

Rupprecht Mayer / Florian Knothe / Hua Shuo et al. (eds.): *Reflected Beauty*

In this well-documented, bilingual, and richly illustrated catalogue, published for the long-anticipated exhibition *Reflected Beauty: Chinese Reverse Glass Paintings from the Mei Lin Collection* at the University Museum and Art Gallery of the University of Hong Kong (September 2021-January 2022), the authors give us a profound insight into the phenomenon of reverse painting on glass and mirror paintings, with a particular focus on those from the Mei Lin Collection assembled by the Sinologist, author, and translator Rupprecht Mayer and his wife Haitang Mayer-Liem. Composed of over one hundred works acquired in East Asia between 1968 and 2012, this is one of the world's most important collections of Chinese reverse glass paintings from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Parts of the collection have been shown at the City Museum of Augsburg, Germany, at the Swiss Glass Museum in Romont, Switzerland, and are on show in Germany at the Landesmuseum Hannover until 16 April 2023 and the Museum Werdenfels in Garmisch-Partenkirchen until 31 March 2023.

Adding to research on well-known reverse glass paintings from Southern China that were produced in Canton for export to the West, *Reflected Beauty* shows that glass paintings were also widely found in the north of China. While the creation of glass paintings with scenes that targeted western markets flourished in the Chinese port cities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was simultaneous production of glass paintings with subjects and styles to suit local tastes using traditional Chinese imagery, especially vernacular paintings and (New Year's) prints. Production continued until the Cultural Revolution halted the development of this vibrant art form (and many others). Evidence of the widespread practice of this technique in northern China and its increasing popularity on the domestic market are a welcome addition to the discourse on Chinese reverse glass painting.


The structure of the catalogue is straightforward with an introduction by the art historian Alina Martimyanova who maps Chinese reverse glass painting in all its aspects, including the history of its production, and introduces the exhibition and the book. The book contains three essays and colour reproductions of the glass paintings in the catalogue section. One of the three essays, *Reverse Glass Paintings: Localisation and Innovation* written by Gao Xiaosong, argues that the domestic market for Chinese export glass paintings convincingly demonstrates that they should be considered part of the history of Chinese painting; not only because of their Chinese creators, but also because of their ties with domestic imagery and local audiences. In his essay he argues that the paintings in the Mei Lin Collection demonstrate the localisation of Chinese glass paintings and "reveal the integration of glass paintings into the traditions of Chinese art, especially a specific type of folk art" (24). Some of the glass paintings displayed in *Reflected Beauty* retained their layer of silver and their function as mirrors, and, Gao writes, offer "a layer of self-referentiality and playfulness" (25), enabling the viewer to add their own image to the company of depicted figures.

The contributions of sixteen authors, many of whom are renowned experts in the scholarly field of this still relatively understudied art form, offer the reader comprehensive information on the Mei Lin collection paintings. The almost 70 art works are roughly divided into three groups. The first group presents scenes from popular literature, folklore, and drama. The second group comprises various auspicious motifs such as birds and flowers, fruit, and scholars' objects. The third group of paintings includes portraits of women (*meiren*) and children surrounded by fashionable accessories, flowers, and auspicious objects associated with successful male progeny, dutiful mothers, and family bliss. Except for a few left-right inaccuracies (77, 121), the informative commentaries that accompany the illustrations add much value to this publication.

The texts are well-written and full of information about the (life) stories of famous characters from classical Chinese literature, Daoist immortals, episodes from popular operas, historical dramas, (fairy) tales, and local legends. Furthermore, they elaborate on the meanings of the depicted accessories, auspicious symbols, and traditional motifs of happiness, show the changing image of Chinese women in terms of clothes, hairstyles, and ornaments, and carefully analyze the arrangement of objects and other elements represented in the paintings.

The last two essays included in the catalogue relate to painting no. 21 in the catalogue; Ulrike Unschuld's essay deals with stylistic features of fumigation rituals, while the contribution by Simon Steger discusses materials and techniques. These two essays are informative, but mainly intended for readers who are either familiar with traditional Chinese medicine or the technical analysis of pigments and binders. The selected bibliography, on the other hand, provides a rich and useful overview of Chinese and English-language sources on the topic, making *Reflected Beauty* a recommendable book.

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