When I was fourteen I came to London with my father. We were on the way to Cambridge, where I was to investigate the possibility of studying Chinese. I visited the Victoria and Albert Museum for the first time, and there in a large room titled “Far Eastern Art” I was enthralled to see a great carved lacquer seat, labeled “Throne of the Emperor Ch’ien-lung.” While the uniformed warder looked or pretended to look away, I knelt down and put my forehead to the black linoleum in homage.

These are not the tales curators tell. Their role in maintaining objects (in both senses of the word) demands that they suppress such embarrassing personal engagements and secret fetishisms, which threaten to reopen the space between the viewer and the artifact. The throne was there, and the Emperor of China sat on it. Now it is here, and you the visitor view it. Do not ask how it got here, or where it was from 1770 to now; that does not matter. You are here to engage with “China,” not with “Britain,” so do not
ask what the presence of the throne of the emperor of China might tell you about Britain and its narratives about China over the two centuries since the thing was made.

Admission of this bit of adolescent theatricality may undermine my professional identification as a member of the staff of that same museum, entrusted by the British state with the power to place that same “throne,” write about it, and display it. Failure to admit to it, however, to accept the object’s presence in South Kensington as being an untroubling and natural occurrence, which need not touch anyone’s fantasy life today, can only in the end reproduce a stifling identity of self-regard. What follows is a step toward compilation of the inventory that Gramsci saw as necessary, if a consciousness of myself and my colleagues as a product of the historical process to date is to be produced. The dates, deeds, and institutional affiliations of past scholars that I write down here are presented not simply as what happened but rather as an essential part of any critical elaboration of present practice in the production of “Chinese Art” in Britain, in a context where the displays of the major public museums are the principal visible constructions from which a discourse of “Chinese culture” can be derived.

Possessions/Identities

C. B. Macpherson’s work on the political theory of possessive individualism in eighteenth-century England has made familiar the notion that possessions are seen as constitutive of identity within the dominant discourses of political and moral economy in Britain. More recently, the works of Susan Stewart and James Clifford have extended this notion to the position that possessing is also central to the generation and sustaining of the identities of collectivities. This is particularly so in the case of the imagined community of the nation-state. The National Museum acts as a key site of promotion of the existence and validity of the state formation. It does so with particular force in that the discursive practices at the heart of the museum lay claim to scientific objectivity, to a transcendental mimesis of what is “out there.” It thus can act with particular force to validate the claims to sovereignty and independence by proving through displays of archaeology and ethnography the inevitability of the existence of the actually contingent conditions
that give it its very existence. This role of the museum as constitutive of national identity emerges very sharply in historical contexts such as post-Habsburg central Europe, but it is no less well developed in the museums of imperial and postimperial Britain, where the refusal to privilege the presentation of distinctively “British” material (and if anything rather the reverse) within the collections is constitutive of an identity that eschews national definition in favor of a claim of universal hegemony, as a transcendent fixed point which observes all other “cultures.”

The British Museum could never be restricted to British things, for to do so would set a limit to the reach of British power, as well as to the gaze of the all-comprehending and autonomous subject. British museums of the imperial era are a cultural technology of display that form part of what Carol Breckenridge has termed an “imagined ecumene”:

This Victorian ecumene encompassed Great Britain, the United States and India (along with other places) in a discursive space that was global, while nurturing nation-states that were culturally highly specific. One condition for the construction of cultural specificity . . . was a concept of the cultural other, for these new technologies, routines and rituals of rule were frequently developed in relation to this imperialized or imperializing other.3

The British colonial presence in China differed from that in India in duration and intensity, but many of the same practices in the field of culture can be observed, practices constitutive of a “British” identity differentiated not only from the other of Asia but from more immediate colonial rivals such as France and then the United States. However, this type of identity is in no sense a fixed one; it is subject to contestation both from within and without. The works of Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff on the social life of things, and the biography of the object, should have made us sensitive to the proposition that while social situations encode objects with fluctuating meanings, methodologically a close attention to the particulars of the objects will illuminate those very social contexts.4 I would wish here to extend this idea to take in the social life of the collection. They too shift their meaning over time.

In what follows I want to look at some changes in the presentation of material from China in the British Museum and in the Victoria and Albert
Museum in London, two institutions directly patronized and supported by the British state, conscious that the framing of Chinese objects in these institutions conditions their viewing as expressive of discourses of national and imperial identity. The interplay of private and public possession, between individual collectors and public museums that they patronized and supported, and which ultimately came to possess the objects they had amassed, is of particular importance in forming the collections of material out of which representations of “China” and “Chinese art” were manufactured in Britain. The number of men who made a full-time living out of explaining China to Britain at this period was very small but tightly integrated through personal and professional networks, even if formal structures, other than the national museums, were very few. No women formed part of this project before the 1970s. Having told one story that should not be told, I will write further, with intentional ambiguity, about Britain’s possession of the “throne” of China (fig. 1), to which I bowed as a teenager.

Commodities and Works of Art

In eighteenth-century Britain, not only members of the aristocracy and gentry but also those whom Jonathan Swift called “the middling sort” encountered luxury goods from Asia in their daily lives. These included a broad range of goods from China: silk piece goods for clothing and furnishings, tea, and the porcelain vessels necessary for brewing and drinking it, lacquered and hardwood furniture, small-scale carving in a number of materials, and pictures. These goods were available through a network of specialist retailers, called “Chinamen” in London, a considerable number of whom were women. They might employ other women, and a significant portion of their clientele was made up of women, too. Certainly it was an article of faith among male arbiters of taste that the fashion for Asian imported goods was concentrated in two groups rigorously marginalized in elite cultural discourse—namely, the nouveaux riches, grown wealthy on trade rather than by the more socially prestigious route of landholding, and women, whose irrational desire for the hideous products of the East Indies was seen as being matched only by the rapacity and frivolity with which they spent their husbands’ money.
Figure 1 Throne, carved lacquer on a wood core. Made about 1775–1780, taken from the Nan yuan hunting park in 1901. W.399–1922, Swift Gift. Photo courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.
Despite the ease with which Chinese goods found customers, and despite the existence on continental Europe of intellectuals willing to speak with warmth of the supposed virtues of a Confucian empire of the rational, no British intellectual of the period had a good word to say for China, in particular for the aesthetic manifestations of its culture. China was at this time becoming firmly fixed as the "other," the irrationality of its intellectual productions becoming set as the essential counterweight to the enduring canons of quality represented by the art of Greece and Rome. As such it was associated by men at some level with the equally problematic "other" of the female. There is the real possibility that this double marginalization, and the gendering of Asian artifacts in everyday life, was used by at least some women in the period to create a measure of cultural space for themselves that was beyond criticism. What else could the male social critic expect of women than that they would like Chinese things? Significantly, they could act freely as consumers, but were not allowed to go the further stage of creating a publicly visible discourse about "Chinese art." Like many women, Lady Dorothea Banks built up a large collection of Chinese ceramics, but it was her husband, not she herself, who categorized and ordered it in a handwritten catalog of 1807. By the time of major museum formation in the middle nineteenth century, a masculinist gendered understanding of collecting separated the "scientific" activities of taxonomy and categorization from the realm of mere accumulation.

