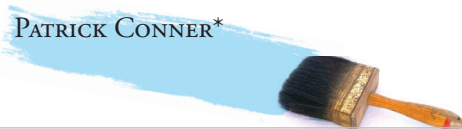


# European artists in Canton, 1793-4

## William Alexander and the Daniells

PATRICK CONNER\*



**ABSTRACT:** Professional artists from the West had scarcely any access to China until the latter years of the 18th century. But in December 1793 three professional artists from Britain – William Alexander, Thomas Daniell and William Daniell – found themselves together in Canton (Guangzhou). Alexander, ‘draughtsman’ to the first British embassy to China, was returning from the embassy’s audience with the Qianlong Emperor; the Daniells, after seven years in India, were seeking a passage home in convoy from Canton.

We might suppose that these artists would have returned to London with a plethora of sketches of Canton. However their access to the city was limited, and they faced competition from the rapidly expanding group of Cantonese export artists; the Westerners’ contact with these ‘export’ artists is discussed (with reference to Alexander’s unpublished diary), as is the influence that these Chinese artists may have had on the three visitors and subsequent Western paintings of Chinese subjects.

**KEYWORDS:** Export artists; Embassy; Qianlong Emperor; Alexander; Daniell; Canton (Guangzhou); Macartney; Allom; Pearl River; Bocca Tigris.

For a few weeks in late 1793 and early 1794 three British professional artists found themselves together in Canton (Guangzhou): Thomas Daniell (1749-1840), his young nephew William Daniell (1769-1837), and the latter’s near-contemporary, William Alexander (1767-1816).

This was a rare event indeed. Until this time very few Western artists could claim to have visited any part of China. It was a great opportunity – one might think – for these highly skilled practitioners to make detailed views of the place, and perhaps to compare notes with the Cantonese ‘export’ artists

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Fig.1 James Gillray, *The Reception of the Diplomatique & his Suite, at the Court of Peking* – Macartney's embassy as imagined by a contemporary satirist. Etching with engraving, 13 x 16 ins, published 14 September 1792. Maggs Bros., London

who worked for the Western merchants and ships' officers in Canton.

The three artists had not planned to meet in Canton. The Daniells, who had been to Canton before, probably revisited the place only as a means of returning home. They had originally travelled to China as a means of reaching India; they arrived at Whampoa (Huangpu), the anchorage for Canton, aboard the ship *Atlas* on August 23, 1785. By July 1786 they were in Calcutta (Kolkata); then, after seven years of

travelling and sketching in India, they returned to the China coast in 1793, to pick up a ship in which to sail back to London in convoy– a safer method of transport than taking ship from Calcutta or Bombay.

William Alexander, on the other hand, was the official draughtsman on the first British embassy to reach China (Fig.1). The members of this embassy, led by the Earl of Macartney, had sailed to China in the preceding year; the Qianlong Emperor had duly received the British ambassador at Jehol (Chengde) in



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September 1793, but had offered the British none of the concessions they sought. On their return journey they were allowed to make their way south by river and canal to Canton, from where they could sail home to England.

So it happened that, by coincidence, these three artists were in close proximity on the south



Fig.2 William Alexander, *Chinese barges of the Embassy preparing to pass under a bridge*. Pencil and watercolour, 11 x 17 ¾ ins. Signed and dated 1793 private collection. Photo: Martyn Gregory, London.

China coast in the last weeks of 1793, waiting for a convoy of ships to be assembled. We do not know whether Alexander was on good terms with the Daniells (William Daniell was nearly the same age as himself), but we do at least know that they were acquainted; the diarist Joseph Farington dined in London with the Daniells soon after their return to England, and reported that the Daniells had met 'Mr Hickey & Mr Alexander' at Canton.<sup>1</sup>

Alexander and the two Daniells were all expert in representing small details of architecture, dress, and articles of everyday life; all were conscious that much of their future income could be derived from the engraved versions of their drawings – and moreover the engraving would often be done by their own hands. We can now appreciate that Alexander, although inexperienced, was

an excellent choice as recorder of the embassy's travels. (It seems that these three were not quite the first professional artists from the West to visit the city. They were preceded apparently by Arthur William Devis (1762-1822), draughtsman aboard the ship *Antelope* which was wrecked on one of the Palau Islands in June 1783; the crew made their way to Macao, and Devis is said to have spent a year in Canton before moving on to India.<sup>2</sup> But no drawings by Devis of Canton, or any other location in China, are recorded.)



