





George Chinnery in Macao (1825-1852)

Drawings of an Adopted Homeland

Patrick Conner*

Many European artists have come to Macao in search of subjects that might appeal to European eyes, and such subjects have not been hard to find. Yet when the British artist George Chinnery came to Macao in 1825 he was not, it seems, primarily motivated by a desire to find fresh subject-matter or even fresh clients for his work. His principal object was to escape from his creditors in India. Yet it is our good fortune that Chinnery came to Macao, for here he found a rich source of subjects well suited to his talents and his artistic outlook; and when he finally died in Macao in 1852, he left an incomparable body of drawings and paintings illustrating and documenting Macao and its people in the second quarter of the 19th century.

Several albums of drawings and watercolours by Chinnery have appeared on the art market in recent years, albums compiled after the artist's death, containing works from different phases of his career and works by his followers also. From such collections

we can see that Chinnery's manner of drawing, and his confidence in his own abilities, developed gradually in the course of his life. One of these albums, formerly owned by Mr. and Mrs. Bertram Seton of Ireland, includes a group of academic drawings that may well date from the 1790s when the artist was a student at the Royal Academy Schools in London (plate 1). The classical head is drawn with precision and assurance, but offers us little idea of the directions that Chinnery's artistic career was to take.

From his initial years in England and Ireland too few drawings have survived other than portraits—in which he showed talent from a young age—to give us more than a vague notion of his potential in the sphere of topography and depictions of everyday life. Only after his arrival in Madras (Chennai), in 1802, did it become clear that he had the makings of a master draughtsman. His celebrated watercolour of palanquin bearers (plate 2) presents a group of figures whose sinewy grace and latent energy is admirably expressed by the bold curves of the artist's pen-strokes. But Chinnery had not yet

* Director of the Martyn Gregory gallery in London, ex-curator of the Brighton Museum, world expert on China trade painting, and especially George Chinnery.

Director da galeria Martyn Gregory em Londres, ex-curador do Brighton Museum, especialista na pintura do China trade, especialmente em George Chinnery.

Plate 1. George Chinnery, Study of a classical head. Pencil, 18 3/4 x 12 5/8 ins. Signed 'G Chinnery'. Macao Museum. Photo: Martyn Gregory Gallery, London.

DIÁLOGO INTER-ARTES E MACAU



Plate 2. George Chinnery, Palanquin bearers resting. Pen and ink and watercolour, 14 x 19 1/2 ins. Signed and dated 'Geo Chinnery E.I. 1806'. Private collection. Photo: Martyn Gregory Gallery, London.

developed the subtlety of figure-drawing and the range of posture which was to characterise his later drawings. In his etching of catamarans on Madras beach (plate 3) the boatmen appear as mesomorphic heroes who might have decorated a Grecian vase. (Their catamarans—consisting of three or four logs lashed together—may still be seen on the beach where Chinnery sketched them two centuries ago (photo 1)).

As Chinnery's career in India began to prosper he made his way to Dacca and finally Calcutta, where by 1820 he was established as the pre-eminent European artist in India. From his base in the city he would make sketching expeditions into the countryside of Bengal. The resulting drawings—and much of his work in Macao also—show the extent to which Chinnery retained the notions of 'the Picturesque', which had been a dominant aesthetic principle during his formative years in England. According to this principle an artist on his travels should avoid the neat,

the regular and the symmetrical, and seek out instead the rough, the decaying, the overgrown. A ruined tomb was a fitter subject than a palatial mansion, according to this canon, and if the façade of a building was to be drawn, it should be viewed from an angle rather than from directly in front. Sir Uvedale Price, whose treatise on the Picturesque was a bible of the tourist-sketcher, took pleasure in the contemplation of

'...hovels, cottages, mills, insides of old barns, stables, &c. whenever they have any marked and peculiar effect of form, tint, or light and shadow...

It is owing to the same causes that a building with scaffolding has often a more picturesque appearance than the building itself when the scaffolding is taken away'.¹

In the villages of Bengal Chinnery found an unlimited quantity of structures which Price would have wholeheartedly endorsed. Plate 4 shows a village

INTER-ARTS DIALOGUE AND MACAO

bangla, a mud-walled dwelling with a roof of thatch laid on to a bamboo lattice framework; wooden props support the projecting edges of the roof, and a *chattar* (umbrella) inserted into the thatch. Even the cockerel emerging from the doorway would have met with the approval of Price, who thought birds especially picturesque when their 'heads and necks are adorned with ruffs, with crests, and with tufts of plumes...' ²

Chinnery's sketches at this time formed a pleasurable but incidental part of his activity; it was as a portrait painter in Calcutta that Chinnery was in demand and earned his living. And at this point we should consider his personal circumstances, and the effect they had on his art. Despite his high reputation and the many lucrative commissions he had received, the extravagant artist ran up large debts. In June 1821, as one of his creditors (William Prinsep) observed:

'our amusing and instructive friend George Chinnery, the painter, fell into such distress from heavy pressure from his creditors that he fled to the Danish settlement for protection, and took up his abode at Serampore'. ³

Serampore, some fifteen miles from Calcutta, was notorious as a place in which British bankrupts and debtors could take refuge and escape from their



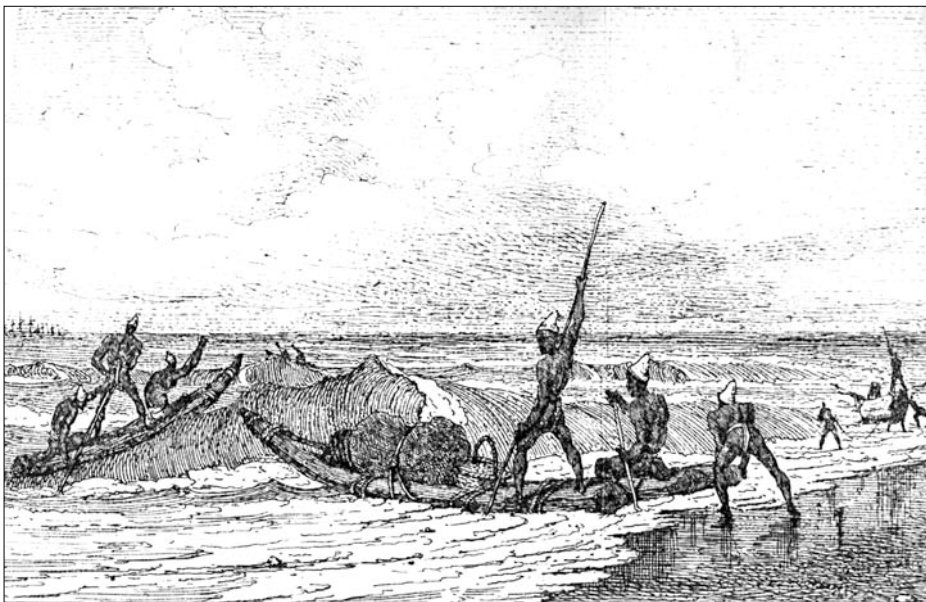
Photo 1. Catamaran on Madras city beach, 2008.
Photo: author.

responsibilities, since in this Danish enclave British civil law did not apply. Eventually a group of Chinnery's friends and creditors brought him back from Serampore to Calcutta by lending him 20,000 rupees to pay off his debts; it was agreed that the artist would repay this sum from the proceeds of public commissions still unfulfilled. But Chinnery failed to fulfil his part of the bargain, and this time he must have looked upon Macao as his last resort. 'When he ran away to China' (William

Prinsep recorded) 'we found ourselves losers of more than 30,000 Rs [rupees]!'

So Chinnery arrived in Macao in September 1825 under unpropitious circumstances. Very possibly he imagined that he would be able to return from Macao to Calcutta after a year or two, just as he had managed to return from Serampore. A year after his departure a Calcutta newspaper reported that 'the Friends of Mr. Chinnery will be glad to hear that his health has been re-established

Plate 3. 'Catamarans', etching by George Chinnery published in *The Indian Magazine and European Miscellany*, Madras, 1807.



DIÁLOGO INTER-ARTES E MACAU



Plate 4. George Chinnery, Bengal dwelling. Pen and ink, 7 1/4 x 7 1/4 ins. Inscribed in the artist's shorthand 'correct October 7th [18]21'. Photo: Spink & Son, London.

by his voyage to China', and hoped that 'ere long circumstances will admit of his returning'.⁴ But the 'circumstances'—clearly economic in nature—did not improve, and the creditors did not forget the large sums outstanding. Chinnery must have known that there was little prospect of his ever going back to India, let alone to his native land. In 1836 his creditors (some of whom had now left India) obtained a court order requiring Chinnery to pay half his earnings for five years to a

trustee. Of course no money was forthcoming from the artist, but James Matheson—by now senior partner of Jardine, Matheson—arranged for credit to be made available to his creditors in Calcutta.

On the China coast Chinnery was by no means idle; he painted the portraits of many of the leading merchants on the China coast, both Western and Chinese, especially in the years 1825-32 when he continued to make regular visits to Canton. But these projects had little

INTER-ARTS DIALOGUE AND MACAO

effect on his accumulated debt. When he retired more or less permanently to Macao in 1832 he continued to accept any commissions he could find, but in reality he was now dependent on the charity of others. He lived in a house he had leased soon after his arrival from Rita Maria de Carvalho, in the street now known as Rua de Ignacia Baptista (parallel to the present-day Rua de George Chinnery). In 1830 he shared this address with two employees of the East India Company and the missionary Robert Morrison. He remained at the same address until his death, sometimes in poor health and paying no rent in his latter years; at least some of the money he owed was recovered from the sale of his pictures after his death

in 1852.⁵ Visitors to the 'studio' of the legendary artist were often shocked to see him in straitened circumstances. When the Bostonian merchant and mariner Robert Bennet Forbes called on Chinnery in October 1838, he found the artist 'sitting on a dirty old settee under fed with half a dozen leeches on his head, the blood flowing down his naturally picturesque countenance...'⁶

For most of Chinnery's European contemporaries Macao was a temporary place of residence, a stage in their career which would earn a voyage home, a substantial reward and a good many years of active life in which to enjoy it. Chinnery however was cut off from his roots. A few of his portraits found their way into the exhibitions of the Royal Academy in London, but it seems that he no longer had any contact with the land of his birth. His three sons all predeceased him in India; his estranged wife and his married daughter returned directly

Plate 5. George Chinnery, Old houses, Macao.
Pen and ink and watercolour, 7 x 10 1/2 ins.
Provenance: the descendants of Dr Thomas Boswall Watson.
Collection Peter and Nancy Thompson.



DIÁLOGO INTER-ARTES E MACAU



Plate 6. George Chinnery, *The Praya Grande, Macao, from the north-east*. Pen and ink over pencil, lightly squared for transfer, 8 1/4 x 12 ins. Inscribed and dated in the artist's shorthand 'correct. September 22 1840', and 'design good fully to be depended upon'. Private collection. Photo: Martyn Gregory Gallery, London.

from India to England. The artist himself lived on in Macao, his abilities as a draughtsman undiminished despite the reputed excesses of his life, until his death at the advanced age of 78. Thus he spent 27 years on the China coast—a longer period than he had spent in either England, Ireland or India. Macao was his adoptive home.

Chinnery remained in Macao because he had little choice; and this situation surely affected his artistic practices. Other professional artists from the West travelled eastward in search of exotic subject-matter, to be exhibited at home after their

return. Auguste Borget, who visited the China coast in 1838 in the course of a round-the-world voyage, certainly had an eye for compositions that would find favour in the *Salons* once he was back in France. But for Chinnery there would be no return to Europe. Sketching now came to play a major role in Chinnery's life. His daily routine involved sketching before breakfast. When William Prinsep came to Macao in 1838 he found the artist 'surrounded by (as he described) tons of sketches, for he declared that he had adhered to his fixed principle of adding 7 new ideas every morning to his stock'.⁷

Not satisfied with repeating the same compositions, he was constantly in quest of fresh observations, or at least novel aspects of familiar subjects. In general Chinnery's drawings in Macao are diverse in both subject-matter and in style, some drawn with the freedom of initial on-the-spot sketches, others



INTER-ARTS DIALOGUE AND MACAO



Plate 7. George Chinnery, Fishing craft off the Praya Grande, Macao. Pencil, pen and ink, 7 x 10 1/2 ins. Macao Museum.

carefully composed with outlines tightly drawn, others again with broad areas shaded with a soft pencil, giving that vivid effect of light and shade which is also such a feature of some of his watercolours. He was able to find subjects in every part of the peninsula: churches and temples, forts, civic buildings and private houses, rocky shores and smooth beaches. Sometimes his compositions consisted of groups of unpretentious dwellings which might have seemed unremarkable in themselves, but which Chinnery represented as a visual essay in intersecting angles and textures: plate 5 shows a group of such houses depicted from the rear, a satisfying array of old stonework, timber posts and discoloured plaster. The shorthand reads 'Gardener watering on the right of the principal figure would be excellent'; there are two dates, 9 June and 10 June 1835, separated by the initials 'OLC' (for 'outline and colouring'), suggesting that he made a pencil drawing

on the 9th, and added the ink outline and watercolour on the following day.

Chinnery's almost compulsive sketching may have been partly a matter of personal satisfaction, but there was an economic aspect also. In Macao commissions for oil paintings were scarce (especially since the Cantonese artist Lamqua could undercut his prices); but visitors to Macao would frequently seek out Chinnery's drawings, which they bought or borrowed and often copied. 'I am drawing a very little from one of Mr. Chinery's [*sic*] drawing Books', wrote the Scottish merchant Hugh Gordon to his future wife from Macao in 1839, 'and only regret I am such a slow hand for his are admirable...'. In a postscript Gordon added:

'I have requested Mr. Chinnery to paint me another sketch of Macao so as to hang in our Drawing Room—which I hope will also please you. I have been induced to this from his being

DIÁLOGO INTER-ARTES E MACAU



INTER-ARTS DIALOGUE AND MACAO



Plate 8. George Chinnery, Self-portrait sketch. Pencil, 5 1/4 x 5 ins.
Inscribed in the artist's shorthand 'Something...'.
Provenance: Mr and Mrs Bertram Seton. Private collection.
Photo: Martyn Gregory Gallery, London.

a poor man and has done what very few artists wd., given me his Books to Copy from, and it is the only way I can remunerate him in a Degree for his attention.’⁸

Some locations were particular favourites, notably the Praya Grande and the A-Ma temple, subjects which were no doubt in regular demand by visitors to Macao who sought mementoes of the place. But Chinnery was never content with a single composition. He sketched the Praya (plates 6 and 7) and



Plate 10. George Chinnery,
The garden of Bom Jesus, Macao.
Pencil, pen and ink and watercolour, 9 x 7 3/4 ins.
Private collection.
Photo: Martyn Gregory Gallery, London.

the A-Ma temple from differing points of view, at different times of day, and with fishermen and boats variously deployed. His regular practice was to sketch in pencil on the spot, adding notes in shorthand to remind him of colours, proportions and (sometimes) inaccuracies in his drawing. Then the drawing might be ‘fixed’ with congee, or ‘filled in’ in pen and ink. The artist himself was the subject of several drawings; from the Seton album comes a hitherto unrecorded self-portrait sketch (plate 8), drawn on the back of another drawing. It must date from some time after Chinnery’s arrival on the China coast, as it depicts the bespectacled artist with a painting of the British hong at Canton resting on his easel.

From a historical point of view Chinnery’s drawings of Macao have the great merits of being precisely dated and (in many cases) of recording the scene precisely as he saw it. Plate 9 is a view along the Largo de Senado, in which a group of industrious figures are clearing the rubble of a recently collapsed house—no.18, the house next to the belltower of Santa Casa de Misericórdia. The date inscribed is ‘September 10 [18]36’. The structure may have been weakened by recent typhoons on 5 July 1835 and 30 July 1836, the latter having occurred only six weeks before Chinnery made his drawing.

Plate 9. George Chinnery, Macao street scene, with Santa Casa da Misericórdia and the Leal Senado.
Pen and ink over pencil, 7 3/4 x 10 3/4 ins.
Private collection. Photo: Martyn Gregory Gallery, London.





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INTER-ARTS DIALOGUE AND MACAO



Plate 11. George Chinnery, Market outside St. Dominic's Church, Macao.
Pen and ink over pencil, 10 3/4 x 7 3/4 ins.
Inscribed in the artist's shorthand 'correct.
This good[,] quite right / December 1 1838'.
Private collection.

In his drawings, and particularly in his watercolours, the façades of churches are often partly obscured by foliage (see plate 10), as Picturesque theory recommended; alternatively they serve as backdrops for the street life which the artist drew so vividly, such as the crowded market area beside S. Domingos Church (plate 11, and see also photo 2). Chinnery was an indefatigable sketcher of figures—fishermen, boatwomen and children, vendors and their customers, gamblers, porters, blacksmiths, barbers, stonemasons, passers-by. Plate 12, a sketch-book page crowded with delicately drawn figures, is also inscribed with notes in the Gurney system of shorthand that Chinnery

Plate 12. George Chinnery, Sketchbook page of figure studies in pencil,
7 1/2 x 4 1/2 ins.
Private collection.
Photo: Martyn Gregory Gallery, London.



Photo 2. Outside St. Dominic's Church, 2008.
Photo: author.

had learned from his father and grandfather, both writing-masters. The shorthand gives an idea of the scrupulous care with which Chinnery made his records. Beside the woman and child he writes 'the colour of the draperies / the women wear / they are brown bright blue / and black'. Beneath the small group of gamblers: 'part correct part design'. By the larger group of gamblers: 'the 2 figures correct / the upper one added'. By the small figure standing in a boat: 'this is not the sentiment of this figure exactly. It was / perfectly beautiful'.

Some of Chinnery's most effective and appealing works are watercolours. Among his watercolour subjects the makeshift dwellings of the Tanka people in Macao offered endless variety and seem to have given him particular satisfaction. In the composition of plate 13 one Tanka boat is pulled a little way up the beach and secured with rocks; another boat has been lifted up on

DIÁLOGO INTER-ARTES E MACAU

to a platform supported by wooden piles at the water's edge. To its left, elements of other boats—planks, posts and curving rattan roofs—have been adapted to form a larger dwelling, also raised up over the water, whose walls catch the slanting rays of the evening sun, in contrast with the shadowed group of mother, child and boat in the foreground. It is works of this kind that

remind us of Chinnery's observation made to his pupil, Mrs. Maria Browne:

'When people talk of painting with their Eye, it is not the organ we see & see with on a clear day a mile on the Horizon, but the mind's Eye, the Poet's Eye...' **RC**

NOTES

- 1 *Sir Uvedale Price on the Picturesque*, edited by Sir Thomas Dick Lauder (Edinburgh and London, 1842), p. 84.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- 3 'Memoir of William Prinsep', I, 350, MS in the British Library, OIOC Mss Eur D1160.
- 4 *Calcutta Monthly Journal*, August 1826.
- 5 Patrick Conner. *George Chinnery, 1774-1852: Artist of India and the China Coast*. Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 1993, p. 194; Fr. Manuel Teixeira, 'The House of Chinnery', *Hong Kong Sunday Post-Herald*, 21 March 1974; and *Directory for Macau in 1830*, British Library, London, PP 2571d.
- 6 [Robert Bennet Forbes]. *Letters from China: The Canton-Boston Correspondence of Robert Bennet Forbes, 1838-1840*, edited by Phyllis Forbes Kerr. Mystic: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1996, p. 58.
- 7 'Memoir of William Prinsep', III, pp. 115-18.
- 8 Letters in a private collection, kindly communicated by James Broadbent. See also James Broadbent et al. *India, China, Australia: Trade and Society 1788-1850*. Glebe: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Australia, 2003.
- 9 Letter of 4 November 1816 in Richard Ormond, 'George Chinnery and his pupil Mrs Browne' *Journal of the Walpole Society* XLIV, 1974, p. 151.

Plate 13. George Chinnery, Tanka boat-dwellings. Watercolour, 5 x 7 5/8 ins.
By descent in the family of Matilda Brown (née Chinnery), the artist's daughter. Private collection.

