James Cox and his Curious Toys

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One of the most ingenious artists of eighteenth century London is also one of the most elusive. Jeweler and mechanician, James Cox suddenly achieved fame in 1772 by supplying the Chinese emperor Ch’ien Lung and his court with watches and automata—much as the famous Fabergé in the nineteenth century supplied jewelry to the Russian court—and was as suddenly forgotten.

Automata had fascinated the Chinese as early as the tenth century when, in their travels to the Near East, they first encountered the Arabic clepsydra or water clocks. These marked the passage of time by regulated drops of water (being, so to speak, sandglasses with “grains” of water) which set in motion automatic figures such as birds or musicians. But it was not until 1601, when Father Matteo Ricci won the favor of the Ming emperor Wan Li with a present of some watches and a large clock, that the techniques of European clockmaking caught the imagination of the Chinese. They came to take such a delight in the mechanics of Western time-telling that toward the end of the seventeenth century the emperor K’ang Hsi established in his palace an atelier of clockmakers recruited among the Jesuit missionaries, who, because only they could design and repair the instruments, thus found their often precarious position in China easier to maintain. In the eighteenth century, with increased contact with Western and particularly English culture, came an apparently insatiable demand for the much more sophisticated European mechanical “toys”—as these trinkets were called in Georgian England—and throughout the century the English poured watches and automata into China: Ch’ien Lung was said to have in his palace four thousand clocks and watches imported from Europe. This was largely a luxury trade; the only people who could afford these extravagant toys were the Emperor and members of his court. The watches, it is true, enjoyed a much wider popularity: by the middle of the century the vogue was such that in 1751 a Swedish traveler could write, “Watch-makers are very much wanted here. The Chinese buy large and little watches of the English. In their shops they have sometimes English watches to sell, and sometimes at moderate prices, but mostly of the worst kind.” The complaint of shoddy workmanship, voiced off and on into the nineteenth century, seems in no way to have lessened the enthusiasm of the Chinese for these mechanical wonders.

The main source of the watches and automata was England, and among English craftsmen James Cox led the field. Cox had been working in London for many years—at least since 1757 when he is first mentioned at 103 Shoe Lane, Fleet Street—but his earliest known work dates from the mid-1760s. One example from this period, a nécessaire fitted with a variety of toilet implements (Figure 2), was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1957. Of moss agate sheathed in a delicately chased gold frame, it is surmounted by two entwined serpent handles set with emeralds. An outer cover, lined with a mirror, opens to reveal an inner one set with a watch, signed “Ja Cox London,” surrounded by an automaton of revolving paste jewels. On the reverse of this inner cover is a miniature of an English card party. A pair of nécessaires by Cox almost identical to this one is included in a 1933 inventory of European mechanical toys in the Peiping Museum. Ours, too, may have been intended for the China trade; for about 1765 Cox began to produce sumptuous toys in which elaborate mechanisms and European forms used together with elephants, pagodas, and Chinese figures found such a ready market in the Far East.

Such was Cox’s position that in 1772 it was...
reported in the *St. James's Chronicle* that a large collection of his work “struck the Chinese with so much Astonishment, that the whole was purchased for the Emperor, and no other was then admired”—with the result that several cargoes of jewelry and clocks by his rivals were returned to London unsold. Perhaps it was this success—or might it have been, as he himself put it, the “Love of an honest Fame”—that led Cox to show his work in London that same year. From 1772 to 1775 Cox’s Museum, exhibited at the Great Room in Spring Gardens, near Charing Cross, was the rage of fashionable London.

The museum, according to the catalogue, consisted of twenty-three mechanical objects, all originally designed for the China trade (and perhaps duplicates of those recently added to the emperor Ch’ien Lung’s collection). Displayed in a room hung with crystal chandeliers and crimson curtains, the pieces—which ranged from nine to sixteen feet in height—were enclosed by white and gilded balustrades. At a quarter guinea a head, Londoners poured into the three daily shows to delight in such exoticisms as “a Griffin seated upon a Rock, supporting a Vase . . . the pedestal itself being supported by four beautiful Palm Trees”; or a “magnificent Asiatic temple . . . out of the dome of which gradually rises a Pagoda to the musick of its chimes”; or, best of all, a life-sized copper figure of a gardener’s boy wearing a hat that concealed musical chimes and was crowned with a large silver-gilt pineapple that burst open when the chimes played, revealing a nest of young birds being fed pearls by their mother, who fluttered among them until the chimes finished and the pineapple closed up.

