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Enamels “Ancient” and “Rare”: The “Summer Palace” Market in Imperial England

ABSTRACT

This article examines the numbers and types of imperial objects that entered the art market following the plunder and destruction of the imperial garden Yuanmingyuan at the end of the Second Opium War in 1860. Examples from the collections of Alfred Morrison (1821–97); Mervyn Wingfield, the 7th Viscount Powerscourt (1836–1904); John Alexander Thynne, the 4th Marquess of Bath (1831–96); and Alfred de

Rothschild (1842–1918) demonstrate how connoisseurs evaluated imperial artworks in relation to each other and European decorative arts, and how spoils were integrated into British collections during this early period of connoisseurship. The fact that imperial art was paradoxically elevated in British esteem through an act of war against the Chinese emperor himself, can be read either as a collective act of concession or appropriation.

In recent years, the plunder and destruction of the imperial garden Yuanmingyuan at the end of the Second Opium War in 1860 has been a subject of research and discussion among art historians, scholars of empire, and parties involved in heritage and cultural property debates. Dubbed by British and French troops “the Summer Palace” and “Le

Palais d’Été”, the Yuanmingyuan was the private estate of the Xianfeng emperor (1831–61, r. 1850–61), which had been established by his ancestor, the Kangxi emperor (1654–1722, r. 1661–1722), and expanded under the Qianlong emperor (1711–99, r. 1735–96). This paradise of sublime gardens and pavilions lay six miles northwest of Beijing and held a significant portion of the Qing imperial collections, as well as everyday wares for the court: jewelry, jades, porcelains, cloisonné, silks and much more. These precious works of art were looted by both armies; but the British plunder was collected and sold at a military auction onsite, where wealthy officers and diplomats bought much of the treasure. For the emperor the spoliation was a humiliating defeat, which forced upon him trade and diplomatic privileges for Britain.

In early 1861, returning campaign members began to sell their spoils in Britain. This article examines the numbers and types of imperial objects that entered the art market, how connoisseurs evaluated imperial artworks in relation to each other and European decorative arts, and how spoils were integrated into British collections during this early period of connoisseurship. The analysis focuses on the top tier of the market: cloisonné and *famille rose* porcelains in the collections of Alfred Morrison (1821–97); Mervyn Wingfield, the 7th Viscount Powerscourt (1836–1904); John Alexander Thynne, the 4th Marquess of Bath (1831–96); and Alfred de Rothschild (1842–1918). As the time wore on, important jade collections were formed, while porcelain aficionados embraced blue-and-white and monochrome wares with the rise of the Aesthetic Movement and growing awareness of Chinese glaze aesthetics; but this study centers on the early market in enameled wares.

The spoils had a great impact, since Britain had a longstanding taste for Chinese decorative arts, but the British elite had seen only a few objects produced for the Qing court prior to 1860. These were jades, porcelains, silks and carved lacquer pieces presented by the Qianlong emperor in 1793 to the British Ambassador, the Earl of Macartney (1737–1806), for his entourage and monarch, George III (1738–1820). Queen Charlotte (1744–1818) displayed the lacquers in the Green Closet at Frogmore House, and William Henry Pyne (1769–1843) published an engraving of the room in *The History of the Royal Residences* (1819). The original watercolor by Charles Wild (1781–1835) shows the lacquers arrayed near delicate export porcelains in a chinoiserie interior, with the figure of a lady reading. (Fig. 1) The image is reproduced here as a counterpoint to the late-nineteenth century displays of imperial art. The latter reflect radical changes in Britain’s exposure and approach to Chinese art, which occurred with the 1860 conflict. In 1819, many of the gifts were sold with Queen Charlotte’s effects; but only one lot was linked with the Qing court: “A pair of curious basons of the Imperial five clawed dragon pattern”.¹

The reception of spoils from China was framed by this limited direct experience of imperial art, together with three other factors: the wider experience of export art

1 *A Catalogue of the First Part of a Magnificent Collection of Oriental Curiosities and Porcelain, &c &c &c which will be removed to Mr. Christie’s Great Room, Pall Mall, and will be sold by auction, by Mr. Christie, On Friday, May 7, 1819, and Three following Days ...* (London: G. Smeeton, 1819), 17, lot 36. <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL.HOUGH:28538458>.

