

Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum
1986
Mss.069.C17n

American Philosophical Society
2003
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Table of Contents

Summary Information	3
Background note	5
Scope & content	6
Administrative Information	7
Related Materials	7
Indexing Terms	7
Bibliography	8

Summary Information

Repository	American Philosophical Society
Title	Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum
Date	1986
Call number	Mss.069.C17n
Extent	0.1 Linear feet
Extent	0.1 linear feet
Location	LH-MV-E-7
Language	English
Abstract	<p>Founded in 1838 by merchant and philanthropist Nathan Dunn (1782-1844), the Chinese museum informed and entertained Philadelphians from 1838-1841 with its variety of objects, art, and life-size figures in recreated Chinese room settings. For the 50,000 or so people who visited, the museum provided a window into a world that few of them ever would have the chance to experience firsthand.</p> <p>In his 1986 B.A. thesis at the University of Pennsylvania, Aaron Caplan described American diplomatic, commercial, and religious involvement in China and how the experiences of Anglo-American traders and missionaries influenced public perceptions of China and the Chinese. He explored how, in this context, Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum educated and entertained the public and how it fit into the world of Philadelphia museums in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.</p>

Preferred Citation

Aaron Caplan, Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum, American Philosophical Society.

Background note

A museum featuring "ten thousand Chinese things," Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum informed and entertained Philadelphians from 1838-1841. Filled with artifacts, paintings, life-size mannequins, and recreations of Chinese shops and drawing rooms, the museum gave Americans a brief glimpse of a country that most never would see.

Founded in 1838 by merchant and philanthropist Nathan Dunn (1782-1844), the museum shared its home at Ninth and George (now Sansom) Streets in Philadelphia with the Philadelphia Museum, the descendant of Charles Willson Peale's museum of portraits and natural history. During his time in the China trade, Dunn had acquired a large collection of artifacts in Canton between 1818 and 1831 and presumably housed them at his New Jersey summer home, known as the "Chinese Cottage," until the late 1830s, when he decided to bring his collection to the public. He joined the Philadelphia Museum company and spearheaded the campaign to raise funds for the building that would house both the Philadelphia Museum and his own Chinese Collection. By most measures, the partnership was a success. An estimated 100,000 people visited Dunn's Chinese Museum during its short life, purchasing 50,000 copies of its catalogue, and although it did not present any new ideas about China, the Museum did play a major role in shaping American perceptions of China.

By 1842, Dunn decided to relocate his collection to London, perhaps for financial reasons. Planning to donate a large portion of the profits to charity, he may have sought a larger audience who would find the exhibit fresh and novel. The opium wars also may have played a role in Dunn's decision to relocate. Dunn opposed the opium trade and apparently believed that he could sway the British public against the trade by making them better acquainted with Chinese society and culture. Following a favorable report from its first visitor, the young Queen Victoria, the British nobility and scholars flocked to Dunn's exhibit pavilion in droves, and for the next two years, the Museum enjoyed considerable success. After Dunn's death in 1844 revealed that his assets could not cover the generous bequests he had laid out in his will, the Museum's curator William B. Langdon, took the collection on a tour of Britain in an attempt to raise funds. The later whereabouts of the collection are uncertain, although a portion of it may have been lost in a train wreck near Edinburgh in 1849. In the following year, P.T. Barnum displayed what was apparently at least a portion of the collection in Knightsbridge to little success, after which the collection was auctioned in December of 1851, perhaps saving some of it from the fiery fate that befell Barnum's American Museum. Its later whereabouts are unknown, but over twenty-five years later, the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia reportedly featured a few items from the Museum.

A philanthropist as well as a merchant, Dunn was the first major donor to Haverford College. He persevered through intermittent legal and financial troubles. Despite being disowned by the Philadelphia Monthly Meeting in 1816 for bankruptcy, his Quaker beliefs continued to influence his life and his work. He was director of the Philadelphia House of Refuge and involved with several other benevolent organizations, including the Pennsylvania Institute for Instruction of the Blind, the Indigent Widows and Single Women's Society, African colonization societies, and prison reform societies. He was a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences and in 1836 was elected to the American Philosophical Society. Dunn died at age 62 of malaria in Switzerland on September 19, 1844.

Scope & content

In this history of Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum, written as his BA thesis at the University of Pennsylvania, Aaron Caplan explores contrasting views of China and the Museum's role in educating and entertaining the public and dispelling myths about China and its people. Caplan describes the diplomatic, commercial, and religious context of 18th and 19th century American involvement in China and how the experiences of Anglo-American traders and missionaries influenced public perceptions of China and the Chinese. He also discusses how the Chinese Museum fit into the world of Philadelphia museums of the 18th and 19th century.

Administrative Information

Publication Information

American Philosophical Society 2003

Provenance

Acquisition Information

Gift of Aaron Caplan, 1986.

Processing Information

Catalogued by val, 2004.

Related Materials

Related Material

Haverford College has papers of Nathan Dunn among the papers of the Dunn, Battey, and Osborn families (Ms. Coll. 1163). The American Philosophical Society has some material relating to Dunn in the APS Archives and Miscellaneous Manuscripts collections. The papers of merchant John Richardson Latimer at the Library of Congress include transactions with Nathan Dunn.

Indexing Terms

Corporate Name(s)

- Chinese Museum (Philadelphia, Pa.)
- Peale's Museum (Philadelphia, Pa.).

Genre(s)

- Masters theses

Geographic Name(s)

- China--Civilization--19th century
- China--Commerce--United States
- China--Politics and government--19th century
- Philadelphia (Pa.)--History--19th century
- United States--Commerce--China

Personal Name(s)

- Dunn, Nathan,1782-1844.

Subject(s)

- Museums--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia

Bibliography

Hummel, Arthur William, "Nathan Dunn," *Quaker History* 59 (1970): 34-39. **Call no.:** 920 Pam.a no. 441.

Langdon, William B., *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Chinese Collection, now exhibited at St. George's Place, Hyde Park Corner, London, with condensed accounts of the genius, government, history, literature, arts, [etc. etc.] of the people of the Celestial Kingdom..* (London, Printed for the Proprietor, 1842). **Call no.:** 915.1 D92L.16

Silliman, Benjamin, *Mr. Dunn's Chinese Collection in Philadelphia.* (Philadelphia: Brown, Bicking, and Guilbert, 1841).