

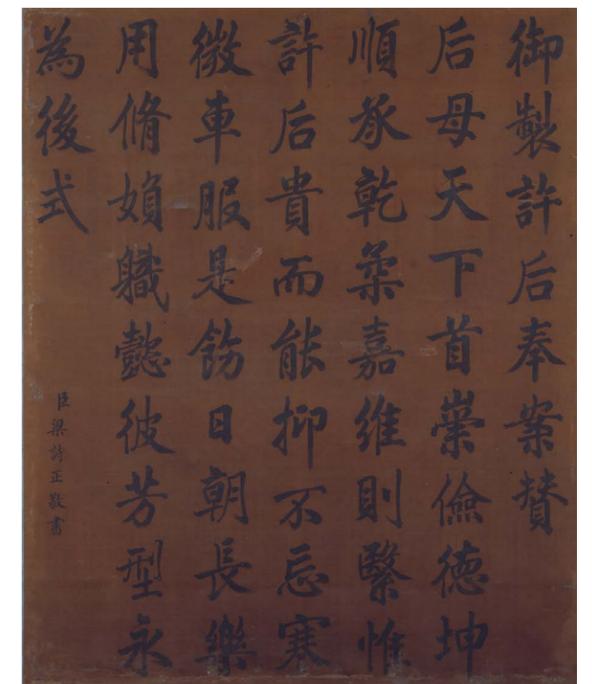


Idealized Portraits of Women for the Qing Imperial Court

Wen-chien Cheng

The Forbidden City exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) brings together a group of paintings of women from the Yongzheng (1723–35) and Qianlong (1736–95) eras. Based on the traditional classifications of these paintings, they can be divided into two types: *shinü hua* or *meiren hua* (paintings of refined beautiful ladies) and *gongxun tu* (paintings of inner palace admonitions). *Shinü hua* highlight the physical beauty of women, for the pleasure of viewers. By contrast, *gongxun tu*, which depict idealized behaviour for elite women, serve normative and motivational ends. Qing court painters followed long-established traditions from both inside and outside the court for the production of the two genres of painting. This paper offers a close visual reading of such paintings featured in the exhibition to shed new light on their distinctive functions for members of the Qing imperial family.

Empress Xu Serving Food to the Emperor's Mother is a painting of inner palace admonitions (Fig. 1a). It depicts the wife of Western Han emperor Xuan



(Fig. 1a) *Empress Xu Serving Food to the Emperor's Mother*
Qing dynasty, 18th century
Ink and colour on silk
Height 126.8 cm, width 103.5 cm
The Palace Museum (Gu6268-1/2)

(Fig. 1b) Eulogy accompanying *Empress Xu Serving Food to the Emperor's Mother*
By Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736–95),
calligraphy by Liang Shizheng (1697–1763)
Ink and colour on silk
Height 126.8 cm, width 103.5 cm
The Palace Museum (Gu6268-2/2)



(Fig. 2) *Album of Ladies'*
Seasonal Activities of Twelve Months
 By Chen Mei (act. 1720–40)
 Three leaves from a twelve-leaf album, ink and colour on silk
 Height 37 cm, width 31.8 cm
 The Palace Museum (Gu9224-9,2,11/12)

(91–49 BCE), herself serving her mother-in-law. The accompanying *zan* (eulogy), composed by the Qianlong emperor, with calligraphy written by the official Liang Shizheng (1697–1763), praises Empress Xu's virtues of filial piety and frugality even after she had advanced to the status of empress (Fig. 1b). Despite her high-ranking status, she did not neglect her role as a dutiful wife, establishing a model for the imperial consorts of later generations. Qianlong's eulogy reinforces precisely the expected function of such a painting: to serve as a reminder of ideal behaviour for imperial consorts. According to The Palace Museum, Beijing, this is the only surviving piece from a set of twelve paintings/texts depicting exemplary imperial consorts from past Chinese dynasties. In *Guochao*

