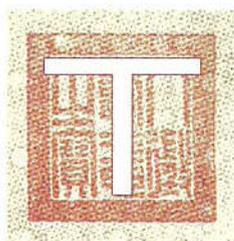




T h e e m p e r o r





The eighteenth-century Qianlong emperor was one of China's greatest art patrons. Just as he strove to expand the territory under his control, so too did he endeavor to bring the arts of many foreign cultures into his domain. The premier artisans in his imperial workshops—hailing from Europe, India, and

capped sword handles, and Mongolian yurts stood as temporary throne rooms for outdoor events (see Fig. 4).

The *Victory Banquet at the West Garden* hand scroll in Figures 2a and 2b, on view for the first time at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, not only demonstrates the caliber of the imperial artists but also offers a glimpse

l o o k s w e s t By Nancy Berliner



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Background: Fig. 1. Detail of *Portrait of Imperial Guard Uksiltu*, hanging scroll by Liu Tongxun (1700–1773), Liu Lun (1711–1773), and Yu Minzhong (1714–1780), China, Qing dynasty, 1760. Inscribed with the artists' signatures and one seal of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1796). Ink and color on silk, 73 ½ by 38 inches overall. Collection of Dora Wong.

Figs. 2a and 2b. *Yuan Xi Kai Yuan* (*Victory Banquet at the West Garden*), by Zhang Tingyan and Zhou Kun, 1749. Inscribed with the characters for “Respectfully painted together by your humble servants Zhang Tingyan and Zhou Kun” along the left edge and with a poem written by the Qianlong emperor at far top right. Ink and color with gold on silk, 1 foot, 8 ¾ inches by 19 feet. Private collection.

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Fig. 3. Snuff bottle, Chinese, 1736–1796. Painted enamels on copper alloy with gilding, ivory; height 2 ½ inches. Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

Central Asia, as well as China—created fine and truly unique works of art that blended and balanced the cultures and aesthetics of the period. Under the Qianlong emperor, who followed a path set by his grandfather the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722), European women with blond hair and blue eyes stared out from glossy enameled surfaces (see Fig. 3), mechanical clocks chimed with spinning lotuses and European figures (Fig. 6), rugs from Central Asia swathed floors and the ground (see Fig. 4), Mughal carved and inlaid jade

at the emperor's desire to cultivate a style of life that encompassed all the cultures within his reach, and even those beyond. In the lushly painted scroll, the artists Zhang Tingyan and Zhou Kun depicted their emperor arriving at the lakeside West Garden of the Imperial City (at the center of what is now Beijing) for a banquet honoring a military conquest. He is seated in an open palanquin carried by sixteen red-robed eunuchs (Fig. 5). Unlike earlier images of previous emperors who insisted on being represented as larger than all



other mortals, the Qianlong emperor, inspired by European verisimilitude, allowed his artisans to paint him as a figure comparable in size to the servants and subjects around him.

What brought on this new perspective and fresh approach in Chinese imperial arts in the early Qing dynasty? Answering this question requires a step back into the history of the dy-

early alliance with the nomadic Mongols to the west, which was cemented by Nurhaci's marriage to several Mongolian wives, all descendants of the Mongolian khans, or rulers, was intended as a strategic move for future conquests, and it did, indeed, prove beneficial over the ensuing centuries. After this early alliance with the Mongols, the Manchus began adopting their neighbors' religious practices

The round tents known as yurts, or *gers* as they were called in their native region, were a Mongolian architectural form descended from the days of Genghis. With domed roofs and vertical sides that were supported on the interior by a wooden fence-like lattice, yurts were easily assembled and disassembled, making them convenient dwellings for the nomadic herdsman of Mongolia, who needed to move constantly in search of fresh grasslands for their animals. Some Manchus were already using them in the first half of the seventeenth century, just when they were first allying themselves with the Mongolians, and the structure's continued importance under the Qing court is seen in the Victory Banquet scroll, in which an elegant yurt decorated with a *ruyi*-edged roundel on its peak is the architectural highlight (Fig. 4). Indeed, like the grand halls within the Forbidden City, it was the focus of the event's entire constructed environment, and as such was intended to symbolize the grandeur of the emperor. For those familiar with the traditional Chinese monumental architecture of brick, wood, and glazed tile found in the Forbidden City, the presence of the Mongolian yurt in the imperial garden could be a surprising vision. However, for the emperor, who would have been responsible for designing the setting of the banquet, the yurt announced the significance the Qing rulers attached to this type of architecture, and, more important, it symbolized their alliance with their neighbors and old friends, the Mongolians. Yurts appear in many Qing imperial paintings depicting the emperor or imperial entourages beyond the urban setting.

