

Part I



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Court Painting

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Paintings made at court can be considered as a branch of the larger art of painting. This is the usual approach of art historians. In the Chinese art critical literature, especially from the Ming period on, literati artists were elevated above court artists, and this literature has had a pervasive influence on studies of Chinese painting. Typically, the court is treated as the most important patron of painting from antiquity into the Song period, but after the rise of literati painting, artists outside the court are seen as taking the lead and court painting becoming backward-looking. Scholars regularly highlight the political side of court painting and offer political interpretations of individual paintings.

Court painting can also be analyzed as an element in the court culture of a particular era. Thinking from the perspective of the court encourages us to ask how painting produced at court compared to other things produced there, such as poems, books, music, rituals, buildings, and so on. Did painting offer rulers something they could not get as easily other ways? How did the organization of court painting compare to the organization of literary projects or court rituals? Does an understanding of court politics explain why better paintings were made in one period rather than another? Did emperors' personal understanding or appreciation of painting make much of a difference, or was the institutional structure so sturdy that standards would be preserved even during the reigns of indifferent emperors?

In this chapter, I consider court painting from both perspectives. Most of the texts that deal with court painting frame it as part of the history of painting, but when other types of historical sources are also brought in, the court context can also be taken into consideration. Here, after providing a very brief chronological overview, I pursue a fuller understanding of Chinese court painting by looking more closely at one period—the Song dynasty—and at one central issue—the political side of court paintings.

It should be kept in mind that Chinese courts differed in important ways from the better-known courts in Europe. In the imperial period (roughly from 200 BCE to

1900 CE) upper-level officials were much more important at court than nobles. Those active at court included civil service officials serving in the capital, all of whom would participate in some court ceremonies and celebrations. Among officials, however, it was the higher-ranking ones, the couple dozen who met regularly with the emperor, who had the most influence at court. Over time, birth played a lesser role in determining who rose to high posts, so court society should not be thought of as aristocratic from Song times on. Political favor rather than birth distinguished those inside and outside of court, and who was in and who was out could change radically in a few years with a change of ruler or a change of policy. Princes and imperial relatives could be important elements in the makeup of court society, but this varied over time. For instance, imperial clansmen in Song times were compelled to stay in the capital and line up at major court assemblies, while in Ming times princes were sent out of the capital and played no part in court culture in the capital, instead presiding over their own small provincial courts (Clunas 2013). From time to time empresses were powerful at court, especially when serving as regents for child emperors, but most of the time empresses and other consorts, as well as princesses, did not mix with the men who attended court. Their male relatives, though, occasionally were powers at court. Eunuch palace servants, too, gained considerable power at court in certain periods, particularly in the late Han, late Tang, and late Ming periods. And then there was the emperor himself, the central figure at court, who did hold his post on the basis of birth, unless he was a dynasty's founder. Some emperors involved themselves in the artistic projects of their courts, while others preferred to let their officials or eunuch servants handle such matters for them.

Despite these differences in the social makeup of Chinese and European courts, similarities in the ways courts functioned are still noticeable. Both provided spaces where religion, art, literature, ritual, and politics all intersected and where manners and taste mattered. Those who attended court as councilors, courtiers, religious dignitaries, entertainers, or artists also acted in predictable ways, with rivalries and jealousies recurrent problems. In both Europe and China, spending at court could get out of control, and building sprees provoked both criticisms of irresponsibility and plans to retrench. Those working for courts faced similar circumstances. Compared to artists working privately, painters working for courts had such advantages as steady employment, flexible budgets, access to important art in the possession of the court, and the prestige that comes with royal recognition. The social space of the court could lead to jealousy between painters working there, but could also facilitate creativity as painters picked up ideas and techniques from each other. The types of paintings made for courts also bear some similarities, as rulers often commissioned paintings that made them look good. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in both China and Europe, courts put artists to work on large-scale paintings celebrating the monarch's victories and achievements.

Painting was just one of the arts important at Chinese courts. Since antiquity the arts of poetry and music had been central elements in the performative side of court culture. Luxurious surroundings were expected too: courts employed craftsmen, such as bronze casters, jade carvers, and painters to fashion the palace accoutrements. Although most Chinese courts in the imperial era gave employment or commissions to painters, the institutional arrangements changed over time, as did the types of paintings made. Through the Tang period and into the Song, court painters devoted much of their time to painting murals and screens for palaces, government offices, and Buddhist and Daoist temples funded by the court. In palaces and government offices, a common subject was portraits of famous men admired for their cultural, political, or military

accomplishments. Viewers were meant to be inspired by the moral message they conveyed (Murray 2007). Art criticism and art collecting came to influence the type of paintings artists made both at court and outside it, and by Tang times great painters could become famous. In Tang through Song times, a high proportion of the famous masters accepted commissions or appointments from the court, including Yan Liben, Han Gan, and Wu Daozi in the Tang period; Zhou Wenju and Huang Quan in the Five Dynasties; Guo Xi, Cui Bo, and Li Tang in the Northern Song period; and Ma Yuan, Xia Gui, and Liu Songnian in the Southern Song period. By Song times artists at court were spending more time painting portable forms of painting (hanging scrolls, handscrolls, fans, and albums). Song court artists excelled at bird-and-flower painting and were active in the development of landscape painting (see Figure 1.1). Although “scholar-amateur painting” developed outside the court in the late Northern Song, one of its key elements—a close connection between painting and poetry—was taken up and successfully developed by Song rulers and artists in their employ.

