

Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire, 1796-1911

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(Fig. 1) Battle Scene from the Taiping Rebellion
Anonymous court artists, 2nd half of the 19th century
Wall-mounted painting, ink and colour on silk
Height 135.9 cm, width 307.3 cm
Cemac Limited

The last hundred years of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) have been looked upon as a time of tumultuous political change; a period when China was forced into submission by foreign powers, and a series of rebellions, culminating in the revolution of 1911, brought imperial rule to an end. Despite the wrenching political and social problems of the time, however, painting flourished. At the court in Beijing, in the old cities of Hangzhou and Suzhou, and in the new commercial towns of Shanghai and Canton (Guangzhou), painters enriched old traditions and established new approaches that reflected the tastes and interests of a changing society. The exhibition, *Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire, 1796-1911*, has been organized in an attempt to initiate a deeper understanding of painting in this period.

Previous studies of the development during the nineteenth century of the arts in China have tended to be overly-influ-

enced by the perception of the period as one of political turmoil. Art historians in their eagerness to interpret this subject in the light of political and social change have often ignored aesthetic considerations. Furthermore, attempts to categorize the painting of the period as either tradition-bound or commercialized have deflected attention away from the lively and complex painting styles. The urge to find the seeds of modern revolution in the art of the nineteenth century has also distorted the interpretation of the work of late Qing artists, sometimes leading to a one-dimensional evaluation of their painting. The purpose of this article is to revise the position of nineteenth century Chinese painting within the period's political and social contexts.

The Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95), who devoted great energy to his own painting and poetry, took imperial patronage to its apogee in the eighteenth century. However, by the end of his reign, court sponsorship of the arts had

already begun to decrease. His successors, the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796-1820) and the Daoguang emperor (r. 1821-50), were faced with a critical depletion of the imperial treasury's reserves, and instituted reforms reducing court expenditure. The vast literary and historical projects instigated by the court in the eighteenth century had gathered in Beijing scholars from all over China to work on the compilation and standardization of texts for massive compendia. As court sponsorship of such projects dwindled, fewer scholars gathered in the capital, and scholarship took on a more regional character. Painting still flourished among the literati at the fringes of the court, such as Yao Yuanzhi (1776-1852), but a decentralizing trend was clearly underway.

Court commissions continued, nevertheless, for palace decorations and commemorative paintings, such as an impressive series of battle scenes (Fig. 1) commissioned to commemorate victo-



(Fig. 2) Detail of *Longing to Travel*, dated 1823
 Qian Du (1763-1844)
 Handscroll, ink and colour on paper
 Height 30.8 cm, length 114.9 cm
 Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona



(Fig. 3) Detail of *Dreaming of Flowers*, dated 1807
 Zhai Jichang (1770-1820)
 Handscroll, ink and colour on paper
 Height 29.2 cm, total length 262.5 cm
 Howard and Mary Ann Rogers collection, Kamakura, Japan

ries of the Qing armies during the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64). The paintings, however, were executed in a style that was developed at the court almost a century earlier. Under the Empress Dowager, Cixi (1835-1908), court patronage did enjoy a revival. Cixi, perhaps thinking of the precedent set by the Qianlong emperor, turned to painting as an erudite pastime. Although Cixi's own paintings have received attention recently, less consideration has been given to works by artists who were commissioned by the court during those years. Cixi revived the practice of documenting grand court occasions in painting with the commission of a series of nine oversized albums depicting the marriage celebrations in 1889 for the Guangxu emperor (r. 1875-1908). Were it not for the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) which caused the cancellation of Cixi's sixtieth birthday celebration in 1894, she no doubt would have commissioned paintings of that occasion as well. After the Boxer Rebellion (1900-01),

Cixi often gave paintings by court artists, with her seal and signature attached, to foreign dignitaries as part of her efforts to secure foreign support.

The Qing court recruited its artists and scholars during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the cities of the lower Yangtze river (Changjiang) delta, which for centuries has been China's richest region in the cultural as well as the material sense. With the decline of court patronage, private sponsorship from these cities began to fill the void. In Hangzhou, the style of the Southern Song (1127-1279) painting academy was only a distant memory by the late Qing period, and landscape painters, such as Qian Du (1763-1844), borrowed little from this style, but drew heavily from the tradition of depicting the famous sites of the former imperial capital and the beautiful scenery of the nearby West lake. Qian's handscroll depicting a scholar drifting in a boat on West lake (Fig. 2) is one of a series of delicately coloured,

wistful travel scenes painted for a local literatus. Illustrations of gardens formed an important genre in painting. In Hangzhou, Suzhou and other cities, gardens served as retreats where poetry composition, painting, calligraphy, music and tea-tasting were enjoyed. *Dreaming of Flowers* (Fig. 3), a handscroll by Zhai Jichang (1770-1820), is prefaced with an inscription by Wang Guozhen, the man depicted in the painting, in which he nostalgically describes his childhood spent in his father's garden, where once while napping he dreamed of being invited into the paradise of the immortals.

These works from the Yangtze river region painted in the early decades of the nineteenth century depict a world of literary and artistic accomplishment sheltered in well-tended gardens, a world which fades from view towards the middle of the century and is rarely glimpsed in the onslaught and aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion. The artists and patrons of these works rose above personal disappointments and political frustrations, but those of the second half of the century were faced with a series of national crises that precipitated the end of the empire. The occupation in the early 1850s by Taiping forces of the city of Zhenjiang (formerly Dantu) in Jiangsu province may have stunted altogether the development of a promising new style of painting that had been evolving in that city in the first half of the century. This unique style, practised by Zhang Yin (1761-1829) and Gu Haoqing (b. 1766) (Fig. 4), was not revived after Zhenjiang's liberation in the early 1860s by Qing forces.

The nineteenth century witnessed China's first direct confrontation with the West. During the Jiaqing period, trade with the West increased dramatically. The system of trade that had been in effect during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century became strained by the volume of traffic and the demands of the foreign traders. In the Daoguang period, opium traffic and the widespread addiction and corruption it fostered reached a level of crisis. The Chinese government's attempt to halt the illicit trade at Canton was met by British resistance and ultimately the invasions of the Opium War (1840-42). The resulting Treaty of Nanjing (1842) had far-reaching effects – the forced opening of new treaty ports, including Shanghai, and the surrender of Hong Kong to Britain. The

