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Yuan Ming Yuan The Garden of Absolute Clarity and Imperial Peking, The Last Days

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LOT 1312

AN IMPORTANT IMPERIAL PAINTING "OVERCOMING OF THE ISLE OF JIUFU AND OTHER STRATEGIC PASSES" FROM THE SET OF TWENTY PAINTINGS OF THE CAMPAIGN OF THE VICTORIES OVER THE TAIPING, 1886-1890 BY QINGKUAN (FL. LATE 19TH CENTURY) ET. AL.

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**QING DYNASTY, GUANGXU PERIOD**

800,000—1,000,000 HKD

Lot Sold. Hammer Price with Buyer's Premium: 5,031,500 HKD

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MEASUREMENTS**measurements note**

painting: 135 by 284cm., 53 1/8 by 111 7/8 in. colophon: 135 by 284cm., 53 1/8 by 111 7/8 in.

DESCRIPTION

ink and colour on silk, framed

one painting from a set of twenty, depicting the victorious battle of General Bao Chao and his troops over the Taiping army, thereby taking control of Jiufu Island and two forts of Jiangpu and Pukou, accompanied by a long colophon describing of the battles and naming various military leaders of the Imperial Army including Zeng Guofan and General Bao Chao

PROVENANCE

Removed from the Ziguangge, Zhongnanhai, Beijing, 1900.

CATALOGUE NOTE

The present painting belongs to a set of twenty paintings depicting commemorative battle scenes between the Qing Imperial Army and the rebel forces of the Taiping Heavenly Army. The Taiping Rebellion, led by Hong Xiuquan, an unorthodox Christian convert, was a large scale revolt against the authority and forces of the Qing government between 1850 and 1871. The scene depicted on this painting is the battle led by General Bao Chao of the Imperial Army, in June 1863, to take control of Jiufu Island and the two strategic forts of Jiangpu and Pukou. Following the defeat of the Taiping Army in this battle, Qing forces were able to secure control of the entire northern shores of the Yangtze River and thus depriving the rebel forces of strategic points around the Taiping capital of Nanjing. The capture of Nanjing in February 1864, marked the destruction of the Taiping government, although it was not until 1871 that the last Taiping rebel army surrendered and the Taiping Rebellion finally came to an end.

As can be seen from the painting, soldiers in the Taiping Heavenly Army typically wore a uniform of red jackets and blue trousers and grew their hair long. Ethnically they belonged to the Hakka from the South

and the Zhuang, a non-Han ethnic minority of Tai origin, as well as Han Chinese that included many women. Socially they were from the lowest class, many of whom were former miners and peasants. The Taiping Army's strength was their organization, brutality and their fanaticism. The facial expressions of the soldiers depicted in this painting suggest that they were a force to reckon with. The Imperial Army, as seen depicted, was made up of regular soldiers under the different banners, regional militias and foreign mercenaries. There was also an elite army called the 'Ever Victorious Army' (*chang sheng jun*) consisting of soldiers trained in Western military techniques and tactics under the command of Frederick Townsend Ward, and after his death by Charles George Gordon, known as 'Chinese' Gordon. One of the strongest and most famous imperial forces was the Xiang Army led by Zeng Guofan, who is credited for the suppression of this long and bloody rebellion. Zeng was made a Marquis of the first class with the designation *yi yung*. The text accompanying the present painting mentions Zeng as the chief commander of this battle. It is known that in fact it was his younger brother, Zeng Guoquan, and General Bao Chao, who led the imperial forces to victory. However, Zeng was of higher ranking and a name that everyone recognized.

According to Hongxing Zhang in 'Studies in Late Qing Dynasty Battle Paintings', *Artibus Asiae*, vol. LX, no. 2, 2000, p. 268, and also in the Beijing Palace Museum Journal, *Gugong buwuyuan yuankan*, no.2, 2001, the Guangxu Emperor (r. 1875-1908) in 1885 initiated a painting project to commemorate the government victory over the three major rebellions, the Taiping Rebellion, the Nian Rebellion, and the Muslim Rebellions of the nineteenth century. Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) approved the proposal for the paintings in 1886 and a decree was sent to the Painting Workshop, in *Shenyijing* (Beijing Field Forces) in the Forbidden City, to carry out the work immediately. Qingkuan, a bannerman belonging to the Plain Yellow Banner from the clan of Zhaojia and Director of the Three Agencies in the *Neiwufu* (Imperial Household Department), was appointed as director of this major imperial art project. In total sixty-seven paintings were made, twenty for the Taiping War, eighteen for the Nian Rebellion, twelve for the Muslim Rebellion in Yunnan and Yuizhou and seventeen for the Muslim Rebellion in the northwest borders.

Zhang *ibid.* p. 269, notes that a colophon by a certain Wang Yu on a landscape painting by Qingkuan, mentions that the painting project was completed in 1890 and the paintings were made for the Ziguangge (Hall of Purple Splendour) in Beijing. Ziguangge, a two-storey building on the western shores of the Central Lake in Zhongnanhai, located west of the Forbidden City, was where the Qianlong emperor (1736-1795) received envoys from foreign countries and where he gave banquets to celebrate the victories of his ten military campaigns. It was also where war trophies such as banners and weapons were displayed and portrait paintings of the meritorious banner officers as well as battle scene paintings were hung. Di Chuqing in *Pingdengge biji* (Notebook of the Pingdeng Studio), Shanghai, n.d., n.p., records his visit to the Ziguangge in the summer of 1900, and describes how paintings depicting the victory of the Nian and Muslim Rebellions were still hanging on the walls on the ground floor.

Only a very small number of paintings of the original sixty-seven have survived. A complete set of twelve paintings depicting scenes of the Muslim Rebellion in Yunnan and Yuizhou are in the Palace Museum, Beijing, of which one is illustrated in Zhang, *op.cit.*, fig. 5; one painted with the Tongcheng battle scene of the Taiping War, in the Cecile McTaggart Collection, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, but lacking the accompanying text, is included *ibid.* fig. 1; two paintings of the Nian Rebellion, in the National Gallery, Prague are illustrated *ibid.*, fig. 2-3; and one painted with the battle of Weihe from the Muslim Rebellion in the northwest borders, from the Royal Collection at Sandringham House, Norfolk, is illustrated *ibid.*, fig. 4. The paintings in Prague and Norfolk all lack the accompanying text.

Two paintings, possibly depicting battles from the Taiping War, were sold at Christie's London, 22nd April 1991, lot 101, without the descriptive text of the battles; and one possibly depicting a battle scene between the Qing army and Nianfei at Yingzhou of Anhui province in 1863, was included in the *Summer Exhibition 2000*, Roger Keverne, London, 2000, cat.no. 132.