

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

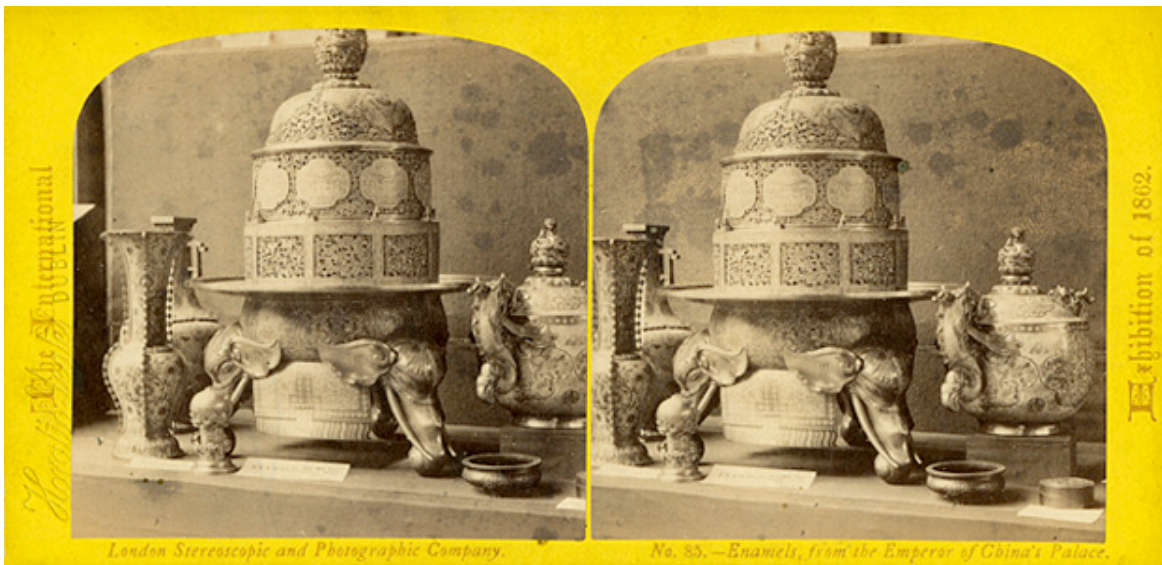
COLLECTING LOOT

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 Peking."
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]



“Enamels, from the Emperor of China’s Palace” is the caption of an 1862 stereograph published by the London Stereoscopic and Photography Company.

[1862_MSC-28b] Terry Bennett Collection

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.

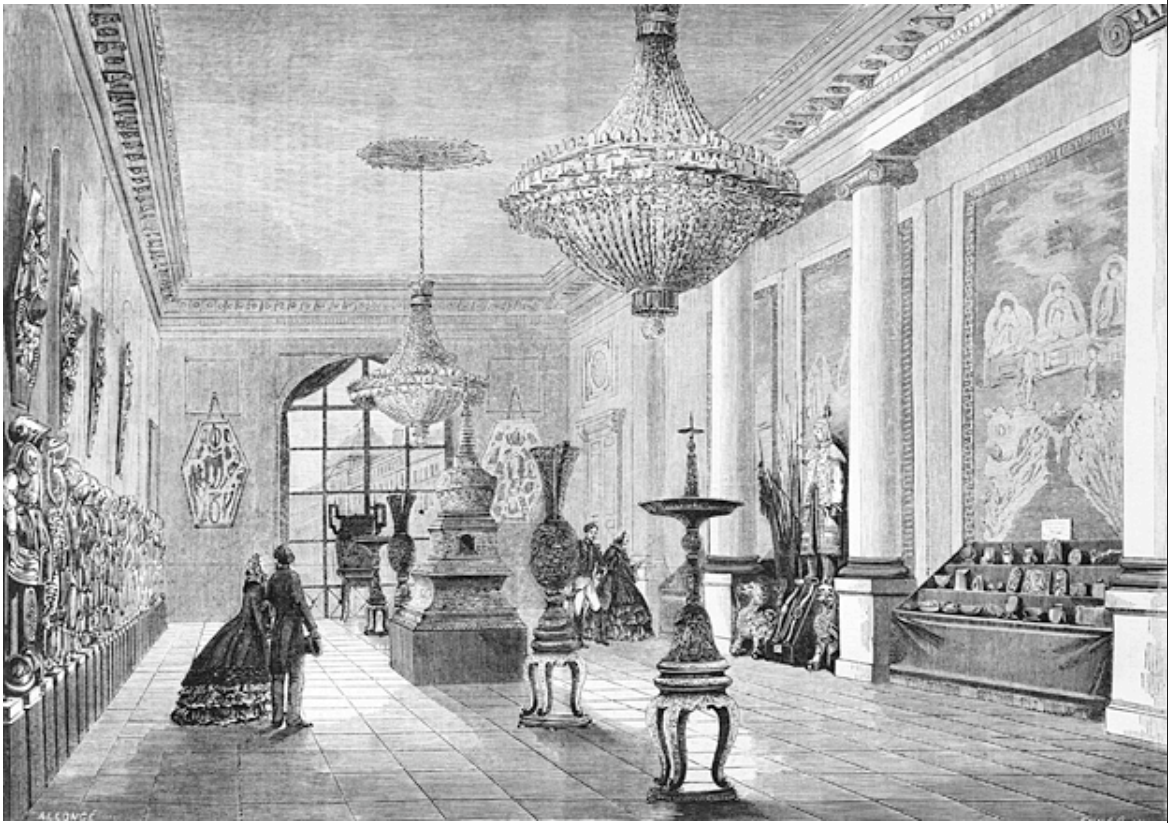
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*“French Spoils from
China Recently
Exhibited at the Palace
of the Tuileries”*

