

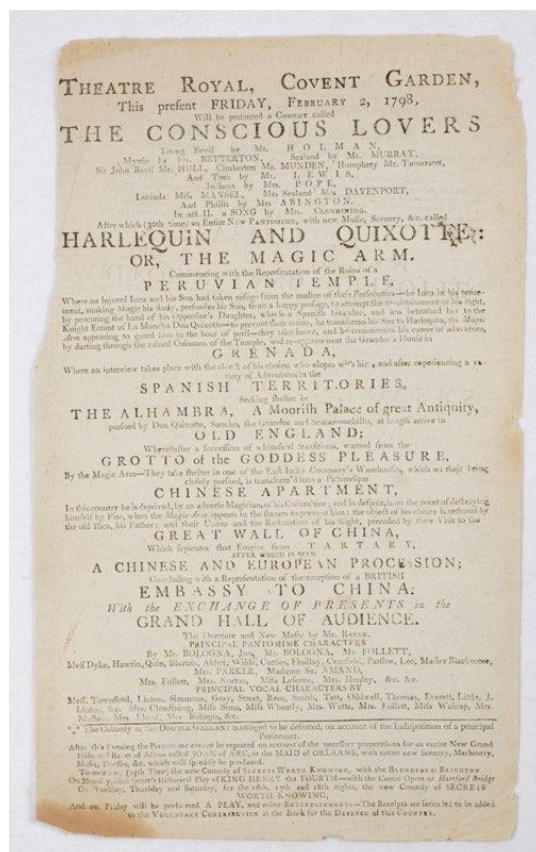
Chinese scenes at Covent Garden - How does Lord Macartney go on?

The British Embassy to China, led by Lord Macartney in 1793, excited a lot of interest, both before its departure and after. There was controversy: was it a failure, or a success as the Government spin suggested. It failed to achieve its main objectives of establishing a diplomatic and trade presence at the Imperial court. But it was more important as the first official meeting of two great cultures and world powers. It certainly fed the growing public interest in an exotic land, which seemed to match the power and historical influence of the great European nations.

If you were quick off the mark, you could have read Anaeas Anderson's rogue narrative of the Embassy. Anderson was Macartney's valet, and with the help of an eager publisher, got out the first unofficial, and lively, narrative in 1795. But by 1798 you could have read Sir George Staunton's official account published in 1797, or the journal of Samuel Holmes, a member of the militia, or if your German or French was ok, the account by the young George Staunton's tutor, Johann Christian Hüttner.

But if you wanted something more visual and musical, then trot along to one of the leading theatres of the day. On February 2, 1798, at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden, London, you would have seen a pantomime, preceded by what would by then, have been a very accomplished performance of Richard Steele's play *The Conscious Lovers*. This was a play with some resilience, having been written in 1722 and played regularly on the London stage ever since.

The play was a comedy, privileging morality over licentiousness. But for real comedy and exotica the audience would have looked more to the second part of the bill, what was called the afterpiece. This was a pantomime called *Harlequin and Quixotte, or the Magic Arm*. It was basically a set of recitatives and songs incorporated into a fanciful love story taking you from the Incas in Peru to Spain, England, then China. It combines Don Quixote and Sancho, with an Inca Harlequin, his son Harlequin who is in love with Columbine, and a number of minor characters such as a Chinese magician and the Goddess of Silence. It comprised a series of 11 scenes including an Inca temple, Grenada, The Alhambra, Merry England, and then shifting inextricably to China, with scenes in a Chinese apartment of the East India Company, the Great Wall, Tartary, and an English Embassy to Peking, clearly referring to the recent embassy led by Lord Macartney. It had music written by William Reeve (1757-1815), a popular London Theatre composer.¹



Broadside for the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, February 2, 1798. 32 x 19.5cm.

The poster for the evening², describes the play and pantomime in detail, and also tells us that the pantomime wont be repeated because a new production of a ballet of *Joan of Arc or the Maid of Orleans* will be put on with new scenery, machinery and music. China unable to compete with a public burning.

