

THE ARTISTIC COMMUNICATION BETWEEN EUROPE AND CHINA IN THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

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ABSTRACT: *This article is a comparative study of European and Chinese arts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Unlike the earlier studies which emphasized unilateral Chinese impacts on European art, this study examines mutual artistic influence between China and Europe. It also discusses how Europeans initiated the artistic communication and absorbed the chinoiserie as part of the Rococo, and how Chinese interacted with European missionary artists and adopted Rococo elements and techniques in the courtly art. Rather than imitating indiscriminately, European and Chinese artists combined the exotic novelties with their own patterns, forming these uniquely blended styles, and kept the communication until the early nineteenth century. This paper provides a history of cultural exchange between East and West through a systematic analysis of contemporary paintings, literature, architecture, and craftworks.*

KEYWORDS: *Rococo, chinoiserie, missionary artists, Chinese courtly art, intercultural communication*

In the early eighteenth century, Rococo style emerged in France as an ultimate expression of Baroque movements.¹ Compared to the Baroque, the Rococo was exceptionally decorative and flamboyant without the restriction of orders. It soon engaged with more admirers in Great Britain, Italy, Germany, and Russia, becoming the dominant artistic trend in the eighteenth century. Meanwhile, in the East, Chinese emperors and officials in the Qing Dynasty patronized courtly arts for clothes, etiquette, and entertainment. Supported by the centralized state power, royal arts came into its triumph, marked by the blossom of porcelain, handicrafts, and architecture. Overall,

¹ Victoria and Albert Museum, "What is Rococo?"
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/rococo>

these two styles seemed to be different and unrelated, whereas global trade provided artistic communication between Europe and China.

The Development of Artistic Communication

In 200 BCE, Han Dynasty established the Silk Road, which exchanged Chinese silk, tea, and ritual vessels for the Middle East's goods, such as perfume and spices. Only a few goods finally arrived in Europe with intermediate business. Europeans did not massively interact with Chinese art and economy until the middle sixteenth century. In the 1550s, during the Age of Discovery, Chinese and European merchants started direct sea trade on a large scale and in long distance. In addition to flourishing global economy, sea trade broadened its impacts to cultural and political aspects. Chinese high-quality goods and prosperous society drew the attention of European philosophers to Qing's social orders and government. Therefore, in the seventeenth century, European visitors came to China as missionaries, to diffuse Catholicism and understand Chinese culture. They brought European artworks and artistic skills, which served as a means to enter the palace to spread religions.² Returning to their home countries, missionary artists carried their journals with delicate Chinese art. Consequently, sea trade and missionaries made artistic communication possible for the two unrelated artistic styles. Rococo absorbed chinoiserie as one of its unique characteristics,³ and Chinese blended Rococo elements and technical skills into the courtly art. However, the communication started to decline as the neoclassical style popularized in Europe in the 1760s. Later in the mid-nineteenth century, European favors of chinoiserie decreased. With the initiation of the First Opium War, the Chinese closed-door policy blocked import and export goods. The disruption of sea trade almost ended the European Oriental interest.⁴ Therefore, artistic communication based on missionaries and business became a history since then.

Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), one of the pioneer missionaries traveled to China, kept his Chinese experiences in the journal with notes and images. Based on Ricci's records, Athanasius Kircher (1602–80), a German Jesuit scholar, published a treatise titled *China Illustrata* in 1667, which later became an essential source for seventeenth-century Europeans to know China.⁵ Although Kircher's narration and paintings were recomposed, the treatise still incorporated original religious meanings. The depiction of the Chinese palace and gardens also provided useful information about Chinese architecture. In the treatise, Kircher drew Ricci and Xu

² Robert L. Thorp and Richard Ellis Vinograd, *Chinese Art and Culture* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001).

³ Victoria and Albert Museum. "Chinoiserie." <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/s/style-guide-chinoiserie/>

⁴ Harry Gelber, *Opium, Soldiers and Evangelicals: England's 1840–42 War with China and its Aftermath* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

⁵ "Matteo Ricci (1552–1610)," In *Ideas of Chinese Gardens: Western Accounts, 1300–1860*, edited by Rinaldi Bianca Maria (2016): 52–56.

