Made in the Americas: The New World Discovers Asia

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

A dazzling show is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA). It opened in August and will be up through February 15, 2016—an unusually long run for an exhibition at this museum. After that, the show travels to the Winterthur Museum, Library, and Garden in Wilmington, Delaware, for another lengthy stay, from March 26, 2016, through January 8, 2017. In a dozen years of writing about exhibitions for *M.A.D.*, I have avoided using the cliché "groundbreaking," but it's absolutely the right word to describe *Made in the Americas*.

This is the kind of show that only an encyclopedic museum like the MFA could do and do well.

Five years ago, when the MFA opened its Art of the Americas wing, it committed itself to collecting and displaying art not only from North America but across Central and South America too. This show, conceived and organized by Dennis Carr, the MFA's Carolyn and Peter Lynch Curator of American Decorative Arts and Sculpture, delivers on that promise, bringing together in startling ways more than 90 objects made in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, as well as Mexico City, Lima, Quito, and Quebec City.

The magnificent pieces of case furniture, exquisite folding screens, textiles, silver, portraiture, and ceramics date from the 16th through the early 19th centuries. They include works from the MFA's collection as well as other institutions and private lenders. Some have never been lent to anyone before. Several items owned by the MFA have never before been on public view. One textile in particular the museum has been holding back literally for years, saving it for this exhibition. More important, none of the works in this show has ever been seen together in the context in which they are presented here. Subtitled *The New World Discovers Asia*, it is the first large-scale show to examine the influence of China, Japan, India, and the Philippines on the arts of the colonial Americas.

We think of ours as an age of globalization, and it certainly is. But there was an earlier period when the world was brought together through trade for the first time. We tend to forget that Columbus was looking for Asia when he bumped into the Americas. It was quite literally in the way. As a result, this unimagined landmass found itself situated at a nexus of several major global trade routes, Carr points out in the excellent catalog that accompanies this show and is recommended to all who can't get to either of the venues. "To be a colonial citizen in the Americas was to be a global citizen," Carr writes.

It was a complicated moment, when distant cities were interconnected on an unprecedented scale. It was a time, for example, when the crew on a 16th-century Spanish galleon from Manila would, after five or six months on a roiling, nearly unendurable sea, unload its cargo in Acapulco. Or an 18th-century artisan in the hinterlands of modern-day Bolivia would be commissioned by Jesuits to carve Spanish cedar and inlay it with mother-of-pearl to create an elegant writing box for a mission church elsewhere in the religious order's missionary domain. The idea that such an intensely beautiful object was made in what we might imagine to be a cultural backwater is an idea that takes some getting used to—but its time has come.

The technique of japanning, born of that same historical moment, will be familiar to those who know their Americana. The painted imitation of Asian lacquer work is represented in at least nine pieces in this show. It is created by building up layers of varnish, black most commonly but also red, green, and blue; that surface is then embellished with Asian-style decorations in gold. Because of its popularity in the first half of the 18th-century in New England, japanning grew to have a market niche in Boston. The city kept over a dozen japanners employed before 1750. But japanned furniture was also produced in New York and Philadelphia, as well as Mexico, Guatemala, Brazil, and Jamaica, where a cache of it has only recently been discovered. Among the many unprecedented things that this show does is to bring japanned objects from various parts of the Americas together.

Two splendid, well-known Massachusetts japanned high chests, one from the MFA's collection and the other from Winterthur, can be fruitfully compared to each other here and also to a Massachusetts tall clock on loan from a private collection. With a movement by Scituate maker John Doane, it is in a case considered to be one of the most finely preserved surfaces among surviving 18th-century Boston examples. Yet the more unusual and exciting experience is to see these pieces side by side with furniture japanned in Mexico. A mid-18th-century desk-on-stand, one of only two known pieces signed by José de la Cerda of Pátzcuaro and lent by the Hispanic Society of America in New York City, is among them. A celebrated lacquer artist of the viceregal period, Cerda was of noble Indian heritage. Yet he decorated the surface with both Asian-style imagery (e.g., weeping willow trees and exotic buildings) and distinctly European military figures on horseback and ships laying siege to a city. These vignettes recall battles waged between Christians and Moors in Spain for centuries—battles reenacted in New Spain during the period that the desk-on-stand was made.

Americana lovers are also undoubtedly familiar with chinoiserie. Used to decorate everything from wallpaper to women's clothing, the style that literally means "in the Chinese taste" was popular in the 18th and early 19th centuries. But as this show makes vividly clear, there is so much more to learn and understand about why artisans in the Americas adapted Asian aesthetics. Of the many reactions museum-goers will have to this show, I guarantee that one will be surprise—delighted surprise.