Here's the synopsis taken from a short book on the pantomime, published in 1797, which also contains the cast and the script of the piece.³

DESCRIPTION OF THE PANTOMINE

THE Pantomime commences with the representation of a

PERUVIAN TEMPLE,

Where an injured Inca and his son had taken refuge from the malice of their persecutors - the Inca in his retirement, making Magic in his study, persuades his son, by a happy presage, to attempt the re - obtainment of his right, by procuring the hand of his Oppressors Daughter, who is a Spanish Grandee, and has betrothed her to the Knight Errant of La Mancha, Don Quixotte:

To prevent their union, he transforms his son to Harlequin, the Magic Arm appearing to guard him in the hour of peril - they take leave, and he commences his career of adventure, by darting through the ruined columns of the Temple, and re-appears near the Grandee's House in

GRENADA,

Where an interview takes place with the object of his choice, who elopes with him, and after experiencing a variety of adventures in the

SPANISH TERRITORIES,

Seeking shelter in

THE ALHAMBRA,

A Moorish Palace of great antiquity; pursued by Don Quixotte, Sancho, the Grandee and Scaramonchillo, at length arrive in

OLD ENGLAND,

Where after a succession of whimsical transitions, driven from the

GROTTO of the GODDESS of SILENCE,

They take shelter in one of the East India Company's Warehouses, which on their being closely pursued, is transformed into a Picturesque

CHINESE APARTMENT,

In this country he is deprived, by a Magician, of his Columbine and in despair, is on the point of destroying himself by fire, when the Magic Arm appears in the flames to prevent him: the object of his choice is restored by the old Inca, his Father and their union and restoration of his right, preceded by their visit to the

GREAT WALL OF CHINA,

Which separates that Kingdom from

TARTARY,

And viewing the reception of a

BRITISH EMBASSY TO CHINA .

A CHINESE AND EUROPEAN PROCESSION;

WITH THE Exchange of Presents IN

THE GRAND HALL OF AUDIENCE.

Its not too clear how the recitatives and songs fit the scenes, so it is likely that the published script only comprised the main airs, rhymes and catches.

Here is a song sung by a lascar:

I

*O'er Seas roving, fortune seeking
 Little Foot I find at Peking,
 Where de Loos big music ring
 Wid de Englis homeward sailing
 Breezes soft the heart regaling,
 Now we reach de dear Tien sing
 Ha ha ! ha ha!
 Wid pretty Ching quau
 Gay I quaff de rich Show coo
 Ha ! ha ! ha ! ha ! in Tong choo foo .*

II

*Legates, Mandarines, great party,
 Give de Englis welcome hearty;
 Kiss de presents dat dem bring:
 Roguish eyes so gay be glancing,
 Features smiles and hearts be dancing,
 Now we reach de dear Tien sing
 Ha ha ha ! ha !
 Wid pretty Ching quaw
 Gay we quaff de rich Show coo
 Wid ha ha ha ! ha ! in Tong choo foo .*

Tien sing is modern Tianjin, where the Macartney Embassy landed to proceed by boat inland to Peking on the Pei Ho river. *Tong Choo Foo* lay between and was the starting point for the return boat journey down the Grand Canal. Thus it is probable that the names came from Anderson's or Staunton's account of the journey. *Ching quau* (to rhyme with ha!) possibly refers to porcelain, Qinghua being the blue and white porcelain, as in a cup to quaff from. and *Show coo* would seem to be some sort of drink, possibly souchong tea or from Suzhou (Souchow). The song clearly refers to the Macartney embassy, with its sumptuous gifts (with the emperor and court largely unimpressed).

