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## “[W]hat Beauty in Oriental Art Means”

### Asian Arts, Soft Diplomacy, and New Zealand Cultural Nationalism—The Loan Exhibition of Oriental Art, Christchurch, 1935

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article presents new historical research on Asian art—particularly Chinese art—in New Zealand through the examination of the content and reception of the Loan Exhibition of Oriental Art, which was held in Christchurch from May to June 1935. It situates the exhibition within the context of Depression-era New Zealand, examines the place of Chinese art, in particular, in the developing cultural nationalism of New Zealand of this period, and highlights the role of one local connoisseur in the making of the exhibition. Moreover, the article’s focus on the southern hemisphere fills a gap in global histories of Chinese art exhibition in this period.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Asian arts, Chinese material culture, collection, Depression-era museums, exhibition history, New Zealand, soft diplomacy

### Cultural Diplomacy and Chinese Arts

Cultural exchanges are a bridge connecting the hearts and minds of all countries and an important way to project a country’s image.

—Wen Jiabao (cited in Rawnsley 2007)

The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) “dumplings and calligraphy” approach to soft diplomacy of recent years forms part of a global charm offensive centering on overseas loan items of Chinese material culture, most famously the Terracotta Warriors (Fiskesjö 2015).<sup>1</sup> Less well-known are both the longevity and the sophistication of earlier phases of cultural diplomacy involving loan exhibitions and gifts of Chinese artifacts outside China.

The present article attempts to both problematize and localize a burgeoning literature focused on contemporary cultural diplomacy, exhibition, and Chinese material culture. First, in line with a growing number of studies, this article supports the argument—novel to many political scientists still—that the deployment of Chinese arts for the purposes of cultural diplomacy is neither a recent phenomenon, nor an entirely novel departure in the history of museums and display in China (Beattie et al. 2019). Indeed, as my colleagues and I have argued in a recent book, “[s]oft power has comprised a distinct feature of Chinese history and philosophy from ancient times,



aligning at least to some degree with traditional Chinese approaches to social and diplomatic relations” (Galikowski et al. 2019: 4). Second, this article attempts to redress the overwhelming focus of scholarship in the Northern Hemisphere on cultural diplomacy, collecting, and the exhibition of Chinese arts. It does so by examining the content and reception of a display of Asian, especially Chinese, arts in Depression-era Aotearoa New Zealand, and considering the place of Chinese art in the developing cultural nationalism of New Zealand in this period.

The detailed case study of this article also responds to a recent plea by Conal McCarthy for studies in New Zealand that “historicise museums,” by situating “them within their own historical context” (Forthcoming: 17). Historicizing museum practice in New Zealand with a focus on Asia, this article argues, can help break scholarship out of its overwhelmingly bicultural focus. Until the work of McCarthy and Amiria Henare, New Zealand scholarship has largely focused on a progressive narrative of museums as settler institutions, either ignoring or writing out Māori entirely (Henare 2005; McCarthy 2009; McCarthy and Cobleby 2009). A focus on Asia extends this new critical museology in New Zealand by asking local scholars to reorient their work to take account of significant collectors and collections of Asian arts in Aotearoa New Zealand (Beattie and Bullen 2014; Beattie and Bullen 2016; Beattie and Murray 2011; Bell 2014; Bullen 2014). To this extent, it also responds to late art historian Francis Pound’s great regret at having to remove his chapter on Chinoiserie and Japonisme in his seminal work, *The Invention of New Zealand: Art and National Identity* (2009: xvi). Finally, this case study attempts to reply to McCarthy’s call for museum histories of New Zealand “to include the people who visit them, and not just the people who work in them” (Forthcoming: 17–18). It is precisely their transitory nature, their very ephemerality, we argue, that lends studies of exhibitions like the 1935 Loan Exhibition historiographical urgency and interest.<sup>2</sup>

### New Zealand in the 1930s

The 1930s were a “formative era in nation-building, through the conscious ‘making’ of New Zealand” (Smith 2005: 150). European New Zealanders exhibited “a straining desire, in literature and painting, to cut free at once from the colonial past and from a maternal England” (Pound 2009: 9). Art historians have tended to look to the economic stress and frustration of the Depression to account for this dramatic cultural change in New Zealand. Reflecting on the decade, author, poet, and Sinophile Robin Hyde (cited in Pound 2009: 9) claimed that “the Depression had a stimulating effect on the thought and culture of rebellious young minds, in a silent country which at last learned to be articulate,” and that this was “probably worth all the hardship involved . . . no New Zealand writer regrets the Depression.”

