OBLIQUE DRAWING
A HISTORY OF ANTI-PERSPECTIVE

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introduction by
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By the end of the sixteenth century, Renaissance perspective had become established in the West as the most realistic system of representation. Having lost all symbolic significance, it had become a convention in artistic practice and had begun to be studied with a sort of antiquarian fascination by mathematicians. The studies carried out by Simon Stevin, Guidobaldo del Monte, François d'Aguilon, Girard Desargues, and Jean Dubreuil contributed to its definitive codification as an analytical-geometrical method, with Jean-Victor Poncelet's projective geometry completing the process at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

But just as linear perspective reached the apex of its acceptance as a convention, suddenly Jesuit missionaries exported it to China as a vehicle of Christian iconography. Matteo Ricci, the founder of the China mission in 1583, brought late sixteenth-century European perspective oil paintings with him. It was the first time that Western anthropocentric representations had appeared on the boundless horizon of Chinese art. Chinese painting made use of a consolidated method of oblique parallel projection and was organized into precise genres, obeying rigid descriptive rules. Balletic calligraphy and evanescent watercolor effects reiterated the philosophical and lyrical character of art. The representation was not a transcription of direct observation of the real but of what the inner eye was capable of grasping. The use of parallel orthogonal perspective abolished the primacy of the viewpoint and there were no depth cues, such as vanishing points or converging lines, only the contrivances of aerial perspective shrouding distances in mysterious vapors.

It is not surprising that this technique of painting struck the Jesuits as weak, while the Chinese found Western paintings to be "violent" and "devoid of any artistry." "The Chinese," wrote Ricci to his superior, "do not know how to paint in oils, nor do they shade the things that they paint, with the result that all their paintings are dull and totally devoid of life."
At the end of 1610, after twenty years of petitioning, Ricci was finally admitted to the presence of the Emperor and presented him with three oil paintings. The Son of Heaven's reaction exceeded the Jesuit's expectations: after having exclaimed, "This is the living God," the Emperor venerated the marvelous image with "incense and perfumes." But he was so perturbed by the appearance of these gifts that he kept only the painting of Baby Jesus, dispatching the other two (Salus Populi Romani and The Virgin between Jesus and John the Baptist) to the Emperor Mother, who, perturbed in her turn, deposited them forthwith in the imperial treasury.²

During his long wait for admittance to the capital city, Ricci had the opportunity to witness the extraordinary reaction of the Chinese to strongly shadowed perspectival representation. Painting played an important role in the subtle and complex workings of the Jesuit missionary strategy, along with lenses, robots, hydraulic machines, and astronomical knowledge. Captatio benevolentiae comprised not only behaving in a humble and respectful manner toward the culture and language of the host people (something often omitted by Franciscans and Dominicans), but also the skillful intertwining of faith and wonderment.

However, the new perspective vehicle contained one insuperable contradiction. The religious images appeared to the Emperor's eyes solely as technical marvels, and as such were accorded an almost religious respect. The evangelical message was ignored since, for the Chinese, the manner of representation was not realistic.

In order to make those images more convincing and theoretically more effective, it was necessary to familiarize the Chinese with the rules that governed perspective. Thus, alongside an obstinate and often futile evangelical activity, the Jesuits also embarked upon a program of scientific acculturation. In 1606, Ricci had his pupil Xu Guangqi translate the first six books of Euclid's Elements, an indispensable premise for perspectival construction.³ The translation "was a very wondrous thing, showing with great clarity a manner of proof and demonstration, the like of which has never again been seen."³ Euclidean geometry was a complete novelty for Chinese culture. Although deductive reasoning comparable to that of the Greeks may be found in the ancient Mohist Canons of the fourth century BC, the geometrical cognitions of the Chinese, from the Han Period onward, were limited to practical formulae for the approximate calculation of surfaces and volumes. As far as optics was concerned, as Joseph Needham writes, the theory of the emission of visual rays has always been extraneous to Chinese theory.⁴ Euclid's error, which had permitted the
formulation of Western perspective, was thus not known in China. Even the
definition of plane, already present in the Mohist Canons, carried no optical or
geometrical implications, since a plane is a surface that never reaches its sides.

But given the Chinese disinclination for generalist laws and theorizing,
tangible demonstrations were necessary in order to convince them that
perspective was the right way to see and therefore to represent; in short, the
right way to think. Sight and thought had to converge in harmony toward
that magical point where the parallel lines met and where the Western painting
tradition placed the image and the idea of the divine infinite. Nineteen
years after Ricci’s death, the Jesuit Francesco Sambiasi published a book on
perspective titled Risposte alle questioni sul sonno e sulla pittura (Replies to
questions on sleep and on painting), and later Father Buglio presented the
Emperor with three paintings that exemplified the rules of perspective. On
this count, the astronomer Father Ferdinand Verbiest, who had been elevated
to the grade of Mandarin and who was the director of the Astronomical Tribunal
of Beijing, wrote: “Perspectiva lucidissimus suis oculis prima omnium oculos
Imperatoris in se convertit... Vix credi potest quantum haec ars omnium
rapuit oculos non solum pekinensium.”

But if the victory of European astronomy was total and was accepted by the
Chinese for practical reasons as the best method for ordering those rites that
objectified their relationship with the heavens, the Emperor, and his subjects,
the same did not happen with painting. Perspective was certainly “marvelous,”
but that did not make it better than traditional methods of painting, and the
Chinese understood that its seduction concealed a “conversion” that had not
been asked for and that conflicted with the attributes of the Emperor, who
was both mother and father of his subjects. Resistance to perspective was
thus very tenacious, and although they made use of it, even those painters
who had converted to Christianity remained substantially bound to tradi-
tional Chinese painting. The attempts to acquaint the Chinese with the rules
of perspective continued, however. In 1729, the greatest painter who worked
in China, Giuseppe Castiglione, arranged for the translation and publication
of the fundamental work of his teacher Andrea Pozzo. Though this attempt
was met with little success, Castiglione was, along with Verbiest, one of the
seven Jesuits elevated to the status of Mandarin between 1581 and 1681, and
therefore he played a role of some prestige at the imperial court. In the end it
was the rigidity of the Confucian China of the Mandarins and literati, seduced
by science and by the dignity of Ricci’s life at the end of the Ming Dynasty, as
well as by Castiglione afterward, that managed to colonize the colonialists.

