



Short notice

Illusion on Paper: A Rediscovered Eighteenth- Century Chinese Trompe-l'œil Still Life

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The rediscovery of *A Cupboard Containing Various Objects* (fig. 1) provides a significant case for the study of eighteenth-century Chinese illusionistic painting. The work came to attention through a chance encounter on the Rijksmuseum's online collection database, where the curator of Chinese art was struck by an unfamiliar image he had not recalled seeing in storage or on display. Archival investigation revealed the reason: the sheet had long been misattributed as a French work of the late eighteenth century and was therefore being held in the Department of Decorative Arts. The misclassification may have resulted from the object's donation in 1894 by Victor de Stuers (1843-1916), who presented it to the museum together with several French wallpapers, causing the group to be regarded as a single ensemble.¹ Correcting this attribution initiated the present investigation.

At the time of its rediscovery, the sheet was in fragile condition, having sustained severe cockling and numerous tears, with the lining detached. Conservation treatment

< Fig. 1
ANONYMOUS,
*A Cupboard
Containing
Various Objects*,
China (Canton?),
eighteenth century
(c. 1740-60?).
Woodblock print
in black ink and
watercolour on
paper, mounted on
linen, 57 x 104 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv.
no. BK-NM-9776-D,
gift of Victor de
Stuers.

was therefore essential, both to stabilize the object and to permit close technical examination.² Infrared imaging showed details beneath the painted surface, providing important insight into how the work was made.

The resulting analysis situates the work within a broader corpus of trompe-l'œil still lifes preserved in European collections and enables a more precise understanding of its production and significance. By situating the painting within this expanded framework, the study reconsiders the role of illusionistic imagery in eighteenth-century China and underscores the art historical significance of this understudied genre.

Painted Perception

The sheet depicts an open-front wooden cupboard with two shelves separated by a central section containing two closed drawers. On the upper shelf one finds an arrangement of various items: a stack of books in blue and red cases; two bamboo-woven baskets; a *famille rose* porcelain lantern, decorated with overglaze

enamels in green, white and purple; and a blue-and-white porcelain dish holding *pinpo* (*Sterculia monosperma*), lychees and pomegranates, accompanied by flower blossoms. The lower shelf contains: additional books housed in an elaborately decorated, green-brocade case; a set of gaming pieces for *tianjiu* (or *paijiu*);³ a blue-glazed bowl filled with pomelos, resting on a bamboo tray; and a blue-and-white porcelain flowerpot, containing yellow and white leopard lily (*Iris domestica*).

These objects constitute a densely articulated symbolic programme grounded in Qing dynasty material culture. The prominent display of books foregrounds learning and moral cultivation, aligning the image with the tradition of scholarly accoutrements, in which texts and implements operate as indices of intellectual distinction and social status. The sumptuous, brocade case upholstery further signals elite taste and connoisseurship. The fruits – *pinpo*, lychee, and pomegranate – carry auspicious connotations of prosperity, fecundity and generational continuity, while the accompanying blossoms amplify themes of vitality and renewal. Floral symbolism continues in the leopard lily, whose medicinal associations evoke resilience and equilibrium. Leisure objects, particularly the *tianjiu* gaming set, introduce references to cultivated sociability and the values of wit and strategic skill espoused by the educated elite.

The porcelain vessels – both blue-and-white and *famille rose* – function simultaneously as emblems of technical refinement and markers of participation in global circuits of trade and exchange. By contrast, the bamboo baskets and tray articulate an aesthetic of natural simplicity consonant with ideals of harmony between humanity and the natural world. Collectively, these elements construct not merely an illusion of a cupboard interior but a microcosm of cultivated life.

Compositions of this type are commonly classified either as *wenfangtu* (images of scholarly objects) or *bogutu* (images of antiquities). The large size of *A Cupboard Containing Various Objects* suggests it may have been used as wall decoration. Displays showcasing such pictures survive in Europe, including the Count's Study at Veltrusy Chateau and the Chinese Bedroom at Milton Hall, Cambridgeshire. Loose, closely comparable sheets are preserved in several European collections, including the Nordiska museet in Stockholm, the Linnaeus Museum in Uppsala and the Museum of Gothenburg.⁴

Print and Paint

At first glance, *A Cupboard Containing Various Objects* appears executed in paint, an impression reinforced by the detail in the depicted wood grain and the subtle modelling of light and shadow across the surfaces. Nevertheless, scholarship has consistently identified analogous compositions as coloured woodblock prints.⁵ The resulting tension between visual appearance and presumed technique raises critical questions regarding the material and technical nature of the present work.

