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Eighteenth-century Chinese reverse glass paintings in a Dutch collection

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EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CHINESE REVERSE GLASS PAINTINGS IN A DUTCH COLLECTION ART AND COMMODITY

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Abstract

Chinese export painting had a strong appeal to foreign powers active in China and neighboring Asian countries in the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. As a result, today, Chinese export paintings can be found in eighteen public collections in the Netherlands. Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden owns some sets of Chinese reverse glass paintings. The set central to this paper consists of nineteen eighteenth-century images with an interesting provenance dating back to 1824, the year when they entered the collection of the Royal Cabinet of Rarities. In this essay Van der Poel will discuss the subject matter of the two paintings from this delicate set of oil paintings that contain elements suggesting a strong link with the period they were produced and are exemplary for the westward movement of this specific painting genre. It is clear that these commodified artworks, with their cohesive values make this painting genre distinctive and a class in its own right.

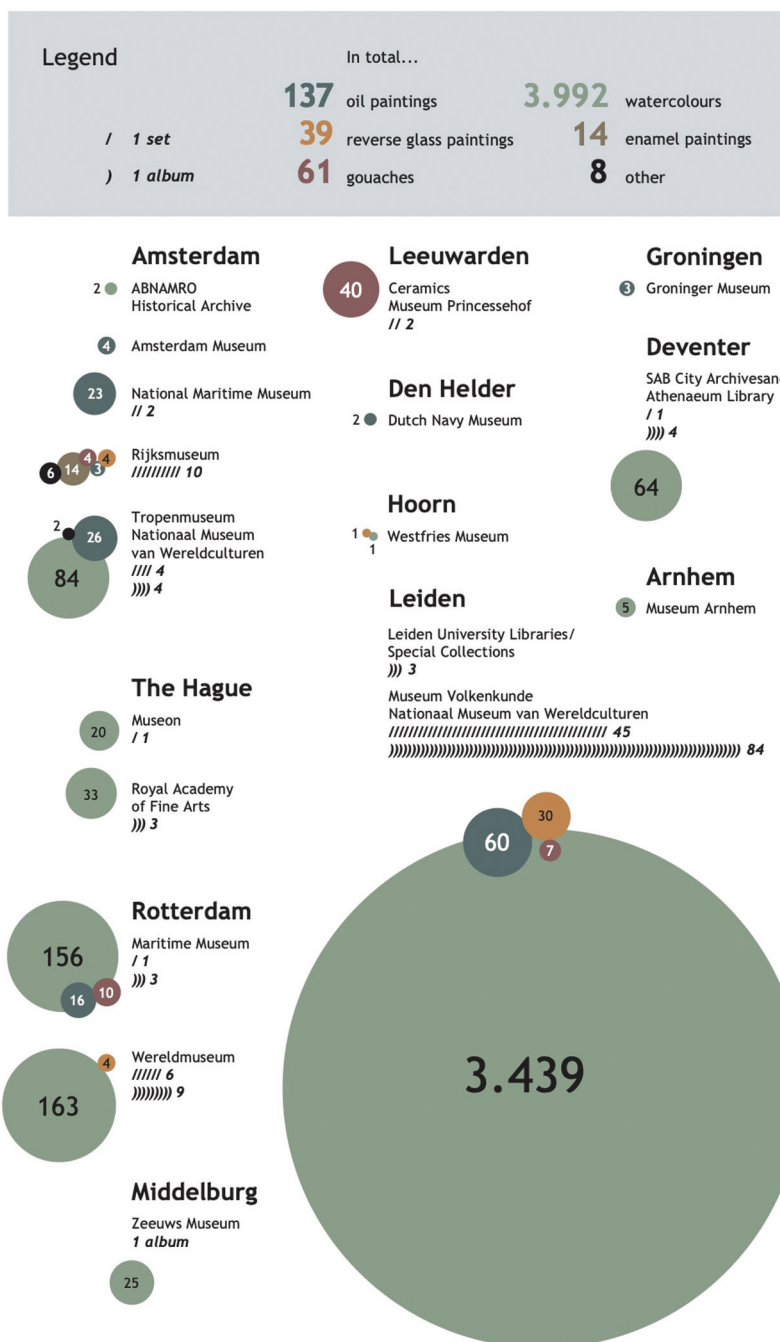
Keywords

China, the Netherlands, museum collections, Chinese reverse glass painting, export, commodity

