Non-portrait Paintings by the Portrait Painter Yu Zhiding (1646-1716)

Yu Zhiding 禹之鼎 (1646-1716) is best remembered for his portraits of famous men. In his time serving the Kangxi court, Yu was lauded as the top portraitist in the empire, a painter capable not only of capturing a likeness, but of imbuing that likeness with layers of historical and art historical significance. Artists in particular seem to have appreciated his paintings—the poets Wang Shizhen 王士禛 (1634-1711) and Nalan Xingde 納蘭性德 (1655-1685) sat for them, as did the painters Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (1642-1715) and Wang Hui 王翬 (1632-1717). Yu painted other prominent men of the court, including Gao Shiqi 高士奇 (1645-1704), Song Lao 宋勞 (1634-1713), Xu Qianxue 徐乾學 (1631-1694), and more. Their portraits became important components of the social scene in the capital, as sitters invited friends to add colophons and frontispieces to them, transforming them into complex text-image artifacts. For a time in the 1680s and 90s, a Yu Zhiding portrait was a must-have accessory for an ambitious man in Beijing.

But portraits are only part of the story. In the course of ongoing research for my dissertation on Yu Zhiding, I have been surprised to find a large number of works by Yu in other genres, some of which have rich histories that have greatly expanded my own notion of this painter. In this presentation, I will speak primarily about two such images. The first is a picture of the Taihedian 太和殿, the central ceremonial space in the Forbidden City, painted by Yu in commemoration of that building’s reconstruction in 1697. This image, which survives as an illustration to a printed book, shows that Yu experimented with foreign visual modes being introduced at court by Europeans. The second is an image of an inkstone and three stacks of books that Yu painted at the behest of Wang Xuling 王環齡 (1642-1725), one of Kangxi’s senior officials. The objects depicted were all given to Wang by Kangxi, and as such they are examples of a practice of imperial gift-giving that was key to Kangxi’s successful maintenance of relationships. This painting is a rare—perhaps unique—visual document of such a gift from an emperor to an official. I will discuss the history of the painting and the gifts it depicts.

By focusing on these works rather than portraiture, I hope to expand received notions of Yu Zhiding. In the process, I am also looking to open a discussion about what it meant to be an artist in and around the Kangxi court. It is generally agreed that the Qing painting academy was formally established by the Qianlong emperor in 1736, and that painters at court prior to that time were organized in a looser, more ad-hoc fashion. It remains unclear how responsibilities were apportioned and how skills were fostered among court painters during this period of nascence. I believe that a case study of Yu, who was a key figure during this period, may tell us something about the structures of Qing court art during their formation. I hope to draw upon the diverse expertise of the China Project Workshop to work on the following questions, and others,
together: Are there historical precedents for Yu’s range of activity, and if so, what/who are they? If his portfolio of skills and responsibilities is new, what can this tell us about what it meant to be a painter in and around the Kangxi court? What do the non-portrait works I discuss here share with portraiture, for which Yu was celebrated, and how might we stitch these little-studied works into a more holistic picture of this artist?