stretching back to the Tudor era; prior acts of looting during the Opium Wars, which brought small amounts of cloisonné and other material to Britain; and a group of publications dealing with Chinese porcelain in the 1850s, which provided some information on imperial wares and reign marks.² From these sources, a culturally literate British



Fig. 1: Frogmore House: The Green Closet, c. 1819. Watercolor by Charles Wild (1781–1835). Ref. No. RCIN 922123
Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

citizen in 1861 could have gleaned that treasures of art far beyond the usual export goods sat in China and that some of these were made for the emperor’s exclusive use; specifically, objects graced with the five-clawed dragon and brilliant “imperial yellow”. The public was primed further for the arrival of imperial spoils when fantastic press reports of the Yuanmingyuan and its treasures began to appear in late 1860. In early 1861, the *Oxford Journal* suggested the excitement among “dealers in old curiosities” at the prospect of receiving “the ‘loot’ of the Palace of Yuen-Ming- Yuen”:

... the rarest marvels in eggshell china, “grand mandarin,” which descrip-

tion of porcelain has not been allowed to leave Peking for upwards of two hundred years; “yellow dragon” vases, “crackle glaze,” jadestone, josses, concentric balls, ivory filigree, feather fans, silks, brocades, silver tissues, rice-paper miniatures—all the multifarious wonders of Chinese ingenuity and taste.³

The speculation reflects the market for Chinese decorative art at the time: these goods were sold by “curiosity” dealers; connoisseurs wanted “old china” to which “mandarins”

2 Henry Bohn, *Guide to the Knowledge of Pottery, Porcelain, and Other Objects of Vertu* (London: H. G. Bohn, 1857), p. xx. Joseph Marryat, *Collections towards a history of pottery and porcelain: in the 15th, 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries: with a description of the manufacture, a glossary, and a list of monograms* (London: J. Murray, 1850), 120. Both texts, www.archive.org.

3 12 Jan. 1861, *Oxford Journal*, 3.

jealously clung; and valuable jades were thrown together in the public imagination with the kind of export goods offered by Hewett’s “Chinese Warehouse”.

In early 1861, the spoils began to arrive with returning soldiers; and over the course of the next several years, the market in imperial artworks was established through a series of auctions and private sales, which took place largely in London.⁴ Some spoils were displayed at industrial art exhibitions in soaring public venues throughout Britain, where they were seen by thousands of visitors, and the press enthused over the dazzling novelties. Campaign members published memoirs of the expedition, in which they described the fabulous estate in tantalizing detail, then justified its destruction. Euphemistic phrases like “brought from the Summer Palace at Peking” and “Jade Articles from the Summer Palace, Peking”,⁵ magically suppressed the incident of fevered looting and resurrected as an imaginary edifice the emperor’s grand estate, which the British had reduced to a heap of ashes. This collective act of repression reflected Britain’s new dominance over China and its culture. Taken at face value, these factors enhanced the sense of excitement as fabulous objects passed through sale rooms, where they were promoted energetically as “extremely rare and beautiful”, and “the finest specimens known”.⁶ While noble provenance had long been a guarantor of quality, high status and authenticity in the marketplace of monarchical Britain, “Summer Palace” provenance became an important new sign of value as British dealers grappled with novel materials of which they and their clients had little prior experience. Long before connoisseurs began to decode reign marks and established the imperial art chronology, which are today the stock in trade of Chinese art specialists, the conception of imperial art was in effect bounded by the walls of the estate.

An examination by this author of auction catalogues and newspaper advertisements published during this period reveals that approximately 3,590 items attributed to the “Summer Palace” were exchanged in Britain through auction houses and private sales during the period 1861 to 1866.⁷ This count includes individual and grouped objects said to be “from the Summer Palace” in sale catalogues and advertisements; it does not cover objects recorded outside the marketplace in exhibitions and private collections, nor the objects sold privately by the diplomat Henry Loch (1827–1900) to Alfred Morrison, which will be discussed below. Other artworks linked with the Yuanmingyuan appeared in the

4 Christine Howald, *The Power of Provenance: Marketing and Pricing of Chinese Looted Art on the European Market (1860–1862)* in Bénédicte Savoy, Charlotte Guichard and Christine Howald, eds., *Acquiring Cultures: Histories of World Art on Western Markets* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 241–59.

