

## China: the empire of things

Review of:

Jason Steuber and Nick Pearce, *Original Intentions: Essays on the Production, Reproduction, and Interpretation in the Arts of China*, Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press 2012, 302 pages, £48.95, ISBN: 9780813039725

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*There is always something disquieting about an isolated work of art.*<sup>1</sup>

*Original Intentions: Essays on Production, Reproduction, and Interpretation in the Arts of China* inaugurates the David A. Cofrin Asian Art Manuscript Series, a new collaborative project between the Samuel P. Harn Museum and the University of Florida Press.<sup>2</sup> The volume includes nine essays on topics as diverse as printed books, murals, ceramics, bronze ritual vessels, and performance art, from the Bronze Age to the contemporary. As set out in the introduction, the volume seeks to offer a new look at how objects were produced and circulated, making defined meaning, consumption shaped consumers' identities, and the ways historians had, and most frequently not, engaged with objects' material properties. The volume thus joins other studies that over the last ten years have explored aspects of making, skilling, and materiality from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. This 'anthropological turn', with the different characterizations we may want to give to it, is a paradigmatic shift in the relatively young discipline of Chinese art history that will have a lasting effect on its future development. As it is often the case with edited volumes, the breadth of the material covered and the variety of the approaches surpass a coherent unity of goals. Broadly speaking, the essays are examples of technical art history, the history of collecting and reception, and the socioeconomics of the arts. The task of positioning each contribution vis-à-vis the growing recent scholarship on material culture in Chinese and western art history is left to individual authors. Such loose organization, where multiple and at times contrasting voices are maintained and objects move freely from essay to essay, rhymes well with Maurice Ravel's cabinet of curiosity invoked in the introduction: an environment saturated with sensory suggestions, a composite space where individual objects gain in meaning as an ensemble, away from the isolation of the

<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Das Erklären von Kunstwerken*, Leipzig: Seeman, 1921, 167 quoted in Otto Pächt *Practice of Art History: Reflections on Method* translated by Christopher Wood, London: Harvey Miller Publisher, 1999, 61.

<sup>2</sup> To date other volumes are: Jason Steuber and Lai Guolong, eds. *Collectors, Collections, and Collecting the Arts of China: Histories and Challenges* (2014) and Harrie A. Vanderstappen, *The Landscape Paintings of China: Musings of a Journeyman* edited by Roger E. Covey (2014).

museum cabinet. The impression of stepping into a *fin-de-siècle* interior is enhanced by the volume's elegant layout and superb illustrations of well-known but poorly published works or overlooked ones, presented for the first time to the reader in high-quality colour reproductions.

Framed by two essays on bronze ritual vessels, all contributions reconstruct patterns of production, replication, and circulation of three-dimensional objects, leaving aside the more common focus on painting. Those essays that do take painting as their case study approach it exclusively from a technical point of view (Lu Ling-en) or from a functionalist perspective that equates painting to architecture and to objects, as in Jason Steuber's synthetic overview of the circulation of multiples at the eighteenth-century imperial court. This is a welcome shift not only because it restarts a conversation about three-dimensional objects that the increased focus on painting had brought to a halt, but also because it problematizes narratives of medium specificity upon which the field of Chinese art history in the United States has relied as one of its many modernist foundations.<sup>3</sup> By bringing so many methodological approaches together, the volume tackles a number of issues about the practice of art history at large, and the ways historians have over time sought to overcome the 'disquieting' isolation of the individual artwork by making comparisons, creating narratives, embedding individual objects in textual imbrications.

Few shared themes can be highlighted in this volume's content. Nick Pearce reconstructs the case of *odium sinologicum* that fractured the small community of British and French sinologists around 1910, when the Victoria and Albert Museum published a large, bronze vessel with rounded handles in the *Handbook of Chinese Art*, one of the first illustrated monographs on Chinese art published by a Western institution. The bowl, more correctly a basin (*pan*), was purchased in Beijing by Sir Stephen W. Bushwell, the *Handbook's* author and a well-known expert on ceramics and bronzes. Dated by Bushwell to the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (771-453 BCE), the bowl carried a long inscription yielding information that could be also found in the written chronicles of the time. The 'authenticity' of the episode mentioned in the text sanctioned the authenticity of the object, despite the inscription's many mistakes and overall poor quality. In a review of the *Handbook*, the French sinologist Édouard Chavannes noted that no mention of the basin was found in the extensive antiquarian literature of classical China and that the information provided in the inscription did not exactly correspond to that of other historical sources. For Chavannes, the basin was a fake. Despite their irreconcilable conclusions, Bushwell and Chavannes relied on textual documentation, be it the inscription or the written sources on that period, with no attention to the object's material features. Somewhat surprisingly, the first to point out the basin's formal and technical characteristics

<sup>3</sup> This point was made as early as 1973 in one of the first attempts at systematizing the method of connoisseurship of Chinese painting. Marilyn and Shen Fu, *Studies in Connoisseurship: Chinese Painting from the Arthur M. Sackler Collection in New York and Princeton*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973, 15ff

was Alfred Giles, the prominent historian and author of a well-known dictionary and Romanization system of the Chinese language. With a masterful narrative twist, Pearce shows that antiquarians in China, whose scholarship and method were unknown to their Western counterparts, had arrived at conclusions similar to Chavannes's by focusing on the physical qualities of the inscription rather than on the text's content. The piece was the by-product of the eighteenth-century antiquarian imagination, and recent technical analysis has confirmed that dating.

The relationship, at times contentious, between textual and visual evidence also underpins Roger Covey's essay. Exploring the mechanisms by which an object is granted canonical status in trans-historical narratives, Covey surveys the afterlife of a celebrated limestone sarcophagus, dated to the early sixth century CE, in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City. Since its purchase in 1933 and its inclusion in the landmark exhibition of Chinese antiquities at Burlington House in 1935, the sarcophagus has been assigned a central position in narratives about the development of Chinese pictorial art. More than the sarcophagus as an *object*, modern historians have been interested in the two narrative scenes carved on the sarcophagus's long sides, which depict four episodes of exemplary virtuous behaviour drawn from classical Confucian sources. Praised for its 'impeccable qualities' and heralded as 'the work of a genius', the narrative scenes of the sarcophagus appear in every survey text of Chinese art as they yield key evidence of the rise and early development of landscape painting at a moment when a wealth of literary sources describes the phenomenon but no 'authentic' attribution can be secured. Covey reveals that the sarcophagus's canonization occurred essentially by means of textual transmission, which is to say from an author's analysis to another author's acceptance of that analysis, with virtually no attention to the object itself. For Covey that attention would unlock a very different story. Blindness, Covey argues, also characterizes the writing of the proponents of the New Art History who, despite their polemical revisionist agenda, have uncritically endorsed earlier historians' interpretations of the sarcophagus. With the shift from 'text' to 'discourse', the New Art History has perpetuated the earlier generation's disavowal of close looking.

Covey's call for a reengagement with material evidence as the basis for art historical analysis finds application in the essays by Ling-en Lu and Zhang Changping devoted to the practice of repainting and replication in fourteenth-century murals and the production of dedicatory inscriptions on ancient bronze vessels respectively. The monumental depiction of the assembly of the Buddha Tejaprabha has been exhibited at the Nelson-Atkins Museum since 1933 after having been purchased from the famous dealer C.T. Loo in Paris. The mural shares provenance with other monumental wall paintings preserved in American museums today: they all originated from the southwest part of Shanxi Province, where a distinct muralist tradition thrived during the fourteenth and fifteenth

century.<sup>4</sup> Technical analysis conducted with sophisticated new technologies has shown that what we see today only partially corresponds to the original. Extensive repainting and retouching had taken place at the time of the museum's purchase in order to 'beautify' a surface that had already undergone much damage when it was cut off its original location. The study of the 'authentic' fourteenth-century layers of paint allowed for the identification of some distinguishing markers of the local production as well as for the reconstruction of the organization of the workshops responsible for this and other related murals. Zhang Changping shares Lu Ling-en's method of inquiry, and his detailed survey of a large sample of dedicatory inscriptions on ritual vessels reveals that these were often re-carved, changed, or modified to either re-dedicate the vessel or expedite production. Unlike Nick Pearce and Roger Covey, who focus on a specific object to interrogate broader disciplinary fixations, Zhang and Lu show how productive the exchange between art history and conservation may be, with the contribution of new reproductive technologies.

Transmission across time, rather than translation through space, is what distinguishes Wei-cheng Lin's study of the significance of the ancient practice of rubbing among contemporary artists and Shane McCausland's take on Xu Bing's much-celebrated installation, *A Book from the Sky* (1989). Rubbing was the privileged reproductive means of ancient artefacts in classical China. Similar to the technique of frottage, a rubbing is 'like a second skin peeled off from the object itself', and thus it presents an exact replica of the object's original surface.<sup>5</sup> Rubbings registered the historicity of an inscription or of a monument with an accuracy that was impossible to achieve through printing or other techniques of replication. Both an object and an image, rubbings retained the charisma of the original object, and their qualities were appraised through a sophisticated connoisseurship. Wei-cheng Lin argues that the reappearance of rubbings in contemporary art practices, like Xu Bing's monumental undertaking of *Ghosts Pounding the Walls* (1991) or Qiu Zhijie's *Grinding the Stele* (2001), are symptomatic of artists' anxiety about the preservation and proper position of the past in contemporary China. Rubbings, however, rarely existed in isolation but were most frequently included in collected editions that canonized certain calligraphic scripts or certain monuments over others. By means of systematization, a canonical narrative of ancient art was created and transmitted. Continuity was thus a matter of collective agreement, and Song Dong and Xu Bing among others may be questioning precisely the mechanisms of formation and transmission of classical culture rather than an undefined and undifferentiated idea of the past.

