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Title

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6177f02c>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(14)

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Publication Date

2015-03-01

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6177f02c#supplemental>

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Picturing Science in Modern China

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The ink brushes of the painters Chen Shizeng 陳師曾 (1876–1923), Liu Kuiling 劉奎齡 (1885–1967), and Gao Jianfu 高劍父 (1879–1951) were employed as tools of the nation in early twentieth-century China. Among each artist’s oeuvre were paintings dedicated to the welfare of the country—Chen Shizeng commemorated a week-long exhibition for flood relief; Liu Kuiling painted the Boxer Rebellion, which he had witnessed firsthand in Tianjin, from memory years later, during the Second Sino-Japanese War; and Gao Jianfu famously depicted skulls crying over the nation’s fate at about the same time. Yet any clear expression of a radical idealism about the new republic in these artists’ ink paintings was tempered by a tentative and self-conscious exploration of new ways of seeing. By synthesizing a “universal” scientific gaze with their trained vision as artists, Chen, Liu, and Gao created pictures that encouraged their viewers to cross the boundaries and binaries that would come to define *guohua*, or “national painting”: East versus West, oil versus ink, modernity versus tradition, painting versus graphic arts, and elite versus folk. It was through the scientific gaze of these brush-and-ink artists that political idealism and learning came to cooperate, and through their paintings that possibilities for new ways of seeing the nation emerged.

This *Cross-Currents* photo essay explores these artists’ extended moment of synthesis and experimentation—at the interstices of science and ink painting—at the beginning of the twentieth century. It does so with an eye to each artist’s immediate visual culture and to the bodies of knowledge with which they were respectively engaged, just then in the process of becoming the modern sciences of ethnography, zoology, and entomology. Like *guohua* and the nation itself from the 1900s through the 1920s, these sciences were fluid in definition.

Chen Shizeng’s 1914–1915 painted album of street figures, which he titled *Beijing Social Life and Customs* (*Beijing fengsu tu*), was described in a recent textbook as an urban

“ethnography” (Thorp and Vinograd 2001, 389). The album comprises thirty-four paintings, each accompanied by a page of inscribed poems and short prose pieces. It features images of flower peddlers as well as rickshaw coolies—but it also contains pictures of spies, beggars, displaced court attendants, and other figures from the shadowy side of the street. Its darker content is echoed by a dark, almost violent style of brushwork. Such pictorial and stylistic tension prompts the question: how was ethnography itself understood at the time in Beijing? And how did pictorial ethnographies—particularly trade albums featuring street figures in China for a European and domestic tourist market—help to shape the “ethnographic gaze”?

The first section of this photo essay features Chen’s painting for disaster relief; pictures from his album of social life and customs in Beijing; paintings of beggars by Chen’s contemporary Wang Yiting 王一亭 (1867–1938)¹ and by the late eighteenth-century painter Huang Shen 黄慎 (1687–1772), whose style was appreciated by Chen; as well as a few pages from a trade album of street figures painted in Beijing in 1890 or earlier, also ethnographic in content.

The Tianjin brush-and-ink painter Liu Kuiling famously created an ink menagerie of black bears, lynxes, wolves, rhinoceroses, camels, and other wild and domestic animals. Important among his oeuvre were screen paintings. Purchased mainly by the moneyed elite in Tianjin, these screens were usually displayed in the public spaces of homes. Their wild content, coupled with a style that slipped between objective and poetic representation, asked people who encountered them to look at domestic space through new eyes. Hence, we might ask: what did it mean to invite a polar bear into your home? To echo art historian John Berger (1980), why look at animals? And how did Liu’s screens embody and shape perceptions of arenas of scientific inquiry beyond the home—the zoo and the natural history museum—where not only animals, but also the emergent, imagined nation, were on display?

The second section of the photo essay features Liu’s depiction of the Boxer Rebellion (entitled *National Humiliation*), as well as a selection of his screen paintings of animals, a hanging scroll of a camel in the style of the Jesuit court painter Lang Shining 郎世寧 (Guiseppe Castiglione, 1688–1766), and an anthropological ink painting that demonstrates Liu’s engagement with photographs in the collection of a local natural history museum. The essay also features a color lithographic print of a fox by Gao Qifeng 高奇峰 (1889–1933) and another screen of animal paintings by Zhu Qingqi and Luo Fukan that is oddly intermixed with

calligraphy copied from epigraphic rubbings (which may have been in the collection of Luo's teacher, the treaty-port intellectual Kang Youwei 康有為 [1858–1927]). Together, these last few pictures begin to give some sense of the visual and cultural field of animal paintings in which Liu was working.

An important new form of insect painting also emerged in China at the turn of the twentieth century. This genre did not evolve from within the realm of Chinese art traditions specifically, or even art generally. Instead, it evolved through trade pictures of insects produced in Canton (Guangzhou City) for a scientifically minded European clientele in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the progenitors of modern-day entomologists. Those who made these paintings included not only the Europeans who oversaw their production but also the Chinese who did much or all of the painting itself, and through the pictures integrated long-lived domestic painting styles into European techniques of illustration used for purposes of scientific illustration. Word and diagram overtook picture as the primary medium for communicating knowledge in the nascent discipline of entomology by the end of the nineteenth century, but this genre of painting and the ways of looking at insects it encouraged did not entirely disappear in China. Instead, it found a new home in design and ink painting, as exemplified by the work of the Cantonese artist Gao Jianfu.

In its final section, this photo essay features exemplary illustrations culled from entomological books over the course of the long nineteenth century; trade paintings of insects made for export by the anonymous hands of workshop artists in the port city of Canton; paintings by Ju Lian 居廉 (1828–1904), the Cantonese artist with whom Gao Jianfu studied, as well as by his older cousin Ju Chao 居巢 (1811–65); and Gao's own early sketches—sketches that demonstrate the nature of his training under Ju Lian's inquisitive and scientifically oriented eye. Gao's later and more formal entomological studies also helped to shape his design sensibility and informed his sense that porcelain production could save the nation. A dish decorated with mantises serves as an example of his exploration into porcelain design.

There was both the darkness of loss and a sense of promise to these painters' project of working out how to see. By immobilizing their subjects through brush and ink, the three artists featured here captured those subjects that were quickly moving toward the edge of vision: customs and social roles in the streets of Beijing, wild animals in their natural habitats, and insects in gardens. The desired processes of modernization and nation-building on the global

stage ensured a movement from lively presence to stilled absence and loss. But the artists also threw their pictures back into the flow of time by questioning the nature of seeing itself for the nation. It is this dimension of their paintings that indeed makes it not only relevant, but urgent, to look at their painted pictures of what is no longer there—again, and again—as we question today whither China.

Lisa Claypool is associate professor of the History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture at the University of Alberta. Her research has been supported by a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Insight Development Grant and the University of Alberta President's Grants for the Creative and Performing Arts from the Killam Research Fund. The author would like to thank her research assistants, Yifan Li and Lulu Yu, for their assistance in this curatorial project.

Notes

- 1 The labels for the album paintings by Wang Yiting were graciously contributed to the exhibition by my colleague Walter Davis, associate professor of the History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture at the University of Alberta. The story Davis begins to tell in them is fleshed out in his forthcoming book (Davis, forthcoming).

References

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