

exhibition review

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Reoccurring Imagery: Celebratory Decorative Arts and the Work of Xie Zhiliu

Mastering the Art of Chinese Painting: Xie Zhiliu, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 6 – July 25, 2010

Celebration: The Birthday in Chinese Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 27 – August 15, 2010

Two of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's current special exhibitions examine the common element of traditional imagery in Chinese art. While centering on very different topics, these exhibitions both use a considered diversity of materials to reference a visual continuity between the past and the present. *Mastering the Art of Chinese Painting: Xie Zhiliu* features work by the prolific and well-regarded twentieth century painter and calligrapher. The exhibition, however, is as much about the process of traditional Chinese artistic study as it is about Xie's own oeuvre.

The exhibition begins with a well-preserved collection of Xie's early line drawings, which were completed by tracing celebrated paintings of figures, birds and flowers, including those done by the late Ming dynasty painter Chen Hongshou (1599-1652), and Buddhist figures from the Dunhuang cave murals. As in Western schools, meticulous study of earlier artwork constituted a major component of traditional Chinese artistic education. Through combining these precedents, the artist was not only expected to know and learn from his artistic forbearers, but also to provide his own improvements in rendering, composition and tonality.

By displaying a roughly chronological span of Xie's work alongside preparatory studies, viewers are given a rare glimpse into his artistic process. The mixture of work from rough drawings to completed paintings creates the feeling of having been given access into the artist's studio for a behind-the-scenes look. While doing justice to his meticulous skill and thorough training, the exhibition lacks any context regarding the forces impacting artistic production during the twentieth century. Without any reference to Xie's political or social realities, we are left wondering about the impact on his (and others') reflection on artistic works from the past. Sudden departures in the style and content of his drawings and paintings, as well as an abrupt shift to studying calligraphy in the 1960s, are left unexplored. This absence is a missed opportunity to examine how these tumultuous decades impacted the artistic study of a celebrated painter and scholar.

The galleries one floor above the Xie exhibition showcase traditional decorative motifs connected to longevity in *Celebration: The Birthday in Chinese Art*. Beginning with an impressive 12-part series of painted and embroidered scrolls depicting a celebratory scene, the exhibition highlights many stunning examples of the traditional finery visitors might have seen on display on just such an occasion.

For anyone with a knowledge of Chinese art, motifs featured on the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasty exhibition pieces are familiar: peaches, cranes, butterflies, bats, and gourds. United in their references to old age, the passing of time and the hope for immortality, the persistence of this symbolic imagery across nearly six centuries of artistic production and a multitude of physical forms is a testimony to the power of this visual language. Daoist imagery and the use of the Chinese character for longevity also frequently recur. Pieces in the exhibition range from dishes and small medallions to massive painted scrolls, elaborately painted vases and a carved lacquer screen. The assembly of such a vast array of work allows the message of celebration to fully emerge, thereby adding an additional layer of meaning beyond pure aesthetics and the significance of individual pieces.

Particularly impressive are the four ceremonial Qing dynasty robes. Hung as if on an invisible human form, their vivid colors and startling sizes prompt reflection on the individuals who might have made and wore them. Like glimpsing inside an artist's sketchbook, the undeniable humanity in the clothes reminds the viewer that through the reuse of visual imagery, the past continues to manifest itself in present lives, be it in work and study or in times of joy and celebration.



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