Such notice as was given in Britain to the concept of Chinese art was universally derogatory. To be more precise, the notion of Chinese art was an oxymoron, since the Western hierarchy of media put painting at the top, with representations of the human form at the highest point therein. The "fine arts" of painting and sculpture, as opposed to the "mechanical arts," were universally believed to be extinct among the Chinese. Almost no Chinese painting for the domestic, as opposed to export, market left for Europe or America before the end of the nineteenth century. John Barrow, writing in 1804, can be taken as indicative of widely held views:

With regard to painting, they can be considered in no other light than as miserable daubers, being unable to pencil out a correct outline of many objects, to give body to the same by the application of proper lights and
shadows, and to lay on the nice shades of colour, so as to resemble the tints of nature.9

In general the creation of goods for the export market was taken, by the nineteenth century, not as a sign of entrepreneurial flexibility but as a sign of a culture hopelessly decayed and static, one with a vaunted (though unsubstantiated) aura of past greatness, but with no present and no future. This “inability to represent” on the part of Chinese artists swelled as a theme in the decades leading up to the first British imperial assault on the Chinese state in 1840.

The Institutional Framing of “Chinese Art” in Britain

This preamble may seem of doubtful relevance. However, it is impossible to discuss the creation of the broader category of Chinese art in Europe and America over the past hundred years without first accepting the existence of a discourse (and a gendered discourse) of China that has its primary locus in the context of domestic consumption, since it is against, or by contrast with, what is done in the home that so much of what happens in the institutional context of museums and of the academy is defined. This is particularly striking in the case of objects of luxury consumption for the Chinese domestic market redirected by the museum and put under the category “decorative arts”: chairs, items of clothing, ceramic wine jars, and personal religious images, to take a few random examples. Chinese elite categorizations of art, as expressed in texts, as well as in the practices of the art and craft markets, excluded much of the Chinese material subsequently displayed in the museum context in Britain. (This is not to say that fissures on gender, class, and ethnic lines within the Qing polity did not exist over this issue of definition.)

Indeed “art” is not a category in the sense of a preexistent container filled with different contents as history progresses. Rather, it is a way of categorizing, a manner of making knowledge, that has been applied to a wider and wider set of manifestations of material culture, paralleling the constant expansion of an “art market” that is applied to a wider and wider range of commodities. It remains a site of conflicting interpretations, fissured on
class and gender lines, among others, and the right to define something as “art” is typically seen as an important attribute of those dominant in society at a given moment.

Crucial to this way of categorizing in European museum and academic practice is the strategy whereby notions of function must largely be removed from the objects of the exercise. In order to be an object of “decorative art” a cup must no longer be drunk from, and questions of how it would be drunk from have to be occluded. Thrones must no longer be bowed down to. Michael Podro has shown how what he calls “the disregard of function” was consciously conceived by nineteenth-century German theorists such as Karl Schnaase as a programmatic part of the creation of “art history.” Schnaase saw any concern with function as making for a lack of the disengagement necessary to appreciate true artistic import, an import which is inextricably formed from the work of art’s “modifying its antecedents and as carrying intimations of its successors” (or what we would more insidiously call just “stylistic change”). This privileges the diachronic over the synchronic, and leads naturally to the situation in which talk of “influences” and “trends” supplants a notion of links from given objects horizontally toward the total assemblage of objects present in a specific social and historical context. Objects transferred from the domain of “ethnography” to that of “art” typically find diachronic links privileged at the expense of connections with others that have failed to make the transition.

But narrative art history, which from its origins in the German-speaking world was translated into the Anglo-Saxon one in the later nineteenth century, is only one interpretive framework into which the things made in China have been construed in Europe and America. Despite its role as the dominant paradigm in the United States today, it is arguable whether narrative art history has ever actually taken root in Britain at all. Another framework of representation has historically flourished here, one with an equal power of generating discourse, though this time originating in the study of the natural world — the framework of taxonomy. In the later nineteenth century, most particularly in Britain, taxonomy exercised a powerful hegemony over the ordering of manmade products as well as over those of nature. It is the program of a universal taxonomy of the “industrial arts” that formed the explicit project of the South Kensington Museum, known
after 1897 as the Victoria and Albert Museum. In 1863 (immediately after the Second Opium War against China) the Lords of the Committee of the Council on Education had stated “that the aim of the Museum is to make the historical and geographical series of all decorative art complete, and fully to illustrate human taste and ingenuity.” The aim of completeness was qualified by the exclusion from the South Kensington collections of the material culture of those peoples, dubbed “primitive,” who had neither art nor history. They were consigned to the historic present of ethnography collections, represented in 1863 primarily by the British Museum but later in the century by collections such as those of the Horniman Museum in London and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

As the dominant institutions in defining not simply Chinese culture in Britain, but in defining to an extent what could be thought of as “culture” at all, it is necessary to talk in some more detail about the evolution of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum, and of the Chinese collections within them. One problem immediately presents itself: What is the Victoria and Albert Museum a museum of? Its various historic titles singularly fail to announce its contents, though it has in my brief curatorial career been variously subtitled for marketing purposes as “the nation’s attic,” “Britain’s national museum of art and design,” and “the world’s greatest museum of decorative arts.” The refusal to announce itself is surely indicative of the institution’s totalizing claims for a taxonomic universality over which the monarch, symbol of the British imperial state, holds sway. What, then, is the British Museum a museum of? Again the title significantly gives us no clue, while transparently (even naively) telling us that it is a Museum of Britain, where Britain is displayed to itself and the world. Both institutions have since their inception (and in the case of the British Museum, that is well back in the eighteenth century) included Chinese objects in their collections, and the administrative arrangements they have made for them, as well as the contexts and combinations in which they have presented them to the public, have done much to form a current discourse of “Chinese art.”

It is very hard to research the history of a museum. The point of a museum is that it has no history, but represents the objects it contains transparently, in an unmediated form. In James Clifford’s paraphrase of the idea
of Susan Stewart, “the making of meaning in museum classification and display is mystified as adequate representation. The time and order of the collection erase the concrete social labour of its making.” It is even harder to create a history of the display of Chinese material in British museums, since very little descriptive or pictorial information exists as to what was shown where or when, what juxtapositions (almost the most powerful creators of meaning in display) were made, which objects were privileged by particularly prominent positioning, and what was said about them on labels. This is more than an accident, or a piece of forgetfulness on the part of my predecessors. The museum cannot allow itself to document its own frequently changing display arrangements, since then it will have a history, and if it becomes a historical object in its own right, then it can be investigated, challenged, opposed, or contradicted. Much of what we have (and that often only patchily and in no coherent form) in place of a history of representations through display is a history of representations through essentially administrative arrangements, which make extremely dry reading, but which at least give us some way of coming to grips with the rhetoric of stable, unchanging truth and getting a glimpse of the contingency and historical concreteness of the arrangements into which objects have been placed. For there have in fact been many changes in the contexts and categories into which Chinese artifacts have been inserted in Britain. Only some of these contexts have involved a deployment of the notion of Chinese art, but all have operated with the notion of an integral Chinese culture, for which certain types of luxury artifact, mediated through the international art market and categorized by British individual and institutional collectors, were a satisfactory synecdoche.

Chinese objects came to the British Museum in the founding bequest of Sir Hans Sloane in 1753, and appear at first to have been included under the rubric of ethnography. That this was felt to be in some sense inadequate by the mid–nineteenth century is shown by the complaint in David Masson’s *The British Museum, Historical and Descriptive* (1850) that works of China and Japan were crammed into “five paltry cases” among a “collection of articles illustrative of the manners and customs of nations lying at a distance from our own, as well as of rude ancient races.” Masson argued that there should be distinct rooms for the antiquities of China,
India, and Japan, which should be separated from those of more primitive peoples.