Close examination of the paint layers revealed black lines beneath the coloured surface, but the character of these lines – painted or printed – could not easily be determined with the naked eye. Infrared imaging, a photographic technique that reveals carbon-containing materials such as black ink, helped to confirm these lines are printed.⁶ Consistent and uniform in width and texture, the lines are characteristic of woodblock printing. Several areas show printing-related irregularities, including slight paper shifts and variations in pressure, while a vertical discontinuity from top to bottom indicates the woodblock was constructed from two joined planks (fig. 2). By contrast, black areas such

> *Fig. 2*
Detail of *A Cupboard* (fig. 1), captured with infrared light. Black lines are printed, while shading was applied with a brush. The arrows point at the 'break' in the wooden printing block.



as the *pinpo* nuts in the fruit bowl and the shading of leaves, are painted and distinctly more dynamic than the printed lines. Here the application with a brush is recognizable, where pressure, the angle of the brush and pigment load influence the outcome.

A closer study of the black lines indicates the use of a finely cut wood-block, where details like the ornamental motifs on the flowerpot and the delicate pistils of the flowers were all carved. Other details, including the

woodgrain of the planks at the back of the cupboard and the flecks on the fruits were not printed, and therefore left to the painter's interpretation, thus demonstrating a hybrid process in which print and paint came together.

The presence of printed lines implies that multiple copies of the image were made, suggesting workshop practices in which printers and painters collaborated. Works could be printed simultaneously and coloured by several painters in parallel, facilitating an efficient production in larger quantities. Multiple extant copies of the same image confirm this practice. For instance, a loose sheet in the Nordiska museet is compositionally identical to another, wallpaper sheet in the Count's Study, Veltrusy Chateau. Differences in painted details reveal the work of different hands: with the Nordiska museet sheet, the outlines of two cockroaches on and inside the left drawer were negated when painted over with the woodgrain motif. Another disparity is that the pendant pamphlet was left blank, while in the Veltrusy study, it has been given the characteristics of a dated almanac (figs. 3a, b).

Figs. 3a, b
Drawer with cockroaches and pendant pamphlet.
a) ANONYMOUS, *A Cupboard Containing Various Objects* (detail), China, eighteenth century. Painted woodblock print. Stockholm, Nordiska museet, inv. no. NM.0091958-L. Photo: Von der Burg 2021 (note 4).
b) ANONYMOUS, *A Cupboard Containing Various Objects* (detail), China, after 1751. Painted woodblock print. Bohemia, Veltrusy Chateau, Count's Study. Photo: Barbora Bartyzalová, M.A. (2023), courtesy of the National Heritage Institute, Czech Republic

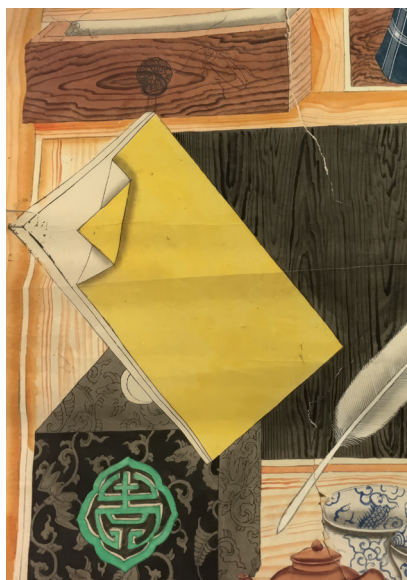




Fig. 4

ANONYMOUS,
Auspicious Objects and Antiquities,
China, eighteenth
century.

Woodblock print,
35.7 x 15.8 cm.
Amsterdam, Rijks-
museum, inv. no.
RP-P-1962-129,
purchased with
the support of the
F.G. Waller-Fonds.

Production Context and Art Historical Significance

Stylistically, *A Cupboard Containing Various Objects* belongs to the group of cupboard images previously mentioned in the other European collections. Most scholars link such works to the so-called 'Suzhou prints' workshops in the Yangtze Delta, though firm evidence regarding the exact place where they were made is lacking. 'Suzhou prints' is the modern name for a type of Chinese woodblock print that thrived in Suzhou during the late Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties (1636/44-1912).⁷ By the late sixteen hundreds, local artists were experimenting with effects borrowed from European copper engravings, such as fine shading and linear perspective. Yet, when one looks closely at the

present piece alongside seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Suzhou prints, clear differences emerge: its colours and lines set it apart. As a representative work of Suzhou printmaking, *Auspicious Objects and Antiquities* (fig. 4) demonstrates the distinctive qualities of the genre: the contour lines reveal the rhythmic rise and fall of the brushwork, while the colours are printed rather than painted. Most importantly, the colours are translucent versus opaque. The subject matter fits comfortably within the Suzhou print category, yet the style suggests characteristics distinguishing it from conventional examples of that genre.

