

An Overview of Stylistic Development in the Qianlong Painting Academy

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The special governmental institution of the painting academy in China stimulated the practice of painting during her imperial past. Within the long history of painting academies, that of the Qing dynasty is among the better known; and within the Qing, that of the Qianlong period is the most outstanding.

The painting academy of the Qianlong period was extraordinary in all aspects, including organization, scale and talent. The painters were employed for numerous types of work, and they have left us with a massive corpus for study. A large number of the paintings are now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, and upon them this preliminary probe into their stylistic changes is based.

Pertaining to the paintings done in the Qianlong academy, the Taipei collection comprises as many as seven different categories: paintings for aesthetic appreciation, paintings for wall decoration, miniatures for *duo-baoge* ('treasure chests'), painted caskets or boxes, ceramics with overglazed enamel, paintings on folding fans, and sketches and prints. In terms of quantity and quality, the first two categories, including those which were stripped from walls and remounted as scrolls and albums, are unsurpassed. There are 4,099 paintings in the Museum collection, with each album figured as a unit and not counting the individual leaves; of these 1,598, or roughly 39 percent, are Qing works. Of the Qing works, 1,083, or 68 percent, are paintings done in the academy. Of the last, a full 90 percent, or 975 works, are of the Qianlong period. Again, this figure does not include paintings on porcelain, folding fans, or any other decorative arts. Varied in content and covering the entire sixty years of the Qianlong reign, these 975 paintings provide us with a rare opportunity to examine in detail the development within the academy while highlighting the Emperor's role as its leader. A broad overview suggests three stages of development.

I

The first stage lasted from 1736, the beginning of the Qianlong reign, to until 1751. The emperor was only a youthful 25 when he ascended the throne. Eager to rule and to glorify his rule, he seized on the art of painting as a tool for such glorification. Moreover, Qianlong by nature was fond of painting and calligraphy and his taste was a compelling factor to favor styles that were rich, ornate and finely detailed. Fortunately, there were several older painters in the academy whose styles coincided with the imperial taste, such as Tangdai, Jiang Tingxi, Zhang Pengchong, Zou Yigui, Leng Mei and Lang Shining. There were newer talents as well, including Yu Xing, Dong Bangda, Li Shizhuo, Zhang Ruo'ai and Ding Guanpeng. Their subject matters are varied and rich, with individual preferences and specialization.

Landscape Painting

Landscape in this stage clearly divides itself into two camps. One camp is the purely academic style, with Tangdai as its representative. Tangdai, whose art developed from that of Wang Yuanqi, but also added a touch of Fan Kuan's, created a style which was revolutionary in merging the Northern and Southern schools of painting. His *Guinyin Tu* ('The Retiring Gentleman') (Figure 1) is a good example. The composition is tightly controlled, and the forms clearly outlined. Texture strokes are fine and dense and the overall effect is strong and heroic. To the extent that his painting is sufficiently different from the past, it earned for him the favor of Emperor Kangxi, who honored him with the title of *hua zhuangyuan* ('The Champion among Painters'). Qianlong followed suit, praising Tangdai's paintings in his inscriptions. Another artist who bridged the reigns from Kangxi to Qianlong is Lang Shining. Lang, or Giuseppe Castiglione, was an Italian who combined traditional Chinese techniques with Western perspective and chiaroscuro. His painting, *Landscape*,¹ presents not only a convincing portrayal of depth, but a strong sense of tactility as well.

These two painters were extremely influential in the Qianlong academy. Consequently, artists who imitated their styles were numerous, and included Chen Mei in *Farming and Silk-Production*,² Chen Shixing in his pictorial counterpart to Qianlong's calligraphic rendition of Fan Chengda's poem,³ Shen Yuan in his *Ice-skating Festival*,⁴ not to mention the landscapes of such artists as Leng Mei, Jin Kun, Sun Hu, Lu Zhan, Cheng Zhidao and Jin Jie.