The development of new technologies is inextricably linked to the creation and perpetuation of the canon. Exemplary is the case of the early fifteenth-century

<sup>4</sup> On the murals see, Michelle Baldwin, 'Monumental Wall Paintings of the Assembly of the Buddha from Shanxi Province: Historiography, Iconography, Three Styles, and a New Chronology', *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 54, no. 3-4 (1994), 241-267.

<sup>5</sup> Wu Hung, 'On Rubbings: Their Materiality and Historicity' in Judith Zeitlin and Lydia Liu, eds. *Writing and Materiality in China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 29-72.

encyclopaedia *Yongle dadian*, more than twenty thousand fascicles compiled under imperial auspices over a period of five years. Shane McCausland reconstructs in great detail the production of the encyclopaedia and the organization of its content. Like Borges' Chinese encyclopaedia, it encompassed all branches of classical literature organized according to a rhyme system. In the mid sixteenth-century, another emperor ordered a complete transcription of the fifteenth-century compilation. This handwritten transcription carefully maintained the original organization and presentation in order to create a sense of continuity with and reactivate the prestige of former emperors. McCausland dramatizes his account of the mechanisms of systematization of knowledge in the encyclopaedia by contrasting it with the equally ambitious, iconoclastic gesture of Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky*: the enormous, enveloping installation where thousands of unintelligible characters are printed on fascicles that mimic classical texts. Analogous to the work of the other artists of his generation introduced by Weicheng Lin, Xu Bing's 'meaningless' intervention subverts the link between knowledge and power. If the imperial encyclopaedia is a closed system of fixed meanings and self-contained references, Xu Bing's combination of imaginary characters is open, a matrix that confounds and disrupts oppositions, unearthing the contradictions and opacities of what Hajime Nakatani has described as the 'graphic regime' of a totalitarian state.<sup>6</sup> It is in passages like this one that the model of the cabinet of curiosity adopted by the editors as the organizing principle to the volume finds its most effective application, opening to the viewer unexpected analogies between seemingly isolated works of art, an isolation that object-to-object comparison seems to overcome more effectively than text-to-object comparison.

## II

For most of the twentieth century, China has been the ideal Other in the Western scholarly imagination. Alice Yang has eloquently discussed the ways modernist formalist critics forged an idea of 'Chinese art' that served strategically to foreground their critique of the Western classical canon.<sup>7</sup> For Roger Fry, who wrote extensively on the topic, 'Chinese Art' yielded the possibility of thinking about a formal language that was completely disengaged from mimesis and naturalism. 'Chinese painting', which for Fry coincided with monochrome, gestural 'Literati' painting, 'was always conceived as the visible record of a rhythmic gesture. It was the graph of a dance executed by the hand.'<sup>8</sup> Along similar lines, for the Clement

<sup>6</sup> Hajime Nakatani, 'Imperial Griffonage: Xu Bing and the Graphic Regime', *Art Journal*, vol. 68, no. 3 (Fall 2009), 6-29.

<sup>7</sup> Alice Yang, 'Modernism and the Chinese Other in Twentieth-century Art Criticism' (1996) republished in Melissa Chiu and Benjamin Genocchio eds. *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader*, Boston: MIT Press, 2011, 249-264.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Fry, 'Some Aspects of Chinese Art' in *Transformations: Critical and Speculative Essays on Art*, London: Chatto and Windo, 1926, 73.

Greenberg of *Toward a Newer Laocoon* (1940), in China 'painting and sculpture were the dominant arts', had superseded nature as source of artistic creation, and that confirmed to the critic the possibility of aesthetic purity.<sup>9</sup> For Fry, Greenberg, and a host of others, 'authenticity' was never in question; 'Chinese art' was authentic inasmuch as it was the pure expression of a maker or of a homogenous culture.

