

ONE

THE POLITICS OF CHINOISERIE

The Disappearance of Chinese Objects

“Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”
“To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”
“The dog did nothing in the night-time.”
“That was the curious incident,” remarked Sherlock Holmes.

—Arthur Conan Doyle, “Silver Blaze”

This chapter explores an absence, or more accurately, an erasure. It is an attempt to understand why Chinese art disappeared from an American art discourse in the 1870s. This remains a critical question still, because despite the reemergence of Chinese objects in the art discourse of the 1890s, that almost twenty-year silence has shaped subsequent discussion concerning American art of that time. The significance of Americans’ reluctance to acknowledge the Chinese origin of import ware during this period cannot be seen fully by examining the isolated Chinese object. Rather, such an investigation requires a more oblique look, one capable of incorporating the surrounding political as well as the aesthetic context. Reconstructing the surrounding positive space gives shape to the missing discourse: seeing Chinese material culture through the mediating histories of the earlier decades of commerce between China and the United States, through American attitudes toward Chinese people, and, finally, through the contrasting American reception of Japanese people and things.

The juxtaposition of social/political history with the study of material culture assumes a relationship between politics and art. Connections between

the two have been elaborated throughout the modern period at least as early as 1798, when William Blake wrote: "The Foundation of Empire is Art and Science. Remove them or Degrade them and the Empire is No more. Empire follows Art and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose."¹ Blake's statement asserts a relationship that is familiar to us from the Modernist relation of art to politics; art as an "avant-garde," anticipating and leading social and political change by breaking from societal authority as well as from artistic tradition.² According to art historian Richard Schiff, modernist artists "assume the role of revolutionaries either by introducing change, returning to values long lost . . . or representing truths in personalized, perhaps deviant, expressive form."³ In the mid- and late nineteenth century, the use of Japanese motifs often signaled Western artists' membership in progressive, innovative art movements. For instance, in 1880 New York art critic Clarence Cook spoke derisively of previous American artists who "blindly" accepted English standards and conventions, compared to the current "reclaiming of artistic freedom." For Cook, this revived "freedom" derived in large part from the discovery of the "far more artistic art of the Japanese with freedom and naturalness equally its characteristics."⁴ Was there a relationship between innovative nineteenth-century art and political advancement? Did this proto-avant-garde art equally signal and promote social change?

And why, then, was there an emphasis on Japanese objects only, and not also on the Chinese things that were also present in the country at the same time? What associations connected Japanese art with freedom that did not apply similarly to the alternatives offered by Chinese art, which would be equally available for scrutiny? After all, Chinese objects had a long history in the United States. They were admired and collected in the colonies in the seventeenth century and exhibited in Salem in 1799; before 1850 two museums were created exclusively for Chinese objects.⁵ The types of objects imported ranged from decorative doodads to exquisitely crafted furniture and vases. While consumable items formed the bulk of Chinese exports to America—silks and tea were the main exports—ivories, fans, clothing, and porcelains were also exported in great quantities. A smaller component of the trade were specialty items such as paintings and furniture and wallpaper, generally of excellent craftsmanship.⁶ But in the 1870s, when Americans first began to discuss Asian objects as fine art, they focused almost exclusively on Japanese objects.

As Arjun Appadurai points out, "Commodities represent very complex social forms and distributions of knowledge."⁷ Objects are seen in this book to be more than singular things; they are understood as social signs. Each object can be seen as a nexus of encounters, a focal point for societal values. The desirability and significance of Chinese and Japanese objects derived from their social meaning and the social relationships they promised. This

chapter looks at these meanings and how they attached to the objects; it examines what associations Americans were buying when they purchased Chinese or Japanese art.

The chapter extends the investigation of objects into a study of the social networks constellating around them. In doing so, it reframes the relationship between art and politics, encountering more complexity than the general assumption of a politically precocious artistic avant-garde. This investigation of the disappearance of Chinese art from America's art historical canon mandates the need for another look at *how* the art world functions as an instigator, or even a barometer, of social change.⁸ If indeed art is such an indicator, this study suggests that the social change augured by the art might not always be one we hope to find.

The earlier decades in the century are critical in informing both the art and politics of the later decades. Consequently, the investigation of the decades from 1800 to 1870 serve as introduction to the later period and as an investigation in its own right. The second section concentrates on a smaller time period, from 1870 to the Centennial Exposition in 1876. While American relationships to Chinese art and people differ significantly throughout the century, nevertheless both periods were characterized by resistance to accepting Chinese objects or imagery as art.

SECTION I. THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

1. The Presence of Chinese Objects in the United States

By the 1870s and increasing through the last two decades of the century, collecting and imitating Japanese art was an enthusiasm shared by all classes, and promoted heavily by the print media.

