

The Garden of Perfect Brightness—3

Destruction, Looting, and Memory (1860-present)

by Lillian M. Li

Opium War:
The Final Act

Plundering
Paradise

Collecting
Loot

Relics &
Controversy

Ruins &
Memory

Sources
& Credits

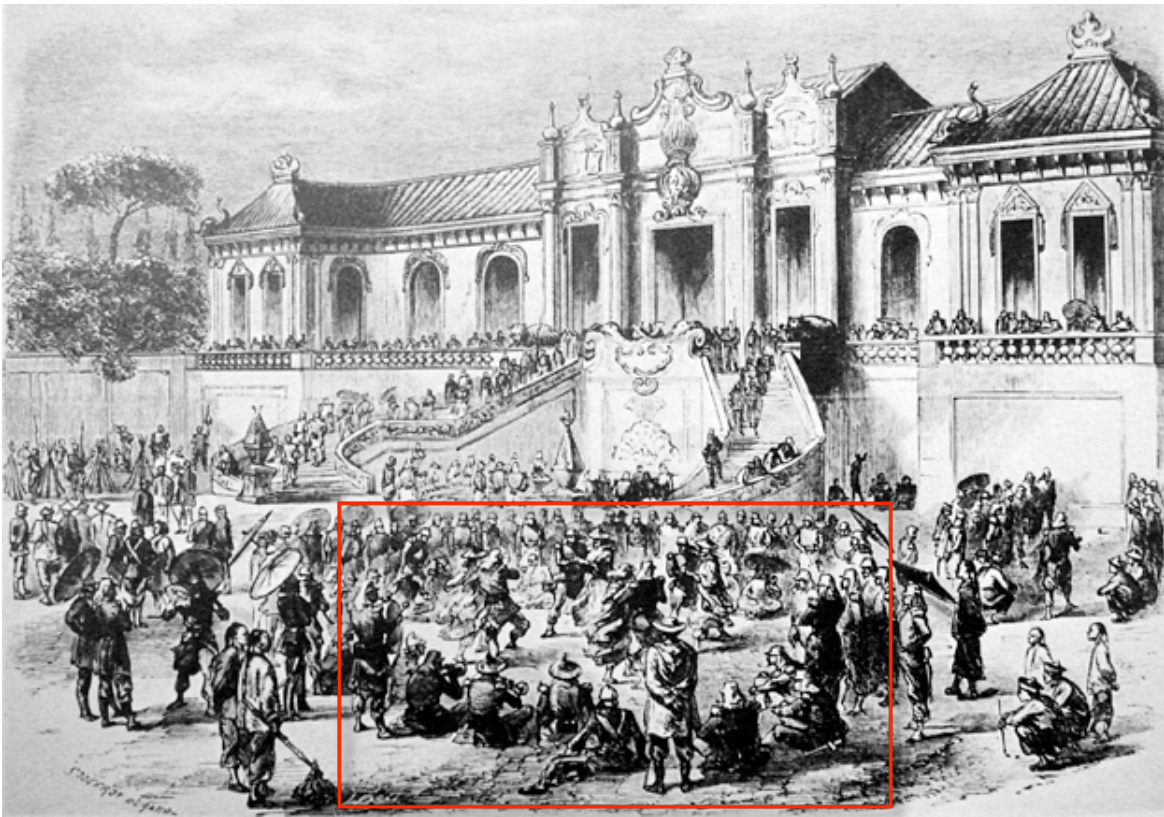
PLUNDERING PARADISE

The plunder that took place before the burning of the palaces was perhaps even more shocking than the destruction of the buildings themselves. The British said that the first round of “plunder and wanton destruction” was the work of the French. Soon, however, the British did more than their share. They ransacked each building, appropriating the contents of the private quarters and public rooms. Great amounts of gold, furs, robes, silks, jades, porcelains, and statues were taken, as well as Western clocks and ornaments—gifts of the 1793 Macartney mission, or from European contacts of earlier eras. Much was destroyed or damaged in the melee.