Tomomi Itakura, formerly senior designer at the MFA, has given the show a very open floor plan. Everything is in a single, great big space cleverly divided so that one can see the connections across the galleries. "There are amazing 'conversations' between objects going on at this show, largely the result of her," Carr said of Itakura, who has recently taken a position as head of design at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Executed in ink, color, gold, and gold leaf on paper, this circa 1600 six-panel folding screen measures 69 1/16" x 151 3/16" overall. Titled *The Southern Barbarians Come to Trade,* it is attributed to Japanese artist Kanõ Naizen (1570-1616). Anonymous loan.

Working with his team, Carr organized the objects according to materials, techniques, and themes rather than regions of the world. Indeed, the regional approach wouldn't make sense for a show of what Carr rightly says "can only be classified as 'global' objects," i.e., made in one place in the style of another place and sometimes ending up in a third place, since some were made for export. Or, even more complex, they may have been assembled at various points on the worldwide map, taking up the scents of influences from multiple cultures encountered along the way. An 18th-century Nativity scene lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a good, small-scale example of this phenomenon. The heads of the figures were carved in ivory in Asia. Ecuadorian artists received those pieces, produced their wooden bodies, and painted them in their own distinctive style. Gauvin Alexander Bailey of Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, calls it a "kind of global outsourcing" in his catalog essay.

An 18th-century desk-on-stand by José Manuel de la Cerda, Mexico, lacquered and polychrome wood with painted decoration, 61" x 40 3/16" x 24". The Hispanic Society of America, New York City.

As a result, going through the exhibit trying to guess the country of an object's origin without looking at its label will be a frustrating, perhaps humbling experience but an illuminating one. It will also inevitably lead to the idea that there must be many mislabeled objects in both public and private collections out there. Carr said there "absolutely" are. He has personally found some during his years' long preparations for this show that required travel to Spain, Japan, Canada, Brazil, England, Italy, many parts of Mexico, and throughout the United States. There are also "mystery pieces" whose true nature and histories have yet to be discovered, he said.

A late 17th- to early 18th-century cover, Peru, wool, silk, cotton, and linen interlocked and dovetailed tapestry, 93 13/16" x 81 5/8". Denman Waldo Ross Collection, MFA.

One particularly eye-popping piece, an 18th-century high chest covered in an intricate mosaic of luminescent mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell, was thought for

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decades to have been made in Goa, India. That's probably what tobacco heiress Doris Duke thought when she acquired it at auction in the late 1950s to use in the bedroom of her Newport, Rhode Island, estate called Rough Point, which is now owned and operated by the Newport Restoration Foundation. Mexico and the Philippines were other guesses about the place of origin of this and similar pearly, high-style urban pieces that reside in various collections, many in South America. Scientific analysis of related pieces done by the MFA found the secondary woods to be Spanish cedar and mahogany—American species. Carr's initial hunch, that the chest was made in Peru, has been corroborated by new research showing that Lima was a major production center for these objects.

What is more, a close examination of the boards used in the drawers and back of the case showed that the shell pieces had been cut and fitted by the artisan rather than prepared elsewhere and assembled as a kind of kit, which had been a previous theory. "This piece is like a Rosetta stone," said Carr. "It proves to me that these were made, whole cloth, in the Americas."

Enconchado is the name of one of the techniques used to create these pieces. It is meant to mimic inlaid mother-of-pearl objects from Asia. The Spanish word *concha*, meaning shell, is the term's root. It translates roughly to "encrusted with shells." There is a style of painting called *enconchado*, in which mother-of-pearl is inlaid then thinly painted in a European style. The results of this type of fusion are gloriously apparent in several works of fine art in the show. One is *Miracle of the Wedding at Cana* by Nicolás Correa. Painted in Mexico City in 1693 and lent by the Hispanic Society of America, it illustrates the New Testament story of Jesus changing water into wine at his mother's request. Correa used shell particles to create texture and depth. The overall effect is as if the scene and its figures, including the haloed Jesus and Mary, were "painted" in precious metals. The setting isn't Cana in Galilee, however. It's a sumptuous, contemporary Mexican interior with silver-framed mirrors on the walls and shelves lined with silver platters.

Another *enconchado* painting, *St. Francis Xavier Embarking for Asia* by Juan González of Mexico City, arrived in Boston from a private collection in Durango, Mexico just days before the exhibition opened. Painted in 1703, it shows the Jesuit missionary examining a large map of Asia before his departure for that continent. "He never stepped foot in the Americas," said Carr, but he was nonetheless celebrated in numerous paintings and statues created in Mexico during the viceregal period. The main figures, including the saint and others labeled "Africa," "Asia," and "America," were created by the artist with shell. So were the garlands of flowers and cherubs that encircle the figures. "The painting was also clearly inspired by a European print," a catalog essay by Denver Art Museum curator Donna Pierce points out, "…making it a truly global artifact in its conception and fabrication."

