



Chairs, Writing Tables, and Chests: Indian Ocean Furniture and the Postures of Commercial Documentation in Coastal Yemen, 1700–40

Nancy Um

On 21 August 1731, the merchants of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, VOC) residing in the Yemeni port of Mocha noted in their daily logbook or *dagregister* that the English merchant Francis Dickinson had just left the port for Bombay. His boat, appropriately called *The Bombay Galley*, departed along with a number of English private ships and a *ghurab* (a square-sterned vessel with two or three masts) that was rented to carry the merchant's furniture.¹ Such an entry is hardly unusual for the *dagregister*. The Dutch residents at Mocha would record the coming and going of ships as major occurrences at the port. Moreover, they would carefully scrutinize the activities of other merchants, such as the English and the French, to speculate about their commercial plans and size up their competition.

This offhandedly-delivered passage does, however, shed light on a particular aspect of European overseas lifestyles in the early modern Indian Ocean. It is notable that Dickinson shipped his household belongings, which probably included tables, chairs and a chest – items that were not available for purchase locally – to India for the winter. Presumably, he could have left these bulky objects at the rented house that the English used as their 'factory', or trading establishment, in Mocha, although Dickinson may have been unsure whether or not he would return to Yemen the next year.² Or, he may have needed these personal effects while in Bombay. At any rate, it is clear that he found these pieces of furniture worth transporting across the Arabian Sea, even leasing the space of a whole extra vessel to do so.

Dickinson's story is not unique. In general, European merchants were unhabituated to the floor-oriented lifestyle that dominated the city of Mocha, as well as many other Asian sites.³ So, they brought furniture from Europe, India, or elsewhere in Asia for use during their residence on the Arabian Peninsula, even if they stayed for only a few months. This article makes the case that these mobile household objects, which were hardly convenient as cargo items, were transported to Yemen in the first half of the eighteenth century not simply to accommodate the perennial Western habit of sitting upright on raised furniture, but more specifically because of their key role in supporting the enterprise of overseas commerce. The goal is to denaturalize the assumption that sitting on chairs was an unquestionable aspect of Western, as opposed to Eastern, lifestyles, by examining the focused goals that chairs, tables, desks, and chests served. By exposing the cultural conditioning and historical circumstances that underpinned even seemingly utilitarian concerns, this study attempts to explain why European merchants felt compelled to transport such objects across long distances, even for short periods of time. Certain material goods,

**Detail from Document Case
with the Falck family crest,
Vizagapatam, 1748–58
(plate 5).**

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such as furniture, served the varied needs of long-distance traders during an era when European presence and impact were increasing around the Indian Ocean and thus serve as crucial sites for inquiry.

During the early decades of the eighteenth century, the European interest in Yemen was oriented mainly around coffee, a relatively new commodity that was then still difficult to obtain outside of the region, even with the establishment of new colonial plantations.⁴ Everything that European merchants carried to Yemen in their boats, from Indian textiles to silver coins to quills, was marshalled in support of their quest to procure these beans, which they exported via the port of Mocha. Yet, because this coastal city did not host a local cabinetmaking industry, unlike other connected Indian Ocean ports such as Surat or Batavia, one had to import raised furniture from overseas or simply do without it.⁵

The Production and Circulation of Furniture for the Indian Ocean

Without question, one needs to look toward the Indian industry of woodwork, which predates the arrival of Europeans in the late fifteenth century, as the source for many of these furnishings.⁶ The Portuguese, however, were responsible for greatly expanding this industry in order to outfit their newly settled Asian outposts, such as Goa, in the sixteenth century. In the following period, furniture workshops in Gujarat in the northwest and on the Coromandel Coast in the southeast served the increasing needs of the English and the Dutch, who also came to settle on India's coasts. The products of these various workshops were extremely diverse, although they share a few unifying qualities. They relied upon the local availability of high quality hardwoods, such as teak and ebony, and also used rattan for caned backs and seats instead of upholstery.⁷ Although their shapes sometimes directly imitated European models or employed ornamental programmes imported from Western sources, local artisans also took advantage of long-used regional techniques of surface carving and embellishment, including mother of pearl, ivory, or wooden inlay and overlay, in addition to decorative veneers. They also integrated many local motifs and ornamental patterns. Thus, as furniture historian Amin Jaffer has stated, this tradition was 'exotic both in the eyes of the people who produced it and those who used it'.⁸ For example, a late seventeenth-century ebony armchair now in the J. Paul Getty Museum represents a classic shape that was common around Europe at the time, with an upright back, square seat base, low stretchers, and twisted rails. However, its decorative motifs, which include cherubs, but also parrots and creatures from Indian iconography, point clearly to its Asian manufacture (*plate 1*).

