

## WESTERN ARTISTS IN CHINA – AND CHINESE ‘EXPORT’ ARTISTS

*Background notes*

**Dr Patrick Conner - 18 April 2018**



**James Gillray, *Caricature of Lord Macartney's reception by the Emperor of China***



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## Part 1: European artists in China

Until well into the 19th century China was almost inaccessible to Western artists. Western merchants were confined to the southern port of Canton and the Portuguese enclave of Macau; only ambassadors and missionaries had the opportunity reach Peking. A few pioneering artists made their way to China in the late 18th century; in particular the indefatigable Thomas Daniell and his young nephew William came to Canton in order to find a passage to India.

The first European artist to depict the hinterland of China was William Alexander, who had the good fortune to be appointed 'draughtsman' to the first British embassy to China in 1792-4. The Ambassador (Lord Macartney) and his large retinue did succeed in meeting the Qianlong Emperor at his summer residence north of the Great Wall, but the array of British gifts and up-to-the-minute technology failed to impress him. Although the embassy did not achieve its aims, the young William Alexander was able to make detailed watercolours as the British party made its way back through China by river and canal, in junks provided for them by the Chinese government.



**William Alexander, *The Walls of Peking***

The outstanding British artist to visit China in the 19th century was George Chinnery. Flamboyant, extravagant and unreliable, Chinnery enjoyed great success in Calcutta, the social and administrative centre of British India. But his debts grew even more rapidly than his clientele; after attempting to evade his creditors in India he finally fled in 1825 to the China coast, where he became a legendary figure in the expatriate community of Canton, Macau and Hong Kong.



**George Chinnery, *On Dent's Verandah, Macau***

Other European artists in China to be noted are Auguste Borget, friend of Balzac, who made a journey around the world in 1837-9; and the widely-travelled William Simpson, an unschooled Scotsman who became the leading 'special artist' of his day. For over forty years Simpson recorded wars, royal visits and state events from Crimea to Peking, working mostly for the *Illustrated London News*.



**George Chinnery, *drawing of pigs, Macau***

## Part 2: Chinese 'export art' for the West

On 25 September 1660 Samuel Pepys *'did send for a cup of tee (a China drink) of which I never had drank before'*. 20 months later Catherine of Braganza landed in England, and promoted the fashion for tea drinking at court. From then onwards tea was the commodity which the British most desired from China.

Until the middle of the 19th century almost all the tea drunk in Britain was Chinese, shipped by way of Canton (modern Guangzhou) on the Pearl River. For Canton was the only port in China at which Westerners were allowed to trade, until the conclusion of the first 'Opium War' in 1842 led to the opening of other 'treaty ports' to Western merchants – and to the founding of the colony of Hong Kong.

But together with huge quantities of tea, many other Chinese products were sent back to Europe from Canton, including porcelain, silks, lacquerware, carved ivory, and furniture. And alongside these came vivid and detailed 'export paintings', produced by Cantonese artists in a semi-Western style for the ships' officers and merchants who sailed in the great 'East Indiamen' to China.



*Tingqua, An Cantonese export artist's studio*

Most of these 'export paintings' were produced in a particular style, which the Chinese artists of Canton proved adept in developing. This attractive and hybrid style was designed to appeal to Western tastes. Some of the Cantonese artists' earliest and most appealing works were 'reverse-glass paintings', often part mirror and part landscape, which were painted in Canton on sheets of glass which had been brought out from England and France – since China at that time lacked the technology to produce plate glass on this scale.

Among the most elaborate works produced by the Cantonese 'export artists' (as they are now known) were highly detailed views of the ports where the trade was conducted. The city of Canton itself - with its 'hongs' or 'factories', its forts, its towers and temples - was a favourite theme (one was also depicted on porcelain, lacquerware, wallpaper and fans). Other locations recorded by the 'export artists' were the anchorage of Whampoa, the great bay and inner harbor of Macau, and other ports of call along the sea trade route between Europe and China (St Helena, Capetown, Penang). After 1842 Hong Kong and Shanghai were added to the list.



Chinese reverse-glass painting, *A Man-trap*



**Chinese artist, *A shop in Canton***

Some of the Cantonese export artists were much in demand as portrait painters. From the 1770s the artist known as Spoilum was painting skilful portraits of the Western merchants and their Chinese counterparts, firstly on glass but from the 1780s on canvas in the Western manner. In the 1820s Lamqua began to paint portraits (and landscapes) in a dramatized 'romantic' style inspired by the British artist George Chinnery, who had recently arrived on the China coast; moreover he undercut Chinnery's fees by a considerable margin.

Other subjects favoured by the 'export artists' were series of scenes showing the production of tea, porcelain, cotton, rice and silk; pictures of shops, showing the many Chinese (and some Western) items for sale in Canton; views of gardens, plants, animals and birds, many of them new to European eyes; and pictures of the different trades and occupations practised in China, offering us a vivid conception of Chinese life at the time.

## Reading list

### ***European artists in China***

Susan Legouix, *Image of China: William Alexander*, 1980

*An Embassy to China: Being the Journal Kept by Lord Macartney during his Embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung, 1793-1794*. The Folio Society edition of this work (2004) is well illustrated by William Alexander's watercolours

Patrick Conner, *George Chinnery 1774-1852, artist of India and the China coast*, 1993

Patrick Conner, 'The Flamboyant Mr Chinnery', 2011: catalogue of a loan exhibition held at Asia House, London

Robin Hutcheon, *Souvenirs of Auguste Borget*: long out of print, but second-hand copies easily available online.

### ***Chinese Export painting***

Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984: a lucid account of the V&A's collections of Chinese export works on paper.

Patrick Conner, *Paintings of the China Trade – the Sze Yuan Tang Collection of Historic Paintings*, 2013: catalogue and illustrations of perhaps the world's premier private collection of export painting.

Margaret Jourdain and R' Soame Jenyns, *Chinese Export Art in the Eighteenth Century*, 1950: pioneering work on different varieties of Chinese export art, notably the decorative arts.

### ***General background***

William Hunter, *The 'Fan Kwae' at Canton before Treaty Days, 1825-1849*, 1882, and *Bits of Old China*, 1885: readable, gossipy accounts of trading in China in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century – both available online as free downloads.

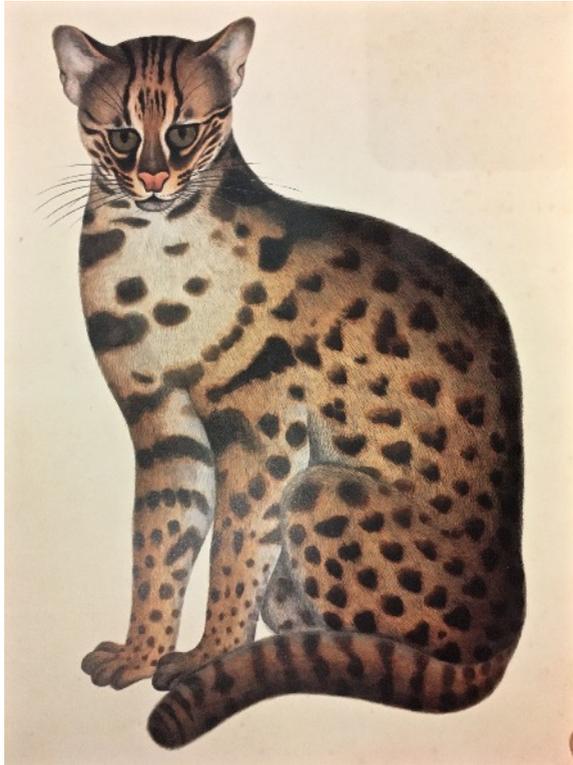
Patrick Conner, *The Hongs of Canton. Western merchants in south China, 1700-1900*: a history of Western trade at Canton as seen in Chinese export paintings.

Van Dyke, Paul, *The Canton Trade. Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845*, Hong Kong, 2005: a detailed academic account of Western trade at Canton by the leading scholar on that subject.

Julia Lovell, *The Opium War*, 2011: a clear, well-illustrated account of a war that still influences Chinese attitudes and affects relations between China and the West.

Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China. Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832-1914*, 2011: particularly good on the everyday lives of Westerners in China

Wood, Frances, *No Dogs and not many Chinese. Treaty Port Life in China 1843-1943*, 1998: a lively and amusing book by the former Curator of Chinese Collections at the British Library.



Chinese artist, *A Bengal Cat (Reeves)*

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