

Introduction

Global Gifts and the Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia

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Gifts played a key role in the making of the early modern world. They were an indispensable ingredient of global diplomacy and were central to the establishment and development of global connections. This much is clear from the wealth of scholarship on early modern gift exchange and diplomacy. This volume builds on the existing literature, but takes the field in new directions. First, it explores the question of what exactly a diplomatic gift is. The question is not new, but demands new answers in light of the emergence of global history and the insight that material culture provides a key complement to textual sources for historical research. Second, this volume argues that global gifts were an important vehicle for the establishment of shared values and material and visual experiences. We seek to show that gifts were key agents of social cohesion and transcultural systems of value in the emergence of a global political community in the early modern world. And third, we argue that gifts were agents in the unfolding of political rivalries and asymmetries of power.

This introductory chapter begins with an exploration of the diplomatic gift itself, followed by a consideration of recent developments in the fields of material culture studies and global history and their impact on our understanding of what makes a diplomatic gift. We then move on to a consideration of the agency of gifts in the establishment of power relations in the early modern world. Here we see gifts both creating cohesion and facilitating shared regimes of value, while at the same time highlighting differences in meaning and value, to the point of creating and

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exacerbating political rivalries and asymmetries of power in the early modern world.

THE MAKING OF A DIPLOMATIC GIFT

Ambassadors without appropriate gifts had little hope of being successful. Take the case of the embassy sent in 1657 by Charles X Gustav of Sweden (r. 1654–60) to the Ottoman sultan Mehmet IV (r. 1648–87). Having to travel incognito, Claes Brorson Rålamb, the chief Swedish ambassador, reached Constantinople without any suitable gift for either the sultan or the grand vizier. He was received by the Porte, but the embassy was ultimately a failure.¹ He was not the only ambassador to face difficulties with gifting. A century and a half earlier, Vasco da Gama had arrived in the kingdom of Calicut in India and faced a similar challenge. The meager gifts he presented to the Samudri Raja in 1498 were simply not in line with what was expected from a merchant, let alone an ambassador. Gama's successors, the governors residing in Goa, had to learn swiftly the art of gifting in order to survive in the Asian political arena. Their apprenticeship set the tone for centuries of diplomatic exchange to come.²

Gifts were, along with the letters sent by foreign rulers, at the heart of the ceremonies that accompanied the formal reception of ambassadors in Asia and in Europe. Two pages from the *Akbarnama* or Book of Akbar (Figure I.1a, b) show the reception of an embassy from Safavid Persia by the Mughal emperor in 1562. While the envoy of Shah Tamasp (r. 1524–76), Sayyid Beg, is shown in the company of Akbar (r. 1556–1605) on the right sheet, gifts are depicted ostentatiously as they were prepared for delivery on the left.³ Another image, in many ways similar, shows us Louis XIV of France (r. 1643–1715) receiving an ambassador from Persia in 1715 (Figure I.2). Mohammed Reza Beg, the envoy of Sultan Husayn (r. 1694–1722), appears presenting a letter

¹ Rålamb was aware that the lack of suitable gifts would have been perceived as an affront. Yet his travel incognito did not allow the carrying of precious gifts. Sten Westberg, "Claes Rålamb: Statesman, Scholar and Ambassador," in *The Sultan's Procession: The Swedish Embassy to Sultan Mehmed IV in 1657–1658 and the Rålamb Paintings*, ed. Karin Ådah (Constantinople: Swedish Research Institute in Constantinople, 2007), 26–57, esp. 43–44.

² Zoltán Biedermann, "Portuguese Diplomacy in Asia in the Sixteenth Century: A Preliminary Overview," *Itinerario* 29, no. 2 (2005): 13–37; a revised version is available in id., *The Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India: Studies in the History of Empire, Diplomacy and Trade* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), 7–32.

³ Susan Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor: The Art of the Book 1560–1650* (London: V&A Publications, 2002), 23 and 38.



FIGURE 1.1A Painting from the *Akbarnama*: “Akbar receives Iranian ambassador Sayyid Beg” (folio 1). Outline by La’l and painting by Ibrahim Kahar. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, Mughal, c. 1586–89. Victoria and Albert Museum IS.2:27-1896.

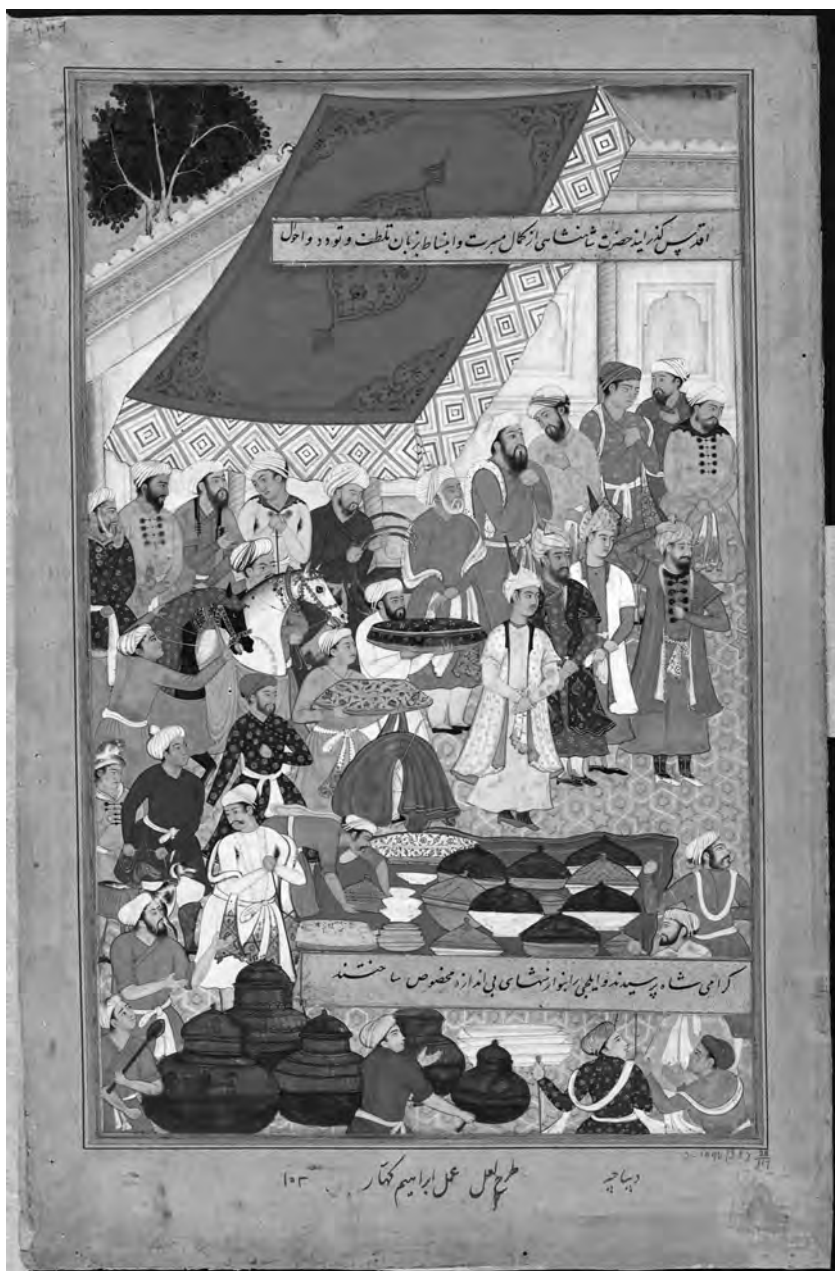


FIGURE 1.1B Painting from the *Akbarnama*: “Akbar receives Iranian ambassador Sayyid Beg” (folio 2). Outline by La’l and painting by Ibrahim Kahar. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, Mughal, c. 1586–89. Victoria and Albert Museum IS.2:28-1896.

