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Menu ▾

Featured Researcher

Each month, we offer the spotlight to one of our funded researchers to exhibit their research projects in more detail.

The Featured Researcher for April 2022 is [Tullia Fraser](#).

Working Title: Shaping Taste, Building Knowledge: Collecting China in Scotland in the Early Twentieth Century

University of Glasgow, School of Culture and Creative Arts



Detail of an imperial seat (dàbǎozuò) of brown lacquered wood: China, Qing dynasty, Qianlong reign, 1735 – 1796 AD.

Image © National Museums Scotland.

The presence of Chinese material culture in Scotland has grown significantly over the last 200 years, much of it during Britain's imperial expansion. The means and scope of collecting were as diverse as the collectors themselves, whose backgrounds and motivations touched almost every aspect of life in the British imperial project. The total rewriting of societal order in China in the early twentieth century, seen particularly in the 'Western penetration' into China and the collapse of the Qing monarchy, effected an unprecedented mobility of Chinese artefacts. This was further catalyzed by internal political instability, the timely growth of the international art market and interest in Chinese 'art', as well as the development of national and regional museums in Britain.¹ Also at play were factors such as the unique and somewhat contradictory nature of the 'Scottish experience in Asia', characterized by some as a collective that enjoyed more visibility and publicity than their Welsh and Irish counterparts.² This was despite historical factors such as the 1707 Acts of Union underpinning the Scots' comparatively more individualistic involvement in various British imperialist endeavours.³



Top view of a dish of earthenware with a pedestal foot:
China, Tang dynasty, 7th – 8th century AD. Image ©
National Museums Scotland.

The transnational 'journeys' these artefacts then undertook were as varied as the reasons that caused their dispersal. As these objects passed through the hands of dealers, collectors and museums, they were often assigned anew: names, labels, fiscal values and purposes. In this process, they also inherited descriptions,

interpretations and meanings, many of which were reflective of the 'then-current' Eurocentric scholarship, traditions and (mis)conceptions.⁴ As these layers were added to an object's 'journey', ever more out of reach are the core provenances, uses and meanings that these artefacts once embodied in their original contexts and cultural frameworks.⁵ Also often concealed are the Chinese creators, owners/users, finders, collectors, dealers and advisors whose hands these objects once passed through, sometimes well before the early twentieth century.⁶ These complex entanglements from both the 'former' and 'after' lives of these artefacts all ultimately continue to impact their storage, documentation and interpretations in Scottish museums, where they are housed today. As these objects are placed on display, often to the warm reception of Scottish visitors, these entanglements also pose huge influences on how modern audiences perceive China – and Scotland's relationship with China – both of the past and present.



Detail of a puzzle teapot of stoneware, with a dragon-shaped handle and spout: China, Qing dynasty, probably 18th century. Image © National Museums Scotland.

Through investigating several collectors whose collections are housed in selected Scottish museums today, my collaborative project between the University of Glasgow and National Museums Scotland aims to explore these entanglements in the Scottish 'collecting of China' in the early twentieth century. I approach my research with the further endeavours of uncovering the original cultural frameworks of some of these objects and addressing their identifications within museum documentation and displays. Much of these initial months of my PhD has been spent in the stores of various Scottish museums, physically examining objects for traces of these 'former lives'. Though this project is still in its exploratory stages, I am excited about highlighting the stories of these artefacts, thereby shedding light

on the rich array of Chinese material culture in Scottish museums and how they came to be there.

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Endnotes:

¹ Christine Howald and Léa Saint-Raymond, 'Tracing Dispersal: Auction Sales from the Yuanmingyuan Loot in Paris in the 1860s', *Journal for Art Market Studies* 2 (2018): 1–23, 1. Giles Waterfield, *The People's Galleries: Art Museums and Exhibitions in Britain, 1800-1914* (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2015). Iain Robertson, *Understanding Art Markets: Inside the World of Art and Business*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

² T. M. Devine and Angela McCarthy, eds., *The Scottish Experience in Asia, c.1700 to the Present: Settlers and Sojourners*, 1st ed. 2017, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Cham: Springer International Publishing: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2.

³ Devine and McCarthy, 25.

⁴ Elinor Pearlstein, 'Early Chicago Chronicles of Early Chinese Art', in *Collectors, Collections & Collecting the Arts of China: Histories & Challenges*, ed. Jason Steuber and Guolong Lai (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 7–42, 33.

⁵ Iside Carbone and Helen Wang, 'Introduction to Special Issue: Asia Collections Outside Asia: Questioning Artefacts, Cultures and Identities in the Museum', *Transcultural Perspectives*, no. Special Issue: Asia Collections outside Asia: Questioning Artefacts, Cultures and Identities in the Museum (2020): 1–9, 2.

⁶ Yi Yan Ivy Chan, 'Collecting Chinese Art in Hong Kong from 1949 to 1997: Collectors, Museums and the Art Market' (Ph.D., London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2021), 15.

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