Asian encounters

The MFA Boston exhibits the flowering of globalism in the arts of the colonial Americas
We tend to think of it as a recent phenomenon but globalism actually began in the sixteenth century when ships carrying explorers and, later, goods connected Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The product of these early encounters was a fascinating, and often surprising, interchange that affected artistic production across North, Central, and South America. Artists in the Americas—both indigenous and recent arrivals from Europe and elsewhere—embraced the arrival of Asian art and incorporated it into their work.

_Made in the Americas: The New World Discovers Asia_ explores this remarkable era of early global trade and features more than ninety objects from Mexico City, Quebec, Boston, Philadelphia, and elsewhere—furniture, silverwork, ceramics, textiles, featherwork, large-scale oil paintings, and delicate paintings over mother-of-pearl called _encahados_. In organizing this exhibition I was especially drawn to the dramatic stories these objects tell: stories of discovery and exchange, artistic innovation and adaptation, and transit across oceans and continents.

The history of the colonial Americas has long been written as a series of encounters between Europe and the New World. The objects in this exhibition encourage us to think more broadly about the powerful influences from across the Pacific that changed the course of history.


One of the most extraordinary objects in the exhibition is this mid-eighteenth-century inlaid desk-and-bookcase made in Puebla de los Ángeles, Mexico (a nearly identical example is in the Museo José Luis Bello y González in Puebla). Never before exhibited, it embodies the newly globalized world. The dramatic interior features painting in gold on a red background and, on the doors, maps of an extensive hacienda in Veracruz. The maps are drawn in an indigenous style, reminiscent of early colonial maps of Mexico by native artists, but with a distinctly chinoiserie cast. The exterior features elaborate, geometric inlay of incised bone and wood in a Hispano-Moresque style, a remnant of the Moors’ centuries-long occupation of Spain. Objects such as this were the fruits of global trade.
Chinese silk textiles made their way to viceregal Peru in the seventeenth century, where skilled artisans created a group of striking textiles such as the spectacular and rare example woven in camelid (llama or alpaca) fibers and silk thread (top). Clearly influenced by Chinese embroideries of the type shown (bottom) that were exported to Peru, the indigenous example mixes Chinese iconography—phoenixes, peonies, and the xiezhi (an auspicious mythical creature) with indigenous fauna, such as alpacas (or perhaps vicuñas) and viscachas, silky-furred mountain rodents native to the Andes. The red background of the textile is produced with cochineal, a carmine dyestuff made in Peru from small cochineal insects harvested from cacti.
Situated between Asia and Europe, the Americas quite naturally became the hub of global trade and artistic exchange. Each year, beginning in 1573, Spanish ships sailing from Manila to Acapulco carried luxury goods gathered from across Asia: finely woven silk textiles and porcelains from China, delicately painted screens and luxurious lacquer wares from Japan, carved ivories from India and the Philippines, and spices from the Moluccas. One of the early artifacts of this trade may be this Chinese porcelain plate, discovered in a small auction in the Netherlands in 2004, that bears the coats of arms of the viceroy of Peru García Hurtado de Mendoza y Muriel and his wife Teresa de Castro y de la Cueva. The viceroy wrote in 1592 that he had recently received “some curious and attractive things for my household” from Manila, which could have included this delicate plate that traveled thousands of miles from China.

In emulating Asian imports, artists in the Americas often had to improvise. Seventeenth-century guild agreements among the potters in Puebla, Mexico, show that they were explicitly trying to replicate Chinese export porcelains. Since they did not have access to the fine white clays and kaolin needed to create true porcelains, they covered buff-colored earthenware pottery with a thick, white tin glaze, in much the same way potters did in Delft and in Talavera de la Reina in Spain, and decorated it with expensive cobalt blue. Unlike the serene backgrounds of most Asian porcelains, this basin shows Chinese figures in a landscape crowded with trees and natural features; the sides are decorated with intricate Islamic designs, a style popular in Mexican ceramics.

In the eighteenth century British-trained potters in North America made their own attempts at Chinese-style porcelain manufacture. John Bartlam, for instance, had set up a factory in Cain Hoy, South Carolina, by 1765. A small number of his soft-paste porcelain objects such as this delicate tea bowl have been rediscovered recently in England where Bartlam advertised he was exporting goods. Fine white clay had been discovered in the 1730s in the Carolinas, which allowed for the production of white-bodied ceramics with thinly potted sides and a smooth finish in the manner of the best imports.

American silversmiths also produced objects that emulated traditional Asian forms, such as this elegant 1738-1745 silver sugar bowl made by the Huguenot silversmith Simeon Soumaine of New York in the shape of an Asian lidded bowl. This elegant object bears the cipher of Elizabeth Cruger, who married New York merchant Henry Cruger in 1738 and returned with him to New York from her native Jamaica. It was there that the Crugers likely commissioned the bowl from Soumaine.
Although Boston is well known as a center of japanned furniture during the eighteenth century, the style also flourished in Brazil, Mexico, Guatemala, and Jamaica. The Mexican artist José Manuel de la Cerdas, for instance, created his own uniquely styled desks-on-stand, boxes, and bowls (large trays) with weeping willows delicately picked out in gold paint, unusual buildings, and soldiers on horseback over a black ground. This example, one of only two signed by the artist, may be decorated with nogue (a shiny resinous material made in Mexico using chia-seed and jute oils), taken from the Japanese word for lacquer, maki-e. Writing about de la Cerdas objects in 1766, a contemporary commented that “in fineness and luster they exceed Chinese lacquer and are possessions suitable for persons of very high status.”
In 1543 Portugal became the first European power to enter the Japanese market. Objects from Japan, such as luxurious lacquer wares, painted folding screens, and precious ceramics, were especially prized in Europe and its colonies in the Americas. The Japanese referred to the Portuguese traders, as they did all outsiders, as *nanban*, “southern Barbarians.” This folding screen shows Portuguese merchants and sailors—tall and bearded, wearing hats and puffy pants—trading in Japan. For the Japanese, paintings like this provided a rich and dynamic interpretation of these early trade encounters, which lasted only a short time. After less than a century, Japan closed almost entirely to the West in 1635 for more than two centuries.
Artists in Boston created patterns for japanned furniture and embroidered textiles with chinoiserie designs. Abigail Hiller, who ran a boarding school for girls in Boston in the 1740s and 1750s, advertised that she taught "Japanning, Quill-Work, Feather-Work and embroidering with Gold and Silver, ... with Patterns of all sorts of Drawing, and Materials for this Work." One source for Boston designs featured in the exhibition is a rare manuscript book dated 1718 by the French Huguenot painter Jean Berger, who moved to Boston from Canada around 1710. The book includes Berger's fanciful sketches in a chinoiserie style as well as architectural designs for stylish baroque interiors.

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DENNIS CARR is the Carolyn and Peter Lynch Curator of American Decorative Arts and Sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the curator of Made in the Americas: The New World Discovers Asia.