Chinese export paintings in Dutch public collections

The collections of seventeen museums, archives and libraries in the Netherlands include a large number of Chinese export paintings, many of which have finally been unveiled thanks to the new publication Made for Trade – Made in China. Chinese export paintings in Dutch collections: art and commodity. Existing research on the corpus deals mostly with the transfer of stylistic aspects; Western and Chinese painting conventions; literary sources; historical models; socio-cultural and aesthetic differences; dating and iconographical issues; and technical analyses regarding conservation of pigments and paper. In contrast, Made for Trade puts a new focus on these paintings: to see them as meaningful information carriers of an unknown culture that derive their legitimacy from the historical China trade, and to draw upon current theoretical approaches for treatment of these transnational works of art in future museum practices and strategies. Made for Trade follows the entire trajectory of this specific transcultural painting genre, from the production two centuries ago to the current position. At work in this trajectory are mechanisms between people, institutions and the paintings, which increase or, indeed, diminish the appreciation of this time- and place-specific art.

Rosalien van der Poel

Stages of value assignment

1770-1870: Production period, exchange and consumption period

The period of the making of. Transfer to other temporal and spatial settings, and different value attribution. High value/status in the Netherlands.

1870-1930: Exchange and consumption period

The period of emotional value accrual. Children and grandchildren inherit from father and grandfather; the stories behind the paintings are shared and known, the paintings hang on walls.

1930-1960: Exchange and detachment period

Great-grandchildren inherit from great-grandfather and paintings are taken to museums or auctioned. Paintings frequently fall from grace. Period of decline of value.

1960-1990: Exchange and continued detachment period

Low ‘frozen’ status. No longer purchased by Dutch museums; still accepted as valuable in trade. Low status quo concerning value aspects. No particular attention (dormant).

1990-2000: Detachment period

High ‘frozen’ status. No longer purchased by Dutch museums; still accepted as valuable in trade. Period of decline of value.

2000-2016: Revivification. Consumption and production period

Value re-accrual. Market improves. Paintings increasingly appear in auctions (consumers are producers at the same time). High status in China. Proliferation of museums and academic research centres. Chinese interest in the history of the historical China trade and the period of the Canton System (1757-1842).

2016 to present: Recovered pride

In China, these paintings are used to narrate these periods. In China, these paintings are used to narrate these periods.

Reference

1 In the Netherlands, Jan van Campen’s doctoral research on Royer was published in 2001, mentioning the famous Royer albums and his other spectacular paintings, including the set of Chinese winter landscapes in Tartary. Since 2013, I have noticed a sense of urgency in Dutch museums to digitise their collections, to collaborate with universities, knowledge institutions and other cultural (museum) partners, to establish material research centres, and to preserve valuable objects so that they can withstand the merciless test of time.
A shared cultural visual repertoire

Dedicated by the trade routes of the time, the westward movement of Chinese export paintings also conveyed images of China; the paintings became bearers of information. Notwithstanding the role played by Chinese painters in the creation of these images, the undoubted persuasive power of the illustrations was read and interpreted by the eye of the Western beholder. The various representations of ‘exotic’ Chinese subject matter appealed to a kind of immediacy and fascination. Despite the social use-value of Chinese export paintings offering ‘reliable’ evidence of a Chinese past, we can assume quite reasonably that the veracity of some subject matter is a more straightforward proposition, considered in terms of its likely commercial success. After all, the different themes represented only what Western customers demanded. They were in great demand and are still viewed by many people around the world as ‘articles of knowledge’. On the one hand, the subject matter of ‘daily life’ helps us to construct a ‘history from below’. They purported ‘in parallel with travel stories, and personal diaries, to be eyewitness accounts of the city’, as Koon states, when she writes about the image of Canton that emphasised a hybrid Guangdong cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, it is acknowledged that the depicted scenes more likely distort social reality than reflect it.

