture. The Chinese merchants additionally provided luxury items or collectibles for their American partners. These included silverware, carvings from ivory and other materials, paintings, or embroidered wall hangings. Dunn and other early American merchants in Canton and their Chinese counterparts collected objects they considered valuable and unique. Dunn and the Chinese agents he worked with were business associates, and on more or less equal footing in transacting exchanges of goods. The power relationships between Americans and Chinese at that time were different from those that developed later. Habits of defining certain objects as representing a distinctive Chinese or American art had not yet formed. What was thought to be valuable during the nineteenth century may no longer be considered significant today.⁸

In the same way, our notion of Chinese art, according to Craig Clunas, "is quite a recent invention, not much more than a hundred years old" (1997). Clunas is observing that Chinese art, as well as art in general, is a constructed idea, inculcated through twentieth century museum displays and art history books. In his book *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*, he attempted to resolve the inconstant categorizations of objects while he was working at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (1991). Although many of the Chinese objects in the museum were not "art" when they were made, they are now displayed as "art" because they have been deemed

to embody a conscious aesthetic program. This notion of the fluidity in the way objects are perceived can also be seen in American museums. Steven Conn, in his book *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876–1926*, noted that during the later part of the nineteenth century, with the development of American cities and the appearance of patrons who were affluent urbanites, American museums went through a transformation in which museum directors, curators, and collectors came to purposely acquire, exhibit, and learn from art (1998). The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were also a time when there was a conscious effort to distinguish a representative art and culture for a modern Chinese nation. Specific values and meanings were attributed to certain objects, such as “great” Chinese paintings, establishing a hierarchy of culturally significant objects to represent a historical China.

CHINESE PARTICIPATION IN WORLD EXPOSITIONS

Many early Chinese collections in the West were built with objects acquired at world expositions. In the United States, the establishment of the Philadelphia Museum of Art was an integral part of the plans of the 1876 Centennial International Exposition in Philadelphia.⁹ Another example is the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, closely tied to the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition held in that city during that year (Conn 1998). It was through their participation in world expositions that the Chinese first presented China to the modern world. Chinese participation in fairs and expositions during this period and the subsequent establishment of museums has led Chinese historians to examine the relationship of the world expositions to Chinese modernity.¹⁰

The 1876 Centennial International Exposition in Philadelphia

The 1876 Centennial International Exposition, held in Philadelphia, was the first American exposition in which the Qing government officially participated, and as such it’s a good case study for discovering what objects were considered important by the Chinese themselves. The Chinese had been represented in earlier world expositions, but the Qing government had not shown too much interest. It left the curating of expositions to the Imperial Maritime Customs Service of the Zongli Yamen (essentially the Qing Foreign Office), the organization established by the Qing government to manage foreign affairs in China. After the 1860s, when China was forced to open up in the aftermath of the Opium Wars, the Qing government took a more direct interest in what was represented. This was also the time when there were voices criticizing the government’s lack of involvement in earlier expositions in Europe and its use of foreigners to organize the Chinese display (Fernsebner 2002). When the United States government invited the Qing court to participate, Prince Gong accepted, and according to the American organizers: “[Prince Gong had] ordered the Inspector General of Customs to select suitable officers to be Commissioners to attend it” (Pitman 1999).

The Chinese display was organized by Robert Hart, who had been hired by the Qing government to run the Customs Service; Hart’s commission to Philadelphia included Chinese representatives. Hart sent out memoranda to provincial officials to ask them to choose the most representative products from their regions. According to Li Gui, a customs official who traveled with the commission and kept a diary, the best of all products produced in China were selected for inclusion (Li 1877). In the

American newspapers of the time, it was impressed upon the public that the Chinese thought highly of the exposition because of the participation of a wealthy banker, Hu Quang Yung, who was reported to have been a prominent collector of ancient and valuable specimens of Chinese art. The most popular coverage of the Centennial was the illustrated newspaper published by Frank Leslie. It contained descriptive sketches of the objects on display as well as the activities. Leslie's account reads as follows:

The Chinese section in the Main Building has proved to be one of the most attractive in the entire exhibition, and compares favorably with that of Japan in the curiosity and interest which it excites.... The arrangement is comprised as follows: At the western end are the china-ware, furs and skins, and the trade collections; at the eastern side are the furniture, woodwork and carvings; in the center are the silks and satins, the cloisonnes-ware and bronzes; and in the rear part, the office (Leslie 1877).

