A diplomat and collector

Malcolm MacDonald's pursuit of beauty during the Cold War and end of Empire

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Malcolm MacDonald was a high status British diplomat during the period of the 1940s-1960s who achieved success through his unconventional, personable approach to international negotiations. He was equally successful as an architect of decolonisation in Asia and Africa. At the same time, MacDonald was a collector in a variety of genres. This collecting activity was not separate from his public career as a diplomat and colonial *administrator but rather central to it. MacDonald's identity as a collector helped* him build relationships with East and South-East Asian leaders. His views on material culture and *enthusiastic patronage of the arts also influenced MacDonald's efforts at cultural decolonisation. This article evaluates the links between MacDonald's colle*cting and his *official international duties, arguing that he should be understood as a 'public collector'.*

MALCOLM John MacDonald (1901-1981) claimed that 'I like Beauty, I love Beauty, I worship Beauty in all its earthly forms'.[1] His pursuit of artistic, personal and cultural beauty provided direction in his position as a politician, colonial administrator and diplomat. The son of Britain's first Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, Malcolm entered parliament in 1929 and rose to become Secretary of State for the Colonies and Dominions during the 1930s. Following the outbreak of the Second World War he served briefly as Minister of Health before being appointed High Commissioner to Canada from 1941 to 1946. MacDonald expected this overseas appointment to be no more than a brief hiatus in his political activities but it transpired to be the start of a new career in international relations.[2]

In 1946, MacDonald moved to Singapore as Governor-General of Britain's colonial possessions in South-East Asia. From 1948 his remit was expanded into the new post of Commissioner-General for South-East Asia. As the king's official representative, MacDonald coordinated all foreign and colonial policy in the region. He continued to pursue the transformation of the British Empire into a more equal Commonwealth through later postings as High Commissioner to India (1955-60), as last Governor of and first High Commissioner to Kenya (1963-65) and as roving Special Representative in East Africa (1965-69).

MacDonald was not only a successful diplomat and champion of decolonization; he was also an active and important collector in a range of artistic genres. His passion for artistic beauty began in Europe until successive diplomatic postings broadened MacDonald's horizons by introducing him to new understandings of beauty from across the globe.

As a collector, MacDonald's activities merit greater attention than they have hitherto received. Although his public career is well narrated in a biography of 1995, this makes only scant reference to his collecting habits.[3] Scholarly scrutiny of MacDonald has been largely confined to diplomatic historians of South-East Asia.[4] As one historian, Karl Hack, notes,

'we might look for MacDonald's significance not so much in individual decisions, as in his approach to Asian leaders'.[5] This personal diplomacy was crucial to his success.

However, MacDonald's official duties were inseparable from his recreations. To truly understand his significance as a diplomat and a collector, both aspects of his identity must be evaluated in tandem. MacDonald's overseas postings introduced him to different cultures which prompted a continually developing conception of beauty. Conversely, his reputation and personality as a collector contributed to his effectiveness as an international negotiator. The label of private collector cannot be applied to MacDonald: he was, rather, a public collector whose activities as a connoisseur contributed directly to diplomacy while promoting post-colonial interest in the arts as the foundation of new national identities.

This article presents an original analysis of MacDonald's life as a diplomat and collector. It applies an interdisciplinary methodology drawing primarily from the field of international history. This not only demonstrates the significance of MacDonald and his collecting to Britain's end of Empire, but more generally highlights the potential for further study of the overlap between private collectors and public diplomacy in the twentieth century. We begin by examining MacDonald's collecting philosophy, both as an accumulator of objects and as a self-proclaimed collector of people. The latter identity in particular indicates the important links between his collecting practices and MacDonald's role in pursuing Cold War foreign policy and decolonization in South-East Asia. Finally, the article concludes by assessing how his passion for Chinese ceramics enabled him to become an informal envoy to communist China during a critical period in China's opening up to the West.

This evaluation utilizes a range of sources. Most significant are MacDonald's private papers, now held at Durham University. These include official diplomatic correspondence in addition to draft manuscripts of his unpublished memoirs, The Pleasures and Pains of Collecting and Constant Surprise. They are supplemented by Foreign and Colonial Office records from the National Archives, MacDonald's many published books, and the collections of Durham University's Oriental Museum.

Over his lifetime, MacDonald accumulated many collections, including European fine art, Iranian ceramics and antiquarian books. But most personal to his life and career were his collections of South-East Asian antiquities and imperial Chinese ceramics, obtained primarily during his period in Singapore. MacDonald assembled a collection of over 400 pieces of imperial Chinese ceramic art spanning from Neolithic times to the nineteenth century. In 1956, he placed this important collection on loan to the recently established Gulbenkian Museum (today the Oriental Museum) at Durham University (henceforth DUOM).

Following his retirement from public life, MacDonald hoped to donate the collection permanently to the museum, but he found himself in an unstable financial position after spending all his disposable income on collecting beautiful things. Contrary to those who invested their money in bonds or shares, MacDonald 'thought it foolish to buy dull bits of paper which would be hidden away in drawers when I could purchase instead beautiful objects to delight the eye in my rooms'.[6]

Needing capital to purchase a new house in England, he sold the collection in 1968-69 for one third of its market value and assisted the museum in raising the necessary funds from numerous benefactors.[7] He envisaged a legacy to inspire others, particularly through assisting in teaching at Durham University. To this end, MacDonald continued to add pieces to the collection following its original loan to the Oriental Museum in 1956, bringing it up to include early twentieth century ceramics.[8] It is this concern with the social impact of collecting, in addition to its political implication for his diplomatic career, that makes MacDonald such a distinctive public (rather than private) late-imperial collector.

The pursuit of beauty

At a superficial level, MacDonald's collecting philosophy was simple: it was driven by the pursuit of beauty. As he later reflected: 'feasting my eyes on radiant beauty in its numerous natural or artistic forms was as vital to my healthy, serene mental and spiritual survival as was feeding my tummy on food and drink for my physical well-being'.[9]

This seeming simple dictum hides a complex philosophy. MacDonald's activities were highly chaotic – both in the range of cultures that attracted his interest and in the vast array of his collections. Not all of these can easily be categorized as recognizable artistic genres. Throughout his life he pursued beauty through fine art, antique furniture, ceramics, indigenous craftwork, and sculpture. But MacDonald's pursuit of beauty also entailed collecting memories through adventures in untamed landscapes in the Canadian Arctic and in the jungles of Borneo. He also developed a fascination for cultural beauty, enraptured by the daily life of indigenous peoples across the globe. Further, as a keen amateur twitcher, MacDonald penned books on bird-watching in Scotland, Canada and India.

