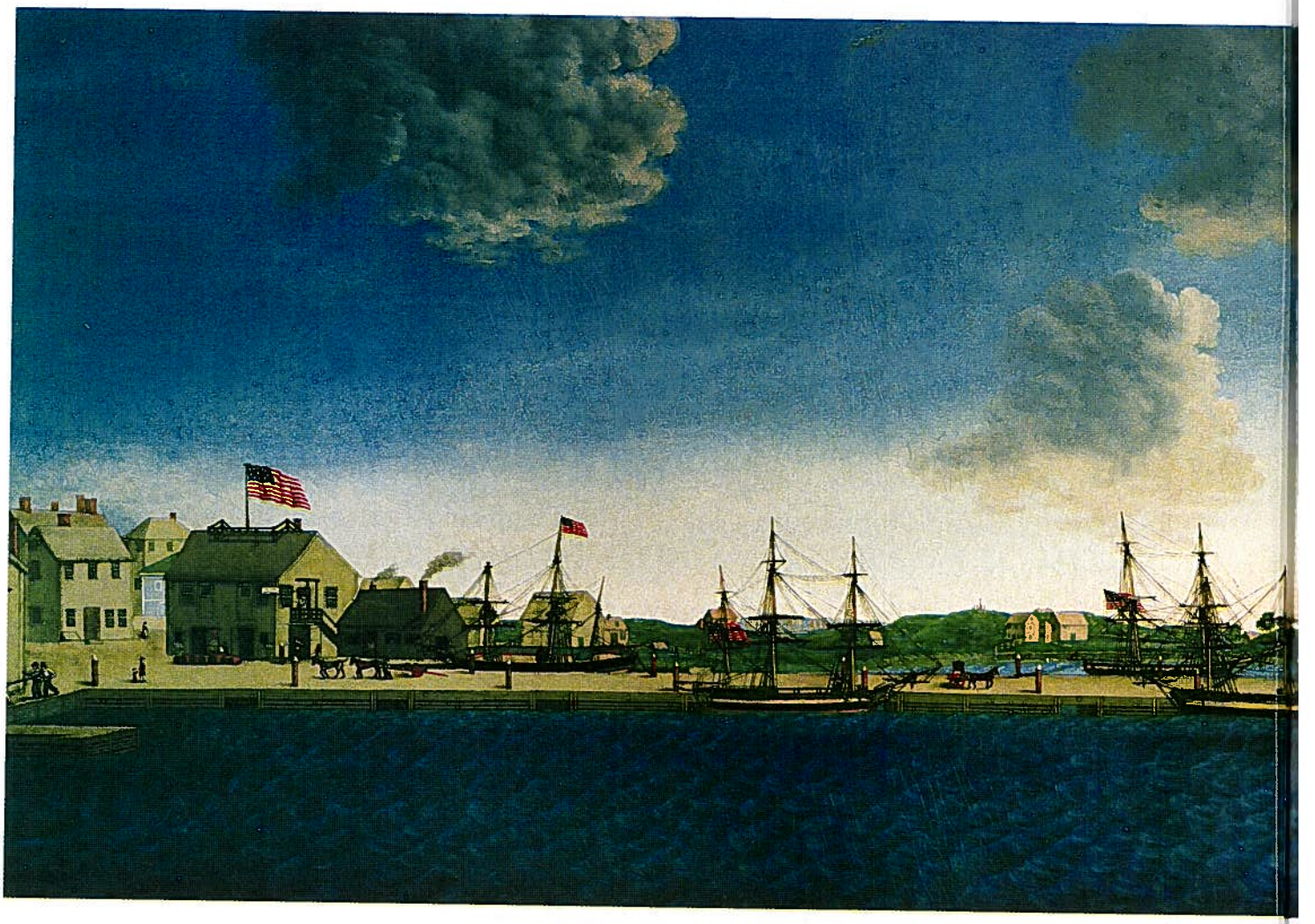
Salem SETS SAIL

After the Revolutionary War, ships from a little Massachusetts seaport brought the new nation wares from China and the mysterious East - BY DOUG STEWART

THE CITY SEAL OF SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS, features neither a black-clad Puritan elder nor an American eagle but, instead, a robe-and-slippered Sumatran dignitary standing next to a row of palm trees. Below him, the city motto: *Divitis Indiae usque ad ultimum sinum* ("To the farthest port of the rich East").