Dutch Collections with Eighteenth-century Chinese Reverse Glass Paintings

Chinese export painting had a strong appeal to foreign powers active in China and neighboring Asian countries in the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.¹ As a result, today, they can be found in eighteen public collections in the Netherlands (fig. 1). These collections have an historic, an artistic, and a material value. They are closely related to the overseas historical China trade, either having been brought back by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) employees, private merchants, diplomats and government workers in the Chinese port city of Canton, or collected in the Dutch colonial households in Batavia and Cape Town and the coastal cities of India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), where the Dutch also had their trade settlements. These integrated economic relations produced, among other things, integrated art objects such as paint-

Chinese export paintings in Dutch collections



1 Chinese Export Paintings in Dutch Collections.



2 *Garden Scene*, 1860–1900, reverse glass painting, 49×34 cm, Museum Volkenkunde / Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, RV-6166-6.

ings, which, as a result of their representative and social functions, over time formed a special artistic phenomenon, and a shared cultural visual repertoire with its own Eurasian character.

The National Museum of World Cultures, which consists of Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, Afrikamuseum in Berg en Dal, Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, and Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam, owns a couple of sets of Chinese reverse glass paintings in its collections. This paper will consider three of these sets:

1. A small cohesive set of three nineteenth-century paintings in the Museum Volkenkunde with identical original hardwood frames that depict two harbor views and one interior-garden scene (figs. 2–4).² The interior scene with three figures in an open room and on a garden terrace could be a scene from a story from Chinese classical literature: “Dream of the Red Chamber, The Story of the Western Wing” or “The Romance of the Three Kingdoms.” On the second painting, it is not exactly clear which location is presented.³ The painting shows some foreign factories in China along with a customs office. It can either be the Bund in Shanghai or the port of Yuezhou (today Yueyang) with the custom building *Shangyang guan*. The third painting shows a view of the Hong Kong Harbor with white buildings and hills in the background.⁴ The paintings belonged to the couple Mr. and Mrs. Reinders Folmer, who lived and worked in Shanghai, Kobe, and Tokyo in the 1930s and 1940s.
2. A set of four reverse glass paintings in the Wereldmuseum with a gilded wooden frame (fig. 5). After reading the seminal works of Jérôme Samuel, Thierry Audric, and the research of Seiichi Sasaki et al. about Indonesian painting on glass,⁵ some serious doubt exists whether these four paintings were originally made in China, which was the assumption until now, or came from a (Chinese) painter in the East Indies. The set was purchased by the Wereldmuseum in 1889 from Mr. Kellen.
3. A set of nineteen eighteenth-century “sensitive plates,” nineteen Chinese reverse glass paintings in the collection of Museum Volkenkunde, which deserves attention for a variety of reasons (fig. 6).⁶



3 *Harbor View*, 1860–1900, reverse glass painting, 34.4 × 50 cm, Museum Volkenkunde / Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, RV-6166-7.



4 *View of Hong Kong*, 1860–1900, reverse glass painting, 34.4 × 50 cm, Museum Volkenkunde / Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, RV-6166-8.

Valuable Sets

The value of these artworks as coherent sets cannot be overestimated. Sets of paintings can be understood as “sets” because the images clearly belong together. They form a coherent whole in terms of style, color use, materials used, or as a genre. They carry identical original frames or were commissioned and/or produced simultaneously. The documentary and serial nature of a set, which is often thematically constructed, contributes to the individual images within such a set accruing value. Together, the images form a narrative that, in a logical and coherent manner, makes the unknown “exotic” scenes familiar and thus tells a meaningful story.



5 *Set of 4 Portraits of Chinese Dignitary Women*, nineteenth century, reverse glass painting, 60.5 × 45 cm (2 paintings) and 70 × 51 cm (2 paintings), Wereldmuseum Rotterdam / National Museum of World Cultures, 3954 to 3957.