The Mongolians were not the only peoples with whom the Manchus chose to demonstrate their allegiance in a material fashion. The Tibetans were considered another potent force of the time, and Qing rulers did not hesitate to show their respect for them as potentially helpful allies. The Qianlong emperor's personal involvement with Tibetan Buddhism is apparent not only in the magnificent temples and shrines he built within the Forbidden City and at other palace sites—such as a reduced replica of the Potala Palace at Chengde, the Qing imperial summer resort—but also in the multitude of objects created in the imperial workshops for specific Tibetan Buddhist rituals. In addition, during his reign the emperor entertained the third Panchen Lama (c. 1738–1780), Tibet's spiritual leader, in great

nasty and of the Aisin Goro, the Jurchen clan that established it. In the first years of the seventeenth century, while the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was still ruling China, a Jurchen ruler named Nurhaci (1559–1626), the great-great-great grandfather of the Qianlong emperor, founded what would become the Qing dynasty in the region we now call Manchuria, and changed the name Jurchen to Manchu. The Manchus defined themselves as horsemen warriors, skilled at archery, who constantly sought to expand their dominion. An

and lifestyles, including Tibetan Buddhism and the nomads' yurt dwellings. Moreover, the alliance allowed the Manchus to see themselves as descendants—or incarnations—of the great conqueror Genghis Khan (c. 1162–1227). Like Kublai Khan (1215–1294), a grandson of Genghis, who in the thirteenth century had established the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) and proclaimed his rule over China, the Qing were able to march into Beijing in 1644, take the palace, and eventually conquer the entirety of Ming China.