*Fig. 1. The Great Room in Spring Gardens as it appeared in 1820 in a drawing by C. Bigot*

The British Museum
This piece was the principal wonder of the tour, which concluded with a performance of “God Save the King” by a mechanical band of kettle-drums, trumpets, and an organ, while curtains parted to reveal portraits of George III and Queen Charlotte by the fashionable painter John Zoffany. Presiding over all as the exhibition’s curator was one John Joseph Merlin, a sometime mechanician and harpsichord maker now acting as Cox’s manager. And Dr. Johnson’s friend Mrs. Thrale recalled being “shocked at the sight of [Cox’s] only Son sneaking about the Room in a coloured Coat when it was a Year of Publick Mourning [for the Dowager Princess of Wales]— but his Father thought him an Incumbrance I believe, & saved all he could from his Family to make more Elephants twist their Trunks, and more Rhinoceroses roll their Eyes.”

In 1773, although the museum was still drawing crowds, Cox, who had by then, according to a contemporary estimate, spent about £220,000 on it and needed money, appealed to George III for permission to sell the pieces by lottery. The King assented in May 1773, whereupon Cox quickly refurbished the Great Room, adding some new pieces and publishing a new catalogue that opened with a long panegyric on his work. “The luxuries of the rich,” he declared ingenuously, “are the chief sources of employment for the poor . . . let us not then look on luxury partially, and dwell entirely upon its casual inconveniences.” After all, he pointed out, his splendid baubles “brought half a million into the kingdom [and] for years they furnished employment to hundreds.” Justified or not, Cox was determined to make the most of the circumstances of taste, and the slightly defensive tone of the introduction gave way to one of unqualified self-gratulation in the rest of the catalogue.

This second catalogue included, in addition to the original twenty-three pieces, thirty-three more which had also been designed for the China trade. Among the new pieces was one which is particularly interesting as it seems to correspond exactly to a signed piece (Figure 5) in the Metropolitan Museum. Cox’s description is worth quoting in full: the piece is a cabinet, one of a pair, of “the finest and most beautiful red onyx: it is overlaid and mounted in every part with ornaments of gold, richly chased in festoons of flowers and other fine designs. In the front are folding doors lin’d with mirrors, which when opened discover the draws of the Cabinet; the upper draw contains a great number of fine instruments and essence bottles mounted in gold; the under draw contains the key of a most curious time piece, which when wound up gives motion to a sphere of gold, revolving on its axis during the going of the time-piece. At the corners of the Cabinet are golden vases fill’d with flowers of pearls and jewellers’ work, above which, on spiral springs of temper’d gold, are insects that move with the smallest touch as if hovering over the flowers; above the sphere is a larger nosegay suitable to those at the corners, and terminating the whole. In the bottom part of the Cabinet is a most curious chime of bells, playing various tunes; at the four corners are four bulls that support it; they stand on a gilt rock, in the front of which is a cascade and running stream of artificial water, where swans are seen swimming in
contrary directions; at the corners of the rocks are Dragons with extended wings." The Mu-
seum's cabinet is no longer, alas, supported by
dragons and swimming swans, and the mirrors
and "fine instruments and essence bottles" are
now missing, but the illustrations in these pages
will show how precisely it matches the descrip-
tion in other details. The watch with its revolving
sphere; the "curious" chime of bells which plays
four tunes (they have been identified as Chi-
nese); the hovering insects; the bulls—all are
just as Cox describes them. There are, however,
two possible points of difference between our
cabinet and the one described. In this 1773
catalogue Cox did not mention the size of the
pieces as he had done previously, but it cannot
be assumed that the additional ones were as
large as the first lot. Also, what Cox calls red
onyx appears to be, on our piece, translucent
agate over red foil. But it is not begging the ques-
tion to say that his description was not meant to
be taken literally, being more of rhetorical than
of technical intent. In short, it seems perfectly
possible that our piece is one of the pair exhibited
in 1773 and that when the lottery finally took
place on May 1, 1775 it was sold, not to a mem-
ber of the Chinese court as Cox had intended,
but to some European fancier of his inventions.
Our cabinet has a long history of Russian owner-
ship; that country seems to have provided Cox
with his greatest market outside China, and our
piece may have been sold directly into Russia,
where it remained until 1931. It was once owned
by Prince Felix Yousouffoff, from whose collec-
tion it passed into that of Count Gregory Strogan-
off sometime before 1910 when the latter died.

