

Leng Mei's Tired Reading in the Spring Boudoir: Imperial Patronage, Cultural Hybridity, and Gendered Confinement in the Qing Dynasty

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Abstract

This analysis examines Leng Mei's *Picture of Tired Reading in the Spring Boudoir*, revealing how the artist's technical mastery both served the function of elite patronage and reflected gender dynamics during the Qing Dynasty. Employing compositional strategies, spatial depth, realistic textures, and a harmonious muted palette, Leng Mei synthesized Chinese ink techniques with European chiaroscuro to create compelling realism in his art. Commissioned by the Manchu aristocracy, the work functioned dually. Its use of symbolism reflected auspicious domesticity and status, while its depiction of an educated, confined woman simultaneously fostered empathy among female viewers and catered to the male gaze through idealized beauty. As a whole, the painting serves as a multitudinous artifact of imperial power, cultural exchange, and restrictive gender norms.

Keywords

Leng Mei, Qing Dynasty, Court Painting, Cultural Hybridity.

1. Introduction

Leng Mei's *Picture of Tired Reading in the Spring Boudoir* (Figure 1) offers a window into the refined world of the early Qing Dynasty elite. Created by one of the era's foremost court painters during Emperor Yongzheng's reign, this ink-and-color silk handscroll exemplifies Leng Mei's unique synthesis of tradition and innovation. Though trained in meticulous Chinese techniques at the Imperial Art Academy, the artist subtly integrated European methods of shading and spatial depth, reflecting the cultural exchanges facilitated by Jesuit presence at court during the Yongzheng era. Commissioned by the Manchu aristocracy, the painting depicts an elegant noblewoman in her private chamber, surrounded by symbols of wealth and auspicious meaning. Through a synthesis of formal qualities, Leng Mei fulfilled his patrons' desires to display status and domestic harmony while also capturing the complex realities of elite women's secluded lives. This analysis explores how the artwork functioned as both a personal symbol of power and a reflection of its historical moment.

2. The Artist's Background

Leng Mei (1662-1742) was a Chinese court painter during the early Qing Dynasty. He worked in the capital Beijing under the patronage of the Kangxi and Yongzheng emperors. His lifelong affiliation with the imperial court helped him attract patrons of upper class status. Leng Mei belonged to a family of artisans, and quickly became a member of the prestigious Imperial Art Academy [9]. He was considered the top figure painter for a time. He learned under the teachings of court painting, which emphasized technical precision and adherence to imperial aesthetics, often painting portraits for the aristocracy. His position granted him access to both Han Chinese literati traditions and the Qing court's growing interest in hybrid artistic styles, including influences from Jesuit missionaries. Stylistically, Leng Mei was influenced by the

Song-Yuan revival in Qing art, which prized meticulous detail and lyrical composition, as well as the subtle integration of Western techniques introduced by Jesuits like Giuseppe Castiglione [10]. This led his style to combine both the delicate brushwork of Chinese traditional painting with European elements of shading and spatial depth. As Leng Mei's works were often commissions by the aristocracy, they served to celebrate Qing imperial culture and flaunt the social and economic status of his clients.



Figure 1: Picture of Tired Reading in the Spring Boudoir [16]

3. Medium

This artwork was created using ink and color on silk, a medium that is characteristic of East Asian artistic traditions. Silk painting reflects China's longstanding cultural practices and material sophistication. Silk, as a painting surface, became prominent during the earlier Tang and Song dynasties, favored for its smooth texture and durability. By the Qing Dynasty, silk remained a preferred medium for court painters like Leng Mei, as its non-absorbent surface enabled layering of ink and colors, allowing artists to create fine tones and gradients [2]. Furthermore, it was a famous commodity, an expensive material that showed the refinement and wealth of the patron. Furthermore, the horizontal handscroll is a classical Chinese format in art. Common for long horizontal landscapes, it was designed to be unrolled section by section, engaging the viewer in an immersive narrative [17].

4. Public Reception

Leng Mei was a respected painter during the Qing Dynasty, but his renown was largely confined to small elite circles. Leng Mei's status derived from his institutional role, which granted prestige but tethered his influence on the world of the imperial court and the upper class. As a court painter, his reputation was dependent on patronage from the Kangxi and Yongzheng emperors, whose commissions helped him build fame among aristocratic clients [10]. Because of the uniqueness of his clients, his art was used to showcase power and reinforce hierarchies rather than for cultivating public acclaim. Most of Leng Mei's paintings, including *Picture of*

Tired Reading in the Spring Boudoir, were created to be shown to a selective audience, either displayed in private households or elite collections for the client to view. This made his works inaccessible to the general populace.

