

An Allegory of Charity: A Fine Qianlong Period Chinese Export Reverse Painting on Glass for the American Market, circa 1780

Description

Based on a popular print, set in a period gilt frame and likely produced in or for the United States in the late-18th century.

Provenance: Spink and Son Ltd, London.

Entirely original and in the original carved gilt-frame, this fabulous piece depicts a mother with three children in a bucolic landscape, and a house in the distance. The figural composition on the piece is an allegory of charity, represented by a mother caring for her children. This fine piece is a fascinating example of the cross-cultural fusion involved in creating glass paintings in China for the Western market.

Through a recent discovery, the figural composition of the piece can be identified as an allegory of charity, represented by a mother caring for her children. We are fortunate to have located a version of the present composition of *Charity* in the form of a small oval print, which will accompany the Chinese export reverse glass painting (see image below). Particularly fascinating is that the composition of the reverse glass painting is almost an exact mirror image of the print, suggesting that this very print may have served as the original source for the painting.

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This oval print is housed in a gilt-painted period frame (frame: 7.25â?• H x 5.75â?• W; image: 6â?• H x 4.75â?• W), likely made in the United States in the late 18th century. There are countless compositions of this sort that were engraved during the 18th and early 19th centuries, with the initial design likely to have been a collectable print which was then reproduced in a variety of so-called popular prints for a larger market. Ironically, these popular prints, while accessible to most buyers at the time, are now extremely rare survivals and are sought-after by museums worldwide. Due to their relative affordability when they were made, these prints at the time were not treated with much care, and so very few are available for study today.

The discovery of this print source is especially significant, as it links the reverse painting on glass work to both the tradition of Americana folk art and the history of China trade. Together, both pieces with their charming aesthetic, offer us a glimpse into the tastes and values of everyday people beyond the social elite.

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