
In this study of Chinese decoration of the late Ming and early-to-mid Qing dynasties (circa 1570-1840) Jonathan Hay attempts to bring the neglected aspect of pleasure in decorative objects into art historical discussion. Focusing only on luxury secular display objects and drawing on contemporary and slightly later manuscripts of taste, connoisseurial literature, and imperial workshop documents as well as novels, short stories and plays, he argues that sensuous surfaces and the pleasure derived from them are central to the decorative arts of that period.

The first part of the study covers the unwritten rules of production and consumption of luxury articles as well as Hay's theory of how decorative objects “think with” the observer. This central concept, further explored in the concluding chapter of the book, remains somewhat nebulous but can be summarized as the pleasurable effect decorative objects have on the beholder which is realized when one engages with the object in the way the producer has intended. A topography of sensuous surface, “surfacescape” in Hay's terminology, is according to him the single most obvious characteristic of a luxury object as decoration and central to the way in which these objects are experienced.

The main part of the book is devoted to the formal resources of surface treatment for Ming-Qing decorative objects, including monochrome smoothness, material patterning, formal pattern, depiction, inscription, fictive surfaces, and diversified surfaces, all of which were used for a variety of objects in different media. Unlike other studies of decorative objects in China, Hay's focus is less to provide a comprehensive list of styles, media, or object types but instead to explore how the surfaces and objects were experienced in their time. Since in their original context decorative objects were not viewed in isolation, the third part of the book covers residential interiors with a focus on the conventions and usually unwritten rules governing the display of decorative objects in what Hay calls object landscapes or objectscapes.

The book is illustrated lavishly with color photographs of decorative objects as well as paintings and other illustrations showing these objects in interior settings. References, a select bibliography, a character list for Chinese terms and categories, and an extensive index complete the volume. The weak binding of this rather heavy book unfortunately may necessitate repairs after a few uses.

Difficult terminology, several somewhat speculative statements, and Hay's unique theory make this not an ideal choice for undergraduate collections. Recommended where there is interest in Ming/Qing arts and/or decorative arts.

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