

TRAVELS IN TARTARY: Decoding Ten Export Winter Landscapes

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The Chinese export paintings collection of the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden includes ten winter views in Tartary painted on canvas. That these ten paintings have never before been studied as a group has inspired the present author to conduct research into their origins, the findings of which are presented in this article.

Seven of the ‘winter views in Tartary’ in the Leiden museum were made on commission for the Hague lawyer and collector Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807) and are

dated to before 1807 (see van Campen, 2000b, p. 323; van der Poel, 2007, pp. 41-45). While assembling his Chinese collection, Royer was assisted by Ulrich Gualtherus Hemmingson (1741-99), who worked for the VOC in Canton from 1765 to 1790 (Meilink-Roelofs, 1980, pp. 458-69). Hemmingson or his intermediaries purchased items directly from the workshops in Canton. Part of the Royer Collection was also purchased in the Netherlands, where a huge variety of Asian objects was available. While it is not



(Fig. 1) *Winter Landscape*
China, c. 1800
Oil on canvas
Height 64 cm, width 95 cm
The National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden (360-349b)



(Fig. 2) *Winter Landscape*
China, c. 1800
Oil on canvas
Height 64 cm, width 95 cm
The National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden (360-349g)

known how Royer came to acquire the ‘winter views’, that he also wanted a set of winter landscapes for his Chinese research collection is undisputed. In 1816, six of the paintings were rehoused in the Royal Cabinet of Rarities, where the director, Reinier Pieter van de Kastele (1767-1845), titled them ‘Six winter views in Tartary painted on canvas’ (van Campen, 2000b, p. 323; van de Kastele’s 1816 inventory contains the earliest descriptions of the objects in Royer’s museum, and served as the basis for a catalogue of the collection). The seventh view was added later. The *Guide to Viewing the Royal Cabinet of Rarities (Handleiding tot de bezigtiging van het Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden)* provides a schematic and geographical classification of the Cabinet (van de Kastele, 1824). Here, too, the six winter landscapes are specifically mentioned. In 1883, the paintings were relocated to the National Ethnographic Museum, now the National Museum of Ethnology, in Leiden. The other three paintings were acquired, probably between 1824 and 1860, from the collection of the Royal Cabinet of Rarities, established in 1816 by King Willem I (1772-1843), on the basis of the Royer Bequest of 1814, which included 3,000 Chinese and Japanese objects.

While in general these winter landscapes were painted to include Western perspective, composition and materials, the

mountains exhibit a more Chinese touch (Fig. 1). This is why the paintings have been described as ‘hybrid’ works (Shang, 2005, p.94). The particularities of these depictions of winter are the Manchu figures in a rugged mountainous landscape with typical Chinese towns and pagodas. Chinese attributes such as clothing, accessories and palanquins also contribute to the Chinese atmosphere. The trees in the rocky landscape are leafless, deciduous species (Fig. 2). The people portrayed are placed in the foreground of the image, dressed in winter headgear and thick clothing. They are seen travelling, returning from a hunt, working the land, or at ‘home’ in encampments. These scenes are set amid in snow-covered mountains, on barren plains, rocky plateaus and mountain paths. Some figures are portrayed *en face*, effectively including the viewer in the scene depicted. In a number of the paintings the travelling figures are also depicted in the centre foreground, seemingly inviting viewers to join them. The postures and gestures of the figures are significant, and inform the viewer that the depictions show meetings between individuals or groups.

The towns and villages in the distance are remote and surrounded by nature, Chinese Tartary having been separated from the rest of Tartary by high mountains (Forêt, 2000, pp. 85-88). But despite their many Manchu-Chinese characteristics, these winter landscapes cannot be regarded as typically Chinese paintings: the composition of the human figures in natural surroundings contrasts strongly with Chinese literati art, in which human figures are usually

portrayed in valleys at the lower edge of the painting, insignificant in relation to the majestic mountains.

In another departure from classical Chinese art, the trees and foothills in these export works function as *repoussoir*, directing the eye of the viewer by framing the painting. This function, and the media used – oil paint or gouache on canvas – are typically Western conventions. Apart from the mountains and rocks, which are depicted in traditional Chinese painting style, the other visual elements have been painted without visible brush strokes. The use of light and shade, and the colour and atmospheric perspective complete the overall Western tone.

