

Contributors

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Giorgio Riello is Professor in Global History and Culture at the Department of History at the University of Warwick, UK. He has written on the history of trade, material culture, textile and fashion and is the author of *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World* (2013) and coauthor of *Luxury: A Rich History* (2016, with Peter McNeil).

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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.

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 1.1a, 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 1.2). 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.