



**HAL**  
open science

# Asymetries of Connoisseurship in a Globalizing World: The Geopolitics of collecting in Eighteenth-Century Paris

Charlotte Guichard

► **To cite this version:**

Charlotte Guichard. Asymetries of Connoisseurship in a Globalizing World: The Geopolitics of collecting in Eighteenth-Century Paris. Valérie Kobi; Kristel Smentek; Chonja Lee. Networks and Practices of Connoisseurship in the Global Eighteenth Century, De Gruyter, pp.223-245, 2024, 9783110996951. 10.1515/9783110985085-013 . hal-04296955

**HAL Id: hal-04296955**

**<https://cnrs.hal.science/hal-04296955>**

Submitted on 15 Feb 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Charlotte Guichard

## Asymmetries of Connoisseurship in a Globalizing World: The Geopolitics of Collecting in Eighteenth-Century Paris

Although focused on Paris, this chapter begins with Johann Zoffany's conversation piece (fig. 1), painted around 1786–87, in which the painter provocatively staged the development of global networks of collecting and connoisseurship in colonial India. The absence of such a portrait of connoisseurs in French eighteenth-century painting could make us think that Paris lacked similar practices of art connoisseurship in a globalizing world. But a comparison of both cities, metropolitan London and metropolitan Paris, gives us a better understanding of the variety of connoisseurial practices that developed to address new and unfamiliar aesthetic conventions in Europe. This chapter intends to show that metropolitan Paris, although less engaged with the display and study of artifacts from abroad, was also affected by globalizing though asymmetrical connoisseurial practices.



**Fig. 1:** Johann Zoffany, *Colonel Antoine Polier, Claude Martin, and John Wombwell with the Artist in the Background in Lucknow*, 1786, oil on canvas, 138 × 183 cm, Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta

In the center of his painting, Zoffany himself looks back at the viewer. Born in Germany, but active in England, the painter spent six years, from 1783 to 1789, in India where he circulated in British imperial society. On the right, John Wombwell (d. 1795), a British East India Company (EIC) accountant, pauses from reading a book. Together with Major Claude Martin (1735–1800), a former weaver born in Lyon, who was also an officer of the EIC, Wombwell admires a watercolor held by an Indian servant, representing Martin's new mansion built in India. Antoine-Louis-Henri Polier (1741–95), a Swiss engineer who worked for the EIC, takes a break from his perusal of an album of Mughal paintings.<sup>1</sup> Displayed on the wall behind are paintings depicting Indian landscapes probably executed by Zoffany. This was not the first time Zoffany portrayed connoisseurship as a social and cultural bond among European elites. In an earlier conversation piece, *The Tribuna of the Uffizi* (The Royal Collection Trust, Windsor Castle, 1772–77) Zoffany depicted aristocratic European men gathered around Italian masterpieces in Florence. In this more recent canvas, however, the practices of connoisseurship were displaced to the setting of Lucknow, the capital of the province of Awadh, now controlled by the EIC, where the collecting of Mughal art was integral to the self-fashioning of British identities in colonial India.<sup>2</sup>

In his Lucknow conversation piece, Zoffany also discretely invokes a satirical vein of connoisseurship. Held on a chain by a servant, a monkey stands in front of a picture exhibited on an easel. The monkey gives a sense of playfulness to the painting, but it was also a motif used to satirize connoisseurs. In 1740, the French artist Jean Siméon Chardin (1699–1779) exhibited his painting of a *Monkey Antiquarian* (Paris, Musée du Louvre) at the Paris Salon. In 1761, the Englishman William Hogarth (1697–1764) published an engraving for the catalogue of the pictures exhibited by the Society of Artists, in which a monkey also posed as a connoisseur at work.<sup>3</sup> With this image, Hogarth criticized English connoisseurs who preferred old master paintings to works by living English painters. William Hamilton (1731–1803), the English ambassador to the Kingdom of Naples, and a famous connoisseur of art and antiquities, caused a sensation with his “East India monkey.” Named Jack, this black monkey from the Malabar Coast in southwestern India, was a celebrity in Naples who “divert[ed] himself with [Hamilton’s] magnifying glass to look at objects, [and who had been taught] to look at medals by way of laughing at antiquarians.”<sup>4</sup> In Zoffany’s painting, the monkey

1 On Polier, see also Friederike Weis’s contribution to this volume.

2 Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Conquest and Collecting in the East, 1750–1850* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), p. 71; Romita Ray, “Inscribing Asymmetry: Johann Zoffany’s Banyan and the Extension of Knowledge,” *South Asian Studies*, 27, no. 2 (2011): pp. 185–98.

3 Harry Mount, “The Monkey with the Magnifying Glass: Constructions of the Connoisseur in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” *Oxford Art Journal* 29, no. 2 (2006): pp. 167–84; the engraving was made by Charles Grignion after William Hogarth, as the “Tailpiece” for the *Catalogue of the Society of Artists at Spring Gardens*, 1761.

4 *Collection of Autograph Letters and Historical Documents Formed by Alfred Morrison*, second series, vol. 1 (London: Strangeways and Sons, 1893–95), p. 63: Sir William Hamilton to Charles Greville, September 12, 1780.

stands between the shade of a banyan tree and the connoisseurs' world, between colonial nature and the space of polite society. Looking in the same direction as Polier and Martin, the animal mimics their gaze while conspicuously grabbing an exotic banana—aping their connoisseurial practices of looking, the monkey playfully casts doubt on their authority. In this painting, Zoffany brilliantly relocated the European satire of the connoisseur to an Anglo-Imperial context and reformulated it.

Enmeshed in international networks of trade and British Empire, connoisseurship addressed an expanding range of material and visual productions in an expanding global field. It therefore reveals aspects of connoisseurial practices that were obscured by canonical European literature about art. As defined by academic hierarchies and artistic theory, connoisseurship was limited to specific items and media. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, in England, France, and Italy, the connoisseur was presented as mostly, if not exclusively, interested in the fine arts: Ephraim Chambers, author of *Encyclopaedia* (1728) defined the connoisseur as “a Person who is a thorow [sic] Judge, or Master in any way; in Matters of Painting, &c.”<sup>5</sup> In Europe, connoisseurship had developed as a set of visual and social skills in the realm of the liberal and visual arts, and these interests remained indebted to conceptions of taste rooted in Eurocentric visions of the world.<sup>6</sup> In England, Hogarth considered the taste for Chinese painting and sculpture as a “mean taste,”<sup>7</sup> not to be admired or emulated. In France, Voltaire wrote: “There are vast countries into which good taste has never penetrated . . . there is scarcely any kind of art in which the Asians have ever excelled . . . good taste has only fallen to the lot of a few nations in Europe.”<sup>8</sup> Against these Eurocentric, derogatory views, Zoffany's painting illuminates the extension of connoisseurship and collecting to eighteenth-century global cities. Imperial trade is visually evoked through the red coats of the EIC while a range of colorful products and items—oil paintings, Indian silks and cottons, gouache paintings, a book, and even fruits in a basket—solicit the aesthetic gaze and prompt sensual delight. This is a painting of connoisseurs and for connoisseurs that opens the context to global networks of trade and knowledge. It posits a more inclusive definition of connoisseurship, both in terms of practice and the kinds of objects engaged, than the traditional form proposed in early modern artistic literature focused on European high art.

---

5 Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for James and John Knapton [and 19 others], 1728), s.v. “Connoisseur.”

6 Carol Gibson-Wood, *Jonathan Richardson: Art Theorist of the English Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

7 William Hogarth, *Analysis of Beauty: Written with a view of fixing the fluctuating Ideas of Taste* (London: Reeves, 1753), p. 19.

