

On the Similarities and Differences Between Eastern and Western Art Cultures through Portraits of Military Attire

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Abstract:

This study compares the similarities and differences between Eastern and Western cultures in the 17th century through the analysis of character images, features, backgrounds, forms, and content in two artworks - Emperor Qianlong's Grand Military Parade and Portrait of Louis XIV in Military Attire on Horseback. It further analyzes the cultural phenomena and artistic expressions behind these works. From other artists' works showing military dress, the artistic wisdom is reflected, and the fate of Qianlong's military dress reflects the final glory and decline of the Qing Empire.

Keywords:

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Emperor Qianlong's Grand Military Parade
Portrait of Louis XIV in Military Attire on Horseback

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1. Background of Emperor Qianlong's Grand Military Parade

In the 17th century, both China and France reached the peak of feudal authoritarian rule. The Kangxi and Qianlong Reign marked the economic, political, and cultural pinnacle of the entire Qing Dynasty. The rulers of the Qing Dynasty successfully suppressed rebellions, stabilized the south, and secured the northwest. The agricultural policies promoted by them at that time fundamentally solidified the dynasty's rule. In cultural development, Emperor Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong actively studied Chinese traditional culture, aiming to maintain their rule. Kangxi once said that he had been saturated with Confucian classics since he was five. Many

artworks left during the Kangxi and Qianlong periods show that they described themselves as scholars, ancient saints, and gods. In "Emperor Qianlong Celebrating the Lantern Festival" painted by Giuseppe Castiglione, Qianlong's image is to resemble a Taoist deity holding a ruyi-scepter, wearing a tall hairpin and loose robes^[1]. Similarly, in "A Portrait of Emperor Qianlong," Castiglione depicts Emperors Yongzheng and Qianlong dressed in loose robes and sleeves, holding bamboo and passing plum blossoms, embodying the image of ancient scholars, which reflects Qianlong's love and pursuit of Han culture (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. The Qianlong Emperor's Reading by Lang Shining.

The Qing emperors' cultural aesthetics were close to the aesthetic tastes of traditional Chinese art, vividly demonstrating that the Qing emperors wanted to dialogue with ancient Chinese saints through their portraits, attempting to gain cultural identity. Such passion reflects the emperors' personal preferences, and more importantly, it tries to weaken the cultural and ethnic opposition between Manchus and Han Chinese, achieving the goal of stability^[2].

2. Analysis of Emperor Qianlong's Grand Military Parade

In "Emperor Qianlong's Grand Military Parade" painted by Giuseppe Castiglione in 1739, it depicts the emperor in full military attire during a military parade. The emperor needed to wear military attire (also known as grand parade armor) for reviewing the Eight Banners. The entire attire was divided into eleven parts, made of silk and gold. Unlike the more realistic and detailed portrayal of the horse and Emperor Kangxi in other works, Qianlong and the background in this painting are treated differently. The emperor's face is in a 3/4 side view with no expression, which is related to the Confucian culture that emphasizes "not showing one's emotions." The emperor's facial features are depicted with light ink to create a stereotypical feel. Influenced by Zhao Mengfu's paintings, the horse emphasizes the emperor's gorgeous military attire and accessories symbolizing imperial status. According to records, Emperor Qianlong was

only 155 cm tall, which Castiglione did not deliberately conceal but realistically portrayed^[3]. In the background, for the grassland, he first used the texture technique of Chinese painting, with additional foreground grass leaves that exhibit obvious light and shadow perspective, painted in a three-dimensional manner. The sky is based on light ink with a touch of blue added. The entire painting has no shadows, and in terms of perspective, objects appear larger in the foreground and smaller in the background, which is typical of the European perspective.

In previous imperial portraits, they were not displayed publicly but rather served the purpose of sacrificing ancestors^[4]. In aesthetic paradigms, they did not focus on changes in imagery but rather depicted the subject's official robes and appearance. We can imagine that in the temple, these portraits had almost identical compositions, forms, and techniques. The images of successive ancestors dressed in gorgeous official robes were placed in a line one by one. The emperor's image, dissolved under a rich altar, a wide and towering temple, and the magnificent attire of different ancestors, was almost indistinguishable in their respective characteristics, leaving only the worship of power, noble status, and admiration for the ancestors' glorious achievements. However, in "Emperor Qianlong's Grand Military Parade," there is no stiffness or formulaic portrayal of the emperor as seen in portraits before the 17th century. Under Castiglione's brush, in combination with Western painting techniques, Emperor Qianlong returns to the human world from the throne where he was previously deemed untouchable. In the painting, Emperor Qianlong's gaze does not directly meet the viewers but slightly shifts to the right, avoiding direct eye contact. He holds the reins in one hand, a whip in the other, and supports an arrow, with a particularly relaxed facial expression^[5].

