



PORTRAITS OF THE COURT OF CHINA

By ALAN PRIEST

Curator of Far Eastern Art

It would be hard to find a subject in which there is a wider divergence of taste or a greater diversity of opinion than that of portraiture, and this though the counterfeit be limned by human hand or mechanically arrived at by cutting out a silhouette or clicking the shutters of a camera. So many elements are involved, and these are often inharmonious and often strongly opposed. Whereas in painting and sculpture only two people are concerned, the maker and the observer, in portraiture a third personality obtrudes itself, that of the person painted, and there arises the emotional conflict popularly referred to as a triangle. I have noticed that there is a vast difference if the subject is oneself, and when the person depicted is a known contemporary, a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, or (pity that 'tis possible) a person cordially disliked, our first-hand judgment of the sitter enters in and the conflict develops into violence. Only when we come to unnamed sitters of the past can human judgment be moderately pure and un-

sullied. When they are named, a new element of interest comes in, a conjecture of character and often doubt. Good heavens! Could all Englishwomen of the eighteenth century have been so ravishing as the fashionable painters of the day present the Linley sisters, as Lady Hamilton, as Mrs. Lovat? Could there have been so many handsome men or charming children? But here they are portrayed for us, nor can sharp-witted words make us disbelieve in them.

There is even a trace of this when the person painted is unnamed. As we look boldly even on an unknown, we unconsciously weigh the sitter's personality and match our own against it: "Oh, how lovely! I should like to have known her," or "Look out! That shade of hair usually means bad temper, and there is a haughty curve to that right nostril." With portraits the subjective element is always there, however firmly we may deny it, however conscientiously we may apply our measured aesthetic principles, and more than one

good critic has been thoroughly tricked by it.

There may be a considerable body of opinion that the painter is good. Beyond that it is each man for himself. As for pictures of ourselves, those of us who do not prefer to be flattered at least like to be shown at our best, and when caught off guard reserve the privilege of considering the presentment a caricature or libel. When it comes to pictures of our families and friends, it is almost equally a personal matter. I know more than one cherubic presentation of children generally considered ill-favored which are serenely swallowed whole canvas by their fond mamas and even sheepishly subscribed to by their papas. And who shall say that these are not perfect portraits if they so completely satisfy one person—their mamas in this instance?

Consider photographs and especially the relentless series taken and treasured from year to year, which nowadays most of us have: Baby at one month, Baby at two months (occasionally a thoroughly infatuated parent will start taking Baby the first week), and then Baby at one year and so on to ten. After that it is to be noticed that the interims lengthen until Grandma and Grandpa are lucky if they are taken once a decade. Even before photography bonneted herself as an art such souvenirs were dear to somebody, and they always will be.

Perhaps the secret of portraiture has one clue here: the attempt to catch and hold transfixed another human being in the passage of life, which whirls so wildly past us however calm and static we may try to make it seem. This in real life can't be done; as well try to freeze a wave or bid the wind stand still as try to hold another person in a moment of time. We think it can be done instant by instant, but however we deceive ourselves, the flight of time wings past us all. However, we can have the illusion of doing so, and this is the very heart of portraiture and the reason for it.

The wise and sensible Chinese never seem to demand the unattainable. All they seem to try for in portraiture is a suggestion, almost a statement of a general type. With the famous

figures of the distant past they draw the lineaments of the character tradition has set for them. Yang Kuei-fei was a moon-faced beauty, Yo Fei was a great and powerful general, Confucius was a statesman, and there they are, and we in the West are disappointed because we want them more particularized. If we are dissatisfied with the presentations of the ancients, when it comes to the thousands and thousands of "ancestor portraits," our Western spokesmen for Chinese painting are downright malignant and categorically brush them all off as tradesmen's stuff made for funerals. Beware! Many and many are dull and conventional, but now and then some anonymous Chinese Holbein leaves us not only a likeness drawn with clarity but one that imprisons a firefly glint of radiance which for one second makes his subject real and still alive.

Most of these ancestor portraits are anonymous. But there has come into our hand a group of portraits of varying quality which have names rightly or wrongly attached to them, and it is this personal element which is the basis of our special exhibition. These portraits purport to come and almost surely do come from the Forbidden City of Peking. The Forbidden City had several sets of portraits, and it is obvious that from time to time copies and new sets were made for various uses. The interesting thing is that aside from being stunning decoration and, assembled together, rich decoration, here we have pictorial glimpses of members of the imperial Manchu court, whose names and histories are becoming familiar to us. Now we can visualize the powerful K'ang Hsi and have a hint of his fourth son, Yung Chêng, "a suspicious, querulous and savagely vindictive individual," as well as glimpses of his uneasy wives and of his dour old sister. We can see Ch'ien Lung as a young and as a mature man and one of his beautiful consorts. Here is Chia Ch'ing, the eleventh son of Ch'ien Lung (neither the *Annals* nor his portrait have much good to say of him), and here his troubled empresses. There are other great names of the Ch'ing court attached to portraits, and one which seems to be a youth-



Portrait of an old lady, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)
Lent by G. Del Drago



*Portrait of a man in blue, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)
Lent by G. Del Drago*

ful picture of the ill-fated and unhappy Kuang Hsü.

With the Museum's new group of twenty portraits we show a group nearly as large lent by G. Del Drago and others lent by Nellie B. Hussey, Charlemagne E. Wells, Mr. and Mrs. H. G. J. McNeary, Mrs. George D. Pratt, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. All but three of these portraits are anonymous, but they show an amount of characterization in keeping with the ones which bear names. Most of the borrowed paintings are Ming (one or two are definitely Sung), and as a whole this group lifts the exhibition from one in which the personal element would have been paramount into the realm of nearly great pictures. Seeing the two groups together, it would be hard for any critic to say that Chinese portraiture is insignificant or not great art.

But although the exhibition contains paintings of quality which stand on aesthetic excellence alone, as has been said the special intention is a personal one: to give a visual glimpse of some of the great figures of the Manchu court. The most easy reading about them is to be found in the two frankly sensational books by J. O. P. Bland and E. Backhouse. The books are *The Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* and *China under the Empress Dowager*. They are extremely good reading, not quite like Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* but a little like it, and while stern scholars can noggle a good bit on details and while the interpretation is somewhat lurid, the accounts give a palatable version of the goings-on at the Ch'ing court. It is partly a matter of taste. The *Times* and the

News have the same communiqués—let the scholar salvage them. The Empress Tz'ü Hsi, for instance, was a contemporary of Queen Victoria, and if Bland and Backhouse wish to throw in a little boudoir talk about her, that is nothing new. There was a time when there was a good deal of gossip about Marie Antoinette. That has been set straight. Now we know that Marie Antoinette and Lucrezia Borgia herself were innocent young things much besmeared by envious gossip. I, for one, am very disappointed. I should like to feel that Lucrezia Borgia had poisoned somebody just once, and I hope to go to my grave believing that Tz'ü Hsi in the heat of the Boxer troubles did actually say of the "Pearl Concubine": "I have had enough of that woman—throw her down the well!" I myself have eyed the well plenty of times, but there is a drum stone over it, and I have been a trifle disturbed about how they got her down. It is quite a small aperture, and even cramming her head first must have been a little difficult. Bland and Backhouse do not go into these practical details, but it does seem clear that the "Pearl Concubine" vanished from the imperial scene at that time. We have, alas, no portrait of her.

The illustration on page 184 shows a portion of a Ch'ing scroll portraying several generations, lent by Charlemagne E. Wells. In connection with the exhibition, which will remain open through February 28, the Museum has published a picture book with twenty-two illustrations and one of the portraits executed in color on the cover.