That idea of China has changed profoundly over the past thirty years. From being the site of the authentic China has now become the site of the counterfeit, the illegitimate, and the inauthentic. Countless newspaper and magazine articles, together with more specialized publications, are unearthing an economic structure and a cultural system in which key Western values of 'authenticity' and 'originality' are put under threat.<sup>10</sup> Everything coming from China today carries an air of illegitimacy, and it is approached with suspicion. For some observers, the current conditions of production and circulation of Chinese counterfeit products can be explained not only as the result of late capitalistic globalized economy but also because of the presumed traditional laxity of classical Chinese cultural tradition toward what constitutes the 'authentic' and the 'original.' While this is a question that would require a whole essay of its own, this view of China as the 'empire of things', of accumulated counterfeits, harks back to old stereotypical characterizations of 'Oriental' insidiousness, the natural inclination for deception, measured against the Western analytic and objective appraisal.<sup>11</sup> A highly sophisticated discourse about originality and inauthenticity developed in early and pre-modern China as well, and failing to acknowledge that reiterates monolithic and essentialist views of previous critics, displacing the monolithic authentic with a monolithic inauthentic.

It has become therefore something of a cliché to approach objects made in China now and then as potentially fraudulent, as hiding something different from what their surfaces and appearance claim. The *pièce de résistance* of the volume is Roger Covey's analysis of the Nelson-Atkins Museum sarcophagus and his critique of the methods of current Western and Chinese art history. As mentioned earlier, Covey surveys the ways the sarcophagus was transformed into a piece of evidence for supporting distinct and sometimes contrasting interpretations of the historical development of early pictorial arts in China. Unearthing the mechanisms and

<sup>9</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Toward a Newer Laocoon' in John O'Brian ed. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1 'Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944', Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1986, 23-38.

<sup>10</sup> See, among the recent publications, Pang Laiwkan, "China Who Makes and Fakes': A Semiotics of the Counterfeit', *Theory, Culture, and Society*, vol. 25, no. 6 (2008), 117-140; Pauline J. Yao, *In Production Mode: Contemporary Art in China*, Beijing: TimeZone8, 2008; Winnie Wong, *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Greg Thomas, 'The Looting of the Yuanming yuan and the Translation of Chinese Art in Europe', *Nineteenth-century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-century Visual Culture*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Autumn 2008).

machinations that grant an object 'canonical' status, Covey commits to a detailed analysis of the sarcophagus's formal, compositional, and technical features, and compares it with other well-known or recently excavated examples of sixth-century funerary art. Looking at the objects from all angles, he finds inconsistencies – the handling of particular motifs, the sarcophagus's overall spatial arrangement, and the manufacturing process. Weaknesses of execution, design, and concept suggest that the piece is not genuine but an 'artful' concoction completed sometime around Laurence Sickman's purchase in the early 1930s. Despite having been widely published and discussed, the sarcophagus now reveals itself for what it really is, a fake. The urgency for narrativity and canonization had prevented historians from asking themselves whether the blocks upon which their narratives were built were solid enough. For Covey, the case of the Nelson-Atkins sarcophagus is an egregious exposition of Heinrich Wölfflin's well-known dictum, 'One sees what one seeks and one seeks what one sees.'

Covey's essay is cogently written, and his analysis makes a number of acute observations. He is one of a handful of scholars who consider the sarcophagus as an object and not just for the images it carries. Unlike the vast majority of publications available today, the essay reproduces three of the four sides of the sarcophagus to explain how the two short slabs have little in common stylistically and technically with the long ones and were added at a later date. Covey's thorough discussion of the chiselling and carving techniques of this and other stone artefacts of the time is to my knowledge unprecedented and adds new information on the technological development of the time. Yet the appearance of expressions like 'naturalistically unconvincing' or 'lacking in quality' suggests that the author had approached the object with expectations that do not correspond to those the sarcophagus can fulfil. Covey identifies weaknesses in those passages where the register of figuration changes, a cartwheel is incorrectly attached to a spindle, and the delineation of the tiled floor of a pavilion in the story of Cai Shun is incomplete. Similar motifs are handled differently (though not necessarily less convincingly because they are less mimetically accurate) in other incised sarcophagi from the time. Why should descriptive accuracy and representational coherence be part of the makers' formal thinking? One could think of other reasons why these 'inconsistencies' are present. For one thing, our knowledge of workshop organization and labour division of workshops of the time is still too scanty to rule out the possibility that different hands were involved in the execution of the design, or that similar designs circulated among workshops, which, in turn, produced analogous but not identical versions of established themes. One should also just be reminded of Max Loehr's perceptive reading of the sarcophagus to realize that in the sarcophagus, like in other objects of this time, the dominant mode of attention was not narrative, but a specific combination of narrative and surface design playing on repetition, doubling, unexpected shifts of scale, and agglomeration.<sup>12</sup> In Covey's accounts,

<sup>12</sup> Max Loehr, *The Great Painters of China*, London: Harper & Row, 1980, 26ff.

