LIFE

Framing a portrait of innovation

Suzhou exhibition focuses on art during Ming and Qing dynasties, **Zhao Xu** reports.





Left: Lyricist-poet Wu Yunzhao (middle) depicted by renowned Ming-dynasty portraitist Zeng Jing (1564-1647), with the landscape painted by Hu Zongxin. **Above:** A Qing-dynasty portrait of a woman, painted using *mogu fa*, or the technique of structuring with ink, as first employed by Zeng. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"A camera of the Ming (Dynasty of China)" is how Yang Danxia, an expert on ancient Chinese painting from the prestigious Palace Museum in Beijing, describes Zeng Jing, a leading portraitist active in the late 16th century to mid-17th century China.

Of the many works he presumably painted, only around 20 have lasted to date.

One of them, owned by the museum, depicts a man named Wu Yunzhao, a lyricist-poet and member of the literati among whom Zeng had commanded a large following.

Donning a monochromatic robe and a black headscarf befitting a scholar-recluse, Wu was placed amid forested mountains, where he was accompanied by his own read, which he held by hand, as well as two boy attendants rendered skillfully by Zeng.

It's worth noting that the scenery was done by Zeng's contemporary Hu Zongxin, one of the several landscapists Zeng had cooperated with in an effort to bring out the inner tableau of those he portrayed.

"Zeng brought something new into a long tradition of ancient Chinese portraiture, with huge success," Yang says.

That reason alone has guaranteed his position in art history, and his inclusion in an ongoing exhibition focusing on the art form during the country's Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties between the mid-14th and early 20th century.

"Why Ming and Qing? Because in between those centuries, Chinese portraiture, steeped in the thoughts and aesthetics of Confucianism, underwent big changes, of which Zeng was a key figure," says Yang Zewen, the exhibition's curator.

Featuring around 100 pieces of work ranging from ancestral and royal portraits to images of eminent officials and celebrated men of words, the exhibition is held by the Suzhou Museum in Suzhou city, Jiangsu province, whose modern-day capital Nanjing, around 200 kilometers from Suzhou, was where Zeng spent his most productive years.

In 1582, around 18 years after Zeng was born, Matteo Ricci, an Italian Jesuit priest, arrived in Macao, where he studied the Chinese language and customs.

It eventually took him 13 years to arrive in Nanjing, where he stayed for a couple more years before making his way further north to Beijing. There he was given an audience by Emperor Wanli of the Ming Dynasty in 1601.

Among the gifts he presented to the Chinese ruler were three oil portraits. The emperor was believed to have been astounded by how lifelike the images were. In the following two centuries, more Jesuit missionaries followed Ricci's footsteps, among whom were many painter-portraitists with an innate understanding of the power of art.

"Two artistic traditions intersected — one embraced by traditional Chinese portraitists; the other, by Western artists who had previously been trained, among other things, to carve a vivid image with light and shadow," says Yang Zewen.

Light and shadow — prominent factors in Western painting including portraiture — had largely been ignored by ancient Chinese portraitists "for a deeper, philosophical reason", to quote Yang Danxia from the Palace Museum.

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"For them, it was the perceived truth about an individual rather than physical likeness that mattered. So, instead of going after a heightened sense of existence and momentariness often conveyed by the employment of intense light and shadow, they went for something more constant, more indispensable of the man, as seen through their mind's eye," she says.

However, that doesn't mean that the Chinese portraitists who had contact with the missionaries and their art weren't tempted to reflect on their own way of painting. In fact, some of them did, including Zeng, who soon came up with what's known today as the *mogu fa*, or the technique of structuring with ink.

He first used light ink both to outline the subject's facial features and to shade certain areas of his face. This was before colored ink, sometimes of a rosy-beige or dusky tone, was applied on the face, one ultrathin layer after another. The goal was not to cover the black ink-shaded areas but to slightly subdue and soften them.

Still visible under the translucent colored paint, these inky parts would add dimension to a face that would otherwise look much flatter, emphasizing details from the brow ridge and cheekbones to wrinkles and eye bags.

"By doing so, Zeng had merged the two main methods in traditional Chinese portraiture, one using pure lines without any color or wash, the other, more popular in Nanjing and the surrounding regions, relied on the smooth application of colored ink for facial depiction," says Yang Zewen, the curator.

"He did so, informed by Western portraiture. And what he had accomplished was highly evocative representations of his subjects that still exuded the sensibilities of the literati culture."

To walk that fine line, Zeng had to adhere to a muted color palette, and had limited his experiments only to the faces of his subjects. The rest of the figure, clothing included, are rendered with highly suggestive lines.

The resulting succinctness and two-dimensionality was an antithesis to what his Western counterparts were so bent on achieving through their palpable rendition of delicate crispy lacework or sensual silk and velvet.

"Toward the end of the Ming Dynasty, the Yangtze River Delta region, where Nanjing was located, experienced great prosperity, which in turn led to a general enthusiasm toward anything new. Zeng, with his latest adaptations, became the portraitist of his time," says Yang Danxia.

"He was admired, copied and emulated as a pioneering force who brought the art to a place it had never quite been."

In 1644, three years before Zeng's death, the Ming Dynasty met its own end, succeeded by Qing, which lasted for another 267 years.

The dynastic transition did almost nothing to stop Western artists from coming to China, and Beijing in particular, where they tried very hard to impress the Qing rulers, and in that process, interacted closely with their Chinese counterparts.

Reflecting on Zeng's phenomenal success, Yang Danxia says: "It's important to remember that Zeng had never sought to revolutionize classical Chinese portraiture. In fact, his very success lies with the great sensitivity he had shown toward an art tradition into which he was born, while trying to take that tradition just one calculated step further."

