

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

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« From Artefact to Daily Life Environment.

The « East India Company Style » in the Eighteenth Century Pondicherry Trading Post»

Today, I would like to discuss the issue of the material culture of the French in the Indian Ocean during the 18th century, and more precisely Pondicherry. There are numerous studies on the material culture of the Europeans in the modern period, however few of them have investigated populations living in foreign colonies. For several years now, I have been looking into the daily life of the French in India during this period, by using probate inventories, which are kept in the French national archives for overseas territories, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, located in Aix-en-Provence, in the south of France.

This paper will begin with a focus on the artefact, which can be found in European and Asian museum collections, as well as in private collections. However, we will not be able to look at all of the artefacts which have been found in the interiors of French homes in Pondicherry. I will, therefore, focus specifically on artefacts, mainly furniture, which were of the "East India Company style". They mostly are pieces of furniture made of exotic wood, coming from local species, but which were given European shapes. In fact, this particular style was not only applied to artefacts, from a stylistic point of view, but it also transposed into the overall daily life environment, from a more social and cultural angle. Moreover, you may note that the notion of exoticism should be redefined and that it occupies a central place in the interior furnishing logic.

I. DESCRIPTION OF INTERIOR FURNISHING

1. The scope of analysis

So, what are the artefacts that link Europe and Asia? These artefacts are mostly pieces of furniture for sitting rooms or dining rooms in French homes. They make up all of the pieces of the reception area in the home. The most common include chests of drawers, seats, sofas, tables, chairs, cupboards, and console tables. Pieces of furniture used for comfort were those which were given particular attention and substantial financial resources by the home owners. This is why a large part of the furniture that interests us today, those of the "East India Company style", were found in the reception areas.

Here is a first example. A chest of drawers in the Louis XV or Régence style, from Pondicherry and dated from the mid eighteenth century. Specific elements of stylistic vocabulary can be seen on it, but with Asian adaptations. For example: these metal bands of an Indian pattern, or the stylized lotus blossom in the lower centre portion of the piece.

This furniture style would quickly spread through Pondicherry, as we will see in a few minutes, because it was important for the French to favour appearances and to demonstrate their tastes for beautiful artefacts. Owning rare pieces of furniture was a way of distinguishing themselves from other social classes. The desire for innovation is constant for the elite social class, which is then imitated by lower social classes. This makes it possible to integrate a social class, and to reinforce belonging to it. This aspect is not contained only to the French in Pondicherry, but can be found in most social groups.

2. Origin of the furniture

Today, numerous examples have been included in museum collections, some of which make it possible to try to understand how they were made. It is difficult to establish precisely the issue of craftsmanship for this style of furniture. Indeed, archival sources are rare. I have, however, found the traces of a master carpenter, who boarded in Lorient, an East India Company ship which was Pondicherry bound. Luckily, he died. Now, I say luckily because his death made it possible to find his probate inventory which confirmed that he was indeed a joiner, and not a carpenter. He practiced his profession from his home as can be seen from the large variety of raw wood species, as well as a wide-variety of furniture, which was exceptional for someone of that social class.

There were indeed French craftsmen who worked in Pondicherry. However, a piece of furniture preserved in Lorient's Museum of the East India Company has led us to believe that Indian craftsmen created copies of French pieces.

In fact, we have a settee of the purest Louis XV or Régence style, which like the previous cupboard was made in Pondicherry during the mid-eighteenth century. When we took a closer look at its armrests, we could see three wooden half-spheres, which show a poor interpretation by the craftsmen who used a model, probably a printed one, to make the piece of furniture. They were, in fact, bullen nails which were used to hold the fabric in place. However, this settee was made of canework, so bullen nails were not needed. This has led us to believe that the piece was completely copied from a model, probably by Indian craftsmen.

3. Interior furnishing logic

Let us now look at the "East India Company style." It can be characterized in two ways. There is first the artefact, that can be found in museum collections for example and which are made of Asian materials (wood, fabric), but crafted in a European style.

However, the "East India Company style", can also be seen, in a more global dimension, through the very composition of the house itself. This can be done by considering the proportions of Asian and European artefacts that can be found within it. This approach gives information on the interior design and layout sought by the inhabitants, which meet their own personal desires, as well as external constraints.

To better understand this, here is diagram which summarizes the composition evolution of French Pondicherry homes in the eighteenth century. Before going any further, it is important to note that this study is based on the French who had lived in this trading post for several years, and whose families had been settled there for several generations (some are still there today). They were mostly families who were part of the middle and upper classes of the population.