8 [François-Marie Arouet] de Voltaire, “Goût,” in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, vol. 7 (Paris: Briasson et al., 1765), pp. 761–70, for an English translation: [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/did2222.0000.168/-taste?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=taste](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/did2222.0000.168/-taste?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=tastehttps://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/did2222.0000.168/-taste?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=taste)

To my knowledge there are no French equivalents to Zoffany's visualization of connoisseurship abroad. How can we explain such an absence? This kind of painting—or rather, its absence in French visual culture—raises broader issues about the relationship between connoisseurship and collecting in the French Empire. It also brings to the fore a diversity of reactions, inside Europe, to collecting in an expanding, global economy and the new forms of connoisseurship this global collecting promoted. Thinking about connoisseurship more expansively, through this painting, forces us to consider the tension between connoisseurship as a global skill, enmeshed in international trade and imported luxury goods. Connoisseurship, as it was understood by European elites of the era, was as an exclusive form of knowledge production reserved for European fine arts—even if sophisticated cultures of art connoisseurship did exist outside Europe, especially in early modern Asia.<sup>9</sup> In eighteenth-century Paris, the practices of connoisseurship—as defined by Jonathan Richardson—rested on attribution, authentication, and aesthetic judgement. They were the province of privileged and elevated social groups, which represented themselves as taste communities, sharing a language of beauty, aesthetic valuation, and quality, supposedly separated from the world of commerce.<sup>10</sup> The development of international trade in porcelain and other luxury products would transform these practices and hierarchies of connoisseurship in metropolitan Paris in the eighteenth century while artistic artifacts from abroad inspired new technological development and emulation. At the same time, “new players” or entrants to the field of connoisseurship, such as soldiers and adventurers of the new French colonial empire, had less success in establishing their authority as connoisseurs after their return to the metropole.

Four main themes guide the arguments that follows. Connoisseurship developed as an expert taste for a small range of imported products. Through trade with the Qing Empire, a shared taste for Chinese porcelain developed in small circles of Parisian dealers and amateurs, which contributed to the constitution of large European collections of porcelain and promoted the distinctive figure of the “connoisseur.” This promotion of a shared globalized taste differed from other forms of appropriation of non-European visual artifacts in Paris, namely technological curiosity. Chinese paintings, in the collection of Minister of State Henri-Léonard Bertin (1720–92), were subject to scientific experimentation and examined for technical expertise. Not described in the language of taste and beauty, these artifacts were instead subject to industrial emulation in the context of rivalry between France and the Qing Empire. With European expansion, new forms of connoisseurship expanded to colonial sites, to include new kinds of objects and to engage unfamiliar aesthetic conventions. In India, a territory disputed by French and English forces, hundreds of Indian artifacts and manuscripts were collect-

---

<sup>9</sup> Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Guichard, “Taste Communities: The Rise of the Amateur in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45, no. 4 (2012): pp. 519–47.

ed by a French military officer, Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gentil (1726–99), who brought them to Paris and offered them to the Royal Library (later the Bibliothèque nationale de France) where they are stored today.<sup>11</sup> Until their recent rediscovery in the twentieth century, these objects of curiosity continued to be, what in another context have been called “sleeping objects;” “lying in wait”<sup>12</sup> in library storerooms, their value was uncertain. Accumulated abroad by soldiers or marine officers who had developed an interest and knowledge for these lesser-known types of objects and materials, they were housed in European public collections, which lacked adequate knowledge of, and therefore practices of connoisseurship for, these objects. These globalized practices of collecting tell different stories; embedded in imperial histories, they are the basis of the vexed relationship between connoisseurship and the controversial status of collections in the French museums of today.

## Global Connoisseurship: The Case of Porcelain

Parallel to the promotion of connoisseurship in early modern European artistic literature, which theorized the “science of a connoisseur”<sup>13</sup> while promoting the value of the visual and fine arts, connoisseurial skills also developed in international trade. As economic historians have noted, connoisseurship required tact, a quality often mentioned in eighteenth-century commerce. Expert in discriminating between levels of quality, identifying similarities and differences between goods and products, connoisseurial practices expanded into the world of trading textiles, dyes, and papers as European trade grew on a global scale.<sup>14</sup> Jacques Savary Des Bruslons in the *Dictionnaire Universel du commerce* (1723–30), for example, tried to systematize the knowledge of merchants, consumers, and trade officials. In his entry on wool, he highlighted the “connoisseur” as the person capable of distinguishing between different qualities of the material. As William Reddy notes, Savary’s article on plain linen cloth “includes a list of seven points to check when buying a piece of toile. This list places great emphasis

---

11 On Gentil’s collecting, see also Friederike Weis’s and Mrinalini Sil’s contributions to this volume.

12 Fanny Wonu Veys, “Awakening Sleeping Objects,” in *Pasifika Styles: Artists Inside the Museum*, ed. Amiria Salmond and Rosanna Raymond (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2006), pp. 119–23; Alice Stevenson, “Lying in Wait: Inertia and Latency in the Collection,” in *Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt*, ed. Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 231–39.

13 On connoisseurship as a form of empirically-based knowledge: Kristel Smentek, *Mariette and the Science of the Connoisseur in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); Valerie Kobi, *Dans l’oeil du connoisseur: Pierre-Jean Mariette, 1694–1774, et la construction des savoirs en histoire de l’art* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017).

14 Jean-Yves Grenier, “Une économie de l’identification. Juste prix et ordre des marchandises dans l’Ancien Régime,” in *La qualité des produits en France (XVIIIe–XXe siècles)*, ed. Alessandro Stanziani (Paris: Belin, 2003), p. 42.

on the purchaser's ability to judge by eye."<sup>15</sup> Endowed with this visual acuity, the connoisseur was a key figure in the "mercantile imperialism, " which characterized eighteenth-century Europe and its global ambitions.<sup>16</sup>

In the luxury Asian porcelain trade, which grew substantially in the eighteenth century with the expansion of the European trade companies, especially the French *Compagnie des Indes*, expertise was expressed in the language of taste and connoisseurship.<sup>17</sup> The frontispiece for the sale catalogue of Louis Augustin Angran de Fonspertuis (1669–1747), published in 1747, displays European artifacts, such as framed paintings and drawings in portfolios, with distinguished amateurs. It also features a globe on the right of the image that could well evoke non-European art—namely Japanese and Chinese porcelain—which also featured in his collection.

The dealer who organized the sale, Edme François Gersaint (1694–1750), knew how to discriminate between German imitations of Asian ceramics made in Meissen at the time and the "ancient and beautiful Porcelain of Japan and China."<sup>18</sup> In the catalogue, Gersaint chose to associate the figure of the connoisseur with the judgment of porcelain. Adopting the vocabulary of taste was one of his marketing strategies. By introducing porcelain into the world of expertise and aesthetics and positing it as a desirable product, he sought to draw connoisseurs into this new market.<sup>19</sup>

The true connoisseurs, however, do not make any comparison between these two Porcelains [Asian and Meissen]. They cannot even get used to the latter [from Dresden (Meissen)], to which they only grant the pleasure of the forms & the choice of figures which have more taste than those of the Indies & which are more familiar to us. They rightly deny it the quality which is essential to Porcelain, and that gives it its name.<sup>20</sup>

---

15 Jacques Savary des Bruslons, *Dictionnaire portatif de commerce* (Copenhague: Chez les Freres C. & A. Philibert, 1770), s.v. "Wool," p. 461; William Reddy, "The Structure of a Cultural Crisis: Thinking about Cloth in France before and after the Revolution," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 261–84, here p. 265.

