

“Passeurs”: Chinoiseries

This cultural blindness, or at the very least short-sightedness, affected Europe-based artists in a similar way. The craftsmen making furniture in the Chinoiserie style, the highly decorative mode originally vaguely inspired by Chinese motives, were also not capable of knowing/seeing the original pieces which were being exported from China into Europe, even when they were actually in the presence of one of them. One of the most notable importers of these objects in France was Edmé Gersaint (1694–1750), a famous Parisian figure for whom Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721) painted a celebrated shop sign, a work that is now considered to

be one of the greatest masterpieces of the Rococo period. In October 1739, the magazine *Le Mercure de France* announced that Gersaint was changing the nature of his business. Before 1739, his shop had not been particularly specialized in its official description, but he nevertheless sold mostly items such as decorated furniture, prints, frames, and paintings. His new commerce was specialized for the “curieux,” i.e., people with inquisitive minds, and consisted in strange things from nature (like shells and corals) and also all kinds of functional and decorative objects. Of these objects, Gersaint was most famous for his choice of Chinoiseries. In this new business, named “La Pagode,” he sold, among many other things, cabinets imported from China like



Figure 1.2 Anonymous, *Storming the Encampment at Gadan-Ola* 御題格登鄂拉斫營之戰, 平定準部回部得勝圖 (or 清人畫平定伊犁回部戰圖冊). Ink and color on paper, 52 × 90.3 cm. Photo courtesy of Palace Museum, Beijing.

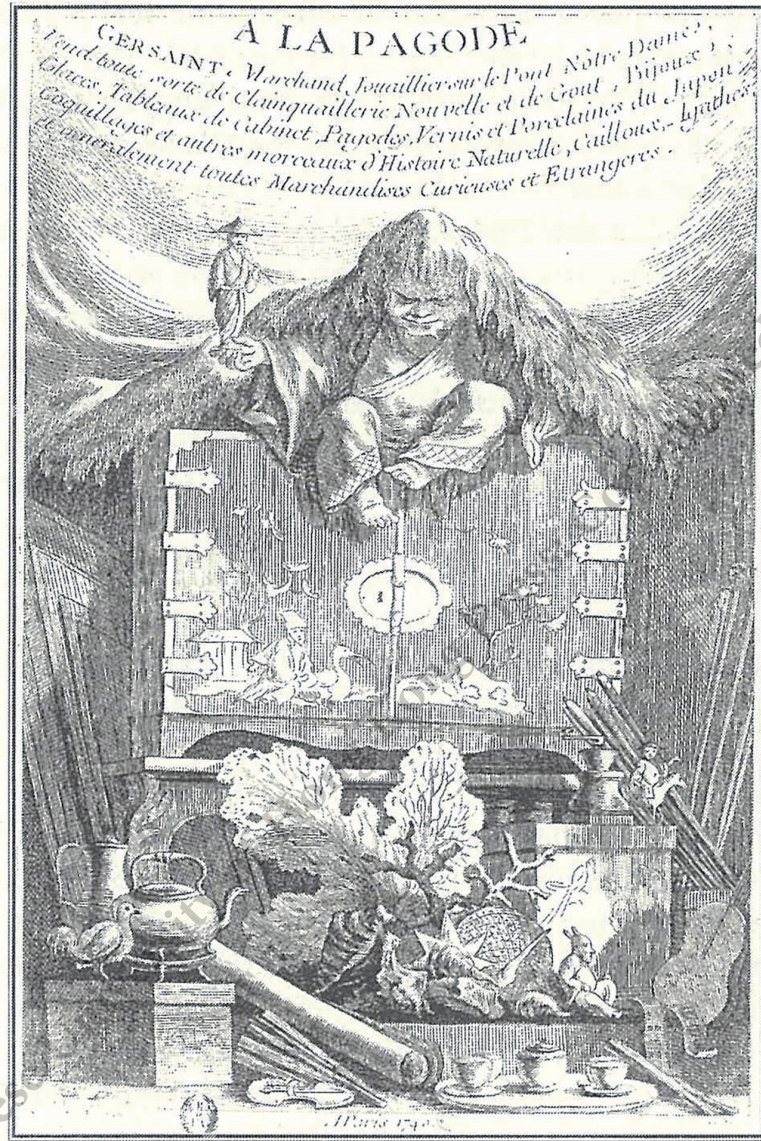


Figure 1.3 *À La Pagode*, from a design by François Boucher (1703–1770), engraved by the count Anne-Claude de Caylus (1692–1765), 27.9 × 18.5 cm. Advertisement published in the October 1739 issue of the magazine *Le Mercure de France*. The inscription reads: “At the Pagoda, Gersaint, Jeweller Merchant at the Pont Notre-Dame, sells all sorts of objects new and old, jewels, mirrors, paintings for cabinet furniture, pagodas (author’s note: even though the word also came to mean a tiered building in French, throughout the 18th and most of the 19th centuries, it primarily meant a small statuette representing a Chinese man or woman), lacquerware and porcelains from Japan, shells and other pieces of the nature world, stones, semi-precious stones, and assortments of all curious and foreign merchandise.” Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.



Figure 1.4 Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702–1789), *Portrait of John, Lord Mountstuart, later 4th Earl and 1st Marquess of Bute*, 1763. Pastel on parchment, 114.9 × 90.2 cm. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

the one displayed on a publicity card, for his shop designed by the other great painter of the Rococo period in France, François Boucher (1703–1770) (**Figure 1.3**).²⁰ However, one can wonder what happened to these made-in-China original pieces of furniture, and therefore made by Chinese craftsmen (even though many of those were made for export and somehow adapted to foreign taste), when they were dismantled and reassembled into a Chinoiserie piece, and therefore remade in Europe by European craftsmen. Of course, even when some craftsmen

could be fascinated by these Chinese or Japanese pieces of furniture and could even have the desire to copy accurately all of their characteristics, their clients, who could require nothing but the arabesques of the Rococo style, would probably not have let them do so. Epistemological blindness and cultural short-sightedness were therefore not the sole responsibility of the makers, but it remains that European eyes in general could only see the forms coming from China through the prism of their own visual culture. Sometimes however, accurate reproductions of