

Dealer in Magic: James Cox's Jewelry Museum and the Economics of Luxurious Spectacle in Late-Eighteenth-Century London

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So when great Cox, at his mechanic call,
Bids orient pearls from golden dragons fall,
Each little dragonet, with brazen grin,
Gapes for the precious prize, and gulps it in.
Yet when we peep behind the magic scene,
One master-wheel directs the whole machine:
The self-same pearls, in nice gradation, all
Around one common centre, rise and fall:
Thus may our state-museum long surprise;
And what is sunk by votes in bribes arise;
Till mocked and jaded with the puppet-play,
Old England's genius turns with scorn away.

P. Toynbee, *Satirical Poems Published Anonymously* . . .

The linking of the words *industry* and *heritage* appears to belong unmistakably to our own era of global tourism, media as manufacture, museology, and so-called indirect earnings. Jules Lubbock (1995, 134) has argued that Adam Smith's prescience as an economic theorist hits a problem with the arts owing to his insistence "that productive labour was only that which resulted in some permanent object 'which lasts for some time.'" The spectacle I examine in this essay comprised objects

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that were transitional (stylistically and materially) in a display that had all the hallmarks of ephemerality and brilliance that characterize the language of economic debate in late-eighteenth-century England, which was, perhaps, more multifaceted than Lubbock has assumed. The issue of ingenuity that Neil De Marchi and Hans Van Miegroet (this volume) identify as a major element in arguments about economic and aesthetic effect is here examined as part of a microhistory of a particular, and short-lived, manifestation of the arts in London at the moment of publication of Smith's most celebrated work. It is important perhaps to state at the outset that although "heritage" implies permanence, visual culture then as now is largely ephemeral. I suggest that the museum Cox established in the 1770s illuminates an eighteenth-century arts industry located in London, the nature of which needs to be better understood if we are adequately to understand the concept of an alliance between heritage and commerce for the benefit of the nation in which much current economic and cultural discourse is grounded. I therefore initially propose a genealogy for the notion of *heritage industry* and then examine how an entrepreneurial craftsman working in the 1760s–80s situated his own product at the interstices of commerce and the arts.

Museum history is usually told as a series of moves in the nineteenth century that transformed the princely collection into a public gallery. In the process, what had been private capital was translated into transcendent worth. England invested heavily in works of art that would nurture its populace free of charge. The indignation in the late 1980s at the campaign by the Saatchi's advertising firm to promote the Victoria and Albert Museum as an Ace Caff with quite a nice museum attached stemmed from the fact that the jingle ruptured that concept of a neutral space protected from the market that our Victorian ancestors had so successfully promoted. To a Londoner of the 1770s, the implied connection between art and economic interest would have been taken for granted; admission charges were the rule at every show from the Royal Academy to Rackstrow's Museum in Fleet Street where you could see "a large collection of curiosities preserved in spirits, among which are miscarriages, from the size of a pin's head, to a perfect state."¹ Early

1. For a contemporary debate on admission charges at the Royal Academy and the distribution of profits, see Pye [1845] 1970. An advertisement for Rackstrow's Museum dated 1783 is in the Guildhall Library, London (*A Collection of Various Extracts*).

one-off displays were succeeded in the second half of the eighteenth century by organized collections, of which there were a very large number; these were promoted as spaces of visual pleasure, wonder and curiosity, learning, nationalism, and commerce (Altick 1978).² Value for money and ephemerality of effect were by no means incompatible with worth and novelty imparted particular quality to any display. London abounded in museums, but for a period from 1772 to 1776 all other exhibitions were eclipsed by Cox's Museum or, the Museum as it was widely termed.³

James Cox was a jeweler and toy maker who, from the mid-1760s, produced luxury articles for trade with the Far East (Harcourt-Smith 1933; Chapuis and Droz 1949, 109–14); public interest in the exotic artifacts produced for export is evinced as early as 1766 when the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1766, 36:586) published a description of two curious clocks made by English artists, with moving figures, set with diamonds and rubies, intended as a present from the East India Company to the Emperor of China. The chronology for the Museum has been much disputed. What seems certain is that the opening, planned for spring 1771, was delayed until February 1772. However, Cox had been exhibiting automata since at least 1769, when he put on show, prior to export, a chronoscope ornamented with bulls, storks, dolphins, dragons, and elephants with moving trunks (*Description of a Most Magnificent Piece*, 1769). Moreover, while much has been made of the short-lived nature of the Museum (Cox's application to sell the contents in a lottery was passed as a bill in Parliament in May 1773), it is equally evident, first, that there was nothing unusual about museums enjoying a relatively short life span and, second, that Cox continued to exhibit his jeweled automata throughout the run-up to the lottery draw, which took place only on 20 May 1775, and even after it.⁴ The sale of Cox's

2. See also Exhibitions of Mechanical Ingenuity, scrapbook assembled by Peckham and now in the British Library (1269/h38) upon which Altick draws heavily, and the Guildhall Library, which includes sections on museums and waxworks.

3. See, for example, notice advertising publication of *A Collection of Various Extracts . . .*, the Guildhall Library, Lotteries iv, f. 20.

4. Dorothy Richardson recorded in her journal visiting Cox's Museum and buying a catalogue on 14 July 1775 (Dorothy Richardson's Tours, MS, John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Eng.Ms. 1124, f. 170. The writer's library has not been located). Richardson, an antiquarian, is punctilious about the accuracy of the information she records so it is extremely unlikely she is referring here to Weeks's Museum that succeeded Cox's Museum and displayed some of Cox's pieces.

automata spawned a number of other shows that continued well into the nineteenth century; particularly noteworthy are the show opened by John Joseph Merlin (who had worked for Cox) (French 1985, 13) and Weeks's Museum in Tichborne Street, valued at £400,000 in 1819 when its contents were still described as "prepared for the Chinese market" (Rush 1845, 35; Altick 1978, chap. 25).