In his wide-ranging study, Pound (2009) traced artistic nationalism to the first issue of *Art in New Zealand*, a magazine first published in September 1928. Certainly, the impact of this publication, along with other arts and literary magazines at the time, both reflected and aided such a sentiment. The following decade boasted numerous arts and literary initiatives. In 1932, Caxton Press opened, specializing in New Zealand literature, and the first issue of the radical, Auckland-University-based *Phoenix* magazine appeared. In 1934, the left-wing weekly *Tomorrow* was launched, and in 1936 New Zealand’s first state-supported art institution, the National Art Gallery, opened its doors to the public in Wellington (Rice 2012). These developments declaimed “that something new was beginning, or about to begin, and such a beginning was repeatedly posed as a separation from England” (Pound 2009: 5). Of this separation, Blackwood Paul wrote: “We are making our origins slowly and painfully at this present . . . New Zealand is not England, nor our people hers” (1931: 181, 184).<sup>3</sup>

As Rebecca Rice (2012: 4) showed, new institutions like the National Art Gallery both reflected and fed into this growing nationalist sentiment through their selection of particular kinds of exhibitions and narratives. “Objects in New Zealand’s new national institutions,” she noted, “were to be embedded in a story or narrative that would provide an evolutionary history of the nation” (see also McCarthy and Copley 2009).

### Bringing Asia to New Zealand

Most Christchurch residents would have likely passed over the small paragraph appearing at the bottom of the “News for Women” column in *The Press* newspaper’s 4 April 1935 issue, which announced the formation of a committee to arrange for “an exhibition of Ancient and Oriental art to be held in the Art Gallery . . . to help the funds of the Young Women’s Christian Association” (Anon. 1935j: 2). Amid a sea of articles concerning unemployment and relief work—a consequence of the Great Depression—talks of war in Europe, independence in Ireland, and King George V’s approaching Jubilee celebrations, an exhibition of oriental art in 1930s Christchurch seemed somewhat out of place. Indeed, it would appear as though not even the committee members themselves could have foreseen that the Loan Exhibition would later be labeled as “the most important show of its kind ever in New Zealand” at its conclusion (Anon. 1935b: 6). But how does an exhibition of oriental art in 1930s New Zealand earn such an accolade, unless, of course, it is not so “out of place” as one might think?

The 1935 Loan Exhibition at Durham Street was one of a series of exhibitions of Asian art that took place in New Zealand in the late 1920s and 1930s. In these, Captain George Humphreys-Davies (1880–1948) took center stage, organizing art exhibitions at the Auckland War Memorial Museum in 1932 and 1933 and, earlier, curating exhibitions of Japanese art in 1927 and 1934 (Anon. 1934a) in Auckland. Other than the Loan Exhibition at Durham Street of 1935, Asian art was also displayed at that year’s Otago Art Society’s Annual Exhibition, while another exhibition exclusively of Chinese art also took place at the Auckland War Memorial Museum, closing in 1936 (Beattie and Murray 2011). The 1935 exhibitions were fine preparation for Humphreys-Davies’s wildly popular 1937 Exhibition of Chinese Art. Touring the country’s four main centers in 1937, the Exhibition of Chinese Art was arguably the most significant Asian art exhibition until the 1950s, due to its quality and “unprecedented and ambitious scope,” which attracted large numbers of visitors (Beattie and Murray 2011: 46).