The report spent a lot of time describing many of the objects, focusing on the distinction of the materials and craftsmanship. Interestingly, paintings and imperial wares, objects which are today considered art, were mentioned only briefly at the end of the discussion treating the Chinese section:

Some curious pictures in water-color and aquarelle on pith paper, are subjects illustrating the cultivation of and manufacturing of teas, occupations in the life of a Chinese lady, mandarins, landscapes, flowers and fruits.... A number of Chinese relics are shown from the Imperial summer Palace of Peking, and the collection of curious articles may be closed with mention of a pair of bronze idols, also from Peking (Leslie 1877).



Photo 1: "Curiosities in the Chinese Department in the Main Building," from Frank Leslie's *Historical Register of the United States Centennial Exposition, 1876*. New York: Frank Leslie's Publishing House, 1877, page 157.

As a gesture of goodwill, at the end of the exposition the Chinese delegation bequeathed many of the remaining unsold objects to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Jean Gordon Lee,

former curator of Far Eastern Art at the Philadelphia museum, has indicated in her writings on the museum's Chinese ceramics collection that some of the pieces can be traced back to purchases from the exposition (Lee 1976). In addition to these ceramics, the Philadelphia Museum of Art also has several very fine examples of Chinese furniture, purchased by the museum at the Centennial.

Conflicting Views and Images of China at the Centennial

The Centennial was the first American world exposition in which the Qing government participated, and it sent the best of natural and man-made products from different parts of China for display—yet opinions on the success or failure of the Chinese contribution varied greatly. For some of the Chinese reformers who wanted to improve the Chinese image abroad, the Centennial still reflected Western (or specifically, Hart's) ideas about China. More recent observations are often in agreement with Edward Said's concept of "orientalism," since the exhibition reflected the Western organizers' exotic view of the Orient, which for some scholars included China (Said 1994). In his studies, John Haddad seems to have understood the complexity of "agency" in cross-cultural interactions; he viewed the role of Robert Hart, the British who worked for the Chinese government, differently. Haddad relies on Arif Dirlik's reinterpretation of "orientalism" to describe the actions of early Chinese and Western organizers and participants of world expositions. Using Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zones" (2008), Dirlik appended the idea that in order to communicate with the dominated, the person from the dominant culture goes through a language change. For Dirlik, the "orientalist" becomes "orientalized," enabling him to not only speak *about*,

but also *for*, the Other (1996). Haddad described Hart as an example of Dirlik's "orientalized" metropolitan (a term used by Pratt to describe Europeans). Hart himself wrote in his diaries:

It is to be distinctly and constantly kept in mind that the Inspectorate of Customs is a Chinese and not, a foreign, Service, and that as such it is the duty of each of its members to conduct himself towards Chinese, people as well as officials, in such a way as to avoid all cause of offence and ill-feeling.... The first thing to be remembered by each is that he is the paid agent of the Chinese Government for the performance of a specified work, and to do that well should be his chief care (Spence 2002).

Hart and his colleagues, even though they were Westerners, were conscious of the fact that they were working for the Qing government and, accordingly, organized and managed the Customs Service affairs—including the Chinese participation in world expositions—from the Chinese perspective. In this light, objects from Chinese collectors, such as paintings and imperial wares, were included in the exhibition. Images of the Chinese displays at the Centennial indicate that the paintings were primarily depictions of beautiful women and birds-and-flowers, usually considered decorative today, and not the exemplary landscapes now commonly considered great Chinese art.¹¹ The whereabouts of these works remains unknown.

In the introductory section of *Frank Leslie's Historical Register of the United States Centennial Exposition, 1876*, a statement explained the attraction of the Chinese section as "owing more to the extreme gaudiness of the structure which incloses [*sic*] it than to any extraordinary interest possessed by its contents" (Leslie 1877). The negative remark about the Chinese display may simply reveal the personal taste of the



Photo 2: "Main Building: China," the United States Centennial International Exposition, 1876. *Photo courtesy of the Free Library of Philadelphia, Print and Picture Collection.*

author; it could also be explained by Americans' general attitudes toward the Chinese at the time. By the opening of the Centennial in 1876, American sentiments toward China had been affected by the disasters of the Opium Wars. Japan, on the other hand, had gained respect from the world with its successes in modernization. Contemporary reports indicated that people in attendance, including Li Gui, were more impressed with the Japanese displays.

