

The Inexplicable and the Unfathomable (London, 11–12 Nov 16)

The Courtauld Institute of Art, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN, Nov 11–12, 2016

James Cameron

The Inexplicable and the Unfathomable: China and Britain, 1600-1900

Organised by

David Park: The Courtauld Institute of Art

Lars Tharp: Ceramics Historian, Curator and Broadcaster

Frances Wood: Former Curator of Chinese Collections, The British Library

£16 general admission / £11 students and concessions

advance booking required

The 'Chinese character seems at present inexplicable', observed Lord Macartney during his celebrated embassy to China in the 1790s, while the Chinese themselves at this time often described 'western ocean barbarians' as 'unfathomable'. The failure of Macartney's embassy is well known, not least the Emperor Qianlong's dismissive comment that 'we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures'.

A sense of bafflement might therefore overwhelm the present-day visitor to the Forbidden City, on encountering its glorious array of English clocks, many imported during Qianlong's reign. The present conference will consider some of the endless misunderstandings and deliberate deceptions that characterised relations between Britain and China in the four centuries under review, in fields as varied as religion and art, and commerce and literature. It will also explore, however, the burgeoning range of contacts between the two countries, and the increased mutual understanding achieved by two cultures separated by 'the confines of many seas'.

Book now via Eventbrite:
<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-inexplicable-and-the-unfathomable-china-and-britain-1600-1900-tickets-28334769057>

PROGRAMME

Friday 11 November (DAY 1)

17.30 – 18.00 REGISTRATION

18.00 – 18.10

Welcome: Ted Lipman (The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation) and David Park (The Courtauld Institute of Art)

18.10 – 19.15

Donald S. Lopez (University of Michigan): Britain and Buddhism: George Bogle in Tibet, 1774-1775

19.15 RECEPTION (in the Front Hall)

Saturday 12 November (DAY 2)

09.45 – 10.15 REGISTRATION

SESSION 1 – Chair: Roderick Whitfield (School of Oriental and African Studies)

10.15 – 10.45

Greg Clingham (Bucknell University, PA): Cosmology and Commerce on Lord Macartney's Embassy to China, 1792-1794

10.45 – 11.45

Catherine Pagani (University of Alabama): Elaborate Clocks and Sino-British Encounters in the Eighteenth Century

11.15 – 11.25 Discussion

11.25 – 11.55 TEA / COFFEE BREAK (provided in Seminar room 1, 1st floor)

SESSION 2 – Chair: David Park (The Courtauld Institute of Art)

11.55 – 12.25

Tang Hui (University of Warwick): 'The finest of Earth': Selling Porcelain in Eighteenth-century Canton

12.25 – 12.50

Lars Tharp: China on a Plate: Images from Hogarth to Whistler

12.50 – 13.00

Discussion

13.00 – 14.30 LUNCH (provided for the speakers/chairs only. Seminar room 1)

SESSION 3 – Chair: Frances Wood

14.30 – 15.00

Jessica Harrison-Hall (The British Museum): Collecting Chinese Art at the British Museum 1760-1860

15.00 – 15.35

Edward Weech and Nancy Charley (Royal Asiatic Society): The Thomas Manning Archive and Prospects for a New Perspective on British Intellectual Engagement with China in the Early 1800s

15.35 – 15.45 Discussion

15.45 – 16.15 TEA / COFFEE BREAK (provided in Seminar room 1, 1st floor)

SESSION 4 – Chair: Lars Tharp

16.45 – 17.15

Elizabeth Chang (University of Missouri): Writing Personhood from the Frontier of Western China

17.15 – 17.45

Frances Wood: The View from the Other Side: China's Reactions to the West

17.45 – 18.00

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

18.00 END

Reference:

CONF: The Inexplicable and the Unfathomable (London, 11-12 Nov 16). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 7, 2016 (accessed Dec 20, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/13891>>.