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### Recognizing Vernacular Painting

So much has been written over the centuries about Chinese painting—by the Chinese themselves, and over the past century by Japanese, Western, and other foreign authors as well—that the chance of any large and important area of it remaining unstudied might seem small. But the subject of this book, Chinese painting of the kind I call vernacular, is just such an unexplored area. It has been a focus of my own attention only relatively recently, late in a long career, and I arrived at it by a strange, roundabout route.

As a graduate student in the 1950s writing my doctoral dissertation about the artist Wu Zhen (1280–1354), I realized that a key to understanding his thought and his works lay in defining the ideas about expression in painting that had come to dominate the thinking and practice of the most prestigious artists of his time. This was the theory of literati painting, which had arisen in the eleventh century among a group of scholar-artist-critics associated with the great poet and statesman Su Shi, or Su Dongpo (1036–1101). It held that paintings by amateur artists, men of the scholar-official class who were learned in the classics and expected to devote themselves mainly to scholarship and government service, were by their very authorship superior to works by the technically trained professional painters. By the fourteenth century, the time of Wu Zhen's activity, this way of thinking about

painting was so widely accepted as to endanger the critical reception of other kinds of work, especially those by openly professional masters, many of whom continued in the “academic” styles practiced in the Imperial Painting Academy of the fallen Song Dynasty. I devoted half of my dissertation to a first attempt at formulating a coherent theory of literati painting; later I published an article incorporating some of my findings under the title “Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting” and wrote about the literati-professional distinction on a more popular level in my book *Chinese Painting*.<sup>1</sup> I was sometimes accused, not undeservedly, of setting myself up as a spokesman for these critical ideas and attitudes, a true believer.

In the half-century since then, much has changed in my thinking. One fundamental truth I realized early on, though it was only later that I understood its full implications, is that the great corpus of Chinese painting theory and criticism as it has been preserved, richer and fuller by far than the literature of any other of the world’s premodern artistic traditions, is heavily biased in favor of the literati artists and their works—understandably so, since the authors of it were virtually all members of the literati class themselves, and so strongly inclined to favor the kinds of painting practiced and promoted by their fellows. A slower realization was that Chinese painting as it survives today has been, in effect, severely censored by this same elite, the Chinese male educated class, who have exercised control over its transmission, deciding which paintings should be preserved, remounted and repaired when they needed to be, and passed down through collections, and which others deserved to be neglected and lost. A good part of my later career has been devoted to attempts to recover and reconstitute, insofar as possible, “lost” areas of Chinese painting by identifying and bringing together pieces that have somehow survived, against the odds.

A closely related interest in recent years, and another that has led me away from orthodox Chinese attitudes about painting, has been the pursuit and study of pictures of women. This began with a mistake made in an exhibition that I organized with a graduate seminar and held at our University Art Museum in Berkeley in 1971. The exhibition was *The Restless Landscape: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Period*; the mistake was including in the show and its catalog a very beautiful painting of a seated woman that proved, after further consideration and research, to have been falsely dated and misidentified in an interpolated inscription with a spurious signature.<sup>2</sup> In short, to make it more respectable and salable, a generic *meiren hua* or “beautiful-woman painting”—a picture, that is, of a beauty as a type, not of any individual person—had been fitted out with an impossibly early date and a spurious identification as a portrait of a famous woman. My concern with righting this mistake expanded into a deep curiosity about paintings of women in China: why were they so unstudied and so misunderstood? I complained in a lecture at the time that we “cannot even tell the portraits from the pinups.” Chinese writers on painting, when they mentioned pictures of women at all, referred to them loftily and without differentiation as *shinu hua* or “paintings of gentlewomen.” And no one had written seriously about them. At this time innovative studies by social historians and others

of women's changing role in Chinese society, especially in the Ming-Qing period, were adding rich revelations that were revising our old stereotypes of the stable Confucian society and its pattern of male dominance. Scholars engaged in women's studies of this kind were making heavy use of Chinese vernacular and popular literature, a field that had also opened up remarkably in recent decades. But no one was looking seriously at the paintings, or taking account of what they could reveal about these new concerns.

In the spring of 1994 I delivered a series of Getty lectures titled "The Flower and the Mirror: Representations of Women in Late Chinese Painting."<sup>3</sup> As I began to rework those lectures for publication as a book, I added a section meant to supply a larger context not seriously addressed in the lectures: Who were the artists who did the generic pictures of women, *meiren hua* and others? What else did they paint? Why were their works so marginalized as low-class? Why have so many of their works been, like the picture in our exhibition, misattributed and misrepresented? The chapter meant to answer those questions grew as the answers unfolded, turning into a separate book—this one.

Gradually I came to recognize and attempt to define a great body of painting, created over the centuries by studio artists working in the cities, artists who produced pictures as required for diverse everyday domestic and other uses, pictures I have come to call vernacular. They were intended not so much for pure aesthetic appreciation as for hanging on particular occasions such as New Year's celebrations and birthdays, or for serving particular functions, such as setting the tone in certain rooms of the house or illustrating a story. These and other uses of them will be explored in the chapters that follow. They were executed in the polished "academic" manner of fine-line drawing and colors, usually on silk, and were valued for their elegant imagery and their lively and often moving depictions of subjects that answered the needs and desires of those who acquired and hung them, or enjoyed them in album and handscroll (horizontal scroll) form.

They fell outside the categories of painting praised by critics and preserved by collectors, which were valued, by contrast, as individual creations and personal expressions of prestigious masters; serious painting collecting in China, as in the West, was largely a matter of pursuing genuine works by name artists. Most desirable, especially for the periods after the Song Dynasty ended in the late thirteenth century, were the works of scholar-amateur artists or literati painters, educated men who, endowed with high principles through their study of the Confucian classics, were expected to devote their principal energies to scholarship and public service. In theory they practiced painting only as a leisure pastime and a form of self-cultivation, not for material gain. That this disinterested character of literati painting was largely a myth is a subject I have written about elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Myth or not, it served as a potent barrier to exclude openly professional artists who accepted commissions and produced pictures to satisfy particular needs.

Vernacular paintings, then, had several counts against them in the critical system that dominated Chinese connoisseurship and collecting. They were openly

functional, in a culture that professed to despise functionalism. They were in the wrong styles, executed in ways that did not prominently display the hand of the artist in personalized brushwork. The identity of their makers was ordinarily of small concern to those who acquired and hung them, and in any case the artists were not of the literati class, men who were supposed to manifest their high-culture refinements in their paintings. Moreover, the subjects of vernacular paintings were likely to be drawn more from everyday life and popular culture than from the revered classics and histories. Some of the subjects were mildly or outright erotic, and thus transgressed into an area forbidden to serious writers and painters—in a Ming play, a literati artist asked to paint the heroine's portrait refuses, saying that "beautiful women are the lowest level of painting in an artist's repertory."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, since collectors had no interest in vernacular paintings, dealers and other owners commonly furnished them with misleading attributions and interpolated signatures of early and respected masters, intended to give them greater commercial value, if under false colors. Many of them survive, then, as "fakes," from which the misidentifications must be stripped away before they can be given their true art-historical status and seen for what they are.

There was a time, only decades ago, when some of the same factors excluded Chinese vernacular and popular literature from serious appreciation and study. Specialists devoted themselves largely to belletristic writing and poetry, along with philosophical and other texts that reflected the concerns of the literati elite, the educated male minority who dominated Chinese society. Non-elite literature (i.e., writing that was not addressed primarily, or only, at the classically trained male elite), like non-elite painting, was considered too low-class or vulgar to merit critical attention. But in the field of literary studies the taboos were broken, and there has appeared in the past half-century or so a large secondary literature, growing in subtlety of argument, on vernacular fiction, drama, local popular songs, and the like. If scholars of Chinese literature had remained hobbled by the old elitist attitudes, the great advances they have made in recent decades would not have happened, and the new understandings of Chinese social history, concepts of gender and the status of women, and all the other concerns that have been opened for investigation through studies of non-elite literature would have remained closed. The present book is meant to stimulate a similar opening up in Chinese painting studies, where similar rewards await those willing to expand their vision to include the long-scorned vernacular pictorial art.

The rewards, as we will see, are considerable. "Respectable" painting in China had long ago narrowed its range of acceptable subjects to rule out, with few exceptions, scenes of daily life, scenes that seem to convey the real feelings of the people portrayed, and scenes that explore human relationships in more than the stiffest and most moralistic ways. A heavy concentration on landscape promoted the virtues of escaping from the human world to live in nature; symbolic plants and birds, auspicious figures, historical scenes that carried political messages all belonged to a largely closed system of interpreting pictorial imagery. The artists who produced

vernacular paintings—mostly masters of small renown working in studios in the cities—also worked under constraints, the principal one being that they satisfy the needs and desires of their clientele. But because those desires were so diverse and flexible, the urban studio artists enjoyed considerable freedom, and they used it to explore the real world around them far more freely in their works than their prestigious contemporaries could do, revealing subtle insights into Chinese life and the workings of Chinese society.