Within a narrower definition of collecting as the accumulation of physical objects, MacDonald's collections at the DUOM demonstrate two of the three types of collecting as described by Susan Pearce. Several objects can be interpreted as 'souvenir collecting' or 'samples of events which can be remembered, but not relived'.[10] These include personal gifts presented to MacDonald, exemplified by three silver cigar-holders from Brunei. MacDonald enjoyed the companionship of a circle of around twenty master silversmiths led by the octogenarian Haji Mohammed. These cigar holders (Fig. 1), decorated with butterflies attached to springs which float gracefully in the cigar smoke, although often given as ceremonial gifts, therefore held personal significance for MacDonald as a reminder of his visits to Brunei.[11]

MacDonald also exhibited the pattern of a 'systematic collector', defined by Pearce as not merely the accumulation of samples of a particular genre (or 'fetishistic collecting') but 'the selection of examples, intended to stand for all the others of their kind and to complete a set'.[12] This definition encompasses MacDonald's collecting of imperial Chinese ceramics, envisaged firstly as a private activity but later as a public legacy. He intended to provide a complete ceramic timeline of imperial China to the DUOM. This even meant purchasing ceramics which for him held no personal appeal, including Republic of China (1911-49)

'famille noir' five-colour glazeware. MacDonald found this distinctly unattractive but bought a slightly damaged teapot to complete with minimal expense his ceramic timeline.[13] Personal relationships played a role in both MacDonald's systematic and souvenir collecting, although an obsession with beauty and an academic pursuit of knowledge were also significant driving forces.

A more haphazard (or 'fetishistic') collecting pattern took shape when MacDonald visited Paris at the age of twenty. He spent much of this sojourn in museums, and 'fell in love' for the first time – not with a real woman but with a Dresden porcelain shepherdess. Recalling the incident with some humour, MacDonald wrote that 'I would have liked to buy her, but knew that the Musée Cluny was not the sort of house where such females can be acquired for money'.[14] Although he had collected seashells as a boy, this was the first time MacDonald felt the mature collecting desire. Along with a French friend, he promptly went to a market where together they purchased a similar porcelain pairing of a shepherd and shepherdess; unsurprisingly, MacDonald chose to keep the shepherdess for himself. 'My introduction to the Arts', he remarked, 'was induced in part by my youthful admiration for the fair sex'.[15]

Until the opening of his diplomatic career, MacDonald's early collecting centred on European art-forms. As well as ceramics, he collected English antique furniture and European paintings by masters including Van Gogh and Renoir. He took advantage of the worldwide Great Depression to snap up choice objects at comparatively little cost.[16] His later conversion to Asian arts had one brief precedent when a much younger MacDonald visited Kyoto for a conference in 1929. He took advantage of this trip to tour East Asia, falling under the spell of the architecture and artistic splendour of imperial China. He admitted that 'my intellectual understanding of their aesthetic significance remained extremely superficial, but I was entranced by them as majestic expressions of the mystery of the East'.[17]As a memento, MacDonald purchased five pieces of Chinese ceramics including a pair of Ming dynasty (1368-1644) lion-shaped candleholders from the Yamanaka Brothers in Kyoto. He was enchanted by their store, which was not one shop but a series of themed pavilions arranged through a traditional Japanese garden. During the following sixteen years he purchased very few Asian ceramics, feeling that he lacked the knowledge necessary to be a discriminating collector.[18]

Henceforth, MacDonald approached his pursuit of beauty from the perspective of an amateur scholar. Collecting was about gaining knowledge as much as enjoying ownership.[19] His transition from a westernized approach to a more global appreciation began with his posting to South-East Asia in 1946. Rather than leaping in haphazardly, he embarked cautiously on new collections whilst steadily improving his knowledge.

Even discovering that he had been hoodwinked by forgeries did not overly dishearten MacDonald since each of these experience 'taught me a little better how to be more discriminating in future. Often the best (if most humiliating) way to learn is from one's own mistakes'.[20] As his knowledge increased over time, he became less susceptible to imitations, although he proved not necessarily a savvy businessman. Looking back, he recalled that:

> My reputation as a connoisseur was well-known in the antique shops of a dozen cities, in the workrooms of countless living craftsmen, among itinerant vendors who kept track of my travels from newspaper reports, by rogues trading in the "thieves' market" in Bangkok and . . . oh, all over the region. It was not always flattering to my shrewdness in business deals.

On one memorable occasion, an acquaintance arrived in Singapore from Indonesia where he had tried unsuccessfully to haggle over an antique bell. The dealer had refused to lower his price because he expected to be able to sell it for twice its value next time MacDonald paid him a call.[21]

Whilst seeking to become a true connoisseur, MacDonald was not embarrassed to seek expert advice. In so doing, he benefitted from personal friendships and his diplomatic status. As Commissioner-General, MacDonald was the highest ranking British representative in South-East Asia. He spent a great deal of time visiting regional statesmen and royalty, including the royal family of Laos. Luang Prabang, the Laotian capital, was one of MacDonald's favourite cities. Visiting its ancient sites felt 'like journeys not only through hundreds of miles in space but also hundreds of years in time'. On his regular visits he enjoyed learning about Buddhism from the Crown Prince. This deepened MacDonald's understanding of one of the most widespread religions in Asia and helped him develop an appreciation of Buddhist art based on intellectual understanding of Buddhist practices.[22] On other occasions, he even appealed to the King of Laos (who was a great authority on certain antiquities): MacDonald bought a Burmese Karen rain drum from an antique shop in Luang Prabang and had its authenticity confirmed by the King.[23]

Consequently, when MacDonald was appointed High Commissioner to India in 1955, he was at first baffled by its artistic styles. Over time, as he gained understanding, he came to appreciate Hindu art, but at first he sought out Buddhist items as more familiar to him from the teachings of the Crown Prince of Laos. Indeed, his favourite acquisition from India was not even produced in India itself: it was the stucco head of a Bodhisattva from the ancient kingdom of Gandhara (present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan).[24]

