“That amusing man Chinnery,” wrote Miss Harriet Low of New York during a visit to Macao, China, early in the nineteenth century, “... plumes himself upon being ‘though not handsome, excessively genteel;’ his personal appearance, I think, however, is rather against him, for he is what I call fascinatingly ugly, and . . . were he not so agreeable he would be intolerable.”

A self-portrait of the subject of these reflections, George Chinnery, an English-born artist resident in China, has recently been acquired by the Museum. It gives graphic emphasis to Miss Low’s comments, portraying a ruddy-complexioned man in his early fifties, with heavy jowls and thick lips, a prominent nose, and a high, receding forehead crowned with a shock of unruly hair. From behind old-fashioned spectacles, however, a pair of twinkling eyes dominate the homely features and add an air of good nature to what another candid contemporary called “one of the ugliest of faces.”

The portrait was among the possessions brought back to this country from China by Benjamin Chew Wilcocks in 1827. Wilcocks, a Philadelphian, was one of the most prominent of the American merchants engaged in the lucrative China trade. For over twenty-five years he lived in the Orient, dividing his time between the foreign settlement at Macao and the near-by port of Canton, where he transacted his business with the Chinese Hong, or Committee of Merchants. He was influential in founding the hospital for foreign residents and from 1814 to 1820 served as American consul. When Chinnery arrived in Macao in 1825, “Wilcocks took to him,” William C. Hunter recorded in his memoirs, “[a]nd they became the best of friends.” Presumably the portrait was painted for this friend in Macao or Canton sometime between Chinnery’s arrival and Wilcocks’s departure for the States.

The painting is a small one, about seven by eight inches, but the warm browns and reds which compose its palette have been applied with vigor and enthusiasm, approaching abandon in the coat and background. This broad treatment characterizes most of Chinnery’s work, notably the portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes—whether in oil, gouache, water color, or ink—and even the miniatures, of which he did many early in his career before his eyes became too weak. The critics who referred to him as “the Frans Hals of the Irish School” and “le suave et sauvage Irlandais” were justified in the association, if mistaken as to his nationality.
Chinnery came, not from Ireland, but from England. He was born in London in 1774, the son of an amateur artist and grandson of the author of a book entitled *Writing and Drawing Made Easy*. He was already exhibiting at the Royal Academy at the age of seventeen, and only three years later a critic noted that "among the budding candidates for fame this rising young artist is the most prominent." Chinnery was well on his way to achieving that reputation of an accomplished portraitist to which Thackeray's Colonel Newcome paid tribute when admiring a portrait by his own son: "Chinnery himself, Sir," he exclaimed, "couldn't hit off a likeness better!"

During a six years' stay in Dublin the young artist married his landlord's daughter, Marianne Vigne. The marriage was not a happy one, and in 1802, after little more than three years together, he left his wife and two children and departed for the East, where he was to remain for the rest of his life. After five years in Madras he settled in Calcutta, becoming the fashionable painter of the day and a beloved and famous character in the colony. That the adventures of Tom Raw, the fictional hero of a poem burlesquing the life of a cadet in the East India Company, were not considered complete without a visit to Mr. Chinnery is an amusing sign of his prominence.

Chinnery was a dramatic storyteller, an accomplished Persian scholar, and a poet, as well as a painter. "Like many other men of extraordinary talent," however, William Hickey observed, "Mr. Chinnery was extremely odd and eccentric, so much so as at times to make me think him deranged. . . . He had a strong tendency to hypochondria which frequently made him fanciful. . . . I have lately heard that soon after my departure from Calcutta Mr. Chinnery became determinedly insane and has ever since been kept under restriction being now pronounced a confirmed and incurable lunatic." Chinnery must, nevertheless, have recovered in part, or perhaps the restrictions were slight, for in 1825, ostensibly to better his health, but probably to escape his wife, who had followed him from England in 1818, he set out for China. He is said to have celebrated his departure with characteristic humor in a painting showing a view of Calcutta, a ship preparing to set sail, a man bowing farewell to the city, and a scroll bearing the words "thermometer 2oo, too hot for me." "Too hot" it might well have been, for he admitted in later years that he had had to bolt to China for a debt of about £40,000.

A story frequently told about Chinnery relates that upon his arrival in Macao his wife again threatened to follow him. Whereupon he quickly withdrew to Canton, a city closed to European women, exclaiming: "Now I am all right. What a kind providence is the Chinese government that it forbids the softer sex from coming and bothering us here!" Whether or not his wife was pursuing him, it is probable that Chinnery made several trips to Canton from Macao, where he maintained residence until his death in 1852.

In China Chinnery became, as he had been in India, the fashionable painter and popular wit of his community. Among the prized possessions of many Americans returning to the States were portraits of themselves from the hand of this English artist. The portraits of Miss Harriet Low, Mr. and Mrs. William Henry Low, and Mr. Wilcocks which were shown at the Museum in 1941 in a special loan exhibition, *The China Trade and Its Influences*, testify, like the present self-portrait, to the talent of that "monstrous epicure," "incorrigible punster," and "droll genius," the versatile Mr. Chinnery.

Acc. no. 43.132.4. Oil on canvas. H. 85/8, w. 7 3/4 in. Shown in Gallery F26B, in the American Wing, with other imports of the China trade.

Tom Raw Sits for His Portrait, an engraving showing Chinnery as a young artist in India. From “Tom Raw, the Griffin,” a burlesque poem by Sir Charles D’Oyley, London, 1828, describing the adventures of a cadet in the East India Company’s service. Reproduced through the courtesy of the Princeton University Library

...Gentle readers, ... we usher in great Ch—n—y! . . .

That giant man in face and scenery,
Whose works have pleased alike in East and West,
Who looks at nature with an eye bold and free,
And steals her charms more keenly than the rest,
Who, with less real merit, better line their nest.

"You have not been at Ch—n—y’s, I think?" said Randy to his friend, one afternoon.
"No," replied Tom, "that is a wanting link in my career, which I must add, and soon."—
"Well then," cried Randy, "I will grant the boon
Of shewing you to this most skilled of painters:
You’ll be delighted with him—if in tune;

He’s always in his shop, and will not stint us
In hearty welcomes, as his lungs will soon acquaint us."

... In his atelier
You see the ablest limner in the land,
With mild and gentle look inviting near,
Palette on thumb and maplestick in hand,
And saying, “Sirs—what may be your command?”

... O’er the walls are charcoal dashings
Of sudden thoughts—or imitative keys,
Hung on a nail—and various coloured splashings—
The shape of frames, of houses, horses, trees,
Prismatic circles—five dot effigies;
Notes of short hand—a card for five o’clock,
"Lord M. desires the honour of Mr. C.’s Company," in conspicuous station stuck,
To shew the deference paid his talent—or his luck?