Numerous first-person accounts by both British and French dramatize the total, unbridled greed and savagery, and the extent to which the violence was wreaked on material objects. Frederick Stephenson, adjutant-general of the British army, wrote his brother:

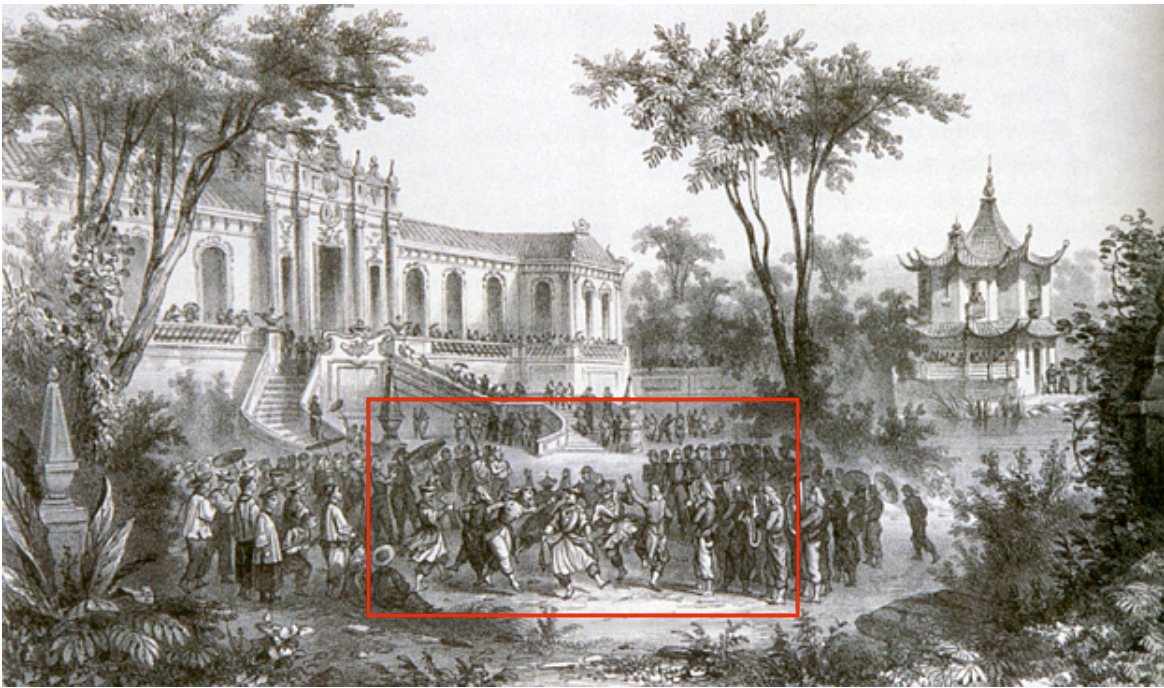
The rooms and halls of audience... and specially the Emperor's bedroom, were literally crammed with the most lovely knick-knacks you can conceive.... Large magazines full of richly ornamented robes lined with costly furs, such as ermine and sable, were ruthlessly pulled from their shelves, and those that did not please the eye, thrown aside and trampled under foot. There were large storerooms full of fans. Mandarins' hats, and clothes of every description, others again piled up to the ceiling with rolls of silk, all embroidered, and to an incredible amount.... All these were plundered and pulled to pieces, floors were literally covered with fur robes, jade ornaments, porcelain, sweetmeats, and beautiful wood carvings. [4]

Garnet Wolseley, a lieutenant colonel with the British forces at the time, later recalled arriving at the Yuanmingyuan just in time to see “a string of French soldiers going in empty-handed and another coming out laden with loot of all sorts and kinds. Many were dressed in the richly embroidered gowns of women, and almost all wore fine Chinese hats instead of the French kepi.” [5] The riotous scene he recalled actually found representation in prints published in France at the time.



