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Redefining the British Decorative Arts

Edited by Iris Moon



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Cover image: Michelle Erickson, Shell Dish and Helios Dish, 2021, 3D scanned printed, molded and slipcast porcelain with lifecast lobster and antler and ceramic transfer prints, width: 8 in. 3D scanning and printing done in collaboration with Dr Bernard Means at the Virtual Curation Lab, Virginia Commonwealth University. Collection of the artist.. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).

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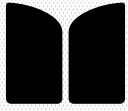
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For this feature, curators working with museum collections that represented the British Atlantic were asked to revisit and revise a label on a decorative arts object that they had previously written. The aim was to show the hidden mechanics involved in condensing a complex story around an object's history into a short text dictated by the physical size of the label. When that small and unassuming piece of paper sitting next to an object carries much of the interpretative weight in a museum, there are many factors involved in label-writing. Do you write from the neutral position of the institution? Or do you speak from lived experience? The responses gathered here adopt multiple formats. Some are accompanied by commentary, while others appear simply with the changes tracked. There are many different ways of thinking about what—and what doesn't—end up going onto a label. Revealed too are the variety of different visitors that each curator imagines addressing as the reader of their text.



Figure 1.

Charger made in Jingdezhen, China, 1740–1760, hard-paste porcelain, 35.56 cm. Collection of the Reeves Museum of Ceramics, Washington and Lee University, Museum Purchase with Funds Provided by Herbert McKay (2012.5.1). Digital image courtesy of Reeves Museum of Ceramics, Washington and Lee University (all rights reserved).

Label written in 2014 by Ronald W. Fuchs II, Senior Curator, Reeves Museum of Ceramics, Washington and Lee University

Charger

Made in Jingdezhen, China, 1740-1760

Made of Hard-Paste Porcelain

14" diameter

**Museum Purchase with Funds Provided by Herbert McKay
(2012.5.1)**

The nutmeg, cloves, and pineapple painted on this dish are copied from Pierre Pomet's *A Compleat History of Druggs*, published in London in 1712.

Fragments of a similar plate were found in a Philadelphia privy associated with the sea captain William and Patience Annis, who lived at the site from 1729 to 1748. Other examples were recovered from the wreck of the *Griffin*, an English ship that sank in 1761, on its return voyage from China.

Label rewritten by Ronald W. Fuchs II

Large Dish

Made in Jingdezhen, China, 1740-1760

Made of Hard-Paste Porcelain

14" diameter

**Museum Purchase with Funds Provided by Herbert McKay
(2012.5.1)**

The pineapple, nutmeg, and clove plants on this dish are just a few of the new foodstuffs that transformed European diets in the 1600s and 1700s. All came from places conquered by Europeans and were cultivated by enslaved labor; pineapples from the Caribbean, and nutmeg and cloves from Indonesia.

The pattern, inspired by illustrations in Pierre Pomet's *Compleat History of Druggs* (1712), proved popular in Britain and her colonies, perhaps because it reflected the power, wealth, and exotic flavors made possible by colonization and trade.

Rationale for Rewriting

by Ronald W. Fuchs II

When this plate was first acquired in 2012, I saw it as fitting within our group of Chinese export porcelain whose decoration was inspired by European prints, and in fact some of the initial curatorial research conducted on it was by a Washington and Lee University student taking the course *Art History 288: Chinese Porcelain and the China Trade*, which had as a strong focus the influence of European design on Chinese export porcelain.

I was also frankly excited by the discovery of pieces excavated in Philadelphia and from the wreck of the *Griffin*, which helped not only to date the pattern but also to document that they were likely intended for the British market, and I wanted to share that information.

Re-imagining the label in 2021, I am placing greater emphasis on what it can say about global trade and the movement of products, plants, animals, and people around the world, and the influences they had on different cultures, which has become an increasingly important part of the interpretation of our Chinese export porcelain collection. The tolls and legacies of global trade and colonization, and especially slavery as central to both, have also become an important part of our interpretation, as has our desire to expand the types of stories we tell and the range of people we talk about with our objects.

In rewriting the label, I sacrificed the specifics about where examples of the pattern have been found to make space for more interpretation of the plants and their larger cultural context. As the label is relatively long for a museum display context, I would consider cutting the reference to the design source if needed.



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 2.

Mortlake Tapestry Manufactory, *News of the Stag* from the series known as *The Hunters' Chase*, circa 1645–1675, wool tapestry, 347.3 × 463.6 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Amory S. Carhart, 1957 (57.127). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, (public domain).