In Japan a century of study, in an atmosphere less dominated by a censorious orthodoxy than in China, has illuminated the once-neglected areas of *fūzoku'ga* or genre painting and *ukiyo'e* (pictures of the floating world), both prints and paintings. Our vernacular paintings might be thought of as Chinese rough equivalents to those, as long as we are careful to get the sequence of events right: late-Ming erotic prints imported from China in fact played a large role in the beginnings of *ukiyo'e* in Japan, and some Chinese vernacular painting was familiar to Edo-period artists, and used by them. Pictures portraying the alluring figures and activities of the courtesan culture of China, and of the corresponding “floating world” of Japan, make up a large part of both painting traditions. Both shade easily into the openly erotic. This book will end with a chapter about courtesan culture and beautiful-woman (*meiren*) paintings in China, but will stop short of treating the *chungong hua* (spring palace pictures), Chinese erotic paintings mostly in album form; those will be the subject of a separate, smaller book, tentatively titled *Scenes from the Spring Palace: Chinese Erotic Printing and Painting*.<sup>6</sup>

The copious production of studies and reproduction books of Japanese *fūzoku'ga* and *ukiyo'e* prompts again the question: why has so little been written about the corresponding kinds of vernacular painting in China? I propose some tentative answers in what follows. But the primary explanation lies in the beliefs and attitudes, based in the dogma of traditional Chinese literati-painting theory, that have dominated our studies. No one states it exactly as I will here, but it nonetheless underlies a great deal of the writing and thinking in our field, both within China and outside. It takes the form of an unchallenged equation, an assumption that certain elements in Chinese painting and its surrounding circumstances always belong together and so take on the character of equivalence. It goes like this (the elements can appear in any order): in later Chinese painting, **scholar-amateurism = brushwork = calligraphy = self-expression = disdain for representation = high-mindedness = high quality.**

Nothing has so hampered independent and innovative directions in Chinese painting studies as the uncritical acceptance of this equation by many of our specialist scholars. It was, until recently, the likely basis of the training of a connoisseur in China; elsewhere, whole academic programs have promulgated it and indoctrinated students with it, as if it were a central truth about Chinese painting. It will not be overturned easily or soon. But books such as this one could not be written until its hold on at least one scholar was broken. At a time when little else of the old, self-serving rhetoric of elites has been allowed to stand, this one has been surprisingly tenacious. I hope this book will further erode it.

Paintings of the vernacular types had been made from the earliest periods of Chinese painting, but their production greatly increased in volume and variety during the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the period with which this book is mainly concerned. This is the “high Qing” of the book’s title, comprising the reigns of three emperors of the Qing or Manchu dynasty, Kangxi (r. 1662–1722), Yongzheng (r. 1723–35), and Qianlong (r. 1735–95). In the late Ming period, the later sixteenth century and first half of the seventeenth, Chinese society had been profoundly transformed from one that was basically agrarian to one increasingly urban and mercantile. In the new society, a growing urban middle class, affluent and eager to adopt the elegant lifestyle that had formerly been the prerogative of a landed gentry and government officials, provided a vastly expanded market for the works and services of artists, artisans, writers, and entertainers of all kinds. A huge increase in the production of printed books created in the great cities an urban print culture that underlies the heightened sophistication of the artists to be considered here and their clientele. The city of Suzhou, located below the Yangtze River some fifty miles inland from present-day Shanghai, experienced the most extraordinary new growth. The urban studio masters were also active in other cities located, like Suzhou, in the Yangtze delta region, cities such as Wuxi, Nanjing, and Yangzhou. Later, from early in the eighteenth century, a northern branch would grow up in Beijing, somewhat in the shadow of the Imperial Painting Academy there. I touch on regional aspects of vernacular painting at a few points where they seem relevant and ascertainable, but they cannot yet map the geographical development in any detail.

Since my purpose is to illuminate long-neglected areas of Chinese painting, I do not treat some genres and types in the repertoires of the urban studio artists that have been the subjects of substantial studies by others. These include single-figure portraits and Buddhist-Daoist religious painting.<sup>7</sup> Imperial Academy painting—another heavily studied category—will be dealt with only peripherally, in its relation to the production of the urban artists who are our principal focus.<sup>8</sup> Court painting, partly because of the glamour associated with the two Palace Museums, Beijing and Taipei, in which most of it is preserved, and partly because it is backed up with copious court records that support research on it, has received a great deal of attention in recent years, both in exhibitions and in scholarly publications. Again, this book is aimed at shifting some of that attention to the more relaxed, ultimately richer body of vernacular painting produced and used in the larger society outside the court.

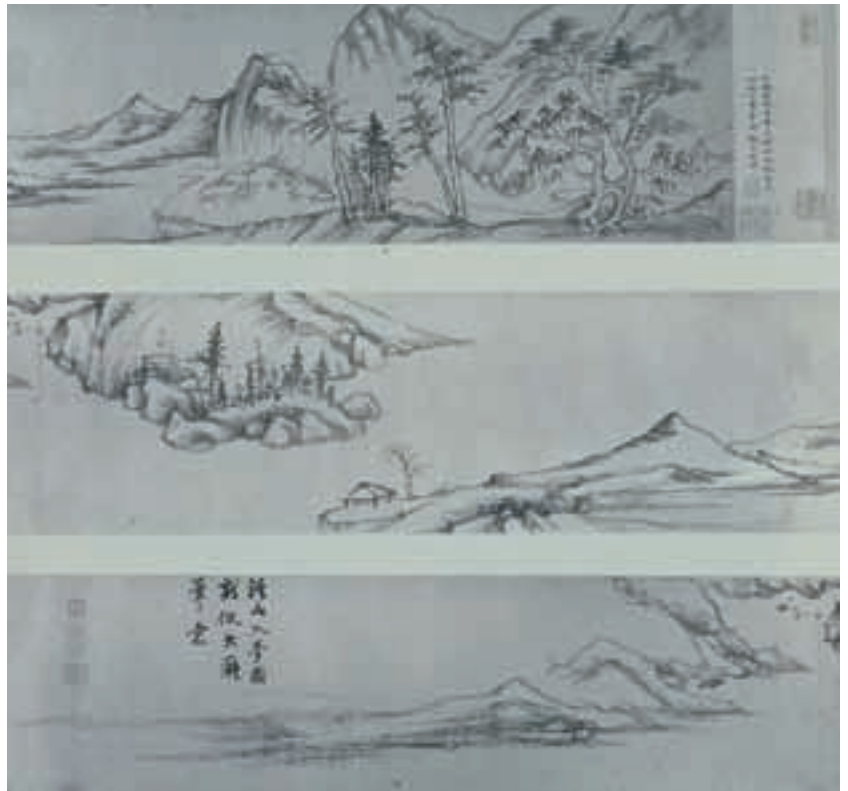
## Two Traditions of Painting

A few examples of the two types, literati and vernacular painting, can introduce them and demonstrate how deeply unlike, visually and expressively, they can be. For the most extreme contrast, a handscroll by a prominent scholar-amateur artist can be juxtaposed with one by an anonymous studio master. (I admit to slanting the comparison to favor the latter.) The late Ming literatus Li Rihua (1565–1635) was represented in the excellent 1988 exhibition *The Chinese Scholar’s Studio* by a



landscape handscroll he painted in 1625 titled *Rivers and Mountains in My Dream* (figure 1.1). Li had held a high position in the Ministry of Rites in Beijing, and his paintings, though amateurish (he never really studied painting), were much in demand, partly for their status-symbol value as creations of a man of high official rank. His 1625 scroll was praised in the catalog as a work in which “the landscape serv[es] as a vehicle for the poet-painter to express his desire to rise above the vicissitudes of the mundane world.”<sup>9</sup> The other handscroll, an anonymous work, depicts a family New Year’s celebration, with the elders watching from the doorway as the children, seemingly all boys, enact the seasonal festivities as play. It is an example of one of the vernacular types to be represented in this book and dates probably from the early Qing, the later seventeenth century (figure 1.2, whole composition; see also figure 4.3, detail).