3. Background of portrait of Louis XIV in Military Attire on Horseback

After the War of the Augsburg League, the ambitious French King Louis XIV sought large-scale expansion but encountered resistance from the combined forces of the Netherlands, England, Rome, and Sweden. The war reached a stalemate, yet it established France's status as the strongest country in Europe. During this period, Louis

XIV left behind his portrait in military attire on horseback. In the portrait (**Figure 2**), Louis XIV holds the reins with one hand, while the horse's hooves are raised in a state of motion. In his other hand, he holds a telescope, dressed in black leather military attire with ribbons floating behind him. These details indicate that Louis XIV is depicted riding on horseback in a war scenario. The goddess of victory in the top left corner of the painting adorns Louis XIV with a wreath of palm leaves symbolizing victory. The village in the background is shrouded in smoke, indicating a war-torn plain ^[6].



Figure 2. Anonymous Louis XIV on Horseback.

4. Analysis of portrait of Louis XIV in Military Attire on Horseback

Looking back on Louis XIV's life, he was France's most warlike emperor, experiencing four major wars. During his reign, he ushered in a peak of French art and culture, establishing academies for dance, painting, and others, and constructing Versailles Palace. He aspired to turn France into the foremost power in Europe, and this period marked the heyday of France's history. Although Louis XIV was only 155 cm tall, he does not appear short in this painting. By shifting Louis XIV's body position and making the horse appear smaller, the artist emphasizes Louis XIV's grandeur. The fluffy ribbons, mane, and exaggerated horse nose due to movement enhance the sense of motion in the painting. Louis XIV's stern gaze, directed at the viewer, and under the patronage of the goddess of victory, exudes confidence and arrogance ^[7].

5. Portraits in military uniform reflect the wisdom of the artist

Another work 100 years later, David's Napoleon Crossing the Alps St. Bernard Pass, depicts Napoleon riding on a white horse, pointing to the image of the river and mountains, the picture presents a diagonal composition, it is said that Napoleon's elevation is about 165, and the picture of Napoleon is very tall, even the white horse in front of him is very small (**Figure 3**). In another case, the 17th-century English painter Van Dyck created a portrait of Charles I, then king of England. Charles I was notoriously short and eccentric. In order to make him look less obscene, Van Dyck added a stone under his feet, made him stand above the horizon, and wore high heels, which were popular with royalty at the time, and the horses behind him bowed their heads, so that no one would question his height. It can be seen that many artists who perform imperial armor generally use contrast to deliberately conceal the defects of the emperor, and "lie" in the picture to highlight the majesty and heroism of the emperor ^[8].

Qianlong Emperor wore a "big Yuejia" composed of a jacket, a skirt, left and right shoulder pads, front seam, left seam, left and right sleeve. Its whole body is yellow satin, covered with copper nails, surrounded by black Fujian Zhangzhou velvet edge, yellow satin embroidered with various ruyi moire, seawater, river cliff, coral, treasure beads and other patterns, and embroidered with different forms of Zhenglong, traveling dragon, Sheng dragon, a total of 63, using a variety of embroidery methods, such as Xiangping needle, osmanthus needle, Pingjin, representing the highest level of weaving and embroidery technology in the Qianlong era. In Lang Shining's "Qianlong Emperor Reading Picture", the emperor's embroidery is vivid, showing Lang Shining's superb skills ^[9].

Emperor Qianlong wanted to let the world see his great achievements in the war, in his ruling career, Lang Shining drew for him "Qianlong Manshu Garden to give a banquet," "Qianlong Pacification of the Ministry Back to the Ministry of War," "Qianlong pacification of the Western Regions War" and so on. In addition, Qianlong liked to wear various costumes and have Lang Shining paint his portrait. For example, "Hongli Collecting Zhi Axis" dressed as Taoist fairies, "Peaceful Spring Letter"

of Yongzheng and Qianlong father and son in Han clothes at the same time, “Hongli Viewing Lotus playing Qin” dressed as elegant literati, “Qianlong playing with children and enjoying family happiness” and other works.



Figure 3. Napoleon Crossing the St. Bernard Pass in the Alps by David.

On June 10, the thirty-first year of Qianlong, Lang Shining died in Beijing at the age of 78. Emperor Qianlong issued a decree: “The western Lang Shining since the Kangxi years into the value of the imperial court, quite diligent careful, had awarded three top wear. According to the example of Dai Jinxian, Gaen gave the title of servant, and awarded the internal affairs office silver three hundred and two funeral care, to show the best.” Lang Shining’s works and most of his time are in the process of transforming Western painting into Chinese painting, he made a lot of changes, for example, in the Qianlong Emperor Reading Picture, we can see the difference in the performance of characters and backgrounds; The realistic portrayal of Qianlong’s face and the deliberately avoided shadow provided a very necessary reference for the reform of Chinese painting and the improvement of oil painting. It can be said that without Lang Shining’s reform and the road ahead, future generations will have to go on the road of improvement for a long time^[10].

