

British Art Studies

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Redefining the British Decorative Arts

Edited by Iris Moon



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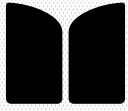
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Presenting Eighteenth-Century

Britain in Western New York State, Christopher Maxwell



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In May 2021, The Corning Museum of Glass, located in Western New York State, opened the exhibition *In Sparkling Company: Glass and the Costs of Social Life in Britain during the 1700s*. Its aim, through a lens of glass, was to introduce visitors to what it meant to be “modern” during the eighteenth century, and the social and economic costs of modernity both for the consumers and producers of luxury during this period. This feature considers the role of gallery design in engaging visitors with displays of often small-scale, colourless glass, while simultaneously supporting the exhibition’s narratives of technical innovation, design, and elite sociability against a backdrop of colonial expansion and exploitation.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 1.

The Corning Museum of Glass, *In Sparkling Company* Exhibition at The Corning Museum of Glass, 2021, 1:30. Digital file courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY.

Introduction

The eighteenth century was a golden age for the production of English and Irish lead glass (also known as “lead crystal”). The formula was perfected in the closing decades of the seventeenth century and coincided with Britain’s political transformation into a constitutional monarchy with parliamentary representation, the diversification of its economy through international trade, imperial expansion and manufacturing, and the attendant flourishing of British cultural life within country “power houses”, the metropole, and expanding colonial centres. Glass became embedded within the rituals of sociability that facilitated and defined Britain’s political, economic and cultural identities, and the advancement of British colonial interests. The production of blown lead glass was accompanied by parallel developments in plate glass and lens technologies, and this modern, distinctively “English” (since Irish productions were heavily restricted until the 1780s) product enjoyed international markets and resonated deeply with the British cultural ideals of politeness. In many ways, glass became a metaphor for British modernity.



Figure 2.

Possibly the glasshouse of the Duke of Buckingham, London, England, thinly blown Venetian-style vessels, 1670-1680. Collection of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (CMoG 2014.2.1-4). Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Figure 3.

Lead glass drinking vessels, England, circa 1700-1740. Collection of The Corning Museum of Glass (CMoG 54.2.9; 79.2.118, bequest of Jerome Strauss; 63.2.2; 79.2.122, bequest of Jerome Strauss; 55.2.3; 2005.2.8; 79.2.77, gift of The Ruth Bryan Strauss Memorial Foundation; 79.2.129, gift of The Ruth Bryan Strauss Memorial Foundation). Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Located in Western New York State, the museum holds the world's most comprehensive collection of glass, which spans antiquity to contemporary art and design. Eighteenth-century English and Irish lead glass has been part of the museum's collection since it was founded by Corning Glass Works (now Corning Incorporated) in 1951. Tableware, mainly in the form of drinking vessels, constitutes the main part of the collection in this area. Alongside items from the museum's holdings, the exhibition brought in objects from ten loaning institutions (five in the U.S. and five in the U.K.) to present a more comprehensive, critical, and trenchant survey of the many innovations, functions, and meanings of glass, beyond its utility on the dining table, in Britain during this transformative century.

Audiences at Corning

Short-term special exhibitions such as this present opportunities for museum curators to consider ways in which design might amplify and support specific themes around a chosen subject. Under such circumstances, design can be more creative, experimental, and responsive to the moment than more conventional "permanent" displays. In normal years, Corning receives just under half a million visitors a year, making it one of New York State's most

popular attractions outside Manhattan. The term “attraction” is an important one, for visitors to the museum campus are presented with numerous opportunities to engage with glass beyond the traditional collections-focused museum experience. These include the 100,000 sq. ft., light-filled Contemporary Art and Design Wing; the interactive Science and Innovation Center; the Hot Glass Show amphitheatre, along with several other glassworking demonstration areas; and the Studio, a world-renowned glassmaking school where visitors can participate in their own glassmaking experiences.

Visitor interest in glassmaking has grown significantly in recent years thanks to the success of the Netflix series *Blown Away*, which many visitors cite as a primary reason for their trip. Consequently, families and regional tourists comprise a significant portion of the museum’s visitors, further drawn to the city by household glass brand names such as Pyrex, Corelle, and Steuben, all of which were (or remain) Corning products. The great opportunity (and challenge) for the museum, its curators, and educators, is to harness this enthusiasm and introduce visitors to the world’s most comprehensive collection of glass, and its many histories, through accessible and informative displays and exhibitions.