Both the Jurchen Jin and Mongol Yuan courts employed painters, as they did other craftsmen. Major painters who painted for the Yuan court included He Cheng, Liu Guandao, and Wang Zhenpeng. Court painting had a rough start in the Ming period

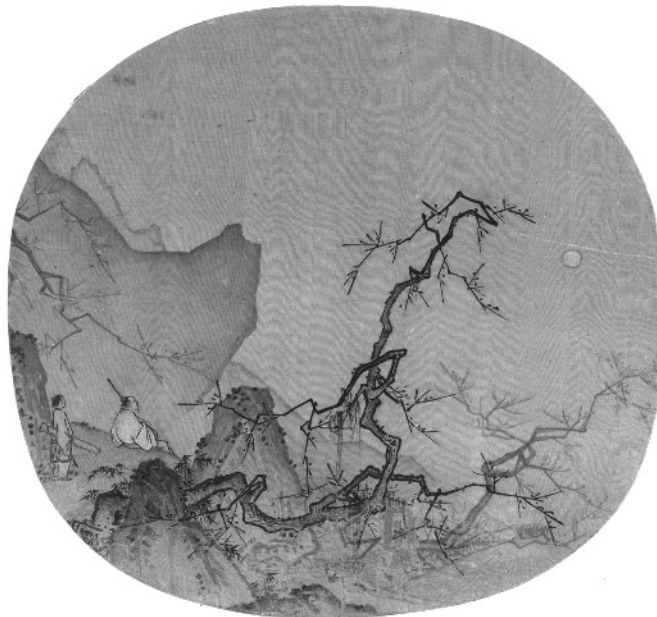


FIGURE 1.1 Ma Yuan (act. ca. 1180–1225), *Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight* (*Cai mei tu*). Fan mounted as an album leaf; ink and colors on silk; 25.1 × 26.7 cm, with mat 39.4 × 39.4 cm. Gift of John M. Crawford Jr., in honor of Alfreda Murck, 1986. Photograph: Malcolm Varon. *Source*: © Metropolitan Museum of Art 1986.493.2; Art Resource, New York.

since the founding emperor had little appreciation for it and had two painters executed when he did not like the paintings they made for him. Fifteenth-century emperors were more active as art patrons; their taste tended to be conservative, preserving traditions of style and subject matter that dated back to the Southern Song. Some of the major masters at the Ming court were Bian Wenjin, Lin Liang, Lü Ji, and Shang Xi. Occasionally paintings were made of emperors on expeditions with large retinues, something unheard of in the Song but perhaps building on Yuan precedents. In the sixteenth century the growing power of eunuchs at court had a negative impact on court painting. From the mid-sixteenth century until the end of the dynasty, in Richard Barnhart's opinion, "no painter of achievement was associated with the court at all, and most of the earlier vitality and promise of the dynasty had dissipated." In the late Ming many of the works by earlier Ming court artists lost their identity and were relabeled as works by Song artists to boost their market value (Barnhart 1993: 232, 5–6).

During the high Qing (Kangxi through Qianlong reigns), the Manchu court was generous in the resources it devoted to painting, undoubtedly in part because its fiscal resources were so ample. The court wanted to be at the forefront of the arts and made efforts to bring famous Jiangnan painters such as Wang Hui and Wang Yuanqi to the court. The court also was a leader in adopting Western painting techniques such as single point perspective and shading to show volume. Some of the major names are Tangdai, Zou Yigui, Jiang Tingxi, Dong Bangda, Qian Weicheng, Jin Tingbiao, and Leng Mei. Even more than in Ming times, court paintings in the Qing often depicted the emperor. "Stylized, idealized and ritualized scenes abound of that worthy [Qianlong] implacably leading his troops to victory in battle, traveling in state throughout his empire, receiving in pomp the offerings of tributary countries, and presiding in dignity over the affairs and pleasures of his palace" (Rogers 1985: 312).

Reconstructing the history of Tang and earlier court painting depends on texts, especially Zhang Yanyuan's *Lidai minghua ji*, but court paintings survive in enough numbers from Song times onwards to add to the available evidence, even if texts are still indispensable for understanding the court context.

The Artistic Success of Song Court Painting

What combination of factors made possible the high quality of the paintings produced at the Song court? Here I will argue that three elements were crucial: the personal involvement of emperors; the close cultural connections between the court and the capital; and the institutional structures established to recruit, promote, and reward painters. Even though it was in Northern Song times that the superiority of literati painters was asserted, professional painters at court and their royal patrons rose easily to the challenge. The desire to draw a distinction between literati art and court art was entirely on the literati side; the court and its painters valued versatility and were open to adopting new styles. The court took to collecting paintings by literati, as it long had collected their calligraphy.

Quite a few Song emperors took an interest in the work of their court painters. The second emperor, Taizong (r. 976–997), liked to spend time with two of his court painters, Gao Wenjin and Huang Jucai. He personally instructed Gao on how he wanted murals restored at the Xiangguo Monastery, just south of the palace. Shenzong (r. 1067–1085) allowed two of his favorite painters, Cui Bo and Guo Xi, to refuse any

assignments that did not come from him personally. Shenzong showed his partiality to Guo Xi in other ways as well. After Guo did a screen titled *Whirling Snow in the North Wind*, Shenzong was so pleased that he gave him an embroidered gold belt, explaining that no other painters had been given such a token of esteem. Several times Shenzong especially asked that Guo Xi paint screens for new buildings. When an elaborate sedan chair was built to carry the empress dowager, Shenzong declared that Guo Xi should paint a screen for it, “which should have a bit of color.” Shenzong’s son Huizong (r. 1100–1125) not only painted himself but personally supervised court painters. From time to time he would inspect the work of his court artists and point out what they did right or wrong. In one case he selected for praise a painter whose depiction of the tea rose allowed one to recognize the time of day and season of the year. In another case he found all of the painters deficient for not knowing that when a peacock climbs it invariably raises its left foot first (Jang 1989; Foong 2006; Ebrey 2014).