It is difficult to date the Museum's cabinet
exactly: its design is essentially the same as that
of several others Cox made in the 1760s—evid-
ently one of his favorite patterns—and we
know, from another dated variant, supported by
gilded rhinoceroses, in the Hermitage, that he
was still producing this design in 1772. While
the appearance of our piece in his second cata-
logue does not necessarily imply that it was
newly made, it does seem likely that the shop
had turned out a greater number of toys in 1772
than first appeared in Spring Gardens, and that
when Cox came to sell the museum by lottery
he included them all.
Fig. 5. Cabinet with musical movement and clock, signed by James Cox, probably 1772. Height 12 1/2 inches. Detail opposite

Gift of Admiral F. R. Harris in memory of his wife, Dena Sperry Harris, 1946
That the many watches and mechanical toys signed "Jas Cox London" were not by Cox's own hand was well known. The fervor induced by the thought of Cox's employment of otherwise needy jewelers can be judged by an anonymous poem that appeared in the St. James's Chronicle:

Thy lib'ral Hand has Thousands fed,
Giv'n to the drooping Artist Bread
To weeping Mothers Peace;
Thou heard'st the pale Mechanick's Moan,
And with a Spirit all thy own,
Bad'st ev'ry Anguish cease.

Certainly the variety of materials and techniques Cox employed in his designs is beyond the talents of a single craftsman. That he was an expert horologist the ingenuity of his mechanisms shows. But there is no evidence that Cox was a working goldsmith—as far as we know he was never a member of the goldsmiths' guild, nor ever used a personal mark—and it seems safe to say that the execution of his pieces was entrusted to others. A sidelight is thrown on this by a watch and a small telescope in a Swiss collection, both signed by Cox but decorated with enamel work attributed to Genevan painters. Did Cox have émigré craftsmen in his London shop, or did he order watchcases and the like to be enameled in Geneva to his specifications? The latter seems probable. There was considerable collaboration between the English and the Swiss in the matter of watchmaking: as far back as the late seventeenth century London-made mechanisms were adorned with Geneva-enameled cases, and this fusion of skills continued throughout the eighteenth century. Moreover, Cox is known to have had close connections with the Swiss watchmakers Jaquet-Droz and Leschot—it has been suggested that some of the mechanisms in his museum were supplied by that firm—and there is no reason to doubt that he was in a position to command the services of Swiss craftsmen. We do not know the names of these enamel painters, nor of the English craftsmen Cox employed. We can, however, recognize the distinctive style of these Cox-signed pieces which manage to combine, with consummate delicacy and skill, such diverse elements as urns, flowers, animals, children, paintings, music boxes, automata, and clocks.

After his lottery in 1775 Cox disappeared from notice for several years. We hear of him directly in 1783, for the last time. In that year the firm of Jaquet-Droz and Leschot opened a branch office in London under the management of Henry Maillardet and signed an agreement with Cox undertaking to supply him with mechanisms for his trade with China. The Jaquet-Droz archives show that from 1783 to 1796 a great number of watch and other mechanisms, made in Geneva, were exported by Maillardet to the Canton shop of James Cox and Son. This was run by John Henry Cox, one of James's sons, who went to Canton in 1781 and successfully established himself as a private merchant. A few years later he took on a partner, a colleague named Daniel Beale who had once been a purser in the service of the East India Company and who, from 1787 to about 1796, was Prussian Consul at Canton. This was a purely nominal office designed to protect him from expulsion by the East India Company, which resented the profits drawn off its own business by the private merchants. James Cox and Son became Cox and Beale and then, briefly, with the addition of a third partner, Cox, Beale and Laurent. By 1796
both John Henry Cox and Laurent had disappeared from Canton, and the shop was left to Beale, who reaped the last fruits of a rapidly declining trade.

In all this James Cox’s role is unclear. He went on living, and presumably working, at Shoe Lane (where he is recorded at least until 1791). But the last trace we have of him is in quite a different connection. In 1787 he is said to have acquired the embalmed head of Oliver Cromwell (the authenticity of which may certainly be questioned) in payment of a debt and, in 1799, to have sold it for £230 to “a syndicate of three persons of democratic views.” If this is true, Cox’s career seems to have closed on a rather macabre note—not incompatible with the exotic taste of the proprietor of the museum in Spring Gardens.

Fig. 6. Clepsydra of the Peacocks, from a copy made in 1315 of al-Jazari’s Treatise on Automata. According to the text on the reverse, the tube at the bottom right regulates air pressure which, when released, starts water pouring from the large trough into the smaller one, thus pushing the air up the funnel. Simultaneously the long bar through the center of the water wheel connects with the ring suspended from the birds’ platform and starts them pecking, at the same time that air released through the globe with a hole starts a whistle meant to represent the peacocks’ call. Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1955