Determining the gaze

For a long time, it was believed that a Chinese export painting’s use-value or utility resided in its ability to represent or reproduce reality. But we also know that these export commodities continued to be liked, if not less, even after their relability as ‘witnesses’ was questioned later in the nineteenth century. The bright colours and the ‘exotic’ topics made the images all the more valuable. There is, then, the question of what Peter Burke calls “degrees of reliability” and “reliability for different purposes”.

In the historical China trade period, the construction of visual culture included an array of agents who might have guided the gaze. By painting only specific subjects in their characteristic way, the painters themselves were important agents who guided the ‘trader’s gaze’, who in turn saw the paintings as a way to keep their memories of China afloat. In addition, both on board and on the home front, seamen and their wives were influential purchasing agents. The high status of these collectors and collectors during the period and discussion led to requests for, at least, a painting or an album to be brought back home. In addition to being a representation of a cultural reality, the paintings appear to form a selective reality, separate and distinct from the subjects they portray. It is clear that in the nineteenth century, and beyond, the paintings were, painted on silk and cherished not only for their historic and informative value, but also because of the longing for the exotic and romantic image of ‘the East’. Today, the characters of the agents who determine the contemporary gaze on Chinese export paintings have changed, but they still exist. Think of descendents with their heirlooms as valuable antiques, auctioneers who determine which objects to put under the spotlight; art sellers with their targeted and compelling descriptions in catalogues and press releases; museum managers who decide what to exhibit; curators who digitalise and thus unlock, or on the contrary, lock their collections; enthusiasts who bring the paintings to the attention of a wider public via social media; and academics who write, or do not write, about this subject.

Back on the stage

The prospects for this painting phenomenon look good. On the one hand, revivification in the places where these paintings originated has resulted in an enormous demand for original paintings. We are seeing the newly established China trade museums and auction houses in China buy back these paintings from the places in Europe and America where they had travelled to in former days. By returning to China, new meanings will be created through this change in their cultural identity. Here, they can reassess their position as prestigious and identity strengthening commodities that confirm the cultural autonomy of owners, a use-value that, at the time of their production, was certainly true for most Western first owners. Thus, export paintings function as tangible material of the early cooperation with overseas trading economies. Through today’s exciting developments in the art market, the paintings will become embedded in new shifting cultural discourses. As the Chinese think of the Western, in fact, we can say that they are in perpetual flux. Their spatial mobility with visible traces of their age, usage and previous life alter their meaning and use with respect to new cultural horizons.


The historical China trade period runs from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.


Labels such as ‘the West’ and ‘Western’ or ‘Westem’ refer to a specific geographic and cultural domain; they are merely terms of convenience rather than useful anthropological or art-historical terms.


Museum of Contemporary Art in Yinshing (Ningxia, China) opened in August 2015. To my surprise this museum also owns a wonderful collection of ‘early Chinese Western-style paintings’ (mosa-yinchuan.com). With an exhibition on this subject entitled ‘The dimension of civilization, from 8 August 2015 to 31 December 2016’. The museum stands along the former Silk Road, showcased its connection to the Chinese international trading history. The Maritime Museum in Shanghai also holds a serious collection.

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References


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7. Embodiments of this revivification include, among others: the reopening in 2010 of the brand new, modernised, large-scale Guangdong Museum, with much attention for the China trade period; the establishment of the Thirteen Hong Kong Research Center at Guangzhou University in 2009; the organisation of a number of symposia on the theme ‘thirteen hongs’ (for example, the jointly held symposium ‘Litterature and the studies of Canton thirteen hongs in September 2013, organised by the Guangzhou Association of Social Sciences, Guangzhou Local Government Society, Canton Hong Kong Research Center and the Guangzhou Archivistics Society); the ongoing and intensified academic research into the multidimensional Hong Kong trade of the Thirteen Hong Kong Research Center at Guangzhou University (Zhongshan University), and the opening in 2013 of the Guangzhou Council for Promotion of the Culture of the Thirteen Hong Kong at the Guangzhou Culture Park. Furthermore, there are an increasing number of exhibitions being organised around this theme by museums and libraries in the region.


11. Ibid., p. 6.