In 1715, an Italian Jesuit lay brother was called to audience with the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661-1722) of the Qing dynasty (1636-1912). He had just arrived in China at the behest of the Jesuit mission to provide the erudite and probing emperor with a skilled European painter. Owing to his artistic reputation and the Jesuits’ emphasis of his talent, he was immediately summoned to court, even before he could meet the local Jesuit mission. There the artist presented a painting of a dog, and was subsequently asked by the emperor to paint a bird. The result was spellbinding. It was done “so skillfully,” his memoir later recounted, “that the emperor was wondering whether the bird was alive or painted.”[1] He was immediately assigned disciples, and shortly thereafter employed as a court painter, a position he would hold for the next fifty-one years until his death in 1766, serving three emperors and obtaining the third-highest rank for a civil official of the Qing dynasty.

This was Giuseppe Castiglione, arguably the most celebrated painter at the Qing court. He was born in Milan in 1688, and at nineteen was identified by the Jesuits for his artistic skill, whereby he was transferred to the Jesuit novitiate in Genoa in 1707 and immediately assigned (on the same day of his initiation, in fact) to China. His mission in China was to serve the imperial court in the capacity of a painter and in doing so promote Jesuit policy in Beijing. It is questionable whether he was successful in his religious mission, but what he did do, as Musillo aptly shows in this book, was integrate, fuse, and translate European and Chinese techniques and elements to create a distinctive high Qing court style.

Much has been written about Castiglione and other European painters in the Qing court, to be sure, often with an emphasis on the integration or hybridity of styles and forms. Musillo’s contribution, however, is to reconstruct their European training and show how these Western aspects “had to be negotiated, translated, or erased because they occupied a significant position in the painters’ original milieu” (p. 150). Musillo is concerned with what the painters acquired in their training and how they would carry it with them; and what was taken up, reprocessed, and transformed through their work in China. Rather than a distinction of elements and techniques—i.e., European and Chinese—that were each adopted by the painters and might fuse together in a hybrid form, Musillo argues that the painters had to translate their European skills and techniques to fit their commission and appeal to their Chinese patrons.
The first half of the book focuses on Castiglione’s training in Italy and his commissions in Europe. He was skilled in drawing and oil painting, and particularly in atmospheric chiaroscuro—that is, the oil-painting technique developed during the Renaissance that creates a three-dimensional effect by contrasting light and shadow. He also received training in quadratura, or illusionistic painting of architecture, typically done on flat ceilings to give the perception of a high, three-dimensional architectural space. Further European training included theater design and copper plate engraving. Castiglione mastered all these skills and techniques before sailing for China, and his use of them pervades his early corpus. In fact, his trip was delayed by a year while he finished commissions painting a college chapel in Portugal and portraits for the Queen of Austria.

The second half of the book analyzes how these skills were employed in the Chinese context. Musillo emphasizes that they were “translated” not integrated, although the distinction seems a subtle one. Castiglione's portraits of the Qianlong emperor and his consorts, for example, made use of brushwork developed in his Italian training to exhibit skin texture and three-dimensionality. Similarly, his painting of the emperor and his children "borrows single elements from the European tradition, such as the proportionality ... and harmonizes them with a Chinese view extending into an immeasurable space" (p. 96). The result, Musillo argues, is not an opposition between the European linear perspective of a single vanishing point and the Chinese rendering of limitless space (p. 95), but rather the mobilization of different techniques in the production of a unique style.

Those looking for a comprehensive discussion of Castiglione’s life and work, however, will be disappointed. This is admittedly less a book about the integration of the Italian artist in the Qing court or why he was there, than one on the history of eighteenth-century Italian painting (p. 1).

Such a focus makes it tough reading for the uninitiated. Terms are not explained, nor are key techniques discussed. The importance of chiaroscuro, for example, is never elaborated, and the rejection of the technique by the Chinese is glossed over as an inconvenient but stubborn truth, while emphasis is much too quickly placed on how Castiglione had to adapt with a "subtle chiaroscuro." Similarly, it is mentioned at one point that Castiglione followed "the [European] rules of convergent perspectives to render three-dimensionality" and achieve an effect that "could have been obtained by using the traditional Chinese system of axonometric projection" (p. 87). What these rules are is never explained, nor is the named Chinese practice—not to mention what the former technique brought to the painting that could not be achieved by the latter, if anything.

Musillo has written elsewhere on Castiglione, to be sure, and done so in ways that preemptively address critiques hinted at here and leveled by other reviewers of this book.[2] As the case with any book, there is always the possibility that it could have done more. Perhaps it could have given a fuller picture of the life and work of Castiglione; perhaps it could have integrated some of Musillo’s previous research on the matter, and maybe even discussed the full corpus of the Italian painter’s work, not just a very limited selection. But the argument linking the painters’ Renaissance European training and employment in the Chinese context is here made. From the perspective of an early modern historian—not art historian—the next step would be to examine how the Chinese interacted and learned from Castiglione: Were he and his fellow missionaries just another culture appropriated by the multiethnic Qing empire, employed in court to expand the Qing cultural and territorial purview? Or was the Kangxi emperor really as awestruck as Castiglione claimed?

Notes


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