Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826–1897) and James Lord Bowes (1834–1899): Collecting Japan in Victorian England

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on two British contemporaries, Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826–97), Keeper of the British Museum from 1866 to 1896, and James Lord Bowes (1834–99), a wool merchant from Liverpool, who founded the first museum dedicated to Japanese art in the UK. While ostensibly from different circles, their early interest in Japanese art makes a comparison possible. Their strongly contrasting collections of Japanese ceramics assembled from the 1860s to the 1890s can be seen as a fascinating case study in Anglo-Japanese interaction during the High Victorian era.

A.W. Franks played a seminal role in establishing what is now an impressive collection of over 30,000 Japanese art objects at the British Museum. Franks’s long tenure of over forty years at the museum
during the nineteenth century, the formative role he played in developing and recording his collections, and his voracious appetite for acquiring ever more examples in a specific field makes him an ideal focus of study. Although he played an important role in forming many of the British Museum’s collections, ranging from prehistoric Britain to Islamic art, Franks has been largely ignored by academics. A former Director of the British Museum sought to place Franks into the pantheon of major donors to the nation and titled his book *The Forgotten Collector* and labelled him the second founder of the British Museum (after Sir Hans Sloane).\(^2\) His services to the Museum were recognized by the award in 1894 of a K.C.B. (Knight Commander of the Bath), an award given to distinguished civil servants.

Recently there has been renewed interest in Franks. Nevertheless, this interest has focused mostly on his work in prehistory and on Europe and has generally neglected the significant impact Franks had on the formation of the East Asian collections of not only the British Museum but also the Victoria and Albert Museum.\(^3\) His collection of Japanese ceramics remains intact at the British Museum and is a lasting testimony to his deep interest in the field.

James Lord Bowes’s reputation has swung distinctly in several directions in the last century. However, a few of his books continue to be reprinted, with his *Marks and Seals* most recently issued in 2003 by Weatherhill.\(^4\) While Bowes’s original collection of Japanese art objects have been largely dispersed, his many publications on various topics of Japanese art and the fact that he created the first Museum dedicated solely to Japanese art in Europe have marked him as an important historical figure in the field of Anglo-Japanese relations.\(^5\)

**AUGUSTUS WOLLASTON FRANKS**

Franks had an unusual childhood as the only son of a well-to-do British family. His father’s first wife died suddenly after only a year of marriage and when the widower quickly married his dead wife’s sister, the family was compelled to move out of Britain for a substantial period of time. Augustus was born 1826 in Geneva, and grew up speaking fluent French, German and Italian. As a youth he lived in Rome (1828–33) and late in 1843 moved for the first time to London. Augustus attended Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge. By the time he graduated, he had already published a book on medieval glazing patterns and was aware of the typological approach just starting to become popular with natural scientists. He chose his second name, Wollaston, himself taken from his godfather’s last name William Hyde Wollaston, a natural scientist and an important influence on young Franks. For his entire professional career Franks was known as Augustus Wollaston Franks or A.W. Franks.

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