In constructing the Chinese holdings of the British Museum as "antiquities," Masson is drawing on a venerable European tradition of the study of material objects as essentially historical evidence, supplementary to the written record, which had developed since the fourteenth century with regard to ancient Greek and Roman civilization. Since 1807 the British Museum had included a Department of Antiquities, restricted in scope to the products of the West. It could encompass objects deemed to be of high aesthetic value (like Roman portrait sculpture), as well as more humble objects, as, for example, simple pottery oil lamps, which might aid an understanding of an obscure joke in the writing of a Roman comedian. Aesthetics as such did not play the decisive role in the decision as to whether to include an item in the collections. It was rather as evidence of "culture" that objects were collected.22

In 1860 there were formed out of the Department of Antiquities three new departments:23 Oriental Antiquities (including the prehistoric British, Western Medieval, and ethnographic/Asian collections), Coins and Medals, and Greek and Roman Antiquities. The year marked a new degree of advance for British imperialism in East Asia, being the one in which Britain invaded north China and sacked the Summer Palace, an action that was to have a major effect on the flow of high-quality artifacts to British private and public collections. In 1866 Oriental Antiquities became a department devoted to Egypt and Assyria, while the Chinese material (together with the bulk of the ethnographic collections) remained part of the new Department of British and Medieval Antiquities, headed by Sir Augustus Franks (1826–1897).24

In 1921 the ceramic and ethnographic collections (in which China by now bulked very large) were formed into a Department of Ceramics and Ethnography for Robert Lockhart Hobson (1872–1941).25 In 1933 Hobson, "the world's leading authority on Chinese ceramics," who had joined the British Museum as far back as 1897, became head of a newly created Department of Oriental Antiquities and Ethnography, with "the Orient" now having moved decisively further east to include only the Islamic world, India, and East Asia. Hobson remained in post until 1938, and his
department also included for the first time all Asian pictorial collections, transferred from the Subdepartment of Oriental Prints and Drawings, which had been founded in 1913 to support the personal interests of Laurence Binyon (1869–1943). This ended the separate and privileged status of Chinese painting in the British Museum (discussed below), as Binyon’s most famous acquisition in the field of Chinese painting, the Gu Kaizhi *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* scroll found itself recategorized as an “antiquity.” Finally in 1946 ethnography was trimmed off to create the Department of Oriental Antiquities, which exists today (though Japan was hived off in 1986 into a separate Department of Japanese Antiquities).

There was clear privileging of Chinese and Japanese pictorial works throughout the nineteenth century, though this owed more to Western notions of the hierarchy of the arts than it did to any recognition of their equal prominence in any scheme of things to be found in China. The fact that they were a “higher” art form is shown by their inclusion in the collections of the Department of Prints and Drawings (formed out of the Department of Antiquities as far back as 1836), where they were collected and curated on a par with European material.

This is a significant point. At a time when Chinese ceramics were still, at least administratively, the same thing as canoes and weapons, a Hiroshige print was the same as a Rembrandt print. A picture could not, by definition, be simply an antiquity, a piece of historical evidence, but it was of necessity part of the realm of (fine) art. A Chinese picture could be bad art, failed art, but it could not cease to be art at this point. Note however that there was no question of including Chinese painting with Western painting in the National Gallery, and it remained alongside items (prints) that occupied a subsidiary, if still honored, ranking in the Western canon. However, the relative privileging of pictures is also shown by the fact that the Japanese and Chinese paintings were the first part of the British Museum collection other than books to have a published catalog. This appeared in 1886, and was written not by a member of the museum’s staff but by the Scottish surgeon William Anderson (1842–1900), who had sold to the museum the large collection of Japanese paintings he had amassed in Japan between 1873 and 1880. The collection had been augmented by many gifts of Chinese painting from Augustus Franks, who though an official of the museum...
also functioned as a wealthy private collector, often buying objects for the collections with his own money (he was a major donor of the British Museum’s Chinese ceramics). Thus we see a situation in which private initiative, as much as institutional policy, dictated what should be collected, and even (in the case of Anderson) how it should be cataloged and described. This private ethos remains a strand in the history of the creation of Chinese art in Britain, and it remained standard practice from before World War I to entrust museum publications to noninstitutional authors.

London’s other major institutional collection, the South Kensington Museum, has also included Chinese material since its inception in the museum attached to the central design school of the Department of Practical Art in the decades immediately prior to the Great Exhibition of 1851. The initial aim of the collection was stringently didactic, aimed at improving the quality of British manufactured goods in a situation of intense commercial rivalry, above all with the French. Consequently, the South Kensington Museum aimed to concentrate on “ornamental art,” which meant excluding pictures and sculpture, though this program was modified shortly after its inception, and a considerable quantity of Chinese pictures were acquired. The institution was very closely linked to the British Museum through the person of Franks, who loaned it a large collection of Chinese and Japanese ceramics from his extensive private collection, and also acted officially as an art referee, responsible for the selection of acquisitions.

In the historicist climate of the time, China was a perfectly acceptable source of design solutions, though one held in lower esteem by many. In 1856, in *The Grammar of Ornament*, the designer and theorist Owen Jones, who was closely associated with the whole South Kensington project, could write that Chinese art was totally familiar, through the medium of imported goods, and could condemn it thus: “The Chinese are totally unimaginative, and all their works are accordingly wanting in the highest grace of art—the ideal.” The complaint is really one about the “Chinese mind,” to which an assemblage of designed objects will provide an infallible key. Nevertheless, large quantities of objects in a variety of media were accumulated at South Kensington, in an institution that became increasingly confused as the nineteenth century wore on as to whether it was there to educate British craftsmen by exposing them to a broad range of often
contemporary practice, or to assemble a great historical corpus of material in which connoisseurly criteria of quality would be the deciding factor.

The struggles over this issue are no necessary part of this article; suffice it to say that in 1897 a new director, Caspar Purdon Clarke, moved to improve the scholarly standing of the Victoria and Albert Museum by dividing the Department of Art (which had endured since 1857) into Departments of Furniture, Textiles, Sculpture and Ivories, Ceramics, and Metalwork, as well as a Department of Prints and Drawings, and the Library. This division was spoken of at the time and later as being one "by materials," and was presented as this museum's distinctive and original contribution to museum organization. However, there were occasions when other criteria overrode this classificatory scheme. Most significantly, a well-orchestrated outcry by a cadre of colonial administrators, led by two former viceroyes including Lord Curzon himself, prevented Purdon Clarke's proposal that the Indian collections be divided in this way. Clearly it was felt necessary to retain the integrity of the holdings of objects from the greatest of imperial possessions, a symbolic model on British soil of the breadth and variety of the empire on the subcontinent, and a separate Indian Museum was maintained. China was a lesser concern within the imperial scheme. The Chinese collections were accordingly divided between these until 1970, when a Far Eastern Department was created. Throughout those six and a half decades, the fragmentation of the Chinese collections meant that "Chinese art" (as opposed to "Chinese woven textiles" or "Chinese porcelain") was rarely raised as an issue at a formal level within the museum and that the degree of interest shown in various aspects of it tended to fluctuate within the departments, depending on the interest of individual curators, hardly any of whom were specialists in material of East Asian origin. This had the effect of creating a hierarchy based not so much on explicit notions of "fine art" versus "decorative art," or of the relative positions of different art forms, as on the degree of interest and activity generated in different parts of the museum.