A third painting in this category, *Presentation at the Temple*, a mid-18th-century Peruvian oil on board from the Hispanic Society of America, was chosen by Carr for its over-the-top *enconchado* frame.

An item lent by private collectors Ann and Gordon Getty has often been chosen to illustrate the show's excellent reviews in the *Wall Street Journal* ("scintillating") and other major media. It is a desk-and-bookcase made in Puebla, Mexico in the mid-18th century. The outside is decorated with inlaid bone and wood arranged in the geometric patterns common in Islamic architecture—a reminder of the Moors' occupation of Spain. The Christians expelled them in 1492, but the Islamic aesthetic continued to be popular there and in New Spain. In Mexico, for example, many buildings are decorated in this so-called Mudéjar style. As remarkable as that exterior is, however, the piece's interior is even more so. When the doors of the bookcase are opened and the desk's writing surface is flipped down, there is a big surprise. The gold-on-red interior depicts a landscape, structures, and figures that have an unmistakable Chinese sensibility. Yet this is a hacienda.

The piece has a mate, a sister piece in a collection in Mexico, not part of this show. Taken together, the two interiors constitute a complete pictorial map of a Veracruz estate once owned by a rich Spaniard. The property was the site of one of the earliest free African settlements in Mexico. Portrayed in this pair, wearing sombreros, are many of their descendants. Islamic, Chinese, Mexican, African—did I hear somebody say multicultural?

Textiles are a major component of this tightly focused, very rich exhibition. "This is one of the reasons I did this show," said Carr of a late 17th- to early 18th-century cover in wool, silk, cotton, and linen. "When we were working on the Art of the Americas wing we delved deeply into our collections, and I came across it." The imagery mixes peonies and paired phoenixes from Chinese export textiles with European symbols such as crowned lions and collared dogs. Yet it was made by indigenous Peruvian weavers, who added local fauna, including alpacas and viscachas, which are rodents, that live in the high-altitude climate of the Andes. The silk probably came from China aboard a Manila galleon either as thread or a finished textile of another kind that was picked apart and rewoven with the thicker, coarser fibers to create this one. Cochineal is the background, a scarlet color produced in Peru from tiny female insects of the same name, which live on cacti. "This is an incredible, luxury object," said Carr. "Very few survive. It came into the collection in 1911. We're not allowed to lend it, and it's rarely been seen."

Another Peruvian textile from the MFA's collection (acquired in 1952) had earlier been attributed to "practically every point on the globe," said Carr. "Previous generations of scholars just couldn't nail it down." Now it is believed to be the work of a convent in Lima. Made of cotton embroidered with cochineal-dyed silk and trimmed with silk bobbin lace, it is dated at the bottom edge in white embroidery May 1, 1661. All combined in a marvelously dense composition are Chinese figures, allegorical personifications of, possibly, the constellations, and viscachas, as well as a central couple, man and woman. But what does it mean? What does the date signify? And what exactly was this textile's function? Bed cover? Wall hanging? No answers were forthcoming. Then in 2012 the MFA acquired a matching textile from a dealer that provided a clue. The recent acquisition shows a grand procession of riders on horseback and finely dressed men and women. That has led to theorizing that the pair of textiles constitute a balcony hanging created to celebrate a new viceroy, Diego de Benavides, who arrived in Lima in 1661. "So we are starting to unlock the mystery, and that is part of the fun," said Carr.

A pair of circa 1705 candlesticks and a snuffer stand by Cornelius Kierstede of New York are among the outstanding silver pieces in this show. Chinoiserie-chased silver is rare in Colonial American silver. These are among the earliest examples. They were made for Johannes Schuyler and his wife, Elizabeth Staats Wendell, around the time that Schuyler served as mayor of Albany. They feature engraved chinoiserie decorations of oversize birds and plants as well as figures wearing what appear to be Native American feathered headdresses and skirts, possibly of South American origin. Lent by the Met, they represent, in Carr's words, "a fantastic mashup of global motifs."