Cox's Museum immediately attracted visitors, including James Boswell, who went on Johnson's advice (Boswell 1960, 99). While Fanny Burney's ([1778] 1968, 76–77) Evelina thought Cox's Museum "very astonishing, and very superb," it nonetheless afforded her little pleasure "for it is mere show, though a wonderful one." As the visitors, including the vulgar francophile Madame Duval and the equally obnoxious and xenophobic Captain, engage in a vigorous debate about utility ("will you tell me the use of all this? for I'm not enough of a conjurer to find out"), their attention is attracted by a pineapple "which suddenly opening, discovered a nest of birds, who immediately began to sing" (76–77; see also *Divine Predictions of Daniel and St. John*, 1774; this must surely be a spoof). If Burney used Cox's Museum to point up the debate between ingenuity and utility, William Mason in his "Epistle to Dr. Shebbeare" (quoted at the opening of my essay; Toynbee 1928, 112) turns the Museum into a model of corrupt centralized government, a "puppet-play" against which "Old England's genius turns with scorn away." Walpole (1955, 325) admired these verses as immortal and thought that they were far more brilliant and would last much longer than the Museum they described. If Cox's Museum was opened in reaction to a commercial crisis, it is clear that it struck a chord with educated citizens and readily became a seductive metaphor and a compelling stage for debating the troublesome issues of political and economic stability.

Cox's specialty, as I have indicated, was large and elaborate clocks incorporating gold surface detail and ornamented with genuine and paste jewels which he successfully exported to China and India (Pagani 1993, 1995; Le Corbeiller 1960, 1970).⁵ The chariot, pushed by a Chinese man, with a seated woman and a clock, made by Cox, and now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York (1982.60.137) (figure 1) contains

5. The most comprehensive account of the trade with China to which Cox was a contributor is in Pagani 1993. There is no equivalent study for India, but a considerable amount of useful information on Anglo-Indian trade in this period is in Jaffer 1995.



Figure 1 James Cox, automaton in the form of a chariot pushed by a Chinese attendant and set with a clock: gold, brilliants, and paste jewels, 25.4 cm high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection (1982.60.137).

gold over a base and real pearls as well as glass stones. The larger automata clocks of the type made by Cox, one of which was sold in 1996 by Aspreys, seem to consist entirely of paste jewels. Cox himself claims in his various descriptions that he uses real jewels, and that is certainly borne out by the sums raised when they were sold. The diamond earrings that formed the *pièce de résistance* of the lottery (figure 2) were evidently authentic, and Cox (*Descriptive Inventory* 1773) offered to buy them back from the winner for £5,000, stating that “the drops were several years matching, even at a time when the diamonds of Golconda poured in upon us more abundantly than they ever did, or probably ever will again.” The diamonds, Cox states, are “incomparably fellowed, as if cut from one divided stone; they are of the first, and purest crystalline water, of the finest form, the nicest proportion, and the most beautiful lustre.”

Little is known of Cox’s exports to India, but something of the complexity of his business can be gleaned from an announcement of 19 April 1774 in which Cox tells his creditors that his attorneys in Calcutta have succeeded in getting payment from a number of creditors to the tune of £20,000, which, once his debts in Bengal have been paid, will permit him to discharge some of his debts at home. (JJC Lotteries iv, f. 25). The moment that is of interest for this essay occurred in 1772 when Cox was apparently unable to sell a valuable consignment overseas. Le Corbeiller (1970, 352) identifies the opening of the Museum with a report in *St. James’s Chronicle* (27–29 August 1772) of a shipment of English toys that had been refused in China and had returned. Cox, however, claimed that he had fitted up the Museum to allow the public the opportunity of seeing his pieces “before they are consigned abroad” (*An Account of Mr. Cox’s Intended Exhibition*, [1772] n.d.). He decided to hire a domed room in Spring Gardens; carpet it throughout, including the stairs; decorate it with emblematic paintings representing the Liberal Arts “in chiaroscuro” by “a celebrated artist”; centrally heat it, and situate there his jeweled automata concealed under crimson curtains which were raised on mechanically operated pulleys at the moment of display. Portraits of George III and Queen Charlotte were commissioned from the first-rank artist, Zoffany, an entry ticket (figure 3) was designed by Biaggio Rebecca and engraved by Francesco Bartolozzi, both of whom signed it (*Descriptive Catalogue*

6. Cox had placed an announcement in the press in June 1771 declaring his intention to open the Museum and apologizing for the delay which, it is alleged, is due partly to the Royal

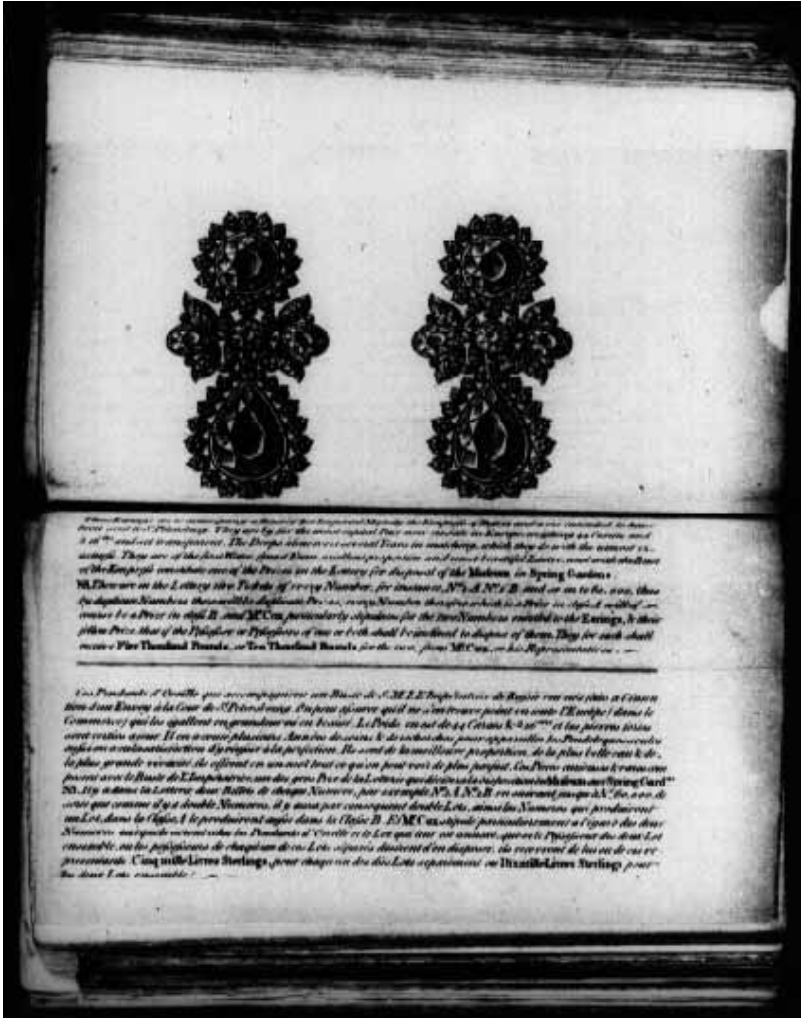


Figure 2 Engraved frontispiece to *A Descriptive Inventory . . .*, 1774, showing brilliant diamonds offered as prize in James Cox's lottery of his museum. Reprinted by permission of the British Library (T.447 [4]) (anonymous).