The court painting establishment suffered a huge blow in 1127 when the Jurchen not only carried off Huizong and his heir Qinzong, but also all the paintings in the palace collection and many painters. One might have thought subsequent emperors would be less interested in the work of court painters, but that does not seem to have been the case. Even with all the challenges Gaozong (r. 1127–1162) faced, such as needing to ward off the Jurchen, keep generals under control, and cope with the loss of much of the archives, he still treated court painters as a necessity and offered employment to any of his father’s painters who made it south to his court. Gaozong and three of his successors—Xiaozong, Ningzong, and Lizong—all had favorite painters and would give them specific commissions. For instance, in 1230 Lizong had Ma Lin illustrate 13 encomia he wrote on Confucian sages from Fu Xi to Mencius (Lee 2010; Cahill 1996b; Murray 1993).

One key element in the vitality of Song court painting was how fully it was enmeshed with the larger culture of the court and with trends in the culture at large. The importance and prestige that poetry and calligraphy had played in court culture for centuries contributed to the ease with which the Song court took up ideas about combining painting, poetry, and calligraphy within a single work of art, ideas that were first articulated outside the court in literati circles. These ideas made it more natural for emperors to get involved with painting and allowed court painting to share in new directions in literati painting. Huizong was in the forefront of the practice of combining poetry and painting in a single work, doing so many times in his own works. He also supplied the poetry and calligraphy for paintings done by court artists. The 1199 catalog of paintings in the Southern Song imperial collection lists nine paintings that Huizong had inscribed with his own poems, which it records. At the Southern Song court the pairing of poetry and painting became extremely common, with the emperor or empress writing out a poem or couplet that a court painter completed with a suitable painting. Approaches inside and outside the court thus enriched each other. Maggie Bickford notes that both scholar-amateur and the court painting communities took up the enthusiasm for depicting plums also found in poetry, and writes of the “interpenetration and creative interaction between scholarly and courtly aesthetics and techniques in Southern Song painting” (Bickford 1996: 160).

The Song capitals were the cultural centers of their day. In contrast to the Ming and Qing periods, when the Jiangnan region rivaled Beijing as a cultural center, in both Northern and Southern Song the capitals—first Kaifeng, then Hangzhou—had no real rivals. Professional painters active in the capital would join the court, bringing with them

styles and practices they had learned elsewhere, and court artists felt free to adopt styles developed outside the court. The court painter Li Tang picked up the figure painting style of the literati Li Gonglin. Painters working at court might also make paintings for private patrons, adding to the mix of influences (Fong 1992: 207; Jang 1989: 34–37, 47–49). The Song court did not dominate production of art in the Song period to the degree it had in earlier centuries, but it still was influential, and many professional painters adopted styles set at court. Indeed, for the Southern Song, it is often difficult to say whether a painting was done at court or by a professional painter working in Hangzhou.

The institutional structure of Song court painting also contributed to its vitality. In the first few decades of the dynasty, painters from defeated states, especially the western state of Shu and the southern state of Southern Tang, were given court appointments and formed the nucleus of the Song court painting establishment. By 998, the Song painting bureau had three painters in attendance (*daizhao*), six apprentice painters (*yixue*), four assistant painters (*zhibou*), and forty students. Although painters were treated with considerable respect by the Song court, they were not classed with regular civil servants, but with various sorts of experts (such as physicians and astronomers) and were not clearly distinguished from craftsmen such as jade carvers and silversmiths. Confusing texts have led some to mistakenly think the painting bureau was under the Hanlin Academy, one of the most prestigious government organs. In fact, eunuchs, not ranked officials, were the intermediaries between the emperor and the painters.

Nevertheless, the Song court made serious efforts to recruit talented painters. When the painting bureau needed additional painters, recommendations would be solicited, and artists could present themselves to the bureau and ask to be evaluated. Some construction projects required large numbers of painters. When Zhenzong (r. 997–1022) was building a huge new Daoist temple complex, he put out a call for painters to decorate its halls and reportedly more than three thousand showed up in the capital to offer their services. Some particularly outstanding ones were able to turn their temporary employment into a regular appointment, but not all painters wanted steady jobs at court, preferring to accept commissions from diverse patrons or produce for the market. As a way to encourage excellence, in 1069 merit standards were established for promotion of painters through the ranks of the painting bureau, ending the use of simple seniority. When vacancies occurred in these ranks, those who wished to be considered would have to declare their specialty. A date and place would be set, and the candidates supplied with silk, brushes, and ink. The senior painter-in-attendance would judge how well the candidates adhered to established standards (Jang 1989; Foong 2006).

In this era, political factionalism was acute and scholar-officials on the inside and the outside regularly accused each other of moral laxity or misguiding the emperor. This put a strain on emperor–literati relations that spilled over into art as well. Su Shi, one of the leaders of the anti-reformers during Shenzong's reign, promoted the idea that paintings by scholars were better than those by professional painters, because they used painting for self-expression, much as the way they wrote poetry and practiced calligraphy. From his time on some literati, not at court (though often in office), challenged the assumed superiority of paintings made by specialist, professional painters, including those employed at court.

