

## REVIEW

Flowering in the Shadows: Women in the Histories of Chinese and Japanese Painting. Edited by Marsha Weidner. Pp. xviii, 315. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.

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Flowering in the Shadows joins the two recently published exhibition catalogues Japanese Women Artists (1600-1900) (Patricia Fister, Spencer Museum of Art, 1988) and Views from Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists, 1300-1912 (Marsha Weidner and others, Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1988) to form a tri-pronged foray into the subject of the role of women in the painting histories of China and Japan. It is a long overdue and most welcome effort. The editor conceived of this volume as complementary to the two earlier exhibition catalogues, and, indeed, as the reproduction of illustrations is not one of the book's strong points, the reader may find it desirable that the catalogues be available for further perusal. Nevertheless, Flowering in the Shadows stands admirably by itself as a collection of essays by respected scholars of Chinese and Japanese art history which together provide a compelling picture of one of the least understood stories of Asian cultural history.

The pairing of Chinese with Japanese subjects is one of the book's strengths. Not only is it justified by the obvious cross-cultural connections, but it results in interesting comparative material because of the differences that emerge among the many parallels between the histories of women and painting in the two countries. The book is evenly divided, five essays apiece for China and Japan, and there is an element of symmetry between the two halves that provides a welcome structure too often lacking in collections of scholarly articles. There is, for example, a chapter apiece that provides an overview of issues of social class, subject matter, style, function and patronage. Moreover, there is a close chronological parallel in the arrangement of chapters between the two countries. Marsha Weidner's introduction also helps to bring together the essays, the remainder of which concern specific case studies.

The rationale for the book is obvious: women's role in the painting histories of China and Japan is a subject that has been virtually ignored in the art-historical writings of both Asia and the West, and the question immediately arises whether this is due to our own blind negligence or to the unworthiness of the subject. The book naturally presumes the former. Marsha Weidner's introduction in part

surveys nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Western perceptions of Asian women in an effort to demonstrate that part of our neglect, at least in the case of China, is the result of facile categorizations of its women as femmes fatales, dragon empresses, or other stereotypes. The answer, however, is clearly more complex than this. If in China itself there had been a long-standing recognition of great women painters, surely they would not have been ignored by modern art historians, regardless of lingering stereotypes. The fact is that standard Chinese biographical sources record a thirty-to-one male-female ratio of painters, and of the thousand-odd women mentioned, only the smallest handful are accorded any true distinction. In a word, the prejudice lies foremost within the histories of China and Japan, where a woman without talent was considered virtuous, to paraphrase a popular Chinese saying, and the highest praise a woman artist might hope for was the comment that her painting "gave no hint of being from the women's quarters."

Two broad historical patterns emerge between China and Japan. The first is the relatively prominent role that women appear to have played early in their countries' cultural histories. This is only hinted, as the book's focus is on the later periods, but at least with Japan there is no question that much of what is associated with the best of Heian period culture was feminine. In China the situation is far less certain, though it is notable that one of its earliest recognized calligraphers, Wei Shuo 衛 金樂 (272-349), was a woman. Moreover, future research into the role women played as arbiters of taste during the Tang dynasty, when women enjoyed a degree of social freedom unknown in later periods, may demonstrate a level of influence which, if not as remarkable as what took place in Japan, is nonetheless significant.

The second pattern is one of social oppression fostered by the growing dominance of Neo-Confucian thought in the later histories of China and Japan. This proves to be so powerful a factor that it quietly settles as a dark and pernicious sub-theme over most of the book. Emphasizing stability through the strict maintenance of social roles, Neo-Confucianism's hierarchical structure rigidly fixed women in subservient positions to their husbands and measured their virtue by the amount and efficacy of energy expended in furthering the success of their sons. There was no room for personal achievement outside of this limited domain. The first essay of Flowering in the Shadows, Julia Murray's "Didactic Art for Women: The Ladies Classic of Filial Piety," graphically illustrates the expectations of obedience and self-sacrifice with a detailed look at one example from a genre of painting whose sole purpose was to instruct women in their social and moral roles, such as serving her "heaven" (husband) when

