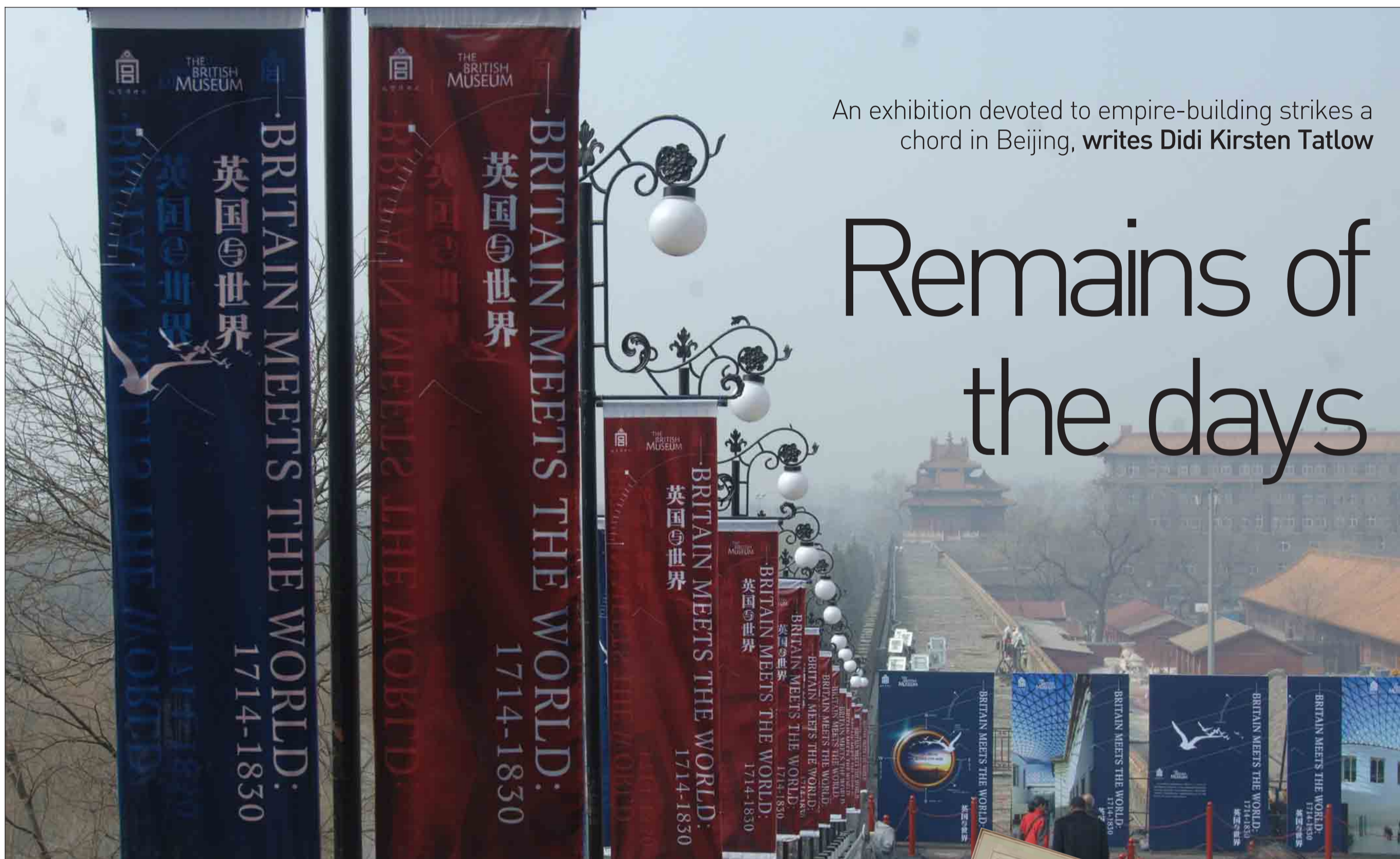


## Arts

Edited by Kevin Kwong kevin.kwong@scmp.com



An exhibition devoted to empire-building strikes a chord in Beijing, writes Didi Kirsten Tatlow

# Remains of the days

**WHAT DO A** 4,000-year-old Akkadian stone seal, a 10th-century Viking silver brooch and the landscape watercolours of British artist J.M.W. Turner have in common? Not a lot – except that they were found, collected or created during the period known as Georgian Britain, the years 1714 to 1830, when four kings called George sat on the throne.