these are 'inconsistencies' that sometimes become 'errors' and sometimes become 'pseudo-archaisms', but the difference between the two remains nebulous. By setting up parameters of quality based on legibility of design and representational accuracy, Covey's analysis overlooks those passages where instead the design reveals itself at the strongest: the rightly celebrated doubling of Wang Lin on a horseback or the dense pattern of agitated trees in the mid-ground. Somehow surprisingly, Covey's close reading of the object's formal features remains engulfed in what Max Loehr described as the methodological paradox of connoisseurship: 'Without knowledge of style, we cannot judge the authenticity of a work, and without convictions about the work, we cannot form concepts of style.'<sup>13</sup>

Many today would share Covey's discomfort with the method of earlier historians who compared the sarcophagus with objects that were temporally, chronologically, functionally, and socio-economically too distant from it. Many would agree that the sarcophagus is not a 'direct copy of some first class painting of the time',<sup>14</sup> as the study of other objects of the time has shown that the exchange between paintings on portable formats and pictorial decoration on three-dimensional objects was more complex than what previously thought.<sup>15</sup> Archaeology has and will continue to add new evidence to this and other periods of Chinese art history, and I agree with Covey that we should be in a position to revise our canons and rewrite our histories. One could think of the related case of the quintessentially canonical tradition of 'monumental landscape painting' of the tenth and eleventh centuries, a handful of paintings whose authorship, context of production, date, and authenticity are far from settled. But, as in the case of the Northern Song landscape tradition, would the rebuttal of the Nelson-Atkins sarcophagus change our assessment of the pictorial arts of this period? And, instead of discarding a work that 'does not fit' as a fake, shouldn't we think of how many conditions of production existed concurrently at that time, the way that we now understand that the 'naturalism' promoted by Northern Song court was but one feature of a much more differentiated stylistic landscape?<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Max Loehr, 'Some Fundamental Issues in the History of Chinese Painting', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2 (February 1964), 188. On Max Loehr's approach to connoisseurship, see Robert Bagley, *Max Loehr and the Study of Chinese Bronzes: Style and Classification in the History of Art*, Ithaca: Cornell University, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Coburn Soper, 'Early Chinese Landscape Painting', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 23, no. 2 (June 1941), 159. This interpretation is reiterated in Max Loehr, *The Great Painters of China*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the recent discussion on the relationship between the lacquered screen discovered in the Northern-Wei tomb of Sima Jinlong (dated 484) and the handscroll *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* bearing the signature of Gu Kaizhi (ca. 344-406). See James Watt and Prudence Oliver Harper eds. *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*, New York City: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005, 158-161; and Shane McCausland ed. *Gu Kaizhi and the Admonitions Scroll*, London: The British Museum, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> As an example, consider the debate surrounding *Riverbank*, an imposing hanging scroll in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the dating of which shifts from the tenth

Covey's rejection of the sarcophagus has less to do with the object itself than with the state of the discipline, a discipline in which works of art have become 'black boxes [...] simply used to illustrate stories about intergroup relationships'. (66) He advocates for a more 'granular' understanding of the specificities of each object's 'contingencies of event and locale' as an antidote against the 'synthetic and syncretic art history that is now being taught and practiced'. (67) I do not see these as contradictory undertakings. Since the beginning of the discipline, synthesis and narrativity have been necessary to bridge the gap between 'art' and 'history'. The notion of canon has itself undergone rigorous revision, and if we take a close look at the scholarly projects of those historians Covey critiques, Ludwig Bachhofer *in primis*, we realize that their attention to the problematics inherent in any attempt at writing a macrohistorical narrative was more nuanced than what has been made of it.<sup>17</sup> The mechanisms of canonization, in Covey's words, mean a disengagement 'from [the object's] local frame of reference to be put to a supra-historical use', but isn't the opposite tendency, 'contextualism', equally contentious since constructing a 'local frame of reference' also entails a high degree of selectivity and abstraction?

We have surely gone a long way from early twentieth-century collectors' assessment of Chinese art, and many pieces in our museums today still wait for adequate attention, but questioning authenticity seems to have become the most expeditious and sensational way to give an object visibility. This approach, however, oftentimes bespeaks more the historian and her epoch than the work itself. 'New Art History' is not a monolithic and programmatic intellectual enterprise, and from Richard Barnhart's polycentric mapping of Northern Song landscape paintings to Wu Hung's and Jonathan Hay's recent reassessment of the 'paradigmatic shifts' of tenth-century pictorial arts, we have now several models for rethinking about the possibility of *longue-durée* narratives that unfold without sacrificing the contingencies of time and place.<sup>18</sup>