It was to the "rich East," indeed, that Salem owed its brief but dazzling period of commercial glory. In the two decades following the American Revolution, Salem's sailing ships returned from China and East India (as Americans then called India, Indochina and the Malay Archipelago) brimming with tea and spices, silks and porcelain, ivory and gold dust. "Boston was the Spain, Salem the Portugal, in the race for Oriental opulence," wrote historian Samuel Eliot Morison in 1921. Salem's hugely profitable trade with the Orient transformed this hardscrabble New England seaport into a global powerhouse and, by the early 1800s, the wealthiest city per capita in the United States.

Salem's ship captains sailed around Africa's Cape of Good Hope to ports from Calcutta to Canton (c. 1800 in a Western-style Chinese watercolor likely painted for export). The Massachusetts city's seal (above) boasts "To the farthest port of the rich East."



During the height of Salem's golden age of trade with the East Indies, c. 1807, the seaport had a fleet of 200 vessels and more than 30 wharves bustling with shops and warehouses. Crowninshield, or India Wharf (above, in an 1806 painting by George Ropes Jr.), was built in 1802. The city itself (right, in an 1854 lithograph) grew and prospered as a result of the lucrative Oriental trade.

In 1799, Salem's globe-traveling sea captains and traders established the city's East India Marine Society, whose bylaws charged members to bring home "natural and artificial curiosities." The giant clamshells, poisoned arrows, silver hookahs and more than 4,000 other curios they collected formed the nucleus of what is now the Peabody Essex Museum, the oldest continuously operated museum in the country. Today the Peabody Essex owns one million works of art from around the world, along with 24 historic buildings and a library of 1.4 million books and manuscripts. In addition to maritime art, its vast holdings of Chinese, Korean, Japanese and South Asian art span five centuries. It also holds the hemisphere's oldest collections of Native American, African and Oceanic art.

A dramatic $125 million expansion by Boston-based architect Moshe Safdie, completed last June, has allowed the display of objects that had languished in storage since the 19th century. Adjacent to the new building is a spectacular, 200-year-old mansion from rural China, which was dismantled and brought to the United States in pieces in 1997. "A local provincial museum has morphed into a potential national icon," wrote Robert Campbell, the *Boston Globe*'s Pulitzer Prize-winning architectural critic, when the museum reopened a year ago. "Our central focus is on outstanding works of art," says Peabody Essex director Dan Monroe, "but we're trying to highlight their connections to the worlds in which they were made. Where did this object come from? Who made it and why? In most art museums, those connections are not often drawn out very thoroughly."

The complex's historic core is East India Marine Hall, a granite edifice built in 1824 by Salem's ship captains to hold their curiosities. The hall was also the terminus of their society's annual procession, in which the seamen paraded through town wearing ornamental robes and brandishing weapons from their travels. At a post-parade banquet inside, they offered ringing toasts—to "the strong limbs, hard faces, and free-born manners of our Sailors."

The club's first inventory, published in 1821, listed a "waist-

A frequent contributor, DOUG STEWART wrote most recently for these pages about the Doris Duke museum of Islamic art in Hawaii.