There is little doubt that Li Rihua’s scroll will have the more immediate appeal for many viewers, including some who are unfamiliar with Chinese painting but find more of visual stimulation, say, in an abstract-expressionist work of the 1950s than in a seventeenth-century Dutch interior. But on longer looking, I believe, Li Rihua’s scroll will reveal itself as a work of much smaller interest and accomplishment, more inept than untrammelled.<sup>10</sup> It is a work that might seem to justify the old Chinese contention that “painting and calligraphy are a single art”—but only by



### 1.1

Li Rihua (1565–1635), *Rivers and Mountains in My Dream*. Dated 1625. Sections 1 and 2 of a handscroll, ink on paper, 23.4 x 253.3 cm. Shanghai Museum.

demonstrating the artist's confinement to nondescriptive, "calligraphic" brushstrokes. And it exemplifies an uncomfortable truth about studies of Chinese painting: we regularly praise and publish amateurish, even awkward works in the Chinese critical category of estimable art, or fine art, largely because of their authorship or because they exhibit some received ideas and shibboleths about the characteristics of high art.

The New Year's picture would normally not be praised or exhibited or published in China because it not only fails to "rise above the mundane world," but also chooses to represent that world in loving detail—a choice that more or less automatically, for a traditional Chinese connoisseur, consigns it to the realm of the trivial.<sup>11</sup> Such a connoisseur, noting also that it bears a false attribution to the great Ming master Qiu Ying (ca. 1495–1552), would pronounce it a forgery of the type called *Suzhou pian* (a dismissive term for the commercial productions of minor artists working in Suzhou in the Ming-Qing period), roll it up quickly, and forget it. But unrolled again and seen for itself, it proves to be a delightful picture, which apart from its artistic merit supplies a lot of detailed information about a New Year's celebration in a large, well-off family in early Qing China. I will return to the work in chapter 4.

Paintings by two artists who were not only contemporaries but also friends, Wang Shimin (1592–1680) and Gu Jianlong (1606–88 or after), offer an equally unlike but more congenial pairing (see figures 1.4 and 1.5, below). Wang Shimin was one of the most respected literati painters of his time, and the oldest of the so-called Four Wangs who were leading masters of the Orthodox school of landscape in the early Qing. He was, moreover, a direct pupil of Dong Qichang (1555–1636), the master

## 1.2

Anonymous (late Ming or early Qing period), *A Family Celebrating New Year's*. Horizontal painting, ink and colors on silk, 94 x 176 cm. Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.





who was surely the most powerful figure in later Chinese painting, as a landscapist, a critic, and the theorist who formulated the immensely influential doctrine of the Southern and Northern schools of painting. This doctrine (which will be discussed further below) was a quasi-art-historical division of landscape painters into two lineages, the Southern, made up of the literati masters and the artists they claimed as predecessors, and the Northern, to which the professional and academy painters were assigned. Wang was a Southern and Gu a Northern school master within this formulation. Gu Jianlong was an openly professional studio artist, one of the relatively few of that class to attain some prominence, even if only as a painter of secondary rank—he will reappear a number of times in this book as an innovator of certain types within our category of vernacular painting. Both Wang and Gu were natives of Taicang in Jiangsu, another of the Yangtze delta cities; Gu was active as an artist mostly in nearby Suzhou, and spent some of his later years in Beijing as a court painter for the Kangxi emperor. In Suzhou he lived at Tiger Hill, one of the pleasure districts a short distance outside the city, where artists like him, who portrayed beautiful women and other images popular within the courtesan culture, commonly lived, surrounded by both their subjects and the market for their works. Gu also painted erotic albums, a genre within which he was a notable innovator.

Today Gu Jianlong is remembered especially in Chinese painting circles as the artist of a surviving forty-six-leaf album of *mogu fenben* (study sketches after old paintings) that reveals a great deal about his working methods and about traditional studio practice more generally (figure 1.3).<sup>12</sup> Few such albums have been preserved, especially outside China. This was only one of many such albums that Gu compiled over the years; Wang Shimin, in a long colophon written for one of them, reported seeing the albums “piled as high as himself.” As opportunities arose for him to see and copy from old pictures, Gu Jianlong added to the albums. He kept them for reference, to supply imagery and pictorial information—costumes and hairdos of early periods, old furniture and architecture, fabric designs, and components of landscape in the styles of various schools—for incorporation into his own pictures as needed. This way of working contrasted sharply with the literati painters’ insistence on spontaneity and on maintaining a consistent, distinct personal style.

An example of how Gu Jianlong put the antique imagery from his *fenben* albums to work can be seen in a painting that probably represents the eighth-century emperor Xuanzong spying on his favorite consort, Yang Guifei, as she bathes (figure 1.4). Although it is unsigned and has been loosely catalogued as “anonymous Ming,” it can be attributed to Gu Jianlong or a close follower on the basis of style. Its overtly erotic content—the near-nudity of Yang Guifei, viewed through a split-bamboo screen, and the prurience of the emperor’s spying on her, a transgression of which she is quite aware, as her sidelong look betrays—suggests that the painting might have hung in the bedroom of a man, or in a courtesan’s chambers. This is a work of high technical finish, with meticulous attention to fine details of architectural ornament and furniture, luxury objects, the attendants’ costumes (suitably antique in appearance though scarcely true to the intended period, the mid-Tang)



### 1.3

Gu Jianlong (1606–88 or after), Leaf 45 from an album of 46 leaves, *Sketches after the Old Masters (mogu fenben)*. Ink and colors on paper, 36.8 x 29.2 cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; purchase: Nelson Trust (59–24/45). Photograph by Jamison Miller.

with lavish use of gold and heavy pigments that still glow from the darkened silk surface.

Wang Shimin, in the long colophon he wrote for one of Gu Jianlong's *fenben* albums, praises Gu's precocious proficiency in drawing and his versatility in handling a wide repertory of subjects, including portraiture.<sup>13</sup> Wang writes that Gu, determined to rise above the common level of professional painters, studied with a number of masters to broaden his skills. One might wonder how Wang Shimin, the most orthodox of the Orthodox school landscapists, could admire Gu Jianlong, an irredeemably Northern school artist who seems at first to exemplify everything Wang disapproved of in painting. But Wang's colophon is not the only testimonial to their mutual esteem. In 1683, after Wang Shimin's death, Gu Jianlong was shown a landscape that Wang had painted in 1651 (figure 1.5) and, presumably at the owner's request, wrote a long inscription on it. In this he recalls his friendship with Wang



#### 1.4

Gu Jianlong or close follower, *Emperor Xuanzong Spies on Yang Guifei Bathing*. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 151.5 x 87.9 cm. Yurinkan Museum, Kyoto. (For a detail, see figure 5.25.)

#### 1.5

Wang Shimin (1592–1680), landscape in the manner of Huang Gongwang. Dated 1651. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 115.6 x 50.7 cm. Inscription by Gu Jianlong dated 1683. Matsushita collection, Tokyo.



over some fifty years, and praises him as heir to the lineage of Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), a revered literati master of the late Yuan period, and Dong Qichang, whose combined styles Wang indeed follows in the painting. Gu’s inscription scarcely differs in any respect, even in its calligraphic style, from what one of the Orthodox school landscapists themselves might have written. And Wang Shimin, when he wanted a group portrait representing himself and his family in their residence, requested or commissioned Gu Jianlong to make it (see figure 4.14).

The paintings that Wang Shimin disdained in his writings as falling outside his Orthodox lineage were the work of errant contemporary landscapists—those who, as he put it, “try to produce new ideas” instead of following the old masters.<sup>14</sup> Because Gu Jianlong was neither a landscapist nor a breaker of traditions, he was no threat to Wang Shimin’s cherished beliefs. The pictures Gu produced were not judged by the same criteria as Wang’s works and placed far below them; they rep-

resented (as both would have agreed) another *kind* of painting, different in intent and function. And that difference is fundamental to the argument of this book. In some part it was a matter of social and economic class: Wang Shimin, as scion to a wealthy gentry family and a direct pupil of Dong Qichang, could never have painted pictures like those of Gu, even had his technique permitted it. And although some leaves in Gu Jianlong's *fenben* album indicate that he could have painted good approximations of Wang's pictures had he chosen to do so, the point is that no one would have asked him to. Seekers after paintings went to artists of certain types in the expectation of receiving the corresponding types of pictures. And the artists, though in principle free to paint whatever they chose, in practice stayed mostly within the bounds of those expectations.

