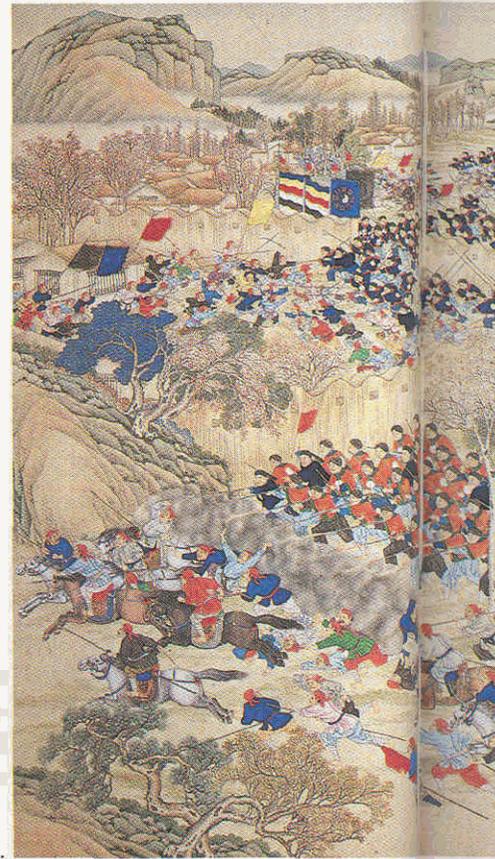


# THE FIGHT FOR SHIH-FENG PAO (1784)

Paul Moss

The diverse areas of fine Chinese painting have been treated with increasing seriousness over the last five to ten years. In the many oriental studies and art history faculties of American universities, Chinese painting is taught as the fundamental embodiment of the culture's artistic expression, producing large numbers of academics who are painting specialists. The majority of magazine articles and theses on Chinese art now deal overwhelmingly with the subject of paintings rather than the tried and true field of ceramics, and other mainstream areas such as archaic bronzes.

Recently there has been a marked shift in the focus of international academic interest to include the less 'painterly' aspects of Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1912) court paintings. In May 1985 the Metropolitan Museum in New York hosted a symposium on Chinese painting and calligraphy, at which the Peking Palace Museum's deputy director Yang Boda delivered a paper on Ch'ing dynasty court painters. When great numbers of the Palace Museum's paintings were removed by the Nationalists in 1949 to form the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, those court or academy paintings classified as historical documents, rather than as major art works, were left intact. As a result the Peking Palace Museum has a complete library of previously unpublished documents relating to the imperial painting academies of this and



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earlier periods, and it is reasonable to expect a considerable number of publications and papers on the subject in the next few years, as the Museum's officials seem bent on exploiting their virtual monopoly of academic research in that area.

During the summer of 1985, an exhibition from the Peking Palace Museum was shown in Berlin. It featured several impressive examples of the new-found concentration on the paintings of the Imperial ateliers and was entitled 'Palastmuseum Peking: Schätze aus der Verbotenen Stadt'. Later the same year the Phoenix Art Museum in Arizona organised a symposium and travelling exhibition devoted primarily to 18th-century court painting – 'The Elegant Brush: Chinese Painting Under The Qianlong Emperor (1736–1795)'. Documentary court paintings are not only held in the Forbidden City, however; several important works have surfaced, especially in Europe, over the past few years, taken by looting armies in the expeditions of 1860 and 1900. Others doubtless lie unrecognised in the frames and long unrolled scrolls of forgotten European collections.

One important handscroll, vividly painted on a single piece of silk over seventy feet long and depicting the seventh of twelve sections of the K'ang-hsi Emperor's Tour of the South in 1689, was discovered by an astute Danish art historian in the window of a Madrid antique



dealer while on holiday in 1980. Nine handscrolls in the set are now known, the other eight of which are in major museums (most of them in the Peking Palace Museum). After a large part of one issue of the 52nd *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* (1980) was devoted to an analysis of the scroll, it was offered as the centrepiece of an extensive exhibition in my gallery in December 1984. Three other handscrolls of the set are lost, presumably languishing in the lofts and cellars of marauding soldiers' descendants.