Modernity as a Curatorial and Design Theme

In considering the design brief for *In Sparkling Company*, the exhibition’s core team (comprising of the Curator, the Director of Collections, the Director of Education and Interpretation, the Exhibitions Manager, and the Curatorial Assistant) attempted to identify an essence of eighteenth-century Britain that would resonate with twenty-first-century visitors in Western New York State. While theatre, novelty, and ephemeral entertainment presented appealing opportunities for immediate visual delight, well suited to a temporary exhibition, we decided that this aspect of elite British culture would detract from the more serious narratives of the exhibition and potentially obscure the objects themselves. The concept of “modernity” emerged as the driving motif; the self-conscious awareness of which was a key tenet of eighteenth-century cultural life. Throughout the century, the British glass industry and its innovative products grew to become the most successful in Europe. The material qualities of lead crystal, its heft, clarity, smoothness, and polish, perfectly embodied prevailing British cultural ideals of politeness. In short, British glass was a unique and modern material like no other. Consequently, we determined that a recognizably “modern”, or rather a “contemporary”, flavour to the exhibition design would not only support the relevance of the interpretive threads, such as colonization, enslavement, exploitation, and political division, but would also preserve the visual

primacy of the glass itself, allowing the arrangement and positioning of the objects to carry the tension between the beauty of the displays and the subtle and critical turns of the exhibition narratives.

Architectural Design

Selldorf Architects were appointed designers in the summer of 2019. *In Sparkling Company* was their third project in the museum's special exhibition space, located within a biomorphic modernist wing of the campus, designed by Gunnar Birkerts in 1976. The firm's familiarity with the comparatively small but complex exhibition space and, crucially, the challenges of displaying glass were invaluable. We were also impressed by the firm's work at the Clark Institute in 2014, in which the European applied arts were redisplayed against backdrops of subtle, yet effective (and somewhat unexpected), wall colours and simplified architectural details which gives precedence to the objects while offering a gently evocative environment in which to view them.

A highlight of the exhibition, and a major sightline from the entrance, were the surviving architectural panels from the glass drawing room designed by Robert Adam for Northumberland House, London, in the early 1770s, on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum and accompanied by the original design drawings, on loan from Sir John Soane's Museum.



Figure 4.

Installation view showing wall panels from the glass drawing room at Northumberland House, on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).



Figure 5.

Installation view showing Robert Adam's designs for the glass drawing room at Northumberland House, on loan from Sir John Soane's Museum, London (SM adam, volume 39/7, 39/5, 39/6), In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

It was vital that the exhibition design did not compete with, or obscure, these remarkable architectural elements (the loan of which had taken five years of preparation), but instead invited an effortless visual connection between the drawings, the panels, and a groundbreaking virtual reality reconstruction of this now-lost interior.

Inspired by the eight cast plate looking glasses ordered from Saint-Gobain, which Adam had originally set between the reverse-spangled panels of red glass which clad the room between dado and architrave, Selldorf proposed a run of mirrored wall cases with cut-out windows for presenting smaller objects. This reference to the idiom of the baroque hall of mirrors referenced the transformative effects of improvements in plate glass manufacture during the long eighteenth century, and its impact on architecture and interiors. At a time when a middling family in England had an annual income of around £200, the Duke of Northumberland spent £1,465 on the room's eight French cast looking glasses, paying a further 75 percent in import tax.



Figure 6.

Installation view showing mirrored walls, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).



Figure 7.

Installation view of the main room, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).



Figure 8.

Thomas Gainsborough, Mary Little, later Lady Carr, circa 1765, oil on canvas, 127 × 101.6 cm. Collection of the Yale Center for British Art, Bequest of Mrs. Harry Payne Bingham (B1987.6.2). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art (public domain).



Figure 9.

Pompeo Batoni, James Caulfield, Fourth Viscount Charlemont (Later first Earl of Charlemont), circa 1753-1756, oil on canvas, 97.8 × 73.7 cm. Collection of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1974.3.26). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art (public domain).

Colour

Complementing the pinkish-red and green of the reverse-spangled glass panels designed by Robert Adam for the drawing room at Northumberland House, and harmonizing with the colour of Mary Little's gown in the portrait by Thomas Gainsborough on loan from the Yale Center for British Art, the selected paint colours, donated by Farrow & Ball, were Calamine and Chappell Green. These colours were also an homage to an eye-catching combination that found favour in the mid-eighteenth century. They can be seen on Sèvres porcelain of the late 1750s and also in the portrait *James Caulfield, 4th Viscount Charlemont* by Pompeo Batoni painted between 1753 and 1756. Batoni was the leading portrait painter of British Grand Tourists in

Rome, and this striking colour combination was an example of “macaroni” taste, a concept also addressed within the exhibition through the interpretation of a glass-embroidered court coat and two small swords with paste-encrusted hilts.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 10.