“Sensitive Plates” in Leiden

“The set of 19” in Leiden has an interesting provenance dating back to 1824, the year when they entered the collection of the Royal Cabinet of Rarities in The Hague. The archive of the Royal Cabinet informs us that on the 1 May 1824 there was a purchase of paintings from China.⁷ Further research in the National Archives of the Netherlands supplement the provenance information about this set. The original documents tell us that following a request to the Minister of Education, Arts and Sciences, and after a Royal Decree of 17 April 1824, the then director of the Royal Cabinet of Rarities was able to buy the set.⁸



6 Set of 19 Reverse Glass Paintings, 1785–1790, reverse glass painting, 52.5×81 cm, Museum Volkenkunde / National Museum of World Cultures, RV-360-1113 to 1131.

The Brief Visitors' Guide to View the Collection of Rarities in the Royal Cabinet at the Mauritshuis in The Hague, prepared by Abraham Anne van de Kastelee in 1860, mentions the display related to this set of paintings: "Nineteen paintings, beautifully painted on glass, depicting the sowing and harvesting of rice, picking tea, views of Canton, Wampo and Makkao, a camp where the emperor is reviewing troops, and interiors and verandas."⁹

In March 1883, a premise in Leiden was taken over by the National Museum of Ethnology (today Museum Volkenkunde), and the diverse national collections of ethnographica were united. This meant the end of the popular Royal Cabinet of Rarities in The Hague. At the same time Leiden received a treasure trove of ethnographic material within its city walls, along with this set of Chinese reverse glass paintings. Paid for from state coffers, the set enriched the royal collection from May 1824 to its surcease in 1883.¹⁰

The paintings in question were produced between 1785 and 1790. They contain elements, suggesting a strong link with this period: for example, the flags of Western countries, the house construction, or the types of ships. Similarities in technique, quality, and size lead us to assume that all of these paintings were created at approximately the same time. Furthermore, the scenes depicted in these technically inventive, detailed, and colorful paintings that are nearly all in a fine state of preservation give us valuable information about aspects of Chinese society at the end of the eighteenth century. In the course of time, however, after they had entered the museum in Leiden, it became quiet around this set of paintings. After more than a century, in the 1990s, the then curator of Chinese collections at the museum correctly attributed the set again. He researched all aspects of the different subject matter represented in the paintings, including their technical and compositional aspects. Moreover, he had them restored and subsequently organized an exhibition. In 2001, they were put on public display in the museum and an informative catalog *"Sensitive Plates": Nineteen Chinese Paintings on Glass*, to accompany the exhibition, was published.¹¹

Emblematic for the Westward Movement of Chinese Export Paintings

The next part of this paper will review the two paintings with a maritime subject matter from this delicate set of reverse glass paintings in the Leiden museum that contain elements suggesting a strong link with the period they were produced and are emblematic for the westward movement of this specific painting genre (figs. 7–8). They contain concrete clues to the presence of westerners in China at that time.

The *Quay of Canton* and *Whampoa Anchorage* were two of the most outstanding places, if not the only ones in the area of Canton during the eighteenth and nineteenth century for all events related to the foreigners visiting this important Chinese port city. Almost every sea trader who visited China returned home with a painting of Canton and/or Whampoa, which were the utmost artistic symbols of the historical China trade. The painting titled *Quay of Canton* (fig. 7) depicts the Pearl River with various boats and the quay with the Western factories. In this area only foreign merchants were permitted to stay. The flags outlined against the empty sky easily identify the trading posts. From left to right we see the Danish flag, the Spanish flag (in fact, the Philippine trading company), the white flag of the French royal house, and the Swedish, British, and Dutch flags. There are some clear indications for a date of about 1785–1790 for this painting. First of all, we see the white pre-revolutionary French flag. After the revolution in 1790, the white French flag was replaced with the *tricolor*. Furthermore, the American flag is not depicted. This means that the painting can probably be dated just before 1785, when the Americans arrived in Canton for the first time. On top of these indications, the architectural elements of depicted buildings give some clear hints to the period of 1785–1790, such as the entries and balconies on the British and Dutch stations, for example. In this painting the projecting section of the entry to the British station is depicted with a closed arcade on columns. In the 1780s, a narrow entrance



7 *Quay of Canton* (from set of 19 paintings), 1785–1900, reverse glass painting, 52.5×81 cm, Museum Volkenkunde / National Museum of World Cultures, RV-360-1116.

with a simple roof on open columns was replaced by an entry three times as wide. Similarly, in this painting the Dutch station has a double extension on the ground floor. Before 1780s, this structure had only one floor layer.¹²

