
THE HISTORIES OF MATERIAL CULTURE AND COLLECTING, 1700–1950

Collecting and Displaying China's "Summer Palace" in the West

The Yuanmingyuan in Britain and France



EDITED BY LOUISE TYTHACOTT

Collecting and Displaying China's "Summer Palace" in the West

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In October 1860, at the culmination of the Second Opium War, British and French troops looted and destroyed one of the most important palace complexes in imperial China—the Yuanmingyuan. Known in the West as the "Summer Palace," this site consisted of thousands of buildings housing a vast art collection. It is estimated that over a million objects may have been taken from the palaces in the Yuanmingyuan—and many of these are now scattered around the world, in private collections and public museums. With contributions from leading specialists, this is the first book to focus on the collecting and display of "Summer Palace" material over the past 150 years in museums in Britain and France. It examines the way museums placed their own cultural, political and aesthetic concerns upon Yuanmingyuan material, and how displays—especially those at the Royal Engineers Museum in Kent, the National Museum of Scotland and the Musée Chinois at the Château of Fontainebleau—tell us more about European representations and images of China, than they do about the Yuanmingyuan itself.

Louise Tythacott is Senior Lecturer in Curating and Museology of Asian Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Her books include, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, *The Lives of Chinese Objects: Buddhism, Imperialism and Display* and *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches*.

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For Sophie, with love

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Acknowledgments

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The original series editor, Michael Yonan, supplied positive and enthusiastic feedback from the start. Margaret Michniewicz at Ashgate gave excellent guidance on the initial proposal, while Isabella Vitti and Julia Michaelis at Taylor & Francis have ably seen the volume through to publication. I would like to thank Katrina Hill for commenting on a draft of the introductory chapter. The views of two anonymous reviewers were also extremely useful. Above all, I am indebted to James Hevia’s pioneering work. His book, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (2003) inspired my initial research on “Summer Palace” objects some years ago, thus sowing the seeds for both the conference and this publication.

Part I

Overviews

1 The Yuanmingyuan and its Objects

Louise Tythacott

The Yuanmingyuan was one of the most important palace–garden complexes in imperial China.¹ Known in the West as the “Summer Palace,”² the English term for the site is misleading, for this was not, in fact, a single edifice, but rather a grouping of classical gardens and waterways, with thousands of buildings, housing a vast art collection.³ Originally established in 1709, it was used during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the principle residence of Qing dynasty emperors, and it became the official seat of government, at times frequented more than the Forbidden City in Beijing.⁴

In October 1860, the Yuanmingyuan was notoriously looted⁵ and destroyed by British and French troops at the culmination of the Second Opium War (1856–1860): as a result, for many Chinese people today, the highly visible, ruined park in north-west Beijing has become a potent symbol of national humiliation.⁶ In recent years, objects looted from the Yuanmingyuan buildings—estimated to be in the region of 1.5 million⁷—are the subject of increasing political and academic concern. While there has been a range of texts that discuss the broader issues surrounding the looting and repatriation of imperial Qing objects,⁸ this is the first edited volume to discuss, in detail, the diverse histories and multiple interpretations of material from the Yuanmingyuan in museums in Britain and France.⁹

