

COMMITTEE IV

The Relationship Between Science and
The Arts and Its Relevance to
Cultural Transformation

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**THE DREAM OF CHINA: THE SWEDISH EAST INDIA COMPANY
(1731-1813) AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR SWEDISH
SCIENCE, ART AND CULTURE**

by

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During the years 1731 to 1813, the city of Göteborg in Sweden was dominated by the Swedish East India Company, which was regarded as the most remarkable commercial company in the country, with an enormous importance not only for the economy but also for Art and Science.

Göteborg was founded at the mouth of the Göta River in 1621, when the geographical relationships between the Scandinavian countries were different from today. Finland belonged to Sweden, and Stockholm, at the Baltic, was a natural centre of the Kingdom. The Swedish realms to the west consisted of only 15 kilometres around the mouth of the Göta River. The areas north and south of the river - Bohuslan and Halland - belonged to Norway and Denmark. Therefore, it was of the utmost importance for the King to fortify this part of Sweden as strongly as possible.

King Gustav II Adolf ordered that the city should be built as a strong fortification with moat, walls and bastions, and at the end of the 17th century, Göteborg was seen as one of Europe's strongest and most impregnable fortresses. On hills north and south of the city, two separate fortresses - the Lion and the Crown - were built to defend against attacks from land armies. The people in Göteborg lived like prisoners in their own city, because the three city gates were closed from sunset to sunrise. Nobody was allowed to pass through the gates during those hours. The city looked very Dutch with its canals edged with pruned limetrees, and gable-houses of wood painted in vivid colours, such as red, yellow and blue. In this town, Niklas Sahlgren^{who} was born in 1701, the younger son of a timber-merchant and ship-owner,¹³ known as a pioneer of the Swedish East India Company.

In the 13th century, Marco Polo from Venice was travelling in China as the guest, and an official, of the Mongolian Ruler, Kublai Khan. In a long report, written after his return to Italy in 1295, he described the

flourishing culture and wonders of China. His book was well read in Europe during the Middle Ages, and his stories about China are said to have inspired geographical science and the efforts to reach India and China by sea around the African coast.

Marco Polo writes of the beautiful ceramics, which reminded him of the shell Porcella, and which gave ceramics the name of 'Porcelain', whose production was widely spread both in the north and south of China. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the Chinese made a white porcelain with a decor under the glaze in a blue colour, which was very popular because of its beauty.

Trade with Europe was forbidden during this dynasty, but the Europeans could get ^{subject} ~~it~~ by import through the Middle East. Chinaware was regarded as a rare object of art, and it soon became an expensive feature of royal collections, often set in gold and silver.

In the beginning of the 15th century, Portugal, liberated from the dominion of the Mahometans, tried, in order to build up a new prosperity, to conquer trade with the East by finding new commercial routes. In the 1430s, the Portugese looked for the seaway to India and China by sailing along the African west coast. In 1486, Bartolomeus Diaz reached the south point of Africa, to which he gave the name of Cape of the Tempests. This was changed by the King of Portugal to the Cape of Good Hope, because he meant that from this point there would be a 'good hope' of reaching China.

In 1498, Vasco da Gama reached Calicut, on the west coast of India, with an expedition of four vessels, and in the 16th century Portugal founded several commercial factories in India and China. The Pope divided the

world into two halves between Portugal and Spain. In 1644, the Chinese emperors of the Ming Dynasty gave way to the Ching Dynasty, which was more friendly to strangers from Europe, and Canton was opened for the export trade of the Chinese government.

England and Holland, who at the end of the 16th century took over the roles as leading sea-nation from Portugal, in 1600 and 1602 opened companies for trade with East India. They became the dominant countries in this trade for more than two hundred years. Denmark founded an East India company in 1618, and France another in 1655.

In the 1720s, an Austrian company was founded in Ostende in Flanders, but England and Holland saw it as a threat, and after diplomatic pressure Austria had to close down the Ostende Company in 1731. Many merchants in England, Scotland and Holland had invested money in the Ostende Company, and now they searched for other business. One businessman, Colin Campbell from Scotland, in Holland met Niklas Sahlgren from Göteborg in ~~Sweden~~. They agreed to establish a new company in Göteborg. Sahlgren had been sent ~~out~~ by his family to study business in Amsterdam, where he was very much impressed by the activity of the Dutch East India Company. After negotiations covering several years, the Swedish government in 1731 granted licences to Henric Konig - decoy to Campbell and Sahlgren - to carry on trade for fifteen years with the countries east of Cape of Good Hope. The rules of the contract included the following: the company's ships should sail under the Swedish flag, and should be bought or built in Sweden, preferably of local material; a certain duty should be charged on both import and further export; Swedish money should not be taken out of the country; the company's books should be destroyed every third year after

being audited; all ships should sail from Göteborg and return there to discharge the cargo, which should be sold at auction as soon as possible.

