East India Company at Home, 1757-1857

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Section 1
The social life of things

In his introduction to *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986), Arjun Appadurai argued that ‘we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories’. Following the material objects that animated Britain’s eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperial project can prove taxing, however, for even the most seemingly immobile of things – animals, monuments, perishable foodstuffs – became highly portable in the Company era. Trade, smuggling, gifting, looting, collecting, migration, decay and loss made objects both mobile and labile. Carried by merchants, mariners, family, friends, patrons, clients and their outright owners, Company things journeyed on sea and land routes, from port to retailer to recipient. Once on British soil, they moved between and among, moving between houses and household members. As Appadurai asserts, movement and change shape what commodities, things and objects are, how they function and what they mean. To understand material objects in imperial contexts at home in Britain, we must track their social lives, their entangled relationships with people, other objects and places and explore how such embodied material networks affected their values and meanings.

The four chapters in this section explore the acquisition, display and interpretation of Asian and Company material objects in domestic British contexts, heritage sites and museums. Sarah Longair and Cam Sharp Jones’s chapter analyses an intricately decorated filigree casket now in the British Museum’s collections. Documentary evidence suggests that the casket once belonged to Tipu Sultan (c.1750–99) but was removed – perhaps looted – from Seringapatam (present day Siringapatna) in 1799 after Tipu’s defeat by the British in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War. The casket’s subsequent history in private hands demonstrates how Company men and women fostered and perpetuated the Indian genealogies of their Asian
objects long after these items had been relocated to Britain. Yet, even as they used mobile material things to document, celebrate and justify their lives on the subcontinent, the casket’s successive owners also deployed this meaningful thing to knit together a shared family identity for the far-flung kin of the Fraser of Lovat clan. Enmeshed in family stories that stretched from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu to the Scottish Highlands, the casket came to rest in London’s Bloomsbury. Here, its donation to and exhibition in the British Museum have worked at multiple levels to domesticate an exceptionally violent episode in the East India Company’s protracted campaigns to assert territorial and mercantile hegemony on the subcontinent.

Helen Clifford’s chapter on Chinese wallpaper also examines questions of provenance, origin and connection. Focusing on the processes and routes by which Chinese wallpaper came to adorn so many stately homes in Britain, it explores both how Company connections provided access to ‘Oriental’ furnishings and why elite men and women – living in an age most often associated with neo-classical tastes – invested time, money and social capital to acquire, install and elaborate these exotic Company goods. Like Longair and Sharp Jones’s chapter, Clifford’s contribution benefits from engagements with a diverse range of expertise, stretching from the heritage sector through the museum to the academy. Her analysis of Chinese wallpaper, researched in collaboration with National Trust staff, demonstrates how the interpretation of complex imperial objects benefits from interdisciplinary methodologies that work to unpick both material conditions of production and the meanings things can embody and express.

Kate Smith’s chapter on ivory furniture looks both at the making of these imperial objects and the meanings attached to their presence in British country houses in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Now subject to global export bans inspired by conservationists, ivory furniture was among the most luxurious of Asian commodities to which Company commerce and connection gave elite Georgian men and women privileged access. At moments of purchase, dismantling and recirculation, ivory furniture provided a matrix for the construction, display or perpetuation of families’ connection to the East India Company. The aesthetic and material particularities of ivory furniture represented the craft cultures of specific areas of the subcontinent, such as Vizagapatam and Murshidabad. Ivory furniture crafted in these sites allowed Company men (and their descendants) to signify the specificity of their imperial experiences in different regions of the subcontinent. As potent symbols of the imperial project these objects continue to act as signifiers of imperial histories within families and museums today.
Yuthika Sharma and Pauline Davies’s chapter on Osterley Park and House, Hounslow reminds us that not all Company men and women obtained Asian luxury objects during periods of residence on the subcontinent. Three generations of the Child family, which owned and furnished Osterley, were involved at a distance in administering the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century East India Company. Although none of the house’s denizens are known to have travelled to Asia, the Childs obtained a wealth of lacquer furniture, textiles and armorial porcelain through their Company connections. These objects still reside in Osterley today, yet their conspicuous presence has historically figured as an anomalous backdrop in a National Trust site more typically presented to the public in its guise as a neoclassical stately home fashioned by the celebrated Robert Adam (1728–92). It is precisely by exploring the intersection of material histories such as these – the entangled British, European, Indian and Chinese biographies of things – that this section aims to illuminate the domestic lives of Company society and culture.