

# Ranges of Response: Asian Appropriation of European Art and Culture

Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann  
Department of Art and Archaeology  
Princeton University

## Abstract

In an insightful recent essay, Cheng-hua Wang proposed applying the notion of “appropriation” as a way to counter concerns with “Eurocentrism” in global art history by granting agency to local actors in Asia. Endorsing this approach, this paper presents several case studies of cultural interchange between Europe and Asia between ca. 1500 and 1800 that suggest interpretation nevertheless remains complicated. While Dr. Wang concentrated largely on the Qian Long era in China, many other times and locations might be taken into account. Considered here are two East Asian realms and South Asia, each region considered in relation to two different time periods. Focal points for discussion are late Ming and early Qing China; pre- and post-*sakoku*, meaning seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Japan; and India under Mughal domination in the early seventeenth century versus eighteenth-century Rajasthan.

These cases indicate a wide variety of Asian patterns of response existed to cultural elements taken immediately or mediated from Europe, even considered as appropriation. One extreme is exemplified by the act of *e-fumi*, wherein Japanese acted out the rejection of Christianity through stomping on *fumi-e*, several of which were manufactured as imitations of Christian images explicitly intended for desecration. (Can this be called non-appropriation?) *E-fumi*, along with the imposition of the policy of *sakoku*, exclusion of foreigners, came however after what had been the most successful and widespread process of Christian proselytization in early modern Asia. Nevertheless, *sakoku* by no means cut Japan off from relations with the outside world. While Jesuits and other Catholic orders were persecuted and excluded, eighteenth-century Japanese artists and intellectuals eagerly responded to books and objects imported via the Dutch (and Chinese) still allowed in Nagasaki Bay, sparking a rage for things Dutch. Characteristics of Japanese painting were transformed, including the introduction of perspective, in part through a Chinese translation of a manual originally published by Andrea Pozzo, a painter and Jesuit lay brother. In comparison, the Dutch East India Company and the Jesuits brought Netherlandish

prints to Mughal India, where artists under Jahangir and Shah Jahan adapted them for imperial aggrandizement. But the early eighteenth-century Rajput ruler Jai Singh, builder of Jaipur, found supposedly European know-how and technology offered by books and Jesuit visitors of little help when he came to design astronomical observatories. The Jaipur Jantar Mantar and other sites contain large devices like those found in Ulugh Begh's observatory in Timurid Samarkand. In contrast, while the Dutch failed to gain much ground in Ming (and Qing) China, Chinese emperors found the Jesuits useful as technicians and scientists. But Father Verbiest equipped the old observatory in Beijing with devices resembling Jaipur's, albeit smaller. How much before the mid-eighteenth century with Castiglione Chinese artists or patrons found European pictorial methods of interest remains a matter of debate, however: the Jesuit painter Wu Li provides a good counter-example, because despite his profession of faith there seems little or nothing European visible in his work. Asian response to European art and culture in Asia ranged from rejection through selective appropriation to emulation.