

Quex Park, Kent
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Figure 1. Quex House c.2012. Powell-Cotton Museum. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

Introduction

How did the meanings that were attributed to objects imported via the East India Company and placed in British country homes, change over time? To contribute to the wider research around this question, being led by the *East India Company at Home 1757-1857* project, this case-study will analyse Quex House in Birchington, Kent.

This house has a rich colonial history that is around 200 years old, though the Quex Estate is much older. It has been called 'Quex' since its ownership in the 1500s by the Quekes family who prospered from the extensive wool industry in Kent. The Powell-Cotton family connection with the house began when John Powell (1721-1783), Assistant to the First Lord Holland, purchased estates, including Quex, from Holland's son, Charles James Fox, in the 1760s. These subsequently passed to Powell's sister, nephew, and then niece, Harriot (1776-1837) who married Charles Bowland Cotton (1768- 1847) – hence the Cotton link.

The marriage to Charles Bowland Cotton also marked the beginning of Quex House's links to the East India Company. Charles's father, John Cotton (1735-1803) was a Commander in the East India Company's Marine Service, and Charles himself was in charge of the East India Company ship, *The Cufnells*. Charles's son, Henry Perry Cotton (1806-1881) who inherited the house after the death of his father and then uncle, became a Lieutenant in the Company army, and later, Aide-de-Camp to General Pine.

A number of decorative objects from India and China are believed to have been passed down from these generations to the individual who is the focus of this case-study, their descendent, Major Percy Powell-Cotton (1866- 1940). The significance of this inheritance for the *East India Company at Home* project lies with the fact that Major Powell-Cotton actively used this collection in the decoration of Quex house. He also added to the collection himself as his decorative tastes developed. Both of these points raise questions about the legacy of objects acquired by eighteenth-century East India Company officials, and invite an interrogation of processes of change in British country houses, especially the acquisition, use, and understanding of Asian luxury goods inside them.

This case-study will begin with a brief family history, followed by an analysis of evidence from the family and Museum archive at Quex to understand the makings of Percy's decorative tastes, particularly how his artistic ideas of the Orient were constructed through these inherited objects. Percy later embarked on a period of extensive travelling and experienced other cultures for himself, and so the second part of this study will investigate him in his later life as a collector who added to his treasured family collection in ways influenced and informed by his own travels, and from wider cultural movements of his own time. The developments in Percy's ideas are reflected in the extensive decorative schemes, renovation, preservation, and collecting that he carried out at Quex House.

This study is a reflection on one man and his collections, which seeks to uncover some of the meanings attributed to his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century East India Company possessions, and how such meanings were adapted to the Victorian and early Edwardian setting.



Figure 2. Quex House c. 1840. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

Family tree



Figures 3-5 (following left to right). Family portraits in the Powell-Cotton Museum. From left to right: John Cotton (1735-1803); Charles Bowland Cotton (1768-1847) and Henry Perry Cotton (1806-1881). The painting of John Cotton can be found in the Armoury at Quex House. Figure 6 (far right). Photograph of Percy Cotton aged 18. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic. 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

John Cotton (1735-1803) (see figure 3) was appointed a Commander of the East India Company Marine Service on 27 October 1762. Between 1762 and 1781, he made six voyages to China as Commander of the *Hawke*.¹ He resigned in 1791 and the following year, was elected an Elder Brother of Trinity House to aid marine navigation.

John Cotton's son, Charles Bowland Cotton (1768-1847) (see figure 4) began his East India career as a captain's servant, sailing to India on the *Warren Hastings* in 1784, and rising to Second Officer in 1792. In 1795 he took charge of the East Indiaman, *The Cuffnells*. Charles sailed to China in 1796 and 1798, the year of his marriage to Harriot Roberts, niece of the late John Powell (hence the later family name, Powell-Cotton). In December 1796, his ship anchored 12 miles down river from Canton to offload eastbound cargo, including goods brought from India. By mid January, the return consignment began to be loaded. More than 5000 chests of assorted teas, 120 bales of silk and 100 boxes of Nankeen (either cotton or porcelain) were stored in the holds.² On 28 February 1797, he set sail for England. His third and final voyage to China on *The Cuffnells* was in 1802. Charles kept a log book of his travels, though its focus was largely on his naval exploits, rather than any personal objects he might have acquired and brought home.³