Ceramics as the Flowering of Chinese Art

In the interwar years and after, the Department of Ceramics was broadly responsible for the sustenance and construction of Chinese art within the
Victoria and Albert Museum. With what were, both numerically and in terms of prominence in display, the most important Chinese collections, and with internationally renowned scholars such as William Bowyer Honey (1891–1956) and Bernard Rackham (1877–1964) on its staff, the department exercised an unofficial hegemony, as guardian of the master narrative in which Chinese ceramics and Chinese art were collapsed into each other. In one of several volumes published to coincide with the Royal Academy of Art exhibition of Chinese Art of 1935, the sections on Sculpture and Lacquer and Textiles were both provided by Leigh Ashton (1897–1983), then an assistant keeper in the Department of Ceramics.

In this interwar period, however, there was a significant turn in all the departments to an engagement with the idea of "national heritage," and a redirection of publishing and acquisitory activity toward British (in fact largely English) things. Perceptions of national and imperial decline, particularly in competition with America, lent this a greater urgency. The Victoria and Albert Museum’s Chinese collections, physically and administratively divided by their materials, remained, “scattered in various odd corners and obscure passages,” until 1939, when for the first time “these priceless objects [were] permanently assembled in chronological sequence in the spacious and brightly lit North Court (incidentally one of the Museum’s largest galleries). The arrangement is most effective, following the method so effectively adopted at the Chinese Exhibition at Burlington House a few years ago.” The display was to prove even less “permanent” than any other such presentation, being necessarily dismantled when the Museum’s entire collections were shipped out of London at the beginning of World War II. Ceramics also played a dominant role in the British Museum, within the Department of Ceramics and Ethnography and its successor, Oriental Antiquities and Ethnography.

During this interwar period, the British Museum’s Subdepartment of Oriental Prints and Drawings (established in 1913) employed the young Arthur Waley (1889–1968), nowadays better remembered as a translator of Chinese and Japanese literature. Waley had been employed by Laurence Binyon (1899–1943), author in 1908 of The Painting of the Far East. Both Waley and Binyon enjoyed wide literary reputations that gave them an authority not essentially derived from their museum offices. Although his
championing of painting might make him seem a more faithful transmitter of “traditional” Chinese connoisseurly criteria, Binyon’s views are those of the classic orientalist position as defined by Edward Said, where “the East” cannot represent itself but must be revealed to itself by the Western expert, who has penetrated its essential and unchanging characteristics. They are summed up in a series of lectures delivered at Harvard in 1933–1934, dedicated to his great American contemporary, Langdon Warner, director of the Freer Gallery.

These construct Chinese art as a reflection of essential and largely historically invariant characteristics of the “Chinese race,” and are full of typically reductive aphorisms—“The Chinese have kept their eyes fresh”; “This race has always had a turn to the fabulous”; “It [Chinese art] has its roots deep in the earth.” Binyon certainly shared the view described here that the touchstone of quality lay in the early achievements of Chinese culture and that these were in some sense unknown to the Chinese themselves; “for it is only in the present century that the real achievements of Chinese art have been revealed.” He also provided a theoretical underpinning for the prominent role given to ceramics in museum collections, in his typically florid panegyric in Bergsonian vein to a Tang dynasty ceramic jar:

No less than a great picture or statue, this vase typifies what art is and art does: how it has its being in the world of the senses yet communicates through the senses so much more than we can express in words. You cannot tell the body from the spirit, the thing expressed from its expression. The complete work is filled with a mysterious life like a human personality.

The anonymity of potters saved the connoisseur from even having to consider any named, individuated Chinese maker as a conscious social or political actor. No actual person had made the pot, it had been made by “the race.”

**Writing Chinese Art History at South Kensington**

Prior to 1939, only one attempt had been made at South Kensington to address the entire field of Chinese Art and to improve the scholarly treat-
ment of the Chinese collections in line with the European holdings, but this had been done right at the beginning of the century by recourse to knowledge held by a private collector, in this case Stephen Wooton Bushel (d. 1908). The South Kensington Museum commissioned his *Chinese Art* (originally of 1904, but with numerous reprints), using the museum’s pieces as illustrations almost exclusively. The use of private expertise was a standard practice at this time, but the book is still the first one in Europe to equate the holdings of a single institution with the total field of knowledge. Predecessors such as M. Paleologue’s *L’art Chinois* (Paris, 1887) had drawn on the holdings of a large number of private collectors for its examples and illustrations. However, in Britain the move to bring definitions of the subject within the parameters of the “national collections” can be read as an affirmation of public, official powers of definition in the field of culture, the very purpose for which a museum like that at South Kensington was created.

The book never states, but assumes as self-evident, that the collection of the South Kensington Museum can stand practically for the totality of Chinese art. Only in the case of painting is significant recourse had to another collection, and not to any private holdings but to the British Museum. By visiting these two imperial institutions, “Chinese art” can be seen in its totality. The work is structured in a series of chapters that reveal something of how Bushell saw this essential category as breaking down, and which is idiosyncratic by both contemporary elite Chinese criteria of categorization of the arts and by the terms of the “rational” departmental organization recently erected at the South Kensington Museum. The chapters are (after an historical introduction) Sculpture, Architecture, Bronze, Carving in Wood, Ivory, Horn etc., Lacquer, Carving in Jade and Other Hard Stones, Pottery and Porcelain, Glass, Enamels (subdivided into Cloisonné, Champlevé, and Painted), Jewellery, Textiles (Woven Silks, Embroidery, Carpets), and finally, Pictorial Art. To begin with sculpture and end with painting may look like both an inversion of traditional Chinese canons of high and low, as well as sundering the unity of the fine arts in the Western tradition; however, the author does refer to pictorial art as “the most important branch of our subject.” This was despite the fact that the collection included almost no Chinese painting, by this date the major focus of acqui-
sition of American collections such as those of railroad-car magnate Charles Lang Freer and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. A distinctively British official definition of Chinese art was being born.

**Chinese Art and Imperial Decline**

The years after World War I saw a major shift in the valuation of Chinese art in Britain, with a collapse in the status of the types of Qing (1644–1911) porcelain that had been the focus of interest for an early generation of collectors (including Bushell and those advised by him), and a new engagement with the art of early China.\(^{47}\) It has been traditional to view this in rather mechanistic terms, as the simple reaction to the increased opportunity to see early Chinese things concomitant on the progress of excavation, legal and illegal, in China. Clearly there was a connection between railway building and the flood of tomb ceramics onto the market. But it is also the case that changed attitudes made for a greater receptivity to early Chinese artifacts. (After all, plenty of bronzes were available aboveground in the Qing period, but there is no evidence that they moved Whistler or Oscar Wilde in the same way as did Kangxi blue-and-white ceramics.) Rachel Gotlieb has shown how the philosophy of Henri Bergson, and to a lesser extent that of Jung, was explicitly cited in advanced aesthetic circles promoting the shift of taste, and how in particular early Chinese art was seen as embodying a spontaneity and vitality that was invigoratingly different from (and superior to) the more highly finished porcelain that had attracted an earlier generation.\(^{48}\) This notion of a tired Europe refreshing itself from the vital springs of more primitive cultures is clearly part of the larger picture of appropriation of the other seen in the art of the cubists and surrealists.\(^{49}\) In the particular case of China, the otherness is seen as distance in time, not space. Chinese culture has a glorious past, a decayed and exhausted present and no future. As the French aesthete Georges Soulié de Morant put it in 1928, “Aucun signe n’apparait encore d’une renaissance des arts.”\(^{50}\) His views were echoed by many and created a simple device for structuring canons of quality and importance in Chinese art—older was better.