Though exhibitions of Chinese and Japanese art would be displayed again in the 1950s, through the activities, largely, of Sinophile Rewi Alley, Canterbury Museum Director Roger Duff, Hawke’s Bay collector H. W. Youren, and former Jardine, Matheson & Co. employee W. H. Way (Beattie and Bullen 2016; Beattie et al. 2017), the number of exhibitions and their enthusiastic reception in the 1930s warrants examination. The most important factor in helping to contextualize such enthusiasm was the great popularity of Asian arts in Britain, a somewhat ironic development given that New Zealand’s interest in this category of art was purportedly representative of a *break* with Mother Britain.

As G. M. L. Lester (1935: 2), in the foreword to the 1935 Loan Exhibition at Durham Street, stated: “The signal success that attended the Exhibitions of China and Oriental Art, held in London in 1910 and 1932, has encouraged the Committee . . . to offer to the New Zealand public an opportunity of seeing and rejoicing in the beautiful work of the oriental artists.” In 1910, London’s Burlington Fine Arts Club held the first of several exhibitions of Chinese “art,” which included indigenous Chinese examples of jade, bronze, porcelain, furniture, and other objects that were not popularly known in the West. Following the Great War, interest in China boomed

on both sides of the Atlantic; it was encouraged in part by the ruling Nationalist Chinese government, which deployed cultural diplomacy to raise China’s profile on the international stage and to win itself financial aid and international support: “Two large touring exhibitions in 1931 and 1934–1935, put together by Liu Haisu and Gao Qifeng, and officially endorsed by the Chinese Nationalist Government, took place in major cities across Europe, including Berlin, Amsterdam, Geneva, Prague and London” (Galikowski et al. 2019: 5). It is the last of these to which Lester was likely referring to above. Aside from European precedent, as Canterbury’s curator more prosaically explained, Asian artworks were cheaper than European ones (Humphreys-Davies 1937).

Like its British inspiration, Christchurch’s exhibition encouraged visitors to imagine something beyond the horizon of European artistic traditions and, in its case, turn instead to New Zealand’s geographically closer neighbors in Asia for artistic inspiration. As our analysis shows, in this way the exhibition contributed to the national awakening that Pound suggested was characteristic of 1930s New Zealand by offering an alternative artistic tradition to Europe. More than that, however, was the exhibition’s aim, as a 1935 article in *Art in New Zealand* claimed, to introduce the Dominion’s visitors to the arts of Asia (Anon. 1935c).

### Exhibiting at Durham Street, 1935

Christchurch’s *The Press* newspaper extensively covered the exhibition, carrying content on almost every day of its opening, and on some days it even boasted two separate articles on it. As explored below, the subject matter of these articles is surprisingly broad, including items on collectors and their collections, the different types of art displayed—including their history and manufacture—exhibition events and reception, as well as photographs of objects individually and on display.

Most likely, the impetus for the Loan Exhibition of Oriental Art came from the Canterbury Society of Arts (CSA) (King 1996). Not only was the exhibition directed toward the Christchurch public, but, unlike other Asian exhibitions of the 1930s, its contents all came from New Zealand collectors, including a significant number from Christchurch residents. The organizing committee strove to involve and engage the public in several different ways: from discounts on the admission of schoolchildren and a poster-painting competition for students from Canterbury College School of Art, to lectures involving the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and the School of Art contextualizing exhibition objects, as well as a daily “special exhibit” (Anon. 1935e; Anon. 1935f; Anon. 1935l; Anon. 1935q). W. A. (May) Moore, the daughter of one of the two major donors (Joseph Kinsey), attended the exhibition. She helped to arrange her father’s collection and describe some of the pieces, especially for the readers of *The Press Junior* (Anon. 1935r). This engagement reflected contemporary emphasis in museum studies on education and art’s social purpose (McCarthy and Copley 2009). As well, the particular example of Moore highlights the role of women and exhibitions in New Zealand, a new research avenue pioneered by Bronwyn Labrum (2018). Reflecting the exhibition’s practical aims, proceeds went to the struggling Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), which, for its part, helped in the exhibition’s organization, providing tea and refreshments each each winter afternoon and evening session (Anon. 1935i).

