CRAIG CLUNAS

Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. 244 pp.; 8 b/w ills. $22.00

Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China
Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996. 240 pp.; 18 color ills., 30 b/w. $24.95

Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China
London: Reaktion Books, 1997. 221 pp.; 16 color ills., 80 b/w. £25.00

Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming, 1470–1559
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. 223 pp.; 63 color ills., 35 b/w. $57.00

Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368–1644
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007. 288 pp.; 61 color ills., 138 b/w. $61.00

The publication of Craig Clunas's *Superfluous Things* in 1991 marked the arrival of a major new voice in both Sinology and art history. The book's rare combination of theoretical imagination and pragmatic methodological rigor, presented with rhetorical verve, immediately compelled attention. Since then, Clunas has further reinforced his importance for both fields of inquiry through four well-received monographs as well as a general survey of Chinese art.[1] Today professor of the history of art at Oxford University, and the 2012 A. W. Mellon Lecturer at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Clunas is one of the most closely read writers on Chinese art history.[2] None of his books has been reviewed in the pages of the *Art Bulletin*, however—an omission belatedly corrected here. Setting aside *Art in China*, as well as two early short books on export watercolors and furniture,[3] that leaves the five monographs published to date, all on Ming dynasty topics: *Superfluous Things* (a paperback edition with a new preface, 2004), *Fruitful Sites* (1996), *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (1997), *Elegant Debts* (2004), and *Empire of Great Brightness* (2007). Particular attention will be paid here to *Elegant Debts*, this being the book in which Clunas defines most explicitly the relation between his project and art history as a discipline. The five studies keep in tension two competing ways of defining China's past: the dynastic (Ming) and the early modern (defined as parallel to early modern Europe). The two frames overlap during the last century or so of the Ming dynasty, which fell in 1644, and also during the afterlife of Ming culture at the beginning of the succeeding Qing dynasty, up to about 1680. Over the five books, the second half of the Ming from about 1520 on gets the bulk of the attention, providing the major historical venue for the richly textured and conceptually sophisticated analyses that characterize Clunas's work, in which China's cultural specificity *and* its place in the world are equally given their due.

Within the Chinese art history world, part of the freshness of Clunas's voice and project in *Superfluous Things* can be credited to the fact that he was not by training an art historian; instead, he came from the literary side of Sinology, bringing with him formidable skills of close reading. Written while he was a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, the book examines seventeenth-century prescriptive writing on artifacts and interior decoration. The project is notable for the clarity and practicality of its design. The Chinese writings are not scattered; they come from a limited number of books that clearly borrowed from each other, one of which, *Treatise on Superfluous Things* by Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645), receives special notice from the author. Clunas's own text dissects the shared discourse relevant to manufactured things, with separate thematic chapters devoted to books, ideas, words, and anxieties about things, and to things of the past and those in motion. The meat of each chapter is a series of short discussions of the semantic fields of specific terms, making ample use of citations; more general discussions at the beginning and end of the chapter draw out the significance of the theme. The close readings have a sense of analytic purpose that was not commonly to be found among Chinese art historians in 1991, and they come together in an overall argument of a kind that was also new to historians of Chinese art. Clunas realized that anthropology could usefully be introduced into the art historical study of things and images from China's past, and that the tastemakers' manuals he was studying could be used to illuminate the functions of art in seventeenth-century Chinese society. His project resonated with the anthropological turn taken by the study of Chinese history in North America during the 1980s, which introduced concepts of ritual, social space, and material culture into historians' discussion of the Chinese past. *Superfluous Things* does not stop, therefore, at an anthropological understanding of social practice but goes on to explore how this can illuminate the cultural history of the period.[4] The central thesis of the book is "that the period of Chinese history from the middle of the sixteenth century to the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 was one in which the relationship between the manufactured things of the material world and the social order favoured by the power-holding elite was of particular concern to them" (p. 8). In fact, his thesis goes beyond this to argue more pointedly that this period in China saw the "invention of taste" as the mechanism through which a gentry elite was able to retain cultural power, by making the manner of owning or appreciating manufactured things more important than the mere fact of ownership—a process that would not occur in early modern Europe until about a hundred years later (pp. 171–72). The argument may take the literati rhetoric of snobbery in the manuals too much at face value. Read even more skeptically, the texts show the mutation of elite values toward a greater acceptance of commerce and its accompanying relativization of social hierarchy. Increasingly, given the limited opportunities to serve in government, highly educated men would remain part of the elite principally by self-consciously *performing* their educated status, most often for money, for others who lacked their cultural capital. In other words, the literati would professionalize themselves (in the modern sense).[5]