Running parallel to this development, expressed above all in critical
writing like that of Roger Fry, was a deepening fetishization by the Victoria and Albert Museum of objects manufactured at what was deemed to be both the apogee and the end of “traditional China,” the eighteenth century. The reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736–1795) was held to mark the last era of artistic excellence before the catastrophic nineteenth-century “decline” (the causes of which, if they are discussed at all in artistic literature, are usually put down to something like “exhaustion” on the part of the “tradition”). The role of imperialism in China’s decline is not commented on. The Qing empire disappeared in 1911, closely followed by the emperors of Russia, Germany, and Austria. By 1920 only the emperors of Abyssinia and Japan and the King-Emperor George V kept their thrones. The latter ruled over territories that were expanded after World War I, reaching a physical extent from which they were so swiftly to shrink. It is in the light of this that we must examine the fascination with the Chinese imperial court that was to permeate writing about, collecting, and displaying Chinese artifacts in an institution like the Victoria and Albert Museum. The signs of rulership (crowns, thrones, and other regalia) had been prominent in the Indian courts of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the event from which the Victoria and Albert Museum rhetorically derived (and continues to derive) legitimacy. The fascination with the imperial provenance of the loot from the 1862 sack of the Summer Palace was reflected in the museum’s collecting in the decades after the event, but the supply of objects of high enough status and sufficient aesthetic quality was seen as necessarily limited before the ending of Qing rule.

In 1922 the museum was given what has remained one of its most famous and most reproduced treasures (fig. 2). It is a late-eighteenth-century throne-chair, looted from an imperial hunting park to the south of Peking in the 1901 multinational invasion of China and sold on the London art market by Mikail Girs, a White Russian émigré who had been Tsarist ambassador there at that time. It cost £2,250 and earned the donor of those funds the thanks of Queen Mary, who was known to have “expressed a hope that, by some means, it might find a place” in the museum that bore her husband’s grandparents’ names. The throne has remained on display ever since, labeled until recently “The [note the definite article] throne of the Emperor Ch’ien-lung.”
Figure 2 The throne as it appeared in *The Illustrated London News*, 8 July 1922, prior to its purchase for the Victoria and Albert Museum. Reproduced by kind permission of the Illustrated London News Picture Library.
The screen with which it once formed a pair remains unpublished in the Museum of Ethnography in Vienna, but then possession of the screen of China is not the same thing as possession of the throne of China. It would of course be recognized that Qing political discourse made no room for a throne of China, no ruler's seat symbolically equated with right of rule. The object's meaning is entirely a product of its context of display.

In Stewart's terms, the throne is more of a souvenir than an item in a collection:

We need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative. Through narrative the souvenir substitutes a context of perpetual consumption for its context of origin. It represents not the lived experience of its maker but the "secondhand" experience of its possessor/owner. Like the collection it always displays the romance of contraband, for its scandal is its removal from its "natural" location. Yet it is only by means of its material relation to that location that it acquires its value.53

As the British Empire became more and more remote, souvenirs of the emperor such as the throne of China played an ever-increasing role in the national imaginary, as nostalgia for one empire slid across into nostalgia for all, and souvenirs of empire became fetishes of consolation. British colonial power in China was less effective in 1922 than it had been two decades earlier, at the point of the looting of the throne, and it was to decline significantly over the next two decades, leading to a final collapse under Japanese assault. The throne thus comes to signify not the empire from which it was taken but the equally vanished empire that took it.

Private Collections/Public Institutions

In the interwar period immediately after the throne's acquisition, the pace in the study of Chinese art in London was being made to an equal, if not actually greater, extent by private individuals, of whom the most significant are perhaps George Eumorfopoulos (1863–1939) (fig. 3) and Sir Percival David (1892–1964).54 The former, a business magnate of Greek descent,
Figure 3  Bronze bust of George Eumorfopoulos, by Dora Gordine, FRBS. A.12–1944, Scaramanga Gift. Photo courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.
was intimately involved in the founding of the Oriental Ceramic Society in 1921, of which he was the first president. This private organization, its membership initially limited to fifteen, had as its object “to widen appreciation and to acquire knowledge of Eastern Ceramic Art by periodic meetings for the purpose of discussion.” (Originally objects from the Middle East were also collected, but this strand of interest soon faded.)

Validation of “Eastern Ceramic Art” as a coherent and discrete field drew both on the Bergsonian interest in ceramics as an “immediate” and “vital” form of artistic creation and on the growing body of dealers in the London art market prepared to specialize in this type of goods. These included businesses such as Spinks, Sparks, Bluett and Sons, and Marchants, all of which survived until very recent years. Dealers were initially excluded from membership of the Oriental Ceramic Society (OCS), but they were essential to its functioning, since most of the members' purchasing was done in London rather than in Asia. Questions of a Chinese provenance were by and large not of concern, in contrast to the nineteenth century when “from the Summer Palace” was extremely important in market terms.

From its inception the OCS was involved in setting the agenda for public institutional display of Chinese art, with a program of exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum of ceramic pieces drawn from the holdings of members (often, particularly with regard to early pieces, as fine as anything the museums had themselves). However, the fact that museum staff too (Hobson from the British Museum, and Honey from the Victoria and Albert Museum) were among its founding members reflects the social class from which such scholars were drawn in the interwar years, as well as the intimate relations they enjoyed with private collectors.

Eumorfopoulos and Sir David were both prominently involved in organizing the famous 1935 Exhibition of Chinese Art held at Burlington House. David was described in 1985 by Basil Gray, the last survivor of the British organizing committee, as the person thanks to whom “above all... this concept was brought to fruition.” The show was a massive one, with 3,080 exhibits (750 of them loans from the Chinese government), and was seen by 422,123 visitors. Judging by the volume of press coverage, it was certainly a popular success. In reflecting on it fifty years after the event,
however, Gray commented that, “I hold from the point of view of scholarship, the occasion was largely missed.”\textsuperscript{59} His point is that it did relatively little to reorder priorities of study in Britain, which were to remain dominated by the study of ceramics into the postwar period, supported by the same constellation of interests among private collectors, dealers, and museum curators.

**Chinese Art in the Academy**

David, while also building up a major collection of Chinese ceramics, provided in 1930 the funds for an experimental lectureship in Chinese Art and Archaeology, to be tenable at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University.\textsuperscript{60} This lectureship, the first formal teaching to be made available in Britain in the field, was given to Walter Perceval Yetts (1878–1957).\textsuperscript{61} In 1932 the post was made into a chair attached to the Courtauld Institute of Art and funded by the Universities China Committee in London, a grant-giving body supported by the monies extorted from the Chinese government by Britain as part of the “Boxer indemnity” after 1901.