Incorporated Society of Artists' occupation of the rooms for their exhibition, and partly to delay in delivery of Zoffany's portraits "on ovals on copper, half length, size of life" (JJC iv, f. 16).



Figure 3 F. Bartolozzi after Biaggio Rebecca, trade card for Mr. Cox's museum, 1772, John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Lotteries iv.

1772).⁶ By hiring rooms that had been regularly used for the exhibition of paintings (the Society of Artists exhibited there) and by publishing a series of descriptive catalogues including one with a grand frontispiece dedicated to George III,⁷ and a French translation,⁸ Cox insisted on occupying the high cultural ground. The best-known survival of Cox's Museum is the silver swan (figure 4), now in the Bowes Museum at Barnard Castle, which, albeit without its original stand, remains in good working order and performs daily at 3:00 p.m., when visitors can see it raise its elegant neck, turn its head, and (implausi-

7. This is mentioned in an unattributed newscutting ("in quarto upon a large royal gilt paper" as presented to their majesties with a portrait of the king engraved by Sherwin) in JJC iv, f. 25, but I have as yet not been able to find a copy.

8. This is announced in 1772 (cutting in JJC iv, f. 18), but there is no edition in French in the British Library, though the frontispiece to *A Descriptive Inventory . . .* (1774) carries a French translation. Cox mentioned the French a great deal in his public communications and saw them both as commercial competitors and as potential visitors. He was arguably matching Boydell's double-language usage in the letterpress of prints. The "Frenchness" of Cox's Museum is an issue also in the discussion recorded in *Evelina* (Burney [1778] 1968).

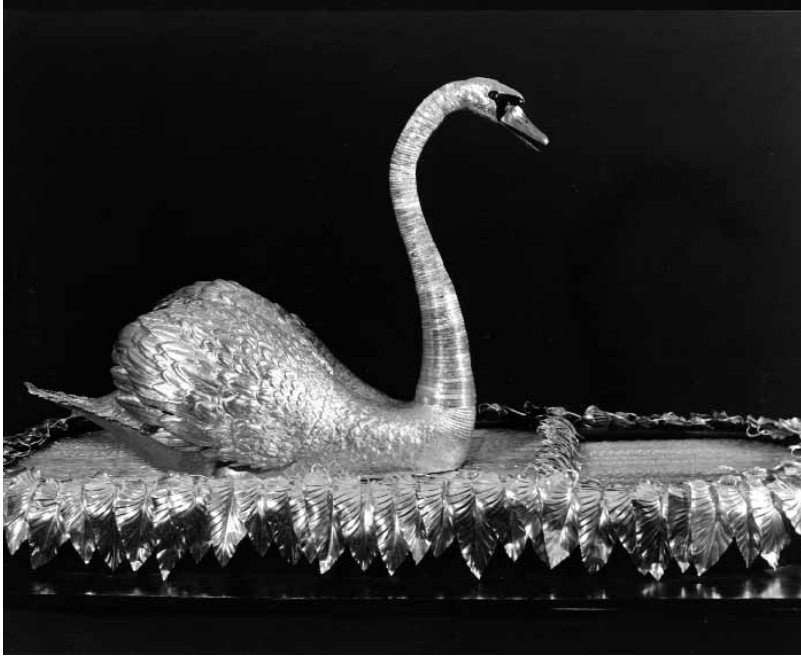


Figure 4 James Cox, life size silver swan automaton, 1773.
The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, County Durham.

bly) pick up small fishes from the rotating glass rods that simulate flowing water.⁹

The Museum was illuminated by candles in candelabra and girandoles suspended from dragon's mouths, and Cox engaged "proper persons to exhibit and explain to foreigners and natives what each piece performs both of mechanism and music" (Newscutting 7 June 1772, JJC Lotteries iv, f. 18). Admission was half a guinea which, according to a letter (probably written by Cox himself) in the *Public Ledger* (17 March 1772) was the same as entry to the Pantheon, to Fischer's benefit concerts,¹⁰ and "to hear Signiora [*sic*] Sirmen sing" (*A Collection of*

9. An excellent account of the subsequent history of this piece, its popular appeal, and its museum status is in Kane 1996–97. A technical account is given in Camerer Cuss 1965. There is also a peacock attributed to Cox which belonged to the Empress Catherine of Russia and is now in the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

10. Fischer was Thomas Gainsborough's son in law; see *Gainsborough and his Musical Friends* 1977.

Various Extracts, 20). Nonetheless, Cox reduced the admission price by half at certain hours in July 1772 (*Collection of Various Extracts*, n.p.) and, at the same time, made special arrangements to open at 8:00 p.m. for people going to masqued balls at Haymarket (Newscutting JJC Lotteries iv, f. 20) and offered a select exhibition at 9:00 p.m. “by desire of Noble families and Persons of Distinction” (*St. James’s Chronicle*, 2 January–1 February 1774). Cox’s Museum has been treated somewhat dismissively by scholars.¹¹ Although it did not survive the century, the Museum’s celebrity, as well as its owner’s disposition as a disseminator of advertising copy, generated a large amount of documentation. Within the context of eighteenth-century commerce and letters where “puffs” abound, hyperbolic declarations of the kind Cox indulged in were par for the course, and we should appreciate the possibilities opened up by this rich archive for an understanding of the cultural and economic dynamic of a characteristically commercial museum.

To sum up so far, we can draw a number of general conclusions. First, people expected to pay for museums and charges were graduated to allow for different audiences; like Wedgwood (McKendrick et al. 1982; Baker 1995), Cox deliberately offered a product considered to be expensive and was evidently targeting a cosmopolitan audience. One of the eulogistic press articles (from a Lover of Merit, and Well-wisher to Trade and Commerce) claiming to have “seen most of the foreign cabinets and splendid apartments of different Princes in Europe” found that none could compare with the Museum (Letter to the London Evening Post 29 February 1772, *Collection of Various Extracts*, n.p.). If we assume this originated with Cox, it would be an interesting indication of his determination to situate his Museum in the great courtly *Kunstkammer* tradition, while transforming an elite art form into a demotic spectacle, open to all who could pay for their entertainment. Second, the kinds of categories into which historians have seen fit to organize cultural material from this period have privileged painting over those visual media that had the greatest impact on metropolitan audiences. The exhibitions of the Royal Society of Arts, the Royal Academy, and the Incorporated Society of Artists should, therefore, be recontextualized; Cox takes pains to situate his Museum as one further

11. French, Le Corbeiller, and Pagani all seem driven by a notion of craftsmanship that is independent of the market and which is concerned chiefly to establish great geniuses; they are thus somewhat negative toward Cox’s venture.

manifestation of “the gradual increased [*sic*] of taste and elegance, within these last twenty years, in this metropolis” (*ibid.*).