Label written in 2012 by Elizabeth Cleland, Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

News of The Stag from the series known as The Hunters' Chase

Wool

Designed after Bernard van Orley (ca. 1492–1541/42), ca. 1540

Woven at the Mortlake Tapestry Manufactory (1619–1703), ca. 1645–75

This tapestry is one from a nine-piece series known as the *Hunters' Chase*. Curiously enough, given its secular subject-matter, the original edition was commissioned by the Dutch Church in London, in 1645. Francis Clein designed four of the pieces in the series from scratch; the other five, including *News of the Stag*, were based on existing tapestry designs by the great 16th-century artist Bernard van Orley for his influential, Brussels-woven *Hunts of Maximilian*. *Hunters' Chase* proved incredibly popular for Mortlake, resulting in much-needed commissions for the floundering manufactory: at

least 8 different re-editions were woven during the following decades, including that of which this *News of the Stag* was part.

Gift of Amory S. Carhart, 1957
57.127

Label rewritten by Elizabeth Cleland

Remembering with Advantages

In a world shaken by ongoing civil war, this tapestry was made by and for immigrants. Nostalgic for a bygone age in the country they had left behind, it looks Brussels-made from the 1540s, a period of Netherlandish prosperity and relative peace. In fact, it was woven a century later, using 100-year-old designs, in England—at that time, a sanctuary for European refugee Protestants. It was commissioned by London’s Dutch Church from weavers at Mortlake. These weavers were immigrant Flemings, recently fleeing persecution by the Catholic authorities, some having left under cover of darkness, bringing only the possessions they could carry on their backs.

News of the Stag from the series known as The Hunters’ Chase

Designed after Bernard van Orley (Netherlandish, ca. 1492–1541/42), ca. 1540

Woven at the Mortlake Tapestry Manufactory (1619–1703)

British (Mortlake), ca. 1645–1675

Dyed wool on undyed woolen warp

Gift of Amory S. Carhart, 1957 (57.127)



Figure 3.

Giuseppe Gricci, Pair of candlesticks, circa 1750, soft-paste porcelain, 14 cm, Capodimonte porcelain factory. Collection of The British Museum (Franks.508). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Label written in 2018 by Patricia F. Ferguson, Project Curator in the Britain, Europe and Prehistory Department at the British Museum from 2017 to 2020

Pair of candlesticks

Italian, Naples, Capodimonte factory, about 1745-50

Soft-paste porcelain, enamels, gilt

Mark: fleur-de-lys in blue

British Museum, Given by Sir A.W. Franks, 1897, Franks Cat. 508

These candlesticks, modelled by Giuseppe Gricci, depict Africans supporting conch shells on shell-like rockwork, known as Rocailles, with coral branches. They may have been part of a marine-themed table service.

Label rewritten by Patricia F. Ferguson

Pair of candlesticks

Italian, Naples, Capodimonte factory, about 1745-50

Soft-paste porcelain, enamels, gilt

Mark: fleur-de-lys in blue

British Museum, Given by Sir A.W. Franks, 1897, Franks Cat. 508

The presence of kneeling Afro-European figures struggling under enormous shells normalised enslaved labor. Such humiliating ornamental images of forced servitude increased with the rise of the transatlantic slave trade.



Figure 4.

Unknown manufacturer, Plate with William Parry's Ships Hecla and Griper at Melville Sound, circa 1840, earthenware with blue transfer print from the "Arctic Scenery" series, 3 x 27.6 cm, inspired by William Parry (1790-1855), *Journal of a Voyage of Discovery a Northwest Passage*, 1821. Collection of Gardiner Museum, Toronto, The Barbara and James Moscovich Collection of Canadian Historical China (G13.15.45). Digital image courtesy of Gardiner Museum, Toronto (all rights reserved).

A New Lens on Canadiana

by Sequoia Miller, Chief Curator, Gardiner Museum

The permanent collection of Gardiner Museum includes a group of nineteenth-century British ceramics made for the Canadian market, conventionally known as Canadiana. The forms are mostly tableware and have transfer-printed imagery of Canadian scenes derived from print sources, including William Parry's *Journal of a Voyage of Discovery a Northwest Passage* (1821) and William Henry Bartlett's multi-volume *Canadian Scenery Illustrated* (beginning in 1840).

Many of the images include representations of Indigenous people and lifeways. While the current gallery interpretation, on view since 2015, notes the scenes as “romanticized”, it does not address specifically the representation of Indigeneity, which was central to European understandings of Canada as a place and as a colony.