The products of this industry were not intended just for local consumption, but also for export around the Indian Ocean and to Europe. For instance, the set of twelve ebony chairs at the Getty, of which *plate 1* is a part, was purchased for Longleat Castle in Wiltshire, England, likely at some point in the early eighteenth century.⁹ Additionally, artisans worked in various connected ports, such as the enslaved Indian woodworkers whose skills were exploited in Batavia.¹⁰ Moreover, raw materials like teak and ebony were transported in an unworked state to many destination points around the Indian Ocean, as was the case long before the arrival of the Europeans. So, with their composite identities as well as the mobility of their creators and materials, this class of objects is slippery to categorize or identify and has thus challenged generations of art historians, including Jaffer, Pedro Moura Carvalho, and Jan Veenendaal, who have studied Indian and Indian Ocean furniture under the rubrics of English, Portuguese, and Dutch patronage.¹¹ While all of them acknowledge that these elusive goods were extremely mobile, they are still invested in the unwieldy

1 Armchair, India, c. 1680–1720. Ebony, ebonized hardwood, ivory, ebonized walnut inner-seat frame with cane, 106.7 × 61 × 49.4 cm. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum (92.DA.24.3). Photo: Getty Open Content Program.



task of categorizing them, usually by place of manufacture, time period, and aesthetic criteria.¹² By contrast, here, these items are not treated as decorative objects, particularly because their visual features are impossible to reconstruct. Rather, they are understood in regard to the functions that they facilitated in an intensely commercial maritime world.

Indian Ocean Furniture in Mocha

For the case of Mocha, only scant textual records confirm the presence of Asian produced furniture, particularly from India, in European establishments during the eighteenth century. Yet, none treats them as items of consequence. Moreover,

no extant examples of furniture or images of domestic interiors remain from that period, thus making it difficult to pursue even basic questions about sites of manufacture, type, and visual attributes. By contrast, the available records provide clues about the circulation of these pieces and their patterns of use, thus shedding light on the reasons for their fundamental itinerancy.

Three inventories from the English East India Company (EIC) dating from 1722 to 1740 indicate that, in addition to many other household effects, weapons, and tools, a large number of tables of various shapes, sizes, and functions, as well as desks, chairs, stools, benches, couches, and settees, were used in their trading establishment in Mocha. This building, which doubled as their residence, was inhabited year round until 1726, but only during the high trade season thereafter.¹³ Over this time span, the number of pieces is consistently large. For instance, in the inventory from 1723, among other furnishings, seven tables and forty-seven chairs and stools were mentioned. Given the relatively small number of residents, these figures suggest that imported wooden furniture constituted a significant part of the English adopted domestic environment in this Arabian port.¹⁴

Because these inventories are organized as lists, they include only scant information about each piece. Although one item is described as an ‘old Japan’ tea table and two as ‘China tables’, for the most part, a place of manufacture (or association) is not mentioned.¹⁵ Yet, the materials used – teak, ebony, and cane – strongly confirm an Indian, if not Indian Ocean, place of manufacture. This impression is further endorsed by the presence of many ‘Surat cane’ chairs and couches, which point directly to this Gujarati port that was known for furniture production.¹⁶ Because the chairs often appear in high-order multiples, of twelve or fifteen for instance, one can assume that they were brought over in matching sets, as with the Getty ebony chairs. It is also evident that these objects were used well and consistently over time. Several are described as ‘new’, ‘old’, or ‘broken’, which suggests a continuous cycle of replenishment, ultimately leading to mismatched groupings of pieces in different materials and styles and in various states of repair.



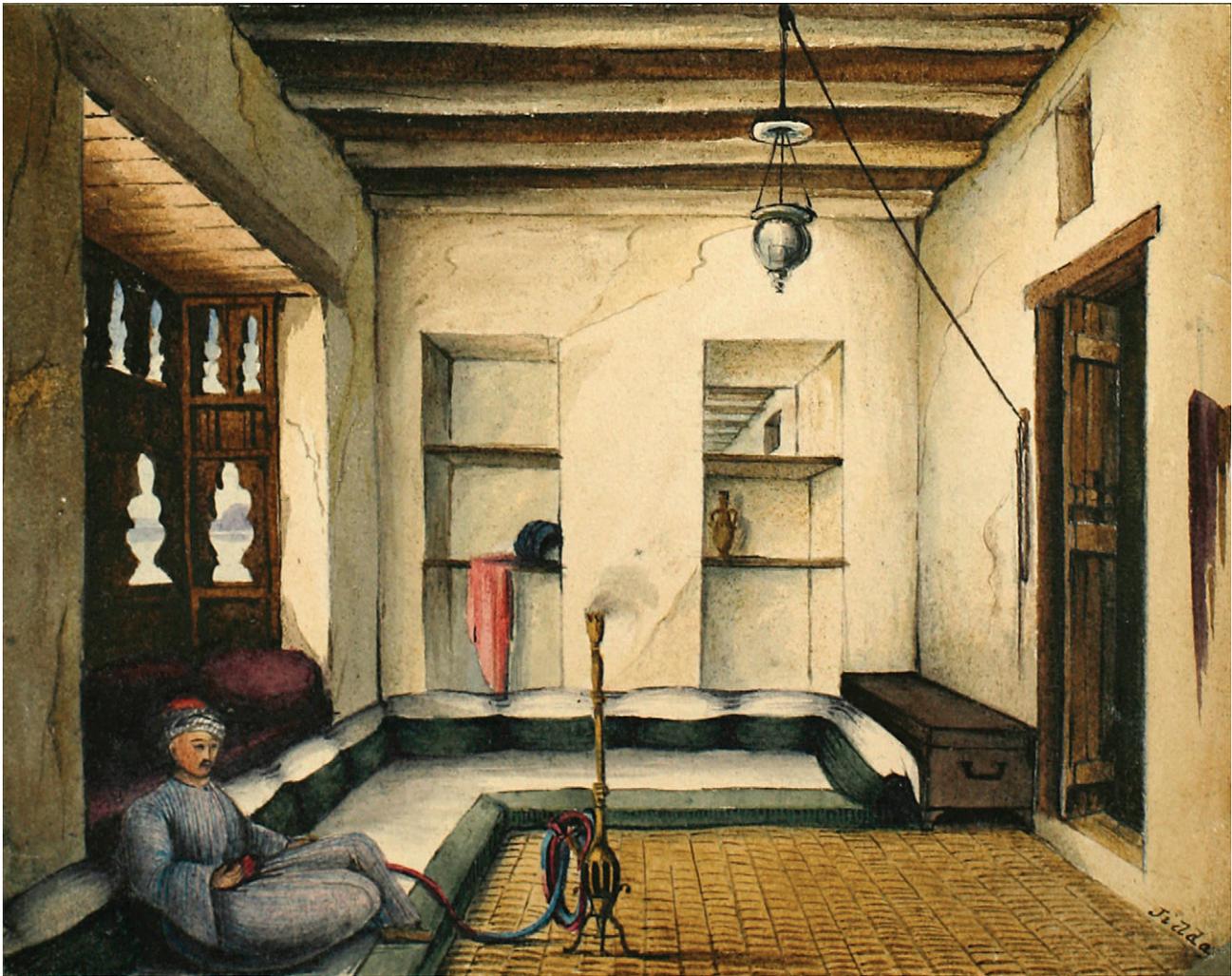
2 Fall-Front Cabinet, Gujarat or Sindh, c. 1650–70. Rosewood inlaid with ivory, brass fittings, 38.42 × 55.25 × 40.64 cm. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.2007.56). Photo: LACMA.