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Interpreting art in a different light

By ZHAO XU





Left: A portrait of Emperor Yongzheng of the Qing Dynasty, tentatively attributed to Italian Jesuit missionary painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766). **Above:** A rubbing of a likeness of celebrated Qing-dynasty painter Wang Hui, done by his portraitist friend Yu Zhiding upon Wang's departure from Beijing.

"One must try to forget what one has already learned, and open up fully to new (artistic) influences and techniques, in order to come up with works that appeal to the cultural sensibilities of his new audience," wrote French Jesuit painter and missionary Jean Denis Attiret (1702-1768) in his diary during his stay in Beijing, which lasted from 1739 until his death in 1768 at the age of 66.

There, in the capital of the Qing Dynasty, Attiret painted inside the Forbidden City, the vast imperial palace that today houses most of his works under the name of the Palace Museum. And the words Attiret, whose Chinese name Wang Zhicheng denotes sincerity and earnestness, had put down were probably meant as much for himself as for his fellow Western artists who had willingly entered the service of the Qing emperors.

"For one thing, their royal Chinese patrons — like all other Chinese at the time — found shadows on the face highly disagreeable. So that had to go, or at least had to be greatly adjusted," says Yang Zewen, curator of an ongoing exhibition at the Suzhou Museum that focuses on portraiture from China's Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties.

Yang is standing right in front of a portrait of Emperor Yongzheng (1678-1735), whose father Emperor Kangxi, considered the greatest Qing ruler, harbored a passionate interest toward Western painting, which directly facilitated the arrival in China of many missionary artists.

Flanked by two portraits of his royal consorts — one of them the mother of his successor Emperor Qianlong, Yongzheng appears in the painting, done with traditional Chinese colored ink on silk, as a rather benign-looking character with a sense of aplomb. His facial features are delicately rendered, with light shading on the nasal wings and toward the back of his face.

"One gets the feeling that whoever had painted this was fully aware of the element of light, and by extension, shadow, in portraiture," Yang says. "Yet the same person must be equally aware of the Chinese aesthetics as not to upset it.

"While many Western paintings indicated strongly at a single light source through the dramatic interplay between light and shadow, the missionary artists, in their attempt to reconcile two artistic traditions, had made their works appear as if they had been painted in open light, which readily deleted all darkness."

Interestingly, one Western ruler who also insisted that no shadow came across her face is Elizabeth I, the powerful, long-reigning Queen of England from the 16th century. Elizabeth oversaw the creation of many of her likenesses by artist Nicholas Hilliard that look a bit flat, a deliberate decision for the monarch who probably thought naturalistic representation was not entirely helpful in the projection of power and symbolism.

The aforementioned Emperor Yongzheng portrait has been tentatively attributed to Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), an Italian Jesuit missionary painter who served three Qing emperors — Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong. A friend of Attiret and a master of fusion when it came to mixing artistic influences, Castiglione, whose Chinese name Lang Shining implied serenity and harmony, saw his fame reach its height during the reign of Emperor Qianlong, who declared him as "standing head and shoulder above all other portraitists (in my court)".

Under the auspices of Qianlong, Castiglione and other Western artists gave lessons to young Chinese trainees deemed talented. They also helped raise the status of studio-trained portraitists, long considered lesser mortals to literati painters who, as their collective name suggests, were usually highly educated, well-versed in poetry, and dominated Chinese landscape painting since around the 10th century.

In 1729, *Shi Xue*, or The Science of Perspectives, a richly illustrated book and the first Chinese one to have dealt with the topic, was published. The author, Nian Xiyao, elder brother of Nian Gengyao, the right-hand man of Emperor Yongzheng before his deadly fall from grace, had studied perspective with Castiglione.

A notion central to the illusion of depth in Western painting, perspective was brought into traditional Chinese painting — the depiction of architectural landscape in particular — by missionary artists around the same time, and was quickly taken up by their Chinese counterparts, especially those working at the imperial court.

In 1689, Emperor Kangxi made a grand tour to consolidate his authority over southern China. The renowned landscapist Wang Hui (1632-1717), assisted by his team of painters, recorded the journey in a series of twelve oversize handscrolls ranging from 14 to 26 meters long.

While the format of a handscroll is decidedly Chinese, the spatial representation in each painting pointed to an acute sense of depth and perspective not typically seen in traditional Chinese paintings.

On view at the Suzhou Museum exhibition are two images of Wang Hui. One is the rubbing of an original work done by celebrated Qing-dynasty portraitist Yu Zhiding. Yu meant it as a parting gift for Wang Hui who, having spent eight whole years on his royal commission, had decided to leave Beijing for good.

In the painting, Wang Hui, wearing a loosefitting robe and no hat, was making his way home on the back of a cow, followed by his luggage-bearing attendant. For those familiar with the iconography of Chinese portraiture, Wang Hui, once trusted by the emperor, had chosen to be seen as someone whose only ambition was to be with nature.

A few steps away from the rubbing is a portrait of him living the life he had always wanted, amid nature's untended wilderness. Visibly older than he had appeared in Yu's work, the man, slightly frail and in white, seems to be receding slowly into the background. This deeply spiritual portrait was from Wang Hui's two other painter friends, Xie Bin and Wu Li, the latter believed to have befriended many Western artists who lived in China at the time.

"It's a two-way street whereby the Chinese and Western artists came under the influences of each other," says Yang. "While some of the influences had led to conscious decisions — like the one to keep shadows off the face, others were felt more subtly, sometimes without one's knowledge."

In 1711, Italian Jesuit priest Matteo Ripa was appointed court painter by Emperor Kangxi. According to his own memoir, to get that position, Ripa was asked to prove his own worth, with painting tools drawn from both Chinese and Western traditions.

"These included a Chinese brush, some paint and an oil painting canvass," he wrote.