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The Cleveland  
Museum of Art

Consumption  
and Exploration:  
Trade Connections  
between Europe and Asia



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*Porcelain Bowl*, early 1900. Japan.  
Porcelain. Gift of Mrs. Lyman H. Treadway, 1924.193

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## Introduction

On an average trip to the store, the majority of objects in your shopping cart could hail from around the world. The global market is not new. Between the 2nd century BC and the 14th century AD, goods moved on land west, across Europe to the Middle East and then through Asia on the Silk Road. Goods from Asia traveled east on the same path, to Europe. By the 15th century, sea routes had become important.

This suitcase traces the history of connections between Asia and Europe, focusing on issues of trade, cultural diffusion, colonialism, and globalization.

### The Silk Road

The Silk Road was a network of paths across some of the world's most difficult terrain. These trails through vast deserts and treacherous mountains connected Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey), the western terminus, and Chang'an (present-day Xian, China), the eastern terminus, with various trade posts dispersed across 7,000 miles.

Transporting merchandise along this great expanse was like a relay race. Traders would take their cargo to one or two cities, usually staying within the borders of a single politically controlled region. Having exchanged these goods, they would return home to sell their new wares and begin the process again.

The difficult geographic conditions and the threat of thieves made the trip slow. A caravan took about six months to travel the 1,300 miles from Kashgar to Chang'an. Today, a commercial airplane flies the same distance in four hours. Camels were the pack animal of choice because they could withstand harsh conditions while carrying 400 to 500 pounds on their backs.



The Silk Road of the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907) superimposed on a map of present-day Asia.

## Chinese Exports and Imports

What did these camels transport? Traders, attuned to their customers' desires—however luxurious, rare, and exotic—transported items including perishables such as grapes and peaches and consumer goods such as leather, paint pigments, and jewels.

Silk was one of the most coveted items. Conservative political commentators during the Roman Empire deplored their countrymen's conspicuous consumption of silk. The Chinese had discovered the technology for sericulture, or silk cultivation, by 3000 BC, and this trade secret afforded them a monopoly for millennia. The museum's *Sericulture Scroll* (1977.5) (not illustrated) details the various steps in this labor-intensive process, from tending the silkworms (*Bombyx mori*) fed a diet of fresh mulberry leaves to weaving textiles. The finished silk was so precious it was sometimes used instead of gold as payment to government officials.

Silks woven with Chinese motifs were popular in Europe. Even after sericulture was introduced there in the 13th century, Chinese-made silk remained highly prized. The popularity of Chinese silk continued into the 20th century, when the museum acquired the *Silk Tapestry Weave Fragment* (1921.425), a 19th- or 20th-century woven textile whose decorative elements include bamboo leaves, orchids, and weathered rocks.

Chinese export of silk, along with paper, porcelain, and other items, was matched by Chinese desires for imported items. Trade across the Silk Road was particularly lucrative during the height of the Tang dynasty (618–907). In the cosmopolitan capital city Chang'an, the members of the court wore jewels from India, used glass wares from Byzantium, and played polo on horses from Central Asia.

The wealthy and powerful sought to continue their lifestyle in the hereafter by installing in their tombs earthenware figures representing daily life. Mortuary sets included guardian figures to protect the tomb from evil spirits, such as the armor-clad *Grave Figure* (1928.286), and dogs, sheep, and musicians. Tomb excavations indicate that depictions of foreigners, camels, and polo horses was common. These objects not only help modern historians reconstruct the impact of foreigners on Chinese society of the period, they also indicate that the Tang dynasty elite hoped to ensure their way of life for eternity.

*Silk Tapestry Weave  
Fragment, c. 1875–  
1911. China. Silk;  
metallic slit-tapestry  
weave. Sundry Purchase  
Fund, 1921.425*



Jade was another prized import. The equivalent of gold to Westerners, in China jade was associated with permanence, power, and wealth. While there were native sources of the stone, some of the most desirable jade was imported from the mountains of Central Asia. Chinese craftsmen used slow abrasion to carve sculptural forms from large raw stones, as seen in inlaid element in the lacquer *Box with Cover* (1652.1939) on page 10.

## **Religion and the Significance of Sea Trade**

Missionaries and sometimes the traders themselves spread Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity across the trade routes throughout Asia. The history of these religions in the region underscores the increasing importance of sea trade over land trade.

Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama in India in the fifth century BC, professes a code of action tied to a sense of moderation and offers enlightenment to its adherents. By the fifth century AD, the Silk Road had become a conduit for Indian missionaries, who brought religious texts, portable religious objects, and doctrine to China, and for Chinese Buddhist

pilgrims, who visited holy sites in India. Buddhist monasteries and temple complexes came to dot the various land routes throughout Central and East Asia.

Spreading across the web of land routes, Islam became the dominant faith in Central Asia by the eighth century AD. Islam had been founded on the Arabian Peninsula a century earlier by Muhammad of Islam. Practitioners of this faith believe in a single god, Allah, and that the Prophet Muhammad received divine revelations, which were compiled as the Koran. The communal call to prayer that is essential to Islam was answered with monumental mosque complexes in each of the many wealthy trading cities. Muslim traders also largely pioneered sea trade to South Asia and Southeast Asia, controlling the spice trade until the 15th century; this contact led to the growth of Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world today.

Christianity has long roots in Asia, though its numbers never reached that of the Muslim and Buddhist populations. While Christian communities existed in India and China before the 15th century, the reach of Christianity increased after Europeans gained primacy on the seas across the globe. Roman Catholic missionaries traveled by sea to Asia, Africa, and the newly discovered Americas. On these journeys, small-scale religious objects such as bibles and icons helped missionaries pass on their doctrine. Artisans served the needs of new adherents by creating religious art, drawing from materials and styles with which they were already familiar. The small scale of the *Madonna and Child* (1945.200) indicates it was likely used for personal devotions. The infant Jesus holds a lily, a common symbol of the Virgin, and Mary draws a rosary through her hands. Her face and dress, however, are modeled on Chinese Buddhist and Confucian religious figures.



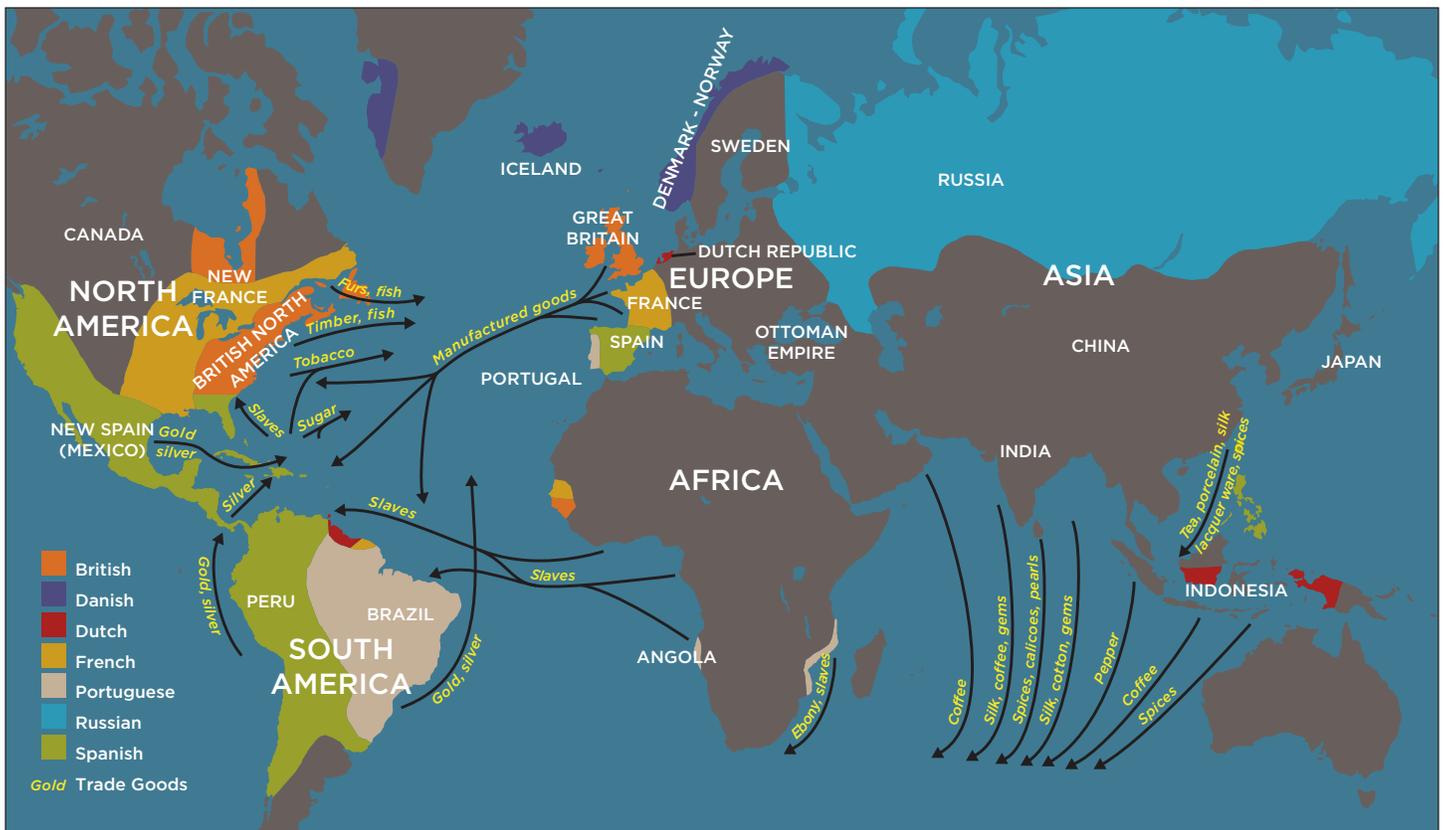
*Grave Figure*, AD 618–907. China, Tang dynasty. Terracotta. Educational Purchase Fund, 1928.286