However, the scribes who recorded these inventories were much more interested in the quantity of pieces and their condition than their decoration or visual attributes, neither of which is ever discussed. For example, one cannot be certain if the frequently mentioned ‘black wood chairs’ were as ornate as the Getty example.

The two inventories from the VOC trading establishment in Mocha, dated 1734 and 1739, suggest that this factory was outfitted in a much more provisional fashion than its English counterpart, with only three wooden dining tables, one long writing table, and six wooden chairs.¹⁷ However, in 1712, Dutch merchants had requested twelve chairs from Batavia, which suggests that a larger quantity of furnishings was likely held there in previous years.¹⁸ Moreover, the personal effects of individual merchants appear to have been omitted from these lists. Regardless, it is clear that these pieces of company-owned furniture were considered valuable, because the VOC merchants who formally closed down the factory in 1739 brought them back to Surat. By contrast, they chose to sell the factory’s remaining copper cooking vessels before departing Yemen, suggesting that some household effects, even smaller and less bulky ones, were better disposed of at the port.¹⁹

In a narrative of the first French mission to Mocha, the St Malo captain Godefroy de la Merveille mentions the presence of imported furniture and decorative objects in a house that he rented for the trading season of 1709. These items included a dressing table, a buffet covered with plates, and chairs, in addition to two mirrors and several prints. While most of these pieces were probably brought from France, one object of Asian manufacture is mentioned, referred to as a ‘China cabinet’.²⁰ Although its name may suggest otherwise, it was likely an Indian wooden fall-front cabinet with small drawers inside and lateral drop handles (plate 2). Amin Jaffer has called such chests, which were commonly referred to as *China escritorio* despite their Indian manufacture, ‘a basic requirement of European merchants and traders living and travelling in Asia’.²¹ Although La Merveille provides no further details about this object, which was likely similar in size to the inlaid wooden chest in plate 2, he makes it clear that, with their functional and visual novelty, the various pieces of furniture in his house inspired great interest among local observers.²²

In Mocha and its wider region, domestic spaces were functionally flexible and did not rely upon large or fixed pieces of furniture to determine their use.²³ Rather, furnished with low mattresses and cushions, a single room could serve as a bedroom at night, a dining room during meal times, and a living room in between. A nineteenth-century watercolour of a reception room in the closely connected Red Sea port of Jidda provides a general sense of the layout of these spaces, in which windowpanes and shelves were low to the ground to accommodate floor seating, and the room was scaled intimately to accommodate direct social interactions (plate 3). In 1790, the French merchant Louis de Grandpré complained about these aspects of Mocha houses, saying that they are ‘not as convenient as ours’. In particular, he noted the lack of attributes that would meet the approval of a Western visitor, stating ‘they have no looking glasses or costly pieces of furniture’. Yet, he continued to describe how incompatible any specimens of the latter, which would undoubtedly be raised, were for these spaces, adding that the floors were ‘hardly solid and never level. It is rare for the four legs of a table to stand firmly.’²⁴ In 1719, a tragic event signalled the implicit unsuitability of these pieces of bulky imported furniture for use in Yemeni interiors. One evening, the third floor of the Dutch factory in Mocha collapsed and brought a heavy dining table at which several people were eating crashing down below. The *oppermeester*, or physician, of the Dutch ship *Luchtenburgh* died in the accident.²⁵



3 Rupert Kirk, *Interior of a House in Jidda*, 1832. Watercolour, 10 × 12.5 cm. London: Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) (S0021626). Photo: RGS (with IBG).