Personal friendships were therefore central to MacDonald's collecting. A gift from a friend began his transition from a very European aesthetic to embracing the Chinese conception of artistic beauty. The friend in question was the pre-eminent Chinese businessman and community leader in Singapore, Dato S. Q. Wong. 'S.Q.' was dismayed that MacDonald's collection of Chinese ceramics was dominated by export wares. These were lesser-quality pieces designed for trade with South-East Asia and were easily purchased in Singapore. Many of those owned by MacDonald were rather gaudy creations from the Ming (1368-1644) or Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. Highly colourful and ornate, these were most similar to the eighteenth-century European porcelains with which he was most familiar. To begin his conversion towards imperial Chinese ceramics, 'S.Q.' gave his friend a 'scrap of bait': a chipped and imperfectly glazed Junware bowl of the Song dynasty (960-1279).[25]

Gradually MacDonald came to prefer monochrome Song and Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) ceramics characterized by their technical perfection. As MacDonald's knowledge matured, he came to the realization that 'sentimental prettiness is a far lesser virtue than simple beauty'.[26]

Subsequently he seized every opportunity to expand his collection of imperial Chinese ceramics. Hong Kong proved the most fertile ground for acquiring such pieces, especially his favourite wares from the Song dynasty. Friendships with respected dealers proved invaluable, especially with the doyen of the Hong Kong antiques fraternity, T. Y. King. Prior to 1949, King had lived in Shanghai, where MacDonald first made his acquaintance. Due to the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War, King hastened to Hong Kong, fearing that the new regime would be less tolerant of his business than the capitalist British colony. MacDonald visited King's new shop while he was still unpacking his stock. Eager to raise hard cash, King sold MacDonald some choice ceramics for less than their acknowledged value.[27]

This should not be interpreted as taking advantage of political turmoil. Rather, MacDonald seized the opportunity not just to add to his collection but to help an old acquaintance resurrect his business. On other occasions, he would readily pay over the odds for items that he particularly desired. He preferred to purchase his most valuable pieces from trusted friends such as King or the Hong Kong dealer Eddie Chow who helped MacDonald relocate his collection to Durham in 1956.[28] It was probably from either Chow or King that MacDonald purchased his favourite piece of ceramic for £750 – a Song dynasty Dingware bowl with a delicately incised pattern of Mandarin ducks (Fig. 2).[29]

Moreover, MacDonald saw himself not only as a collector of objects but also as a collector of people.[30] His ability to make friends of all social standings and from any cultural or ethnic background made MacDonald an extremely successful diplomat. He was fascinated with everyday life in indigenous societies. This was particularly apparent in Canada and Borneo, where he enjoyed spending time amongst local peoples and learning their customs.

To summarize, MacDonald's varied collecting habits can be understood with reference to three main impetuses. Foremost was his love of beauty, which he understood in many different personal, cultural and artistic forms. His contact with other cultures converted him from a European appreciation of artistic beauty to a more nuanced reflection inspired by Chinese and South-East Asian aesthetic ideals. Secondly, he approached collecting with a scholarly desire to improve his knowledge of different art-forms. Finally, collecting was not a solitary activity of acquisition but inherently linked with human interactions. These three impetuses were inseparable. MacDonald's friendships enabled him to gain knowledge and therefore develop a changing understanding of beauty.

A collector of people

'One of the things one collects is people', MacDonald wrote. 'I have made a fine collection through the last sixty years, of very many different types: Frenchmen, Americans, Indians,

Chinese, Head-hunters, Eskimos, African tribesmen'.[31] During his overseas career in Canada, Asia and Africa, MacDonald befriended people from many cultures and social classes, friendships that led to the acquisition of some of the outstanding pieces in his collections but which also made MacDonald an effective and respected diplomat.

As Commissioner-General for South-East Asia from 1948 to 1955, he worked towards a so-called 'Grand Design' whereby Malaya, Singapore and the British Borneo territories (Brunei, Sarawak and North Borneo) would attain independence as part of a federal greater Malaysia. This dream proved elusive, but continued to form the basis of British decolonization policy until it was partially fulfilled with the creation of a more restricted Malaysia in 1963.

MacDonald's later career continued to entail decolonization and Commonwealth briefs. As High Commissioner to India from 1955 to 1960, he helped repair Commonwealth relations following Britain's 'neo-imperialist' attack on Egypt during the 1956 Suez Crisis.[32] Subsequently, he served as the last Governor of Kenya, helping to guide the peaceful transition to independence in a potentially explosive atmosphere following the Mao Mao violence of the 1950s. Then as Special Representative to East Africa, he became a roving ambassador, concerned principally with the Rhodesian problem and its potential to disrupt Commonwealth unity.

In all these appointments, MacDonald was successful largely because of his unique personality. He was an unconventional diplomat who disdained formality and archaic protocol. Instead he preferred to deal on a more personal basis with both international statesmen and colonial subjects; he even refused a knighthood as he felt uncomfortable with formal precedence. Instead, he was 'a natural mixer . . . He made a point of declining the titles which went with high office and took the formalities of rank with a pinch of salt. His easy manner enabled him to get the best out of people.'[33] The press seized on his habitual attire of a jacketless bush-shirt, characterizing him as 'the shirt-sleeve diplomat'.[34] He had a habit of breaking up boring meetings by showcasing his ability to stand and walk upon his hands, a talent that failed to impress the youngest daughter of his friend King (later Prince) Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia: the young princess dismissed MacDonald's acrobatics with the words 'I've got a monkey that can do that'.[35]

When MacDonald was due to leave the position of Commissioner-General in 1955, the Foreign and Colonial Offices were at first reluctant to assign a replacement: the Foreign Office felt that the value of the position rested solely on MacDonald's unique personality and relationships.[36] Nevertheless, MacDonald's tenure had already been extended six times, and there were worries that he was beginning to be too 'Asia-minded' to be the best interpreter of British policies. There were also concerns that eight years was too long to leave MacDonald in the tropical climate and that his considerable energies had already been sapped – a persistent fear in British colonial administration.[37] However, it was agreed to appoint a new Commissioner-General, although with a reduced status, no longer bearing the royal crown on his official car.[38]

Meanwhile, despite concerns over the de-energizing effect of the tropics, MacDonald was moved to India. It was a critical period in Anglo-Indian relations due to Commonwealth disputes over British policy in the Middle East and the Soviet Union's overtures to India as part of Khrushchev's new 'Third World' programme.[39] Consequently, his continued deployment in Asia implied that MacDonald enjoyed considerable respect from his superiors because of his uniquely personal mode of conduct.

