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Lee Yun Laundry, 329 Thames Street, Newport, R.I., The Metropolitan News Co., Boston, circa 1900, paper postcard. Reproduced courtesy of Daniel P. Titus



The Chinese Teahouse at Marble House, Hunt & Hunt Architects (American), 1912-1914. Photograph courtesy Andrea Hansen.

Rosecliff Mansion Explores Newport & The China Trade

NEWPORT, R.I. — An exhibition illustrating Newport's deep connections with China from the Eighteenth Century through the Gilded Age opened September 1 at Preservation Society of Newport County's (PSNC) historic Rosecliff, where "The Celestial City: Newport and China" will be on view through February 11.

Newport has always been a crossroads of cultures, particularly during the Gilded Age, which saw massive waves of immigration to the city. In recent years, scholars and institutions have celebrated the diversity of Gilded Age Newport as home to large numbers of working-class residents of Irish, Greek, Portuguese, Jewish and African descent. The King family, who owned Kingscote, and the Wetmores of Chateau-sur-Mer, were both families that financially benefitted from the China trade. But the story of Chinese immigration to Newport, and how Chinese entrepreneurs forged new

lives in the city-by-the-sea in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, was untold until now.

When Dr Nicole Williams began her post as curator of collections at the PSNC in 2022, she was interested in probing whether Alva (Vanderbilt) Belmont's suffragism was connected to her fascination with China, which was evident in her commissioning the Chinese teahouse at Marble House in 1912. Williams began researching connections between China and the US women's suffrage movement and found that in spring 1912, just before Alva commissioned the teahouse, she began building political alliances with Chinese women suffragists in New York City. American suffrage leaders like Alva began reaching out to Chinese women in their communities, energized by the news from across the Pacific that Chinese women had won the right to vote in China. The

news was somewhat overblown: Chinese women were only briefly enfranchised in Guangdong Province. But Alva and colleagues were galvanized.

After a year and a half of research in archives as well as interviews with descendants, found that Newport was home to a vibrant Chinese community during the Gilded Age. The first Chinese-owned business ever recorded in Newport, Wah Sing's Chinese California Laundry, opened on Thames Street in May 1876. Between 1876 and 1915, more than 60 Chinese owned laundries, restaurants and curio shops opened here. Newport's early Chinese residents transformed the city's culture and economy. Their bravery, ingenuity and perseverance are inspiring.

Williams said, "We wanted to expand and diversify the stories told at the mansions and to celebrate Chinese contributions to Newport that have been overlooked for far too long. In a post-pandemic environment that has seen growing anti-Asian hate and discrimination, the topic is even more timely and important."

"The Celestial City: Newport and China" will include more than 100 works in a range of media, from paintings, sculptures, prints and photographs to fashion, ceramics, lacquerwares and lanterns. They come from the collections of the Preservation Society of Newport County, which is hosting the exhibition, and from other institutions, including the Huntington Library and Art Museum; Winterthur Museum; the Museum of Chinese in America; the

Museum of the City of New York, the Library of Congress, the Redwood Library and Athenaeum, the Newport Historical Society, the University of Rochester, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, Cornell University Library and the University of Illinois Library.

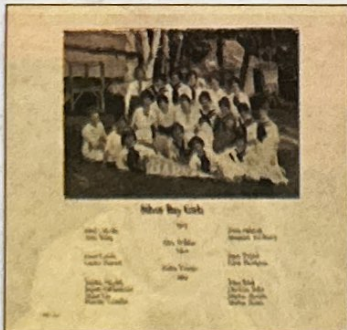
Highlights include treasures of Chinese art collected by Newport merchants and industrialists; photographs and stories from Newport's early Chinese community; and the writings, portraits and family heirlooms of Chinese women suffragists who inspired American women's rights leaders, including Alva Vanderbilt Belmont of Marble House. Contemporary artworks by Yu-Wen Wu and Jennifer Ling Datchuk will illuminate Chinese contributions to Newport as well as hidden connections between the Newport mansions and the Chinese American experience.

"This exhibition will give visitors a new perspective on Newport's past," Preservation Society chief executive officer Trudy Coxe said. "Some aspects of the Newport-China connection are well known, such as the fortunes made in the Nineteenth Century China trade by the families of Chateau-sur-Mer and Kingscote, and of course Alva's Chinese Tea House. But many are not aware of the extent to which many different people of Chinese heritage contributed to life in this city, including immigrant entrepreneurs, suffragists, merchants, makers and sailors."

Rosecliff is at 548 Bellevue Avenue. For information, www.newportmansions.org.



A portrait of Wu Bingjian by Guan Qiaochang (also known as Lamqua) (Chinese, 1801-1860), circa 1840, oil on canvas, giltwood frame. Gift of the Estate of Mrs Gwendolen E. Rives.



Mabel Ping-Hua Lee with Young Women's Christian Association, Barnard College Chapter in Summer 1914, Barnard College Yearbook, Class of 1916. Purchase of the Preservation Society of Newport County.



A plate belonging to Godfrey Malbone (1695-1768), unidentified maker (Chinese), circa 1765, porcelain. Gift of Mrs Philip G. Birckhead.



A cigar box inscribed with a "W" for William Shepard Wetmore, unidentified maker (Chinese), circa 1835, black and gilt lacquered wood, brass. Gift of Mrs Elizabeth Morris Smith.



Detail of standing screen, embroidery by Li Ailian (Chinese, dates unknown), Nineteenth Century, teak, silk. Gift of Mrs Elizabeth M. Smith.



Portrait of Grace Yip Typond, unidentified photographer (New York City), circa 1910, photograph. Collection of Douglas Chu.