

**NATIVE SOURCES FOR
THE HISTORY OF
CHINESE PICTORIAL ART**

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Native sources for the history of Chinese pictorial art by Friedrich Hirth

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HISTORY OF CHINESE PICTORIAL ART**

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FOREWORD

The translations used in this monograph were almost all made by Professor Friedrich Hirth and published by him in Germany in a number of different papers some twenty years ago. Though following in the main the arrangement of his essay "Über die einheimischen Quellen zur Geschichte der chinesischen Malerei," I have introduced some changes and added a few translations that were made with the able assistance of Mr. T. Y. Leo.

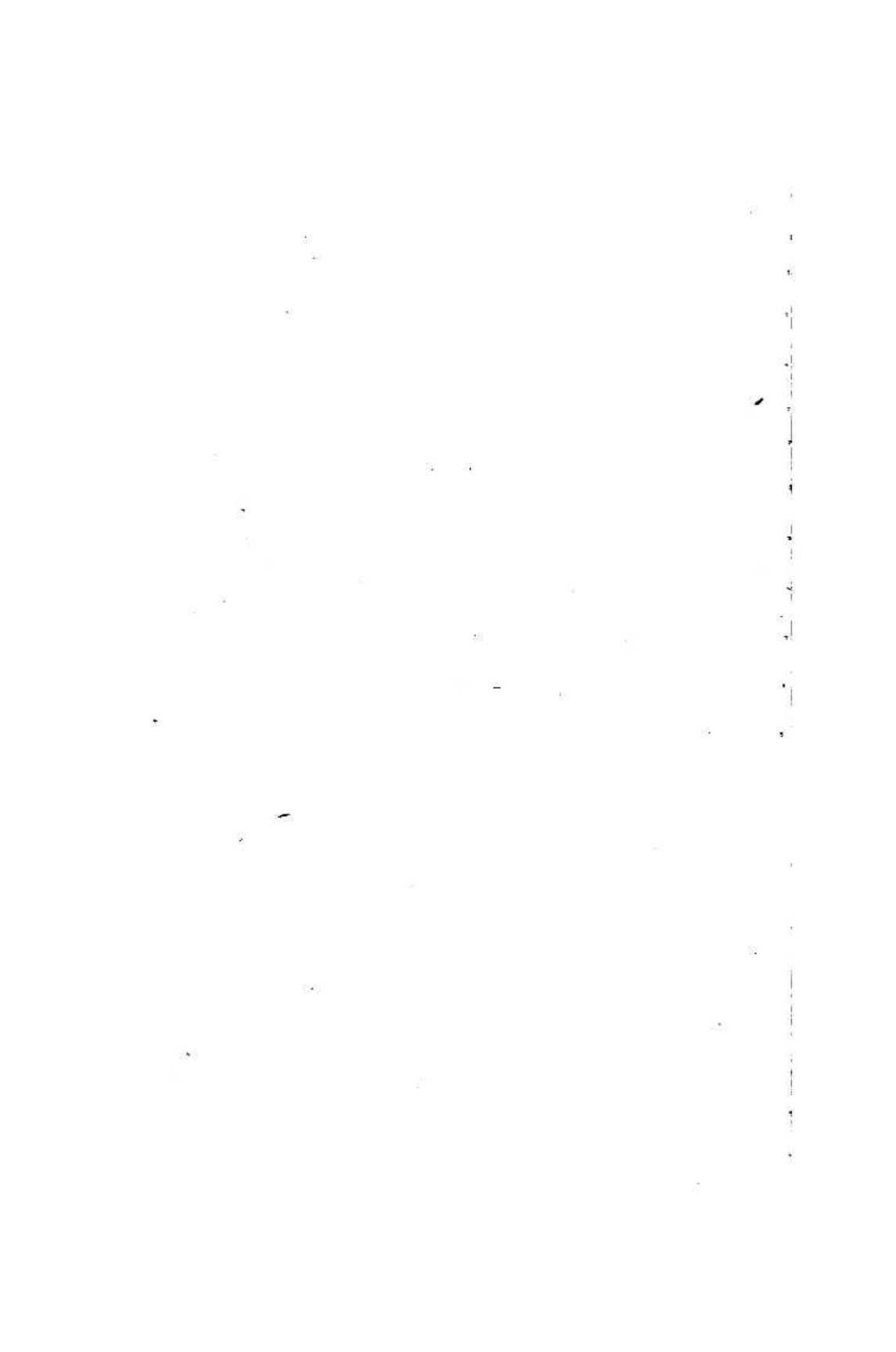
A. E. M.

March 10, 1917.

This reprint has been made because of numerous typographical errors in the first edition.

