

English Artist William Alexander's Portrayals of Late Eighteenth Century China

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William Alexander (1767-1816) was an English artist attached to the Macartney Embassy to China (1792-1794). Alexander produced approximately 1,200 visual records of Qing period China as a draughtsman. Today, the largest collection of his paintings numbering approximately 870 sketches and watercolours can be seen at the British Library. There was a time when such works changed the European perception of China.

Alexander's authentic views of China and the Chinese people are now considered reliable depictions of China, which was virtually an unknown country at the time. Although, England made proposals to Qianlong Emperor of Qing China for the expansion of trade relations, the embassy ended up being an expensive failure. But the valuable information brought back by the embassy was used to formulate their future diplomacy with China.

Contrary to the above mentioned tribute to Alexander, at times his views are considered to be based on imagination and being concocted views at best. Yet, there is genuine truth, authenticity and details in his drawings according to scholars using visual records in their research. This gap in interpretation is one of the reasons why his drawings are not widely used in Chinese historical studies. One of the possible reasons might be that his works cannot be compared to reliable documents and views such as photographs, video footage and digital camera images that is only possible today.

This article analyzes how Alexander's paintings were produced, at times being compiled by several sketches based on observation of other members of the embassy. In other words, the produced views are a result of team effort. Furthermore, the article identifies reliable views produced as "visual records" of China and those produced as a result of team effort for other purposes such as exhibitions. Finally, another topic of interest, which is an ongoing debate whether Alexander was influenced by works of Chinese artists he met at Canton (Guangzhou), will be analyzed. The most obvious are the visual records found in George Mason's *Costume of China* (1804) and Alexander's *Picturesque Representations of the Dress and Manners of the Chinese* (1814).

The author hopes to convince the readers that Alexander's visual records are reliable, detailed and authentic depictions of late eighteenth century China and the Chinese people.