16 Nebahat Avcioglu and Barry Finbarr Flood, "Globalizing Cultures: Art and Mobility in the Eighteenth Century," *Ars Orientalis*, 39 (2010): pp. 7–39, here p. 11.

17 Felicia Gottmann, "French-Asian Connections: The Compagnies des Indes, France's Eastern Trade, and New Directions in Historical Scholarship," *The Historical Journal* 56 (June 2013): pp. 537–52; *Goods from the East, 1600–1800: Trading Eurasia*, ed. Maxine Berg, Felicia Gottmann, Hanna Hodacs, and Chris Nierstrasz (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Louis Mézin, *Cargoes from China: Porcelain from the Compagnies des Indes in the Musée de Lorient* (Lorient: Stewart Museum, 2004).

18 Edme François Gersaint, *Catalogue raisonné des bijoux, porcelaines, bronzes, lacqs, lustres de cristal de roche et de procelaine, pendules de goût & autres meubles curieux ou composés, tableaux, desseins, estampes, coquilles & autres effets de curiosité, provenans de la succession de M. Angran, vicomte de Fonspertuis* (Paris: Prault et Barrois, 1747), p. 17.

19 Neil De Marchi and Hans J. Van Miegroet, "Transforming the Paris Art Market, 1718–1750," in *Mapping Markets for Paintings in Europe, 1450–1750*, ed. Neil De Marchi and Hans J. Van Miegroet (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), pp. 383–404.

20 Edme-François Gersaint, *Catalogue raisonné des bijoux*, p. vii: "Les vrais connoisseurs, cependant, ne font entre ces deux Porcelaines nulle comparaison. Ils ne peuvent même s'habituer avec cette dernière, à laquelle ils n'accordent que l'agrément des formes & les choix des figures qui ont plus de goût que

A shared taste for Asian porcelains had developed in Paris in the first half of the eighteenth century among circles of amateurs who bought pieces in auction rooms and dealers' shops. International trade drove this commerce, which promoted a new vocabulary of taste along with new visual skills in assessing quality. Twenty years later, in 1767, in the auction catalogue of Jean de Jullienne (1686–1766), porcelain was attributed with the capacity to produce haptic sensations among “connoisseurs” such as the “tact flou” and associated with “the taste for true beauty” (*le goût du vrai beau*).<sup>21</sup> Through its material qualities, the transparency of the clay body, and the brilliance and color of its glazes, porcelain had gained an aesthetic status, one comparable to European fine arts, and expressed by reference to taste and beauty.

This new opening of connoisseurship in France to non-European arts and artifacts was visually articulated by the French artist François Boucher (1703–70).<sup>22</sup> In his famous trade card designed for the dealer Gersaint in 1740, Boucher included artifacts from the Qing Empire to represent Gersaint's shop: a Chinese *magot*,<sup>23</sup> a lacquered cabinet with shells and corals, fans, and rolls of painted paper. Similarly, in his less well-known frontispiece for the *Catalogue des tableaux de Mr. de Jullienne*, ca. 1756 (fig. 2), Boucher included two Chinese *magots*, one Chinese statuette, along with shells, and other decorative objects—all depicted with paintings, drawings, and sculptures, the usual objects of European connoisseurship. Together these artifacts signaled the development of a specific taste for, and increasing interest in, Asian porcelains. The imports share the same visual and social space, in a sort of community of objects, with the round forms of the putti echoing the Chinese *magots* with their large bellies and faces. At the time of Jullienne's public sale, the dealer who organized the auction, Claude François Julliot (1727–94), had a shop in the vicinity of the Louvre palace on rue Saint-Honoré, named “Au curieux des Indes.” A true *curieux des Indes* himself, Jullienne possessed numerous artifacts with non-European provenances in his residence in Paris that scholars have overlooked. These included porcelain and lacquerware, but

---

celles des Indes & qui nous sont plus familières. Ils lui refusent avec raison la qualité qui est essentielle à la Porcelaine, pour qu'elle en puisse porter le nom.”

21 Claude-François Julliot, *Catalogue raisonné de porcelaines de qualités supérieures, tant anciennes, premiers sorte, qu'ancien Japon & la Chine . . . faisant partie du Cabinet de feu M. de Jullienne* (Paris: Vente, 1767), p. 6: “On entend par ce tact flou, une certaine sensation que les Connoisseurs ressentent à la vue de ces Porcelaines.” See Isabelle Tillerot, “Du ‘tact flou et – séduisant des couleurs’ chez Jullienne ou l’art de marier tableaux, porcelaines, laques, statuettes, meubles, et autres effets,” in *Corrélations: les objets du décor au siècle des Lumières*, ed. Anne Perrin Khelissa (Brussels: Université de Bruxelles, 2015), pp. 149–81.

22 Jessica Priebe, *François Boucher and the Art of Collecting in Eighteenth-Century France* (London: Routledge, 2022).

23 In the 1751 *Encyclopédie*, Denis Diderot famously described *magots* as “figures in clay, plaster, copper, porcelain, chunky [ramassées], counterfeit, bizarre, which we regard as representing Chinese or Indians. Our flats are decorated with them.” Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 9 (Paris: Briasson et al., 1765), s.v. “Magots.”



also “Indian” jades, weapons from China, India, Turkey, and some “savage” artifacts: one “button from South America” and some “utensils of savages” of unknown provenance.<sup>24</sup> The latter were exhibited as trophies in his gallery of European paintings (though they were not reproduced in Boucher’s drawing), while porcelain objects filled the entirety of his residence from the summer salon (*salon d’été*), to the summer cabinet (*cabinet d’été*), to the gallery.<sup>25</sup>



**Fig. 2:** François Boucher, *Untitled*, frontispiece, eighteenth century, pen and black ink, gray wash, and watercolor, 19.6 × 26 cm, in: Jean-Baptiste-François de Montullé (ed.), *Catalogue des tableaux de Mr. de Jullienne*, ca. 1756, The Pierpont and Morgan Library, New York

Louis Augustin Angran de Fonspertuis and Jean de Jullienne exemplified a new breed of connoisseur, one whose expertise was deeply dependent on colonial and imperial French trade. Angran de Fonspertuis was named syndic (shareholder representative) of the French West Indies Company in 1745. Close to John Law and the Orléans family, he surely invested in the Mississippi Company founded in 1717 for the exploitation of

<sup>24</sup> Julliot, *Catalogue raisonné de porcelaines*, pp. 285 and 290.

<sup>25</sup> Estate inventory, Jean de Jullienne, March 25, 1766, Paris, National Archives, MC/et, XXIX, 529.

Louisiana during the Law Scheme.<sup>26</sup> Jullienne's wealth was partly derived from colonial trade and speculation, and he too was a significant shareholder of the Mississippi Company.<sup>27</sup> Both invested their new wealth, acquired through international trade, in the collecting of European fine art objects, but also porcelain, lacquerware, and other imports. As the director of the Gobelins Manufactory in Paris, which produced royal tapestries, Jullienne must have developed a strong skill in discriminating between dyes and textiles, a "tact" that he also applied to porcelain. Their social worlds, overlapping between international trade and amateurship,<sup>28</sup> allowed them to demonstrate a shared taste for, and expertise in, judgments of European fine arts and non-European luxury products. We do not have images of Jullienne's porcelain collection. Although on a different scale, it must have mimicked porcelain rooms at the courts of the European monarchs. Exhibited in his house at the Gobelins Manufactory and comprised of almost four hundred pieces,<sup>29</sup> his collection of porcelains materialized the trans-imperial trade between France and China as well as a new shared, global connoisseurship focused on these imported luxury goods.