There were certainly other responses, and this has resulted in divergent analyses of the significance of the Chinese display at the Centennial.¹² In her thesis on China and the 1876 Centennial International Exposition, Jennifer

Pitman pointed out that the Chinese display was quite well-received, as indicated by the sales records of the exposition, which showed that most of the objects had been sold (1999). Whether or not the Chinese exhibition at the Centennial was a success, the mixed reviews it received reinforce the existence of inequality in these transcultural exchanges in "contact zones," resulting from an imbalance in power relationships among the people involved in the exchanges, in this case the Americans, the Chinese, and the Japanese. In fact, the negative reviews that were based on cultural comparisons with the Japanese and the criticism of Hart's role as a Westerner all point to the fact that

issues of national identity had at that point begun to play an increasingly important role in how cultural objects were perceived. It should be noted that, within the space of a few years, the United States government would pass the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, imposing restrictions on Chinese immigration, a law that was not repealed until 1943.

Whether or not the public response was positive, the Chinese objects displayed at the Centennial were not considered art. In fact, the main objective of the Centennial was to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the independence of the United States. Additionally, Centennial organizers declared another purpose to be a display of the political and industrial progress of the United States and the other countries of the world. As indicated above, the Philadelphia Museum of Art (originally called the Pennsylvania Museum) had been established through the plans for the 1876 Centennial International Exposition. It also ran a school of industrial and applied arts, modeling itself after the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The museum-and-school collected and displayed man- and machine-made artifacts that could serve as examples in the training of its students. When local newspapers reported about Chinese arts and crafts in relation to activities at the school, they focused on the use of unique techniques and materials. One such report described in detail the intricacy of Chinese ivory carvings.¹³

After years of planning, the Pennsylvania Museum moved to its present location in 1928 and became the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The move reflected the Philadelphians' interests in changing their museum from an art and design museum in the tradition of the Victoria and Albert into an institution parallel to the Louvre, the preeminent museum collecting and displaying the best of the world's art and culture

(Conn 1998). While the Philadelphia Museum of Art has indeed become one of the world's great art museums, it is still known for its collection of decorative arts, a legacy of the Centennial; many of the Chinese objects from the Centennial, such as exquisitely crafted furniture and high quality ceramics, continue to be part of the museum's distinctive Chinese art collection. The objects at the Centennial, which were considered to be refined arts and crafts by both the Chinese exhibitors and the American audiences at the time, are no longer displayed as mere artifacts or luxury goods. They are now one kind of Chinese art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

1904 LOUISIANA PURCHASE EXPOSITION IN ST. LOUIS

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition, held in St. Louis in 1904, had what is considered to be the first truly Chinese participation. By that time, the Customs Service had been dismantled and reorganized, and though it retained some jurisdiction, China's involvement in world expositions was now headed by Chinese officials rather than Western intermediaries. In the opinions of many Chinese reformers of the time, as well as present-day scholars of modern China, however, the Chinese participation in the 1904 St. Louis exposition was a failure. The disintegrating Qing government, which carefully planned the Chinese section of the exposition, was making a final attempt at displaying a strong China to the world. The Qing court sent one of its family members, Prince Pu Lun, as the Imperial High Commissioner to the exposition. Other representatives of the court, along with the officials of the Customs Service and merchants, also attended.¹⁴ According to Wang Cheng-hua's detailed study, the Qing government spent three times more than it had on previous expositions (Wang 2003). Objects



Photo 3 and 4: Chinese exhibit in the Palace of Manufactures at the 1904 World's Fair (Louisiana Purchase Exposition), St. Louis. The French exhibit of "fancy articles" in the Palace of Manufactures is in the modern manner. Both photos courtesy of the Missouri History Museum.

selected for exhibition included carvings, ceramics, enamelware, textiles, and furniture—not so different from earlier displays. What did stand out in the St. Louis Exposition were antique objects, such as bronzes and ceramics, loaned by the Manchu official Duanfang, who was also one of the modern collectors and dealers whose activities came to change Western attitudes about Chinese art (Lawton 1991).