The first charter had a board of three directors, Campbell, Sahlgren and König, who ordered construction of the first ship in Stockholm, and named it Fredericus Rex after the King of Sweden. The ship sailed on her first expedition from Göteborg on 9 February 1732, with Colin Campbell as the chief official supercargo. He had also been accredited ambassador to the Emperor of China. After seven months, the ship reached Canton and after loading left for home on 8 January 1733. In the Sunda Sound, she was captured by seven Dutch men-of-war and taken to Batavia, but when Campbell showed his papers to the governor-general they were immediately returned with an apology and a remuneration for the delay of the ship. The expedition was a good stroke of business, yielding the partners a dividend of 75%. At the auction, the cargo yielded about 900,000 thalers in silver. Goods to the value of 500,000 were exported: tea 350,000, silk 100,000 and porcelain 31,000.

However, a strong opposition to the company made itself felt even in the home country. The charge was that it took out silver ('which withstands the wear and tear of time and which even fire cannot destroy') and exchanged it 'for fragile objects of clay, which once dropped, cannot be mended.' Nevertheless, the Swedish Parliament took the view that the East Indian trade was of value because it made possible the export of Swedish products and the import of raw material for the manufacturing industry.

During the first charter, the company had to contend with many difficulties: two ships were seized by competitors and four were lost - among them the Göteborg which, having completed her voyage, ran aground and sank with

her whole cargo just outside the harbour of Göteborg in 1745. Much of the Chinese porcelain has been salvaged in recent years and is now exhibited in Göteborg Museum.

The second charter, 1746-1766, initiated certain changes. The customs charges were raised, the number of directors was increased from three to seven and a board of twelve 'main participants' was appointed. During this period, 13 ships made in all 36 voyages to Canton, but only one ship, the Prins Friederic Adolph, was wrecked, outward bound on her fourth expedition. The average for the 36 expeditions showed a profit of a good 25%.

The ships of the Swedish East India company rode at anchor at the Gota Riverside, fove kilometres outside Goteborg. It took a long time to equip such an expedition, with enlistment and inspection of the large crew and with loading the big cargo of copper, iron, steel, paper, timber products, tar, broadcloths, etc.

Departures took place usually in December or January to take advantage of the trade winds at the equator. Generally, they sailed along the coast of Bohuslan, along the Norwegian coast westwards to Scotland, then southwards along the coast of Great Britain to the Spanish city of Cadiz, where the Swedish cargo was exchanged for silver coins. The Spaniards brought enormous quantities of silver from their mines in South America, which in Europe was exchanged into different kinds of wares. There was a joke about the silver-that it had been dug with great effort in South America, and then was hidden in the Chinese earth because the Chinese had no interest in Swedish wares, such as wood and copper. They were interested only in the hard cash of silver and gold.

The Swedish ships would ^{often} stay in Cadiz for a month, and then went south along the African west coast towards the Cape of Good Hope, passing the

equator. This was a great event to those who passed it for the first time. They had to be dipped three times from the mainyard into the sea during the sailing in case they did not pay special 'hen-money', which after the return was paid to the poor.

Passing the Indian Ocean, they finally reached China. The first harbour was the old Portugese colony, Macao, where the Chinese pilot came on board, and then they sailed through the narrow sound, Bocca Tigris (Tiger Mouth), which was guarded by two Chinese fortresses. This was the inlet to Pearl River and the island Wampoa, where the ships anchored. The cargo and ballast were unloaded and stored under close guard in 'bank halls'.

Outside the walled city of Canton, the European trading settlements stretched in a long row by the river. No European was allowed to pass the city gates of Canton, and therefore the Chinese merchants had built small suburbs outside the walls, with houses and shops on one floor of clay.

The ship's clerk, C.H. Braad, who came to Canton in 1748, wrote in his diary that in the streets you could only see 'shops filled with porcelain of all kinds; in another street different kinds of silk fabrics; in a third, shops with all kinds of Chinese clothes; in a fourth, Chinese hats and caps, etc.; everything arranged in a very neat and elegant way'. The craftsmen sat in their shops working in sight of everyone: 'some of them paint and lacquer pieces of wood, others are polishing pieces of glass, carving mother-of-pearl, some are cutting gold- and silver-paper, others are sewing and embroidering clothes and silks.'