## The Neglected North

For our traditional Chinese connoisseur, these contrasting pairs of works—Li Rihua's landscape and the anonymous New Year's picture, Wang Shimin's landscape and Gu Jianlong's picture of the bathing Yang Guifei—typify the differences between the Southern and Northern schools of painting that Dong Qichang famously formulated. This theory, or argument, is well known and often cited and discussed.<sup>15</sup> In brief, the Southern and Northern schools have little or nothing to do with geography. The designations have instead been adopted from two schools, or lineages, of Chan (Zen) Buddhism. The Southern school in painting, named after the "sudden enlightenment" school of Chan, corresponded loosely to the tradition of the literati artists, together with the earlier masters they claimed as predecessors; the Northern school, named after the "gradual enlightenment" branch of Chan, comprised the professional and academy painters. Li Rihua and Wang Shimin, then, were Southern school masters, Gu Jianlong and the artist of the New Year's picture typically Northern school. But because Dong Qichang had taken his terms from the two schools of Chan, implying an analogous distinction in painting, the formulation was, to say the least, rhetorically unbalanced: given a choice between Southern (sudden enlightenment, intuitive understanding) and Northern (gradual enlightenment, painstaking study), who would not choose the former? The powerful rhetorical advantage of *Southern*, in both its uses, has been potent in determining which Chan lineage, and which kind of painting, was admired, practiced, and studied. A revisionist scholar of Chan, Bernard Faure, has published a book that attempts to right the balance, recognizing that the Southern-Northern opposition is a misleading, historically unfounded construction and providing a less biased account of the doctrines and development of what came to be called the Northern school of Chan. A similar reassessment of the Northern school in painting is clearly in order.<sup>16</sup>

The dominance of the Southern school and its critical attitudes was based on far more than the term's rhetorical advantage. The literati were educated men, usually from well-off families, who could attain official rank in the government bureaucracy by passing examinations in the classics; so they made up the Chinese administrative system at all levels below the imperial house, from those great ministers

close to the emperor in the capital down to minor local officials. They also compiled the histories and wrote the books, thus establishing themselves as the supreme cultural authority of China. The acquaintance with old styles they gained through their privileged access to painting collections qualified them as connoisseurs and critics, and permitted them to include cultivated references to those old styles in their own artistic works.

The principal source of Northern school styles, for artists of the later periods, was the work of painters who had been active in the Southern Song Imperial Academy or had practiced the same styles outside the Academy in the same period (twelfth and thirteenth centuries). This “academic” manner of painting, as it continued to be called (usually pejoratively) in the following centuries, was a skilled and polished manner of depicting figures and buildings in fine outline and color, plants and animals with close observation and accuracy, trees and rocks in descriptive brushstrokes that imparted naturalistic textures and volume, and of combining these elements as required by the pictorial theme and purpose to produce elaborate but clearly readable compositions. The professional-academy tradition appears to have assumed its lasting shape and stylistic repertory in this period, and was drawn on continually by conservative studio painters ever after. A great many Southern Song pictures in the academy styles were extant in Ming-Qing times, accessible to studio artists working in the cities, where major collections were mostly located. People who commissioned works from these artists for hanging or presentation, to decorate their houses with appropriate auspicious and seasonal scenes or to carry symbolic congratulatory messages (for instance, on someone’s birthday or retirement), normally expected pictures in these technically finished styles. They went to the local literati, or scholar-amateur, masters for paintings of other kinds, and used and valued them differently. The works of literati artists also sometimes served gift and occasional functions, although in principle they were not supposed to do so.

Only a few of these urban studio artists rose to real prominence in the Ming: Du Jin in fifteenth and sixteenth century Nanjing; Zhou Chen, Qiu Ying, and Tang Yin a little later in Suzhou; Chen Hongshou in Hangzhou in the late Ming; a few others.<sup>17</sup> Except for these few who achieved a measure of fame, Chinese studio artists’ status resembled that of the Japanese *machi eshi* (urban picture-makers). For instance, a number of late Ming and Qing portraitists, known from their names inscribed on paintings, are unrecorded in books on artists. They were called in when needed to execute a portrait, or sometimes only to contribute a portrait face to a painting by someone else; they were what in the West used to be called limners. A painter of this kind, even if included in the books supplying information on artists, was likely to receive only a line or two, telling where he was active and what his specialties were—“He was good at painting beautiful women, and also did portraits.” What else, within the Chinese biographical conventions, was there to say about him? If he did not hold an official post, belong to a gentry-official family, write books, or otherwise distinguish himself in some field outside his profession, the answer was: nothing at all.



## The Social Functions and Status of Vernacular Paintings

The urban studio masters who produced functional paintings—to hang as decoration in one's home, or to be presented as felicitations on public holidays or domestic occasions—fitted the subjects and styles to the function or occasion. These artists had large repertoires that included pictures of popular deities and legendary figures as well as narrative and historical scenes. Figural subjects, usually set in domestic interiors or gardens, were central to their production; these are not works that celebrate reclusion in mountain retreats and the like. Terms used to praise literati painting, especially landscapes, did not apply to them: they neither embody “high-minded” attitudes nor “rise above the dusty world.” Because of their functionalism, traditional Chinese connoisseurs dismissed them as artistically inconsequential; in principle, they were not meant to elicit aesthetic contemplation or to express the artist's feeling and temperament, as paintings in China mostly were supposed to do, to be taken seriously. Such judgments assumed that once the occasion for their use was past and their function fulfilled, occasional and functional pictures lost most of their value. They were not, as the Chinese phrase has it, “worthy of refined appreciation” and preservation as works of art. Only if the occasional paintings were by major artists of the past, such as Qiu Ying, would they be preserved; recent pictures by lesser masters ordinarily would not.

An eighteenth-century writer named Zhai Hao, looking over the lists of paintings owned by the “wicked” grand secretary Yan Song (1480–1565), notes the inclusion among them of many birthday and other auspicious pictures, and criticizes these as “lowly” and “vulgar.”<sup>18</sup> Zhai Hao's judgment, however, is misdirected for two reasons. First, what we have for Yan Song is not a catalog of what he considered his collection, a list that would presumably have recorded only those pieces he took pride in owning. No such catalog was compiled during Yan's lifetime. The longer of the two surviving lists of his paintings is part of an uncritical inventory of objects of value in his possession—representing, supposedly, the wealth he had amassed through bribery and corruption—that were confiscated from his household after he was deposed. Second, as Zhai Hao himself points out, many or most of the “vulgar” paintings were probably acquired as gifts from well-wishers (and influence-seekers) felicitating this powerful personage and his family members on birthdays and other occasions.

The shorter list was compiled by Wen Jia (1501–83), son of the great literati painter Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) and himself a noted artist and connoisseur. The paintings he chose to include in it are all by famous-name masters, except for a few early anonymous pieces listed at the end. In effect, Wen Jia was compiling Yan Song's “collection” catalog, applying his skills as connoisseur to judge which pieces merited inclusion. The longer list contains hundreds of paintings for which only titles and sometimes artists' names are given. In this, by contrast, more than half of the works are anonymous; many others are by Ming professional and academy artists, or are attributed to Song-Yuan masters. Because only a few of these attributed works appear in Wen Jia's list, their authenticity is doubtful. The birthday paintings mostly appear in this larger list, together with other auspicious images—pictures of Zhong

Kui, the exorcist of demons; narrative and historical pictures with political implications; popular religious images; *meiren* pictures of unidentified authorship; and diverse other works. These, we can assume, were the paintings used in Yan's household for auspicious and decorative hanging.<sup>19</sup> They belong, loosely, in the same category as the paintings Gu Jianlong made for Wang Shimin and his other clients, without much hope that this work would ever be included in their "collections."

We can assume that large, rich families commonly divided their holdings of paintings into functional and "fine" art, although the distinction need not have been a sharp one. Proper catalogs compiled for later collections ordinarily do not include the functional paintings so numerous in the Yan Song inventory, or works by recent and contemporary artists. Such paintings, however, could no doubt have been seen hanging, enjoyed but not (in principle) aesthetically appreciated or treasured, in the houses of the same collectors. Their collection pieces could be shown with pride to knowledgeable visitors, and besides serving as indicators of status also functioned as investments, tangible components of the family wealth, which could (unless badly chosen) be pawned or resold to raise money as needed. Presumably they passed their functional and decorative pieces down through generations as part of the family heritage; these works were unlikely to enter the art market or to be acquired by serious collectors, except when furnished with false signatures or attributions aimed at legitimizing them. The likelihood of their long-term preservation was thus much smaller.

An especially valuable source of information on how paintings were hung in the houses of affluent and cultivated people is a passage in the *Zhangwu Zhi*, a book now well known through a study by Craig Clunas, who renders the title *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, that is, luxury goods that did not primarily serve practical functions.<sup>20</sup> The author of the treatise was another descendant of Wen Zhengming, his great-grandson Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645). Like Wen Jia, he drew on his family connections (his brother served briefly as grand secretary) and his own upbringing in an atmosphere of cultural refinement to present himself as an arbiter of taste and elegant living. His book offers, among other things, advice to new collectors on such questions as quality and authenticity in antiques and how these should be conserved and displayed. His "Calendar for the Displaying of Scrolls" reads in part (as translated by R. H. van Gulik),

On New Year's morning you should display Song paintings of the Gods of Happiness and images of the Sages of olden times. . . . In the second moon there should be representations of ladies enjoying spring walks, of plum blossoms, apricots, camellia, orchids, and peach and pear blossoms. On the third day of the third moon there should be shown Song pictures of the Dark Warrior. . . . On the eighth day of the fourth moon, the birthday of Buddha, you should display representations of Buddha by Song and Yuan artists, or Buddhist pictures woven in silk dating from the Song period. On the fourteenth day of that moon you should show images of Lü Dongbin, also painted by artists of the Song dynasty. . . .

