

Conservation of a Group of Early Nineteenth-Century Chinese Export Floral Paintings

ABSTRACT

This paper described the technical analysis and conservation treatment of a group of twenty-nine early nineteenth-century Chinese export floral paintings executed in Canton (Guangzhou), from the collection of the Worcester Art Museum.

The paintings of flowers were bound in one gathering and have a Chinese silk brocade cover with straps. Each extremely thin and brittle Chinese paper was locally glued onto a thicker Chinese paper backing. The condition of the paper support varied from fair to very poor. Some of the paintings have names of flowers written in Chinese, but most of them do not have any inscription. The pigments are opaque, and some were flaking. There are glazes over the pigments, which intensify the effect of shininess and depth.

These export floral paintings were highly valued by the Dutch and English East India Company and by European botanists. Produced primarily for botanical studies, they were made on Western paper or Chinese paper such as *mianlin*, *xuan*, or pith paper by anonymous local artists in Canton, either independently or under European supervision. The styles of floral paintings vary from representations of botanical species to artistic renderings that combine Western style with Chinese flower-and-bird painting. Like traditional Chinese floral paintings, the plants here are usually outlined in ink using the *shanggou* (double stroke) technique, which is fine yet firm. A similar technique has been described by Wang Fang Chuen as the second of four main techniques used in traditional Chinese flower painting, where the plant or flower was painted in ink outlines with colors filled in.

Scientific analysis was carried out for the identification of pigments, binding media, and sizing agents, as well as fiber analysis using polarized light microscopy, ultraviolet light, x-ray fluorescence (XRF) microspectrography, and Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) microspectrometry. The findings indicate some of the materials and techniques used in the production of nineteenth-century Chinese export paintings. The conservation treatment of these paintings included adhesive removal, separation of supports, consolidation, mending, and lining.

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