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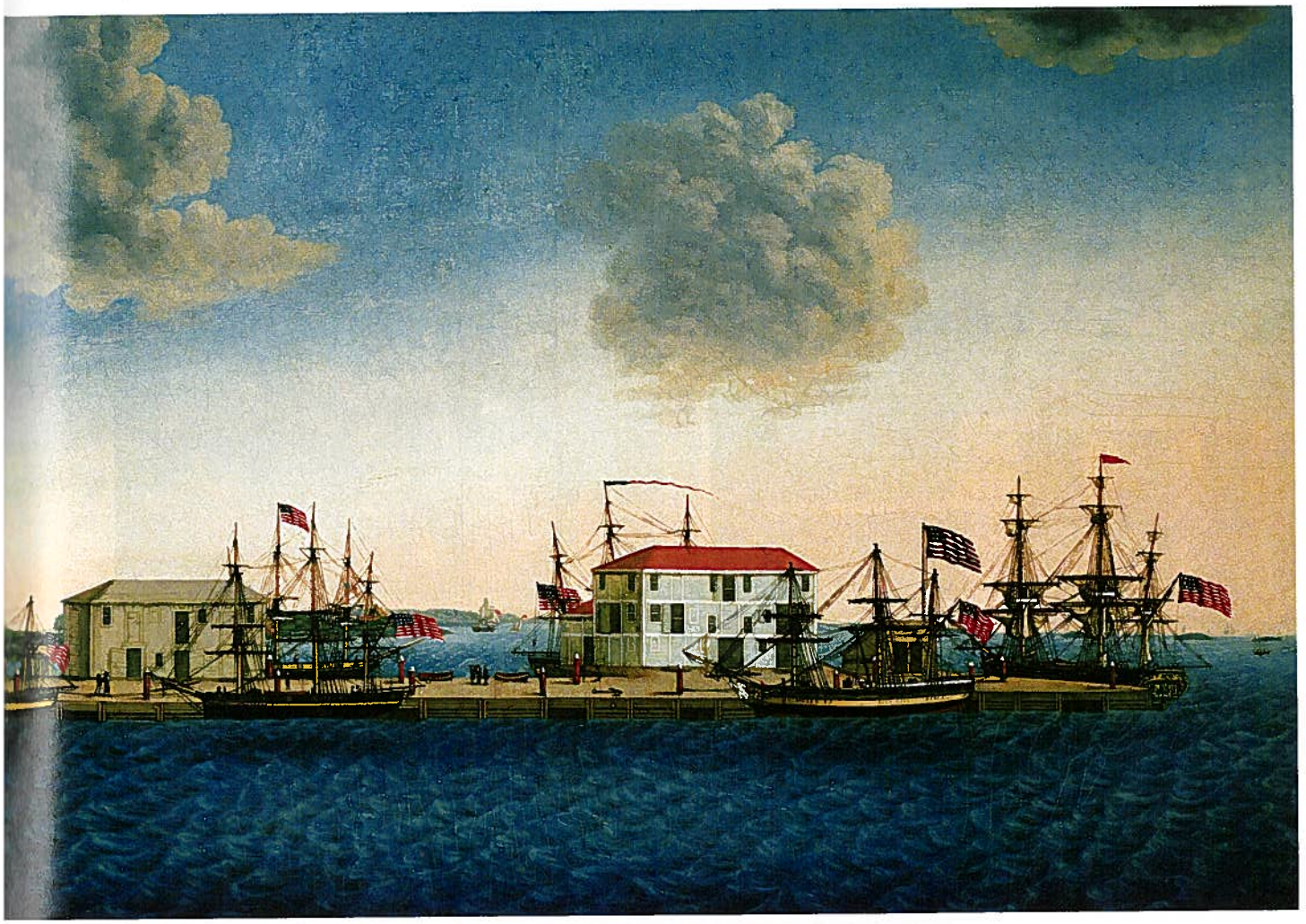