Although they rarely chose to forego them, European merchants abroad could manage to live without such items. Historian William Dalrymple has indicated that some English merchants in India became quite malleable to local customs, particularly with regard to food, medical treatments, clothing, and entertainment during the early years of settlement there. As a point of contrast to Mocha, EIC merchants posted in the poorly provisioned factory of Ahmedabad in Gujarat had dispensed with raised furniture and instead sat on carpets on the floor, a choice that was noted with surprise by a contemporary observer.²⁶ Dutch, English, and French company merchants in Mocha, too, would adapt to other customs of seating, but only temporarily, when they visited other merchants in their residences. Yet, on an everyday basis, these unwieldy, bulky, wobbly, and even dangerous pieces of imported furniture were considered essential to their own adopted domestic environments. By the end of the eighteenth century, the governor of Mocha, who went unnamed in the source, had procured a wooden armchair, which was described as old and worm-infested, for his residence. It was brought out for European guests, which suggests that such an accessory was seen as useful for foreign reception by this time.²⁷

Even though many pieces of imported wooden furniture appear on the above-mentioned factory inventories, it is clear that others were excluded, perhaps because they were considered to be the private property of individual merchants, rather than

the company's. For instance, the English merchant Dickinson was clearly attached to the pieces that he brought with him from Mocha to Bombay in 1731, treating them as his own possessions. In particular, chests were considered to be personal effects and thus appear on inventories of deceased sailors and traders instead of factory lists.²⁸ These independently owned objects were subject to company scrutiny, however. In the early eighteenth century, the VOC limited the chest size of low-ranking servants headed for the Indies in order to minimize potential abuses in private trade.²⁹

Although we have only scant records about these pieces of furniture and it is almost impossible to match textual references to extant objects, the documents consulted confirm that European merchants living in Yemen, even temporarily, required many pieces of wooden furniture imported from India or further east, as well as from Europe, during their Mocha residence. They were brought from land to ship, where they furnished cabins during the ocean voyage, and then back on land again quite fluidly, and thus they were quintessential objects in motion in the early modern western Indian Ocean.

Writing and Recording the Indian Ocean Trade

Art historians have described these pieces of mobile wooden furniture produced in India and around the Indian Ocean as sumptuous objects of luxury production, which inspired interest because of their enticing visual qualities, but also as 'essential tools for Western living'.³⁰ By contrast and more specifically, I highlight the role that these pieces of furniture, particularly the desks, tables, chairs, and writing chests, played in the maintenance of company directives toward commercial documentation. Recently, scholars such as Donna Merwick and Miles Ogborn have shown how writing practices undergirded the development of far-flung geographies of early modern overseas trade.³¹ Particularly, the endeavours of European companies were sustained not only through global streams of capital but also through papered routes that extended across vast bodies of water. As Ogborn rightly states, 'relations to the Company were often worked out in script through networks of letter writers' because travelling merchants only occasionally had direct contact with their associates.³²

From the perspective of the company outpost in a small and remote port such as Mocha, keeping records and maintaining correspondence was a consuming part of everyday activity. Each day the merchants added entries to diaries, updated account books to reflect new transactions, drafted resolutions, and penned lengthy letters to colleagues in neighbouring ports and local officials in Yemen, as well as to authorities in Asia and Europe. One example is the *dagregister* written by VOC merchants in Mocha in 1728–29, later copied in Batavia (plate 4). It is important to recognize that these European commercial writing practices could be carried out only with the support of a whole cadre of material objects, most of which were not local to Yemen.³³ As Dutch annual requests to Batavia indicate, almost all of the stationary supplies used by VOC merchants in Yemen were brought from abroad, such as quills, penknives, paper in different sizes, rulers, binding cords, ink, sealing wax, and pencils.³⁴ In both 1712 and 1713, the VOC merchants from Mocha asked for five hundred quills from Batavia, in addition to many other writing implements, suggesting the large volume of written output that was anticipated for these years.

Perhaps less obviously, furniture also played a role in sustaining such practices. As noted by Ogborn, the famous EIC official Streynsham Master, who instituted major company reforms in the second half of the seventeenth century, specified that each EIC outpost in Asia be outfitted with a dedicated writing office and that

the room be large, well lit, and include desks and tables for writing, along with a lockable cupboard.³⁵ This mandate indicates that an efficient and safeguarded system of writing and documentation was crucial to company activities, but it also points specifically to the necessity of sitting up while writing, a comportment for penmanship that required the availability of raised and upright furniture as structural supports. Master's rule probably served to crystallize and formalize

29

Arigustus In de Stad Mocha N^o 1728

Vanden zal weyzen, endat of de aangehouden
 Coffij borden of de weg van Briteljacqui zyne
 ande narend een Cavallier te langrijng
 had afgetonden, des Coften heeft den heer het
 Logain van niet en Baal te zien uanre,
 men, en van Fhaid Fheed en andre plaatzen
 berigt te krijgen dertelre tot de Logain dertea
 Stad staan aangehouden te wonden, bestaan,
 de de quantiteit in Circa 500 Balen en
 welke te meeren gedette in 1 fchip Cum,
 verland van Bombae gekomen, behooren,
 die too men zegt binnen 7a 8 dagen de
 rijte Staat aan te nemen.
 En komt by vooam brieff en andere aan
 de Bentjanen te blyben het gefargede
 van gisteren fueroel bedagt en in midden te
 Contraire berige, alles ontvare die hooft
 Stad in Suda en Mhameth Men zaak
 lig op het Casteel Loke wan leggende op een
 van looge binghe id berindende daan men
 geloofde Lude Haffan een binnen korten
 Staat te gaan belagere zijnde gind Casteel
 en dize Stad de anigte die nog te bemagtege,
 zijn.
 Dien onta belagereard en van de forda attacqun Zondag 15^e
 daan men mogelijc oyt in Arabien van heeft hond
L. v. b. n.