Organizers had high hopes of the exhibition’s lasting cultural impact. One journalist focused on New Zealand’s artistic community, drawing a corollary with the potential impact of the Christchurch exhibition and that of the 1930 Persian Exhibition in London on British art, house decoration, and fashion (Anon. 1935p). Newspaper articles made bold and enthusiastic statements: “Few people would imagine that there were so many genuine examples of Eastern art in New Zealand,” explained one article excitedly, suggesting that there would be “much to

attract the archeologist, the historian, and the connoisseur” and a general opportunity to gain a “valuable cultural education” (Anon. 1935b: 9).

## Collecting Asia in Aotearoa

The exhibition catalogue lists 870 individual and sets of objects. Some 85 local residents loaned items to the exhibition. The majority came from two significant local collectors: George Humphreys-Davies and Joseph Kinsey (1852–1936). Very much reflecting their contributions, the exhibition catalogue’s first two sections are dedicated to Humphreys-Davies’s and Kinsey’s loan works, respectively, with the last section left for the 85 other local contributors. The focus of this article will be on Humphreys-Davies’s collection. Unlike Humphreys-Davies, Kinsey is a relatively well-known and well-studied figure in New Zealand museum studies and art history scholarship (Bell 2014).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, by the time of the 1935 Loan Exhibition, Kinsey was an old man and had little personal involvement in the display. In contrast, Humphreys-Davies’s vision very much shaped the 1935 exhibition.

Humphreys-Davies was an intellectual dynamo; as noted above, he was associated with every Asian exhibition in New Zealand. Often, he not only lent items from his collection but also voluntarily gave lectures on them, and he contributed articles to New Zealand’s new art quarterly, *Art in New Zealand*. Described as the “nucleus” of the exhibition, Humphreys-Davies’s extensive collection for the 1935 Loan Exhibition had grown out of a life-long passion for collecting (Anon. 1935a: 21).<sup>5</sup> Born in 1880 in relative comfort in the United Kingdom, Humphreys-Davies studied for two years at Pembroke College but seems to have gone down without taking a degree. In 1914, he married Ethel Dorothy Patton, heiress to a wealthy San Francisco mining engineer. Ethel, “talented at music and financially independent,” traveled much in her youth, spending several years in Australia and New Zealand with her father (Anon. 1938). Marriage to a wealthy heiress gave Humphreys-Davies the means to collect Chinese and Japanese art.

George and Ethel shared a love of travel and art collecting. Both went “to the Far East . . . for the purpose of adding to his collection” (Anon. 1938). After war service (George fighting, Ethel nursing), the couple settled in New Zealand in 1919. In addition to farming, the two continued to collect. In 1929, they went to Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, in part to replace items—mostly “old Chinese porcelain”—“smashed beyond repair” on their trip to New Zealand in 1919, objects that George, while a tea planter, had spent a year collecting in the Federated Malay States around 1910 (Humphreys-Davies 1930: 15). Humphreys-Davies boasted of his particular flair for sniffing out hidden treasures:

There is much ancient porcelain in Bali; Ming, Sung and older still, but think not that you can just go and buy, for you must search it out and know the people and their ways. Much of it I found in Kampongs, high up among the hills, and spent many pleasant hours in the quest. (1930: 62)

In the two decades from 1919, Humphreys-Davies made several fruitful collecting trips to China, Japan, and Great Britain. Enthusiastic and articulate, he utilized both his physical possession of Chinese and Japanese jades, bronzes, ceramics, and artworks and his claimed knowledge about the techniques used in the manufacture of such objects to attain a position of some cultural influence in New Zealand. Lester, patron of the 1935 Loan Exhibition committee, described Humphreys-Davies’s involvement as “the crowning stroke of luck.” Here was a man not only “willing to help with his experience, but to place his collection at our disposal and be present at the exhibition” (Anon. 1935k: 3).