Although Yetts wrote about a wide variety of subjects, from architecture to Ming ceramics, he was principally renowned in his own day as a scholar of, first, archaic bronzes and, second, Buddhist sculpture. His major scholarly monuments are the catalogs not of any of the public collections of the day but of the bronzes and sculpture in the Eumorfopoulos collection, which was sold to the British government in 1935 and divided between the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. He came at both subjects squarely from an “antiquities” point of view—that is, with an interest as much in the epigraphy of the material as anything else. Yetts has therefore disappeared totally from the lineage of the study of the subject laid out by Wen Fong in his essay accompanying the catalog of the *Great Bronze Age of China*, and indeed in the sense of the rigorous formalism of a figure like Max Loehr (1903–1991) was not an art historian at all.\textsuperscript{62} Yetts valued bronzes as historical evidence, and in doing so he was probably (like his Swedish contemporary Bernhard Karlgren) closer to the mainstream of Ming and Qing thinking and writing about this material than were those who sought (ultimately with success) to assimilate bronze vessels into the
Yetts was succeeded as a teacher of Chinese art and archaeology at London University by S. Howard Hansford (1899–1973), who initially also had no formal background in art history or academic sinology, having worked rather until his mid-thirties with the family firm of Wright and Hansford, China and Japan Merchants. He was a Universities China Committee (again the Boxer indemnity) scholar in China from 1938 to 1939, served as an intelligence officer from 1940 to 1945, then studied in China again (this time under Chinese government auspices) from 1945 to 1947. In that year he returned to London to teach, but significantly by this point the post remained attached to the Courtauld Institute, London University's specialist postgraduate art history unit, rather than to the School of Oriental and African Studies.

In 1950 Sir David began negotiations with the University of London that culminated in the presentation of his collection of Chinese ceramics to the university, and its opening to the public in June 1952 as the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art. The PDF, as it quickly became known, was administratively part of the School of Oriental and African Studies, and Hansford left the Courtauld to become its first head. What would have happened if the teaching of Chinese art in London had remained within the Courtauld Institute is a moot point, and exactly why the switch was made remains murky, even if the effect is clear. The effect was to consolidate the coherence of an orientalist discursive field.

Hansford's lectureship at the School of Oriental and African Studies was made a chair in 1956, and he held the post through 1966, when he was succeeded by William Watson. In his inaugural lecture, Hansford took the opportunity to review the study of the subject in Britain, but he primarily stressed the long history of "archaeoloatry—the worship of antiquity" in China. In a further statement, very much in the manner of the orientalist concentration on "essences," he argues that "all Chinese" are conscious of the antiquity and unity of their civilization, and adds: "The Chinese, like
the British, are quite sure that they are the salt of the earth, and do not feel the need of proving it by tedious argument.” His definition of the field is one that begins with bronzes, then Buddhist sculpture, then “glyptics,” or the jade carving that was his own special field. For the study of these subjects, London, with its three major museum collections, its private collections, and above all its thriving art market, “offers conditions as near ideal as possible” and in particular better than those of China. He then remarks, “I have said nothing yet about two subjects which properly fall within the scope of our studies, though some might hesitate to admit them to the category of Chinese antiquities, because the bulk of their material dates only from the last thousand years or so. I refer to painting and ceramics.”

Binyon and Waley are given the credit for “the pioneer work of interpreting Chinese painting to the West and enunciating canons of judgement” (the existence of traditional Chinese canons of judgment is implicitly denied in this sweeping phrase). However, Hansford accepts that the torch of scholarship in this field has passed to Americans and Germans, while the major collections are all in Japan or the United States. He never mentions China, and we are left with the clear impression that oriental art is too important a subject to be left to Orientals.

By this post–World War II period, political hegemony in Asia had clearly passed from the British Empire to the United States. But Hansford’s inaugural lecture, and the practices of the national museums, both clearly embody a claim to a continuing hegemony in the sphere of cultural definition, expressed in opposition to the claims of the United States. Hansford explicitly describes London as the best place to learn about Chinese art, much better in all respects than China itself, and better than the United States with regard to the early materials he places at the head of a hierarchy of types of materials. The PDF that Hansford headed is a Foundation of Chinese Art that contains only ceramics and concentrates on those of the last thousand years. Contrast this with the contents of Ludwig Bachhofer’s *Short History of Chinese Art*, written in Chicago in 1944, where the only ceramics discussed are those of the Neolithic Age and “Chinese art” is seen as consisting of archaic bronzes, sculpture, and painting. Bachhofer was in his own day a controversial figure (like his British counterparts, he knew no Chinese), a main conduit, at the University of Chicago, for the transfer of
German scholarly *Kunstgeschichte* to the United States. However, the divergence between his project and that of the London museums is visible and dramatic. In Britain it was and has remained the norm to work on ceramics, metalwork, textiles, jade, furniture, and other manifestations that in the United States have received less attention than painting. There has been correspondingly little work done in Britain on Chinese painting and none at all on calligraphy. The language-based scholarship of Chinese art in America is clearly part of the broader “area studies” movement, answering demands from the American state for agents in Asia who could effectively operate a mode of hegemony different in its aims and agencies from the British imperialism it had superseded. The differences between British and American discourses of “Chinese art” show that there is no such thing out there, that those who present the essence of “China” present essentially themselves.

The End of Empire and the Art of Empire

Hansford’s 1956 inaugural lecture was delivered in a context in which the study of Chinese art in Britain seemed to him to indeed be flourishing. A new generation of scholars at the national museums had become active. The Victoria and Albert Museum was now headed by a director who had worked extensively with the Chinese collections, Leigh Ashton (director in 1945–1955 and knighted in 1948). He undertook a major program of renovation of the museum’s displays, creating what were known as the Primary Galleries, “illustrating a single theme, such as the art of a particular civilisation, country or age, by grouping together the finest things available in a single gallery.” The Primary Gallery of Far Eastern Art opened on 12 September 1952, dominated visually by a display of Qing dynasty robes and by Qing dynasty lacquered furniture (figs. 4–5), the most prominent single item being the “throne” now standing in display terms not for the apogee of Chinese woodwork but as the very focus of “Far Eastern Art.” Nevertheless, for administrative purposes the gallery was a responsibility of the Department of Ceramics, which maintained its primacy within the museum as the center of Chinese studies. The British Museum’s galleries were also reinstalled after the war, the Department of Oriental Antiquities
Figure 4 The Victoria and Albert Museum’s new “Primary Gallery” of Far Eastern Art, featured in The Illustrated London News, 20 September 1952. Of four objects chosen for special attention, three—the throne, ice chest, and group of robes—are given specifically “imperial” connections. Reproduced by kind permission of the Illustrated London News Picture Library.
Figure 5 View of the Primary Gallery in 1952. The throne, robes, and ice chest are situated together at the far end of the gallery, to form a focus of imperial associations. Given the sources of the gallery’s architecture in a Christian basilica, it is hard not to read this positioning as making this group of imperial objects functionally equivalent to the altar. Reproduced by kind permission of the Illustrated London News Picture Library.
being headed there for over twenty of the postwar years (1946–1969) by Binyon’s son-in-law, Basil Gray (1904–1988).70

What was happening in London at this period was the emergence of a more distinctive profile for Chinese art. Distinguished now from “ethnography” at the British Museum (in 1946) and recognized at the Victoria and Albert Museum as a distinct phenomenon by the creation of the Primary Gallery (1952), above all enshrined in the prestigious Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art (1952), as well as supported by a flourishing art market and the collectors grouped around an expanded Oriental Ceramic Society, the subject seemed to enjoy a new degree of discursive coherence, but one still centered on museums rather than on academic teaching. The Percival David Foundation remains at the time of writing the only teaching institution in Chinese art, and from 1966 to the present each head has been a scholar whose career began in a museum (William Watson, 1966–1983; Roderick Whitfield, 1983–).