Problems in St. Louis

The harshest criticisms about the Chinese displays in St. Louis came from a Chinese offi-

cer, Chen Qi. With Chen Huide he co-authored a book recording their travels. The title of the work, *Xin dalu Shengluuyi bolanhui youji* (*A Travel Diary of the New World's St. Louis Exposition*) was inscribed by Zhang Jian, one of the reformers who founded one of the first modern Chinese museums. The most telling controversy was Chen Qi's description of an argument between a visiting Qing government official and the Qing representative at the fair over the display of opium pipes and lotus shoes (small shoes for bound feet) (Fernsebner 2002). Opium pipes and lotus shoes had been shown in other expositions. Familiar objects such as these that



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were previously considered neutral examples of unique goods from the daily lives of Chinese people had become problematic because many of the increasingly self-conscious Chinese officials now in charge had visions of China being represented as a modern nation. Opium pipes and lotus shoes, in the official's thinking, had become depictions of China's backwardness and thus images of national disgrace.

The problem of self-representation by the Chinese on a world stage did not manifest itself only in the objects chosen for exhibit, but also with regard to how and where they were displayed. The St. Louis exposition organizers had decided not to arrange the objects according to countries, but rather according to how they showed the progress of civilization. Each country displayed objects according to the themes of

the ten different "palaces" or exhibition halls: Fine Arts; Education and Social Economy; Liberal Arts; Machinery; Manufactures; Mines and Metallurgy; Electricity; Forestry, Fish and Game; Transportation; and Varied Industries. The Chinese representative Huang Kaijia requested that China be exhibited in one place. The St. Louis exposition organizers agreed and decided that most of the entries should be shown in the Liberal Arts Palace; objects which did not fit within this established scheme were put in other pavilions.

The Chinese representatives accepted this arrangement (Wang 2003). Chen Qi's comments are a clear reaction to this, in that everything about the Chinese displays, because they were largely grouped within a single hall, was "chaotic." Chen further criticized the other

Chinese object displays as being placed in the wrong pavilions and generally unorganized. In retrospect, we can only speculate that the Chinese were not at that time yet aware of the growing importance of the classification scheme preferred by scholars and researchers in American museums and universities. They also appear to have been unaware of the fact that different classifications of objects were closely tied to the positioning of the various world cultures according to their perceived notions of development. Photographs of the Chinese exhibits show that, in comparison with displays from other countries, they appeared cluttered and disorganized; most of the other displays seem orderly, having been arranged according to types and sizes, precisely in the manner familiar to us from modern museums today. Moreover, Chen lamented that the Chinese did not have more examples in the Arts Palace. Actually, the exposition organizers did show their respect to the Qing court by displaying an oil painting of the Empress Dowager Cixi in the Arts Palace, which was considered an exhibition space for the highest form of culture, namely fine art. Interestingly, Chen Qi did not have an issue with this particular painting.

Problems of Defining Chinese Art

The oil portrait of the Empress Dowager Cixi is by far the most perplexing of the objects sent by the Qing government to the exposition. The Empress Dowager herself expressly requested that it be part of the exhibit. The story behind the making of the painting is quite interesting.¹⁵ The oil portrait was done by an American artist, Katherine Carl, who also happened to be the sister of the customs official Francis Carl. The impetus for the painting came from the wife of the American ambassador to China, Sarah Conger, who thought a regal representa-

tion of the Empress Dowager at a world exposition would remedy an image that remained tarnished by her role in the failed Boxers' Rebellion. Cixi agreed. The portrait took nine months to complete. Katherine Carl, in her published writings detailing her experiences of living and working in the palace, provides some interesting information on the process, stating that she had difficulties completing the portraits (she painted four in total) because the Empress Dowager and the court constrained her freedom of expression with restrictions and demands. The finished portrait is quite revealing of Carl's ingenuity in resolving the differences between Eastern and Western modes of pictorial representation, combining the flatness and formalism of Chinese imperial portraits with a touch of western naturalism. Records indicate that Cixi was very pleased with the portrait (Wang 2003). The transportation of the portrait to St. Louis and its unveiling at the exposition was conducted with all the pomp and circumstance befitting the Empress herself. A party given by Prince Pu Lun to honor the unveiling was considered the greatest event of the Exposition.¹⁶