He was also willing to share his views on art with the public, popular or otherwise. In 1937, Humphreys-Davies forcefully argued in *Art in New Zealand* that

New Zealand [is a] recognized dumping ground for works that [are] unsaleable in England. . . . We have New Zealand artists who have talent . . . and I consider it . . . discouraging and definitely not in their interests to have works of any but the highest quality bought at high prices and exhibited as models of composition and technique. (1937: 204)

In 1944, he made a permanent, practical gesture to this end by gifting to the Auckland Museum his entire Chinese art collection—some of which had been loaned and displayed there previously—“as a token of recognition of the valour of New Zealand men in the forces of the last war and in this present one” (Anon. 1944: 2).

To this extent, the 1935 Loan Exhibition contributed to a growing interest in Asian arts among New Zealand’s artistic community. This interest was stimulated by the attendance of several prominent New Zealanders at the 1935–1936 International Exhibition of Chinese Art, a landmark loan exhibition of over 850 objects by the Chinese government. Fascination with all things Chinese reached a fever pitch in the wake of New Zealand’s own 1937 Exhibition of Chinese Arts, which was curated by Humphreys-Davies (Beattie and Murray 2011). In their study of modernist artist Doris Lusk (1916–1990), Lisa Beaven and Grant Banbury wrote that the 1935 Loan Exhibition, together with the 1936 Exhibition of Contemporary Canadian Painting, “had a major impact on New Zealand artists at this time” (1996: 15). Rita Angus (1908–1970), another New Zealand modernist, “drew her symbols from a fusion of European and Asian art and also from a direct study of the plants, fruit, buildings, activities in her daily life” (Paul 1983). An interest in both Chinese Daoism and Zen Buddhism found its expression in style, subject matter, and technique: for example, some of her self-portraits reference the goddess of mercy, Guanyin, while Angus’s watercolors use techniques derived from Chinese landscape painting as well as bright colors of Japanese woodblock prints. Lusk, Angus, as well as other New Zealand modernist artists, engaged on their own terms with the arts of East Asia, and non-Western art more generally, in part encouraged by the exhibitions held in New Zealand in the 1930s and in part inspired by the artistic movement known as Primitivism. Intriguingly, although the 1937 exhibition catalogue drew parallels between the material culture of China and the Māori, no such connections were made for the 1935 exhibition, which is a reflection, possibly, of the greater diversity of object types, sources, and places of origin on display in 1935, notwithstanding the much more variable quality of the 1935 exhibition (Beattie and Murray 2011).

### **Changing Contexts, Changing Categories: Ceramics**

The act of interpreting objects, argues Vishakha Desai, is a “highly contested terrain”:

This is particularly true of non-Western art objects. When collected by Western connoisseurs and curators, such objects carry with them not only assumptions about the cultures for which they were produced, but also about the values accorded to them by the cultures in which they are now located. (1995: 171)

Although Chinese elites have valued particular styles and periods of calligraphy, porcelain, jades, and the like for millennia, Craig Clunas argues that “the idea of grouping this body of material together and calling it ‘Chinese art’” is a late-nineteenth-century Western invention (2009: 9). From this period, Chinese material culture commonly came to stand as a cypher for European evaluations of practically every aspect of Chinese culture and government, including

its civilizational and racial progress. Generally, Westerners collected relatively little after the death of the emperor Qianlong (r. 1736–1795) because, to Europeans, the later Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and its cultural productions symbolized the degraded and impure state into which China had fallen.

For the 1935 exhibition, Humphreys-Davies accordingly focused on one category of the arts of China (ceramics), which he arranged by dynasty, rather than by type, style, or place of manufacture. His text explicitly valorizes the productions of ethnically Chinese (Han) periods over non-Han, while in the exhibition narrative Chinese cultural productions gradually decline in quality and sophistication over time in mirror image to the Chinese state.

