

COPPER ENGRAVINGS OF THE CHIEN LUNG CONQUESTS

Some months ago Mrs. John Poole, Keeper of Prints, obtained from a London dealer a set of sixteen copper engravings of the *Conquests of Chien Lung*. These were engraved in Paris by a number of well-known artists of the eighteenth century and printed there by C. N. Cochin. The original drawings were made at the command of the Emperor Chien Lung by four Jesuit Brothers attached to Chinese Missions in Peking.

Interest in this set of prints has been heightened by the recent gift of two engravings of similar subjects made by eighteenth century Chinese artists after the French manner. These were purchased in Peking by Mrs. Alice Spalding Bowen and were presented to the Academy by S. and G. Gump and Company.

The eighteen prints recently acquired will be exhibited in Gallery III during the month of December.

Chien Lung reigned from 1736 to 1796, during which time there was constant friction between the immensely wealthy—but at the same time very weak—Chinese Empire and the strong, warring tribes of Shansi and Kansu. Having himself conquered the Chinese, the Manchu Emperor Chien Lung was determined that he, in turn, should not be overcome by the peoples in the country to the west. His ensuing campaigns resulted in great victories over these troublesome western neighbors.

At the court of Chien Lung at this period the Jesuit Brothers had been endeavoring to interest the Emperor and his people in European art. Four of these Catholic Brothers were artists as well as priests, and it was natural that they

should be the ones chosen to make drawings illustrating the Emperor's successful conquests. Two of the men selected to carry out this Imperial commission were Italians, Joseph Castiglione and Jean Damascene; a third, Denis Attiret, was a Frenchman; the fourth man, Ignace Sichelbarte, was a German.

Of the four, it is the first named who is best known to us today. Castiglione was attached to the Portuguese Jesuit Mission in Peking. He was a painter in the European style and had been greatly influenced by Chinese art since his residence in Peking. Not only was he interested in introducing Western painting into China, but he was also anxious to bring about its fusion with the painting of the Orient. Chien Lung's commission, therefore, offered a splendid opportunity to introduce into China a medium hitherto unknown to the Chinese artist. Castiglione's efforts to obtain a fusion of the two styles, however, were not successful.

Sketches for the prints were made, and by July 13, 1765 four of them were on their way to Europe for engraving. The twelve which completed the set were sent on later. Excerpts from the Emperor's written order, found in the National Archives of France, read as follows:

"I wish that sixteen prints of the victories which I have obtained in the conquest of the Kingdom of Chungar and the Mohammedan countries neighboring, which I have had painted by European painters who are in my service, be sent to Europe where one will select the best artists in copper who can render perfectly in every detail each of the prints upon plates of copper . . .

"I desire that this work be executed with the greatest possible speed and that after having printed a hundred copies of these prints from the copper plate, these hundred prints and the copper plates be sent to me. As to the twelve other prints, I have ordered that they be sent to Europe by three different ways, four at a time. This decree is to be exactly observed."

The Emperor's orders were magnificently executed, for each of the sixteen prints is thirty-five inches in length and twenty inches high. The average copper plate print is rarely over twelve inches.

The Emperor had said merely that the drawings were "to be sent to Europe" and it was only after considerable discussion between the French and English factions that they were finally dispatched to Paris for engraving. Had the drawings gone to England they would doubtless have been copied as mezzotints, a print medium popular there in the eighteenth century, rather than as copper engravings.

Begun in 1766, the sixteen plates with one hundred proofs were not completed until 1774, when they were immediately sent back to the Chinese Emperor. In recent years four of the original charcoal drawings by the Jesuit Brothers have been found in China, while in 1932 several of the large copper plates were discovered in the Imperial Palace at Peking.

Apart from their unusual size, these engravings are extremely interesting in subject matter and recall a colorful period in the late history of the Chinese Empire. The conquests of Chien Lung always resulted in bloodless victories for the Chinese, according to these prints, for in none of them does one see a wounded or slain Chinese soldier. Only the enemy suffered death and defeat. Drawings showing the situation to be otherwise were discarded by the Emperor.

The failure of Castiglione and the Jesuits to fuse the arts of the East and West—which they so passionately desired to do—is well illustrated by a comparison of these sixteen European engravings with the prints engraved and printed in China after the European manner.

Copper engravings had never been executed in China until the introduction of the sixteen prints under discussion. It was then that Chien Lung set up his own engraving plants and encouraged the Chinese artist, following the Western style, to make engravings illustrating the victories

of the Emperor. However, this sudden burst of interest proved to be of short duration and the making of copper engravings was, after a few years, discontinued in China.

The two prints in the Academy's collection which are engraved by Chinese artists show clearly the traditional patterned style of the Orient. The leaves on the trees, the hills, the smoke, the marching soldiers are all drawn in a stylized manner. This is not true of the sixteen engravings executed in Paris from the drawings of the four Jesuits. Their sketches of soldiers, rocks, trees, and mountains are treated in the naturalistic manner of the European schools of the period.

The Chinese prints have more of the quality of early steel engravings and lack the depth of tone obtained by the Europeans in the copper engravings.

From all we can learn it would seem that few of the prints remained in Europe after Chien Lung's order had been completed, and that at present they are very difficult to obtain in complete sets of sixteen. The Academy's set is one of the early impressions, as poems by Chien Lung appeared on those printed later. They make a significant addition to the permanent collection of prints.

CHRISTMAS CRÈCHES

The Educational Department is sponsoring a Christmas crèche competition for students in the junior and senior high schools. Materials suggested for use are wood, clay, papier mache, wire, wire cloth or combinations of these. It is hoped that the department may be able to select from the exhibits work of such quality as will be suitable for use in the lending collection. In such case two purchase prizes will be offered.

All crèches must be brought to the Academy on Wednesday, December 13. An exhibition of all of the figures submitted will be on view from December 16 to 31.