Two of John Cotton's sons would later serve in the army of the East India Company. Henry Perry Cotton (see figure 5) was born in 1806 at Southwood House in Ramsgate. His older brother Charles died in India in 1821 whilst serving in the Madras Cavalry. Henry was now the oldest son and heir, and soon followed his late brother into the India army, serving in the Bengal (7th light), part of the East India Company force. He rose to Lieutenant in June 1827 and was appointed Aide-de-Camp to General Pine.⁴ In 1828 he married the General's youngest daughter, Georgina, at Calcutta Cathedral. They returned to England where their first son, Henry Horace was born in 1830. When Henry Perry's father and then uncle died, he inherited the family's London and Thanet estates. He soon moved his growing family into Quex, and died there in 1881. His oldest son, Henry Horace Powell Cotton inherited the London and Thanet estates during a period of economic decline.

¹ British Library India Office records- please contact Quex Park for further information.

² British Library India Office records- please contact Quex Park for further information.

³ British Library India Office records- please contact Quex Park for further information.

⁴ Powell-Cotton Museum Archive Doc 4.5 Press cuttings.

Henry Horace, his wife Matilda, and their three children, Percy, Ida, and Gerald lived in South Kensington, and later made Quex their Thanet home. Henry Horace spent a considerable amount of money extending Quex House, and within a decade, it had been extensively re-modelled.



Figure 7. Photograph of Henry Perry-Cotton and family c.1858. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.



Figure 8. Quex House c. 1870. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

On the death of his father in 1894, the subject of this case-study, Major Percy Powell-Cotton (see figure 6) would steer the Quex estate in a new and more financially stable direction. As a traveller, naturalist, collector, and landowner, he would also begin his life's work, the Powell-Cotton Museum. In addition to the Museum, Percy kept a daily journal, and was a keen photographer. These sources not only provide a remarkable record of nineteenth-century family life, but also serve to help us understand Percy's fascination with his family's past and his artistic tastes and influences.

The makings of a collector

The young Percy Powell-Cotton spent the majority of his childhood and teenage years living in the family homes in Regents Park Road, London, Grove House in Garlinge, and then 29 Cornwall Gardens in South Kensington. Sir Henry Thring (1818-1907), a British lawyer and civil servant, once jestingly referred to this part of South Kensington as 'Maine's Village Community', a reference to the anthropological-legal essays about the close-knit structure of North Indian life, entitled *Village Communities*, published in 1871 by Sir Henry Maine.⁵

Indeed, early inhabitants of standing in, or close to Cornwall Gardens included many 'Indian' men and their families: Herman Merivale, Under-Secretary for India, 1866–74; Sir George Campbell, M.P., Indian administrator, member of the Council of India, and ethnologist, 1876–81; Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, jurist, Indian administrator, member of the Council of India, and essayist, 1868–80; and Sir John Strachey, Indian administrator and member of the Council of India, 1884–95.⁶ The Powell-Cottons' immediate neighbour here was Harry Lumsden, Lieutenant General of the Bengal Army. Growing up in this particular social setting must have established particular early ideas, or posed questions about Asia in the young Percy's mind, a position further encouraged by his home.

Photographs of Grove House and Cornwall Gardens tell us that Percy grew up surrounded by Asian pottery, porcelain, furniture, and other objects of interest.⁷ As a result, the young Percy was materially literate and had a good knowledge of the visual arts. Evidence from his archive shows that even as a teenager living in South Kensington, he had already devised ideas for his future Quex house. He drew plans in 1882⁸ and had chosen tiles by the age of seventeen.⁹ His close proximity to the South Kensington Museum and its Oriental Courts, which opened at its current spot in 1857, may have also influenced Percy. Highlighted by the 1851 Great Exhibition in Hyde Park,¹⁰ and added to by the Aesthetic Movement,¹¹ Indian design became epitomised in the South Kensington Museum's Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, the year before Percy's 21st birthday. Percy grew up therefore, not only in a house filled with cultural symbolism relating to Asia, but also in a local community shaped by Asian wealth and goods, and during a time of wider cultural thought which were all entrenched in ideas of the 'Orient'.