The island of Whampoa lay slightly over 100 kilometers north of Macao and 15 kilometers south of Canton. Western ships laid at anchor in this roadstead because of the Pearl River's limited navigability for the numerous big sailing ships. In the foreground of the painting *Whampoa Anchorage* (fig. 8) lies the Dane Island with fields, groves of bamboo, boggy meadowland, and a hill with the Protestant cemetery.¹³ This island, like the French island to the left, was used as a burial place for Westerners.¹⁴ In the middle of the river lies the island of Whampoa, with a strip of sand, some grass, and trees. On the island the nine-storied Pazhou Pagoda proudly rises above the trees. To the right of the trees one can see a smaller pagoda, which no longer exists.¹⁵ Most of the ships are depicted with their topmasts struck. The masts were taken down during the months when the ships laid at anchor, so that they could not depart immediately in this condition. All the commodities they brought with them were shipped from Whampoa to Canton in river junks, or what were called *chop* boats. A special feature of this image is an extremely fine representation of the ships. Their countries of origin are easy to recognize: England, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and America. As the Americans did not begin their China trade in Canton before 1785, we may conclude that this painting was produced in that year, shortly after their arrival.



8 *Whampoa Anchorage* (from set of 19 paintings), 1785–1900, oil on glass, anonymous, 52.5×81 cm, Museum Volkenkunde / National Museum of World Cultures, RV-360-1115.

Some may say that these indications say nothing about the production date of the painting. Since this subject has been repeatedly copied, the representation of Canton or Whampoa can be of a situation from an earlier date and therefore can deviate from the period when the painting was actually made. In this sense, the harbor views are absolutely not indexical. It is likely, however, that Westerners never bought outdated views of Canton, because these views changed almost yearly. Architectural elements of the *hongs* in Canton, new remarkable landmarks in the cityscapes, land reclamation, and the sort and quantity of vessels in front of the quay were some of the aspects that determined whether a view of Canton is up-to-date or not.

Value Accruelement and/or Dwindle?

This essay must conclude with some remarks about the evaluation of this specific painting genre of Chinese export paintings on glass. We can conclude that value always exists in the eyes of the beholder. Due to a prevailing narrow definition of art, for a long time Chinese export paintings were seen as indigenous works of art and were, as Howard Morphy states, “excluded from the art museum or gallery and often sat unrecognized in the ethnographic museum.”¹⁶ These non-European artworks were more or less denied (at least in the Netherlands) primary display spaces in the art museums, where their distinctive features could be viewed to maximum effect. How-

ever, for the future, we need to acknowledge that art museums, together with ethnographic museums, maritime museums, libraries, and archives, will become partners in collecting and collection management. This movement, currently being embraced by scholars in the field, will lead to a new outlook on these kinds of paintings by developing new overlapping relationships in collection management by designing virtual institutions in which these artworks will be compatible.

Their current value is amassed through their cultural biography, which started at the Chinese export painting market, and by their trajectory, which has accrued value during their social life, which, in turn, adds to their artistic, historical, and material value. Furthermore, the history of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century emerges for us through these paintings. They convey many stories instead of being witnesses to one single place or moment in time. On top of that, new conservation technologies, new questions, and new museum scholarship will open new meanings for them.

Thanks to these hybrid material signifiers with Chinese cultural dimensions in Dutch museums, China has a substantial visual artifactual presence throughout the Netherlands (fig. 1). This country still has a thriving sea transport industry in China and so should value this artistic commodity that has so much to do with the earlier overseas trade by the Dutch. The future, therefore, holds a promise of change for this particular painting phenomenon with its representative function. It is clear that these commodified artworks, with their cohesive values, make this painting genre distinctive and a class in its own right.

