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Ting Chang. *Travel, Collecting, and Museums of Asian Art in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Series: The Histories of Material Culture and Collecting, 1700-1950. Burlington & London: Ashgate Publishing, 2013. 210 pp. 40 ills. £60 (hb). ISBN 878-1-4094-3776-5.

Review by Christine M.E. Guth, Royal College of Art and Victoria and Albert Museum

This book offers fresh and provocative analytical frames for the study of the formation of nineteenth-century Euro-American collections of Asian art through an examination of the activities of three French collectors, Henri Cernuschi, Emile Guimet, and Edmond de Goncourt. Studies of individuals of this cultural stature risk slipping into cult of personality narratives focusing on the connoisseurial eye, but Ting Chang, who teaches art history at Nottingham University, firmly rejects this time-honored model. Her interpretive method instead situates her subjects within the broader socio-political and economic dynamics of travel and collecting. Exploring the technologies of modernity that enabled, justified, and structured collection formation, she stresses the importance of seeing this as an ideological activity carried out within particular locations and through the agency of various systems, most notably international monetary policy, transportation and visual communication. Her analysis of the asymmetrical power relationships involved in such cross-cultural exchanges is productively complicated by close attention to the local contingencies and constraints that informed the acquisition, interpretation, and representation of Chinese and Japanese material culture. Euro-American collectors, despite the modern technologies at their disposal, she insists, were not unambiguously in power in such transactions.

Travel is a critical foundation for this book, and Chang contextualizes her three case studies by discussing journeys that give voice to Chinese, Japanese as well as French experiences and perceptions during the 1870s. Passages from the records of privileged members of official Chinese and Japanese diplomatic and trade missions, who toured Europe as part of national efforts to modernize, are introduced to invite reflection on the contrasting expectations of travelers from West to East and East to West. These also serve to underline the differing priorities that individual Chinese and Japanese brought to these intercultural exchanges. Here, as throughout her study, Chang challenges the tendency in Anglophone writings on the reception of Chinese and Japanese art to see the people and culture of those who produced it as undifferentiated regardless of personal and regional variations.

The first chapter, devoted to historical consideration of the European acquisition of Asian objects, situates Cernuschi, Guimet, and Goncourt in the lineage of French collectors of exotic objects from China and Japan through their written accounts. Although these collectors brought to their activities divergent outlooks, they had in common a desire to leave written as well as material legacies. When Cernuschi traveled to Asia in 1870 to flee the chaos following the fall of the Second French Empire, he was accompanied by Théodore Duret, an early Japonophile. Duret's account of their journey, *Voyage en Asie*, was published in 1874. Guimet wrote his own narrative, but invested his *Promenades japonaises* with further empirical authority by including illustrations based on sketches that his companion Felix Régamey had made *in situ*. Goncourt was an armchair traveler, and in his *La Maison d'un Artiste* (1881) objects are made to speak of his imagined experience of Asia. Alone among the three collectors, Goncourt was opposed to the display of his acquisitions in a public museum. His collection was

dispersed after his death, but interpretation of his autobiographical fiction is skillfully amplified with reference to photographs intended for an illustrated edition of this publication, a project, however, that was never realized.

Lack of reliable documentation from his Asian travels, later acquisitions from dealers active in Paris, as well as systematic deaccessioning of substantial parts of Cernuschi's collection during his lifetime and after make it difficult to form a clear idea of what he actually purchased in Asia. Despite these transformations, in her second chapter, Chang argues that the unusual predominance of ancient ritual bronzes from China in the collection should be correlated to Cernuschi's profession as an economist, and more specifically an authority on bi-metallism. For centuries, gold and silver had been the currency of global trade between Europe, America and Asia, at exchange rates beneficial to Euro-American traders. Cernuschi, however, advocated establishing a fixed exchange rate that would self-adjust following supply and demand. Bronzes were of symbolic and artistic significance to him because they were formed from a substance long used for coinage. In addition, they projected an image of historical dignity and technological authority consistent with his desire to use his collection to showcase the development of Asian civilizations. Cernuschi's appeal to such intellectual issues met with mixed success, however, owing to French scholars' privileging of philology over material culture and, more recently, of art historians' questions about the authenticity of many of his ancient Chinese bronzes.

Asian art collecting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was a site of complex and often competing national interests among France, Britain, the United States, as well as Japan, with considerable pluralism and evolution in the interpretive frames brought to this enterprise. This is a subject that Chang might have developed further both to situate more securely the particular characteristics of the French collectors and the fate of their collections. Cernuschi's interest in bronze artifacts, for instance, was shared by other private and institutional collectors, among them the South Kensington (today the Victoria and Albert) Museum. A colossal bronze incense burner made by Suzuki Chōkichi purchased following its display at the 1878 Paris International Exposition for the then huge sum of £1,568 is only one of many instances of this trend. [1]

The acquisition, interpretation and display of Chinese and Japanese artifacts were recognized as strategies that could accrue both personal and national benefits. Cernuschi and Guimet both brought to their collecting an acute awareness of its importance in maintaining French intellectual authority and cultural self-representation. Like Cernuschi, however, Guimet's efforts to promote the study of China and Japan through the lens of material culture rather than aesthetics were not entirely successful: his private museum of world religions, opened in 1889, was not well received and subsequently was transformed into a public museum devoted to the celebration of Asian art. Goncourt was perhaps more fortunate: since his collection was defined chiefly through his own words, its discursive power remained unchallenged by the artistic revisionism that informed the fluctuating reputations of his fellow collectors.

