



The Figurative Works of Chen Hongshou (1599–1652): Authentic Voices/Expanding Markets (Visual Culture in Early Modernity)

By Tamara Heimarck Bentley

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Despite the importance of Chen Hongshou (1599-1652) as an artist and scholar of the Ming period, until now no full length study in English has focused on his work. Author Tamara H. Bentley takes a broadly interdisciplinary approach, treating Chen's oeuvre in relation to literary themes and economic changes, and linking these larger concerns to visual analyses. Considering Chen's paintings and prints alongside Chen's romance drama commentaries and prefaces and his collected writings (particularly poetry), Bentley sheds new light not only on Chen, but also on an important cultural moment in the first half of the seventeenth century. Through analysis of Chen's figure paintings and print designs, Bentley examines the artist's engagement with the values of "authenticity" and "emotion," which were part of a larger discourse stressing idiosyncrasy, the individual voice, and vernacular literature. She contrasts these values with the commercial aspects of his production, geared at an expanding art market of well-to-do buyers, excavating the apparent contradiction inherent in the two pursuits. In the end, she suggests, the emphasis on the "authentic" voice was marketed to a broad field of anonymous buyers. Though her primary focus is on Chen Hongshou, Bentley's investigation ultimately concerns not only this individual artist, but also the effect of early modern changes on an artist's mode of working and his self-image, in the West as well as the East. The study touches upon expanding international trade and the rise of middle class art markets (including print markets), not only in China but also in the Dutch Republic in circa 1630-1650. Bentley investigates the specific rhetoric of different categories of images, including Chen's non-literal figurative works; literal commemorative portraits; his printed romance-drama illustrations; and his printed playing cards. Bentley's investigation takes in issues of studio practice (including various types of image replicati

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Editorial Review

Review

'The Figurative Works of Chen Hongshou is a smart book by one of the field's smartest young talents. Through the lens of Chen Hongshou's paintings and woodblock prints, Tamara Bentley ably discusses the complex philosophical tenets, market economy, and social inversions of the late Ming. Arguing for a discourse of authenticity, her nuanced explanation helps readers understand how forgeries and replications could have roles as necessary as the original art objects.' Katharine P. Burnett, University of California, Davis, USA 'The Figurative Works of Chen Hongshou is a work of substantial interest, which offers a systematic consideration of Chen's woodblock print production over the course of his career. The account is set within the context of the late Ming market for woodblock print illustrations and illustrated books, and the intellectual milieu of writers such as Li Zhi, Zhang Dai, the Yuan brothers, and Chen Jiru, who were concerned with qualities of spontaneity, authenticity, direct expression of feeling, and popular cultural forms.' Richard Vinograd, Stanford University, USA 'The commercialization of Ming life and the positioning of its economy within circuits of global exchange provide two broad contexts within which Tamara Bentley sets her study of the eccentric painter Chen Hongshou. This is a sensible approach to the artist, who produced the strangest figurative images in late Ming art.' Sixteenth Century Journal 'One of the merits of the book lies in its focus on Chen's work as a designer of print illustrations, an understudied area when compared with the study of his paintings ... this is an ambitious study that draws on the multidisciplinary strands of intellectual history, literary studies, economic analyse and formal art history.' East Asian Publishing and Society '... readers will readily appreciate the quality of the scholarship - which ranges across art history, literary criticism, and social and intellectual history - and the richness of Bentley's argument about Chen Hongshou's artistic practice, learning and market in late Ming China.' China Review International

About the Author

Tamara Heimarck Bentley is Associate Professor of Asian Art History at Colorado College, USA.

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