

## The Figure of the Chinese in European Art

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### **ABSTRACT**

While the discovery of America in 1492 was a cultural and psychological shock for Europe, one that was echoed in Montaigne, the mythical "Cathay" of Asia had always been a part of Western imagination thanks to the Silk Road. The exchange that developed beginning in the seventeenth century established direct contact with this "other," whose difference was both surprising and captivating, and whose representations primarily express an Orient ("The East") dreamt up by Europeans.



The East had fascinated Europe since Antiquity due to its legendary wealth and its mystery accentuated by its remoteness. The merchant Marco Polo established initial direct contact during his fifteen-year stay, and upon his return in 1298 published *The Travels of Marco Polo*, the first work on China written by a Westerner. *The Voyage and Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, a compilation written between 1355 and 1357, instead evoked a fantasy East and marked European minds in equal measure, if not more. This fascinating “Cathay” drove European navigators to find a sea route that was shorter, less costly, and less subject to political contingencies than the land route. Vasco de Gama discovered the passage to India around the Cape of Good Hope in 1498; his account of the wealth of the Indies (spices, precious stones, silk, ivory, etc.) upon his return, along with the riches he brought back from his second voyage in 1504, reinforced the legendary image of a fabled Asia.

In Europe, publications on China increased with the establishment of Jesuits beginning in the sixteenth century (Fathers Ricci, Kircher, Du Halde, Le Comte, etc), and were supplemented by accounts from lay travelers (Johan Nieuhoff, Mendes Pinto, etc.). These works described the political system, customs, life, and daily traditions of the Chinese with greater accuracy and were illustrated by engravings that depicted the inhabitants and architecture of China. Images always left more of an impression than the long written descriptions, with these engravings emerging as the first representations of “the other” who lived on the other side of the planet and provoked astonishment.

These images of Chinese men and women became one of the favoured themes of the more or less fanciful evocations of the East—and China in particular—in seventeenth and eighteenth century Western art. These prints were the product of Western aesthetic codes, along with the more subjective interpretation of European engravers. In addition to these engravings, there was a circulation of china, lacquerware, porcelain and stone statuettes and paintings on paper imported from China and decorated with human figures drawn by artists from the East. These representations generally met with a poor reception among Europeans, due to their treatment which was removed from Western aesthetic canons, in which the human figure remained the most prestigious subject. This was true symbolically, because humans were God’s most developed creation, as well as aesthetically, because the representation of humans demonstrated the artist’s mastery of the complexity of human anatomy and its proportions, with the creations of Antiquity being considered as unsurpassable references and models. This reservation partly explains the use of somewhat condescending terms to designate human figures from the East, such as the word “*magot*” in de Furetière’s *Dictionnaire* published in 1690, which meant both “a large monkey” and the representation of a seated male, or the term “*pagode*,” which designated both an Eastern temple and a standing female figure.

European artists reworked these male and female figures, both sitting and standing, but did so according to Western canons (geometric perspective, proportions, interplay of shadow and light), and presented them as characteristic elements of a pleasant East imagined by Europe, in which the fanciful and marvelous vied with seduction and the picturesque. Artists took inspiration from engravings and displayed great freedom of interpretation, as did François Boucher in the cartoons for his *Tenture chinoise* [Chinese Wall Hanging], which would be woven in Beauvais beginning in 1742. A number of its characters were inspired by the book of engravings from Jan Nieuhoff’s (1625-1683) diplomatic mission to the Emperor of China, which was published in 1666, and by the work by Arnoldus Montanus (1625-1683), which was published in Amsterdam in 1669, and described the diplomatic mission of the Dutch East India Company to...Japan! In reality, the geographical limits of the countries of the East remained vague for Europeans, with its different cultures grouped together under general designations such as “the Indies,” the “East” or “China,” with no real or precise identification.

The figures executed by European artists present the same identifying elements as belonging to the East: Asian eyes, long mustaches and sometimes a goatee for men; a hairstyle with tufts, or a shaved head with a long strand of hair growing from the top of the head; conical hats made of straw or other more or less identifiable materials; long and loose-fitting clothing, full of colour and adorned with rich patterns. Chinese men and women moved

through light and open architecture (pavilions, daises, etc.) with curved roofs embellished with dragons and bells, which artists used unstintingly. Landscapes very often included the indispensable multi-storied pagoda, directly inspired by engravings of the one from Nanjing. It was the marker *par excellence* of Asia, along with jagged rock formations and luxuriant and fanciful vegetation that would make a botanist turn pale with envy. This largely imaginary world was characteristic of the *rocaille* style that developed starting in the mid-eighteenth century, which distanced itself from ancient models as a source of inspiration, with this imagined “China” representing one of the drivers of the creative liberty of the *rocaille* style.

These representations enjoyed tremendous success, for they transported viewers into a magical, dreamlike, and seductive world. They appeared in all mediums of artistic creativity: in architecture, from garden pavilions (Sanssouci in Germany, Drottningholm in Sweden, the pagodas in Kew Gardens in England and in Chanteloup in France, the Chinese redoubt at the Foire Saint-Laurent in Paris) to the Japanese Palace of Augustus the Strong in Dresden; in interiors as part of painted woodwork (Chantilly, Champs-sur-Marne, Turkish cafés on the boulevards of Paris); in sculpture, for instance in the porcelain cabinet at Charlottenburg in Germany, or the Chinese room at Claydon House in England. While rare in monumental sculpture, they enjoyed sudden success in painting, on furniture, and especially on art objects. All techniques were affected, including tapestries, gilt bronze, vases, porcelain sculptures, clocks... This fanciful China also became a preferred theme in celebrations, operas, and masked balls.

The great liberty taken with regard to the originals bears witness to the creativity of European artists, who seized upon this world with the same enthusiasm as their clients. Their pleasant and unbridled vision nevertheless reflected a superficial and primarily decorative—albeit positive—approach to China, and more generally to the East. These works reflected both the curiosity of Europeans and their lack of understanding of this civilization that they saw as both rich and strange, as well as their attempts to grasp such different cultures and human beings, which relativized their certainties. At the same time, philosophers projected their aspirations and fancies onto it, presenting China as an ideal realm, with wise and levelheaded government that stood in opposition to the increasingly criticized monarchical system.

The return to Antiquity as the only reference of good taste which began in the 1760s, gradually diminished the fashion for Chinese inspiration in *décor*. This inspiration met with renewed favour during the second half of the nineteenth century, with the opening of China and Japan to merchants, and particularly with more rigorous and scientific European approaches, which diminished the role of dreams and fancy in the evocation of these countries that were growing increasingly less distant.

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