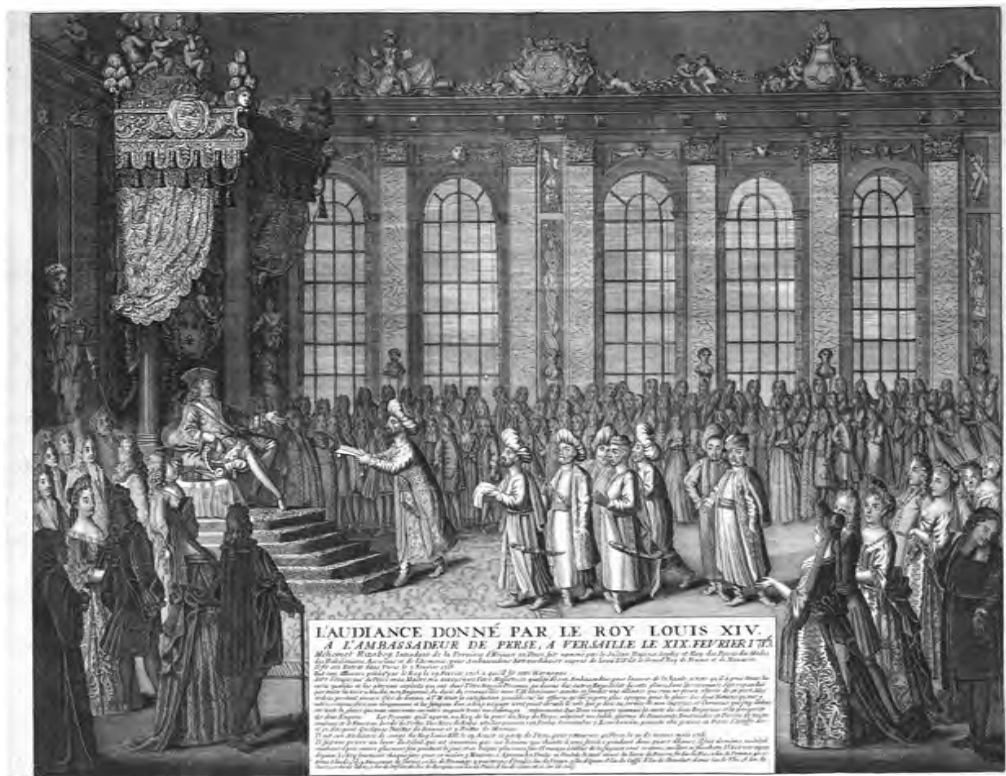


FIGURE I.2 “L’audience donné par le roy Louis XIV à l’ambassadeur de Perse ... 19 février 1715” (Hearing given by King Louis XIV to the ambassador of Persia ... 19 February 1715). Engraving, 44.5 cm × 56.0 cm.

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from his master to Louis XIV, followed by his coadjutants carrying a sample of gifts. The cartouche reports the speech made by the ambassador to renew the friendship between the two rulers, and then gives a detailed list of the objects not shown in the image. These included “a sabre encrusted with diamonds, emeralds and stones of all colors and the encasing covered in pearls; a rose made of rubies; 280 turquoises; 100 oriental pearls; 7 garnets weighing 250 grains; 12 pieces of gold cloth and 12 of silver cloth.”⁴

In Versailles or Agra, as in other European and Asian courts, the arrival of ambassadors tended to create material expectations. Ambassadors might spend months preparing for the reception and negotiating what objects were to be displayed in what manner. In hostile environments, gifts paved the way for dialogues or generated disputes. They might be stolen or lost. They could be put on display for courtiers to see, and at times be disposed among nobles as part of the munificence of the receiving king. All these acts would ideally be recorded and commemorated in additional artifacts such as reports, paintings and engravings – and of course amply talked about among the elite. Under such circumstances, diplomatic gifts created desire as much as they satiated it. Shah Abbas II of Persia (r. 1642–66) sent textiles with his diplomatic missions to promote the consumption of Iranian fabrics.⁵ On arriving in Moscow in 1650, an ambassador of Abbas had with him over 300 pieces of velvet, damask, satin and taffeta, as well as sashes and 15 carpets. Such a stock would in other circumstances have passed him for a merchant. In this case, however, there was no doubt that he should be welcomed as a diplomat.⁶

What does exactly make a “diplomatic gift” a gift as opposed to just being an object of trade? As a point of departure, what we have chosen to

⁴ See *La Perse et la France: Relation diplomatiques et culturelles du XVIIe au XIXe siècle*, catalogue of the exhibition held at the Musée Cernuschi, January–March 1972 (Paris: Musée Cernuschi, 1972).

⁵ On diplomacy and the use of textiles by the Iranian court, see Sinem Arcak Casale, “The Persian Madonna and Child: Commodified Gifts between Diplomacy and Armed Struggle,” *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015): 636–51; and Maria João Ferreira, “Embroidered Flowers and Birds for Shah Abbas I: Chinese Silks in Portuguese Diplomatic Missions in the Early Modern World,” *Textile History*, forthcoming (2018).

⁶ Elena Yurievne Gagarina, ed., *The Tsars and the East: Gifts from Turkey and Iran in the Moscow Kremlin* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2009), 4. Russia received also enormous quantities of silk from Chinese embassies as for instance the 700 bolts of patterned and embroidered silk sent by the Shunzhi Emperor (r. 1644–62) to Russia as part of the 1649 embassy. Maria Menshikova, “Chinese Silk in Imperial Russia in the 17th–18th Centuries,” in *The Silk Road: A Road of Silk*, ed. Zhao Feng (Shanghai: Donghua University Press, 2016), 234–36.

engage with in the present volume are things given away in the context of diplomatic negotiations without a direct pecuniary payment in exchange. To borrow Zemon Davis's words, the "'gift mode' . . . exists along with [and is thus distinct from] the mode of sales . . . and the mode of coercion."⁷ This said, such categories are most useful if they can also, at one point or another, be fine-tuned or overcome. The deeper we go into the history of diplomatic gifts, the more difficult it becomes to establish exactly where the boundaries between gifts, luxury commodities, tribute and booty can be drawn. Most theories of gift-giving emphasize – as indeed common sense would suggest – that gifts tend to be made with a past or a potential future benefit in mind. In other words, gifts tend to come with strings attached, they generally imply some sort of reciprocity, though they are part of a wider economic logic pervading all social relations. As Marcel Mauss stipulated in what is still the most frequently cited work on the subject, gifts served to form and express commitments to "services and counter-services," and they helped create a web of obligations following the logic of "*prestation totale*."⁸

Gifts played a key role in the symbolic economy and the social relations of the people handling them, which takes us into difficult terrain because it lays bare the ambiguities involved in the very notion of the economic. As the literary scholar David Hawkes put it, economic analysis "can be called 'materialist' only on the supposition that the economy is a material phenomenon" – which of course it is not.⁹ If we are to take Mauss seriously today, then we have to acknowledge how his entire theory of reciprocity was grounded in a critique of mechanistic economic theory, pointing to the importance of reciprocal gifting as the glue that holds societies together, a point to which we return below.¹⁰

⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 9.

⁸ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, transl. W. D. Halls, foreword Mary Douglas (New York: Norton and Company, 1990), 5.

⁹ David Hawkes, "Materialism and Reification in Renaissance Studies. Review Article," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2004): 114.

¹⁰ For an illuminating analysis of Mauss's theory and how it has been misread over the decades, see Patrick J. Geary, "Gift Exchange and Social Science Modeling: The Limitations of a Construct," in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner and Bernhard Jussen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2003), 129–40. See also Beate Wagner-Hasel, "Egoistic Exchange and Altruistic Gift. On the Roots of Marcel Mauss's Theory of the Gift," in *ibid.*, 141–71, and Harry Liebersohn, *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Our understanding of diplomatic gifts, then, is shaped by several further questions. How did gifted artifacts work (or sometimes fail to work) in the context of early modern diplomatic exchanges across cultural boundaries? What can the history of things tell us about the making of the early modern world that other histories do not? The main objective of the present volume is to address these and other questions through a series of case studies from the Eurasian context. But first we offer a reflection on gifts in academic fields of study, at the intersection of three different but related fields: the resurgent history of diplomacy, material culture studies and the discipline of global history.

NEW APPROACHES TO DIPLOMACY IN THE EARLY MODERN WORLD

Our contribution to the historical understanding of the relationship between material culture and diplomacy is part of a wider shift in how diplomatic history is interpreted today. “Diplomatic history is back,” wrote an enthused reviewer for the *Renaissance Quarterly* in 2011.¹¹ The discipline has undergone a significant transformation over the past fifteen years. In marked distance from the older tradition grounded in legal and political theory, a new brand of diplomatic history inspired by the cultural turn of the 1990s has emerged. The New Diplomatic History is not primarily about the formal (legal, institutional, political-philosophical) precepts of diplomacy anymore.¹² It aims instead to complement our understanding of those traditional core themes by studying the wider cultural and social foundations of diplomatic action. Some of the most important and paradigm-shifting work on the early modern period has come from continental European scholars working on early modern Europe. In Italy, Riccardo Fubini and Daniela Frigo have pioneered the study of diplomacy as a tool not only of “external” affairs but also “internal” state formation.¹³ French and German historians have

¹¹ Paul M. Dover, “Review of Robyn Adams and Rosanna Cox, eds., *Diplomacy and Early Modern Culture*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2011): 1279–81.

¹² The term first appeared in John Watkins, “Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 1–14.