*Madonna and Child*,  
c. 1800s. China. Ivory,  
pigment. Gift of the  
Estate of Mr. and Mrs.  
Edward A. Woods,  
1945.200

## The Age of Exploration and the Sea Route to Asia

The first European to reach Asia by sea was Vasco da Gama, who arrived on the west coast of India in 1498. After this initial contact, more ships reached Asian ports each season in search of spices, silks, porcelain, precious stones, and aromatic wood. European maritime trade with Asia effectively cut out the middlemen along the Silk Road and the Arab traders in Southeast Asia. Cities such as Kashgar and Samarkand, which had been geographically blessed in previous centuries, went into economic decline while Spain, Portugal, England, France, and the Netherlands prospered.



As with the Silk Road, traders who knew their markets could maximize profits. In the maritime trade, profitability hinged on having ships enter a port with saleable items and leave with even more valuable ones. While the list of items European traders wanted from Asia was long, the Chinese and Japanese did not have a comparable desire for European finished products. In order to rectify this massive trade defi-

The global nature of trade around 1700.

cit, traders began to create a global network in which raw goods such as silver from the Americas and ivory from Africa would be procured at low cost, often as a result of colonization. These goods would then be traded in China and Japan for porcelain, tea, and other items.

Export of lacquerware is a good example of this sea-trade business model. Lacquer resin comes from the varnish tree (*Rhus verniciflua*), which is native to Asia. As with silk centuries before, the Chinese and Japanese monopolies on lacquerware created a market in Europe for such objects in the 16th century. In addition, lacquerware is a time-intensive product: a small *Box with Cover* (1652.1939) might take six months to create. Its rarity made lacquerware even more attractive to European collectors. Successful traders brought ships filled with silver from the Americas to Japan to purchase lacquer boxes, furniture, and consumer goods that would then be sold in Europe.

*Box with Cover*, 20th century. China. Lacquer. Lent by Mrs. Charles F. Rogers, 1652.1939.a-b



