COLLECTING LOOT

The quantity of treasures stolen from the Yuanmingyuan that reached European museums and private collections was staggering. James Hevia has argued that the public seizure, flaunting, display, and later sales of the crowns, jewels, silks, furs, and other personal artifacts belonging to the emperor and his family was in the first instance a sign of the triumph of European imperialism over the Chinese empire. During the looting, some of the more conspicuous items were plundered explicitly in the name of Queen Victoria or Emperor Napoleon III. A Pekinese dog taken from the emperor’s palace was named “Looty” by the British officers, and later presented personally to Queen Victoria. [7]

“Looty, A Little Dog Found in the Summer Palace, near Pekin.” This picture and story appeared in the Illustrated London News, June 15, 1861. The origin of the Pekinese breed in Europe is often attributed to “Looty,” who was presented to Queen Victoria by the British forces who sacked the Yuanmingyuan (widely known at the time as the “Summer Palace”).

[1861_June15_Looty]
After the sack of the Yuanmingyuan, French officers presented a large cache of treasures to Napoleon III and his empress Eugénie. Initially displayed at the Tuileries Palace, they were moved to Fontainebleau Castle near Paris in 1863. Some 400 treasures from the Yuanmingyuan—many dating from the Qianlong period (1736 to 1795) including jades, cloisonné, lacquer, textiles, and objects in gold as well as bronze—filled a suite of three rooms at Fontainebleau called the Musée Chinois (Chinese Museum), where they remain to the present day.
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“Exposition des curiosités Chinoises offertes à l'empereur par l'armée expéditionnaire” (Exhibition of the Chinese curiosities given to the Emperor by the expeditionary army), an illustration published in Le Monde Illustre, 1861
The July 4, 1863 issue of Le Monde Illustré featured a depiction of the new Chinese museum of the Empress Eugénie at Fontainebleau.

Caption: “Le nouveau Musée chinois de S. M. l’Impératrice, installé dans le palais de Fontainebleau”, Bertrand & Lix from a sketch by Moullin.

The 1863 illustration was juxtaposed with a photograph of one of the recently restored Chinese rooms in the 1994 catalog Le Musée Chinois de l’Impératrice Eugénie to show how closely the original installation was maintained. The luxurious ambiance at Fontainebleau palace underscores the imperial provenance of precious relics acquired in the 1860 sack of the Yuanmingyuan.
The Chinese rooms house the Empress’s original collection of jades, gold, cloisonné, lacquer, and textiles. One of the most striking displays at Fontainebleau is a set of five ritual vessels of blue and gold cloisonné. They are pictured in the museum catalog resting on a set of five red lacquered stools against a background of French chandeliers, which might sound culturally discordant but in fact seems totally appropriate in the ornate and aristocratic setting of this castle.
Soon after the events of 1860, loot from the Yuanmingyuan began to appear as commodities on the market in London and Paris. Between March 1861 and June 1866, more than a dozen sales were held at London auction houses. Over the years, many of these objects changed hands more than once, increasing their financial value. The availability of such prized “collector’s items” launched another phase or stage of Orientalism. Although Chinese porcelains and designs had long been valued by the monarchs and aristocrats of Europe, and even popularized through Chinese exportware, in the mid-19th century the taste for chinoiserie received a great boost from the looting of the Yuanmingyuan.

In the ensuing century and a half, items from the Yuanmingyuan—sometimes not explicitly identified as such—continued to appear on the market. The catalog of an auction at Christie’s Hong Kong on April 30, 2000 was titled “The Imperial Sale–Yuanmingyuan,” yet only a few items were explicitly advertised with a Yuanmingyuan provenance, probably out of apprehension that the Chinese government might demand their repatriation.

Title page of “The Imperial Sale–Yuanmingyuan” catalog, Christie’s Hong Kong, 2000
Treasures in the News

In recent years, treasures plundered from the Yuanmingyuan have commanded attention in the media, and huge sums in the antiquities market. Here are two contrasting examples of the fate of exquisite looted porcelains that recently made headlines.

"New Zealander returns looted Yuanmingyuan treasures"

CNTV.cn Oct.19, 2010
Qing Dynasty Relic Yields Record Price at Auction

LONDON—As treasure-in-the-attic stories go, the 18th-century Chinese vase sold at a suburban auction house in outer London on Thursday night will be hard to beat. The delicate, decorative 16-inch vase started at a not-inconsequential $800,000, but after a half-hour of unexpectedly spirited bidding, the gavel fell at $69.5 million. It was the highest price ever paid at auction for a Chinese antiquity.

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New York Times, Nov. 12, 2010