The European 'bank halls' were built on an island in Pearl River, and the houses were turned towards the river and connected with a long street, 'the Street of the Thirteen Factories'. Many pictures of these factories have been preserved, on which can be seen the different flags of the

countries in front of their head offices.

The supercargo, the chief official of the Swedish East India Company, had to negotiate the business with a specially licensed Chinese trading company, led by the Mandarin Pan K'i-kuan, who is said to have been a very good friend to the Swedes. In 1769, he visited Göteborg, and his friend, Niklas Sahlgren, who was presented with his guest's portrait painted on a mirror, now in Göteborg Museum.

The Chinese wares loaded on to the ships were tea, porcelain, silk, cotton, mother-of-pearl, rhubarb, China-root, sago and cane; also, hand-painted wall-papers, on silk and paper, lacquered furniture and boxes, ivory-fans, paper flowers, bouquets and dolls.

The cargoes of porcelain were enormous: in 1768-88, more than 10 million pieces of porcelain were brought into Sweden. Members of the crew also had the right to buy certain Chinese goods for themselves or to sell at home. When the supercargo had the Mandarin's seal on the export-lists, the anchor could be weighed and the long voyage back to Sweden began.

The safe return did not mean that every member of the crew of about 150 came back; the mortality on board was high. During the 132 expeditions, 2,000 people died of different diseases and by accident. The diseases were generally rotfever, which, specially during the stay in the Tropics with heat and bad drinking-water, were very common.

Because of the heavy cargo, the ships became so deep-going that they were caught in the mud at the mouth of Göteborg. A part of the cargo had to be unloaded before they could be brought into the harbour of Klippan, outside Göteborg. Then the cargo was put on wooden barges, each with a

capacity of 40 to 60 tons, then into the city and the store-house of the company, the East India House.

The face of the old fortified city had changed slowly, thanks to the East Indian trade. After a big fire in Göteborg in 1746, a fourth of the city was destroyed and the company bought a whole block at the Big Harbour Canal for its planned East India House. This building, erected in the years 1750-62 as a store-house and Head Office, was planned originally as a copy of the Royal Palace in Stockholm. This was an idea of the city-architect, Bengt Wilhelm Carlberg, but his splendid drawings were altered by the King's architect, Carl Harleman. In the auction-room on the second floor, the Chinese articles were sold by auction.

Thousands of men have written their names in the history of the Swedish East India Company, but there is just one name which really is attached to it - Niklas Sahlgren. ~~He was born in Goteborg in 1701, and when he was 16 he was sent to Holland for further education. During his stay there, he met Colin Campbell, and together they made out the plans for the~~ company. Sahlgren became the real organiser and constructor of the company, and for 35 years, from 1733 to 1768, he was the director. When he died in 1776, he was regarded as the richest man in Sweden, with a fortune of more than 4 million thalers in silver. He gave away half of his fortune in donations of different kinds. The best-known is that of 200,000 thalers in silver, in 1782, to the establishment of the Sahlgren Hospital. It still exists and is one of the biggest hospitals in Scandinavia, famous for its medical research. Sahlgren was married twice, and had one daughter out of each marriage. They were married off to two sons of Sahlgren's best friend, Jonas Alstromer. For the sons-in-law, Sahlgren

founded two big estates - Koberg and Gasevadholm. - which were inherited by his only grand-daughter, Anna Margareta Alstromer. She was the best marriage-partner in the country during the 18th century, and was called the 'Gold Hen' or the 'Gold Barrel'. Once, when King Gustav III visited the Alstromer office in Goteborg to borrow money, he proposed to her for his good friend and crown equerry, Count Munck. This King's favourite did not have the best of reputations, but it was not easy for Baron Alstromer to deny a king. Therefore, he made up a lie and told King Gustav that the young girl was engaged. 'To whom?', the King asked. Baron Alstromer looked out through the window and in the street he saw the young Baron Silfverschiold. 'She is engaged to Baron Silfverschiold, Your Majesty,' Alstromer answered. And soon the young baron received a message that he was engaged to the 'Gold Hen'. His family is still the owner of Sweden's biggest estates, Koberg and Gasevadholm.

Niklas Sahlgren devoted himself 'to learning, he honoured Science, encouraged Art, expanded Trade and Business, cultivated the earth and rewarded its laborious farmers.'

The third charter, 1766-86, turned out to be the most profitable, showing nearly 300% gain over the capital investment. This was because most of the company's competitors were engaged in war. Many descriptions of voyages to the East Indies were written during the years of this charter. The best-known is Jacob Wallenberg's, 'My Son on the Galley', which describes Wallenberg's voyage to China on the ship Finland, 1769-1771. It belongs to the classics and is still reprinted.

