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**Peopling landscapes, ethnographic and otherwise:
European images of Asians
from the 15th to the 19th centuries**

Encounters, the landmark show at the Victoria and Albert Museum that examined the 'meeting' of Asia and Europe between 1500 and 1800, included among its exhibits a design for a fan, painted in oil and Europe around 1700. It portrays what seems to be a merchant's shop in South or East Asia. The interior teems with goods. Ceramics are everywhere, sitting on the floor and crowded on every available surface, almost all blue and white vases, but a few red glazes and one or two figures. Many sit on what look to be lacquered tables and trunks, both red and black, with gold decoration of foliage, landscapes, and again the occasional figure. A lacquered folding screen has six panels with figures in landscapes, while the walls are covered with pictures, half of what might be Chinese or Japanese landscapes, the remainder of South or South-East

Asian figures. In the middle of the shop are two groups, perhaps of customers, some admiring the objects and others in conversation. Fabrics drape various windows and doors, while a group of much smaller figures, higher in the picture plane, lead the eye out of the room—perhaps out of the shop and across the street—where another pile of porcelain beckons. As the curators note, ‘while the furniture and porcelain are painted with reasonable accuracy and suggest a familiarity with such goods, the portrayal of the figures is drawn more from the imagination and seems to derive from prints or paintings of Turkish life.’¹

The object and the comment come as a salutary reminder of some simple truths about European depictions of Asia and Asians during the early modern period. Europe was drawn to Asia inasmuch as the latter was more developed, a source of unimaginable wealth and luxury unattainable in the backward west. Nor did contact quickly change the calculus. Even once they had found their way to the east, Europeans were confined mainly to a few trading ports on the edge of a vast continent, whose riches they had long been desperate and were now able to access, despite highly unfavourable terms of trade, but whose interior long remained out of sight. European anxiety about their own position began to abate with the collapse of Ottoman pretensions in Europe and the ebbing of Mughal hegemony in South Asia at the end of the seventeenth century. Confidence was clearly on the rise in the eighteenth century, with easier access to the Near and Middle East and Anglo-French rivalry in and over South Asia. But Europe continued to be marginal within much of Asia until well into the third, if not fourth,

¹ Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer, ed., ‘Introduction’, in *idem.*, eds., *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500–1800* (V&A Publications, 2004), p. 5. It would have been impossible to write this essay without the V&A exhibition and catalogue. The range of opinion and material in the latter makes it an indispensable reference in thinking about the problems that the exhibition raised. The essays by the curators, Rosemary Crill, and Steven Parissien have been particularly useful.

century of contact. And these basic conditions of supply and demand determined the market for images no less than for any other good.

Supply was both constrained and conditioned. Asia had long been desired but distant, subject more to fertile invention than accurate observation. This had not diminished the attraction, however, and artists had developed an extensive repertory of fancies and fantasies on which to draw. Access increased over time. But this did not always imply a shift toward the real or an interest in the individual. In the early days, distance and exoticism could prompt both the free play of imagination and a desire to see for oneself. In the eighteenth century rising confidence and increasing access stimulated a demand to know both more and less. Economic imperatives and intellectual curiosity brought some features of the landscape into sharper focus. But the gradually shifting terms of exchange obviated the need to take what one found too seriously. Given the nature of the market, this made eminent artistic sense. Asian rulers provided some demand for the technical abilities of European portraitists, but in Europe itself the interest remained material rather than personal. Asian goods, such as the ceramics, lacquer, and textiles of the fan design, were the object of ever more elaborate discrimination, but Asian faces could remain generic if not indiscriminate. Asia was a landscape, which could be imagined just as well as recorded, populated or not, against which to cultivate a European self of sense and sensibility. It was the rare European who transcended these limitations to produce a portrait of an Asian that limned an individual.

Even as Europeans began to extend their gaze and impose their authority from the late 18th century, images of Asia and Asians remained bound for the most part by restrictions of pictorial convention and conventional taste. Over time, travel and knowledge increased and the picture filled out. There were detailed depictions of the land from which the

wealth sprang, the somewhat quaint societies within which it circulated (and from which it might be siphoned), and the rituals by which they were ruled, all combining to provide a comprehensive natural history. But there was little incentive to broach the gulf between a Europe that now imagined itself to be progressive and an Asia conceived as a repository of unchanging tradition. The imposition of unequal treaties in what was tellingly designated as the 'Far East', as well as direct rule in India, accelerated the turn toward the proto-ethnographic, entrenching the distance between the observer and the observed and enabling the typologies demanded by efficient administration. By the late 19th century, Europeans were free to roam and record. Their ranks included artists of great technical ability and genuine sympathy for the countries within which they worked, for the peoples whom they depicted. Even here, though, it is rare for an Asian to escape landscape and history: for portraits to allow the individual to emerge from the type that he or she illustrates, or for Asia to escape the past to which it had by then been consigned.