Third, the kind of careful and planned exploitation of the commercial potential of visual curiosity—a term associated in the eighteenth century with the quest for totality, as compared with the cult of the amateur that was identified with the theme of laudable desire (Pomian 1990, 53–64; Benedict 1990)—that was an ingredient of Wedgwood’s and Boydell’s success was found in the display of other kinds of goods; commerce, trade, and the Museum are demonstrably overlapping in ways that should make us rethink current orthodoxies about the relationship between nineteenth-century department stores and exhibitions as originary moments, as argued by recent writers (Richards 1991; Bennett 1995). Museums capitalized on actualities: Cox turned his unsaleable cargo into a Museum: Wedgwood exhibited the Frog Service prior to delivering it to Empress Catherine (Baker) and thereby helped to offset the huge deficit incurred by the manufacture of such a labor-intensive production, just as Reynolds made sure he exhibited *The Infant Hercules*, commissioned by the Empress, at the Royal Academy in 1788 (cat. no. 167) before having it shipped to St. Petersburg (Penny 1986, cat. no. 140).¹² Boydell similarly cashed in on the fashion for Shakespeariana following the tercentenary celebrations when he created his potentially lucrative Shakespeare Gallery (Pape and Burwick 1996).¹³

Fourth, in these museums, manufacture was foregrounded; these are

12. For example, at “the elegant exhibition adjoining Somerset House, in the Strand (consisting of Automaton Figures which move in a great variety of descriptions, by clockwork, with the Diamond Beetle . . . [and] some of the most beautiful and striking Pencil and Chalk Drawings . . . by Mr. Lawrence [i.e., Thomas Lawrence] (1788) (Whitley 1928, 2:104); at Mrs. Palin’s Wax Work of “the Grand Canoverian Cabinet,” including George IV, the Emperor of Russia, and “a most beautiful representation of the late Princess Charlotte and her Infant lying in state” (suggesting a date of 1817), Temple Bar, Fleet Street, admission 1 shilling, children six pence; at the Royal Wax Work, 67, Fleet Street with HM George IV, Napoleon in death and some fine cabinets of French and Roman busts; and at the Waterloo Exhibition, 1 St. James’s Street, Pall Mall, 1815, including clothes, swords, equipages, Empress Maria Louisa’s wardrobe, nap sacks, and collections of caricatures published in Paris since Napoleon’s abdication. JJC Waxworks, III.

13. Shakespeare also featured in Cox’s Museum: The *Descriptive Inventory* of 1774 lists as “piece the twenty-ninth,” a musical chime on top of which is an octagon temple standing on a quadrangular ground, at the corners of which are four gilt pineapples. “The dome of the Temple is blue and gold, terminating with a gilt vase; within the temple is a moving procession of the various characters of Shakespeare’s Jubilee.”

the forerunners of the Musée d'Arts et de Metiers founded in Paris in the 1790s and the Victoria and Albert Museum initiated in 1851. Thus, for example, Cox's chronoscope (defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "an instrument for observing and measuring time") was raised on an ornamented pedestal on casters "of a peculiar construction, not affected by the weight they support" that permitted the level to be corrected. The whole thing included four bulls supporting a table; dolphins, dragons, and storks; mathematical instruments to reveal when it was elevated to a perfect level; and an elephant with a moving trunk and a tartar guiding the elephant from a gallery on its back. It also incorporated a seven-day clock. Moreover, the mechanism for the clock was "so contrived, that the motion and running of the wheels, which is extremely curious, may be seen through the transparency of the dial." The *Description of a Most Magnificent Piece* (1769) makes a point of drawing attention to features of construction. Thus, we are told that "the various holes to introduce the keys for winding up the clock-work, music part, and mechanism, are all hid by ornaments formed for that purpose: other ornaments are also contrived to shift the tunes, make the music play for a short time or perpetual: likewise to make the elephant go round or move his trunk at pleasure." This is precisely the kind of beauty in contrivance and ingenuity, pleasure in facility, about which Adam Smith ([] 1976b) wrote in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and which lies at the heart of the analysis of De Marchi and Van Miegroet in this volume.

At Cox's Museum, visitors were invited not only to marvel at the illusionism of swans gliding over water and pagodas rising of their own volition but also to meditate on the costs involved in the production of these automata and on the contribution of such curious inventions to the national economy. In the case of the chronoscope, for instance, we are told that "besides the great weight of gold employed in various parts . . . there are near one hundred thousand stones set in ornaments and embellishments of it, including diamonds, rubies, emerald, precious stones, and pearls." Cox also refers to "stones of a ruby colour" (*Description of a Most Magnificent Piece*, 1769). Economic value is therefore tied to visual effect that is part authentic and part illusion. The commercial worth of each individual object (its export value) generated problems of conservation and maintenance, but it was this notion of visible value that was a key element in what was being marketed and consumed. In the same spirit, Adam Smith, who was in London from

1773 through 1777 (Ross 1995, chap. 15), lays great stress on “the appearance of expence” when discussing the imitative arts: “As the idea of expence seems often to embellish, so that of cheapness seems as frequently to tarnish the lustre even of very agreeable objects” (Smith [1795] 1980, 182–83). Accordingly, Cox tells his prospective audiences of the “very different circumstances that distinguish this from every other exhibition . . . the prodigious charge at which this entertainment has been prepared . . . the necessity, from the nature of the undertaking, of admitting but a limited number of spectators at one time, and the expensive attendance requisite on each exhibition” (*Public Advertiser*, 9 March 1772, pp. 11–12 in *Collection of Various Extracts*, 10; repeated as a postscript to *Descriptive Catalogue of the Several . . . Pieces*, 1772).

