

[Research Seminar: Feminist Revisions of Chinoiserie](#)

Announcement published by Alice Read on Wednesday, February 8, 2023

Type:

Seminar

Date:

March 22, 2023

Location:

United Kingdom

Subject Fields:

Anthropology, Art, Art History & Visual Studies, Women's & Gender History / Studies, World History / Studies

- 22 March 2023
- 5:00 - 7:00 pm
- Part of the series 'In Conversation: New Directions in Art History', which will explore the changing modes and methodologies of approaching visual and material worlds. Running from January to March 2023.
- Paul Mellon Centre and Online

Iris Moon, Assistant Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts Department (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Woman in the Mirror

Chinoiserie, a style of decoration that emerged in early modern Europe, has typically been pictured as a neutral, harmless and nostalgic fantasy of the “exotic” Far East, one that was embodied by the traffic, trade and ravenous consumption of luxury objects such as mirrors, wallpaper, furniture and porcelain. Though Chinoiserie is often pictured as encompassing a wide field of material production, it has rarely been considered as part of the contested forms of subjectivity that emerged in the eighteenth century. This presentation proposes that we rethink the history of Chinoiserie. It asks what a feminist approach to Chinoiserie might look like, and what the ramifications are for British decorative arts in positioning Chinoiserie at the inflection point of racialised and gendered forms of subjectivity that continue to exert a hold on the present. Building on a rich and growing body of critical and theoretical literature, the presentation nonetheless anchors the discussion of Chinoiserie in a formal analysis of a group of reverse-painted mirrors made for the British market. These eighteenth-century mirrors picture women, both real and imagined, in different modes of dress and postures, painted on the reverse side of the glass scraped of its reflective surface. Scholars have relegated these export objects to a secondary status, considering them as trade paintings of little artistic merit, refusing in turn to probe the subtle and complex questions they raise about gender, identity, power, representation and reflection. Yet these are the questions that materialise when standing before the mirrors. You ask: Who is the woman in the mirror? Myself or another? Where do I position myself? Who am I supposed to be?

Rachel Silberstein, Adjunct Assistant Professor (University of Florida)

The Women on the Garment

Chinese material culture offers several routes for a feminist approach to Chinoiserie. One could counter its insistence on the generic Chinese woman by exploring histories of specific Chinese women: the Qing dynasty social counterparts of the privileged European women who purchased Chinoiserie silks, porcelains and mirrors. Their consumption, especially of textiles and fashion, offers an arena of specificity, agency and control that refutes Chinoiserie's imagined Qing beauties: languorous and ahistorical. Alternatively, one could consider a different counterpart: Qing society's engagement with images of European women. Though such imagery may not have travelled far beyond the imperial palace, recent scholarship has clarified how European textiles, architecture and dress fascinated those elites able to access such new visualities, introduced by Jesuit missionaries, print culture and the East India Companies.

But perhaps most intriguing when considering Chinoiserie's potential for contesting female subjectivities is to understand it not as a European fantasy unrelated to Chinese practice, but rather a shared global visual space whose dynamic was driven by fashion. Accordingly, the presentation focuses on a genre of Qing fashion: the embroidered figures of beauties that adorned the fabrics and trimmings of the mid-late period jackets, robes and accessories. Similar to the eighteenth-century mirror designed for a European consumer, these embroideries depict women, both real and imagined, in different postures and dress. In the same way as the eighteenth-century mirror, the embroideries derived from imagery circulating in pattern books and print culture. Yet, these embroideries were produced for Chinese female consumers and, in an intriguing act of self-referentiality, the female figures were placed on the very surface that covered the female wearer's body. By showing how this fashion trend traversed different media, cities and classes, this presentation explores how it allowed Chinese women a way of exploring identity by playing with narrative, and how this figural bricolage can be understood alongside European women's consumption of Chinoiserie.

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<https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/whats-on/forthcoming/feminist-revisions-chinoiserie>