Under the fourth charter, 1786-1806, the company could no longer compete with other nations, and after 1803 no new expedition was sent to China.

Among imported goods, Chinaware held a very important place. More than 30 million pieces were brought into Sweden by the East India Company. The everyday sets of China might include a large number of pieces. Old accounts still in existence list sets of up to about 300 pieces, and the Gripsholm set presented to King Gustaf III is supposed to have comprised no fewer than 700 items. A china set could have plates in no fewer than nine different sizes. The production of Chinese porcelain, which was begun by Emperor K'ang Hsi (1662-1722), reached its highest development under his successors, Yung Cheng (1723-1735) and Chien Lung (1738-1795), when the export to Europe reached enormous proportions. It is difficult today to date the different pieces if they do not belong to the armorial porcelain, which is the term used for china imported directly upon order from Europe, with the coat-of-arms of the future owner, monogram or other devices copied on each piece. It has a higher artistic quality than other china, and is, therefore, of interest to collectors. We may estimate that some 300 noble families are represented by the Chinese armorial porcelain known in Sweden up to the present time. There are three large collections to be seen in Sweden today: in the House of Nobility in Stockholm, at the Swedish Prime Minister's summer residence, Harpsund, and in the Göteborg Museum. The interest in collecting Chinese porcelain started with the East India Company. It soon became a fashion to decorate one drawing-room in Chinese style with handpainted Chinese wall-papers, curtains of Chinese silk painted with roses and other Chinese flowers, lacquered furniture and many Chinese decorations. The most famous example is the China Palace in the park of Drottningholm Palace outside Stockholm. The first version of this royal summer-house was made in secret in Stockholm, transported on barges to Drottningholm and put together at night. It was

a gift from King Adolf Fredrik to his wife, Queen Louise Ulrika, on her birthday, 24 July 1753. The presentation is vividly described by the Queen herself in a letter to her mother, the Queen of Prussia: 'The King brought me aside from the pleasure-garden and I was surprised to stand suddenly before a real enchanting scenery, because the King had got a Chinese palace to be built, which is the most beautiful thing you can see. The Cadet Corps was dressed like the Emperor's guards in China and two of the King's aides were in command of the corps dressed like Chinese Military Mandarins. They were drilled in Chinese method. My eldest son stood at the entrance of the palace dressed like a Chinese prince, attended by the court's cavaliers who were dressed like Civil Mandarins. He read a complimentary poem to me and presented the keys to the palace with its furniture. Everything bore witness to the generosity and the good taste of the person who had attended it: a beautiful drawing-room fitted up in an excellent Chinese style with four big Chinese vases, one in every corner. In the next rooms there were old Japanese lacquers and sofas covered with Indian silks, everything in the most exquisite taste; there was a bedroom covered with Indian stuff and the bed with the same material, the walls were furthermore decorated with the most lovely porcelain, pagodas, vases and birds.' After the inspection, there was a Chinese ballet to Turkish music.

After 10 years, the Queen had the palace rebuilt and enlarged in stone and brick following drawings of the King's architects, Carl Fredrik Adelcrantz and Jean Eric Rehn. This palace still exists and was skilfully restored 20 years ago. Together with the Drottningholm Court Theatre, it is one of the most conspicuous sights in Stockholm. On the first floor is a library

with Chinese hand-coloured albums with descriptions of rice-cultivation, sericulture, tea-growing and porcelain-manufacture. There are pictures showing the Pearl River and the city of Canton in the 1740s as seen by the East Indiamen.

The governor of King Gustaf III as crown-prince, Count Carl Fredrik Scheffer, probably used these books as illustration when he instructed the crown-prince in Confucian philosophy. When King Gustaf in 1772 succeeded in his bloodless coup d'etat, which transferred the centre of political power from Parliament to the King himself, he was influenced by the Confucian concept of the ideal ruler. To commemorate the occasion, he ordered a special royal service to be made in China, the Revolution service, decorated with a blue shield with a G under a royal crown in gold framed with a wreath on which is written 'D. 19 Aug. 1722' - the date of the revolution.

We have studied examples of how the East Indian trade influenced the Royal family in Sweden, not only in decorating their homes, but also in making revolutions. It had a meaning, also, for Swedish science in the 18th century.

The Royal Academy of Science began to co-operate early with the East India Company. The captain and his assistants were asked to make scientific observations and measurements, to collect plants, animals and minerals during the voyage, and to make observations in China which could be valuable for the economy. Carl von Linne, who at first was opposed to the Company, soon became a warm friend. He persuaded the Management to take his pupils free, or as surgeons and clergymen, on the voyages. Thus, he obtained his natural history objects.