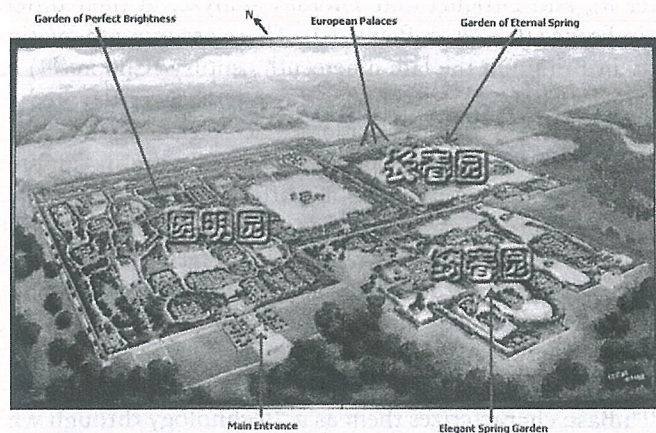


Figure 1.1 Map of Yuanmingyuan

Inspired by James Hevia's seminal work, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (2003), and Kopytoff and Appadurai's notion of objects having "social lives,"¹⁰ this book examines the movements and shifting meanings attached to Yuanmingyuan artifacts over the past 150 years. In his introduction to the *Social Life of Things*, Appadurai stressed the need, when discussing the lives of objects, to analyze the wider social contexts in which material culture is immersed in terms of different "regimes of value" (1986: 4).¹¹ As we shall see, the diaspora of looted objects from the Yuanmingyuan after 1860 became embroiled within distinctive value systems in the West. Some pieces were transferred from one imperial collection to another—from the Yuanmingyuan of the ruling Chinese Manchu dynasty to the royal palaces of the Emperor Napoleon III of France and Queen Victoria in Britain, where they were inscribed with new nationalistic symbolism. This volume identifies how the museums that house Yuanmingyuan objects embody diverse ideological perspectives, whether it be the military focus of the Royal Engineers in Kent, with its emphasis on developing the *esprit de corps* of the regiment (as discussed by Scott in Chapter 6) or the Musée Chinois at the Château of Fontainebleau, in a forest to the south of Paris, with its French Empire style aesthetics and celebration of imperial taste (the subject of both Droguet's and Thomas' Chapters 9 and 10). It should also be remembered that the interpretations and meanings given to Summer Palace loot have shifted over time as European museum displays were refurbished and updated. This volume, therefore, discusses the very different stories Yuanmingyuan objects in the West have been made to tell.

Included are chapters written by those who have looked after Summer Palace material—Scott as a former curator of the Royal Engineers Museum in Kent; McLoughlin, former Principal Curator for East and Central Asia at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh; and Droguet, Conservateur général du patrimoine at the Château of Fontainebleau. Distinctive approaches to the collection, representation and exhibition of Summer Palace material are evident. While Hevia (Chapter 2) and Pearce (Chapter 3) provide introductory overviews of historical and political issues, other chapters focus on more detailed discussions of specific objects or displays. Scott, for example, examines the exhibition of Summer Palace loot in the Royal Engineers Museum in Kent (Chapter 6), Finlay addresses French collections in the eighteenth century (Chapter 8), and Droguet and Thomas analyze, in their different ways, the Musée Chinois in France (Chapters 9 and 10). There are more thematic chapters: Hill on design reform in Britain in the late nineteenth century (Chapter 4) and Pierson on imperial provenance (Chapter 5). Included too is a chapter devoted to the detailed museological biography of a single Summer Palace piece—the Hope Grant Ewer at the National Museum of Scotland discussed by McLoughlin in Chapter 7.

The role of museums in defining meanings attributed to Summer Palace objects is clearly of particular concern. Museums are ideological institutions—and their mission as part of an imperialistic apparatus in the late nineteenth–early twentieth century, through which other cultures were understood, analyzed, classified, and dominated, is now well established in the academic literature.¹² MacKenzie, for example, refers to the museum as a "tool of empire."¹³ For Barringer and Flynn, they function as "potent mechanisms in the construction and visualization of power relations between colonizer and colonized"¹⁴; Basu characterizes them as a "technology through which the British . . . were able to transform the unknown into the known: that which could be collected, classified, categorized, and thereby commandeered and controlled."¹⁵ We shall see in

this volume how particular museums in Britain and France placed their own cultural, political, and aesthetic concerns upon Yuanmingyuan material. Summer Palace objects in the West were disassociated from previous uses, earlier histories, and meanings were erased and they were reinscribed with new interpretations in relation to the prevailing ideologies of the time. Above all, we shall see how Summer Palace objects became enmeshed in complex imperial histories, and ultimately how the displays discussed—at the Royal Engineers Museum in Kent, the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, the Musée Chinois at the Château of Fontainebleau—tell us more about European representations and images of China, than they do about the Yuanmingyuan itself.