Although she touches on the complex history of the Guimet Museum, Chang's primary focus in Chapter 4 is to deconstruct the "labor of travel," that made it possible. Using Guimet's narrative, Felix Régamey's sketches, together with other photographic evidence, the author offers close readings of the modes of transportation on which Guimet and his companion depended for their tour of Japan. By drawing attention to the discomforts and limitations of travel by jinrikisha (perceived to be an archaic form of transport although it was in fact a nineteenth-century invention) Chang redresses the view that Euro-Americans traveled in East Asia as all-powerful "conquering heroes." Instead, she argues, they were "domesticated by the locals who conveyed them" (p. 100).

While this chapter offers a thoughtfully nuanced discussion of the limitations of western power, it fails to address the more significant ways in which Guimet was dependent on his Japanese hosts. To make sense of Guimet's engagement with Japan, as Ellen Conant revealed in a pioneering 1984 article,

requires taking into account the disease that in 1861 killed off the silkworms on which the French industry depended, threatening the Guimet family business in Lyons. [2] This national disaster led representatives of the French silk industry to travel to Japan to negotiate the purchase of a strain of silkworms fed on oak rather than mulberry leaves to replenish French stocks. Thereafter, many French firms and merchants were established in Yokohama, and until 1872 French nationals constituted the largest number of foreign technical and language teachers employed by the Japanese government. Among these was Paul Brunat, a silk expert who set up the Tomioka silk mill in 1870 with machinery and technicians from Guimet's hometown of Lyons. Silk produced at the Tomioka Mills won a prize at the 1873 Vienna International Exposition, the first such event in which the Meiji government participated.

Because of her failure to consult Conant's research, Chang misses a chance to make a significant connection that would have extended and deepened interpretation of Guimet's travel and exploration of Japan. By 1876, when Guimet traveled there, the sale of raw silk constituted the chief source of foreign exchange. The significance the Japanese government attributed to this industry helps to explain the unusual access to powerful officials as well as the exceptional mobility that Guimet enjoyed. It was thanks to Kūki Ryūichi, acting Minister of Education (later Director of the Tokyo Imperial Museum), and Makimura Masanao, Mayor of Kyoto, that Guimet was able to make an extensive tour of temples and shrines throughout the country that were not open to ordinary tourists. It is likely that they also helped to arrange his purchase of the hundreds of Buddhist images that later formed the core of the museum's collection.

Chapter 4 is the strongest in the book. It is devoted to the recuperation and interpretation of Edmond de Goncourt's collection on the basis of the author's writings and, especially, his *mise-en-scène* of his *objets d'art* in his home, as recorded in the hundreds of photographs commissioned to secure his aesthetic legacy. This scenography, in which the *artiste* himself often figures, offers complex and even contradictory versions of Goncourt's identity as a collector yearning for the past yet dependent on modern technologies to conjure it up. Unlike Cernuschi and Guimet, Goncourt did not have democratic leanings, and was dismayed by the way the forces of capitalism were turning the world of inherited privilege upside down. His self-reflexive narrative expresses this disenchantment with contemporary French bourgeois culture, using idealized Asian objects "as vehicles to show his kinship with *ancien régime* collectors and to support a particular vision of France" (p. 129). At the very moment when global capitalism, modern transportation and mechanical reproduction combined to make China and Japan real places, Goncourt clung tenaciously to an affectively charged outlook that these regions were wholly accessible through intimate physical contact with things. Yet the nostalgia, fantasy, and erotic desire that are important dimensions of his collecting also led him to recognize the "underlying commensurability as art" of Chinese and Japanese artifacts in ways that Cernuschi and Guimet, with their more scientific approach, did not (p. 146).

This book joins the growing body of literature that seeks to identify and understand the mutually constitutive uses, forms, and purposes to which Chinese and Japanese material cultures were put in nineteenth-century Europe and America. While there is no lack of writing on the subject, Chang brings to her study a new set of research questions and methodologies that offer a richly textured picture of what was at stake in these cultural practices. *Travel, Collecting, and Museums of Asian Art in Nineteenth-Century Paris* opens up suggestive lines of inquiry by closely examining the particular historical conditions that gave meaning to three particular collections, but it offers an analytical model that could be fruitfully applied to other collections as well. Its appearance suggests that the study of Chinoiserie and Japonisme is undergoing a welcome change appropriate to the complexities and ambiguities of the subject.

NOTES

[1] See <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/093126/incense-burner-suzuki-chokichi/>

[2] Ellen P. Conant, "The French Connection: Emile Guimet's Mission to Japan, A Cultural Context for Japonisme" in *Japan in Transition: Thought and Action in the Meiji Era, 1868-1912*, edited by Hilary Conroy, Sandra Davis and Wayne Patterson (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984), pp. 113-146.

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