

Chinese Optics: Artful Looking

Abstracts

Mirror Stage: Reflection of Early Modern Desire in China

Kaijun Chen

This paper examines the dramatic optic experience captured in a few novelistic illustrations such as Min Qiji's *Romance of the Western Chamber* (1640) and mercantile booklets such as the *History of Lenses* (1681). Through close reading and analysis, the paper discloses the ways in which traditional visual and literary tropes of desire and illusion in China convey early modern optic experience brought by new optic devices.

Bio: Kaijun Chen is Assistant Professor of early modern Chinese Literature and Cultural History at Brown University. His publications investigate the global and domestic circulation of connoisseurial, mercantile, and technological knowledge of luxuries from the twelfth to the eighteenth century.

Crystalline Visions in Medieval China

Anne Feng

At once durable and transparent, crystal's marvelous ability to retract and reflect light made it a precious rarity in medieval China, one that informed Buddhist allegories of transformation and enlightenment. This paper draws from recent work on "crystalline aesthetics" to develop a new account of transparent rocks in medieval Chinese visual culture. Commonly imported to China from the Gandharan region, rock crystal was one of the "Seven Treasures" in Buddhism and was frequently found in Buddhist reliquaries, yet at the same time, it was carved into cups and beads as luxury artifacts for the Tang elite. My paper uses two rock-crystal balls and related translucent artifacts found in the relic crypt in Famen Temple and various medieval tombs to explore the shifting relationship between transparent vessels and optics in Sui-Tang China. Juxtaposing crystalline objects with paintings, Buddhist textual sources, poetry, and records of diplomatic tributes, I show how the materiality of crystal—as a translucent, seemingly empty, yet solid form—inflected philosophical and poetic discussions of light and vision.

Bio: Anne Feng is Assistant Professor of Chinese Art at Boston University. She received her doctoral degree from the University of Chicago in 2018 with support from the Franke Institute for the Humanities. Her research explores concepts of sacred space and ritual art, theories of vision and meditation, and representations of the Western Pure Land. She has participated in research projects on Pure Land art at the Dunhuang Academy with the support of a Fulbright-III Fellowship (2014-2015) and was the Andrew W. Mellon COSI Curatorial Fellow at the Asian Art department of the Art Institute of Chicago (2016-2017).

The armillary in the boudoir: What was it doing there?

Bing Huang

The presentation discusses a painting of an 18th century Chinese imperial consort in her bedroom featuring a western-style pocket watch and an armillary sphere. What are the watch and the armillary sphere doing there? Facile assumptions--i.e., time, female beauty, transience of beauty--do not hold. To explain it all involves an understanding of how the Chinese imperial system works, and how the woman, the clock and the armillary sphere fit into a larger scheme.

Bio: Bing Huang received her PhD in art history at Harvard University in 2018. She is now assistant professor of art history at Providence College. Her research focuses on the artistic and cultural exchange between Europe and East Asia with regard to art and technology. Her interest in digital art history has led her to interrogate the question of medium in art history and practice. She works on virtual reality projects that demonstrate how immersive media technology and in-depth humanist research may be combined to enhance teaching and research.

Articulating Vision in Late Imperial China

Kristina Kleutghen

What are the terms of vision during the Ming and Qing dynasties? With multiple words available to both denote and connote “looking,” the decision of how to articulate visual engagement with the world varied with how a viewer conceptualized that experience. Focusing on how vision was expressed in words allows us to assess the socially-conditioned process of “looking” alongside the historical understanding of the biological facts of eyesight in both art and science.

Bio: Kristina Kleutghen is the David W. Mesker Associate Professor of Art History and Archaeology at Washington University in St. Louis. Her first book, *Imperial Illusions: Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palaces*, appeared in 2015 with University of Washington Press. Current projects in progress include monographs on optical devices and art in late imperial China, and in the Qing court taste for exoticizing decorative arts from across Asia.

The Flower in the Mirror: A Mode of Vision in the Medieval China

ChenChen Lü

Multi-axis symmetrical floral medallion is a ubiquitous pattern in the Tang-dynasty visual culture. Why were the Tang people so fascinated with this kaleidoscope-like pattern? What is the cultural meaning behind its geometrical principles? This paper explores the relationship among the floral medallion, Avatamsaka cosmology, and the optical illusions generated by multi-mirror installations in the Tang-dynasty Buddhist practice. The design of the kaleidoscope-like flower was to capture the optical quality of a mirror, thus visualizing the interpenetration as well as the ultimate emptiness of the world.

Bio: Chenchen Lü received her Bachelor of Architecture with honors from Tsinghua University and a Master of Architecture from Harvard GSD. She entered the Ph.D. program at Harvard in 2015 in the field of Chinese art history. Chenchen specializes in the Buddhist art and architecture of Medieval China, focusing on the visual culture of meditation. She is currently writing a dissertation on meditation processes embodied in the iconographical programs and material systems of caves and tombs in early-Medieval period (3rd – 6th century).

Shuhua 術畫: How Chinese Painting Lost its Optical Magic in the Eleventh Century?

Heping Liu

Accounts of *shuhua* or “magic painting” appear frequently in early Chinese texts often as thrilling public spectacles. *Shuhua* was featured as an independent category of painting, for the first time, in Guo Ruoxu’s *Tuhua Jianwenzhi* (1085), but only to meet its hard fate. This preliminary study asks questions of why and how.

Bio: Heping Liu is a historian of Asian art and specialist of Chinese painting at Wellesley College. His current research focuses on art, society, and science and technology of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127).

Optics and the Mathematics of Space in Song China

Jennifer Purtle

To render three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional support is to translate an aspect of the visible world into the representational schema of a specific culture. In the Chinese tradition, absent Euclidean optics and geometry, indigenous epistemologies of vision and mathematics generated correspondingly indigenous means of representing of dimensionality. This paper explores painting of the Song dynasty (960-1127) with respect to the non-Euclidean optical and mathematical knowledge of office-holding scholars through three lines of inquiry: first, how was three-dimensionality understood during the Song?; second, how was three-dimensionality measured in the real world of the Song?; and third, how did Song scholars and/or painters figure three-dimensionality on two-dimensional supports in *tu* (diagrams), *hua* (paintings), and three-dimensional media? Ultimately, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the symbiotic relationship of mathematics and visuality established by optics facilitated the representation of three-dimensionality in paintings made in Song China in ways unrelated to the Euclidean paradigms too often presumed to be normative and universal.

Bio: Jennifer Purtle (PhD, Yale) is Associate Professor of Chinese and East Asian art history at the University of Toronto. She is the author of *Peripheral Vision: Fujian Painting in Chinese Empires, 909-1646* (Hawai’i, forthcoming 2020), and of *Reading Revolution: Art and Literacy during China’s Cultural Revolution* (Coach House Books, 2016), and co-editor (with Hans Thomsen, Zurich) of *Looking Modern: East Asian Art and Visual Culture from the Treaty Ports to World War II* (Art Media Resources, 2009). She is currently working on a book entitled *Forms*

of Cosmopolitanism in the Sino-Mongol City, which has been supported by grants and fellowships from the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art (USA), the Getty Foundation, the Getty Research Institute, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Theories of Vision in Republican Era Photography

Stephanie Tung

In the 1890s, fine art photographers in Europe and America defended the soft, blurry tones of naturalistic photography by claiming that such pictures mimicked the mechanics of human vision. When these ideas were translated into Chinese in the 1920s, they became the basis for a theory of art (*xieyi*) photography that linked blurriness to scientific principles. In this presentation, I will examine the debate between *qing* (clarity) and *hu* (blurriness) in the work of Liu Bannong, a central figure in Republican Era Art Photography.

Bio: Stephanie Tung is a specialist in the history of photography of China. At PEM, she is working on *China Through the Lens*, a major exhibition of 19th-century photography in China. She is also a PhD candidate at Princeton University, where she is completing a dissertation, “Pictorial China: Art Photography in Republican Era China, 1919 — 1929.” Her research interests include transnational art exchanges, global modernism, translation studies, and notions of artistic labor.

Imperial Optics: New Perspectives on Qing Court Photographic Portraiture

Daisy Yiyou Wang

Focusing on portraits of key members of the Qing imperial family, including Prince Gong, Prince Chun, Empress Dowager Cixi, and Puyi, from 1860 to the 1930s, this paper looks at how photography generated new ways in which imperial images in particular, and the imagery of the Qing empire in general, were produced, circulated and received. Photography not only continued but also radically challenged conventions in painted portraiture. Photography the newly introduced technological apparatus offered the imperial family new representational possibilities to project their power, ethnicity, and gender, and deal with their relationship with encroaching foreign powers.

Bio: Dr. Daisy Yiyou Wang is the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM)’s first Robert N. Shapiro Curator of Chinese and East Asian Art. Wang leads PEM’s Chinese, Japanese, and Korean art exhibition programs, collection-based installations, research, and acquisitions. She co-curates with Jan Stuart *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City*, a major exhibition that sheds new light on the role of empresses in shaping Qing court art and history. A specialist of decorative arts and Qing court portraiture, Dr. Wang has served at the Smithsonian’s Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Asian Society Museum in New York, where she contributed to a number of exhibitions. Her publication topics range from Buddhist art to contemporary art and the history of collecting Chinese and Korean art. Wang earned her Ph.D. in art history from Ohio

University and is a recipient of a Getty Museum Leadership Fellowship and a Smithsonian Postdoctoral Fellowship. Her work has been merited with a Smithsonian Scholarly Studies Award (with Blythe McCarthy) and a Smithsonian Valuing World Cultures Award (with Alice Tracy). Dr Wang will join the Hong Kong Palace Museum as its founding Deputy Director, Curatorial and Programming, on July 2, 2019.

The Atmospheric Perception in Chinese Architecture

Hui Zou

The recent revival of Romanticist concepts of “atmosphere,” “Stimmung” and “attunement” in architectural theories has been closely related to phenomenological discussions on synesthetic experience and non-perspective space in human perception. This presentation draws a comparative cultural perspective on the traditional atmospheric perception (*guanzhao* 观照) in Chinese architecture and its representation with focus on some aesthetic concepts such as *jing* 景, *qing* 情, *xinzhai* 心斋, *qiyun* 气韵, *kongji* 空寂, *shenyuan* 深远, and *yuyin raoliang* 余音绕梁. The hermeneutic interpretation of the atmospheric perception in Chinese optics will help reveal the role of non-perspective space in cultural identity.

Bio: Hui Zou is a Professor at the School of Architecture of the University of Florida. He teaches architectural history and theory and supervises graduate theses and graduate research and design projects. His scholarship lies in the fields of architectural history, garden history, theory and philosophy, and comparative cultural studies in architecture.