Guangxi, a Chinese promoter and benefactor of the missionary (Fig. 1). Their elegant manners and delicate clothes were similar, suggesting the relationship and communication between China and Europe. Jesuit members did their missionary work with intelligence and persistence, which provided them the same mental ground with Chinese scholar-officials. Conversely, a favorable Chinese reputation in Europe led to European homage to scholar-officials' wisdom and rigorous scholarship. On the wall, there was a portrait of the Virgin Mary and her child, a piece of ancient Chinese calligraphy, and "Ricci" and "Guangqi" in Chinese and Latin. The portrait of the Virgin Mary and her child suggested religious paintings and artistic techniques, such as chiaroscuro and linear perspective, that missionaries brought to China. Bilingual names represented missionaries' major work that translated Catholic texts and scientific documents into Chinese and Chinese history and moral books into Latin.⁶

Chinoiserie in Europe

In response to the favor of Chinese culture in Europe, European arts added Chinese elements in different aspects — without barely restricting to paintings — including fabrics, furniture, interior decoration, music, garden designs, and drama. Contemporary artists named the trend “chinoiserie,” the European interpretation and imitation of Chinese and East Asian artistic traditions.⁷ In the book *Art de la Chine*, Voltaire explained the impact of chinoiserie on Europe that “the fact remains that four thousand years ago when we [Europeans] did not know how to read, they [the Chinese] knew everything essentially useful of which we boast today.”⁸ In other words, Europeans realized that it existed a country where the brilliant culture could rival with the Roman and Greek civilizations in the East. Chinoiserie, hidden in Chinese goods, provided opportunities for Europeans to know a different and novel culture that was more than four thousand years old.

Paintings

The popularity of chinoiserie peaked around the mid-eighteenth century when it belonged to the Rococo. Both of them included flamboyant decorations, asymmetry, twisted curves, and subject matters concentrating on pleasure and leisure.⁹ Jean-Baptiste Pillement (1728 – 1808) was a French painter and designer known for his exquisite depictions of landscape. Appealing to Chinese elements and culture, Pillement spared his life permeating chinoiserie in lightness and humor throughout Europe. His engraving artworks ranged from rural-life scenes (Fig. 2) to landscape (Fig. 3) to Chinese figures (Fig. 4). Most of his designs were later applied in the

⁶ Alfaro, et al., “Jesuit Missions,” in *Artes De México*, no. 65 (2003): 81-112.

⁷ The Oxford English Dictionary. “Chinois.”

⁸ Arthur Lovejoy, “Voltaire,” in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948).

⁹ See note 2 above.

production of ceramics, silver, fabrics, tapestries, and wallpapers in France and England (Fig. 5, 6, 7). Among his works, the engraving *Recueil de Plusieurs Jeux d'Enfants Chinois* [Chinese Children's Games] was the most popular design for manufacturers to reproduce (Fig. 2).¹⁰ It depicted a rural scene that two Chinese boys were playing the seesaw. The light projected from the bottom-right corner to the back of the child of lower position, creating a sense of gentle and peaceful feeling based on the *chiaroscuro*. The lower child had emotional contrast with the higher child, who held the seesaw tightly. Afraid of the slipping down, the higher child's feet swung back and forth, which established dynamism in the engraving. In addition to the picturesque illustration, multiple layers of clothes, unique male hairstyles, and pine trees' background unmistakably followed ancient Chinese customs.

On the other hand, the difference between European chinoiserie and actual Chinese art drew the critic's attention. Artwork like Pillement's engravings indeed reflected Chinese cultures; however, for chinoiserie in other paintings, "paradoxically, it is this imitation and repetition of the iconic signs of China that negate the very possibility of authenticity, and render them into stereotypes."¹¹ Williams Alexander (1767–1816) was a British painter who traveled to China in the late seventeenth century. Engaged with Chinese culture and landscape, Alexander depicted an idealized and romanticized version of China. However, he was influenced by "pre-established visual signs."¹² Therefore, instead of representing the real Chinese nature, his interpretation of chinoiserie was excessively Rococo that the Chinese elements were based on western preconceptions.