Under Emperor Huizong, the court responded to this challenge in several ways. By his own behavior Huizong countered the idea that court and literati were opposed categories. First of all, the emperor practiced not only poetry and calligraphy, as



FIGURE 1.2 Huizong (r. 1100–1125), *Finches and Bamboo* (*Zhuqin tu*). Handscroll; ink and colors on silk; 33.7 × 55.4 cm, overall with mounting 34.9 × 839 cm. John M. Crawford Jr. Collection, purchase, Douglas Dillon Gift, 1981. *Source*: © Metropolitan Museum of Art 1981.278; Art Resource, New York.

several earlier Song emperors did, but also painting (see Figure 1.2). The higher officials who made up his court were all well-educated literati, not military men or nobles, and Huizong found many occasions to interact with his highest officials as a man of letters among other men of letters. From time to time he would show his officials paintings he had done, and even made gifts of his paintings to officials. He would also collaborate with court artists, inscribing a poem on a painting one of his court painters had made. Since the court was largely composed of men of letters, elevating the standing of men of letters was not seen as undermining the cultural importance of the court (Ebrey 2014).

Huizong also took steps to bring up to date the court collections of artworks, especially calligraphy, paintings, and antiquities. Because eleventh-century private collectors had made many advances in connoisseurial standards, Huizong reexamined and expanded the court's collections. Eventually Huizong had a catalog compiled of the best of his paintings; it listed 231 artists and 6397 of their paintings. This catalog, the *Xuanhe Painting Catalogue*, is a rich source for painters' biographies, titles of paintings, and contemporary attitudes toward both court painters and literati painters. Huizong appreciated the work of earlier Song court painters, especially bird-and-flower painters such as Huang Quan and his son Huang Jucai. The catalog lists 349 paintings by the father and 332 for the son, more than any other painters (Ebrey 2008).

Most of the ideas associated with literati painting were enthusiastically embraced in Huizong's catalog. The catalog introduced a new category, comprised of monochrome bamboo and plum flower painting, the type of painting favored by poets and writers, rather than professional painters. Appended to this category was "small scenes," described as the sort of landscapes literati painted. The catalog lists 107 paintings by the late eleventh–early twelfth century man of letters Li Gonglin. An exemplary scholar-painter, he made paintings that were as subtle as poems, adopting Du Fu's way of conveying meaning by focusing on telling details. Much like Su Shi, the catalogers disparaged attention to form-likeness. They even downplay service as a court artist, praising the

bird-and-flower painter Cui Bo, for instance, for only with great reluctance accepting a court painting appointment (Ebrey 2008).

Another element in Huizong's response to the charge that professional painters did not express ideas in their paintings was to reform the training of court painters. In 1104 Huizong established a formal painting school as part of a major overhaul of state education. The new painting school (along with the other technical schools of mathematics, medicine, and calligraphy) was put under the Directorate of Education, which supervised the Imperial Academy, the main government school training men for the civil service. The goal of this reorganization was to attract more educated men to technical fields and raise the social standing of graduates.

Under Huizong, the painting school offered instruction in six subjects: religious art, figures, landscape, birds and animals, flowers and bamboo, and architecture. The students had to be literate and were given instruction in etymology from the ancient dictionaries including the *Shuowen* and *Erya*, giving them a foundation in calligraphy. On the basis of a preliminary exam on their understanding of these subjects, sixty students would be selected, divided into two groups of thirty each: those who would combine scholarship and painting, and those who would do miscellaneous painting, requiring less mastery of literary traditions. Those in the scholar group would have to study one major and one minor classic, plus the *Analects* or the *Mencius*. The others could study one of the minor Classics or books on philology. The training program was to last three years. In judging students, the highest grade was given to those able to "catch the feelings, form, and color of the subject in an entirely natural manner, with the tone of the brush lofty but simple, all without imitating earlier masters." Second best were those who "In imitating old masters are able to go beyond the sense of antiquity, whose forms and colors correspond to the subject, and whose application of color and design are ingenious." The lowest grade went to those who could "make accurate copies of paintings." Students who pursued the scholar track would get titles in the civil rank hierarchy, while those in the miscellaneous track would continue as before to get titles in the less prestigious military rank system (Ho 1980; Jang 1989; Foong 2006; Ebrey 2014).

Exams for the literati track required the student to create a painting that captured a poetic couplet, an ability that went far beyond draftsmanship. Deng Chun wrote:

One examination topic consisted of the poetic couplet: "No passenger crosses the river in the wilderness. / A lonely skiff all day cross-wise." Most painters depicted an empty boat tied to the shore, perhaps with an egret resting on it or crows nesting on its awning. One, however, took a different approach and depicted a boatman lying in the back of his boat, playing a flute. He showed a boatman, but a boatman with nothing to do because there were no passengers. Another topic was "The disordered mountains hide an ancient temple." The highest scorer depicted desolate mountains filling the sheet, above which stood out a Buddhist banner which conveyed the meaning of "hidden." The others showed the top of a pagoda or the corner ornament. Some even showed temple halls, failing entirely to convey the meaning of "hidden."

The grading of the examinees' paintings placed a premium on indirection, subtlety, and allusion, all of which were highly valued in Song poetics.

Huizong used the collection of paintings he had assembled to enrich the training of court artists. Two painters who had served under Huizong reported that every ten days two cases of paintings from the palace collection would be brought out and shown to

court artists. Guards who brought the paintings would remain to make sure that all of the paintings were returned and none were damaged.

Huizong wanted his painters in the scholar track to mix easily with literati and government officials, and not be classed as craftsmen. He ruled that specially favored court painters were eligible to wear the fish pendant attached to their belt. He also saw to it that when all officials lined up according to rank, court painters stood ahead of lute players and such craftsmen as jade carvers. Another symbolic gesture was calling the compensation calligraphers and painters received a “salary,” the same term used for the compensation given civil servants, rather than “food money,” the term used for craftsmen who were treated more like servants. On the other hand, it was required that one of the “miscellaneous” (non-literati) painters be on call at Sagacious Thoughts Hall, in case the emperor felt a need for his services, which would have seemed more like the service provided by eunuch court servants than by civil servants (Ebrey 2014).

