

Introduction

Global Gifts and the Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia

Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello

Gifts played a key role in the making of the early modern world. They were an indispensable ingredient of global diplomacy and were central to the establishment and development of global connections. This much is clear from the wealth of scholarship on early modern gift exchange and diplomacy. This volume builds on the existing literature, but takes the field in new directions. First, it explores the question of what exactly a diplomatic gift is. The question is not new, but demands new answers in light of the emergence of global history and the insight that material culture provides a key complement to textual sources for historical research. Second, this volume argues that global gifts were an important vehicle for the establishment of shared values and material and visual experiences. We seek to show that gifts were key agents of social cohesion and transcultural systems of value in the emergence of a global political community in the early modern world. And third, we argue that gifts were agents in the unfolding of political rivalries and asymmetries of power.

This introductory chapter begins with an exploration of the diplomatic gift itself, followed by a consideration of recent developments in the fields of material culture studies and global history and their impact on our understanding of what makes a diplomatic gift. We then move on to a consideration of the agency of gifts in the establishment of power relations in the early modern world. Here we see gifts both creating cohesion and facilitating shared regimes of value, while at the same time highlighting differences in meaning and value, to the point of creating and

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exacerbating political rivalries and asymmetries of power in the early modern world.

THE MAKING OF A DIPLOMATIC GIFT

Ambassadors without appropriate gifts had little hope of being successful. Take the case of the embassy sent in 1657 by Charles X Gustav of Sweden (r. 1654–60) to the Ottoman sultan Mehmet IV (r. 1648–87). Having to travel incognito, Claes Brorson Rålamb, the chief Swedish ambassador, reached Constantinople without any suitable gift for either the sultan or the grand vizier. He was received by the Porte, but the embassy was ultimately a failure.¹ He was not the only ambassador to face difficulties with gifting. A century and a half earlier, Vasco da Gama had arrived in the kingdom of Calicut in India and faced a similar challenge. The meager gifts he presented to the Samudri Raja in 1498 were simply not in line with what was expected from a merchant, let alone an ambassador. Gama's successors, the governors residing in Goa, had to learn swiftly the art of gifting in order to survive in the Asian political arena. Their apprenticeship set the tone for centuries of diplomatic exchange to come.²

Gifts were, along with the letters sent by foreign rulers, at the heart of the ceremonies that accompanied the formal reception of ambassadors in Asia and in Europe. Two pages from the *Akbarnama* or Book of Akbar (Figure I.1a, b) show the reception of an embassy from Safavid Persia by the Mughal emperor in 1562. While the envoy of Shah Tamasp (r. 1524–76), Sayyid Beg, is shown in the company of Akbar (r. 1556–1605) on the right sheet, gifts are depicted ostentatiously as they were prepared for delivery on the left.³ Another image, in many ways similar, shows us Louis XIV of France (r. 1643–1715) receiving an ambassador from Persia in 1715 (Figure I.2). Mohammed Reza Beg, the envoy of Sultan Husayn (r. 1694–1722), appears presenting a letter

¹ Rålamb was aware that the lack of suitable gifts would have been perceived as an affront. Yet his travel incognito did not allow the carrying of precious gifts. Sten Westberg, "Claes Rålamb: Statesman, Scholar and Ambassador," in *The Sultan's Procession: The Swedish Embassy to Sultan Mehmed IV in 1657–1658 and the Rålamb Paintings*, ed. Karin Ådah (Constantinople: Swedish Research Institute in Constantinople, 2007), 26–57, esp. 43–44.

² Zoltán Biedermann, "Portuguese Diplomacy in Asia in the Sixteenth Century: A Preliminary Overview," *Itinerario* 29, no. 2 (2005): 13–37; a revised version is available in id., *The Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India: Studies in the History of Empire, Diplomacy and Trade* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), 7–32.

³ Susan Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor: The Art of the Book 1560–1650* (London: V&A Publications, 2002), 23 and 38.