Chinese objects excited no comparable response, although they were equally available and affordable.⁹ Because most American art historians do not perceive the presence, even omnipresence, of Chinese objects, they perpetuate a history in which Japanese art presents a sudden revelation of aesthetic possibilities. Historians have meticulously documented and interpreted America's overwhelming enthusiasm for Japanese objects in the early 1870s that continued through the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ This concentration on Japanese art exclusively interprets the excitement over Japanese objects as an immediate—and unmediated—appreciation of Japanese aesthetics, without prior foundation.

For instance, William Hosley's perceptive analysis of the Japanese display at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876 interprets the Japanese government's approach to its bazaar as both a commercial and a political enterprise. Hosley reports that the Japanese government viewed the Fair

as an international trade competition, and he identifies the strategies used to enhance Japanese sales.¹¹ A key factor in marketing and sales was the Japanese government's stipulation that a consortium of its own merchants, rather than foreigners, select the merchandise; further, its expenditure of \$600,000 on its exhibition, was more than twice the investment of any other foreign country, and more than the expenditures of Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany combined.¹² Japan's investment strategies proved profitable; all its exhibited items sold. Given Hosley's subtle analysis of the business acumen involved in merchandising the Japanese objects, it is then surprising that, like other historians, he too, attributes the impact of the Japanese style completely to its freshness to Western eyes. In Hosley's words:

With the West anxious to enlarge its vocabulary of naturalistic ornament, Japanese art was a revelation that provided a new visual language of birds, animals, sea creatures, and flowers. Monkeys and dragons, cranes and chickens, elephants and eagles, chrysanthemums and cherry blossoms; these are just a few of the motifs that Americans discovered at the Japanese display.¹³

Yet some of these motifs had already appeared in familiar Chinese objects, which also were displayed at the fair.¹⁴ But although few Americans could differentiate between Chinese and Japanese art, comparatively little mention was made of "Chinese" objects journal articles. Not until the last decade of the century did Chinese objects receive the high artistic regard earlier ascribed to Japanese objects, and secure a place of pride within newly created American art museums. And then, unlike Japonisme, they rarely entered into popular awareness of art, but were discussed mainly by Chinese experts and connoisseurs.

The absence of a vernacular appreciation of Chinese objects paralleling Japonisme does not denote their lack of consequence in nineteenth-century American culture. On the contrary, the question why the mania embraced only Japanese things, rather than including Chinese things as well, indicates that these objects resonated with political and cultural concerns.

Most Americans today do not realize how eagerly the United States anticipated the American–China trade, as a source for individual wealth and, perhaps just as much the expectation of material profits, as an international gesture to verify America's independence and nationhood. While a British colony and subject to the monopoly rights of the East India Company, American speculators rankled at England's prohibition of their trade with China, believing that it might be a pathway toward enormous wealth. Within a year of signing the Treaty of Paris, acknowledging the United States as an

independent nation, Americans quickly inaugurated direct China trading, launching their first trade ship, the *Empress of China*, with raw goods from America to trade for manufactured goods in Canton.¹⁵

As early as 1765, Americans brought soybeans from China for cultivation with the anticipation of further trade, and ginseng grown in the United States became the first market export traded to China.¹⁶ Furs and Spanish silver dollars supplemented American exports. Contemporary shipping records report that Americans received in exchange:

tea along with textiles, porcelain, furniture, and fireworks. . . . mandarin heads, umbrellas, ciphered fans, flower seeds, bamboo wash-stands, sweetmeats, tea waiters, boxes of paints, ivorywork caskets, sugar, cassia, clay images, paper hangings, furniture, satin, lacquerware, bamboo blinds, floor mats, fans, and whangee canes.¹⁷

Subsequently, the U.S. government created special tariffs and duties designed to favor China traders.¹⁸

The ready availability of Chinese goods by midcentury for consumption by moderate income households is borne out by advertisements found in broadsides and in newspapers announcing the presence of Chinese merchants and merchandise. (See fig. 1.1) One such advertisement appeared in the *New York Times*, Friday, December 8, 1854, under the title CHINA TEA STORE:

I, TSUNG ZEQUAY, issue my proclamation to the inhabitants of the city of Brooklyn, situated on the beautiful bay of New York, on whose waters sail the great ships bringing the produce of far off lands, that I, TSUNG ZE-QUAY having left my kindred and my nation, and having been led to your goodly land, proclaim my design of offering for sale the products of the Celestial Empire. I have with me much Tea, Coffee, Cocoa, Chocolate, &c. of the choicest gatherings which I will give you for your smallest pieces of gold and silver; and may health, joy and length of day attend you. All you who want the finest, choicest flavored Teas, come to me, and you shall have the purest that China can produce. Also, a beautiful assortment of Lacquer-ware work tables, Lacquer-ware centre tables, Lacquer-ware work boxes, Lacquer-ware Tea-Caddies, Lacquer-ware checkerboards, Lacquer-ware writing desks, flower Vases of every size & elegance, Chinese Pipes for tobacco, Chinese Pipes for Opium, Flowered Fans, Sandal wood Fans, Sandal wood Boxes, Chinese Lanterns, Ornamental Stone figures, Fairies & Toys, Stuffed Birds, Ivory Fans, Pomatum Jars, Buddhist Rosaries, Chinese Shawls,