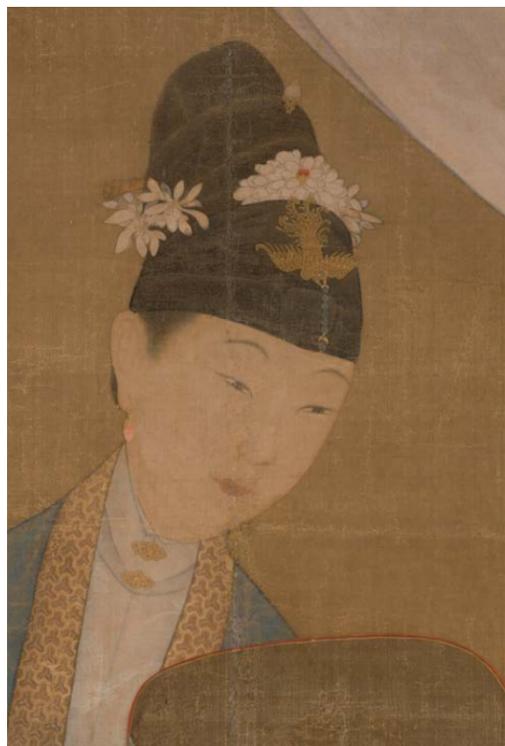
(Fig. 2a) 9th month, 'Enjoying chrysanthemums at the Double Ninth festival'
 (Fig. 2b) 2nd month, 'Swinging under the spring willow trees'
 (Fig. 2c) 11th month, 'Appreciating antiques'

gongshi (*Qing Court History*; 1742), the set was given the general name of *gongxun tu* and each painting received a four-character title indicating the subject-matter. Why twelve? According to the same document, they were to be hung on the wall of the front hall at each of the twelve inner palaces. The sole surviving painting once belonged to Zhongcui gong ('The Palace of Purity') in the east wing.

At first glance, the painting resembles earlier Chinese narrative paintings on historical subjects. The admonitory nature of the set determines its relatively conventional stylistic preference referring to the Song (960–1279) and Ming (1368–1644) academic painting style, and is reminiscent of paintings of similar subjects such as *Ladies' Classic of Filial Piety*, from the



Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). However, upon closer examination, the earlier academic mode only serves as a conceptual model; the pictorial rendering of the painting speaks directly to the function of the painting in the Qing court context. In addition to conveying the moral narrative of the story, the painting reveals an overall decorative flavour and emphasizes a privileged imperial life. The painter portrays the very elaborate clothing and coiffures worn by court ladies, regardless of how such a depiction might be at odds with the emphasis on the empress's virtue of frugality mentioned in Qianlong's text. Towards the upper right of the painting, we see several court ladies attending a display of valuable antiques on a table in the hallway of an elegant palace complex. As mentioned,



(Fig. 3) Detail of *Lady at a Window with Two Cats*
By Zhang Zhen (act. early 18th century)
Hanging scroll, ink and colours on silk
Height 143.8 cm, width 63.5 cm
University of California, Berkeley Art
Museum and Pacific Film Archive

such paintings would be hung on the walls in inner domains on a specific day of every lunar twelfth month, when pictures of door gods and calligraphy of New Year couplets were posted. They would be taken down to be stored away along with other New Year decorations in the second month of the following year. Their seasonal display suggests that such large paintings not only served as a pictorial reminder of moral models, but also functioned as 'auspicious images'—according to the logic that the good morality of royal females would naturally bring fortune to the imperial household. In this particular painting, the two towering pines and the clouds framing the palace building, with four unusually large cranes in the courtyard—symbols for immortality and longevity—enhance its auspicious quality.

This extended function of the twelve *gongxun tu* speaks to a tendency in Qing court paintings to combine various conventionally divided genres and thus serve multiple purposes. *Album of Ladies' Seasonal Activities of Twelve Months* (*Shi'er yue shinü jing tu che*—the Chinese title is based on *Shijiu baoji xubian*; *Album* hereafter) by Chen Mei (act. 1720–40) is another example (Fig. 2). This album falls into the genre of *shinü hua* with its sole focus on images of refined ladies. The central theme of twelve-month activities, however, places the set in a different genre as well, that of depicting customs. The distinctive category of *yueling tu*, or pictures of twelve-month activities, was popular at the Qing court, representing a major activity or custom (not exclusively about royals) for each month, usually in a set of twelve images. It was not uncommon for *shinü hua* to represent ladies in changing sequences along with the scenery of four seasons. The *Album*, however, might be the first known example to combine *yueling tu* with *shinü hua*. Arranged in a monthly sequence each leaf depicts an activity enjoyed by women. The choice of monthly activity includes both seasonal customs conventionally found in *yueling tu*, such as watching the full moon at the Mid-Autumn Festival or enjoying chrysanthemums at the Double Ninth festival (Fig. 2a), and other activities exclusively for females and commonly depicted in *shinü hua*, such as making an offering on the Double Seventh day or swinging under the spring willow trees (Fig. 2b). Non-gender-specific activities, such as chess-playing and appreciating antiques, are also integrated with seasonal settings (Fig. 2c). The result is a hybrid work, much like a calendar.

Chen's *Album* may also be regarded as a sub-theme of *shinü hua*—paintings of court ladies. The life of women in the inner palace has been a subject of interest in both poetry and painting since the Tang dynasty (618–907) onwards and was a favourite genre of the Qing court. On the facing leaf of each painting from the *Album*, Qianlong ordered his official Liang Shizheng to inscribe a matching poem, which exhibits decisively the tone and style of poetry on the subject of palace ladies. While the women in Chen's *Album* appear to be court ladies, pictorially, they are not intended to refer specifically to Qing court ladies, because they wear Han instead of Manchu attire. The Qing court painters drew upon the earlier pictorial repertoire from the genre of Han palace ladies (*Han gong tu*—Han refers to Han dynasty here) to visualize their stereotype of court ladies. This pictorial connection to the genre also explains why architectural elements are prominent features in Chen Mei's *Album* and many other paintings of palace ladies. (Chen was indeed known for his *jiehua*, or paintings of architecture.) The depiction of palatial architecture was a major focus in early Han palace paintings, with figures in some cases being of secondary importance.

Chen's ladies are delicate and elegant with their slender bodies and ideal oval faces. Despite their tiny size, each figure is portrayed in incredible detail. All wear colourful, embroidered robes and ornamental ribbons. Fine hairpins made of kingfisher feathers and gold adorn their hair. In many cases, a type of *jinbu yao*—a hair ornament that originated among royal ladies during the Han period (206 BCE–222 CE) and gained popularity among elite women in the Tang dynasty—is depicted. It takes a popular shape, that of a gold phoenix with a jewel suspended from the bird's beak, seen commonly in the hairstyles of beautiful women paintings popularized during the Ming–Qing period (Fig. 3). But here, Chen applied it only to one lady's hair in each painting, perhaps to indicate her higher status (Fig. 4a)—which can be seen as a representation of the inner court hierarchy. The painting is not short of items suggesting its palatial association—elaborate lanterns, large fans decorated with peacock feathers, and the ornate imperial parasol (Pu Lian, 2008) (Figs 4a, b and c). The generous use of striking colours and precious gold pigments also demonstrates its high-quality court production. The imperial quality of the images thus goes beyond their content.