FIGURE 1.1A Painting from the *Akbarnama*: “Akbar receives Iranian ambassador Sayyid Beg” (folio 1). Outline by La’l and painting by Ibrahim Kahar. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, Mughal, c. 1586–89. Victoria and Albert Museum IS.2:27-1896.

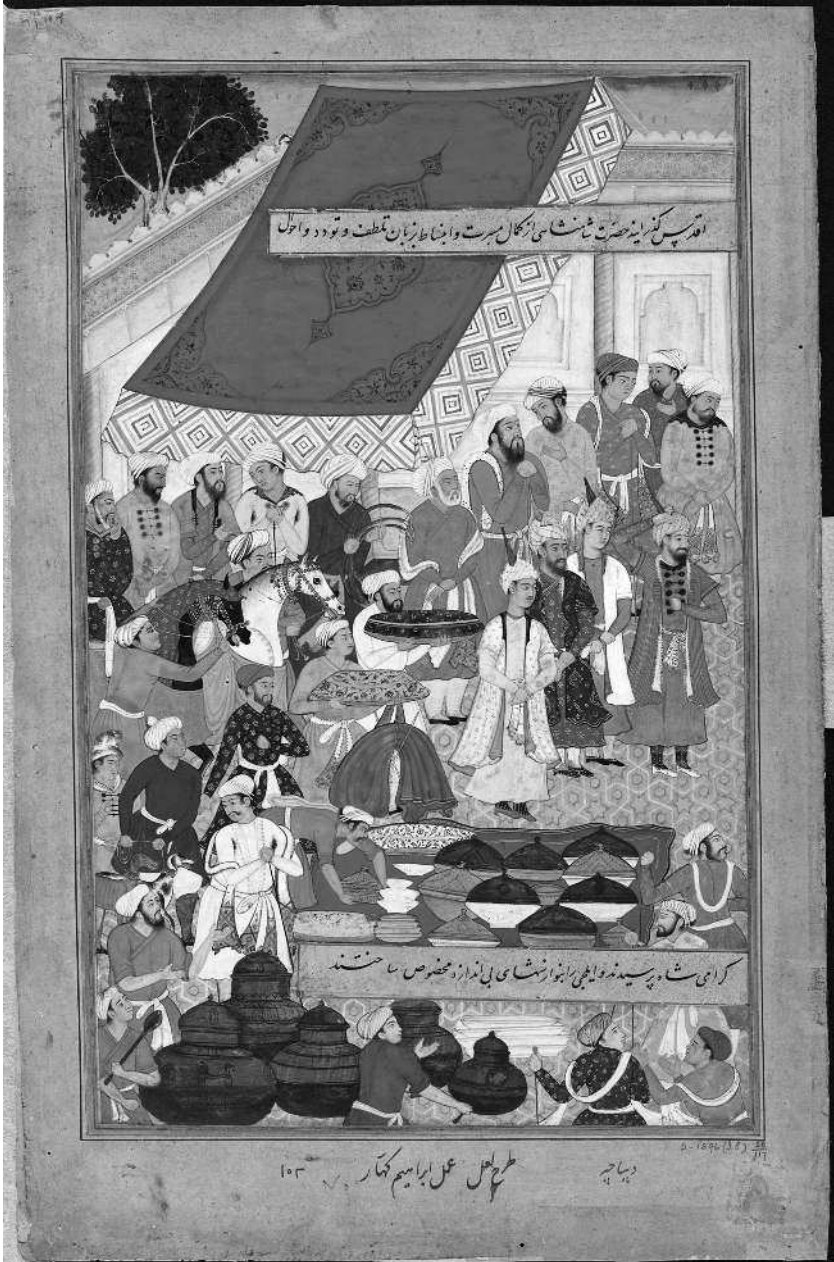


FIGURE 1.1B Painting from the *Akbarnama*: “Akbar receives Iranian ambassador Sayyid Beg” (folio 2). Outline by La’l and painting by Ibrahim Kahar. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, Mughal, c. 1586–89. Victoria and Albert Museum IS.2:28-1896.