The voyages of da Gama did not inaugurate the accounts of Asia in Europe. Crusades and Mongols had enabled the continuing elaboration of a repertory within which the continent luxuriated in excess, oscillating between long-established poles of military aggression and feminized passivity.² Contact did at least allow Europeans to begin to chart a course between these and work out how to access some of the surplus. In the early years, two concerns were paramount, each producing images of Asians to their own specifications, albeit with substantial overlap. For the Church, particularly the Jesuits, Asia promised both a confirmation of revealed truth and an abundant harvest of souls. The universal pretensions of the former, as well as a glancing acknowledgment of its geographical birthplace, were

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1979), p. 57

clearest in depictions of the Adoration of the Magi. Before too long enough the three kings had been distributed geographically across Asia and Africa, with Balthazar chosen to represent the 'indeterminate Oriental'.³

The prospect of souls prompted somewhat more disciplined observation, particularly if they were prepared to make the journey to Europe. Hence the publicity that surrounded the Japanese 'mission' to Europe between 1582 and 1590. The 'royal ambassadors' appear together with their minder in the print, *News from the Island of Japan* [CATALOGUE NUMBER?], produced by Michael Manger in Augsburg in 1586. But the boys were not royal ambassadors and the print is hardly a portrait. The mission had been orchestrated by Alessandro Valignano, in large part to buttress the credentials of the Jesuit mission both in Japan and Europe, and represented at most the three minor lords from whose domains they came. This did not stop assorted elites throughout Europe assuming that they stood for the archipelago as a whole.⁴ The print betrays a similarly tentative grasp of representational accuracy, perhaps exacerbated by the nature of the woodblock medium. There is some attempt at physiognomic differentiation, but the faces are hardly Japanese. And while contemporary observers were taken with Japanese dress, the costume is resolutely European.⁵ It was not that accurate observation was beyond European

³ Donald F. Lach and Edwin J. Van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe. Volume II, Book One, A Century of Wonder. The Visual Arts* (University of Chicago Press, 1970) [hereafter *Visual Arts*], p. 68-9, 75. Lach's extraordinary, multi-volume achievement is the second source to which this account is heavily indebted. See also the review by M.N. Pearson, "'Objects Ridiculous and August": Early Modern European Perceptions of Asia', *Journal of Modern History*, 68.2 (1996), pp. 382-97.

⁴ See Michael Cooper, *The Japanese Mission to Europe, 1582-1590: The Journey of Four Samurai Boys through Portugal, Spain and Italy* (Global Oriental, 2005) and, for the European perspective, Judith C. Brown, 'Courtiers and Christians: the First Japanese Emissaries to Europe', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 47, 1994.

⁵ Lach and Van Kley, *Visual Arts*, p. 72.

artists. In 1616, Archita Ricci produced a powerful portrait of Hasekura Tsunenaga, who had been sent around the world by Date Masamune, a lord from the north of Japan, and converted to Christianity mid-mission. On this occasion, face, body, and dress are rendered with skill and sympathy, although here too the staging is conventional and the iconography charged.⁶ The veracity of the portrait was necessarily subordinate to the higher truth.

A different set of concerns, namely material resources, animated those after power and wealth rather than souls. These included land, products, and people, who began to appear in European collections early in the sixteenth century. The earliest collection of paintings of Asia, in the Biblioteca Casanatense, seems to include images based on direct observation of life in India during the 1530s and 40s, with what Donald Lach has called 'rich ethnographic detail'.⁷ The phrase is telling. The emphasis is on details of 'feature, hairdress, and costume', rather than the individual. But this was enough, inaugurating a line of typological observation that continued over the course of the century, through Cesare Vecellio's comprehensive account of 'ancient and modern costume' in 1590, to the authoritative *Itinerario* of Jan Huyghen van Linschoten in 1596. The latter proved seminal, providing models not least for Theodor de Bry; but the figures remain 'strangely un-Asian', the focus elsewhere, on the landscape, fauna, and architecture that could provide the clues through which the continent's wealth might be tapped.⁸

The same remained largely true into the seventeenth century and beyond. Even when written accounts lingered on

⁶ Greg Irvine, 'Japanese Diplomatic Relations with Europe', in Jackson and Jaffer, *Encounters*, 100-1.

