

Approaches to Painting at the Qianlong Court

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For nearly fifty years, western and Chinese scholars showed little interest in the prodigious output of the Academy of Painting at the Qianlong court. 'Re-discovery' of this artistic institution began to take place in 1985 with the appearance of several major articles and exhibitions devoted at least in part to the Qianlong academy. These included a study by Kohara Hironobu¹ of the Qianlong emperor's connoisseurship of Chinese painting, a study by Yang Boda² of the structure of the academy based on archival materials, and two major loan exhibitions from the Palace Museum, Beijing, one held at Seibu Museum of Art³ and other Japanese museums, and the other held in Berlin,⁴ both of which prominently featured Qing court painting. With the exception of Yang's study, however, these dealt more with the imperial collection as such than with the creative activity of the painting academy. A different approach was followed in an exhibition devoted specifically to painting of the Qianlong period, within and outside the court, which opened in Phoenix in August of 1985.⁵ The exhibition attempted to explore as a whole the neglected area of painting in the later two-thirds of the eighteenth century and to place both the court academy and the independent 'eccentric' artists in their broader context. This became the goal of a symposium organized in conjunction with the exhibition, held on 3-5 October 1985, papers from which are published in revised form in the present volume.

The last time eighteenth century court paintings had attracted such interest was in the 1930s when the newly established Palace Museum undertook to bring its remarkable riches to the public's attention.⁶ After war dampened this initial enthusiasm, interest in the Qing court academy languished. During the 1950s and 1960s the Palace Museums of Taipei and Beijing seemed to put their emphasis on the ancient – especially Song – works in their collections, a direction which lent credence to each in its claim to cultural leadership.

Meanwhile scholars in the West were searching for the authentic Song and Yuan styles upon which to base a stylistic history of Chinese painting. If Ming painting seemed derivative, aside from the work of a few painters of genius, then Qing painting was late and decadent.⁷ The sub-genre of court painting⁸ was not exempt from the paradigm of deterioration, and eventually the model was laid over the Qing period itself, so that the earlier Kangxi academy was believed to have set a level of quality never again attained. The position was stated succinctly by Heilesen in 1980: 'the quality of documentary court painting steadily declined during the eighteenth century.'⁹ Although the attitude persists even in recent, serious studies of Qing court painting – Qianlong works may be presupposed to be paler, weaker reflections of their Kangxi precedents – it is now mitigated by a recognition of the changing requirements of imperial taste. Consider, for example, Hearn's assessment of the *Nanxun* series by the Qianlong court artist Xu Yang,¹⁰ in which Xu's unification of the pictorial space and simplification of the narrative themes is interpreted in part as a reflection of his inability to equal the complexity of the Kangxi period *Nanxun* scrolls, but also as a reflection of the different requirements of the Qianlong project.

Contributing to the neglect of the Qing academy was the mid-twentieth century preference in the West for the art of the avant-garde, and the consequent rejection of all that was conservative, traditional or 'academic'. In the field of Chinese art, this was fortified by Chinese theories of the *yi* ('untrammelled') approach to painting and eventually by aspects of the theory of literati or scholar's painting, which emphasized the independence of the artist and denigrated the academic tradition. Western scholars have at times tended to attribute an anti-establishment outlook to the scholar-artist, neglecting the fact that for most the prospect of gaining imperial patronage was highly desirable. Recent studies have begun to recognize court service as a high achievement for a painter. Heilesen describes the appointment of Wang Hui as director of the *Nanxuntu* project as the artist's 'crowning success', and describes Wang Yuanqi's directorship of the Kangxi *Wanshou Chang Tu* in similar terms.¹¹ In some cases anti-Manchu sentiments have been ascribed to individuals for whom such attitudes probably played a minor, even insignificant role. Assessing the cultural milieu of Yangzhou at the middle of the eighteenth century, Chou has remarked that modern scholars have at times preferred 'to dwell on racial tension as the setting and cause for any brilliance in the art and literature of the period', and have ignored the general acceptance of the Manchu reign.¹² The resulting distortion not only obscures the complex motivations of artists of the period but also poses a false dichotomy between disaffected artists and artist-scholars who matriculated in the bureaucracy.

Europeans, perhaps more comfortable with an academic tradition because of their own institutions (such as the Royal Academy in London or the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris), have taken more interest than Americans in the Qing academy.¹³ Their scholarship in this area was stimulated by the Qing academy works which had entered European collections in the aftermath of the Opium War. Moreover, the paucity of Song and Yuan paintings in European collections kept interest centered on the Ming and Qing at a time when American scholars were preoccupied with the Song and Yuan periods. The European investigation of the Qing painting academy was restricted largely to studies of Jesuit and other missionaries who worked as artists there. Based on Jesuit documents as well as paintings and prints in European collections, scholars contributed important studies on the missionary artists in general,¹⁴ on Giuseppe Castiglione¹⁵ and more recently on the *Mulan* scrolls.¹⁶ These monographs on the European artists at the eighteenth century Chinese court were not accompanied, however, by interest in the Chinese artists of that institution. A notable early exception was Roger Goepper's monograph on the Manchu court artist Tangdai, published in 1956.¹⁷

One outgrowth of these studies was a preoccupation with identifying the impact of European painting on the Chinese tradition. While this legitimate avenue of investigation produced important studies,¹⁸ it has also promoted a search for a 'western-influenced' style of the Qing academy. Striving to isolate this ingredient, some scholars have overlooked the extent to which eighteenth-century court painting was deeply rooted in Chinese tradition. Elements of pictorial realism have been ascribed conveniently to Western influence rather than, more convincingly, to the revival of the representational painting styles of Song, Yuan and Ming. The study of old paintings at court provided the major source for illusionistic painting in the academy.¹⁹ With regard to the style of the missionary artists themselves, it has long been recognized that under imperial patronage they developed a new manner of painting in Chinese ink and colors on paper or silk incorporating some devices of Western oil painting, above all *chiaroscuro* shading.²⁰ But they also appear to have developed a modified style in oil in which shading was reduced and formal, frontal poses were adopted.²¹ These modifications, intended to make the oil paintings more palatable to the Chinese, reflect a cultural accommodation far more subtle and complex than what the simple term 'Western influence' implies.

The preoccupation with identifying the influence of European art on that of China can be seen as the art-historical equivalent of what Paul Cohen has called a 'Western-centric' approach in American scholarship on nineteenth and twentieth century China²² – a view, ultimately ethno-

centric, which interprets Chinese history in terms of the Western impact upon it. Overemphasis on the interaction of China and the West has as subtly skewed our perception of Qing painting as it has our perception of modern Chinese history. A related problem is the tendency to look for signs of decline in the culture of a period which has been blamed by modern historians for China's nineteenth and twentieth century political hardships. Thus Kahn seems to reduce the Qianlong emperor's continuation of ceremonial art patronage to the level of tasteless self-indulgence and the eighteenth-century mutual emulation of artistic ideas by China and Europe to an 'exchange of superficialities'.²³

While the Qianlong emperor's role as a patron of art has received relatively little attention until recently, his significance as collector has never faded from view. Critical attitudes toward his collecting activities have varied. Many have lamented the presence of his seals: the large seals of earlier emperor-collectors seem less obtrusive, possibly because their collections are dispersed while that of Qianlong, on the contrary, survives in discrete clumps in Beijing and Taipei, and works which left the palace in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries continue to appear prominently on the art market. Many have complained that Qianlong's inscriptions and colophons intrude upon the great works he collected. The emperor's confidence in appending his comments reflects his successful absorption of the literati ideal and his keen interest in connoisseurship. The article by Kohara in the present volume discusses these motivations in depth. Some have attributed the supposed decline in eighteenth and nineteenth century painting to the fact that so many old paintings were tied up in the palace collection.²⁴ In a 1978 lecture, Lothar Ledderose remarked that although 'even modern scholars are still under the spell of the great emperor collectors, no scholarly study of the imperial art collection has been made so far'.²⁵ While his own studies have led the way in examining the early palace collections of China, other scholars recently have begun to systematically analyze the vast Qianlong collection. Compiling statistical data from the three editions of the imperial catalog, the last completed in 1816, Howard Rogers²⁶ has brought to light evidence that the collecting of art at court was inextricably bound to patronage of its artists: of 15,000 paintings and calligraphies in the imperial collection, two-thirds had been painted since 1644. The very process of reviewing and cataloging old paintings brought about the creation of new works in the form of colophons, including some pictorial colophons,²⁷ and in the form of copies, both free and exact.²⁸