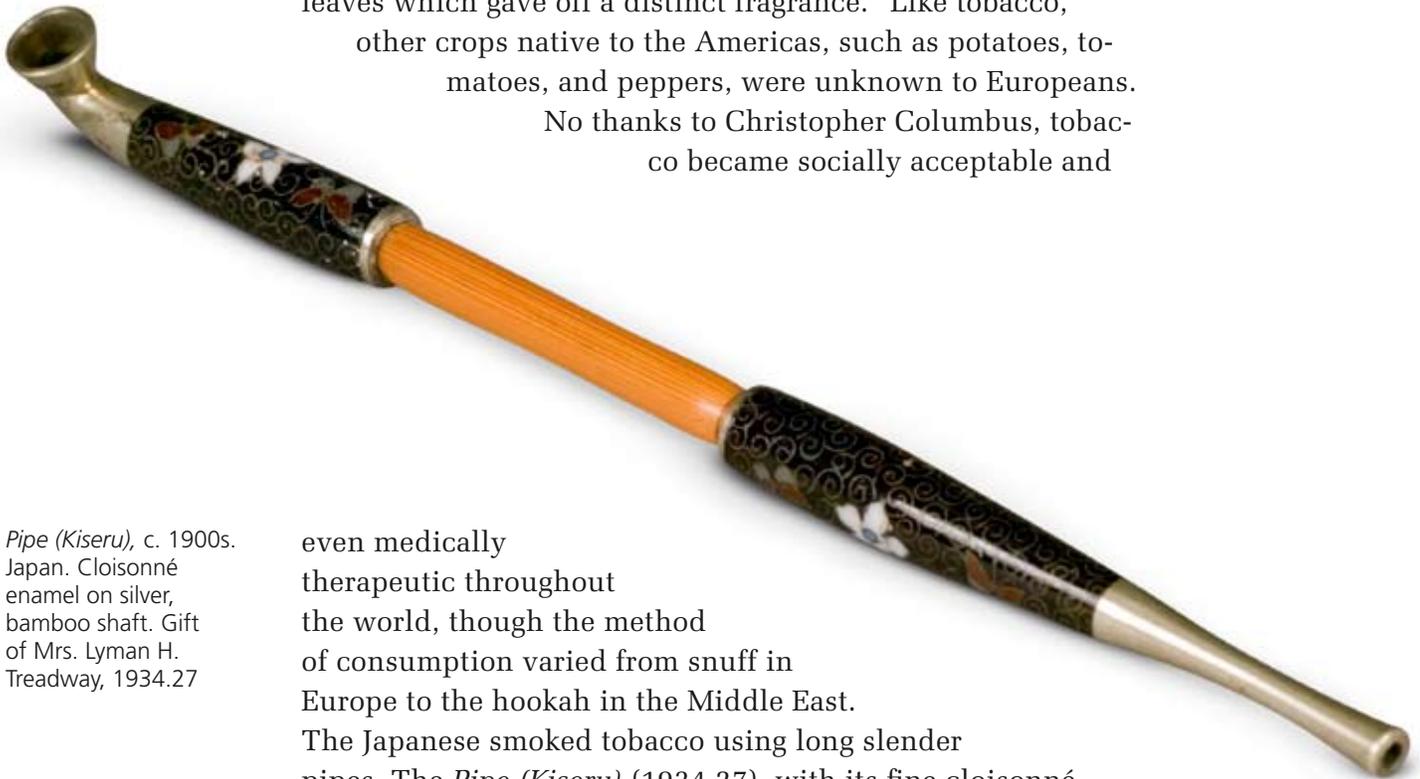
### **Spices, Tobacco, and Tea**

Sea trade rested on the establishment of strategic ports throughout the world and strong monopolies. Within 60 years of Vasco da Gama's arrival in India, the Portuguese had an empire of fortified coastal settlements and trading posts throughout Asia. In an effort to create trade monopolies,

England, Spain, and Portugal eventually became colonial powers. Spices were some of the most profitable trade stuffs that returned from Asia; control of distribution of a spice, such as the Dutch monopoly on the clove market, allowed traders and merchants to dictate prices. Once introduced, the taste for spices and other foodstuffs led to a constant desire for them. Traders, adept marketers as they were, often created markets for their goods. Christopher Columbus threw away the tobacco he received as a gift when he landed on the island of San Salvador because he was unfamiliar with the “dried leaves which gave off a distinct fragrance.” Like tobacco,

other crops native to the Americas, such as potatoes, tomatoes, and peppers, were unknown to Europeans.

No thanks to Christopher Columbus, tobacco became socially acceptable and



*Pipe (Kiseru)*, c. 1900s.  
Japan. Cloisonné  
enamel on silver,  
bamboo shaft. Gift  
of Mrs. Lyman H.  
Treadway, 1934.27

even medically  
therapeutic throughout  
the world, though the method  
of consumption varied from snuff in  
Europe to the hookah in the Middle East.

