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Collection of 87 Chinese Export Botanical Watercolours

Canton (Guangzhou), China, ca. 1810–1830

Watercolour and gouache on European paper

Each 30.5 cm x 39.5 cm

Provenance:

Winifred Bois (1875–1966);

Probably sold by Bois to WT Spencer, London, between 1930 and 1966.

Purchased by Henry Roger Broughton, 2nd Baron Fairhaven (1900–1973); thence by descent until 2022.

The 87 artworks presented in this catalogue come from a large album of Chinese export watercolours, bound into nine volumes under the title Dessins originaux chinois (‘Original Chinese drawings’). Three volumes were dedicated to professions and customs, one to punishments, and one to sailing boats. The remaining four volumes, dedicated to natural history and botanical studies, are the source of the watercolours in this catalogue.

The album’s earliest known owner was Winifred Bois (1875–1966), a collector of Chinese art who grew up in a mercantile family in Sri Lanka. She likely acquired the album in the 1930s, corresponding with the date on her bookplate (reproduced on the inside cover). The second known owner of the album was Henry Roger Broughton, 2nd Baron Fairhaven (1900–1973). Combining his twin passions for gardening and collecting, Baron Fairhaven built an extensive natural history library at his home in Windsor. Much of this collection was gifted to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, upon the Baron’s

death in 1973. The remainder, including this album, stayed in the family until 2022. Though it is unclear how Baron Fairhaven acquired the album, it is likely that he purchased it from the London bookdealer WT Spencer, to whom Bois had regularly sold Chinese watercolours. At some point after 2022, the watercolours were cut out of their albums and dispersed. We are proud to have reunited all but one of the flower studies from the original album, and many of the natural history studies.

The wealth of the British Empire was built on botany. By the early nineteenth century, when this album was created, plant collecting was already a vast colonial enterprise. Between 1770 and 1820, Joseph Banks, the first director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, recruited some 126 collectors outside Europe

to send him any plant that was either 'useful, curious, or beautiful'.[1] Many of his plant collectors were East India Company merchants, such as the tea inspector John Reeves and the Company surgeon John Livingstone.[2] To this day, a majority of the 100,000 specimens in Kew's botany collection date back to this time.[3] Once the plants arrived in England, they could be categorised, studied, and hybridised so that they could be successfully grown in Britain or transplanted to other areas of the Empire, where they could be grown on plantations and sold back to their native lands at a premium.

Home to a greater range of plants than the continental United States and Europe combined, China proved a fertile resource for both the acquisition of plants and local knowledge.[4] Few plants, however, survived the journey from China to Britain. The changeable climate and limited fresh water aboard the ships proved fatal to most live specimens, while seeds often rotted on the journey. Therefore, European plant collectors would commission local artists, usually in Canton, to produce illustrations to accompany the specimens. The artists were provided with the finest European paper and pigments, as well as some examples of Western scientific illustrations.[5] The resulting paintings exhibit a hybrid of Western scientific and traditional Chinese techniques. The practice of colouring the undersides of leaves with a paler shade of green — as visible in the two coconut magnolia studies — derives from Chinese bird-and-flower painting. The blemishes seen on fruits like the jujube or gingko would probably have been avoided by Western botanical artists. Similarly, the use of blue washes to make white petals stand out from the paper, as in the case of the narcissus, also derives from Song dynasty techniques.

It was common practice for individuals to commission multiple sets from the same workshop. It seems likely that this was intended either as insurance for the perilous voyage back to Britain or to allow sets to be divided between different scientific institutions. In this case, at least three sets were created.

For more information and to view the full collection, please click **here** for the online catalogue.

[1] Joseph Banks's instructions to William Kerr, manuscript in 'Dawson Turner Copies of Joseph Banks Correspondence' (hereafter DTC), Natural History Museum, London, vol. 14, 'Hints on the Subject of Gardening, suggested to the Gentlemen who attend the Embassy to China'; cited in Fa-ti Fan, British Naturalists in Qing China: Science, Empire, and Cultural Encounter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 66.

[2] Linda Batchelor, 'Bringing Seeds and Plants from Distant Countries', National Maritime Museum Cornwall, https://nmmc.co.uk/2025/07/bringing-seeds-and-plants-from-distant-countries/ [accessed 21

August 2025].

[3] Jane Kilpatrick, Gifts from the Gardens of China: The Introduction of Traditional Chinese Garden Plants to Britain, 1698–1862 (London: Frances Lincoln, 2007), 12; cited in Fa-ti Fan, ‘Science in a Chinese Entrepôt: British Naturalists and Their Chinese Associates in Old Canton’, Osiris 18, no. 1 (2003): 60–78, at 65.

[4] Haida Liang et al., ‘Culture and Trade Through the Prism of Technical Art History: A Study of Chinese Export Paintings’, Studies in Conservation 59, suppl. 1 (2014): S96–S99.

[5] Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1984), 76.