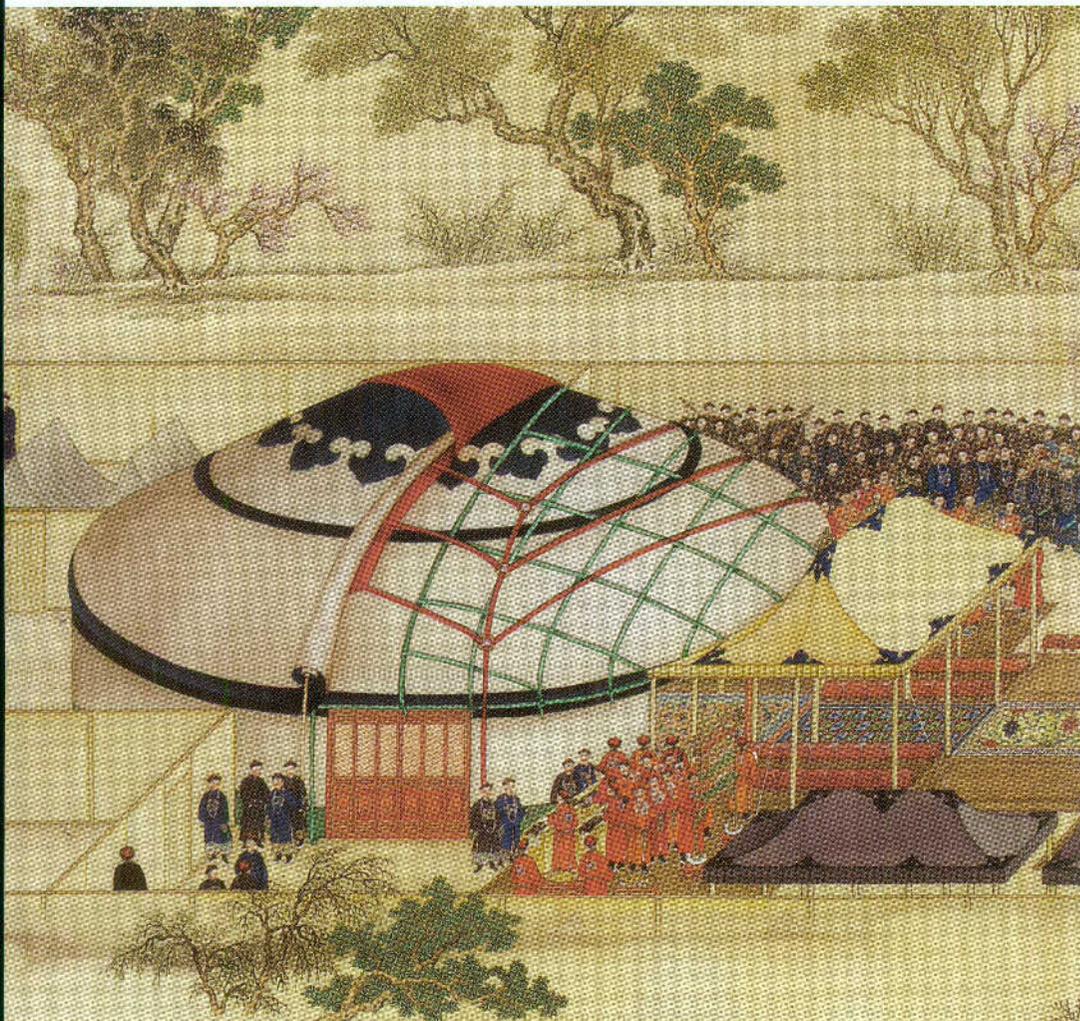


Fig. 4. Detail of the hand scroll in Fig. 2b.

splendor at both Chengde and Beijing.

The extravagant urn in Figure 8 exemplifies the emperor's dedication to creating the finest Tibetan Buddhist ritual implements for use either in the court or in religious institutions supported by the court. It was created in the imperial workshops using the cloisonné technique, which itself had been imported to China centuries earlier from Byzantium and adopted by Chinese artisans during the early Yuan dynasty. The body reflects typical cloisonné patterns and construction, but it has been enhanced with gold mounts inlaid with coral, lapis lazuli, and turquoise, three stones that are marks of Tibetan opulence and figure in important Tibetan religious art. Current understanding is that vessels of this type were used to hold butter tea, a significant beverage in Tibetan Buddhist rituals and life but one that was not taken up by native Chinese Buddhist sects.



Just as the Manchus cemented their alliances with the powerful peoples to their west by absorbing the Tibetan Buddhist religion, Mongolian

yurts, and other aspects of Mongolian culture, once they had overthrown the Ming dynasty in China, the Manchus also intentionally studied and took on significant aspects of Chinese culture—from Confucianism to the Chinese writing system and from Chinese poetry to southern Chinese style gardens. This borrowing was intended to ensure that they would be accepted as foreign rulers and respected by their Chinese subjects, although among themselves they maintained their own native Manchu culture, language, dress, and archery skills (see Fig. 1).

Into this richly brewing mix of traditions in early eighteenth-century Qing palace culture entered a fresh and exciting new cultural whirlwind—the Europeans. When Jesuit priests eager for new religious adherents first appeared at the doorstep of the Ming emperors in 1601, their spiritual proposals were rejected. However, the emperors were intrigued by some of their guests' talents and gifts, such as scientific apparatus that could probe astronomical phenomena and artistic skills that produced surprising new visual experiences. Over the following decades the Jesuits endlessly displayed their skills in glassmaking, enamels, clockmaking, and realism in painting, introducing these new realms of production into the imperial workshops.¹ Then, while serving

the Qianlong emperor, who knew no limits in artistic extravagance, they were called upon to transform the appearance of the palaces and palace grounds.

The emperor had been shown images of the fountains at Versailles and demanded that his European artistic servants—the Jesuits—create such mechanisms for him. As the setting for these experimental European style struc-

ture in residence at the Yuan Ming Yuan, preferring to return to the Forbidden City only for official obligations.

