

Artistic dissent in imperial China

When the Manchus Ruled China: Painting under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) at the Metropolitan Museum

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2 August 2002

When the Manchus Ruled China: Painting under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911): February 2, 2002—August 18, 2002 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

Most people think of the Manchu or Qing (pronounced Ching) Dynasty in China as a corrupt, tradition-bound absolute monarchy that fell long after it deserved to in the Revolution of 1911. This is no doubt true. Less attention, however, is paid to the establishment of this last imperial dynasty or the assessment of its cultural impact on China. The Manchu rule was certainly the dying breath of old China, but even the last gasp must have had a first inhalation.

The Manchus, originally known as the Jurchen, were a people living in what is now Northeast China. They spoke an Altaic language related to Mongol and Turkish, and still constitute a distinct ethnic group in China. By the end of the 16th century, groups of Jurchen living in a traditional society based on a hunting and herding economy were united by a charismatic leader and brilliant military tactician named Nurhaci. He conquered certain settled, agricultural populations of Jurchen and Chinese colonists, favoring members of the upper classes who accepted his rule. He renamed his people Manchus, established a written language, and founded his own dynasty, which his descendants called the Qing or “pure.” He died before he could realize his aim of conquering the Chinese Empire to the South, but his descendants made inroads on China’s spheres of influence, conquering Korea in 1637.

China itself had been ruled by the native Ming Dynasty. In a pattern found in more than one empire’s history, the Ming rulers had begun a slow decline after a vigorous foundation with the ousting of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in 1368. By the 1630s, civil society began to groan under economic strains, produced in part by the sudden inflow of silver exchanged for Chinese goods much in demand in Europe. In many regions, the peasants and urban poor had risen in rebellion.

By 1644, a peasant army, lead by a former postal employee named Li Zicheng, had occupied the capital of Beijing, and the last Ming emperor hanged himself. Ming generals, who had been dispatched to the northern frontier to check growing Manchu incursions, defected to the invaders. The Qing restored the upper classes to power, but took the monarchy for themselves and gave ethnic Manchus a privileged position in China.

The imperial court had been the cultural center of the empire throughout most of Chinese history. The emperor, his family and his officials patronized poets, philosophers and painters. The Qing court took on this role immediately, and artistic schools in the early years after the conquest can be understood in part by their relationship to the

new Qing and old Ming courts. The current exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York focuses on the three major groups of the early and middle Qing.

The Traditionalists attempted to continue the painting of the Ming court with Qing support and patronage. The Individualists were Ming loyalists exiled from the court after the Manchu conquest, and the Courtiers were the court painters of the Qing at its height, during the reigns of the Emperors Kangxi (r.1662-1722) and Qianglong (r.1736-95). The Museum’s exhibition notes and web site characterize these schools clearly, and it is easy for the viewer to understand the historical background, although there is little material that discusses Qing China as a social organism. Some discussion of the social status of Ming and Qing painters would have been useful as well.

Overall, the work of the Traditionalists exhibits the impetus provided by a new regime. One feels that to some artists the Manchus represented a fresh start, at least for individual careers, if not for Chinese society.

Among the Traditionalist works on display were some notable landscapes, especially the hand scroll in ink by Wang Yanqi (1642-1715) of Wang Wei’s *Wangchuan Villa* (hand scroll; ink on silk). Wang Wei was an almost legendary painter and poet who lived during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). He was regarded as the exemplar of the scholar-gentleman painter, who lived off a landed income, had connections at court, was loyal to his emperor and wrote about friendship. His villa was supposed to have been beautiful and to have represented the artistic life. Wang Yanqi painted what was really a small town contesting with and spreading over hills and mountains and waterways. There is a certain confidence and strength and a kind of utopian fairyland represented in this painting.

The several long scrolls of the Emperor Qianglong’s tour of the south are panoramic depictions of Chinese town life: there are crowded markets and fathers giving their children piggyback rides; lanterns shine and the details of boats’ prows are visible. The mass of people seem to be busy only because of the emperor, although we know that life goes on without him. But even when he is not visible, the emperor is clearly at the center of these paintings.

A sense of good order and harmony—for the imperial court—must have seemed a central aspect of the painting to contemporaries. Perhaps that is why it is difficult to pick out distinct social classes among the thousands of individual figures. But that absolutist sensibility has faded from our view—eradicated by subsequent historical development, including the Chinese Revolutions of the 20th century. What remains is a sense of the complexity of daily life in

early Qing China, and simply of masses of people; this is significant, too, because China's population would double under the Qing. The detail is also astonishing: one can even see smiles on the faces of the tiny figures.

The Individualists, however, steal the show. These painters conveyed the thoughts and feelings of those Ming loyalists, often former members of the imperial bureaucracy or of the imperial family, who could not accommodate themselves to the Manchu regime: the *yimin*, or "leftover subjects," as they called themselves. The *yimin* represented a distinct intellectual trend among educated Chinese for at least a generation into the Manchu rule. Those officials who refused to serve the Qing or whom the Qing exiled, were not severely persecuted (although the Qing would later kill and exile writers). But they often maintained a precarious existence, sometimes hiding, often wandering. It was only in the reign of Qianglong that Ming loyalists began to reconcile with the Qing court.

The subject matter of the Individualists is more-or-less traditional: landscapes, forests, rivers, animals and sometimes people, almost always of the scholar-gentry class. Nevertheless, a dense emotional disruption pervades many of these paintings, a feeling that the world is out of joint, that something is wrong or that there is a great tension in everything.

For example, Gong Xian's (1619-1689) *Sailing by Willows Laden with Wine* (hanging scroll; ink on paper), which depicts a ship sailing past willows on a riverbank in the barest outline. Here is world in which one has to work to see, in which everyday, simple things are almost invisible. Lines are subtle and ephemeral. Life seems to go on, but at a great distance. Gong never attained an official post, and appears to have been a commoner.

There is a tone of protest in the best work of the Individualists. This is certainly the case with the most artistically successful painters of the school: two minor members of the Ming imperial family, Bada Shanren, (1626-1705), the pseudonym of Zhu Dao, and the younger Shitao (1642-1707), whose real name was Zhu Ruoji.

Bada Shanren fled the Ming court in 1644 and spent the next twenty years living as a Buddhist monk, pretending to be mute. He painted directly from nature, without access to the art collections of the capital, an important resource for painters.

The exhibition notes tell us that he exploited the tension between abstract patterns and representationalism. Involved here is a truly astounding boiling down of the world to the essence of its shapes and motions. The notes call his *Fish and Rocks* (hanging scroll; ink on paper) "profoundly unsettling" and a few minutes of close observation confirms this view. Two rocks are set in the upper left and bottom right corners, painted only in outline, and would, as the notes remark, be unrecognizable without the fish. Six fish are shown from the side, but the seventh is shown from above, disorienting the viewer. The whole impression is one of discord within a scene, the impossibility of what exists.

There are feelings of removal and dislocation expressed through natural objects in his *Flowers, Birds, Bamboo, and Rocks* (album of eight paintings), in which the much smaller studies depict a world that is difficult to understand, though full of simplicity and grace when one does.

Nothing seems easy in Bada Shanren's world. There seems to be an organic protest against—but also a serious love for—life. Perhaps the most successful of his works, and even of the entire exhibition, is *Two Eagles* (hanging scroll; ink on paper), painted at the age of 76. Even to the American viewer, for whom the eagle can be a clichéd national

symbol, the two birds, painted in outline, with heavy brushstrokes on the wings, are full of power as they sit high in their aeries, defiant.

Shitao has many of the same virtues as Bada Shanren, but he paints with more complex implications; people appear more, and it is not always clear who and what they are.

I admired *Drunk in the Autumn Woods* (hanging scroll; ink and color on paper). Here through delicate, swaying trees, several small groups of men—presumably members of the scholar-gentry class—sit in the woods, sipping wine. The colors are soft pinks and oranges and a small bridge straddles a creek. There is a sense of relaxation but also of isolation. Why are the parties drinking apart from one another? Why do they seem to blend in with the woods? Isn't it possible to be jovial and converse in larger groups? There is simplicity everywhere. No canopies, no servants, only, presumably, friends and conversation loosened by alcohol.

Many of these paintings are accompanied, as was traditional, by poems written by the painters. *Drunk in the Autumn Woods* has lines that draw the viewer in: "Red trees fill the skies spreading fire through the heavens/I invite you, sir, to get very drunk on my black brushstrokes" (trans. Weng Fang).

The rest of the exhibition is either anticlimactic or a fitting end-frame for the Individualists. After a dissenting flush of beauty, there was a commercialism of prettiness in the Yanzhou school of paintings for sale. I enjoyed the strange and powerful *The Demon Queller Zhong Kui* by Gao Qipei (1672-1734), but most of the painting from this school has something cheap and gaudy about it.

Of the new generation of court-painters proper, Ming Tingxi (1699-1732), who worked under the Emperor Kangxi, painted two albums of still lives that have deep and refreshing colors and reveal an eye for humble detail. It is exciting to see very normal objects like fruit and seashells freshly, but there was no long yearning of the heart, no sense of internal struggle and conflict as with the Individualists. Social conditions, at least for the ruling groups, appear to have "normalized".

Another theme with which the exhibition ended was the inflow of Western sensibilities, especially as represented by the Italian Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), who introduced Chinese court artists to Western techniques of perspective and portraiture.

Unfortunately, the Metropolitan did not issue a pamphlet about the exhibition, and a small bookstand near the Chinese galleries did not have any book on the art of this period. This hardly tarnishes an amazing display of the artistic consequences of the Manchu conquest.

The exhibition's web page, which includes some images of the artists' work, can be accessed at the following address: <http://www.metmuseum.org/special/>



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