In *Fruitful Sites*, Clunas turned his attention to a different kind of writing about material culture—writings on gardens between about 1450 and 1650. With consumption still his major framework for analysis, the new project shifted the focus from portable objects to landed property. From Ming writings he extracted a discourse on gardens that changed radically between the beginning and the end of the period, in line with changes in the social and cultural uses of gardens:

> If we look at the phenomenon of gardens in China from c. 1500 to c. 1600, it is possible to argue that there is a major shift in what is signified by the very concept of a "garden" at this period, which ultimately tilts the balance of understanding of this particular artefact entirely away from the "good" realm of production, of natural increase and natural profit through the ownership of land, and towards the problematic realm of consumption, excess, and luxury. (p. 22)

With Edward Said's critique of Orientalist thinking very much on his mind, Clunas explicitly framed *Fruitful Sites* as an antidote to the long-standing Western use of the Chinese garden as an essentializing emblem of the supposedly unchanging, contemplative core of Chinese culture in general.[6] Like its predecessor, the book has a kaleidoscopic thematic structure, presenting the Chinese gardens of the period from a series of different points of view. Thus, we encounter in turn the economic dimension of certain gardens, their use for artistic activities, their social networking function, the conventions of their pictorial representation, and, finally, their esoteric but fundamental numerological dimension. Across these discussions he develops two original and illuminating historical theses. The first: it was the prestige of the fifteenth-century gardens of the Ming capital, Beijing, that provided the model for a wave of garden building in the great southern commercial city of Suzhou during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that itself has always been taken as the model for eighteenth-century garden building in Qing Beijing. The second: the late Ming garden, having seen the association with agricultural production give way to an aestheticized model of garden building that had to conceal from view any productive dimension of that kind, became principally productive of status through the mechanism of taste. In *Fruitful Sites*, Clunas's forays into visual analysis remain somewhat rare, a fact that, given the large and underexploited

archive of relevant garden depictions in painting, weakens the book. When they come, though, they are usually effective, even at times brilliant. I especially appreciated his treatment of the beholder's implied physical point of view in relation to the garden, and, in particular, his elucidation of the metaphoric connotations of height as moral loftiness or enlightenment, whether for the beholder of the painting looking down on the scene or for the garden owner (and painting recipient) who is depicted looking out over his garden from the upper story of a two-story building (pp. 148–53).

By the time he published *Pictures and Visuality* in 1997, Clunas had moved from the museum to the university (Sussex). *Pictures and Visuality* was written at a moment of widespread reaction against the narrowness of the art historical canon, and against the effect that this narrowness had had on theoretical and methodological perspectives of the discipline. Among the major pathways of reaction was a reframing of pictorial art in relation to the image, the latter being taken to be the basic unit constituting the larger field of visual culture. *Pictures and Visuality* fully embraced this leveling move, and in the process furnished *Superfluous Things* and *Fruitful Sites* with a neat pendant. To the earlier two works' deployment of a material culture frame corresponded the later work's charting of visual culture; to the consumption lens of the earlier books corresponded a new interest in the production side of the equation. Moreover, the extended examination of the visual in *Pictures and Visuality* went a long way toward laying to rest the suspicion of art historians that the earlier books were the work of an author who was really "a text man." The book opens with a blistering critique of Eurocentric assumptions about pictorial art that (sad to say) has lost remarkably little of its pertinence today. Clunas puts his readers on notice that in contrast to earlier generations of Chinese painting historians who tacitly allowed Western art history to retain its central place in the art history discipline, he is not about to let the same thing happen in any emergent field of visual culture studies.