In the Minutes of the Academy, from the 1750s and 1760s, there are many paragraphs on natural history objects from China, such as fishes, insects, birdnests, shells, corals, tea-plants, minerals, etc. Some specimens were given to the Queen's Cabinet of Natural History at Drottningholm Court Palace. Many objects were placed in the museum of the Academy, which became the basis of the present Museum of Natural History in Stockholm.

One of the most famous East Indiamen, William Chambers, was born in Goteborg, of English parents. He made three voyages to China, where he spent many years as supercargo of the company. In China, he was inspired by the architecture, and after his appointment in the company he went to Paris to study architecture. He became architect to the Prince of Wales and later King's architect to George III. Chambers planned gardens in a new open style, inspired by the Chinese gardens. His most famous work - Kew Gardens - was even adorned by a real Chinese pagoda. He wrote many books about the Chinese style, such as Designs of Chinese buildings (1757), A Treatise on Civil Architecture (1759) and A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening (1772). His works were of importance to Swedish architecture, as seen in the China Palace and the Drottningholm Court Garden. In Goteborg, he designed two manor-houses for his brothers-in-law, Partille and Rada, today used as city-hall for Partille and as an inn.

Many of the important palaces and manor-houses in Sweden during the 18th century were built by the directors of the Company from money gained by the Company. Count Gustaf Adolf Sparre (1746-94), son of one of the directors, founded in 1772 his art collection with paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens, Chardin, etc. His art gallery was fitted up in Sahlgren House, next to the East India House, and it became the leading art museum in the city.

During the 20 years the Sparre Gallery existed, prominent art critics and connoisseurs praised the collection and its founder highly. The collection was open to prominent art-lovers, and it functioned as a sort of art museum in Göteborg 200 years ago. Bearing in mind its exceptionally high quality, the collection had practically no other private counterpart in Sweden, and certainly none in Göteborg. It was a forerunner of the Furstenberg Collections, which became the basis of the present art museum.

Even the music life in Göteborg had its roots in the East India House. One of the directors, Patrick Alstromer, a great music lover and an enthusiastic amateur violinist and composer, had the idea of using the auction hall as a public concert hall. He was also the real founder of the Royal Academy of Music, and one of the initiators of the Royal Opera in Stockholm.

The viola d'amore was a very beloved instrument in the 18th century. It is in outline and shape rather similar to the ordinary violin and viola. Its distinctive sound results from two sets of strings, one above the other. The upper set of six or seven playing-strings is played ~~on~~ with a light bow. The instrument is a result of the wish ~~to~~, and endeavour, to, find new sounds, typical of the changeover between the 17th and 18th centuries. Viols with sympathetic strings are first mentioned in Europe in the beginning of the 17th century. Therefore, it is not inconceivable that this type of instrument was brought back to England with the East Indiamen, in company with silks and porcelain. There is no doubt that some instrument from the Arabic world possessing sympathetic strings is the prototype of the viola d'amore.

In 1813, the Company was discontinued and East India House was used for different things. The auction room was equipped as a Museum of Natural History in 1819, and gradually collections of art, handicraft, ethnography, church art, etc. were brought into the house. In 1861, the Göteborg Museum was founded, with the museum in South Kensington, London, as a model. One department of the museum is today occupied with the extensive collections of Chinese porcelain and other remembrances from the East India Company. The portrait on mirror of the Mandarin P'an Ki-Kuan is one of the most valuable objects. There is also an interesting exhibition about the Chinese porcelain salvaged from the wreck of the East India ship Goteborg in 1745.

Interest in Chinese culture did not end with the death of the Company. In the 1860s, many handbooks about Chinese porcelain were published in Europe, and these began a new interest in collecting. At the same time, the first Swedish missionaries were sent to China and they were soon followed by Swedish scientists and explorers, such as Sven Hedin (1864-1952), Osvald Siren (1879-1966), scientist and writer on Chinese art and architecture, and John Gunnar Andersson (1874-1960), who in 1914 was asked to make an inventory of the Chinese mineral deposits in co-operation with the Geological Survey of China. During his expeditions in 1914-1924, in the areas around the Yellow River, he found important examples of the early animal world and of flora. He brought many of his findings to Sweden. In 1926, he became professor in Chinese archaeology in Stockholm and the first director of the Far Eastern Antiquities Museum.

The establishment of the Swedish East India Company began the development of Göteborg as a city of commerce, trade and industry - a city initially of prime military importance. Today, Göteborg is the biggest harbour of Scandinavia, and one of the most important centres for industry. The Company also initiated a new taste in art and architecture and stimulated natural science, as well as music life and political science.

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