4 Copy of a Mocha dagregister.
 The Hague: National
 Archives, Verenigde
 Oostindische Compagnie
 (VOC), nummer toegang
 1.04.02, inventarisnummer
 9123.



5 Document Case with the Falck family crest, Vizagapatam, 1748–58. Wood, inlaid with ivory, 43.8 × 63.5 × 13.3 cm. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum (NG 854). Photo: Rijksmuseum.

ongoing practices, rather than to dissuade merchants from sitting on the floor as those in Ahmedabad had in the seventeenth century. But, even so, it points to the important place that furniture occupied in underpinning a successful European trading enterprise in India.

Certain pieces of furnishing were more mobile than others, such as fall-front cabinets that could store various writing implements while also providing a flat surface for composing texts (see plate 2).³⁶ But, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Indian workshops began to produce more and different types of objects that were easy to transport, such as portable writing desks with fold-out slopes and elaborate bureau cabinets with handles on the sides.³⁷ Notably fine examples, some of which were inlaid with incised ivory and can be directly associated with EIC and VOC officials, were made in the eastern Indian port of Vizagapatam. As an example, a document box now in the Rijksmuseum was once in the possession of Carl Gustaaf Falck, a VOC official posted in Ceylon, and bears his family seal on the top (plate 5). Veneendaal refers to such objects as ‘almost indispensable items of furniture’ for merchants like Falck.³⁸ Jaffer, for a later period in Madras, notes that almost all of the 354 inventories that he consulted included a writing case or a document box, giving the sense that these items were truly widespread among Europeans in Asia.³⁹ Although it is impossible to say whether such items, especially the most ornate ones, ever made it to the Arabian Peninsula, these expressly portable products provide the sense that there was a strong demand for writing equipment to accommodate the distinctly mobile documentary practices of a growing European (and perhaps also local) population engaged in the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean.



6 Bureau cabinet, Vizagapatam, 1730–40. Rosewood and ebony, inlaid with ivory. Pondicherry: Ananda Ranga Pillai House. Photo: Institut Français de Pondichéry.

The close link among company merchants, the commercial practices of writing, and the production of Indian wooden furniture is evidenced by a pair of eighteenth-century ivory inlaid ebony and rosewood bureau cabinets that remain in the house of Ananda Ranga Pillai (d. 1761), a local interpreter for the French *Compagnie des Indes*, in Pondicherry (plate 6). Pillai is famous for leaving a multi-volume set of his private diaries, considered to be the earliest substantive Tamil language source on the Indian Ocean trade.⁴⁰ In the case of Pillai, his unique and extensive diaries remain for present audiences to read, but the surfaces upon which he penned them also endure, a pairing that allows us to connect the act of writing to the specific material objects that supported it. Together, they provide evidence of the pervasive policies of documentation required of all merchants and agents associated with the European overseas trading companies, foreign and local, but also highlight the need to look at the tools of writing and the furniture that facilitated them, rather than simply their textual remains.⁴¹

The early modern European-fostered Indian furniture industry was not engineered solely to cater to these pervasive writing practices, but its products certainly facilitated them in Mocha and around the Indian Ocean. It should also be noted that in Mocha, the EIC mandate for a dedicated writing office was never implemented. Still, it is no surprise that the merchant Francis Dickinson, who worked in Mocha for most of the period from 1721 to 1734, had two desks and five chairs in his personal space, in addition to two paper presses.⁴² He penned a large part of the documents that were generated from Mocha in the