And in a subsequent recitative near the end of the piece, by the Inca harlequin, the empire lives on:

*The sons of Britain your attention claim
 In Chinese hearts they 'grave their Country's fame.*

It is clear that the pantomime was devised mainly to allow the theatre to present a number of exotic scenes, which might thus attract an audience. This would have included a post-Macartney public intrigued by the recent narratives and descriptions of China. The reading public were familiar by now with prints of Chinese scenes, both in the later Embassy accounts, and earlier throughout the 18th century. For instance, in the early years of the century, the missionary Matteo Ripa⁴ made the first copperplate prints in the years 1711-1723. In collaboration with court artists, he used woodblock engravings of subjects such as the Kangxi emperor's own poems, and these duly arrived in Europe. Museums in Britain and on the continent hold hundreds of prints and paintings that would have circulated during

the century. For instance, in 1738, a collection in Dresden made by August II, (Elector of Saxony and King of Poland) included more than 1100 Chinese drawings and watercolours on paper and silk, woodcuts and coloured prints and you can see one illustrated by Ripa.⁵ Prints and comprehensive descriptions of China were widely available in books, such as the great assemblage of Du Halde, first published in French in 1735⁶.



Gillray's famous cartoon of Macartney and his entourage presenting gifts to the Qianlong Emperor. Published in the same month that Macartney departed, it portrays a common view of the culture clash, mocking both the embassy and the court.

The London theatregoers of the 18th C were also familiar with Chinese exotica, perhaps the most famous being the disaster at Drury Lane in November 1755, when David Garrick put on the spectacular French Ballet *Les Fêtes Chinoises*, or *The Chinese Festival*. It caused riots, but mainly because of English animosity to the French.⁷ But now, with the grand Lord Macartney presenting his gifts to an exotic Emperor, you could safely indulge in Chinese scenes on the stage, part of the long history of European enthusiasm for China and Chinoiserie that extended from the later 17th through to the 19th centuries.

Just as an afterword, an afterpiece, don't forget that the Macartney embassy itself resonated well into the 19th C, perhaps most famously being referred to by Jane Austen in her third book *Mansfield Park* (1814). 'How does Lord Macartney go on?', says Fanny Price, providing scholars with plenty to say on what Austen's characters were reading, and which account of the Embassy Fanny Price might have had at hand.⁸ Lord Macartney might have 'gone on', but he certainly went on very well indeed.

¹ William Reeve had a career writing popular music for performances at Covent Garden, Drury Lane, and Saddler's Wells (where he supported the great clown Joseph Grimaldi). He has an entry in Grove.

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Dictionary_of_Music_and_Musicians/Reeve,_William

² Thanks to Asia Bookroom in Canberra, Australia.

³ *Airs, Duets, And Chorusses in a New Pantomime Called Harlequin and Quixotte ; or The Magic Arm. As Performed at The Theatre - Royal , Covent - Garden. The Music by Mr. Reeve. London, Woodfall, Longman, 1797.* <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=P9lZAAAACAAJ&pg=GBS.PA8&hl=en>. *Another digital copy can be found at* <https://londonstagedatabase.uoregon.edu/event.php?id=51140>

⁴ Matteo Ripa (1682-1746) came back from China in 1723 and established the Jesuit College in Naples to train young Chinese men for the missions. It was this college that Macartney obtained his two interpreters to take with him back to China. Ripa's memoirs were published about 100 years later. (*Memoirs of Father Ripa : During Thirteen Years' Residence at the Court of Peking in the Service of the Emperor of China, with An Account of the Foundation of the College for the Education of Young Chinese at Naples. Selected and Translated from the Italian by Fortunato Prandi. London, John Murray 1844.*)

⁵ <https://kupferstich-kabinett.skd.museum/en/exhibitions/la-chine-die-china-sammlung-des-18-jahrhunderts-im-dresdner-kupferstich-kabinett/>

⁶ Du Halde, Jean-Baptiste, *Description Geographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique, et Physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise* Paris: P.-G. le Mercier, 1735. 4 vols. It was quickly translated into English as the *General History of China*, 1737.

⁷ Hsin-yun Ou, *The Chinese Festival and the Eighteenth-Century London Audience. The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture. Vol 2., December 2008 pp. 31-52.*

⁸ Susan Allen Ford, *Fanny's "great book": Macartney's Embassy to China and Mansfield Park. Persuasions online*, vol 28, No. 2, Spring 2008. A publication of the Jane Austen Society of North America.