Since the awakening of even a limited public interest in such Imperial atelier paintings, a few other documentary pieces have come to light in the West. A handscroll from the set of twelve of the Ch'ien-lung Emperor's Tour of the South was recently sold at auction in New York. It is derivative of (and some sixty years after) his ancestor's journeys and commemorative paintings. Similarly, a large portrait of a Manchu Imperial bodyguard was sold – one of a set of fifty with features painted by the famous Jesuit missionary Castiglione, whose name is sinicized as Lang Shih-ning. Together with other missionaries active at the Peking court around the early 18th century, Castiglione was responsible for a strongly Europeanised figural style in academy painting which distinguishes it markedly from traditional Chinese styles.

The extraordinarily large painting illustrated here

measures ten by four and a half feet. Painted in brilliant mineral colours on silk, it was rescued from obscurity in a Swiss household in 1986. Initially creased and loosely mounted in a large, ill-fitting frame, its provenance earlier this century is unknown.

There was a special bureau within the painting ateliers in the Ch'ien-lung period (1736–1795) known as the 'Shih-ch'üan Wu-kung' (Completion of Ten Military Campaigns), which by Imperial order commandeered court artists for a set, or a single painting, thus recording for posterity military victories, not only in the Emperor's own Northern campaigns, but in the pacification campaigns – largely suppressions of ethnic minority and secret sect or bandit uprisings – in which he took no personal part. The tradition of such campaign paintings was revived later, in the 19th century. Recently a large painting was sold in London showing a victorious procession during the T'ai-p'ing rebellion of the 1860's, with the leading General Tso Tsung-t'ang riding through a village at the head of a parade with prisoners in a cage. The quality and vividness of the painting declined considerably over an eighty-year period from a height in the 18th century, but the stylistic essentials remained intact.

The large painting illustrated (Figure 1) has no title or signature, but contains several clues as to its subject. The names of sixteen military leaders, both Chinese and Manchu,

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1. Large atelier painting from the Ch'ien-lung academy, thought to depict the fight for Shih-feng Pao in 1784. Mineral paint on silk,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ft.  $\times$  10 ft.

of the attacking Ch'ing forces are written in small gilt cartouches by the figures' heads, and the various flags are indications of the participating forces. The broad configuration of the composition seems likely to have been borrowed both from copper-plate engravings of the Ch'ien-lung Emperor's pacification of the Western regions (1764, by Castiglione and others) and the Emperor's Northern campaigns (1765, by Attiret and others) but evidently the storming of a stockade was a prominent feature of the battle.

In the 48th year of the Ch'ien-lung period (1784) a younger, rebellious sect of the Moslem Hui tribesmen of Kansu province in Western China once more took up arms against the Ch'ing government, as they had done thirty years before and again, briefly, in 1781. (A famous painting recording the earlier campaign survives, depicting the presentation of Hui prisoners of war to the Ch'ien-lung emperor in 1755, painted by the court artist Hsü Yang, who was responsible for the Ch'ien-lung set of twelve Tour of the South handscrolls.) The Manchu generals Fu-k'ang-an (reputedly as corrupt as the Prime Minister Hoshen) and Hai-lan-ch'a headed the main force suppressing the insurrection, while the able A-kuei led a 2,000-strong troop known as the 'Fire Gun' Group, riflemen who were

active in the final assault on the rebel position, the Shih-feng Pao (fort, or stockade: Figure 2), on the eleventh day of the sixth month of 1784, only four months after the beginning of the campaign. None of these officials is depicted in the painting, but the unusual and distinctive flag of the Fire Gun Group, with yin and yang symbols surrounded by the pa-kua, or eight mystic trigrams (like the modern Korean flag), unmistakably indicates the presence of that regiment, whose members dressed in red.