Animated projection, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Based on Johann Sebastian Müller (after Canaletto), *A View of the Temple of Comus &c in Vauxhall Gardens*, 1751, coloured engraving. Digital image courtesy of David Coke and The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

Glass and Sociability at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens

Using design to evoke an impression of eighteenth-century British sociability was another key aim. As visitors approached the exhibition entrance, they first arrived in an immersive “bower” evoking Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens. Renowned during the eighteenth century as a place of fashionable resort on the south side of the Thames, all those who could afford the modest entrance fee (one to two shillings, compared to the five shilling weekly salary of a glass worker) could enjoy art installations, architectural novelties, music, fireworks, outdoor dining, celebrity spotting, and sexual encounters—in short, social activities that remain recognizable in the twenty-first century. Vauxhall was well known for spectacle and dazzling illuminations, which often included the use of ephemeral architecture and “transparencies”. Transparencies were scenes painted onto a translucent substrate—most commonly large sheets of canvas—and lit from behind. As a nod to this, and other amusing spectacles such as magic lanterns, a print of Vauxhall, dated 1749, from the collection of David Coke was projected against a curved wall and slightly animated with gently swaying branches, wafting fans, and inclining heads, with birdsong to enliven the space during quiet moments.



Figure 11.

Installation view of title wall with neon sign by FagSigns, Brooklyn, NY, and window view to dessert table, In *Sparkling Company*, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

An adjacent wall was filled with a full-size graphic of a print after Thomas Rowlandson's *Vaux-Hall* (circa 1784) including a depiction of a supper box, which was cut out and fitted with a window to reveal the exhibition space beyond and a "dessert table" laden with confectionery based on eighteenth-century recipes and made from glass by the museum's Hot Glass team (sugar and glass actually behave similarly in their molten states). Above this hung a ten-arm chandelier fitted with candles. iPads inside the exhibition guided visitors through the various forms of dessert tableware and identified the sweetmeats with accompanying recipes from Hannah Glasse's guide, *The Complete Confectioner: Or the Whole Art of Confectionary Made Plain and Easy* (circa 1760).



Figure 12.

Glass sweetmeats, created by the Hot Glass Team at The Corning Museum of Glass. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY.

Vauxhall Gardens also happened to be located in proximity to some of London's glasshouses, which supplied it with the necessary stream of tableware, looking glasses and—most famous of all—lanterns. Thousands of glass lanterns were strung along the walkways of the gardens. Fuelled by whale oil, their wicks were connected to one another by a single fuse dipped in flammable saltpetre, which was a key ingredient to both gunpowder and lead glass, as well as other industrial processes. At a certain point in the evening, a signal was given and attendants emerged with lit tapers, which, upon contact with the fuse, ignited all the lanterns within just a couple of minutes. This daily feature remained a highlight of Vauxhall well into the nineteenth century, and was remarked upon by Londoners and tourists alike, including Benjamin Franklin.

Vauxhall's famous glass lanterns are clearly visible in Rowlandson's print, above the heads of the celebrity revellers gathered to hear a performance by the singer Frederika Weichsel. Against this, the exhibition title was fixed as a hot pink neon sign, made for the exhibition and donated by FagSigns, a Brooklyn studio founded by glass artist Matthew Day Perez. Neon is currently enjoying a surge of interest among glassmakers and collectors and it seemed a fitting twenty-first century equivalent to Vauxhall's lanterns, conjuring a sense of "modern" urban sociability, visual delight, creativity, and perhaps still a hint of seediness. In hot pink, it was also fittingly camp and perfectly aligns with Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* (1964), which locate the origins of camp taste in the eighteenth century, with its love of surface effect, instant visual gratification, innovation, and effortlessly concealed self-consciousness.

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 13.

The Corning Museum of Glass, Neon Collaboration with FagSigns and Corning Museum of Glass, In Sparkling Company, 2021, 4:50. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

Reflections in the Soundscape

Visits to Corning are markedly seasonal, with peak attendance coinciding with the summer months and the autumn colours. While the galleries are often filled to capacity during this time, winter visitors have a very different experience, and it was important that the exhibition design helped suggest the idea of glass and sociability even when there were few visitors to fill the space. Consequently, a soundscape was developed by Undertone Music. Zoned speakers directed specially composed music in three different areas of the gallery. The composition featured the flute, oboe, clarinet, and banjo. It was important to include an original composition in support of the theme of innovation and modernity by avoiding the historicizing, and therefore potentially distancing, effects of a familiar eighteenth-century composition. In so doing, Tom Hambleton of Undertone Music sought also to incorporate the spirit of the exhibition and its glassy content. The result was typical of the eighteenth-century British style of composition. Its construction of crossing and weaving melodic lines gave the music a complex yet refined and essentially unadorned quality.

