
“Intention was everything. Faking, or the art of deception, was as frowned upon by Chinese scholars and collectors as it was by their Western counterparts,” writes Nicholas Pearce in his introduction to Original Intentions. In seven well-illustrated scholarly essays an international group of curators and professors explores concepts of authenticity, replication, imitation, and forgery in Chinese art from ancient through contemporary periods, with an uncommon focus on three-dimensional media from decorative arts to contemporary installations.

Wei-Cheng Lin’s chapter titled “Ink Rubbing and Its Related Ideas in Contemporary Chinese Art,” exemplifies the new scholarship in this collection. Ink rubbing, an ancient means of reproducing and disseminating text and images from carved stone, retains the tactile evidence of the carvings in ways that photography or copying do not. Lin uses ink rubbing, a collective cultural practice handed down through generations, to discuss contemporary artists’ rejection of tangibility as transmission from the past. Many Chinese artists working today draw upon but alter or even negate past traditions, as in Xu Bing’s Ghosts Pounding the Wall, Song Dong’s Printing on Water, or Qiu Zhejie’s Twenty-Four Solar Terms.

Chapters on “Western Chinese art history,” restoration of wall paintings, inscriptions on ancient bronzes, and analysis of forgeries round out this diverse collection. Shane McCausland’s essay, “Copying and Transmitting, Knowledge and Nonsense: From the Great Encyclopedia to A Book from the Sky,” contrasts Xu Bing’s 1987 work with the eleven thousand volumes of the Ming dynasty Great Encyclopedia of the Yongle Reign, an attempt to organize and transmit vast knowledge. Xu’s work references the form of older books, but contains four thousand fabricated and thus unreadable characters. Jason Steuber’s essay, “Qing Dynasty Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong: Rule through Replication in Architecture and the Arts,” brings together objects from imperial collections to trace replication and dissemination of imagery that legitimized cultural authority.

These wide-ranging and timely analyses are best suited for readers at research libraries and art museums, but are accessible to those with less exposure to Chinese art. Each essay includes extensive bibliographic citations and notes on the text. The book concludes with supplemental materials: a map of China with a chronology of dynasties and historical periods, a concordance of transliterated terms, and an index. Original Intentions is an oversize, heavy volume with high production values: a sturdy hardcover binding with a dust jacket, printed endpapers, and plentiful, crisp color plates on bright paper.

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