The Man Who Had Everything: Qianlong as Patron of the Arts
Patricia Berger, April 29, 2016

The Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1795), in a letter to King George III of England, responded to the gifts brought by the delegation led by Lord George Macartney in 1793, writing: "As your ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufacture."

Collecting modes: gifts received and given; imperial production of new objects; variations on a theme; faux effects and illusory scenes; copies of famous old objects.

Paintings and Prints:


Tribute objects brought by Macartney, as described by George Saunders: [Allan Ramsay, Portrait of George III, 1762] (and reverse glass painting, ca. 1810), Weltmaschine of Philipp Matthäus Henss; Burning lens.


Portait of the Qianlong emperor: Is it One or is it Two?是一是二, originally kept in the Sanxitang 三希堂 (Three Rarities Hall) of the Yangxindian 養心殿 (Hall of Cultivating the Mind). Note: Wang Mang-era (9-23 CE) grain measure and Ming Xuande (1425-35) blue-and-white porcelain jar with Buddhist dharani (talismanic phrase).

Porcelain in 4 categories: overglaze enamels in Chinese style (fengai 粉彩), overglaze enamels in European style (falangcai 琺琺彩), yaobian 窯變 "kiln transformation" glazes, faux-surfaces.
Foreign places:
Yuanmingyuan 圓明園: Chinese gardens and Western palaces
Chengde 承德: Eight Outer Monasteries 外八廟, "replicas" of famous temples, such as the Potala, Lhasa (Putuozongchengmiao 普陀宗乘廟, built to celebrate the Qianlong emperor's 60th birthday and the pledging of allegiance of the Torguts in 1771, and Tashilunpo, Shigatse (Xumifushoumiao 須弥福壽廟, built to honor the visit of the Panchen Lama in 1780 on the occasion of the emperor's 70th birthday).

Religious objects:
The Qianlong emperor in the robes of a Lama and with the attributes of Maṇjuśrī, thangka, colors on cotton (Freer and Sackler Galleries, Washington, DC)
Buddhist pantheons of the Qianlong emperor's guru, Rolpay Dorje: Fanhua lou (梵華樓, Hall of Buddhist Efflorescence), 300 Icons, 360 Icons.
Replicas of Famous Images: Sandalwood Buddha (lost?), Arya Lokeśvara, 1744, gift of the Tibetan leader Polhanas (Yonghegong, Beijing), Śadākṣarī Lokeśvara (AAMSF), based on a Ming-dynasty Yongle-period (1403-24) image woven into presentation scarves.

Catalogues and illustrated compendia of the Qing emperors: Shiqu baoji 石渠寶笈 (1744-45, catalogue of the imperial painting collection); Bidian zhulin 秘殿竹林 (1744-45, catalogue of the imperial collection of Buddhist and Daoist images); Xiqing gujian 西清古鑑 (completed in 1755, catalogue of the imperial bronze collection); Jiao Bingzhen 焦秉貞, Gengzhitu 耕織圖 (1696, Pictures of Agriculture and Weaving); Album of Porcelain Production, 1738, etc.

Recommended reading: