

THE GRANDEUR OF ART DURING THE QING

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SCHOOLS OF ART DURING THE QING DYNASTY

Art during the Qing dynasty was dominated by three major groups of artists. The first, sometimes called "the Individualists," was a group of men largely made up of loyalists to the fallen Ming dynasty. The Individualists referred to themselves as "leftover subjects of the Ming" and practiced a very personal form of art that sought to express their reaction to the Manchu conquest -- either a sense of resistance, reclusion, or sadness over the fall of the Ming dynasty. They often removed themselves not only from government circles but also from society, often by becoming Buddhist monks. The Individualists sought to express in their art their own feelings regarding the fall of the Ming dynasty and the conquest of China by a group of people whom they regarded as barbarians. These artists focused particularly on the expressive potential of painting and sought not to emulate past models so much as to use poetry, painting, and calligraphy in ways that would express their feelings of defiance and loss over the fall of the Ming dynasty. [\[Read more about "the Individualists" at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History.\]](#)

A second group of Qing artists included those men who dedicated themselves to the preservation of Chinese traditional culture by returning to the careful study of a canon of earlier masters that had been defined in the 17th century. Their commitment to replicating and being inspired by this earlier canon of masterpieces led to the labeling of these artists as "the Orthodox school." The Orthodox masters made a point of first imitating these established earlier models and then trying to incorporate these stylistic traditions into their own work. They often created albums of paintings wherein each leaf would be devoted to the exposition of a specific earlier style. In this way, a particular album would demonstrate an individual's command over a whole range of earlier stylistic traditions. [\[Read more about traditionalists and "the Orthodox school" at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History.\]](#)

A third group of Qing artists included commercial and court artists who specialized in large-scale decorative works. Such artists were employed by the imperial court to produce documentary, commemorative, and decorative works for the imperial palaces. Masters of technique, these artists drew upon the representational styles of the Song dynasty, when meticulously descriptive painting techniques were highly revered. [\[Read more about professional and court artists at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History.\]](#)

The Chinese Literati

In China, the literate elite were often referred to as the "literati." The literati were the gentry class, composed of individuals who passed the civil service exams (or those for whom this was the major goal in life) and who were both the scholarly and governmental elite of the society. The literati also prided themselves on their mastery of calligraphy. Often, as an adjunct to calligraphy, they were also able to paint. During the Qing dynasty, both the Individualists and the Orthodox school masters came from this elite scholar class.

The Scholar-Artists

The Individualist and Orthodox masters were proficient scholars who often embellished their paintings with poetry. These men were part of a long-standing tradition of the "scholar-artist" that had existed in China as far back as the 11th century. Members of the educated elite, also called the "literati," had already taken possession of calligraphy -- the art of writing -- as a form of self-expression. But by the 11th century, they began to apply the aesthetic principles of calligraphic brushwork to painting. They began by painting subjects that could be depicted easily with the brush techniques that they had mastered in the art of calligraphy, such as bamboo, rocks, and pine trees. This approach to subject matter set scholar-artists apart from commercial artists, who pursued a more representational manner.

Wang Hui and the Orthodox School of Painting

It was a stroke of genius on the part of the Kangxi Emperor to enlist the foremost Orthodox school master, Wang Hui (1632-1717), to direct the painting of the monumental *Southern Inspection Tour* scrolls, the execution of which was sure to be an enormous challenge. Wang Hui was one of the leading artists of the time and an acknowledged master at creating long landscape compositions in the handscroll format. Furthermore, his selection immediately identified the Qing court with China's most revered artistic traditions.

CHINESE APPROACHES TO THE WORK OF ART

Personal Expression Valued Over "Realism"

Although "realistic" painting in the European style was very much in vogue at the Qing court, where it was appreciated for its documentary value in commemorating the Qianlong Emperor's exploits, it was not regarded as "high art." The Chinese and their Manchu rulers held to the belief that the highest form of pictorial expression was traditional Chinese painting, which privileged the personal expression of the individual artist over the representation of external appearances. Since the 14th century what mattered most in Chinese painting was the artist's ability to express his personal feelings -- to create an image of his interior world -- rather than to describe the external appearances of things. As a result, most Chinese painting connoisseurs regarded the European style as little more than a gimmick.

