

An Excerpt from Art History Writing: “The Image of Court Ladies in Tang Painting”

Introduction

The Tang dynasty is called the “golden age” of Chinese history, a time when politics, culture and economy all achieve a high point. Art works from the Tang period reflect the prosperity of this era and the lifestyle of its people. Among the different forms of art in Tang, painting of court ladies was a very popular and unique genre. In these paintings, women were depicted very differently from how they were in other historical periods. Women in these works were usually painted with plump bodies, wearing luxury clothes, and engaging in same leisure activities. In addition to being another sign of the prosperity of this “golden age”, those paintings also highlights the attention drawn on women in the palace, and the Tang dynasty’s unique aesthetic standard on appreciating the beauty of women. Many critics, however, have alleged that women in these paintings look lonely, melancholy, stereotypical and materialistic.

Tang, the Wealthiest Dynasty

The Tang dynasty was the peak of economic development in ancient China. As one of the most developed countries at that time, China was a center of international commercial trade in Asia. In this period of time, science and technology were in rapid development, especially the invention of advanced agriculture tools that improved productivity greatly. This growth and innovation allowed people, especially women to be free from heavy loads of labor and to enjoy their lives with greater time for leisure. Aesthetic standards changed as more voluptuous women were appreciated as beautiful, rare in the history of China, but serving as another denotation the prosperity of the life in Tang.

The affluent lifestyle of Tang can also be seen in the beautiful clothes the women wore. Silk was very popular in the Tang period, not only in China, but throughout much of the world, since silk was often traded with people from other countries. Indeed, the Tang period is when the famous “Silk road” was established. Fashionable and colorful patterns are shown on women’ robes. We can see intricate details of the patterns of woman’s clothing in Zhang Xuan’s *Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk* and Zhou

Fang's *Court Ladies Wearing Flowered Headdress*. The patterns shown on these court ladies' robes are in a variety of kinds very beautifully done.

During the Tang period, the government maintained a fairly high level of social stability in the society. In the palace, the governors didn't need to worry too much about politics, wars or economic, elite men and women spent more time relaxing, doing leisure activities. For example, in the *Spring Outing of Lady Guo-guo* by Zhang Xuan, Lady Guo-guo is with a group of elite women and men in a hunting scene.

Although the Tang dynasty was the most developed era in Ancient China, the wealth of society was not equally distributed among all the people but controlled by the elite class. Women depicted in such luxury clothes on their plump figures are royal women or high class women. Women depicted in leisure activities are usually palace women but not average civilians.

The ideal Tang female was the creation based on the image of palace women. This kind of female beauty was widely admired in the whole country and pursued by women in the lower classes. These court paintings have chosen the highest standard and ideal female image adored at that time to be portrayed; so what we now see from these survived paintings might not be the images of average women but likely are the ideal images of women that could represents the overall aesthetics standard at this period of time.

The Melancholy of Court Ladies

Because of the prosperity and stability of the Tang era, the atmosphere in the court was more relaxed and less tense than during other dynasties. The royal ladies, imperial concubines, and palace maidens were able to live a worriless and joyful live. The easy lives of the court ladies might, however, a sense of melancholy. When describing the painting, *Court Ladies Wearing Flowered Headdress*, Yang Xin and his fellow scholars said that "There is a faintly melancholy air about this group" (Yang, et al 80) This painting depicts a group of six ladies appreciating the blossoming flowers, playing with dogs and exotic animals, or even just standing and doing nothing. They are not directly interacting with each other,

seeming rather to occupy their own mental spaces. "No setting or background is indicated; the figures themselves create the space about them" (Loehr 46).

They even seem lethargic and idle in these paintings. In painting of *A Woman Playing a Game of Chess*, the lady seems to be paying little attention to the game as only the corners of her eyes are gazing toward the chess board. Her face shows barely any tension of gaming or competing; her fingers are holding almost overly elegantly when placing the chess on the wooden board which makes it seem like this chess game is not time sensitive at all, that it could be continued for hours and perhaps given up halfway through.

In *Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*, the ladies, although are doing an activity corporately, don't seem interacting with each other. A sense of isolation rises in the air of silence. Or perhaps in this particular painting, it is not isolation or melancholy, instead, a sense of severe and respect because preparing silk was primarily a ritual activity for the palace ladies.

Even in the *Lady Guo-gou* in a *Spring Outing*, the figures seem to have few interactions, confined to space which seem to be carefully planned out by the painter.

It is obvious that in these paintings, the depiction of court ladies lacks of interaction, motion and vivid facial expression. The reason of it can be that the court ladies were spoiled by the luxuriant and worryless life they live in the court, so that it is loneliness and melancholy grow as most of the critics have stated. But it is also possible that the melancholy of the court ladies was not a depiction, since a common standard of this genre was to exaggerate the elegance of the palace ladies.