But success was not merely a matter of personality. MacDonald's private life as a collector also played a significant role in shaping his approach to diplomatic and cultural relations. As a collector of people he actively sought out interactions with both powerful world leaders and with indigenous peoples on the edges of westernized 'civilization'.

This fascination with indigenous culture had first become apparent during MacDonald's wartime work in Canada. He undertook three excursions to the Canadian Arctic in which he observed the traditions of the native peoples. These expeditions were not, however, primarily anthropological: MacDonald was on official war business. As well as inspecting the construction of new airfields for the northern defence of Canada, his duty was to assess popular feeling amongst the indigenous populations for the Commonwealth war effort. He was pleased to report that 'these sturdy men are eager to play their part in the worldwide struggle of Liberty against Tyranny'. MacDonald relayed to the British Cabinet an anecdote of how one 'Indian' (First Nation) community he visited was spontaneously involved in raising funds for war charities.[40] Across northern Canada, the National War Mobilization Act was proving troublesome as it divided the First Nations from the Arctic peoples: although the former were compelled to register for military service, the Arctic Inuits were exempted. In the event, over 200 aboriginal peoples died in Canadian service during the Second World War.[41]

These wartime expeditions introduced MacDonald to the Inuit peoples; in later life, after experiencing the pleasures of indigenous society in Borneo, he regretted not having spent longer learning about Inuit culture and craftsmanship. Only on later visits did he discover the beauty of their soapstone sculptures. By this point Inuit industry had been affected by tourism, which created pressures for the production of reservation art that was a poor, 'pot-boiler' imitation of traditional artistry, geared towards a European aesthetic. MacDonald despaired of the 'decadence' of European society, which exploited indigenous art for economic benefit at enormous cultural cost.[42]

One aspect of Arctic craftsmanship, however, did impress MacDonald with its cultural resilience: this was the skill of the Inuit peoples in making clothing out of caribou skins. Due to the necessities of survival in the inhospitable Arctic climate, this aspect of Inuit culture proved more resilient in the face of outside influences. Indeed, MacDonald pleasingly noted that 'instead of white men changing Eskimo [sic] dress, Eskimos have changed white men's dress in the Arctic. Settlers there in winter more or less adopt native styles of clothing.'[43] On one of his later visits, MacDonald purchased two pairs of moccasins, although the craftsmanship of even these was closer to that of reservation art than truly traditional pieces.[44] The issue of traditional costume continued to absorb MacDonald during his

adventures in South-East Asia: he deprecated the increasing abandonment of traditional dress in favour of western garments as 'a world-wide aesthetic tragedy'.[45]

Most of his collecting in Canada, however, was in the field of paintings by modern Canadian artists.[46] It was not until his appointment to Singapore that he developed more global aesthetic tastes. 'In the sphere of art as well as politics vast new worlds were opened to me', MacDonald wrote; 'I began to turn my attention in leisure hours to Asian cultural interests – and before long I was running amok among the . . . art treasures of the Far East'.[47]

While serving as Commissioner-General, MacDonald's favourite retreat from official duties was to the jungle interior of Sarawak on the island of Borneo. There he encountered peoples such as the Ibans, Kayans and Kenyahs whose traditions often challenged MacDonald's conception of beauty. He was particularly struck by the practice of Kayan women of stretching the lobes of their ears by about six inches through wearing heavy brass rings. To MacDonald's eyes, 'this seemed a frightful mutilation, but in the eyes of Kayan men it is a supremely lovely touch'.[48] He was more persuaded by the cultural beauty of traditional head-hunter's dances as performed by the Kayan men (Fig. 3), but through contact with these cultures he became more open to new aesthetic ideals.[49] This occurred in parallel with his conversion to a more Chinese aesthetic appreciation under the tutelage of S. Q. Wong.

Every detail of daily life in Borneo absorbed MacDonald's interest, represented in his collections by ordinary items such as clothing, baskets and wooden carvings.[50] Nevertheless, he remained worried that these traditions – a form of cultural beauty – were steadily disappearing. In 1956 he wrote Borneo People to record the lives and traditions of these peoples. He subsequently collaborated with his friend, the celebrated photographer Wong Ka Foo (also known as Ken Foo Wong), to collate a pictorial record of life in the Borneo interior. To accompany Wong's photographic testament, MacDonald wrote an unambiguous warning that the British colonial authorities 'would be guilty of wrong-doing if we destroyed the congenial tranquillity of tribal communities thereby giving them "progressive" ideas to the point of making them dissatisfied with their own way of life and anxious to copy slavishly the European and his habits.'[51]

But MacDonald's activities in Borneo were not confined to collecting people: a more literal understanding of the collector as an accumulator of objects also helped MacDonald befriend the peoples of the interior. This was important to British colonial policy because of the fraught political situation in Sarawak. Prior to 1946, Sarawak had been ruled by the Brooke family (the 'White Rajahs') for a century. In 1946 formal control passed to the Colonial Office (the so-called 'cession'), with major repercussions. Several city-dwelling Malays remained zealously loyal to the Brookes, leading to an extremist assassinating the Governor in 1949. In the midst of this political crossroads, it was essential to ensure the loyalty of the indigenous populations, some of whom had been won over by the anti-cession movement.[52] MacDonald proved supremely effective at re-establishing British authority and garnering support for future peaceful decolonization.