The structure of *Pictures and Visuality* is determined by the cartographic impulse that it shares with its two predecessors. In five efficient chapters, we are introduced to a vast range of tropes governing the making, circulation, and reception of images in Ming China. These tropes are mapped in five zones. We learn first about the social typology of picturing genres, then about the particular ideological categorization of imagery that distinguished the realms of heaven, earth, and man. From there, we pass on to a differentiation of practices of looking in relation to the social terms of the image in Ming China. There follows a short consideration of the printed image, before Clunas surveys the kinds of images that were transgressive or unacceptable. If this cartographic enterprise is the meat of the book, its framing in the introduction and conclusion is noteworthy in itself. Clunas wants us to understand that the kinds of images traditionally privileged by historians of painting did not exist outside a larger field of the image in Ming China—what he calls "picturing," understood critically as a specific mode of representation with its own discourses and tropes or topoi. This is not a thesis with which painting historians of his own generation and younger would have been inclined to disagree in 1997; indeed, as he acknowledges, recent work on painting had started to explore the same territory, a trend that has continued and strengthened. Yet it is difficult to see where in the history of picturing or of pictures adumbrated by Clunas there would be a place for the kind of extended analyses of specific works, offering full accounts of artistic form, that specialists of painting depend on. For all the discussion of pictures in relation to painting, the theoretical account of the latter is somewhat impoverished in *Pictures and Visuality*, marked by a reluctance to explore the density of meaning that the self-conscious, art historically informed practice of painting at its best was capable of achieving.

Three books into his project, the cartographic thrust of Clunas's approach was already clear. A more careful characterization, though, has to take into account particularities of both voice and analysis. First, voice. The first three books are marked by the author's ethical commitment to disclosing at all times the place from which he is speaking. Thus, there are repeated acknowledgments of the limitations of his knowledge, the speculativeness of a given interpretation, the narrowness of a sample base used for a generalization. He is equally scrupulous in not laying personal claim to all the knowledge he presents, instead making a point of paraphrasing and dialoguing in the text with a host of contemporary scholars in different fields. (Non-Chinese names consistently outnumber Chinese ones.) The combined effect of repeatedly breaking the rhetorical spell of his own narrative and bringing in all these other names, I find, is to keep me suspended somewhere between the present and the past, between the modern West and Ming China. This makes the author of the first three books the perfect cicerone, but it also places me as reader in a position akin to an intellectual tourist—a sensation that is reinforced by the rapid passage from one subtopic to another. The advantages are that one is in the company of a knowledgeable, convincing, stimulating, and responsible guide to Ming visual and material culture, who packs a lot in and makes one think hard about one's own cultural assumptions. The corresponding disadvantages are that despite the citations and paraphrases of Ming writers, the reader rarely feels immersed in Ming China and is often left wishing that the visit to a particular "site" could have been extended long enough to permit at least a fleeting sense of immersion. Of course, Clunas might well object that the lure of immersion is a romantic dream—and, what is more, a dangerous dream—even that he has written his books precisely in order to demystify its charms. This putative objection I can fully accept and respect, while still suspecting that there is something else in play—perhaps a cast of mind that favors the calculable load-bearing potential of taxonomic category. There is a sense in which Clunas can be seen as the intellectual successor within Chinese art history to James Cahill, an earlier cartographer of the Chinese visual past who charted first a landscape of style, before later on (in reaction to his own earlier work) mapping out the iconographic landscape of the subjects of painting with special regard for overlooked subgenres.[7] Cahill's concentration has remained firmly fixed throughout on painting as his chosen genre of art. Clunas, however, has no aspiration to be an art historian defending the cause of art; the loyalties on view in the first three books are to the broader and more democratic cause of visual and material culture. Equally, in Clunas's work, style and iconography have given way to a critical (political) concept of representation, which he develops in a plethora of different registers. But these two scholars of very different generations share in common the cartographer's desire to establish reliable coordinates and, from there, to multiply coordinates in order to create an ever more detailed understanding. A lateral attention is their chosen mode.

The risk of identifying cartographic method too closely with taxonomic distance seems to have become clear to Clunas himself around this time, because his next book zooms in, so to speak, on a single artist. From the beginning, Clunas had taken a special interest in the city of Suzhou and in one of its major families, the Wens. This family produced the author of *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, as well as a dynasty of literati artists starting with Wen Zhengming (1470–1559). Clunas's demystification of literati culture had long circled around the latter, who in modern times has epitomized Ming literati art, and in *Elegant Debts* (2004) he tackled Wen Zhengming head-on. As a specialist of painting, and more particularly as someone who has tried to reconstruct as broadly as possible the life of another major Chinese artist, I devoured this book. Aided by the unusually extensive documentation on the artist, *Elegant Debts* situates Wen Zhengming within Ming society with a degree of comprehensiveness and detail nowhere else available.

The book is in three parts, each of which introduces a number of the social fields—

sets of social relations, in Clunas's definition—that provided the parameters of Wen Zhengming's social existence. Part 1 focuses on the early life, part 3 on the later, and part 2 "takes examples from throughout his life," but begins with the short period, from 1523 to 1526, when he was an official in the capital, which has traditionally been taken as a defining interruption in his career. There is thus a loose but palpable sense of biographic progression subtending the book's structure. Clunas begins in part 1 by mapping out family relations, followed by relations with masters and patrons, and ending with his interactions with peers and contemporaries. Part 2 traces relations first with fellow officials, and then with fellow Suzhou natives. Up to this point, Wen's art, in the form of calligraphies and paintings, is often adduced as evidence, but without any sustained consideration of Wen the artist. This proves to be the task of part 3, which charts relations with clients and customers, and then with subordinates of various kinds, including pupils. The master trope throughout the book is gift exchange, as the major mechanism in an economy of social reciprocity mediated by actions, words, texts, images, objects, and, of course, money. A brief afterword proposes a specific characterization of this microlevel project, distinguishing it explicitly from the established art historical approach to which his own comes closest:

> Those myriad unique details, ultimately irreducible to a pattern, are what matters. Engaging with the history of this social art is thus a very different project from what has generally been construed as a social history *of* art, a history variously in thrall to (or equally in reaction against) the idea of the work of art as a privileged reflection of an equally privileged "something else," be it the "spirit of the age" or the "mode of production." (p. 181)

Clunas's cartographic method can thus claim two distinct modes, the more distanced view of the earlier books permitting a mapping of visual and material culture, while the close-up view of *Elegant Debts* models the mapping of social art.

My summary has passed over the last chapter of the book, which, though included in part 3, stands apart from all that precedes it. Chapter 8 addresses the question that the prior mapping of social fields raises for the art historian and, more particularly, for the specialist of painting: What is art history to do with a Wen Zhengming in whose life artistic practice had a very different place from the one suggested by modern characterizations of him as principally a painter? The chapter thus examines his contemporary broader social reputation and the subsequent gradual construction of him in narrower artist terms. Here, I think, three strains of Clunas's argument intersect to distorting effect. First, the emphasis throughout *Elegant Debts* is on a "dividual," socially networked self, in which Wen Zhengming's sense of identity was constructed relationally through the subtleties of situational self-siting that took place within social webs of reciprocity. Clunas contrasts this Ming Wen Zhengming with the atomized individuality attributed to the artist in an early eighteenth-century Qing text (p. 167), and with the twentieth-century construction of Wen as a canonical Ming artist, with "artist" here connoting a modern individualistic autonomy. One would not know from Clunas's presentation of Wen Zhengming that he lived during a period of emerging philosophical theorization of personal autonomy in which the status of the senses, emotion, and desire were being rethought, with consequences for the understanding of parameters of moral action and personal destiny.[8] This other discursive field, centered on the bodily individual (*shen*), goes undiscussed as such, leaving the dividual discourse of the hierarchically networked person (*ren*) to define the horizon of Ming selfhood in general and Wen's in particular. The picture is partial, mostly weft with glimpses of a lost warp.