¹³ Riccardo Fubini, *Italia quattrocentesca: Politica e diplomazia al tempo di Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1994); Daniela Frigo, ed., *Principi, Ambasciatori e “Jus Gentium”: L’amministrazione della Politica Estera nel Piemonte del Settecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991), trans. as *Politics and Diplomacy in Early Modern Italy: The Structure of*

developed the notion of a “cultural history of politics” (*histoire culturelle du politique*, *Kulturgeschichte des Politischen*), where early modern state building is examined as a cultural process.¹⁴ Most historians of early modern Europe thus agree that it is important to inquire into what Nicholas Dirks, a historian of India, called the “cultural foundations of power.”¹⁵

Diplomacy emerges almost naturally as a central topic of inquiry especially with regard to our understanding of the making of early modern dynastic states and empires. Ironically, however, the very historiography that is thus embracing notions of performance, theatricality and display borrowed from cultural anthropologists and from historians of the non-Western world is also being timid in its ventures beyond the boundaries of Europe. There are practical reasons for this, given what is still generally a wide gap between the historiographies of early modern Europe, of European expansion and of other regions of the world. Under such conditions, it already counted as a bold move when, as happened in 2008 with a landmark special issue on diplomacy of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern History*, the boundaries of the continent were pushed to include Byzantium and Muscovy.¹⁶ Only recently have we seen a widening of horizons with remarkable thematic issues in *Art History* and in *Journal of Early Modern History* (on diplomacy in the Mediterranean in 2015, and on diplomacy and visual and material culture and on diplomacy and cultural translation in 2016).¹⁷

Diplomatic Practice, 1450–1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Also see Christopher Storrs, *War, Diplomacy, and the Rise of Savoy, 1690–1720* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, ed., *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen?* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005); Ronald Asch and Dagmar Freist, eds., *Staatsbildung als kultureller Prozess. Strukturwandel und Legitimation von Herrschaft in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2005).

¹⁵ Nicholas B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 5.

¹⁶ “Towards a New Diplomatic History,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008).

¹⁷ Maartje van Gelder and Tijana Krstić, eds., “Cross-Confessional Diplomacy and Diplomatic Intermediaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 19, nos. 2–3 (2015); Meredith Martin and Daniela Bleichmar, eds., “Objects in Motion in the Early Modern World,” *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015); Nancy Um and Leah R. Clark, eds., “The Art of Embassy: Objects and Images of Early Modern Diplomacy,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 1 (2016); Toby Osborne and Joan-Pau Rubiés, eds., “Diplomacy and Cultural Translation in the Early Modern World,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 4 (2016).

One problem certainly is that some historians might still struggle to overcome the notion of European exceptionalism.¹⁸ Scholars of early modern diplomacy in Europe in particular may find it difficult to liberate themselves from the perception that there is a heartland – in and around northern and central Italy – from which early modern diplomacy as we know it ultimately emerged. It was, after all, in Venice, Florence and Rome that so many of the fundamental characteristics of diplomatic practice were developed during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – or so we believe. Like historians of Renaissance art, historians of Renaissance diplomacy often find it challenging to accept that comparable processes may have occurred in other parts of the world. Even more daunting is the prospect that certain innovations may have originated outside the borders of Europe and influenced the course of history in those imaginary heartlands, rather than vice versa.¹⁹

Even more disconcerting than this reticence among diplomatic historians of Europe to engage with global history is the hesitation of global historians to embrace diplomacy as a core subject. Between Jack Wills's *Embassies and Illusions* published in 1984 and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's *Courtly Encounters*, a collection of talks published in 2012, very few monograph-length studies resulting from the global history boom have tackled early modern diplomatic culture as a topic in itself.²⁰ In contrast with the modern period, for which books on diplomacy abound, early modernists have tended to make more disjointed incursions into the field. Some of the most auspicious recent explorations are those in Markus Vink's *Encounter on the Opposite*

¹⁸ Jerry Bentley, "Europeanization of the World or Globalization of Europe?," *Religions* 3 (2012): 441–54.

¹⁹ See namely D. Goffman, "Negotiating with the Renaissance State: The Ottoman Empire and the New Diplomacy," in *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, ed. Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61–74. Also see, for art and science, Valérie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris and The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001); and Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

²⁰ John E. Wills Jr., *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-hsi, 1666–1687* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Also see Wills's earlier study, *Pepper, Guns, and Parleys: The Dutch East India Company and China, 1622–1681* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974). At the tail end of our period, mention must be made of James L. Hevia's *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1995), and Christian Windler's *La diplomatie comme expérience de l'Autre. Consuls français au Maghreb (1700–1840)* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2002).

Coast (2015) and Adam Clulow's *The Company and the Shogun* (2014) along with some important work on European-Ottoman diplomacy.²¹

Literary historians have begun to successfully unravel the diplomatic narratives of English envoys to Asian courts, and a case has been made for placing such texts at the heart of the making of early modern European literature.²² Attempts have been made to summarize the main features of Portuguese diplomacy in the East, a particularly complex subfield given the precociousness of Lusitanian expansion and its extreme exposure to Asian political cultures.²³ And two recent volumes of collected essays in German have brought to the fore the intercultural logics of diplomatic reception ceremonies in transcultural contexts, especially in the Middle East.²⁴

This book argues that what is needed is a diplomatic history capable of engaging with its topic in a global setting. The stage that we will be observing is not, of course, stable. The globe as such was in the process of being invented by the various sides involved in early modern transcontinental encounters. So was the diplomatic playing field on which representatives of political formations as diverse as the Venetian Signoria, the

²¹ Adam Clulow, *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), esp. 25–58; Markus P. M. Vink, *Encounters on the Opposite Coast: The Dutch East India Company and the Nayaka State of Madurai in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). Also see Bhawan Ruangsilp, *Dutch East India Company Merchants at the Court of Ayutthaya: Dutch Perceptions of the Thai Kingdom, c.1604–1765* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). On the Ottoman case, see among others Palmira Brummett, “A Kiss Is Just a Kiss: Rituals of Submission along the East-West Divide,” in *Cultural Encounters between East and West, 1493–1699*, ed. Matthew Birchwood and Matthew Dimmock (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2005), 107–31.

²² Richmond Barbour, “Power and Distant Display: Early English ‘Ambassadors’ in Moghul India,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 61, nos. 3–4 (1998): 343–68; id., *Before Orientalism: London’s Theatre of the East, 1576–1626* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. 146–93; Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Douglas Biow, *Doctors, Ambassadors, Secretaries: Humanism and Professions in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Timothy Hampton, *Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2009).

²³ Stefan Halikowski-Smith, “‘The Friendship of Kings Was in the Ambassadors’: Portuguese Diplomatic Embassies in Asia and Africa during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Portuguese Studies* 22, no. 1 (2006): 101–34; Biedermann, “Portuguese Diplomacy in Asia in the Sixteenth Century.”

²⁴ Peter Burschel and Christine Vogel, eds., *Die Audienz: Ritualisierter Kulturkontakt in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2014). The introduction by Burschel contains further references especially to work in German. Ralph Kauz, Giorgio Rota and Jan Paul Niederkorn, eds., *Diplomatisches Zeremoniell in Europa und im mittleren Osten in der frühen Neuzeit* (Vienna: OeAW, 2009).

Ottoman Porte, the Portuguese Estado da Índia, the Empire of the Mughals, the English East India Company or the *daimyo* of Japan began to interact. Needless to say, even at the level of these polities, much was in motion. Power structures were in the making while others unraveled. Rulers attempted to establish their credentials through warfare and diplomacy, but their authority was often brittle and open to internal challenges. Whoever could get hold of diplomatic moments and channel the symbolic capital they generated to consolidate his or her own authority was more likely to thrive than others who could not. The instability of diplomatic relations before the establishment of a solidly structured system of resident ambassadors and formalized interstate relations is thus an opportunity as much as it is a challenge to historians.

The sheer amount of intercontinental diplomatic interactions that unfolded from the late fifteenth century is staggering. While we are far from seeing the whole picture and certainly no quantitative assessment exists so far, it should be sufficient to consider the following: when the Portuguese began to build up a power network in the Indian Ocean region in the early sixteenth century – in other words, when they began to create the structures of what would become known as the Estado or Portuguese Empire in the East – they went from a handful of face-to-face encounters with minor rulers of coastal towns and kingdoms to a complex network of diplomatic relations within a few years. Crucially, this was due not to Portuguese planning but to the necessities of doing business in and interacting with the Asian political landscape. In places such as Malacca or Hormuz, diplomatic exchanges propelled by Siam and Persia, respectively, quickly imposed their own pace and practices on the newcomers.²⁵

In Goa, the Portuguese governors would soon dedicate a substantial part of their time to the management of extensive diplomatic relations with dozens of states ranging from small port cities on the Malabar Coast to the Empires of Vijayanagara and the Mughals. The exposure to practices of gift-giving especially from the Islamic diplomatic tradition was very considerable and is yet barely understood by historians. Once other Europeans made their appearance in Asia – either through the Cape Route or by moving overland through the Ottoman sphere into Safavid Persia and other regions – the web of diplomatic relations gained additional complexity. We are nowhere near to even just estimating how many diplomatic missions occurred in those contexts over the early modern period, let alone getting to grips with the amount of gifts exchanged. But it is clear already that the

²⁵ Biedermann, *Portuguese in Sri Lanka and South India*, 7–32.

study of such a vast and poorly known system of diplomatic exchanges will require coordinated efforts not only at the level of archival exploration, but also with regard to the formulation of questions and lines of inquiry. A single method may not suffice in the face of the complexities of the field, yet some sort of common ground is clearly needed.²⁶

MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE DIPLOMATIC GIFT

The analysis of gift-giving practices in early modern diplomatic relations has greatly benefited from developments in the field of material culture studies. Written texts, central to the understanding of diplomacy, are increasingly interpreted alongside a variety of other historical materials, including artifacts.²⁷ Diplomacy in particular – with its great theatricality often mediated by luxurious props and detailed written narratives – lends itself to complex interpretations through multiple sources, and here objects can be of great help to scholars, students and the general public. The material objects that served as diplomatic gifts in some of the most spectacular embassies of the early modern period have been at the heart of several recent exhibitions, including “The Tsars and the East: Gifts from Turkey and Iran in the Moscow Kremlin” (originally held at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in 2009), “Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts” (originally held at LACMA in Los Angeles in 2011), and “Treasures of the Royal Courts: Tudors, Stuarts and the Russian Tsars” (at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2013).²⁸ These shows were the outcome of, and at the same time resulted in, new opportunities for

²⁶ See for instance the thought-provoking introductory piece to the special issue edited by Toby Osborne and Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Introduction: Diplomacy and Cultural Translation,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20, no. 4 (2016): 313–30.