The seal, brooch and watercolours are among 180 objects in Britain Meets the World, 1714-1830, an exhibition at the Forbidden City's Women Gallery until June 10. The first show jointly curated by the

British Museum and Beijing's Palace Museum, it aims to introduce Chinese audiences to the zeitgeist of 18th-century Britain, when the country aggressively pursued overseas empire that eventually covering one-third of the globe.

"The significance of that period is that this is when the global economy was created," says British Museum director Neil MacGregor, who is in China as part of an agreement between two of the world's greatest art institutions.

The British Museum, founded by a doctor in 1753, was built up largely by Brit-

**"The significance is that this is when the global economy was created"**

Neil MacGregor British museum director

ons travelling abroad independently, or as representatives of the growing empire. They bought, borrowed, stole or were often given various objects that fascinated them. Georgian Britain was also a time when the so-called Grand Tour – a long, cultural trip through continental Europe – was popular with the educated classes.

The Beijing exhibition, although relatively small, is an eclectic mixture of riches. From the Middle East, there's a 14th-century BC statue of the goddess Sekhmet – "she who is powerful" – possibly excavated by Henry Salt and his collaborator Giovanni Belzoni, as well as ancient art from Turkey, Iran, India, and seventh-century BC bricks recording the name of Sennacherib, king of Assyria.

Other exhibits include amulets from New Zealand; musical bracelets of ivory from Nigeria; golden daggers from Ghana; a massive, second-century head of Hercules from Rome; and drawings by Michelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci.

Sheila O'Connell, assistant keeper at the museum, says the show is about Britain and the museum. "Instead of looking to religion and the authority of the past, people were looking for themselves and excavating," she says. "And this was the attitude that founded the British Museum."

"Of course, the inspiration of these people was to enrich themselves," O'Connell says. "But many realised that there were a lot of different cultures out there to enrich them. When they reached China, for example, they started studying the Chinese heritage. The British Museum was the first attempt to put the whole world into one building."

With 170 objects on loan from London, the Palace Museum's contribution of 13 pieces is small, but fascinating, focusing on gifts sent by George III via his emissary Lord George Macartney in 1792.

These included clocks, scientific instruments and a 1.6-metre-long golden gun (China and Britain would be at war 50 years later). There's also a jade album engraved with a poem by Emperor Qianlong, George III's counterpart, recounting the events of the British mission.

Why an exhibition about Georgian Britain now? Is it coincidence that this depiction of the cultural spirit of a country on the brink of global expansion comes to the mainland at a time when China is fast becoming a major world power?

"Right now in China, one of the most popular topics is the rise of great powers," says businessman and philanthropist



AS THE YEARS DISAPPEAR ...

Britain Meets the World, 1714-1830, is a variously edifying and exhilarating exhibition. The launch turns out to be amusing as well – although probably not in ways organisers intended.

For a start, hardly any of the officials seem keen to mention the word "colonialism". Instead, Georgian Britain is presented as the first era of economic globalisation – a much more acceptable term, apparently.

Then, proudly nationalistic mainland journalists ask British Museum director Neil MacGregor if Britain plans to return Chinese artworks that are deemed to have been stolen more than 100 years ago in the aftermath of war. The Chinese government has never formally asked for their return, he says.

Then there's the decision to end the Georgian era at 1830 – nine years before the first opium war between Britain and China. The British Museum reportedly wanted to continue to 1850, but the Palace Museum apparently felt that straying into the opium war years would confuse the public – although publicly the word was that it was Britain, not China, that wanted to cut the show short. Which all sounds a bit like the good old days.

Didi Kirsten Tatlow



Among the exhibits on show are a portrait of Emperor Qianlong (left), a punch bowl with a scene of the Guangzhou waterfront (below), and a drawing of a man's head by Leonardo Da Vinci (right)