5 Christie, Manson & Woods (CMW), 6 June 1861, 10; CMW, 1 July 1863, 11. Note: due to limitations of space, “Summer Palace” sales at Christie, Manson & Woods will be referenced through the abbreviation “CMW”, followed by the date of sale, page and lot number (if applicable). Locations outside of London will be noted.

6 CMW, 21 July 1862, 4, lots 57, 59.

7 Messrs. Foster, 14 June 1861, 20 June 1866. For the second sale, see *Catalogue de Captain de Negroni’s Collection* (London: McCorquodale, 1865). Phillips & Sons, 18 April, 18 July and 12 Dec. 1861. CMW, 26 April, 27 May, 6 June, 12 June and 5 July 1861; 15 May, 22 May, 30 May, 30 June, 21 July and 1 Dec. 1862; 1 April, 11 June, 1 July and 20 July 1863; 18 May and 6 July 1864.

marketplace later in the century, such as the collection of Gen. Charles George Gordon (1833–85) in 1894,⁸ but the market was essentially established in the five years following the war. Bearing in mind that the attribution does not guarantee the provenance,⁹ the numbers given here reflect the reality of the marketplace.

These 3,590 items can be sorted roughly by material. In order of frequency, they were: 1,412 porcelains; over 690 loose precious stones; 274 jades; 267 pieces of enameled metalwork; 242 pieces and garments of silk, some embroidered; 136 furs; 131 Chinese jewelry pieces and jeweled objects; 113 books and works on paper; eighty hardstone carvings; seventy-seven bronzes; forty-nine wood carvings; forty-eight European *objets d’art*; twenty-two tortoiseshell carvings; fifteen ivory carvings; six rhinoceros horn cups; four root carvings; three carpets; two *kesi* tapestries; three ink cakes, two brushes and one ink stone; thirty-three objects in smaller categories, like Chinese compasses and shoes; and ten objects in unknown materials. Exact totals are not possible, since cataloguing conventions varied greatly from those of today. For instance, “enamel” was used to describe both painted porcelain and cloisonné; and “surface enamel” was sometimes used for painted enamel on metal. In such cases, mention of a turquoise or lapis lazuli ground is the only suggestion that a piece is cloisonné.

Although the cataloguing is often vague, some known types can be found. Among the porcelains were ninety-four monochrome pieces; forty-two dragon bowls with bicolor decoration; twenty-four *famille rose* medallion bowls, twelve *famille rose* sgraffito vessels, thirty-seven blue-and-white wares, one pair of “hundred-deer” vases; one gold-ground *wugong* garniture; two five-neck vases and one three-neck vase; and – since the Yuanmingyuan was a garden – five pairs of garden seats, ten flowerpots and two fish for fountains, along with hundreds more vases. Among the many cloisonné treasures are one miniature shrine; seven figures of mythical beasts; five square beakers, which may be archaic *gu* vases; four “moon flasks”, also known as “pilgrim bottles”; one five-piece *wugong* altar garniture; and thirty-five incense burners.

Of all these items, cloisonné and painted enamel metalwares, together with *famille rose* porcelains, held center stage in the 1860s. Originally called *yangcai* (洋彩, “foreign colors”) at Qing imperial kilns, these overglaze enamels were termed *famille rose* by Albert Jacquemart and Edmond Le Blant in their groundbreaking volume on porcelain, which piqued interest Chinese porcelains and was published in 1861.¹⁰ One sign of interest in cloisonné is the fact that two extremely rare lots were offered for sale at Christie, Manson & Woods twice respectively by 1864: two matching models of the White Pagoda

8 CMW, 25 Jan. 1894, For a preview of the sale, see 22 Jan. 1894, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 7.

9 On the provenance issue, see Nick Pearce, From the Summer Palace 1860: Provenance and Politics, in Louise Tythacott, ed., *Collecting and Displaying China’s “Summer Palace” in the West* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 38–50.