With regard to the issues of how the Qing government represented China, the oil painting of the Empress Dowager Cixi provides an interesting case study. The Qing officials who criticized the problematic representation of China at the exposition did not comment on the portrait of Cixi. The painting was exhibited as part of the Chinese display, yet was executed in an undeniably Western medium, oil, by an American artist, a fact that seems proof that, at this particular moment, both American and Chinese notions of what counted as "Chinese" painting were more open. The paintings made in China during the period of Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum, as well as those displayed in the 1876 Centennial International Exposition in Philadelphia, included some that depicted Chinese

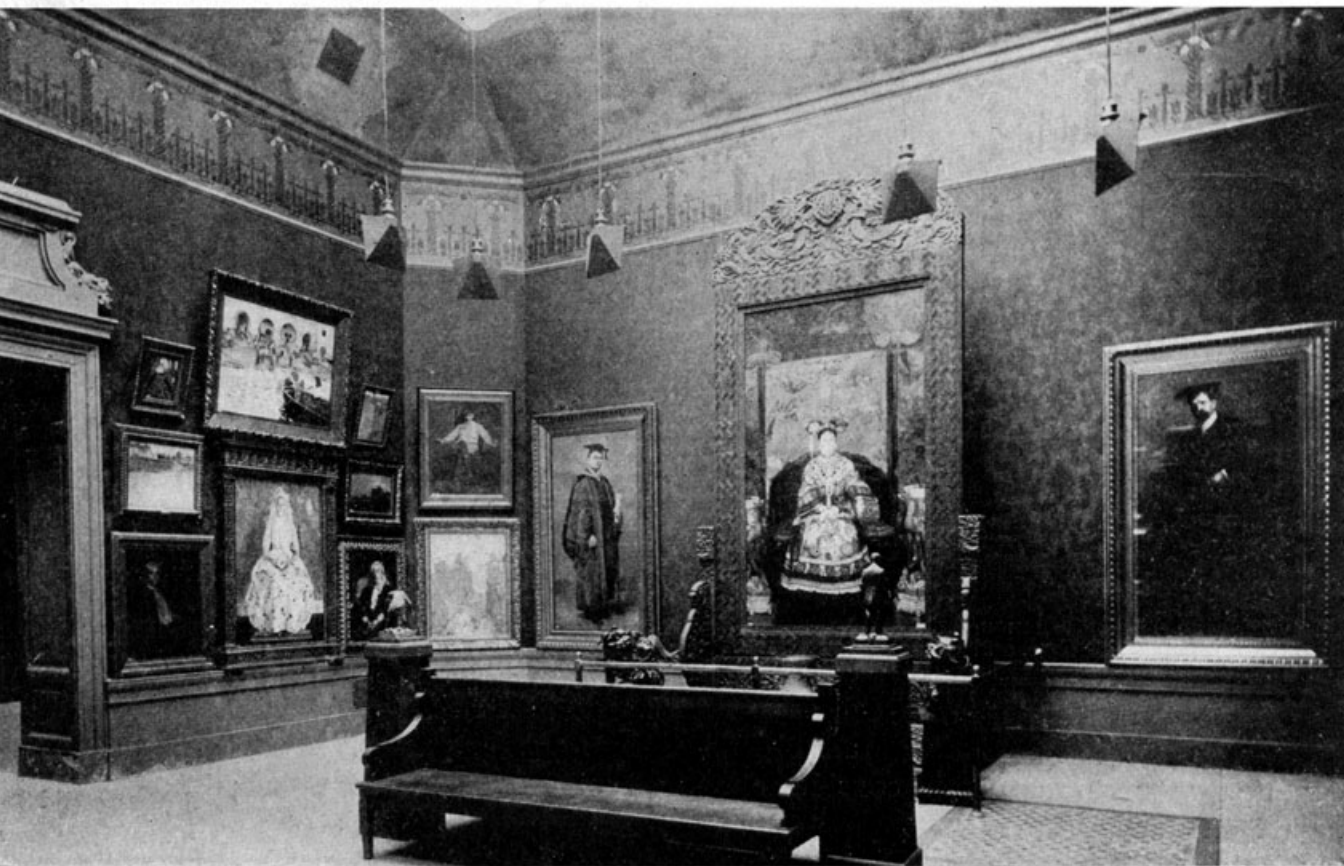


Photo 5: The Empress Dowager Cixi of China, painted by American artist Katherine Augusta Carl, 1903-1904; gift of the Imperial Chinese Government. The painting was recently photographed at the Freer-Sackler while a frame is being constructed for it. *Photo by permission of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Transfer from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, S2011.16.1-2a-ap.*

subject matter but were executed using Western materials and in the descriptive manner typical of Western painting; they were nonetheless accepted as “Chinese” paintings in the exhibitions.

