36. Chinese artist, c.1800
Portrait of George Washington (after Gilbert Stuart)
Reverse painting on glass
29 x 22 ins

A number of portraits after Gilbert Stuart of George Washington, painted on glass or on canvas, were produced at Canton in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Stuart felt threatened by the potential influx, and he took legal action to prevent the importation of the Chinese versions from China to America. He claimed in the Eastern District Circuit Court that John E. Sword of Philadelphia, having commissioned a portrait of George Washington from him, had taken it to China, 'and there procured above one hundred copies thereof to be taken by Chinese artists, and hath brought the same copies to the United States...’ (Richardson, p. 97).

This was not the only portrait of Washington to be copied in China. Another is said to have been taken out by 'James Blight, an Indian [i.e. China] trader... About 1800 or a little later a number of portraits of Washington on glass were brought out of China...’ (quoted in Crossman, p. 447, n. 21). Reverse glass portraits of Washington after Stuart were also painted in America and in Europe, but generally at a later date and with less finesse than the Chinese versions.

37. Chinese artist, c.1800
Vanity Fair
Reverse painting on glass
14 x 10 ins

Figures dressed in the latest fashion, the subjects of Chinese glass painting through Canton in 1790s, whom he identified as 'Publius' (1806, p. 343). In this instance a young man and a woman, an elegant couple garbed in a variety of costumes, beneath a portal inscribed 'Vanity Fair' (or possibly 'Venus'), with a view from a brothel; as the gentleman is being confronted by a furious wife (or perhaps his lover) as the source is probably one of the prints which were issued by Matley's China House.