²⁷ Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, “Introduction: Writing Material Culture History,” in *Writing Material Culture History*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1–13; id., “The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World,” in *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the First Global Age*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London: Routledge, 2015), 1–27. See also Karen Harvey, ed., *History and Material Culture: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London: Routledge 2009), and Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” *American Historical Review* 110, no. 4 (2006): 1015–44. For the early modern period, see Paula Findlen, “Introduction: Early Modern Things,” in *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800*, ed. Paula Findlen (Basingstoke: Routledge, 2013), 3–27.

²⁸ Yurievne Gagarina, ed., *Tsars and the East*; Linda Komaroff, ed., *Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Tessa Murdoch, ed., *Treasures of the Royal Courts: Tudors, Stuarts and the Russian Tsars* (London: V&A Publications, 2013).

curators and academics to collaborate, as well as a development we might refer to as a “material turn” in several academic disciplines.

Diplomatic gifts illustrate the history of political encounters, but they can also trigger deeper considerations about the interweaving of words, acts and things at the heart of key historical processes such as the building of early modern state power and the making of transcontinental political, economic and cultural connections. They may even open doors to the telling of the material conditions of diplomacy, taking us straight into a world made of perilous travels, seasickness and infectious diseases, broken plates and rotting carpets, robberies, falsifications and penny-pinching. Material culture can thus contribute to the way recent diplomatic history has recovered the importance of individual agency and rehabilitated the figure of the ambassador beyond a mere implementer of higher political aims.²⁹ The letter case and comb (Figure I.3) that belonged to the Dutch ambassador Thomas Hees in Algiers provide us with such an intimate – albeit still very narrow – glimpse into ambassadorial life. Hees was sent to Algiers in 1675 as a plenipotentiary of the States-General to conduct negotiations for the purchase of the freedom of Dutch slaves.³⁰ On a contemporary portrait we see him in a relaxed pose, smoking, and surrounded by his nephews, his servant “Thomas the negro, 17 years old,” and some artifacts acquired in North Africa. One of those is the comb case lying on the table (Figure I.4).

Focusing on the materiality of the gift helps us create narratives in which political and economic motives, including personal acts, institutional ambitions and technological innovation are seen as interwoven aspects of a single story. The procurement of suitable gifts, for example, was no trivial matter. It could consist of a shopping spree on the local market, the recycling of items that were already part of a collection, or the systematic purchasing of exceptional things in distant places. It might also involve more unexpected operations including the fabrication of novel objects following precise specifications given by the receiver himself.³¹

²⁹ Nancy Um and Leah R. Clark, “Introduction: The Art of Embassy: Objects and Images of Early Modern Diplomacy,” *Journal of Early Modern History*, 20, no. 1 (2016): 7.

³⁰ Alexander H. de Groot, “Ottoman North Africa and the Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Revue de l’Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 39 (1985): 139–40; Ton J. Broos, “Travelers and Travel Liars in Eighteenth-Century Dutch Literature,” in *History in Dutch Studies*, ed. Robert Howell and Jolands Vanderwal Taylor (Lanham, MA: University Press of America, 2004), 32–37.

³¹ The Dutch factors in Asia, for example, compiled detailed lists of the gifts considered suitable on the basis of enquiries with the rulers and trade officials, as Cynthia Viallé has shown.



FIGURE 1.3 This letter case and comb belonged to Ambassador Thomas Hees when he was in Algiers. Under the flap of the case is an embroidered inscription: “His Excellency Sir Thomas Hees Ambassador of the States General of the United Netherlands 1676.” On loan from the Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen Mauritshuis, Rijksmuseum SK-C-1216.

The demands made by the Ottoman elite, for instance, posed spectacular challenges to Venetian artisans, which in turn contributed to technological innovation.³² When no information was available about which kind of objects a foreign prince might like to receive, a network of informers had to be mobilized. This was in all probability the case with the chandelier that the Habsburg ambassador Walter Count Leslie presented to Sultan Mehmet IV. Although the chandelier has long been lost, we still have a life-size drawing (c. 60 cm × 100 cm). According to the description, the chandelier weighed 22 kilos and was adorned by 303 rock crystals (Figure 1.5).³³ Looking at the precision of this and other drawings of clocks and candelabra in the Vienna archives, it is clear that Dutch artisans were put to work to produce high-quality artifacts that perfectly matched the taste and expectations of the Ottoman receiver.

See Cynthia Viallé, “To Capture Their Favor’: On Gift-Giving by the VOC,” in *Mediating Netherlandish Art and Material Culture in Asia*, ed. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Michael North (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 291–319, esp. 296.

³² See Luca Molà’s chapter in this volume.

³³ Peter Noever, ed., *Global:Lab. Kunst Als Botschaft Asien und Europa, 1500–1700* (Vienna: MAK, 2009), 208–9. See also Barbara Karl and Claudia Swan’s chapters in this volume considering the receptions of gifts from the Habsburgs to the Ottoman Court.



FIGURE 1.4 “Portrait of Thomas Hees, resident and commissioner of the States General to the governments of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, with his nephews Jan and Andries Hees and a servant.” Rijksmuseum SK-C-1215.

We do not know what the Sultan made of the chandelier. Metals – especially precious metals – were often melted down once an object was no longer considered worth keeping. This specific object, which we only know because a two-dimensional representation survives, shared a common destiny with the majority of diplomatic gifts: they were lost in the course of time. Indeed, in some cases gifts were not supposed to remain as tangible evidence of a diplomatic encounter at all. This was the case of the food and *materia medica* that embassies sometimes carried with them: for instance, a shipload of Italian cheese that the Ottoman

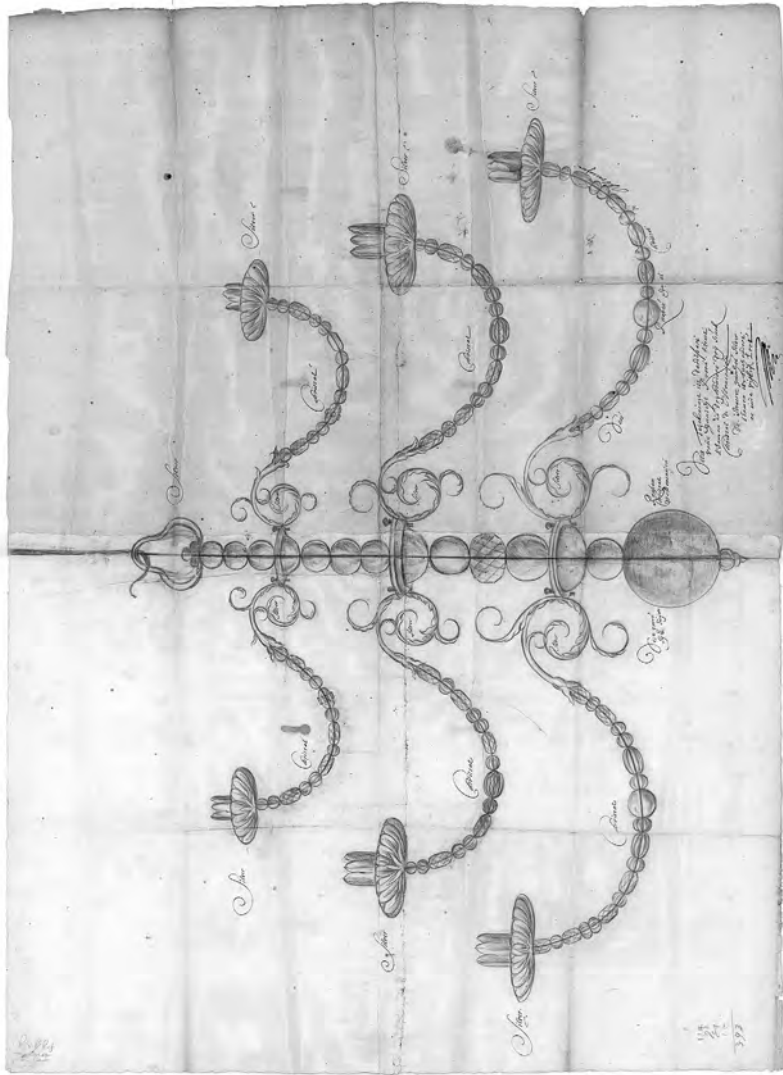


FIGURE 1.5 Design for a chandelier, Amsterdam, 1665. Red chalk drawing, 82.0 cm × 110 cm. Austrian State Archives, Financial and Aulic Chancellery Archives, Collection of Plans and Maps, inv. No. S 62/1.