One leading military official who is recorded as having taken part in the 1784 campaign against the Hui tribesmen is Te-leng-ke, a Manchu of the Blue Banner (Figure 3). He continued to be active into the Chia-ch'ing period (1796–1820), stationed in Western China. The close-up affords a view of the very fine details incorporating the use of shagreen, gilding, and so on, to the scabbards, saddles and other paraphernalia which the horsemen bear. The rather European treatment of figures, and especially facial expressions and horses, is immediately derived from the Castiglione style which was overwhelmingly influential in the palace ateliers throughout the century. Super-realistic features (Figure 4) such as contorted body postures, a man bleeding from an arrow through his neck and large puffs



2. Detail showing stockade of Shih-feng Pao, the fort itself, or perhaps its outer defences.

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3. Detail showing Te-leng-ke, a Manchu of the Blue Banner and leading military officer known to have taken part in the 1784 campaign against the Hui tribesmen.





4. Detail showing the highly realistic painting of features characteristic of the Ch'ien-lung academy's European-influenced style.



of gunsmoke would be otherwise unknown in Chinese painting, as would the progressive reduction in size of figures as they recede in distance.

Examination of the overall picture shows equally fine gilding to the cannon being wheeled in at the top right, while one of the scene's amusing aspects is the little stream of refugees hurrying out of harm's way at the top of the picture. The landscape follows the conventions of the orthodox school of traditional Chinese painting favoured by the court throughout the Ch'ing dynasty; despite the frenetic and crowded activity of much of the painting surface there are a few peaceful, even lyrical landscape passages in the centre as well as at the edges of the composition. The rustic enclosure surrounded by trees at the right-hand side is especially pleasing.

Many of the faces of leading figures in the attacking forces suggest portraiture (a feature of Ch'ing atelier paintings). The Shih-ch'üan Wu-kung was generally ordered to produce its painting, or series, quite soon after the victory in question, and this large work must have been completed within the four or five years after the campaign, at the very longest. The individual faces do suggest, though, that the troops may have returned to Peking in triumph after their battles, and that the court artists may have painted their likenesses from life. Triumphant returns to the capital were the rule after successful campaigns, although if one took place on this occasion records do not reveal its date.

The painting must have been the work of one of the known court artists of the period, or perhaps a group of them. Atelier work very often permitted lesser talents to fill in the insignificant parts; perhaps there was a portraitist who did the faces; sometimes the landscapes and the figures were painted by different artists after the basic composition had been mapped out by the senior painter. This painting seems extremely consistent throughout its extensive foreground, but there remains the possibility that the smaller, more distant figures may have been executed by a pupil. They are well delineated, but the expressions and some postures are notably less lively. It would be tempting to suggest that Hsü Yang, given his connection with the earlier Hui campaign handscroll, might have been the artist but Hsü's working life is thought to have ended some ten years earlier, and the painting style is if anything more flowing than his characteristically was. Other well-known court names of the time include Chang T'ing-yen, Hsieh Sui,

Yang Ta-chang, Shen Huan, Li Ming, and Chiang Mao-te, but there are a few other potential authors. One of the most intriguing possibilities is that a late Ch'ien-lung academy painter named Shen Ch'ing-lan, who specialised in figures and horses, may have painted much of the work but this is no more than speculation. Only two examples of his work, both hanging scrolls, survive in the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, neither of them published.

Whoever the painter, this unusually large and fine painting of a battle's final charge is one of the most dramatic and exciting of its genre, yet entirely typical of the Ch'ien-lung academy's European-influenced style. Created in the melting pot of European cultural imperialism and Chinese imperial culture, it was 'liberated' as a direct result of Western armed invasion. It seems likely that further important examples of comparable court paintings will come to light over the coming years, primarily in Europe, as interest in this area of curious cultural mix grows in Occident and Orient.