The Jesuit artist Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) designed a new waterworks for the emperor and then teamed up with Michel Benoist (1715–1774), a fellow Jesuit and an expert in mathematics and hydraulics, to create a model fountain. Delighted by the result,

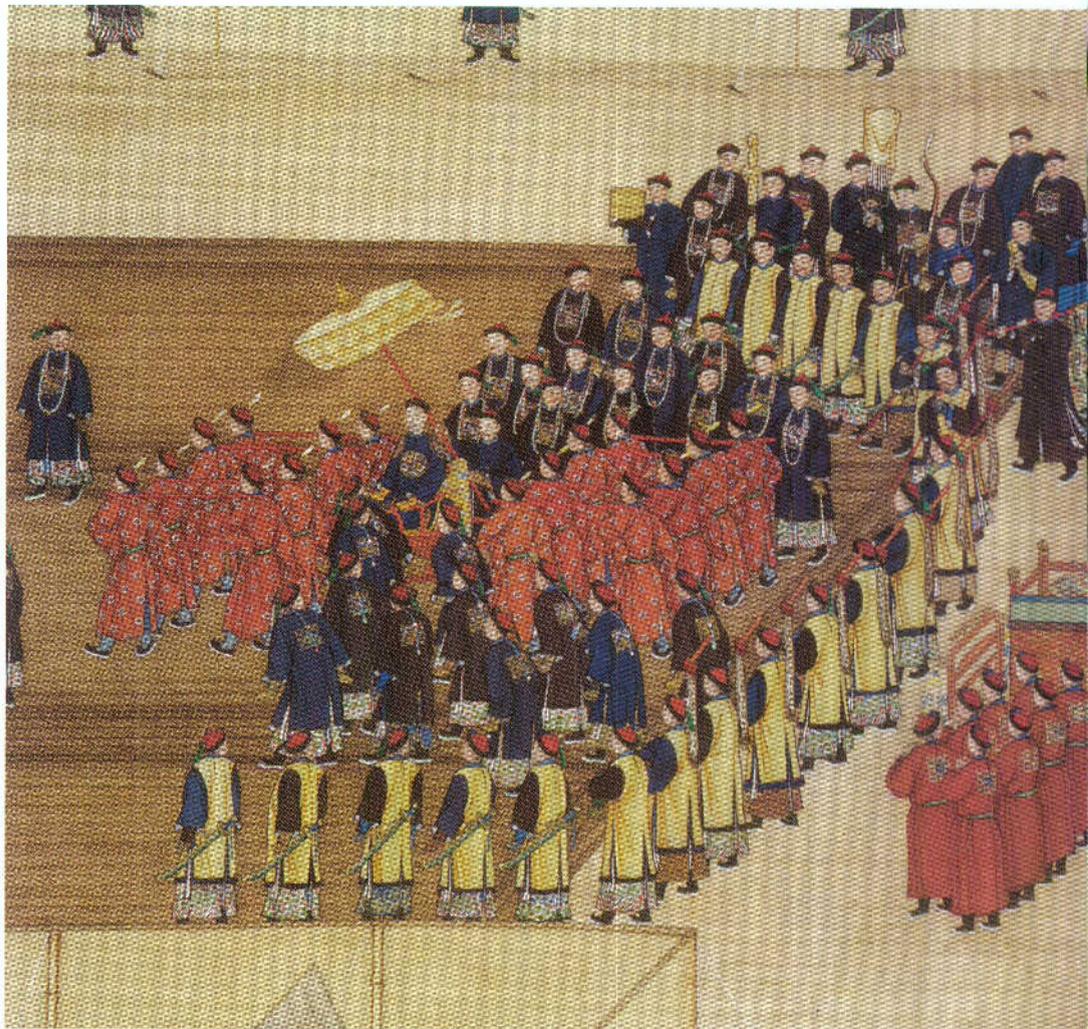


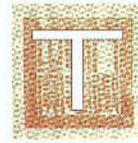
Fig. 5. Detail of the hand scroll in Fig. 2b.

