

Envisioning journeys through Asia

By transforming personal journeys and distant places into familiar routes and iconic destinations, images depicting travel reveal and shape ideas about beauty, culture and foreign lands. Featuring more than 100 works created over five centuries, the objects exhibited in *The Traveler's Eye* are by travelers, artists, photographers and scholars who recorded actual journeys, as well as imagined voyages, to and across Asia. Curated by seven experts, the objects range from masterpieces of Asian art to quirky souvenirs – woodblock prints, ink paintings and art photography, to archaeological drawings, vintage postcards and diaries.

The Traveler's Eye: Scenes of Asia
22 Nov 2014 – 29 May 2015
The Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

"WHETHER THEY WERE COLLECTED AS MEMENTOS, or whether they provided virtual experiences for those who remained at home, each has an extraordinary immediacy [...] Encountering these works invites our visitors [...] to think about how they might record and remember their own journeys," says organizing curator Debra Diamond. The first three galleries present how artists in Japan, China, and India envisioned particular journeys and destinations at key moments between the 1600s and the 1990s. The last gallery contrasts personal and mass-produced records of travel to and within Asia during the twentieth century. Radically diverse in style and intent, these glimpses invite us to consider the visual choices that established particular routes, places, and human activities as fascinating or important. Looking beneath the surfaces of these works illuminates the ways that seemingly straightforward images encode broader cultural perspectives.

The Traveler's Eye begins with a magnificent pair of Edo-period Japanese folding screens, lushly gilded and almost 11 feet wide, depicting *nambanjin* ("southern barbarians"; in this case Portuguese seafarers) in a Japanese harbor

beneath swirling gold clouds. Created at a time when the Japanese were contending with an influx of European merchants and missionaries, and wanting no part in the ongoing colonization elsewhere in the world, the screens have traditionally been interpreted as scenes of cultural encounters with exotic foreigners. However, the images are rich in visual clues that suggest that the screens weren't created for Westerners after all, but were in fact commissioned by wealthy Japanese merchants as symbols of good fortune. (fig.1)

The second gallery features five rare Chinese scrolls and paintings, each portraying commercial travel on land and water in Ming and Qing Dynasty China. Neither artists nor patrons (members of the political and business elite) were interested in documenting the hardships or actual circumstances of any particular journey. Rather, these slice-of-life images of anonymous characters capture some of the noteworthy sights and scenes a traveler might encounter along the way. The images buzz with human activity, such as outdoor meals at mountain rest stops and boatmen grappling with narrow river passes, yet simultaneously convey the benevolent rule of an enlightened sovereign and the fundamental ideals of a harmonious society.

Among the highlights of the third gallery are Japanese woodblock prints that depict scenes along the famed Tōkaidō road. As travel on this route was highly restricted to individuals of great stature and wealth, such prints



Fig. 2

became an immediate sensation among the vast populace, many of whom could only imagine the journey. In this gallery you also find examples of the work by photographer Raghubir Singh (1942–1999). Singh maintained a lifelong interest in his country's vast and vibrant landscape as a means of capturing the changing complexity of modern India. He traveled frequently to observe the ebb and flow of daily life in bustling cities, along trunk roads, and across mountains and deserts. Sublime images of the mighty Ganges River contrast sharply with saturated, dense compositions framed by India's iconic Ambassador cars.

The exhibition concludes in the fourth gallery with records of journeys to and in Asia during the early 20th century. Western adventurers, archaeologists, and scholars were already traversing the globe to conduct research and explore foreign lands, but the advent of commercial travel brought on a flood of photographs, drawings, postcards, mementos, and other means of recording scientific and sentimental experiences abroad. Museum founder Charles Lang Freer's enthusiastically scribbled diary entries, photos and pedestal-mounted rock collection, tell of a man enamored with China's artistic glories. In 1910 he made his final journey to China; this time drawn into the country's interior to explore the Buddhist cave temple complex at Longmen Gorge in Henan province. Freer's destination was remote and largely abandoned, and so Chinese officials insisted that an armed guard accompany him. When he set out, his party had grown to more than twenty people, including porters, a cook, a photographer (Yütai), and six soldiers. (fig.2) Many of the more than one hundred large-format photographs (and relief rubbings) produced on this trip are the best in situ visual documents of sculptures that were looted over the following decades.

The exhibition's final installation features perhaps the most recognizable artifact of travel over the past 150 years: the picture postcard. During their golden age (1890s–1920s) postcards were requisite souvenirs. They were collected as mementos or mailed from abroad, accruing the additional prestige of a foreign stamp and postmark. Armchair travelers also acquired postcards, compiling them in specially made albums. They eventually became so ubiquitous that they created enduring and iconic representations of Asia for global audiences. Postcards could advance political agendas, whilst others romanticized a vanishing way of life for tourists' benefit, such as those showing rickshaws. With travelers and residents visiting the same photography shops, however, views intended for tourist markets also served to redefine local communities' perceptions of their own pasts and traditions, as well as their own modernity. (fig.3) Postcards remained popular throughout the twentieth century, but with the advent of mobile phones, they are becoming harder to find. Millions of posts on Instagram, Facebook, and other outlets, however, prove that the appeal of recording travels with a striking photograph and brief message has not diminished.



Fig. 1



Fig. 3

Fig. 1: Southern Barbarians in Japan, Japan, Edo period, 17th century. Ink, color, and gold on paper Freer Gallery of Art, F1965.22-23.

Fig. 2: Longmen, Freer's Chinese assistants along the riverbank, November 12, 1910 Yütai (active early 20th century). Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives FSA A.1 12.5.GN.088.

Fig. 3: Chinese Girls in Jinrikisha China, Early 20th Century Picture postcard Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, SA A2001.13 045.