Global Capitalism and Local Artistic Taste in Late Imperial/Early Modern China, 1600-1800

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Abstract

During the late Ming, conspicuous consumption based on global commerce vicariously impacted on literati life and elite taste in gardens, paintings, books, and antiquities. The expanding literati appetite for consumption carried over to the eighteenth century. The patrons of late Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1644-1911) garden estates, for example, lived in a world where silver from the New World was exchanged to pay for Chinese commodities, principally silk, porcelain, tea, and jade. The Ming economy was further transformed by an agrarian revolution in which cotton displaced rice production in southern coastal provinces and the influx of Japanese silver heightened the monetization of the sixteenth century economy in unprecedented ways. Ming Chinese unwittingly faced a global marketplace. Their arts and letters would never be the same again.

Key words: Ming, literati, arts, taste, economy, consumption, commerce, silver, global, gardens, paintings, antiquities