This discursive coherence nevertheless operated in a political climate of massively reduced British colonial power in Asia. The decolonization of India, Pakistan, and Burma was swiftly followed by a collapse in the visibility of the art of those parts of the world, with the demolition in the mid-1950s of the Indian Museum (which Curzon’s efforts had preserved in 1909) and the removal into storage of most of its collections.71 The collapse of the market for Japanese art after Britain’s series of defeats in the Pacific meant that the amount of display space allotted to it was also severely restricted in proportion to the size of the collections acquired in the nineteenth century. Colonial power in Asia, particularly after the end of the Malaysian emergency (fought as Britain’s contribution to the global containment of communism in Asia) was now focused almost solely on China, through the retention of Hong Kong. Yet throughout this period, and down to the present, colonialism was displaced into culture. Hong Kong remained invisible to the public culture represented in museums like the Victoria and Albert and the British, and “China” remained, the two colliding only in the last decade with the reinstallation of the galleries at both the Victoria and Albert and the British Museums using funds donated by individuals from the Hong Kong business community.72

As government restrictions on museum budgets mirror national eco-
onomic decline, and as the private sector of corporate and personal sponsorship becomes the major support for once-imperial institutions, the question of who gets to represent what to whom comes to the fore. To a sector of a museum’s visitors, the loot of empire is what they expect to see—a literal “empire of things.” In this world of insecure meanings and private fetishisms, major displays of Chinese art in the national museums, paid for with money from Hong Kong, come to seem in their entirety like souvenirs of that empire that is fast vanishing into the imaginary consolations of costume drama.

Notes

Condensed versions of this paper were presented at meetings of the College Art Association (Seattle, February 1993) and the Association of Art Historians (London, April 1993). It has benefited particularly from suggestions by Tim Barrett, Rupert Faulkner, Susan Nelson, and Charles Saumarez Smith, and by positions reviewers.
7 This point is well made in Ch’ien Chung-shu, “China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century: Part 1,” Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography, n.s., 2 (1941): 7–48; “Part 2,” ibid., 2 (1941): 113–152, a work of great erudition that, like its companion piece on the seventeenth century, deserves to be much better known. The interest in Chinese architectural forms, particularly in landscape architecture, by William Chambers is perhaps best seen as a way of positioning his own practice in the marketplace, and is accompanied by statements such as the following: “Though I am publishing a work of Chinese Architecture, let it not be suspected that my intention is to promote a taste so much inferior to the
antique, and so very unfit for our climate” (Chambers, “Preface,” Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils . . . [London: 1757]).


11 Clifford, Predicament of Culture, 224–225.


15 What happened in America, without a single metropolitan center exercising hegemony over the whole cultural sphere, is not only more complex, and outside the competence of the present author, but has been broadly mapped out in Warren I. Cohen, East Asian Art and American Culture: A Study in International Relations (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), which contains much valuable material in a convenient form but would be even more valuable with a less narrow focus on the United States and a greater awareness of at least some of the controversy surrounding the notion of “orientalism” in recent decades.

16 I joined the museum in 1979, after training in the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Cambridge University, at Peking Languages Institute and the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. The presumption of China’s unshakable alterity underwrote every stage of that training and was unchallenged by me until very recently.

17 Clifford, Predicament of Culture, 220.

18 In the course of the last year, the staff of the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum have for the first time pulled together in one sequence all of the guidebooks to the collections published since the mid-nineteenth century, making it possible for such research to begin. A pathbreaking endeavor in this vein is Rupert Faulkner and Anna Jackson, “The Meiji Period in South Kensington: The Representation of Japan in the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1852–1912,” in Japanese Art in the Khalili Collection, ed. O. R. Impey (forthcoming). However, my point holds: each guidebook presents itself as a transcendent present, with no sense of a history to the display arrangements.

19 Certainly since the 1980s it has been forced to be more self-aware, by a broadly based critique of its positivist framework. This critique is represented in Britain by works such as

The other thing we have is oral history. The orality of most museums’ institutional cultures has struck me often throughout my career.


This lack of interest in aesthetic quality as grounds for classification is associated by Breckenridge with the “cabinet of curiosities” tradition that “represented an eclectic aesthetic of mercantilism soon to be displaced by one of imperialism in which collecting served as a sign of connoisseurship, and hence of control. Value in wonder cabinets was derived less from an object’s aesthetic associations, and more from its uniqueness that was the product of its decontextualized presentation” (Breckenridge, “Aesthetics and Politics,” 199).

What follows depends on Miller, “Appendix C: The Keepers of the Departments,” in *That Noble Cabinet*, which is not always easy to interpret.


This decision was driven to an extent by the need for a separate identity as a means of raising private-sector funding in Japan for the museum’s activities.


Faulkner and Jackson, “Meiji Period” (forthcoming).


Robert Skelton, “The Indian Collections: 1798 to 1978,” *Burlington Magazine* 120 (1978): 302. Purdon Clarke, prior to his appointment as director, had been the architect of the Indian
Court at the 1878 Paris international exhibition, and keeper of the Indian section from 1883. During 1881–1882 he traveled extensively in India, acquiring 3,400 artifacts, specifically designed to be an exhaustive and encyclopedic taxonomy of Indian manufacturing, with particular attention paid to place of origin within the empire.

I can find no documentation of the reasons behind this major move; they remained entirely within the oral culture of the museum and are now (by the retirement of everyone involved) outside even that. Thus a contingent step comes to seem like a “natural” development.

Thus the Department of Sculpture (later Architecture and Sculpture) produced almost no scholarship on any aspect of the extensive Chinese collections it held, and the level even of internal cataloging was exiguous for much of the period. The Department of Metalwork was more conscientious in its internal practice but still produced little work on China. The same would be true of Furniture and Woodwork, with the exception of Lt. Col. E. F. Strange (1862–1929), who published a pioneering Catalogue of Chinese Lacquer in 1925. On Strange’s career see Craig Clunas, “Whose Throne Is It Anyway? The Qianlong Throne in the T. T. Tsui Gallery,” Orientations 22 (1991): 44–50.


H. Granville Fell, “Chinese Art at South Kensington,” Connoisseur 103 (1939): 223, 225. The photograph accompanying this display is of the Tang-Song section of the gallery, dominated visually by sculpture, (though including one of the early painted textile banners from Dunhuang) and with separate cases for metalwork and ceramics, in the manner of departmental apartheid that determined display policies in the Victoria and Albert Museum well into the 1970s.

Waley worked for the British Museum from 1913 to 1930 and produced a catalog of the Dunhuang paintings in 1931, which is still reckoned of some value today. Waley represented the exceptional figure of the self-taught genius and remarked quite correctly in 1923 that it was simply impossible to learn in London the kind of Chinese needed to equip one for a study of Chinese painting (though the idea of going to China to learn it was equally rejected) (T. H. Barrett, Singular Listlessness: A Short History of Chinese Books and British Scholars [London: Wellsweep Press, 1989], 47).

