

The book by Craig Clunas "Art in China" belongs to the category of universal volumes that would be equally interesting for those who only begin their acquaintance with the topic and as well for those who already aim to expand their knowledge. One of the important merits of the author is his rather unconventional approach to the studied theme. Indeed, China has an extremely long history of art which began almost 5000 years ago and which in the process of its development dealt with a variety of objects and images, like tablets made of jade, diverse forms and methods of painting, sculpture, porcelain, calligraphy, and many others. However, the Chinese artistic traditions were usually only partially valued in the Western world. For example, researchers more often studied Chinese sculpture and paid little attention to such a valuable form of art in China as calligraphy. In this regard, in his book Clunas attempts to compensate for such a one-sided traditional approach to the study of art in China, as for one he describes the mentioned virtual omission by Western scholars of calligraphy as an art form in favor of painting, and even points out that the cognomen "Chinese Art" is mostly a Western concept. In reality, as we learn, for the most period of its history in China artistic sphere was closely connected with its functions, be they decorative, religious, or political in nature. Now contrast this with the notion of a kind of an isolated museum exhibition that may arise from the Western approach to the study of art, and we may understand why Chinese art has not been fully appreciated in the West and what potential benefits the approach of Clunas may offer. With the mentioned innovative approaches to his investigation Craig Clunas apparently manages to penetrate deep within his subject of study due to his organic combination of study of Chinese arts in their proper contexts with attention to all their essential aspects, starting from tomb artifacts and up to the Mao Zedong era. Interestingly, with these observations in mind we can also think of Clunas`s book as simultaneously a critical investigation of the Western perception of Chinese art.

Let us see how the author tackles the task that he has set before him. This can already be seen from an introduction where, instead of attempts to superficially describe the most important artists and works of art of different periods of history, Clunas rather chooses to elaborate on the plausible historic context that accompanied works of Chinese art. As we learn, it turns out that some elements of what is considered today to be the Chinese artistic heritage may have been originally created for other purposes, but nevertheless such elements influenced the further development of art. In the main section of the book the author divides the content not so much along chronological lines, but rather singles out chapters centered on certain topics. There are five such main realms of study - art in the tomb, art at court, art in the temple, art in the life of the elite, and art in the market-place. It is by such a careful separation of specific qualities of artistic manifestations in these different spheres of life that Clunas deals with the task to define what was historically called art in China, and it is hard to deny that this methodology is very interesting and effective.

Another fine technique that the author employs in his work is the comparison between the pieces of art traditionally viewed as masterpieces and less famous works. In this way we can better comprehend what historical role did art play in the life of the Chinese society through the degree to which different objects of art were valued. In this regard it is important to point out that the book contains references to recent discoveries, which makes discussions contained in it very competent. Throughout the book we can find supportive figures and concise columns that explicate terms and specific words used. This is a very helpful feature indeed, as well as bibliographical essays in the final parts of the book. In addition, clear pictures of pieces of art vividly demonstrate readers the primary objects of study.

At the same time, from the very beginning of the book Clunas clearly states his intent to try to search where possible for the meaning which was ascribed to works of art by those who were making it, and if such a meaning cannot be recovered now, to withdraw judgement

based on our modern interpretations. In this way, the book gives an early impetus for readers to employ their imagination and relate themselves to the depths of history of which we only have artistic artifacts (Clunas, 1997, pp.15-19). One of the observations that validates this approach is related to the fact that since the dawn of Chinese art perspective and illusionism were of lesser importance than in the history of the Western art, and, moreover, excessive attention to these aspects was thought to be detrimental for artistic expression. Now, in this respect Chinese art may be said to have preceded today's theory of art by many centuries.

In general, Clunas' book leaves a markedly positive impression. It greatly helps that, even though the book provides a very wide coverage of Chinese art and culture and presents a superb collection of works of art, the size of the book is not overwhelming, so it can be read rather quickly. This may be an important advantage for those who only begin to study Chinese art and would like to gradually increase the depth of their research. On the other hand, the approach of the author to the grouping of topics in the book may be helpful for those who seek fruitful methodologies for further study. However, here it could be noted that the lack of an English-Chinese glossary in the book is very disappointing as it would be very helpful for students who also learn Chinese, and who may naturally be interested in this book. Also, a person who would read this book for research purposes may find that in some places where interesting issues are discussed references are not sufficient, which limits options for further investigation of the topic. At the same time, Clunas sometimes advances views which are not yet based on firm evidence and so can be considered as mere assumptions. Nevertheless, his educated guesses only add to the atmosphere of an open discussion that encourages readers to conjure up their own opinions.

All in all, this enlightening book manages to provide a competent and emotional story of history of art in China, so that many readers may wish to re-read it. In this way, even with its modest size "Art in China" may well be considered a must for students of Chinese art.

References:

Clunas, Craig. *Art in China*. Oxford University Press, 1997.