THE COLLECTOR, THE CONNOISSEUR, AND LATE-MING SENSIBILITY*

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In the Record of Famous Paintings Through the Ages (Li-tai ming-hua chi 歷代名畫記 [847], hereafter LTMHC), the art historian and painter Chang Yen-yüan 張彭遠 (ca. 815—after 875) justifies his passion for collecting and restoring paintings: “Yet if I do not do that which is useless, how can I take pleasure in this life which does have a limit?” The phrase wu-i 無益 (useless, profitless) rings with echoes of the praise of non-action (wu-wei 無為) and the “uses of uselessness” (wu-yung chih yung 無用之用) in Taoist writings. In the Chuang Tzu 莊子, uselessness represents disinterested self-containment and the condition conducive to the freedom of the spirit (hsiao-yao 逍遙). Only the category of the useless can establish the individual’s freedom to define a private realm of significance, which is in its turn a response to mortality.

This reference to the idea of “confronting mortality” may seem ironic, since in an earlier version on “The Fortunes of Paintings” (“Hsü hua chih hsing fei” 故畫之興廢) Chang Yen-yüan describes how great imperial collections were assembled and destroyed. His own family’s vast collection of calligraphy and paintings was appropriated by the emperor, and what remained was dispersed during his grandfather’s exile, so that “only a few scrolls were left behind” (LTMHC, c.1.5–7). But if collections are perishable, writings about collections are deemed less so. Chang Yen-yüan ex-

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1 Chang Yen-yüan, Li-tai ming-hua chi 歷代名畫記, ed. Ch’in Chung-wen 梅仲文, Huang Miao-tzu 黃茂子 (Beijing: Jen-min mei-shu ch’u-pan-she, 1983 reprint of 1963 edition), c. (abbreviation for chüan) 2.35. Li-tai ming-hua chi is dated to 847 in a section of the first chapter. These two lines are often quoted, often by way of defence of writing and literary creation. See, for instance, Hsiang Hung-tso’s 項鴻祚 (1798–1835) preface to his manuscript (Ping-kao hsü 內稿序); Ch’en Yin-k’o’s 陳寅恪 (1898–1969) preface to Liu Ju-shih pieh-chuan 柳如是別傳. I am responsible for all the translations in this article.

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presses this idea in the chapter "On Discerning, Collecting, Acquiring, Appreciating" ("Lun chien-shih shou-ts’ang kou-ch’iu yüeh-wan” 論識識收藏購求聞): “There are those who collect without being able to discern, discern while failing to appreciate, appreciate but lack the skill to frame and mount, frame and mount yet neglect to select and rank - all these are faults common among collectors” (LTMHC, c.2.33). Insofar as selecting and ranking are precisely what Chang sets out to do in his work, writing may be seen as a logical extension of collecting. More importantly, writing is a means of repossessing. Both writing and collecting are bound up with the anticipation of loss and the attempt to overcome loss.

Selection and ranking draw attention to the criteria of evaluation and raise questions of public and private values. Chang uses the language of spiritual communion, which has become by his time conventional in aesthetic appreciation: “My passion becomes ever more intense, it is almost like obsession (p’i 課) ... As for what may become a burden beside my body, there are no superfluous things (chang-wu 長物). Only with calligraphy and paintings have I not yet forgotten my feelings (yu-wei 懷未忘情). Oblivious, I forget words, looking on in joy” (LTMHC, c.2.35). The language here suggests an intensely personal experience. But the categorization and ranking Chang proposes elsewhere in the book claim a general validity. When he writes about the value of works of art, he shows an implicit antiquarian bias. In his periodization of art history into early, middle, late antiquity, and recent times, he ranks what he considers the three greatest painters of the T’ang dynasty (Yü-ch’ih I-seng 尹遜乙僧, Wu Tao-tzu 吳道子, Yen Li-pen 閔立本) with the masters of middle antiquity (such as Ku K’ai-chih 顧愷之 and Lu T’an-wei 陸探微), while the lesser ones are compared to painters of late antiquity (LTMHC, c.2.31). (Painters from early antiquity being known only by name, Chang elevates the masters of middle antiquity to a preeminent position: comparison with them is thus the highest compliment.) Moreover, Chang is quite aware of the market value of paintings and calligraphy as commodities. He goes into details about prices (LTMHC, c.2.31), thus confirming the double life of works of art as commodity and anti-commodity.

2 An allusion to Lao Tzu: “The reason I have great trouble is that I have a body. When I no longer have a body, what trouble have I?” See Tao-te ching, translated by D.C. Lau (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1963), 18-19.