Efforts to reform the education of painters and raise their status are reminiscent of the development of painting academies in Europe, starting in Italy in the sixteenth century then gradually spreading to more and more European countries in subsequent centuries. In both cases instruction began with copying and mastery of established techniques. The best students, however, were expected to develop further, and competitions were often used to identify and reward the best painters. Some also compare the entire tradition of court painting from Tang through Qing times to the European academy tradition, seeing a similar trend toward an “academic” style that favored mastering established styles before trying to do anything new. Differences should, however, be kept in mind. Many of the European painting academies were self-governing and had some degree of independence from the court whereas Chinese court painters were government employees.

The elements that contributed to the success of Song court painting discussed here—connections to the larger world of painting and other arts, personal involvement of emperors and empresses, supportive institutional structure, and so on—can all be found at different times in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods, though rarely all at the same time. The Yuan emperor Renzong (r. 1311–1320) and his sister Princess Sengge favored the painter Wang Zhenpeng, a master of “ruled line” architectural painting. The Ming Xuande emperor (r. 1425–1435) was himself a painter and took an interest in court painters and their working conditions. Qianlong, too, was a poet, painter, and calligrapher, and he took an interest in the work of court painters. Like several Song emperors, his poems were often paired with paintings by court artists. He also had court painters make copies or modern adaptations of paintings in his collection. On the other hand, some of the assignments Qianlong gave his painters required very meticulous work that took years of their time, work that some, surely, must have found discouragingly tedious. Collaborative works of this sort could take up 10 to 50 man-years of labor. The distance between Beijing and the cities of Jiangnan such as Suzhou, Nanjing, and Yangzhou did not deter some professional painters from traveling to the capital to seek court appointments, even if the flow of talent was not as easy and natural as in Song times (Weidner 1989; Barnhart 1993; Wang 1999; Rogers 1985).

The Political Context of Court Paintings

One basic feature of court painting held true in all periods: rulers and other powerful people at court engaged painters to make paintings that would contribute to their larger

political goals. Paintings made at court, in other words, had political purposes. One could say the same thing about rituals performed at court, poetry written at court, and banquets held at court. To understand how painters and paintings functioned within this larger court context requires attention to who commissioned the paintings, who would see them, and how easily those seeing them would be able to understand their meaning. Is the emperor the agent using the painter to communicate to an audience? Or is the emperor the intended audience? When most court paintings were done on walls or screens, their audience was those who spent time in a hall. Walls in temples, audience halls, and the women's quarters were decorated with different subject matter. Just as Buddhas and bodhisattvas were painted on the walls of temples, the walls of the more public palace halls often had portraits of eminent figures or narrative paintings of morally uplifting stories. By the Northern Song period, many other subjects were being painted on government and palace walls, from landscapes, to trees, rocks, bamboo, flowers, birds, and monkeys. From the Song period on, more and more paintings were made as scrolls or albums, forms of painting that were often kept rolled up or stored in boxes, rather than being on constant display. With these paintings, we can make fewer assumptions about the audience that looked at them.

For a ruler, the desire to make his court magnificent supplies a political motive for the creation of paintings that would be admired by contemporary viewers, but the paintings themselves would not need to be interpreted as political statements. Taste is often a matter of intense interest at court. People scrutinized others' manners, clothing, and poetry compositions. The distinctions they made were an element in the construction of status and power, but the particulars are largely irrelevant. Every new element in garden design, musical composition, or poetic style would be noticed, and some people would be judged as having better or more *au courant* taste than others, but people who disagree on political issues could have similar taste in poetry, music, or painting.

Emperors and other court agents had many ways to convey their political positions, from oral statements at court, to edicts and imperially commissioned books. Why did they sometimes choose to use paintings? If they chose paintings, why did they sometimes choose to add words, making the meaning explicit, and other times not? As is well known, painters outside the court sometimes used paintings to convey dissatisfaction with what was occurring at court, either openly or in subtle ways that might not be apparent to most viewers (Murck 2000). Did it ever make sense for court agents to purposely obscure their message? If a painting's *raison d'être* was to celebrate the success of the ruler, why allow room for ambiguity?

Whether or not court paintings were ever purposely ambiguous, scholars today often do not agree on their meaning. Many scholars have vigorously debated the agent, intended audience, and message of the Song masterpiece *Spring Festival along the River* (*Qingming shanghe tu*). Another interesting case is the set of pictures of agriculture and sericulture originally submitted by Lou Shu to Gaozong and then produced in multiple copies at Gaozong's court. James Cahill suggests that since farming and silk culture

could only be accomplished under stable conditions, they epitomize the Chinese idea of a settled agricultural society, in contrast to the nomadic, more mobile way of life. For Gaozong, these paintings were assertions of the superiority of his regime to that of the Jin, who had adopted Chinese ways but still had a nomadic background, and so could be suspected of less commitment to agrarian interests. (Cahill 1988: 19–20)

One might well ask, however, that if the court's goal was to discredit the Jurchens, why choose such an indirect and ambiguous way to do it? Given the seething resentment of the Jurchen in Gaozong's day and its many expressions in prose and poetry, did an elaborate set of paintings have much to add? Hui-shu Lee, looking at the same set of paintings, puts emphasis on the fact that Gaozong had the initial set shown to the empress and other palace women and sees them as the sort of didactic art an empress would sponsor, since half of the set shows women's work (Lee 2010: 149–150). Roslyn Hammers, taking a different direction, proposes a connection between Lou Shu and Wang Anshi's new policies and suggests that the painting expresses allegiance to Wang Anshi's ideals and the elevation of the scholar-officials in the imperial echelon (Hammers 2011: 47, 7).