Although the National Museum of Ethnology did not acquire all the paintings at the same time, their similar narrative and hybrid styles mean that they can be considered as a group. The research into the winter scenes has not so far revealed the literary source that might have inspired them. Furthermore, the degree to which export painters could influence the choice of subjects and their style and composition remains unclear. Mass and serial production meant that individual contributions by artists were probably very limited. However, these winter landscapes do not appear to have been produced according to such a system. For one thing, their stylistic uniformity suggests that they were all executed by the same artist or studio. The outlines of some of the small groups of figures appear to have been applied with templates, while elsewhere, it would appear that pattern books were used for the trees and groups of rocks, one example being the well-known *Mustard Seed Garden Manual* (*Jieziyuan huazhuan*), the first edition of which dates to 1679. It is also important to note that very few similar representations are known worldwide. Exceptions include a painting that was displayed in the exhibition ‘Journey to the Far East – George Chinnery and the Art of Canton, Macao and Hong Kong in the 19th Century’ at Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum (1996-97), and a reverse glass painting in the National Museum of Ethnology collection.

One notable feature of the seven paintings from the Royer Collection is that each is surrounded by a painted black frame, forming part of the image (see Fig. 2). Such ‘painted’ frames occur frequently in 18th century European prints (although not in oil paintings). It is thus plausible that the Chinese export painter copied the image from a printed model. The three, larger, paintings in the Royal Cabinet are not, however, surrounded by a painted black frame.

We know that landscape paintings of this type were in general used as decoration, as over-mantel paintings or as *supraportes* (a relief or painted work hung above a doorway) in rooms in which the walls were covered with Chinese painted wallpaper or decorated according to the prevailing taste for Chinese art in European society in the 18th century. The composition of the staffage in the landscape is reminiscent of some of the representations found on Chinese wallpaper (Fig. 3). However, it is unlikely that the ten ‘winter views’ were intended for use as wallpaper, which was always executed in gouache, while over-mantel paintings and *supraportes* were frequently painted in oils (Wappenschmidt, 1989, p. 33). It is possible that these paintings were made in a studio that also produced wallpaper: that the Dutch East India Company (VOC) commissioned wallpaper, *supraportes* and over-mantel paintings from the Cantonese silk painters Anthonij (act. c. 1756-87) and Sequa (act. c. 1778-90) in 1786 (*ibid.*, pp. 74-75), although the descriptions thereof do not correspond with the winter landscapes in The National Museum of Ethnology.

Several possible models can be identified by linking the motifs found within these export paintings and tracing sources and influences from 16th and 17th century North European painters. In the 18th century, an increasing number of paintings from famous European collections were reproduced as prints, copies of which may have made their way to China via the imperial court or through Dutch and Belgian missionaries. A brief search by this author produced a number of works by landscape painters from the northern



(Fig. 3) Panoramic Chinese wallpaper depicting a falcon hunt Nymphenburg Castle, Munich (Photo courtesy of and © Bavarian Department of State-owned Palaces, Gardens and Lakes, Munich, Germany)



(Fig. 4) *Winter Landscape*
China, c. 1800
Oil on canvas

Height 64 cm, width 95 cm

The National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden (360-349a)

and southern Netherlands, which, although not identical, share many similarities regarding atmosphere and subject-matter with the paintings under discussion. Among these are prints and paintings by the Flemish painter and draughtsman Joos de Momper (1564-1635) and works by the Dutch painter and graphic artist Hercules Segers (c. 1590-1636). With its composite imaginary landscape, clusters of rocks and overall composition, Figure 4 may be compared to such paintings as de Momper's *Tobias' Journey* (Fig. 5). It is also possible that Biblical themes, from sources such as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, may have been used as models.

Further similarities can be seen between several of these

Chinese winter landscapes, for example Figure 5, and some of the different depictions of the themes *Flight into Egypt* and *Landscape with Hunters* by 16th and 17th century European landscape artists. The *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1572-1616) by Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg is also an important source. A copy of this six-part work arrived at the Jesuit mission in Nanchang in 1708, and was thoroughly studied by Chinese artists who had contact with the Western missionaries. The distinctive portrayals of the human figures and the composition of the zigzagging pathways, suggest that this set of prints could have served as inspiration for the winter landscapes (Cahill, 1982, pp. 70-105). How the transmission of the works actually took place is, however, unknown.

Scenes from Chinese literary classics may also have served as models. Several Chinese court painters of the 16th and 17th century, such as Wu Bin (act. c. 1568-1626), Dong Qichang



(Fig. 5) *Tobias' Journey*

By Joos de Momper (1564-1635), 16th century
Oil on wood panel

Height 90 cm, width 136 cm

KBC Bank NV, Rockoxhuis, Erwin Donvil, Antwerp, Belgium



(Fig. 6) Detail of *Landscape*
By Wu Bin (fl. c. 1568-1626), 1610
Handscroll, ink and colours on paper
Width 35.6 cm, length 1005.8 cm
Honolulu Museum of Art
Purchase, 1967 (3519.1)

(1555-1636), Zhao Zuo (act. c. 1610-30) and Gong Xian (c. 1617-89), experimented with Western painting techniques in their landscapes (Fig. 6).