With such a focused field, there are inevitably crossovers and resonances between the chapters. The same objects appear in different places—the now controversial and politicized zodiac heads, for example, are discussed by Hevia (Chapter 2), Pearce (Chapter 3), and Pierson (Chapter 5); the Sino-Tibetan “Skull of Confucius” is referred to by Pearce (Chapter 3) and Hill (Chapter 4); General Gordon’s throne makes an appearance in both Scott’s and Hill’s chapters (6 and 4); and “Grant’s” gold ewer, the central subject for McLoughlin (Chapter 7), is mentioned too by Pearce (Chapter 3). A number of authors touch upon the problems of provenance, as well as the fraught issue of restitution (Scott, Chapter 6, and Pearce, Chapter 3).¹⁶ Chapters address as well international exhibitions (Hill, Chapter 4), and the role of the market in the commodification and dissemination of the material (Hevia, Chapter 2 and Pierce, Chapter 3).

* * *

In order to contextualize issues addressed in subsequent chapters, this introduction now turns to discuss the origins, history, and development of the Yuanmingyuan in China, particularly in the eighteenth century, and its destruction in 1860 at the hands of British and French troops. It then provides a summary of the movements of the substantial diaspora of Yuanmingyuan material, from 1860, to distinct sites of representation and display in Britain and France.

The Yuanmingyuan: “Garden of Perfect Brightness” (1709–1860)¹⁷

*Beyond doubt, had the garden survived to this day, it would be one of the greatest and richest museums in the world.*¹⁸

For more than a century, the Yuanmingyuan was the abode of five Manchu emperors—Yongzheng (r. 1722–1735), Qianlong (r. 1736–1795), Jiaqing (r. 1796–1820), Daoguang (r. 1821–1850), and Xianfeng (r. 1851–1861). The Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors, in particular, made the Yuanmingyuan their home, conducting most of the affairs of state from within its capacious walls. Its location, on a site five or so miles to the northwest of Beijing, was originally chosen by the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722), and initial construction began in 1709. The palace–garden complex was destined as a gift for the emperor’s fourth son, later the Yongzheng emperor.¹⁹ Under him, from 1725, the gardens expanded dramatically. Water-works were introduced, creating lakes, streams, and ponds: Yongzheng was the first emperor to take up residence in the Yuanmingyuan, and he was to die there in 1735.²⁰ In the reign of his son, the Qianlong emperor, the Yuanmingyuan increased once more in

size. Tracts of land were added to the east, west and the south, and the space grew to include the Changchunyuan, "Eternal Spring Garden"²¹ and the Qichunyuan, "Variegated Spring Garden".²² The Qianlong emperor took personal interest in and directed the works—and of all Qing emperors, he spent the longest time and lavished the most resources on this, the "Garden of Perfect Brightness."²³

Once completed, the Yuanmingyuan comprised around 3.4 kilometers²—roughly the size of Central Park in New York (see Figure 1.1).²⁴ The area was dotted with many small gardens, with lakes, artificial hills, palaces, and architectural creations. The arrangement of the individual scenic sites was complex.²⁵ Distinct garden units created beautiful quiet retreats, extraordinary vistas, enclosed and enchanted spaces. Each small area was conceived as an architectural and natural ensemble, deliberately designed to have a poetic atmosphere. Courtyards were filled with magnolias, with bamboo and rare trees. An artificial landscape composed of hillocks, terraces, ponds, lakes, canals was set about with formal gardens, and with elegant rocks composed of fantastically shaped limestone. Deer, peacocks, hawks, golden and silver pheasants, horses, and elephants inhabited various parts of the site.²⁶ The Jesuit artist, Attiret, considered the Yuanmingyuan "a veritable paradise on earth";²⁷ Ringmar writes of it as a "perfect world."²⁸ For the French soldier, Dupin, it was "a vision from the Thousand and One Nights."²⁹

To capture its vastness and beauty, in 1737, the Qianlong emperor instructed court artists to create a silk map of the Yuanmingyuan, which was then hung on the wall of one of his apartments.³⁰ A group of "40 scenes," painted on silk, was also commissioned in 1738 (see Figure 8.1), and by 1744, the album "40 Views" was completed.³¹ The circulation of these images in eighteenth century France is discussed by Finlay in Chapter 8, and they remain to this day the primary visual record of the gardens.³²

