

Suzhou Paintings and Woodblock Prints Used as Wall Decorations and Wallpapers in Europe

Hsu Wen-Chin

Suzhou 蘇州, located in the southeastern Jiangsu Province of East China, on the lower reaches of the Yangtze River , is not far from Shanghai 上海. The city has a very long history of development, it was founded in 514 B.C., since the 10th century of the Song dynasty (960-1279), it has been an important commercial center in China.

During the Ming(1368-1644) and Qing(1645-1911)dynasties, it became a national economic, cultural and commercial center, as well as one of the largest city in the world, until the 1860 Taiping Rebellion. Although the importance of Suzhou was replaced by Shanghai after 1860, it is now still one of the most highly developed and prosperous cities in China. The city is well known for its canals, bridges and classical gardens. Among them, the classical gardens of Suzhou as well as its local drama *kunqu* 崑曲 are now in the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Suzhou has a very long and renowned tradition of painting and decorative arts. During the mid-Ming period (ca. 1465-1566) court academy declined, and in its place, Suzhou emerged as the most important center of paintings in China. The Four Masters of the Ming Dynasty (明四大家) — Shen Chou 沈周 (1427-1509), Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470-1559), Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470-1523) and Chou Ying 仇英 (ca. 1494-1552) — lived and were active there. They had many followers, thus Wu School of painting was formed and was considered as a school for prestigious literati painters. However, because of the economic prosperity and opportunities, Suzhou painters of the late Ming period mostly became professional, and thus lost their leading position to the painters in nearby areas, such as Songjiang 松江 and Huating 華亭, both in nowadays Shanghai. It is under this background that we can find Suzhou paintings by professional painters of 16th and 17th centuries in Europe.

Chinese paintings have been sent to Europe as early as the 16th century, in the beginning perhaps carried by missionaries and businessmen as gifts to friends when

they returned home from China. Gradually the demand increased, and the amount of paintings carried into Europe increased. Nowadays, we can see four mid- 16th century Chinese paintings in the collection of Schloss Ambras, outskirts of Innsbruck, Austria. They are hanging scrolls produced in Suzhou, in the subjects of landscape and bird and flower paintings.

In the Chinese Cabinet of Eggenberg Palace, Graz, Austria, there are about fifty small size (48 x 44 cm) Chinese silk paintings hung on the walls as decoration. These paintings were very likely produced in Suzhou during the Chongzhen 崇禎 period

(1627-1644) . They are in various subjects of figures, birds and flowers as well as drama and fictional themes.

In the 18th century, Suzhou became the most prominent and important woodblock print center in China. Suzhou woodblock prints produced during this period of time were very large in size (on average 110 x 50 cm) and were influenced by Western art in style, such as showing techniques of three dimensions and perspective. Suzhou woodblock prints were sold in both domestic markets and abroad. While in China none of these woodblock prints remains today, in Europe we still can find them used as wall decorations and wallpapers in palaces, castles and manors, such as in the following places:

Milton Hall, Cambridgeshire, England

Saltram, Plymouth, England

Chateau de Filiers, Normandy, France

Chateau du fayel, Le Fayel, Oise, France

Das Worlitzer Landhaus, Anhalt-Dessau, Germany

Badenburg Pavilion, Nymphenburg Palace, Munich, Germany

Lichtenwalde Castle, Niederwiesa, Germany

Esterhazy Palace, Eisenstadt, Austria

Etc.

In Europe, these 18th century Suzhou woodblock prints are often mixed with the real wallpapers produced in Guangzhou 廣州 after the 1750s. Guangzhou wallpapers are mostly hand painted and were specially produced for export to the West, therefore have very different quality and features from the Suzhou prints. Recently people started to realize the necessity and importance of differentiating these two types of products. We are on our way to understand more of this subject, and hence the artistic and cultural interaction between China and Europe in the 18th century.