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to the twentieth century. On the *Riverbank*, Wen Fong and Judith Smith, eds. *Issues of Authenticity in Chinese Painting*, New York City: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999; and Wen Fong and Maxwell Hearn, *Along the Riverbank: Chinese Painting from the C.C. Wang Family Collection*, New York City: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Introduction to Ludwig Bachhofer, *A Short History of Chinese Art* (New York, Pantheon, 1947). For an analysis of Bachhofer's method of approaching Chinese Art, see Lilian Lan-ying Tseng, 'Traditional Chinese Painting through the Modern European Eye: The Case of Ludwig Bachhofer' Kang-i Sun Chang and Meng Hua eds. *Tradition and Modernity: Comparative Perspectives*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007, 508-533.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Barnhart, 'The Five Dynasties (907-960) and the Song Period (960-1279)' in Richard Barnhart, James Cahill, Wu Hung eds, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, 87-126; Wu Hung ed. *Tenth-century China and Beyond: Art and Visual Culture in a multi-centered Age*, Chicago: The Center for the Art of East Asia, University of Chicago, 2012.

## III

When an object is labelled a fake, it is forced to linger once again in disquieting isolation. The kind of granular understanding that Covey calls for should be extended to the study of forged works, all too often hastily edited out from the canon and from the historian's attention. But if China has now become the site of the inauthentic, the replica, the multiple, and even the forgery, perhaps it is precisely the analysis of these classes of objects that should become our entry point to the meaning of objects and materiality. *Original Intentions* comes after a decade of renewed interest in the making of three-dimensional objects, an interest that, in the field of Chinese art history, comes largely as the response to path-breaking research by anthropologists and historians of technology and material culture. The work of Jacob Eyferth, Dagmar Schäfer, and other historians of 'embodied' or 'practical' knowledge, is, in turn, conversant with the methodological positions of historians of sciences and technology of Western pre-modern and modern worlds.<sup>19</sup> It is regrettable that little, if any, trace of this vibrant conversation and of the possibilities it opens up for interdisciplinary exchange is found in the volume's introduction and essays. Instead, the quest for what constitutes the 'original' and the value of the replicated object remain the themes underpinning most contributions of the volume and the introduction.

<sup>19</sup> See Jacob Eyferth, 'Craft Knowledge at the Interface of Written and Oral Cultures' *East Asian Science and Technology Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2010), 185-205; Jacob Eyfert, *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots: The Social History of a Community of Handicraft Papermakers in Rural Sichuan, 1920-2000*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009; Francesca Bray, Vera Dorofeeva-Lichtman, and Georges Métaillie, eds. *Graphics and Text in the Production of Technical Knowledge in China: The Warp and the Weft*, Leiden: Brill, 2007; Mu Peng, 'Imitating Masters: Apprenticeship and Embodied Knowledge in Rural China' in Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Kelvin E.Y. Low eds. *Everyday Life in Asia: Social Perspective on the Senses*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2010, 115-135. Dagmar Schäfer ed. *Cultures of Knowledge: Technology in Chinese History*, Leiden: Brill, 2012; and *The Crafting of 10,000 Things: Knowledge and Technology in Seventeenth-century China*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011; Dorothy Ko, 'The Artisanal Body of Gu Ernian (ca. 1662-ca. 1724; fl. 1700-1724), a Female Inkstone Carver', in Olga Lomová ed. *Paths Toward Modernity: Conference to Mark the Centenary of Jaroslav Průšek*, Prague: Studia Orientalia Pragensia, vol. 26, The Karolinum Press, 2008, 35-61. Studies on pre-modern West include Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004; and Lissa Roberts, Simon Schaffer, and Peter Dear, eds. *The Mindful Hand: Inquiry and Invention from the Late Renaissance to Early Industrialization*, Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, 2007; Peter Miller, ed. *Cultural Histories of the Material World*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013. A forthcoming cross-cultural analysis of materiality is Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith eds. *The Matter of Art, Materials, Practices, and Cultural Logics, c. 1250-1750*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014.

This compels the editors to draw the contours of an essentially Chinese approach to originality and authenticity that sets the Chinese world in stark contrast to its Western Other. In the introduction, for example, the editors subscribe to the argument of Lothar Ledderose's *Ten Thousand Things* (2001). At the onset of his influential study on modular production in classical China, Ledderose argues that, 'the Chinese [...] were never coy about producing through reproduction. They did not see the contrast between original and reproduction in such categorical terms as did Westerners.'<sup>20</sup> The editors go on to distinguish the common practice of reproducing by copying from that of reproducing for deceit, the forgery, which was, at least since the sixteenth century if not before, at the centre of an extensive critical debate and scrutiny. The Chinese thought differently of reproduction because their approach to making was *systemic* and not mimetic like that of their Western counterpart. Going back to Ledderose, the editors explain that the Chinese are 'concerned with organic growth and development commensurate with natural evolution, acknowledging gradual change that emanated from a common source. Chinese artists were not concerned with a verisimilitude that mirrored the surface of the natural world [...]'. (1) As in nature, everything has a precedent, every object is 'firmly anchored in an endless row of prototypes and successors', so for Chinese, 'originality took on a complexity that reflected that of nature itself'. (1) While one should ask oneself whether Westerners had always and consistently understood the distinction between original and copy in such categorical terms, it is unlikely that 'Chinese' theories on and attitudes towards the authentic and the original remained unchanged and homogeneously applied throughout China's long history. The editors recognize the possibility of an object assuming multiple or partial dimensions of the 'authentic', the copy being 'authentic' in its own way. Yet, coupling authenticity and originality, they also disavow the object's capacity of being the validating agent of its own authenticity. Since objects are enmeshed in an unbroken chain of duplicates and precedents, artists' or makers' 'intentions' distinguish between the genuine and the illegitimate. Originality lies in intention, and 'intention was everything'. (1) Intention is a notoriously insidious concept that begs for more explanation than those the volume can provide. Throughout the volume, 'intention', 'originality', and 'authenticity' are applied as analytic categories with no account of the terms' historicity and association to particularly charged moments in the intellectual history of the West, Romanticism, Modernism, post-Modernism. That, in turn, bounces back at a series of polarizations, 'art' and 'culture', 'artwork' and 'artefact' that more recent scholarship has sought to problematize.

Furthermore, a forgery could well be seen as a thematization, a catalyst for the web of relations described earlier in this essay, relations between text and object,

<sup>20</sup> Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 7. An important review of the intellectual goals and foundations of Lothar Ledderose's text is Lothar von Falkenhausen, 'Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts by Lothar Ledderose', *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2000), 333-348.

object and object, and between an individual object and the macrohistorical narrative in which it is embedded. A forgery is always conceived with other objects in mind; rarely is an object bearing no resemblance to other objects known from a given period identified as forgery. Because the forgery explicitly capitalizes upon shared knowledge about a time or a place, the forgery is a repository of what was known at a given time about a particular historical period. In a way, the forgery is a conservative object, for it tends to confirm rather than disrupt established interpretations of a given style. Our understanding changes, and the forgery becomes the best gateway to that body of knowledge. If we reconsider the Nelson-Atkins sarcophagus, the forger(s) must have had in-depth expertise not only of Northern Wei sarcophagi but also of other works canonized by historians of the time, and that expertise would have served as basis for selecting motifs that were immediately recognizable as belonging to this or that style. The presence of identifiable 'anachronisms' thus strikes against the forger's intention to be 'authentic'. As many have noted, the forger is sometimes the most experienced connoisseur, and a forgery is a condensation of intention: everything is deliberate, too deliberate, constructed ad hoc to give the viewer a feeling of truth that is truer than what the authentic object can ever be. Lastly, a forgery has its own special kind of historicity. Our method teaches us to detect forgeries by comparing them with genuine works, but rarely do we compare forgeries with forgeries.<sup>21</sup> Gathering comparable forged works would allow us to detect common features, draft possible chronologies, and perhaps identify a particular forger's 'hand'. If we assume the Nelson-Atkins sarcophagus to be a forgery, we should ask ourselves whether it was possible for the forger(s) to gather all the documentation necessary to blend together stylistic and compositional features from so many distinct historical periods; whether the forgery could be dated; and whether such mobilization of resources could be responsible for other incursions into our canons. Discarding an object because it is a forgery isolates it and reiterates the mechanisms of the crudest processes of canonization. Whatever the field's reaction to Roger Covey's polemic would be, the essay reminds us of the need of a more sophisticated art historical theory of the forgery and of its value as evidence.<sup>22</sup>

Historians of Chinese Art are in a way facilitated in this undertaking by the particular conditions under which the 'authentic' was detected and understood in classical critical discourses and practices. The idea that the Chinese approached production in a radically distinct way from their (timeless) Western counterpart and

<sup>21</sup> An important contribution in this direction is Wai-Kam Ho, 'The Trubner Stele in the Metropolitan Museum: A Problem of Authentication and Connoisseurship', *Kaikodo Journal*, vol. 18 (Fall 2001), 16-27.