## Technical Expertise: A Culture of Imitation and Industrial Emulation

International trade and imperial French expansion were accompanied by the circulation of non-European artifacts, qualified as "curiosities" in Parisian sale catalogues or guides to the city. Beyond curiosity and wonder, some of these items, notably Chinese paintings, raised questions relating to their technologies and materials. These were as much a mystery as porcelain had been in the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>30</sup> At the end of the eighteenth century, two French collectors were motivated by an interest in the study of Chinese material culture and more specifically paintings, which were largely disregarded by Europeans at the time except for their colors.<sup>31</sup> Marie Joseph Louis d'Albert d'Ailly, duke of Chaulnes (1741–92) and Henri-Léonard Bertin both as-

---

26 Rochelle Ziskin, *Sheltering Art: Collecting and Social Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012).

27 Isabelle Tillerot, *Jean de Jullienne et les collectionneurs de son temps. Un regard singulier sur le tableau* (Paris: Éditions de la MSH, 2010), p. 46.

28 Sarah Easterby-Smith, "Selling Beautiful Knowledge: Amateurship, Botany and the Market-Place in Late Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* (2013): pp. 531–43.

29 Sylvia Vríz, "Le duc d'Aumont et les porcelaines d'extrême-orient de la collection de M. Jean de Jullienne," *Revue de la société des amis du musée national de céramique* 22 (2013): pp. 89–98, here p. 89.

30 Bertrand Rondot, ed., *Discovering the Secrets of Soft-Paste Porcelain at the St. Cloud Manufactory ca. 1690–1766*, (London: Yale University Press, 1999).

31 Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, "Chinois," in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, vol. 3 (Paris: Briasson et al., 1751), p. 347. "The Chinese . . . fail absolutely in taste and form . . . they have beautiful colors and bad paintings."

sembled “cabinets de curiosités chinoises” (cabinets of Chinese curiosities) in Paris. Bertin was the minister of state between 1763 and 1780, with responsibility for, among other things, the East India Company, the manufacture of cotton and painted canvas, and agriculture. His collections and his long-running project of publishing “reliable knowledge of China” extended earlier initiatives developed under Louis XIV.<sup>32</sup> The duke of Chaulnes had no official duties; he was a noble, studying arts and sciences as an amateur, who had inherited collections from his family. He was the nephew of Joseph Bonnier de la Mosson (1702–44), famous for his cabinet of natural curiosities in Paris. His father Michel Ferdinand d’Albert d’Ailly, duke of Chaulnes (1714–69), was a physicist and member of the Royal Academy of Science who had also exhibited an interest in Chinese art and material culture. Two paintings from China were even displayed on the wall of his cabinet of curiosities in 1757.<sup>33</sup> Marie Joseph developed his own collection, housed in his residence on the rue de Bondi in Paris. One room was filled with natural history specimens (shells and corals) along with textiles, arms and games, described as “Chinese” and “Indian.”<sup>34</sup> Neither Bertin nor the dukes de Chaulnes had traveled to China, and both were highly dependent on the information they received from the French Jesuits at the imperial court of Beijing. At the courts of Versailles and Beijing, the geopolitics of connoisseurship resulted from an emulation that lasted for centuries, a rivalry between empires, which had started in the seventeenth century.<sup>35</sup> The lasting presence of the Jesuits in Beijing reflected the lasting interest in European art and technology at the Qing court. Likewise, the collections of Bertin and Chaulnes were shaped by the selections made by the French Jesuits, who translated and explained the meaning of the artifacts they sent to their correspondents in Paris in meticulous notes.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> John Finlay, *Henri Bertin and the Representation of China in Eighteenth-Century France* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>33</sup> Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d’Argenville, *L’histoire naturelle éclaircie dans une de ses parties principales, la conchyliologie* (Paris: n.p., 1757), p. 117. The painting on the wall may have been the “Vue du Palais de l’Empereur de la Chine, peint à la Chine, monté sur toile, avec son contrepoids pour le suspendre, en deux cartes,” see *Catalogue des livres du duc de Chaulnes* (Paris: n.p., 1770), item 3679.

<sup>34</sup> Luc-Vincent Thierry, *Description raisonné de cette ville, de sa banlieue et de tout ce qu’elle contient de remarquable*, vol. 2 (Paris: n.p., 1787), pp. 681–83; Constance Bienaimé, “Les objets ‘de la Chine’ dans les collections des ducs de Chaulnes,” in *L’Extrême-Orient dans la culture européenne des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, ed. Florence Boulerie, Marc Favreau, and Éric Francalanza (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2009), pp. 151–65.

<sup>35</sup> Marie-Laure de Rochebrune, ed., *La Chine à Versailles: art et diplomatie au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Somogy; Versailles: Château de Versailles, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> For example, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Réserve, 0e-89–4, *Yuzhi Gengzhi tu* (Illustrations of Agriculture and Sericulture). A note, still preserved in the album at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, was added to the manuscript in Beijing before its shipment to Paris, by Jesuit Joseph-Marie Amiot who lived at the Qing imperial court between 1751 and 1793. Destined for his French correspondents who could not read Chinese, it explained the signification of the engravings. Those engravings were notably appreciated for their artistic quality. They were executed after paintings of an unnamed Chinese

In these collections, knowledge production and expertise were not conveyed in the language of taste and connoisseurship but rather in the language of technique. Expertise was conceived as a step toward industrial imitation and emulation and corresponded to the wider interest of Chinese scholarship.<sup>37</sup> Bertin and Chaulnes collaborated in the 1780s, and they shared many items of their collections with other interested individuals to increase technical knowledge of Chinese material culture. Their interests also encompassed musical instruments,<sup>38</sup> but I will concentrate on their analyses of Chinese paintings: the matter and materiality of their paint, pigments and technique. Connoisseurship in Europe may have occasionally involved the material manipulation of artworks,<sup>39</sup> but for Bertin and Chaulnes, the examination of Chinese paintings relied primarily on technical and material expertise. Quite remarkably, their cabinets were conceived as laboratories for material experimentation, which was intended to promote innovation and stimulate the French luxury goods industry. In 1785, Bertin explained his motivations to his correspondent in Beijing, the Jesuit Joseph Amiot:

To make the most of the many curious objects you have enriched my cabinet . . . I shall invite chemists to analyze the productions which are unknown to them, physicists to classify them, and artists to take advantage of the resources and new ideas which the collections which you have provided me with can offer them.<sup>40</sup>

Chinese paintings were accordingly put to the test. Along the lines of other experiments with Chinese imports he had directed,<sup>41</sup> in 1781, Bertin lent a “volume de dessins relatifs à l’architecture chinoise” (an album of drawings related to Chinese architecture) (fig. 3) from his collection to Chaulnes so that he could experiment with Chinese painting techniques. Chaulnes’ conclusions were presented in a report to the Academy of Sciences in Paris entitled *Sur la manière de peindre comme les Chinois sur leur papier & avec leurs couleurs* (*On How to Paint Like the Chinese on Their Paper & with Their Colors*), which was published in 1783. He praised Chinese knowledge in the arts and even placed it at the same level as the “European nations:” “This collection & that of Mr. Bertin put me in a position to confirm & to demonstrate that [the Chinese] have

---

painter dubbed by Amiot “the Chinese Titian.” On the *Yuzhi Gengzhi tu* see Perrin Stein, “Boucher’s Chinoiseries: Some New Sources,” *The Burlington Magazine* 138, no. 1122 (September 1996): pp. 598–604.