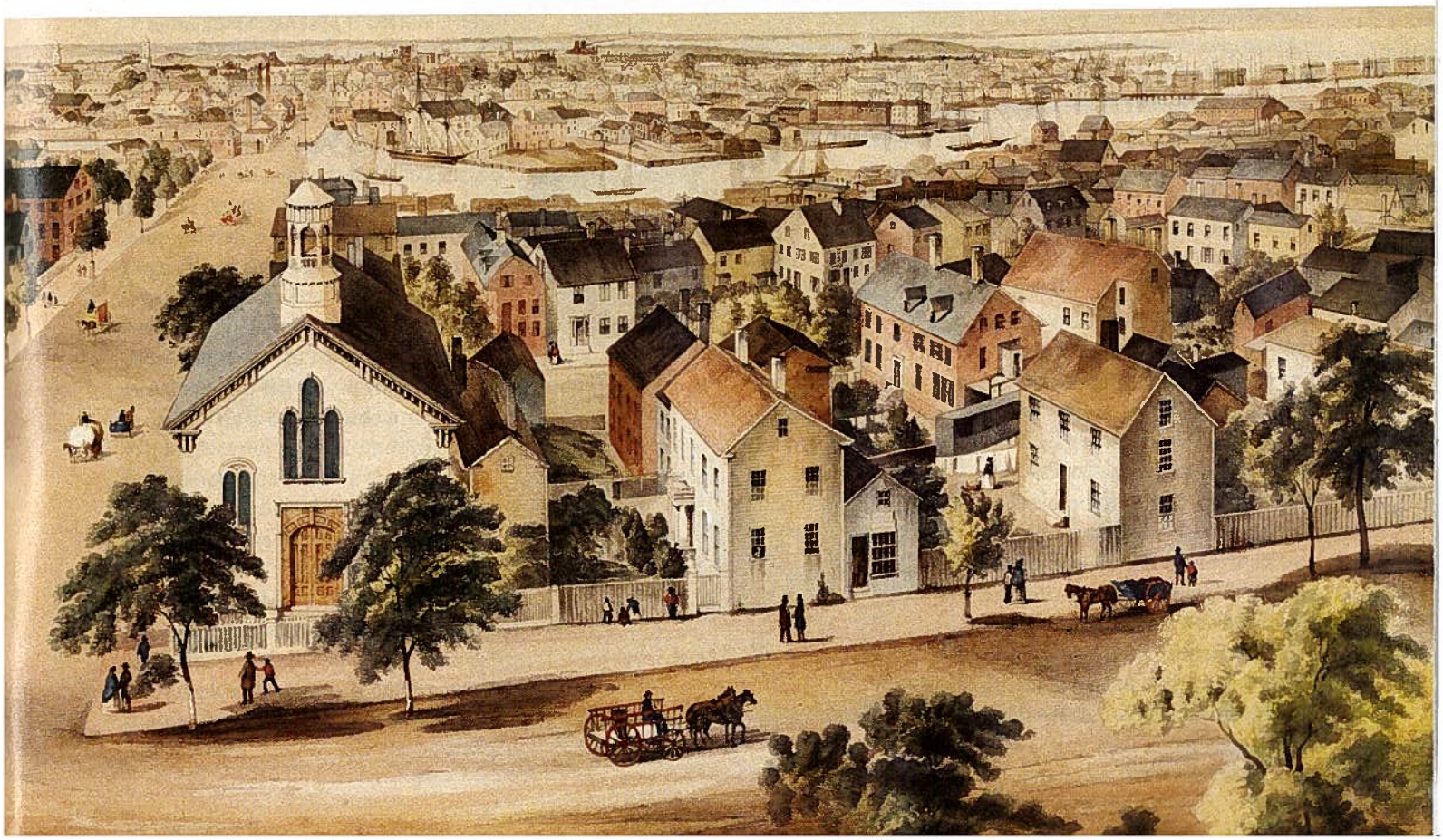

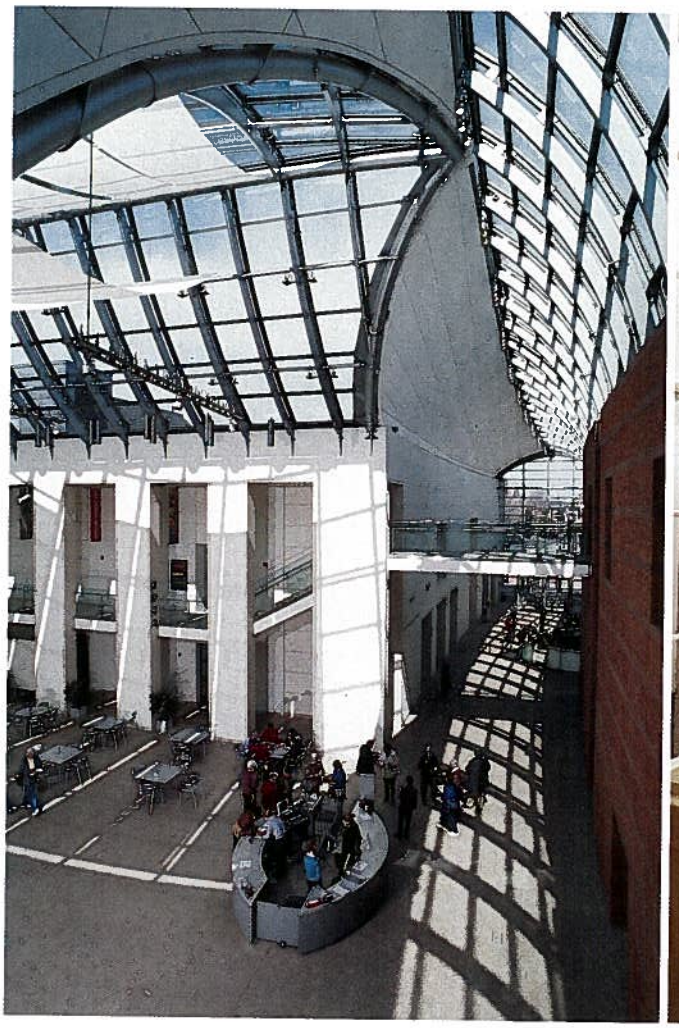

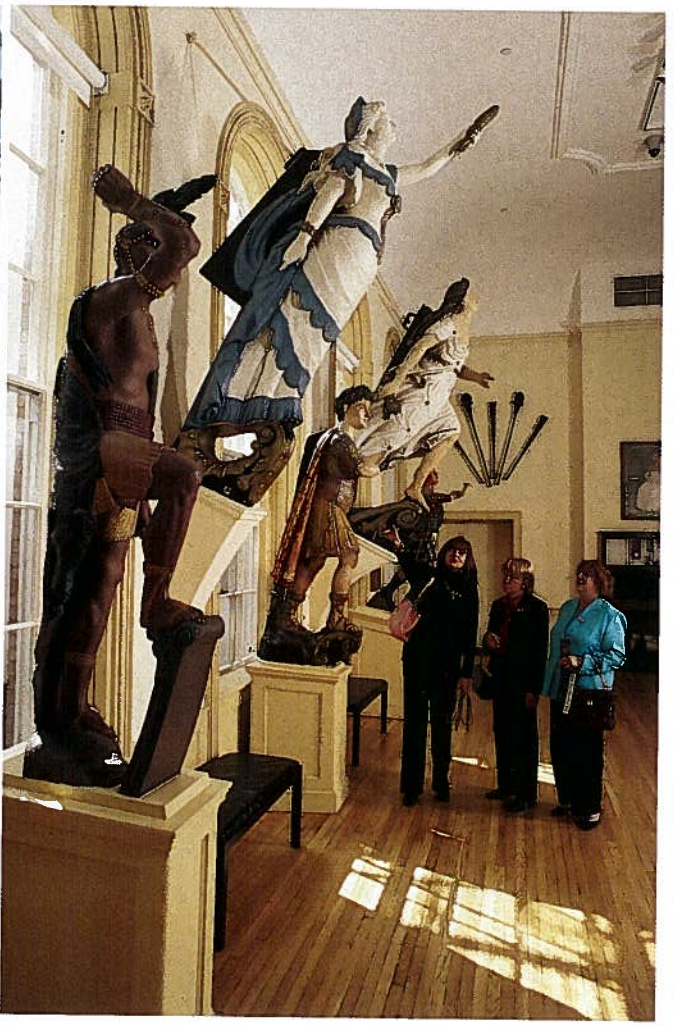

Boston architect Moshe Safdie's addition to the Peabody Essex Museum features a soaring atrium (left) that serves as a kind of "village green" connecting the new galleries to the old East India Marine Hall (right), built in 1824 to house Salem's East India Marine Society's collections. The hall is now home to maritime art and artifacts, including figureheads from 19th-century ships.