In the words of Hambleton:

It does not indulge in the lavish ornamentation or even 'balletic' dalliances of the eighteenth-century French style. It eschews the operatic sweep of the eighteenth-century Italian style. Nor does it veer toward the Empfindsamkeit (sentimental style) of many of the German composers who were trying to express 'true' human feelings as opposed to older Baroque Affektenlehre (doctrine of affections). Therefore, in keeping with the British style, rather than find 'sparkle' in trills and other ornaments, I found 'reflections' in melodies that are repeated or 'reflected' back as a melody or theme repeated by a different instrument than that which first stated the theme. It is a reflection in structure rather than one of gimmicks.

[mul]

Glass, Sugar, and Slavery

By the dessert table, the musical composition was overlaid with a “walla”—soundbites mixed to mimic the background murmur of a crowd—which we recorded with Madeleine Pelling, an art historian at the University of York and Caroline McCaffrey-Howarth, a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, reading and discussing extracts from works by eighteenth-century diarists, writers, and etiquette manuals. It is barely decipherable when the gallery is full, but throughout the exhibition, wherever possible, we wanted to introduce likenesses, names, and words of real people to encourage more personal connections with visitors.

The instruments heard in the audioscape varied slightly across the three “zones” of the gallery and here, by the dessert table, the banjo could be heard in Undertone’s composition. Suggested by Cheyney McKnight, founder and director of Not Your Momma’s History, and an interpretive consultant to the exhibition, we included a banjo because the consumption of confectionery, and its impact on the design of glass tableware and social life, was directly dependent upon the exploitation of enslaved labour in Britain’s most profitable North American colonies: those of the West Indies, and Jamaica in particular. As James Delbourgo has observed, it was in Jamaica that Hans Sloane acquired a banjo, which was then illustrated in his *Natural History* (1707), as well as a sample of African music complete with pidgin/Creole lyrics. The influence of Africa on European culture extended beyond the luxury products of enslaved labour, as Amelia Rauser has written, and permeated other aspects of fashionable life, such as costume, dress and the emergence of Creole culture more broadly.

Although the objects on display in the exhibition largely related to the lives of an elite that comprised little more than five percent of the population, the economies of slavery that underpinned the diversification of the British economy during the eighteenth century were recognized throughout, and addressed through objects such as abolitionist medallions, engraved goblets, trade beads, an illustrated log book kept by the captain of a slave ship, and a “deed of sale” for a sixteen-year-old enslaved girl named Geney. While the tableware, filled with glass sweetmeats, and presided over by the portrait of Mary Little, offered a delightful vignette, the banjo, the spectral shadow of the chandelier, the proximity of the deed of sale and a goblet enamelled by William Beilby with a toast to “The Success of the African Trade of Whitehaven”, presented visitors with the opportunity to reconsider the *mise en scène* in a more critical way.



Figure 14.

Installation view of dessert table, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021-2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

Trade with Asia

Trade with Asia through the British East India Company played a significant part in the nation's economy and international presence. Two displays considered the connections between glass and British trade with China. The emergence of the Chinese taste, later known as chinoiserie, was represented by a large lead glass goblet engraved with a landscape and figures in the Chinese taste, after an engraving by Johann Nilson. Recent revisionist theories of chinoiserie challenge the notion that the Chinese taste was purely decorative, derivative, and fanciful, and propose that, in fact, design references to China supplied British consumers with a lexicon of motifs by which to project alternative notions of respectability, besides those associated with Europe's classical past in ancient Greece and Rome.¹ This

sentiment was expressed by the botanist and President of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks, who in 1792 observed: “The great inventions which actually [sic] serve as the basis of our present state of Civilization were all known to the Chinese long before they were either reinvented or stolen from them by us”.

It has been well established that the East India trade had an enormous impact on British material culture of the period. Asian goods were so eagerly received by British markets that they, or imitations of them, became naturalized (tea, porcelain, silk, lacquer). To reflect this, the engraved decoration on the museum’s goblet was photographed, enlarged, and applied to the plinths supporting a toilette set and the dessert tableware to suggest a damask pattern. These graphics also amplify the centrality of glass to the exhibition’s narratives, and especially celebrate the particular compositional qualities of lead glass that allowed it to withstand complex engraving and therefore become so responsive to the cultural moment.