37 Alexander Statman, *A Global Enlightenment: Western Progress and Chinese Science* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2023).

38 François Picard, “Joseph-Marie Amiot, jésuite français à Pékin, et le cabinet de curiosités de Bertin,” *Musique, images, instruments. Revue française d’organologie et d’iconographie musicale* 8 (April 2006): pp. 69–86.

39 Kristel Smentek, “The Collector’s Cut: Why Pierre-Jean Mariette Tore Up His Drawings and Put Them Back Together Again,” *Master Drawing* 46, no. 1 (2008): pp. 36–60.

40 Henri-Léonard Bertin to Joseph-Marie Amiot, December 21, 1785, fol. 45v., Paris, Institut de France, Ms 1522.

41 Kristel Smentek, “China and Greco-Roman Antiquity: Overture to a Study of the Vase in Eighteenth-Century France,” special issue, *Multilayered: Journal* 18 1 (Spring 2016): [10.30610/1.2016.3](https://doi.org/10.30610/1.2016.3).

almost as much knowledge in the Arts as any European Nation.”<sup>42</sup> The experiment Chaulnes describes in the report is a curious mix of chemistry, art, and science. Chaulnes was fascinated by the long-lasting and vivid colors used in Chinese paintings. He especially noted their resistance to water and their strong contrasts.<sup>43</sup> To gain a better technical understanding of them, he identifies the components of Chinese paintings: paper, vegetal glue, and pigments. While he acknowledges the technical knowledge and skills of Chinese painters, he only positively evaluates them in technical terms. The praise was neither aesthetic nor formulated in the language of taste and connoisseurship. Three academicians, chemist Pierre Joseph Macquer (1718–84), a specialist in dyes and colors, Auguste Denis Fougeroux de Bondaroy (1732–89), a scientist who conducted research in botany, physiology, chemistry, and archaeology, and a M. de Montigny—probably French engineer Etienne Mignot de Montigny (1714–82), reported on Chaulnes’ results. All were experts on sciences and techniques—not art connoisseurs. They concluded favorably, but not without ambiguity, that:

We could not invite him too much to continue his research on the arts of the Chinese nation; [if China] is less advanced than us in the physical sciences, its Antiquity, its long practice of the arts, its patience, its industry made it make greater progress in several arts, it would be important for us to reach [these arts].<sup>44</sup>

Bertin’s and Chaulnes’ collections were incorporated into a larger project of political economy. As director of the porcelain factory of Sèvres between 1774 and 1780, Bertin intended to stimulate French industry with innovations inspired by imported luxury goods. In addition to his engagements with Chinese imports, he was also interested in India’s material and visual culture. From Bertin’s correspondence, we learn that two manuscripts from “Indoustan” sent by Gentil, the French military officer in India, to the French Indologist Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805), were copied at the Sèvres factory in 1777.<sup>45</sup> The album *Histoire des Pièces de Monnoyes*

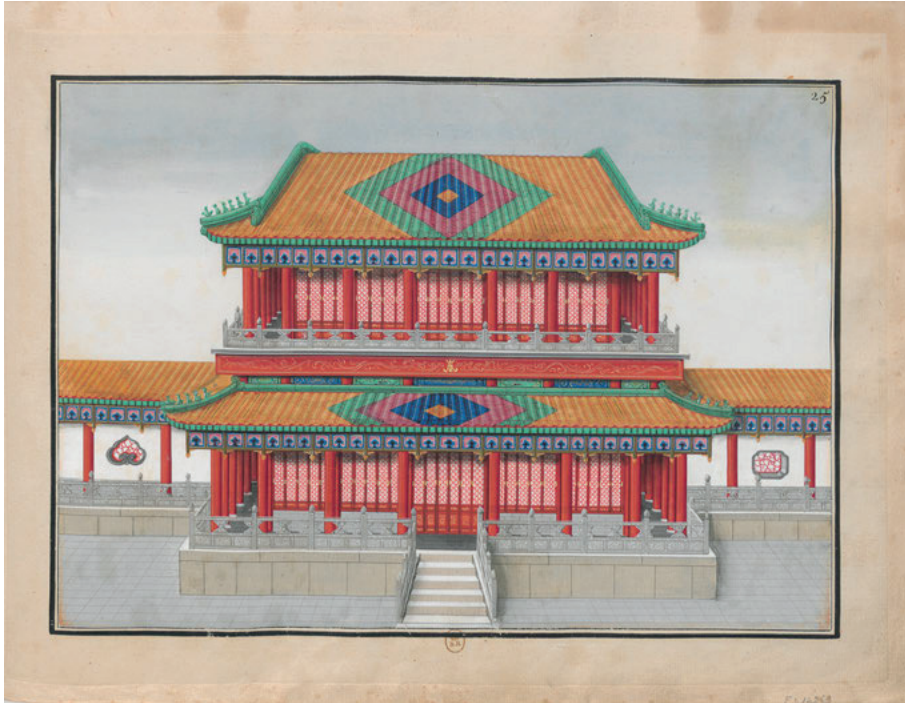
---

42 [Marie Joseph Louis d’Albert d’Ailly, Duke of Chaulnes], *Mémoire sur la manière de peindre des Chinois sur leur papier et avec leurs couleurs* (Paris: L. Jorry, 1783), p. 2: “Cette collection & celle de M. Bertin me mettent en état d’assurer & de démontrer que [les Chinois] ont presqu’autant de connaissances dans les Arts qu’aucune Nation européenne.”

43 Paris, Académie des Sciences, Archives, Dossier Chaulnes, January 20, 1781: “L’éclat et la vivacité des couleurs surpasse tout ce que nous avons de plus beau dans ce genre; elles ont de plus l’avantage de résister à l’eau dont la moindre goutte tache et délaye toutes nos détrempe.”

44 Paris, Académie des Sciences, Archives, Dossier Chaulnes, January 20, 1781: “. . . on ne sauroit trop l’inviter a continuer ses recherches sur les arts de la nation chinoise; si elle est moins avancée que nous dans les sciences physiques, son antiquité, sa longue pratique des arts, sa patience son industrie lui ont fait faire de plus grands progrès dans plusieurs arts, il seroit important pour nous de les atteindre.” In 1783, a copy of a painting on silk was executed by a draftsman at the Architecture Academy for the Duke of Chaulnes: *Rapports d’experts, 1712–1791. Procès-verbaux d’expertises d’œuvres d’art*, ed. Georges Wildenstein (Paris: Les Beaux-arts, 1921), pp. 136–37.

45 Letter from Henri-Léonard Bertin to Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, August 21, 1777, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, NAF 8872, fol. 31: “Je suis fort aise Monsieur que vous ayiez été con-



**Fig. 3:** Unknown artist(s), *Two-story house*, eighteenth century, 27 × 36 cm, in: Unknown artist(s), *Essai sur l'architecture chinoise*, eighteenth century, département des Estampes et de la photographie, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, réserve, Oe-13 (A)-Pet-Fol, fol. 25 (from Henri Bertin's collection)

*qui ont été frappées dans l'Indoustan (The History of Coins Minted in Indoustan)* (1773) (fig. 4) was meant to serve as a visual resource for the production of new luxury goods:

As for the metallic history . . . we will use it well if we dare to do it at the factory, but we are quite [eccentric] in this century in which we live, to hope that [it would appeal to] the taste of the public, which is, as you know, the God of Manufacturing, however, if we put the whole collection on two or three cabarets, the curiosity of the thing would be well done [well positioned] to tempt the rich and, among them, some English lords, but I doubt that our people would dare to undertake it if they were not ordered to do so.<sup>46</sup>

tent de la copie de l'histoire de l'Indoustan; on me fait espérer qu'à la fin du mois nous aurons et pourrons vous livrer de même l'autre ouvrage."