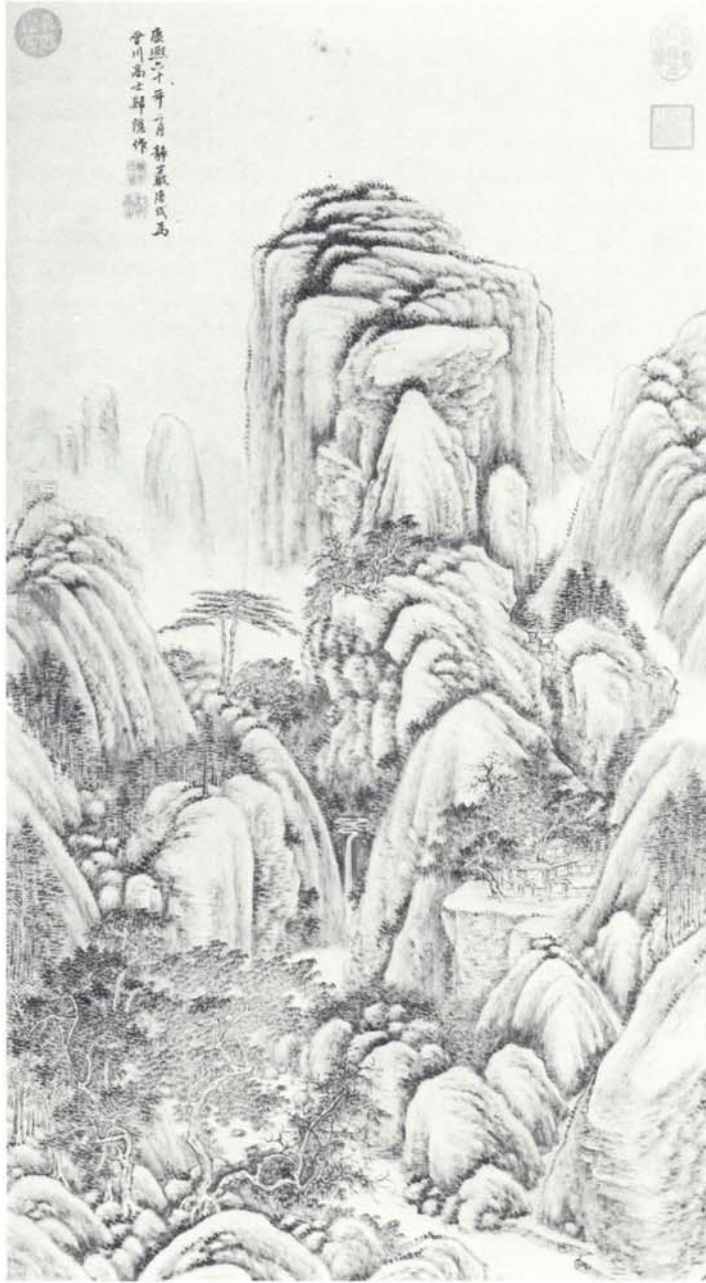


Figure 1. Tangdai, *The Retiring Gentleman*, dated 1731. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

The other camp consists of a group of scholar-painters who served at the court: Zhang Pengchong, Li Zongwan, Dong Bangda, Jiang Pu, Li Shizhuo, Zhu Lunhan and Zhang Ruo'ai. Though officials first, these talented men were often called upon by Qianlong to paint, occasioned either by imperial visits to various scenic sites or by his poetic attempts. Due largely to their literary accomplishment and official position, their paintings naturally differ from those of the academy artists. For example, they tended to follow the Four Wangs of the Early Qing, and beyond them, the Four Masters of the Yuan, Dong Yuan and Juran. Their paintings also adhere to the established styles of literati painting, stressing the quality and flavor of brush and ink rather than superficial beauty and detailed treatment; many of their works are in ink only. Finally, the scholar painters sought after lyrical sentiments: they tried to express the mood beyond the immediate and the apparent. For these reasons, the paintings of these men are deeply imbued with an affective aura, as in the evocation of seasonal clarity and stillness in Zhang Pengchong's *Blue Peaks in Autumn*⁵ or the sense of cold and desolation in Li Zongwan's *Summer Clouds and Strange Peaks: After Wang Meng*⁶ and Zhu Lunhan's album of finger paintings in response to imperial poems.⁷ Another notable work is Dong Bangda's *After Du Fu's Poem* (Figure 2), which was inspired by the lines:

The setting sun and the shimmering waves
Reflected light upon the rocky cliff;
Clouds returned to embrace the forest,
The villages disappearing.

Insomuch as the Emperor was fond of this painting and never grew tired of looking at it, Dong Bangda painted this theme a number of times.

Flower Painting

The coloristic, 'boneless' style of flower painting gained currency in the painting academy once Emperor Kangxi found favor with the works of Yun Shouping, introduced to the court by Jiang Tingxi. In the Qianlong period, Yun was highly respected by Zou Yigui, who wrote in his treatise, *Xiaoshan Huapu*, that the early Qing master was capable of 'imparting [to his flower painting] a sense of aliveness and rendering fully the wonder of Nature' and that his works were 'unprecedented and unrivalled.'⁸ Other than a small number of ink 'bird and flower' paintings after Yuan and Ming styles, such as Zhang Ruo'ai's *Birds, Pine and Bamboo*,⁹ or works combining 'bird and flower' and landscape, like Dai Hong's *Flower Buds by the Water*,¹⁰ the 'boneless' style dominated the painting academy. Representative works are Zou Yigui's *Spring Flowers*¹¹



Figure 2. Dong Bangda, *After Du Fu's Poem*. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.



Figure 3. Lang Shining (Giuseppe Castiglione), *Machang Attacking the Enemy*, detail. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

and Yu Xing's *Album of Flowers*.¹² Exquisite and refined, these works extend beyond Yun's rich and luxuriant style. The inclusion of the Western method of modelling in light and shade illuminates further the three-dimensionality of the flowers and enlivens the subject with convincing details and a sense of aliveness. Of course, there is also the pure Western mode of Lang Shining, which may be considered as yet another trend in the context of this genre.

Figure Painting

Infinitely rich and varied, figure painting is where the painting academy excelled. A number of styles developed. The first is the Western style, with Lang Shining as its leader. To the extent that he employed the modelling and shading technique of Western painting, the results were extremely life-like. For this reason, he won the praise of Qianlong. Indeed, practically everyone associated with the court, from the emperor and his consorts down to the officials, were the subjects of his portraiture, a typical example of which is *Machang Attacking the Enemy* (Figure 3). The same approach characterizes Lang's depiction of animals, such as dogs, horses, and other rare and unusual birds and beasts.

The second style of figure painting combined the Chinese and Western, employing both brushstrokes and modelling. It had emerged at the end of the Ming dynasty, led by Zeng Jing and others. It became popular in the court academy in early Qing and reached its apex during the Qianlong reign. This style of painting can be further divided into two groups. One group stressed heavy pigments over brush and ink, as exemplified in Leng Mei's *Viewing the Moon*,¹³ Chen Mei's *Farming and Silk-Production* album¹⁴ and especially in Ding Guanpeng's *Spring Market in Time of Peace* (Figure 4) and his rendering of *Manjusri*.¹⁵ Paintings such as these may have taken seven months or more to complete, with exquisite details and rich coloring. Another group stressed the bone structure, or brushstrokes, over color. Hedazi's album of historical beauties,¹⁶ Ding Yu's album entitled *Forever Young*¹⁷ and especially Yao Wenhan's *Selling Drinks*,¹⁸ are typical examples. The brushstrokes are tense and strong, the color light and tinted, and the overall effect classical.

Besides landscape, flower and figure, another special area of painting that demands attention is architectural painting, or 'boundary painting'. By resorting to the Western technique of perspective, an extremely convincing degree of depth could be attained. Commonly seen in architectural renderings amidst a landscape setting, it is especially prevalent in works of collaborative nature, in which were pooled together the talents of many artists. Outstanding works are *Spring Dawn at the Han Palace* (Figure 5), painted by Jin Kun, Lu Zhan, Cheng Zhidao and Wu Gui; *The New Feng City*,¹⁹ painted by Tangdai, Sun Hu, Shen Yuan, Zhou Kun and Ding Guanpeng; and *Ceremonial Silk-reeling*,²⁰ by Lang Shining, Jin Kun, Wu Gui, Cao Shude, Lu Zhan, Chen Yongjie, Cheng Liang, Li Huilin and Ding Guanpeng. These are complex paintings that often took two to three years to complete, and are a unique feature of the period.

In summary, paintings done in the academy during this initial period of Qianlong were rich in subject matter and style, with alluring colors and succinct brush strokes and ink passages. It was a great beginning for the new reign.

II

The second stage of development lasted from 1752 to 1775. Change in personnel is the major reason that accounts for the change in style, or styles, during this period. In addition, as Emperor Qianlong entered his forties, his taste in painting turned toward the realm of ideas (*'yijing'*). While some of the older painters survived, including Lang Shining, Zou

Yigui, Dong Bangda, Yu Xing, Li Shizhuo, Zhang Tingyan and Ding Guanpeng, recruitment of new talents, such as Zhang Zongcang and Jin Tingbiao, made the critical difference.