10 Albert Jacquemart and Edmond Le Blant, *Histoire artistique, industrielle et commerciale de la porcelaine* (Paris: J. Techener, 1861), 77–105. www.archive.org.

in Beihai Park, offered on 12 June and 5 July 1861;¹¹ and a 54”-high censer, offered on both 30 June 1862 and 11 June 1863.¹² British interest in enamelled porcelain and metals is also seen in a sale of spoils “brought from the Summer Palace at Peking, by an officer”, at the same auction house on 21 July 1862. The consignment comprised 124 lots of “curiosities”, silk, enamel, jade and porcelain. Thirty lots came under the heading “Ancient Enamels”, and thirty-nine under “Ancient Porcelain”. Nine lots in the latter group are clearly substantial *yangcai* pieces.¹³ The entry for the revolving vase alone suggests the impact they had:

56 A VERY RARE AND BEAUTIFUL BOTTLE, of elegant form, green ground enamelled all over with plants and ornaments in brilliant colours, with four perforated medallions of dragons, with revolving neck and foot of rare crimson enamelled with ornaments in brilliant colours; turquoise inside—on wood stand—15 1/2 in. high

The Leeds Mercury reported the highest porcelain bids: a pair of turquoise-ground vases with “flowers, fruits, birds, and patterns in the most brilliant colours” (145g.), a yellow-ground vase with lotus scrolls (£100), a 33”-high vase with garden scenes on a lotus-scroll ground (£62), a yellow-ground reticulated vase (£60), and the revolving vase (£40). The lot notes are among the most extensive for any Chinese porcelains that arrived during the postwar period. Still, these prices were below the winning bid earned by a Sèvres bowl from another consignment (£155).

Further evidence of interest in this material is the collection of Alfred Morrison, the leading British buyer of Yuanmingyuan material in the first decade of this market. The core of the collection was reportedly formed when Morrison in 1861 bought a very large group of spoils for the modest sum of £400 from Henry Brougham Loch, personal secretary to Her Majesty’s Envoy and Minister Plenipotentiary in China, James Bruce, the 8th Earl of Elgin (1811–63);¹⁴ although the 1965 catalogue states that much of the porcelain in that sale had been taken by Loch at the “Summer Palace” and later sold to Hugh Morrison (1868–1931s), Alfred’s son. At any rate, the Morrison collection partly represents the taste of Henry Loch, who in his memoir praised, among all the masterpieces at the Yuanmingyuan, only the magnificent bronze sculptures and “beautiful blue inlaid enamel vases with imitation flowers, made of the blood, cornelian, jade, and other valuable stones”, which ornamented the gardens.¹⁵

11 CMW, 12 June 1861, 11, lot 178; CMW, 5 July 1861, 10, lot 130.

12 CMW, 30 June 1862, 9, lot 141; CMW, 11 June 1863, 14, lot 210.

13 CMW, 21 July 1862. Enamels, lots 64–93; porcelains, lots 25–63; *yangcai* pieces, lots 51–53, 56–59, 62, 63.

14 Geraldine Norman, Ch’ien Lung Pieces Sought at Sale of Spoils from Peking Summer Palace, in *The New York Times*, 19 Oct. 1971, 16; Caroline Dakers, *A Genius for Money: Business, Art and the Morrisons* (New Haven and London: Yale, 2011), Ch. 4, 225–47. See 228–29 for the transaction with Loch.

15 Henry Brougham Loch, *Personal Narrative of Occurrences During Lord Elgin’s Second Embassy to China* (London: John Murray, 1869), 272–73. www.archive.org.

No itemized receipt for the Loch transaction exists; however, a large group of records for his purchases from the dealer Henry Durlacher does survive.¹⁶ Together, these show how objects from the Yuanmingyuan were valued. In the years 1862–67, Morrison paid him £52,520 for 680 items: £28,030 for 156 European *objets d’art*., such as gold snuff boxes, and £24,489 for 524 artworks that are identified as Chinese, Japanese, and Oriental. This group is also defined by materials and terms linked with the Asian art trade in this period: jade, cloisonné. “lac”, “japan”, “china”, and “eggshell”. The numbers are inexact, since the receipts can be vague and in places illegible; however, the material provides information crucial to understanding the high end of the market at this time, since Morrison was one of wealthiest men in Britain. What is immediately apparent is that Asian art – even imperial artworks from the Yuanmingyuan – brought lower prices than European pieces. Asian pieces cost on average £47; while the average price for a European object was £180. Prices for Yuanmingyuan pieces can be seen in a receipt dated 23 July 1863, which includes Chinese items “Collected during the Two Years’ Occupation of Tiensin, all from the Summer Palace and Peking”,¹⁷ purchased by Durlacher on 20 July:

Goods purchased at Christie’s	£
2 basins yellow ground with green dragons	5.5
Pair of turquoise vases	57.9
Small vase	2.15
Surface enamel vase & pair of ditto	34.23
Ditto bowl, 2 handles incense burner & stand [?]	22.13
cloisonne enamel bottle (dragon)	91.7
Pilgrim ditto	68
Jade box w cover	43.1
Ditto vase	44.2
Ditto ditto circular	13.10
2 agate bottles	9.10
2 water color drawings by G R [?]	21
Jade cup with birds	65
2 silver ice pails	145

The receipt shows that Morrison paid the highest price for a pair of silver ice pails; however, the highest and second-highest prices paid for a single item were £91.7 and £68 for

16 Fonthill Archive, Wiltshire, File No. F/2/1130.

17 CMW, 20 July 1863.

two different cloisonné “bottles”. Yellow-ground palace bowls with five-clawed dragons were purchased for only £5.5. No longer was this emblem seen as the essential characteristic of imperial wares. Most intriguing is the entry for the “Surface enamel vase & pair of ditto” for £34.23. These three items appeared in the auction catalogue as:

166 A VERY FINE VASE AND COVER, richly enamelled with flowers in colour on yellow grounds, and festoons of drapery

167 A PAIR OF SMALL DITTO

They are the very same brocade-sash-covered baluster vases sold at Christie’s with the Fonthill collection in 2004.¹⁸

An undated photograph from the Fonthill archive shows cloisonné and *yangcai* vessels from the Alfred Morrison collection.¹⁹ (Fig. 2) In the center is one of a pair of cisterns depicting storks among lilies. Above this piece is a massive cylindrical *ding*, which would have been part of a *wugong* garniture. A similar vessel is in the Empress Eugenie’s Musée Chinois at Fontainebleau.²⁰ At the right edge of the image is a massive incense burner with elephant-head feet from the Yuanmingyuan, which was displayed at the 1862 London International Exhibition and offered for sale at Christie’s twice, as mentioned above.²¹ The cisterns and censer were sold at Christie’s in 1971.²² The collection of massive vessels reflects the taste of elite male collectors during the 1860s, which will be seen in the acquisitions of Morrison’s peers.

Another important collector who purchased cloisonné was Morrison’s neighbor, the Marquess of Bath. In 1866, the press reported that the Marquess had lent to the Frome Art and Industrial Exhibition “a massive ‘brazier’ of beautifully enamelled metal, taken from the summer palace at Pekin”,²³ along with “early enamelled bronzes, candlesticks, [and] a square Chinese bronze, very curiously carved”.

At this time, wealthy patrons lent artworks to local industrial art shows at civic halls in the interest of public education; and thousands saw Yuanmingyuan material at these events. The vessel is an impressive 47 inches tall and has an ornate reticulated cover; the Marquess displayed it on the grand staircase at Longleat, the ancient seat of the Thynne family, and kept two massive censers in the Saloon above. An inventory made after his

18 CMW, 9 Nov. 2004, sale 7100, lots 19, 20.

19 Fonthill Archive, Wiltshire, File No. F-2-1143. By kind permission of Lord Margadale and the Trustees of the Fonthill Estate.

20 Colombe Samoyault-Verlet, *Le Musée chinois de l'impératrice Eugénie* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux), 1994, 62–63.

21 Kate Hill, The Yuanmingyuan and Design Reform in Britain, in Louise Tythacott, ed., *Collecting and Displaying China's "Summer Palace"*, 58.

22 CMW, 18 Oct. 1971, 36, lots 100, 102.

23 15 Sept. 1866, *Bristol Mercury*, 3.

death describes the first piece as “A large circular centre cistern to match the above [the ice chests now in the Saloon] on gilt ormolu cabriole feet on carved wood base in imitation of rock work and serpent, open work brass cover with horn Monsters”. The others are recorded as a “Pair of large square Chinese cloisonné enamel caskets and covers surmounted [by] gilt ormolu kyilins on gilt ormolu feet, mask head and ring side handles – height 34 inches each.”²⁴ These are similar to a pair of censers taken by the French army in 1860.²⁵



Fig. 2: Undated photograph of porcelain and cloisonné in the Alfred Morrison collection. Fonthill Archive, Wiltshire, File No. F-2-1143.