Documentation and Literature

Europeans gained insights into China with missionaries' journals and images. Other influential documentation of early Chinese cultures included *An Embassy to the Emperor to China* published by Dutch author Johan Nieuhof (1618–1672). It narrated Nieuhof's experiences in China, as well as the illustration of Chinese cities and pagoda. For eighteenth-century Europeans, more generalized documentation came from *Description of the Empire of China*,¹³ by which Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (1674–1743), a French Jesuit historian specialized in China, compiled the sections of geography, history, politics, and customs based on missionaries' mails and journals. He also translated excerpts from ancient Chinese philosophy, poems, novels, and drama. As the first Chinese drama introduced to Europe, the *Orphan of Zhao* posed a contrast between Chinese dramatic tradition and English neoclassical drama. In Du

¹⁰ Maria Gordon-Smith, "The Influence of Jean Pillement on French and English Decorative Arts Part Two: Representative Fields of Influence." *Artibus Et Historiae* 21, no. 42 (2000): 119-63.

¹¹ Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. (New York: Manchester UP, 2014).

¹² See note 11 above.

¹³ See note 2 above.

Halde's French translation, he criticized that the Chinese version lacked three unities of time, place, and action, which Europeans soon adjusted to these requirements in the recomposition.¹⁴ In the following English adaptations, Thomas Percy remained original Chinese songs that Du Halde did not preserve, William Hatchett concentrated on political polemic that reflected by the revenge, Voltaire compared Confucian virtues with European ideas in the Enlightenment, and Arthur Murphy elaborated the difference between Chinese loyalty and British liberty.¹⁵ Therefore, the adaptations in literature raised the discussion of Chinese politics and philosophy in the Enlightenment. Philosophers also praised highly on Chinese social order, moral values, and political system and set as China as a model in European countries.

However, similar to chinoiserie in paintings, some literature twisted the Chinese reality with Western preconceptions to fit the European tastes. In Daniel Defoe's second part of *Robinson Crusoe*, he initially favorably depicted China by describing Nanking as a well-established Chinese coastal city. However, he later presented an overwhelmingly negative evaluation of China:

But when I come to compare the miserable people of these countries with ours, their fabrics, their manner of living, their government, their religion, their wealth, and their glory, as some call it, I must confess I do not so much as think it is worth naming, or worth my while to write of, or any shall after me to read.¹⁶

"It had been commonplace in Western accounts ... to reflect on China's comparative military vulnerabilities."¹⁷ However, Defoe utilized Robinson's voice to reflect China as an "impotent and imperfect" country, compared to European countries. His narration might have certain evidential support, but the hostile shift of attitude was either due to his "personal moral conviction" or to "appeal to his British middle-class readers."¹⁸ For most eighteenth-century Europeans, their impressions towards China were fusions of facts, imagination, and fiction. No matter to depict China as an enlightened country with superior administration or a weak state with absurdly ignorant citizens, the view of China somehow mingled with idealized western opinions and preconceptions.

Architecture and Garden Designs

Juan González de Mendoza (1545–1618) was one of the Spanish authors of *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*. The book recorded Spanish travelers' observations on their way to China, including the convenient transportation in Fujian (a coastal city in southwestern China), Chinese-style memorial arches, and

14 Shiao-ling Yu. "The Orphan of Zhao: Chinese Revenge Drama and European Adaptations." *Comparative Literature Studies* 55, no. 1 (2018): 154

15 Yu, 152-60.

16 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1868): 548.

17 Jonathan D. Spence, "Deliberate Fictions," in *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Mind* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).

18 See note 17 above.

astonishing techniques of bridge production. Mendoza evaluated Chinese cities, towns, and architecture that “there were men who were excellent in architecture in all places, and the necessities they had to build with are the best in the world.”¹⁹ Indeed, Chinese architecture and garden designs were attractive icons as they came to Western royal families.

Matteo Ripa (1682–1746) was an Italian priest who came to China as a missionary. Between 1710 and 1723, he worked as a missionary artist at the Manchu court. With Emperor Kangxi’s patronage, Ripa introduced the technique of copperplate engraving to China. However, he exerted a more significant influence on European garden designs. While visiting the Imperial Summer Palace in Chengde, Ripa illustrated Yan Xun Shan Guan (the view of a palace on the hill) with engraving (Fig. 8). In 1724, his depiction was widespread in Europe and inspired Europeans with Chinese concepts of gardens. The artwork displayed a Chinese garden based on the natural landscape and asymmetrical layout, whereas contemporary European gardens cemented geometric design and elaborately shaped grass and trees. However, the Chinese garden seems plain, but it was actually with meticulous designing, artificial management, and even vast amounts of time and labor forces.²⁰ Ripa’s engraving of Chinese gardens and architecture encouraged English gardens to broaden boundaries, reduce fences, and utilize the broad views of asymmetrical trees, lawn, and ponds to create a sense of freedom and natural effects. As chinoiserie suggested Chinese philosophical and political opinions, Europeans always compared the utilization of Chinese garden designs with idealized Chinese institutional reports. Therefore, garden designs also triggered political debates on nature and freedom. Moreover, pavilion with Chinese or East Asian styles often existed in European gardens, accompanied by an ancient Chinese architectural style, forming an exotic and historical atmosphere. The incorporated Chinese elements soon became a hot topic in the discussion of Enlightenment philosophers, such as Voltaire and Quesnay.²¹

