

# Circa 1492: A deeper look at Asian art

*The failure to identify the battle between Confucianism, and its Buddhist and Daoist foes, leaves China's inward turn unexplained. By Michael Billington.*

This is a second view of the Asia ("Toward Cathay") section of the exhibit "Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration" held at Washington's National Gallery of Art Oct. 12, 1991-Jan. 12, 1992, differing in part with the review presented by Nora Hamerman in the Dec. 6, 1991 issue. My perspective, although not informed by any expertise in art history—eastern or western—is based on a study of the 200 years following 1492 in China. These were the years of the re-discovery and the proselytizing of China by the Jesuit missionaries, and of the Grand Design of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, which nearly succeeded in the uniting of East and West, through both the Christianization of China, and the integration of Christian Renaissance science and morality with the Confucian culture of China.

With that orientation, I responded to the extraordinary Circa 1492 exhibit's Asia section with the excitement of discovery, for I believe the curators succeeded in capturing through art both the great potential and the countervailing degeneracy that characterized China in the 15th century. Comparing the paintings in the China section with the collection of Leonardo's drawings in the European section, there is an evident attempt by some of the Chinese artists to address many of the same problems, although falling far short of the accomplishments and discoveries of Leonardo. Others of the Chinese artists were clearly heading in the opposite direction, rejecting reality altogether in favor of abstract impressionism. With the assistance of several excellent essays in the catalogue, I learned that the two schools in Chinese art broadly represented, first, the classical Confucian school, striving to extend the scientific and moral precepts of that tradition, and, second, a Chan (Zen) Buddhist and Daoist influenced "modernist" school of moral indifferentism and anti-scientific irrationalism.

The catalogue essay leading the section on China by F.W. Mote explains that the exhibit tries to rectify a failing common to both Chinese and western studies of Chinese art. During the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) there had emerged a school of painters called *wen ren*, translated as the literati school, as opposed to the professional or "academic" artists who were sponsored by the court. The term "literati" does not imply that these were the Confucian scholars—in fact, it was the opposite. The *wen ren* were largely influenced by

Daoism and Buddhism, and in most cases they were those who either failed the examinations or chose not to become public officials even though they had passed.

It should be noted that passing the examinations, which required an exhaustive study of the Confucian Classics, history, art, and science, was not only a means to rise in the court hierarchy. It was required to attain any public position, from that of a teacher to that of an engineer for irrigation and water projects, in any part of the country. It functioned as a check against corruption and cronyism, by requiring that the prerequisite for public service was a quality of virtue, as best as could be assured by rigorous exams requiring excellence in music, art, philosophy, poetry, etc. The professional artists came from this large, educated elite (estimated at over 1 million in 1500).

Mote makes the point in his essay that all scholars in China, and therefore all civil servants and officials, were of necessity artists, because of the unique role of calligraphy in the Chinese language. The artistry required by the calligraphy in the composition of poems and essays in the exams demanded that scholars be artists as well. Paintings generally included a poem, combining the beauty and style of the calligraphy with the style of the painting itself, with both aspects subsumed by the poem.

History, Mote says, has wrongly claimed that the "literati" school superseded and excelled over the professionals, and has thus significantly downplayed the professionals' work. This exhibit shows both—and my response is that the literati school was a dramatic degeneration from the directions that were emerging among the professional artists—especially that of Zhou Chen (d. 1536).

## The historical setting

Mote starts by stating outright that "China was the most advanced civilization in the world throughout the half-millennium that ended in A.D. 1500." He adds that "China had been the world's greatest maritime power in the first half of the 15th century," and describes the numerous trips of Admiral Zheng He between 1405 and 1433, which toured India, the East African coast, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Arabia. These missions, some with over 300 ships and 30,000 troops, were missions of discovery and statecraft, not of conquest,

and achieved an exchange of culture and an expanding respect for the Middle Kingdom. These voyages were inexplicably halted by a policy shift in the court in the 1430s, never to be revived. It is instructive to note that this dramatic and disastrous turning inward took place at exactly the same moment as the convening of the Council of Florence in Italy, which both defined the moral and epistemological framework for the unfolding Renaissance, while also planning the Age of Discovery that led to the Columbus explorations and the discovery of the New World. Thus, China was retreating from global discovery and responsibility, for reasons that appear to be unclear to historians, at the very moment that the West was overthrowing the divisive and destructive influences which had brought western civilization to the brink of extinction in the New Dark Age of the 14th century, through the creation of the Golden Renaissance.