Fig.3 Detail showing the artist sketching.



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Fig. 4 William Alexander, *The embassy's ships passing the Bocca Tigris forts*. Pencil and watercolour, 10 x 15 ¾ ins. Private collection. Photo: Martyn Gregory, London.

In the preceding centuries numerous illustrations of China and its people had been published in Europe. Since the middle years of the seventeenth century the prime European source of images of China was Johan Nieuhof's illustrated account of the 1656 Dutch embassy to China – an account which between 1665 and 1669 was published in Dutch, French, German, Latin and English. Nieuhof, the embassy's 'steward' (*Hofmeester*), was (nominally at least) the embassy's artist, but his relatively crude and uninformative drawings were transformed (often inventively) by the engravers before they were deemed fit for publication.<sup>3</sup>

Alexander's surviving drawings show that he was a diligent and productive draughtsman,

When the whole embassy made its way southward from Beijing, travelling by river and canal in Chinese 'barges', Alexander was in his element, portraying

himself seated, sketchpad on his knees, on the roof of his boat's central cabin above the sailors who manned the great oar in the prow (Fig.2 and Fig.3). And yet, having reached the great city of Canton, where subjects for drawings and paintings were abundant, he produced surprisingly few drawings in Canton, or so it appears. Many of his working drawings made on the voyage to China, and in China itself – works apparently done on the spot, or soon after – are contained in three large albums held in the British Library; these contain a total of 880 drawings, of which all but a few are in his own hand. Of these 880, about 40 are views taken on the Pearl River between Whampoa and Humen, known to the Westerners as Bocca Tigris. Another sketch in the British Library albums shows the 'Dutch folly fort' opposite Canton; and only four further sketches appear to have been done in the city itself. One of these is a drawing of an actor, inscribed 'Player. Canton Dec. 19';



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another is a small sketch inscribed 'Factory at Canton', depicting the English 'hong' or 'factory', but giving too many columns to its portico; another, inscribed 'Factories at Canton', includes five unidentifiable flags; and the fourth is a garden scene inscribed 'At the Ambassador's residence. Canton. 1794'.<sup>4</sup>

A few finished watercolours of these locations also exist, including two of the embassy ships are seen exchanging salutes with the Bocca Tigris forts, the larger ship being H.M.S. *Lion*, with the ambassador himself aboard (Fig.4). This watercolour is dated 1796, two years after the embassy's return to Britain.

In Canton the members of the embassy did not reside in the Western 'hongs' or 'factories' on the city side of the river, but were accommodated on the south bank of the river in the district of Honam. Alexander's experiences in Canton are recorded in his unpublished journal, also in the British Library. Arriving at Canton on December 12, 1793, a few days ahead of the ambassador and the

main body of the embassy, he soon took the opportunity to visit the premises of the Cantonese export painters who operated in the shopping streets close to the 'factories'. His response to their work was generally disparaging:

*Dec. 13th 1793. Visited the shops of 2 Chinese painters, Puqua & Camfou; these artists copy accurately, & produce very highly finished pictures, indifferently coloured, from the prints of Bunbury, Kauffmann &c., many prints of this style were seen here for that purpose, they have no knowledge of the theory of art, or any pretensions beyond imitation, their productions (speaking generally) are labour merely, without genius, they work when possible by mechanical process, the lines of buildings &c. are made with a ruler, & the subjects they execute are multiplied by tracing &c. They have no notion of perspective or the appearance of things, nor of the reflection of objects in water. When they undertake a Portrait they seldom please, not having the taste to flatter, the subject is copied individually. Painting on the back of glass is much in vogue here, on this substance where the picture requires it they reverse the subject dexterously enough.*<sup>5</sup>



Fig.5 Chinese artist, *The Western 'Factories' at Canton*, c.1770. Gouache on silk, 25 x 31 ½ ins. Private collection. Photo: Martyn Gregory, London

This was the standard response of Westerners to Chinese "export" painters, with perhaps an additional edge of professional rivalry on the part of the young British watercolourist. It also suggests that Alexander had not looked at the more ambitious works produced by the Cantonese studios - works such as (Fig.5) a detailed view of a group of the Western 'factories' in the late eighteenth century. Despite Alexander's claim that the Cantonese artists had 'no notion... of the reflection of objects in water', we can see reflections of both vessels and buildings clearly represented in this picture. Another painting by a Cantonese artist (Fig.6), perhaps painted a little after the embassy's visit to Canton, records (or at least commemorates) Macartney's reception by the Viceroy of Canton - a subject which it seems was not depicted by Alexander or the Daniells.