The Japanese smoked tobacco using long slender pipes. The *Pipe (Kiseru)* (1934.27), with its fine cloisonné enamel flowers, could have been used by one of the fashionable city dwellers for whom smoking tobacco was de rigueur.

As with tobacco, tea had important social connotations throughout the world. People had been drinking tea in China since before 2000 BC, and specific social habits were associated with its consumption. Similarly, after tea was introduced to Japan, a whole culture developed around tea, including the tea ceremony, a ritual-rich tradition of drinking whipped tea. While drinking tea was very popular in China and Japan, it was always consumed from tea bowls, cups without handles. Tea came to Europe from China in the 17th century and quickly became popular among wealthy women in England



*Tea Caddy*, c. 1900–1925. Japan. Repoussé tin or pewter. Gift of Laurence H. Norton, Robert C. Norton, and Miriam Norton White in memory of Mr. and Mrs. D. Z. Norton, 1939.422.a–c

and the Netherlands. Coffee had arrived in Europe by the 16th century, but it was deemed unsuitable for women, who might be overly susceptible to the effects of caffeine. In England, the threat of coffee to women loomed so large that they were banned from coffee shops altogether. Tea thus allowed women to partake in a ritual parallel to men's coffee drinking. Eventually, all sectors of society and both genders drank tea, though the ritual as a social pastime remained the purview of women.

Considerable expense was involved just to acquire the various items needed to serve tea, including a full porcelain service, pots, sugar tongs, and sugar knife (for cutting cane sugar). Then there was the tea itself, which was displayed in a prominent location in a decorative caddy or locked box. Containers such as the pewter *Tea Caddy* (1939.422.a–c) often had tiers to keep green and black teas separate. Women typically served tea in imported tea bowls, and the craze for the drink led to the local manufacture of tea wares. Early on, manufacturers such as Staffordshire attempted to mimic the shape of Chinese and Japanese tea bowls, as seen in the footed *Cup* (1948.472.a). By the early 19th century, European artisans had completely broken with this fashion and updated the tea bowl by adding handles. Handles are essential to tea cups to this day.

## Porcelain and Its Imitators

No single commodity incited local production by artisans in Europe as wholly as porcelain. The raw material of porcelain, white kaolin clay, is found in many places around the world. Until 1709, however, the formula for mixing this clay with ground china stone (petuntze) and the high-temperature firing required to create fine porcelain remained a Chinese secret. Porcelain did trickle into Europe via the Silk Road, but the sheer weight and fragility of the product inhibited large-scale export. By 1700, single European cargo ships were transporting 250,000 pieces of porcelain along with tea and silk.

While Chinese potters employed a variety of decorative schemes featuring assorted colored glazes, to Europeans the so-called blue-and-white wares (white porcelain

*Cup*, c. 1830. Staffordshire Factory (British). Porcelain. Gift of Mrs. S. Prentiss Baldwin, 1948.472.a





*Porcelain Bowl*, early 1900. Japan. Porcelain. Gift of Mrs. Lyman H. Treadway, 1924.193

underglazed with blue cobalt) were the epitome of Chinese porcelain. When consumer demand outstripped supplies, Europeans turned to Japanese porcelain makers, who made imitation blue-and-white wares. Europeans also began to covet the brightly colored porcelain wares characteristic of Japanese porcelain. The Japanese often added enamel adornment to a fired porcelain body, as in the *Porcelain Bowl* (1924.193), with its minuscule butterflies and small street scene. This time-consuming technique allowed for a high level of detail.

European manufacturers yearned to supplant the Chinese monopoly and claim the profits as their own. In Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands, tin-glazed earthenware was created to mimic highly desirable pure white porcelain. In the Netherlands, this method became common for the manufacture of tiles, which were used in fireplaces, as baseboards, and in kitchens. Hand-glazed decoration included scenes of everyday life, fruits, and flowers, especially the tulip as in the *Tile with Stylized Tulips* (1927.224).