One of the most important Borneo personalities was Temenggong Koh (1870-1956). The Paramount Chief of the Ibans, Koh was a renowned head-hunter. Usually suppressed by the British authorities, head-hunting was tolerated during the Second World. Koh reportedly took over a hundred heads in the course of his lifetime. Immensely loyal to the British administration of the day, Koh had rallied native support for the anti-Japanese war effort, once even taking to the skies in a spotter plane to point out targets for Allied bombardment.[53] In 1946, Koh supported the anti-cession movement due to personal loyalty to the Brooke family, but MacDonald's diplomacy helped convince Koh and other Iban leaders to transfer their allegiance to the Colonial Office. In part this was due to the status of the post of Commissioner-General making MacDonald a suitable alternative to the Brooke 'White Rajahs', but his success was aided by his own unique personal qualities.[54]

On MacDonald's first visit to the Iban people, they constructed an almost life-size bamboo replica of Marble Arch, complete with severed Japanese heads, with which to greet him. In return, MacDonald took Temenggong Koh the gift of an export ware Ming dynasty vase. Koh was a fellow collector whose long-house was decorated with Chinese ceramic vases along the walls and decapitated skulls amongst the rafters.[55] Through their shared interests as discriminating collectors and MacDonald's passionate enthusiasm for Iban culture, the two became close friends. MacDonald would visit the Ibans dressed in a bush shirt and a kilt in his clan tartan, 'to show them that they were not the only wild men in the world . . . [giving] us a sense of equality'.[56]

The friendship between MacDonald and Koh (Fig. 4) developed to such an extent that Koh adopted MacDonald as his son and bequeathed the Scottish diplomat his head-hunting sword which is now held in the DUOM.[57] This was no empty gesture, and MacDonald truly regarded Koh as a second father, writing that 'one of my proud boasts is that I have had two fathers, one of whom was a Prime Minister of Britain and the other a Paramount Chief in Borneo'.[58]

A sense of the fellowship of collecting played a similar role in cementing MacDonald's friendship with the Kayan people. The chieftain of the Kayans was a wealthy businesswoman, Lallang, who built her fortune through selling edible birds' nests to Chinese traders for use in the ubiquitous soup. Lallang once showed MacDonald two bead necklaces which were ancient family heirlooms. She did not know their vintage, but as a budding connoisseur, MacDonald was able to tell Lallang that some of the beads were made in Song dynasty China. These were valuable possessions that no member of her family had ever considered parting with, for fear of inciting misfortune. Yet Lallang eventually gave one necklace to MacDonald, demonstrating their close rapport.[59]

The closeness of MacDonald's relations with the indigenous peoples of Borneo benefited from both his scholarly enthusiasm for Asian cultures and his artistic understanding as a collector. Discovering how baskets were woven, taking interest in clothing traditions and watching graceful dancing were all part of MacDonald's pursuit of beauty.[60] His collecting activities made him the ideal person to steer British colonial policy towards independence.

Likewise, his recreations as a collector of people and works of art helped MacDonald coordinate foreign policy towards neighbouring nations.

British foreign policy in the late 1940s and 1950s was largely driven by Cold War concerns, interacting with and giving new impetus to traditional ideas about imperial security in areas of British strategic interest such as the Middle East or South-East Asia.[61] MacDonald feared that communism would spread from China and North Vietnam through Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, to threaten the British possessions of Malaya and Singapore. He warned the Foreign Office that 'if Indochina is lost, then Siam and Burma will probably go the same way shortly afterwards. That will bring the power of international Communism to the border of Malaya.'[62] This view corresponds with the American understanding of domino theory, later popularized by President Eisenhower.[63]

For MacDonald, the solution lay in encouraging greater cooperation between the departing colonial powers and newly independent states. This was partly economic, coordinating development aid through schemes such as the Commonwealth Colombo Plan, but predominantly fixated on the Cold War imperative: 'the object of regional cooperation should be the building of a common front against Russia'.[64] However, MacDonald's views differed from those of the United States: his ambition was to encourage newly independent Asian nations such as Laos and Cambodia to pursue a non-communist but essentially neutral course. Such a solution would provide a continuing buffer against communist expansion, and to that end MacDonald worked with the defence community and secret intelligence services to provide much-needed assistance to these new nations.[65] In contrast, US policy was to create a more proactively anti-communist South-East Asian bloc that was firmly part of the western alliance.

These different approaches to the Cold War culminated when MacDonald visited Washington for talks with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in October 1954. Dulles was notoriously Anglophobic, so MacDonald held out little hope for agreement. At their meeting at the airport, Dulles asked MacDonald an unexpected question: 'Do you know what my Bible is?' Knowing Dulles to be a devout Christian, the bewildered MacDonald guessed 'the Bible?' He was wrong. 'It's a book,' Dulles explained, 'called The Birds of Brewery Creek written by an author named Malcolm MacDonald'.[66] Dulles was a fellow bird-watcher who deemed MacDonald's 1947 book to be most instructive. They soon became genial friends, especially when it emerged that Dulles also collected Qing dynasty ceramics. MacDonald returned to Singapore having made a new friend but having failed to reconcile Anglo-American policies. Nonetheless, his personal interaction with Dulles, strongly influenced by their shared recreations, made MacDonald a more effective mouthpiece for the British position.[67]

He befriended many South-East Asian statesmen. By far his closest acquaintance was with King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, who abdicated in 1955 to become Prime Minister as Prince Sihanouk. Their friendship was not an empty diplomatic association but warm and genuine, proven by their continued visits and correspondence after MacDonald's retirement.

Their first meeting had taken place in 1948, when MacDonald was pleased to discover that the youthful king – then only twenty-six – was a fellow collector of many artistic genres. Visiting Sihanouk's private palace felt 'more dreamlike than real . . . The place might have been a miniature museum representing various cultures arranged by the hand of a discriminating connoisseur.' Throughout Sihanouk's apartments were Chinese rugs, Vietnamese lacquer, Japanese paintings, French furniture and ancient Cambodian sculptures.[68] In other words, Sihanouk's apartments were not so different from MacDonald's own palace at Bukit Serene in Johore (Malaya). MacDonald had turned this former Sultan's palace into a fitting space to house his growing collections of Asian arts, even decorating its veranda with antique bronze cannons purchased from Brunei.[69]

On official occasions, MacDonald and Sihanouk socialized over formal banquets and performances by the Cambodian Royal Corps de Ballet, which impressed MacDonald with the beauty of its music, costume design and dancing. But more importantly they developed their friendship outside of working hours through cultural pursuits. They spent time watching films produced by Sihanouk, dancing to his royal rag-time band, and once held a water-skiing competition in front of the Cambodian government. On many occasions Sihanouk took MacDonald on expeditions to visit the ancient ruins of the Khmer civilization, which inspired him to write the book Angkor.[70] Once again, MacDonald's nuanced sympathy for Asian cultures as well as the mutual interests of a fellow collector, enabled him to maintain a close friendship with Sihanouk.

