

Depiction of feminine beauty and virtues in imperial paintings during the Yongzheng Period

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Keywords: Chinese literati painting, Femininity, Visual analysis, Cultural literacy

Abstract: This paper delves into the nuanced representation of femininity and virtue within the renowned series of paintings titled "Yongzheng's Twelve Beauties," originating from the captivating era of Yongzheng in China. Through visual analysis and insightful iconographic interpretation, the study meticulously examines how these exquisite artworks mirror the prevailing social norms and beauty ideals of the Qianlong Period, providing a window into the cultural ethos of the time. By meticulously scrutinizing the harmonious blend of color palettes, composition techniques, and artistic styles evident of those artworks, emphasizing the importance of clothing choices, accompanying objects, and physical appearances, the study accentuates how these elements collectively symbolize the cultural literacy and elevated social status of the portrayed women. The paintings act as profound cultural artifacts that encapsulate the intricate tapestry of gender norms and ideals of femininity prevalent in historical Chinese society.

1. Introduction

There have been many paintings of ladies in China, or called "beauty paintings" since ancient times in which artists expressed the social norms and beauty standards in creating the artworks. "Yongzheng's Twelve Beauties" was one of the most well-known set of paintings in the Yongzheng Period. According to the record stated in "The Collection of Archives of the Office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Qing Dynasty", the twelve paintings are "Lined with pad paper, each with a rolling rod" in the year 1732. It has been over 290 years till now and they are kept in good condition. Each painting depicts the daily life of a woman who lives in the palace. By applying visual analysis as well as another artistic approach, we are able to discover the role of females portrayed in the paintings during the Qianlong Period.

2. Visual Analysis

Visual analysis, also called formal analysis, is a method of understanding art that focuses on the visual of an artwork. For instance, Johnson Museum of Art explained that it is conducted independently from social history in which elements include color, line, texture, technique and composition [1]. In addition, Sylvan Saul Barnet also defines the term "formal analysis" as "an analysis of the form the artist produces". He added that "formal analysis assumes a work of art is (1) a constructed object (2) with a stable meaning and (3) that can be ascertained by studying the

relationships between the elements of the work” [2]. Thus, we can deduce that visual analysis mainly refers to the description of basic elements we discover when we write about an artwork, which is the first layer of analysis. The painting chosen is one of the twelve paintings in the “Yongzheng’s Twelve Beauties”. This painting is named “Nianzhu Guanmao” (Figure 1). In terms of the use of color, the arrangement of colors in the painting is harmonic. Colors appear muted and it has been dulled by mixing with colors such as brown and green. The tone creates a cool and calm atmosphere. It indicates the virtuous approach of simplicity and elegance among women living in the palace. Moreover, the technique used for drawing facial features is the method of "shaping with color", there are no obvious ink lines in facial features like mouth, face, ears. They are outlined with color lines [3]. This method shows the contrast of the nose shape and the lip shape on the face. The nose shape is drawn out with shading while the lip shape is drawn out with a red line. Therefore, the technique of “shaping with color” signifies the beauty of facial features of the lady. Additionally, in the perspective of composition and scale, the most eye-catching part is the woman sitting at the centre. She is facing left, holding a bracelet in her right hand, leaning close to the desk [4]. In the overall composition, the components in the painting are depicted with a sense of space. Elements at the front are larger than those at the back. The composition is symmetrical but it is balanced in some way. Object distribution is balanced in both the left and right of the painting.



Figure 1 Nianzhu Guanmao. The Twelve Beauties. Before 1723. Hanging scrolls. Ink and color on silk, each 184cm (H) x 98cm (W). Palace Museum, Beijing.

3. Iconography

Feminine beauty and virtue portrayed through the style of clothing, their gestures and the depiction of feminine space in the painting. Iconography has been used by scholars and art historians to analyse Meirenhua (beautiful women’s paintings). For instance, Wu proposed a comprehensive description of iconography concerning a beautiful and talented Meiren (a beauty), he suggested that apart from charming activities, physical appearance, style, skills, auxiliary objects and the environment are also important compositions in the analysis of the paintings [5]. In the painting, the beauty of the female figure is revealed in several elements, for example her dressing, auxiliary objects as well as her appearance and gestures.

3.1 Style of clothing

Firstly, in terms of the style of clothing, Lu suggested that the clothes worn by the beauty are Han costumes which are popular among the upper-class people of that period. According to the rules in the Qing Palace, wearing Han costumes was strictly prohibited among Manchus. She also added the materials of clothing has shown the high social status of the lady, “The material used for the coat is

silk jacquard, the collar is green with embroidery, it indicates the elegant style of clothing during the Qing Dynasty, especially its great development in the palace starting from the Song Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty [6]. Besides, though the use of color is with lower saturation, the vivid combination of color and embroidery pattern in the neckline as well as the cuff (Figure 2) highlight the concinnity of the lady. In addition, icons such as “The Eight Immortals” appeared in the collar and the Chinese rose headwear (Figure 3) expressed the sense of beauty of ladies in the palace. According to the description of Zhao and Wu, “The Eight Immortals” are common traditional propitious patterns in clothing making for females in the upper middle class while the Chinese rose always represents the blessing of safety, which also symbolises elegance [7]. Hence, the feminine beauty has been depicted in the style of clothing and symbolic icons. The beautiful characteristics of Han court ladies in the Yongzheng Period have been emphasized.



Figure 2. Embroidery pattern in the neckline



Figure 3. Chinese rose headwear

3.2 Auxiliary objects

Moreover, other than the style of clothing, the beauty of ladies is manifested in the auxiliary objects of the painting. Yan described the virtues of ladies are depicted in the painting. She argued that auxiliary objects convey the sense of “Yaqi” that the lady is educated [8]. Living in the Qing palace and enjoying the honorable life, they not only have training in piano, chess, calligraphy and painting, but also learnt about cultures and antiques in other countries. For instance, the lady in the painting is holding a coral eighteen-child bracelet, a copper-cast square tripod-style aromatherapy furnace and a Qingtian stone seal are placed on the table, and a red sandalwood painted enamel self-ringing bell is placed with a mud stand [9]. We can also find some expensive hardcover books neatly arranged on the bookshelf and a piece of Chinese landscape painting hanging on the wall (Figure 4). From these auxiliary objects, it is believed that the beauty in the painting has a high cultural literacy. The luxurious western enamel clock (Figure 5) and furniture also indicate the influence of Western culture in that period. In consequence, the virtue of females is shown by the auxiliary objects found in the room that women in the upper class were influenced by the Western culture and those received training in different kinds of skills will be regarded as virtuous.

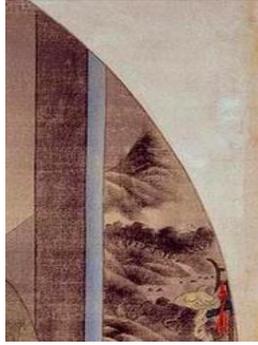


Figure 4. Chinese landscape painting on the wall

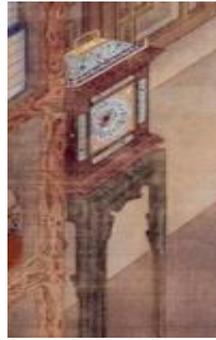


Figure 5. Western enamel clock

3.3 Physical appearance and body gestures

Lastly, the femininity of court ladies can be demonstrated in the physical appearance and body gestures. Yan suggested that the beauty is presented as an aesthetic image in the painting as the body of the lady is leaning against the table, also showing a humble and bashful smile. She also suggested that the lady is not looking at the front but looking on the floor which shows a sense of loneliness but at the same time demonstrates feminine beauty. Additionally, the way that the lady sits with her legs crossing and expresses a sense of beauty. Furthermore, her right hand holding a bracelet is half-covered. Yan further explained wrists are the most sexually attractive body part of women in traditional Chinese society and that half-covered wrists sometimes may lead to the imagination of nudity. Therefore, the facial expression and attractive body gestures found in the painting clearly illustrated feminine beauty of the court lady.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, historical approaches such as visual analysis and iconography are used to discuss how femininity and virtues are demonstrated in the painting. Three perspectives including physical appearance and gestures, dressing style as well as iconic features of auxiliary objects. These two approaches show an effective demonstration on depicting the beauty and virtues of court ladies in the YongZheng Period. Visual analysis provides a basic description concerning texture, line and compositions to show the femininity of court lady whereas iconography emphasized the meaning of the iconic objects as well as its connection to feminine beauty and virtues of the lady.

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