A. E. M.

May 21, 1917.



NATIVE SOURCES FOR THE HISTORY OF CHINESE PICTORIAL ART

Painting as an art in China is much older than the oldest examples which we now know, for we read in the first extensive history of Chinese painting¹ that even in the time of the Emperor Wu-ti (140-87 B.C.) there existed an art cabinet, called Pi-ké, for the collecting of paintings and scrolls of handwriting. By 100 B.C. the mention of portraits is quite common in Chinese literature, though the names of painters are not yet preserved, probably because their productions had as yet no importance *per se*. By 51 B.C. we have such historically accurate accounts as that of the Emperor Hsüan-ti (73 to 49 B.C.) who out of gratitude to his victorious generals had their portraits painted for the Chi-lin-ko, a temple built by Wu-ti in 122 B.C. A few years later painting must have developed freely; for Chang Yen-yüan, referring to a compilation of the 6th century, the *Hsi-ching-tsa-chi*, mentions as many as six painters for the years 43 to 33 B.C. In this same gossipy narrative we find the famous and well-authenticated story of the Emperor Yüan (48-32 A.C.), whose harem had grown to such dimensions that he no longer had time to receive in audience all the palace beauties and therefore ordered that their portraits be painted to facilitate the election of the favorite. The bribing of the painters by the court ladies became very common and huge sums were paid by ambitious aspirants to the Emperor's favor. Only the beautiful Wang Ch'iang scorned this method, and as a result her portrait was neglected and did not do her justice. When the Khan of the Tartars asked for a beautiful maiden's hand in marriage, the Emperor, who knew only Wang Ch'iang's portrait, readily gave consent. When he received her in audience and saw how her portrait had belied her loveliness, his rage was such that he immediately ordered the execution of six of the leading court painters, all of whom the history mentions by name.

But it was not until a century later, in the reign of the Emperor Ming-ti (58 to 76 A.D.) that the growing love for the collecting of scroll paintings led to the erection of a special art gallery (*Hua-shih*).

Chang Yen-yüan, to whom we owe this information, adds that an institution, named Hung-tu-hio, was created, one purpose of which was the collecting of curiosities and works of art, and that it contained art objects representative of the entire known world. Among these art objects there were also paintings, as can be concluded from the further descriptions of his text. Of what nature these paintings were and who

¹ *Li-tai-ming-hua-chi* of Chang Yen-yüan, Chap. 1, p. 3.

painted them, whether they were exclusively by Chinese artists or whether there were foreign ones among them, from Persia, India or Khoten, can not be determined from this text or from contemporary literature. Nevertheless the possibility, not to say probability, of the existence of foreign paintings in Wu-ti's library can be assumed, if, in conjunction with these ancient allusions to a systematic preservation of the paintings in the Imperial possession, we bear in mind the mention by Ssü-ma Ch'ien in the *Shih-chi* of numerous expeditions sent by the Emperor Wu-ti to the West Asiatic countries for the purpose of purchasing art objects of all sorts. It would not be surprising if among the latter there had been West Asiatic, Indian or even some Greek paintings.

In this ancient period we find no attempt at any history of painting, but painting could scarcely have had a "history" at that time. The oldest catalogue of the Imperial Library which forms the bibliographical part of the annals of the early Han dynasty² that ended in the year 25 A.D., contains no title which suggests the existence of any systematic record of the art of painting. On the other hand, in the catalogue of the Imperial Library of the Sui dynasty,³ compiled in 641-656 A.D., there is a title which leaves no doubt that it alludes to a text on the history of art. This work, the *Ming-shou-hua-lu*, in one book, is still mentioned in the catalogue of the T'ang dynasty,⁴ but has been lost since then, and its contents have been incorporated in later more extensive treatises. A similar fate befell a number of other early histories of art whose enumeration would lead us too far afield but which, we must conclude, served as a basis for later historical and critical treatises that are still in existence. Even the number of works still at our disposal is so large that it is possible to enumerate only the most important.

THE LI-TAI-MING-HUA-CHI

The principal source for the very oldest account of painting in China is the *Li-tai-ming-hua-chi*, in ten volumes, written by Chang Yen-yüan, the great art historian of the ninth century. This is not by any means the oldest, but it is one of the oldest technical treatises that we now possess. For the practical student of Chinese art it is especially important because in rough outline it gives an insight into the history of painting from earliest times to the year 841 A.D. The author was a member of a famous and aristocratic family which contributed several prominent statesmen to the T'ang dynasty. Although he is mentioned only casually in the imperial annals, allusion is made to his knowledge of art. There we also learn that upon completion of his book in 847, he was made Secretary

² *Ch'ien-han-shu*, Chap. 30.

