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A social history of painting inscriptions in Ming China (1368-1644)

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Conclusion

Painting inscriptions written in the Ming era are not only the result of artistic concerns. This thesis illuminates the inscriptions in a social context with the aim of drawing attention to this not yet systematically explored subject in the scholarship of Chinese painting and literature. It reveals that this particular genre of text richly encompasses themes relevant but not confined to social history, material culture, early modern publishing, identity construction, and self-knowledge. This study, perhaps for the first time, brings two types of sources of inscriptions—existing paintings and textual anthologies—into the vision of academia. The two sources also represent two categories of inscriptions and their dual nature. On the one hand, inscriptions are material objects with trajectories of circulation and dissemination; on the other hand, they are the texts of histories of reproduction and dissemination.

The two categories of inscriptions are transmittable. A Ming educated man could search his memory or a book for an existing literary composition, and inscribe it on a painting. He could also collect an inscription from a painting in an anthology. This transmittable trait has been illustrated in this thesis by discussions about the efforts to compile inscriptions from paintings in connoisseurship anthologies, and the practice of reusing old compositions for new paintings. The dual nature of inscriptions is meaningful because they problematize the common practice at this time to embrace the present state of a Chinese painting without seeing a prior process that shaped this state. This thesis demonstrates that a painting is not a closed entity, but rather a dynamic entity. A painting, especially in scroll format, is open to alteration. This alteration is mostly brought about by adding or removing an inscription. It was common practice for the Ming elite to add their written appraisal and literary compositions to existing painting works. A painting could have a deceptive inscription added to forge its authorship and pedigree; likewise,

an old inscription could be removed, either to sell the inscription as an independent piece of calligraphy, or to make the authorship invisible. In short, Ming people were fully aware of the dynamism of painting works and they intensively employed inscriptions to exploit this dynamism for social and economic purposes.

Although this thesis is about inscriptions written in the Ming period, it primarily looks into their predefined foundation, tracing the emergence and development of inscriptions in the pre-Ming era. By the end of the Yuan dynasty, the literary genres and physical forms of inscriptions that could be seen in the Ming period had already emerged. Even though the Song ruling house also engaged in the creation of painting inscriptions, it was the cultural elite that seized the discursive power and actively employed inscriptions for identity construction. The ideal of “Three Perfections” was also taking shape in the pre-Ming period. By the early fourteenth century, it had already become a widely acknowledged notion in art.

Painting inscriptions and related practices underwent change in the Ming era. Chapter 2 focuses on the production and utilization of inscriptions, contextualizing them in the actual social context. It investigates inscriptions vis-à-vis painting formats as a foundation for all the following discussions. The main aim is to show inscriptions involved in various social occasions with increasing depth, variety, and sophistication in the hands of Ming artists who faced a drastically rising demand for their works. Many of these demands, I suggest, had social concerns and reasons. I present two case studies for a closer examination of the contents of inscriptions, which have demonstrated that the Ming elite tacitly employed inscriptions for social interactions and obligations. In this process, inscriptions also exerted impact back on the social context. They established and consolidated interpersonal ties, and strengthened a sense of belonging to local communities.

Commerce was vital to the social circulation, utilization and dissemination of inscriptions. My discussion in Chapter