⁷ Lach and Van Kley, *Visual Arts*, p. 65.

⁸ Lach and Van Kley, *Visual Arts*, p. 94 and Rosemary Crill, 'European Depictions of Asians', in Jackson and Jaffer, *Encounters*, p. 218.

physiognomy and physique, not least skin colour,⁹ it proved difficult to illustrate this in any detail, given the frequent reliance on earlier sources, the delegating of the task of depiction, and the constraints of the medium. The Arab, Javanese, and Chinese merchants at Bantam, depicted in the 1670s, were typical.¹⁰ There is some crude differentiation of facial features and a clear contrast in skin tone, but as with most 'portraits' of the time costume and accessory remained the distinguishing features par excellence. Kircher's *China Illustrata*, from 1667, underlines the point. Ricci, the missionary, is depicted with care, but there is little attempt to do the same for Chinese subjects. For the most part, individuals are little more than types, the types themselves a composite of the Chinese and European elements that can combine to create the landscape within which such a figure might be found. Thus noble ladies are designated as such by Chinese dress, vases, scrolls, and religious paraphernalia, framed by Western domestic architecture and fitted out with European features.¹¹ Similar conventions marked the accounts of Japan, culminating with Montanus in 1669 and continuing into the following century.¹²

⁹ Donald F. Lach and Edwin J. Van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe. Vol. 3, Book 4, A Century of Advance, East Asia* (University of Chicago Press, 1993) [hereafter *Advance 4*], p. 1912.

¹⁰ Donald F. Lach and Edwin J. Van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe. Vol. 3, Book 1, A Century of Advance, Trade, Missions, Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1993) [hereafter *Advance 1*], p. 29; and Jackson and Jaffer, *Encounters*, p. 55.

¹¹ As several commentators have noted, the authority of the Qing emperor seems to rest as much on Europeanized architecture and accessories as Chinese dress. (Stick and spaniel may have done well for Charles II, but would have been taken as an insult in the Chinese context.) Lach and Van Kley, *Advance 1*, plate 50; Lach and Van Kley, *Advance 4*, plates 311, 316-7, and 340; and Crill, 'European Depictions', p. 219.

¹² See Lach and Van Kley, *Advance 4*, plates 391 ff.

With the gradual decline of the Ottoman and Mughal gunpowder empires from the end of the seventeenth century, Europe could begin to relax. Travellers joined traders in the Orient, that is, the Near and Middle East, where they could enjoy the frisson of (what by convention was agreed to be) the unknown and thereby develop new genres of travel writing, wherein description and depiction combined to project an emasculated Asia. The anxious inaccuracy of earlier accounts evolved into the comfortable stereotypes through which the East might now be viewed. The most notorious of these is perhaps that of the seraglio, which had earlier been seen 'as symbol and evidence of associations between the despotic power, religious depravity and luxurious decadence of inhuman, immoral "oriental" infidels', but now became the stage for romantic drama, 'intrepid' exploration and intellectual speculation.¹³ Its artistic apotheosis came in the nineteenth century, not least in the painting of Ingres and Gérôme, from where it eventually found its way to the cover of and deconstruction in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Even the seraglio, of course, could serve a range of purposes, nor was its observation simply a projection.¹⁴ The conventions of reportage and realism required direct observation, if not of the scene itself then of prior observers. The iteration of the scene, however, underlines the extent to which Asia in the eighteenth century was becoming subject to certain rules of evidence, which established parameters for the kind of peoples one was expected to find.

This was even true in the far East, however divergent the career of the Qing from other Asian empires. The imperial portraits of Giuseppe Castiglione, not so much European as impeccably hybrid, provide a useful reality check. The careful subordination of European technique—realism,

¹³ Joanna de Groot, 'Oriental Feminotopias? Montagu's and Montesquieu's "Seraglios" Revisited', *Gender and History*, 18.1 (2006), 66–86.

¹⁴ Ibid.

perspective, and chiaroscuro—to Chinese form suggest both the scale of Qing ambition and the terms on which Europe might expect to engage with China. It was a lesson that Lord Macartney would have done well to study at the end of the century, although the depiction by William Alexander of his reception by the Qianlong Emperor makes the dynamic perfectly clear. Here again, the emphasis is rather on the nature of authority and encounter, rendered in clothing and placement, than the individuals, whose figures and faces are merely sketched.¹⁵ The same basic truths about power and exchange were true even further East, even if the Tokugawa were less confident than their Qing neighbors. Kaempfer's illustrations for his *History* underline the extent to which the Dutch were there on sufferance, delineating the extent to which authority was the product of a system rather than the property of an individual.