coat made of the intestines of the Sea Lion," a "Malay passport, written on a Palm leaf," a "Model of a Dog, made of shells, by Miss Bell, of Nantucket, when only 6 years old," and "Three thousand yards of human hair, braided." Salem native son Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose father was a member of the society, satirized it in an 1841 story ("A Virtuoso's Collection") about a museum that housed Nero's fiddle, Pandora's box and the wolf that ate Little Red Riding Hood. Still on view is a circa 1820 Falkland Islands penguin, the first of its species ever exhibited in North America; unfamiliar with the bird, the taxidermist gave it a stork's elongated neck. (In their fascination with exotica, Salem's merchant sailors were far more open-minded than their forebears, who in 1692 hanged 19 people for witchcraft and crushed a 20th to death.)

"They called the objects they collected 'curiosities,' but not in the way we use the word today," says Daniel Finamore, the museum's curator of maritime art and history. "They considered them to be physical embodiments of knowledge about the world—pieces of information." Of course, what lured these men into uncharted, often hostile waters halfway around the world in 100-foot ships wasn't intellectual curiosity but dreams of riches. "People signing on to voyages to Asia weren't just looking to make a living," says Finamore. "They were looking to make it big." With independence from Great Britain in 1783 came the freedom to trade in parts of the world that Britain had previously reserved for herself. And if a voyage was successful, the crew divvied up the profits, which could be considerable. Even a shopkeeper ashore might participate in the windfall by paying the freight charge on a box of handkerchiefs or a couple of boxes of ladies' shoes, hoping eager buyers in some foreign port would pay dearly for them. All at once, wrote a Salem minister around 1800, "the citizens of this little town were dispatched to every part of the Oriental world, and to every nook of barbarism which had a market and a shore."

When the schooner *Rajah* sailed into Salem Harbor in 1797, her hold was packed with wild Sumatran pepper—used as a meat preservative—valued at about $125,000 (more than $1.5 million today) and seven times the cost of the vessel and her contents when she'd left Salem 18 months earlier. A pep-

STEVE DUNWELL (2)

per-importing craze promptly seized the port. No wonder one Malay trader, taking in the sight of so many Salem ships riding at anchor off the Sumatran coast sometime around 1800, observed, "Salem must be a great country."

By then, Salem's port had become one of the world's busiest, with miles of wharves and the fragrance of tea, pepper and cinnamon perfuming the muddy harbor. Deckhands in turbans milled around the docks, and monkeys and parrots were offered for sale. A live elephant, the first to set foot in America, arrived in Salem in 1797, drawing a crowd of gawkers who paid 25 cents a look. A clever local sea captain, Jacob Crowninshield, had bought the beast in India for $450. He sold it in New York City for $10,000.

But it was China that was the most alluring destination for American traders trying to strike it rich. The Chinese, however, were not the easiest trading partners. "Our Empire produces all that we ourselves need," Emperor Ch'ien Lung had summarily notified England's King George III in 1793. "But since our tea, rhubarb and silk seem to be necessary to the very existence of the barbarous Western peoples, we will, imitating the clemency of Heaven, Who tolerates all sorts of fools on this globe, condescend to allow a limited amount of trading through the port of Canton."

The smart barbarian knew that New England staples like lumber and salt cod would never do. So Salem's traders practiced a seagoing form of Yankee peddling, stocking their ships with homegrown goods—nails, buttons, whale oil, rum, some barrels of beef, maybe a few crates of prunes—and swapping them for iron bars at St. Petersburg or umbrellas at Marseille. Vessels meandered around the coast of Africa or among the Pacific Islands, continually trading for items in greater demand at later ports. "Some of these ships were veritable convenience stores," says Finamore. A ship might turn over her inventory four or five times during a voyage, which could last two years.