tures, he chose the Yuan Ming Yuan (Garden of Perfect Brightness), an 865-acre garden and palace complex located six miles from the Forbidden City. Begun by the Kangxi emperor and extended and elaborated over time, the Yuan Ming Yuan encompassed numerous gardens within gardens and multitudes of pavilions and residences of all types. The French Jesuit Jean Denis Attiret (1702–1768) was so awed by it that he referred to it as “a veritable paradise on earth.”² The eighteenth-century Qing emperors spent most of the year

the emperor commissioned the construction not only of several fountains but also of a European style baroque palace in the Yuan Ming Yuan. Using books from Jesuit libraries in Beijing and consulting with other local Jesuits, including Attiret, Ignatius Sichelbart (1708–1780), the botanist Pierre d’Incarville (1706–1757), and Gilles Thebault (1703–1766), Castiglione and Benoist delivered the first completed structure in 1751. The emperor was overwhelmed by it and demanded more. Over the next three decades, the team of European



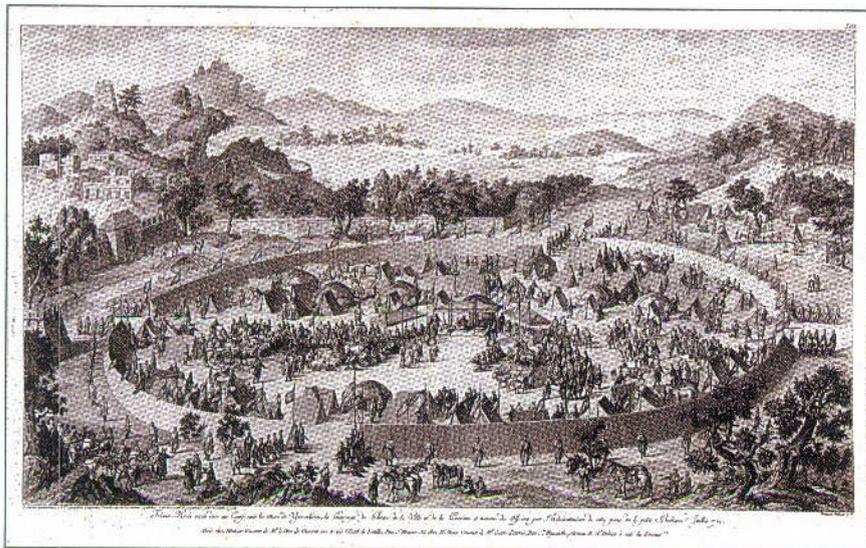
designers, together with Chinese masons, architects, and engineers, created eight fantastic palaces, a labyrinth, and multiple elaborate waterworks. Each construction was unique, but they all combined Chinese and European features—such as marble balustrades in buildings covered with glazed Chinese tiles—that literally made them monuments to the fusion of cultures.



The Qianlong emperor wanted to preserve the Yuan for posterity not only in stone and wood, but also in a reproducible visual format that he could distribute to his loyal subjects. Instead of traditional Chinese woodblock prints, the emperor selected the European technique of copperplate engraving, to which he had been introduced two decades earlier, in the early 1760s, when he was shown engravings of horse-filled battle scenes by the Bavarian artist Georg Philipp Rugendas I (1666–1742). Wishing to have his own military pursuits memorialized in a similar manner, the emperor had Castiglione and other Jesuit artists at the court make drawings of the campaigns in western China, which were sent to Guangzhou and thence to France with orders that they be produced as copper engravings of the finest available quality.³ When he received the results almost ten years later (see Fig. 7), the emperor was so pleased that he commanded that a workshop with trained engravers and printers be established within his palace. Thus, he was able to have images of Castiglione's European palaces and fountains in the Yuan Ming Yuan made under his own direction without waiting for the lengthy delays of shipments from far-off Europe. Fortunately, these prints survive today (five in the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum; see Fig. 9), for, ironically, European allied forces occupied the entire Yuan Ming Yuan in 1860, during one of the most destructive incidents of the second Opium War, and after extensive looting, burned the "veritable paradise" to the ground. Today only its ruins remain in Beijing.

The exteriors of the European style palaces were not superficial facades for Chinese interiors. Accouterments imported from Europe or made in European styles, including plank wooden floors and glass windows, were used throughout. European style furniture was most likely made for many of these structures as well. The carved ivory desk with a mirror

Fig. 6. Automaton clock, Chinese, 1736–1796. Ormolu, enamel, glass, silver, silk, and brass; height 36, width 16 ¼, depth 13 inches. Private collection.



