

Performing a 'Journey to the West': The Problem of Theatres and Gardens in Sino-European Exchange

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At the court of China's Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1795), European and Chinese artists collaborated under imperial patronage to produce monumental paintings called 'scenic illusions' (*tongjinghua*). Derived from European *trompe l'oeil* and *quadratura* paintings that created deceptive illusions on walls and ceilings, the massive scenic illusion paintings with hybrid Sino-European pictoriality formed the backdrop for Qianlong's daily life and duties as emperor. While murals and large-format screen paintings had long framed imperial activity and identity in Chinese culture, this new genre of Chinese painting directly challenged the very definition of China's finest art. Through realistic depiction and linear perspective, scenic illusions seamlessly integrated the imperial presence into a pictured world that existed without limits – including picturing Europe in the heart of China.

Enormous paintings of a European village were installed outdoors by the shore of a lake in the 'European Palaces,' Qianlong's cross-cultural garden fantasy of Sino-European architecture, fountains and landscapes. The emperor could sail his barge towards this painted 'Europe,' but the site's design always forced him to disembark to one side, where the illusion was unmasked for its two-dimensional reality. However, the repeated discovery that 'Europe' was painted did not diminish its power: Qianlong so enjoyed the revelation of his deception that he ordered the site be pictured in an engraving captioned not with 'European village,' but 'perspectival paintings.' Furthermore, the structure and effects that produced this 'Europe' were directly inspired by European theatre technology, adding yet another layer of implications to be peeled back from the site.

This talk seeks to examine China's little-known scenic illusion paintings and their theatricality through a case study of Qianlong's painted 'Europe.' How was the theory and practice of pictorial illusionism translated from Europe to the Qing court? What did it mean for the conquest emperor who unprecedentedly expanded the Chinese empire to perpetually sail toward Europe, but never arrive? What role(s) did he play in front of these paintings – was he acting a part, or manifesting a desire? And most importantly, why was he content to repeatedly rediscover that this Europe was painted rather than real?

To conclude, we will explore the particular methodological problem of how to define 'Chinese art' relative to China's multiethnic eighteenth century. The material and visual culture of this period is inherently cross-cultural, applying not only European elements to classical Chinese art, but also Manchu, Tibetan, Mongolian, and even Islamic features, all during a period that is undoubtedly part of the world's shared global history for the connections made between nations, regions, and empires. The heterogeneity of Qing dynasty art problematizes the definition and use of 'Chinese art' within both art and global history, and raises the question of how we should approach such works, particularly sites like the European Palaces and Forbidden City that possess ongoing international afterlives in the modern age.

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