By kind permission of Lord Margadale and the Trustees of the Fonthill Estate.

An undated postcard reproduced here shows all three pieces on the landing and illustrates their visual impact. (Fig. 3) In fact, these seem to have made a strong impression on visitors. In 1887, a newspaper feature on Longleat for the series “English Homes” noted, “There is rare and beautiful furniture too: the old ebony cabinets in the drawing room, the rich buhl, and the lovely blue enamel “looted” from the Summer Palace at Pekin”.²⁶

Mervyn Wingfield, the 7th Viscount Powerscourt also acquired large cloisonné pieces and porcelains from the Yuan-mingyuan on a hunting trip to India just after the plunder; and he displayed these at Powerscourt, his family seat in Wicklow, Ireland. In 1903, he published *A Description and History of Powerscourt*, a room-by-room tour of his magnificent estate, which mentions several looted

24 From the list of heirlooms created under the will of the 4th Marquess 1896 f.48r “The Grand Staircase”, 4th Marquess 195 01/08/1896; Dr Kate Harris and Dr. James E. H. Ford, Curators, Longleat Historic Collections, personal communications, 19 Oct. 2018.

25 For an engraving of one censer, see 13 Apr. 1861, *Illustrated London News*, 334. Currently displayed at Le Musée Chinois du Château de Fontainebleau. The lid of a matching vessel is fitted as a chandelier. A similar censer from the collection of Henry C. Gibson was offered for sale by Heritage Auctions, 25 June 2020, lot 78250.

26 English Homes: IX, in *Illustrated London News*, 5 Feb. 1887, 27.

items.²⁷ Although he did not buy his pieces in London, his stature as a connoisseur makes his acquisitions relevant to the discussion of enamel display. Possibly, he acquired the objects from Major Francis Cunningham (1820–75) of the Madras Army, who presented him with a custom-built chumpawood library table, which the Viscount placed in his entrance hall among armor and hunting trophies.²⁸ Francis’s brother, Major General Sir



Fig. 3: Undated postcard of the Grand Staircase at Longleat. © Kate Hill

Alexander Cunningham (1814–93), was the renowned British army engineer and archaeologist, who amassed a huge collection of Asian antiquities. Either of them could easily have purchased the objects from soldiers sent to India after the 1860 war. In keeping with the tradition of *chinoiserie* noted above, Wingfield displayed smaller pieces looted from the Yuanmingyuan in private rooms for daily use. Cloisonné and porcelain were kept on bookshelves in the morning room with family portraits and an Egyptian bronze stolen by his brother Lewis Wingfield (1842–91) while reporting on the British conquest of Egypt (1882), led by Gen. Garnet Wolseley (1833–1913), who had been with the China expedition in 1860. Thus, the history of the Powerscourt family and the British Empire were intertwined through display of “mementoes”. In the small drawing room, a “Large Chinese yellow vase, painted with Chinese junks, figures, etc. brought from India by me in 1861, having been looted from the Summer Palace at Pekin”, was displayed near a Chinese Chippendale-style mirror.²⁹ The vase is likely a Qianlong-period *yangcai* piece showing lotus scrolls on a yellow ground covering a portion of the vessel, with a river scene painted in enamels around the body or in a cartouche.³⁰

from the Summer Palace at Pekin”, was displayed near a Chinese Chippendale-style mirror.²⁹ The vase is likely a Qianlong-period *yangcai* piece showing lotus scrolls on a yellow ground covering a portion of the vessel, with a river scene painted in enamels around the body or in a cartouche.³⁰

27 Viscount Powerscourt, *A Description and History of Powerscourt* (London: Mitchell and Hughes, 1903). www.archive.org.

28 Powerscourt, *A Description*, p. 16. The table was sold at Christie’s London, 7 Dec. 2018, sale 16217, lot 601.

29 Powerscourt, *A Description*, 31, 58.

30 A vase of this type was sold at Christie’s Hong Kong, 30 May 2018, sale 16956, lot 2752.

Wingfield also had a large tripod enameled censer, which he kept in the majestic ball-room, or “saloon”.³¹ This was an immense space, decorated in a princely Italian baroque style, where George IV (1762–1830) had been received in 1821. A photograph of the saloon, which Wingfield included in his volume, shows the vessel on the floor next to a massive stone chimneypiece, modeled for the collector on that in the Sala della Bussola at the Palazzo Ducale, Venice. Nearby are the skins of a mother leopard and her cubs, shot by himself. (Fig. 4) In this manner, men of his day often combined trophies of hunting and war. The vessel is a covered tripod *ding* censer with cabriole legs and archaistic dragon scrolls that date it to the Qianlong period. The splendid loot made an impression on visitors, for a reporter who visited in 1899 wrote “not a few of the Oriental ornaments were looted from the Summer Palace at Pekin”.³²