- 1 Parts of the text for this chapter has been taken from the dissertation *Made for Trade – Made in China: Chinese Export Painting in Dutch Collections: Art and Commodity*. See Van der Poel 2016.
- 2 Inv. nos. RV-6166-6 to 6166-8. For the information on the three paintings, I am indebted to Angela Reinders Folmer (1948), one of the descendants of their first owner. Her narrative made it possible to compile the life story of these privately-owned paintings until they were donated to the museum in Leiden. I have spoken to her on 24 November 2014 and later corresponded by email (16 August 2015). I have asked her the following questions: Where and when were the paintings obtained? Are there any stories known about the buying process and the time the first documented owner stayed in China or in the Dutch East Indies (diary, logbook)? Who inherited the paintings, or who owned them from the moment of their purchase to their location in the museum rack? Do you know what meaning or value was assigned to the paintings by the consecutive heirs? Can we draw any conclusions from this information? How was the decision taken to donate the paintings to a museum rather than take them to an auction? As a donor, do you have any wishes with respect to the artworks? How would you describe their value to future generations? Although Angela Reinders Folmers has checked the narrative of these paintings with her other relatives, I would, however, add a caveat, because this story is just one source and memory can play “tricks” when remembering the past.
- 3 Inv. no. RV-6166-7. The fluttering flags on the roofs of the foreign trading houses indicated the countries that were established in the presented port city in that period. From left to right, we see the United Kingdom (a red flag with the Union Jack in the top corner: the British red ensign), alongside the United States, next to which is a building depicted with a blue flag with a white diagonal cross. This is the Scottish Saltire. A flag with a slightly smaller cross is the house flag of the Aberdeen, Newcastle & Hull Steam Co., from Aberdeen. On the far right, we see the French tricolor. Then, pictured in the foreground are three black screw-propeller steam ships with flags. From left to right: United Kingdom, with the red ensign, France, with the tricolor and a second

white flag with red triangles in the four corners and two large black cursive letters "WW." This WW is an inverted "MM," indicating the house flag of the Cie. des Messageries Maritimes from Paris, and pictured on the front far right of the painting is a ship with a white, triangular flag with a red diagonal stripe. Alongside the steam corvettes, in the water in front of the quay, a small clipper in full sail is visible. Source flags: Lloyd's book of house flags and funnels: <http://www.mysticseaport.org/library/initiative/ImPage.cfm>.

- 4 Inv. no. RV 6166-8. On the buildings, painted in a repeating motif, eleven house flags flutter on the back row of foreign shipping companies. From left to right we can distinguish: 1. Aberdeen, Newcastle & Hull Steam Co., Dundee & Newcastle Steam Shipping Co. Ltd., or Indo China Steam Navigation Co. Ltd. London; 2. and 3. Both, United Kingdom with the Union Jack in the top corner: the British red ensign; 4. United States; 5. English house flag; 6. France; 7. Unknown; 8. R & C Allen, Glasgow of International Line Steamship Co. Ltd. (Christopher Marwood Whitby); 9. Denmark; 10. England; 11. Richard Irvin & Sons Ltd., Aberdeen, Eastern Shipping Co. Penang of Dolphin Steam Fishing Co. Ltd., Grimsby. In the foreground of the painting, we can see three black British screw propeller steamships, recognizable from the flags. From left to right, a ship with a red flag with the Union Jack in the top corner, the red ensign. In the middle is a ship with a flag divided diagonally into four quarters: white on the top, blue on the left side, red on the right side, yellow on the bottom (which has fallen off the painting). This is the house flag of the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Nav. Co., London, 1834.
- 5 Samuel 2005, Audric 2020, and Sasaki et al. 1989.
- 6 Inv. nos. RV-360-1113 to RV-1131, Van der Poel 2016, 118–119.
- 7 Effert 2003, 263: NA 2.04.01-4925; ANH 836: 134a.
- 8 NA 2.04.01, 4855, 12 April 1824, and 26 April 1824, no.99, A-series.
- 9 Van de Kastele 1860, 29.
- 10 NA 2.04.01, 4925, Index 1824, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Fifth Dept. Education, Arts and Sciences 1815-1848. "Executie 1 mei 8.F"; NA 2.04.01, 4882, 1 May 1824, F-series; NA 2.04.01, 4917, 1 May 1824.
- 11 Van Dongen 2001. In *Sensitive Plates* Van Dongen describes each of the paintings individually in terms of their iconography and iconology. He also provides a brief overview of the history of this art form, which began in eighteenth-century China. Apparently, the Jesuits introduced the technique and the accompanying use of materials into China around 1760.
- 12 Crossman 1991, 431.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Conner 2002, 81.
- 15 Gregory 2005, 93.
- 16 Morphy 2009, 62.

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