The 1935 exhibition catalogue starts with ceramics from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the period in which glazes arrived in China through communication with the Middle East (Anon. 1935h). These pieces include many ceremonial figures, some on horseback, in addition to a camel and Bactrian horses without riders, which, according to the catalogue, originated in tombs. The second case of Chinese ceramics contains pottery from the Tang dynasty (618–906 CE). Humphreys-Davies claims that during this period the modeling of ceramics reached its highest level. The glazes were of such amazing beauty that many have described this period as the “Augustan Age of Chinese Art” (Anon. 1935h: 4). As an example of this, the writer draws attention to both a green melon-shaped jar and a lilac-glazed bowl, noting that, if no other examples survived from the period, the sight of these alone would be evidence enough to claim the Tang potters as “master craftsmen” (Anon. 1935h: 4). Here, Humphreys-Davies is possibly referring to the predominantly green-and-white ceramics made in Zhejiang province during the Tang dynasty that came to be known as Yue ware, or, conversely, to the complementary white ware made in the southern kilns of Gong Xian in Henan province and Xing and Ding in Hebei (Vainker 1996).

Humphreys-Davies (Anon. 1935h) then claims that many glazes from this period had lost their original beauty over time, as the most commonly used glaze of the period, characteristically thinly applied, decomposes over time in a similar way to the fading of the colored stained-glass windows of medieval European churches. Humphreys-Davies chooses to categorize a certain group of ceramics as representative of Tang pottery, as though a cohesive group of items from this period exists. The Chinese, as noted above, never thought about their many and varied items of material culture as constituting a single category. Traditionally, they categorized ceramics according to the region of pottery manufacture, as style and technique varied from kiln to kiln (Vainker 1996: 232), rather than, as Humphreys-Davies presents, by period.

A noticeable lacuna in the Humphreys-Davies (1935h: 6) section of the 1935 Loan Exhibition is ceramics from the Yuan dynasty (1244–1368), which the writer dismisses in the catalogue as a “technically unimportant” period. This was a reflection of the European veneration of Han Chinese dynasties, rather than those of foreign conquest, of which the Yuan was one. Instead, the writer moves quickly to describe pieces of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). This dynasty, the writer notes, exhibited great development and close contact with Europe (Anon. 1935h). Indeed, as modern historians have shown, the importation of porcelain from late-Ming China into Europe (and especially the Netherlands) created massive demand in Europe, as well as a thriving market in domestic export substitution (Finlay 2010; Impey 1977). A mania for Chinese porcelain inspired European manufacturers to produce cheap import substitutes of much poorer quality. Humphreys-Davies speaks scathingly of the impact of the export trade on the medium in China, claiming that it “soon created a debased and partially exotic type far removed from those simple and majestic forms which constitute true Ming” (Anon. 1935h: 8). For this, he declared, “we may blame the European demand for the subsequent over-elaboration [*sic*] of decoration which took no heed of the perfection of the medium on which it was placed”

(Anon. 1935h: 8). Ironically, recent research is revealing that most of Humphreys-Davies’s collection constitutes Chinese ceramics for export (e.g., Grace Lai, curator at the Auckland Museum, in Anon. 1935h).

The narrative, medium, and age of objects in Humphreys-Davies’s Japan section differs markedly from the presentation of the objects in the China section of the 1935 Loan Exhibition. In contrast to the emphasis on age and the dominance of ceramics, Humphreys-Davies selected 135 Japanese color prints (*ukiyo-e*). Not only does he include an inventory of them in the exhibition catalogue, but he also arranges them by artist: here, items appear as the works of individuals, rather than as representative of a particular dynasty and its cultural achievements. In all, Humphreys-Davies selects 34 artists: a brace of prints each from Harunobu (1724–1770) and Shunsho (1726–1792); four from “one of the world’s greatest artists,” Hokusai (1760–1849), and 19 prints from Hiroshige (1797–1858). Conscious of their recent age, as Humphreys-Davies argues in one of his exhibition lectures, “it is a common fallacy that all Oriental art is ancient, and also that all antiques are intrinsically valuable” (Anon. 1935g: 3). In another piece, after describing woodblock print production and its aesthetic appeal, Humphreys-Davies claims that “all artistic merit vanished from *ukiyo* art when aniline colours reached Japan” (1935: 23). In this comment, he is referring to the introduction and adoption of European-manufactured synthetic aniline dyes. Moreover, in his opinion “there is little to interest” the serious collector “after the death of Hiroshige from cholera in 1858.” Here, Humphreys-Davies argues that *ukiyo-e* production in Japan declined after contact with the West, much in the same way that he argued that Chinese ceramics declined rapidly due to the corrupting influence of export ware demanded by the West. The assumption, here and with China, is of separate, homogeneous artistic communities cut off from the West. The very opposite was true, of course: in China, there is a long history of contact with Hellenistic Europe, the Middle East, and India. Unlike his narrative on China, however, Humphreys-Davies’s narrative on Japan holds that the present generation of artists working in the medium, notably Urushibara, have revived the technique, albeit in a “somewhat modified and more European manner of portraying the subject” (1935: 23).