Teapots, Teacups, Chinese chop-sticks, Wrought silver bracelets, Feather Fans ALL FROM CHINA!—My place of traffic is at the corner of Schermerhorn and Court Sts., Brooklyn.¹⁹

And, twenty-two years before that, in New York, an auction was held consisting entirely of hundreds of fans from Canton, listed as:

500 Palm Leaf Fans, 500 painted Silk fans, 500 embroidered do do, 500 Rice fans [?pith paper], 600 cut and painted bone fans {?ivory}. 400 imitation sandal wood Fans, 400 do do do painted, 100 real camphor wood do, 500 palm leaf Fans, ivory mounted . . .²⁰

Estimating the vast numbers of goods imported during those years, in his dissertation Thomas Schlotterback referred to it as a “flood” and

CHINA TEA STORE —I, TSUNG ZE-QUAY, is-
 cause my proclamation to the inhabitants of the city of
BROOKLYN, situated on the beautiful Bay of New York,
 on whose waters sail the great ships bringing the pro-
 duce of far-off lands, that I, **TSUNG ZE-QUAY**, having
 left my kindred and my nation, and been led to your good-
 ly land, proclaim my design of offering for sale the products
 of the Celestial Empire. I have with me much Tea, Cof-
 fee, Cocoa, Chocolate, &c., of the choicest gatherings,
 which I will give you for your smallest pieces of gold and
 silver; and may health, joy and length of days attend you.
 All you who want the finest, choicest flavored Teas, come
 to me, and you shall have the purest that China can pro-
 duce. Also, a beautiful assortment of

Lacquer-ware Work-tables,	Sandal-wood Boxes,
Lacquer-ware Centre tables,	Chinese Lanterns,
Lacquer-ware Work-boxes,	Ornamental Stone Figures,
Lacquer-ware Tea-Cuddies,	Faries and Toys,
Lacquer-ware Checker-boards,	Stuffed Birds,
Lacquer ware Writing-desks,	Ivory Fans,
Flower Vases of every size and elegance,	Pomatum Jars,
Chinese Pipes for Tobacco,	Budhist Rosaries,
Chinese Pipes for Opium,	Chinese Shawls, Teapots, Teacups,
Flowered Fans,	Chinese Chop-sticks,
Sandal-wood Fans,	Wrought Silver Bracelets,
	Feather Fans.

ALL FROM CHINA! —My place of traffic is at the corner of Schermerhorn and Court-sts., Brooklyn.

Fig. 1.1. *New York Times*, December 8, 1854, CHINA TEA STORE.

speaking just of chinaware, stated that “it is possible to conjecture that during the first half of the nineteenth century several hundred, perhaps even thousands, of tons of chinaware were brought into America.”²¹ Because of their participation in the China trade, by 1800 citizens of Salam had the highest per capita income in the country.²²

2. *Opium, Politics, and American Perceptions of the Chinese*

Chinese people had an initially affirmative relationship with the United States.²³ The predominant American view of China in the eighteenth century had been laudatory. With its agricultural economy, and its question of how to feed a large nation, America admired, indeed was envious, of China’s agronomic management, capable of sustaining a population of awesome proportions. A representative positive description is found in the *New Haven Gazette* on June 21, 1787, synopsizing or, more accurately, plagiarizing a French author:

Turn your eyes, to the eastern extremity of the Asiatic continent inhabited by the Chinese, and there you will conceive a ravishing idea of the happiness the world might enjoy, were the laws of this empire the model of other countries. This great nation unites under the shade of agriculture, founded on liberty and reason, all the advantages possessed by whatever nation, civilized or savage. The blessing pronounced on man, at the moment of his creation, seems not to have had its full effect, but in favour of this people, who have multiplied as the sands on the shore. Princes, who rule over nations! arbiters of their fate! view well this perspective: it is worthy your attention. Would you wish abundance to flourish in your dominions, would you favor population, and make your people happy; behold those innumerable multitudes which cover the territories of China, who leave not a shred of ground uncultivated; it is liberty, it is their undisturbed right of property that has established a cultivation so flourishing, under the auspices of which this people have increased as the grains which cover their fields.²⁴

And the scant information Americans had about China served them better than a tabula rasa, providing a (mythic) ideal of a proto-democracy in China. An article in *North American Review* is typical in its admiration, commending the Chinese form of government especially for its system of examinations which it compared to American democracy.²⁵ Such favorable comparisons of American and Chinese governments had antecedents in America’s early nationhood and were perceived by other countries as well.