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Fig.6 Chinese artist, c.1795, *The reception of Lord Macartney by the Viceroy of Canton*. Oil on canvas, 29  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 43  $\frac{1}{2}$  ins Sze Yuan Tang collection, Hong Kong.

The various written accounts of Macartney's embassy indicate that its members were obliged to spend a good deal of their time in attending formal receptions. On December 20, 1793, the day after Alexander sketched his 'player', a series of theatrical performances was arranged for the benefit of the ambassador and his suite (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8). There followed visits from the leading officials of the province and city, consultations with the hong merchants, and Christmas dinner across the river in the English factory. William Alexander was still in his mid-twenties and a very junior member of the embassy (which also included an older and better-paid artist, the portraitist Thomas Hickey, who produced no more than a handful of drawings on the expedition). When Macartney and most of the embassy went to Chengde to be received by the Emperor, Alexander was one of the small group left behind in Beijing. In Canton, Lord Macartney managed to arrange a tour of the city (something which none of the East India's officials had achieved), but Alexander did not accompany him; it is unlikely that the young artist was given a free hand to sketch as he pleased.

A recently rediscovered Daniell drawing (Fig. 9) clearly dates from this time. Taken from a point close to the so-called Red Fort, it shows the hong from across the river, and the pencilled initials "D", "S" and "F" show that this drawing was intended for use in a future painting - the initials stand for: 'Danish', 'Spanish' and 'French', marking the positions of these hong (and their flags) as they appeared in the mid-1790s.



Fig.7 William Alexander, *A Scene in a Historical Play*. Pencil and watercolour, 9  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 14 ins. Private collection.



Fig.8 William Alexander, *A Chinese actor*. Etching and aquatint, 12  $\frac{1}{2}$  x 10  $\frac{1}{4}$  ins, published 13 August 1801. Photo: by the author.



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On January 8, 1794 the embassy took its formal leave of the English factory, where the leading officials of Canton were entertained, and here it seems likely that Alexander and the Daniells were all present. Alexander's journal describes the event:

*The Lon-ton or Viceroy seems to be favorably disposed to the English, his carriage towards his Lorp. is affable & friendly, it was pleasant to see them hob nob together during the repast'... [This was followed by] 'an aquatic procession to Wham-poa... the captains of every Indian ship I think 14 were now at Canton, each taking with him a gentleman of the Embassy in his boat each of which on this occasion hoisted an union flag of silk, and the several crews were habited in velvet caps & white Jackets, I had the pleasure to be with Capt Pennel of the Hawke...*

Lord Macartney's own journal adds that the Chinese guests seemed to enjoy the Western fare, including the European sweet wine and cherry brandy.<sup>6</sup>



Fig.9 Thomas Daniell, *The hong at Canton with the Red Fort*. Pencil and wash, 11 1/4 x 20 3/8 ins. Photo: Christie's, London.

This farewell dinner was no doubt the occasion for Alexander's portrait of the *Fuyuen*, with a knife and fork placed before him (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK), and it may also have been the occasion for a painting by Thomas Daniell. Daniell's reputa-

