

'Circa 1492': an approach to the riddles of Chinese art

Part 4, by Nora Hamerman

This article concludes a series discussing the major exhibit "Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration," on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington until Jan. 12, and the accompanying catalogue, published by the National Gallery and Yale University Press. In the first two articles I surveyed the galleries devoted to "European and the Mediterranean World," especially the great artist-scientists of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer; and the less-known art of the Iberian peninsula. In the third article, I discussed "The Americas," the final section of the exhibit, and stated that the art of the Aztecs and Inkas bespoke a genocidal society, which had lost the moral fitness to survive without outside intervention.

The middle section of the exhibit, "Toward Cathay," poses more complex issues. It would be idle to claim more than a superficial grasp on this writer's part of the cultural and religious history of Japan, Korea, China, and India, the four areas which the exhibit covers in terms of their art during the 50-year period around 1492, though I have benefited from the advice of some of my colleagues on *EIR*'s staff who have been delving into the Chinese and Japanese languages and cultural history.

Rather, in this commentary, I refer back to the standpoint of Lyndon LaRouche's seminal article which *EIR* published in its Sept. 30, 1988 issue, shortly after LaRouche visited the Republic of China. The article, "Behind the mask of so-called 'Communism,'" foresaw the kind of upheavals which took place in the Tienanmen Spring of 1989. LaRouche posed there the "higher considerations of a true Asia policy which a well-advised U.S. government might come to share with Japan, China, and other patriotic forces of the East and South Asia regions, and as a Pacific-Indian Oceans Basin policy generally."

"My own advantage in this," he wrote then, "is that I am committed to a world-view inherited from such leading European figures as Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa, Leonardo da Vinci, and Leibniz. Thus, I am committed, as were Cusa and Leibniz, to the establishment of a world order based primarily on the Christian view of the quality of each individual human soul, of all races and nationalities, under the rule of universal natural law as Cusa and Leibniz, for example, understood this. For the same reasons, I am committed to the establishment of a world system of perfectly sovereign nation-states,

states whose common submission to universal principles of natural law defines the relations among those sovereign republics . . . as constituting what U.S. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams described as a 'community of principle.' "

These very principles, I believe are expressed in the great works of art exhibited in the "Europe and the Mediterranean" section of the Washington exhibit. Hence they were, at least partially, the impetus behind the European voyages of discovery around 1492.

LaRouche had also observed, "Perhaps the most horrifying thing which a Westerner of Christian conscience sees so pervasive in the Far East, is the lack of an efficient regard for the principle of sacredness of individual human life." He concluded, "the entirety of the culture of China is defined implicitly by the work of Dr. Sun [Yat-sen, the great patriot who founded modern China]. He turned to Europe to discover the weapons for defeating Satan's power in China."

For reasons of space I focus on China here, because of its dominant role in the region, but this is not to underestimate the fact that Korea and Japan were every bit as different from China as France or Germany were from Italy, if not more so. India is yet another story, but it is represented only nominally in this exhibit.

A unique aspect of the "Circa 1492" show is that for the first time, both Taiwan and Beijing have lent from their most precious treasures, to be seen side by side. This is crucial because, as LaRouche had underlined in 1988, "There are not 'two Chinas,' nor a mainland China distinct from an island nation of Taiwan. There is but one China with two rival governments . . . the cultures of the mainland and Taiwan are as identical historically as almost any two regions on mainland China."

China in the 15th century

In the catalogue, I especially appreciated Prof. F.W. Mote's 13-page "China in the Age of Columbus," which paints a broad picture of the economy, science and technology, ruling institutions, and the art and civilization of China at the time of Columbus's voyage. He hypothesizes about what might have happened had Columbus achieved his purported goal of reaching China in 1492. Dr. Mote warns, "It is also unlikely that the scholarly traditions of China, and their manifestations in all aspects of public and private life,

would have been in any degree intelligible to [Columbus]. A century later the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1550-1610), employing superb qualities of intellect and spirit through almost 30 years of profound study in China (1583-1610), was able to penetrate these dimensions of Ming life; no foreign envoy passing through could have done so."

It is not well known in the West that China under the Ming dynasty had been the world's greatest maritime power in the first half of the 15th century. China had developed movable type printing, not invented in the West until Gutenberg unveiled it in 1453, in the mid-11th century, albeit, because of the cumbersome Chinese script, woodblock printing was used for centuries; still, books were plentiful and cheap. In astronomy, botany, pharmacology, medicine, physics, mathematics, and even seismology, China was far ahead of the West.

Confucianism offered an ideal image of the poor but bright boy enabled by some good fortune to achieve education, who could advance up the ladder of success to become a chief minister to the throne. This ideal, though seldom realized, made the society open and strongly achievement-oriented. Mote asserts that China "was a highly developed agrarian society, and a generally prosperous one. The ordinary Chinese of Ming times probably were the best-clothed and housed and best-nourished people in the world." He reports that there was no hereditary aristocracy, and that the scholar-officials who were the ruling elite were recruited by civil service examinations from the villages, hence they understood the needs of the farming people.