Conversely, their friendship allowed MacDonald to add unique objects to his collections. Sihanouk gave him two significant diplomatic gifts. First was a xylophone from the royal orchestra (Fig. 5). The two men often sat together watching performances on such instruments, MacDonald recalling 'the constant cooing and wailing, tinkling and rumbling, whistling and sometimes even shrieking ejaculations of the orchestra'.[71] Now at the DUOM, the royal xylophone is a rare musical survivor of the tragedy of Khmer Rouge cultural destruction. Similarly precious, Sihanouk's second gift was a five-colour (bencharong ware) porcelain teapot (Fig. 6): first presented by the Thai royal house to the Cambodian royal family in the nineteenth century, it became a diplomatic gift for the second time when transferred to MacDonald's collection.[72] While the teapot was primarily a diplomatic gift, implicit of MacDonald's status as Commissioner-General, the xylophone should be seen more as a personal present – a souvenir of his friendship with Sihanouk and the musical memories they shared.

MacDonald's friendship with Sihanouk achieved its greatest diplomatic significance during the Geneva conference on the neutrality of Laos in 1961 and1962. This international summit proved successful (if only temporarily) in ending the civil war in Laos and in securing Laotian neutrality until 1975, under the leadership of pro-British Prince Souvanna Phouma.[73] Having believed himself to be on the verge of retirement, MacDonald was called upon to act as co-chairman along with a Soviet diplomat. His selection for this position of international importance spoke eloquently of the Foreign Office's respect for MacDonald's unique insight into South-East Asia.

Personal friendships with Sihanouk and Chinese political leaders enabled MacDonald to play a less partisan role than more rigid Cold Warriors and ultimately to work towards neutrality. His task was not an easy one, but through persistence and working closely with Sihanouk and Souvanna Phouma, MacDonald pushed through an agreement.[74] His individual role was perhaps more vital than any other delegate. As the Foreign Secretary wrote, 'whenever we got stuck (and we got stuck very often) everybody, by common consent, sent for Malcolm to try and unravel the knot. And he very often did.'[75]

MacDonald's achievements in South-East Asia demonstrate how his collecting activities helped him achieve international repute as a successful diplomat. His sympathy for indigenous cultures similarly helped him to be an effective architect of decolonization. Equally, his collecting activities influenced the course of decolonization through MacDonald's belief in the importance of the arts and material culture to national identity and social transformation.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the creation of the University of Malaya Art Museum. MacDonald was heavily involved in the foundation of the university, serving as its first Chancellor. When leaving Singapore in 1955, he decided to donate his collection of Chinese export ceramics to establish a museum of Asian arts and culture. 'Throughout the years I had received so much wonderful friendship from the peoples of all those lands that this was a small return for their infinite kindness', he explained. MacDonald used his diplomatic influence to persuade Sihanouk and the government of India to present bequests to the new museum. MacDonald's gallery became the kernel of two separate present-day institutions: the National University of Singapore Museum and the University of Malaya Asian Art Museum in Kuala Lumpur. His vision was to leave behind an artistic legacy to inspire a collective, distinctly Asian national identity ready to supplant British colonial rule.[76]

During his career as Governor and High Commissioner of Kenya, MacDonald showed similar faith in the social and political importance of art. At his arrival he had been dismayed to find that Government House – shortly to become the presidential residence – was decorated almost entirely with European artwork: 'the place might have been the dwelling of some plutocrat in London's Mayfair, with no connection whatever with Kenya'. MacDonald set about 'Africanizing' it, covering the walls with examples of local craftsmanship. While in East Africa he proactively championed modern creative industries, buying up leatherwork, wood and stone sculpture for his own collections. In addition, he championed penal reform that saw Kenya's prisons transformed from merely punitive institutions to places of rehabilitation. MacDonald introduced a programme of teaching artistic crafts to prisoners, and would send them his own furniture when it needed repair.[77]

It is apparent, therefore, that MacDonald viewed material culture as central to all his private and public activities. His identity as a collector entailed not merely acquiring antiquities, but rather formed a central part of his personality as an amateur scholar, author and diplomat. He was a connoisseur and patron of artistic production, maintaining a belief that artistic heritage was a fundamental part of national identity. Art and beauty, including intangible cultural heritage such as the dances of Borneo head-hunters and the Cambodian

Royal Corps de Ballet, enabled MacDonald to create friendships which in turn facilitated his pursuit of British foreign policy during the period of decolonization and the Cold War.

Through the Bamboo Curtain

In addition to his diplomatic and post-colonial achievements in South-East Asia, MacDonald played a significant role as an informal envoy to the communist People's Republic of China during the Cold War. This transpired as a consequence of his reputation as a collector of Chinese ceramics, enabling him to befriend important communist leaders who respected his admiration for China's artistic history.

Although MacDonald proactively encouraged resistance to the spread of communism in South-East Asia, he did not adopt an overtly partisan approach to communist China. He publicly condemned the communist insurgency in Malaya which erupted in 1948, linking the Malayan insurgents to the leaders of international communism in Moscow. Nevertheless, he carefully distinguished between communist revolutionaries in South-East Asia and the communist government in China. Britain formally recognized the new government of Chairman Mao Zedong in January 1950, and MacDonald was instructed to emphasize that this was an entirely separate issue from the British resistance to communism in South-East Asia.[78]

As explained to the House of Commons by Winston Churchill, 'the reason for having diplomatic relations is not to confer a compliment, but to secure a convenience . . . One may even say that when relations are most difficult that is the time when diplomacy is most needed.'[79] Britain's desire for diplomatic relations did not imply approval of China's internal policies, but rather acceptance of their existence. British economic and strategic interests required peaceful relations. However, China refused to exchange ambassadors with Britain until 1972, after the British withdrew their consulate from Taiwan (whence the former Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek had fled in 1949). The first Chargé d'Affaires appointed to Beijing, Sir John Hutchinson, was mostly ignored by the Chinese government. With the Korean War of 1950-53, relations deteriorated further. Most diplomatic contact with the Chinese was conducted through third parties such as the Indian embassy in Beijing or informal go-betweens.[80]