5. Analysis of Formal Qualities

5.1. Emphasis

The artist effectively draws the eyes of the audience towards the female figure in the painting by manipulating the composition and colors, creating a guide to the visual priority of the viewer. The painting displays the domination-subordination theory as the female figure is the major focal point, while the surrounding areas are complementary to her. The artist incorporates the compositional strategy of the Rule of Thirds into the painting to attract the eyes of the viewer to the figure. If the canvas is separated into a 3x3 grid, the torso of the figure will be situated exactly along the left 1/3 line, her lower body on the right 1/3 line, and her face and hand on the point where the vertical and horizontal lines of the grid intersect. The human eye is naturally drawn to these locations slightly skewed from the center [15]. Hence, the female figure grabs the viewer's attention. Aside from attraction of the eye, emphasis is reinforced by contrast of color. In terms of color values, the figure is the lightest and whitest point on the canvas. This indicates that she is the center of interest and helps her stand out from the darker surroundings. As such, both compositional and color strategies assist the painting in demanding the attention of the viewer.

5.2. Color

The artist constructs the color palette in a way that establishes a harmonious diversity within the painting, enhancing the visual appeal to the audience as well as engendering a feeling of peacefulness. One way the painter creates variety is through color temperature. The cool tints of the figure's pale green clothing with Prussian blue cuffs contrast with the warm shades of the surrounding wooden interior. The painting comprises of both the cool serenity of the attire and the inviting tones of the environment, allowing a dynamic visual experience as the eyes of the viewer travels across the canvas. Despite the diversity of the colors, they are overall consistent in their low intensity of saturation, which maintains a sense of tranquility in the artwork. The long robe of the figure in the foreground is painted in subdued hues of pale green and cream, giving it pastel-like soft qualities. Moreover, the color palette of the background is also muted, composing of colors that resemble nature, such as the yellow colors of the walls and dark brown of the furniture. Color psychology has found that people tend to associate earthy brown colors with the natural world and feel emotions of reliability and relaxation. Hence, through artistic renders of color, the painter creates a cohesive yet diverse palette and successfully makes the viewer sense a feeling of congruity.

5.3. Movement

The artist arranges line directions to create movement, generating a realistic quality to the viewer and creating an accurate anatomy. Mimicking the behaviors of soft fabric, the artist encapsulates the easiness for them to bend and wrinkle according to movement of the body, establishing realism in the painting. To be specific, the folds on the long robe that the woman figure wears form a "S" shape, in a vortex-like pattern. This direction corresponds with the motion of her torso which leans sideways from where she stands. The movement of the slithering lines indicate the shapes of the folds, giving the clothing portrayed in the painting lifelike similarities to reality [22]. Furthermore, the folding lines of the robe on both the turned right shoulder and above the kneeling leg of the woman move to merge at a singular point. This sense of movement accurately portrays fabric gathering together according to the shape of the body. Although the woman's body is covered, the audience can infer her accurate anatomy from

the direction of the lines on the fabric, such as the location of the pubic bone and underside of the arm. Hence, through movement, the artist produces photograph-like renders of fabric and human body parts and their proportions, like towards a real person, this realism kindles more emotional connection and affection from the audience with the painting.

5.4. Space

The artist uses pictorial space to create a realistic spatial relationship in the painting. The painting can be divided into three layers of space. This is evident to the viewer because the artist utilizes both the techniques of overlapping and size variation to establish pictorial space, thereby creating an illusion of third-dimensional depth on a two-dimensional surface [13]. Overlapping can be seen with the dog obscuring part of the woman's robe as well as the woman partly covering the table and wall. It effectively cues the viewer the location of each element in relation to each other, specifically, that the woman, the dog, and the square table are the foreground, the Root Art incense table in the middle-ground, and the wall recede into the background. The artist also manipulates the size of objects. For instance, the incense table is much shorter and smaller than the woman, so it seems to be further away from the viewer. This is based off of the knowledge that distant objects appear smaller and closer objects appear larger to the human eye. Hence, the difference in sizes create a lifelike scene. Furthermore, In the background, the artist painted three lines, showing a corner of the interior where two adjacent walls meet the floor. This creates the illusion of an enclosure around the woman and the furniture, looking similar to a real-life room. By forming pictorial space, and establishing three-dimensional depth, the artist makes the setting and model real and believable to the audience.