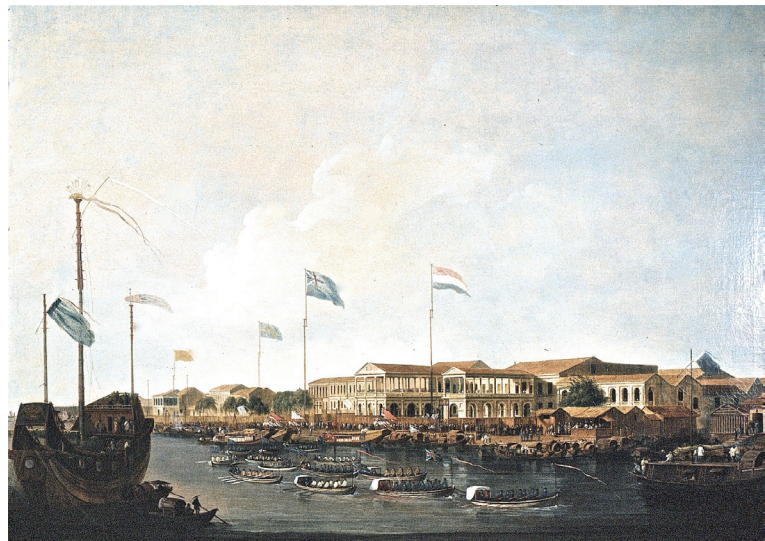


Fig.10 Thomas Daniell, *British pinnaces leaving the hong at Canton*. Oil on canvas, 40 1/2 x 54 1/4 ins. Private collection. Photo: Spink & Son Ltd.

tion had gone to Canton before him, for several of his paintings of Indian subjects were already on display in the dining-room of the English factory. So he (and probably also his nephew) would no doubt have been invited to the embassy's farewell event. Daniell's painting traditionally entitled 'a regatta at Canton' (Fig. 10) surely represents not a regatta but the ceremonial departure described above of the British from their factory. In the picture we see a procession of ships' boats, their sterns covered, not

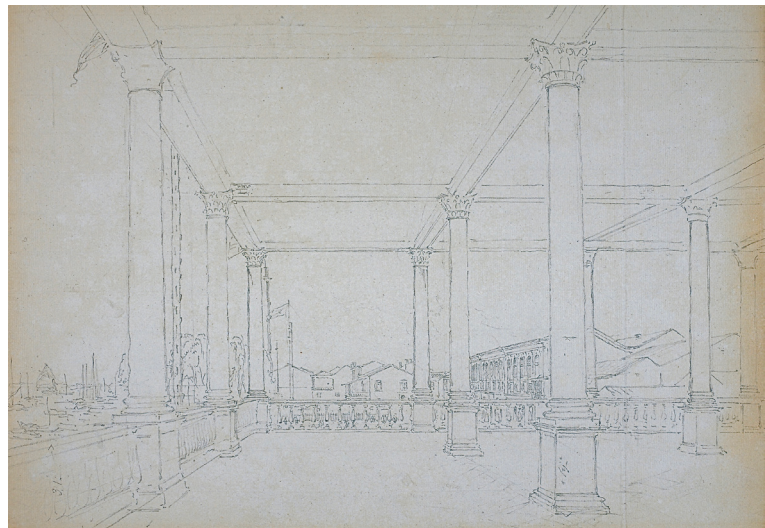


Fig.11 Thomas Daniell, *View of the Western Factories from the veranda of the English hong, Canton*. Pencil, 14 1/4 x 20 1/2 ins. British Library (WD 1732)



Fig.12 Thomas and William Daniell, 'Macao'  
Aquatint from *A Picturesque Voyage to India by the way of China*, 1810  
Photo: by the author.



racing but proceeding in formation down towards the anchorage at Whampoa (Huangpu). Further indication that Thomas Daniell was present may be found in a careful drawing by him taken from the veranda of the English factory (Fig. 11), inscribed on the back in ink 'Embassy's Veranda Canton China Jan'y 1794'.

From Whampoa the members of the embassy (including Alexander) sailed in short stages down the Pearl River, dropping anchor on January 13 about six miles west of Macao, as Macartney's journal records.<sup>7</sup> The long distance between the city of Macao and its anchorage may account for the evident difficulty experienced by European artists in depicting Macao from the sea. In particular the Daniells' aquatint of Macao (Fig. 12) wildly exaggerates the hills on the Chinese mainland behind. The members of the embassy stayed in Macao while waiting for the convoy to assemble; Alexander would presumably been reunited with the Daniells here for a few weeks.

On 8 March 1794 the convoy sailed from Macao; the *Lion*, Macartney's ship, was accompanied by 13 East Indiamen, together with a Spanish, a Portuguese and an American ship. Which of these carried the Daniells is not known. As it happened the voyage home was largely uneventful, although soon after leaving Macao the con-

voy was involved in an exchange of fire – not with French ships, but with a group of Malay *praus*, each manned by 'upwards of fifty Malays'; [they] frequently do a great deal of mischief off the coast of Sumatra'.<sup>8</sup>

In the decades following their return to Britain, engravings based on drawings by both Alexander and the Daniells appeared in a variety of publications. One of the Daniells' illustrated books was entitled *A Picturesque Voyage to India by the way of China*, published in 1810. The voyage apparently described is their outward journey of 1785 from London to south China and thence to India. It



Fig.13 Thomas and William Daniell, 'A Chinese of Rank'. Aquatint from *A Picturesque Voyage to India by the way of China*, 1810. Photo: by the author.