Yet, this agrarian base contributed to the view of China's scholar-bureaucrats that the country did not need overseas trade, and in fact should not take the risk! This led to the bizarre decision in 1434, by the imperial court in Beijing, to shut down the extraordinary overseas voyages that had been led by the Muslim eunuch Admiral Zheng He, and even to burn the Chinese fleet. It is stunning to consider that Chinese seafaring, which had a rich interchange for centuries with Arab and Persian navigators, led the world in navigational techniques (the compass), naval architecture (hulls divided into water-tight compartments; the stern-post rudder, known in China 1,000 years before it appeared in the West); propulsion (paddle wheels, treadmills, and sails instead of galley rowers as in the West). Zheng He's ships in the 1420s were three times as big as Columbus's and his fleet twice the size of the Invincible Armada of 1588!

Professionals and literati

Once one's eyes adjust to the lower lighting, one cannot fail to be impressed by the technical command and delicacy of the many works of art on paper and silk, mirroring a culture in which literary production, calligraphy, and painting were three aspects of a unified training mastered by all highly educated scholars.

Chinese art has been divided between the professional

artists who worked at the court, and the "wen ren," literati who were "recluses," which meant not that they were hermits but that they chose not to strive for office. Until recently, the "recluse" faction, which appears to have been much influenced by Chinese Legalism and Zen Buddhism, has been much favored by western and Chinese criticism alike, but in this exhibit, both have equal status. The recluse faction apparently gained prominence with the Ming rejection of scientific progress, exemplified by the rejection of Zheng He's seafaring.

I have picked three works from the show to illustrate the issue raised by LaRouche in the cited writing. What from the European Renaissance must be added to the culture of China, to provide that missing concept of the sacredness of individual life? Can we see this in the art?

Figure 1 is the Chinese hanging scroll on silk, *Enjoying Antiquities*, by Du Jin (active 1465-1500), who belonged to the "recluse" camp. "The four canonical scholarly pleasures of lute, chess, calligraphy, and painting await their turn to enrich the lives of the gentlemen who inhabit a realm separated from the outer world both physically and symbolically by works of art," says the catalogue entry. **Figure 2** is a hanging scroll by Shang Xi, active around 1425-50, a commander in the emperor's personal bodyguard. This very histrionic painting recounts a story from a Ming novel about Chinese antiquity, in which the virtuous general Guan Yu, the large figure seated in the center, triumphs over his wicked adversary Pang De (lower right) through a masterful stroke of strategy taking advantage of a flooding river.

Contrast both to **Figure 3**, the small panel *Supper at Emmaus* by the Flemish-Spanish painter, Juan de Flandes, ca. 1500. The artist captures the moment of epiphany when Christ, who has journeyed incognito with two disciples after his death and resurrection, breaks bread and they are suddenly aware of his true identity. What does Juan de Flandes have that both Chinese paintings lack? Depth, luminosity, and proportion, born of a perfect marriage between mathematics and the craft of painting.

Both Chinese pictures are flat; they eschew any serious effort to create the illusion of three-dimensional space, i.e., to overcome the literal limitations of the flat painted surface. Strikingly, the trees in Shang He's scroll show his ability to model skillfully, yet no such volumetric modeling is given to the figures! Despite their colorful and elaborate costumes, the men are thus less real than "nature." In Du Jin's work the beautiful objects are appreciated as a cultivated life pursued for its own sake. Thus, in one scroll there is a story, but it is not uplifting; in the other, there is elevation, but no action. But in the *Supper at Emmaus*, man is seen within nature and among the objects of his own creation, but is above both. The vessels, draperies, etc. and natural setting, while beautifully rendered, are mere ephemerals, making sensuous the central drama of Christ as God become man, who inspires man to his divine destiny. The active and contemplative life are here



National Palace Museum, Taipei

FIGURE 1



Palace Museum, Beijing

FIGURE 2

fully joined.

I suggest that these are not merely different tastes—different pathways to equally valid ends. The drive toward perspective, or what Leonardo da Vinci called “relief” in western painting, was at one with the principle of the necessity of progress. Was there not a fatal flaw in Chinese culture, a flaw which by the 1430s divided the destinies of East and West? For example, Zheng He was physically castrated in order to be admitted to power in the court, and his work was castrated by being stopped after his death. In the West, the republican theorists, who were working with artists to discover perspective, wrote in the 1420s of the unique capability of the republic to realize the full talents of each individual,



Francisc Català Roca

FIGURE 3

Figure 1: “Enjoying Antiquities,” by Du Jin, late 15th century, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 50×74 in.; Figure 2: “Guan Yu Capturing Pang De,” by Shang Xi, ca. 1431–41, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 79×94 in. The two works show the “literati” school and the court professional school, respectively. Figure 3: “Supper at Emmaus,” by Juan de Flandes, c. 1500, oil on panel, 8×6 in., was painted for Queen Isabella of Spain and is in the Royal Palace of Madrid.

the “divine spark” to create inventions that would enable society to overcome successive crises. The ideal was not that a poor boy could rise in the court, but that a poor boy could serve the commonwealth in his own right.

Yet China’s Confucian ethical system provided a moral basis for the Christian message, to which China proved so open in the century after 1492, and again in this century with the Christian convert, Dr. Sun Yat-sen. The evidence of the art suggests that to rescue the Chinese nation today, it will not be enough to recover the roots of China’s great past; they must be revitalized with the idea of man as the living image of God, developed to its highest level by the European Christian Renaissance.