Against this background of Chinese rebuffs, MacDonald played a useful role in creating dialogues. By the mid-1950s, he had acquired a reputation throughout Asia as a connoisseur of Chinese ceramic art. He had also visited China in 1929 and 1948 and been distinctly unimpressed with the social programmes of the Nationalist government. The rural poverty which MacDonald encountered appalled him. In 1929, the British Minister to Beijing, Sir Miles Lampson, tactlessly procured a prostitute for MacDonald. Having no desire to avail himself of her services, instead MacDonald talked to the girl. He was shocked to discover that she was only in her middle teens and had been sold by her parents to their landlord, who in turn sold her into the service of a pimp. The Nationalist administration was evidently doing little to bring about much needed social reforms. Therefore, unlike the

American 'China bloc' of extremely anti-communist Republican Congressmen (who applied significant pressure to the Truman administration, which itself was closer to MacDonald's sincere disenchantment with Nationalist China), MacDonald entertained no illusions of the viability of a government headed by Chiang Kai-shek. He was willing to judge the performance of the communists based on merit.[81]

First contact between MacDonald and the communist government occurred in 1955. Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier and foreign minister, was travelling to the non-aligned conference in Indonesia when his aircraft developed engine trouble over Singapore. When the aircraft landed for repairs, MacDonald seized this opportunity to meet the pre-eminent Chinese statesman. They conversed genially at Singapore airport, beginning a surprising friendship which gave MacDonald privileged access to China.[82] Ironically, despite his strong opposition to communism in Malaya and Singapore, MacDonald developed higher regard for Zhou Enlai than any other international diplomat, regarding the Chinese premier as 'a statesman of unsurpassed Wisdom'.[83] Their friendship developed further during MacDonald's appointment as British representative to India. He also became acquainted with Zhou's vice-premier and successor as foreign minister, Marshal Chen Yi.

Three primary causes can be adduced for the lasting friendship between MacDonald and Chen Yi which transcended Cold War politics. Firstly, on the official level, Chen Yi served as Chinese representative during the Geneva conference of 1961-2. They developed a mutual respect for one another's diplomatic skill and integrity. But their friendship really blossomed during recreations. Both men shared a fondness for ancient Chinese works of art and they enjoyed discussing MacDonald's collections of ceramics while dining at Chinese banquets in Geneva. Once they discovered that they shared the same birthday (17 August 1901), their lifelong friendship was certain. 'Although we were conceived by different parents and had originally opened our eyes on opposite sides of the Earth, we were twins', felt MacDonald. 'From that moment we regarded each other as brothers'.[84] Just as MacDonald's adoption by Temenggong Koh was no empty, political act, his brotherhood with Chen Yi was a genuine and reciprocated display of affection.

This unique bond earned MacDonald the esteem of the Foreign Office. In 1962 he was offered the position of Britain's first ambassador to communist China. However, due to Britain's refusal to recognize the Nationalist enclave of Taiwan as an integral part of mainland China, negotiations fell through and no ambassadors were exchanged for a further decade.[85] Irrespective of diplomatic differences with Britain (or perhaps because of them), Chen Yi and Zhou Enlai invited MacDonald to visit China as their personal guest in October 1962. From Hong Kong, MacDonald 'slipped through the bamboo curtain into new China'.[86]

While the rest of the world was on tenterhooks due to the Cuban missile crisis, MacDonald was building bridges between Britain and communist China. His reputation as a collector played no small part. His 'twin' Chen Yi joked that MacDonald must be a very big capitalist to own such a 'hoard'. MacDonald laughingly retorted that it was communism which had made his collection possible by causing dealers such as T. Y. King to relocate to Hong Kong. Chen Yi himself had commanded the Red Army attack on Shanghai in 1949

which sent King into flight. As a token of their friendship, MacDonald gave Chen Yi a cheque with which to purchase a particularly fine Song dynasty bowl for the National Museum in Beijing. This made him perhaps the only western collector to donate art directly to communist China at the height of the Cold War.[87]

His visit of 1962 left MacDonald favourably impressed by the social and cultural policies of the communist regime. This was before the Cultural Revolution, and he was pleased to see restoration work on historic landmarks. This was not entirely apolitical, as MacDonald astutely observed during his next visit in 1971, when he deduced that China was investing in preserving its cultural heritage for propaganda as well as conservationist reasons. Museums and monuments enabled the regime to showcase the brilliant craftsmanship of the ancient Chinese peasants whilst deploring the selfish tyranny of their masters.[88]

MacDonald was equally impressed with the speed at which the deplorable situation of rural poverty he had witnessed in 1948 appeared to be changing. In 1962 he travelled 7,000 miles, talking with peasant farmers, train conductors, and the occupants of a retirement home. He recalled that 'looking round the company in the Home I thought that, but for Chairman Mao, quite a number of its inmates would probably have been rotting in graveyards that afternoon instead of sipping wine, playing mahjong, growing pot-plants, breeding goldfish and pursuing other hobbies in the autumn sunshine'.[89] MacDonald most admired their seemingly genuine adherence to communist ideology and belief in social progress. As the son of Britain's first Labour Prime Minister, MacDonald sympathized with this goal.

Of course, Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi carefully stage-managed the visit to leave MacDonald with a favourable impression. They arranged for him to tour facilities such as an enamel factory which would appeal to MacDonald's artistic temperament and also showcase China's modern industrial achievements. Nevertheless, in private discussions they were frank about both the successes and catastrophic failures of the recent Great Leap Forward. They even admitted that these agricultural reforms had been mismanaged by the central government due to unrealistic optimism.[90] The frankness of these discussions is surprising given the state of Anglo-Chinese relations at the time. MacDonald remembered Zhou and Chen Yi referring to him as 'the only Imperialist they trusted'.[91]

The early 1970s were a crucial turning point in China's engagement with the West. Shortly before MacDonald's next visit in 1971, communist China was admitted into the United Nations. In 1972, President Richard Nixon visited Beijing following secret negotiations conducted by Henry Kissinger.

MacDonald played a useful role for the British government in having informal policy discussions with Zhou Enlai. In 1971, he had hoped to visit China with a film crew to produce footage of Chinese heritage sites for a documentary he was filming for the BBC about the oriental collections at the British Museum. However, due to the political turmoil in China, the Beijing government refused filming permission. They were nevertheless happy to welcome MacDonald as their guest and to pay for him to return to China whenever he

wished.[92] Thus MacDonald's plan for a film inspired by his collecting instead became an informal diplomatic mission.