The Importance of Poetry for Artists and Connoisseurs

Chinese literati artists often wrote poems directly on their paintings. This practice emphasized the importance of both poetry and calligraphy to the art of painting and also highlighted the notion that a painting should not try to represent or imitate the external world, but rather to express or reflect the inner state of the artist. The artist's practice of writing poetry directly on the painting also led to the custom of later appreciators of the work -- perhaps the initial recipient of the painting or a later owner -- adding their own reactions to the work, often also in the form of poetry. These inscriptions could be added either directly on the surface of the painting, or sometimes on a sheet of paper mounted adjacent to the painting. In this way some handscrolls accommodated numerous colophons by later owners and admirers. Thus in Chinese art the act of ownership entailed the responsibility of not only caring for the work properly, but to a certain extent also recording one's response to it. [\[Read about Li Gonglin, the Song dynasty painter who](#)

[gave form to the ideal of painting as a reflection of the artist's mind and an expression of deeply held values, at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History.\]](#)

The Work of Art as a Dialogue with the Past: The Role of Owners and Connoisseurs

One of the most extraordinary characteristics of Chinese painting is that, in a way, a painting is never quite finished. What does this mean? Just as the artists themselves used poetry as a medium of expression in painting, later appreciators of a painting felt free to add to it by writing a poem in response to the work, or sometimes just adding a personal seal, directly on the surface of the painting or to the silk mounting bordering the painting. In this way a painting remains "open-ended," and viewing a painting is like engaging in an ongoing conversation, not only with the artist, but with all the people who have in the past owned the work and have recorded their response to it. And through this visual record, a painting's provenance can be traced, so that literally written on the surface of the painting is the very history of who owned it, how people over time have appreciated it, and how different eras saw its merits in a different light. When a connoisseur looks at a painting today, he or she not only examines the work, but takes great delight in seeing which other collectors owned it, and what some of these owners and other commentators have had to say about it.

Classifications of Pictorial Space in Chinese Painting

Pictorial space in Chinese painting is defined somewhat differently from the foreground, middle ground, and background typically found in traditional Western painting. In *Scroll Three of the Kangxi Inspection Tour* series, three distinct classifications of pictorial space, as defined by the 11th-century artist Guo Xi, can be seen in the artist's treatment of the mountains: "From the bottom of the mountain looking up toward the top, this is called 'high distance' (*gaoyuan*). From the front of the mountain peering into the back of the mountain, this is called 'deep distance' (*shenyuan*). From a nearby mountain looking past distant mountains, this is called 'level distance' (*pingyuan*)."
-- From Guo Xi and Guo Si, *Lin quan gao zhi* (Lofty Ambitions in Forests and Streams), in Yu Jianhua, ed., *Zhongguo hualun leibian* (Compendium of essays on Chinese paintings)

REPRESENTING SPACE AND THE EXTERNAL WORLD

The painters of the Qing dynasty were inheritors of a tradition that was already more than a thousand years old. By the 13th century, Chinese artists had mastered the illusion of recession in space. But after this time, the representation of space and the description of the external world gradually ceased to be the principal objective of artists. Working on a flat surface -- such as a canvas or a scroll -- an artist faces the challenge of creating the illusion of three-dimensional forms on a two-dimensional surface. This is a problem for which artists both in the East and the West found solutions, but their solutions were very different. European painting after the 15th century tended to treat a painting as though the canvas were a window through which an illusionistic three-dimensional scene could be viewed; Chinese painting created the experience of space by means of a moving perspective that allowed the viewer's eye to explore the pictorial space from a shifting vantage point, so that, in the case of a long handscroll such as those chronicling an emperor's journey, space is experienced through the continuous unrolling of the work.

The Qianlong Emperor: Collector and Connoisseur

The Qianlong Emperor was an avid collector and connoisseur of Chinese art, and the number of paintings and artifacts collected during his reign was unprecedented. Many palace halls were used specifically for the Emperor to admire and study works of art. The Qianlong Emperor had a tendency to admire the works he collected and commissioned by adding a great number of seals and inscriptions -- usually in the form of poems -- to the works. In so doing, the emperor not only endowed these works of art with the imperial imprimatur but also, by leaving his mark on some of the most important works of Chinese art, asserted his control over Chinese culture and his legitimacy as the ultimate connoisseur of Chinese art. Often he must have had ghost writers helping him inscribe these poems, but he did write many of them himself. In fact, the Qianlong Emperor is said to have composed some 40,000 poems, and many of them are inscribed on the enormous collection of paintings amassed during his reign. As a result, the Qianlong Emperor's inscriptions and seals appear on hundreds of the most important Chinese paintings that exist today.