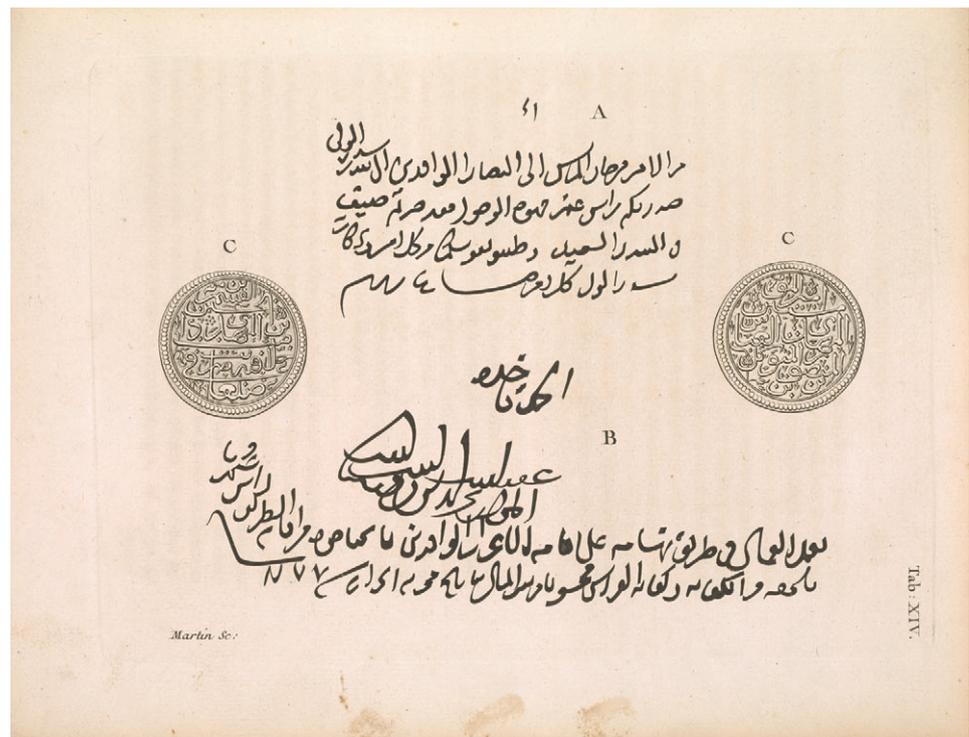
1730s, likely while sitting at one of those chairs and desks, which were brought from elsewhere precisely for that purpose.

Postures of Writing

This essay has focused on the role that furniture manufactured in the Indian Ocean played in undergirding and supporting the commercial writing practices of overseas trading companies based in Mocha. However, writing was by no means the purview of European merchants alone. In fact, a complex, multi-lingual, and dynamic system of commercial documentation drove the business of this port. A series of scribes or *katibs* served the port's administration by keeping detailed records in Arabic of the ships that came into the port, what merchants brought on shore, and how much their goods were worth, all of which were central to the proper collection of taxes and duties. The head scribe of the Mocha customs house was a high-level position, appointed directly by the imam of Yemen.⁴³ Private merchants and brokers also engaged in their own systems of documentation. For instance, Baniyans, Hindu and Jain merchants and brokers from Gujarat, served as key intermediaries of Yemen's

overseas trade in Mocha and other cities.⁴⁴ They kept copious records of their trade activity in Gujarati, as well as that of the wholesalers for whom they worked, while actively maintaining correspondence with their compatriots around the Arabian Sea. Known for their impeccable language skills, Baniyan records and correspondence would have required the translation of commercial data from and into many languages and scripts. Freelance writers also worked in Mocha, hired by individual merchants to pen agreements and letters in Arabic to be sent to the imam and his officials in the highlands, some of which remain in translated form in company archives. We can presume that these freelancers wrote letters for non-European merchants as well, particularly those from Gujarat who would have needed assistance with the intricacies of written Arabic composition.⁴⁵ Unfortunately none of these documents remain in their original form today, and we can say little about their format or the material objects that lent to their production.

However, two letters received by Carsten Niebuhr, a German traveller who visited Yemen in the mid-eighteenth century, provide concise specimens of Arabic missives from the time, although they were not related to commerce (plate 7). One was from Amir Farhan, the governor of the port of al-Luhayya located to the north of Mocha, and the other from the imam, al-Mahdi 'Abbas. These short samples prompt us to consider the divergent practices of writing, both commercial and non-commercial, that these documents embody, as well as the material objects and postures that facilitated their production. The writer of each of these texts, who may have been the sender as well, sat on a cushion with one knee raised and a writing board upon it and a reed pen in hand, rather than sitting at a desk on a raised chair with a quill.⁴⁶ This floor-oriented world of Yemeni scribal practice relied on a radically different set of bodily movements and engagements from those engendered by European upright furnishings. These local writing practices resulted in very specific products as well, as we can tell from these two letters, where each line of writing extends fully to the left edge of the paper and then sweeps upward, as is common in Ottoman chancery



7 Letter from Amir Farhan of al-Luhayya (A); Letter from Imam al-Mahdi 'Abbas (B), illustration xiv from Carsten Niebuhr, *Description de l'Arabie: faite sur les observations propres et des avis recueillis dans les lieux mêmes*, Amsterdam: S. J. Baalde, 1774. Photo: John Hay Library, Brown University Library.

documents. As a point of comparison, VOC documents, such as *plate 4*, follow the grid-like order of the horizontally ruled line with consistent wide margins. European writing practices, formats, and conventions adhered to their own styles and rules, just as they relied upon distinct suites of material objects for their production.

Conclusion

I have argued that desks, tables, chairs, stools, and chests sustained European writing practices in the trading world of eighteenth-century coastal Yemen. Admittedly, there is much more to say about these pieces of mobile furniture and one can link certain objects, such as tables and chairs, to other practices, namely culinary activities. Furthermore, soon after the era considered in this study, objects of raised and case furniture became increasingly ubiquitous around the Indian Ocean rim, and their uses extended far beyond the circumscribed framework sketched in this essay. This focused approach, however, has been taken in order to examine the particular, rather than the generic, cultural operations that called upon such material objects as essential attributes of the European commercial enterprise in the east. These objects were not passive recipients of Western identity or direct conveyors of it, but rather shaped and structured the behaviours and postures of those who used them for particular ends.