Landscape Painting

In 1751 Qianlong made a tour of the South and was presented with paintings by Zhang Zongcang, who was then given a place in the academy. Zhang's entrance on the scene gave landscape painting a new thrust. A pure landscapist, Zhang Zongcang derived his style from Huang Ding and ultimately from Wang Yuanqi. As can be observed from his painting, *View of Mt Lingyan* (Figure 6), his art is closely aligned with Wang's, in form and in spirit. He also reveals a fondness for describing mountain and rock forms with alternating dry and wet *cun* strokes and for controlled ink tones. Overall the landscape form displays a textured and tempered richness, and is as exalted as it is unique. In short, Zhang was able to sweep away the saccharin-sweetness that had permeated the academy, while finding personal favor with the emperor. The latter had embarked on a study of the Yuan masters such as Ni Zan and Huang Gongwang, the very backbone of Wang Yuanqi's, and by extension, Zhang Zongcang's art. In theory too, Zhang's repeated emphasis on the role of spirit consonance, or *qiyun*, agreed with Qianlong's idea thus gaining the latter's respect.

Zhang was active at the Qianlong court for five years, and his works are numerous. The majority of them received Qianlong's inscriptions, lauding the painter's accomplishment. The following is typical:

Others paint through rules;
Zongcang's painting personifies reason.
Peerless, so it seems, among the modern,
He is perhaps a match for the ancients.
Huang the Fool, and Ni the Aloof:
Out from these two,
The divine marrow he drew.²¹

Zhang's art had a profound influence on the academy after he passed away. A number of painters followed his style, the most notable being Fang Cong and Wang Bing. A comparison between Fang's *Clearing Snow in Bamboo Grove*²² and Wang's *View of the Tianping Mountains*²³ is a study in contrast: the former massive and awesome, and the latter refined and moistened. Each captured a facet of Zhang's art. In general, however, Fang Cong's painting bears a closer resemblance to that of the master, and Qianlong, while fond of both men's art, was partial toward Fang's.



Figure 4. Ding Guanpeng, *Spring Market in Time of Peace*, detail. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.





Figure 5. Jin Kun, Lu Zhan, Cheng Zhidao and Wu Gui, *Spring Dawn at the Han Palace*, dated 1738, detail. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.





Figure 6. Zhang Zongcang, *View of Mt Lingyan*. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

Another artist active at this time whose art shared the laurels with Zhang Zongcang was Qian Weicheng. Qian's *Panoramic View of Mt Qixia*²⁴ closely resembles Zhang's *View of the Mt Lingyan* (Figure 6), and can be considered as one of the finest examples of rendering from real sceneries at that time.



Figure 7. Jin Tingbiao, *The Duet of Immortal Flutes*. Collection of the National Palace Museum. Taiwan, Republic of China.

A new style of painting was introduced to the academy with the entrance of Jin Tingbiao (after 1762). Jin excelled in both landscape and figure painting. His landscapes combine elements from the Southern Song academy and the Zhe school, but especially prominent is influence from Tang Yin's art. In his *The Duet of Immortal Flutes* (Figure 7), a fine network of small axe-cut *cun* helps to build up the composition. Other works normally show abbreviated and animated brush strokes, with light colors added later. In terms of clarity and succinctness of tone, they stand at the opposite pole of Zhang Zongcang, who is known chiefly for his sombre resonance. Jin died in 1768, but due to imperial favor, his art found currency within the academy. The many followers of his style included Jia Quan, whose *Odes to the Plum Blossoms*²⁵ is a fine example of a disciple's work.



Figure 8. Jin Tingbiao, *Children at Play*. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

Figure Painting

Because the aging Lang Shining and Ding Guanpeng were still active during this period, the approach to figure painting that combined East and West remained popular. One representative work is Xie Sui's *Foreign Tributaries*.²⁶ Outside of this, the most notable achievement in figure painting came from the hand of Jin Tingbiao. Like his landscapes, Jin's figure painting shares the same traits of being immaculate and untrammelled. He used the trembling and angular brush strokes to create figures in a simple and abbreviated mode, while instilling in them a sense of vitality and liveliness. His subjects, like *Children at Play* (Figure 8), were carefully chosen for their expressive potential, and his paintings consistently earned the praise from Qianlong, who said of him:

It's not hard to paint,
But hard to capture the spirit.
Be it fine or coarse style,
[He] rises above the ordinary.
Truly, he is without compare....²⁷

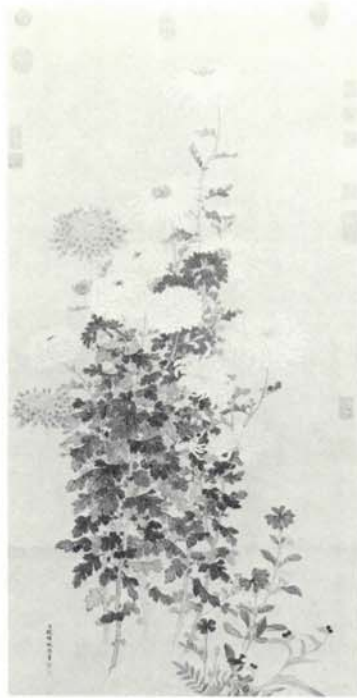


Figure 9. Qian Weicheng,
Chrysanthemums. Collection of the
National Palace Museum, Taiwan,
Republic of China.

