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The Chinese Wallpaper from Strathallan Castle, Scotland, and its Peregrinations

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Chinese hand-painted export wallpapers were an expensive investment for their Western purchasers. They were generally mounted on a textile and wooden batten system that allowed them to be taken down and reused elsewhere, rather than pasting them down permanently or papering over them.

The construction of Chinese wallpapers is similar in some ways to traditional scroll paintings, which are layers of thin, hand-made papers laminated with starch paste. The outer surface is normally a thin white smooth paper known as *xuan* paper, made from the bast fiber of the *qingtan* tree (*Pteroceltis tatarinowii maxim.*) The *xuan* paper sheets are joined together to form a continuous roll with overlapping joins of approximately 3 mm. These were subsequently lined with smaller sheets of an unbleached cream paper made from a mixture of bamboo and rice straw fibers. The bamboo paper lining added strength, useful when handling the pasted paper. A heavy coarse paper identified as mulberry (*broussonettia kazinoki*) paper was applied as the last backing to the wallpaper roll, to add extra strength and to serve as a handling and straining layer. The finished wallpaper lengths would have been trimmed and numbered. Outline drawings or printed designs were put onto the paper using black carbon ink, graphite or charcoal. These were filled in with flat colors made from both organic and inorganic pigments, bound with animal glue or gums. For some wallpapers the design may have been traced from a draft sketch placed beneath the semi-transparent support. Traditional thin brush techniques for mountains and rocks combined with more opaque paint for plants, people and buildings were used. Linear elements were drawn with compasses and straight edges that had grooves for guiding the brush. They were then worked up with thick and thin paint with the addition of thin, transparent and colored glazes that were used to give a more three-dimensional effect to the images. Some architectural elements in the western buildings had the addition of mica to highlight them, so they became the focal point in a panoramic wallpaper composition.

Chinese export wallpapers may have endured a considerable amount of handling and it has not always been recorded how often individual examples were taken down, re-hung, cut and trimmed to fit into other rooms, or left rolled up for years in storage. As well as the challenging environmental condition Chinese wallpapers often suffered, typical deterioration of these wallpapers includes delamination and discoloration and staining of the paper, fading of pigments, flaking of paint, as well as inappropriate repairs and insect damage.

A rare set of Chinese wallpaper depicting Canton, today Guangzhou, a port in southern China, was acquired by the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, MA, USA, in 2005. The panels illustrate life in the busy port, and the western-style buildings erected along the waterfront. Views of Canton, a motif that is seen more often on Chinese export porcelain, are numerous, but this is thought to be the only known example of historic Chinese wallpaper that depicts the port. It is the largest and probably the most detailed illustration of the western style *hongs* or traders' factories. It is thought that the wallpaper was probably commissioned and acquired by James Drummond, 8th Viscount of Strathallan, while he was living in Macau, before his departure in 1807 (Sargent 2014).

The wallpaper hung in the Ladies' Salon at Strathallan Castle in Auchterarder in Perthshire, home of the Drummond family, for about 170 years. However, there is nothing to indicate exactly when the wallpapers were installed at the castle, nor the date when they were removed. The Estate was sold in 1910 and subsequently used during as a hospital by the Red Cross during the First World War. In the Second World War it became a school for girls.¹ The building was given heritage listing in 1971, when the interior was described as being 'relatively simple and treated plain'.² This suggests that the wallpaper had been removed by this date, if not earlier. There is scant documentation regarding the condition of the wallpaper when it was first removed. A more recent report suggests that it was removed

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

- 1 <https://www.thedicamillo.com/house/strathallan-castle/> (accessed July 2019).
- 2 <https://www.historicenviroment.scot/designation/LB4559> (accessed July 2019).
- 3 Condition Report July 1990, Alyson McDermott, Conservation Consultant.
- 4 <https://collection.vam.ac.uk/Search> the Collections. British Galleries. Room 52, accession number E.2092A-1914.
- 5 By Alyson McDermott.
- 6 Gampi paper is a thin glossy tough paper with good wet strength, non-absorbent and damp-resistant.

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