Sultan Bayezid received with great pleasure from the ruler of Mantua in 1491.³⁴ Among the most appreciated gifts were animals. In the early fifteenth century, Bengali envoys presented a giraffe to the emperor of Ming China. Unknown in China, the giraffe was interpreted as a highly propitious *qilin*, an auspicious beast seen only when a true sage was on the throne.³⁵ In Europe, the most celebrated of these animals was the rhinoceros that reached Lisbon in 1515 as a gift from Sultan Muzaffar II of Cambay (r. 1511–26) to King Manuel I (r. 1495–1521) of Portugal. The Catholic king of Portugal later presented it to Pope Leo X. The unfortunate animal never arrived in Rome as the ship that carried it sank in the Mediterranean, but it was immortalized by Albrecht Dürer in one of his best-known prints – yet another example of how the ephemeral nature of certain gifts could be counterbalanced by pictorial and textual representations and the formation of collective memories.³⁶

The fact that most diplomatic gifts have disappeared creates multiple challenges to historians. Early modern objects surviving today are only rarely connectable to a specific diplomatic event. Inversely, whenever textual descriptions of embassies mention gifts, it has been generally very difficult, if not altogether impossible, to identify them in collections. Some objects, including a series of ivory caskets sent from Sri Lanka to Portugal in the sixteenth century, have been successfully identified and contextualized – but they are the exception confirming the rule.³⁷ There is something deeply counterintuitive to this fact, given the very high status and monetary value that such objects tended to possess when they first circulated. The study of the disappearance or decontextualization of objects is certainly worth developing alongside interrogations about knowledge loss, serving as a valuable complement to the histories of collecting and science in the early modern period.³⁸

³⁴ See Antonia Gatward Cevizli's chapter in this volume.

³⁵ See figure 192 in the catalogue of the recent British Museum exhibition, entitled *Ming: 50 Years That Changed China* (London: British Museum Press, 2014), 224. For a further study, see Sally K. Church, "The Giraffe of Bengal: A Medieval Encounter in Ming China," *Medieval History Journal* 7, no. 1 (2004): 1–36.

³⁶ T. H. Clarke, *The Rhinoceros from Dürer to Stubbs: 1515–1799* (London: Sotheby's Publication, 1986). See also Pamela Smith and Paula Findlen, eds., *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science and Art in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Hedda Reindl-Kiel, "Dogs, Elephants, Lions, a Ram and a Rhino on Diplomatic Mission: Animals as Gifts to the Ottoman Court," in *Animals and People in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi (Constantinople: Eren, 2010), 271–85.

³⁷ See Zoltán Biedermann's chapter in this volume.

³⁸ On collecting, see the work of Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Daniela Bleichman and Peter C. Mancall, eds., *Collecting across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of

Another problem with diplomatic gifts is that, spectacular as they often were and are, they do not necessarily tell us much about how they were seen and received. Only rarely do we have access to as much information as in the following case pertaining to English-Ottoman diplomacy under Elizabeth I and Mehmed III. Shortly before the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Elizabeth sent an ambassador to Constantinople with the aim of fostering diplomatic ties with the Ottoman Empire, Spain's archenemy. The monarch decided to send gifts to Safiye, queen-mother of Mehmed III. Items sent included pieces of gold cloth and a jeweled miniature portrait. On reception, it was communicated to the English representatives that Safiye "so gratefully accepted [the gifts sent in her majesty's name], as that she sent to know of the ambassador what present he thought she might return that would most delight her majesty." The English envoy sent word that "a suit of princely attire being after the Turkish fashion would for the rareness thereof be acceptable in England."³⁹ As a result, "an upper gowne of cloth of gold very rich, and under gowne of cloth of silver, and girdle of Turkish worke, rich and faire" were sent.⁴⁰ We are even allowed to conjecture, as recently argued by Jerry Brotton, that while Elizabeth enjoyed wearing the Turkish gown, seeing it as a potent reminder of her new anti-Spanish ally, this very act was seen in Constantinople as a confirmation of England's status as a vassal state of the Empire.⁴¹ Such relatively thick interpretations are, however, again only rarely possible with diplomatic gifts – or at least this is where we stand at present, at a time when the systematic study of this category of object is still in its beginnings.

THE GIFT IN GLOBAL HISTORY

While many early modern diplomatic encounters on the global stage still have to be read through European sources with the widely known biases, silences and plain prejudice that this presents, it does make a difference if we read the sources with an awareness of the connections and interactions that began to

Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Peter N. Miller, *Peiresc's Orient: Antiquarianism as Cultural History in the Seventeenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012). See also the now classic essays in Oliver Impey and A. MacGregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). On the loss of knowledge, see Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge*, vol. 2: *From the Encyclopédie to Wikipedia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 139–59.

³⁹ Both cited in Jerry Brotton, *This Orient Isle: Elizabethan England and the Islamic World* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 189.

⁴⁰ Cited in Gerald MacLean and Nabil Matar, *Britain and the Islamic World, 1558–1713* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47–48.

⁴¹ Brotton, *This Orient Isle*, 190.

shape so many parts of the world from the fifteenth century onward. Without aspiring to complete global coverage – our focus here is on Asia–Europe interactions – most of the contributors to this volume see the incentive to challenge national boundaries and Eurocentrism as central to their work.

Global history, then, serves here to provide a methodological framework within which gifts can be conceptualized.⁴² Rather than seeing the gift in isolation, as the means by which an individual relationship between two entities is established, with one of two generally located in Europe, we propose here to situate both in global context. In practice, this means not so much that both might be located anywhere in the world, but that the relationship can be fully understood only when taking into consideration that both are part of complex networks of connections that extend beyond their immediate location.⁴³ The full implications of the movements of gifts can be grasped only when all these connections are also made visible.

Figure I.6 provides an exemplary glimpse of a network of relationships within which early modern gifts were exchanged. The painting, made in 1757 by the Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), depicts the offering of a set of horses. On the right-hand side of this detail of the handscroll, which is over 2.5 meters long, we see the emperor of China (Qianlong, r. 1735–96) seated on a carved seat in front of a painted screen. Standing by his side on the raised platform are two courtiers, looking toward the scene in front of them. A white horse stands in the in the left-hand of the detail, next to the hunched figure of a man prostrating himself before the emperor. Two more horses, one a deep brown color, the other skewbald (with brown and white patches) stand on the left of the white horse (not included in this image). The three horse grooms, possibly Kazakhs, all have a distinctive red, pointy hat, which marks them as visitors to the Qing Empire (1644–1911). Even without any knowledge of the ways in which the Chinese court dealt with foreign emissaries during the Qing dynasty, the viewer immediately sees a particular power relationship playing out in front of their eyes – a powerful

⁴² For some recent overviews of the methodologies and themes of global and world history, see Maxine Berg, ed., *Writing the Global: Challenges for the 21st Century* (Oxford: British Academy and Oxford University Press, 2013); Jerry Bentley, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Douglas Northrup, ed., *A Companion to World History* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

⁴³ See, from the vast literature on connections and their historiographical potential, Michael North, ed., *Artistic and Cultural Exchanges between Europe and Asia, 1400–1900* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2010); Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity,” *History and Theory*, 45, no. 1 (2006): 30–50.



FIGURE 1.6 Detail of “Kazaks Offering Horses in Tribute to the Emperor Qianlong,” by Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766). Hanging scroll; ink and light colors on paper, eighteenth century. 45.5 cm × 269 cm. Former Frey collection. Now in Musée Guimet, inv. nr. MG 17033.

reminder of the fact, to be explored further below, that gifting is far from being as “mutual” an affair as Western theory often likes to have it.⁴⁴ The humble and submissive posture of the gift-giver, in stark contrast to the proudly raised head of the white horse, enforces the position of power from which the emperor receives this precious gift.