Chen's paintings, in a portable album format, must



(Figs 4a, b, c) Details of *Album of Ladies' Seasonal Activities of Twelve Months*
(Gu9224-8,11,7/12)



(Fig. 5) Prince Yong's *Twelve Beauties*
Anonymous, Qing dynasty, 18th century
Hanging scroll, one of a set of twelve, ink and colour on silk
Height 184 cm, width 98 cm
The Palace Museum (Gu6458-10/12)

have been viewed in a less formal, somewhat relaxing environment that would allow for full appreciation of their artistic sentiment. The *Album* is surely designed for personal savouring—the refined detailing can only be discovered upon closer examination, and paralleled poems serve to evoke poetic imaginings.

Liang's poems were presumably a later addition, inscribed in 1738, the third year of Qianlong's reign. The old label (which is still attached to the current album cover) indicates the album was a treasure of Leshan tang ('Leshan tang *qingwan*'), a studio name of Qianlong when he became Prince Bao (Bao *qingwang*). Qianlong's princely seal 'Leshan tang tushu ji' ('Record of Leshan tang books') was also stamped on each leaf. Qianlong, as a prince, commissioned or owned many similar types of paintings, many inscribed with his early poems: *shinü hua* were perhaps considered suitable for princes' enjoyment.

Qianlong's father, the Yongzheng emperor (Yinzhen), also commissioned a set of twelve large paintings of beautiful women when he was a prince. The existence of the set at the Palace Museum only came to light in the early 1950s, and researchers have now convincingly attributed its commission between 1709 and 1723 by Prince Yong (Yong *qingwang*; the title bestowed on Yongzheng as a prince) (Palace Museum, 1992; Wu Hung, 1996).

In recent years, these works have attracted scholarly attention for their life-size, portrait-like and opulent appearance and the provocative yet ambiguous meanings they contain. Scholars have not agreed upon the status of the beauties in these paintings, although the Palace Museum now labels them as 'Twelve Consorts of Yinzhen Enjoying Themselves' (*Yinzhen fei xingle tu*), endorsed by recent research (*Forbidden City*, 2013). Many scholars view the women as anonymous generic beauties, belonging to the genre of *meiren hua* (paintings of beautiful women) that became fashionable during the Ming

and Qing eras. The Qing emperors were fascinated by the sophisticated erotic culture of the Jiangnan area, south of the Yangzi river, and the Qing court recruited many painters who either specialized in or were influenced by the fashion of *meiren hua*. The production of Prince Yong's *Twelve Beauties* (*Twelve Beauties*, hereafter) is often discussed in this context even though the artist's name is unknown (Cahill, 2010; Wu Hung, 1996, 1997).

Setting aside the question of whether the twelve women in the paintings are modelled after Prince Yong's actual consorts, both the theme and pictorial rendering of *Twelve Beauties* unmistakably parallel the highly formulated content and imagery of *meiren hua*, which combine the old iconography of the lovelorn palace lady and the new idealization of the glamorous courtesan. In this writer's opinion, *Twelve Beauties* reveals more of a distinctive Qing court adoption and manipulation of this existing *meiren* genre. The women in the paintings are pictured in their private boudoirs or gardens and are surrounded by signs of cultivation. They wear Han outfits that were popular in the Ming period—the V-shaped collar and broad-sleeved over-dresses, looking no different from those depicted in *meiren* images. *Twelve Beauties* depicts items commonly associated with romantic feelings and longings, such as the round fan, mirror, bed curtains, paired magpies, cats, butterflies and double-rings. Erotic connotations are revealed through some of the gestures portrayed, as well as the inclusion of sexual symbols (such as the Buddha's hand citron). All these seem to follow closely the convention of *meiren hua*, but there are also discernible differences.

