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Introduction

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The present volume is dedicated to Chinese art, in many ways most remarkable in its particular ways of expression through different artistic media, which offers a more direct approach as a universal language. From the earliest times images and artworks have transmitted ideas about life and the world in a manner that words and literature could not. Chinese philosophers, writers, critics and artists continually debated and argued over the primary role and inner qualities of art in numerous theoretical and philosophical works throughout history. The primary subject of their discussions was painting, which also represents a significant part of this volume. The importance of painting was already clearly perceivable in a statement made by a Western Jin 西晉 writer, literary critic and calligrapher Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303): “For making things widely known, nothing is greater than words; for preserving their form, nothing is better than painting.”¹ (Zhang 1963, 2)

Chinese traditional painting is highly appreciated for its theory, expression, and technique, for all the richness and diversity, the number of recorded artists and critics, the large corpus of surviving paintings, frequently accompanied by a sophisticated critical literature, which can help us in understanding the inner core of the Chinese paintings. The special tools and materials used by Chinese artists contributed to a specific feature of Chinese paintings—the drawing of lines and the adoption of calligraphic elements, representing a rich repertoire of special brushstrokes. The use of brush can already be traced back to various decorations on Neolithic pottery. In the following dynasties (Shang 商 and Zhou 周) the use of

¹ It is quoted by Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 in his famous monumental compilation *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 (*Record of Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties*). The English translation is taken from Murray 2007, 3.

brush and ink had already developed to such a point that the basic shapes made by brush in later depictions had not changed much. Although a tendency towards realistic representations of the subject matter prevailed in the early periods, reaching its culmination in Song 宋 dynasty, the prominent philosopher from the Warring States period Han Feizi 韓非子 (280?–233 B.C.) argued that the easiest subject to paint were ghosts, namely where nobody can judge if the likeness has been achieved or not, while the most difficult to paint are dogs, horses and other real things (Yang 1997, 1), there is the tendency towards the expression of inner qualities and spirit of the subject—where the form is subordinated to the content, already became inveterate in early periods. Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (ca. 344–406), a native of Wuxi 無錫 in Jiangsu province and a famous painter and art theoretician, set the general principle “*yi xing xie shen* 以形寫神”—“with the form depict the spirit” which remained the main principle of the Chinese painting to the modern era. Half a century later this principle was further developed by Xie He 謝赫 (active in 5th century). In the preface to his book *Guhua pinlu* 古畫品錄 (*Classified Record of Ancient Painters*) he laid down the six fundamental rules of painting, known as *Liufa* 六法 (“Six Principles of Painting”) (Xie 1954), that became the main standards for the traditional Chinese painting. The first principle “*qi yun shengdong* 氣韻生動” emphasizes the “spirit consonance” (*qi yun* 氣韻) of painted forms, while the other five principles are related to brushwork, form, colour, composition and copying that are the essential medium for attaining the first principle. Later art theoreticians in discussing the principles and rules of the paintings only elaborated these principles, in their interpretations constantly affirming the first principle that the pictorial image must express the spirit of life. With the appearance of the literati artists, skilfully trained in calligraphy and poetry, the pure landscapes and various plants without prominent figures or architectural structures became one of the main subject-matters to express the feelings, internal moods and personality. They thus often rejected the outer form and accepted the more abstract dimensions of the paintings. Consequently, although a tendency to more realistic representations prevailed in the early periods, the shift towards capturing the subject’s spirit is noticeable in the Song, Yuan 元, Ming 明 and Qing 清 dynasties. “Sketching the idea” or *xieyi* 寫意 became the chief point, truly important in painting.

Although Chinese civilization during the long dynastic history, especially in the 20th century after the Xinhai revolution 辛亥革命 in 1911 underwent radical

transformations, clearly seen in the attempt at reconstructing the traditional art as a result of China's social, political and cultural conflicts, the traditional elements in painting and other artistic forms did not just simply perish. To the contrary, with the ardent debate and critiques they became even more incorporated in the artworks of individual artists—of those who continued along the tradition of brush and ink, or those who integrated Chinese and Western styles, and even of those who eagerly criticised and rejected the rigidity of the tradition, usually by employing traditional motifs to reinterpret its meaning and re-contextualize the Chinese tradition. In order to understand this diversity and delineate the new image of controversial intentions and notions, two articles in the present volume explore a wide range of cultural and traditional issues in the art of modern and contemporary artists. Lucie Olivová explores the literati tradition in the works of Qi Baishi 齊白石 (1864–1957), while Tania Becker examines the relation between tradition and modernity as reflected through the work of the contemporary artist and activist Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957).