European Approaches to Representing Space

In the West, in Greco-Roman times and again in the Renaissance, artists created the illusion of spatial depth on a flat surface through the use of linear perspective, which meant that implied parallel lines were drawn to intersect at an imaginary point on the horizon called the "vanishing point," and all forms were rendered in scale and positioned to correspond to these guiding lines. As a result, there is a kind of geometric logic to the composition in Western painting, and the viewing frame (which can be seen all at once, unlike in a Chinese handscroll painting) was experienced as a kind of "window" onto another world. [\[See an etching that uses linear perspective, by the 18th-century Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi, on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History.\]](#)

Chinese Approaches to Representing Space

Chinese artists' approach to the problem of representing spatial depth on a flat surface is quite different from that of their Western counterparts. In fact, the very formats that are used in Chinese painting -- particularly the long handscroll -- have an impact on how pictorial space itself is conceptualized in the Chinese painting tradition. Imagine unrolling a scroll painting, for instance, from right to left as one would in viewing a Chinese painting. The scroll may be as long as 60, 70, or even 80 feet, so it is impossible to see much more than a small section of the entire painting at once. And in fact, the work was not meant to be seen all at once. Unlike a traditional Western painting, which is contained within a distinct frame, a painting on a long scroll that has to be unrolled section by section would not make sense visually if it were composed with a technique such as linear perspective, which depends on the use of a single, fixed vanishing point. In a long scroll, the viewer controls the boundaries of the viewing frame at any single moment, and the pictorial space unfolds as the viewer unrolls the scroll. In this way, the handscroll format requires that the pictorial space remain fluid. As in traditional Western compositions, there is a foreground, a middle ground, and a far distance, but the artist continuously shifts the focus of the composition so that the viewer's apparent vantage point is constantly changing, enabling him or her to easily navigate the pictorial space unhindered by the constraints of a fixed vanishing point.

INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN ARTISTIC STYLES ON CHINESE PAINTING

Beginning in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, European Jesuit missionaries began to enter China and serve at the imperial court. Many of these missionaries brought engravings, illustrated books, and paintings with them and it was through these visual materials that the Chinese were first introduced to Western linear perspective and the use of shading to model forms as if they were illuminated by a single light source (called "chiaroscuro," an Italian word literally meaning "light-dark"). [\[See a charcoal drawing that uses chiaroscuro shading, by the 15th-century Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci, on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Timeline of Art History.\]](#) The Chinese were impressed with the Europeans' techniques for creating the illusion of recession on a flat pictorial surface. This was particularly true in court circles, where emperors quickly realized the extent to which this new style of painting could serve well to commemorate and document their activities in a way that would be all the more powerful and convincing because of its realism. It is important to note, however, that even as "realistic" painting in the European style was very much in vogue at the Qing court, where it was appreciated for its documentary value, it was never regarded as "high art." Chinese art had long moved away from a representational style to one that privileged the personal expression of the individual artist over the representation of external appearances of nature.

Comparing the Kangxi and Qianlong Tour Scrolls: The Influence of Giuseppe Castiglione and the European Style

One Jesuit artist in particular, Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) -- who served under three Qing emperors (including the Kangxi Emperor and his grandson, the Qianlong Emperor) and even had a Chinese name, Lang Shining -- had a major impact on documentary painting at the Qing court. The Qianlong Emperor's *Southern Inspection Tour* scrolls were not painted by Castiglione, but the influence of his style is clearly evident and becomes especially salient when the Qianlong Emperor's tour scrolls are compared to the Kangxi Emperor's tour scrolls, which were painted about 70 years earlier.

The Qianlong Emperor's tour scrolls were begun in 1764 by the court artist Xu Yang (act. ca. 1750-after 1776), who was very much influenced by the European traditions of perspective and figural representation. Wang Hui, who began the Kangxi Emperor's tour scrolls in 1691, was one of the foremost painters of the Orthodox School, whose members dedicated themselves to the preservation of Chinese traditional culture by returning to the careful study of a canon of earlier Chinese masters. Thus, it is not surprising to compare the two sets of scrolls and find that they differ radically in their approach to the representation of space and the treatment of figures. A telling example is the comparison of two specific scrolls, the seventh scroll in the Kangxi Emperor's tour series and the sixth scroll in the Qianlong Emperor's tour series, which both feature the Grand Canal and the city of Suzhou.