All this demonstrates what it means to move from the water- and air-driven mechanisms of the sixteenth century, and the aristocratic cabinets of the seventeenth, to the highly refined mechanical repertoire of the eighteenth century (see Benhamou 1987), and from that academic milieu to the public exhibition. In 1621, for example, we know that Rudolf II’s Kunstkammer in Prague comprised a long table “covered with globes, clocks, mechanical devices, caskets, mirrors, musical instruments . . . , silver vases with flowers of coloured silver” and a mechanized device “in the form of a peacock, which walked, turned around and fanned its tail of real feathers” (Bukovinská 1997, 203). The interest in imitating nature reached its apogee with M. Vaucanson, whose artificial duck could be seen “eating, drinking, macerating the Food, and voiding Excrements; pluming her Wings, picking her Feathers, and performing several operations in Imitation of a living Duck” in London in 1742, along with his marvelous flute player (*Account of the Mechanism of an Automaton*, 1742, title). Cox’s Museum united Vaucanson’s animation with the German tradition for *artificialiae* associated with the Augsburg goldsmiths and was exemplified by the spectacular work of the Dinglinger family (von Watzdorf 1962). The objects collected in the Grünes Gewölbe in Dresden are distinguished for their precious materials and their miniaturization as well as for their potential for movement.¹⁴ Cox, on the other hand, created very large pieces in which movement was at least as important as craftsmanship (figure 5). He had

14. Cox’s work is more similar to the ornamented jeweled clocks made by J. H. Köhler of Dresden, examples of which can be seen in the Semper Galerie.



Figure 5 James Cox, mechanical bronze gilt automaton clock, c. 85 cm high, Imperial Museum, Peking, Harcourt-Smith, plate XVI. Reprinted by permission of the British Library (7802.pp.10).

no hesitation in combining precious and semiprecious stones with glass—thus exemplifying the notion found in Adam Smith’s work that the value of an artifact resides in the contrivance rather than in the cost of the materials used (De Marchi and Van Miegroet, this volume)—and strove to control audience response through sound and a variety of theatrical devices.

Vaucanson insists that he is less interested in public applause than in the recognition of the august members of the Académie Royale and that his extraordinary automata are “raised on the solid Principles of Mechanicks,” which he had taken from them (*Account of the Mechanism of an Automaton*, 1742, 3). The work of Vaucanson and other French *mécaniciens* continued to appear in London. In May 1766, for example, the “Sieur Comus having performed many surprising feats by means of an artificial mermaid” went on to show an artificial swan. The *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1776, 36:207) gave a graphic account of this and supplied a fold-out plate that may well be the source for Cox’s silver swan that first appears in *A Descriptive Inventory* of 1773 and was probably made, therefore, late in 1772 when Cox was enhancing his Museum. Cox follows Vaucanson’s example in producing a very detailed and carefully modulated prose description of each piece and how it works, a description in marked contrast to the hyperbole of the press reactions. But Cox is distinctly interested in public applause, and he presents his work within a complex economic discourse; with Cox, the uniqueness and exclusivity of the Kunstkammer and the technical demonstration of Enlightenment savants are transformed into a commercially oriented spectacle, which time and again invokes the capacity of discourse to engender a popular cultural memory and to provide a common point of reference (figure 6). Thus, when Sheridan’s *Rivals* was first performed in London in 1775, the entire audience would have understood that when Sir Anthony Absolute spoke of a lady “as ugly as I choose . . . [whose] one eye shall roll like the bull’s in Cox’s Museum” (Apperson 1899, 276), he was referring to Cox’s “richly caparaisoned bulls” (*Descriptive Inventory* 1774, no. 9).

Historians value longevity of craftsmen and companies: it makes provenances easier to establish, and lineages via the apprenticeship system enable the charting of stylistic change. It is not surprising, however, that Cox’s flamboyant, high-risk, activities in the jewelry trade, culminating in his bankruptcy in 1778 (*Gentleman’s Magazine* 1778, 48:552) have been greeted with some distaste. I wish to propose that,



Figure 6 Engraved theatrical illustration featuring James Cox's museum, c. 1773. John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Lotteries iv (anonymous).

quite apart from the interest of the objects he displayed, the discourses surrounding Cox's Museum provide a unique resource for examining art in relation to economics. I shall focus on labor and Orientalism. First the question of labor. In the press Cox repeatedly claimed to have brought employment to a large number of workers in various trades. "While forming this splendid assemblage of mechanical rarities," he says of himself, "He has found means to make the labour and industry of so great a number of the most ingenious artists concur to its perfection. The painter, the Goldsmith, the Jeweller, the Lapidary, the Sculptor, the Watchmaker; in short almost all the liberal arts have found employ in it" (*Collection of Various Extracts* n.d., n.p.).

Cox was never a member of the goldsmith's guild and did not use a personal mark; it is therefore virtually certain that he subcontracted (Le Corbeiller 1970, 356). As Helen Clifford (1998) remarks, he was, perhaps, the nearest London equivalent to a *marchand mercier*. Accordingly, it may have been with justification that he claimed to have "given bread to many hundreds of our most eminent workmen in the jewellery business" (Letter from Candour to the *Public Ledger* 17 March 1772, repr. in *Collection of Various Extracts* n.d., 21). The most bombastic statement occurs in a letter from Mercator to the *Public Ledger* on 11 April 1772 (repr. in *Collection of Various Extracts* n.d., 28–32). Here Cox offers himself as an example of the ingenious manufacturer who contributes to the greatness of the nation by extending its foreign commerce: "Whether I view it in a commercial light, or merely as works of art; whether I consider the magnitude and expence [*sic*] of the undertaking, or the spirit and genius of the proprietor, I am filled with pleasure and admiration," declares Mercator. By uniting the West's mechanical skill with the imagination of the "Asiatics," continues the correspondent, Cox has "absolutely struck out a new and important field of commerce, beneficial to himself and his country." I will return to the question of the Asiatic imagination shortly. For the moment, let us notice how this argument develops, for Cox's chief merit, it is proposed, is not his abilities as an artist or a merchant, but his foresight in exporting "the superfluities we received from other countries, worked up by our artisans." This is probably a reference to the import of escapement mechanisms for Cox's automata from Jaquet-Droz and Leschot in Neuchâtel (Le Corbeiller 1970, 35–36; Chapuis and Jaquet 1956, chap. 6). This assertion makes possible the claim that Cox "exports, in short, the *labour* of our people": "The Emperor of China

support(s) some hundreds of mechanicks in the parish of St. Brides; the Nabob of the Carnatic, and our friend Shujah Dowla, have considerably improved several branches of art among us; they do at this moment give bread to many of our industrious tradesmen; and even our dreaded neighbours, the Marrattoes, this dealer in magic [James Cox] has more than once laid under contribution” (Letter from Mercator 11 April 1772; repr. in *Collection of Various Extracts* n.d., 00).

