

Influences from the East on display at museum

By BARBARA MAYER

When Josiah Broadhead was decorating his home in Salem, Mass., around 1885, he commissioned a paneled screen picturing his three blond-haired daughters shown clothed in Japanese kimonos.

The screen, on display at the newly reopened Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, is a delightfully nutty example of that East-meets-West decor known variously as Asian export or chinoiserie, depending on when and where it was made.

Good news for lovers of Asian export wares: The world's most comprehensive collection of them is on display at the gorgeously renovated and expanded Peabody Essex Museum.

The Peabody, founded in 1799, has the distinction of being the oldest American museum in continuous operation. No spring chicken itself, the Essex Institute began life in 1821 to collect items pertaining to Essex County history. Salem is the Essex county seat. The two museums merged in 1992. Now, their collections, joint facilities and grounds have been reconfigured in more than 250,000 square feet, including a new wing designed by Moshe Safdie.

While the Peabody Essex has many important collections from all over the world among its 2.4 million works of art, architecture and design, the accent is on Asia for the museum's reopening.

That's entirely appropriate, since from the 18th century through the late 19th century, Salem was the home port for some of America's wealthiest ship owners and captains. These sea captains often called in at Chinese and other Asian ports and brought back treasures that have ended up as donations to the Peabody and Essex Institute.

Several special exhibits offer a look at rare Chinese scroll paintings, Chinese commemorative portraits, and 19th century Asian photographs. On permanent view on three floors are wonderful examples out of the institution's 26,000 items of Asian export wares, encompassing ceramics, silver, furniture, works on paper and much more.

There is also a new installation of a complete early 19th century Chinese merchant's house. The house, which is furnished, was purchased from the descendants in the family that

built and lived in it in south China. It was taken apart and reassembled on the museum's grounds adjacent to the new wing.

In addition to original furnishings, lots of information on the lives of those who lived there is included in the exhibition. "It appears to be the only complete Chinese house or not a reproduction or outside China," said Dan L. Monroe, executive director of the Peabody Essex. "Having it provides an opportunity to give a real sense of life, architecture and art in a part of China."

The displays at the Peabody Essex allow visitors to glimpse something of the long history of decorative interactions between Asia and the West. Going back more than a thousand years, Asia has given the rest of the world decorative images, materials and ideas, including porcelain, silk, ceramic glazes, floral decorations and ornamental forms such as pagodas, bridges and fretwork, to say nothing of Chinese characters and clothing forms such as the kimono. "There are pictures of women wearing dresses of Chinese silk on the walls of Pompeii, which was covered over in 79 A.D. by ash," said William Sargent, curator of Asian Export Art.

In the 17th century, the Dutch and British established trading companies in the Far East and began to import exotic decorative wares. Meanwhile, missionaries published books about their travels in China and elsewhere, illustrating them with pictures of places, customs and costumes. The imports and books helped create a fad in the West for Asian decoration.

The 18th century was a high point, when Chinese textiles, porcelains, furniture, silver, tea paraphernalia and more were specifically made for export to the West. To appeal to the Western market, merchants often had Chinese artisans copy Western designs, producing what has become known as chinoiserie. Sometimes, the designs were not even copied, but merely imitated in the West. Blue and white pottery from Holland and England imitated Chinese blue and white porcelain, for example. Japanning was another example of imitation, in which Westerners copied Asian lacquer ware as best they could.

"Since the 18th century, the export trade has never stopped, although there have been times

when Asian influence was greater or lesser, depending on fashion," said Sargent.

Josiah Broadhead's panel screen is an example of the

Japan craze of the 1880s. It started in 1876 when a Japanese display at the Philadelphia Centennial led to a vogue for things Japanese. Wicker furniture,

such as the Wakefield loveseat on view at the museum, is another example of an East-West crossover. The loveseat by Cyrus Wakefield is actually



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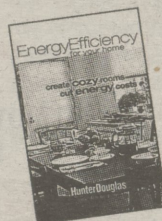
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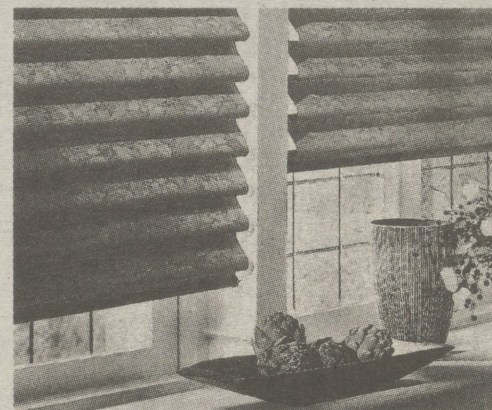


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