The formal exchange of gifts between the Chinese Empire and the political entities the Chinese considered submissive to them formed part of the so-called tribute system and played a central role in the foreign relations of the various Chinese dynasties. The form and frequency of the tribute missions to the Chinese imperial court, the geopolitical entities that were invited to be part of the system, its representations and meanings all changed so dramatically over the centuries that the term “tribute system” has now largely become regarded as misleading. Nonetheless, the giving of gifts, both from visitors from afar to the Chinese court and from the emperor to the visiting emissaries, runs like a red thread throughout the history of early modern China. To make sense of tributary gift circulation, we need to look beyond the suggestion of a single, linear connection between for example the Kazakhs and the Chinese, toward the military campaigns and territorial expansion of the Qianlong emperor into Central Asia of the mid-eighteenth century. The nomadic Kazakhs hailed from a territory beyond the contested Central Asian region that the Qianlong emperor had set his sights on, but of course he accepted their gift of horses as a welcome sign of the extension of his power. Meanwhile, the Jesuit

⁴⁴ See Geary, “Gift Exchange,” 129–40.

painter Giuseppe Castiglione, who created this record of the exchange, will have had his own perspective on it as a representative of a European religious order that sought to extend the reach of Christianity in the Qing Empire. The newly conquered Central Asian territories and the Europeans vying for influence at the imperial court all have their part to play in this offering of horses and the way its representation has come down to us.

This also was and remains a matter of complex, often shifting desires for material goods and the potential they carried to consolidate or transform hierarchies. In 1757, the chief of the Kazakhs in Figure I.6 wanted to do more than please the emperor of China.⁴⁵ In exchange for horses, he wanted textiles and tea from the Qing, a move that would doubtless have strengthened his own position and probably augmented his wealth, while at the same time increasing the circulation of certain goods among his people, in turn triggering cultural change. In 1758, the Qing emperor officially approved of a trading relationship; the Kazakhs provided horses at reasonable prices, and the Chinese shipped vast quantities of satins, silks and tea from the interior of China to the Kazakhs in Inner Asia.⁴⁶ Global history has, for some of its practitioners, close connections to economic history and the history of material connections between different parts of the world. That aspect of global history is useful in this context, too. For example, large numbers of traders accompanied any mission to the Chinese imperial court, stopping frequently en route to the palace, to sell the goods they had brought from home and buy others to sell at home. The expectation was also that the expensive gifts the emperor bestowed on the visitors would be sold at home. In that sense, then, the formal exchange of gifts that featured at the Qing court might have been little more than the thin veil hiding an extensive trade mission, as were the vast majority of the ambassadorial missions that the European

⁴⁵ As Nicola di Cosmo has shown, the facade of gift exchange on the Qing-Kirghiz nomadic frontier confirmed an unequal relationship of vassal to sovereign, while allowing all partners to maintain their status. The Qing court officials and their local representatives could represent the nomads as inferior, covering up the economic dependency of the Qing court, while the gift-bearing nomads could maintain their aristocratic status to their local audiences. Nicola Di Cosmo, “Kirghiz Nomads on the Qing Frontier: Tribute, Trade, or Gift Exchange?,” in *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries, and Human Geographies in Chinese History*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo and Don J. Wyatt (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 351–72.

⁴⁶ James A. Millward, “Qing Silk-Horse Trade with the Qazaqs in Yili and Tarbaghatai, 1758–1853,” *Central and Inner Asian Studies* 7 (1992): 1–42. See also Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 400–402.

courts and trade companies embarked on. The exchange of gifts has its own history, undoubtedly, but the history of diplomatic gifts is in many ways the history of the desire for economic expansion.⁴⁷

This approach reflects a recent trend in the practice of global history. The aim of world and global historians has always been to see the wider picture, to draw out comparisons and connections between different parts of the world and to challenge the assumed preeminence of the nation-state. If it seemed at one stage that this required a “macro” approach, looking at the economic convergences and divergences of the planet as a whole; more recently, scholars have become interested in the roles of individuals, especially those who negotiated individual pathways through the entanglements of the early modern world.⁴⁸ Mobile individuals like the sixteenth-century al-Hasan al-Wazzan, born a Muslim in Fez, later baptized as Giovanni Leone, who entered the history records as Leo Africanus, or the eighteenth-century Elizabeth Marsh, who passed through the West Indies, Europe, Africa and India in the course of her life, provide profound challenges to historians.⁴⁹ What remains of their records is scattered all over the world, and in a variety of languages. Yet their individual stories matter and, like the stories of individual objects, shed important light on the complex entanglements that shaped early global connections.⁵⁰ A study of the exchange of gifts, then, requires the entire repertoire of approaches, from the level of the individual and his/her artifacts – such as the things that al-Hasan al-Wazzan selected as gifts in his early years as he moved between the different courts in places like Tunis, Cairo and Timbuktu – to the offering of gifts by the representatives of the Dutch and English East India Companies, and the role of gifts in the mediation of larger geopolitical relationships.⁵¹

⁴⁷ See Giorgio Riello’s contribution in this volume.

⁴⁸ Amy Stanley, “Maid-servants’ Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia, 1600–1900,” *American Historical Review*, 121, no. 2 (2016): 437–60, esp. 438–40.

⁴⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (London: HarperPress, 2007). See also Miles Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Nicholas Thomas has proposed the concept of “entangled objects,” a tool through which people across the known world could make sense of one another. See his *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Also see Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

⁵¹ Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels*, 48–49.

Instead of reducing the political relationships of the early modern world to a function of abstract state interactions, the global-historical study of diplomacy and gifts thus allows us to explore the complexities and nuances arising from a combination of individual and organizational agency and culture in an open-ended, fast-evolving system. In such a context, diplomatic gifts could build on, and hence reinforce, similarities between distant societies. In other words, global gifts afford us a glimpse into the “commensurability” of shared diplomatic practices across large parts of Eurasia.⁵²

DIPLOMATIC GIFTS AND GLOBAL POWER RELATIONS

When we study the cultural construction of power across cultural borders in the early modern world, gifts emerge as connectors and carriers of complex messages about imperial ambitions, and as vehicles in the negotiation of a global regime of values. We argue that gifting is not a kind of archaic economy of exchange, but a pervasive, symbolically laden agent of cohesion for any society. In the studies in this volume, gifts emerge as a part of the social glue that made the formation of a global political community possible. There has been a relatively abundant production of studies on diplomatic gifts in Europe, grounded in part in a wider literature on gift-giving in France, England, Italy and other regions. Along with Natalie Zemon Davis’s seminal work on *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France*, numerous studies of medieval and early modern societies have emerged to emphasize the pervasiveness of gifting.⁵³ As Felicity Heal recently put it, “the mode of giving, as well as what was given, was crucial

⁵² On the concepts of incommensurability and its opposite, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Par-delà l’incommensurabilité: pour une histoire connectée des empires aux temps modernes,” *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 54, no. 4-bis (2007): 34–53; and id., *Courtly Encounters*. See also Mathieu Grenet, “Muslim Missions to Early Modern France, c. 1610–c. 1780: Notes for a Social History of Cross-Cultural Diplomacy,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 19, no. 1 (2015): 223–44, and the introduction to the special issue by Maartje van Gelder and Tijana Krstić, “Introduction: Cross-Confessional Diplomacy and Diplomatic Intermediaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 19, no. 1 (2015): 93–105.

⁵³ Zemon Davis, *Gift in Sixteenth-Century France*. Some other titles illustrating the broad range of topics at stake include Jane Fair Bestor, “Marriage Transactions in Renaissance Italy and Mauss’s Essay on the Gift,” *Past & Present* 164 (1999): 6–46; Rob C. Wegman, “Musical Offerings in the Renaissance,” *Early Music* 33, no. 3 (2005): 425–37; Piers Baker-Bates, “Beyond Rome: Sebastiano Del Piombo as a Painter of Diplomatic Gifts,” *Renaissance Studies* 27, no. 1 (2011): 51–72.

to social bonding and political success.”⁵⁴ The exchange of gifts and benefits had wide social and political implications, thus serving as a paradigmatic example of how cultural practices contribute to the making, the consolidating, and at times the breaking of power relations in early modern societies.

If gifts played a crucial role between individuals within certain realms such as convents, towns, lordships or kingdoms, then they must be assumed to have been similarly important in the management of relations between rulers. In a world of dynastic states ranging from large terrestrial empires through a variety of composite, often geographically disjointed monarchies to a range of smaller formations including “little kingdoms,” city-states, and of course some precursors of modern nation-states, personal relations between sovereigns served to express power relations on a larger, multisocietal scale. It is in this context that gifts gained the potential to shape not only the Asian or European, but also the emerging global political landscape. They did so not only in the context of dowries used to cement dynastic agreements in key moments of the lives of rulers, but also – and perhaps increasingly so – as objects or groups of objects offered on the occasion of theatrical receptions structuring diplomatic negotiations. Much came to be expected of gifts especially on the occasion of ambassadorial visits, and even more when the said ambassadors originated in a distant part of the world. With diplomats serving not only as political, but also cultural mediators, the gifts they brought along served to express the possibilities of cross-cultural communication as much as the primary political ambitions of the rulers involved.