**46** Ibid.: "Quant à l'histoire métallique, vous n'etes pas bien au fait; on s'en servira bien si on ose le tenter à la Manufacture mais nous sommes bien zinzolinis [farfelus] dans le siècle où nous vivons pour espérer que le goût du public qui est comme vous croyez bien le Dieu de la Manufacture, y donnât, cependant si on mettoit toute la collection en deux ou trois cabarets, la curiosité de la chose seroit bien faite pour tenter les gens riches et entrautres quelques seigneurs anglois, mais je doute que nos gens osassent l'entreprendre si cela ne leur etoit commandé."



**Fig. 4:** Unknown artist(s), *Untitled*, 1773, 24.5 × 17.5 cm, in: Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gentil (ed.), *Histoire des Pièces de Monnoyes qui ont été frappées dans l'Indoustan*, 1773, département des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Fr. 25287, fol. 48

Bertin proposed that the porcelain factory of Sèvres should copy Indian medals to display them on a set of “cabarets” (trays, usually in lacquer, on which a Chinese porcelain service was displayed), which would then be sold to rich elites, notably English. Aware

of the “public’s” unfamiliarity with the aesthetics of Mughal paintings, Bertin hoped to stimulate consumption through a culture of imitation and technical emulation.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, no traces of such copies exist today in the archives. But Bertin’s correspondence reveals that expertise and knowledge in his collection were part of a larger political economy, which rested on the development of local manufacturing, industrial competition, and import substitution. Bertin and Chaulnes’s collections played an important role in the diffusion of knowledge about Chinese arts and crafts, reprising the strategies of industrial espionage that had characterized the very beginning of Bertin’s enterprise in the 1760s.<sup>48</sup> However, their collections, devoted to the diffusion of knowledge, replication, and experimentation within circles of savants and artists, remained at odds with the scholarship of the metropolitan connoisseur, which was based on attribution, authentication, and aesthetic judgement. While the porcelain trade, promoted by dealers, had succeeded in creating international taste communities which could exchange through shared practices of connoisseurship, these communities still resisted the incorporation of non-European paintings. Savants and amateurs engaged with Chinese art through science and technology, while their scholarly activities started to incorporate the language of aesthetics and connoisseurship only in the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

## Connoisseurship Abroad and the Fate of “Sleeping Objects”

The divergence of connoisseurship, knowledge, and collecting produced unexpected effects when artifacts collected abroad were brought to metropolitan Paris. Trade between Europe and Asia, and the French colonization of India, facilitated the arrival of Indian paintings, manuscripts, and objects in Paris. Brought to Europe by soldiers, adventurers, East India Company officers, and agents, these items had been collected in the field, in highly asymmetrical situations. In Paris, sustained study of these artifacts, however, remained rare; from private collections to public museums, many of these items remained “sleeping objects,” stored but rarely displayed. They remained

---

47 Sébastien Pautet, “Fausses porcelaines, vraies innovations? Tôles vernies, économie de la variété et invention technique dans la seconde moitié du xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Les Cahiers de Framespa* 31 (2019): <http://journals.openedition.org/framespa/6337>.

48 John Finlay, *Henri Bertin and the Representation of China*, pp. 8–39.

49 Ting Chang, *Travel, Collecting, and Museums of Asian Art in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Kristel Smentek, “Étienne-Jean Delécluze, Art from China, and Nineteenth-Century French Painting,” in *Beyond Chinoiserie: Artistic Exchange between China and the West during the Late Qing Dynasty (1796–1911)*, ed. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Jennifer Milam (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 93–122.



potential objects for connoisseurship and expertise that would develop later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>50</sup>

Some “Indian paintings” appeared in Parisian auction rooms, though they were an infrequent presence. The category of “Peintures indiennes,” as distinct from “Curiosités indiennes” appeared in the auction catalogue of the naturalist Pedro Franco Davila, late in the century.<sup>51</sup> His collection, sold in 1767, consisted of “Curiosities in Nature and Art” (*curiosités de la nature et de l’art*). Authentication of these paintings, which were described as “precious,” rested on their French colonial provenance. The catalogue mentioned that some “volumes [a painting collection of Hindu gods and temples] had belonged to a famous Brahmin of the territory of Madras, from whom they passed into the hands of the French, when they took control of this place in 1745.”<sup>52</sup> However the historicity and provenance of the pieces often remained uncertain and most of the time was not even mentioned. Descriptions of Indian paintings were based on material elements (scale and materials) rather than on their formal qualities. The category “Peintures indiennes” in Davila’s sale catalogue was inserted into a larger section titled “Peinture à gouache,” which included natural history illustrations and Chinese paintings. Indian and Chinese paintings were understood and classified through their material and technique, as gouache was associated with miniatures and natural history paintings in European tradition.<sup>53</sup> Attributions to named artists and formal descriptions remained absent in this section.

In contrast to its absence in Paris, the connoisseurship of Hindu and Mughal art developed among foreigners in colonial India. While he was on the subcontinent, Jean-Baptiste Gentil assembled a collection that he brought with him from Faizabad to Paris in 1778. In 1752, Gentil embarked for India, where he would stay for twenty-five years. As an infantry officer, he resided at the court of Bengal and then moved to Faizabad, to the court of Shuja-ud-Daula, Nawab of Awadh and Vizir of the Mughal Empire, where he was finally appointed as an official French agent to negotiations with English forces.<sup>54</sup> Gentil returned to France in 1778, after the death of the Nawab Shuja-ud-Daula in 1775 and the establishment of British rule in India. During his stay, Gentil

---

50 Mirjam Brusius and Kavita Singh, eds., *Museum Storage and Meaning: Tales from the Crypt* (London: Routledge, 2017).

51 See Juan Pimentel, “La naturaleza representada: El gabinete de maravillas de Franco Dávila,” *Elites intelectuales y modelos colectivos: Mundo ibérico (siglos XVI–XIX)*, ed. Monica Quijada Mauriño, Jesus Bustamante García and François-Xavier Guerra (Madrid: CSIC, 2003), pp. 131–54.

52 *Catalogue systématique et raisonné des curiosités de la nature et de l’art qui composent le cabinet de M. Dávila*, vol. 3 (Paris: Briasson, 1767), p. 197, item 893: “. . . ces livres avoient appartenu à un Brame célèbre du territoire de Madras, d’où ils passèrent entre les mains des François, lorsqu’ils se rendirent maîtres de cette Place en 1745.”

53 Antoine-Joseph Pernety, *Dictionnaire portatif de peinture, sculpture et gravure* (Paris: Bauche, 1757): “Gouache.”

54 Francis Richard, “Jean-Baptiste Gentil, collectionneur de manuscrits persans,” *Dix-Huitième siècle* 28 (1996): pp. 91–110; Chanchal Dadlani, “Transporting India: The *Gentil Album* and Mughal Manuscript Culture,” *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015): pp. 748–61.

amassed a collection dedicated to Indian art, manuscripts, and artifacts such as medals, weapons, and natural history specimens. Gentil's intention was to offer it to the royal French collection,<sup>55</sup> though the British allegedly offered him 120,000 rupees for it.<sup>56</sup> In 1777, he had already sent a series of manuscripts to Paris from Faizabad, which included Persian and Sanskrit manuscripts, dictionaries, and poetry.<sup>57</sup> The year Gentil returned to France, he offered "oriental manuscripts and drawings . . . , as well as gold and silver medals"<sup>58</sup> to the Royal Library, a center of Orientalist knowledge and antiquarianism since the seventeenth century.<sup>59</sup> His medals augmented the king's collection of antiquities, contributing to knowledge of the history of India and of the Asian peninsula (fig. 5).

