The prehistory of Asian collections in Paris

Review of


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Ting Chang introduces *Travel, Collecting, and Museums of Asian Art in Nineteenth-Century Paris* with the startling disclosure: the principal modes of inquiry into museums, collections, and their founders have come to a stalemate. (Page 9) Accordingly, Chang turns her attention to some unexplored approaches. She does not discount the importance of the new historiography of quotidian life and reading strategies proposed by postcolonial scholars that unravel the exercise of power and authority by the West over Non-West during the era of European expansion. Acknowledging the continued importance of postcolonial critiques of museums as instruments of power and control, she makes effective use of them. However, her contention is that, while there have been plenty of works dealing with these issues, the economic and geopolitical aspects of colonial encounters – labour and other social relations and somatic experiences of travel – have received scant attention. And yet such encounters were not a simple case of the dominance of ‘advanced’ cultures over ‘backward’ ones. As she argues, such cross-cultural encounters between Europe and Asia also led also to ‘subtle inversions of power’, undermining European sense of superiority. What she brings out quite clearly is the complexity of human interactions that cannot simply be reduced to questions of power and authority. Ting Chang also points out that the normal practice has been to study collections through the lives of individual collectors. While not neglecting the importance of individual agency in collecting, she seeks to foreground the complex interactions of ‘political, commercial, monetary and power relations’ as well as the impact of extensive networks behind European collections of Asian art. Furthermore, she is also concerned with the question as to how material objects serve to represent other cultures, in the process sharpening the self-definition of recipient cultures.

Ting Chang has chosen to study the implications of these cross-cultural intersections through three key collectors of Asian art in Paris: Enrico Cernuschi, Émile Guimet (founder of the Musée Guimet), and the celebrated French man of letters, Edmond de Goncourt. Cernuschi acquired the largest collection of Chinese bronzes in the West; Guimet’s collection, which originally served to educate the French in Eastern religions, laid the foundations of the most important museum of Asian art in France, the Musée Guimet; in contrast to Cernuschi and Guimet, who actually went out to Asia, so that their collection formed an aspect of their travels, Edmond de Goncourt amassed his entire collection of Asian objects at home in Paris through art dealers. He never stepped outside...
Europe and wrote extensively on the collection he acquired in France. The choice of Edmond, one half of the inseparable duo, the Goncourt Brothers, is felicitous to say the least, given the fact that the Journal de Goncourt maintained by the two brothers offers an invaluable portrait of contemporary life in Paris that helps explain the motivations behind the collection.

As opposed to the general influence of Japanese art on Impressionism and other movements, these main figures made substantial contributions in the discursive fields dealing with China, Japan and France. They were however art lovers and acquired European and Asian objects with equal gusto. To give an example of the volume of objects brought to Paris for Cernuschi, ‘A convoy of train wagons containing 63, 296 antique and modern European paintings, drawings, sculptures, illuminated manuscripts, and books made their way to Paris in 1875. Also included were Egyptian mummies, Chinese sculptures, and archaeological finds. A set of Peruvian pottery that Cernuschi later donated to the Musée américain in Nancy...’ (43) Significantly, private homes of these collectors were transformed into museums. The museums of Cernuschi or Guimet offer the source and methods of collection of each object as well as their composition, form and function. But their sanitized environments do not reveal the ‘messy process by which the valuable objects were brought to their current, brightly renovated homes’ (161).

Ting Chang is resolved to set right this omission, analyzing individual collectors from the perspective of ideology, class, race and gender, and not simply concentrating on the museum as an institution and its politics of display that create national narratives. Cernuschi and his friend Théodore Duret, and emile Guimet and his artist friend félix Régamey visited East Asia at a time of western expansion. This was the era when the French Société de Géographie and similar associations combined scientific and overseas economic interests. She adopts the following strategy in her opening chapters, which compares Eastern and Western situations, contrasting technologically advanced with less developed societies, but also showing how these dichotomies breakdown under pressure. She begins with the political background to uneven relations between East Asia and Europe, tracing the gradual political and cultural engulfment of Asian cultures by the West in the mid-19th century.

In the 19th century Bimetallism prevailed in the global colonial order. One of the aspects of the north-south inequality was the western monopoly of the gold standard, while China and India were forced to remain on silver, with the harmful consequence for these countries. Both gold and silver have constitutive and symbolic value in monetary transactions. Hence this was another way of asserting western superiority. An authority on currency standards, Cernuschi proposed a fixed exchange rate of 15.5 to 1 between silver and gold with a view to stabilizing global exchange rate, that would be based on production rather than a sense of western superiority. This proposal was intimately connected with his massive bronze collection. As Chang remarks, a ‘set of alien bronze artifacts suddenly made more difficult the award of gold and silver in the contest between entire peoples’. (59).

The unprecedented wealth accruing from the industrial revolution naturally gave Europeans an unquestioned sense of superiority, and the four travellers to the
East were no exception. Ting Chang conveys this sense of superiority well by comparing Europeans with Asian travellers to the West. In the process she brings out some rather unexpected surprises. Considerable difference existed between European and East Asian travellers. Unlike European curiosity about the East and their candid and often unflattering descriptions of local populations, and their general observations, the Chinese and the Japanese lacked the knowledge of languages, tending to make specific comments related to their mission. The Japanese in particular were awestruck by western technological advances and their experiences in Europe helped make Japan the great military power it became in the 20th century.

European methods of acquiring art objects during their travels were to scour the country, single out particular sites, and swiftly arrange for the shipment of artifacts and even monuments wholesale before any objection could be raised. Cernuschi came across a four meter high Buddha in a temple in Meguro near Tokyo, which he obtained through a local agent, ‘as a battalion of native labourers dismantled and removed the trophy, much to the distress of local worshippers’(48). And yet, all the while they were not averse to driving a hard bargain.