Second, the author's repeated references to Wen Zhengming as a painter leave untouched the question of what is actually meant by painting (*hua*) in this context. For Wen Zhengming, it was in no sense a medium-specific practice. On the contrary, it was a field of intersecting and mutually mediating practices of text, calligraphic sign, and pictorial image, united by a shared surface site and a shared tool (the sharp-tipped brush), as well as by protocols of metaphor and affect that were partly shared, partly distributed among the constituent practices. Literati painting, as inherited by Wen Zhengming, was thus a practice that opened directly on to independent practices of the text (poetry, prose) and of writing (calligraphy). Wen's art comprised all of this. One can certainly argue that painting in a medium-specific sense was never the center of Wen's life, and even that painting in the broader sense just defined was not its center during his earlier years. But one cannot as plausibly deny the centrality of artistic practice in general after his return from Beijing in 1526. Clunas's interpretation only works if one does not make the above distinctions between a medium-specific practice of painting, a broader "open" practice of painting, and artistic practice in general.

A third problem—to give it an abstract formulation—is that the author identifies the object of his analysis (Wen Zhengming as a major Ming artistic and cultural figure) with the assumptions of his method (a history of social art). The "social art" method very effectively makes visible the social imbrication of Wen Zhengming's every cultural act. But it also predisposes the author to attribute greater significance to, say, formal late-life birthday eulogies of Wen that exclude painting in the medium-specific sense (p. 159) than to a mass of writing by Wen and others, cited or mentioned by Clunas himself, that incessantly references, together or separately, the different components of the culturally open practice of painting. For me, such texts confirm that painting in the latter, broader sense was central to Wen Zhengming's significance for Suzhou society and Ming culture.

The concept of social art is Clunas's answer at the theoretical level to a question raised at the very beginning of the book: Why does this body of objects exist at all?

> [*Elegant Debts*] is still *intended* as a book addressing the history of art, or at least what I take to be one of its central questions: why does this body of objects exist at all? I do not think that a better understanding of what called a work into existence is also a sufficient answer to the other major question, "And why does it look like this?" This second, crucial question of the visual qualities of individual works is relatively little explored in what follows, and only partly for reasons of space. I believe above all that an *absence* of understanding of what called a work into existence will vitiate an attempt, no matter how sophisticated, to explain that appearance, which has in any case been the focus of most previous enquiry into Wen Zhengming. The position I take is one that seeks to hold "visual culture" (the scroll as text and image) and "material culture" (the scroll as thing) in some sort of productive tension. . . . I am writing from a conviction that the relations between agents, relations in which the work is embedded, illuminate the object, but that equally the object enacts those social relations. (p. 13)

A theoretical blind spot here is that the vitiation operates in both directions. An absence of understanding of why the object looks like *this* is liable to lead to dubious inferences about why the object was brought into existence at all. One of a number of places where Clunas seems to me to fall into this trap is in his discussion of a late masterwork, the album *Garden of the Artless Official* (1551), consisting of eight leaves with accompanying poems on the facing pages. Here is a work so thematically and formally complex that it would justify a book of its own. Yet, knowing that Wen had in 1533 produced a much larger album depicting the same garden (thirty-one paintings and accompanying poems), Clunas infers a lesser importance for the later, smaller album:

> Wen was quite prepared to replicate earlier works of his own, in particular his own poetry, to provide patrons with

