

# George Chinnery comes home

George Chinnery enjoyed a double career in the Far East. The first phase was in India, where he rose to become the principal artist of the Raj, a hookah-smoking 'old hand' with an Indian mistress and a huge appetite for curry and rice. 'Chinnery himself could not hit off a likeness better', exclaims the Colonel back from India, as he admires a portrait in Thackeray's *Newcomes*.

Patrick Conner

**The Flamboyant Mr Chinnery (1774-1852) – an English Artist in India and China**  
Loan exhibition at Asia House, London, from 4 November 2011 to 21 January 2012

AT THE AGE OF 51, when he might have been expected to retire to Britain, Chinnery moved in the opposite direction. Pursued by his creditors, he took ship to the China coast, claiming that it was for the good of his health, or that he was fleeing from his vengeful wife. He never managed to clear his debts. Unable to make the voyage home, and against all the odds, the artist lived on for another twenty-seven years in Canton and Macau, where he died in 1852.

The loan exhibition being staged at Asia House suggests that Chinnery's misfortune was our gain. It is hard to imagine that he would have produced such a variety of vigorous and individual paintings and drawings if he had come home to a comfortable retirement in England. And it is remarkable that an artist whose work has been taken so seriously abroad – with substantial exhibitions held in recent years in Lisbon, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Macau – should have been apparently forgotten in his native land. The Tate Gallery held a Chinnery exhibition in 1932, and another was mounted by the Arts Council in Edinburgh and London in 1957, but the exhibition at Asia House is his first public loan show in Britain for over half a century.

Looking at the selection of his work displayed at Asia House we may feel that his art, or some of his art, is not quite what his public image might lead us to expect. Chinnery was renowned for his dinner-table wit, his genial temperament and his eccentric charm. In 1946 Maurice Collis, himself a former ICS administrator and amateur artist, wrote of ageing Englishmen in the East: 'who yet cannot tear themselves away from an unhurried life of soft wind, rich sunsets, sweet scents and black-haired beauties, and would rather be buried in a palm-grove within sound of the surf ... than face English cold, English haste and English women!'

Collis might have had Chinnery in mind, and indeed there are some 'black-haired beauties' and sunset vistas among Chinnery's subjects. But the truth was less idyllic. In his latter years the artist lived in straitened circumstances. He remained devoted to his work, but portraiture was no longer his mainstay. He would rise early and go out sketching before breakfast, making careful studies of porters, barbers, boatwomen, food sellers and blacksmiths and fishermen

on the beach (figure 1). These sketches are perhaps the most appealing element of his oeuvre. They reveal an almost obsessive determination to perfect his drawing of human figures engaged in their daily activities. These are not the work of an idle voluptuary, but of an artist dedicated to his ideal, which he pursued with a vigour seldom seen in his earlier sketches. His drawings were frequently imitated by visitors to the China coast, most of whom fell well short of the master's confident fluency with the pencil.

Some of his studies of informal groups resulted in small oil paintings, such as the one of street traders in Macau (figure 2). A turbaned figure leans out of his window to receive a basket being passed up to him; he drops a few coins down towards the group below, of whom the smallest seems to be holding out his broad-brimmed hat to maximise his chances of catching a coin. On the crumbling wall two poppies appear, providing the touch of bright red which is a leitmotif in Chinnery's oils and watercolours, and indeed in his portraits – one can play a satisfying game of 'hunt the vermilion' around the walls of this exhibition.

Chinnery would add notes in shorthand to his drawings, reminding himself of colours and textures, or whether the sketch was to be relied upon; he might name an individual who had commissioned a finished version, or jot down anything else that came to mind. He used the Gurney system of shorthand current at the time, of which his father had been a noted exponent. After his death the Gurney system fell into disuse, and by the twentieth century the dashes, dots and squiggles on Chinnery's drawings were entirely baffling. The Bengal historian Julian James Cotton (1869-1927) was asked to pronounce whether the writing was Tamil or shorthand; Cotton was at least able to certify that it was not Tamil.

In recent times a thorough study of Chinnery's shorthand has been undertaken by Geoffrey Bonsall of Hong Kong University Press; something of an eccentric genius himself, Bonsall also read out the early morning news on Hong Kong radio. He died last year at the age of 85, a sad event for Chinnery enthusiasts, but through his research he had succeeded in casting a great deal of light on Chinnery's methods and practices. Many of the translations of shorthand given in the exhibition catalogue were made originally by Bonsall.

The exhibition concentrates on Chinnery's fifty years in India and China, with a variety of portraits and landscapes on view; the visitor may be struck in particular by the simple charm of



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his watercolours of palanquin bearers in Madras, ruined tombs in Bengali villages, and junks at anchor on a calm evening on the China coast. His early years in England and Ireland are covered in summary fashion, but we do see a charming small portrait from that time: his young wife Marianne in 1800, looking out demurely from beneath a luxuriant mass of hair (figure 3). Chinnery left her behind in Ireland, with two infant children, when he returned in 1801 to his native London and then onwards to India in 1802. Sixteen years later she joined him there, but they soon separated again; she became the butt of many ungallant jokes, on the part of Chinnery, about her supposed unattractiveness – a notion scarcely supported by this portrait.

The artist would add however that he himself was uglier still; and we may judge this for ourselves in the eight self-portraits included in this show – five drawings and three oils. One of the latter is his famous late self-portrait, lent by the National Portrait Gallery, in which the artist stares belligerently at us over his spectacles; on his easel is a Bengal scene, and on the wall above is the 'Praya Grande' at Macau (figure 4). This self-portrait was sent back for exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1846, as if to remind Londoners that, at the age of 72 and some ten thousand sea miles distant, he was still a force to be reckoned with.

**Patrick Connor has published about Oriental architecture and art, and is Director of the Martyn Gregory Gallery in London, which specialises in historical paintings related to the China Trade. He has been curator of a number of loan exhibitions exploring the relationships between 'Eastern' and 'Western' cultures, including the exhibition featured in this article. (patrick@martyngregory.com)**

## Notes

1 Collis, Maurice. 1946. *Foreign Mud: Being an Account of the Opium Imbroglia at Canton in the 1830s and the Anglo-Chinese War that followed*, p.21.



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1: *The Praya Grande Macao from the north, with further sketches* Pencil, pen and ink, on two joined pieces of paper, 27.6 x 48 cm Inscribed and dated in the artist's shorthand: 'all these details May 13 [18]40', and (by the upper figure) 'correct. Proportions right'. Mr and Mrs Peter Thompson (no. 58 in catalogue).

2: *Street traders Macau* Oil on canvas, 22.9 x 17.8 cm Illustrated: Tillotson 1987, pl. 43; Conner 1993, col. pl. 75; HKMH 2005, no. C83; Macau 2010, no. 119 HSBC Holdings plc (no. 62 in catalogue).

3: *Marianne Chinnery, the artist's wife ('Miss Vigne')* Pencil and watercolours, 14.6 x 11.4 cm Signed with initials 'GC' and dated 1800 The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited (no. 6 in catalogue).

4: *Self-portrait of the artist at his easel* Oil on canvas, 71.1 x 54 cm Provenance: Lancelot Dent, by whom brought from Hong Kong to London in 1845; given by his nephew John Dent to NPC in 1878 National Portrait Gallery, London (779) (no. 92 in catalogue).

5: *A fisherman carrying his net* Pen and ink and watercolour 12.1 x 10.2 cm Mr and Mrs R.J.F. Brothers.



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