Unfortunately, the historic battle between the Confucian outlook and the Buddhist and Daoist irrationalism is not mentioned in the catalogue. Rather, the authors adopt the common disclaimer that the three world views, while opposed in many ways, coexisted, both in the nation and in most individuals. This pluralist approach completely obfuscates the crucial issues which lay at the root of Chinese history, much as the conflict between the humanist outlook of Plato and the oligarchical reductionism of Aristotle characterizes the development of Western civilization. Daoism (and the related political form of Legalism) had functioned since the time of Confucius as an Aristotelian-type world view, used by those of an oligarchical bent to justify their tyranny, and their effort to destroy Confucian morality. Buddhism, with its rejection of the physical universe in favor of the sickly, disembodied spirituality which in other areas of the world was called Hesychasm, didn't take hold until about the 6th and 7th centuries, but then spread rapidly. In the 12th century there was a revival of Confucianism which attempted to combat the growing Buddhist influence. But this neo-Confucian school, or at least some of its leading proponents, made major concessions to the Buddhist cosmology and practice, while attempting to keep the emphasis on reason and on social reality. These neo-Confucians became hegemonic, but the Daoists and Buddhists retained a significant influence in society, and even over the Confucians. Just as the world explorations represented an extension of the Confucian moral code which called on man to view every human being as a brother, as one's own child, so the collapse of this age of exploration reflected the Daoist and Buddhist rejection of the "outside world." These opposing world views are clearly expressed in the paintings.

### The art

Figures 1 and 2 are from the classical Professional school, while 3 and 4 are examples of the *wen ren* literati school. *Sharpening the Sword* depicts a poorly dressed warrior with an expression of fierce determination preparing for

battle in a stormy setting. The artist, Huang Ji, who held rank in the guard of the Emperor in the late 15th century, uses a well-known Chinese legend which derived from the Daoist tradition, but transforms it into a defense of the Confucian state, as a form of political cartoon. The figure is Iron-Crutch Li, described as "one of the most potent of the Eight Immortals of Daoism," who by circumstance ended up in the mortal body of a beggar. The artist places the mythical figure standing in a miniature river, whetting his blade on a miniature mountain. The catalogue points out that this calls up the famous oath of allegiance sworn to the founder of the Han Dynasty in 206 B.C., Emperor Gao Zu, in which the subjects "promised fealty until sacred Mt. Tai was reduced to the size of a whetstone and the mighty Yellow River narrowed to the width of a sash." Since Emperor Gao had overthrown the hated and tyrannical Qin dynasty, which had imposed Daoist-linked Legalism upon China, burned the Confucian classics, and buried the Confucian scholars alive, there could be no mistake of the political intent of the irony. The fact that a mere beggar is taking an oath meant for those who were being ennobled by the Emperor also expresses the fact that Confucian society rejected feudal caste structures—that anyone through proving his merit could rise to the highest positions.

The second picture, *River Village in a Rainstorm* by Lü Wenying, also from the late 15th century, captures the sweeping ferocity of a storm, but the relative calm of the riverside pavilion and the fishing junks safely docked in a cove. Like most of the classical landscapes of this school, man's mastery over nature is integrated into the beauty of nature.

In both these paintings, the mastery of technique and careful construction is apparent. I believe that Nora Hamerman's characterization of the classical school paintings as "flat" is too broad a generalization as shown in these and many other paintings in the exhibit from this school. It is true that the Chinese failed to develop the science of linear perspective mastered by the Renaissance artists of Europe, but the use of depth perspective and the capacity to capture motion on a static surface was highly developed.

I will digress here before describing the *wen ren* paintings, to discuss the dramatic developments in China during the two centuries following the Columbus voyages. When the Jesuits finally broke through the "Great Wall," using the tools of Renaissance science, art, music, and Christian morality, they discovered that the Chinese were totally receptive to these new teachings. Moreover, they found, to their great excitement, that the Chinese Confucian tradition was not only rational and opposed to mysticism, but that it was almost entirely consistent with Christian beliefs.

The greatest mind of Europe in the 17th century, Gottfried Leibniz, made an intensive study of the Confucian texts through his collaboration with the Jesuits in China. He characterized the Confucian view of man's relationship to God as "quite excellent and quite in accord with natural theology.

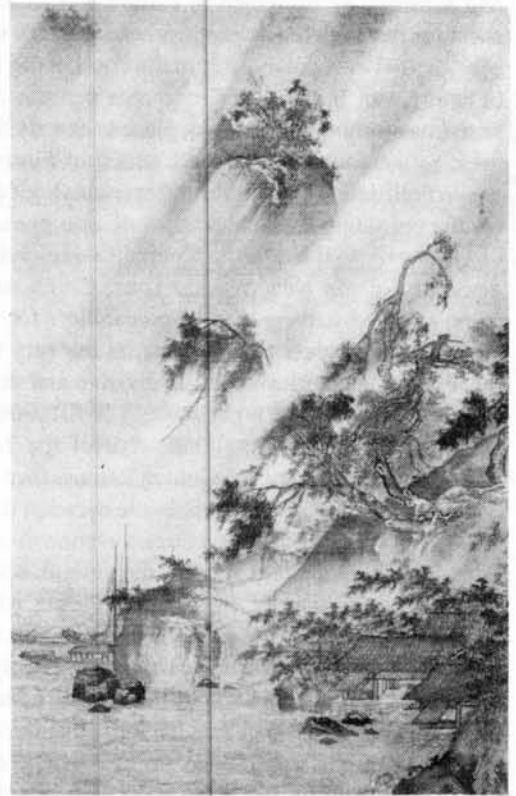
FIGURE 1



Huang Ji, "Sharpening the Sword," late 15th century, Palace Museum, Beijing. Painted silk scroll, 67x44".