Gentil's knowledge of India relied on his linguistic skills in Persian and his capacity to draw on the skill of local painters and writers at the court of Faizabad, who produced numerous albums of paintings, which synthesized and translated Mughal history, for him. His albums "manifest a clear impulse to collect, catalogue, and describe,"<sup>60</sup> but what forms of connoisseurship on Hindu and Mughal Indian paintings existed in Paris? Universal histories, encompassing Indian antiquity, had been published; linguistic knowledge had also developed. A chair of Turkish and Persian languages at the Collège de France was created in 1773. In the relocation of his collection,<sup>61</sup> Gentil could rely on Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, himself a traveler to India during the Seven Years War (1756–63). Today considered as one of the first field Indologists, Anquetil-Duperron was Gentil's correspondent and a close friend of the keepers of the King's Library in Paris, Abbé Jean Paul Bignon and Abbé Jean Jacques Barthélemy. Gentil had met Anquetil-Duperron in India, and in 1774, he had sent him Sanskrit manuscripts, many translated into Persian.<sup>62</sup> Like Anquetil-Duperron who had brought many Indian manuscripts back to Paris, Gentil's practice of collecting manuscripts and artifacts benefited from the French alliance with the Awadh province during the Seven Years War. Therefore, his collection was undertaken in a larger political proj-

---

55 Roselyne Hurel, *Miniatures & Peintures Indiennes: Collection du département des Estampes et de la Photographie de la Bibliothèque nationale de France*, 2 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2010). Gentil did not immediately deposit the integrality of his donation to the king's library: Letter to the Abbé Gentil, December 18, 1778, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, NAF 8872, Fol. 99.

56 Jean-Baptiste Gentil, *Mémoires sur l'Indoustan ou Empire Mogol* (Paris: Petit, 1822), p. 7.

57 "Manuscrits envoyés de Faizabad, au nord du Bengale par M Gentil, Chevalier de St Louis, chargé des affaires du Roy auprès du Nabab de Oud, et déposés à la bibliothèque du Roi en 1777," Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, NAF 5440, fol. 21.

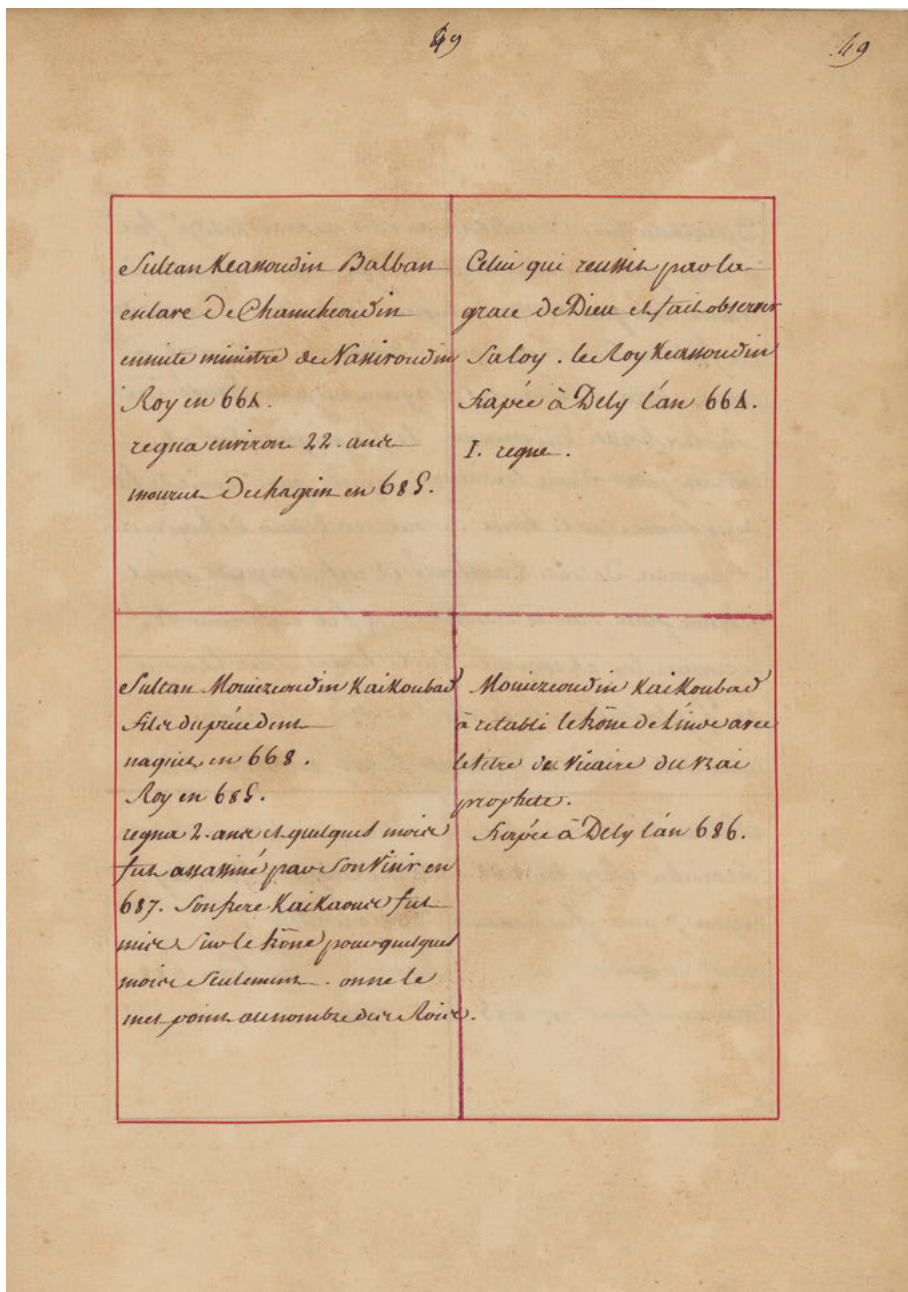
58 "Note sur le dépôt de M. Gentil," Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Medal Cabinet, Archives, 3 ACM 39. Gentil offered ninety-nine medals from Nepal, the Coromandel Coast, and of the Mughal emperors.