The presence of Jesuit painters at the Chinese court and the preference of the Qing emperors Kangxi (1662-1722), Yongzheng (1723-35) and Qianlong (1736-95) for Western painting techniques in their commissions to court painters, albeit on a limited scale was key to the development of Chinese export painting from the 16th century onwards. While Westerners and their art gradually lost their status in the northern court following the end of the Qianlong period (see Kohura in Molen and Uitzinger, 1990, p. 102), events in southern China took a different course. Foreign merchants were engaged in brisk trade with China, with Canton being their only port of access. Prior to the 18th century, the massive trade in porcelain, tea and silk, and the fashion for all things Chinese in the West had fostered a predilection for faithful portrayals of Chinese life, which Cantonese craftsmen – experts at imitating and adapting European styles and techniques – would supply. This industry reached its apex in the middle of the 19th century, but declined following the introduction of photography in around 1900.

Here it is important not to overstate the gulf between typical Western characteristics and the Chinese characteristics of the various forms of painting, styles and subject-matter (Thorp and Vinograd, 2001, p. 357). That Western materials and artistic techniques such as oil paints, linear perspective and *chiaroscuro* were adopted in China is the result of deliberate appropriation, rather than the passive absorption of Western influences by Chinese export painters. The Chinese artists chose carefully and only adopted techniques that would enhance the representations and enliven their compositions (Cahill, 2010, p. 69). Moreover, depictions painted in the Western style sold better.

The winter landscapes produced by Cantonese painters could have resulted from their links with northern Chinese

missionaries and court painters in Beijing. Collaborations between Western Jesuit painters and Chinese court painters on grand official painting projects (*hebi*), for which artists were recruited from throughout the land (Shang, 2005, p. 95), also exposed painters from southern China to the methods used in the imperial workshops. Furthermore, when Chinese painters left the imperial court and returned to their places of birth, they took their knowledge of Western painting conventions to other areas of China, such as the Jiangnan region

(Nanjing, Suzhou and Yangzhou) and Canton. Qianlong period woodcuts from Suzhou, which had a flourishing industry in woodblock art, included landscapes where the European central perspective was used. These prints were sometimes marked with a text or seal reading ‘former court painter’ (Hironobu Kohura in Molen and Uitzinger, 1990, p. 99). During the early 19th century, in addition to the existing upper-class art collectors, a new class of collectors emerged, made up of wealthy members of the middle class, mainly salt and textile merchants from Yangzhou (Shang, 2005, p. 100). They cleared the way for Western-style prints and paintings from Beijing to make their way to coastal towns and southern China.

VOC journal entries from 1763 provide evidence about the arrival of court painters from the north in Canton (Van Dyke and Viallé, 2008, p. 129 and 131). One anonymous painter who had worked for the viceroy, the governor-general of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces and for the court in Beijing, informed the viceroy that his life had vastly improved now that he was working for the Europeans. The Co-hong, the (monopolistic) merchant’s guild in Canton, forbade him from becoming a member of their association, but the viceroy issued the artist with a permit to open a workshop in Canton, at which Europeans could order paintings (*ibid.*, p. 186, footnote 141).

It should be stressed here that the winter landscape theme is quite unusual in export painting, and to date, very little has been written on this subject. In general, Chinese painters in sub-tropical Canton were not well acquainted with the northern Chinese climate and landscape, and it is likely that the Cantonese studios were supplied with Western engravings or landscape prints of these winter scenes, which their painters then copied.

Northern winter landscapes had been a popular subject for the domestic Chinese market centuries before the Cantonese painters adopted it as an export theme. Sets of four paintings representing the four seasons were common in traditional Chinese painting: winter landscapes represented stillness and purity, and winter was regarded as the end of the annual cycle. At the same time, winter was interpreted as



(Fig. 7) *Winter Landscape*
 China, c. 1800
 Oil on canvas
 Height 72 cm, width 102 cm
 The National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden (360-1138)

the starting point of all life. The catalogue accompanying the 1989 exhibition ‘Special Exhibition of Winter Landscapes’ at the National Palace Museum, Taipei states that Chinese winter landscapes were painted as early as the 4th century (*Special Exhibition of Winter Landscapes [Dongjing shanshui hua te zhantulu]*, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 1989, pp. 73-74; see also Shang, 2005, p. 98).

Most of the extant export winter landscapes correspond to Western ideals of a Chinese winter landscape (Fig. 7); additionally, the overwhelming European interest in portrayals of all aspects of China and its inhabitants also played a role. But several questions remain unanswered in the discussion about this set of works. The search for the models used for these landscapes is ongoing. Also remaining are questions of the provenance of the three paintings not from the Royer Collection, and their acquisition by the Royal Cabinet of Rarities. The design process, media used, and the market for such hybrid paintings are also questions to which we do not yet have answers. It is hoped that further investigation will result in the restoration of the paintings to their original condition.

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