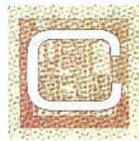
stand in Figure 10, based on early eighteenth-century English designs, may, in fact, have once offered its surface to the emperor's paper and brushes when he was in residence at the Yuan Ming Yuan. Previously thought to have been commissioned for a European, the desk is made of precious and rare materials that more likely suggest a great imperial client. The desk is constructed of the rare, deeply dark-colored tropical wood called *zitan*, imported from Southeast Asia. Its grain is so dense, and the wood so heavy, that it sinks in water and polishes to a gleaming surface comparable to jade. *Zitan's* sensuous appeal and slow-growing tendency guaranteed its eventual shortage and the court's ultimate

Fig. 7. *Tchao-Hoei [Zhao Hui] Receives in His Camp within the Walls of Yerechim the Homage of the Inhabitants of the City and of the Province, and Tchao-Hoei Names the Offices for the Administration of this Part of Little Buckarie, July 1759*, drawn by Jean Damascène (d. 1781), engraved by Isidore Stanislas Helman (1743–c. 1806), Paris, 1786. Copperplate engraving, 17 by 23 ½ inches. This print is from a set in reduced size that Helman issued in 1786, after his first set, executed between 1765 and 1775 for the Chinese emperor, had become extremely rare and desirable in Europe. *Peabody Essex Museum, gift of John Mayer.*

Fig. 8. Tibetan Buddhist ritual vessel, Chinese, 1736–1796. Carved into the central gold mount are the characters “Da Qing Qianlong Nian Zhi” (made in the great Qing Qianlong era), indicating that it was made in the imperial workshops. Cloisonné with gilt-bronze mounts inset with lapis lazuli, turquoise, and coral; overall height 32 ½, diameter 16 ⅞ inches. *Private collection.*

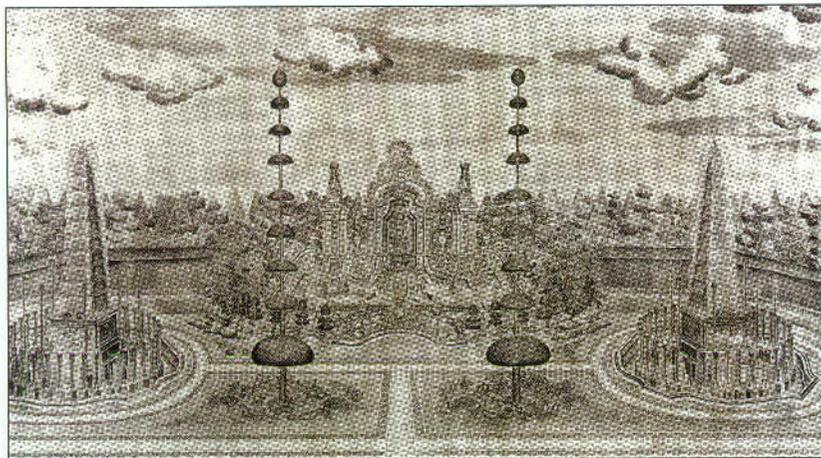


monopoly over all available timbers. Like *zitan*, ivory was a rare imported material of utter luxury. The carved images on the ivory covering the desk further suggest Qianlong's taste. A magnificent hunt in the wilds, attended by handsome horsemen and courtiers—a favorite theme of the Qing emperors who savored their Manchu traditions of the hunt—is played out in fine detail.