59 Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

60 Dadlani, "Transporting India," p. 751.

61 Bénédicte Savoy, Felicity Bodenstein, and Merten Lagatz, eds., *Translocations: Histories of Dislocated Cultural Assets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

62 Richard, "Jean-Baptiste Gentil," pp. 94–95, 98.



**Fig. 5:** Unknown artist(s), *Untitled*, 1773, 24.5 × 17.5 cm, in: Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gentil (ed.), *Histoire des Pièces de Monnoyes qui ont été frappées dans l'Indoustan*, 1773, département des Manuscrits, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Fr. 25287, fol. 49

ect and shared “a mercantilist conception of knowledge based on the desire to enrich the state, to feed the prosperity of the nation” with Anquetil-Duperron.<sup>63</sup>

When Gentil returned to France in 1778, Anquetil-Duperron introduced him to Bertin, who had already received manuscripts from Gentil in Faizabad. To secure his position and to establish his authority as a scholar, Gentil managed to obtain personal recognition by the king, whom he met twice in 1778 and 1785. At his first audience, Gentil offered Louis XVI items from his collection: his illustrated album “Abrégé historique des souverains de l’Indoustan,” a saber, as well as a portrait of the Nawab Shuja-ud-Daula with his sons, painted in 1774 after a canvas by Tilly Kettle. The portrait given by Gentil was placed in the king’s private apartments in Versailles in 1778.<sup>64</sup> Despite the importance of the original Persian and Sanskrit manuscripts he had collected, and the quality of his painted albums, with texts penned in French and illustrated by painters at Faizabad, Gentil’s position as a connoisseur remained largely ignored by scholars in the academic institutions. Similarly, Anquetil-Duperron did not gain full recognition in the French Republic of Letters.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, while Anquetil-Duperron published his translations of the sacred texts of Hinduism and numerous dissertations at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, which finally allowed him to be appointed as *pensionnaire* at the Academy in 1785,<sup>66</sup> Gentil never published his manuscripts, which remained in the Royal Library; his *Mémoires* were only published by his son in 1822.<sup>67</sup>

Soldier or field Indologist? French agent to the Awadh court or connoisseur? Thinking about connoisseurship abroad forces us to confront the geopolitics of collecting as the arrival of new players, such as soldiers and adventurers, remained largely ignored in the networks of European connoisseurship. Their own social status differed from the social milieu of European connoisseurs,<sup>68</sup> while the collections they accumulated abroad were deemed unartistic. Gentil’s collection, given to the Royal Library, was kept in storage. According to Chanchal Dadlani, almost hundred and fifty objects are now held in the National Library in Paris, the present incarnation of the Royal Library.<sup>69</sup> For almost two centuries, the status of these items remained uncertain in the National Library’s collection. Neither considered to be art nor valuable objects

---

63 Stéphane Van Damme, “Capitalizing Manuscripts, Confronting Empires: Anquetil-Duperron and the Economy of Oriental Knowledge in the Context of the Seven Years’ War,” in *Negotiating Knowledge in Early Modern Empires: A Decentered View*, ed. Laszlo Kontler, Antonella Romano, Silvia Sebastiani, and Borbala Zsuzsanna Török (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 114.

64 Jean-Baptiste Gentil, *Mémoires sur l’Indoustan*, p. 310.

65 Lucette Valensi, “Éloge de l’orient, éloge de l’orientalisme. Le jeu d’échecs d’Anquetil-Duperron,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 212, no. 4 (1995): pp. 419–52.

66 Van Damme, “Capitalizing Manuscripts,” p. 120.

67 Jean-Baptiste Gentil, *Mémoires sur l’Indoustan ou Empire Mogol* (Paris: Petit, 1822).

68 Pascal Griener, *La République de l’œil. L’expérience de l’art au siècle des Lumières* (Paris: O. Jacob, 2010).

69 Dadlani, “Transporting India,” p. 758

of study, they had a potential value and represented an epistemological challenge,<sup>70</sup> that was only fulfilled at the end of the twentieth century with the development of interest and expertise born out of a debate on museums in the post-colonial context.

These case studies bring into view the shifting practices of connoisseurship, expertise, and knowledge production in an eighteenth-century Paris that was increasingly aware of foreign artistic conventions and modes of making. Mercantile imperialism dominated the traffic in imported arts and products and relied on skillful dealers, who implemented the language and practices of connoisseurship in the porcelain trade. With French expansion, new artifacts were collected, often in situations of asymmetrical power dynamics. Some of these artifacts were imitated in Paris, producing innovative products that it was hoped would appeal to the “taste” of rich consumers for luxury goods. Medals of Hindustan were considered as “curiosities” to be copied in porcelain at the Sèvres factory, while Chinese gouache paintings were emulated and copied by French painters, provoking debates on colors and pigments, which had an enduring legacy in the nineteenth century.<sup>71</sup> New forms of technical expertise, driven by commerce and innovation, and based on a culture of imitation and emulation, opened alternative and more inclusive definitions of art as craft. However, an asymmetry remained; these forms of knowledge and expertise were not described in the language of connoisseurship reserved for European art. Collections of non-European artifacts were rarely organized according to learned taxonomies, while the histories of these imported artifacts remained debated—even if a new appraisal of the antiquity of the Chinese and Mughal Empires had led to a pluralization of antiquity in the eighteenth century.<sup>72</sup>

Within Europe, relationships between metropolitan cities and their empires differed significantly. In the eighteenth century, British society made room for its colonies and its products in the metropole, creating an “imperial popular culture.”<sup>73</sup> Zoffany’s group portrait manifested the importance of the colonies, materialized in portraits and crafted objects, in British imperial society, overseas and at home. France, where the conversation piece did not develop as a pictorial tradition, offered few possibilities for such a visual celebration of connoisseurship in a globalizing world. More generally, French and British imperial visual cultures differed in the eighteenth century, drawing from different pictorial traditions.<sup>74</sup> In Georgian London, the material presence of the

---

70 For a comparison with archeological artifacts in the nineteenth century, see Mirjam Brusius, “The Field in the Museum: Puzzling Out Babylon in Berlin,” *Osiris* 32 (2017): pp. 264–85.

71 For this legacy from Michel-Eugène Chevreul to Gottfried Semper, see Isabelle Kalinowski, “*Opus plumarium*: Gottfried Semper et l’art chinois de la juxtaposition des couleurs,” *Revue germanique internationale* 26 (2017): pp. 123–42.

72 Charlotte Guichard and Stéphane Van Damme, eds., *Les Antiquités dépaysées. Histoire globale de la culture antique au siècle des Lumières*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022).

73 Kate Fullagar, *The Savage Visit: New World People and Popular Imperial Culture in Britain, 1710–1795* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

74 In France, in the first half of the eighteenth century, *galanterie* and commerce became powerful schemes to visualize and imagine the French empire. See Charlotte Guichard, *Colonial Watteau. Empire, Commerce and Galanterie in Regency France* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2022).

British Empire in India was more assertive. In the 1770s and 1780s, Indian imports accounted for up to twenty percent of James Christie's sales in London, and they could be evaluated as high art.<sup>75</sup> Many of them were also housed in the Oriental Repository. Founded in 1798 and opened in 1801 as the India Museum, this was the first British institution explicitly dedicated to non-European collections.<sup>76</sup> Its early collections consisted of the souvenirs of missionaries and naval officers, which escaped Enlightenment taxonomies and highlighted the "contested, volatile status of Hindu images in several nineteenth-century collections."<sup>77</sup> In Paris, the canonical and Eurocentric tradition of connoisseurship was negotiated in the spaces of private collections, sometimes at the highest levels of the government, in relation to crafted objects that came from afar, despite their lesser visibility in public collections, institutions, and auctions. Behind the label of "curiosity," a multiplicity of attachments and interests unfolded in a couple of Parisian collections containing objects from abroad, testifying to mimetic and technological rivalries between empires in a globalizing world. Today, housed in archives and storerooms, these objects and images reveal the plurality of the geopolitical forces that drove knowledge, connoisseurship, and empire in eighteenth-century France.

---

75 Natasha Eaton, "Nostalgia for the Exotic: Creating an Imperial Art in London, 1750–1793," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 2 (2006): pp. 227–50; Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters. A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1977).

76 Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire*, p. 171.

77 Natasha Eaton, "Colonial Iconoclasm: Mimetic Rivalry, Collecting and Idolatry between India and Britain," in *Acquiring Cultures. Histories of World Art on Western Markets*, ed. Bénédicte Savoy, Charlotte Guichard, and Christine Howald (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