First, the erotic overtone of the paintings is not as explicit as that found in *meiren hua* produced for the general market. The beauty holding a double-gourd in her fingertips with her attentive gaze directed at the viewer strikes one of the more seductive poses among all twelve beauties (Fig. 5). Her attenuated



(Fig. 6) *Lady in her Boudoir with Book*
Attributed to Leng Mei, dated 1724
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk
Height 174.9 cm, width 103.9 cm
Tianjin Art Museum



(Fig. 7a) Prince Yong's *Twelve Beauties*
Qing dynasty, 18th century
Hanging scroll, one of a set of twelve, ink and colour on silk
Height 184 cm, width 98 cm
The Palace Museum (Gu6458-6/12)



(Fig. 7b) Detail of *Putting out the Lamp*
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk
Height 134.6 cm, width 59 cm
University of California, Berkeley
Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive



(Fig. 7c) Detail of Figure 7a, showing
the hand holding the needle

body leaning towards a table is similar to that of the figure in *Lady in Her Boudoir with Book*, which has a signature of Leng Mei (not signed as a court artist, but 'Jinmen huashi' for his works produced for the general market) (Fig. 6). However, *Lady in Her Boudoir*, in which the lady rests one leg on a chair, making her body more willowy, conveys a much stronger erotic message without doubt. Our lady from the *Twelve Beauties* is modified to look more elegant, yet retaining some idea of eroticism. In another painting, a lady is engaged in needlework by candlelight in the evening. Her right hand gesture bears a resemblance to that in another image, *Putting out the Lamp* by an anonymous painter (Figs 7a and b), although in *Putting out the Lamp*, the lady is positioned in an alluring manner as she reaches to extinguish the lamp with two fingers of her right hand. The image thus evokes the notion of romantic intimacy after the candle flame is extinguished. The 'needlework lady' in *Twelve Beauties* exhibits a similar gesture, presenting instead a needle between her two fingers (Fig. 7c); there is a much wider distance between her fingers and the candlelight, thus the image's erotic innuendo is dramatically reduced.

On the other hand, aside from typical romantic/erotic references, *Twelve Beauties* is imbued with auspicious signs and symbols, which although not absent in *meiren hua* are not a key element in general. The artist of *Twelve Beauties* employs various pictorial schemes to integrate such elements into the images. One painting is filled with symbols for longevity: the central figure, dressed in auspicious red, sits in front of a large screen displaying what looks like an intricate piece of embroidery bearing a design of *shou* (壽; longevity) characters in countless styles. Next to her is a bonsai pine tree. Chrysanthemums adorn her hair and the brocade on her sleeves has patterns of cranes (Fig. 8). In another, a woman stands by a bamboo garden fence that is overgrown with hundreds of peonies—a symbol for wealth and status.



(Fig. 8) Prince Yong's *Twelve Beauties*
Qing dynasty, 18th century
Hanging scroll, one of a set of twelve, ink and colour on silk
Height 184 cm, width 98 cm
The Palace Museum (Gu6458-3/12)