In the late 1700s, the merchant Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest (1739–1801) published a book in Dutch; his dedication to George Washington equated the Chinese government “that makes its Chief the Father of the National Family” with the American government “in which everything bespeaks the love of the First Magistrate for the People.”²⁶ In 1852, California’s Governor John McDougal praised Chinese immigrants; addressing the California legislature, he called the Chinese: “one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens.”²⁷

Yet by 1882 the U.S. federal government enacted the Chinese Exclusion Law, effectively banning Chinese from immigrating to the United States and refusing naturalization to those who had already immigrated here. What accounted for this extreme shift?

Throughout the eighteenth century Americans had admired the Chinese and had been eager to engage in trade, but because of trade disagreements in the last decade of that century, two cultures saw a change in this cordiality. In the late eighteenth century a negative portrayal of Chinese people was first constructed; disapproving comments began to appear as early as 1786: Americans directly involved in the China Trade were among the first to malign the Chinese, followed shortly by diplomats.²⁸ The first American appointed as consul general to China, Boston merchant Samuel Shaw, previously the supercargo on the *Empress of China* (an executive position responsible for the sale and purchase of cargo on board a ship), was among the earliest Americans to denigrate the Chinese, and he readily acknowledged his opinion as a radical departure from previous views: “Notwithstanding the encomiums which are generally bestowed on the excellence of the Chinese government, it may, perhaps, be questioned, whether there is a more oppressive one to be found in any civilized nation upon earth.”²⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century the two nations had rapidly reached a relationship best characterized as mutual disdain.³⁰ According to Jean McClure Mudge, “Both nations met mainly for trade, with the aggressiveness of the Americans only increasing the restraint of the Chinese. Commerce was carried on in an atmosphere of suspicion and contempt.”³¹

Prefiguring remarks that would become widespread in the last third of the century, in 1827, M. Malte-Brun’s *Universal Geography, or a Description of All the Parts of the World on a New Plan, According to the Great Natural Division of the Globe . . .*, published in Philadelphia, described the Chinese as “a set of subjugated and disciplined barbarians. Seldom do they lay aside the humble insinuating air of a slave anxious to please.” His critique included castigating the Chinese language as: “composed of monosyllables, and scarcely contains 350 terms which a European can distinguish from one another . . . perpetuates that eternal infantine imbecility of intellect

by which the Chinese are degraded, and almost rendered inferior to nations immersed in the savage state.”³²

But behind the negativity was the friction over the trade of opium that eventually exploding as the Opium War (1839–1842). Although Miller does not attribute the change of attitude entirely to this commerce, nevertheless his chronology suggests that American opinion changed initially and was voiced loudest by Americans who probably trafficked in opium.³³ Orientalist Edward D. Graham traces the beginning of America’s involvement in selling opium to a small shipment in 1805, which proved so lucrative that opium sales rapidly increased, in the next few decades becoming one of the most important of American trades. Graham writes that “so far as the American merchant community was concerned opium had become a part of the commercial landscape by the 1820’s.”³⁴ A large number of American merchants covertly added to their fortunes by flaunting their disdain for Chinese legislation, joining the British in forcing opium into China. In *Philadelphia and the China Trade*, Jonathan Goldstein cites profits derived from opium: “In the single season of 1837–38, foreign opium sales in China reached a record high of 28,307 chests worth \$19.8 million.” In 1848, Western traders imported about 50,000 chests of opium, increasing to 85,000 by 1860, all in violation of Chinese law.

Yet the illegality of the trade in China and the disapproval that pushing drugs occasioned in America led the American merchants to obscure the realities of their activities for the American public. At the same time that American merchants were trading opium and describing it as a “legitimate business,” without censure from the American government, the majority of American people believed that U.S. merchants remained uninvolved and were not complicit in the illegal traffic.³⁶ In fact, many Americans imagined a special relationship between the United States and China, in part based on the erroneous assumption that China preferred Americans to all other Westerners since they had taken a moral stand against the Opium trade!³⁷

In the wake of the Opium War, by 1839 as public awareness of their involvement grew, American opium traders tried to vindicate themselves, fabricating various fictional histories. To disguise American complicity, traders publicly insinuated their lack of participation in dealing opium (the 1840 *Democratic Review* is one of the journals whose coverage of the opium problem never mentioned America’s involvement). Simultaneously, they shifted the blame for the opium problem onto the Chinese, contending that China was at fault for tolerating a trade which Britain, less guilty, merely supplied.³⁸ American statesmen also reinvented events to shift culpability. Edmund Roberts was a merchant/trader who became part of the American embassy of 1832 and was considered quite successful by Americans, negotiating lower

duties in Bangkok and influencing Bangkok policies almost to the point of legalizing opium. His journal of his Asian tour scathingly criticized China's politics, religion, and customs:

The Chinese of the present day are grossly superstitious. . . . In their habits, they are most depraved and vicious: gambling is universal and is carried to a most ruinous and criminal extent; they use pernicious drugs as well as the most intoxicating liquors . . . ; they are also gross gluttons; everything that runs, walks, creeps or flies or swims . . . and articles most disgusting to other people, are by them greedily devoured. The government has a code of laws, written in blood; the most horrid tortures are used to force confessions and the judges are noted for being grossly corrupt; the variety and ingenuity displayed in prolonging the tortures of miserable criminals . . . can only be conceived by a people refined in cruelty, blood-thirsty and inhuman."³⁹

Even dignitaries such as former President John Quincy Adams sanctioned the merchants' opinions and blamed the war on China. In 1842, *Niles's* newspaper printed Adams's remarks, declaring "The cause of the war is the Ko-tou!—the arrogant and insupportable pretensions of China, that she will hold commercial intercourse with the rest of mankind, not upon terms of equal reciprocity, but upon the insulting and degrading forms of relation between lord and vassal."⁴⁰

As the United States steadily increased its economic, mercantile, and military capacities, realizing its idea of progress, it had correspondingly begun to judge the worth of other countries exclusively by American goals and standards. Kevin Walsh describes that Americans saw themselves as participants in a modern world of "rational advancement through increments of perpetual improvement."⁴¹ America's expansionist policy of Manifest Destiny clashed with the Chinese policy of isolation, and journal articles reflected and helped manufacture a new, negative portrayal of the Chinese. China's worth and integrity diminished in American eyes as chauvinism increased.

Even as long as two decades after the end of the Opium War, some Americans still argued for the trade's renewal. An article by Emanuel Weiss titled "Hints as to the Development of our California-China Trade," appeared in *Hunt's* magazine in 1862. It did not hint at but explicitly advocated opium dealing:

One-third of the Chinese export goes to the United States. Why should the citizens of this country not plant this much in opium on the Pacific shores, as long as the article sells, and sells well—

better than our cotton ever did in its best days? This cultivation is monopolized not only by the British, but also by the Dutch and Spanish colonial authorities in India. Much has been said by our Anglo-phobic and Puritan press of the immorality of this trade, yet it has been studiously ignored that our Boston houses in the Chinese ports indulge as largely in this contraband trade as their rivals, the English and Parsee.⁴²

The end of the Opium Wars did not improve the American circulation of negative imagery of Chinese people. In fact, new dimensions were added to the negative portrayal by religious Americans' frustration at Chinese people's reluctance to undergo Christian conversion.

Prior to 1840 only twenty Protestants missionaries were allowed to proselytize in China, but agreements made at the end of the Opium War allowed Americans to immediately double that number, with an increase every year thereafter. American trade ships gave missionaries free passage. This aggressively ambitious group became instrumental in disseminating a negative view of Chinese people. Miller explains how the missionaries enlarged tales of Chinese villainy for their own didactic purposes: in their attempts to persuade Americans to be against China some even construed the entire culture as a creation of Satan. Typical of such diatribes is the opinion voiced by Rev. Maclay, admonishing how immoral behavior was everywhere in China:

Its corrupting and debasing influences pervade all classes of society. . . . Forms of this vice which in other lands skulk in dark places, or appear only in the midnight orgies of the bacchanalian revelers, in China blanch not at the light of noon-day. . . . this lust funds ready access to the precincts of the family, the forum, and the temple.⁴³

Such lurid descriptions of Chinese culture found ready ears in the flush of new religious enthusiasm brought on by a Christian revival movement in America.⁴⁴

The success of these strategies can easily be seen: the once-marginal negative opinion began supplanting the older one: Americans retaining a favorable view of China were now considered traditionalists, while the most inflammatory rhetoric gained greater credibility and appeared more frequently in print. Newspapers such as the *Democratic Review* and the *National Intelligencer* disseminated vicious accounts of Chinese people, stating: "bigoted, intolerant, incommunicative, and selfish, the Chinese have kept apart from the people of the world, have resisted the power of civilization spreading itself so effectively through all other nations."⁴⁵

3. *The Chinese in the United States*

Immigration from China to the United States began in earnest with the discovery of gold in California in 1848, the main immigration occurring between 1850 and 1880, when the Chinese population in the United States increased from 7,520 to 105,465.⁴⁶ The influx of thousands of Chinese people into the United States provided fuel for those with an anti-Chinese attitude. But the Chinese population was small and localized, and this attitude remained confined to fringe groups.