> pieces (apart from anything else it presumably took less effort), and it is possible that this is the context in which we should situate this fragment, in the absence of any clearer dedication. He may, as we have seen in earlier cases, have sustained a patronage relationship with the family of Wang Xianchen beyond the death of its original instigator, and the album may have been prepared for one of the sons of the garden's builder, the men to whom Wen had given their social names, and with whom he therefore maintained an ongoing relationship in which the balance of respect and obligation was subtly altered from what it had been with their father. (p. 47)

The implication is that the later work is the lesser, and thus enacts social relations of less social weight, but the evidence of the two albums considered as art (why do they look like *this*?) is that the number of leaves may be no guide at all to their respective significance, forcing a very different sense of the potential conclusions one might draw about the enactment of social relations.[9] The ambition and quality of the 1551 album, giving it an important place in a long-standing artistic project of carefully calibrated pictorial interventions, are noteworthy social facts in their own right.[10] So, too, are Wen's choices of subject and style, as well as the dynamics of conceptual and technical craft through which he negotiates his relation to subject and style—a negotiation in which, moreover, he cannot always be assumed to have fully understood the significance of his own decisions.

Having taken the close-up view in *Elegant Debts*, in *Empire of Great Brightness* Clunas, teaching at this point at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, zooms out again, to a greater distance than in any of his previous studies of the Ming. "One can learn a lot about a culture from its pleasures," he writes, in a chapter devoted to exactly that, and culture (visual and material) is indeed the explicit subject of the book. Faithful to his thematic approach, the author presents seven chapters devoted to (I simplify greatly) cosmology, movement, text, classification, pleasure, violence, and aging and death, in which one in fact learns a huge amount about Ming culture; a final chapter deals with the afterlives of Ming visual and material culture, both immediate and more distant. The book allows Clunas to correct an avowed weakness of his earlier studies on the Ming—their focus on one part of China, the wealthy southeast that produced a disproportionate number of elite artists and intellectuals. Based on his 2004 Slade Lectures at Oxford University, *Empire of Great Brightness* is partly modeled on the Chinese genre of "brush notes" (*biji*), in which disparate subjects are brought together. Clunas's thematic method, however, brings order to what might otherwise be a mass of accumulated factoids, some recycled from the earlier books but here given new significance.[11] These must have been very engaging lectures; revised as a book that maintains the feel of a lecture series, they are perhaps a little less compelling. The reader of a printed text has more time to reflect on the balance between argument and information, which here slips just enough toward the latter to give the book something of the feel of a textbook. The effect is no doubt partly intended, and in this regard *Empire of Great Brightness* performs an important job: it provides, if not a comprehensive map of Ming visual and material culture, then certainly the most extensive ever attempted. I defy any specialist of Chinese art history to come away from reading the book without thinking that she has learned all sorts of new and useful things, both about specifics and about how it all fitted together at the time. Art historians working on the same time period elsewhere in the world will find it an accessible and disorienting introduction to a culture that they are perhaps less likely to ignore today than twenty years ago, in part due to Clunas's efforts.[12]

The approach associated with the term *visual culture* (which I take to be an abbreviation of visual and material culture), sometimes called visual studies, has made an immense contribution to art history as a discipline over the last twenty years. Not only has it opened the art historical viewfinder to include a vast field of previously marginalized and subordinated material, but it has also introduced new techniques of critical analysis that do justice to the social stakes of artistic production and consumption. A further and perhaps less obvious contribution has been to draw attention to the relational dimension of art—its imbrication in and enactment of discursive relations, which, because they are all three at once, can variously be interpreted as cultural, social, or ideological.[13] The visual culture approach seems to reach the edge of its efficacy, however, precisely where art history has classically invested its energies, that is, in the study of the individuated artistic event or process, whether at the level of an artwork, a series of artworks, an articulated set or ensemble, an individual artist's oeuvre, or related production in a specific place and time. Although there has been no lack of attempts to tackle such individuation historically from a visual culture point of view, the results often expose cruelly the need for an equal mastery of traditional art historical skills. Recognizing the fact that the approach is not well adapted to the study of individuation may be more important, at least as a basis for self-aware coexistence, collaboration, and cross-fertilization within an expanded art history discipline, than arguments opposing the elitism of art history to the democratic impulse underpinning visual culture studies. In this regard—and any criticisms offered here notwithstanding—I find Craig Clunas's Ming project exemplary and essential. Some may regret that he has resolutely steered clear of the individuated artistic event or process, even when dealing with an individual artist. But it is this very clarity of purpose that has allowed him to achieve something very rare in the history of the discipline—the invention of a distinct method whose potential he continues to explore in depth.[14] Deployed at varying distances in relation to the same Ming chronotope, Clunas's cartographic approach has proven immensely flexible, with five books to date that for the study of the Chinese artistic past are separately illuminating and cumulatively transformative. Through these five works, Clunas has also become one of Chinese art history's most effective emissaries, both to Sinology at large and to the wider discipline of art history.