The four stages described in the diagram do not have precise chronological limits. I will only be able to give definitive results at the end of my doctoral research.

Stage 1 clearly shows that Indian artefacts are present in large majority, which is logical as the French had only just started moving to Pondicherry. There were not yet many European artefacts circulating. They used what was available on site.

Note that, for this study, the artefacts described as "European" are either those which came directly from Europe, or those crafted in the European style.

Furthermore, stages 2 and 3 show that the portion of Asian artefacts continuously gave way to European artefacts; however they increased in stage 4 to attain equivalent portions for each. We will

see in a moment though that the Asian artefacts which constituted home interiors did not have the same aspect at the end of the century as they did at the beginning of it, because the notion of collection emerged.

II. THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF EXOTICISM

The concept of exoticism is very important here because it is one of the deciding factors of the reasoning for acquisition in interior furnishing. As we've seen, the continuous goal of the French is innovation so as to set themselves apart from other social classes and to reinforce their position as the elite.

Exoticism can be defined as the search for an elsewhere, for something distant, that is not familiar, and which, because it is difficult to attain, fascinates and attracts. Upon their arrival in India at the end of the seventeenth century, we could easily imagine that Europeans were impressed and unfamiliar with their daily environment. But what about after they had spent several months there, or better yet, when they were descendants of several generations of families located in the Indian Ocean? The concept of exoticism should be reconsidered here. Indeed, would it not now be European, French, references that were the least common and therefore the more exotic ones?

Exoticism in Pondicherry was, therefore, defined by three factors: the moment the individual arrived in India, the length of residence, and the current trends in the trading post.

This line chart gives the two trends in Pondicherry in the eighteenth century. At first, it was the Asian style that was exotic for the French. However, little by little during the course of the eighteenth century, as the French established their family lines, it was the European style that was sought as it was less common and more exotic. By mid-century, the trend began to stabilize, where the French had a lifestyle with common references, which were generalized to all of the inhabitants. The Asian style was once again present in the home interiors, but the nature of the artefacts were different from those at the beginning of the century.

III. FROM EXOTICISM TO OPENING ONTO CIVILIZATIONS

This is where the desire for collections will grow. Indeed, from the 1740s/1750s, homogeneous collections of artefacts could be seen in French interiors, including objets d'art in their own right. They were more often of Asian origin or from somewhere other than Europe. For example: prints from China often in groups of 10 or 15, terracotta statuettes from China, which were sometimes painted, as well as stone or bronze statues, Morrish weapon collections, etc.

The artefacts in these collections constitute the majority of the Asian elements which would create the interiors of the late eighteenth century. The nature of the Asian elements that we found from this period was therefore very different, in quantity and quality, from those of the beginning of the century.

This interest in civilizations and opening of mentalities is a well-known phenomenon of the time period. It is therefore logical to find numerous indications of these trends in Pondicherry. However, in India, the Europeans were in direct contact with the civilizations that were in style in Europe. The interest for Humanism was therefore doubled by the necessity of knowing their local interlocutor. To do so, numerous works on these civilizations became common in the libraries of the Pondicherry French. For example: The History of Persia and Asia, The History of the Big Island of Madagascar, The History of China, or even The History of Mohammed.

Of course, it is necessary to take the profession and social situation of the library owners into consideration to analyse and understand the interest they had for these civilizations.

IV. CONCLUSION

Finally, this brief discussion was to show that the analysis of the interiors of the French in Pondicherry and their cultural material should be based on the artefact itself; all while taking into account all of the elements of the material culture. The quantitative and qualitative analyses should be done in pairs so as to obtain a vision as faithful as possible to the daily life environment in the Indian counter, on a material level of course, but on a social one as well.

It is possible to go further into this study by correlating the composition of the interiors and the evolution of the perception of exoticism. The logic of the interior layout and design would then be quite clear. We could then distinguish two different periods. On the one hand, there were the periods during which they were forced to acquire specific artefacts for their home interiors, even if the artefacts didn't correspond to their tastes. And on the other hand, there were the periods during which they were able to choose artefacts according to their desires and tastes. Ultimately, this analysis could make it possible to understand what, after a period of forced acquisition, the French would do to move onto a period of chosen acquisition. The mechanisms of how this change was obtained could then be studied.

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