As well as an exquisite garden complex, the Yuanmingyuan was a gigantic architectural creation, consisting of some of the most magnificent building works conceived in the Qing period.³³ Around three thousand separate structures with an estimated total floor space of 160 kilometers² were located around the huge garden site.³⁴ These structures conformed to specific Chinese architectural codes, and can be loosely categorized as palaces, halls, pavilions, terraces, temples, chambers, belvederes, basilicas, gazebos, galleries, chapels, pagodas, kiosks, studios, land boats, marble bridges, and elaborate walls.³⁵ The French, General Montauban, found it impossible "to convey . . . the magnificence of the many buildings."³⁶ There was a three-story building devoted to Guanyin, the Goddess of Compassion, as well as a court for the God of Rain.³⁷ The Fahui Temple had a 22.5-meter tall pagoda made of colored glazed tiles.³⁸ The Temple of Treasures included a large image of the God of War, and other buildings on the site were filled with hundreds, if not thousands of religious statues of all shapes and sizes, in woods, metals, and porcelain.³⁹ A gallery created for the Qianlong emperor displayed his collection of inscribed stone tablets.⁴⁰ The most imposing edifice was the magnificent and costly Ancestral Shrine, built in 1742, and constructed from the finest materials.⁴¹ There were more everyday buildings too—a silkworm farm, a brocade and dye mill, schools and theatres, a village replicating rural life with cottages, a temple and vegetable plots.⁴² In the market area, eunuchs dressed as shop keepers sold merchandise to the emperor in masquerade with "all the bustle of a city."⁴³ The Yuanmingyuan thus functioned as a mini society, a world within a world.⁴⁴

The most unusual area was devoted to European-style buildings. Between 1747 and 1783, mainly Jesuit architects and engineers of European origin working in the

court—key among them, Castiglione, Attiret, and Benoist—constructed, alongside Chinese experts, a series of Western-style palaces, pavilions, and gardens to the north-east, known as the Xiyanglou. Built on a 26-hectare strip of land—750 meters long by 70 meters wide⁴⁵—it covered one-fiftieth of the site.⁴⁶ Indeed, this “Chinese Versailles,” as it came to be known, was the most ambitious project undertaken by the Qianlong emperor.⁴⁷ The Xiyanglou included over 40 structures, including palaces following Baroque models, using European-style materials—huge columns, marble balustrades, glass windows. Surrounding these were formal gardens and European-style fountains (see Figures 1.2 and 8.3). The first buildings were erected by 1747—with the Xieqiqu (Palace of the Delights of Harmony) the initial structure encountered.⁴⁸ Decorated with Ionic and Corinthian columns, it had a three-story central section, with three galleries running to double-story octagonal pavilions on each side. In the side pavilion was a large pool with fountains and musicians’ galleries.⁴⁹ The Fangwaiguan, known as the Belvedere, was completed by 1759—a crescent-shaped palatial building with marble balustrades enclosed by a moat, with doors, windows, and steps designed in heavily chased bronze by Castiglione.⁵⁰ The largest palace was the Haiyantang (Hall of Calm Seas) reminiscent of the Cour d’honneur at Versailles (see Figure 1.2). Containing 36 rooms, two winding staircases, marble balustrades, and glass windows, outside was a large fountain surrounded by a Chinese-style water clock, with the now-famous bronze zodiac animal heads spouting water from their mouths every two hours.⁵¹ Nearby, a large gray-brick palace on a small hill, the Yuanyingguan—“Observatory of Distant Waters”—was used by the Qianlong emperor as his royal vacation home: a huge hall for the emperor’s throne on a dais was part of its interior.⁵² It had European-style furniture and tapestries, life-size portraits of French women, as well as magnificent pier glasses, sent as gifts in 1767 by Louis XV.⁵³ And it was here that the emperor would listen to music from Mongolia and Chinese Turkestan. Around these palaces were arranged other exotic European-style structures—water fountains, a large maze, an aviary for peacocks, and other exotic birds. The European section was Qianlong’s “cabinet of curiosities”⁵⁴ and, as Danby notes, “the achievement of a . . . monarch who . . . had the most wonderful materials and unlimited resources at his disposal.”⁵⁵