JONATHAN HAY *is Ailsa Mellon Bruce Professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University [Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1 East 78th Street, New York, N.Y. 10075].*

Notes

1. Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
2. Announced under the overall title "Chinese Painting and Its Audiences," the lectures include "Beginning and End in Chinese Painting," "The Gentleman," "The Emperor," "The Merchant," "The Nation," and "The People."
3. Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolors* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984); and idem, *Chinese Furniture* (London: Bamboo Publishing, 1988).
4. There is a parallel here with Michael Baxandall, who also studied literature at university, had formidable language skills, started his career at the Victoria and Albert Museum—a museum of "things" as much as "art"—and pushed his field to take into account a wider range of social and cultural factors bearing on the production and reception of art.
5. For further discussion of this professionalization with regard to artists, see Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 205–9.
6. See pp. 10–13, where Clunas points out that the middlebrow clichés about the Chinese garden as the expression of timeless values of Chinese civilization, which were well-meaningly purveyed by such writers as American landscape architect Fletcher Steele (1885–1971), find an echo in recent museum practice: "From the National Palace Museum, Taipei, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, a 'Chinese garden' is now a key site of 'Chineseness,' replacing in America at least the temple interiors that fulfilled the same role sixty or seventy years ago" (p. 12).
7. The shift in James Cahill's orientation was initiated in *Three Alternative Histories of Chinese Painting* (Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 1988). Cahill's most recent contribution to our understanding of neglected subgenres is *Pictures for Use and Plea-*

sure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

8. This rethinking is associated above all with the name of Wang Yangming (Wang Shouren, 1472–1529). See his *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

9. In the case of another major late work, *Wintry Trees after Li Cheng*, the author uses the fact that "in the extensive written record there is no evidence of any sort of contact between [the dedicatee] and Wen Zhengming on any other occasion" (p. 31) to discount the artist's expressed gratitude for a journey specially made to offer condolences to the recently bereaved artist, as well as the specific mention of an art world insiders' discussion between the two men about the tenth-century artist whose work is the model for the painting. "One plausible scenario is therefore that a near-stranger has made use of the occasion to obtain a coveted painting by a man who was now one of the most renowned elite artists of the day, and whose work was notoriously hard to get hold of" (p. 31). And again: "So we know nothing of Li Zicheng of Wuyuan, whose receipt of *Wintry Trees* as a fairly direct result of his visit of condolence and funeral contribution is made explicit in the colophon to the picture" (p. 124). This is not actually a likely scenario, as Suzhou natives would have told any such hopeful near-stranger at the time. A more plausible explanation is that the textual record is simply incomplete; the dedicatee had claims on Wen Zhengming, whether affective or more crassly social, that are today unknown beyond the hints in Wen's inscription. In chapter 6 Clunas nuances his earlier remarks, introducing the helpful distinction between artworks produced in the context of a one-off exchange and those that belong to a longer history of interactions and exchanges (p. 127). When the former rise to a certain level of quality, he goes on to suggest, we may be seeing the enactment of a social relation of clientelism, in which Wen is showing care for the recipient (pp. 141–42). But this still seems very far from an adequate explanation of the release of masterpieces into the context of one-time exchanges. Other cases cited by Clunas are *Spring Trees after Rain* of 1507 (p. 125) and *Seven Junipers of Changshu* of 1532 (p. 126).

