



Opium-Pipe

Date

1800-1850

Medium

Brass

Description

Opium pipe inscribed with four Chinese characters at the top. The Cuming family, who created the Cuming museum collection in the 18th and 19th centuries, collected objects from all around the world, including China. Like many collectors of their day, their attitudes and interests were shaped by their world. It was a world of creation and inventiveness but also invasion, seizure and obliteration. The rise of new empires, especially the British Empire, reshaped the rest of the world, often by force. This force could be applied through war but also through less obvious means such as exerting influence, appropriating cultures or demanding and enforcing trading agreements

to serve British interests. The opium pipes in the Cuming collection represent part of Richard and Henry's interest in collecting the same kinds of objects across different cultures, countries and communities. Henry Syer Cuming writes of the interest he has in collecting objects which show the "progress of cultures and nations towards civilisation". He meant Western civilisation and he was not alone in seeing this as a goal. It was a common attitude in the 19th century and arguably remains today. The objects he collected about China include a lot of footwear for bound feet and opium related items. Probably as a result of Western countries' wish to profit from China, stereotypes were fostered depicting Chinese people in unsavoury ways, particularly as opium addicts. All without really mentioning Britain's part in creating, controlling and expanding the global opium drug trade by brutally enforcing their trading demands on China and China's resistance.

Dimensions

Object/Work: 85 x 510 mm