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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 automatons, 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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