

From Shen's Special Collection...

A Glance into Chinese Ancestral Paintings and Portraits

-Written by April Shen

Chinese ancestral paintings have long been collected in the West by museums, institutions, and private collectors. There are about 100 pieces of Chinese ancestral paintings in Shen's Special Collection, spanning from Ming, early Qing, mid Qing, and late Qing Dynasty with the majority from the Qing Dynasty. This collection includes a portion of finer paintings with fine details, good colors, and unusual findings in the images. Others, interesting and with beautiful colors as well, were also included for the purpose of study and research as a whole. Many of the ancestral paintings in this collection, like some other ones in other collections, will need much of the conservation work or simply be re-mounted at a future day. This is both because of the Chinese ancestral painting was not traditionally collected and hung by a different family other than the one the painting was painted for, and that the painting often included several generations, spanning a long period of time for preservation. Giving its large format in size, it was often difficult to carry the painting around even in a scroll form and that the object might not have been a priority to keep during the war or a political turmoil. One can only imagine places or conditions some of these paintings might have been in, unlike Daoist or Buddhist paintings which often were kept by the monasteries or temples and had better chances of surviving in better condition.

Thus, it also brings out another interesting point about the ancestral paintings. Some of them may have been painted and completed at different times in order to include more generations in one painting as the writings on the altar plaques often display different dates for the different deceased, spanning different dynasties, or that the painting might altogether be re-painted at a later time by the later generation for the purpose of re-worship or for enhancing the social status of the family. In the later case, sometimes the headress, hat, crown, and the costumes might have been altered to signify the new ranking or new court status. In other words, it is not unusual that we see a mixture of different styles of detail and even different painting techniques in one painting and that the painting sometimes is dated to a later period rather than the style of the details in the painting shows (Stuart, Rawski).

The significance of this collection of Chinese ancestral paintings, often impressive with detail and lavish colors made of precious stones, minerals, and special vegetation, shows in the following different ways among others:

1. The ancestral painting introduced western taste and even different artistic painting techniques into China and had since been retained in its particular style as an art rather than being altered and infused into other Chinese art forms.
2. The collection of these paintings offer study opportunities particularly for an era, or a bigger span of eras, when the traditional older culture slowly being replaced by the more contemporary art culture which had to do with the modernization and industrialization as well as trading. In that, it is similar to the revolution of the digital art and culture, verses the more traditional art and culture, at a time we live in.
3. It signifies an era after which the use of the photography rose and the demand for a more convenient life style in general which lead to more revolution and paved the base for a new general life style with a broader westernization in China and is part of the world trend. This change is universal and inevitable as it has happened to many countries and cultures around the world as well.
4. It allows for more opportunities to further research the organic colors used in these ancestral paintings that might correspond to colors used on old Chinese furniture, woodwork, architecture, and even other types of Chinese art from certain periods. For example: when cross-referencing with the colors used on an old Chinese furniture piece, because we know in what period of time the furniture piece might have been made due to its joinery, style, type of wood used, where it came from, and other details, we might be able to date a painting, along with other factors, by comparing the similar colors used often for some of these paintings, such as the different shades of blue.

The figures in this collection of paintings include both the court figures and the ordinary majority. Here I have selected examples of paintings with different styles to share with you. Most of the paintings were photographed while behind a glass frame. So, some of the images show uneven colors or lighting. Some show weird angle as it was hard to avoid the glares from the glass. Also, it is fairly common that some of the ancestral paintings we have seen, either in this collection or other collections, might have been re-sized or cut as many of the ancestral paintings originally would have had a much larger painted space above the figures shown, filled with additional painted scene or written calligraphy. Sometimes on the two sides of the figures shown, there might have been missing figures from what would have been a much larger size painting. Nevertheless, these images continue to haunt us with their striking and beautiful rendering of human forms and the unique cultural value that came with them.

Citation

Stuart, Jan & Rawski, Evelyn S., *Worshipping the Ancestors-Chinese Commemorative Portraits*, the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C., in association with Stanford university Press, Stanford, California, 2001. (For the occasion of an exhibition held at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, June 17-September 9, 2001).

Additional note from the writer of this article:

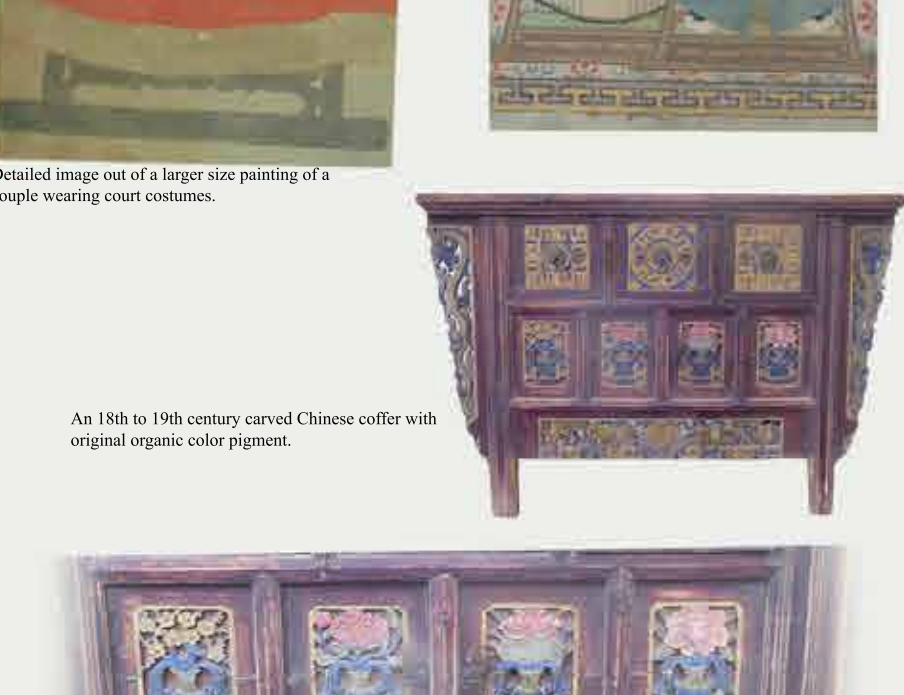
I have only glanced through some of the photos in the above book and read the descriptions for these photos in order to re-affirm my own opinion in selecting these examples to show. Although I have not read most of the content of this book, it appears to be a very fine book for anyone who wishes to study Chinese ancestral paintings.



The above two painting were exhibited at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History at the McPherson Center in the Ying exhibition 2008



This painting is painted on pieces of thick cotton cloths sewn together.



Detailed image out of a larger size painting of a couple wearing court costumes.



An 18th to 19th century carved Chinese coffer with original organic color pigment.