In many cases, of course, the point of a court painting was perfectly obvious. In 1044 Emperor Renzong had a room in one of the main audience halls decorated with paintings of the good and bad deeds of earlier rulers, which he instructed his councilors to look at and contemplate. As Julia Murray put it, "Even though the highly educated scholar-officials did not need visual aids to grasp the lessons of the past, such pictorial documentation promoted and inculcated the authorized interpretations of sometimes ambiguous historical events" (Murray 2007: 76). When an emperor had paintings made of events in his own reign, we can think of them as part of a program of self-presentation. In the early Southern Song period, Emperor Gaozong promoted an image of himself as learned, serious, and morally upright by having painters depict didactic stories, often adding his own calligraphy, or letting Empress Wu perform for him as ghost-writer. More directly, Gaozong commissioned *Auspicious Omens for Dynastic Revival* to present twelve incidents which foreshadowed his rise to the throne from his birth in 1107 to the eve of his enthronement in the fifth month of 1127 (Murray 1985, 1993; Lee 2010). In the Ming period, the emperor Xuande (r. 1425–1435) used several media to promote an image of the cultivated sovereign. He wrote many poems about his outings in the imperial parks and had his commemorative essay on one of the halls inscribed on a stele there. On outings there, he invited high officials to accompany him, and they in gratitude wrote accounts of their visits. Xuande also called on court painters to make a visual record. This extant painting, probably originally a screen, shows Xuande on horseback, with a large mounted retinue in a park with flowering trees and auspicious white deer and black hares, among other creatures (Wang 1999).

No ruler went further than Qianlong in having paintings made that contributed to his self-presentation. Like Xuande he made use of his prose, poetry, and calligraphy in presenting an image of himself. He had painters depict him leading troops, hunting, banqueting his officials, performing rituals, and spending time with his family. The most ambitious of these is a set of twelve scrolls, over 470 feet long altogether, of the first of his six southern tours. Even though Qianlong had published a 6,700 page set of books on his first tour with illustrations of 150 scenic spots along the way, he decided he needed a set of paintings as well, each to illustrate one of the poems he wrote on the journey. His painters, under the supervision of Xu Yang, spent more than five years on the project (Hearn 1988; see Figure 1.3). Many of the other paintings Qianlong had made were paired with texts he wrote. Occasionally the texts and the images seem to have worked at cross-purposes. For instance, Qianlong would write of his simple taste but the painting would depict in loving detail an elaborate palace (Chung 2004: 157).

In many cases, the emperor was more the intended audience for a painting than the agent initiating its creation. Writing to praise or flatter the ruler was a central part of

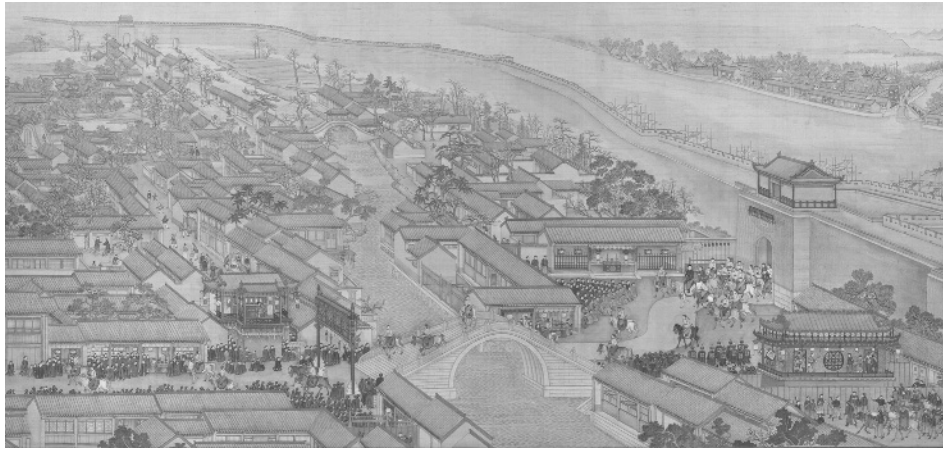


FIGURE 1.3 Xu Yang (act. ca. 1750–1776), *The Qianlong Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll Six: Entering Suzhou along the Grand Canal*. Dated 1770. Handscroll; ink and colors on silk; 68.8 × 1994 cm. Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1988. Source: © Metropolitan Museum of Art 1988.350 (detail); Art Resource, New York.

Chinese literature from the time of the *Book of Songs*. In Han times the extravagant rhapsodies (*fu*) appreciated at court described in exuberant language the splendors of the palace and royal gardens and hunting parks. By Tang and Song times, when memorials submitted to the throne survive by the thousands, we can see that any official serving at court had to be adept in casting events and issues in ways that drew attention to the many merits of the dynasty and the current ruler. Not only did officials have to write memorials to congratulate the ruler on his birthday, the completion of a major sacrifice, and other routine events, but when they had important business to conduct they had to know how to avoid offending the ruler by first underlining the merits of what the ruler had accomplished so far. Chinese courts—like courts elsewhere—were places where flattery was raised to a high art.

Many court paintings generally thought of as forms of political persuasion might be better thought of as forms of flattery. This involves a shift in understood agency—from seeing the active agent as the emperor who is addressing a wider audience whom he wants to persuade of his merits—to seeing the emperor as the intended audience, and the agent either the painter himself or someone who told him what to paint, such as a high-ranking official, eunuch supervisor, or a palace woman. These people were accustomed to flattering the emperor in words; using paintings as well was a diversification strategy.