Experiencing Reverse Painted Pictures

The exhibition also featured two Chinese reverse-painted pictures. The technique of painting behind glass was introduced to China by European merchants in the late seventeenth century and, by the eighteenth century, Chinese artists skilled in the graphic arts of ink painting and painting on porcelain had become so accomplished at reverse painting on imported European plate glass that their products were appreciated back in Europe.² The success of the painting depended as much upon the quality of plate glass as it did on the skill of the artist, and the remarkable journey of the glass from Europe to China, and back again, entailed significant financial investment and personal networks. The novel, experiential qualities of reverse-painted pictures, especially when applied to looking glasses, are perhaps difficult to appreciate in the twenty-first century but the colourful, glimmering, reflective, and almost interactive surfaces would have allowed viewers to imagine themselves as part of the painted scenes. As Lihong Liu has written, the Chinese seem also to have appreciated the psychological and aesthetic potential of reflective glass surfaces.³ Viewing such scenes through a plate glass vitrine detaches present-day viewers from this experience, but it was revived in the exhibition by the addition of a graphic frame around the case, emulating that of the reverse-painted looking glass inside, so visitors might appreciate how they were actively looking into a scene beyond the plane of vitrine glass or, conversely, imagining themselves inside such a scene looking out.



Figure 15.

Toilette service with the arms of William Bentinck, 1st Earl of Portland (1649-1790), on loan from a Private Collection, installed in *In Sparkling Company*, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021-2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

Reflections

The object checklist for *In Sparkling Company* was finalized by summer 2019 and the label text had been signed off by March 2020, in preparation for a May opening. Then came the pandemic, the closure of the museum, the murder of George Floyd, and the powerful messaging of the Black Lives Matter movement. Around the globe, governments, museums, and the public engaged in heated discussion about colonial pasts, histories of enslavement, and their enduringly pernicious legacies. In the world of entertainment, *Bridgerton* drew large audiences as the latest popular point of reference for the long eighteenth century. In short, the major themes of the exhibition, namely elite sociability and histories of imperial expansion, suddenly became prominent and rapidly moving topics of mainstream discussion.

The question was posed: did the exhibition still strike the right note? Remarkably, despite the closure of lending institutions during the first year of the pandemic, the object list remained unaffected, with only one exception: a glazed Bow porcelain figure representing Africa, probably intended for display on a dessert table, which we had planned to use as the “opening object” at the start of the exhibition. Its absence allowed us to re-centre the story of lead glass as a modern British technical innovation. Whether this

ultimately made the narratives of empire and exploitation more subtle, or contributed to the unexpected tension of their emergence elsewhere in the exhibition, is still being assessed through formal visitor evaluation.

Our intention for the exhibition design was that it should play a subtle yet supportive role in generating an atmosphere that would connect visitors to the objects on display, and the contexts in which they were produced and consumed. In avoiding any attempt to historicize the gallery space, our aim was to support the contemporary relevance of the narratives, while enhancing intellectual and physical accessibility, and evoking such concepts and tensions that, for various reasons, could not be represented by objects or simply defied effective written description. Far from transporting visitors back in time, we hope to have brought attention to the legacies of this period in the twenty-first century, and drawn attention to a remarkable material that is all too often overlooked in studies of eighteenth-century culture.

Glass and the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World

On 8 and 9 October 2021, the museum presented its 59th Annual Seminar on Glass, the first ever in a virtual format. The first day was titled “Staging the 18th Century” and featured three panel discussions, in which museum staff and external collaborators considered approaches to the interpretation, design, and digital components of the exhibition.

The second day was titled “Glass and the 18th-century Atlantic World”. A series of pre-recorded papers, made available a week before the event, informed three live panel discussions relating to the many contexts, meanings, functions, and innovations of glass within cultures and communities throughout the Atlantic world during the long eighteenth century (about 1680–1820). The day ended with a state-of-the-field discussion considering the achievements of, and possibilities for, glass scholarship and eighteenth-century studies.

Recordings for all sessions and links to the pre-recorded papers can be found here: <https://whatson.cmog.org/events-programs/lectures-seminars/annual-seminar-glass>.



Figure 16. Installation view showing Chinoiserie vases, sugar caster, wine glasses, and a reverse-painted looking glass, In Sparkling Company, The Corning Museum of Glass, 22 May 2021–2 January 2022. Digital image courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY (all rights reserved).

Footnotes

- 1 See David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2010) and Stacey Sloboda, *Chinoiserie: Commerce and Critical Ornament in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2017).
- 2 For a recent study on Chinese reverse-painted pictures see Thierry Audric, *Chinese Reverse Glass Painting, 1720–1820* (Peter Lang, 2020).
- 3 Lihong Liu, "Vitreous Views: Materiality and Mediality of Glass in Qing China through a Transcultural Prism", *Getty Research Journal*, no. 8 (2016): 17–38.

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