

# NEW ENGLAND Antiques JOURNAL

Vol. XXXI, No. 12 June 2013

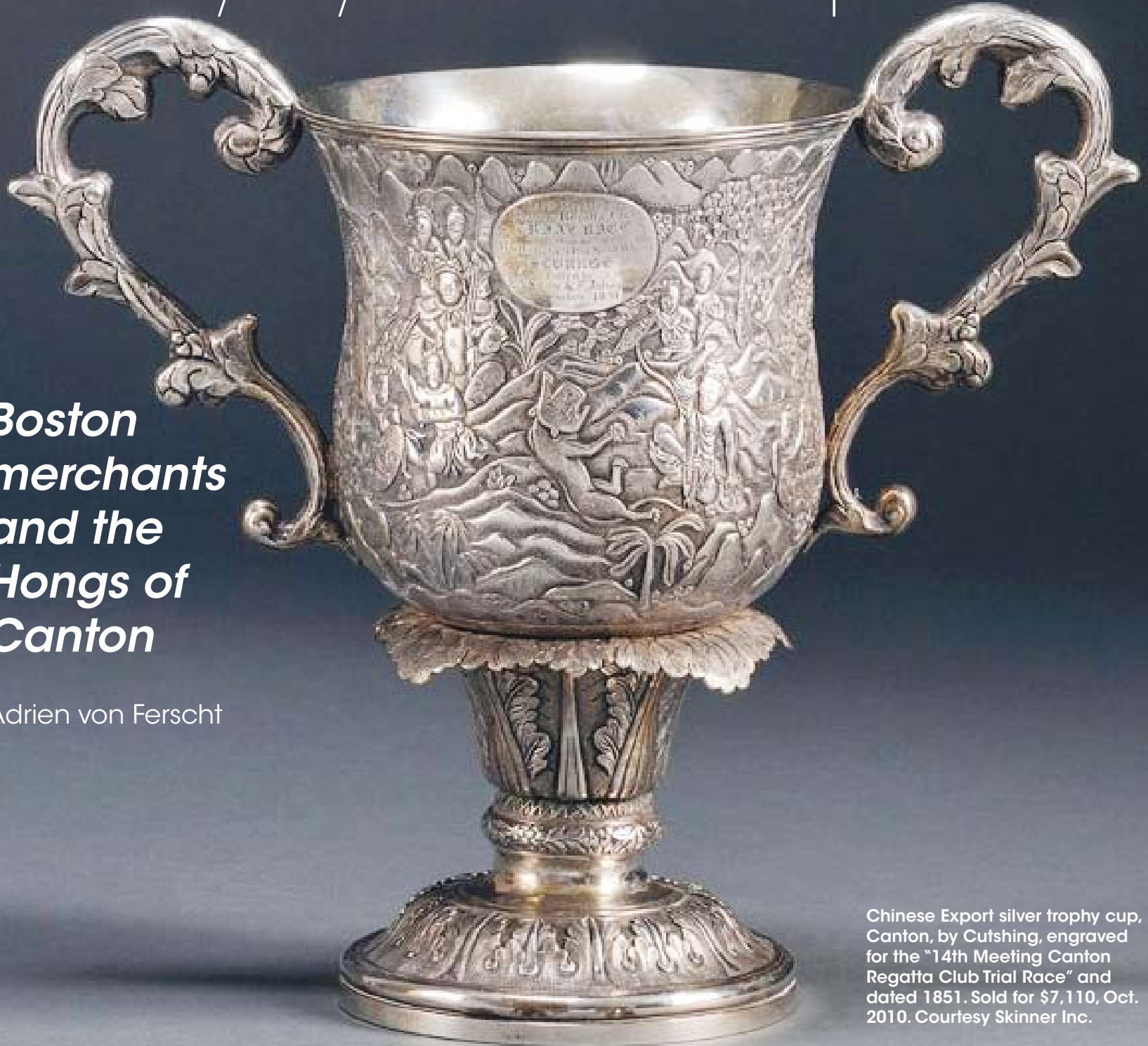
## Lincoln at Home

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Chinese Blue & White

# The Heyday of Chinese Export Silver

## ***Boston merchants and the Hong of Canton***

Adrien von Ferscht



Chinese Export silver trophy cup, Canton, by Cutshing, engraved for the "14th Meeting Canton Regatta Club Trial Race" and dated 1851. Sold for \$7,110, Oct. 2010. Courtesy Skinner Inc.