*Occupation of the Yuanmingyuan by Anglo-French Forces,
published in L'illustration, December 22, 1860, France.
(full image and detail highlighted in red)*

[ymy7121] Wikimedia Commons



*Almost a mirror-image of the illustration of French revelers in front of one of the looted European-style palaces that appeared in L'Illustration, this print was done by G. C. de Fortavion, an artist who accompanied the French high command in China in 1860.
(full image and detail highlighted in red)*

[ymy7102]

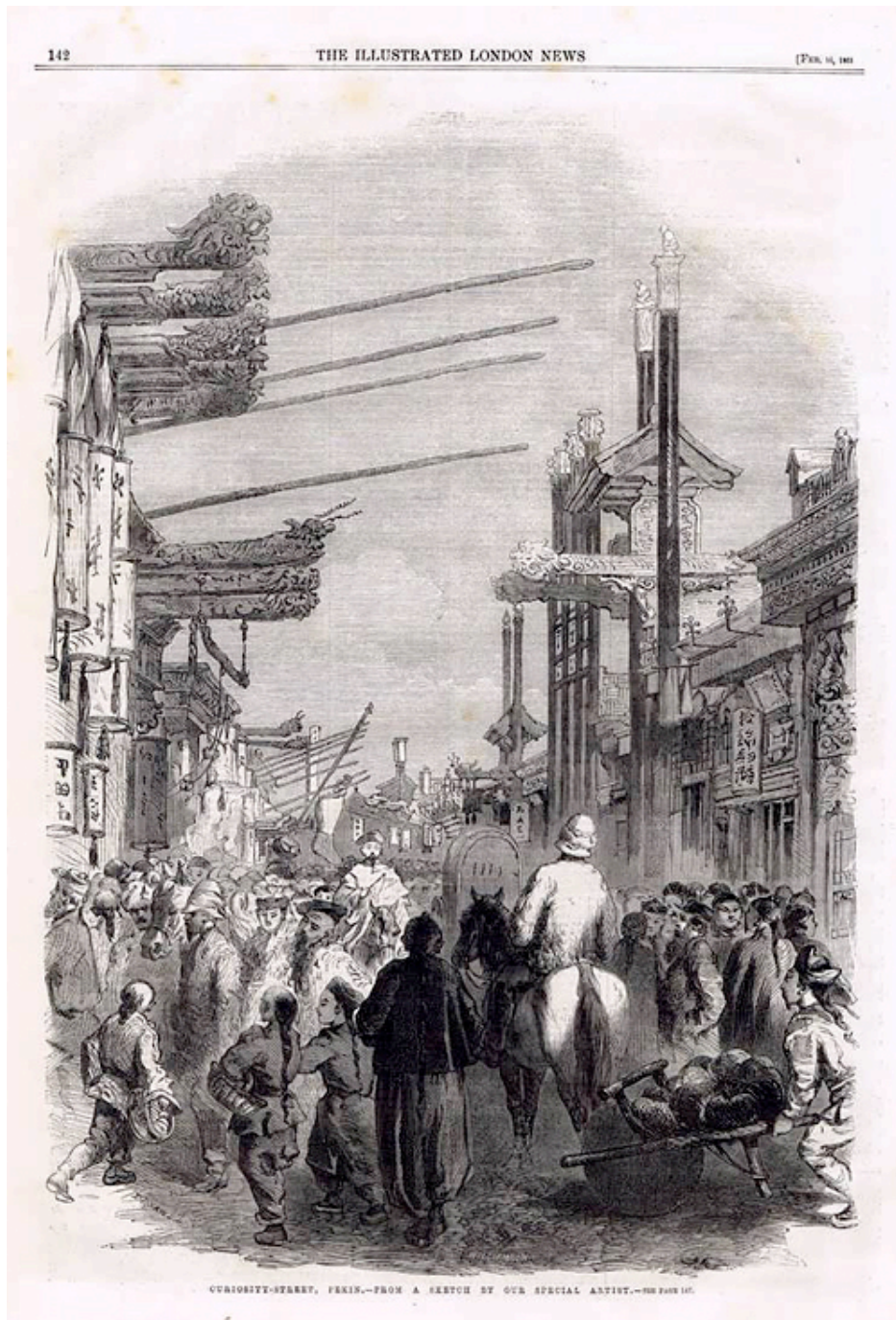
This vivid illustration from a French memoir published by Armand Lucy in 1860 depicts a French soldier leading on a leash a mustachioed Chinese “peasant” who carries a halberd, dwarfs him in height, and carries various items taken from the Yuanmingyuan on his back. The soldier carries a parasol in one hand and a fan in the other. His booty includes, remarkably, a bird in a cage.