As next characteristic of the art in China, I would like to point to its strong relation to the social, political, philosophical and cultural context of the society, which clearly reflects the ideological and value system of that time. From the theoretical work *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 (*Record of Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties*) of Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (ca. 815–ca. 877) one can detect an attempt to bring painting into line with the ethical function of the prevailing Confucian ideology:

Art of painting exists to enlighten ethics, improve human relationships, divine the changes of nature, and explore hidden truths. It functions like the Six Classics and works regardless of the changing seasons. (Zhang 1963)²

In the early dynasties the emperors and governmental officials were already carefully selecting the motifs with the moral and educational connotation to be depicted on the huge surface of the palaces' walls. They portrayed the loyal ministers and generals to show their appreciation for their loyalty and hard work. In the Song period with the establishment of the official Imperial Academy of Painting the court painters became even more restricted in following their own way of expression. They had to create works under the prevailing academic style of the court, often determined by the leading artist or the emperor. For example,

² English translation is taken from Yang 1997, 2.

the last emperor of the Northern Song, Hui Zong 徽宗 (1082–1135), was much more engaged in painting than in governing the country. The governmental supervision over art production has not receded ever since. Individual exhibitions are accompanied by severe restrictions or otherwise closed down, public museums and galleries exhibit artistic products of their own strict selection, and the financial support is limited only to certain art projects. Individual artists whose works denounce particular social problems or human/natural exploitation are persecuted and denounced. The artistic life in the contemporary Chinese society is distinctly determined.

In order to illuminate certain aspects of Chinese art—painting, the present volume explores a wide range of cultural, theoretical and aesthetical aspects of art intertwining between tradition and modernity. It is divided into three sections. The first examines the notions of life, values, philosophy and aesthetics in early Chinese art. In the Shang and Zhou dynasties the basic artistic activity was mainly recognized in the manufacture of bronze vessels and their attentive embellishing, closely linked to state and religious functions. For more than a millennium bronze vessels played a leading role not merely in the artistic expressions, but likewise in the quality of casting bronze products, a technology which peaked in the late Shang dynasty. The article by Wang Yi and Fu Xiaowei compares the ancient Chinese bronze wares and Western artworks, and their abundant decorative patterns. They investigate the essential feature and values of aesthetics and argue there was a rather obvious difference between Chinese and Western aesthetic values, absorbed in the foundation of each culture.

A major part of the artistic products and paintings from the Han dynasty, based on the excavation up to the present, were closely connected to the creation of the underground burial structures. The Chinese were obsessed with building posthumous structures, to which they devoted an exceptional amount of labour and finance. They furnished them with exquisite objects and embellished the walls with particular iconographical motifs. Each object, its location, and various motifs on the walls, along with the design of the entire architectural structure were interconnected and contributed to the integrity of the tomb. It is thus necessary to interpret the entire tomb design and its pictorial materials together, and recognize that the integrity of the tomb is obscured when it is broken up into different objects, classified, say by their materials or numerous other classificatory criteria. As long

as studies focus on the interpretation of individual objects and motifs, the unveiling of the formative, sociological and symbolical connotations of the grave scheme remains fragmentary, entirely failing to reveal their original human significance. By considering the above factors and using diverse methodological theories, based on an interdisciplinary research, the article by Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik tries to illustrate a more profound message in the Han grave design. The author offers answers to the question about the degree to which the cosmological and philosophical notions of that time, especially the correlative cosmology of *yin-yang wuxing* 陰陽五行, were manifested through the grave architecture and its art.

The second section of this volume, devoted to specific artistic dimensions of Chinese paintings, begins with Marina Prasolova's exploration of the extant written material about the Chinese silk painting and its development in the Sanguo 三國 and Western Jin periods. By a thorough analysis of written sources, particularly the compilation *Lidai minghua ji* by Zhang Yanyuan, the author reconstructs the artistic features of lost silk paintings and elucidates the complex relations between artistic production and the prevailing contemporaneous tendencies in artistic expressions in different genres. The article in classifying different thematic groups investigates the initial stage of Chinese painting development and its traditional elements. The next article by Lucie Olivová explores the traditional dimensions, formed through the successive dynasties, in the paintings of Qi Baishi. Qi Baishi, one of the most famous painters of the 20th century, lived at a time when Chinese painting was entering a new phase of development. His favourite subjects to paint were bamboos, lotus blossoms, insects, shrimps, crabs, birds, and old houses in the mountains, which adhere to the literati tradition and carry its legacy. It is noteworthy that the meticulous styles of painting combined with free sketch evolved in his particular individual manner of expression. The author in searching for the root of this idiosyncrasy examines six paintings from the large collection of his paintings in the National Gallery in Prague, one of the largest collections of Qi Baishi's paintings outside China. Each contribution opens new insights into specific attitudes towards painting that emerged after the collapse of a powerful regime in a transitional period (of Six Dynasties as well as at the beginning of the 20th century).

The final section with articles by Minna Valjakka and Tania Becker explores the complexity of contemporary artistic expressions that evolve in diverse media

of representation. Minna Valjakka thoroughly investigates the nature of caricature in contemporary Chinese art, focusing on Mao's image as represented through the artistic expressions of contemporary artists. The author argues that the usage of caricature in Mao portraiture is best understood as an illustrative example of trans-contextual parody—that the artists are challenging the visual norms of Mao's standard image. Tania Becker focuses on the controversial Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei and his particular attitude towards his own cultural tradition and Western art. By the adaption of traditional motifs he attempts to transform their original meaning and thus to re-contextualize the Chinese tradition. She examines the roots of his work in traditional art and explores his unique position between tradition and modernity, and prevalent current trends in the Western art and the Chinese culture.

The wide diversity of contributions to the present volume equips the readers with a variety of pragmatic viewpoints and interdisciplinary research methods. It brings new theoretical and methodological approaches to research of Chinese art which can enrich investigations of the long artistic tradition in China, leading to yet new and incisive interpretations.

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