Although these cupboard pictures have usually been linked to Suzhou, Jung Eun Lee has suggested they were more likely made in Canton (present-day Guangzhou). Her argument rests on the provenance of similar sheets said to have been brought back from Canton by Pehr Osbeck (1723-1805), a student of Carl Linnaeus who spent an extended period in that city. This connection points strongly toward a southern Chinese origin.⁸

Iconographic evidence reinforces this hypothesis: lychee and *pinpo* are indigenous to southern China; *pinpo* nuts are traditionally consumed during the Qixi Festival in Cantonese practice; and the domino game *tianjiu* was widely played in the region. Such motifs collectively strengthen the case for a Cantonese origin.

Painted dates on similar cupboard pictures – 1745, 1748, 1750, and 1751 – place them in the mid-eighteenth century.⁹ In style, they are a preamble to the export paintings later made for foreign buyers in Canton. These were usually produced in busy workshops, where several anonymous artists worked together. This system is well documented in nineteenth-century Canton. Painters, including Tingqua (1809-1870) and his older brother Lamqua, ran studios near the foreign

'factories', turning out watercolours and gouaches of plants, animals, interiors and local life.

These images did not remain in China. Kee Il Choi has shown that French cabinetmakers in the seventeenth seventies used *wenfangtu* motifs – steelyards, abacuses, brush pots and books – in marquetry panels on desks and cabinets, resulting in monochromatic trompe-l'œil decoration.¹⁰ Their use as wall decoration, such as in the Veltrusy Chateau (fig. 5) and Milton Hall, shows how coloured prints added to these rooms' spatiality. Yet the fashion of trompe-l'œil decorations was by no means exclusive to Europe; they also flourished in China itself, and especially at the Qing court. Predominantly under the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735-96), European Jesuit artists and their Chinese pupils produced numerous trompe-l'œil works for the palaces. For example, in the Studio of Exhaustion from Diligent Service (Juanqinzhai) in the Forbidden City, illusionistic trompe-l'œil paintings on its walls and ceiling created striking three-dimensional effects (fig. 6).¹¹



Fig. 5

Mounted panels of Chinese woodblock prints in the Count's Study at Veltrusy Chateau, Bohemia. Photo: Vojtěch Obereigner (ante 2002), courtesy of the National Heritage Institute, Czech Republic

These experiments drew on European manuals such as *Perspectivae pictorum et architectorum*, translated in part as early as 1729 by the scholar and court official Nian Xiyao (1671-1738) with the assistance of the Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688-1766) as *Shixue jingyun*.¹² This publication disseminated practical knowledge of linear perspective, re-shaping both courtly and urban visual culture (fig. 7). Perspective was more than a technical trick – it changed how



Fig. 6

Wall and ceiling painting in Studio of Exhaustion from Diligent Service (Juanqinzhai), Forbidden City, Beijing.

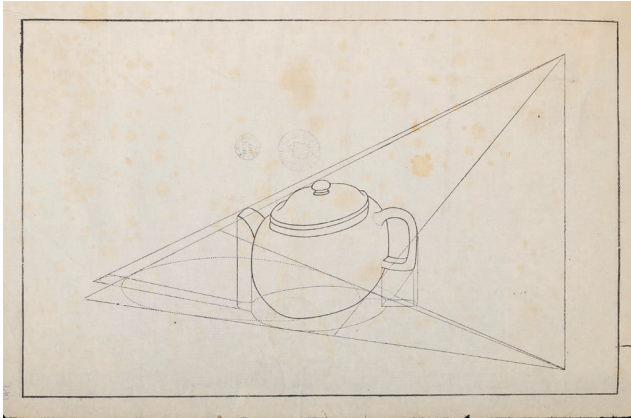
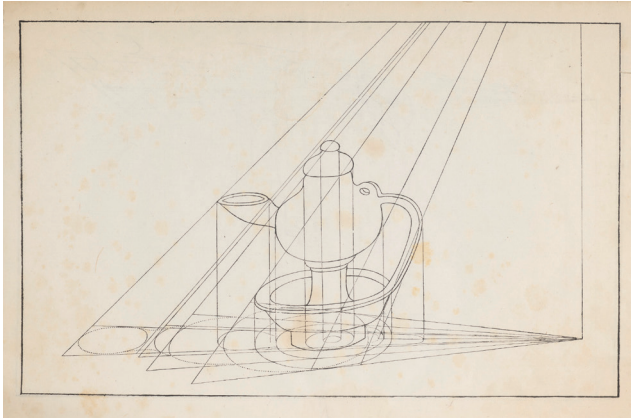
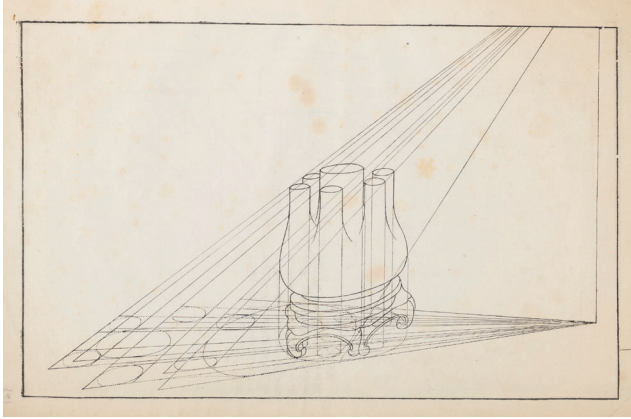


