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# PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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## NICHOLAS OF RUSSIA TRAVELS TO THE EAST. III: A GIFT EN ROUTE

In *Manuscripta Orientalia* X/2, E. Rezvan and A. Teriukov gave a graphic account of the grand tour of Nicholas, the Crown Prince of Russia, which took him through many lands to China and Japan. The second half of their article includes a description of the gift to Nicholas of a splendid set of twelve albums — containing in all some 115 Chinese export watercolours on pith, presented to him when he visited a Russian tea-brick factory in Hangzhou in 1891. These albums are now held in the *Kunstkamera* Museum.

Having been invited by Professor Rezvan to examine the collection it was with ill-concealed excitement that I approached the *Kunstkamera* Museum on the morning

I was first to see it. Though I had already been sent electronic images, the real thing was a fresh delight: twelve albums in beautiful and auspicious red silk brocade covers with a rich cloud pattern in the weave. Unusually large pages of pith signalled a prestigious collection and the original brilliance of the pigments is well preserved within the album covers. They had rarely seen the light of day since they were given to the museum by Nicholas II in 1897. These were pictures painted with an accessible immediacy that makes it easy to understand why they so appealed to Western visitors to China in the nineteenth century.

### The *Kunstkamera* Albums

The twelve albums in the set are all of the same size (37×25 cm) and have red silk covers with green silk ties. The pictures are also a uniform 33×21 cm, significantly larger than the more common size of about 30×20 cm. The method of cutting the pith on a narrow ceramic block meant that it took great skill to produce sheets of this unusual size and they would have been comparatively expensive. The pith is of good quality, still white and clear and of a fairly thick cut. In the usual manner it is secured to mountings of Chinese paper by blue ribbons at the edges. The pith itself is not stuck down. Because the pith is not directly supported by the backing, it must be handled with great care. Over the years it has dried out and become very brittle and a few of the pictures are badly fractured.

One of the albums (No. 311-1-12 (8)) has been restored in the recent past. It is not clear whether the others are in their original state with the pictures in their intended groupings and sequences since not only are there duplicates in the collection but some of the pictures appear out of any obvious sequence. The first album contains ten pictures of grandees in domestic settings. The second, ten of wealthy young women with their attendants. The third, a mix of nine pictures, including a wedding, domestic scenes and some that would appear to belong elsewhere. The fourth album contains ten pictures of a ceremonial religious procession. The fifth has eight pictures of birds, the sixth a traditional story from the Peking opera, the seventh the tale of a child growing up and the eighth is another album

of splendid pictures of birds. Album nine shows young ladies playing musical instruments while album ten has a mix of subjects, some of which seem to belong to other groups. Album eleven shows a procession and twelve contains pictures of sea going ships and river boats.

Some damaged pictures are in urgent need of restoration if they are to be preserved but the works are generally in good condition with bright strong colours. There is an ongoing debate among conservators as to whether pictures on pith are best preserved in albums or separately mounted on card in folders. In the albums they are at risk from frequent and clumsy handling but they were bought and brought to the West in albums. The albums keep them in sequence and may hold information (such as a studio plate) from which the individual pictures should not be separated. In the case of the *Kunstkamera* collection the albums bear the seal of the tea company. Pictures that remain in albums can only be displayed one at a time but they should not in any case be exposed to strong light for any length of time. It may be that the solution is to retain the pictures in albums and to satisfy the needs of the curious by publishing the pictures electronically.

The variation in styles and treatment of subject matter suggest that though most of the albums were from a single source, some came from other studios. There are pictures I recognise from other collections, the tale of a boy growing