Caption under the drawing:
 “Cela s'appelle: ENTREPRISE DE DÉMÉNAGEMENTS CHAUVIN ET Cie, POUR LA CAMPAGNE ET L'ÉTRANGER.” (translation: “This is called: Business and Removal Chauvin and Co., Campaign and Abroad.”)

[8161_113_Armand_Lucy_gb135]
 Google Books



Both the British and French called attention to the fact that local Chinese also took advantage of the chaos at the Yuanmingyuan to help themselves to works of art and other precious items. Many of these looted goods showed up in the antique shops at Liulichang, which the British called “Curiosity Street.”



"Curiosity-Street, Peking," an illustration in the Illustrated London News, Feb. 16, 1861, shows the market where looted goods were likely to be traded.

[ymy7111] Wikimedia Commons

The burning of the palace two weeks later was accompanied by mixed feelings of triumph, awe, and revulsion. Captain Charles Gordon—later to be famous as the leader of the Ever-Victorious Army against the Taiping rebels and still later as “Gordon of Khartoum”—wrote home to his mother and sister that after receiving orders to burn the palace:

We accordingly went out, and after pillaging it, burned the whole place, destroying in a Vandal-like manner most valuable property, which would not be replaced for four millions... You can scarcely imagine the beauty and magnificence of the places we burnt. It made one's heart sore to burn them; in fact these palaces were so large, and we were so pressed for time, that we could not plunder them carefully. Quantities of gold ornaments were burnt, considered as brass. It was wretchedly demoralizing work for an army. Everybody was wild for plunder. [6]

As soon as these events occurred, conflicting accusations flew: the British saw the French as the initiators of the looting, while the French pointed out that they had not participated in the burning of the palaces. The British had devised their own method for dealing with the spoils of war: they allowed soldiers to do some looting, but required them to turn over the goods to a common pool for later auction. The proceeds were then divided among soldiers and officers according to rank. Thus much of the loot reached a public market; items were not necessarily taken home by the individual who had seized them.

Valuable objects from the imperial collections ended up in museums in England and France. Others were offered for sale at fashionable auction houses in London and Paris. Still other items were retained in family collections in private homes all over Europe, but particularly in England.

Victor Hugo's Letter of Protest

Both the British and French illustrated press published engravings depicting this vandalism, and the great French writer Victor Hugo expressed his shame over his country's actions in scathing words that carry a ring of prophesy to the present day:

One day two bandits entered the Summer Palace. One plundered, the other burned...Before history, one of the two bandits will be called France; the other will be called England. But I protest, and I thank you for giving me the opportunity! the crimes of those who lead are not the fault of those who are led; Governments are sometimes bandits, peoples never.

Writing to his friend Captain Butler, he wrote emotionally and scathingly of the wanton destruction of the Summer Palace, which he considered to be "a wonder of the world," comparing it to the Parthenon in Greece, the pyramids in Egypt, the Coliseum in Rome, and Notre-Dame in Paris. He said it was a work of the people.

If people did not see it they imagined it. It was a kind of tremendous unknown masterpiece, glimpsed from the distance in a kind of twilight, like a silhouette of the civilization of Asia on the horizon of the civilization of Europe.

He compared Elgin's destruction of the Summer Palace to the theft of marbles from the Parthenon. Then, in a voice heard echoed a century and half later, he opined:

The French empire has pocketed half of this victory, and today with a kind of proprietorial naivety, it displays the splendid bric-a-brac of the Summer Palace. I hope that a day will come when France, delivered and cleansed, will return this booty to despoiled China.