CIHA Meeting Beijing

Portraits in China – Portraits in Europe

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Portrait paintings are works of art that bring us face to face with people - from the past, from faraway places, from other ways of life. Simply through looking at faces, we gain understanding of other people. In the West, portraits figure very prominently in museums and exhibitions; for China, the subject has been rather neglected.

Thanks to generous loans from the Palace Museum and other loans from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto we can organize an exhibition in Berlin next year that gives a comprehensive overview of Chinese portrait painting from the early Ming to the late Qing Dynasty, from 1400 to 1900. In all, there will be about 100 works, shown in two galleries of each 400 square meters, 800 square meters together. These galleries are right next to the galleries for European master paintings (Gemäldegalerie), that include many portraits from the 15th to the late 18th centuries. So of course it makes sense to compare and confront the Chinese and European traditions in portrait painting.

We do this right at the beginning, as a statement. The first thing the visitor sees when entering the exhibition will be the large ancestor portrait of Yang Woxing 明散官杨我行 in a red robe, early 17th c, next to an oil portrait of a Genovese lady painted by the famous portrait painter from Antwerp Anthony van Dyck (1500-1641) around 1621. Both painting are about two meters tall. (In the Gemäldegalerie, the missing lady will be replaced by a Chinese female ancestor portrait in red robe.) Both figures are stiff and highly formal, both are sitting on a chair on a sumptuous rug; Van Dyck’s lady is holding a folding fan, a recent import from East Asia.

Art museums, and the Palace Museum and Gemäldegalerie both belong to this category, build up their collections on the basis of artistic quality and art historical importance. They don’t focus primarily on the documentary and social function of the works of art. Yet for the patrons who ordered portraits and the painters who made them the documentary and social function came first. Yu Hui also shows this in his contribution.

Portraits have a long tradition both in the West and in China. Just a few examples from the Berlin Museums to remind us of this fact (Nofretete, Fayum portrait, Roman portrait head). Both Yu Hui and I focus on the Ming and Qing, 14th-19th c. In these 500 years, both in China and Europe hundreds of thousands of portraits were painted, most with a primarily documentary function (ancestor and family portraits), but many also with the ambition of being a work of art.

Yet when we think of Chinese painting, we think of landscapes, when we think of European painting, we think of historical scenes with figures, religious paintings with figures, and portraits. Museum galleries and collections reflect this: figures and portraits in the West; landscapes and “micro-landscapes” (flowers and birds) in China.

I would like to use the planned exhibition as a starting point to make some general remarks about portraits in China and Europe.

The exhibition brings together the two main categories of portraits in China: formal ancestor portraits and informal portraits from the literati world. This has never really been done before outside China: of the only two larger portrait exhibitions held in recent years “Worshiping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits”, 2001 at the Freer Gallery of Art/Arthur M. Sackler Gallery showed ancestor portraits only, and “Figures and Portraits from the Ming and Qing Dynasties”, 2008 at the Museu de Arte, Macao literati portraits and non-portrait figure painting only.

Ancestor portraits were used in the ancestral cult and displayed at family altars and in ancestral shrines at festive and commemorative occasions. They received offerings of incense, wine and food.

In Europe, no food offerings were made in front of ancestor paintings – but possibly religious ceremonies by catholic priests involving incense were held, for example at Christmas. Apart from this, there are many similarities with Chinese ancestor paintings. Except for the highest quality for wealthy or royal patrons, they are of average or simple quality, they are stereotyped, stiff and repetitive, and show men and women in their best clothes, without much background. The families who owned them would know exactly who the depicted people were, but when they are removed from the family context, this information often gets lost. A difference is that in Europe, the portraits usually were oil paintings that were hung permanently in palaces or mansions, and in China scroll paintings that were kept in chests and hung only at special days – primarily New Year, but also sometimes at the day of birth or death of the ancestor. Another difference is that, in Europe, tens of thousands of such paintings still exist, whereas in China, they are quite rare now.

Of course, literati families in China, who themselves produced and collected literati paintings, also possessed ancestor paintings. Ordered from professional painters, these were used in their own ancestral cult. This is splendidly illustrated in a key work in the exhibition: Bian Jiu’s 卞久painting “Zhu Maoshi Worshiping his Ancestors” 朱茂时祭祖先图像 (17th c.; Palace Museum), which shows Zhu Maoshi, a scholar and poet who was the uncle of the famous calligrapher Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊, offering in front of a typical ancestor painting. This painting is the connecting link between the two big chapters of the exhibition, ancestor portraits and literati portraits. Yu Hui has published about this painting, and maybe he will show it also. I have always wondered why Zhu Maoshi ordered this painting to be made, what did he want to say with it. That he was a good filial son? I just want to remark that the ancestor portraits of a man with his two wives in this work are painted very convincingly. They do seem to have a faint smile, however, and real ancestor portraits never smile, they always look very stern. But then, when they receive offerings from their descendants the spirits of the ancestors return, and perhaps it is this moment that has been caught here.

About the sitters in literati portraits we often know a lot, thanks to lengthy inscriptions. The inscriptions are a big difference with European portraits, which usually are without inscriptions. They are not called “literati paintings” without reason! The European parallel would be portraits of writers, poets, collectors, architects, philosophers etc., and artists of course. Here, everything is about the setting and representation, both in China and the West. A special category here are self-portraits, which, almost by definition, tend to be artist’s portraits. In Europe, it is easy to find a thousand self-portraits of good quality in museum or other collections. The Uffizi Museum in Florence alone has more than 700 of them. In all of China, it would be difficult to find one hundred, I think. And this is different from ancestor portraits, they were not destroyed on purpose (in two ways: typically, ancestor portraits beyond the fifth generation were not preserved and sometimes ritually disposed of – see Zhu Xi *Jiali* 朱熹家礼(“Confucian Home Rituals”, 12th century); and because of political campaigns and social change in the 20th c many works got lost also).

Here the phenomenon appears that after the Tang Dynasty and Song dynasties (after around 1200 AD), most painters focused on landscape painting and received no training in figure or portrait painting. Portrait painting became the domain of professional portrait painters, who, generally speaking, did not enjoy a high status. They painted ancestor paintings for a living, but were asked frequently to do the faces, the actual portraits, in literati portraits. Such informal portraits thus were often executed and signed by two painters: a specialist for the face, and another, often more famous painter for the background, typically a garden.

Looking at typical literati portraits several things catch the eye: The actual portrait face usually is small, just a few centimeters (ancestor portraits, in contrast, tend to be life-size). If other figures are depicted, for example servants, their faces are generic, one sees immediately that they are not portraits. In a European portrait, a servant, even if it’s not a portrait, would be painted lifelike, with a fully modeled face. And also, the body of the portrayed person is covered almost entirely by a robe without much modeling, you can’t guess anatomically correct bellies, breasts, legs or shoulders under the fabric, let alone see them exposed.

This, of course, has everything to do with the training of artists. In Europe, since the Renaissance, apprentice painters started so to speak with the human body, they made drawings of plaster casts, then of the nude model. Drawing a lifelike portrait was and still is part of the skills of any self-respecting artist. And artist’s liked to portrait themselves: all the great painters did it, Dürer, Rembrandt, Goya, Van Gogh – Vermeer is an exception, he didn’t. Nevertheless, the history of the self-portrait in China is fascinating – Yu Hui can tell a lot about it, I’m sure.

Perhaps it is precisely because Chinese painters were not trained in this way that printed manuals for portrait painting were published. The most important one is from the 1740s, “The Secret Tradition of Portrait Painting” (写真秘诀*Xiezhen mijue*) by Ding Gao 丁皋, a professional portrait painter himself – at least five generations of Ding Family portrait painters are known, including a female artist, Ding Yu 丁瑜. I’m very grateful to the Palace Museum that we can show important works by Ding Gao and his son Ding Yicheng 丁以诚in Berlin. “The Secret Tradition of Portrait Painting” is illustrated with many woodcut illustrations, and there is a clear connection with the science of physiognomy – telling a person’s character and future from his facial features. I don’t think a similar manual exists in Europe, certainly not in such detail.

Ding Gao’s book is mainly about the painting of ancestor portraits. For making a formal ancestor portrait a preparatory portrait after life was first drawn, usually when the person involved was old and his or her children started to think about the burial, tomb and related things. These preparatory, real portraits were usually small. Later, in the studio this portrait was enlarged and copied life size into the full- body portrait, which basically consists of a beautiful court robe sitting on a chair. In Europe, the US and Taiwan, several collections of 19th-century preparatory portraits still exist. The most important collection is in the Munich Ethnology Museum: 365 small portraits (19th c.) glued onto 93 leaves in two albums – which we are allowed to disassemble. Women and men from many ways of life, painted in different styles and different quality level by different hands, but always after life. They comprise a full ten square meters, and we want to show them all in a special installation.

Portraits, both in China and Europe, are functional. They are different from a landscape or a still-life. A landscape, in Europe, is hung on the wall, it’s a decoration. In China, it’s taken out from a chest, unrolled, and appreciated by the owner alone or with some friends, as a work of art.

A portrait is a direct link to a person, a person who more often than not is not here, because she died, or because he is far away, or because he is leaving. Farewell portraits are a special category, certainly in China. I mentioned at the beginning that in art museums, because they focus on masterpieces and usually don’t provide context, the functional aspects of portraits often gets lost. I want to show two examples of multiple portraits, one from Europe, one from China, that illustrate this. Some of the best known masterpieces of Velazquez are his five portraits of the princess (Infanta) Margarita born 1651 in Madrid. Two of them are in the Art Historical Museum (Kunsthistorisches Museum) of Vienna. They were sent by her father, the king of Spain, to her intended marriage partners, sons of the Emperor of Austria in Vienna (they were her cousins), to show what the princess looked like. The young men died one after the other, and in the end the princess married Emperor Leopold I of Austria in 1666. She died in 1673, 22 years young. Paintings to show brides to potential husbands were used in China too.

Another type of multiple portrait is the group portrait of the “Five Same” Gentlemen, from the early 16th century. It shows five Gentlemen who did their Examination in the Same Year, who came from the Same Town, were Officials under the Same emperor, who held the Same ideals, and followed the Same way. They had a farewell meeting, and asked the painter Ding Cai 丁彩to make a group painting. The painting was copied five times, and each of the five gentlemen got a copy. Two copies still exist. This one is in the Shanghai Museum, the other is her in the Palace Museum. 五同会图：同时同乡同朝同志同道。Again, this is a functional painting, and all is recorded in lengthy inscriptions. (In this painting we see again how the servants look very different from the portrayed gentlemen.) I don’t know if similar multiple portraits existed in Europe before photography.

The subject of portraits is very big, and here I just wanted to present some fairly haphazard ideas that came up to me when I was thinking about portraits in Europe and China. I hope to express them more coherently in the catalog and in the exhibition texts that will accompany the exhibition next year. I look forward to hear Yu Hui’s thoughts, and I am grateful to the Palace Museum and Yu Hui in particular for agreeing to give so many splendid portraits as loans to the exhibition.