See, for example, this single object label (for the plate on the previous slide):

Plate with William Parry’s Ships *Hecla* and *Griper* at Melville Sound

Unknown manufacturer, c. 1840

Earthenware with blue transfer print from the “Arctic Scenery” series, inspired by William Parry (1790–1855), *Journal of a Voyage of Discovery a Northwest Passage*, 1821

Mark: Transfer printed *Arctic Scenery* on an igloo against a glacier, flanked by harpoons and a standing figure

The Barbara and James Moscovich Collection of Canadian Historical China G13.15.45

The exploits of Sir William Parry (1790–1855) on his two expeditions to the Arctic were popular on both sides of the Atlantic after the publication of his *Journal of a Voyage of Discovery of a North-West Passage* in 1821 and 1824. Here we see the ships *Hecla* and *Griper* in the ice at Melville Sound. A border of tropical animals encircles the scene, perhaps because Parry was seeking a viable northern route to China and India.

In addition to the two ships, the plate shows a group of people in the foreground on a sled being pulled by dogs. With the standing figures in the middle ground in European dress, we can identify those in the foreground as Inuit. This scene is a deliberate reworking of two separate prints from Parry’s book, one showing the *Hecla* and *Griper*, and a second showing a group of Inuit people on a sled. Perhaps the two images were combined to locate the scene more clearly in Canada (in the absence of an accompanying narrative), or just to generate more interest.

Melville Sound, also known as Viscount Melville Sound, is a body of water in the Canadian Arctic that forms part of the Northwest Passage. Its first European navigator was Parry, who gave Melville Sound its name. Locating the scene at Melville Sound in the title of the print and the plate, then, is a colonizing gesture in itself rather than a neutral description. In a sense, the *Hecla*, *Griper*, and standing sailors are on Melville Sound, while the sledding party is on Tariyunnuaq, the traditional name of the body of water. In 2012, the Geographical Names Board of Canada re-designated the sound as Tariyunnuaq.

Overlooking people of colour depicted in artworks is a well-known occurrence. The many historical European paintings portraying enslaved people are only now being retitled and reconsidered with their presence acknowledged. In this case, the Inuit sledding party is perhaps omitted because the presumed audience for the transferware is non-Indigenous. Both at the time of the production and in the museum, the “Canadian market” observes Indigeneity rather than constitutes it. The presence of Indigenous people helps to locate the scene, yet subjecthood rests not with them but with the ships, as avatars of European exploration and accomplishment.

Interpreting these scenes depicting Indigenous life felt like too big of a job for a label rewrite. Our curatorial team decided instead to begin by commissioning an Indigenous artist, Mary Anne Barkhouse, to intervene in the case as a whole, both the objects and existing didactics. Barkhouse is at work on the project now and we are just starting to talk about how to approach writing new labels together.

Rewriting labels can often productively update the interpretation of historical decorative arts. It is important, however, to recognize and cultivate opportunities where a stronger shift in the interpretive lens is needed. We hope we are doing this at the Gardiner.



Figure 5.

Chinoiserie case, British Galleries, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photographed November 2021.

Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Photograph by Rich Lee (all rights reserved).

Label written in 2019–2020 by Iris Moon, Assistant Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Rewritten with tracked changes by Iris Moon

Where is East? ~~The Near and Far East~~

Chinoiserie is often pointed to as a striking example of the West's fascination *obsession* with Asia. In the eighteenth century, the term referred to an ensemble of imports from different places across the region, including China, India, and Japan, and to their overall aesthetic effect. Chinoiserie also encompassed the copies made by Western manufacturers.

~~Curiosity about~~ *The elite's desire to possess* the rare initially drove the *luxury* market for Asian goods. As global trade brought the East closer to the British, the number of imported goods entering households ~~increased~~ *proliferated*. Red-and-gold lacquer furniture, colorful wallpaper, and richly patterned porcelain vases filled elegant country houses. Outdoors, George III's architect William Chambers, who had traveled to Canton with the Swedish East India Company in the 1740s, reimagined Kew Gardens by adding a multistoried pagoda tower.

The exquisite quality and diversity of objects shipped from Asia provided domestic makers with new standards to emulate. As ~~more affordable~~ *cheaper* Asian imports arrived in Britain, domestic porcelain factories began to sell wares with Asian motifs. Over time, imitation turned into invention. Under the guise of the "Chinese taste," makers developed fantastical figures, some of which may appear grotesque, bizarre, or offensive to modern eyes. ~~To eighteenth-century viewers, however, chinoiserie stood for colorful flights of the imagination—a stark contrast to the gray fog of the British Isles.~~ *Objects of curiosity and repulsion, the harmful after-effects of Chinoiserie can be found lingering in the cultural stereotypes of the Other deployed today.*

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