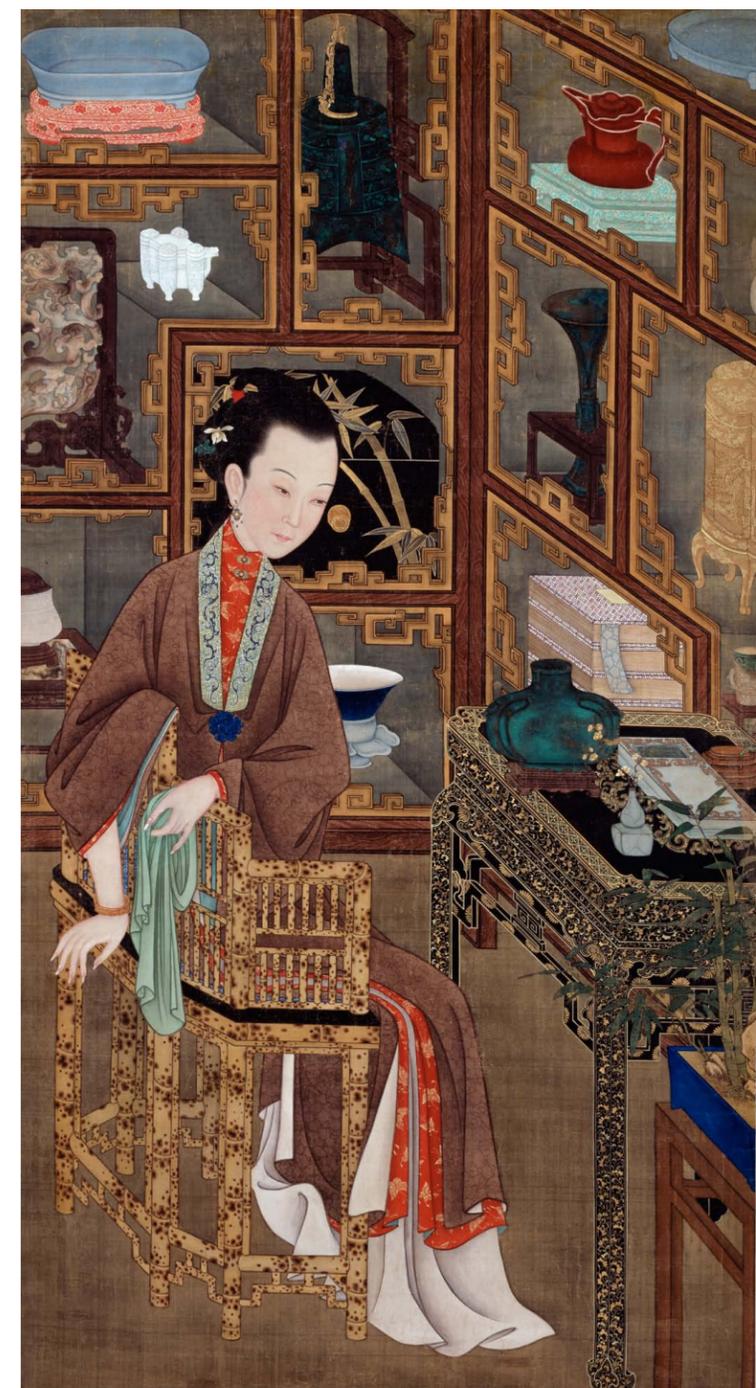
(Fig. 9) Prince Yong's *Twelve Beauties*
Qing dynasty, 18th century
Hanging scroll, one of a set of twelve, ink and colour on silk
Height 184 cm, width 98 cm
The Palace Museum (Gu6458-4/12)



(Figs 10a and b) Details of
Prince Yong's *Twelve Beauties*,
showing auspicious symbols
on women's garments
(Gu6458-8/7/12)

She is holding a large *ruyi* (如意; lit., 'as you wish') sceptre in the shape of a *lingzhi* fungus associated with immortality. The *ruyi*'s Buddhist origin matches well with the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism decorating her collar (Fig. 9). Other paintings place the lucky elements in the backdrop, integrated into ornaments in dresses, furniture and objects. Stylized *shou* characters, ornate butterflies (which in addition to representing lovers serve as a pun for *die* 蠶, another character referring to long life), and formalized bat images (a pun for good fortune) frequently decorate embroidered bands of collars, sleeves and hairbands, and feature as patterns on textiles in women's clothes (Figs 10a and b)—not to mention the presence of plants, flowers and animals carrying auspicious meanings. In short, the *Twelve Beauties* are embellished with wishes for happiness, material blessings, longevity, immortality and love.

The whole atmosphere goes hand in hand with the emphasis on the exquisite material wealth presented. One painting depicts a lady surrounded by a fine 'treasure shelf', which displays fourteen extremely valuable treasures, from bronze vessels and ceramics to jades and calligraphy rubbings (*fatie*)—an epitomized showcase of this material privilege (Fig. 11). Again, the inclusion of literati-associated objects (antiques, books and so on), luxuries, and elegant furniture is common in *meiren hua*, alluding to ladies' intellectual cultivation and refined tastes. Here in *Twelve Beauties*, however, these objects appear to be actual imperial items found within the palace. Researchers have now identified more than twenty such objects in the paintings that match or are similar to objects in the palace museums in both Beijing and Taipei (Peng, 2006; *Forbidden City*, 2013). Examples of Western technology, such as clocks, pocket watches and armillary spheres, speak exclusively to the Qing imperial belongings (Figs 12, 12a and b). In the *Twelve Beauties*, the type of generic furnishing in the space of *meiren hua* is transformed into a sophisticated display of fine imperial goods.