In the Kangxi scroll, Wang Hui's figures are painted in a stylized, almost cartoon-like style that gives them a tremendous amount of buoyancy and expressive energy. The figures in the Qianlong scroll, on the other hand, are handled in a more European style and are anatomically more accurate, but they look stiff and posed, as though they are frozen in space and time. Xu Yang's figures are more three-dimensional in their representation, and therefore more "realistic" than their counterparts by Wang Hui, but, paradoxically, they actually seem to have less animation and life than Wang Hui's figures.

A comparison of the two artists' approaches to the representation of space in the tour scrolls reveals the limitations of translating the European style to the Chinese scroll format. Influenced by the Western technique of linear perspective, Xu Yang strives in the sixth Qianlong scroll to maintain a consistent vantage point in his representations of the Grand Canal and the route of the Qianlong Emperor into Suzhou. The Canal is presented as though the viewer were always looking from the east toward the west. But in order to maintain the consistency of this viewpoint, Xu Yang had to present Tiger Hill, one of the scenic highlights on this leg of the tour route, from the back rather than from the front, which would have been its characteristic and thus, more recognizable, view. In the seventh Kangxi scroll, on the other hand, Wang Hui had no problem reorienting the mountain to present it from its more characteristic frontal view, which is precisely the way a Chinese map maker would visualize a mountain. Xu Yang, in trying to maintain a consistent reference point based on linear perspective, could not reorient the mountain suddenly and show it from the other side. So again, as with the treatment of figures, the commitment to pictorial realism in fact became a limitation to the artist in significant ways. Though the European style added a certain kind of illusionary realism to the depiction of Qianlong's southern inspection tour, it could be argued that it also detracted from one of the most important functions of these scrolls as historical documents, which was to highlight the significance of the emperor's visit to important sites (such as Tiger Hill and the Grand Canal). [\[INTERACTIVE: See a detailed comparison of Wang Hui and Xu Yang's approaches to the representation of space in the inspection tour scrolls.\]](#)

CHINESE ART IN EUROPE: PORCELAIN

One of the most important Chinese exports to Europe in the 17th century was porcelain, which had been invented in China about 1,000 years earlier. As European demand for Chinese porcelain grew (in part because European ceramic centers at this time did not possess the technical knowledge required to manufacture porcelain), porcelain from China, and later Japan, was by the 1630s flooding the Europe market. The Dutch alone were importing more than one million pieces per year. But in the 1680s, the Kangxi Emperor reasserted imperial control over the kilns at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi (an area renowned for having the finest clay and for producing porcelain fit for an emperor), and the export of Chinese porcelain to Europe came to a halt for a period of time. This interruption in supply led in part to renewed attempts at ceramic centers across Europe to unlock the "secret" to Chinese porcelain, which did happen eventually but not until early in the 18th century. Prior to this time Europeans could only copy the look of Chinese porcelain models and keep working to duplicate the translucent quality of Chinese porcelain.

Today the term "Made in China" has gained a somewhat negative connotation as something that's an inexpensive imitation of "the real thing." Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, however, the situation was quite the other way around when it came to porcelain. The European ceramics centers were far less sophisticated in their manufacturing techniques, and Chinese decorative arts had a huge influence on European tastes during this time.

Porcelain Production in China

The manufacture of porcelain in China evolved over time into a highly specialized set of related crafts that together formed an entire industry. There were those who specialized in mining kaolin clay, others whose specialty was to mix the raw clay with other materials to create the particular mixture used for porcelain, and still others who actually shaped the objects, others who fired them, and still others whose specialty it was to paint and decorate the final pieces. As demand continued to increase, porcelain production in China began to resemble a highly specialized, mass-production-style industry. A common view of the industrial revolution as it occurred in England in the 1750s is that the burgeoning textile industry was a key contributor to the complex interaction of various socioeconomic developments that led to that phenomenon; mentioned less often is the possibility that the porcelain industry, as it evolved in China, may have also contributed to this development.