5.5. Texture

The artist's artistic choice of implementing implied natural textures throughout the artwork creates an illusion of realness and authenticity to the viewer. The home interior in the background of the painting involves traditional Chinese furniture of a variety of styles, including both rustic and artisan pieces. The artist portrays the differences in designs by using varying implied textures. For instance, when painting the Root Art incense table on the right of the canvas, which is a natural, crude piece of wood, the artist uses irregular, organic shapes to portray the bumpy tree cavities, as well as painting concentrated small dashes and dots on its surface to capture the rough and grainy texture of the tree roots [20]. On the other hand, the wood of the square table on the left side of the canvas is painted with a smooth implied texture, where the artist used a flat expanse of color without imperfections to indicate its evenness and glossiness. By imitating real life and representing rustic and exquisitely styled furniture with different textures, the artist gives the painting a realistic quality. Furthermore, the artist also portrays texture through the facial features of the woman, layering thin, regular lines together to create an implied slick and uniform texture of hair and eyelashes. The range of textures on dissimilar furniture and the realistic hair allows the artwork to seem lifelike to the audience, engendering fondness and emotional affinity towards the painted woman, as if she and her surrounding are real.

6. Purposes of the Artist

6.1. Purpose of Appealing to the Client

Commissioned art is inherently designed to serve the needs and preferences of the sponsoring client. During the time when the painting was produced, the artist had been dismissed from his original position as a court painter, leading art historians to believe that he monetized on his fame by opening personal workshops [21]. This has led to several art historians believing that this artwork is a commission from a client. For one, the identity of the painted woman is likely

to be an aristocrat, as shown from her triple earrings, which is a fashion custom unique to Manchu culture. This detail confirms the purpose of the painting, as the upper class of the Qing Dynasty were exclusively composed of people of Manchu ethnicity, and were the only people that afforded portraiture paintings to convey wealth and status [22]. Hence, it is likely that the painting was a commission created with the intention of catering to the social wishes of the client.

6.2. Purpose of Wishing for an Auspicious and Romantic Household

In the painting, the artist incorporates symbolisms in the artwork for it to serve the purpose of representing lucky wishes. In the painting, on the table beside the woman, is a plate of "Buddha's hands". It is an aromatic fruit with a history of being used as a natural herbal fragrance. The shape and pronunciation of Buddha's hand has extended meanings in Chinese culture: Its affiliation with Buddhism, as seen from its name, made people attribute capabilities of warding off evil spirits and disasters to it. "Buddha's hand" is also homophonous with 'fortune and longevity', which are auspicious wishes. Its finger-like protrusions are also connected with many children and fortunes [18]. Therefore, the fruit was considered a cultural good luck charm, and its appearance in the painting hints that the purpose of the painting was for its owner to show optimistic wishes in the household. Moreover, the artwork also employs symbols flaunting the wealth and romanticism of the household. For instance, the Mongolian gundog by the woman's feet, which is an adored pet, as can be seen from its collar [20]. It is a common house animal of wealthy Manchu families, symbolizing the comfort and lovingness of domestic life. Thus, utilizing various symbols, the artwork is a decoration to the client's household that engender good luck and romantic atmospheres.

7. Functions of the Artwork

7.1. Function of Engendering Empathy from Female Audiences

The poem motif within the painting functions to elicit empathy with its female audiences on an emotional level. The depiction of a pining woman in the artwork invites the female viewer to project their own emotional and intellectual engagement onto the scene. From the words it is identifiable that the scroll held by the woman is *Poetry of Famous Socialites*, an anthology of romantic poetry by women writers. Chinese historian Yanyi Gao points out that this piece of literature often revolved around themes of love, longing, and the struggles of womanhood. These resonated deeply with the lived experiences of the female audience, who were often educated upper class women with minimal duties and sense of purpose in their lives aside from tending to their lovers or husbands [21]. Thus, the poem motif in these paintings serves as a conduit for emotional identification, allowing female viewers to see their own reflections in the depicted women and fostering a sense of shared experience and empathy. Therefore, the poem symbol shows the female experience of love and pining for her lover, which would have functioned as an emotional affinity with women at the time.