None of this prevented Europe from seeing East Asia and East Asians as it wanted, however. Distance and an emerging sense of cultural superiority seems to have licensed the free play of the eighteenth-century imagination, in counterpoint perhaps to the symmetry and seriousness required by the ancestral imperatives of neoclassicism. Asia could be both exploited for models that broke with the constraints of European practice and blamed for their inability to conform to the laws of perspective.¹⁶ Nowhere was the license more evident than the Chinoiserie that swept the continent from mid-century. As Steven Parissien notes, the enthusiasm for porcelain and the rest 'never ventured beyond the realm of fantasy'. 'Topographical indifference' was the premise for

¹⁵ James L. Hevia, 'Diplomatic Encounters: Europe and East Asia', in Jackson and Jaffer, *Encounters*, fig. 7.1, p. 93. See also idem., *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Duke University Press, 1995).

¹⁶ I am grateful to Brian Durrans for pointing out this productive ambivalence toward the Asian lack of single-point perspective.

the 'random attribution' by which Asia might be ransacked to produce a sufficiently charming domestic interior.¹⁷ 'In these contexts the Orient was pictures as a harmless, picturesque and sometimes magical idyll whose inhabitants were invariably languid, melancholic and indolent... Eastern figures... were often strangely androgynous, indicating a European apathy towards individual identities...' Thus the porcelain Chinaman [CATALOGUE NUMBER ??], usefully deployed as a flower holder. 'Alternatively eastern landscapes were simply emptied of people and filled with birds and animals—preferably monkeys.'¹⁸ The saucer decorated at Breslau [CATALOGUE NUMBER ??] still includes figures, a useful design element among the flowers and birds, but the tendency is clear. It would terminate at the end of the century in the willow pattern: a generic landscape, invented in industrializing England and attributed to Chinese legend, within which indistinguishable figures might celebrate the enduring power of love against the tyranny of Oriental despotism.¹⁹ What better backdrop against which to have one's cake?

By the end of the century, also, the terms of exchange had begun to shift. Imperial rivalries were beginning to spill beyond the European theatre. The Seven Years' War was the first global war, inaugurating a shift in the balance of power not only between Britain and France but also, with the Battle of Plassey, in India itself. Soon enough, Europeans began to venture beyond the coast. Anglo-Indian Art followed, lavishing detailed attention on a range of Indian subjects.

¹⁷ Steven Parissien, 'European Fantasies of Asia', in Jackson and Jaffer, *Encounters*, p. 350.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

¹⁹ See Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Willow Pattern' (http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/british_galleries/bg_styles/Style05c/objects/object4_1.html) and 'The Story of the Willow Pattern' (http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/british_galls/audio_tales/willow/), both accessed 1 June 2008.

Princes learned to make use of the medium for their own ends. Women 'evoked a sensuous chivalry in British artists'.²⁰ Occasionally, as in Zoffany's painting of the Palmer family, an individual might transcend the circumstances of the time.²¹ But this was unusual. For the most part, Indians 'appeared in subordinate roles: as soldiers filling out battle scenes, as servants waiting on their employers, as pedestrians populating densely-inhabited streets, or craftsmen exercising their skills'.²² The subordination was both historical and aesthetic. However accurately depicted, Indians for the most part were adjuncts to an Anglo imperial project, a relationship documented both in official views of new settlements and trading centres and in more informal scenes, for example, Zoffany's most famous achievement, of Colonel Mordaunt's cock match.²³ The distance between painter and subject was further exacerbated by the lens through the latter was observed. India provided 'the element of scale so essential to the full development of the romantic imagination at the optimum moment in time', a superb stage on which the new appreciation for the sublime, picturesque, and exotic might illustrate the grandeur of the imperial project.²⁴ Given the unchanging nature of landscape and civilization, Company painters could detach figures from this backdrop and often each other, in classificatory denial of historical change and lived complexity, confident in the knowledge that the individual could stand for the natural history of which he or she was a part.²⁵

²⁰ Clive Dewey, 'Figures in a Landscape: Anglo-Indian Art', *Modern Asian Studies*, 16.4 (1982), p. 684.

²¹ William Dalrymple, 'Personal Encounters: Europeans in South Asia', in Jackson and Jaffer, *Encounters*, p. 167.

²² Dewey, 'Figures', p. 684.