³ *Sui-shu*, Chap. 33, p. 29.

⁴ *T'ang-shu*, Chap. 59, p. 29.

in the Board of Ceremonies, and in 874 was made a Judge in the Court of Appeals. His grandfather, Chang Hung-ching, in whose biography⁵ we find this information, had collected a very important group of paintings⁶ a few of which Yen-yüan had opportunities of studying. It is not merely arid theoretical speculation which he offers us in this important text, but a critique which was based upon personal observation of the art products of antiquity, the admiration of which often led the author to express his contempt for the productions of his contemporaries. Because of the importance of this work as our principal source for antiquity and the early middle ages, a short synopsis of the contents of the ten books is given here.

The *first* book contains a few historical treatises on:

1. The beginning of painting in China.
2. On its height and decadence.
3. On the number of important artists from earliest days to the year 841. The number of important names in the successive dynasties are as follows:†

Prehistorical Period of the Mythical Emperor Huang-ti (2697 B.C.)	1
Period of Chou (1122-255 B.C.)	2
Period of Ch'in (255-206 B.C.)	1
Period of Ch'ien-han (206 B.C.-25 A.D.)	6
Period of Hou-han (25-221 A.D.)	6
Period of San-kuo (221-265 A.D.)	8
Period of Chin (265-420 A.D.)	23
Period of Sung (420-479 A.D.)	28
Period of Ch'i (479-502 A.D.)	28
Period of Liang (502-557 A.D.)	20
Period of Ch'ên (557-589 A.D.)	1
Period of Wei (386-550 A.D.)	9
Period of North Ch'i (550-557 A.D.)	10
Period of North Chou (557-589 A.D.)	1
Period of Sui (581-618 A.D.)	21
Period of T'ang (618 until time of author, 841 A.D.)	206
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Total up to 841 A.D.	371

⁵ *T'ang-shu*, Chap. 127, pp. 6 to 9, and *Chiu-t'ang-shu*, Chap. 129, pp. 13-16.

⁶ *T'ang-shu*, p. 8.

† As China was frequently divided into several different kingdoms, the dates of these dynasties are not always consecutive. This list proves, however, that according to the views of Chang Yen-yüan, painters of importance appeared only sporadically before the third or fourth century, and that the art of painting had its real beginning at that time.

4. Analysis of the author's views on the six principles of Hsieh Ho, one of the great painters of the fifth century. In the course of this discussion he characterizes with a few concise sentences the styles of the principal periods of antiquity. The first book closes with a dissertation on the art of landscape painting.

In the *second* book the theoretical discussions are continued. Here we find dissertations "On the style of the old classic painters," "On the inheritance of peculiarities of style among the old masters," by which he means the painters Ku K'ai-chih, Lu T'an-wei, Chang Seng-yu and Wu Tao-tze. There are, in addition, treatises on the value of the different painters' styles and the author's attempt at a classification. He also discusses the prices and the preservation of objects of art.

The *third* book discusses the signatures on old paintings. Before the T'ang dynasty it was not customary to put seals on the paintings belonging to the Imperial collections, but the authenticity of the most celebrated paintings was certified by the personally inscribed signatures of famous art critics. Chang Yen-yüan has preserved for us the names of these authorities. His list for the Sung and Ch'i dynasties (420-502) contains only a few names, but the Liang period (502-557) is represented by fourteen critics, probably because of the great development which museums received under the famous Emperor Yüan. In the Sui dynasty (581-618) the pictures of the Imperial collections were signed by the high civil officers, and the same practice was followed in the beginning of the T'ang dynasty. The Emperor Hsüan-tsung (713-756), who through systematic purchases had brought his gallery to an, as yet, unattained excellence, ordered the signatures removed from his old paintings in order that his own court critics might provide the paintings with a new date and inscription. From about the middle of the seventh century there was added to the inscription a seal of vermilion ink, which at that time was not the painter's seal but the seal of the owner. On the pictures which belonged to the collection of the Emperor Hsüan-tsung, is usually found the inscription "K'ai-yüan," a name given to the years of his reign between 713 and 742, and which might fairly be called the foundation period for the museums of China. Special seals were also owned by the state institutes of learning, such as the Academy of Arts (Ch'hsien), the Academy of Sciences (Han-lin), and the Imperial Library (Pi-kê), that used their seals for stamping scrolls of handwritings and paintings in their possession.

Among the private seals that are described, only a few can be identified as being those of famous painters, among them being that of Chou Fang (eighth century), but all the seals that he mentions must have belonged to connoisseurs, as he makes the statement at the end of his list that all other private seals merely show former possession without