she was not catering to the needs of her in-laws. What one learns from Flowering in the Shadows is that the exceptions who escaped the net of Neo-Confucianism's code of behavior were truly exceptional. The most prominent example is the Mongolian princess Sengge Ragi 永羊 哥刺吉, a notable fourteenth-century collector of Chinese painting and calligraphy whose background and activities are described in Fu Shen's essay. Her position as a member of the imperial family obviously provided her with the means to collect, but one cannot help but feel that her people's foreignness was what allowed her to pursue her literati interests, including the hosting of an "elegant gathering" of the most notable scholars of her day, impervious to traditional Chinese mores.

With the gradual absorption of painting into the activities of the scholar-official class after the eleventh century, leading to the eventual dominance of literati painting in China, its function as a mode of social discourse became male-oriented. Women painted, but if there was what one might call a women's aesthetic, it is not readily apparent. Ellen Laing's overview of women's painting in China demonstrates that, with the exception of courtesans who frequently specialized in the painting of orchids, women did not necessarily gravitate to particular subjects in painting. Gentry women (and courtesans) essentially painted the same subjects of flowers, bamboo, landscapes, etc. as their male counterparts. There is tragedy in this--not because these subjects were inherently masculine (they were not), but because women had little choice but to paint according to the aesthetic values established and perpetuated by men. The irony is that literati painting, by definition, was supposed to be a vehicle for the expression of aspects of individual virtue and personality. Yet women who painted in the literati mode were essentially partaking in a ritual that was so strongly associated with the male educated elite that they had little choice but to assume their pretensions. Moreover, if a woman's painting were to express socially acceptable feminine virtues, these somehow had to reflect her tightly circumscribed role as wife, daughter-in-law, or mother. There was little room for creativity, and little tolerance for the expression of a strong personality.

These issues emerge with particular clarity in James Cahill's and Marsha Weidner's essays, which are aptly titled "The Painting of Liu Yin" and "The Conventional Success of Chen Shu," respectively. Liu Yin 柳隱 (1618-1664), better known as Liu Rushi 柳如是 (among other names), was clearly one of the more remarkable personalities in a remarkable century. A former prostitute with extraordinary literary talents, she became the lover of two of the most prominent poets of the seventeenth century, Chen Zilong 陳子龍 and Qian

Qianyi 錢謙益, and joined them as an equal in their literary activities. Under James Cahill's skillful analysis of the single painting he considers a reliable attribution to Liu Yin, a short handscroll entitled "Misty Willows at the Moon Dike" that describes a part of Qian Qianyi's villa under a half-hidden moon, we find a painting that unpretentiously expresses layers of personal meaning through the deft use of poetic allusions and a soft touch free of conventions. It is not feminine charm that impresses us about the painting, though this could be considered one of its attributes, but the immediate manner in which the painting seems to reflect the mind and personality of its maker. Liu Yin's single painting stands out as an exception in Flowering in the Shadows, just as Liu Yin was an exception to the Chinese social order. We are not surprised to learn of her penchant for dressing in the attire of a male scholar.

In utter contrast to Liu Yin is Chen Shu 陳書 (1660-1736), a woman who personified respectability--indeed, she was considered a model of feminine virtue. According to her biography, Chen Shu possessed a strong, willful personality, but one whose talents and hard-fought gains in the end were solely expended in the role of devoted wife and mother. Her son, Qian Chenchun 錢陳群, whose education was supervised by Chen Shu herself, became a high official at the Qing dynasty court of Qianlong. He presented the emperor with a number of his mother's paintings, which then became imperial symbols of an ideal mother-son relationship. It was Qianlong who inscribed one of Chen Shu's paintings with the back-handed compliment that it did not look like a painting from the woman's quarters. After reading the biography of Chen Shu, the anecdotes of her life and a number of the "positive" comments made about her paintings, it dawns on the reader that no one really wanted to know the woman behind the brush. They only wished to have confirmed their ideal of what a woman should be, and Chen Shu's paintings, which are indeed utterly conventional, helped in that process of confirmation. Quite honestly, Chen Shu's paintings are no more than competent, no better or worse than those of countless other Chinese painters, men and women, whose names are barely known. Her success was clearly owed to who she was--the devoted mother of an important official at the court. One should not detract from Chen Shu's achievements, which are considerable, but for myself at least, her significance is not as an artist but as a symbol of the realities that women painters faced in China.

Unquestionably, the most interesting subject broached in Flowering in the Shadows is that of the women painters at the Heian court, for in early Japan a clear and profound distinction was made between the paintings of men and women. Akiyama Terukazu's essay does not focus on the issues underlying the differentiation between otoko-e

男絵 and onna-e 女絵 (men's and women's painting) to the degree that the reader may wish--for this one must turn to Louisa McDonald Read's dissertation "The Masculine and Feminine Modes of Heian Secular Painting and Their Relationship to Chinese Painting: A Redefinition of Yamato-e" (Stanford, 1976)--but he offers a succinct review of the important historical figures and brings forward likely candidates among extant scrolls for products of the women amateur painters of the court.

Onna-e does not specifically refer to paintings by women; rather, it is a term that encompasses a range of distinct aesthetic values, style, and subject matter associated with the secular culture of the Heian court ladies. Like its counterpart in calligraphy, onna-de 女手 ("women's hand"), the sinuous forms of kana writing distinguished from the masculine Chinese calligraphy practiced by the men of the court, onna-e was the language of native culture. It was the pictorial counterpart to waka poetry and the monogatari tales, such as Lady Murasaki Shikibu's Tale of Genji. It was, in short, intrinsic to everything we now consider fundamental not only to Heian culture, but Japan itself. Women's painting, like its literature, is considered by Read to be the vehicle of the important aesthetic concept of mono no aware 物のあわれ, "the pathos of things." And mono no aware is related to mameyakasa 忠實, "sincerity" or "truthfulness," the quality in Genji that is considered most needed in feminine nature. According to Lady Murasaki, it is the same quality most required of art. With the twelfth-century painting scrolls of the Tale of Genji as unsurpassable models of onna-e, we are faced with one of the greatest achievements of world art: pictorial explorations into the most profound and emotional aspects of the human condition. In Heian Japan such important matters belonged to the world of women.

Despite its importance, Akiyama's study is unfortunately not free of some of the biases against women common to modern Japan. Specifically, his criteria for choosing the scenes within the extant Genji scrolls that he considers to be painted by women are basically negative. A prominent example that he offers is "Hashihime 橋姫," from chapter 45 of Genji, where the young courtier Kaoru visits rural Uji on an autumn night and spies through a bamboo fence of an imperial villa upon a private midnight concert being performed by the daughters of the Eighth Prince. Akiyama points out a number of problems with the scene: the architectural setting is tentative; the figures are unnatural in proportion and squeezed uncomfortably into their places in the composition; the pose of the elder princess is awkward, etc. In Professor Akiyama's defense, his point is not that the painting is likely to be by a woman painter simply because it is inferior, but that these weaknesses are more likely to indicate the

amateur tradition associated with the Heian court ladies. Nevertheless, I find his judgments to be subjective and far from equitable. Personally, I have always found "Hashihime" to be the most captivating of the Genji scenes. Like Kaoru, I am transfixed at the sight of those pale concentrated faces swimming in a sea of swirling robes under the light of a silver moon. Perhaps the profundity of the scene's mystery is a better measure of a woman's touch, if it was indeed painted by a woman.

The later history of women in Japanese painting somewhat parallels that of China. Neo-Confucianism again provided the rationale for a rigid structure of social order, especially during the Edo period, when the position of women in Japan is considered to have been at its lowest. Nevertheless, there are indications that the situation was different from China. Neo-Confucianism was essentially imposed from above, rather than from within, and it is evident that there were seams within the greater social structure that allowed for a small flourishing of woman painters. Mostly, these were educated townswomen from the merchant or artisan classes, or from low- and mid-ranking samurai families, who worked and lived within small groups of creative intellectuals largely associated with the bunjin-ga 文人画 or literati painting movement. Though derived from China, early Japanese bunjin-ga was characterized by a freedom that had long disappeared in the country of its origins. It did not carry that tremendous weight of social and moral self-importance, and thus provided fertile ground for the explorations of these unconventional men and women. In a curious way, the women bunjin-ga painters of Japan were somewhat closer to the original Chinese literati ideal than their counterparts across the sea. Foremost, they were known for their literary talents, especially in poetry. A market for their paintings would develop from the recognition their poetry earned among the urban public. Part of that interest can be attributed simply to the novelty of such talented women, but nevertheless curiosity fosters a genuine interest in who these women were, and we can presume that this was taken into account when they painted.

The last two chapters of Flowering in the Shadows describe bunjin-ga women artists: Stephen Addiss's "The Three Women of Gion," and Patricia Fister's "The Life and Art of Chō Kōran." A sense of the relative freedom of the bunjin world of Edo Japan is well illustrated by Stephen Addiss's essay, the story of three generations of poetesses whose small teahouse in Kyoto's Gion Park became a center for literary activities. It was here that Yuri 百合 (1694-1764), representing the second generation, is said to have discovered Ike Taiga 池大雅, one of Japan's greatest painters. Taiga married Yuri's daughter, Machi (Ike Gyokuran 池玉澗, 1727-1784), who became

a well-known painter in her own right. The numerous colorful anecdotes told of this couple, and the fact that two of these three remarkable women are still represented in Kyoto street festivals, well reflect the Japanese capacity for celebrating the novel. However, they also reflect the fact that a woman artist in Edo Japan, despite a measure of accorded respect, remained well outside of conventional society, and there is a price to pay for this. Certainly such women were self-conscious of the difficult route they had chosen. Chō Kōran 張紅蘭, in particular, leaves behind small clues of a preoccupation with the distance that separated her from the security of a conventional life, such as a seal that reads "Extra things besides needle and thread," and a poem added to a painting in which she claims to read one of the Chinese Confucian texts that preach the proper behavior of a woman. The inherent irony of this final contradiction might serve as a summary statement of the problems women artists in China and Japan confronted.

One begins Flowering in the Shadows with the expectation of being introduced to paintings of high quality and interest, excavated from under centuries of historical writings which have perpetuated the prejudicial view that only the paintings of men were important. If this was the book's goal, however, it is not one that is fulfilled. What we discover in Flowering in the Shadows is not great art but an engrossing picture of why it was so difficult for women painters in China and Japan to create great art. It is a historical picture that emerges slowly and collectively, essay by essay, in a process of discovery. I am not certain that this was the goal of Flowering in the Shadows when it was conceived and planned, but it is unquestionably a valuable contribution to the studies of these two countries' cultural histories. Certainly, we come away from this book with the expectation that countless other women painters yet remain whose stories are waiting to be told and whose paintings are waiting to be appreciated. For those who plan to pursue this worthwhile endeavor, may I suggest that the femmes fatales and dragon empresses not be ignored. If there is one thing I have learned from Flowering in the Shadows, it is that those who earned such dubious badges of distinction were the women most likely to possess the strength and character necessary for their art to overcome the considerable barriers they faced.

This book is highly recommended for teaching. While it may be too specialized in its entirety for general classes on Asian art or Chinese and Japanese painting, individual chapters would serve such courses well. Asian studies or art history courses specifically addressing women's issues will find Flowering in the Shadows indispensable.