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FIGURE 1.2 “L’audience donné par le roy Louis XIV à l’ambassadeur 1715” (Hearing given by King Louis XIV to the ambassador of Persia Engraving, 44.5 cm × 56.0 cm.
© The Trustees of the British Museum 1917,1208.3937.

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from his master to Louis XIV, followed by his coadjutants carrying a sample of gifts. The cartouche reports the speech made by the ambassador to renew the friendship between the two rulers, and then gives a detailed list of the objects not shown in the image. These included “a sabre encrusted with diamonds, emeralds and stones of all colors and the encasing covered in pearls; a rose made of rubies; 280 turquoises; 100 oriental pearls; 7 garnets weighing 250 grains; 12 pieces of gold cloth and 12 of silver cloth.”⁴

In Versailles or Agra, as in other European and Asian courts, the arrival of ambassadors tended to create material expectations. Ambassadors might spend months preparing for the reception and negotiating what objects were to be displayed in what manner. In hostile environments, gifts paved the way for dialogues or generated disputes. They might be stolen or lost. They could be put on display for courtiers to see, and at times be disposed among nobles as part of the munificence of the receiving king. All these acts would ideally be recorded and commemorated in additional artifacts such as reports, paintings and engravings – and of course amply talked about among the elite. Under such circumstances, diplomatic gifts created desire as much as they satiated it. Shah Abbas II of Persia (r. 1642–66) sent textiles with his diplomatic missions to promote the consumption of Iranian fabrics.⁵ On arriving in Moscow in 1650, an ambassador of Abbas had with him over 300 pieces of velvet, damask, satin and taffeta, as well as sashes and 15 carpets. Such a stock would in other circumstances have passed him for a merchant. In this case, however, there was no doubt that he should be welcomed as a diplomat.⁶

What does exactly make a “diplomatic gift” a gift as opposed to just being an object of trade? As a point of departure, what we have chosen to

⁴ See *La Perse et la France: Relation diplomatiques et culturelles du XVIIe au XIXe siècle*, catalogue of the exhibition held at the Musée Cernuschi, January–March 1972 (Paris: Musée Cernuschi, 1972).

⁵ On diplomacy and the use of textiles by the Iranian court, see Sinem Arcak Casale, “The Persian Madonna and Child: Commodified Gifts between Diplomacy and Armed Struggle,” *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015): 636–51; and Maria João Ferreira, “Embroidered Flowers and Birds for Shah Abbas I: Chinese Silks in Portuguese Diplomatic Missions in the Early Modern World,” *Textile History*, forthcoming (2018).

⁶ Elena Yurievne Gagarina, ed., *The Tsars and the East: Gifts from Turkey and Iran in the Moscow Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2009), 4. Russia received also enormous quantities of silk from Chinese embassies as for instance the 700 bolts of patterned and embroidered silk sent by the Shunzhi Emperor (r. 1644–62) to Russia as part of the 1649 embassy. Maria Menshikova, “Chinese Silk in Imperial Russia in the 17th–18th Centuries,” in *The Silk Road: A Road of Silk*, ed. Zhao Feng (Shanghai: Donghua University Press, 2016), 234–36.

engage with in the present volume are things given away in the context of diplomatic negotiations without a direct pecuniary payment in exchange. To borrow Zemon Davis's words, the "'gift mode' ... exists along with [and is thus distinct from] the mode of sales ... and the mode of coercion."⁷ This said, such categories are most useful if they can also, at one point or another, be fine-tuned or overcome. The deeper we go into the history of diplomatic gifts, the more difficult it becomes to establish exactly where the boundaries between gifts, luxury commodities, tribute and booty can be drawn. Most theories of gift-giving emphasize – as indeed common sense would suggest – that gifts tend to be made with a past or a potential future benefit in mind. In other words, gifts tend to come with strings attached, they generally imply some sort of reciprocity, though they are part of a wider economic logic pervading all social relations. As Marcel Mauss stipulated in what is still the most frequently cited work on the subject, gifts served to form and express commitments to “services and counter-services,” and they helped create a web of obligations following the logic of “*prestation totale*.”⁸

Gifts played a key role in the symbolic economy and the social relations of the people handling them, which takes us into difficult terrain because it lays bare the ambiguities involved in the very notion of the economic. As the literary scholar David Hawkes put it, economic analysis “can be called ‘materialist’ only on the supposition that the economy is a material phenomenon” – which of course it is not.⁹ If we are to take Mauss seriously today, then we have to acknowledge how his entire theory of reciprocity was grounded in a critique of mechanistic economic theory, pointing to the importance of reciprocal gifting as the glue that holds societies together, a point to which we return below.¹⁰

⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 9.

⁸ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, transl. W. D. Halls, foreword Mary Douglas (New York: Norton and Company, 1990), 5.

⁹ David Hawkes, “Materialism and Reification in Renaissance Studies. Review Article,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2004): 114.

¹⁰ For an illuminating analysis of Mauss's theory and how it has been misread over the decades, see Patrick J. Geary, “Gift Exchange and Social Science Modeling: The Limitations of a Construct,” in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner and Bernhard Jussen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2003), 129–40. See also Beate Wagner-Hasel, “Egoistic Exchange and Altruistic Gift. On the Roots of Marcel Mauss's Theory of the Gift,” in *ibid.*, 141–71, and Harry Liebersohn, *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Our understanding of diplomatic gifts, then, is shaped by several further questions. How did gifted artifacts work (or sometimes fail to work) in the context of early modern diplomatic exchanges across cultural boundaries? What can the history of things tell us about the making of the early modern world that other histories do not? The main objective of the present volume is to address these and other questions through a series of case studies from the Eurasian context. But first we offer a reflection on gifts in academic fields of study, at the intersection of three different but related fields: the resurgent history of diplomacy, material culture studies and the discipline of global history.

NEW APPROACHES TO DIPLOMACY IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD

Our contribution to the historical understanding of the relationship between material culture and diplomacy is part of a wider shift in how diplomatic history is interpreted today. “Diplomatic history is back,” wrote an enthused reviewer for the *Renaissance Quarterly* in 2011.¹¹ The discipline has undergone a significant transformation over the past fifteen years. In marked distance from the older tradition grounded in legal and political theory, a new brand of diplomatic history inspired by the cultural turn of the 1990s has emerged. The New Diplomatic History is not primarily about the formal (legal, institutional, political-philosophical) precepts of diplomacy anymore.¹² It aims instead to complement our understanding of those traditional core themes by studying the wider cultural and social foundations of diplomatic action. Some of the most important and paradigm-shifting work on the early modern period has come from continental European scholars working on early modern Europe. In Italy, Riccardo Fubini and Daniela Frigo have pioneered the study of diplomacy as a tool not only of “external” affairs but also “internal” state formation.¹³ French and German historians have

¹¹ Paul M. Dover, “Review of Robyn Adams and Rosanna Cox, eds., *Diplomacy and Early Modern Culture*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2011): 1279–81.

¹² The term first appeared in John Watkins, “Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 1–14.

¹³ Riccardo Fubini, *Italia quattrocentesca: Politica e diplomazia al tempo di Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1994); Daniela Frigo, ed., *Principi, Ambasciatori e “Jus Gentium”*: *L’amministrazione della Politica Estera nel Piemonte del Settecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991), trans. as *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy: The Structure of*

developed the notion of a “cultural history of politics” (*histoire culturelle du politique*, *Kulturgeschichte des Politischen*), where early modern state building is examined as a cultural process.¹⁴ Most historians of early modern Europe thus agree that it is important to inquire into what Nicholas Dirks, a historian of India, called the “cultural foundations of power.”¹⁵

Diplomacy emerges almost naturally as a central topic of inquiry especially with regard to our understanding of the making of early modern dynastic states and empires. Ironically, however, the very historiography that is thus embracing notions of performance, theatricality and display borrowed from cultural anthropologists and from historians of the non-Western world is also being timid in its ventures beyond the boundaries of Europe. There are practical reasons for this, given what is still generally a wide gap between the historiographies of early modern Europe, of European expansion and of other regions of the world. Under such conditions, it already counted as a bold move when, as happened in 2008 with a landmark special issue on diplomacy of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern History*, the boundaries of the continent were pushed to include Byzantium and Muscovy.¹⁶ Only recently have we seen a widening of horizons with remarkable thematic issues in *Art History* and in *Journal of Early Modern History* (on diplomacy in the Mediterranean in 2015, and on diplomacy and visual and material culture and on diplomacy and cultural translation in 2016).¹⁷

Diplomatic Practice, 1450–1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Also see Christopher Storrs, *War, Diplomacy, and the Rise of Savoy, 1690–1720* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

- ¹⁴ Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, ed., *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005); Ronald Asch and Dagmar Freist, eds., *Staatsbildung als kultureller Prozess. Strukturwandel und Legitimation von Herrschaft in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2005).
- ¹⁵ Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 5.
- ¹⁶ “Towards a New Diplomatic History”, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008).
- ¹⁷ Maartje van Gelder and Tijana Krstić, eds., “Cross-Confessional Diplomacy and Diplomatic Intermediaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 19, nos. 2–3 (2015); Meredith Martin and Daniela Bleichmar, eds., Objects in Motion in the Early Modern World, *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015); Nancy Um and Leah R. Clark, eds., “The Art of Embassy: Objects and Images of Early Modern Diplomacy,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 1 (2016); Toby Osborne and Joan-Pau Rubiés, eds., “Diplomacy and Cultural Translation in the Early Modern World,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 4 (2016).

One problem certainly is that some historians might still struggle to overcome the notion of European exceptionalism.¹⁸ Scholars of early modern diplomacy in Europe in particular may find it difficult to liberate themselves from the perception that there is a heartland – in and around northern and central Italy – from which early modern diplomacy as we know it ultimately emerged. It was, after all, in Venice, Florence and Rome that so many of the fundamental characteristics of diplomatic practice were developed during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – or so we believe. Like historians of Renaissance art, historians of Renaissance diplomacy often find it challenging to accept that comparable processes may have occurred in other parts of the world. Even more daunting is the prospect that certain innovations may have originated outside the borders of Europe and influenced the course of history in those imaginary heartlands, rather than vice versa.¹⁹

Even more disconcerting than this reticence among diplomatic historians of Europe to engage with global history is the hesitation of global historians to embrace diplomacy as a core subject. Between Jack Wills's *Embassies and Illusions* published in 1984 and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's *Courtly Encounters*, a collection of talks published in 2012, very few monograph-length studies resulting from the global history boom have tackled early modern diplomatic culture as a topic in itself.²⁰ In contrast with the modern period, for which books on diplomacy abound, early modernists have tended to make more disjointed incursions into the field. Some of the most auspicious recent explorations are those in Markus Vink's *Encounter on the Opposite*

¹⁸ Jerry Bentley, "Europeanization of the World or Globalization of Europe?," *Religions* 3 (2012): 441–54.

¹⁹ See namely D. Goffman, "Negotiating with the Renaissance State: The Ottoman Empire and the New Diplomacy," in *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, ed. Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61–74. Also see, for art and science, Valérie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris and The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001); and Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

²⁰ John E. Wills Jr., *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-hsi, 1666–1687* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Also see Wills's earlier study, *Pepper, Guns, and Parleys: The Dutch East India Company and China, 1622–1681* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974). At the tail end of our period, mention must be made of James L. Hevia's *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1995), and Christian Windler's *La diplomatie comme expérience de l'Autre. Consuls français au Maghreb (1700–1840)* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2002).