

Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire, 1796-1911

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(Fig. 1) Battle Scene from the Taiping Rebellion
Anonymous court artists, 2nd half of the 19th century
Wall-mounted painting, ink and colour on silk
Height 135.9 cm, width 307.3 cm
Cemac Limited

The last hundred years of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) have been looked upon as a time of tumultuous political change; a period when China was forced into submission by foreign powers, and a series of rebellions, culminating in the revolution of 1911, brought imperial rule to an end. Despite the wrenching political and social problems of the time, however, painting flourished. At the court in Beijing, in the old cities of Hangzhou and Suzhou, and in the new commercial towns of Shanghai and Canton (Guangzhou), painters enriched old traditions and established new approaches that reflected the tastes and interests of a changing society. The exhibition, *Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire, 1796-1911*, has been organized in an attempt to initiate a deeper understanding of painting in this period.

Previous studies of the development during the nineteenth century of the arts in China have tended to be overly-influ-

enced by the perception of the period as one of political turmoil. Art historians in their eagerness to interpret this subject in the light of political and social change have often ignored aesthetic considerations. Furthermore, attempts to categorize the painting of the period as either tradition-bound or commercialized have deflected attention away from the lively and complex painting styles. The urge to find the seeds of modern revolution in the art of the nineteenth century has also distorted the interpretation of the work of late Qing artists, sometimes leading to a one-dimensional evaluation of their painting. The purpose of this article is to revise the position of nineteenth century Chinese painting within the period's political and social contexts.

The Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95), who devoted great energy to his own painting and poetry, took imperial patronage to its apogee in the eighteenth century. However, by the end of his reign, court sponsorship of the arts had

already begun to decrease. His successors, the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796-1820) and the Daoguang emperor (r. 1821-50), were faced with a critical depletion of the imperial treasury's reserves, and instituted reforms reducing court expenditure. The vast literary and historical projects instigated by the court in the eighteenth century had gathered in Beijing scholars from all over China to work on the compilation and standardization of texts for massive compendia. As court sponsorship of such projects dwindled, fewer scholars gathered in the capital, and scholarship took on a more regional character. Painting still flourished among the literati at the fringes of the court, such as Yao Yuanzhi (1776-1852), but a decentralizing trend was clearly underway.

Court commissions continued, nevertheless, for palace decorations and commemorative paintings, such as an impressive series of battle scenes (Fig. 1) commissioned to commemorate victo-