Flower and Bird

In 'flower and bird' painting, the style that combined the boneless technique, life-drawing, with the Western modelling by means of light and dark, continued to dominate the academy. Moreover, it pushed skill and refinement to a degree hitherto unknown. Qian Weicheng's *Chrysanthemums* (Figure 9) is an excellent example of such artistry where the petals and leaves multiply and overlap, reaching the ultimate in sensuousness. Another example is Li Bingde's *Album of Flowers, Fruits, Fishes and Birds: After Zhang Wei*.²⁸

In summary, Qianlong's academy took a large step toward maturation in this second period, the result of technical and conceptual advances. The Emperor's love for Jin Tingbiao's landscape and figure paintings was such that he chose Jin, in place of Lang Shining, to use the traditional technique and style associated with Li Gonglin to paint *The Eight Horses*. This portended, within the academy, the gradual decline of the trend favoring East and West synthesis and the gradual awakening of a movement toward archaistic revival. At the same time, a concurrent tendency toward simplification was also observable in a number of paintings done during this phase.

III

The third stage lasted from 1776 to 1795. It seems that, once he entered his sixties, Emperor Qianlong shifted his interest from painting to jade, ceramics and carved objects. Though he continued to pursue connoisseurship in painting, he was markedly less devoted than in the past. By a natural process, the great heights of achievement reached by the academy in the previous periods faded from sight, and a state of decline set in. Although a large number of painters were still being employed in the academy, and all categories of paintings were still being practiced, the resultant paintings tended toward formalization, their content devoid of interest, the brushwork standardized and the size of the paintings increasingly small. While the artists competed in the album format, this work could no longer compare with the breadth and grandeur of the previous phases.

Landscape Painting

In landscape painting, works which received imperial favor show an excess of refinement while lacking in force. Such is the case with Dong Gao's *Illustration to Imperial Poem: 'After the Snow Fall'* (Figure 10); Guan Huai's *Landscape in Snow*,²⁹ Hu Gui's album, *Autumn Scenes*³⁰; Feng Ning's album, *Landscape of Four Seasons*,³¹ and other works of the period. Moreover, it is evident that the stylistic affiliation has turned away from Wang Yuanqi and Wang Meng to Wang Hui.

Flower and Bird

It can be observed that, in flower paintings by artists such as Dong Gao,³² Wang Chengpei,³³ and Cheng Lin,³⁴ the boneless technique, while still being practiced, has lost that exquisite touch. In bird and animal painting, He Chingtai, or Louis de Poirot,³⁵ could still carry on the legacy of Lang Shining with a degree of success. Moreover, Yang Dazhang's *White Hawk* shows how a traditional composition could be used on an equally traditional theme but with new results (Figure 11). Other works, such as Zhang Kai's *The Potted Osmanthus*³⁶ and Shen Shijie's *Lotuses*,³⁷ show the pursuit of realism to an extreme degree, resulting however in a loss of emotive power.

Figure Painting

Figure painting was particularly weak, with no one to replace the great masters of the first two stages. One group pursued traditional styles and themes, as exemplified by Men Yingzhao's album illustrating *Lisao* (Figure 12) as supplement to Xiao Yuncong's rendition of the same theme, and Li Ming's *The Six Worthies of the Bamboo Stream*³⁸ after Jin Tingbiao.



Figure 10. Dong Gao, *Illustrations to the Imperial Poem: 'After the Snow Fall'*, dated 1774. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.



Figure 11. Yang Dazhang, *White Hawk*. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.



Figure 12. Meng Yinzhao, *Album Illustrating the Lisao*, detail. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

Another school favored contemporary subjects, such as Xu Liangbiao's *Beauty under Banana Plants*.³⁹ Works such as this underscore the character of the age by bringing fashionably adorned beauties into the pictorial sphere. For the viewer, it also brought a new kind of appeal beyond the commonplace.

In summary, the painting academy during the Qianlong reign established a new standard for realism in Chinese painting, with a unique style characterized by classical and elegant brushwork. Especially notable was the introduction of Western painting techniques which infused new life into the traditional modes. Unfortunately, this new style of painting came to a halt with the end of the reign, only to be revived in the beginning of the Republic period. If in the past the literati's view toward art contributed toward a negative image of the academy, this should be carefully re-evaluated today.