The Rococo in China

Unlike Europeans sent missionaries to China, Chinese emperors directly invited western visitors to imperial courts and promoted them as royal artists. Therefore, the courtly art started to mingle with the Rococo and further adapted to a blended style in the early seventeenth century. Although western countries initiated this communication, instead of passive absorbing the exotic novelties, Chinese artists actively selected superior skills and European elements. Until the late eighteenth century, the Rococo and its techniques, widely used in paintings, porcelain, and royal architecture, became one of the indispensable features of Chinese courtly art.

¹⁹ Juan González de Mendoza, *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*, (1588): 16.

²⁰ See note 2 above.

²¹ See note 2 above.

Missionary Artists and Paintings

European artists were originally Jesuit missionaries, aiming at engaging with Chinese Catholic preachers from elite to commoners.²² It was European art they brought provided them chances to enter the palace and maintain contact with Chinese officials, even emperors. However, when Chinese novelty towards the Rococo wore off, missionary artists found the flamboyant effects in the Rococo had little influence on the Chinese elite, not to mention the commoners. Chinese did not appreciate the strong visual effects, as Europeans did. Therefore, to mingle the western means of painting with Chinese tastes was inevitable. Under Emperor Kangxi's patronage, missionary artists succeeded in the cultural exchange in paintings, as well as mathematics, medicine, and other artistic fields.²³ Moreover, encouraged to utilize more Chinese elements, missionary artists formed a blended means of painting, usually using western techniques to depict Chinese themes or incorporating both Western and Chinese subjects in one painting. As a consequence, European artists were somehow altered by Chinese customers.

Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) was an Italian Jesuit who worked for the imperial court from 1715 to 1766. Employed by three successive emperors of Kangxi, Yongzheng, Qianlong, he was given a Chinese name Lang Shining, which suggested his fusion into Chinese culture. Castiglione depicted artworks that praised the emperor's glory and ruling concepts, such as the emperor's portrait, imperial figures, horses, pets, and fighting scenes.²⁴ One of his most famous paintings was the handscroll of *One Hundred Horses in a Landscape* (Fig 9). "It was largely done in a European-style in accordance with the rules of perspective, and with a consistent light source." However, Castiglione did not neglect the Chinese elements. He combined different perspectives on Chinese spatial aesthetics. The technique of *chiaroscuro*, widely used in Rococo, was also reduced since "there are only traces of shadow under the hooves of the horses."²⁵

Similar to what Castiglione did, contemporary adaptations to the Rococo inspired the local Chinese production of arts. In Liu Zhixue's painting *The Returning Procession of the God of Mount Tai* (Fig. 10), he "unmistakably utilized linear perspective in a symmetrical composition in which all lines converge at one point on the central line within the pictorial frame."²⁶ The vanishing point located on the bottom of Mount Tai, which was also the end of walls. The trees, in a largest-

²² See note 6 above.

²³ Marco Musillo, "Reconciling Two Careers: The Jesuit Memoir of Giuseppe Castiglione Lay Brother and Qing Imperial Painter." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 1 (2008): 45.

²⁴ Musillo, 45-49

²⁵ "Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766)". Media Center for Art History, University of Columbia.