The section on Guimet and Régamey’s travels in the East brings out the sense of unquestioning superiority of the European traveller who often moved around with an entire ‘native’ entourage. Enormous confidence and a stereotyped view of the East in the treatment of those who served them created resentment that was to culminate in the Boxer Rebellion or Japan’s assertion of national might in the 20th century. What struck the traveller was the enormous progress made in transportation in the West with the archaic slow moving vehicles drawn by men or animals in Asia. Yet the story is no so simple. East was being transformed as distances shrunk because of railways and other forms of mechanized transport. In volume one of Promenades japonaises, Guimet failed to mention the existence of railways in Japan, which was celebrated by contemporary printmakers such as Hiroshige III, who extol the romance of railways and steamships, the old and the new. On the other hand, as a telling photograph by Eugène Atget demonstrates, a French rag-picker was still plying his trade by pulling a handcart across Haussmann’s grand boulevards as late as 1899. There was a human element here as well. Frequently, the human rickshaw pullers (jinrikisha) in Japan aroused initial disquiet but it soon gave way to exasperation. Guimet demanded machinelike invincibility. When the bearers were unable to move fast, Guimet complained that their ‘breathless and weakened [grunts]…their bleeding feet and sunken eyes, their shrunken noses and dry mouths made me worry that they would crush in exhaustion and pain’.(84) There is indeed a chilling incident when Guimet forced the coolies to continue despite their obvious exhaustion.

How much of this innate superiority was, as it were, written in stone? Chang argues eloquently that the European Traveller’s confidence often rested on insecure grounds. They were, after all, at the mercy of the local labourers, sometimes fearing for their own safety. Interestingly, she points to the fact that Régamey used classical nudes as a model to represent semi-naked Japanese labourers. She regards Régamey’s failure to represent the tattooed bearers adequately within a classical framework as a form of local ‘resistance’ to European universality, giving rise to clash of mores and decorum. However, I would suggest
that E. H. Gombrich’s classic analysis of understanding the unknown though known categories makes sense here. Here the artist attempts to represent an object through a pre-existing schema. Perhaps because the tattooed Japanese was too exotic for the French artist, he was unable to ‘adapt’ the stereotype sufficiently to create a convincing image.

Ting Chang offers another example of how western confidence was undermined on the ground in the East. The engraving of the Austrian traveller and diplomat Joseph-Alexander Hüblner being carried in a cango by two men gives the impression of a feminized defenseless man, an impression accentuated by the fan, an emblem of feminine sexuality (99). The author points to the amusing fact that there are striking parallels between Hüblner’s pose and that of Manet’s Olympia, which contributed to the undermining of the image of strident European masculinity. She reflects on the fact that the East was exhibited in a domesticated form in western museums where the sweat and toil of foreign labour involved in the presentation of the material cultures of the East did not intrude. The prehistory of the objects, including the somatic or bodily experiences of the collectors in the East, she writes, would have no place in the sanitized environment of the Musée Guimet.

Unlike Guimet or Cernuschi, Edmond de Goncourt never set foot outside Europe. His substantial collection was made entirely through influential dealers. She provides a detailed analysis of this leading literary figure’s collection and life, his writing and collecting feeding one another, examining his literary output and his self-confessed view of collection as a sublimation of sexual desire. The point to remember is that not only was Goncourt a major collector of eastern objects, he was also a champion of French art. His collection of European and East Asian objects seen in close proximity, and the collector’s view of their affinities, set up a dialectical relationship that challenged western superiority. His appreciation of Asian porcelain was a way of paying homage to Sèvres. A conservative, Goncourt also expressly identified himself with the great figures of the ancien régime, seeking to establish collecting as an exclusive aristocratic practice. His reaction may have been prompted by the changing market for these objects that witnessed the overthrow of the social order by the arrival new groups, especially Jewish financiers. What I find interesting here is the link between rococo and eastern objects in a collector like Goncourt who abhorred classical taste, especially of the revolutionary neoclassicist variety. The Goncourt mansion served as a museum where he actively drew out affinities between rococo and oriental objects. Significantly, he placed his favourite, Watteau’s Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera, on the stairwell that formed the bridge between East and West.

Asian collections fulfilled different purposes for their authors. For the republicans, Cernuschi and Guimet, their museums aimed at restoring France’s prestige compromised by the Second Empire and severely mauled by the German war machine, heralding an optimistic future of democratic principles. For Edmond de Goncourt, a conservative who dreamed of returning to the halcyon days of the ancien régime, his museum sought to recreate his vision of an idealized past. However, there were unintended consequences. Importantly, whether to endorse the monarchy or the republic, encounters with the East severely depleted confidence in western superiority. A central figure in the French cultural scene, the East slowly eroded Goncourt’s belief in the primacy of French art. Guimet’s espousal of eastern
religions seriously compromised the primacy of Christianity. In the final analysis, on the shifting sands of taste, neither China or Japan enjoyed an unchallenged supremacy.

The linguistic turn in art history, one of the dominant forces since the nineteen seventies, is slowly being replaced by iconic and material turns. Each new turn focuses a searchlight on to a hitherto underexplored or forgotten area of study and thus is a gain for the discipline of art history itself. Despite occasional lapses in syntax and grammar, the work is clearly written and persuasively argued. *Travel, Collecting, and Museums of Asian Art in Nineteenth-Century Paris* makes an original contribution to this emerging area of art history by concentrating on the material aspects of works of art and to the literature of colonial encounters, stressing neglected areas such as the complexity of economic and social relations in these human encounters.