

Trained to be Receptive, Celebrated for being Forgotten: Castiglione's Artistic Training and New Art Historical Perspectives

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Abstract

In my essay I will discuss the Italian training of Giuseppe Castiglione as important means for understanding the painter's Chinese production.

It is evident I fact that the painter's first training imprinted a methodological and pictorial intelligence that would be deployed throughout the artist's entire career. We must then inquire about the main differences between professional and amateur European painters in Beijing and, in turn, understand how Castiglione's adaptation to the Qing canon was achieved. The painting methods acquired by Castiglione during his Italian apprenticeship and successfully transferred to his Qing commissions include accomplished drawing techniques and compositional vocabulary, the ability to render the texture of any type of surface, competence in managing illumination, and control of different brush techniques. Among the many Qing commissions that provide visual evidence of such knowledge are many scrolls preserved in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. These works, extremely valuable as evidence of his methods of pictorial translation, also stand out as particularly representative of the pictorial canon, called the "academic style," cultivated by the Qing court. Such mode was characterized by the careful description of birds and flowers, figures, and landscape elements and the naturalistic depiction of architectural features using mimetic drawing and brushwork supported by vivid colors.

Finally, from the perspective of painting training, I analyze current Western art historical views on the Qing patronage of European artists, and especially on Castiglione's legacy. In particular I discuss the idea of adaptation, and reconsider the work of Castiglione by looking at the difference between diverse European canons. In fact by considering the specificities of Castiglione's Milanese professional training it is possible to shed light on the links that connected the Chinese and Italian tradition of painting. In turn such a trajectory will reveal that the mid-Qing emperors were fully aware of the differences and similarities between the two traditions, and that they

actively guided the Italian painter to the realization of a striking pictorial translation. If the evangelical efforts of Western missionaries to conciliate Chinese spectators with religiously themed pictures from Europe did not succeed on the long term, for more than a century, Qing patronage enabled professional artists from Europe to achieve a coherent pictorial synthesis while respecting local traditions. Like many established traditions, the Qing court canon comprised in fact the possibility to absorb pictorial forms from outside in order to display them as canonical forms.

Key words: adaptation, artistic training, canon, Giuseppe Castiglione, Milanese painting, Qing painting, translation