A good example of a painting made to flatter a ruler is *Literary Gathering*, in the National Place Museum in Taipei, a painting thought to have been done by one or more of Huizong's court artists and graced with inscriptions by both Huizong and Cai Jing (illustrated in Ebrey 2014: pl. 17 and 18, and many other places). Eight men in the clothes of literati are seated around an elaborately set table, assisted by servants; two others are having a conversation nearby. From the inscriptions we know that Huizong and Cai Jing looked at the painting together and considered its meaning. Huizong's poem, in the upper right, evokes the glory of elegant literary gatherings, states that

in the past and present alike scholars have gotten together to chant poetry and drink, alludes to the pleasure in having so many talents within reach, and praises the painting for letting us see such literary elegance. In the upper left is Cai Jing's response, using the same rhyme words. He compares Huizong's ability to attract talented men to the famous eighteen scholars who were recruited by Tang Taizong. Cai Jing goes on to imply that their own time surpasses the Tang because Huizong has attracted many more than just eighteen scholars. Clearly Cai Jing uses the painting to flatter Huizong; it is certainly plausible that Cai suggested the subject to either a painter or someone supervising court painters in order to use it in this way.

We of course do not need to divide all court paintings that carried meaning into two piles: those in which the emperor was the instigator, and had the painting done the way he wanted as a form of propaganda or self-representation; and those that someone else instigated, where the emperor was the most important viewer. It is easy to imagine that both processes could take place simultaneously. For instance, the emperor may have requested the painting, but the painter or his supervisor saw in it an opportunity to please the emperor by flattering him, creating a panegyric painting.

Less easy for us to understand are paintings that were apparently made to be kept in boxes and rarely if ever viewed after the emperor first approved them. Sometimes, especially in the Qing period, the amount of effort put into a painting that records an event seems quite disproportionate to the number of people who would ever have a chance to look at them. Documentary paintings of emperors on campaign, hunting, or performing rituals apparently could perform some of their functions while rolled up, serving as evidence for future historians (though there was no shortage of textual evidence on those events). Perhaps paintings to flatter the emperor needed to be seen only by him.

Art historians have often suggested that more minor court paintings might have been made to give away (e.g., Fong 1992: 261; Cahill 1996a: 170; Lee 2010: 93, 140, 236). Chinese emperors—like monarchs across the world—demonstrated their munificence through liberal gift-giving. To put gift paintings in context, one would want to know how much of the output of court painters was devoted to this purpose and how from a ruler's point of view paintings compared to other possible gifts.

Certainly a ruler who wanted to reward, favor, or honor an official had many options. Probably the reward that officials most coveted was a promotion to a more important or higher-ranking post. When an emperor did not think that a new post was appropriate, he could honor an official by writing a poem for him or giving him a piece of his own calligraphy, or entertaining him at a banquet. He could make gifts of valuable objects, such as gold belts and even homes. Huizong gave all of these favors or gifts to Cai Jing at one time or another. In terms of honor, receiving a painting by a court artist would probably rank below a piece of the emperor's own calligraphy.

Historical sources record a variety of occasions on which emperors made gifts of paintings to officials. In 1113, Huizong gave Cai Jing a long landscape handscroll done by an eighteen-year old student in the court painting bureau, Wang Ximeng. We know of this only because the painting survives with Cai Jing's colophon. Given Huizong's close association with Cai Jing, it is unlikely that Huizong was using the painting to persuade Cai Jing of anything other than his generosity and affection. If we could ask Huizong his motives, he would probably say he thought Cai Jing would like it.

Another well-documented gift was made by Gaozong to Cao Xun, one of the officials involved with negotiating with the Jurchen for the return of his mother. Gaozong first

asked Cao Xun to write a commemorative account of her return. He also had a court painter do a painting of the moment when she and her party reach the welcoming Song officials, a painting that survives. When Cao Xun asked to retire, Gaozong gave him the painting as a parting gift. This is an interesting case because the painting had a clear political meaning—it asserted that reaching a peace agreement with the Jurchen was an act worth commemorating because it fulfilled the filial obligation of Gaozong to care for his mother and see to the proper burial of his father. Yet rather than displaying this painting to officials who needed to be persuaded (the many who thought Song should not have made peace with the Jurchen), Gaozong gave it to an official who already approved of making peace. Moreover, since Cao was leaving the capital and retiring to Mount Tiantai, he was unlikely to be showing it to many members of the political elite whom Gaozong might have wanted to influence (Murray 1985; 2007: 83). Thus, rather than use this painting for self-representation or political persuasion, Gaozong gave it a new purpose as a mark of favor.

Sometimes the paintings presented to officials were not done by the current court painters, but instead came from the court collection of old paintings. For instance, Zhenzong, at the farewell audience for the high official Ding Wei, newly assigned to Nanjing, gave him eight scrolls by an unidentified artist. They were chosen for presentation because of the message conveyed by their narrative subject, a model Han official. Zhenzong could have set one of his own court painters to paint this subject. Presumably he chose instead to give old paintings either because he saw doing so as an even higher honor, or had little attachment to the paintings in the court collection. Huizong, who was attached to his painting collection, preferred to make gifts of paintings he had done himself.

A major reason not to overestimate the role of gift-making in court art production is the clear evidence that large numbers of paintings were not given away. The palace museums in Taipei and Beijing have thousands of scrolls by Qing court painters that were never given to anyone. This also seems to have been true in earlier periods. Even though Guo Xi was one of Shenzong's favorite painters, the emperor rarely seems to have made gifts of Guo Xi's paintings. When Guo Xi's son Guo Si was granted an audience with Huizong in 1117, the emperor spoke about Shenzong's love of Guo Xi's paintings and mentioned that they still filled the palace halls. It is equally unlikely that Shenzong gave away many of the bird-and-flower paintings done by Cui Bo, another favorite painter, since there were still at least 241 left in the palace in Huizong's time.