Importantly for the concerns of this book, the Yuanmingyuan also housed much of the Chinese imperial collection of art and antiquities. The Qianlong emperor in particular was famed for assembling the richest private grouping of objects ever seen in China.⁵⁶ There were paintings, calligraphy, bronzes, porcelain, cloisonné, snuff bottles, silks, textiles, decorative arts and antiquities in jade, bronze, and other precious materials, rare books, furniture, and jewelry.⁵⁷ While the Qianlong emperor had special galleries and a library built for displaying inscribed stone tablets and books, most of the collections were distributed throughout the buildings as furnishings or ornaments. Interiors were adorned with imposing mirrors and chandeliers;⁵⁸ there were thick rugs of silk and wool of the highest quality.⁵⁹ Magnificent thrones, chairs, tables, and couches were found in the different buildings of teak and red sandalwood (*zitan mu*); some inlaid with semiprecious stones, some decorated with jade, ivory, and gold. The Jesuit artist, Jean-Denis Attiret (1702–1768) noted:

... all the most beautiful things that can be imagined as to furniture, ornaments and paintings . . . [There are] the most valuable sorts of wood: varnished works, of China and Japan; ancient vases of porcelain; silks, and cloth of gold and silver. . . .⁶⁰

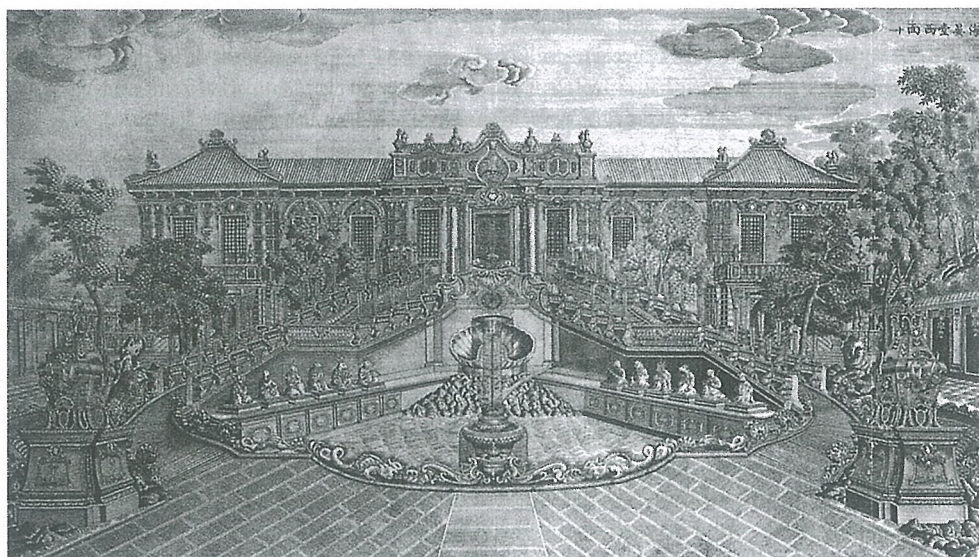


Figure 1.2 Illustration of Haiyantang, in the Xiyanglou Section of Yuanmingyuan

Ringmar comments on the large numbers of miniature objects and the lacquer boxes filled with small things: “ivory balls, flowers, fruit and insects, tiny scrolls, books and paintings.”⁶¹ In the emperor’s apartments were porcelains, carved jade ornaments, statuettes of gold, silver, and bronze. The Yuanmingyuan accommodated collections of the most accomplished calligraphy—the highest art form in China—as well as important scroll paintings dating back a thousand years. Exquisite cloisonné vases and incense burners were used in the temples. The empresses’ apartments were lavished with decorative arts, as well as lacquer wares, jewelry, belts, and hair ornaments in jade, pearl, coral, and ivory. In other parts of the Yuanmingyuan were large store rooms stacked with bolts of silk and the immaculately embroidered court robes used on official occasions.⁶²