Due to the labor shortage in the early nineteenth century, the western states needed and appreciated the assistance of skilled Chinese craftspeople: for its first stone buildings, San Francisco imported both the stones and the stonemasons from Guandong.⁴⁷ Chinese labor was part of the grand scheme conceived by several American industrialists, most notably Aaron H. Palmer, to assist construction of a transcontinental railroad across the United States. Palmer envisioned Chinese people as ideally suited for transforming the wild regions of California into cropland, writing, in 1848 that: "No people in all the East are so well adapted for clearing wild lands and raising every species of agricultural product . . . as the Chinese."⁴⁸

American merchants advertised in China, enticingly portraying America as a land of gold and plentiful employment, a land that desired Chinese workers. Yet the three-month sea voyage between China and America was arduous, often deadly. Chinese travelers were confined to the hold below decks, crammed in as cargo, dependent on their own supplies for food and sometimes even for water. The death toll for the Chinese on American ships commonly was 350 to 450 persons per voyage, and reaching as high as 600 persons.⁴⁹

Peter Parker, the US consul in Canton, reported that between January 1, 1851, and January 1, 1852, 14,000 Chinese arrived in California. The following year the number reached 20,025, and throughout the next decade approximated an average of 4,000 immigrants per year.⁵⁰ While the majority of the Chinese worked on the railroads or in the mines, a number of others brought or acquired skills in a wide variety of businesses and professions, becoming merchants, tradesmen, doctors, carpenters, cigar makers, restaurateurs, and farmers.

Only dire circumstances, those directly resulting from the Opium Wars, could prompt so many thousands to leave their homeland for an uncertain future. The wars had devastated China, producing chaos and famine: food shortages and disease resulted in 20 million to 60 million deaths. By 1860 China had become so debilitated that, on its resistance to the British demand for further concessions, it could not prevent Anglo-French troops from burning the Forbidden City's palaces and gardens, destroying the structures they had so recently marveled at and replicated as chinoiserie.

By 1864, 10,000 Chinese men, nicknamed “Crocker’s Pets” by Americans, were recruited by the railroad mogul Chester Crocker. Allegedly, when challenged about the suitability of Chinese men for this purpose, Crocker had responded, “the Chinese built the great wall, didn’t they?”⁵¹ Many of the Chinese workers came as sojourners, not immigrants, planning to return to China after achieving their financial goals.⁵²

As the number of Chinese laborers increased they became viewed as rivals to other laborers, and over time increasingly became a target for aggressive, even violent behavior. Nonetheless, many others maintained their high regard for the Chinese immigrants: in 1852 the governor of California John McDougal responded to the Chinese immigrants’ skill and general civility by recommending land grants to encourage further Chinese immigration and settlement in California.⁵³ For several decades in the mid-century goodwill and antipathy existed simultaneously. An example of this schizophrenia is easily found: in the same year that Governor McDougal commended the Chinese, a California newspaper reported a violent incident against a Chinese man: “An American yesterday attacked a Chinaman, beating him shamefully. The Chinamen in the neighborhood were afraid to interfere and the Americans, of whom there was a large crowd, stood by and saw the poor Chinaman abused.”⁵⁴ As such hostility became more common, leaders of California’s Chinese community began to warn people in China about the increasing hostility in that state, cautioning them not to make the journey.⁵⁵

The violence that began as physical and illegal acts quickly spilled over into areas in which it could be legitimated. Throughout the 1850s and in the decades that followed, the California government increasingly used the legal system in a similarly brutal manner. In *Tea That Burns* Edward Bruce Hall enumerates the legislated atrocities:

Flouting the 1868 Burlingame Treaty, which promised the Chinese civil rights equal to any other foreign residents, local laws were passed to prevent Chinese from owning real estate, attending white schools or even fishing whether commercially or for pleasure. There was even a California law enacted threatening jail for people who slept in a space of less than 800 cubic feet—an obvious attack on the notoriously crowded Chinese neighborhoods. This measure backfired, however, when it was realized not only that tens of thousands of Chinese would have to be incarcerated, but also that the space allotted to them in jail was considerably less than that prescribed by law. Chinese immigrants were baselessly accused of spreading leprosy and bubonic plague. . . . And since Asians did not technically fall into the categories of “white persons, Africans, or those of African descent” specified by the 14th Amendment

to the Constitution, Chinese people were denied naturalization. Since they couldn't become citizens, they couldn't vote. Since they couldn't vote, politicians ignored them.⁵⁶

From 1852 to 1870, the list of legalized infringements of Chinese rights in California escalated in quantity and in intensity, including:

1850 (1853, 1853, 1855) The foreign Miners Tax was initially enacted to force forcing Chinese out of the mines.

1852 The Columbia District Mining Regulations prohibited Asians from mining.

1852 The Bond Act required all arriving Chinese to post a \$500 bond.

1854 A California Supreme Court Decision decreed Chinese ineligible to testify in court against whites.

1860 The Fishing Tax restricted Chinese access to fishing.

1870 The Act to Prevent Kidnapping and Importing of Mongolian, Chinese and Japanese Females for Criminal Purposes prevented the entry of Chinese women into the United States without a special certificate.