The quandary of how to classify Cixi’s portrait, and what to do with it, is revealed in looking at its afterlife since the exposition closed. The Chinese delegation to the 1904 St. Louis exposition donated the portrait to the Smithsonian Institution, and it became part of the National Collection of Fine Arts, which is today the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. It is believed to have been stored and exhibited in the Smithsonian Castle for many years, along with the other items left from the exposition.¹⁷ From the 1960s till very recently, the painting was in Taipei at the National Museum of History, having been loaned to that institution by the Smithsonian.

New information has raised even more questions regarding its classification. During the planning process for the 2010 World Exposition in Shanghai, the Chinese committee became interested in displaying the painting as part of the history of China’s involvement with world expositions. Loan letters traveled back and forth between the United States, the People’s Republic of China, and the Republic of China in Taiwan; the process of facilitating the loan proved too complicated and time consuming in the end for the painting to be shown at the opening of the World Exposition in Shanghai. Meanwhile, the National Museum of History in Taiwan seized the opportunity to organize a special exhibition, *Cixi and World Expositions: The Story Behind a Painting*, which was on display at the museum in Taipei from September 17 to October 17, 2010. At the same time, David Hogge, head of Freer and Sackler Archives, became interested in the painting and thought it would be a fitting addition to the Archives’ collection of photographs of Cixi. Eventually, arrangements were made to have the painting returned to the Smithsonian, where this time it would be under the care of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler



THREE NOTABLE PORTRAITS—American Section.

Gari Melchers (Gold Medal), Irving Wiles, Kate Carl (United States).

The northeast corner of gallery 18 was a popular spot, because of the presence there of a magnificently framed portrait of the Dowager Empress of China. Near by hung the Irving Wiles portrait of Mrs. Gilbert, the actress. However, the best portrait in the group was that of Doctor Harper, by Gari Melchers.

Photo 6: The painting of the Empress Dowager in its ornate original frame: "The Arts Palace at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis," from *The Art Gallery of the Universal Exposition*, edited by Frank Parker Stockbridge. Universal Exposition Publishing Co., 1905, page 31.

Gallery (Freer/Sackler). Adding yet another dramatic turn to the story, when the painting was ready to be shipped from Taipei to Washington, D.C., its export was denied by the Taiwan customs office because the officers thought the painting was a national treasure belonging to the Republic of China. Jenyi Lai, registrar of the National Museum of History, had to hastily find the proper papers proving that the painting belonged to the Americans.¹⁸

In this very curious narrative, there was never an explicit explanation as to why Taiwan

(officially called the Republic of China) and its National Museum of History were interested in the painting in the first place. In the report on the special exhibition of Cixi's portrait in conjunction with the 2010 Shanghai world exposition, Chang Yu-teng, the current director of the National Museum of History, wrote that the director of the museum in the 1960s, Ignatius T.P. Pao, found out about the painting while visiting the United States in 1965. Pao thought Cixi's portrait, painted by an American artist, would be a great work to display in Taipei in

order to show the continuing close relations between the United States and China (Chang 2010). Pao's interest may be explained as one of the many efforts made at the time by officials of the Guomindang government of the Republic of China to display images of the Chinese past in order to validate its rule in Taiwan as the legitimate China. During the Cold War, the dilemma of which government properly represented China—the Guomindang in Taiwan or the Communists in China—was a point of contention in international politics (Ju 2007). The question of how effective the painting was in achieving its various goals may never be answered. After its arrival at the National Museum of History in Taipei in the 1960s, the painting was placed in a back gallery of the museum that could be easily missed. According to Jenyi Lai, the painting was often not accessible because the installations of special exhibitions required that the Cixi gallery be closed.