The Yuanmingyuan contained a range of imported objects too, both tribute from foreign delegations and much through the Canton trade.⁶³ There were the royal gifts from Louis XV, as we have seen, as well as mechanical toys, music boxes, clocks, astronomical instruments, porcelain, and watches from the Macartney Expedition.⁶⁴ Ringmar describes the Audience Hall:

The throne was carved in rosewood and decorated with dragons . . . All along the upper portion of one of the walls was a painting that showed the grounds of Yuanmingyuan. Below it and along the opposing wall were side tables with books and yellow silk covers, porcelain bowls, a celestial and terrestrial globe, and a musical clock made by George Clarke, Leadenhall Street, London.⁶⁵

The libraries in the Yuanmingyuan were of immense historical significance. The largest, and one of the most important buildings in the site, was the Wenjuan Ge, dating to 1774. Constructed to house one of only seven sets of the *Siku Quanshu*,

"Collected Works of the Four Treasuries" (the largest collection of books ever compiled on Chinese history),⁶⁶ it was said to have housed over 120,000 volumes.⁶⁷

Wolseley described the Yuanmingyuan he encountered in 1860 as a "city composed only of museums and Wardour Streets."⁶⁸ Yet, inventories of its vast collections have, unfortunately, not survived and it seems unlikely that the original locations of extant objects can ever be fully known.⁶⁹

After the death of the Qianlong emperor in the late eighteenth century, three successive Qing rulers inhabited the Yuanmingyuan. Yet as China's economy worsened in the early-mid nineteenth century, few new buildings were added, and existing structures were rarely maintained or repaired. Nevertheless, by the mid-nineteenth century, the imperial complex had undergone expansion in one form or another for over 150 years. The huge size, precise and exquisite landscaping, extraordinary buildings, and priceless objects made the Yuanmingyuan, in Wong's words, "the greatest imperial garden China has ever built."⁷⁰

The Looting of the Yuanmingyuan in 1860

While the Yuanmingyuan developed and expanded in this rarefied world over the course of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, wider geopolitical shifts were to have a dramatic impact upon the fate of the site. The rise of Britain as an industrial and trading power in the early nineteenth century was matched only by the decline of China's empire. Indeed the British, keen to expand their economic markets, declared war on China in 1839, on the pretext that quantities of their opium had been destroyed. The First Opium War (1839–1842), as it became known, was the first time the Middle Kingdom had been invaded. China was unprepared for Britain's military offensive and the result, in 1842, was the country's defeat and the imposition of the humiliating Treaty of Nanjing. Tensions escalated over the following decade, culminating in a Second Opium War (1856–1860), and the even more onerous, Treaty of Tianjin, of June 1858. When the Chinese refused to ratify the latter, relations between the countries deteriorated. In August 1860, James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin (1811–1863) was placed in charge of an expeditionary force of 11,000 men, sent under the command of General Hope Grant (1808–1875) with the aim of making the Qing government acquiesce.⁷¹ The capture and torture of the British Consul and a number of other members of the invading force in September 1860 was the excuse for the British and French⁷² to attack the capital, Beijing.

On the night of October 6, 1860, French troops were the first to arrive at the Yuanmingyuan, followed by the British, the imperial family having fled.⁷³ The French General Montauban,⁷⁴ along with Elgin and Hope Grant, toured the site to identify trophies to present to Queen Victoria and Emperor Napoleon III: after this, the grounds were "opened up to all soldiers."⁷⁵ The accounts of the military attest to the atmosphere of frenzy that overcame soldiers in the various buildings. Wolseley wrote how the "indiscriminate plunder and wanton destruction of all articles too heavy for removal commenced at once."⁷⁶ The British soldier, Tulloch, described men, "off their heads with the excitement of looting a palace and for no apparent reason tearing down grand embroideries."⁷⁷ Witnessing one man smashing a large mirror with the butt of his rifle, he wrote that "With the feelings of a boy suddenly told to take what he likes in a pastry-cooks shop, I was puzzled where to begin."⁷⁸ Swinhoe commented on the emperor's throne room, "filled with crowds of foreign soldiers