1870 The Act to Prevent Importing of Chinese Criminals prohibited entry of Chinese males without proof of good character.⁵⁷

Newspapers added their own form of hostility. Finding that disseminating "humorously" derogative stories of Chinese people bolstered their sales, they published sensationalized stories alleging to reveal Chinese life in America. A typical example: in 1852, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, published in New York, printed an article by P. B. Doesticks titled "Among the China-men." Purporting to be a factual account of his visit to China Lodging House, Number 61 Cherry Street, in New York, Doesticks's bias was never far from the surface, beginning with his opening sentences: "Where do the Celestials roost? Do they hang themselves up by their unctuous pigtailed; do they roll themselves into balls to sleep; as they do in the streets to beg; or do they make unto themselves beds, like respectable human animals, wherein they slumber in like fashion with other men?" He ended the article with an inevitable account of the opium smoke.⁵⁸

Western aggression intensified against the Chinese in China as well. After the renewal of the 1858 Treaty of Peking (the Sino-American Treaty of Tientsin, aka the Burlingame Treaty), Raphael Pumpelly (1837–1923), a geologist who traveled extensively throughout Asia, described how he witnessed Western ships deliberately mowing down Chinese junks, and the parallel practice of some Western pedestrians in China striking Chinese in their path with walking sticks.⁵⁹

4. *Americans Assess China's Artistic Ability*

The hostilities between China and the West threatened the China trade, while at the same time the previous century's delight with Chinese art and philosophy gave way to derision. This connection, however, went unnoticed. Rather than attribute the changes in esteem of Chinese culture to their own frustration in commerce, Westerners transferred accountability, claiming that their changed regard stemmed from new information about the Chinese personality. A member of an unsuccessful British trade embassy to China belittled the Chinese, alleging: "[what] was not *then* so generally known as *now* . . . the proneness to falsehood, the duplicity and knavery of the Chinese."⁶⁰

Not surprisingly, the same people instrumental in disparaging the Chinese people also were the first to disparage the art. In his survey of the writings of American traders on Chinese art the early 1800s, A. Owen Aldridge concludes that, in concert with their negative opinions on the Chinese people, many Americans actively involved in the Chinese trade equally disdained Chinese art.⁶¹

Robert Waln Jr., supercargo on the *Caledonia* in 1819–1820, ridiculed Chinese artists with what was to become the archetypal complaint. "The Chinese are excellent copyists," he wrote, "but possess little or no inventive faculties."⁶² In an essay of 1823 titled "Painters of Canton," Waln itemized the faults of Chinese art:

Chinese painters offend against every rule of perspective, which, with the effects produced by the proper disposition of light and shade, they affect to consider unnatural. Always taking a horizontal view of their subject, they place themselves alternately in front of the objects, whatever may be their position or extent; thus, in their paintings, houses are placed one on top of another, and the method which they have imagined to express objects at a distance, is to represent clouds intersecting trees, buildings and men. They absurdly contend that it is proper to represent the objects in the back, of the same size as those in the fore ground, because they

are so in nature. . . . Having no idea of demi-tints, or softening shades, or indeed of any shades at all, and no variety of colouring being commonly used, a Chinese landscape appears at first to be a mass of black marks, representing nothing; and a closer examination only discovers the bare outline of an unsuccessful and rude attempt to imitate nature."⁶³

But on what objects did these Americans base their assessment of Chinese artistry? While in earlier centuries European countries had imported chinaware made to European form, the painted designs remained traditional to Chinese decoration. However in the first half of the 1800s, emulating the European fashion, Americans bought their dinnerware from China but instructed Chinese artisans to copy Western motifs and designs.⁶⁴ Consul General Shaw was typical in his commission of a large set of commemorative porcelain. Conforming to the prevailing American aesthetic preference for allegory, he designed a scene incorporating the insignia of Cincinnatus as the central motif.⁶⁵ This motif was quite popular—apparently George Washington purchased 302 pieces of the set⁶⁶ (fig. 1.2). Shaw's design exemplifies the American fashion of combining classical iconography with specifically American motifs. His order was for an "American Cincinnatus, under the conduct of Minerva, regarding Fame, who, having received from them the emblem of the order, was proclaiming it to the world." To familiarize the Chinese artist with this iconography, Shaw provided him with two engravings of the Roman goddess Minerva, a sketch of the figure of the Count d'Estaing to represent the military, and the medal of the order of Cincinnatus: he instructed the artist to duplicate them as an ensemble. But to his dismay, Shaw discovered that the artist "was unable to combine the figures with the least propriety; though there was not one of them which singly he could not copy with greatest exactness."⁶⁷