Reciprocity and mutuality are aspects that certainly deserve emphasis in connection with the gesturing of global historians to a level playing field in the early modern period. In the battle against Eurocentrism, it has been important to underline how European, Asian and indeed African rulers engaged in diplomatic conversations without assuming that Europe was in some way predestined to global domination. To counterbalance older Eurocentric narratives, we need to keep highlighting non-Western agency in early modern encounters, including the Asian perspective on Europeans (who were often diplomats carrying gifts) and the imperial ambitions non-Western rulers hoped to pursue against, or with the assistance of, people from the West. The recent historiography of Portuguese expansion has, perhaps more than any other, pointed out how the

⁵⁴ Felicity Heal, *The Power of Gifts: Gift Exchange in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

political, cultural and economic power of Asian policy-makers humbled their counterparts in Lisbon and Goa. As one observer at the Portuguese royal court put it in the early sixteenth century, it was “them” – the peoples of the continent to which a direct sea route was found in 1498 – who “discovered us.”⁵⁵ In this sense, then, it is important in principle to link up global history’s newly gained interest in mutuality with what is perhaps the most quintessentially mutual thing in our imagination: gifts.

However, it is equally vital not to romanticize early modern diplomacy and diplomatic gift-giving as an unhierarchical, fundamentally positive, naturally cosmopolitan stage for negotiations between equals. One risk involved in the proliferation of individual case studies on gifts – often engaging with very limited sets of objects – is that we may lose sight precisely of those aspects of gift giving that, while they imply reciprocity and mutuality, also serve to establish difference and imbalance. It is certainly legitimate to revel in the beauty of the objects involved and explore the sophistication of the exchanges they were involved in. But diplomacy is, in its very essence, about expressing ambitions, establishing differences and managing hierarchies of influence and power. Early modern European-Asian diplomacy may yet have been void of the specter of British imperialism (although Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch imperialism left their imprints over the centuries), but frictions and clashes were an essential part of the game. From petty differences in the allocation of trading privileges, prices and taxes to the clash of empires with declared and conflicting universal ambitions, diplomatic encounters carried the seeds of peace and of war at the same time. Gifts were only very rarely moved around on a perfectly horizontal plane. For most of the time, they traveled up and down complex hierarchical ladders, expressing political moods ranging from submissive prostration through more or less overt challenge to dismissal or even disdain. Gifts can thus help us understand the unfolding of political rivalries and the constant shifting of power balances, rather than just illustrating a static world of conspicuously communicating sovereigns.

Gifts were exposed to and handled by numerous agents involved in the construction of power relations. They were subject to intense scrutiny, receiving criticism as well as praise. The various people whose paths they

⁵⁵ Jorge M. Flores, “‘They Have Discovered Us’: The Portuguese and the Trading World of the Indian Ocean,” in *Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th Centuries* Jay, ed. Jay A. Levenson, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Freer and Sackler, 2007), 2: 185–93.

crossed viewed gifts in very different ways. What might appear valuable to some might be perceived as trivial by others. Gifts carried, as they still do for all of us, the possibility of countless mutual understandings and misunderstandings. What their history suggests, however, is that because diplomatic gifts were expected to complement the performance of ambassadors and because the objective of most participants was, in essence, to make deals rather than break them, in a majority of cases they were the object of a search for common ground rather than radical dissent.⁵⁶ If at times the opposite was the case, then this only adds to their appeal as historical sources. Because their qualities, and above all their value, received attention from all sides involved in diplomatic negotiations, they can be made to serve today as indicators of how far early modern societies were capable of establishing common, transcultural systems of value.

Value itself is, as we know, no absolute quality. Theories of value abound, taking into account a wide range of social, cultural and economic factors.⁵⁷ A gift could be valuable on grounds of the materials used to produce it (which, of course, had different values in different places), but also of the quantity and quality of labor that went into it, or the symbolic charge it received in certain political or even religious contexts. Again, it seems important that we do not get fixated on rigid typologies. Pitching “material” against “symbolic” value will not take us far. Even if we do not wish to dismiss theories that affirm the existence of objective value completely (on grounds, for example, of the labor that goes into the making of an object or the relative rarity of a material – not an altogether unreasonable assumption), we need to be aware of all the other aspects that then contribute to the valuation of objects in circulation by a variety of subjective observers. In general, it is when an object changes hands that different ideas about their value form a web tight enough to bring those objective and subjective values into a meaningful, if tension-ridden dialogue. The negotiation is bound up with the display of the object, which in turn is what allows the latter to fully function as a cross-cultural

⁵⁶ Cf. Johannes Fabian, “You Meet and You Talk: Anthropological Reflections on Encounters and Discourses,” in *The Fuzzy Logic of Encounter: New Perspectives on Cultural Contact*, ed. Sünne Jüterzenka and Gesa Mackenthun (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2009), 23–34.

⁵⁷ David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). Also see John K. Papadopoulos and Gary Urton, *The Construction of Value in the Ancient World* (Los Angeles: The Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2012).

signifier.⁵⁸ And that is, of course, the moment that historians interested in diplomatic gifts will find to be most abundantly documented, by both written accounts and the objects themselves.

In fact, we can consider gifts – like most other objects – to have their own biographies as proposed by Arjun Appadurai in *The Social Life of Things*.⁵⁹ The biographies of gifts are not just lists of the hands through which they went. Daniela Frigo has insisted quite rightly on the fact that “diplomacy” as such did not exist in the early modern period and that diplomatic activities are better seen as a “role” or an “office” practiced by a key actor, the “ambassador,” than anything else.⁶⁰ By extension, we might argue that diplomatic gifts sometimes served as ambassadors in their own right, fulfilling a function – the “gift function” – rather than just figuring as a rigid category of object. True, gifts cannot usually talk, move on their own two feet, or perform theatrical gestures (though the occasional gifted parrot and mobile automaton may be mentioned here to complicate the picture). But their limitations are also a virtue. They can remain silent, endure humiliations in a quiet corner of a palace hall, only to reemerge later in full splendor, once the air is cleared of discord. They can stand as reminders of key moments in the life of a dynasty or a state when ambassadors have long vanished. They may be de- and recontextualized and end their lives in a museum vitrine, but if we listen to them carefully, their diplomatic past is a powerful reminder of how the world we live in results, in significant part, from endless, thoroughly ritualized negotiations (sometimes improvised) involving cross-cultural dialogues about beauty and value.

It is thus an important subfield of historical research that is currently emerging around diplomatic gifts, and we are in the fortunate position to present our findings at this precise moment. Some recent studies indicate that gift-giving may be the one aspect of early modern diplomacy that is particularly likely to contribute to a breakdown of barriers between

⁵⁸ Cf. Anthony Cutler, “Significant Gifts: Patterns of Exchange in Late Antique, Byzantine, and Early Islamic Diplomacy,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 79–101.

⁵⁹ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63. Also see the excellent review of this book in James Ferguson, “Cultural Exchange: New Developments in the Anthropology of Commodities,” *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 4 (1988): 488–513.

⁶⁰ Daniela Frigo, “Prudence and Experience: Ambassadors and Political Culture in Early Modern Italy,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 16.

European and global history. It is also a field that has seen some promising attempts at establishing a research agenda. Cynthia Viallé's meticulous work on diplomacy and Dutch gift giving in Asia, for instance, drafts a catalogue of key points that historians will find themselves addressing almost inevitably when engaging with European-Asian diplomacy. It points out the importance of gift giving for Dutch diplomacy from Arabia to Japan, the existence of correlations between gift value and the political status of the Company's interlocutors, the pecuniary conundrum thus created for an organization that was expected to generate shareholder profit, the curious matter of how gifts were often ordered, with very precise instructions, by those who were to receive them, the extraordinary range of items gifted, the occasional need to "test the market" with new kinds of gifts, the difficult management of expectations especially in settings that were thousands of miles away from European political centers, the complicated negotiation of value at foreign courts, the risk of disappointment, the possibility of shifts in appreciation even in the very short term, the fact that some gifts proved inappropriate and might be refused and the problem of what to do with gifts received (would they remain with the VOC servants or revert to the Company, how might this create conflicts of interest or even contribute to corruption?).⁶¹ This list of topics is likely to grow further in the near future and keep us busy for some time. It already looms large over the chapters in this book and the ongoing research of our contributors.

THE CONTENTS OF THIS VOLUME

The contributors to this volume work in a variety of fields, including global history, area studies, and art history; all are concerned with mapping a series of relationships across time and space that involve more than the ambassadorial exchanges between two nations or empires. All have taken seriously the wider contexts in which diplomatic gifting relationships emerged and developed. The chapters appear here more or less in chronological order, without imposing geographical structures. In the first chapter, Antonia Gatward Cevizli explores the period of intense diplomatic activity between Francesco II Gonzaga, the Marquis of

⁶¹ Viallé, "To Capture Their Favor." See also id., "Zingen voor de Shogun: VOC-Dienaren aan het Japanse Hof," in *Aan de Overkant: Ontmoetingen in Dienst van de VOC en WIC (1600-1800)*, ed. Lodewijk Wagenaar (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2015), 35-54.