During the sixth moon there should be displayed large Song or Yuan pictures of towers and palaces, of forests and rocks, of high mountain peaks, of parties gathering lotus flowers, of summer resorts, and similar scrolls. On the seventh evening of the seventh moon there should be displayed pictures of girls praying for skill in needle work, of the Goddess of Weaving, of towers and palaces, of banana trees, of noble ladies, and suchlike representations . . . while during the eleventh moon there should be paintings of snow landscapes, winter plum trees, water lilies, Yang Guifei indulging in wine, and suchlike pictures. During the twelfth moon there should be scrolls showing Zhong Kui inviting good luck and chasing away devils or of Zhong Kui marrying off his sister. . . .

Further, on the occasion of changing your abode you may display pictures like that of Ge Hong moving to the Lofou Mountain, while on the occasion of an anniversary there should be shown images of the God of Longevity by artists of the Song Imperial Academy or representations of the Queen of the Western Paradise. If you are praying for clear weather, hang on your wall an image of the Sun God, and when praying for rain, pictures of transcendental dragons sporting in wind and rain. . . .

Thus all scrolls should be displayed according to the season so as to indicate the time of the year and the various calendar festivals.<sup>21</sup>

Yan Song's inventory and Wen Zhenheng's calendar match up well: one could fulfill, more or less, the calendar's stipulations for what to hang by drawing on the pictures listed in the inventory. Together they provide a good indication not only of the practice of hanging scrolls of different subjects to suit season and occasion, but also of the demands that were placed on professional painters, as well as on the antiques market and the studios of forgers, who supplied "Song paintings" (such as are stipulated in Wen Zhenheng's list) for a demand that must have vastly exceeded the authentic supply. The urban studio masters responded to similar demands. But their output was by no means limited to domestic uses; they also made paintings intended for hanging and viewing in other settings and contexts: public and semi-public places in the pleasure districts of the cities, such as restaurants and brothels. Some of them painted illustrations to fiction and drama; some represented subjects that can properly be classified as erotic, whether soft-core pictures of "beauties" (*meiren*), often with coded sexual allusions, or hard-core erotic albums. The primary function of these, as of erotica today, was to entertain and arouse—principally the male viewers but sometimes, if we can believe Chinese fictional accounts and other written evidence along with the paintings themselves, female viewers as well. But the best of them evoke sensations and feelings far beyond simple titillation.

## Urban Professional Masters in High Qing Painting

The clientele and viewership for these paintings cannot be identified more narrowly than as the well-off inhabitants of the great prosperous cities of China. From the late Ming, members of old gentry families, new merchant families, elites of all kinds had moved in large numbers to the cities, where they made up a rich mix of people of diverse occupations and backgrounds.<sup>22</sup> The time was long past when landed gentry and literati were clearly set off socially from merchants; now a single family might have members in both groups, and even a single person could move easily between

one role and another. What one writer calls a “culture of mid-level merchants” emerged in the late period on which I focus, when “successful landlords, merchants, artisans and officials tended to associate socially on a basis of approximate equality.”<sup>23</sup> Patronage for painting came from correspondingly diverse groups.<sup>24</sup>

The High Qing period, as the term is commonly used, covers the reigns of the three great Manchu emperors, Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong (1662–1795); I extend the term to reach roughly from the dynasty’s founding in 1644 to the end of the eighteenth century. Accounts of the painting of this period in art-historical writings are commonly constructed in terms of broad polarities. For the early Qing (second half of the seventeenth century and early eighteenth), the poles are the Orthodox school landscapists, made up of the so-called Four Wangs and others who trace their lineage in a conservative descent from Dong Qichang, and the masters known collectively as the Individualists. For the middle Qing (roughly the remainder of the eighteenth century) the opposition is usually described as between a continuation of Orthodox-school landscape and the production of the so-called Eccentric Masters of Yangzhou. Lesser local schools and artists working outside these major trends have been recognized and studied, as has the painting of the Imperial Painting Academy in Beijing.<sup>25</sup> But the Orthodox versus Individualist and Orthodox versus Yangzhou formulations still underlie most accounts. Although the two schools in each are placed in opposition to each other, they are customarily taken to represent together a polarized main line of development in these periods. Yangzhou painting, in particular, is hailed as liberating, an escape from an orthodoxy in landscape that was by this time already in decline.

My purpose is not to upset altogether these formulations, which contain some truth and serve to bring some order to the plethora of great and small masters and diverse stylistic directions. I want only to supplement the accounts of early and middle Qing painting, and later Chinese painting more generally, by drawing together and introducing the missing component, the deeply interesting category of paintings dealt with in this book. It cannot properly be termed a school, being too dispersed for that, both geographically and chronologically, nor is it properly a movement. In a preliminary, working definition it consists of works by studio artists active in the cities during the High Qing period, especially in the Jiangnan or Yangtze delta region but also in the north. Their paintings were in some sense functional, and stylistically within the great Chinese professional-academic tradition extending back to the Song period, with the addition of some new elements of style drawn from European pictorial art. Chinese artists had access to new representational techniques, especially illusionistic ones, adopted from European pictures (chiefly engravings, but also some oil paintings) beginning in the late sixteenth century, and used them in diverse forms and contexts. These techniques, or pictorial ideas, were crucial to the development of urban studio painting in the early and middle Qing. I have addressed this large phenomenon in a number of writings, and will only outline here the forms it took in paintings, so that I can take it up again in chapter 3.<sup>26</sup>

Many of the illustrations in this book are pictures of figures in interior settings, or outdoor-indoor scenes. They differ markedly from the relatively few figures-in-interiors compositions painted by Chinese artists during preceding centuries. Notably, they exhibit a new mastery of techniques for representing interior space, often with elaborate systems of openings from foreground spaces to others farther back, and of positioning figures within these spaces. Some of them display also a mastery, or at least a determined employment, of light-and-shadow effects. It appears clear that these new techniques were largely inspired by the Chinese artists' acquaintance with European pictures, especially northern European, Dutch and Flemish ones, and were in part learned from those pictures, though never through slavish copying or imitation—the Chinese painters quickly and artfully turned their appropriations to their own special purposes. And in doing so they opened a new chapter in Chinese painting of figures in interiors, a genre that had seriously occupied artists up to the Five Dynasties and early Song, the tenth century (as seen, for instance, even in the surviving late-Song copy of Gu Hongzhong's *Han Xizai's Night Revels* composition)<sup>27</sup> but had generally languished in the intervening centuries, exhibiting little innovation even in the hands of mid-Ming artists of the stature of Qiu Ying and Tang Yin (1470–1523).

Gu Jianlong appears to have been a pivotal figure in the transition to this new mode, as he is for a number of the developments that this book will treat. Although it may be that no single painting by Gu impresses us as truly brilliant, as do some works by his contemporaries among the Individualist masters of landscape, his whole achievement, considered in context, is nonetheless impressive. What he and other early Qing urban studio masters of the Jiangnan cities inherited was the “low tradition” of *Suzhou pian*, the dismissive collectors' term for paintings produced by followers of Qiu Ying and Tang Yin working in Suzhou studios in the later Ming and early Qing. Much of the output of these epigones consisted of copies and forgeries of Song-Yuan painting, or of the works of Qiu and Tang themselves. What Gu and other transitional masters passed on to studio artists active over the century or so that followed was a number of new or rejuvenated subject types and genres, as well as stylistic innovations, that were instrumental in bringing new life to a tradition of professional painting that had fallen into decline.

The new mastery of complex and readable spatial systems permitted painters to employ these for narrative purposes, as well as for ascribing depths of feeling to the people they depicted and evoking nuances of relationships between them; it also engaged the viewer more fully by seeming to draw the gaze into the depicted space. Gu Jianlong employed these techniques skillfully, as seen in his illustrational and erotic albums (see figures 4.37, 5.4, and 5.6). His interiors are not so illusionistically spacious and visually penetrable as those by some later artists would be—much of the older, flatter Suzhou mode persists in his pictures, partly because he did not attempt to render light and shade as strongly or convincingly as others would do. The technique of using shadowy areas to increase the readability of spaces was adopted only later—an early example, from 1697, is by the Yangzhou master Yu Zhi-



ding (1647–1710 or after), who creates a shadowed alcove behind a draped curtain and places in it a melancholy woman waiting for her lover (see figure 5.18). From the early eighteenth century, both techniques were taken up and practiced at the Imperial Academy in Beijing, where the development of a semi-Westernized illusionistic manner was further stimulated by the active presence of European Jesuit artists, notably Giuseppe Castiglione (Chinese name Lang Shining, 1688–1766).