²⁶ Cheng-hua Wang, "WHITHER ART HISTORY? A Global Perspective on Eighteenth-Century Chinese Art and Visual Culture." *The Art Bulletin* 96, no. 4 (2014): 387.

to-smallest order, also contribute to the spatial recession. Meanwhile, the negative space behind figures and the environment suggested the beauty of emptiness in Chinese aesthetics. Other than paintings, in the woodblock print *Perspective Picture of the West* (Fig. 11), the painter Sun Yunqiu revised the original European version. Based on a linear perspective and chiaroscuro, he illustrated a river scene with Dutch architecture.²⁷ Trees and a bridge, located in the foreground, created an open space with the house in the background, establishing a sense of spatial recession. Consequently, the Rococo techniques and European elements exerted stylish impacts on Chinese courtly art. European artists changed their manner to fit Chinese customer's tastes, and, in turn, the Chinese held a gradually open and favorable attitude towards this blended artistic pattern.

Architecture and Garden Designs

As Europeans appreciated the naturalism and plainness in Chinese gardens, Chinese imperial families also praised the luxurious European architectural styles. For Castiglione, his artistic contribution was not solely limited to paintings. In 1747, Emperor Kangxi initiated a construction project of a European-style palace in Yuanmingyuan, an imperial garden of China. Castiglione and other missionary artists designed Xiyanglou (Western-style architecture) and fountain for this project (Fig.12). "Hundreds of building groups, native and exotic plants, constructed hills, rivers, and lakes serving administrative as well as recreational and dwelling purposes were situated within Yuanmingyuan."²⁸ The carving stones on Xiyanglou utilized European decorations of Mannerism. The labyrinth also corresponds to European garden designs in royal families. Therefore, Xiyanglou followed both Chinese natural rules of openness and western style of decoration. It had the same cross-cultural impact with Chinese pavilion in European gardens. However, Xiyanglou was destroyed by Anglo-French and British armies during the Second Opium War in the 1860s. In the following warfare, theft, and abandonment, most parts of Yuanmingyuan remained as stone pieces even after its renewal (Fig. 13).²⁹ Fortunately, a series of copperplate engravings recorded the original views. Yi Lantai, a royal artist and a disciple of Castiglione, depicted this small but exquisite Rococo-style palace with arches, gates, fountains, and gardens (Fig. 14). Therefore, Yuanmingyuan was a collection of western and eastern architecture — an enlarged treasure bowl of artistic fusion.

²⁷ Wang, 386

²⁸ Lei Gao and Marc Treib, "Making and Remaking the Yuanmingyuan." *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 3, no. 1 (2006): 12-13.

²⁹ See note 2 above.

Porcelain and Craftwork

Porcelain was one of the Chinese commodities that exported to Europe with the greatest amount. Serving as daily necessities with decorative patterns, porcelain altered the European culture of visual art. With the global trade, Dutch merchants shipped about three million Chinese porcelain to Europe until the 1640s. Later in the mid-eighteenth century, English merchants transported more than a hundred thousand pieces of porcelain each year. Therefore, proceeded by the substantial economic benefits, Chinese porcelain adapted to fit the European market and customs, including producing European vessels like beer mugs and butter plates.³⁰ European merchants also sent design drawings and models to China as instructions for the production. This communication in production explained why European armorial patterns and Catholic scenarios frequently existed on customized Chinese porcelain. One of the most famous porcelain for export was called “Kraak ware” (Fig. 15). It was a unique blue and white pottery. The central design was commonly Chinese scenario, and borders were usually European patterns, such as tulips and flamboyant Rococo decorations, as illustrated in Figure 15. Appreciating the beauty of exported porcelains with Chinese, European, or blended styles, royal families asked courtly artists to add European elements on royal enamels. A typical example is the enameled vase of a rural couple situated in the European-style background (Fig. 16). On the vase's neck, it depicted birds flying through bamboo and plum blossom, which is a unique bird-and-flower painting in Chinese royal composition.

In addition to porcelain, craftwork like enamel, furniture, silk, sculpture, and metal vessels added Rococo patterns to meet European tastes for export or to resonance with the luxurious appetite in Chinese royal families. During the ruling of Emperor Qianlong, the imperial art held a favorable attitude towards grandeur style of craftwork. On the pearl-inlaid gold celestial sphere (Fig. 17), although it was only 82 centimeters high, it included 300 constellations and 3242 stars made of pearl.³¹ The appropriate scale and unmistakable position of stars reflected the Chinese ruler's substantial interests towards astronomy that introduced by missionaries. The celestial sphere stood on a bottom of cloisonne with twisted dragons. Therefore, other than an astronomical model, it was exquisite craftwork contributed by the Chinese and European communication.