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has generally been assumed that his drawings of Whampoa and Canton were made on that voyage in 1785. But it is possible that most, perhaps all, of their Chinese sketches date from the voyage of 1793-94. Moreover, some of the Daniells' aquatints in the *Picturesque Voyage* volume - like some of Alexander's - are evidently based not on any sketches of their own but on Chinese export compositions (Fig. 13).

After 1806 (more than ten years after their return) William Daniell exhibited three oil paintings of Chinese subjects at the Royal Academy - two of the Canton 'factories' (1806 and 1808), and one of tea cultivation (1810) that is clearly derived from a Chinese export painting.<sup>9</sup> A further six oils of Chinese subjects by Thomas or William Daniell are recorded, all views of Canton or Whampoa, where they no doubt spent most of

their time in south China; one of the latter, a view of the upper end of the anchorage at Whampoa (Fig. 14), has recently come to light.<sup>10</sup> The architecture and the flags in the Canton oil paintings show the 'factories' as they appeared after the turn of the century, not as they appeared when the Daniells were there in 1793-94 (or at an earlier date). After their return from China the Daniells would have had access in London to up-to-date Chinese paintings (in oils or in gouache) of the Canton factories and of other subjects in the neighbourhood, paintings that were much more specific and informative than the meagre supply of their own drawings. We may conclude that the Daniells, like William Alexander, found it difficult to make sketches in Canton, but were able to supply any deficiencies by reference in London to the work of the Cantonese export studios. **RC**

Fig. 14 William Daniell, *The Pearl River at Whampoa*. Oil on canvas, 24 ½ x 36 in. Martyn Gregory, London





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NOTES

- 1 Entry for 28 December 1794 in *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, vol.I, ed. K. Garlick and A. Macintyre, Yale U.P., 1978, 282
- 2 Sir William Foster, 'British Artists in India, 1760-1820', *Walpole Society* XIX, 1930-31, 24; see also *DNB*.
- 3 The Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris holds a set of drawings (Cartes et Plans/ Société de Géographie/ Ms.in 8o/ 17/1271) whose authorship has been disputed by numerous scholars; it seems that they are either Nieuhof's originals or contemporary copies of another series by Nieuhof which are as yet undiscovered). See Leonard Blussé and Robert Falkenburg, *Johan Nieuhoofs Beelden van een Chinareis 1655-1657*, Middelburg, 1987; Sun, Jing, 'The illusion of verisimilitude: Johan Nieuhof's images of China', Dissertation for Leiden U., 2013; and Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World*, 2015, ch.1.
- 4 B.L., India Office Select Materials WD961: f.40.28; f.66.186; f.37.18; and f.37.19
- 5 William Alexander, 'Journal of a Voyage to Peking...', British Library Add.MS 35174, f.35
- 6 J.L. Cranmer-Byng (ed.), *An Embassy to China, being the journal kept by Lord Macartney...*, 1962, p.216
- 7 Cranmer-Byng, p.218; he records that on January 15 he went ashore 'with all the gentlemen of the Embassy'.
- 8 Aeneas Anderson, *A Narrative of the British Embassy to China in the years 1792, 1793 and 1794* (1795), 265-6. For drawings made by the Daniells on their return journey see Thomas Sutton, *The Daniells. Artists and Travellers*, 1954, 85-6.
- 9 See Kee Il Choi, 'The China Trade: Romance and Reality', De Cordova Museum, Lincoln, Mass., 1979, 34-5
- 10 For the list of the Daniells' oil paintings of Chinese subjects see Maurice Shellim, *Additional oil paintings by Thomas Daniell RA and William Daniell RA*. Spink & Son, 1988, 7. For the rediscovered oil of Whampoa see Maurice Shellim, *India and the Daniells*, 1979, WD5A, and Martyn Gregory Gallery Cat. 97, 'Images of the East', 2017, no.40;

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