*Tile with Stylized Tulips*, 1600–1650. Holland, Delft. Glazed ceramic. 1927.224



The Chinese monopoly on porcelain was finally broken when the German alchemist Johann Böttger discovered the formula in 1709. Very quickly the Germans, French, and English established porcelain factories. Well before that time, illustrated books were being printed as well as images engraved on woodblocks and metal plates. Ceramic factories such as Staffordshire used printmaking technology to transfer detailed images onto porcelain, increasing their efficiency and output. While Staffordshire created various styles, its blue-and-white ware was particularly popular. After all, the initial European love affair with porcelain came with Chinese blue-and-white wares.

## **Mapping and Owning the World**

Printmaking also revolutionized the way people understood the world. In the time before radar and satellites, the outlines of the continents, the locations of mountain passes, and the shapes of the harbors had to be charted by hand. For traders throughout the centuries, accurate maps were essential tools that assured them safety and success in their ventures. Early in European sea trade, maps leading to the sources of precious commodities were guarded as trade secrets. Yet the contours of the continents would not remain concealed for long.

Printed maps became popular with collectors. A pioneer in consumer maps was John Speede, a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I and James I. In 1627 Speede created the atlas *Prospect of the Most Famous Parts of the World* from which *A New Map of East India* (1629.189) was excised. On the reverse of each map is a description of the geography, culture, and people of the area. Such details could augment a collector's appreciation of the things in his possession that came from far-away lands.

Desire and possession were key factors in the ever-changing business of trade between Europe and Asia. During the time of Silk Road, consumer appetites were fed with the ready stream of goods that traders transported throughout Asia and Europe. When the Europeans gained primacy over the seas, land itself became a commodity as countries themselves became possessions. During the colonial period, trade throughout the world increased. Tobacco, tea, silk, porcelain,

and other merchandise flooded into Europe affecting artistic production, social customs, and consumer habits. By the 18th century, Europeans not only owned maps of the world, but also products from the world and dominated the world itself.



*A New Map of East India*, 1626. John Speede (British). Hand-colored engraving. Educational Purchase Fund, 1929.189

## Vocabulary

**blue-and-white wares.** Style of decorated porcelain. Porcelain is covered with transparent glaze and fired; glaze derived from the mineral cobalt is then applied before the second firing; finally, a layer of transparent glaze is applied and the object fired for the third time.

**commodity.** Anything that can be transported and therefore traded.

**ceramic.** Fired clay classified as earthenware, stoneware, or porcelain.

**earthenware.** Porous ceramic, fired at 600 to 1100 degrees Celsius. Earthenware vessels need to be glazed to be watertight.

**enamelware.** Porcelain brightly decorated with enamel. Enamel decoration differs from other glazes in that it uses glass as a bonding agent.

**glaze.** Coating applied to ceramic before firing.

**globalization.** Interconnectedness of people around the world. This term is often associated with economic interconnectedness and trade.

**lacquerware.** Objects made of wood that have been coated with layers of resin from a lacquer tree.

**majolica.** Stoneware vessels decorated with tin glazes to mimic porcelain.

**motif.** Recurrent design or visual element.

**porcelain.** Impermeable translucent white ceramic, fired at 1250 to 1400 degrees Celsius.

**stoneware.** Impermeable opaque ceramic, fired at 1200 to 1300 degrees Celsius.

**Silk Road.** Network of trade routes connecting Europe and Asia.

**tapestry weave.** Method of weaving textiles. Various color threads (the weft) are interlaced into the foundation threads (the warp) to create decoration.

**tea caddy.** Container for storing tea, often with compartments for separating different types.

**tea bowl.** Tea cup without a handle, used throughout Asia to this day. Tea cups with handles originated in Europe in the 19th century.

**transferware.** Style of decorated porcelain. A pattern engraved into a copper plate is printed with glaze on tissue paper, which is then transferred to the ceramic.

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### List of Objects

*Silk Tapestry Weave Fragment*, c. 1875–1911. China. Silk; metallic slit-tapestry weave. Sundry Purchase Fund, 1921.425

*Grave Figure*, AD 618–907. China, Tang dynasty. Terracotta. Educational Purchase Fund, 1928.286

*Box with Cover*, 20th century. China. Lacquer. Lent by Mrs. Charles F. Rogers, 1652.1939.a–b

*Madonna and Child*, c. 1800s. China. Ivory, pigment. Gift of the Estate of Mr. and Mrs. Edward A. Woods, 1945.200

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