Claiming that Cox sells his wares from the Gulf of Persia to the remotest areas of China, and northward among the Tartar nations “who have received from his performances the first idea of the excellence of European art,” the writer continues: “The inhabitants of the Eastern world want neither our food nor our clothing, and they do not relish our luxuries; but their productions have always been eagerly sought by us, and therefore the wealth of Europe has for a long succession of ages, rolled to that quarter, and centred there. We see at length a channel opened by which we may bring back a part of ourselves: a channel more flattering than even the supply of necessities would be, because more unlimited [*sic*]” (00). The nation would, asserts the writer, be much better off if, instead of “having our mercantile coffee houses filled with men who prey on the ignorance and credulity of others, we should see them striving to emulate each other in profiting by the labour of our people, and the extension of our manufactures” (00). Though Cox’s profits have been “much larger than fall to the lot of many,” we are told, he has not built palaces or given in to fashionable dissipations. Rather, he “contents himself with giving ease to the indigent mechanic, and with bringing the ingenious from obscurity” (00). Cox here presents himself, in contrast to financial speculators who sit around in coffeehouses, as a proponent of enlightened mercantilism, concerned about the nation’s balance of payments, and engaging in arguments familiar from Thomas Mun’s *England’s Treasure by Foreign Trade* (1664) and developed in Book 4 of Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*.

It is difficult, of course, to establish Cox’s investment, his turnover, or his payroll and even more difficult to discover the overall value of the export trade with which he was concerned. In 1793 Lord Macartney calculated that the collection of English clocks and watches, many by English makers, kept by the Chinese emperors at Jehol was £2 million (Macartney 1962, 261, quoted in Pagani 1993, 147). The diamond earrings that, along with a bust of the empress of Russia by Nollekens,

were a lottery prize in 1774 when Cox tried to dispose of the Museum and recoup his losses (see Figure 2), were valued at £5,000, while the total prize money was calculated at £197,500.¹⁵ Some comparison of these costs can be made if we note that, for example, in 1772 the jeweler Charles Belliard charged Sir John Delaval £70—10 s for 154 small rose diamonds and £21—00 for setting them into three bows.¹⁶ What cannot be in doubt is that Cox was dealing in very large investments. In 1774 he announced to his creditors that he had succeeded in paying off £20,000 of debts and that the capital sum of over £60,000 remained. That these sums had been raised in India as a result of payment by several princes for large purchases from Cox in 1771 and 1772 is valuable evidence, not only of the sums involved but also of Cox's mercantile activities on that continent.¹⁷

Cox's claim to have employed many hundreds is probably an exaggeration, though he must have been instrumental in bringing employment to a very large range of people: clerks, attendants, textile and glass manufacturers, and printers, as well as individuals employed in all the different branches of goldsmithing and jewelry. It is striking, first, that Cox conceptualized the labor force in terms of Adam Smith's economic model for productive labor, asserting that he reinvested capital in labor and, second, that he insists on the utility of his exhibition of arts. Indeed, Cox asserts, in his 1774 *Descriptive Inventory*, that the arts "furnish employment for thousands" and "keep immense sums at home, which the opulent would otherwise send abroad for works of splendour or ingenuity; and they even bring in immense sums from other kingdoms." Therefore, Cox declares, the arts should "be weighed in the scale of utility, as well as in the balance of ornament," a theme taken up, as we have seen, in the visit to the Museum described in Burney's

15. Nollekens returned from Rome in December 1770 and seems to have accepted commissions for decorative objects; Cox had allegedly made the peacock clock, which was bought by the Empress Catherine and is now in the Hermitage. John Kenworthy Brown is of the view that the Nollekens bust (which would most probably have been in plaster rather than marble and would have been based on an existing portrait) was made as a bonus for whoever purchased the clock. There is a reference to the bust in J. T. Smith's list of Nolleken's busts. I am grateful to John Kenworthy Brown for this information (personal communication 22 March 1996). Details of the insurance costs and the prize money are given in JJC, Lotteries, ff. 9 and 10, and in the *Descriptive Inventory* of 1774, vii–x.

16. Invoice dated 19 January 1772, paid 18 March 1772, Delaval MS. Northumberland County Record Office, 2DE/31/10/20(b).

17. Le Corbeiller (1970, 335) has established that John Henry Cox is first cited in East India Company records as a private merchant in Canton in 1781.

Evelina. In short, states Cox, “to philosophize and rail against the arts, as luxuries, is to lay a general axe to the root of all Art and Science,” for, he continues predictably, “the luxuries of the rich are the chief forces of employment for the poor, and the revenues of the State are collected in a great measure from the luxuries of the whole community” (iv). Thus Cox, inflecting the case for luxury familiar from Mandeville, points out that “it has . . . been repeatedly observ’d of Mr. Cox’s labours, that though they are wonders of ingenuity and splendour, they were nevertheless of no real *use*”; on the contrary, “surely they were of great utility, if they brought half a million into the kingdom” (vi).

The second area I wish to explore is that of Orientalism. It is generally agreed that the artifacts that made up Cox’s Museum had been intended for the Eastern market. The 1772 *Descriptive Catalogue of Several Pieces* describes one of its exhibits, a chronoscope, as fellow to a similarly “stupendous piece sent in 1769 on board the Triton Indian to Canton and now in the palace of the Emperor of China.” The latter is clearly the chronoscope “of a peculiar construction” and covered in ornaments that I have already described and that was exhibited on its own in 1769 (*Description of a Most Magnificent Piece* 1769). As the chronoscope exhibited in 1772—remaining in the Museum throughout, though changing its place from number one to number forty-six (*Descriptive Inventory* of 1774, 36, 46th piece)—was stated to be signed and inscribed with the date 1772, it seems likely not to have been a “fellow” of that which was exported but a replica produced for exhibition later. Despite the difficulty of establishing whether any of the pieces in Cox’s Museum were actually made for export rather than for display in London, it is well established that there were problems for European manufacturers caused by the glut of “sing songs” being exported to China in the 1760s (Chapuis and Droz 1949, 110–114; Corbeiller 1970, 355; Pagani 1993, 208).¹⁸ What interests me is how Cox turned this to account. Financially his gamble failed, but his Museum had to be packaged, and I suggest it is to that packaging that we should turn our attention. By contrast with a view of Cox’s enterprise as an opportunistic endeavour by a somewhat unprincipled showman to make the best of an economic downturn, my concern is to suggest how expla-