A fan created of tiny, cut tropical-bird feathers is one of the great small items here. It is two-sided—flowers on one side, warriors on the other. An ancient Asian form but made in 17th-century Mexico, the fan is very much a colonial object. Many of the indigenous crafts were destroyed during the conquest of indigenous people, but the Spanish particularly admired feather-working. Spanish friars supported schools that kept the indigenous tradition of feather-working alive. An extremely rare and fragile object, lent by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, it is one of only two that Carr knows. "It is a treasure that the Peabody Essex has rarely shown and that we are only now beginning to understand," he said.

The MFA is known for its superb oil portraits of Colonial Americans by John Singleton Copley. The Art of the Americas wing is chockablock with them, hanging in tableaux that feature what we might have previously called standard Americana—a Boston side chair with needlework seat, a Newport chest of drawers, et cetera. At this show, however, Copley's well-known Nicholas Boylston is seen in an entirely new context. The successful Boston merchant of textiles, paper, tea, and glass for whom a street was named in this city is wearing a chocolate-brown silk banyan. That is a kind of robe popular among both men

Bedspread, 1700-50, made in India of cotton embroidered with silk, 102⅜" x 133". Gift of Mrs. Frank Clark, MFA.

***Saint Francis Xavier Embarking for Asia* by Juan Gonzalez, 1703, Mexico, oil on panel inlaid with mother-of-pearl, 44½" x 36⅛". Dr. Miguel Vallebueno Collection, Durango. Schinto photo.**

A 1588-93 plate bearing the arms of Garcia Hurtado de Mendoza y Manrique and Teresa de Castro y de la Cueva, made in China of porcelain with underglaze blue decoration, 8" diameter. Lost for centuries, this plate was known to scholars, who wondered where it might be. It turned up at a small auction in the Netherlands and was bought by a private collector. Thomas Lurie Collection.

***Nicholas Boylston* by John Singleton Copley (1735-1815), circa 1769, oil on canvas, 50⅛" x 40". Bequest of David P. Kimball, MFA.**

A mid-18th-century desk-and-bookcase, Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, inlaid woods and incised and painted bone, maque (Mexican lacquer-like decoration), gold and polychrome paint, metal hardware, 87" x 41" x 26½". Ann and Gordon Getty Collection.

Candlesticks by Cornelius Kierstede (1674-1757), New York, circa 1705, silver, 11¾" x 6 7/16" x 6 7/16". Gift of Robert L. Cammann, 1957, gift of Mrs. Clermont L. Barnwell, 1964.

and women of leisure in the period. They were modeled after coats worn by Indian merchants. He is also wearing a crimson velvet turban, an Asian-style hat, to cover his shaved head that would have sported a wig when he was out in public. Posed with the tools of his trade—ledger books—he looks very proud of himself.

This is the kind of show that only an encyclopedic museum like the MFA could do and do well. As Carr said, "This show involved almost every one of my colleagues in the building and almost every department: American art, European art, Americana, Asian art, textiles, all of our conservation departments, frames, textiles, paintings. It was really a museum-wide effort to mount this show. The conservators spent over a year working on the two Japanese screens alone."

These circa 1600 six-panel folding screens (an anonymous loan) are objects made in Asia, not the Americas, but influenced by the global trade that emanated from their shores. They depict the arrival of Portuguese traders in China and Japan, respectively. On display is the comical strangeness of these foreigners in their pantaloons and cinch-waisted jackets who so overloaded their ships that, as Carr describes it in his catalog essay, crates were "piled high on the decks, lashed down with nets and rope, or suspended over the ships' sides." No wonder each screen, attributed to Japanese artist Kanõ Naizen, is titled *The Southern Barbarians Come to Trade*. In Japan, barbarian is what these traders were called.

No doubt there were some who said this show couldn't be done. Too difficult, too complicated. They're proved wrong. There were probably some who also pointed out that exhibits of decorative arts don't get funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities or the Terra Foundation. This one did.

To be sure, *Made in the Americas* is academic, and the more knowledge you bring to it, the better you will be able to appreciate its depths. However, it's easy to imagine parents bringing teenagers and encouraging them to admire the virtuosic craftsmanship alone. Even younger children may enjoy trying to find the exotic animals and plants in the objects—e.g., the qilin, a Chinese mythical hooved creature, or the peony, a flower associated in Chinese culture with female beauty.

As for members of today's antiques trade, which, like it or not, has become yet another global enterprise driven by the Internet, they should realize that this show cracks wide open the hard nut of the Americana field, making it feel fresh again, and its relevance newly apparent. *Made in the Americas*, by harking back to the colonial past, welcomes us all into the future.

For more information, see the museum's website (www.mfa.org).

Japanned high chest, John Pimm, 1730-39, soft maple, black walnut, white pine, mahogany, brass, 85¼" x 42" x 25¼". The japanning is attributed to Robert Davis, an Englishman who worked in Boston (d. 1739). Winterthur Museum, gift of Henry Francis du Pont.