Conclusion

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the opportunity of sea trade and missionary activities, western and eastern art started the artistic communication in aspects like painting, sculpture, architecture, garden design, drama, literature, and craftwork. In comparing European Rococo and Chinese courtly art, they had a mutual influence on each other. Rococo added chinoiserie as a new subject, and the courtly art, in turn, absorbed Rococo and European elements

³⁰ See note 2 above.

³¹ Dai Jinxian, *Yixiangkaocheng* (1744).

further evolved into a blended style. The adaptation to exotic art provided us a history of cultural exchange between the West and the East. Meanwhile, native culture exerted a profound impact on Chinese and European. Therefore, the national spirit's nature would not get lost due to the selection of foreign elements. With the trend of globalization, advanced technology, and convenient transportation, China and western countries will continue their artistic communication. We can look forward to more cross-cultural art in the years to come.

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Appendix



Fig.1 Athanasius Kircher, Ricci and Guangqi, 1667, Engraving/etching on hand laid (verge) paper.



Fig. 2 Jean-Baptiste Pillement, Recueil de Plusieurs Jeux d'Enfants Chinois, in



L'Oeuvre de Jean Pillement, engraved by P. C. Canot, 1759



top
3-1'



Fig. 3 Jean-Baptiste Pillement, *Chinese Landscape*, in *L'Oeuvre de Jean Pillement*, engraved by P. C. Canot, 1759



Fig. 4 Jean-Baptiste Pillement, *Allegories des Douze Mois de L'Annee* in *L'Oeuvre de Jean Pillement*, engraved by P. C. Canot, 1759



Fig. 5 Luneville oval platter, ca. 1770-1780. Sevres, Musee National de Cramique. Photo RMN - M. Beck-Coppola. (Corresponding item of Pillement's engraving in



Fig.

Fig.6 Bow circular plate, ca. 1760. Private collection.

(Corresponding item of Pillement's engraving in Fig. 3)



Fig. 7 Worcester hexagonal covered vase 1765-1770.

(Corresponding item of Pillement's engraving in Fig. 4)



Fig. 8 Matteo Ripa, 1712-14. Yan Xun Shan Guan (The hall on Yanxun hill).

Engraving.



Fig. 9 Giuseppe Castiglione, 1723-25.

One Hundred Horses in a Landscape Handscroll





Fig. 10 Liu Zhixue, 1677. The Returning Procession of the God of Mount Tai.



*Fig. 11 Sun Yunqiu, 1680-81. Perspective Picture of the West,
in History of Lenses (Jingshi). Woodblock print.*

Fig. 12 Xiyanglou, Labyrinth, rebuilt in 1987.



(Photoed by Marc Treib, 2005)

Fig. 13 Yuanmingyuan, after renewal.



Copperplate engraving on paper.

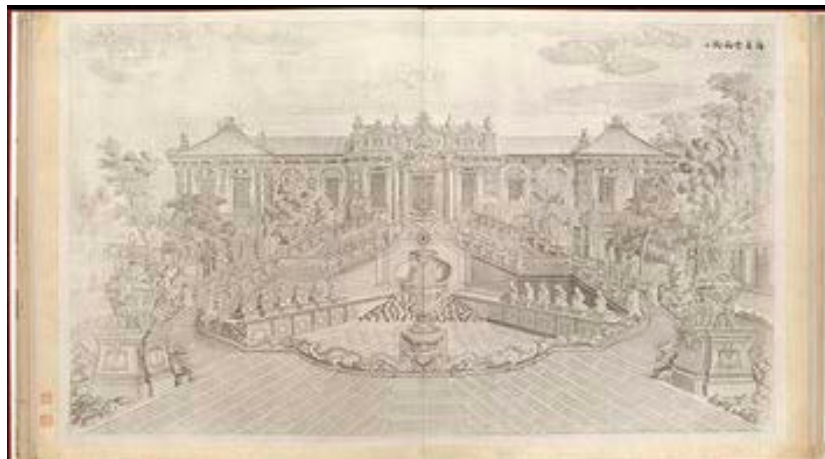


Fig. 14 Yi Lantai, 1783-86. The Twenty Views of the European Palaces of the Yuanmingyuan.

Fig. 15 Kraak Ware. 1635-55.



Fig. 16 Enameled vase with European figures. 1736-96.



Fig. 17 Pearl-inlaid gold celestial sphere. 1711-99.