The photographs taken by Percy at his twenty-first birthday (held in 1887 at Quex House- four years after his parents moved in), show how the inherited Asian objects that he had grown up with had begun to conjure ideas of other cultures in Percy's imagination, long before he embarked on any travels of his own.¹²

⁵ George Feaver, *From Status to Contract, A Biography of Sir Henry Maine 1822–1888*, 1969, p. 122. See British History online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=50315#n21>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Powell-Cotton Museum Archive Doc 2.8 Leases & Title Deeds.

⁸ Powell-Cotton Museum Archive Doc 2.7 Estate Maps and Plans.

⁹ Powell-Cotton Museum Archive Doc 2.9.4 Family Journals – Percy Cotton.

¹⁰ Highlighted by the fact that the 'Indian Court' had covered 30,000 square feet of the exhibition. See Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (eds). *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (Routledge: 1998), p. 12.

¹¹ During this movement, it was generally believed that an individual's choice of art became an act of self-definition, and art from the East was increasingly becoming the art of choice. See for example, Jane Hamlett (2006) 'Nicely Feminine, Yet Learned: Student Rooms at Royal Holloway and the Oxford and Cambridge Colleges in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Women's History Review*, 15:1, p. 137- 161.

¹² Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1.

An early/mid-nineteenth-century family Chinese hanging served as inspiration for the party (below left and right), and the 'Oriental Drawing Room' as it was named by the family, was transformed into an exotic tent of lanterns, parasols, and fans (bottom). This would also have pleased Percy as a follower of the craze for Japonism.

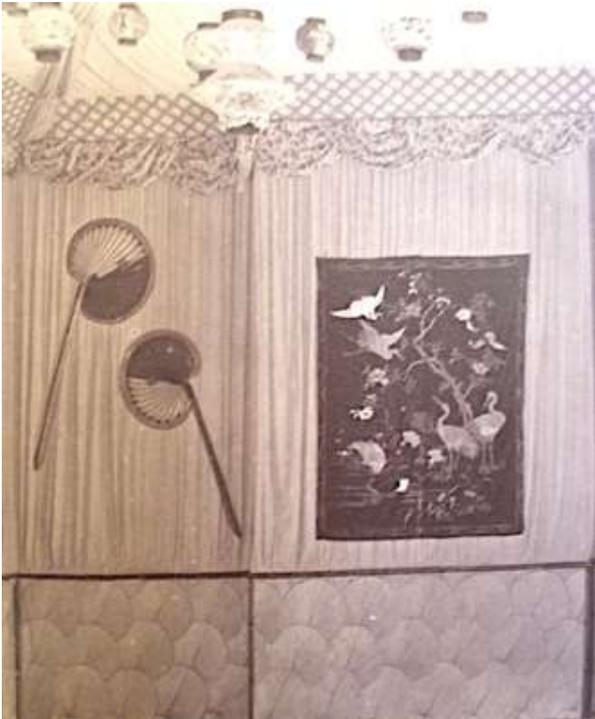


Figure 9 (left). Chinese embroidery hanging at Percy Powell-Cotton's 21st birthday. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees. Figure 10 (right). Detail of hanging. Image courtesy of Alison Bennett.



Figure 11. Photograph of Percy Powell-Cotton's 21st birthday held at Quex House in 1887. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

A newspaper report following the event describes the décor:

Mr & Mrs Powell Cotton gave a successful fancy dress ball at Quex Park, Isle of Thanet, on 20th ult to celebrate the coming of age of their eldest son, Percy Gordon Cotton. The new ballroom was picturesquely decorated in Japanese style, the walls and ceiling being draped with salmon pink and light blue Liberty muslin, ornamented with handsome portières of Eastern Embroidery. The dado was especially admired, being entirely composed of palm-leaf fans. The hall and entrance to the ballroom were profusely decorated with palms and hothouse plants.¹³

This was clearly an important social event for the family, with the family collections used in a central, if whimsical way to celebrate the occasion, and much admired by society. Percy's worldly ideas were clearly developing at this stage of his life, and the photos provide a snapshot of how he was using his family collections to form an identity for himself, as a cultured man with particular tastes. As a keen family historian, the objects may have also helped Percy to feel connected to his ancestors, and to a wider world unknown to him.

In addition to the hanging, Percy also inherited pieces of carved Indian furniture including chairs, a table, and a corner cupboard (see figure 12). These pieces have been described in successive handbooks at Quex House as padouk wood, sometimes also loosely referred to as part of the rosewood family which was imported by the East India Company from 1720 onwards, either as a raw material or as manufactured furniture.¹⁴ The pieces also resemble Bombay Blackwood (also known as Indian Rosewood). This type of wood was recorded in the customs returns from 1759 onwards and was made predominantly in the Bombay presidency.¹⁵ It was typically based on English furniture forms from about 1850-1880, and followed the conventions of Rococo Revival.¹⁶ Bombay Blackwood furniture featured a range of standard forms, often with common elements of decoration. It was made in great quantities and shown in numerous exhibitions in Europe and North America from 1851 onwards. Quex is also home to a pair of library tables which have been been categorised by valuers in the past as Anglo Indian, rosewood, c.1830.¹⁷



All of these pieces display richly carved motifs of flowers, foliage, and animals, and are featured in *Furniture from British India and Ceylon: A catalogue of the Collections in the Victoria and Albert Museum* by Amin Jaffer, who writes that 'Carving was deeply rooted in implicitly held notions about the value of furniture: in the general mind, carving still meant expense, and being able to afford a highly carved piece gave an air of affluence to the owners.'¹⁸ These pieces must therefore have been highly treasured at their time of acquisition. The fact that Percy retained them and also kept them on display suggests that this continued through the generations.

Figure 12. Photograph of carved Indian chair. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

¹³ 'Entertainments, Balls, Etc'. *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper & Court Chronicle*. 1 October, 1887.

¹⁴ Adam Bowett, *Woods in British Furniture Making: 1400-1900: an illustrated historical dictionary*. (Oblong Creative Ltd, in association with Royal Botanic Gardens Kew: 2012), p. 206.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁶ Amin Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon: A catalogue of the Collections in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Peabody Essex Museum* (V&A Publications: 2001), p. 330.

¹⁷ Sotheby's 2003.

¹⁸ Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon*, p. 330; See also R. W. Symonds and B. B. Whineroy, *Victorian Furniture* (Studio Editions: 1987), p. 58.

A four day sale of Quex House's contents in 1849,¹⁹ resulting from circumstances that included the death settlements of both Henry Perry Cotton's uncle (John Powell-Powell) and his first wife (Georgina Pine),²⁰ would have left the house very empty. It is likely therefore, that the carved furniture arrived with Henry Perry Cotton, who had served in the Bengal cavalry and moved in to a rather empty house in need of furnishing after the death of his uncle and wife. When Percy inherited the estate, the chairs were kept in a room named the 'Indian Room' which was already in place. Although the attribution is difficult to confirm, it is thought by current staff at Quex Park that the Indian Room may have also derived from Henry Perry Cotton's time as a nod to the family's East India Company connections.

Percy took photographs in 1884, one year after he moved in, and again in 1887, when he was aged 21, of the position of the table and chair in the Indian Room. Precisely why he photographed this scene is unknown, but Percy was a keen family historian, and may have done so to provide evidence of former life in the house, which had a rich history of links to the East India Company. There is the strong possibility that the scene had been carefully choreographed by Percy himself, deliberately using these pieces to hint to others about his lineage. Many of the sources used in Deborah Cohen's study of Victorian interiors also show that photographing domestic interiors was a conventional nineteenth-century practice. For example, Colonel Harold Esdaile Malet (1841-1918) was an enthusiastic watercolourist, and made a habit of photographing the interiors of houses in which he lived.²¹ Similarly, Major Joicey of 59 Cadogan Square commissioned Bedford Lemere to photograph his flat in 1890,²² as did W.D James for his hall at West Dean Park, Chichester which was decorated with oriental furnishings in 1895.²³ Perhaps this was a way of circulating information about one's self, and one's status and tastes, to the rest of society.



Figure 13. Photograph of The India Room c.1887. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

¹⁹ Sale catalogues in the Quex archives show that a proportion of the family's decorative objects had been sold at auction in both 1849 and 1873.

²⁰ His later remarriage was also a probable factor in the sale of goods which possessed memories of his former wife.

²¹ Deborah Cohen. *Household Gods: the British and their possessions*. (Yale University Press: 2006), p. 98.. Figure 77 Colonel Harold Esdaile Malet (1841-1918), *Interior at Cox Hoe*, 1867-8.

²² Cohen, *Household Gods*, p. 103. Figure 80. Major Joicey, 59 Cadogan Square drawing room.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 129. Figure 100. W. D James's Hall at West Dean Park, Singleton, Chichester, Sussex.

Similarly, Jane Hamlett's 2006 essay, 'Nicely Feminine, Yet Learned: Student Rooms at Royal Holloway and the Oxford and Cambridge Colleges in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain' studies photographs of student rooms taken by individuals who 'wished to preserve some record' of their everyday life at the institutions.²⁴ It questions the way students expressed their identities through material culture, with many taking on the ideas of the Aesthetic Movement. The photographs show that these ideals were taken up by men as well as women, with the author suggesting that this form of expression could signify an 'alternative masculinity to differentiate from more athletic fellows' at the colleges. She concludes by arguing that for both genders, aesthetic, or 'artistic' decoration was adopted as a 'strategy for differentiation.'²⁵

In Percy's photograph of the Indian Room (see figure 13), a comfortable armchair can be seen next to the carved Indian chair, suggesting that the latter was only used for deliberate display. The fact that the young Percy deliberately photographed the Indian furniture and the Chinese hanging suggest that they were of some significant importance to him, and had an important place in the house.



Figure 14. The India Room c.1884. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

A family library of history and travel books that had been accumulated over generations must have also been a powerful influence on his enquiring teenage imagination. But it was a world trip (1889-91) that broadened his ideas and cemented his own passion for collecting.

During his trip, Percy visited Kashmir, India, China and Japan amongst many other countries.²⁶ Whilst on his travels, he accumulated goods with which to furnish Quex House, and from this point, he would become an avid collector of material culture.²⁷ On his African travels especially, Percy often lived with the communities

²⁴ Hamlett, 'Nicely Feminine', p. 139.

²⁵ Ibid, pp 137, 157, 138.

²⁶ Powell-Cotton Museum Archive Doc 2.9.4 Family Journals – Percy Cotton – [World Trip].

²⁷ Powell-Cotton Museum Archive Doc 2.9.4 Family Journals – Percy Cotton – [World Trip].

he visited, and alongside the development of his artistic and collecting tastes, this also cemented his lifetime commitment to Natural History and Anthropology which coincided with its emergence as a valid discipline for study.

Given his now varied experiences abroad, Percy's understanding of world arts, and especially the meanings of his inherited pieces, must have evolved. He would now add his own pieces to the same collection that had formed his early colonial imagination, thereby maintaining his link to his ancestors and continuing their family collecting heritage, but now adding his own identity to its legacy. The following section will study some of these pieces, and their place within the established family collection, to understand how Percy's thoughts may have evolved.

Major Percy Powell-Cotton: The collector

On his return from his world trip in 1894, Percy inherited and moved into Quex and began to make extensive changes. His travels renewed his love for his family collection and he discovered old objects from storage and began to place them strategically around the house. He made a list of furniture at Quex in 1909, referencing items that he had inherited including the Bombay carved furniture (previously mentioned), Japanese vases, and Korean candlesticks.²⁸ He also valued greatly a lacquered sea chest brought back from China in 1796 by Charles Bowland Cotton (now displayed in the Armoury). A letter from his Aunt describes her pleasure at his interest in his family history:

...I am so pleased to hear that both you and Percy are so interested in All the dear old things about the place, there were three dear old carved large chairs of the time of Charles 1st out of the old Manor House, our dear Mother had restored and new seated in crimson colored velvet, are they to be seen? Poor Quex was so shamefully treated before dear Horace [Percy's father] got there, it is impossible to say what disappeared. I hope this will not weary you, with our kind love....²⁹

It is interesting that Percy's Aunt only refers to the English pieces here. She is referring to the very early pieces in the family collection, and the old mansion house. At this point, Percy and Hannah were creating a family home, and transforming the entrance hall into a fashionable baronial style hall furnished with mainly 17th-century pieces. Percy also continued to collect English 'antique' furniture to help dress the house. A William III state Chair in the Armoury (King William stayed at Old Quex whilst waiting for a 'fair wind' to Holland), was one of the 'old dear things' & still had pride of place. It is clear that Percy valued his inheritance, but it is possible that he was building something different to that valued by the wider family

group. He used his experiences abroad to buy wisely, and to add to the Quex collections. It has been mentioned that a large proportion of the family's decorative objects had been sold at auction in 1849 and 1873. Percy would now also try to recreate what was missing, complement what was left, and also add his own personality through new objects. At a sale in 1910, for example, he purchased an early nineteenth-century Chinese lacquer cabinet filled with carved netsuke that was likely to have been brought to England on an East India Company ship (see figure 15).



Figure 15. An early 19th-century Chinese lacquer cabinet currently held in the Museum's reserve collections. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

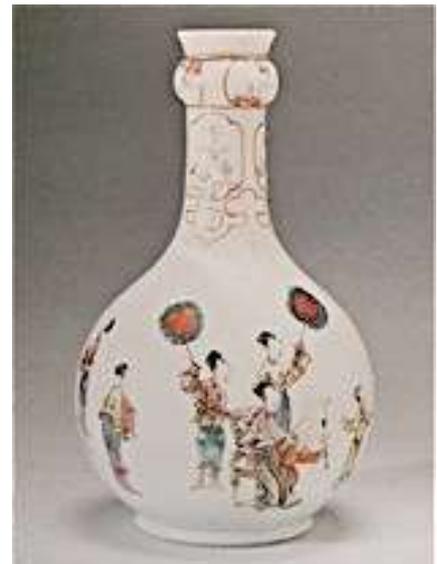
²⁸ Powell-Cotton Museum Archive Doc 2.6. Auction Catalogues Pope sale, 1910.

²⁹ Powell- Cotton Museum Archive Doc 2.3.9.

Percy also inherited many pieces of Chinese export ware through his family connections with the East India Company, including a porcelain bowl and guglet bottle belonging to Charles Bowland Cotton (see figures 17 and 18).³⁰ He housed these objects in a breakfront cabinet in the newly created boudoir (see figure 16) alongside Chinese Imperial Ware that he was inspired to purchase at auction in 1910 in a show of his own decorative tastes, as well as that of his ancestry.³¹



Figure 16. Photograph showing breakfront cabinet in the 'Boudoir'. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.



Figures 17- 18. Porcelain bowl and guglet bottle belonging to Charles Bowland Cotton. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

³⁰ Powell-Cotton Museum Chinese Ceramics P/O 254 & P/O 255.

³¹ Powell-Cotton Museum Archive Doc 2.6. Auction Catalogues Pope sale, 1910.

Percy and Hannah created the boudoir in 1907 from the original Indian Room, and also created a new library. These became rooms to receive guests, and through this, the couple were able to make their individual mark on the house whilst upgrading it, perhaps to maintain their reputation as a landed family with good taste. The rooms were made much lighter, and more in line with the Georgian style. This move might be regarded as rather unfashionable for the period, but Deborah Cohen has argued that for many people at the end of the nineteenth century, the eighteenth century was hailed as a golden age of craftsmanship, especially given the new craze for antiques during this period, possession of which represented hierarchies of value and worth, given their rarity.³² Percy's actions suggest therefore that he was knowledgeable about what his home and possessions would say to others about him, and that he was actually seeking to mark out an image for himself. His material heritage of Company goods combined with his own exotic travels—a leisured lifestyle underpinned by his family's Company wealth—allowed him to fashion a distinctive global identity predicated on past familial imperial service.

The carved wood furniture was now moved downstairs into the newly created 'Oriental Drawing Room' (see figure 19) which still remained impressive, and would have been very much on show to visitors. Percy was therefore still able to maintain a show of his worldly inheritance, respecting the form of deliberate display that the furniture had upstairs under his father and grandfather, and to display his inherited antiques which were now highly prized.



Figure 19. Photograph of The Oriental Drawing Room in 1913. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.

The photographs taken by Percy in 1913 picture the rather hybrid Oriental Drawing Room theatrically styled with inherited items including the Chinese lacquer, and carved Indian furniture, alongside newly

³² Cohen, *Household Gods*, p. 155.

acquired objects including highly ornate carved panelling (which look similar in style to the carved Indian furniture), porcelain, and Kashmir rugs. Many of these items were acquired on his world trip, where he visited workshops and bazaars, collecting examples of ancient and modern art and crafts. The Persian style ceiling (see figures 20 and 22) was fitted by Italian plasterers. There is also a Persian style carved over-mantle which holds a Buddha and is placed above a tiled fireplace which has a shrine-like feeling about it. The room also contains a Japanese domestic moon shrine.



Figure 20. The Oriental Drawing Room, 1913, from opposite angle. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Courtesy of the Powell-Cotton Museum Trustees.



Figures 21 (left). Chinese lacquer chair purchased by Percy Powell-Cotton. Powell-Cotton Museum Archives Pic 4.1. Figure 22 (right). Detail of Italian plasterwork ceiling in Persian style. Image courtesy of Alison Bennett.

This room certainly stood in stark contrast to the Georgian styled rooms upstairs, but the images of both show the culmination of influences from his upbringing and family history, as well as the cultural and decorative influences of his own generation. Percy was proud of his heritage and the inherited objects which personified this. He was also keen to present himself as an experienced collector and man of taste, and to keep up with current fashions.

Quex House displayed Percy's individual tastes and reflected his own personal history, but this style was also common in other English houses in around the same period. Photographs featured in Deborah Cohen's *Household Gods* include Sir Frederick Leighton's Moorish inspired home in Kensington which was famous for its decor,³³ as was Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's drawing room at Townsend House- filled with exotic textiles, furnishings, and ceiling decoration,³⁴ and Mrs Wallace Carpenter's "Moorish Fantasy" at 28 Ashley Place in London.³⁵

A similar example of globalised domestic furnishing is provided by Elveden Hall in Suffolk, which was purchased by Duleep Singh in 1863.³⁶ Singh was the deposed Maharaja of Punjab, established by the British government as a landed gentleman after his removal from power. After his death, the property was sold in 1894 to Edward Cecil Guinness, 1st Earl of Iveagh who largely retained Duleep Singh's Indian furnishings and décor, and commissioned Caspar Purdon Clarke, Curator of the Indian collections at the V&A to complete it. Purdon Clarke had also been the designer of the 1886 Colonial and Indian exhibition, which is described by Driver and Ashmore as 'unashamedly hybrid'. They also note that many objects in this exhibition 'generally bore no relation to their original purpose' and were used mainly for 'dramatic effect'.³⁷ This description bares a close resemblance to the images of Percy's Oriental Drawing Room, but places him in an interesting position, given that as well as collecting decorative arts from Asia, his other interests included the anthropological and ethnographical study of objects from Africa. Such actions do reflect the general thought of this period- that African objects were considered worthy of ethnographical study, but not of artistic study, but in doing so, Percy was attempting to synthesise his family legacy and continue its artistic traditions and heritage, with new ideas about the study of objects and other cultures.

Conclusion

Through a reflection on one man and his family history, this paper sets out to uncover something of how the meanings of objects acquired from Asia in the eighteenth century changed over time, reflecting the changing socio-political relationship that Britain had with Asia. The trans-generational history of Quex house, its inhabitants, and its decorative art provide an interesting framework through which to interrogate the legacy of objects acquired by East India Company Officials, and this can add a deeper understanding to the research already carried out by the *East India Company at Home 1757- 1857* project.

In the case of Quex House, the meanings of its Asian objects were adapted according to new settings (i.e. where in the house they were placed for people to see), and new ways of thinking (i.e. alongside a revival in neo-classical architecture as well as the Aesthetic Movement which greatly valued Orientalist art, exoticism, and antiques). Deborah Cohen argues that within this line of thought, one's possessions served to reveal something about an individual's tastes and moral make-up: 'possessions did not just speak to the outside world. They offered a lifeline for coming to terms with one's identity in a society so much in flux'.³⁸ She also writes that 'design reformers endowed goods with new meanings: what one owned, bought and

³³ Cohen, *Household Gods*, p. 72.

³⁴ Cohen, *Household Gods*, p. 73. Figure 63. Anna Alma Tadema, *The Drawing Room, Townshend House*, 1885.

³⁵ Cohen, *Household Gods*, p. 128. Figure 98. Mrs Wallace Cooper's Moorish Fantasy at 28 Ashley Place, London, 1893.

³⁶ Ruler of the kingdom of Lahore, but lost his throne to the British at the conclusion of the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-49)

³⁷ Felix Driver and Sonia Ashmore, 'The Mobile Museum: Collecting and Circulating Indian Textiles in Victorian Britain', *Victorian Studies*, 52:3 (2010), p. 377.

³⁸ Cohen, *Household Gods*, p. xii.

treasured, helped to communicate something of the moral makeup of a person'.³⁹ Percy Powell-Cotton clearly understood this, because of the careful curation and organisation that he put into his home. As well as being dictated by the ideals of Victorian society, the meanings of objects were also adapted by the individual. Percy Powell-Cotton was a complex figure: in addition to his passion for decorative arts and family history, he was also interested in ethnography and anthropology, which was unusual for this period and for a leisured man of his standing. His interaction with his collections developed alongside his interactions with other cultures. Before his extensive travels, the family collections and artwork contributed significantly to his comprehension of other cultures. These pieces also linked him to his ancestors-important for a man interested in family history. In addition to this, these pieces were often highly valuable (the Indian carved furniture for example), and so their continued display contributed to an image of prestige and privilege that would be expected of such a family. But Percy also added to the collection, and through this, he was able to show himself as an experienced collector, cultured traveller, and knowledgeable about global arts. All of this contributed to an identity which satisfied his personal inquisitiveness, but fitted with the ideals of Victorian society, and ensured that his family legacy lived on. In other words, his collecting acted as a legitimising tool at a number of levels.

The history of Quex suggests is that across generations, objects are still able to conjure specific ideas about a person, a family, or a society. When placed in different historical contexts, we can see changes and continuity in their meanings. In Percy Powell-Cotton's case, it seems he was using the objects to try and synthesise his family legacy with new ideas about anthropology and cultural difference.

In a more in-depth study, it would be interesting to explore the African objects housed in the Quex Park Museum, and to compare Percy's specific treatment of these to the pieces in the house which were largely from Asia and the Middle East, and used specifically in the decoration of the home. This analysis would provide new insights into ideas of African 'art' during the Victorian period.

Another unexplored topic in this essay, has been the role of Hannah Powell-Cotton, Percy's wife, and later on, his children, particularly Diana (the eldest daughter), Antoinette (the youngest daughter), and the middle daughter, Mary, in the decoration of the house. Nineteenth-century literature stressed the importance of a gendered division in the home, especially in rooms such as the drawing room and the dining room.⁴⁰ This idea is echoed in Quex House, where the drawing room and study, thought to have been used largely by the women of the house, were distinct from Percy's Oriental Drawing Room for example. But Hannah had also travelled extensively with Percy, and Diana and Antoinette were distinguished anthropologists and photographers. They undertook fieldwork and collecting trips to Southern Angola during the late 1930s, and many of their collections are now housed in the British Museum.⁴¹ Mary was the only child to marry and from her, the genealogical line continued. She was a talented photographer and painter, and trained in photography at the Polytechnic Institute c. 1930.

It has been mentioned that Jane Hamlett has studied the gendered context of male and female decoration in student colleges in the late nineteenth- century, and has shown that gendered decoration in this context was not always clear cut. The Aesthetic style of decoration, for example, was appropriated by both genders. Some photographs used in her study show that although many men had African objects as trophies and signifiers of the hunt,⁴² some women had animal skin rugs, it is suggested, as signifiers of differentiation.⁴³ It would be interesting, therefore, to explore more closely the gendered differentiation, or indeed similarities of style, taste, and decoration in Quex House, particularly within its nineteenth- to twentieth-century colonial context.

³⁹ Cohen, *Household Gods*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ Jane Hamlett, cited p. 149, in J. Kinchin (1996) 'Interiors: nineteenth-century essays on the 'masculine' and 'feminine' room', in Pat Kirkham (Ed.) *The Gendered Object* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 13.

⁴¹ See AOA Ethdoc 190 - papers relating to the expedition to Angola by Miss D and Miss A Powell-Cotton.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 154, in Brian Lunn (1948) *Switchback* (London: Eyre & Spottiswood), p. 69.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p151, in RHUL Archives, RHC/PH/116/53.

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