



chapter six

European Images of the East

Travellers' Tales

▼ Engraving from a book entitled *China* published in 1667. It shows a Chinaman about to kill two giant serpents. The whole illustration projects the European idea of China as a strange landscape populated by fantastic plants and animals.

From the earliest times, Europe had direct contact with the neighbouring peoples of Western Asia. At various stages, too, European empires held substantial territories in Asia – firstly from the staggering conquests of Alexander the Great to the later holdings of Rome and Byzantium. However, further east, European knowledge of Asia became increasingly limited. Few had travelled very far eastwards and even fewer left any record of their journey. As a result, the western image of the Orient was based partly on fact but largely on fiction, probably fed on the tales of Western Asians keen to protect their lucrative role as the middlemen of the trade routes and to endow their goods with an element of mystery and marvel.

One of the first European accounts of the lands to the East was written by Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador sent to the Maurya kingdom of northern India in 303 BCE. His book, entitled *Indica*, contained information about the people, customs and natural history of the area. But he also included a number of fables, for example, a description of the 'umbrella-foots', one-legged people whose single foot was so large they could use it as a sunshade. This description and others were later borrowed by the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) when he compiled his monumental *Natural History*.



Pliny's work also included some description of the people of Seres (the Chinese), as did *The Periplus of the Erythraeum Sea*, a document on the Spice Route trade written around 80 CE probably by a Greek sea captain. Both books idealised the Chinese, seeing them as peace-loving and taciturn. An image also emerged at this time of the ruler of China being strict but absolutely fair, a myth that continued to be widely believed for many centuries. Boccaccio made use of it and, even later, the French philosopher, Voltaire (1694-1778).

From the Seventh Century, the strength of the Islamic empires created an effective barrier between Europe and the East. However, the rise of Mongol power in the Thirteenth Century enabled Europeans to travel to China for the first time. Most famously, Marco Polo travelled east to trade and his account of his journey from 1271-95 is now regarded as one of the most important, and accurate, sources of information on the East of this time.



▲ Map of Asia, engraved in 1562 by Jenkinson, based on Marco Polo's account of his travels, which were by then over 250 years old.



◀ Illustration from the *Livre des Merveilles*, a 15th Century French version of Marco Polo's travels. It incorporated the extraordinary beings and marvels of other accounts that appealed to the popular imagination.

His book was extremely popular in Medieval and Renaissance Europe but it was its more bizarre elements that inspired people's imaginations. Equally popular were such fantastic accounts epitomized by *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. It was 500 years before it was discovered that Sir John had never travelled and his 'personal experiences' were pure invention, but this book supplied the stories people wanted to hear. Borrowing ideas from Pliny and Megasthenes, the author described an Orient filled with strange monster-people, some with eyes in their foreheads and others without heads at all. It was no wonder that Europeans regarded the East through a veil of fantasy, seeing a place filled with exotic people and strange customs.



Styles of the Orient



▲ English mahogany bed designed by Thomas Chippendale (c. 1718-79). His design clearly shows the European 'chinoiserie' style, with its dragons, upswept lines and 'bamboo' effect.

▼ Engraving by M. Aubert from a painting by Jean Watteau. Watteau painted many fanciful scenes, using images of the East.

The collapse of Mongol power in the Fourteenth Century closed off the East to Europe once more. It was not until the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, when European ships began to sail regularly to Southeast Asia and China, that more information on these lands became available. Some of the myths of the East were exposed as the fabrications they were, and scholars and academics became increasingly rigorous in the pursuit of factual accuracy in their studies of distant lands. But the more fanciful view of the eastern lands remained popular. Travellers still told tall tales and the exquisite nature of the trade goods, such as Japanese lacquer, Chinese porcelain and Indian fabrics, served to encourage ideas of strange lands, full of beauty, riches and magic. They also helped to make the styles of the Orient extremely fashionable.

By the Eighteenth Century, the impact of Oriental goods and western ideas of the East was being seen throughout Europe. Even landscape gardening was affected, resulting in a fashion, propagated

by the English, known as *le jardin anglo-chinois*.

Borrowing from

Chinese gardens and paintings, a walk in *le jardin*

anglo-chinois was designed

to show a succession of views, as if a picture was slowly being unfurled. Trees, man-made lakes and hills were carefully positioned to create different scenes for contemplation.



However, it was particularly in the visual arts and crafts that the new eastern fashion was expressed, in a style known as 'Chinoiserie'. Chinoiserie was not an accurate representation of Chinese styles. The goods western craftsmen produced reflected an idealized image of the East and combined a multitude of different oriental styles with home-grown ones. Indian, Islamic, Chinese and Japanese designs and motifs were happily adapted to western purposes, resulting in a style that was essentially European. Furniture, silver, ceramics and textile designs were suffused with the spirit of chinoiserie.

The influence of the style can be detected in the work of artists such as Jean Watteau (1684-1721) and in some of the images of the Romantic movement in literature, for example in the poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1824). Architecture, too, took on elements of these fanciful ideas. From the exotic *kiosques* of Louis XIV of France (1638-1715) and Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712-86) to the extraordinary Brighton Pavilion, built to please the whim of the Prince of Wales (later George IV, 1762-1830), images of the Orient have produced buildings from the elegant to the bizarre.

▼ *Brighton Pavilion, England, designed by John Nash (1752-1835) for George, Prince of Wales at the end of the 18th Century. It incorporates European ideas of Chinese, Indian and Islamic architecture in a flamboyant mixture of styles.*