Chinese Export Silver (1785-1940) is generally overlooked, yet it is a highly significant category of antique silver. Early Chinese Export Silver consisted mostly of faithful copies of comparable quality of British, American and European silver of the Georgian period, with a higher silver content than the originals. Most of the true masterpieces of Chinese Export Silver are to be found in the first

80 years of production, 1785-1865, when relatively few silver manufactories were operating, compared to the ensuing 75 years when the number of silversmiths and their production mushroomed.

Sea captains and China trade merchants in America and England were quick to recognize the high quality of workmanship of Chinese silversmiths and saw that comparable silver items to those made in the

West could be commissioned in Canton at a fraction of the price without compromising the quality. This is how what we now think of as "Chinese Export Silver" came into being (there had been a small, specialist trade with England since the teapot illustrated here was exported to London in about 1679).

Chinese silver manufactories ran on similar lines to their contemporaries in England and

America: They contained a number of benches at which worked silversmiths who were masters in their own right. We have long assumed that Chinese Export Silver makers' marks indicate an actual person of that name, but the name on the mark is most probably fictitious, often an adopted auspicious name, that commonly identified an entire family dynasty of silver artisans forming more of a



production cooperative. In Canton and later in Shanghai, the practice of having the “chopmark” of the actual artisan silversmith in addition to the maker’s mark gives us an additional insight into the main maker’s mark. But some of those chopmark names appear under several main makers’ marks indicating that some silver makers might have been itinerant or freelance.

### The merchants

Most of the China trade merchants came from either Britain or North America; many of the British being Scots and a good number of the Americans being from Boston and Salem in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts captains and merchants had a habit of consolidating their businesses by intermarrying, and many of them established permanent Canton bases within the Thirteen Hongs territory.

John Perkins Cushing of Boston was the result of one such family alliance. He was dispatched to Canton in 1804 at the age of 16

to become a clerk/agent at the family company Perkins & Co. which formally established itself in Canton in 1806 with an initial capital in today’s value of \$750,000 in gold and silver. Cushing was a true entrepreneur, always looking for ways to expand beyond the furs, tea and porcelain that formed the bedrock of Boston’s China trade. During an early nineteenth-century famine in China, Perkins & Co imported rice to China and during the war of 1812, Perkins & Co loaned money to the American merchants based in Canton, whose finances were affected by the war, at a modest 18 percent interest. But the fur trade began to falter and a new commodity was required to re-create a sizable hard cash flow; apart from tea, opium was the answer which rapidly produced unheard of wealth for the Boston and British merchants.

By 1820, John Perkins Cushing had established himself as the most influential “foreigner” in Canton. He formed close working relationship with the most powerful of all the Hong merchants, Wu Binjian, known in the West as “Howqua.” Howqua became one of the wealthiest men in the world, having a worth in excess of 26 million Mexican dollars and being the largest creditor of The East India Company. Cushing lived in the America House in the Thirteen Hong territory, opposite Howqua’s Hong; a most convenient arrangement given that Howqua was the most powerful of all the Hong merchants and Cushing was intent on being the most successful “foreigner.”

The Hong merchants, together with their American and British counterparts, all colluded to optimize “opportunities” in Canton, a collusion that resulted in incredibly convoluted business arrangements. Howqua entered into a partnership with Perkins & Co in order to “supply goods of British manufacture to the amount of nearly £1,000,000 a year through the Americans” - a convenient arrangement that overcame trading restrictions and laws. Howqua became a founding partner of J.M. Forbes & Co. of Boston. Thomas and Robert Forbes were nephews of James and Thomas Handasyd Perkins, Thomas being John Perkins Cushing’s uncle who raised him after John’s mother died of smallpox. Howqua eventually transferred all of his business to



Teapot, c. 1679, marked TA and London hallmarks for 1682. This is the earliest documented example of Chinese silver exported to the West. It is between 94 and 97 percent silver (higher than sterling) and consists of 63 separate elements soldered together. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



The Hongs at Canton showing the factories and the small exercise area. By an unknown English artist, c. 1820.



Teapot, 1790-1810, marked with lotus flower. The style of this fluted teapot closely follows that of Boston and London silversmiths, but this has four more flutes than usual and the handle attachments are clearly Chinese. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



Candlestick, one of a pair, c. 1830, with marks WE/WE/WC and imitation London hallmarks. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



Forbes & Co after his dissatisfaction of dealing with Baring Bros, the London bank.

John Perkins Cushing returned to Boston in 1830, and he did so not only an extremely wealthy man but one who had consolidated investments that would ensure him considerable ongoing revenues from the opium trade. In 1827 he had dissolved Perkins & Co. and consolidated it with Russell & Co. Also partners in Russell & Co. were members of the Forbes family, including Robert Murray Forbes, who owned 70 China trade ships. (The Forbes family house, in Milton, just outside of Boston is now the Captain Forbes House Museum of the China trade.)

Before he dissolved Perkins & Co. into Russell & Co. in 1818, John Perkins Cushing had created a new concern, James P Sturgis & Co., into which he consolidated all the commissioning business of Perkins & Co. This one act effectively removed John Perkins Cushing himself from "direct" involvement in the opium trade while retaining the constant flow of profits.

Convuluted, devious and incestuous are words that might well spring to mind when it comes to early nineteenth-century business in Canton.

### The Cutshing manufactory

Silver had been the bedrock of the Chinese economy for centuries. It was the currency in which all trade with the West was transacted. It was not uncommon for invoices from Perkins & Co to be paid by Howqua directly in Mexico in Mexican silver trade dollars. But silver was more than currency. By 1820, it had become commonplace for merchants to bring American and British silver items to Canton to be faithfully copied. This was another opportunity for Howqua and John Perkins Cushing who established their own silver manufactory specifically to create high quality copies of American and British Georgian silver.

John Perkins Cushing had by now become probably the most notable of foreign merchants in Canton and had for some years been known by the Chinese as Ku-Shing; this eventually inspired the name of the new silver manufactory CUTSHING. Although the Cutshing mark was used in its various guises between 1830 and 1895, the "faithful copying" of silver actually began in earnest around 1820, much of it initially unmarked. Cutshing, as a manufactory, benefited from the large number of ships under the control of Howqua and John Perkins Cushing's business empires. Controlling both



Two-handled mug, 1830-40, marked W for Wongshing and imitation London hallmarks. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.

the manufactory and the ships that brought in silver for copying and carried back silver items either to sell or as especially commissioned items simply meant even more profit optimization. Mercantile capitalism at its most active produced some of the most actively collected antiques of today.

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*Research and this article is part of his ongoing research. He recently published a second edition of his Catalogue of Chinese Export Silver Makers' Marks - the largest written information resource for Chinese Export Silver and the only one to have been written within an academic framework: <http://chinese-export-silver.com/catalogue-of-makers-marks>. His website is [www.chinese-export-silver.com](http://www.chinese-export-silver.com).*

**For more examples of Chinese Export Silver, visit [Online Exclusive](#).**



Hot water kettle, c. 1700, China, gilt silver. The stand 1741, by Edward Feline, London. In 1741 Edward Feline made a stand for this earlier tea or wine pot, converting it to a hot water kettle. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



Coffeepot, 1830-40, marked YS for Yatshing, and imitation London hallmarks. Stylistically, this coffeepot appears to have been made in England in the 1730s, but was actually made in China a century later, possibly to replace a lost or stolen pot. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



Card case, c. 1800, marked LS and Chinese character. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



# Chinese Export Silver by the Preeminent Manufactory, Cutshing.



Covered entrée dish, one of a pair, marked CU and imitation London hallmarks. Engraved "RGS, Jr." for Robert Gould Shaw, Jr. of Boston. Covered entrée dishes were among the most luxurious forms of Chinese export silver. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



Mug, c. 1840, marked CUT. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



Two-handled standing cup, marked CUT and imitation London hallmarks. Inscribed on the foot, "Won by Leatherlungs Tientsin China 1862." The Tientsin Racing Club held spring and autumn horse races. The cup displays the techniques in which Cutshing excelled: Cast, applied, chased and repoussé decoration. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



An extremely rare silver-mounted coconut cup, Cutshing, c. 1830, sold at Christie's, London for \$3,000 in 2001. Courtesy Christie's.



Chinese Export silver dessert spoons, by Cutshing, Canton, 1825-50, marked CU and imitation London hallmarks. Courtesy Spencer Marks, Ltd, www.spencermarks.com.



Cream Jug, c. 1853, marked CUT and imitation London hallmarks. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



An exquisite pair of Cutshing lidded tankards in high Chinese style, c. 1870 - sold at Christie's, New York in 2012 for \$11,250. Courtesy Christie's.



Bouquet holder, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, unmarked. In a box labeled "Cutshing, Gold and Silversmith; New Street No 8 [Canton]" The pin attached to the holder secured the bouquet: The ring was to hold a handkerchief. NEAJ photo, Peabody Essex Museum.



A selection of Cutshing makers marks, most with imitation London hallmarks, used between 1830 and 1895. Cutshing is thought to have used the mark CU conjoined between 1830 and 1840. The mark CUT is ascribed to the Cutshing shop from 1840 to 1865, and the mark CU with the date letter K, which was used 1850-60, perhaps indicates a branch of the family firm.



An outstanding example of Cutshing workmanship: A tea set, c. 1850, in the style of Paul Storr, London, and of comparable quality. Courtesy the author.