### Exhibiting “Orientalism”

Aside from the material from Kinsey and Humphreys-Davies, the catalogue included 85 exhibitors’ pieces, descriptions that take up 20 pages. The items from India, Burma and Malaya, Persia, Syria, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Palestine, Java, Tibet, and Turkistan speak to the extent of the British Empire and its sphere of influence, the longevity of European orientalism, and the terribly broad category under which such diverse objects were classified in this period. To give an idea of the heterogeneity of the exhibition, the last included a tablecloth from Malaya, a carpet-runner from Persia, an iron kettle from Japan, four daggers from India, and two Jewish lamps from the Pool of Siloam in Palestine (Anon. 1935h). This collection reflected, in short, the world of the last 150 years or more, one in which, as John MacKenzie writes, “Victorian influence radiated outwards into the world, not least through the peoples who emigrated to North America, southern Africa, Australia and New Zealand, as well as the traders, officials, engineers, soldiers and sailors who penetrated almost every quarter of the globe” (2001: 20). A journalist reflected this sentiment, when he wrote:

It may be wondered how these [collections] came to New Zealand, but in the early days of colonisation in this country there were many deep-water sailors who, after beating up and down the seven seas in wind-jammers settled down at last to marry and found families in

New Zealand. These men brought back from the East treasures that they had picked up during their long voyages. Others, young or adventurous sons of distinguished houses, brought from England possessions that had been carried home by diplomats, soldiers, and traders who, generations earlier, had lived in the East. These little pieces of the Orient brought colour into the wooden houses of the early settlers, and have remained through the growth of civilisation in this country. (Anon. 1935h: 20)

The exhibition underlined the extent to which Asia's diverse material culture formed part of everyday life in a former colony like New Zealand (Ballantyne and Moloughney 2006; Beattie and Bullen 2016; Petersen 2001), especially given that all but 23 of the donors lent more than one piece for the exhibition. Yet Lester spoke for many when he wrote how "astonished" he was "to find how much valuable material there was in this country" (Anon. 1935b: 6). Its extent certainly surprised organizers, for three committee members had to be assigned to deal with the local loans, where one had initially been tasked with the job (Anon. 1935b; Anon. 1935l). Notwithstanding the eclectic selection of material, an article from the time nodded to the longevity of the Victorian classificatory impulse that MacKenzie identified, and which tied the narrative of this section with that of China.