3 illuminates inscriptions in the commercial domain, an aspect that has not been fully and systematically discussed in previous studies. I argue that Ming connoisseurs and collectors increasingly relied on inscriptions for the identification of painting works. They sought information from inscriptions to ascertain a painting's authorship and authenticity. Opportunists in Ming art markets saw this use of inscriptions, but they forged inscriptions to pass off fake paintings as genuine. On the other hand, the authentication of paintings without inscriptions also became a problem. Some Ming educated men quickly realized that the problem was a profitable opportunity to establish their authority as connoisseurship experts. This thesis has shown how they added spurious inscriptions to un-inscribed paintings and sold them to the least informed, quite often—in their own claims—to merchants. In this vein, inscriptions continued to assume a function in the expression of social identity, only with new content. Inscriptions in the Ming art markets also found expression in a phenomenal trend in the sixteenth century: inscriptions became the object of cataloguing practices for connoisseurship purpose. These practices and their results, I argue, considered inscription texts as a form of painting knowledge that deserved to be recorded and to be preserved. A noticeable feature is that many catalogue creators kept their anthologies in manuscript form rather than printed form. I interpret this phenomenon as a result of these creators—also cultural elite—managing to control accessibility to the inscriptions. It indicates that inscriptions had various purposes, and dissemination was not always a spontaneous goal for all the inscriptions. An exception to the rule was this chapter's analysis of a unique catalogue of inscriptions. Contrary to the catalogues used for well-intentioned authentication, this one presented nothing but forged texts, and was printed by its compiler. The fact that it was printed is a signal of targeting at wide distribution to deceive the audience in the market.

Unlike connoisseurs' incidental exploration of inscriptions

to authenticate paintings, usually recorded in manuscripts notes, Ming compilers of literary inscriptions exhibited an intention to disseminate what they had collected by means of printing. Even on the limited basis of examples, chapter 4 of this thesis proposes quite different purposes in the exploitation of literary inscriptions, including private printing for social interactions and self-promotion, as well as commercial printing for monetary profits. The Ming anthologies of literary inscriptions presented an unprecedented variety of inscriptions to the reading public, a public that was comprised of individuals and groups with varying degrees of competency permitting their membership in a lettered society. This public included those capable of reading, deciphering, and appreciating inscriptions, and those who wanted to assume the appropriate status in a society that placed such high store in literary values. The printing of these anthologies offered this public an easier accessibility, and offered its members opportunities to be associated with symbols of good cultivation and taste. Another tempting advantage of owning such an anthology was its much higher affordability than a painting.

Inscriptions were effective vehicles of transmission. In chapter 5 of this thesis, I demonstrate that while inscribers often rooted their aims in social occasions of the Ming period, they might also intend to signal emphases from the past and for the future. My analysis of portrait inscriptions shows how inscriptions communicated variously with the depicted subjects of the past, the social demands of the present, and viewers to be summoned from the future. The social aspect of portrait inscriptions has challenged the preconceived idea of Chinese portraiture being frozen in an unchanging ritual display at family shrines. This idea fails to observe that inscriptions included in individual anthologies enabled these texts to continue realizing their social reception and exerting influence. On the other hand, re-encountering an old painting that an inscriber had once viewed or even owned, or an old painting that had borne

many inscriptions, was particularly provocative of a sense of temporal separation that a new inscription needed to explain. This provocativeness directed our attention to the ultimate driving force behind the creation of Ming inscriptions. The force was, this chapter proposes, a constant desire of Ming educated men to publicize, exchange, distribute, and transmit their writings to audiences both living and unborn.

This thesis covers the production, utilization, circulation, and transmission of painting inscriptions written in the Ming period. The thesis argues that historians should pay attention to inscriptions beyond those written on paintings that art historians have utilized almost exclusively. A remarkable number of inscriptions are preserved in textual anthologies. With the rich information of thoughts, notions, and attitudes embedded in and conveyed by inscriptions, this study has challenged some ideas in existing scholarships. It has questioned that the creation of inscriptions was motivated purely by artistic concerns. It has presented alternatives to any simple notion of paintings as static objects only to be stored or displayed. This thesis has proposed that Ming paintings were dynamic objects circulating in the society. Their trajectories are interacted, and even made possible by inscriptions written on or associated with the paintings. My research aimed to situate inscriptions in a social-historical context, both as a genre of writing and as a component of painting. This approach may benefit studies of painting in China towards gaining a better understanding of paintings as objects embedded in society, thereby commissioned, presented, and circulated for social motives. Through the twofold structure of inscriptions as objects and texts, I have attempted to create the investigative scope to enhance further explorations in the social history of Chinese paintings, as well as in the intellectual history of Ming educated society, and for a socio-economic evaluation of art's particular surrounding environment and its era.