

the ability to critically observe and discuss (in written and oral forms) significant aspects of Japan; to engage in on site research through reading, interview and observation; and to improve our understanding of our own culture through the exploration of Japanese culture.

Painting, Poetry and Pedagogy: Teaching Chinese Imperial Art History

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At Hartwick College I teach the History of Chinese Imperial Art to undergraduate students. It's a leap for me as I was trained as an Italian Renaissance art historian and have struggled to learn enough about Chinese art and culture to allow me to teach them. I have been fortunate in my search. In the summer of 1992 I had the opportunity to attend an NEH summer seminar with Jason Kuo on teaching the arts of Imperial China and last year I participated in a seminar through the University of Pennsylvania that resulted in a three-week visit to Japan. Still it is not easy for either me or for the students. The amount of cultural information that an average student brings to class about Western Europe and the United States is phenomenal. The amount of knowledge they have about Asia, and China and Japan in particular, is correspondingly miniscule. Because of this, I try to approach the artworks in two different ways; directly, by looking at slides and assigning readings, and obliquely by bringing in other related disciplines. I have tried a variety of ways to teach the course so that it piques rather than petrifies student interest. I am going to discuss two of the more successful strategies I have employed. One uses poetry to try to expand students' cultural understanding and the other, more unusual, involves a studio component.

In the course, poetry becomes a companion to the art objects from the Zhou through to the Qing dynasties. Its importance remains constant even as its forms change. The class begins by analyzing some of the songs/poems from the *Book of Odes*.¹ The poems probably date back to the Zhou dynasty and they dovetail very beautifully with the enigmatic bronzes from the same dynasty. The bronzes are almost chilly in their craft mastery, large size and abstracted ornament. They certainly make the point that Chinese culture was well organized and highly developed but they do not invite the students into any understanding of the culture. The *Book of Odes*, however, does just that. The complaints about intrusive government officials and tax collectors given voice in *Big Rat Big Rat* have a timelessness that amazes the students. They know much more about taxes and government intrusions than they do about luxurious tombs and monumental bronze

vessels but the poem helps them to believe that they can begin to comprehend the artworks as well. Moreover there are other poems in the *Book of Odes* that students can use as an entrée into the culture. For example, *In the Meadow There's a Dead Deer*, a poem of seduction with allusions to death, is not as transparent as *Big Rat Big Rat*, but themes of seduction and death are popular with college students and they like the chance to imagine other people or poets with the same concerns. Altogether I use six or seven poems from the *Book of Odes*. The poems do not directly explain the artworks, but they do help the students reach back across the millennia.

As we move forward in time through subsequent dynasties, I try to use the poems themselves, as well as the poems and inscriptions found on actual paintings, to illuminate the art. Because Western notions about combining text and image are so different from Chinese ideas, one of my goals is to help students begin to understand the close connections between poetry, calligraphy, and painting. Students can accept the idea of a painter inscribing his or her own work, but the continuing commentary and plethora of seals added by later collectors and poets can be confusing for students.

Additionally, poems are useful in elucidating the politics of the various dynasties. Du Fu, a Tang poet, writes movingly of the unrest at the end of the dynasty. His poems give voice to societal difficulties and provide a mood for the art objects that the students study.² In fact, Du Fu's poem, *Spring Prospect*, makes a bitter counterpoint to the perceived optimism of the brightly colored Tang ceramics. The poem begins

The nation
Has been destroyed
Mountains and rivers remain
In the city
It is spring
Grasses and trees grow deep...

Two examples of the more specific interaction of poetry, painting, and politics that can, at first, elude students, and then excite them are Zhao Mengfu's *Sheep and Goat* from the Yuan dynasty and Shitao's *Reminiscences of the Chin-huai River* from the Qing. In *Sheep and Goat*, students struggle mightily to integrate the iconography and image. Sheep and goats seem far too innocuous to be the bearers of any pointed political meanings. It is only through the required reading of Chu-ting Li's article, "The Freer Sheep and Goat and Chao Meng-fu's Horse Painting,"³ that they are able to uncover and understand the political allusions in the painting and the importance of the later colophon commentary that follows Zhao Mengfu's own inscription.

A final example of the interaction of poetry and painting is Shitao's *Reminiscences of the Chin-huai River*. This image begins to reveal itself to the students even before the poem and the poet's biography are known. The claustrophobia of the mountain and sky, which overwhelm the small monk, alerts students to the mood of the album leaf.

Then when they are presented with the translation of the calligraphy which begins

Along the river with its forty-nine bends,
I search for the remains of the six dynasties along
the Chin-huai,
Who walks in wooden clogs after the snow has
cleared on East Mountain
And composes poems while the wind roars through
the west chasm?
One must sympathize with the plum tree's lonely
state, forever without companions . . .

This allows them to put the image together with the poem and the artist's biography to understand the politics of the Qing dynasty as they related to the artist's life and painting style.⁴

In one version of this course I tried a more radical approach to assisting students in their understanding of the art objects. I was able to offer the course during our January term, and to expand the numbers of hours spent in class. We spent the usual amount of time sitting in a lecture room looking at slides and discussing them but we also spent time every day in the ceramics studio. Students chose a research paper topic that related to one type or style of Chinese pottery and they read about it, wrote about it, and attempted to reproduce it in clay. The success of the reproductions depended, in large part, on the difficulty and intricacy of the chosen ceramic object. As the students imitated their objects, we were also able to more fruitfully discuss the Chinese approach to copying and imitation of earlier works of art. I am trained in pottery as well as art history, which certainly facilitated the project, but I think this would also work as a collaborative

project between a historian and a studio artist. It was a break from a strict art history course, and it made the ceramic history much more real, and I must admit more interesting, to the students. A trip to a museum with a Chinese ceramic collection was the perfect complement to the project.

Teaching and learning the arts of Asia is a challenge to student and professor alike. In my class we take off down unfamiliar paths and read poetry and make pottery in order to find our way through the layers of meaning in the object. I make every effort to treat these areas with respect so that students will not be tempted to trivialize the content. It is hard to assess how successful a course such as this one is just by measuring the memorized facts that students cling to as the term ends. What I have found to be the real success of the course is the enthusiasm that the students acquire for the arts and culture of China and their desire to continue their studies of the country, its art and its history.

Notes

¹ Burton Watson, translator and editor, *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry*, Columbia University Press, 1984, pp. 21, 22 and 32.

² Du Fu, *Spring Prospect*, in Greg Whincup, editor, *The Heart of Chinese Poetry*, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1987, pp. 65-67.

³ Chu-tsing Li, "The Freer *Sheep and Goat* and Chao Meng-fu's *Horse Painting*," *Artibus Asiae*, XXX, 1968, pp. 279-346.

⁴ Henry Kleinhenz, "Shih-t'ao, Reminiscences of the Ch'in-huai River," in *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collections of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City and The Cleveland Museum of Art*, Indiana University Press, 1980, p. 323.

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