6. Differences behind the works

Reviewing “Emperor Qianlong’s Grand Military

Parade” and “Portrait of Louis XIV in Military Attire on Horseback,” we can find that one painter was a missionary from Milan, Italy, influenced by Baroque and classical realistic oil painting from a young age. Upon arriving in China, he adjusted his ingrained aesthetic views due to local preferences, combining them with Chinese ink painting characteristics. The other artist, the painter of Portrait of Louis XIV in Military Attire on Horseback, had excellent skills in oil painting with a Baroque aesthetic.

Both artists were born in the two regions where European oil painting flourished best, during the peak of two different empires. In “Emperor Qianlong’s Grand Military Parade,” there are almost no shadows, and the emperor’s dragon robe is meticulously detailed to reflect his status. According to modern discoveries of Qianlong’s military attire, he had a circular breastplate, which the painter omitted for artistic effect. Different techniques were used for portraying the figures and background. To reconcile stylistic differences, realistic grass leaves were depicted in the front half of the meadow. Giuseppe Castiglione did not conceal Qianlong’s height defect, directly related to the Manchu people’s reverence for horses and proficiency in horseback riding and archery. Qianlong is depicted holding a whip and next to arrows, indicating Castiglione’s influence on the Manchu’s perception of horsemanship and archery. The final image is set against an ink painting-style wilderness, satisfying the aesthetic needs of upper-class intellectuals and metaphorically representing the emperor’s domain.

“Portrait of Louis XIV in Military Attire on Horseback” captures a moment of motion, with Louis XIV holding a telescope, symbolizing his role as a commander on the battlefield. The goddess of victory personally adorns him with a wreath. Louis XIV spent his life waging war, living by his famous quote, “I am the state,” pushing absolute monarchy to its extreme and promoting cultural development. He made outstanding contributions to aesthetics, fashion, dance, and music, turning Paris into a fashionable artistic capital aligning European aesthetics with French standards. His ultimate goal was to surpass Renaissance Rome and establish France as the foremost power in Europe.

In the painting, he stands on a saddle, leaning slightly forward. To emphasize Louis XIV’s grandeur,

the painter intentionally made the horse appear smaller. The painter succeeded. Louis XIV would never expose his defects, often wearing high-heeled shoes to conceal his height. Therefore, the painter understood this and beautified it. As the emperor during France's peak, he firmly grasped power. In this painting, his right-hand holds a telescope, indicating his image as the commander of the state machine.

These two military portraits have different aesthetic tastes, and the two pictures show different meanings in different backgrounds. One is a gentle landscape, and the other is a village in flames, which can be said to be the introverted and extroverted materialization of the characters. One is the empire established by advocating natural science, which is precisely implied by the telescope, the other is the world conquered by horseback shooting, and the Qianlong Emperor's hand-holding arrows also implies the background of the country's establishment. In different regions and times, the two emperors established their great achievements and became the symbol of the era.

7. The military uniform and the fate of history after one hundred years

In historical records, Emperor Kangxi, grandfather of Emperor Qianlong, had frequent contact with Louis XIV and used French fashion as a model to build the Old Summer Palace with marble, irregular curves, and a large number of cameo accessories. After a hundred years, the fate of the Qing Empire took a sharp turn for the better. After a hundred years, they met in the Beijing and Tianjin areas and broke into the Imperial Palace, which was once

the home of Emperor Qianlong. The Old Summer Palace, a French baroque building built by Qianlong, also burned to ashes, and the two Kings who had once been invincible finally met indirectly in such a way and sounded the bell of the end of the Qing dynasty.

The Qianlong Emperor's armor was far away in France. Displayed at Les Invalides in France, the armor was looted from the Old Summer Palace by British and French forces in 1860. Through Lang Shining's "Qianlong Parade Picture", we can imagine the grand occasion when the emperor inspected. Sadly, however, the emperor did not expect that this set of armor representing the supreme imperial power would be stolen by two robbers 60 years after his death. In the list of Yuanmingyuan spoils published by the London Times in 1861, this set of armor stood out. In the burning French Yuanmingyuan, the Anglo-French coalition forces transported a large number of imperial armor, porcelain and artworks to the palace built by Louis XIV.

On the other side of the ocean, Louis XIV's ambitions were no more than a century old, Louis XVI was killed by the guillotine, France ushered in a new revolution, the country took a new direction; The Qing Empire also only two generations to Daoguang and Xianfeng, the fate of the empire took a turn for the worse, signed a series of Western humiliation of the treaty.

Would Emperor Qianlong have thought that his ambition and honor would no longer be mentioned after a hundred years, not only the exquisite clothes symbolizing imperial power and status but also the difficulty of maintaining the Qing government in the wind and rain to maintain the final rule, today we can only leave beautiful paintings and lost overseas armor.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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