***Maria de los Dolores Juliana Rita Nunez de Villavicencio y Peredo*, Mexico, circa 1735, oil on canvas, 67 1/16" x 42 15/16". Unknown artist. This 16-year-old's chinoiserie dress is the thing to note here. It is a glorious fusion of the Far East, Near East, and Europe. The painting came to the show from the subject's direct descendant, who still owns it. Carlos de Ovando Collection, Mexico City. Schinto photo.**

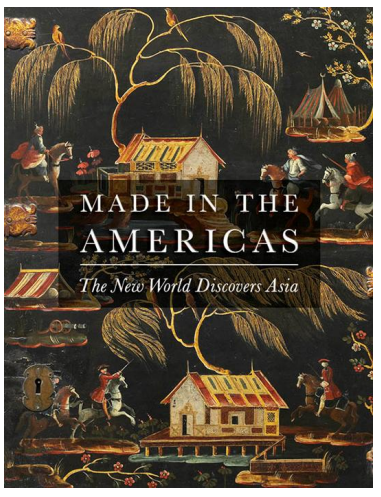
Basin with landscape in Chinese style from the workshop of Diego Salvador Carreto, late 17th century, tin-glazed earthenware, 6½" x 20 11/16". Philadelphia Museum of Art, purchased with the Joseph E. Temple Fund, 1908.

Tea bowl, John Bartlam (active in South Carolina 1763-81; d. 1788), made about 1765-70, porcelain, 3 1/8" overall. After fine white clay was discovered in the Carolinas, Bartlam, an Englishman, established a factory that produced ceramics modeled after the blue-and-white porcelains of Chinese export. He worked in Cain Hoy, which is outside Charleston, and later in Charleston itself, then exported the ceramics to England. Thanks to to new research, there are now four Bartlam tea bowls known, including this one. Anonymous loan.

Part of a set of bed hangings (Lowell family of Boston), circa 1725, linen and cotton twill (fustian) with wool embroidery, 76" x 23¼". Gift of Miss Ellen W. Coolidge, MFA.

High chest of drawers, 1730-40, Boston, japanned butternut, maple, white pine, 71¾" x 42⅞" x 24¾". Bequest of Charles Hitchcock Tyler, MFA.

Teapot, Jacob Hurd, about 1730-35, Boston, silver, 5¼" x 8⅝" x 4¼". Based on Chinese examples, it is in the shape of a Chinese export porcelain. Gift of William Storer Eaton in the name of Miss Georgina G. Eaton, MFA.



Cover of the catalog for *Made in the Americas: The New World Discovers Asia*. The introduction and an essay, "Chinoiserie in the Colonial Americas," are by Dennis Carr. Other essays were written by Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Timothy Brook, Mitchell Codding, Karina H. Corrigan, and Donna Pierce. MFA Publications, 2015, 159 pp., hardbound $50 plus S/H from Museum of Fine Arts Gift Shop, 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115-5597. Phone (617) 369-3575 or see (www.mfa.org/publications). It's also available at bookstores.

Dove of the Holy Spirit altar front, circa 1700, embroidery with silk, wool, and gold and silk metallic threads, trimmed with needle lace, 37⅝" x 104". This splendid liturgical embroidery was made by Ursuline nuns in the chinoiserie style at their convent workshop in Quebec. Its imagery is a mix of Chinese style blue-and-white porcelain vases, pagodas, flowers, and birds, and Native American longhouses and hunters. Collection de Monastère des Ursulines de Québec. Patrick Altman, MNBAQ.

Portable writing desk, circa 1684, wood, barniz de Pasto (a.k.a. *mopa mopa*), silver fittings, 7⅞" x 12 3/16" x 14 3/16". *Mopa mopa* is a translucent, pale green natural plant resin that artisans make malleable by chewing and heating; they then stretch it with their teeth and hands into paper-thin sheets. These are then cut into decorative shapes and inlaid onto wooden objects like this one. The Hispanic Society of America, New York City.

***The Wedding at Cana* by Nicholás Correa, 1693, mixed media with encrusted mother-of-pearl on panel, 22⅞" x 29¾". The Hispanic Society of America, New York City.**

Seen in its gallery setting (left of center), is the 89" x 44½" x 23" desk-and-bookcase made in 18th-century Peru of mother-of-pearl veneer, Spanish cedar, and mahogany. Since the 1950s, it has been in the bedroom of Rough Point, Doris Duke's estate that is now owned and operated by the Newport Restoration Foundation, Newport, Rhode Island. Schinto photo.