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Giuseppe Castiglione, Kazakh People Present
Tribute Horses, eighteenth century, detail.
Paris, Musée Guimet.


In his *History of Wordless Poetry*, dedicated to the painting of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), Jiang Shaochu writes: “Li Madou [Matteo Ricci] brought with him an image of the Lord of the Heavens according to the Western countries: it is a woman carrying a child in her arms ... the figures have a majesty and elegance that is quite beyond the abilities of Chinese painters.” The admiration of the Chinese for the technical aspects of this achievement was on a level with their indifference to its religious significance. It was precisely in order to get around this contradiction that Jesuit policy almost completely gave up its attempt to impose perspectival methods of representation. Putting into practice the maxim “act as a Roman among the Romans and as a Greek among the Greeks,” the Jesuits were “Chinese with the Chinese,” assuming Chinese names, clothes, and customs. And little by little, they brought Christian iconography into the scope of Chinese methods of representation.

When, around 1620, Giovanni da Rocha’s *Method for Praying the Rosary* was published, Geronimo Nadal’s illustrations, which had been prepared to accompany the text, were redrawn according to the Chinese method of oblique drawing. A century later, Castiglione himself ended by painting in parallel perspective.

For Chinese culture, parallel projection was a sort of symbolic form, profoundly rooted in a pictorial experience that knew almost no interruption until the recent past. Changing the way of seeing, and therefore of representing, meant changing the mode of thinking, which was a futile exercise as long as it was conceived in terms of a conversion from the outside. Additionally, the attempt to institute a single viewpoint contradicted the very roots of Chinese thought, in which man is not the measure of all things. Rather, according to the Taoist conception, it is nature that expresses itself through the artist. And if it was accepted that perspectival representation was closer in appearance to vision, as early as the ninth century Sou Chie had written: “He who judges painting according to the concept of resemblance shows the understanding of a child.”

The same concept of realism, in a naturalistic sense, never found particular fortune in Chinese painting. In a text by Shen Kuo of 1086, the “realistic” attempts of the painter Li Cheng (907–960) are criticized for their depiction of things “from below.” Shen Kuo writes, “That is all wrong. In general the proper way of painting a landscape is to see the small from the viewpoint of the large (sia kuan hsiao), just as one looks at artificial mountains in gardens (as one walks about).” This angle of totality is not just an aerial view, but also oblique parallel projection: cavalier viewpoint.
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Late Qing representation showing the building of a city wall.
It is true that oblique projection was incapable of rendering depth, since its geometrical nature meant that it could not cope with diminutions or convergences. But Chinese artists had made recourse to expedients that were able to give the impression of "distancing." Long before Leonardo introduced it into Western painting, Chinese landscape painters were able practitioners of aerial or atmospheric perspective. The painter-scholar Guo Xi (tenth century) was the first to codify ways of representing the third dimension in landscape painting. His text distinguished three types of distances: high distance (gao-yuan) was customarily used in vertical format works, in which a series of towering mountain ranges, each constituting a horizon in itself, is seen from below looking upward; deep distance composition (shen-yuan), the most commonly used, with the spectator placed at a high vantage point looking down; and level distance (ping-yuan), in which the scenery stretches away broadly and the spectator has an uninterrupted view into infinity.12

One of the most serious errors in painting was failing to distinguish between near and far. Generally, when distance could not be rendered atmospherically, the problem was resolved by placing an object, its size not necessarily diminished, in the highest part of the composition.

The Jesuit painters not only had to take such codifications into account, but also the question of the disposition of objects within scenes, which, while relatively free in Western painting, was governed by very precise rules in China. These regulations are exhaustively described in the famous Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting, published for the first time in 1679 by the Wang brothers.13 This work exhorted the artist not to paint water without showing the spring, not to paint landscape without a wild region, a road without both an entrance and an exit, a stone without two sides, a tree with less than four branches, and so forth. Compared to such levels of exactitude, which the court painters and literati carried out with a high degree of naturalness, the advice contained in Federico Borromeo's De pictura14 must have seemed to the Jesuit painters to be hopelessly bland, and yet painfully restrictive of their artistic activity.

For all these reasons, perspective construction and its resultant deformations appeared to Chinese eyes to be false and devoid of artistry. They perceived heavily shadowed areas as dark blotches that disfigured the compositional harmony. Sir John Barrow quotes the Emperor himself as passing a very telling judgment on Western perspective: "On enquiry, I found that Cast[i]gione was a missionary of great repute at court, where he executed a number of paintings, but was expressly directed by the Emperor to paint all his subjects after the Chinese manner, and not like those of Europe, with broad masses of shade and the distant objects scarcely visible, observing, as one of the missionaries told me, that the imperfections of the eye afforded no reason why the objects of nature should also be copied as imperfect. This idea of the Emperor accords with a remark made by one of his ministers, who came to see the portrait of His Britannic Majesty, and said 'that it was great pity it should have been spoiled by the dirt upon the face,' pointing, at the same time, to the broad shade of the nose."

With this peremptory and disarming statement, the attempt to introduce perspective to China reached its end. With the dissolution of the Society of Jesus in 1773, the China mission was also abandoned, leaving space for missions of a more commercial nature.