Illustrated
London News,
April 13, 1861

[1861_ILN_Apr13]



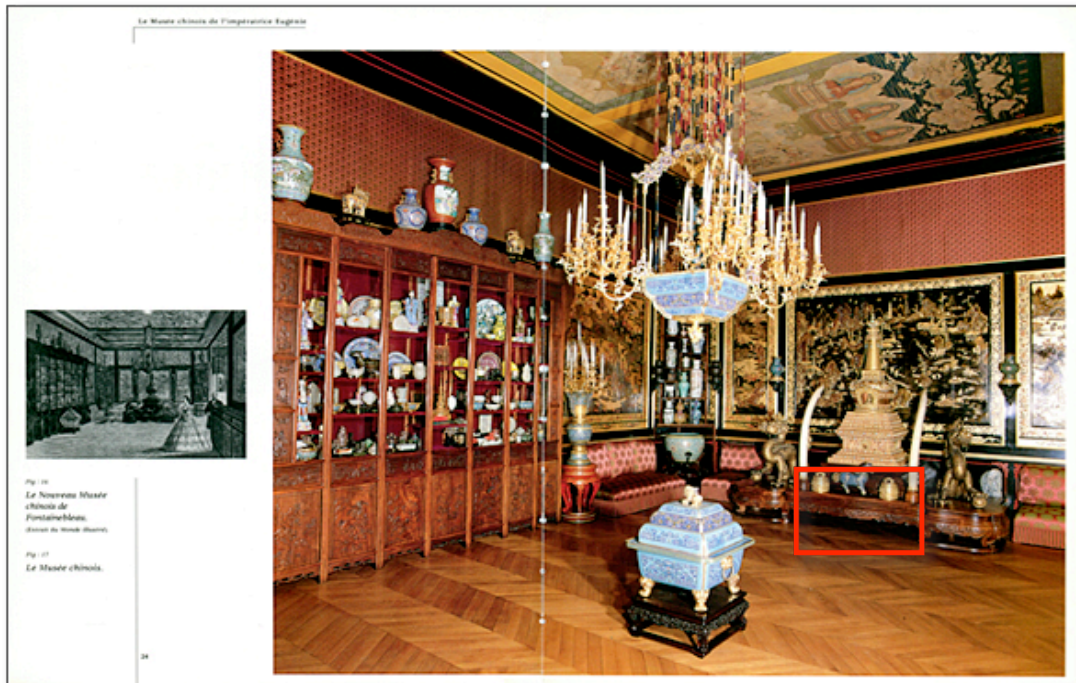
“Exposition des curiosités Chinoises offertes à l'empereur par l'armée expéditionnaire” (Exhibition of the Chinese curiosities given to the Emperor by the expeditionary army), an illustration published in Le Monde Illustré, 1861

[1861_ExChCurio_brd]



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.

[1863_4July_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.

[1994_Musee_Chinois_p24]



Chinese objects include a blue and gold cloisonné “chimera”—a mythic animal with a lion’s body and dragon’s head—and an elegantly embossed pair of bronze bells (detail highlighted in above in red).



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.



Five ritual vessels from the Yuanmingyuan, pictured on pages 62-63 of the 1994 exhibition catalog, *Le Musée Chinois de l’Impératrice Eugénie at Fontainebleau*.

[1994_Musée_Chinois_p62-62]

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. [8] 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 export-ware, in the mid-19th century the taste for *chinoiserie* received a great boost from the looting of the Yuanmingyuan. [9]

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*

[2000_ImpCat]

**THE IMPERIAL SALE
– YUANMINGYUAN –**

AUCTION
SUNDAY, 30 APRIL 2000
4.30 PM (LOTS 501-633)
JW MARRIOTT HOTEL, PACIFIC PLACE,
88 QUEENSWAY, HONG KONG
ENQUIRIES AT THE JW MARRIOTT HOTEL
GENERAL ENQUIRIES TEL: (852) 2918 1362 FAX: (852) 2877 1709
BIDS TEL: (852) 2918 1763 FAX: (852) 2973 0136
SPECIALISTS TEL: (852) 2918 4278 FAX: (852) 2973 0521

SELECTED VIEWING
SINGAPORE, THE GRAND HYATT HOTEL
SATURDAY-SUNDAY 15-16 APRIL 10.00 AM - 6.00 PM

TAIPEI, THE FU BON LIFE ASSURANCE BUILDING
FRIDAY-SUNDAY 21-23 APRIL 10.00 AM - 6.00 PM

VIEWING
HONG KONG, 3/F, THE JW MARRIOTT HOTEL
FRIDAY-SATURDAY 28-29 APRIL 10.30 AM - 6.30 PM
SUNDAY 30 APRIL 10.30 AM - 2.00 PM

SALE CODE
IN SENDING WRITTEN BIDS OR MAKING ENQUIRIES,
THIS SALE SHOULD BE REFERRED TO AS
YUANMINGYUAN-2030

THIS SALE IS SUBJECT TO THE CONDITIONS OF BUSINESS
PRINTED AT THE BACK OF THIS CATALOGUE AND TO RESERVES

CHRISTIE'S

Treasures in the News

In recent years, treasures plundered from the Yuanmingyuan have commanded attention in the media, and huge sums in the antiques 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

By JOHN F. BURNS

Published: November 12, 2010

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.

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.

[*click to read article*](#)

New York Times, Nov. 12, 2010

