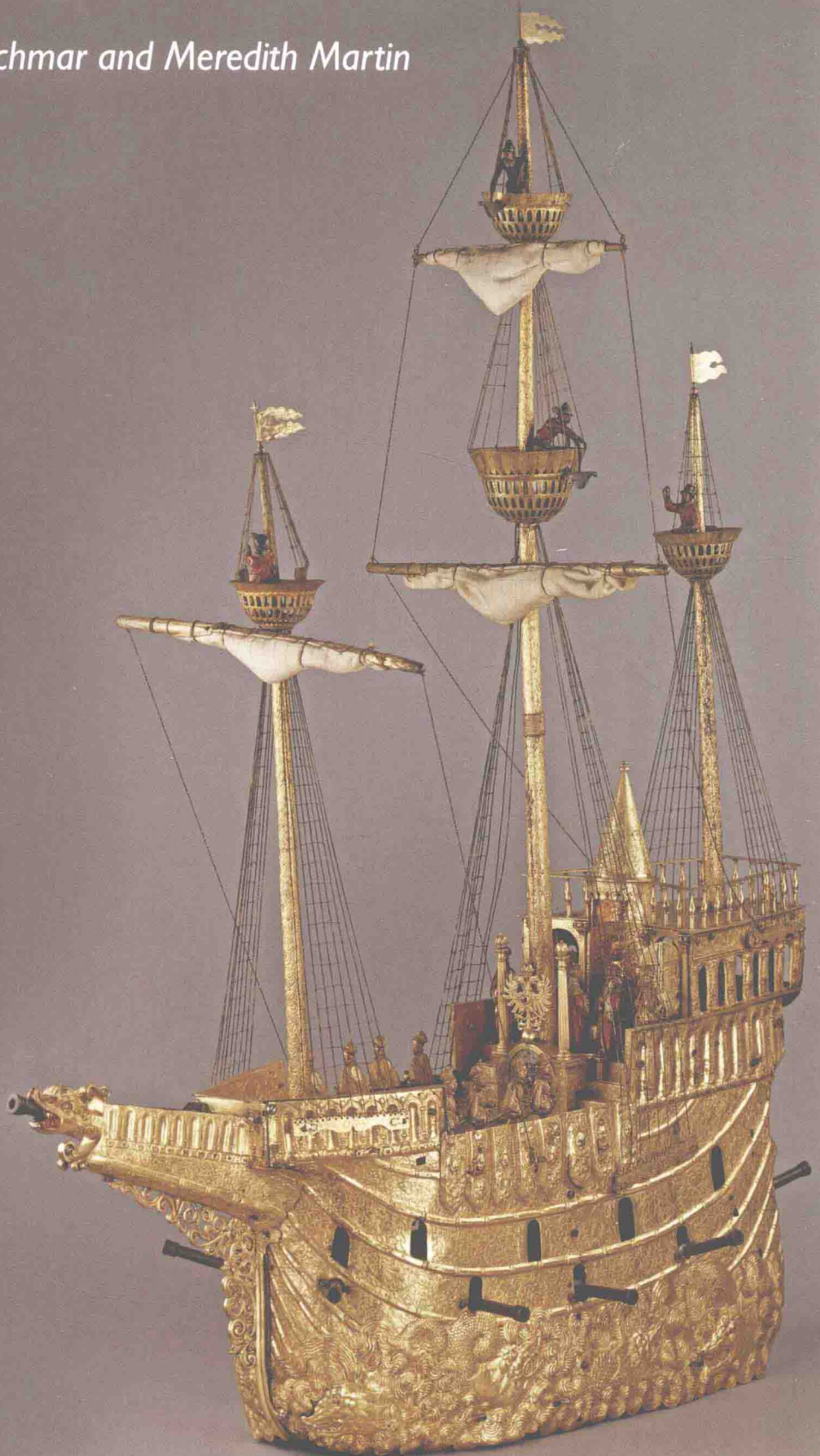


Objects in Motion in the Early Modern World

Edited by Daniela Bleichmar and Meredith Martin



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Chapter I

Introduction:

Objects in Motion in the Early Modern World

Meredith Martin and Daniela Bleichmar

Imagine a varied collection of objects from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, assembled together under a large silk tent, the size of a spacious meeting hall. The tent itself, made in north India, is lavishly decorated with gold embroidered flowers against a red and blue ground. French mirrors and large almanac prints ornament its soft but sturdy interior walls, interspersed with dozens of Chinese blue and white porcelain plates that hang in geometric patterns. Against one wall stands a tall ebony cabinet inlaid with ivory, slightly worn, well-travelled. It holds two rare manuscripts: a codex produced in Mexico City only two decades after the Spanish conquest of 1521 and an album made in eighteenth-century India. Both documents combine European aspects with non-European ones, from Mexican and Mughal pictorial traditions, respectively; both were created to capture detailed information about their sites of production and to transmit that knowledge to Europe. A velvet-lined drawer contains shells and *taumi* necklaces from Tahiti, made of feathers and shark's teeth. A rosewood table on the opposite wall displays a seventeenth-century German automaton of the Roman goddess Diana, along with a roughly contemporary fragment of silk velvet from Safavid Persia depicting an image of the Madonna and Child. Next to the table is an immense *biombo*, a colonial Mexican folding screen showing both resemblances and departures from the Japanese *byōbu* that inspired it. Nearby, a Chinese optical viewing box presents perspectival prints that illustrate, among other subjects, the Forbidden City outside Beijing. Suspended from the ceiling are carefully preserved, jewel-coloured specimens of several New Guinean birds of paradise, curiously missing their feet.

This collection may bring to mind an early modern *Wunderkammer* or cabinet of curiosities, such as the one depicted in Ferrante Imperato's *Dell'istoria naturale* (Naples, 1599, 2nd ed. 1672), only with birds of paradise in place of the stuffed crocodile on the ceiling (plate 1). Or perhaps it evokes royal storerooms or palaces – in Europe, China, India, Istanbul, or elsewhere – filled with precious and exotic wares acquired through diplomatic and mercantile channels. Items from one such collection appear in a painting of the Chinese Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723–35) as well as in one of the 'curio boxes' belonging to his son and successor, the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–96), some of which held foreign objects such as English clocks and Japanese lacquer boxes (plate 2 and plate 3).¹ In fact, our imaginary *Wunderkammer* comprises the items analyzed in this volume's twelve essays, which examine the circulation of objects across regions and cultures in the early modern period (c. 1500–1800) and explore the ways in which their mobility led to new uses, meanings, and interpretations.

Detail from unknown court artist, *Yinzhen's Amusements: 'Reading by a Burner'*, an album leaf depicting the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723–35) with a cabinet of collected objects, c. 1723–35 (plate 2).

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I Depiction of a cabinet of curiosities, in Ferrante Imperato, *Dell'istoria naturale* [1599], 2nd edition, Naples, 1672. Photo: Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

The objects in this volume span three centuries and a similarly wide cultural, geographical, and material framework – from Persian silk textiles sent to Venice at the turn of the seventeenth century to Chinese porcelain displayed in eighteenth-century merchant mansions on the Swahili Coast. What they have in common is that they all moved, and tracking their trajectories sheds light on the role of visual and material culture in arguably the first truly global moment in history. This was a period when cultures and peoples encountered one another in unprecedented ways as a result of geographical discoveries, new cultural encounters, the spread of overseas colonies and empires, worldwide missionary projects, and the creation of long-distance trading networks. But while many humans travelled farther than they had in the past, the real globetrotters of the era were inanimate – not humans but things. Objects, ranging from rare and fragile luxury goods to natural commodities, were the most habitual and inveterate travellers, traversing vast geographical and cultural distances and permitting humans to encounter other places and other peoples at home.

All of the objects considered in this volume, whether natural or man-made, journeyed across distances and cultures; most, in fact, were expressly designed for transit. Often those distances were enormous. At other times they were relatively short, as when the maharaja of Jodhpur, Abhai Singh (r. 1724–49), transported a huge red silk tent in his possession to a Rajput political conference in nearby Marwar, provoking strong reactions among the participants as well as the absent Mughal emperor to which the tent referred. In all cases, mobility had profound implications

in terms of an object's production and materiality. Some things were crafted in ways that facilitated their physical transport: they were compact, easily foldable, lightweight, and durable. Others underwent special preparations that stabilized them for travel, such as the preservation of natural specimens, or the careful packaging of fragile objects. At times, objects were transformed so thoroughly by such processes that they could be misunderstood at the receiving end. The fact that agents in the South Pacific, for example, would routinely remove the feet of dead birds of paradise when preparing them for trade led some Europeans to assume that these wondrous birds remained ceaselessly in flight, never alighting to rest.

In addition to physical travel, some artisans also took cultural crossings into account. They translated or adapted local idioms, traditions, genres, and forms to anticipate distant audiences, as was the case with the Hispano-Mexican or Franco-Indian manuscripts mentioned above, or with the ceremonial rituals and diplomatic gifts exchanged between the courts of France and Siam (Thailand) in the 1680s. Yet proper communication and understanding, as Jennifer Roberts has compellingly



2 Unknown court artist, *Yinzhen's Amusements: 'Reading by a Burner'*, an album leaf depicting the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723-35) with a cabinet of collected objects, c. 1723-35. Ink and colour on silk, 37.5 x 30.5 cm. Photo: Palace Museum, Beijing.