By focusing on writing practices and its various tools, I also hope to inspire further consideration about the ways that historical records operate as more than mere conduits for information about early modern maritime trade. These written records do not simply reflect the details of historic trade activity, but sustained and structured those commercial acts as well, as Ogborn has brilliantly demonstrated with regard to the scribal and print world of the EIC. By emphasizing these documents as material objects that have their own histories of manufacture, European company records become coherent beyond the many words, numbers, and pieces of data that they convey. Following Ann Stoler's call to conceive of 'archiving-as-process' rather than 'archives-as-things', we may more ably interrogate the foundational cornerstones upon which early modern Indian Ocean history has been written.⁴⁷

In 2009, two of the set of twelve ebony chairs at the Getty (see *plate 1*) were selected for the exhibition, *Dutch New York between East and West: The World of Margrieta van Varick*, staged at the Bard Graduate Center in New York. The show exhibited historical objects that were comparable to those that appeared in a 1696 probate inventory, which was executed on behalf of a relatively unknown Dutch woman living in New York and included 'thirteene Ebony Chears'.⁴⁸ The fact that chairs like the ones in the Getty, originally made somewhere in Asia, could have plausibly travelled to New York (probably via the Dutch Republic) in the late seventeenth century, or to Mocha in the early eighteenth century, provides the sense that these highly mobile objects sustained potentially widespread itineraries of dispersal. But it also points to the difficulties and challenges of extracting an understanding of the material world from extremely open-ended textual indications. This study proposes that the context of these movements, as well as the reasons for them, must be situated in both time and space in order to be meaningful.

