

Narrative, visual culture, and imperial relations in the eighteenth-century Pacific world

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In his insightful study of the Indian Ocean in the Eurasian and African world systems before the sixteenth century, the historian Philippe Beaujard observed that ‘trade is not the only method for transferring surplus.’¹ As Beaujard noted, other forms of diffusion and exchange, including the movement of objects along religious networks, ‘the imposition of tribute and taxes, [and] looting’, also contributed to the making of an integrated Indian Ocean ‘world’ before the sixteenth century.

A similar observation could be made about the ‘transfer of surplus’ in the emerging Atlantic and Pacific worlds of subsequent centuries, and about the objects that were set in motion in those worlds. In addition to the many objects that moved along the widening paths of long-distance trade—for example, the ‘Baubles of Britain’ that, according to T. H. Breen, were a key source of cultural unity in Revolutionary America;² or the imported Asian luxury goods that, in Maxine Berg’s view, helped to spark industrialisation in Britain³—many other objects and images moved as a result of forces that may have been linked to the market, but which cannot be described as strictly or even primarily commercial. In eighteenth-century California, as in other parts of New Spain, members of religious orders such as the Franciscan co-founder of Mission Dolores, Pedro Cambón, brought Asian objects in gilded and polychromed wood, silk, and porcelain from Manila for use in the Catholic liturgy; and on the other end of the continent, as Mark Peterson’s work has analysed, New England Puritans placed silver communion cups sometimes acquired from London makers at the heart of their worship.

This presentation will consider one such extracommercial ‘method for transferring surplus’ that has received relatively little attention in recent debates about eighteenth-century ‘objects in motion’: looting and other forms of prize-taking, chiefly as undertaken by Britons as part of the bitter imperial rivalry between Britain and Spain that continued at least until the Seven Years’ War—and that, arguably, was transposed onto Britain’s emerging hostility towards China in the following century. In so doing, it will have three aims. The first and most general aim will be to identify a number of categories of ‘booty arts’ that were produced and set in motion over the long eighteenth century, including images and objects that commemorated or encouraged instances of looting; objects and images that were themselves looted; and, in the case of works fashioned from stolen silver, objects that literally were made from booty. The second aim will be to analyse one such category in greater detail: British texts and images that may be seen to have originated, at least in part, in the 1682 theft by the privateer Bartholomew Sharpe of a Spanish *derrotero* (sailing directions, drawings, and charts) of the Pacific, and their subsequent transformation by William Hack into an illustrated ‘Wagoner of the South Sea’ (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich). This instance of theft and visual reproduction was significant, I will argue, not only because it provided new information to Britons intent on encroaching upon Spanish holdings on the Pacific coast of the Americas (and on intercepting Spanish ships travelling between Acapulco and Manila), but also because it facilitated the emergence of a new form of illustrated imperial text that combined ‘scientific’, hydrographic depictions of harbours and other

places with older, narrative visual forms—notably, the coastal profile. Exemplified by Richard Walter’s *Anson’s Voyage round the World* (1748) and George Staunton’s 1797 account of the Earl of Macartney’s embassy to China, these new texts can be seen in turn to have contributed to further British imperial adventuring in the Pacific—adventuring that ultimately included the looting and destruction of places that, in the case of Manila and China’s Yuanming Yuan palace, were first depicted to British audiences in Walter’s and Staunton’s volumes. Thus in conclusion I will return to Beaujard’s observation with a third aim in mind: to suggest that theft, force, and violence played as much of a role as ‘luxury’, ‘desire’, and trade in the eighteenth-century circulation of objects.

¹ Philippe Beaujard, ‘The Indian Ocean in Eurasian and African World-Systems before the Sixteenth Century’, *Journal of World History* 16, no. 4 (2005), 414.

² T. H. Breen, “Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 119 (1988), 73-104.

³ Maxine Berg, ‘In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past and Present* 182 (Feb 2004), 85-142.