7.2. Function of Fantasizing the Ideal Woman Under the Male Gaze

The bodily attributes of the woman model in the painting allows it to function as a fantasy of the ideal woman under the Male Gaze of the Qing Dynasty. The painting belongs to a genre of Qing Dynasty paintings called Boudoir Beauty, which meticulously depict the female figure by adhering to the aesthetic standards outlined in texts like Xu Zhen's *The Beauty Manual* and Wei Yong's *The Pleasure of Beauty* [19]. These texts reflect cultural obsessions with idealized feminine beauty, including specific descriptions such as "a willow-like waist," and "eyebrows like distant mountains", which match the woman's appearance. These visual elements are deliberate constructions of an idealized femininity that catered to the male-dominated literati culture of the time. In addition, the domestic surroundings and the inclusion of props symbolic

to intellect, such as the books and musical instrument, elevate her status to that of a “virtuous” beauty by Qing standards. A duality where the woman is both intellectually idealized and visually objectified epitomizes the Qing Dynasty's Male Gaze, which sought to encapsulate the physical allure and intellectual elegance of the ideal woman. Thus, the painting reflects a gendered fantasy that served the cultural and social expectations of its male viewers.

8. Varied Context of the Artwork

8.1. Religious-Political Context: Consolidation of Imperial Power under the Yongzheng Emperor

The painting was created around the year 1724 in the Qing Dynasty, during the early reign of the Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1722–1735) of China. The Qing Dynasty was founded by the Manchu people, a northeastern Asian ethnic group perceived as “foreign” by many Han Chinese. To prevent rebellion and secure long-term rule after conquering China, the Qing needed to assert social and political dominance. Hence, this period in history was marked by intense political centralization and administrative reform. The emperor's style of ruling focused on strengthening bureaucracy, specifically consolidating Manchu authority over Han Chinese elites. For instance, key positions in the bureaucracy and military were reserved for Manchus, ensuring their dominance in governance [4]. This was significant because the aristocracy and upper class of Qing Dynasty society were generally comprised of people of the Manchu ethnicity. Leng Mei, the artist of *Picture of Tired Reading in the Spring Boudoir*, was a court painter affiliated with the imperial workshops. The theme of his works, Manchu aristocrats in luxurious environments, is influenced by ideas of Manchu supremacy that emperor wanted to promote in the regime in order to maintain political prowess.

8.2. Historical Context: Eastern and Western Cultural Exchange Through Jesuit Missionaries

Western artistic methods entered China via Jesuit missionaries, a group of Roman Catholics. They played an important role in introducing Western culture, knowledge, and technology to the Qing court, including European artistic techniques. By the 1720s, figures like Giuseppe Castiglione, a Jesuit painter employed by the Kangxi and Yongzheng emperors, blended European realism with traditional Chinese brushwork to create unique artworks reminiscent of both cultures [7]. Meanwhile, increased global trade networks with the western world during this period exposed Chinese artists to Western prints and oil paintings [6]. Western paintings embodied distinct styles different from traditional Chinese paintings. The fact that Leng Mei used these hybrid artistic practices displays the cultural exchange of this historical period: While his paintings retain traditional ink-and-color techniques, the chiaroscuro and the establishment of three-dimensional space are characteristic of European realism. This synthesis of techniques from different origins aligns with the historical context of cultural contact and communication between the Western world and China.

8.3. Social Context: Elite Qing Women's Restricted Gender Roles

China in the 18th century saw rigid enforcement of Confucian philosophy. This was due to Manchu rulers hoping to engage with the Han people through their culture, as well as secure power in spite of ethnic differences by putting emphasis on Confucian teachings of remaining loyal to the ruler [12]. Within this school of thought, women were expected to embody traditional virtues like obedience, modesty and wifeliness, and their lives were largely confined to the inner quarters of the household, or the “boudoir”, without much contact with society [11]. Despite the orthodox Confucian philosophy discouraging women to pursue education, Qing elite women in prosperous regions, especially in wealthy Manchu families, gained access to literacy and were able to participate in literature circles. The painting's subject, a wealthy

aristocrat woman reading in the boudoir, captures the paradox of elite Qing women's lives. They are educated but isolated, cultured but idle. The artwork offering a documentation of the era's gendered expectations, how, despite the privilege of upper-class women, they were still confined compared to their male counterparts.

9. Conclusion

Leng Mei's *Picture of Tired Reading in the Spring Boudoir* testifies for the complex interplay of artistic innovation, imperial ideology, and social constraint in the early Qing Dynasty. Through his synthesis of delicate Chinese brushwork and realistic European spatial techniques, Leng Mei achieved a compelling realism that served the demands of his elite Manchu patrons, showcasing their status, material refinement, and aspirations for domestic harmony. Yet, the painting simultaneously reveals the era's societal contradictions: the educated yet confined woman embodies the tension between female intellectual potential and rigid Confucian gender roles, while the tranquil boudoir setting masks the political consolidation of power under Yongzheng. Overall, the work is a sophisticated visual document of its time, showing future scholars how art reinforced social hierarchies while subtly reflecting the realities beneath them.

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