18. Pagani 1993 indicates that Geneva was proving more successful in exporting automata than London (208) and also that Jaquet-Droz was exporting to James Cox and Son’s outlet in Canton from 1783 (215).

nations based on economic determinants might be enhanced—nuanced or inflected—by recognition of the significant interpretative and shaping role of language. In displaying his artifacts, many of which were evidently made expressly for the Museum,¹⁹ Cox was self-consciously selling an idea of the “other.” Of course, goods from the East were nothing new in eighteenth-century England, nor was the notion of China as a foil to discussions about England’s economy. It is interesting to note that Adam Smith (1976a I (viii): 24–26; (ix): 15) raises the question of why, given its natural advantage, China has stagnated in income per head instead of having grown. The notion of China as a foil to the energy of Western commerce was a trope that long remained effective; Dickens exploits it in 1851 when writing about the Great Exhibition of 1851 (356–360).

The objects that Cox sought to export to the Far East were part of a trade in luxury goods that had developed in the wake of Jesuit missions from the late sixteenth century and diplomatic visits with their accompanying elaborate gift rituals. Especially favored were clocks and watches, not for telling the time, but as status symbols (Pagani 1993, 13–18, 156, 351). The artifacts made by Cox were dominated by the motifs of Chinoiserie—in other words, they reproduced Western stereotypes of Chinese cultural identity—pagodas, mandarins, chiming bells, and dragons. For the Chinese consumer, however, as Pagani points out, these artifacts were attractive because they appeared representative of European taste. Clocks made in China were different. Cox’s gambits to attract visitors to his Museum characteristically stage some of the rhetorical maneuvers that exemplify Orientalist discourse. On the one hand, we are invited to view a national art that will unsettle the popular view that the French are superior in taste and design—and consequently benefit the balance of trade. On the other, Cox offers the public in 1772 a glimpse of specimens such as those that now adorn the palaces of the king of Delhi and the princes of the Decan “before they are consigned abroad” (Account of Mr. Cox’s Intended Exhibition, *British Magazine* January 1772, repr. in *Collection of Various Extracts* n.d., n.p.).²⁰

19. The 1773 *Descriptive Inventory* contained thirty-six new items out of a total of fifty-six pieces, including the swan and a Vaucanson-like flute player; it has generally been assumed, therefore, that Cox made these specially for the Museum, if not for the lottery. The 1774 edition is identical to the 1773 edition and appears to be a re-printing by the same publisher rather than a new edition.

20. As he later added pieces to the Museum, he may actually have intended the advertised items for export.

Cox's advertisement proposes that the Museum provides an opportunity for considering "the difference between the European and Asiatic tastes." Collapsing into one synthetic notion of the exotic "other" the Chinese and Indian markets in which he trades, Cox claims that his work unites "the exquisite Mechanism of the West" with Asiatic conceptions that are "warmer," less restrained, and less correct than ours (Letter from Mercator, *Public Ledger* 11 April 1772; repr. in *Collection of Various Extracts*, n.d., 29).

The question of whether Cox's articles were on their way to China or to India; whether they had been dispatched, failed to sell, and been returned; or whether they were made specifically to be shown in London as a capital means of raising cash is, ultimately, not the point.²¹ What is historically and textually significant about Cox's Museum as an episode in eighteenth-century English economic and cultural history is the way in which it constructs an environment that vividly produces a walkabout experience of the Oriental (what one text calls "fairylane")²² framed within a nationalist economic discourse and re-presented in relays of discursive explanation and justification across the whole range of the London press. The sumptuously ornamental automata stand not only for the idea of the bottomless wealth of the East, which the commercial successes of the East India Company might be expected to continue to tap, but also for the brilliant technological skill of English jewelers or, as Cox prefers to call himself, artists. The uncertainties hanging over the chronology (are they on their way as exports? or have they been returned?) are necessary elements in the construction of an environment redolent of travel, alien visual experience, and what these things traditionally generated—that is, curiosity and awe. Cox's deci-

21. Harcourt-Smith (1933, introduction) states that Cox's exhibits had been delivered to China and returned. This may be unreliable since he also dates an automaton clock (no. xvi) to 1783, five years after Cox's bankruptcy (though the signature could possibly be that of his son). Phillips on 5 July 1808, following Cox's death, sold a collection which it advertised as "Valuable Mechanical Museum, Jewels, &c. from China" (cutting, JJC, Lotteries iv, f. 28); in his advertisement for the lottery of his Museum, Cox stated that he intended to give "a constant edge to public curiosity" by gradually making sales to the Eastern markets, so that "the pieces thus sold will amply pay for the introduction of new articles" (JJC, Lotteries iv, f. 8); Le Corbeiller (1970, 352) cites a report in the *St. James's Chronicle* in 1772 to the effect that a shipment of English toys and jewelry had been refused at China and turned back.

22. "'Enclos'd is your passport, take Bell in your hand, / And feast on the wonders of this FAIRYLAND!" Verses to a Lady, enclosing a Ticket for Cox's Museum, *Public Ledger* 3 March 1772; repr. in *Collection of Various Extracts*, n.d., 9.

sion to join the period fashion for lotteries appears to have been governed at an economic level by necessity. But it was also, I suggest, an appropriate cultural culmination to his enterprise. His need to recoup his losses was not the only thing at stake. As Adam Smith ([1776] 1996a, X; [1759] 1996b, 27) declared: "The world neither ever saw, nor ever will see, a perfectly fair lottery; or one in which the whole gain compensated for the whole loss; because the undertaker could make nothing by it. In the state lotteries the tickets are really not worth the price paid by the original subscribers, and yet commonly sell for twenty, thirty, and sometimes forty per cent advance." Also to be taken into account is the ingenuity devoted to disposing of a display that exploited notions of the fluidity and instability of money and of cultural identity. It is not an accident that the purchasers of lottery tickets are described as "adventurers"; they, too, were participating in an economic expansionism which, like the activities of the East India Company, were mediated at home through a practice of cultural representation.