<sup>22</sup> For two distinct propositions on an art historical positioning of the forgery, see Jonathan Hay, 'The Value of Forgery', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 53/54 (Spring/Autumn 2008), 5-19; Christopher Wood, 'The Credulity Problem' in Peter Miller and François Louis eds. *Early Modern Antiquarianism in Europe and China*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014, 149-179.

distinguished the genuine from the illegitimate in less categorical terms is only partially correct. Instead, we could say that their understanding, an understanding that mutated significantly over time, was *relational*, that is to say that it was determined by circumstantial factors and the specificities of each objects. Historians of Chinese painting are familiar with the many forms the authentic can take: paintings that are authentic because they retain authentic compositions; paintings that are authentic even when their format, shape, or surface have been radically transformed by layers of successive interventions.<sup>23</sup> What we somehow imprecisely define as 'Chinese painting' is a complex object that combines painted image, sometimes more than one, and text, in the form of inscriptions, colophons, and seals. Its structural 'ecology' makes it flexible, maintaining the possibility for expansion by incorporating new seals and inscriptions, or with physical alterations by means of remounting, resizing, or repainting. The bronze vessels discussed by Zhang Changping or the eighteenth-century copies of ancient religious images in Jason Steuber's essay similarly reveal the object's capacity of being simultaneous contemporary and ancient, of accommodating distinct temporal layers, distinct 'hands', without challenging their status as 'authentic' or 'original' objects. To borrow from Roland Barthes, these were 'structural objects', objects 'with no other cause than its name, with no other identity than its form'.<sup>24</sup>

Taking as example the Argonauts' ship, which they gradually replaced, ending with an entirely new ship, Roland Barthes envisions the possibility of an object 'created not by genius, inspiration, determination, evolution, but by two modest actions (which cannot be caught up in any mystique of creation): substitution and nomination.' Barthes defines substitution as 'one part replaces another, as in a paradigm', and nomination as a label 'in no way linked to the stability of the parts'.<sup>25</sup> Physical alteration and material substitution do not harness the 'authenticity' of an object. Instead, they reveal an object's capacity of becoming a structure, of becoming the validating agent of its own 'authenticity'. A 'Chinese painting' or object emplots history within its material features, displays it on its surface, and engages with the viewer both synchronically and diachronically. Such mode of relation has been recently described as 'anachronic' by Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood.<sup>26</sup> In their characterization, 'anachronic' suggests that fluid, malleable, 'open' temporalities are embedded in objects' materiality. If 'anachronism' maintains an understanding of temporal progression as linear and objective, the 'anachronic' reveals an object's capacity of travelling across time, of being unstable, of disrupting stable conceptions of history. Barthes's logic of substitution and nomination are among the permutations of the 'anachronic' object.

<sup>23</sup> For an introduction to the issue of copies and forgeries in Chinese painting, see Wen Fong, 'The Problem of Forgeries in Chinese Painting' *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 25, no. 2/3 (1962), 95-140.

<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 46

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York: Zone Books, 2010, 7ff

Every student of Chinese art would be immediately reminded of the operations of renaming or replicating Buddhist icons discussed by Patricia Berger or Wu Hung.<sup>27</sup> Repainting at the Qianlong court had less to do with creating replicas than with the goal of bringing back ancient paintings' original charisma and tuning it with the contemporary world; ancient buildings were continually rebuilt or replaced to magnify their value; texts could morph into images, which, in turn, were believed to act upon the viewer's minds. Not coincidentally, I think, a Chinese example illustrates the 'anachronic' model proposed by Nagel and Wood. In 1957, Simone de Beauvoir pondered on the feeling of 'hesitation' she had standing in front of the Forbidden City, a palace that 'does not have a restored look nor has an ancient one'.<sup>28</sup> Hesitation is what 'makes [the monument] appear not eternal but precarious and like an imitation of itself'. For de Beauvoir, 'There is nothing accidental about the impermanence of the materials; it is simultaneously the cause, the effect, the expression of a troubling fact; the traces left upon this palace by the past are so few that, paradoxically, I would hesitate to call it a historical monument.' The Imperial palace evades all conditions that would, in the eyes of a Western commentator, define it as a historical monument: it bears no traces of the passage of time, it has no anchor in time. Yet, it is 'authentic', and its authenticity lies precisely in the palace's 'hesitant' state, simultaneously ancient and new, contingent and timeless, original and duplicate. The study of China as the empire of (replicated) things thus has served and continues to serve as ideal interlocutor for reconsidering the artwork's entanglement with history and origins. With its spectacular display of objects, *Original Intentions* reminds the reader of the vast repertoire of possibilities for objects to be authentic, but by insisting on the centrality of concepts like originality and intention, it misses the opportunity of participating in an important interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary exchange on the material world and its histories.

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<sup>27</sup> Patricia Berger, *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003; Wu Hung, 'What is Bianxiang? On the Relationship between Dunhuang Art and Literature', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1 (1992), 111-192; Wu Hung, 'Rethinking Liu Sahe: The Creation of a Buddhist Saint and the Invention of a "Miraculous Image"', *Orientalism*, vol. 27, no. 10 (November 1996), 32-43.

<sup>28</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Long March: A Book on China* translated by Austryn Wainhouse, Cleveland: World, 1958, 64-65, cited in *Anachronic Renaissance*, 7.