Fig. 4: The Saloon, Powerscourt House, Co. Wicklow. ca. 1865–1903. Photograph by Robert French (1841–1917). Ref. No. L_ROY_00406.

Lawrence Photograph Collections, © National Library of Ireland

Alfred de Rothschild displayed large cloisonné vessels among his eighteenth-century French furniture, Sèvres and jeweled treasures at Halton House, Buckinghamshire, and Seamore Place in London.³³ These are listed in a two-volume illustrated catalogue of both residences, published in 1884. The pieces are not attributed to the Yuanmingyuan; but Rothschild’s collecting reinforces the evidence that these pieces were concentrated among the wealthiest connoisseurs in Britain, though consistently ranked below French decorative arts. Some enamels are large and ornate, like a pair of “jardinières”, each supported by four figures of “Chinamen”, and roughly two inches high by three inches long. However, no cloisonné was photographed, while his Sèvres was illustrated. A photograph by Samuel Glendening Payne (1835–1912), shows three cloisonné pieces used as jardinières in the

31 Powerscourt, *A Description*, 49.

32 4 Jan. 1899, in *Daily Nation*, p. 7.

33 Charles Davies (compiler), *A Description of the Works of Art Forming the Collection of Alfred de Rothschild* (Chiswick Press: London, 1884) vol. II, nos. 264–72. www.archive.org.

well-upholstered salon at Halton House, often used for entertaining. (Fig. 5) It seems Rothschild thought, like Powerscourt, that these vessels were splendid and sturdy enough to enhance his festive assemblies. *Le Goût Rothschild* had earlier embraced Asian porcelains in *ormolu* mounts and the display of cloisonné continued this tradition on the grand scale of the nineteenth century.



Fig. 5: The Salon at Halton House, Buckinghamshire. Sepia plate by S. G. Payne. Plate 7 from the photograph album “A de R Halton”. File No. 000/880/20/1.

© Rothschild Archive London

How can we interpret the early interest in cloisonné and *yangcai* porcelains? The visual appeal of these pieces is immediately apparent. The colors of the porcelain pieces are typically bright and well combined; their intricate but lively and organic patterns dance over curved surfaces and resolve seamlessly. The lines of the *cloisons* flow gracefully, though each piece of metal was curled and secured on a round vessel with precision, and their limited color palette is invariably employed to harmonious effect. The complexity of the designs may also have been taken as a sign of value at a time when connoisseurs were at sea with Chinese art. Each *cloison* or *sgraffito* scroll would have conveyed opulence to any potential buyer during this early period.

This small but crucial sample of Yuanmingyuan collecting also reflects radical changes in Britain’s relationship to China. Through the Georgian period, luxury Chinese trade

goods were collected by and closely associated with women. This is illustrated by Queen Charlotte’s handling of the Qianlong gifts and the figure of the reader in the Green Closet, whose white coat links her to the fragile porcelain pieces shown. George IV and William Thomas Beckford (1760–1844) collected porcelain; but they were ridiculed for their scandalous and spendthrift living. After the Second Opium War, wealthy men became the leading collectors of Chinese art, possibly because significant resources and connections with China were involved in establishing the authenticity and chronology of this novel material. Beyond this scholarly aspect of collecting, Powerscourt’s acquisitions during his hunting trip in India suggest that the military provenance of looted objects rendered them “manly” in the eyes of the public. The heft of large cloisonné vessels made them equal to large domestic spaces where businessmen could flaunt their power and wealth, and their provenance would have prompted political discussions on empire and trade during social gatherings. Certainly, the gilding on cloisonné vessels would have glinted in the light of candles or gas lamps during an evening affair, drawing the attention of guests. In this way, imperial art was paradoxically elevated in British esteem through an act of war against the Chinese emperor himself. Whether this can be read as a collective act of concession or appropriation is a question for further consideration and debate.

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