Mantua, and the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II of the 1490s. On the surface these relations appear to have been motivated by Francesco's enthusiasm for importing horses. However, such connections saw the exchange of far more than animals: from Francesco, robes made from *pallio* banners, a portrait of the Sultan's brother Prince Cem – possibly by Mantegna – and a portrait of the Marquis himself; and from Bayezid, a turban and a robe of honor according to the custom of *hil'at*. The success of these exchanges depended on the knowledge, the understanding, the diplomatic skill and the technological know-how of individuals crossing borders.

Luca Molà follows the Italian-Ottoman relations into a later period, analyzing the diplomatic gifts that the Republic of Venice sent to the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Based on a tradition going back to the early expansion of the Turks in the Mediterranean and the Balkans, the Venetian shipments of highly prized luxury goods produced by the city's industries went through a progressive acceleration in the second half of the sixteenth century. Silk fabrics soon took the lead as the most appreciated gifts, followed by glass, mirrors, woolen cloth, clocks and a range of other items, frequently mixed together. At the center of this diplomatic exchange was not only the court of the Sultan and his relatives and Vizirs in Constantinople, but also a complex network of high- and medium-ranking officers throughout the various regions of the Empire, to the point that by the end of the century these gifts almost became a disguised form of Venetian tribute. To satisfy the continuous requests for original objects coming from the Ottoman court, from the 1580s onward the government of Venice launched public competitions among skilled craftsmen with the request of inventing procedures that would allow the production of new goods, thus pushing forward the technical boundaries of the Venetian artisans. Molà's paper shows how diplomatic gifts not only cemented political connections, but acted as a driving force for technological innovation.

Innovation could be technological, but it also involved the appropriation and adaptation of new forms and artistic norms. Zoltán Biedermann discusses the Sri Lankan ivories that played a pivotal role in the making of early diplomatic exchanges with Portugal. In 1541, the Sinhalese monarch Bhuvanekabahu VII sent an ivory casket of exceptional quality to John III in Lisbon. This masterpiece, now in Munich, inaugurated a long series of objects dispatched from various Sri Lankan courts to the Portuguese monarch and his wife Catherine of Habsburg. Like many ivories from Africa, these objects integrate motifs taken from European art into an iconography anchored in other traditions. Biedermann asks

what drove the invention of such combinations in the local political context, and how they achieved at distant courts what they intended. This allows us to address how aesthetic, commercial and political values could be read across cultural boundaries and how the imperfections of such readings contributed (or not) to the making of unequal power relations on the global stage.

Barbara Karl's chapter, too, focuses on the diplomatic gift-giving impulses reaching the West, in this case during the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It explores diplomatic and artistic exchanges between the Ottoman Empire and Habsburg Austria, when Ottoman power in Europe was at its apex. Inimical encounters apart, diplomatic contacts between the two powers occurred on various different levels and regularly involved the exchange of very valuable gifts – including not only top-end textiles, weapons and precious stones, but also large amounts of cash understood by the Ottomans to signal the diplomatic inferiority of the Habsburgs. The so-called Long War, begun in 1593 and leading up to the peace of Zsitvatorok signed in 1606, was in part about eliminating discrepancies and demanding a more balanced regime of diplomatic gifting. One particularity in this case regards the way many Ottoman objects survived in Vienna thanks to the collecting activities of the Habsburgs. The long border that the two empires shared combined with a powerful courtly culture of appropriating and inventorying Oriental artifacts to form one of the greatest collections of diplomatic gifts in the world.

Carla Alferes Pinto's chapter explores the gifting and collecting activities of Dom Aleixo de Meneses, the Augustinian archbishop of Goa and governor of the Portuguese Empire in the East around the turn of the seventeenth century. Soon after his arrival in Goa in 1595, Meneses began to send gifts from Asia to Fabio Biondi, the Legate of the Holy See in Lisbon. At the same time, he maintained diplomatic relations and commercial transactions across Asia, contributing to the circulation of a substantial number of high-end objects of art from Persia through India to China. The article focuses on some surviving objects related to the period of Meneses, exploring the complex geography of gifting, the matching of provenance and destination, the expectations involved and the results achieved. The chapter shows how diplomatic gifts contributed to the circulation of forms, techniques, materials and connoisseurship across the continents.

In Adam Clulow's chapter, we see how Dutch East India Company merchants in Japan were prolific gift-givers, handing over annual presents

to the shogun and the most important Tokugawa officials for more than two centuries. The first gifts, presented in the years immediately following the establishment of a Dutch factory in Japan in 1609, were strikingly unimpressive in comparison to other cases explored in this volume. Yet over time the Company's employees became far more skilled and effective gift-givers. This chapter traces the evolution of the Company's gifts from the first, shoddy experiments to a military phase in which cannon and other weapons were presented to the shogun, before examining a shift to prestige objects that took place in the 1630s. It argues that the Company did not rely simply on importing luxury objects from Europe but also developed a highly sophisticated intra-Asian network of prestige items, which underpinned the success of its gift-giving efforts in Japan.

In 1612, the first Dutch ambassador to the Sublime Porte in Constantinople presented numerous diplomatic gifts to Sultan Ahmed I. This gift forms the subject of Claudia Swan's chapter. Over ninety crates of Dutch-made furniture, pewter work, textiles, cheese, butter, and gin were presented along with many other curiosities (*rarityten*) in the context of securing trade capitulations on behalf of the republic in formation. Among the *rarityten* were eight birds of paradise, which the Sultan is said to have regarded with great admiration, and close to 900 pieces of Chinese porcelain. Such exotica caused a stir in the burgeoning market in global commodities at home in Amsterdam, and were presented in the hope of representing Dutch trading power at a critical moment. Swan's chapter situates the exchange of exotica in the context of early seventeenth-century Dutch trade and the development of the commodities market in Amsterdam, and places particular emphasis on the role of awe in the production of new political affiliations by way of gift exchange in precious commodities.

Mary Laven's chapter focuses on an avowedly spiritual mission: the proposed embassy of the Pope to the Emperor of China, conceived by the Jesuits in the 1580s. That mission never took place, but the Jesuits in East Asia drew up a detailed list of (overwhelmingly secular) ambassadorial gifts. One of the most striking aspects of this list is the diverse provenance of the proposed presents: musical instruments from the Low Countries, Venetian glass, Roman marquetry, and a number of pieces modeled on Asian designs but produced in Europe. Laven's chapter underlines the importance of geographical range for many early modern gift-givers. It shows not only the global circulation of objects, materials and designs, but the power that specifically local goods were thought to have on the global stage if they could be combined into an all-encompassing corpus reflecting sheer geographical amplitude.

Giorgio Riello's contribution explores a series of diplomatic exchanges that took place in the 1680s between King Narai of Siam and Louis XIV of France. Several embassies were exchanged between the two kingdoms that brought gifts from Asia to Europe and vice versa, but only the 1685–87 Thai embassy, led by the charismatic Siamese ambassador Kosa Pan, became a major public event. The foreign ambassadors were welcomed by enormous crowds from the port of Brest where they landed in July 1686, to Paris where they were received by the king in September that year, and again in January 1687. Almanacs and the press disseminated the news of such an "exotic" embassy. The gifts received by the French king and those that in turn he sent to Siam with two large embassies allow us to consider this episode in French history as a key cross-cultural encounter. They show how the motivations and expectations that surrounded these embassies lay as much in Siam as they did in France. In an inversion of classic narratives, the chapter shows how the Asian kingdom was well aware of its strategic importance in the commercial and religious ambitions of France. The gifts convey how the understanding of geopolitics and ultimately the power of the Siamese king might have surpassed that of the French Sun King.

In the final chapter, Natasha Eaton looks at gifting in the context of the relationship between the English East India Company and Indian rulers. Two forms of gifts had prominence in Indian culture: jewels and artworks. Jewels, such as the giant Timurid ruby of Uleg Beg, featured in critical diplomatic encounters between Indian, Persian, Ottoman and Chinese rulers, and jewels became innovative and wondrous artworks. European attempts to participate in this high-stake, jewel-laden, mimetic network were, Eaton shows, mostly farcical. Eaton's chapter suggests that the English East India Company wanted and perhaps had to disrupt this regime of value. The chapter then turns to painted likenesses, which were a rare and even suspicious type of gift among Asian rulers. They were materially "cheap" and yet still carried the mimetic charge of the presence of the "giver." The colonial giver by 1778 began to expect Indian rulers to pay for these likenesses and to endure the tedium of sitting for European artists. Eaton's chapter shows how fraught the mediating role of gifts could be amid the political interactions of the end of the early modern era.

Like those gifts that never quite settled as they kept moving through the early modern world, encountering successive new audiences with different tastes and sensibilities, this book refrains from setting anything in stone – anything, that is, other than our wish to ignite new discussions around the diverse, volatile and complex material culture of Eurasia before 1800.