Carved into the ivory above the European style looking glass is a portrait of a European within a roundel. Europeans also appear in the details of the eighteenth-century imperial clock in Figure 6, which may have once chimed within the Yuan Ming Yuan. The Jesuits and other Europeans had charmed the Chinese emperors with automatons and mechanical

concubine captured by his troops in western China. She, like so many of the elements of the complex, was meant to demonstrate that the palace reflected his domain over all the cultures of the world. While European monarchs of the time may have assumed an attitude of superiority toward this distant fellow ruler, and we today may mistakenly believe that the Chinese rulers were awed by their visitors from afar, the Qianlong emperor did not hesitate to express his condescension toward these “foreigners” proffering their artistic techniques and talents. He considered them to be from remote tributary kingdoms, which, like their equals in Central Asia, would offer up their finest to please him as the all-powerful sovereign of the Central Kingdom. For example, in 1793 he wrote to George III (r. 1760–1820) of England:



clocks, so that clockmaking workshops had also been established within the palace. The Qianlong period clock clearly announces its native Chinese design with eight Chinese Buddhist emblems on the enamel doors, peacocks that flap their wings, and lotuses that twirl. But the doors open three times a day, to a tinkling of chimes, to reveal a European gentleman in his drawing room, and discerning eyes will notice on the sides of the base a European hunt scene of men and dogs bounding through a swamp in search of fowl. Like the Central Asian rugs scattered before the yurt in the hand scroll, such European figures (and those of Chinese women, who were just as exotic to the Manchu Qing emperors) peppered the imagery of the Qianlong era. Another example is offered by the snuff bottle in Figure 3, which is adorned with European women.

Within the confines of the Yuan Ming Yuan, the emperor kept Xiang Fei, a special Uighur

You, O King, live beyond the confines of many seas, nevertheless, impelled by your humble desire to partake of the benefits of our civilisation, you have dispatched a mission respectfully bearing your memorial. Your Envoy has crossed the seas and paid his respects at my Court on the anniversary of my birthday. To show your devotion, you have also sent offerings of your country's produce.... Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures.... It behoves you, O King, to respect my sentiments and to display even greater devotion and loyalty in future, so that, by perpetual submission to our Throne, you may secure peace and prosperity for your country hereafter.⁴

In 1748, the thirteenth year of the Qianlong emperor's reign, Fuheng (1721–1770), one of China's most commended military commanders (and also the emperor's brother-in-law), proclaimed victory over a region in western China. The emperor ordered that a victory banquet be held in the western gardens of the imperial palace and that artists in his atelier paint four hand scrolls to celebrate the conquest. One was to depict the imperial sacrifices attended by the emperor before the soldiers left the capital; one, the ritual imperial farewell to the soldiers and commanders; one, the surrender of the conquered; and the final one, the pomp, rituals, and routines of the victory banquet itself. It is this last that provided the focus for this article and its examination of the emperor's wide cultural interests. Coincidentally, in the same year George III commissioned George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) to compose “The Music for the Royal Fireworks” (1749) to celebrate the end of the War of the Austrian Succession. Imperial commissioning of art to celebrate territorial dominion and expansion was not unique, but, under one of the greatest art patrons of China, the Qianlong emperor, it resulted in fascinating combinations and amalgamations of many cultural traditions.

An exhibition entitled *The Emperor Looks West*, curated by Nancy Berliner, is on view at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, through the end of March. It includes many of the objects illustrated in this article.

¹ For more on this subject, see Lauren Arnold, “Introduction: Of the Mind and the Eye,” *Pacific Rim Report*, no. 27 (April 2003), <http://www.pacificrim.usfca.edu/research/pacrimreport/pacrimreport27.html>.

² Jean Denis Attirel, *A Particular Account of the Emperor of China's Gardens near Peking*, trans. Joseph Spence (London, 1752; reprint Garland, New York, 1982), pp. 7–8.

³ For more on this subject, see Hartmut Walravens, “The Introduction of Copper-Engraving into China,” paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, August 25–31, 1996, <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla62/62-walrh2.html>.

⁴ Cited in Edmund Backhouse and John Otway Percy Bland, *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1914), pp. 322–331.

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Fig. 9. Dashuifa Zhengmian (Grand Water Terrace), front facade, by Yi Lantai (w. 1738–1786), engraved by Shu Wen, China, 1783. Copperplate engraving, 19 $\frac{7}{16}$ by 34 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches. Peabody Essex Museum, museum purchase with funds provided by the Asian Art Visiting Committee and the Herbert Offen Memorial Fund.

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Fig. 10. Desk with looking glass, Chinese, 1760–1770. Zitan wood overlaid with carved ivory, and glass; height 71 $\frac{1}{4}$, width 30, depth 21 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Peabody Essex Museum.





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