

The Garden of Perfect Brightness

The Yuanmingyuan as Imperial Paradise (1700-1860)

by Lillian M. Li

The 3 Great
Qing Emperors

Paradise
on Earth

The 40
Scenes

European
Impressions

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EUROPEAN IMPRESSIONS

Beyond these painted scenes, only a few other impressions of the Chinese-style gardens remain. The Jesuit painter Jean Denis Attiret, for example, wrote to a friend of his high opinion of the Forbidden City and the Yuanmingyuan. On his journey to Beijing, he saw little to impress him in the architecture:

However I must except out of this Rule, the Palace of the emperor of Peking, and his Pleasure-houses; for in them every thing is truly great and beautiful; both as to the Design and the Execution: and they struck me the more, because I had never seen any thing that bore any manner of Resemblance to them, in any Part of the World that I had been in before.

[21]

The “pleasure-houses” were the pavilions of Yuanmingyuan amidst “valleys” and their lakes and streams and mountains—all of which Attiret described with awe. The ornamentation of the interiors he found rich and of “an exquisite taste.” There were brass, porcelain, and marble vases, and “hieroglyphical figures of animals,” instead of “naked Statues.”

He particularly appreciated the architecture and gardens, praising their “beautiful Disorder,” and confessed that “Since my Residence in China, my Eyes and Taste are grown a little Chinese.” [22] Attiret’s long letter, translated into English and published in 1752, had a great impact in Europe, similar to that of Marco Polo’s account of Chinese/Mongol palaces centuries earlier.

In England in particular, the Chinese style of gardens became influential in the design of gardens of that era, including well-known parks such as Kew Gardens. It was a welcome change from the formality of European garden design. The Oriental effect extended to the building of pagodas and gazebos. Sir William Chambers (1723–1796), influential architect to George III and designer of Kew Gardens and numerous famous English buildings and gardens, had been to China as a young man with the Swedish East India Company twice in the 1740s. Although he never saw the Yuanmingyuan, he saw enough Chinese gardens to write rhapsodically about them. His book *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* was published in many editions and profoundly influenced English garden style. He had nothing but contempt for gardening as it was practiced in England. Chinese gardeners, on the other hand, “are not only Botanists, but also Painters and Philosophers....” Chinese gardeners, he said “take nature for their pattern.” [23]

Other Westerners privileged to see the Yuanmingyuan included members of the Macartney mission of 1793. Lord Macartney was sent by King George III to establish diplomatic relations and open trade with China. His mission famously failed because, it is alleged, he refused to perform the kowtow in front of the emperor. Macartney arrived in China with a large retinue that included artists, doctors, astronomers, translators, and 74 craftsmen, along with a huge cache of gifts for the emperor. [24] Upon arrival in the capital area, the entourage went first to the Yuanmingyuan to deposit these presents before proceeding to Jehol (Chengde), where the emperor was residing, and where the abortive encounter later occurred. At Yuanmingyuan, the artist William Alexander depicted the main audience hall.

Two Western depictions of the Main Audience Hall at Yuanmingyuan (below) include, top: a pen and ink drawing by William Alexander made during the Macartney mission (1793 to 94) and, bottom: "Hall of Audience: Palace of Yuen min Yuen, Peking," an 1840s hand-colored print by Thomas Allom.





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 [ymy3004] [ymy3011]

Macartney himself was impressed with the hall, but also somewhat critical:

It is 150 feet long and 60 feet wide; there are windows on one side only, and opposite to them is the Imperial Throne of carved mahogany [probably Chinese redwood]....On each side of the Chair of State [throne] is a beautiful argus pheasant's tail spread out into a magnificent fan of great extent.

On one end he observed a musical clock that played old English tunes.

It was decorated in wretched old taste, with ornaments of crystal and colored stones, but it had been, I dare say, very much admired in its time. [25]

Macartney was truly dazzled by what he saw at Jehol, where he spent most of his time, and said he heard that the Yuanmingyuan's interiors were far more elaborately decorated.

I dare say that, in the course of our voyage, we stopped at 40 or 50 different palaces or pavilions. These are all furnished in the richest manner, with pictures of the emperor's hunting and progresses, with stupendous vases of jasper and agate; with the finest porcelain, and with every kind of European toys and sing-songs; with spheres, orreries, clocks, and musical automaton, of such exquisite workmanship, and in such profusion, that our presents must shrink from the comparison, and hide their diminished heads; and yet I am told, that the fine things which we have seen are far exceeded by the others of the same kind in the apartments of the ladies, and in the European repository at the Yuen-min-yuen. [26]

John Barrow, personal secretary to Macartney, was reported to have been impressed by the grounds of Yuanmingyuan, calling it "a delightful place," praising the "picturesque" landscape, and "luxuriant" gardens and vistas (although he did not care for the buildings). [27] In his own account published in 1805, however, he was very critical of the Yuanmingyuan's appearance, describing its buildings as run-down and its gardens "very short of the fanciful and extravagant descriptions that Sir William Chambers has given of Chinese gardening. ... A great proportion of the buildings consists in mean cottages." The emperor's own dwellings "are little superior, and much less solid, than the barns of a substantial English farmer."

Barrow did not see more than a few buildings, he admits, and his view may have been influenced by his own accommodations within the walls of the Yuanmingyuan, not far from the Great Audience Hall. He described them as "hovels," with paper windows and ceilings in disrepair. [28] His sour retrospective view must also have been affected by what seemed to be dim prospects for accomplishing the goals of the Macartney Mission: ports open to trade and the establishment of diplomatic relations. By the turn of the 19th century, Europeans' admiration for things Chinese began to turn to contempt for the Chinese ways of doing things.

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