Described by his entry in Dictionary of National Biography as “poet, art-historian and critic,” Laurence Binyon remained very much the fin-de-siècle aesthete in his views, a man for whom his work on The Painting of the Far East (1908) was but one strand in a career equally devoted to Western art, to his practice as a poet, and even as a playwright, who enjoyed critical success with his historical dramas Attila (1907) and Arthur: A Tragedy (1923, with music by no less a figure than Edward Elgar!) (L. G. Wickham Legg and E. T. Williams, eds., The Dictionary of National Biography, 1941–1950 [Oxford: 1959], 79–81). Binyon was a much
more famous figure in his day than his present reputation allows and certainly merits a full-length biographical treatment.

41 One difference between the orientalist scholars described by Edward Said and the practice of an orientalist art history by Binyon and his contemporaries is that no emphasis was put on command of the relevant literary sources or linguistic resources. Neither Binyon, Hobson, nor Honey knew Chinese. (Waley of course did, but famously “never went to China,” preferring to retain the Tang dynasty as a country of the mind.) Nowhere in any source of the period is this implied to be a lack. The key to understanding “Chinese art” in this schema lies not with the “Chinese” part of the equation but with a universalist ideal of the aesthetically sensitive individual. This contrasts markedly with the situation in the United States, where beginning in the nineteenth century, Asian (albeit usually Japanese) scholars with a command of the traditional connoisseurship literature had been employed in major museums or accepted as mentors by major collectors like Freer, and where promising young scholars like Archibald Wenley and Laurence Sickman were sent to China to acquire language skills. This cannot but have influenced the development of collections in Britain away from the study of painting (where linguistic resources have been seen as relatively more important) toward those areas in which it was felt (wrongly) that lack of a knowledge of the Chinese language was no impediment.


43 Ibid., 7.

44 Ibid., 21.

45 Bushell had been medical officer with the British legation in Peking, where he had acquired an impressive familiarity with traditional Chinese connoisseurship, including the written sources in Chinese, in the major area of interest to him, namely Chinese ceramics. Although never paid by the South Kensington Museum, he acted as its agent in Peking in the early 1880s, choosing objects for its collections and spending the sum of £250 on his own authority. The fact that Bushell could deploy Chinese texts in his study of art—at a time when the only employee of a national museum to have any knowledge of the language was the librarian Lionel Giles (1875–1958)—gave his work a particular orientalist authority, which has led to its continued citation into the present day. Bushell’s expertise was valued in the United States also, where he cataloged the collection of the Baltimore magnate W. T. Walters (Cohen, East Asian Art, 18; see also Rose Kerr, “The William T. Walters Collection of Qing Dynasty Porcelain,” Orientations 22 [April 1991]: 57–63). Although documentation survives concerning Bushell’s purchases for the museum, all correspondence with him regarding the commissioning of Chinese Art was destroyed in the early 1960s, as part of continuous and systematic “weeding” of museum records.

Giles was the son of Herbert Giles, who succeeded Sir Thomas Wade as second professor of Chinese at Cambridge in 1897. “Young Giles” worked largely on the Chinese manuscript
material from Dunhuang, shipped to the British Museum Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books, by Sir Aurel Stein in 1907.


47 The shift had begun before the war, with the Burlington Fine Arts Club *Exhibition of Early Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*, 1910. Hobson was responsible for the catalog introduction, and George Eumorfopoulos was the leading lender.


49 This has been the subject of considerable research in recent years. See, among others, James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*.


52 *Nominal File: J. P. Swift*, Victoria and Albert Museum Registry. From its acquisition to the removal of the collections at the coming of World War II, the throne was the main focus in a gallery (room 42) devoted to Chinese and Japanese lacquer and woodwork. It is singled out as the most significant item in the room in *The Victoria and Albert Museum: Brief Guide* (London: 1924) and *The Victoria and Albert Museum: A Short Illustrated Guide* (London: 1937). For a fuller discussion of the circumstances of the acquisition see Clunas, “Whose Throne Is It Anyway?”


55 “Rules,” *TOCS* 1 (1921–22): 5. The *Transactions* remain almost the only source for the history of the society.

56 The history of the trade in Chinese art in London remains to be written and would necessarily depend on access to the records of current or defunct businesses, records that are not publicly accessible. Relations between dealers and museums have certainly undergone considerable changes in the period under study. Bluett and Sons was established in 1884, remained a family business until 1988, and went out of business in January 1993 (Caren Myers, “Saint Bluett’s,” *The Antique Collector* [June 1993]: 80–81).


58 Cohen calls it an “extraordinary stimulus to the study of Chinese art... For China, it was an almost unimaginable public relations success” (*East Asian Art*, 122–123). He shows too
how the failure of H. E. Winlock, director of the Metropolitan Museum, to bring the show to New York reflected a “tilt” in American foreign policy against China and toward Japan at that precise moment.

59 Gray, “Royal Academy Exhibition,” 33.


61 Yetts had no academic background in Chinese art history. He was fifty-two when he took the post, and had previously enjoyed a distinguished medical career in the Royal Naval Medical Service, as medical officer of the British Legation, Peking (coincidentally Bushel-1’s old post) and as Medical Officer of the Ministry of Health. He never studied the Chinese language in any British institution, and his knowledge of written classical Chinese is presumably owing to the efforts of private tutors in Peking. While still an employee of the ministry he began to write on Chinese art subjects, chiefly the bronzes that were now much more readily available and more widely appreciated on the London art market. His earliest pieces are all basically puffs for bronzes in the collections of the major dealers—Bluett’s, Yamanaka, C. T. Loo—but in 1925 he contributed a piece on bronzes to a special Chinese art issue of The Burlington Magazine, edited by Roger Fry. Yetts may well have been collecting and dealing in Chinese art in his own right, since he became a member of the Oriental Ceramic Society in 1925, when wealthy individuals still made up almost all of its seventeen-strong membership (“Dr Walter Perceval Yetts, C.B.E.,” Times, 15 May 1957 [obituary]. This obituary is almost certainly by Howard Hansford. Harrie A. Vanderstaappen, ed., The T. L. Yuan Bibliography of Western Writings on Chinese Art and Archaeology (London: Mansell Information/Publishing Ltd., 1975) has a full listing of Yetts’s prolific output.


63 Times, 15 May 1957.

64 It has been suggested to me that it was the language requirements necessary for the advanced study of China that made a connection with the School of Oriental and African Studies seem desirable, but it is hard not to speculate that the objects of study that Yetts and Hansford chose for themselves seemed uncomfortably “low” and “antiquarian” to the rigorously “high” European tradition of the Courtauld.

65 Hansford, Study of Chinese Antiquities, 4.

66 Ibid., 11.


69 When the Far Eastern Department was created in 1970, it was a Deputy Keeper of Ceramics, John Ayers (b. 1922, joined the museum in 1950), who was its first head.

70 Gray’s obituary (by William Watson) in TOCS 53 (1988–89): 9–10 is not without inaccuracies. Basil Gray was Laurence Binyon’s son-in-law and the last great “orientalist” of the British tradition, writing with equal fluency on Chinese and Persian art. His obituarist in the Independent newspaper, the Islamicist Michael Rogers (formerly in the British Museum, now David Khalili Professor of Islamic Art in the School of Oriental and African Studies), proclaimed it one of Gray’s great strengths that his aesthetic sense was not clouded by a knowledge of any Asian language. Gray worked with curators such as R. Soame Jenyns (1904–1976; obituary in TOCS 41 [1975–77]: xxiv) and William Watson (b. 1917, British Museum 1947–1966, Head of the PDF 1966–1983).

71 Skelton, “Indian Collections,” 303.