Within this Qing portion of the collection, Rogers found that 7,500 paintings and calligraphies were by government officials, princes, and

emperors, while only 1,200 were by artists assigned to the Academy of Painting.²⁹ This extraordinary degree of participation by scholar-bureaucrats underscores the fallacy of drawing a simple dichotomy of style between court-painting and that of independent artists of the eighteenth century. The scholars at court who painted drew their inspiration from the same sources as did those who did not seek or failed to attain high official position. Both groups shared similar education and the early aspirations of many of the 'eccentric' painters might well have led them into the court: Jin Nong, for example, was unsuccessful in his attempt to qualify for court service. Hua Yan, too, was frustrated in his bid for service in the capital. The remarkable stylistic range of these artists thus stems not from their backgrounds but from the unprecedented liveliness of the private patronage of painting in Yangzhou.

Among the most revealing studies of the Qing academy are those of Yang Boda³⁰ based on scrutiny of the palace archives in Beijing. His work has brought to light actual practices of the academy, including methods of commission and payment, dispensing of materials, and assignment of painters to specific studios, and also has shown the close personal involvement of the emperor in many projects. No doubt the archives will yield yet more information, but an even more important resource will be the sizable holdings of court paintings in the Palace Museum, Beijing, and the National Palace Museum, Taipei.³¹ These form a resource of documented paintings unparalleled in other areas of Chinese painting.

If Qing court paintings have not always been treated seriously as works of art, they have consistently been valued as historical documents. Indeed, the recent surge of interest in the *Nanxun* scrolls stems in part from the appreciation of their documentary value. Military pictures, too, have received considerable attention for their historical content.³² Such other themes as the glorification of empire, the unification of outer regions, the benefactions of the emperor, and filial piety within the imperial family have been studied in some depth by historians,³³ and yet the full meaning of such paintings, upon which historical interpretation must ultimately depend, has yet to be worked out.³⁴

While the theme of glorification of the unity of the empire was clearly important, such other themes as the emperor's personal identity as 'scholar-literatus' may have been an even greater preoccupation of the court. When taken together the portraits of the emperor as scholar or scholar-artist and the remarkable number of paintings and calligraphies by the emperor himself³⁵ argue persuasively that this was an overriding personal concern. Other motivations of the court clearly included

religious ones, as shown by the significant number of Buddhist subjects painted by academy artists.³⁶

The revival of interest in Qianlong court painting has paralleled a resurgence of interest in decorative arts of the Qianlong period, including porcelain, cloisonné and painted enamels, lacquer, metalwork and glass. In both areas, a shift, perhaps a curtailment, in production of court-sponsored art around 1760 has been recognized.³⁷ What Yang Boda has identified as a reorganization of the Huayuan Chu and the Ruyi Guan coincides with an identifiable decline of activity in realistic court painting of the sort practiced by the professional court painter (as opposed to the scholar-official-painter).³⁸ Coincidentally there was an increased appearance of painted decoration on porcelain and an upsurge in painted enamels – a trend which may stem from the reassignment of painters to the Falang Chu (enamelling workshop).³⁹ Information such as this may at last allow the development of a stylistic history of Qianlong court painting.

The recent resurgence of interest in Qing court painting has followed a few paces behind the movement to re-examine academic painting in Europe. There is a new appreciation of the merits of a system which rewarded professional skills with commissions on a grand scale and provided advanced training for a younger generation of artists. If the potential for a stifling influence was ever-present, the potential for great accomplishment was also strong. Moreover, the well-documented nature of academy painting gives its study an important advantage. As other academies documented their own activity, so did the Qianlong one. The internal documentation and criticism of Qianlong court painting appears most prominently with the commission of the *Bidian Zhulin* and *Shiqu Baoji* in 1744,⁴⁰ but inscriptions, colophons and imperial seals also served as official documentation. In a field where scholars and connoisseurs have long complained about the lack of unequivocally documented paintings, it is ironic that so few studies of the Qianlong material in palace collections have been undertaken.

Although the notion that the painter gives form to government propaganda or imperial images is antithetical to the literati ideal, the Qianlong academy institutionalized literati theory and made an orthodoxy of it. Future studies may reveal how this theory of artistic independence was adapted to function as an establishment doctrine.⁴¹ Moreover, while most scholars are careful to distinguish between official-painters and court-painters, the complex stylistic relationship between their works has yet to be elucidated.