These Western-inspired techniques were not, then, adopted for sheer novelty or exoticism, but because they permitted the painter to engage the viewer with the imagery of the picture in ways that Chinese painting after the Song Dynasty had largely lost the capacity to do. The loss, one hastens to add, had come about through a process of deliberate rejection, reflecting a distaste among the most prestigious Yuan and Ming painters for illusionism of all kinds, which they scornfully referred to as *xingsi* (form likeness) and ranked lowest on a scale of value criteria in painting. The foreign-derived illusionistic techniques paralleled, in their purpose and for the genres in which they were adopted, the new kind of portraiture practiced in the same late-Ming period by Tseng Qing (1568–1650) and others, as well as the contemporaneous revival in Nanjing and elsewhere of the Northern Song monumental, and relatively naturalistic, mode of landscape painting.<sup>28</sup> In all three subject categories (and in others as well, e.g., some heavily colored flower paintings by Yun Shouping, 1633–90), techniques adopted from European pictures combined with elements of native Chinese style that had long fallen into disuse and were now rediscovered to enhance the “reality” of the images—which is not the same as making them more realistic; they are certainly not that by Western criteria.

### A New Genre in Ming-Qing Figure Pictures: Paintings for Women?

There is a sense, however, in which these paintings *can* be called realistic, within the Chinese painting tradition. That sense can perhaps be best understood through some parallels, inexact but suggestive, with developments in Chinese literature of the same period. The late Ming–early Qing is now recognized in all fields of Chinese studies as an age of great economic and social changes, which affected every aspect of the culture. Rising prosperity, along with urbanization and a great increase in the production of printed books, meant more widespread education and literacy, an expanded readership that stimulated the production of popular and vernacular forms of literature to meet a new demand. Similarly, a great increase in the number of families sufficiently well off to aspire to elegant living created a demand for paintings to hang and present on various occasions, as stipulated by Wen Zhenheng’s calendar, or simply to enjoy—paintings of the kinds this book is about. The writers of the new fiction and drama turned away from the high-minded themes of classical Chinese learning (while sometimes echoing or even parodying them), as well as from the unnaturalness of the literary language, to explore a “low mimetic” mode—in Northrop Frye’s definition, “a mode of literature in which the characters exhibit a power of action which is roughly on our own level, as in most comedy and realistic fiction.”<sup>29</sup> The painters of our pictures, as we will see, similarly break out of the limited thematic range of traditional painting, devoted as that

was to edifying and symbolic subjects, all deliberately distanced from quotidian life. They create their own version of a low mimetic mode for painting, portraying scenes and situations that could be imagined as occurring, not as defining moments in the careers of Confucian exemplars or historical personages, or in the ideal lives of lofty scholars inhabiting an unreal realm, but as small events and epiphanies in the everyday lives of the real people who made up their viewership. This remains true even when the pictures also commemorate occasions, illustrate narratives, or carry erotic messages. Like fiction written in the vernacular, they fulfill, with their evocative incidents, richly detailed settings, and descriptive styles, “the aesthetic expectation of a ‘realistic’ representation of some phase of human experience.”<sup>30</sup> At their best, they can convey that quality that Susanne K. Langer, in a memorable phrase, calls “a passage of ‘felt life.’”<sup>31</sup>

It is exactly this basic shift in mode, in effect creating a new genre, that opens Chinese painting, at least the kinds with which we are concerned, to wider participation by women, both as artists and as viewers of the paintings.<sup>32</sup> Ian Watt, noting the importance of female readers in the rise of the English realistic novel, quotes Henry James’s tribute: “Women are delicate and patient observers; they hold their noses close, as it were, to the texture of life. They feel and perceive the real with a kind of tact.”<sup>33</sup> David Johnson, writing about the readership for popular Chinese literature, points out that women “must have remained much closer to the main currents of non-elite culture; they had not been taught to prefer the monuments of the great literary tradition, the subtleties of classical scholarship, the systems of the approved philosophers. These literate, well-to-do women must also have formed a significant audience for popular written literature.”<sup>34</sup> That the vernacular language was easier to learn was of course a factor—the early Qing writer Li Yu advises that when one is educating a concubine, it is best to start her off with vernacular fiction, for that reason.<sup>35</sup> But Johnson’s point is nonetheless valid.

The same assumptions can be made—short of proof, but compelling in the light of all the circumstances this book will explore—about the likelihood of women having been engaged in choosing and using popular or vernacular paintings, which similarly presented familiar materials in traditional representational styles, free of allusions to the old masters and the like. It may well have been the wife or the matriarch of the household who selected paintings for seasonal hanging and family occasions, with the artists responding to her understood taste, while the dominant male chose the more prestigious name-artist paintings for the family collection. That women were mostly excluded from the male world of connoisseurship and collecting can be judged from Dong Qichang’s listing of five conditions under which calligraphy and paintings should not be shown: the fifth, following bad weather and vulgar guests, is “in the presence of a woman.”<sup>36</sup> But there were exceptions, notably in the late Ming, for cultivated courtesans and concubines who moved easily in the company of men, and who were sometimes present at gatherings where calligraphy and paintings were produced and appreciated.<sup>37</sup> The same was no doubt sometimes true of educated gentry wives in the Qing period; and in

any case, numerous examples attest that women could own and appreciate paintings in the quiet of their domestic spheres.

David Johnson continues, “It is not surprising, therefore, that . . . one of the hallmarks of true popular literature in China is the heroine who initiates actions, who is one of the moving forces of the plot, and who is not submissive but who, on the contrary, struggles against the restrictions of conventional domestic morality.” Again, something similar can be said of the paintings we will consider: although some of them, especially those of the *meiren* and erotic genres, treat women as objects of desire, others afford them more individuality and dignity than they had commonly enjoyed in traditional Chinese painting. We will even argue for a loose gender distinction in the intended clienteles for these two large categories, with the more overtly erotic types being aimed primarily at a male viewership, those that present women more as subjects in their own right at a female one—or at viewers, regardless of gender, whose responses were not primarily sexually determined. This argument will be developed, and some evidence presented, at suitable points in the chapters that follow.

### Suzhou and *Suzhou pian*

The main locus for the production of such painting in the late Ming and early Qing appears to have been the city of Suzhou and its environs. The very center of both professional and scholar-amateur painting through most of the Ming, Suzhou by the late sixteenth century had slipped into decline, in the eyes of influential critics; it was cast into shadow by nearby Songjiang, where Dong Qichang and his adherents were creating and promoting a powerful new mode of literati painting, chiefly landscape, that quickly came to be accepted as the touchstone for high-level painting, the kind that collectors should seek and artists aspire to. Suzhou painting was cast, in this scenario, as the survival of an outmoded tradition, commercialized, trivial or vulgar in its subjects, conservative in its styles. Despite the presence of a few innovative but underrated painters in late-Ming Suzhou, notably Zhang Hong (1577–ca. 1652), the painting scene there was dominated, in the critics’ view, by the numerous followers and imitators of the great early sixteenth-century professional masters Tang Yin and Qiu Ying. Some of these followers devoted their skills to producing the *Suzhou pian* that were described earlier as made up mostly of copies and forgeries of earlier masters, including Qiu and Tang themselves but also the great Song and Yuan painters.<sup>38</sup> Use of the term commonly extends also to original paintings by Suzhou small masters of the late Ming and Qing: the writer of the Chinese entry for the New Year’s picture (figure 1.2) in the catalog in which it was first published (see note 2 above), for instance, calls it a *Suzhou pian*, in effect removing it from serious consideration.

What has gone unremarked in this standard, dismissive account is a high-level continuation in late Ming–early Qing Suzhou of figure painting as it had been practiced earlier in the Ming by Qiu Ying and his daughter Qiu Zhu (also known as Qiu Shi, “Miss Qiu,” since her given name is uncertain). Qiu Ying’s wide repertory had encompassed sensitive portrayals of women, and Qiu Zhu had made a speciality of

them: pictures of the woman waiting genre, of literary and cultivated women, of women engaged in leisurely pursuits in gardens. Artists who were in some sense their followers will appear throughout this book, together with others from other places and later periods, and will be seen to achieve striking innovations while remaining within this lineage. One from the late Ming is Wang Sheng, who is the artist of the earliest extant erotic album attributable to a particular master, but also of a picture of a woman playing a flute in a garden, done in 1614. Another Suzhou figure master, Shen Shigeng, painted in 1642 a woman in a garden picking mulberry leaves and gazing at a pair of amorous dogs, a coded indication that she is thinking of her absent husband. (Qiu Ying did similar pictures in which the woman gazes at mandarin ducks instead of dogs.)<sup>39</sup> In seeming to give pictorial expression to specifically feminine concerns, these are good candidates for the still-hypothetical category of paintings intended for women to acquire and enjoy.