Shaw's opinion typifies the cultural chauvinism leading most Americans into twofold error in assessing Chinese art. First, as did Shaw, many Americans mistook the export work from China as Chinese art. And then, judging this "Chinese" art by Western standards they, not surprisingly, found it lacking. Shaw's comments replicated a Western view of Chinese art circulating since Matteo Ricci first visited China, stating: "there are many painters in Canton, but I was informed that not one of them possesses a genius for design. . . . It is a general remark, that the Chinese, though they can imitate most of the fine arts, do not possess any large portion of original genius."⁶⁸

Yet not all traders and diplomats disdained Chinese culture. During the first half of the nineteenth century, two Americans separately established museums of Chinese objects, directed toward the American public. Nathan Dunn, a Philadelphia merchant who resided in China for over twelve years,



Fig. 1.2. Soup plate from the Society of Cincinnati china set, used by George Washington. Courtesy of Mount Vernon Ladies' Association.

collected innumerable objects and established the first such museum. Dunn paid the considerable sum of \$20,000 to buy land for a museum site and leased the ground floor of the building constructed there for his Chinese museum. Charles Wilson Peales's more famous museum occupied the next two floors of the same building.⁶⁹ Dunn modeled the building's entrance on a Chinese summerhouse, and placed life-sized mannequins of Chinese people throughout the displays. The collection and its installation are estimated to have cost nearly \$58,000.⁷⁰ Between 1838 and 1850, Dunn traveled his collection, exhibiting the Chinese objects in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. His primary intention was in heightening American recognition of the high quality of Chinese culture.⁷¹ And Americans responded: in Philadelphia alone, the exhibition reportedly attracted 100,000 visitors in three years.⁷²

Within a year of the museum's opening, a catalog had been created to accompany the exhibition. Titled *Ten Thousand Chinese Things: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Chinese Collection in Philadelphia* . . . it sold over 65,000 copies, further disseminating Chinese culture and aesthetics (fig. 1.3). In it,

物 人 唐 萬

"TEN THOUSAND CHINESE THINGS."

A

DESCRIPTIVE CATALOGUE

OF THE

CHINESE COLLECTION,

IN

Philadelphia.

WITH

MISCELLANEOUS REMARKS UPON THE MANNERS, CUSTOMS,
TRADE, AND GOVERNMENT OF THE CELESTIAL EMPIRE.

PHILADELPHIA:

PRINTED FOR THE PROPRIETOR.

1839.

Fig. 1.3. Nathan Dunn Catalog: *Ten Thousand Chinese Things: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Chinese Collection, in Philadelphia . . .* (1839).

descriptions of the objects counterpointed a discourse on Chinese people and politics. While the objects were generally not discussed as art, and in fact the mannequins of Chinese people receive a great share of Dunn's commentary, occasionally an object or motif would be admired and regarded artistically. Floral designs were singled out for their exemplary aesthetics. For instance, apropos of a Chinese screen:

The silk inserted in the panels is as gay as it can be rendered by a profusion of exquisitely executed paintings of the most delicate and magnificent of eastern flowers. The whole view is redolent of the spirit and beauty of spring. The drawings and colouring of the flowers are admirable, and show the perfection which has been attained in these branches of their art by Chinese painters.⁷³

The catalog listed the items contained in the various cases, including elastic pillows of bamboo covered in glazed leather, pewter vessels for wine, bronzed copper hand-furnaces for keeping the fingers warm when walking in cold weather, a curious root resembling a beggar, an enameled vase, grotesque lions, lamps, and much more.⁷⁴

The Dunn collection left Philadelphia after three years, traveling both in America and abroad. After its tenure in London the collection was dismantled and a part of the original collection returned to the United States, acquired by P. T. Barnum in 1850, who integrated the Chinese Museum, as well as an assemblage of Chinese people, purportedly a family, into his American Museum.⁷⁵

During this same period, a second Museum of Chinese things was constructed. John R. Peters had served with the Cushing mission responsible for negotiating the first official agreement between China and the United States—the Treaty of Wang-hsia in 1844. He organized a Chinese museum in Boston filled with the prodigious number of Chinese objects he had collected. Peters arranged his museum's cases didactically; each case intended to illustrate one facet of Chinese life: a particular employment, status, or daily activity. The museum exhibited not only Chinese paintings, decorative arts, and wax Chinese mannequins but also two Chinese homes, complete with two Chinese attendants.⁷⁶ The museum's entryway reproduced a Chinese temple.⁷⁷

After a year of display in Boston, the exhibition traveled to Philadelphia. Like Dunn, Peters had a catalog printed in conjunction with the museum collection, *Miscellaneous Remarks upon the Government, History, Religions, Literature, Agriculture, Arts, Trades, Manners and Customs of the Chinese: As Suggested by an Examination of the Articles Comprising the Chinese Museum in Marlboro' Chapel, Boston* (fig. 1.4).