(Fig. 11) Prince Yong's *Twelve Beauties*
Qing dynasty, 18th century
Hanging scroll, one of a set of twelve, ink and colour on silk
Height 184 cm, width 98 cm
The Palace Museum (Gu6458-1/12)



(Fig. 12) Prince Yong's *Twelve Beauties*
Qing dynasty, 18th century
Hanging scroll, one of a set of twelve, ink and colour on silk
Height 184 cm, width 98 cm
The Palace Museum (Gu6458-11/12)



(Figs 12a and b) Details of Figure 12,
showing examples of Western
technology in the palace

All of these transformations—the fleshed-out erotic overtones, the embellishment of auspicious images, and the emphasis on exquisite imperial objects—suggest to us that *Twelve Beauties* were not typical of *meiren* paintings, but had likely been custom-made to fit the needs, tastes and intention of the imperial family, in this case Prince Yong. As the prince's own writing and three different sobriquets appear as part of pictorial designs in several of the paintings, it is believed that he must have been deeply involved in the design of the set. Wu Hung argues, for this reason, that *Twelve Beauties* went beyond the stereotype of *meiren hua* and gained their individuality by conveying the Manchu ruler's specific ideology toward Manchu-Chinese dualism. If Prince Yong's personal imprint exists in his *Twelve Beauties*, we might say that it is indeed cleverly disguised as *meiren hua*. Yinzhen manipulated every collective feature of *meiren hua* for his own purposes. In fact, the romantic nature of this popular genre might serve as a perfect means to allude in more subtle terms to otherwise delicate issues (see, for example, Yang Xin's discussion, 2011)—a topic that deserves further investigation, yet is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I only wish to point out the apparent functions of *Twelve Beauties* in the Qing court context that also set the paintings apart from being simply *meiren hua*.

On the one hand, the set must have served a function that is not too dissimilar from that of the set of twelve *gongxun tu*, discussed earlier. Like large *gongxun tu*, the life-size *Twelve Beauties* were for display and for furnishing imperial space—whether in the ladies' inner court or in princes' residences. This function explains their luxurious, decorative and auspicious appearance. On the other hand, unlike the *gongxun tu*, *Twelve Beauties* is intended for visual enjoyment, a function shared by the twelve-month *Album* depicting court ladies' activities. This is achieved not only through the exceptional visual richness the paintings offer, but also through the images of material wealth they depict. Viewed from this angle, the idealized images of beauties present them not so much as the objects of male sexual desires (as would generally have been the intention with *meiren hua*), but more as personal 'possessions': like other precious treasures, they are owned by the prince. The fact that many of the objects illustrated are faithful depictions of actual imperial possessions (many having been identified as once belonging to Prince Yong) could suggest that the ladies in *Twelve Beauties* are modelled after Yinzhen's actual consorts.

However, this might not necessarily be the case since, in theory, all desirable women should be at the princes' and emperor's disposal. Their idealized, generic images indeed serve to bear out this idea. The paintings also stand for a statement of unmatched royal privilege—having both the most ideal, desirable women and the most opulent material goods in their possession.

Qing court artists followed the general iconography of different genres for female images established in Chinese tradition to create their paintings of women. However, their reinvention of each genre was a parallel process that made those paintings distinctively Qing court products. Ultimately, the driving forces behind their reinvention were largely determined by the Qing rulers. All the paintings discussed here represent the status not only of the depicted subjects, but more importantly of their owners.

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