Suzhou in this period was the very center of what Dorothy Ko calls “a floating world,” a “mobile and fluid society” that had come into being in the Jiangnan region through the influx of money and sweeping changes in the social order. Commentators of the time, she writes, “were all too aware of the incongruity between realities in this floating world and the idealized Confucian order frozen in terms of such binaries as high/low, senior/junior, or male/female.”<sup>40</sup> Kathryn Lowry, quoting Ko and building on her perception in a study of Suzhou popular songs and courtesan’s songs, notes that it was this “blurring of categories that attracted seventeenth-century readers to the literature on desire (*qing*),” along with the prestige of the city as “the most cosmopolitan of places,” with its “range of written materials, goods, and social practices that led people [in other places] to emulate Suzhou ways.”<sup>41</sup> Suzhou paintings of the kinds that concern us from the same period can also be seen as fitting comfortably into this large cultural phenomenon, with their high technique, visual elegance, and association in many cases with women. Their “blurring of categories” such as high/low and male/female, on the other hand, no doubt accounts for some of the denigration they received from literati writers, especially by Dong Qichang and his followers in Songjiang.<sup>42</sup> The creation and appreciation of paintings for this *Suzhou pian* market in Suzhou and the very different production of landscapes in literati styles in Songjiang, while we have been in the habit of lumping them together in “late Ming painting,” can be recognized as making up two somewhat separate systems, one producing pictures of attractive and popular subjects in accessible styles that demanded no connoisseurship and could be enjoyed by viewers of either gender, the other concentrating primarily on landscape, deeply involved with stylistic references to the old masters and the brushwork or hand of the individual artist, and demanding high levels of connoisseurship to determine authenticity and quality. The world of the connoisseurs was a male one from which, as noted earlier, women were mostly excluded.

Some Suzhou figure specialists in the early Qing period took the important step of placing the women in interiors, making use of the new spatial techniques discussed earlier. One of them, unfortunately unidentified (the work bears a false Qiu

Ying signature), painted an eight-leaf album of uncommonly subtle and sensitive pictures of women, alone or in pairs, in domestic settings; this album will be central to our discussion of paintings probably done for women (see figures 4.26–28). Gu Jianlong in an early erotic album, and the anonymous painter of a closely related album, include, in addition to a few leaves in which sexual activities are openly depicted, others in which women and men appear in varied situations and relationships, all having to do with love affairs and attempted seductions.<sup>43</sup> No comparable albums of interiors occupied only by men are known to me; it is difficult to imagine what the theme of such an album would be, within the low mimetic mode. We are observing, perhaps, a new pictorial reflection of the traditional separation of *nei*, inner or feminine, from *wai*, outer or masculine, as the latter was represented in images of landscape, often with (male) recluses.<sup>44</sup>

More important, we are also observing, in the new popularity from the early Qing period on of pictures of men and women relating in untraditional, seemingly real-life patterns within domestic interiors, some reflection of a new awareness, in writing and painting, that the perceived locus for romantic love had shifted. Up to the late Ming it was typically situated in scholar-beauty liaisons between literati and courtesans, and the cultivated courtesans were central figures not only in the real events but also in the idealized versions portrayed in fiction and poetry, much of the latter written by themselves. In the Qing, courtesans were deposed from any central role in the production of the literature of *qing* or emotional feeling, replaced by gentry women or *guixiu* from literary families, who were the leading women writers of this later period. The *guixiu* were understandably more inclined to take as their subjects for poetry and prose their own family concerns and their relations with both men and other women. Love and other relationships *within* the household now come to the fore in the thematics of poetry and painting; as Susan Mann points out, “women’s writings opened new paths to intimacy, revealing wives, daughters, and sisters as masters of high culture who were newly intelligible as human beings to their erudite husbands, fathers, and brothers.”<sup>45</sup> Their poems can be expressions of love—usually moderated, to avoid compromising their reputations—or can be complaints over their neglect or abandonment by men who are too long absent, or who turn their attention to other women.<sup>46</sup>

Another painting that appears to fit this new pattern, more elaborate because of its larger hanging-scroll format, is by Wang Qiao, a Suzhou figure master whose dated works range from 1657 to 1680. *A Woman at Her Dressing Table* (figure 1.6) was painted in 1657.<sup>47</sup> The artist has signed it simply with the date and his name; the long inscription in upper left is a poem by an early nineteenth-century woman writer, Zhou Qi, who was herself a painter. The scene is morning in the boudoir of a woman who, judging from the painting itself, might be a courtesan, but might also be a wife or concubine in a prosperous household. She sits at a table looking into a mirror while her maid does her hair; another maid is making up the bed beyond. The rumpled bedclothes and clothing draped hurriedly over a stool at right identify the scene, as they commonly do in erotic paintings, as the aftermath of a sexual





1.6

Wang Qiao (active 1657–80), *A Woman at Her Dressing Table*. Dated 1657. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 100 x 58 cm. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton.

## The Survival of Vernacular Paintings

encounter. Zhou Qi's poem (see the appendix, a translation by Ellen Widmer) makes it clear that she reads the picture as representing a cultivated courtesan repairing the ravages of a night of lovemaking.<sup>48</sup> Her poem is addressed to the woman, almost like a love poem, and it is true that *guixiu* were sometimes themselves engaged in love affairs with courtesans.

However we read the painting, it clearly belongs within the new low mimetic mode. In its simple spatial scheme and in the relatively small size of the figures within the composition, the picture exemplifies the early Qing type of women in interiors developed in Suzhou. The fine, supple, "feminine" line drawing further relates it to that group.<sup>49</sup> As a representation of a woman in her boudoir, with only restrained sexual overtones, it is decidedly at the cool end of a scale of erotic intensity; how warmer and hot pictures of the same subject might look, pictures presumably aimed more at a male audience, will be revealed in chapter 5.

The development from the late Ming onward of a popular, vernacular literature has by today become a well-recognized, heavily studied part of Chinese literary history. The corresponding rise of urban studio painting, and within it the new genre that I take to be in part aimed at a female viewership, has received no such recognition or attention. One reason is that literary texts, even those of a kind depreciated, ignored, and even banned in late-period China, could not so easily be eradicated: copies survived in Japan, or in unsuspected places in China, and could be recovered, reprinted, and studied when the old taboos broke down in the twentieth century. The same is true of pictorial prints, including woodblock-printed illustrations: produced in multiples, they have a good chance of survival, if sometimes only in unique copies, and can easily be reprinted and disseminated. The scholarly literature on these, accordingly, is relatively full. Paintings, by contrast, unless replicated by hand copying (and such copies, in the connoisseur's view, had little value and were scarcely worth preserving), are one-of-a-kind objects, and depend for their preservation on transmission through a succession of collections in which they are cared for and, when necessary, remounted. In the cases of the paintings that are our concern, such a history was highly unlikely. All the critical biases operating within the Chinese tradition of collecting and connoisseurship worked against their survival: their popular and functional character; their traditional styles (in which the artist's distinctive handwriting was typically not displayed); their low mimetic, "trivial" content; the production of many of them in Suzhou; the association of some (if I am right) with a largely female audience; their exclusion from the desirable category of genuine works by name artists; the common practice in later times of adding false signatures to them, attributing them to masters earlier and more famous than the ones who painted them.

This last practice places the paintings in a category that, though scarcely peculiar to China, is unusually common there. In addition to genuine paintings by known artists and deliberate copies and forgeries of them, a large number of paintings

survive that did not originate as forgeries at all, but were caught in a peculiarly Chinese trap: too high in quality and pictorial interest to be discarded, but lacking the name identifications that would place them in the ranks of marketable and collectible commodities, they have had their original identifying marks (signatures and seals of less-known masters) removed and have been fitted out by dealers and owners, over the centuries, with erroneous attributions, spurious inscriptions and seals, misleading identifications of subjects—all designed to move them, however dishonestly, out of undesirable authorial and thematic categories and into desirable ones. Zhe-school landscapes by lesser Ming artists are ascribed to great Song-period landscapists; works by lesser followers of some prestigious master are credited to the master himself; most to the point for this book, Ming-Qing pictures of figural subjects in the academic manner are reattributed to famous early figure painters, with added titles reidentifying their subjects. Paintings of this kind are found in large numbers in old collections outside China, especially those assembled by discerning collectors such as Charles Lang Freer (donor of the original collection of the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.), collectors whose eye for quality was not matched—could not be, in their time—with the kind of expertise that would permit sound judgments of date, school, and authorship. Paintings in this group might equally be assigned to the “anonymous” category, and in fact do fall into it once the misleading attributions are stripped away from them.