Capt. Benjamin Carpenter, whose portrait graces the Peabody Essex's East India Marine Hall, offered painstakingly detailed advice to his fellow merchant-sailors in a logbook, which is also in the museum's collection. In a script as refined as a copperplate engraving, Carpenter recommended carrying tobacco, spoons and coarse blue cloth to the Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, and there trading them for a boatload of coconuts. "This cargo of nuts will purchase at Rangoon a full load of timber," he wrote, "which will net a handsome profit on [India's] Coromandel coast." Be careful "not to assume any haughty airs during your stay [in Rangoon]," he cautioned, or you will be "severely handled."

All this parlaying of goods ideally resulted in a cargo heavily weighted in silver dollars, one commodity the Chinese were happy to accept. For their part, the Yanks who flocked to Canton were after high-value, low-bulk items—"the little elegancies of life," as Salem diarist the Rev. William Bentley called them in 1796. The most desirable of these was tea. "There are few families in our country, however humble their situation," China-trade merchant Robert Waln would write in 1820, "which would not be greatly inconvenienced by a deprivation of this exhilerating beverage." After tea came silk, which the Chinese had produced by secret methods since ancient times. (Punishment for revealing these methods was said to be death by torture.)

A third popular import was Chinese porcelain, or chinaware. For Americans 200 years ago, hand-painted china was a relatively inexpensive household luxury, not the collectible it is now. In fact, sailors used it as ballast, stacking crates of silk and tea on top. "But the teas were consumed, and the silks wore out," says William Sargent, the Peabody Essex's curator of Asian export art. "Porcelain is simply what has survived." When the *Pallas*, a Baltimore ship, arrived home from Canton in 1785, President Washington himself inquired about buying a good set of dishware, "if great bargains are to be had." And bargains there were: Americans in the early 1800s could buy an ordinary 50-piece tea service imported from China for $3 (about $40 today).

China-trade ships also carried home a hybrid form of art made expressly for the Western market: paintings, jewelry, fine silver and furniture, all of which fed the West's fantasy of China as a tranquil and opulent land. In reality, the goods were produced by industrial-style Canton workshops employing nearly a quarter of a million low-paid artisans. Landscapes and seascapes were especially popular. In the 1830s and '40s, ship portraits were in vogue. "We have a huge collection of ship paintings, because anyone who went to China had their ship por-

Brought to Salem in 3,707 pieces in 1997, the rural, 16-bedroom Yin Yu Tang house (below, in the hamlet of Huang Cun in eastern China) was built 200 years ago by a Chinese merchant. Reassembled at the Peabody Essex (bottom), it was opened to visitors last June.

CHENG SHOUQI / PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM; STEVE DUNWELL

trait done," says Sargent. Today, their surfaces sometimes are covered with fine cracks. "It's from the paint drying too fast," he explains. "My theory is that the artists put too much drying medium in the paint because they were always in a rush to get the paintings out the door." Canton's hongs (waterfront trading houses) were another popular motif. Tankards, punch bowls and chests decorated with picturesque views of the hongs made apt souvenirs for sea captains, as the Canton waterfront was the only sliver of Chinese soil on which Westerners were allowed to tread.

A visiting American sailor might drop off a locket miniature of his wife, or perhaps an American-eagle coin. Returning a few weeks later, he could pick up a full-sized oil painting of his spouse or an eagle-themed dinner service. "The people in these parts are very Ingenious, Laborious, and Nimble," Dutch visitor Johan Nieuhof observed in 1669, "and can imitate any thing which they see made before them." An enterprising Philadelphian, Capt. John Sword, arrived in Canton in the 1790s carrying one of Gilbert Stuart's many oil portraits of George Washington. Sword returned home with more than 100 finely painted copies on glass, prompting legal action by the indignant Stuart.

The value of cargo carried by ships returning from China and the East Indies was enriching merchants in cities up and down the East Coast, but especially in Salem. The contents of three square-riggers returning from Canton to Salem in early June 1790, for example, averaged nearly $18,000 (a third of a million dollars today); and the $16.5 million in shipping duties paid at Salem's customhouse in 1807 accounted for nearly 5 percent of all federal revenue collected that year. Salem's entrepreneur in chief was Elias Hasket Derby, the merchant who in 1786 had dispatched the *Grand Turk* to China, Salem's first ship to make the trip. By the time he died in 1799, Derby was likely the new nation's first millionaire.