The painting is now back in Washington, D.C., but this time it is part of the Freer/Sackler collection. Although it has now found a new home there, the placement of Cixi's portrait is still ironic. Charles Freer, the founder of the Freer Gallery of Art, was one of the many Americans instrumental in defining Chinese art in the narrow canonical framework that we know today: ink paintings, ceramics, archeological objects, and Buddhist sculptures. His collecting legacy has narrowed our concept of what constitutes Chinese painting, thereby making the categorization of the oil painting problematic. The dilemma of where the painting properly belongs is compounded by the fact that it was originally part of the Smithsonian's collection of American art. According to David Hogge, the Smithsonian American Art Museum was only too happy to release it to the Freer/Sackler. In fact, in the 1966 letter approving the loan of the painting to the National History

Museum, David W. Scott, then director of the National Collection of Fine Arts, wrote, "Inasmuch as we have no plans to exhibit the portrait in the foreseeable future, I shall gladly authorize the indefinite loan of the work to the National Historical Museum of Taipei."¹⁹ Katherine Carl was no longer of significance by the mid-twentieth century, and is hardly recognized today, even though she was an artist of some importance during her own time; one of her works was displayed at the 1900 Paris Exposition (Fernsebner 2002). The odyssey of the Cixi portrait exemplifies the politics involved in the ways in which art is perceived and valued.

CONCLUSION

From this examination of three case studies—Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum, the 1876 Centennial International Exposition, and the 1904 St. Louis Exposition—it may now be possible to understand why there were no "great" Chinese paintings collected by American museums before the twentieth century. Notions of art, culture, and museums during the twentieth century differed greatly from the suppositions held by Nathan Dunn and Robert Hart and their Chinese agents when they were acquiring objects for museums and world expositions. We cannot simply assume that nineteenth-century Americans were not serious or knowledgeable in their acquisitions of Chinese art and as a result collected the more frivolous decorative arts as a leisurely pastime.²⁰ There could not have been anyone more serious or dedicated than Nathan Dunn or Robert Hart in their endeavors in representing China.

At the same time, the nineteenth century Chinese who helped the Americans collect, or who took part in the selection of objects for displays in world expositions, also had very specific agendas in mind. It just happened their

ideas were different from ours today. By the advent of the twentieth century, China found itself at a significant crossroads of major societal change; compared to the nineteenth century, there were many more voices asserting an opinion as to what China should be and what kinds of objects should represent its culture. As demonstrated in the example of the confused messages conveyed by the Chinese at the St. Louis exposition in 1904, the Qing court wanted to revive the glory of its imperial past, while China all the while was moving toward change and eventual revolution. This period was a significant one in which issues regarding culture and national identity were being debated and (re) defined. In the realm of art, the turn of the twentieth century was the time during which modern studies and narratives of China's art history were being written, not only by the Chinese, but also by Americans, Europeans, and the Japanese.²¹

During the early twentieth century, the image of traditional China was no longer represented by intricate crafts and luxury goods, but instead by jades and bronzes from China's ancient past, the art of the court and the scholar-officials, and Buddhist sculptures.²² This shift in ideas about art and culture can be explained through various factors. The most salient of these is the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911. Antiquities from households of the deposed imperial family and other political elites were entering a volatile art market. Duanfang, mentioned above, was one of many traditional scholar-officials who traded art with foreign art dealers and collectors (Steuber 2005). Duanfang represented a new class of dealers who came from scholarly backgrounds and worked out of urban centers such as Beijing and Shanghai. They formed the basis of a new international art market that involved a different group of Americans—the connoisseurs and

art dealers, such as Charles Freer and John Ferguson, and the many art historians and museum curators who have been instrumental in forming our understanding of Chinese art today.

There was, concurrently, a surge of archeological excavations, accidental or planned, which made objects available for new studies of Chinese history and culture. Some of these recently excavated objects also created a new market for Chinese art. The young modern Chinese nation began to build museums to preserve and display the history and art of China. After several years of political impasse regarding the fate of the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, who had been deposed in 1911, the entirety of the Palace Museum finally opened to the public and became a national museum in 1925.

To understand the major shift in Americans' attitudes about Chinese art between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is essential to know not only what the American collectors thought, but also the social history of these collectors and their agents. Since the advent of the field of material culture studies, scholars have begun to look at museum objects, whether as art or not, from the perspective of different lives—that of their makers and users. Susan Pearce has illustrated this premise—that “objects have lives”—in her studies on museums, objects, and collections (Pearce 1993). It seems that the lack of “great” Chinese paintings in American museums before the twentieth century may be due to the fact that the nineteenth century American collectors and their Chinese agents differed from their twentieth century counterparts in what they regarded as “great,” what they thought was “Chinese,” and what they defined as “paintings.”