Still another category of surviving works is paintings that, for diverse reasons having to do with their subjects, styles, and original functions, were excluded from the range of what was held to be art, or fine art. (And yes, we can recognize that Chinese critics and connoisseurs *did* make distinctions similar enough to ours between art and non-art, as well as between good and bad art, that we can, if we choose, legitimately go on using those terms.) Out of a huge output of pictorial matter, the Chinese arbiters of taste and quality in any period dictated what deserved to be preserved and collected, mounted and remounted as the need arose, appreciated and written about, rescued from the burning house—what should, in short, make up the history of Chinese painting. That the vernacular paintings of this book were among the works excluded is another major reason for their poor survival rate. Today we can explore beyond the fences erected by the literati critics and collectors, using whatever surviving works can still be located and identified in attempts to reconstruct the excluded areas. Most of all, we can revisit and revise our evaluations of the kinds of functional, decorative, entertaining, and otherwise “low-class” Chinese painting that have been considered beyond the pale.

That they were considered so by Dong Qichang and other Ming-Qing literati critics is understandable, given the personal investment of these men in promoting the doctrines of literati painting. What is strange is that none of the successive twentieth-century movements aimed at opening up non-elite areas of Chinese culture for appreciation and study has given these paintings any attention. When Hu Shih, the great champion of vernacular literature and of writing in the colloquial language, made what is (so far as I know) his only published statement on Chinese

painting, one might have expected him to call for a corresponding recognition of what can properly be called vernacular painting. Instead, he adopted the very position he was battling against on the literary front, serving up yet again the familiar literati claim that whereas such other arts as architecture and sculpture were “deficient” in China because they “remained in the hands of uneducated artisans and . . . have not had the illuminating touch of men of advanced education, rich experience, and refined taste,” calligraphy and painting came to be “preeminent” through being “the only two fine arts which the scholarly class in China has taken up and developed to such heights.”<sup>50</sup> In the early years of the People’s Republic, some other previously undervalued kinds of painting began at last to be studied and published—portraiture, temple wall painting, works of the Zhe school in the Ming and the Imperial Academy in the Qing—and whole academic departments were formed to study and promote the popular prints called *nianhua* (New Year’s pictures). But paintings of the kind introduced in this book, though amply represented in study collections and museum storage rooms in China, somehow never made their way into the politically positive category of “people’s art,” and the neglect continued. A 1958 book on “artisan painters of the people” (*minjian huagong*) was devoted to wall paintings in tombs and temples, anonymous portraiture, *nianhua*, and the like, and quite blind to the productions of the urban studio masters. These apparently were not popular enough, or were popular in the wrong way.<sup>51</sup>

Such a consistent pattern of neglect and marginalization impels the question: have Chinese paintings of this kind deserved to be ignored because they really are so vulgar, or of such low quality? The illustrations of the present book will quickly convince any reader, I hope, of the absurdity of that view. The neglect owes, rather, to everyone—specialist scholars as well as collectors and museum curators—having consciously or unconsciously adopted the pro-literati biases that pervade virtually the entire literature on the subject.

Because of the low esteem in which they were held by the literati who wrote the books, paintings of the kinds dealt with here are seldom mentioned in literary sources. Whatever we can say about them has to be pieced together from scattered clues, just as the paintings themselves, only thinly represented in major collections and publications, have had to be sought out and assembled from untraditional holdings. Among such holdings are lesser collections (or forgotten corners of great collections) in China and Japan, including Japanese dealers’ stocks; old European and American collections, for the reasons noted above; and auction catalogs, which make up a rich source for what is commonly thought of as secondary or even minor material. The misleading attributions that encumber them must be stripped away, the misidentifications of subjects corrected, before they can be effectively dealt with. The task of assembling and assessing the pictures, against these difficulties of access and identification, has required some years of work and will require many more; the present book is only a first step.

Some of the pictures bear reliable signatures of identifiable artists, but many more “float free,” essentially anonymous—when the signatures or seals are those of well-

known masters, these are frequently spurious, as the paintings do not agree in style with more acceptable works by the same artists. The true authorship of such pictures, their dates of execution and places and circumstances of creation, are thus not easily to be determined. These are questions that could not even be addressed effectively until the paintings had been brought together and considered as a group.

Individual style, in any case, is not really to the point in these paintings, and individual hands can seldom be decisively identified among them, although we can form stylistic groups among the unsigned or misattributed works and speculate about their authorship. The painters tended to work, as the masters of the Song Imperial Academy had mostly worked, in a deliberately impersonal mode, sometimes employing studio assistants, concerned more with the excellence and salability of their pictures than with the display of distinct artistic personalities. Although questions of authorship have traditionally been paramount among the concerns of Chinese connoisseurs and scholars, they need not be so for us. The position and significance of the paintings within Qing society, how they functioned in certain situations and how people of their time understood them, along with their intrinsic artistic worth, may well be matters of greater interest. But these, in turn, cannot be effectively pursued until some broad art-historical, geographical, and sociological aspects of their production have been clarified. The attempt to do so will draw us into large issues of Qing cultural history, such as the growth of a lively popular culture in the pleasure districts of the cities, including what has been called the courtesan culture, and the relationship between two great centers, the one economic and the other political—the Jiangnan cities in the south and the imperial court in the north.

## Plan of the Book

During the dozen or more years in which I was writing this book, a number of sub-themes opened that seemed important enough to warrant being followed up at length, and I did so, even at the risk of giving the book a somewhat episodic character. Several of these, such as the engagement of women as probable clientele and viewership for some vernacular painting and the rise of a school of vernacular figure painting in Beijing in the eighteenth century, are discussed in different contexts in successive chapters. I hope readers will understand the reasons behind this odd organization and tolerate what might seem failures of clear continuity.

Chapter 2 opens by introducing some urban studio artists active in the Jiangnan cities in early Qing, to define further the type, and goes on to recount how some of them traveled north to Beijing in search of patronage, or were invited there to become members of the Academy of Painting in the imperial court. They carried with them not only their styles but also the fruits of their immersion in the popular culture of the southern cities, which exerted a strong attraction on the Manchu rulers. A striking instance of this northward movement and its reception within the court, centered on a minor Yangzhou master and his son and grandson, serves to open a new, erotically tinged episode in the history of Manchu–Han Chinese relations. A discussion of court painters who were absent from the court during the Yongzheng



era (1723–35) concludes the chapter and prepares the way for a somewhat speculative account of how these and other artists working outside the court can be recognized as making up a “northern school” of vernacular figure painting in the Yongzheng and Qianlong (1735–95) eras.

Chapter 3 explores how the artists of vernacular painting, along with many others of their age, adopted representational techniques and elements of style from Western (European) pictures that were by this time accessible to them, and how this appropriation opened to them new ways of composing their paintings, especially interiors with figures, with spatial complexities that allowed greater clarity of relationships and new expressive effects. Painters working in the imperial court, in particular, were encouraged or commanded to develop the semi-Westernized styles favored by their imperial masters. Some of them learned the rules of linear perspective from Jesuits serving at the court or from other foreign sources. I stress the importance of distinguishing this Italian system of perspective, which was not much employed outside the court, from northern European (Dutch and Flemish) modes of rendering space and solid form, which Chinese artists found more congenial and adaptable to their purposes. The growth of a northern school of vernacular figure painting in the Beijing region is further pursued, and within it some especially successful fusions of foreign and Chinese styles are recognized.

Chapter 4 deals with the repertoires of these artists, offering examples of the kinds of subjects they depicted, including pictures for New Year’s celebrations, birthdays, and other occasions, and discussing how these might have functioned within the society of the time. The question of whether certain types were directed toward women is raised again in the context of a discussion of family group portraits and other family scenes. A section on narrative paintings leads into a consideration of cityscapes, with special attention to one remarkable example, a handscroll depicting the busy pleasure district at the foot of Tiger Hill near Suzhou. Throughout, the more open expressiveness of the vernacular works is contrasted with the stiffer, cooler styles of the Academy and other more “elevated” figure painting.

Chapter 5 is devoted to pictures related somehow in their subjects to the flourishing courtesan culture of the Ming-Qing period. The question is raised of where such paintings were hung or displayed, and provisional answers attempted on the basis of scanty available evidence. A discussion of large changes in societal attitudes toward romantic love and erotic feelings between the Ming-Qing transition and the mid-eighteenth century, a contextual theme introduced in the fourth chapter, is expanded here as a background for a consideration of changes in the subjects and styles of paintings from the same periods. The remainder of the chapter offers a first detailed and scholarly account of the popular genre of *meiren hua*, or beautiful-woman paintings. The question of female nudity in Chinese painting is briefly considered and illustrated by a few examples. A conclusion reiterates some large assumptions underlying the approach I have used in the book, and expresses hopes for follow-up studies of its materials and topics.

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