Remaining Issues

Space constraints have kept me from discussing several other interesting issues concerning court painting in China. One is court style or court taste in painting. The painting style most closely associated with the Song through Qing courts was realism or verisimilitude, often referred to pejoratively. Michael Sullivan (1999: 177) called it “a decorative, painstaking ‘palace style’ which was to govern court taste until modern times”). In the Northern Song mimesis was the dominant style, not specifically associated with the court but certainly practiced there. Probably in part because the sketchy, brushwork-oriented literati style is usually seen as conveying some degree of dissent, some scholars have interpreted the closely observed, descriptive style as expressing support for the

established powers. Hui-shu Lee writes about the verisimilitude dominant in eleventh-century court painting: “the realism promoted by imperial patrons like Zhenzong and Empress Liu established a form of visual communication that bolstered the very foundation of the dynasty” (Lee 2010: 68–69; cf. Murray 2007: 59, 57). Roslyn Hammers, by contrast, argues that realism was a weapon of those out of power: “reform-minded scholar-officials valued similitude in paintings, and used it to challenge established ideology.” In the twelfth century, in her view, similitude constituted a rejection of courtly art “with its mannered and elegant brushwork” (Hammers 2011: 99).

After Song times, a careful descriptive style reminded viewers of the style of the Song court. The Jin, Yuan, and Ming rulers all tended to favor this style. Marsha Weidner writes that “skill in literal description” was especially valued at the Yuan court (Weidner 1989: 39). In the early Ming, Kathlyn Liscomb (1989) argues, leading officials at court were open to other newer styles, but the emperors preferred more mimetic styles. In Qing times, the court embraced the literati painting tradition, especially the orthodox style of the Four Wangs. But an interest in descriptive detail did not fade away. Even though Wang Hui supervised the production of the huge paintings commemorating Kangxi’s southern tours, the locus of attention in these paintings was not brushwork or allusions to earlier painters’ works, but the places traveled and activities observed. The value placed on verisimilitude undoubtedly also explains the willingness of those in charge of painting at the Manchu court to experiment with Western methods of achieving a sense of volume and presence (Hearn 1988: 118–125).

A second issue that would repay closer attention is the anonymity of so many paintings made at court. We have records of the names of many Northern Song court painters, but few court paintings signed by any of them; at the same time, many fine paintings by Song court artists are unsigned. Within the world of collecting, a premium was placed on the fame of the painter, and the *Xuanhe Painting Catalogue* attributes every painting to a specific painter. A contemporary wrote that Huizong liked to take the credit for paintings that his painters did, which he thought explained why so many highly skilled painters who worked for him were not known from signed paintings. But leaving court paintings unsigned was not done only when the emperor wanted to take credit for others’ work. A recent volume of selected Qing court paintings from the Beijing Palace Museum illustrated seventy-five works, just over half of them anonymous. One group of court paintings not discussed here was invariably unsigned: ancestral portraits of emperors and empresses. Paintings that depicted the emperor doing things—hunting, on campaigns, enjoying palace life—made in Ming and Qing times were frequently unsigned, perhaps because they too were supposed to be about the subject, not the artist (see Hearn 1988: 112–123; Wang 1999: 246).

Further Exploration

A good place to begin further exploration of Chinese court painting is a book with ample, full-color illustrations. Several catalogs of exhibits have not only excellent illustrations but thoughtful essays on Chinese court art. Some of the most useful, in chronological order, are Chou and Brown (1985); Barnhart (1993); Fong and Watt (1996), with essays by James Cahill on Song court and Richard Barnhart on Ming court painting; and Rawski and Rawson (2005), which covers many sides of the Manchu court,

not just paintings but also other things made and used there, such as ceramics, lacquer ware, and clothing, all from the Palace Museum in Beijing.

Many of the most important primary sources for court painting in Tang and Song times have been translated. See, especially, Acker (1954, 1974), Soper (1951), Maeda (1970), Bush and Shih (1985), and Lachman (1989).

Recent monographs with substantial discussion of court painting include Chung (2004), Murray (2007), and Lee (2010).

SEE ALSO: McCausland, Figure Painting; Ching, The Language of Portraiture in China; Bush, Poetry and Pictorial Expression in Chinese Painting; Egan, Conceptual and Qualitative Terms in Historical Perspective; Powers, Artistic Status and Social Agency; Murck, Word and Image in Chinese Painting; Silbergeld, On the Origins of Literati Painting in the Song Dynasty

Chinese Terms

Bian Wenjin 邊文進
Cao Xun 曹勛
Cui Bo 崔白
daizhao 待詔
Deng Chun 鄧椿
Ding Wei 丁謂
Dong Bangda
Du Fu 杜甫
Fu 賦
FuXi 伏羲
Gao Wenjin 高文進
Guo Si 郭思
Guo Xi 郭熙
Han Gan 韓幹
He Cheng 何澄
Huang Jucai 黃居寀

Huang Quan 黃筌
Jiang Tingxi 蔣廷錫
Jin Tingbiao 金廷標
Leng Mei leng 冷枚
Li Gonglin 李公麟
Li Tang 李唐
Lidai minghua ji 歷代
名畫記
Lin Liang 林良
Liu Guandao 劉貫道
Liu Songnian 劉松年
Lou Shou 樓壽
Lü Ji 呂紀
Ma Lin 馬麟
Ma Yuan 馬遠
Qian Weicheng 錢維城

Qingming shanghe
tu 清明上河圖
Shang Xi 商喜
Shuowen 說文
Su Shi 蘇軾
Wang Hui 王翬
Wang Yuanqi 王原祁
Wang Zhenpeng 王振鵬
Wu Daozi 吳道子
Xia Gui 夏珪
Yan Liben 閻立本
yixue 藝學
Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠
zhibou 祇侯
Zhou Wenju 周文矩
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Further Reading

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