This visit enabled secretive, informal discussions between MacDonald and Zhou Enlai during the small hours of the night of 18-19 October. Zhou revealed a fundamental shift in China's attitude towards Britain and the United States. MacDonald explained his role as being 'not as a diplomat but a friend', although this downplays the significance of his involvement.[93] The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) prompted him with a long list of questions ranging from population statistics to Mao's health, from the role of the army in politics to whether Liu Shaoqi (a purged Chinese leader) was still alive. Most importantly, the FCO wanted MacDonald to investigate Chinese foreign policy goals.[94]

He succeeded in answering many of these questions, giving the British government vital insight into Chinese strategic thinking. Zhou spoke candidly about China's deepening schism with the Soviet Union and informed MacDonald of the secret negotiations then under way with Nixon and Kissinger. Zhou did not expect these to lead anywhere, and indeed China did not exchange ambassadors with the United States until 1979, whereas Britain did so in 1972 – one year after MacDonald's visit.

Their exchange of views directly helped to facilitate this major landmark by intervening in the official negotiations which had reached an impasse over British representation in Taiwan. MacDonald followed the FCO's instructions, hinting that Britain would withdraw their consulate from Taiwan if Beijing reached agreement soon. In return, he received Zhou's assurance that China had no desire to regain control of Hong Kong sooner than the end of the British lease in 1997.[95] Therefore, by establishing a rapport with Chen Yi and Zhou Enlai, MacDonald's reputation as a collector of Chinese ceramics enabled him to play a significant role in improving Anglo-Chinese relations. According to Britain's Chargé d'Affaires in Beijing, John Denson, 'the line Mr MacDonald took was most helpful. Let us hope it will do the trick'.[96] Ultimately the exchange of 1972 implies that it did.

During 1975, MacDonald became an official envoy invited to lead a delegation of British art gallery and museum experts. This cultural exchange arose from his responsibilities as president of the Great Britain-China Centre: an FCO-sponsored think-tank for constructive engagement with contemporary China. MacDonald had already befriended key Chinese cultural and heritage leaders including the director of the Palace Museum (previously known as the Forbidden City). The Chinese seemed impressed that he wholeheartedly supported their policy of preventing the export of antiquities (MacDonald seemingly oblivious to the hypocrisy) and in 1971 presented him with a valuable catalogue of the Palace Museum porcelain collections. The FCO was less impressed, with Denson noting his embarrassment given Britain's problematic record on acquiring cultural treasures from foreign countries.[97]

These later trips of 1975 and 1979 gave MacDonald an opportunity to go behind-the-scenes and see many newly unearthed objects not yet on public display. His delegation was also shown contemporary art facilities, including the mass production of ceramic pandas for the tourist market in Wuxi. Renewing their acquaintance from 1971, he was presented with

the gift of a Song dynasty ceramic bowl by the director of the Palace Museum.[98] MacDonald's selection to head both these official missions is testament not only to his reputation as a collector and Sinologist but also to the success of his previous visits as an informal envoy.

Conclusion: a public collector

MacDonald led an adventurous life as both a diplomat and collector. Unlike many other Western collectors of Asian and African art, he is not easily to be labelled a private collector; his collecting activities were, rather, inseparable from his public responsibilities as a high-status representative of the British government. Being a collector made him a more effective diplomat.

MacDonald's collecting philosophy was shaped around his lifelong pursuit of beauty. This encompassing definition is not merely restricted to traditional artistic genres: MacDonald was fascinated by the cultural beauty of everyday life in different societies across the world. He was equally enthralled by personal beauty, be it physical or spiritual. He saw himself not just as a collector of objects but a collector of people, and by collecting many friends gained unparalleled opportunities to acquire unique objects. He approached collecting from the perspective of an amateur scholar, delighting in improving his knowledge by learning from respected authorities. He was a collector with a strong social conscience. This is shown by his attitude to the endemic looting which beset Singapore in the aftermath of the Second World War. MacDonald made it known that he would return any item to its original owners if a piece was spotted in his collection that had been stolen before falling into the hands of unwitting and reputable dealers.[99]

This interest in humanity was also shown in MacDonald's informal, often eccentric approach to diplomacy. He befriended leading statesmen including Norodom Sihanouk, Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi. In all these cases, MacDonald's reputation as a collector proved an effective ice-breaker. In this regard, MacDonald's private life as a collector played a significant role in his implementation of public diplomacy. His sympathy for the indigenous peoples of Borneo and enthusiastic patronage of contemporary arts in Singapore and Kenya furthermore helped MacDonald implement cultural decolonization and build lasting Commonwealth goodwill.

Although never formally serving in an ambassadorial role outside Commonwealth territories, MacDonald used these personal and public qualities to become an effective envoy to China during the Cold War. While official Anglo-Chinese dialogues were at an historic low, his friendly rapport and reputation as a connoisseur of Chinese ceramics earned MacDonald the respect of Zhou Enlai, and in turn he helped interpret Chinese policy for the British government, promoting greater understanding between the two nations.

Consequently, MacDonald should be understood as a public collector, and one of the most politically significant of that body in the late imperial era. His personal friendships,

collecting activities and representation of British policy all combined in a career that was as successful as it was eclectic. The legacy of MacDonald's pursuit of beauty lies not only in his benefactions to museums in Malaysia, Singapore and Durham, but also the Commonwealth and international relations to which he contributed. An appreciation of the value of art and material culture was central to all these endeavours.

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Fig. 2. Systematic collecting: a Dingware porcelain bowl from China, Northern Song dynasty (eleventh-twelfth century).1969.40. © Durham University Oriental Museum.

Fig. 3. Collecting heritage: an Iban warrior's head-hunting dance. Photographed by MacDonald's friend Ken Foo Wong, around 1950. 1976.179.77. © Durham University Oriental Museum.

Fig. 4. Collecting people: Malcolm MacDonald shaking hands with Temenggong Koh. MAC 124/3/41. © Durham University Libraries and Archives.

Fig. 5. A personal gift: a xylophone from the Cambodian Royal Orchestra given to MacDonald by Sihanouk. DUROM.1976.116. © Durham University Oriental Museum

Fig. 6. A diplomatic gift: a bencharong ware teapot from Sihanouk. DUROM.1979.32. © Durham University Oriental Museum