

A Chinese scroll through time

The Night Banquet is a tenth century hand scroll attributed to the painter Gu Hongzhong. A well-known statesman Han Xizai [902-970] is the main character, depicted in a number of scenes on this scroll. Han was famous for his parties, as we can read in an imperial painting catalogue from around 1120: "Rumors circulated inside the court and [Southern Tang Emperor Li Yu] regretted not being able to see Han's famous parties with his own eyes." The emperor found a solution for his problem, and sent the painter Gu Hongzhong to act as his spy.

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THE OBSERVATIONS BY GU resulted in a lively eyewitness depiction of the various ways in which Han and his entourage were seen engaging in the pleasures of music, food and women. The, in total five, scenes show some of these pleasures, but they also suggest that a lot more is going on than meets the eye. For example, in the periphery of the first scene we see a curtained bed with the covers slightly ruffled. On the opposite side of this first scene we see a woman partly hidden by a painted screen watching the party. The story behind the implications of these elements are explained in this book as it reaches into the intimate details that are captured in the scenes of the scroll.

Lee starts her book with the question of the authenticity of the scroll. We can follow step by step her examination of textual evidence on the scroll, the external textual evidence and the visual evidence. The first chapter ends with a discussion of one final question: "We must consider whether a lost Southern Tang original is the basis for the extant Night Banquet." Several options follow, some are in favor of the scrolls authenticity while others vote for the possibility that this is a later reproduction of an older original. Each hypothesis is presented with ample proof.

The following chapters almost read like a 'detective' story. The book is a real page turner, as it gives the reader an broad impression of how the painting has been appreciated by different viewers and owners over a long stretch of time. During its existence the scroll has grown in length, as it had several colophons attached. There is an anonymous early addition with a lively description of Han's activities; the text is very clear in its critical view. Lee translates and carefully examines each colophon, to serve as a guide for the opinion or interpretation of the writer about the scenes as a whole, and of the story behind the imagery. A nice touch is the complete print out of these Chinese texts at the end of the book.

The focus in one of the chapters is called "The Confucian gaze", which is mainly concerned with the more or less proper conduct of the people in the scene. This Confucian gaze represents the critical approach of a viewer as he sees the Night Banquet in light of virtue and conduct. Parallel to that is another view: the "voyeuristic gaze". The voyeuristic gaze is equally strong, although now the viewer is attracted to and aroused by the scenes of worldly and sensual pleasure of music, wine and women. In a painting record, written in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, Tang Hou tells us that he had seen two versions of the Night Banquet, by Zhou Wenju and another by Gu Hongzhong, but he condemned the painting "not suitable for a scholars' study". There is one thing we can be sure of – only the high ranking and a well-educated elite was supposed to see, enjoy and understand such a painting.

For yet another point of view speaks a poem added in 1326 by Ban Weizhi. In this poem Ban refers to several well-known historic examples of strange behavior as he expresses a more positive interpretation of the deeds of Han; although Han's deeds look condemnable at first sight they may turn out to be of a very virtuous nature in the end.

In the anonymous colophon that was attached to the scroll in the early fourteenth century, the life of Han Xizai is described in detail, but the question remains how trustworthy this might be. The colophon's author makes clear that Han shamefully wasted his talents. Lee concludes on page 55: "Whatever the viewer's reactions to the Night Banquet may have been, the anonymous colophon effectively changes them." She argues that the addition becomes part of the original work and it is almost impossible to see the painting without this influence.

Lee takes us through the next period in time with new changes in the appreciation of the scroll when we come to the connoisseur who sees the scroll with its additions as a whole. This whole extended scroll is measured in an entirely different way for its historical and cultural value. Aside from the colophons, every owner puts his seal on the scroll – often more than one – therefore ownership by emperors and collectors can be traced through time. This habit of the elite makes the scroll valuable as a historical record as much as it is as a painting.

Above and below:
Details from the
painting on the scroll.

One of the last examples in the book is Zhang Daqian, as he had the scroll for a period of time before it returned to the collection of what is now the Palace Museum in Beijing. Zhang added several seals and two of his friends added colophons and seals. They are in all likelihood the last persons to do so. Since every new era brings a different way of looking at the scroll, this can be recognized in the present time. Today, preservation and conservation of historic art treasures would forbid any further extensions to the scroll.

In the collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing the scroll can seldom be seen by the general public. On one of these rare occasions in 2002, I was lucky enough to see it on display. It was part of an exhibition of Early Treasures of Chinese painting in the Shanghai museum, as one of the finest examples of the period. The exhibition was held in honor of the 50th anniversary of the Shanghai Museum with 72 art treasures of the Jin, Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties on display. The exhibition attracted large crowds of Chinese, who jumped at the opportunity to see the paintings they so far only knew from reproductions in books. The dim lighting of the exhibition halls are proof of the precautions that are taken with these precious works. For protection and conservation of the fragile works of art, only 5000 visitors a day were allowed. Hence the total number of people that were able to see this exhibition was around 200.000, among them a couple of hundred foreigners. I think that the limited access to this type of hand scroll places an important task in the hands of the publishers of books and reproductions of such a scroll.

This brings me to the only problem I have with this book, namely the poor quality reproduction of the painting on the scroll. The images are so small that it is hard to see the finer details of what Lee is describing in such a vigorous and lively manner. Not many of the readers are likely to ever see this painting in reality. For that reason alone the book should have given more attention to the visual underlining of the story unveiled. I would argue that if a scroll is worthy of this elaborate observation and meticulous study – which it surely is – one would at least expect a larger and better reproduction for the convenience of the reader.

As Lee followed the painting through time and encountered the various possible interpretations of the theme, she pointed out that without doubt the image represents a sensual situation and was not meant to be seen by the general public. Today this painting, and the other treasures of the past, are known to the general public, an audience never intended for such an intimate image. As the story unfolds in the last chapter, she reminds us that in publications and on the internet we can find reproductions in abundance and many partial images with more (or fewer) details. Overall, the book is more concerned with the historical evidence in the form of seals and colophons that have been added during its long existence. We are treated to an impressive amount of detail and precise observation of every aspect of the additions to the scroll. The question in the first part of the book was: do we now know when and by whom it was painted? In the end we still do not know for sure. The one option that is not brought to the discussion by Lee is the possibility that Zhang Daqian painted it – he was the last owner before the scroll was returned to the Palace Museum collection, and Zhang is widely known to have copied and reproduced old masters; I just can't help but wonder ...

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