### Exhibition Outcome

After the exhibition's closure on 8 June 1935, *The Press* declaimed that it had "comprised the most valuable collection that has ever been shown in New Zealand and perhaps in the Southern Hemisphere" (Anon. 1935r: 4). The public exercised a slower response. One journalist described with some disappointment the slow uptake of the exhibition by the Christchurch public, stating that, "as is usual with Christchurch, our populace woke up to this fact just as the exhibition was closing" (Anon. 1935c: 57). Evidence of this is hinted at in a *Press* article, which commented that the day before the exhibition's closure "showed a record attendance" (Anon. 1935m: 6). Indeed, until this point attendance had been lower than expected, and, due to these large numbers at the exhibition's end, the committee regretted that "the other engagements for the gallery prevented its extension for a further time" (Anon. 1935n: 20). Even so, the exhibition was visited by a large number of tertiary students, and groups of secondary students, with lectures well-attended and the rooms of the Durham Street Art Gallery especially crowded toward the exhibition's end (Anon. 1935r: 4). The check that Lester gave to the "Cinderella" organization, the YWCA, as a result of the exhibition, was over £138, and while thanking the exhibition committee for its support, Lester also attributed the exhibition's success to the publicity it received from *The Press* (Anon. 1935o: 2). Despite the initial disappointment of the *Art in New Zealand* journalist with the Christchurch public's late rush to see the exhibition, the writer concluded: "As it was, many Christchurch people realised for the first time what beauty in Oriental art means . . . Altogether the exhibition was an unforgettable event in the life of Christchurch" (Anon. 1935c: 57).

## Conclusion

Henare writes that “artefacts generate ties by moving across territorial and cultural boundaries, sometimes crossing oceans to create and affirm social bonds” (2005: 7) and that “[i]n many societies, artefacts collapse spatial and temporal distance, bringing together people who would otherwise remain quite literally out of touch” (2005: 6). The 1935 Loan Exhibition of Oriental Art at the Durham Street Art Gallery brought New Zealanders in touch with the arts of Asia at a time of change in the culture of New Zealand’s (white) national identity. While in the 1930s New Zealand was still trying to climb out of the Great Depression, the 1935 Loan Exhibition was part of a shift in elite white culture that represented a conscious attempt to break away from New Zealand’s colonial past, one in which art could help to forge a path to a national identity. While, as Henare asserts, the movements of artifacts could “create and affirm social bonds” by connecting different peoples, more influential still was, perhaps, the role of cultural intermediaries, like Humphreys-Davies, who positioned themselves as cultural arbiters, interpreters of the “other,” who achieved renown in their countries of residence for their “expertise” on oriental cultures and who introduced the category of “Oriental” or “Chinese” art to New Zealanders. Undoubtedly, too, the level of interest in Asian culture and objects in this period—especially the almost-fevered desire to possess Chinese objects evident in the wake of the 1937 exhibition of Chinese art—challenges the largely bicultural story of arts in Aotearoa. Instead, our article emphasizes the need to consider the arts of Asia, their assembly, representation, and interpretation—however problematically that may have been—in stories of New Zealand identity and art. The arts of Asia presented to many 1930s New Zealanders provided an intellectually stimulating and novel counterpoint to dominant European traditions.

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## NOTES

1. In related fashion, the same period witnessed the explosion of museums (both state and private) in China, which is well summarized by Duncan Campbell (2014). By the end of 2012, the PRC had over 1,800 museums. The quotation in the title of this article is from Anon. (1935d: 57). The authors wish to thank Grace Lai, Auckland Museum, and John Robson, formerly Map Librarian, University of Waikato, for helping with information. The article benefited from the comments of David Bell, Richard Bullen, Joanna Cobley, Conal McCarthy, and the anonymous reviewers.
2. For a survey of existing Northern Hemisphere literature, see Maria Galikowski and colleagues (2019).
3. Interestingly, a reflection of this new identity only reached legislation much later in 1948, when, for the first time, New Zealanders could legally call themselves New Zealand citizens instead of British ones (New Zealand, Ministry for Culture and Heritage 2017).
4. The owner of a Christchurch shipping agency and insurance brokering business, Kinsey was an eclectic collector of curios, art objects (especially Japanese art), and books—the last of which included a library of over 15,000 volumes (Lummis 2009). Between 1938 and 1941, Lady Kinsey and her daughter, May Moore, also gave over 250 Japanese prints, paintings, and decorative arts to Canterbury Museum, whose director, Dr. Robert Alexander Falla (1901–1979), believed to have been “probably one of the best of its kind in New Zealand” (Bell 2014: 123). Moore later gave significant donations of Chinese items from her father’s collection (Beattie et al. 2017).
5. Humphreys-Davies’s father collected European pottery, although he himself had become more interested in Eastern art (Anon. 1935d).

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