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, people have begun to question why the Chinese paintings that were acquired by collectors and curators of American

museums during most of the twentieth century are judged as “great” masterpieces, while other works are not. These critical observations will also be found to be culturally based, once they too are examined.

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NOTES

1. There has always been interest in these early collectors, dealers, and curators as evidenced by articles in art and museum journals, as well as the museums’ own histories. However, it is only recently that more extensive academic and scholarly studies are being done. One such example is Lara Netting (2009).
2. Susan Pearce has pointed out that “things” can acquire different meanings in their lifetime with various terms to designate the nuances of these shifts—objects, goods, artifacts, art, and so on (1993, 6). Unless otherwise specified, I will primarily use the word “object” here.
3. The history of the various institutions that have now been consolidated as the Peabody Essex Museum is complex, partly as a result of the assorted names that have been used in records and documentation. “East India Company” and “The Salem Museum” are the titles used by E.C.

Wines. Officially, the museums were called Museum of the East India Marine Society (founded in 1799) and the Natural History Collections of the Essex Institute (founded in 1834).

4. Published in the catalogue of the East India Maritime Society, Oct. 1831, MH 88, East India Maritime Society, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum.
5. Felice Fisher of the Philadelphia Museum of Art first brought my attention to Nathan Dunn and the materials on him, such as Jean Gordon Lee’s study (Lee 1984). John Roger Haddad has a detailed chapter on Dunn (2008). Steven Conn also discussed Dunn (2000, 157-173). There are two master’s theses on Nathan Dunn. Unless otherwise annotated, I am using Haddad’s research for information on Dunn.
6. My information about Peale’s museum and early American museums comes mostly from Steven Conn (1998) and William T. Alderson (1992).
7. Studies about Chinese merchants who facilitated trade between foreigners in Canton before the mid-nineteenth century often focus on their business activities, commonly and generically referred to as the China trade. It is only now that the social lives of the traders are being examined. However, much of the time, these are merely publications of their memoirs (see Kerr 1996, for instance), and not analytical studies of the person or period.
8. For a book on when and how Americans were conscientious about art, see Annie Cohen-Solal (2001).
9. See *Museum Founding Documents* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives.
10. For one example, see Qin Shao (2004).
11. See report *The Centennial Exposition* described and fully illustrated by J.S. Ingram (1876, 496).
12. Conn and Haddad felt that the Chinese displays were not as well received in comparison to the Japanese. Pitman gave a contrary argument with the success of sales of the Chinese objects at the Centennial.

13. "Industrial Art, New School in Memorial Hall," *Philadelphia Times*, Thursday, Oct. 12, 1876. Scrapbook, Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives.
14. For information on the exposition, I am relying on Wang Cheng-hua (2003, 421-475) and Susan Fernsebner (2002). I will only annotate sources for information not common to both research works.
15. I thank Wang Cheng-hua for showing me her paper "Presenting the Empress Dowager to the World: Cixi's Images and Self-fashioning in Late-Qing Politics," presented at Columbia University, 2001.
16. Newspapers of the time in major cities like Chicago and Washington, D.C. reported on Prince Pu Lun's visit and the party he hosted.
17. David Hogge, head of the Freer and Sackler Archives, provided me with a photograph taken at the Castle, Smithsonian Institution.
18. I thank Jenyi Lai at the National Museum of History for sharing this information about the saga of the Cixi portrait with me. For further details, see Lai (2011, 48-51).
19. A copy of the approval of the loan from the Smithsonian's National Collection of Fine Arts to the National History Museum in Taipei can be found in the Freer and Sackler Archives.
20. In the 1970s, Wen Fong wrote about the Department of Far Eastern Art at the Metropolitan Museum in Hoving (1975). Fong described the interests of nineteenth century collectors in Chinese art as "fascination," and those of the early twentieth century as of "general interest." According to Fong, it was only after World War II that collectors began to be "serious" about art, with exhibitions accompanied by scholarly catalogues.
21. There are many studies on the subject, in both Chinese and English. In addition to works mentioned earlier, such as Lara Netting's dissertation on John Ferguson, read also Shana Brown (2011); Aida Yuen Wong (2006); and *Reinventing the Past: Archaism and Antiquarianism in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (Hung, ed. 2010).

22. For an interesting study on how Buddhist objects became art, see Lopez (1995).

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