The summation of Cox's Museum was not the rhinoceros standing on a rock of gold stone supporting an onyx and gold cabinet or the temple of agate with triumphal chariots moving on a rich gallery supported by palm trees. It was a pair of portraits of the reigning monarch, George III, and his consort, Queen Charlotte commissioned from Zoffany and placed "between the sophas" at the upper end of the room.²³ It is to this aspect of the Museum that I will, in conclusion, turn. The portraits were:

plac'd in frames of metal finely wrought and richly gilt, from whence issue numberless rays forming a glory or irradiation like beams of the sun, in various reflected colours of light, some of which, when in motion, appear like liquid fire extending on every side.

Suspended from above by genii over each picture are imperial resplendant crowns embellish'd with jewels and pearls, placed under a canopy of crimson velvet border'd, fring'd, and tassell'd with gold

23. Described as oval on copper, half length, size of life, the production of these portraits caused the delay in opening the Museum in June 1771 (JJC, Lotteries iv, f. 16). The description is taken from the *Descriptive Catalogue* of 1772. In fact, the portraits measure roughly 78 x 65 cm and are now in the royal collection. Webster (1976; nos. 68 and 69) points out that the Cox portraits were based on the full-length portraits produced by Zoffany in 1771 but that the relative informality of those portraits was abandoned for robes of state.

and adorn'd with pearls, upon the cieling [*sic*] of which, and in front is a glory formed of glass and gold; laurels and palms of gold also decorate the picture of the king, as lillies and roses do that of the Queen, and are most exquisitely wrought from nature, and richly gilt.

Before the portraits upon a Throne of gold thirty-two feet in circumference of six steps, stand two rich and finely adorn'd altars of silver, border'd and embellish'd with gold; on the front of one within a wreath of oak is the cypher of His Majesty in letters of gold; upon the other, within a wreath of myrtle, the cypher of Her Majesty, finely executed. Upon the altars, form'd in high relief, various attributes and emblems are plac'd, distinguishing one as the altar of peace, the other of concord; beneath the throne is a band of mechanical musick, playing upon kettle drums, trumpets and other instruments, various fine pieces, compos'd by Mr. Smith, concluding with God Save the King; at the foot of the Throne on each side are pillars of silver, in richness, elegance and design corresponding with the altar, and upon them two elegant vases filled with flowers of jewellers work, copied from nature; containing musical machines and mechanical motions, by which the flowers unfold, and insects move like life: at the back of the Throne are plac'd four other most elegant vases, two of them pearl and gold, and two of jasper, decorated with figures, flowers, animals, and other ornaments, each containing beautiful bouquets of flowers of jewellery, and in the center flower of each, a curious time piece; the whole together is the most distinguished display of art and elegance which the fancy of the proprietor could form. (*Descriptive Catalogue 1772*, 18–19)²⁴

It is, perhaps, not surprising to find royal portraits as part of the Museum since Cox, like other contemporary entrepreneurs, was keen for royal patronage.²⁵ At the same time, the presence of portraits

24. The use of vases is interesting in light of the hugely popular production of vases by Wedgwood.

25. A report (presumably by Cox) in the *British Magazine*, January 1772, yokes together “the noble protection already granted by his majesty to the royal academicians” to the success of Bolton and Fothergill in attracting to themselves some of the expenditure on French luxury goods made by English consumers; in a letter to the *London Evening Post* 29 February 1772, Cox refers again to the proof of the monarch's taste for arts and science (all reprinted in *Collection of Various Extracts*, n.d., n.p.). Princess Amelia is reported to have visited the Museum on 14 March 1772 (cutting JJC, Lotteries iv, f. 17).

framed by mechanical inventions was a means of pointing up Cox's insistence that his endeavours be understood as not just equal in value to what was on the walls of the Royal Academy but as actually surpassing it. The presence of royal portraits by a leading artist who had been elected to the Royal Academy in 1769 and who was much favored by the royal family provided the most spectacular demonstration of Cox's conviction that his Museum should be accorded the same status as the Royal Academy and the Royal Society of Arts. Reynolds was by no means the royal family's preferred artist; the German-born Johann Zoffany offered a much less flamboyant, showy, painterly style of portraiture than either Reynolds or Gainsborough. All the more spectacular, then, that with music and automata, Cox could apparently bring to life the mimetic but immobile art of portraiture in ways unimaginable in the studios of fashionable portrait painters. George III was a well-known collector of mechanical instruments, and the Queen, a great lover of jewelry (Pointon 1997, 1998), regularly spent sums at London's toy merchants (see entries in the royal accounts, British Library Add. MS. 17870, 24 vols.). So the appeal to royal patronage of this prelude to the era of the Eidophusikon and ultimately of the *son et lumière*, if finally not very productive, was well founded. Perhaps it may seem ironic that Cox has represented the least absolutist of the Hanoverians in this Baroque format, with "brilliant rays of glory" emanating from their images. But these portraits were by no means participating in the culture of similitude that was the medium of the up-and-coming portraitists of the day. Rather, this was an iconic and symbolic representation in which portraits stand for the royal presence in a traditional manner going back centuries.

The insertion of portraits of royalty into an environment full of clocks is also significant; it is clear that all the timepieces in their jeweled surrounds were not there to enable people to tell the time. Clocks and watches have a widespread currency in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as metaphors for the machinery of power and government; we might mention here not only Adam Smith's celebrated example of the acquisition of an expensive watch by someone whose interest lies not in punctuality but in the perfection of the machine (Smith [1759] 1976b, 1:455) but also Paley's comparison of God to a watch (Paley [1802] 1821, iv). Kings and princes in the early modern period were also recommended to be "not merely like the hands of a clock within the machinery of government but rather the balance spring / that

gives the other gears time to turn / since therein lies the art of rule” (Bredekamp 1995, quoting Diego de Saavedra Fajardo, *Idea de un príncipe político christiano*, Munich 1640). By introducing royal portraits as the climax to an experience centered on an elaborate display of jeweled automata containing timepieces, it is implied that George III and Queen Charlotte, models of good government, are the ultimate jewels in the Treasure House. If in the seventeenth century God was the referent for the curiosities of the realms of *naturalis* and *artificialia* that filled the Kunstkammer, in Cox’s Museum it is free trade supported by what its proprietor (Advertisement, p. iv; repr. in *Collection of Various Extracts* n.d., iv) describes as “an enlightened lover of the Arts and Sciences . . . a generous patron to those efforts they produce . . . [one who in] adorning his capital . . . render[s] it, what is very capable of beoming, the ATHENS OF EUROPE.”

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