²³ See J.P. Losty, 'British Settlements and Trading Centres', in Jackson and Jaffer, *Encounters*, pp. 142-53, and Dalrymple, 'Personal Encounters', p. 161.

²⁴ Dewey, 'Figures', pp. 684 and 688.

²⁵ Again, I am grateful to Brian Durrans for his comments here.

Soon enough, however, the charm faded and metropolitan taste moved on.²⁶ There was more of Asia to be discovered, as well as new technology with which to do so. Napoleon's invasion of Europe, however quixotic, proved decisive, underlining both the superiority of European military hardware and tactics and a shift in the terms by which Asia might be understood. If, before, the Orient had been appreciated, now it would be defined. Where there had once been a possibility of sympathetic identification, however charged by exoticism, now there was an obligation to catalogue and classify.²⁷ This did not preclude, indeed demanded, close observation. Before it might have been sufficient to drape a figure with a European face in a generically Asian costume. During McCartney's embassy, however, William Alexander had sought to distinguish among the various functionaries of the Chinese military ['Chinese standard bearer', 'Chinese Foot-soldier', 'A soldier of Chu-San'; CAT NOS?]. A few years later, Utterson was obliged and able to differentiate not only between Java and the rest of Asia, but between classes within Java and between genders within a class ['Costume Study' x 4; CATALOGUE NUMBER?. But these remained 'costume studies'. It was the type, not the individual, that was the object of discrimination, dress rather than feature that caught the artist's eye. Effective diplomacy and efficient administration, of both trade and populations, required only that the individual be marked as a member of a class. As Europe advanced further into Asia, through Opium Wars and unequal treaties, direct rule and new imperialism, this way of seeing would prove both persistent and productive.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the process was well under way and the contours of the relationship clear.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 691.

²⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 116-20. Said's argument here is not uncontroversial, but it remains useful as a way of understanding the broad parameters within which Europe's view of Asia evolved.

Artists produced a steady stream of images describing the new territories and peoples coming under European sway. Few were as well-travelled and prolific as Charles Wirgman. It would be a mistake to expect too many portraits from someone who made his living as a cartoonist, illustrator, and publisher. Wirgman's genius was capturing the scene, to which end he was prepared to skewer his own travelling companions perhaps even more than the local people ['Our Smoking Club'; CAT NO?]. Indeed, the comedy that he frequently made of the Englishman abroad ['Appearance of Times Correspondent'; CAT NO?] contrasts strongly with the rapt attention he paid to a group of Chinese nursemaids [CAT NO?], a sugar cane seller in Canton [CAT NO?], or the mix of people in the shilling stand at the Hong Kong races [CAT NO?]. Nor was it that Wirgman was either technically incapable or emotionally indisposed to produce portraits that went beyond the form of things. The gentle affection evident in the watercolour of his wife, Kane [CAT NO?], suggests someone fully aware of the need to move beyond simple stereotypes. But Wirgman also needed to make sense, for himself, of the variety of Asia, understood to be teeming. And he was too good a businessman not to understand the limits that his market placed on the representation of that variety. In both cases, the demand was best met by vignettes, animated by humour and affection, to be sure, but always reassuring that the scene could be captured, rarely suggesting that the gaze might be returned or that the subject would answer back.

In the end, then, the East remained the East, a source, as ever, of ceramics, furniture, and textiles--Wirgman's interiors are a distinct improvement on the fan design from 1700 ['Chinese Girls'; CAT NO?]-but now also thrown open for travel and trade. The late nineteenth century proved to be Japan's moment in the European sun. Raw silk and export craft flowed out. Foreigners, including Wirgman, came in and described what they saw. But even while the country itself underwent wrenching transformation, its image in Europe became

something of an *idée fixe*. Japan provided a fairyland for a European audience grown tired of the earlier fantasy of *Chinoiserie* and the contemporary grind of industrial life: Japan was the place where women in kimono made tea, using handicrafts, in traditional wooden buildings set in a manicured nature. A more detailed observation of the elements of this picture, whether in person or print, proved profound for European artistic practice. It may be that the distance between observer and observed was what enabled the radical transformations of the late nineteenth century, European artists secure in the confidence that the innovations were their own work, however much they were indebted to Japanese models. But few were as obsessed as artists. Most were happy simply to enjoy the escape. And the terms of the exchange continued to preclude the production of images of Asians wherein the latter might be seen as individuals. The focus remained the landscape, the collective, and the type. The Asian other could only be depicted in one's own European style, at least until one was comfortable with the idea that one's own style might become somewhat other.