Notes

- 1 Mocha dagregister, VOC 2252, 21 August 1731, 166–7.
- 2 The residence would remain in their possession until the next year, with the merchant Thomas Harnett staying behind to settle the company's affairs.
- 3 Jan Veenendaal, *Furniture from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India*, Delft, 1985, 54; Leonard Blussé, 'Dutch settlements and trading centres', in A. Jackson and A. Jaffer, eds, *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500–1800*, London, 2004, 139, fig. 10.3.
- 4 On Yemen's coffee market, see Nancy Um, '1636 and 1726: Yemen after the first Ottoman era', in E. Tagliacozzo, H. Siu, and P. Purdue, eds, *Asia Inside Out: Changing Times*, Cambridge, MA, 2015, 112–34.
- 5 Carpentry tools and supplies appear on both inventories and request lists of the EIC and VOC from Mocha. These tools were needed for the upkeep of ships and also probably to repair furniture, but not to construct it.
- 6 During his journeys to India, Vasco da Gama witnessed furnishings decorated with gold, ivory, and mother-of-pearl at Malindi, Kenya, which were likely of wood and originally from India.
- 7 Europeans would often place cushions on top of the rattan seats and cover tables with pieces of green cloth.
- 8 Amin Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon: A Catalogue of the Collections in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Peabody Essex Museum*, London, 2001, 14.
- 9 The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal, 21, 1993, 143. I thank Jeffrey Weaver, Charissa Bremer-David and Brian Considine, all of the Getty, for sharing information about and showing me these chairs.
- 10 Amin Jaffer, *Luxury Goods from India: The Art of the Indian Cabinet-Maker*, London, 2002, 10; Veenendaal, 'Furniture in Batavia', in *Domestic Interiors at the Cape and in Batavia, 1602–1795*, The Hague, 2002, 29.
- 11 The earliest studies on this topic reflect a profound lack of resolution about the origins and identities of these pieces. Vilhelm Slomann, 'The Indian period of European furniture', parts 1, 2 and 3, *Burlington Magazine*, 65: 378–80, September–November 1934, 112–15, 118–21, 124–46, 156–9, 162–7, 169–71, 201–5, 208–11, 213–14; a heated response was delivered by Ralph Edwards and K. de B. Codrington, *Burlington Magazine*, 65: 381, December 1934, 273–5, 277–9.
- 12 Pedro Moura Carvalho, 'Goa's pioneering role in transmitting European traditions to the Mughal and Safavid courts', in *Exotica: The Portuguese Discoveries and the Renaissance Kunstammer*, Lisbon and Vienna, 2001; Jaffer, *Luxury Goods*; Jaffer, *Furniture*; Veenendaal, *Furniture*; Veenendaal in *Domestic Interiors*.
- 13 'An inventory of the Dead Stock', Mocha, January 1722, G/17/1, pt. 2, 198r–201v; 'Inventory of the Warehouse Remains and Dead Stock', Mocha, 9 January 1723, G/17/1, pt. 2, 282r–285v; 'Inventory of the Sundries', Mocha, 13 August 1740, G/17/2, pt. 1, 470r.
- 14 In August 1723, nineteen European employees were listed as staff. The additional five peons and two 'moor servants' probably did not live in the factory. 'List of covenanted servants', G/17/1, pt. 2, 259r.
- 15 G/17/1, pt. 2, 1722, 201r; G/17/1, pt. 2, 1723, 284r. Some pieces of East Asian furniture were exported to India, but popular Chinese styles were also copied there. Moreover, a geographic label does not necessarily signify the place of manufacture of an object, as with the case of the 'China' escritorio described in this section. Jaffer, *Furniture*, 94.
- 16 G/17/1, pt. 2, 1722, 200v, 201r; G/17/1, pt. 2, 1723, 283v, 284r. 'Surat chairs', described as high or low and sometimes lacquered, appear in Batavia inventories as well. Veenendaal, *Furniture*, 150.
- 17 'De volgende goederen resteeren tot gebruyk', 15 August 1734, VOC 9110, 180v; 'En dus door ons per 't voren waarts gementioneert schip Bassoura marchand herwaarts aangebragt', VOC 2509, 1739, 1454–5.
- 18 'De goederen en coopmansz. die wij verweijnen alhier', 18 August 1712, VOC 1843, 20.
- 19 There was an active market in second-hand furniture, via auction house or in the bazaar, in India. Veenendaal in *Domestic Interiors*, 28; Jaffer, *Furniture*, 99–101.
- 20 Jean de la Roque, *A Voyage to Arabia Felix (1708–1710)*, ed. Carl Phillips, New York, 2004, 95–6.
- 21 The term China 'escritorio' was coined first by the Portuguese and remarked upon by Pyrard de Laval in 1610. It was then Anglicized as 'China escretore', 'scrutore', or 'scretore'. Fall-front cabinets were also used locally in India, as represented by a Mughal marginal painting that shows one filled with jewels, c. 1650. The shape of the box probably originated from a Spanish type. Jaffer, *Luxury Goods*, 18.
- 22 La Roque, *Voyage*, 96–7.
- 23 The only types of furniture that could be procured locally were string-woven charpoy beds, mattresses, small stools, low tables, and trays for food, some of which the English did purchase locally. 'Stewards Account of Disbursements for the Month of January 1722', G/17/1, pt. 2, 204.
- 24 Louis de Grandpré, *Voyage dans l'Inde et Bengale fait dans les années 1789 et 1790*, vol. 2, Paris, 1801, 169–70.
- 25 Mocha Dag Register, 16 May 1719, VOC 9116, 96–7. Also recorded by the English. Mocha diary, G/17/1, pt. 1, 7v.
- 26 William Dalrymple, 'Personal encounters: Europeans in South Asia', in Jackson and Jaffer, *Encounters*, 160.
- 27 Grandpré, *Voyage*, vol. 2, 145.
- 28 Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company*, Chicago, IL, 2007, 198.
- 29 Veenendaal, *Furniture*, 79–81.
- 30 *Exotica*, cat. figs. 59–65, 97; Jaffer, *Luxury Goods*, 9.
- 31 Donna Merwick, 'A genre of their own: Kiliaen van Rensselaer as guide to the reading and writing practices of early modern businessmen', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 65: 4, October 2008, 669–712; Ogborn, *Indian Ink*.
- 32 Ogborn, *Indian Ink*, xvii.
- 33 As a useful case, James Daybell capably describes the relationship among tools, furniture, spaces for writing, and letters in the English context. Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635*, London, 2012, 30–52.
- 34 18 August 1712, VOC 1843, 20; 'Eisch', 1713, VOC 1843, 18; 'Eisch', 1735, VOC 9111, 219–20.
- 35 Ogborn, *Indian Ink*, 101.
- 36 In a seventeenth-century example at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, one of the bottom drawers is provisioned with an inkwell and sand shaker, suggesting that it stored writing supplies. Pedro Moura Carvalho, *Luxury for Export: Artistic Exchange between India and Portugal around 1600*, Boston, 2008, 48–9, fig. 9.
- 37 These upright bureau cabinets followed European shapes exactly, except for the addition of the handles, thus indicating that they were intended for transport. Jaffer, *Furniture*, 182.
- 38 Veenendaal, *Furniture*, 85.
- 39 Jaffer, *Furniture*, 69.
- 40 Ananda Ranga Pillai, *The Private Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai: dubash to Joseph François Dupleix, a record of matters political, historical, social, and personal, from 1736 to 1761*, 12 vols, trans. Sir John Frederick Price, Madras, 1904.
- 41 Even Indian merchants and dubashes of a Westernized port such as Pondicherry did not commonly use European writing tables and chairs at that time. Jaffer, *Furniture*, 123–4. I thank Janet Um, N. Murugesan, and especially Sean Kerr for helping me to obtain a copy of plate 6.
- 42 G/17/1, pt. 2, 1723, 201r.
- 43 Nancy Um, *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port*, Seattle, 2009, 52.
- 44 Um, *Merchant Houses*, 163–7.
- 45 Gagan Sood, "'Correspondence is equal to half a meeting": The composition and comprehension of letters in eighteenth-century Islamic Eurasia', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 50: 2/3, 2007, 177–9.
- 46 In the 1970s, Messick witnessed another possibility. The mufti of the city of Ibb wrote fatwas seated on a cushion with the paper resting on two fingers of one hand as the writing surface. As he worked down the page, he would readjust the paper. Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society*, Berkeley, CA, 1992, 137, fig. 8.
- 47 Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton, NJ, 2010, 20.
- 48 Charissa Bremer-David, 'Armchair and side chair', in Deborah L. Krohn and Peter N. Miller, eds, *Dutch New York between East and West: The World of Margrieta van Varick*, New Haven, 2009, 260–1.