10. Similarly, Clunas infers from the unusually long time (several years) taken for certain important works (*Cascading Waterfalls in the Pine Ravine*, 1527–31; *A Thousand Peaks Contend in Splendor*, 1545–52) that the artist was engaged in a social strategy of deliberate delay, whereas the art historical precedent set by Huang Gongwang's great *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* handscroll (1348–50) may be more relevant. For a study of two of these multiyear works by Wen Zhengming that arrives at a different interpretation of the long period of gestation, see Jonathan Hay, "Wen Zhengming's Aesthetic of Disjunction," in *The History of Painting in East Asia: Essays on Scholarly Method* (Taipei: Rock Publishing International, 2008), 331–62.

11. A few rare errors should be pointed out. The Zhang Pingshan cited on p. 19 as having no surviving works is the Zhang Lu to whom *Su Dongpo Returning to the Hanlin Academy* is attributed in *Pictures and Visuality* (ill. 13). The mark on a cotton head scarf in a portrait painting (ill. 64), identified as that of Li Feng'an, known from a similar mark on excavated silks (p. 89), actually reads "Mark of Zhang Yunquan." The assertion on p. 135 that the fame of the courtesan painter Ma Shouzhen was forgotten until it was rediscovered in the last twenty years is true only if one omits scholarship by Chinese writers.

12. Over the span of the five books, Clunas's relation to the concept of modernity has evolved, as he discusses more than once in his more recent writings. Referring to the term "early modern China," he writes: "Used with a certain naïveté in the first instance, and then possibly more strategically, it is now perhaps time to let it rest" (*Empire of Great Brightness*, p. 230). The strategy mentioned is the use of the term as a deliberate provocation to "the celebration of European exceptionalism which too often still passes for global history" (*Superfluous Things*, preface to the paperback edition, p. xvi). The reason for letting the term "early modern" rest is apparently the author's acceptance of two critiques. One, by Soren Clausen, points out that "early modern" in Clunas's usage in the first three books is simply the flip side of an earlier term, "late imperial," and is equally reifying (*Superfluous Things*, preface to the paperback edition, p. xvi). The other critique, not directed at Clunas, is Dipesh Chakrabarty's with regard to a unitary (world) history, in the name of our inability to escape "the deep collusion between 'history' and the modernizing narrative(s) of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation-state" (quoted in *Empire of Great Brightness*, p. 232). Sinologists, especially historians, have been comforted by Clunas's seeming change of heart, which relieves them of the burden of coming to terms with a modernity of the Chinese past, a prospect that has tended to make them queasy. I find, however, that Chakrabarty's argument says more about postcolonial theory's own internalization of Enlightenment and modernist assumptions than it does about the possibilities of scholarly writing about any precolonial past. Clunas's reified use of the term "early modern" in his earlier books might be seen as symptomatic of having fallen into the same trap. On his own terms, Clunas is undoubtedly right in feeling that a turn toward empiricist detail and diversity should lead to a more subtle understanding of the Ming past. But what remains unconsidered is the prospect that there is more to the question of modernity in the Ming past than the relevance (or not) of the term "early modern." Can one really conceive of a disjunctive diachronics of the Chinese or any other past that would exclude modernity, even for much earlier periods than the Ming?

13. Much of this work, whether by Clunas or others, like work done under the name of the social history of art, has depended on the master trope of representation, which today seems increasingly under pressure from the relationality it has brought to light. The production/consumption framework of interpretation is showing similar stresses.

14. A book on the artistic culture of Ming princely households is in the works, as well as an exhibition on the early Ming dynasty at the British Museum, projected for 2014.