Lü Wenyong, "River Village in a Rainstorm," c. 1500, Cleveland Museum of Art. Painted silk scroll, 67x41".

FIGURE 2



. . . Only by strained interpretation and interpolation could one find anything to criticize on this point. It is pure Christianity, insofar as it renews the natural law inscribed in our hearts, except for what revelation and grace add to it to improve our nature." The Jesuits, and Leibniz, recognized the destructive influence of Daoist and Buddhist irrationalism in China, and devoted themselves to supporting the Confucian leadership in China with Christian science and culture, while also proselytizing increasing numbers of Chinese to the Christian faith. Leibniz devoted himself to the cause of uniting Europe and Asia on the basis of this profound ecumenical foundation. However, the Enlightenment was sweeping Europe, unleashing irrationalism and moral indifference. The issue of China became a battleground in this fight, leading to the ultimate defeat of the "Grand Design" which Leibniz had nearly carried through to success.

Mrs. Hamerman, in her review in *EIR*, was looking for a "fatal flaw" which caused Asian culture (and Chinese culture in particular) to lack the "concept of the sacredness of individual life." I believe the premise was wrong. Confucius and Mencius held that man was born with the God-given qualities of charity, justice, propriety, and reason, which "are not infused into us from without—we are certainly furnished with them. . . . Men differ from one another in regard to them—it is because they cannot carry out fully their natural powers." Confucius stated simply that "jen is man," where the term *jen* is similar to the New Testament concept of

*agapē*, or the pure love of God, love of truth. This term *jen* is pronounced exactly the same as the word for "man" in Chinese, although they have different characters.

Periods of tyranny certainly existed in Chinese history, the most extreme being the previously mentioned Qin Dynasty in the 2nd century B.C. and the Maoist nightmare of the past 42 years. Both were explicitly anti-Confucian, based on the Daoist-influenced Legalist school, which held a bestial view of man very similar to that of the Hobbesian school of apologists for the British Empire. Under the oppressive domination of such satanic ideology, individual human life was dispensed with at the will of the dictator. But we must search for the crucial core in Confucian culture which provides the foundation for ecumenical alliance with the Christian West, as did Leibniz, as well as the great Dr. Sun Yat-sen.

### The 'literati' degeneracy

Another catalogue essay by Sherman E. Lee hypothesizes as follows: "Perhaps the major components of early Chinese painting, its complex and patient techniques, its painterly observation and recording, its rationality in organization and appearance, corresponds to the rise of science and technology in China. . . . It is probably equally significant that the triumph of *wen ren* (literati) painting in the middle Ming dynasty accompanied a reversal of interest in technology and exploration, a turning inward of national interest, and a growing stasis in government and bureaucracy in the period from 1450

FIGURE 3



Wen Zhengming, "Rainy and Windy Landscape," c. 1490, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, album leaf, 15x24".

Tang Yin, "Clearing After Snow," early 16th century, National Palace Museum, Taipei. Painted silk scroll, 27x14".

FIGURE 4



to the end of the Empire." He could have added that it was precisely this shift that led to the economic and cultural decay of the Ming, which in turn led to their collapse in the 17th century. By the time the Jesuits arrived (1583), the Ming were already in an advanced stage of decline.

Lee's description of the literati also reveals the impressionistic, anti-rational, and existentialist character of their art work: "To express the artist's own spirit, rather than the subject's outward form or inward nature, was the aim and theme of [the literati] painting. The demands of realism were set aside in favor of self-expression through brushwork. . . . Careful technique, built-up washes, massed strokes were replaced by 'single stroke' calligraphic expression whose ideal qualities were informality and blandness, a quality of understatement, or seeming artlessness, carried to the point of seeming awkwardness."

The *wen ren* rejected any subject other than landscape. Unlike the classical landscapes, this school included humans or human creations in the landscapes only to emphasize the insignificance of man to nature. The purpose of art was to "express the untrammelled spirit in my breast, without concern as to whether or not the person viewing the art sees the same thing," said one of these artists. The "single stroke" style is pure Zen—capturing the "fleeting moment" rather than the carefully worked-out perfection of an idea. The paintings generally were without color. *Rainy and Windy Landscape*, by Wen Zhengming, **Figure 3**, demonstrates the flat, drab, almost childlike simplicity of these artists.

There was a significant interface between this school and the "Wild and Heterodox" school that emerged out of the

Daoist/Buddhist swamp in the Tang dynasty in the 8th century. These fellows would get drunk, throw ink on the silk, rub it with their feet and hands, and so forth (a technique falsely considered "modern" these days!). **Figure 4**, *Clearing After Snowfall*, shows the influence of that school.

It was this degeneracy that was temporarily overcome in the following centuries through the joining of forces of the best of the Confucians with the representatives of the Christian Renaissance. The exhibit "Circa 1492" is an inspiration to renew that effort today.

*The 672-page catalogue for Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration was published by Yale University Press and the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C. and is available in hardcover for \$59.95.*