Marco Musillo

The Shining Inheritance: Italian Painters at the Qing Court, 1699–1812. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2016. Pp. vii+184. Hb. \$60.

Although set in Manchu-era China, this slim, elegant volume largely fulfills the author's initial premise—to enrich the history of eighteenth-century Italian painting. To this end, *The Shining Inheritance* is a concise study neatly arranged in small, well-focused chapters, in which Marco Musillo includes numerous citations from some unusual and unexpected Chinese and European sources. These quotations are helpfully translated into English within the text, followed by endnotes of impressive erudition, where Musillo cites the passages in full and in their original languages for scholars to compare.

The title of the book, *The Shining Inheritance*, plays off the Chinese name of *Lang Shining* assumed by the Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione when he served as an artist at the court of three Qing emperors. True to Musillo's initial premise, many chapters are devoted to the European artistic training that Castiglione (Milan, 1688–Beijing, 1766) and his fellow Jesuits underwent in Italy before embarking for the imperial workshops of China. In a novel approach, the author follows the young seminarian through the streets of Milan as he masters the exacting techniques of the Italian baroque. Castiglione trained in drawing and oil painting, producing canvases filled with atmospheric *chiaroscuro*; he learned the practice of *quadratura*, or rendering perspectival and illusionistic architectural facades in fresco; he was introduced to the principles of theater design and the techniques of copper-plate engraving; all of these skills were mastered before he sailed with the Portuguese to Macao and hence on to the imperial court around 1720.

Once Castiglione arrived in Beijing, Musillo's focus is on the commonalities of training that the artists shared with their Chinese cohorts as they labored together to satisfy the demanding standards of their royal employers. As the author reminds us, both Eastern and Western artistic traditions shared an emphasis on preparatory drawing; on workshops where artistic collaboration was the norm; and where a deep mutual respect for technical skills was held. Certainly, as Musillo points out, Castiglione's classical drawing skills were in constant use while he made studies for commissioned court paintings, and his training in Italian theater design served him well as he transitioned to the large hand-scroll format of one of his most famous paintings, *One Hundred Horses* (*Baijun tu*), National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Commonalities aside, even as Castiglione made his way and became successful and sought-after for his blending of European effects with classical Chinese formats, over his career he was severely hampered by his lack of

background in the sophisticated literature and poetry that pervaded all Chinese art. Musillo underplays the steep and unnerving learning curve that Castiglione and his cohorts underwent in Beijing and glosses over the fact that none of the baroque skills learned in Milan even remotely prepared the Jesuits for the competitive and subtly dangerous atmosphere of the Qing court. Instead, the author enthusiastically proposes that the Italian-trained Jesuit artists and their students made “pictorial translations” that can be seen as evidence of significant artistic exchange.

To my mind, Musillo’s evidence is slim and unconvincing on this important point. Certainly the Jesuits became good at mimicking Chinese aesthetics and replicating their techniques, just as their Qing students could skillfully imitate the perspectival drawings, the use of canvas and oils, and engravings in the Italian style. Yet ultimately neither had the cultural context to understand the other. Thus the renderings of Italianate gardens by Castiglione’s student Yilanti (Manchu, act. 1749–86) appear to be precious and a bit twee; at the same time, Musillo’s example of Castiglione’s own attempt to compose a classical Chinese landscape reveals the Jesuit to be technically adept, but sorely lacking in a certain poetry and soul that renders the painting to be little more than an amateurish pile of rocks. In short, below the superficial surface of technique, I see no Milan in the Chinese engravings, and no Xie He (the early art historian who wrote on the poetics of nature) in Castiglione’s landscape. And in the end, in spite of Musillo’s optimistic and adept comparisons of commonality between the two artistic cultures, it is doubtful that any true or lasting artistic exchange occurred during the Jesuit’s time in China.

Musillo can be forgiven for his youthful optimism with its emphasis on artistic commonality. What is harder to excuse is his postmodern dismissal of why the Jesuits were there in the first place. He makes it very clear from the beginning that his intent will be to examine them strictly as Italian-trained baroque artists hired to perform at a foreign court, and he successfully does this. But by doing so, he misses the entire focal point of their lives: that their religious vocation and spiritual mission impelled them to spend their lives in the service of their faith and to this end they died far away from home. They were in China not because they were Italian artists who happened to be Jesuits: they were Jesuits who trained to be artists so they could serve their faith in China. Never once does the author touch on the vast importance of Castiglione’s dangerous position as a Jesuit at a court that barely tolerated his foreign religion. There is no mention of the numerous times that Castiglione and other artists endangered their own lives to advocate for fellow missionary Jesuits who were being violently persecuted in the Chinese countryside. Musillo is not to be blamed for the way academic history is now being taught:

but it is a sad fact that Castiglione's heroism and faith are not even worth a single sentence, while several chapters are devoted to out-dated arguments concerning European perspective, and to the overworked charms of the classical *quadratura*.

In spite of my gloom, however, Musillo's *The Shining Inheritance* is a good and recommended read. His major faults are youth and optimism, which are almost always cured by the passing of time, and I expect that Marco Musillo will go on to write many more germane and erudite works over the course of his career. I would love to see this gifted young art historian move beyond extolling perspective (it is so nineteenth century!) and perhaps try his hand at, say, discovering why Castiglione, the devout Jesuit, would consent to paint the face of the Qianlong emperor as Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, at the very center of a traditional Tibetan-style Buddhist *tanka*—to my mind a much more intriguing and potentially enlightening subject than the *quadratura*!

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