"The city was completely transformed," says Dean Lahikainen, the Peabody Essex's curator of American decorative art. "There were people here with so much wealth they could buy anything they wanted." While their husbands built mansions, women wrapped themselves in silk shawls, donned carnelian necklaces and sipped tea from dainty Nanking china cups. The museum's two dozen historic homes and properties include the Federalist-style Gardner-Pingree House from 1806, with carvings by Salem's master builder and shipwright, Samuel McIntire.

Salem's merchant fleet was hurt by a shipping embargo in 1807, then devastated by the British in the War of 1812. Much of the trade shifted to larger cities like Boston and New York with deeper harbors, larger ships, and rail lines radiating inland. By 1850, the founders of the city's East India Marine Society had all died, but their little museum survived and grew. In 1984, it absorbed the China Trade Museum in Milton, Massachusetts, and in 1993 it merged with Salem's historic preservation pioneer, the Essex Institute.

The most impressive artifact in the Peabody Essex Museum has only an indirect connection to Salem's China trade.

In 1799, fifty years before Commodore Perry "opened" Japan to U.S. trade, Salem captain James Devereux returned from Nagasaki with a cargo that included Japanese woodblock prints (below: *A Princess Descending From Her Palanquin*, by Kitagawa Utamaro, c. 1805). China-trade merchants prized high-value, low-bulk items such as tea and silk (above: a 19th-century Chinese bridal gown).

JEFFREY DYKES / PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM (2)

Foreigners trading in China were required to anchor their vessels ten miles downstream on the Pearl River at Whampoa Reach (painted on a c. 1850 Chinese fan), then transport their goods to Canton by sampan and junk. "People signing on to voyages to Asia weren't just looking to make a living," says Peabody Essex curator Daniel Finamore. "They were looking to make it big."

The 16-bedroom Yin Yu Tang house, with ornate lattice windows, carved dragons and a courtyard with fish ponds, was built 200 years ago, roughly the time of the museum's founding, and tea leaves from the nearby hillsides of China's prosperous Huizhou region may well have steeped in Salem pots. Nancy Berliner, the museum's curator of Chinese art, happened upon the house in the tiny hamlet of Huang Cun, some 250 miles from Shanghai, on an architectural field trip in 1996. The majestic but timeworn mansion, which had been in the hands of a single merchant family for its entire existence, was uninhabited and slated for demolition.

At Berliner's urging, the museum acquired the house, furnishings and all, and shipped it to Massachusetts in 19 containers. A crew of Chinese carpenters and masons specifically brought over for the task spent a year reassembling the 3,707 pieces—from wooden pegs to decorative columns—with traditional hand tools, completing it last spring.

"The house hasn't changed much since it was built 200 years ago," Berliner says, "but we wanted to do more than show its architecture. You can see the layers of time here." A faded poster of Mao Tse-tung graces a bedroom wall, and graffiti nearby proclaims: "Down with the counter-revolutionaries!"—most likely scrawled during the 1960s Cultural Revolution to forestall accusations of capitalist decadence.

Chairman Mao, in whose name that upheaval occurred, may seem quite removed from the utterly bourgeois impetus behind the China trade, but in a museum about East-West connections, he is as apropos as a blue-and-white teapot. "This was never a museum about international trade," says director Dan Monroe. "Its founders were entrepreneurs engaged in trade, yes, but they were also among the handful of people at the time who had direct personal knowledge of the world's incredibly diverse peoples, art and cultures. They were far more familiar with Canton and Calcutta and the Pacific Islands than other Americans were with what lay west of the Mississippi." At the annual banquet of the East India Marine Society in 1804, Salem's ever-curious sea captains raised their glasses to toast their five-year-old museum, with its ceramic Buddhas and Fijian war clubs: "That every mariner may possess the history of the world."

MARK SEXTON / PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM