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Global Gifts

This anthology explores the role that art and material goods played in diplomatic relations and political exchanges between Asia, Africa, and Europe in the early modern world. The authors challenge the idea that there was a European primacy in the practice of gift giving through a wide panoramic review of diplomatic encounters between Europeans (including the Portuguese, French, Dutch, and English) and Asian empires (including Ottoman, Persian, Mughal, Sri Lankan, Chinese, and Japanese cases). They examine how those exchanges influenced the global production and circulation of art and material culture, and explore the types of gifts exchanged, the chosen materials, and the manner of their presentation. *Global Gifts* establishes new parameters for the study of the material and aesthetic culture of Eurasian relations before 1800, exploring the meaning of artistic objects in global diplomacy and the existence of economic and aesthetic values mutually intelligible across cultural boundaries.

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Global Gifts

The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia

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Preface

Precious objects and valued commodities did not merely “move” from one place to another, they were purposefully exchanged across cultural and political boundaries. While such exchanges may often have had commercial aspects, we focus here on their political and especially diplomatic dimensions. The giving and receiving of diplomatic gifts constitute a crucial element in the formation of early modern connections and provide us with a powerful analytical tool for enhancing our understanding of that formation. The exchange of material goods as gifts, in the pressured context of diplomatic exchange, inevitably involved the movement and realignment of power. The manner in which they were selected, presented, received and understood tells us something about how the agents of the exchange saw that power and dealt with this realignment. Gifts, and the processes by which they were transacted, thus allow us to explore the multiple modes of exchange that were available in the early modern world.

Diplomacy was – as recent research suggests – pervasive in the interactions between Europe, Africa and Asia, and the display and transaction of material goods (treasured objects, objets d’art) during diplomatic acts are one of the keys for understanding the growth of global connections. Anthropology has taught us about the reciprocity of gifting in many human societies, the principle of *do ut des*: one rarely gives anything away without expecting something in return. But gifts are not passive objects in the diplomatic game. They can contribute to the destabilization of relations or help in the consolidation of power hierarchies. They play a crucial role in the processes of negotiation and, in fact, are often the only testimonies that survive of past encounters between dignitaries of European, African and Asian societies. *Global Gifts* thus endeavors to

highlight the role of visual and material goods in diplomatic contexts and, inversely, enrich our understanding of diplomatic exchanges by emphasizing the presence of art and material culture. The two approaches are, by all means, complementary and work well together to throw new light on the emerging field of connected global history.

Based on a series of innovative papers presented at conferences held at the University of Warwick and the University of London, this book explores a variety of subjects relating to the study of global visual culture in the early modern period. Among other questions, it examines why ivories from Sri Lanka were valued in Renaissance Europe, what Italian Jesuits found to be the most adequate gifts at the imperial court of China, what French and Dutch diplomats carried to Japan and Siam, how Muslims and Christians exchanged artifacts in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean in a time of religious strife and why paintings offered as gifts by the British were not particularly appreciated in eighteenth-century India. Through such a variety of subjects, we explore how aesthetic and commercial value worked across cultural borders and how objects contributed to the making of early “globalized” visual cultures. More importantly, this book seeks to challenge the widespread emphasis on economic exchange that has characterized the study of global connections, and shift the focus to the political exchange of power across cultural boundaries. The exchange of diplomatic gifts played a key part in the growth of early modern global connections.

The present volume brings together a diverse but coherent body of case studies into the making and unmaking of gifts between European and Asian powers during the early modern period. In this sense, this is a pioneering volume with all the advantages and disadvantages that such a status entails. We are grateful not just to the authors who worked with us but also to many other colleagues and friends who helped shape our ideas. Our thanks in particular go to Maxine Berg, Leah Clark, Dana Leibsohn and Beverly Lemire. We are aware that many of the statements made over the course of the following pages may require qualification in a nearby future. But we are also confident that our collection will transmit our enthusiasm for what bears all the signs of emerging as a new field of historical inquiry.