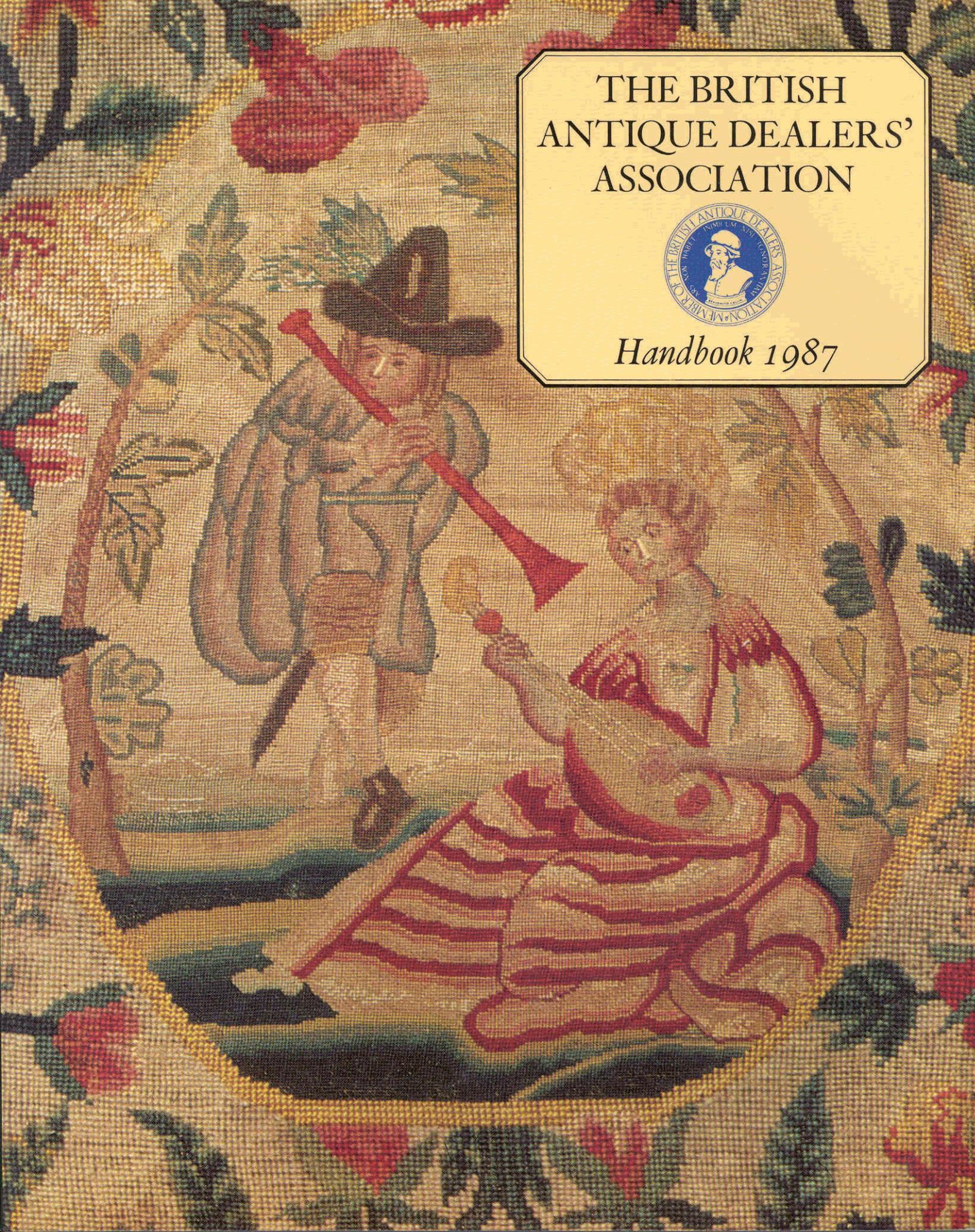
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PAUL MOSS is the third-generation managing director of Sydney L. Moss Limited. He has a 1st class honours degree in Chinese from Durham University and specialises in Chinese scholar painting and works of art. His publications include numerous catalogues on Japanese netsuke, Chinese paintings and scholars' works of art. He is a member of the BADA.

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*Handbook 1987*



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**FRONT COVER**

*Detail showing a group of musicians worked into the needlework upholstery of a Queen Anne settee, part of a suite of furniture made by Thomas Phill of London which was supplied to Edward Dryden of Canons Ashby in 1714. It was recently returned to its original position in the Tapestry Room by the National Trust after an absence of several decades.*