Fig. 7
Pages published in
Nian Xiyao's *Shixue
jingyun* (partial
translation of *Essence
of the Study of Vision*),
1729, reprint in 1735,
pp. 147-49.

University of
Oxford, Bodleian
Library, Bodleian
Library Douce
Chin.b.2.
Photo: © Bodleian
Libraries, University
of Oxford

space and vision were understood, breaking from traditional Chinese ways of seeing, creating a sense of surprise and drama. That same sense of visual excitement appears in both Suzhou prints and Cantonese trompe-l'œil works like the present one.

Finally, such cupboard pictures also connect conceptually with the Qing *duobaoge*: curio cabinets designed to display treasured objects. Like a European *Kunstammer*, the *duobaoge* turned collecting into a visual cosmos of knowledge. Similarities in the images by Beijing court ateliers, Cantonese export workshops and European decorative artists show a complex network of artistic exchange. Parallels have also been noted with the Korean *chaekgado* (*chaekgeori*) tradition of book-and-object painting, popular from the late eighteenth century onwards.¹³ An exhibition linking Chinese cupboard pictures, Qing court *duobaoge* cabinets and Korean *chaekgado* highlights these shared interests.¹⁴ While the exact connections remain unclear, the common use of trompe-l'œil effects and staged displays of knowledge points to a rich cross-cultural influence.

Conclusion

Technical investigation of the rediscovered *A Cupboard Containing Various Objects* underscores the hybrid, procedural character of eighteenth-century Chinese trompe-l'œil production. The use of woodblock-printed outlines with hand-applied colour kept the overall design consistent, while still allowing for individual variation, combining repeatable print production and skilled handwork.

An examination of the painting with the aid of infrared photography shows how the printed structure and the brushwork work together, helping to expand our understanding of how the object was made in greater detail. In art historical terms, though the work aligns with the traditions of

wenfangtu and *bogutu*, stylistic and iconographic indicators point towards a probable origin in Canton during the seventeen forties and fifties. Its scale and illusionistic programme suggest a function as wall decoration, resonant with perspectival experiments at the Qing court – most notably under the Qianlong Emperor – as well as contemporary European interior schemes.

More broadly, the painting reframes the study of visual circulation between

Qing China, Korea and Europe. It embodies the convergence of technical innovation, aesthetic complexity and cross-cultural exchange. At the same time printed and painted, replicable and unique, decorative and erudite: the work occupies a distinctive position within the history of Chinese illusionistic imagery, mediating between local practice and global reception.

NOTES

- 1 Victor de Stuers helped to establish the *Nederlandsch Museum voor Geschiedenis en Kunst*, a precursor of the Rijksmuseum, and functioned as its provisional director. The other objects donated in 1894 are all French wall papers mounted on linen or screen: inv. nos. BK-NM-9776-C, -B, -C, -E and -F.
- 2 For the conservation, see Juliet Baines, 'Conservation Treatment of a Newly Discovered Chinese Trompe-l'oeil Painting from the Rijksmuseum Collection', *Aziatische Kunst* 56 (2026), no. 2, pp. 34-40. After extensive conservation treatment, the painting was shown in the exhibition *Parallels in Arts of Joseon Dynasty and Qing Palace*, held in the Southern Branch of the National Palace Museum, Taibao City, Jiayi County, in 2023; see Yu Pei-Chin and Peng Zicheng (eds.), *Parallels in Arts of Joseon Dynasty and Qing Palace*, exh. cat. Taipei (The National Palace Museum) 2023, no. 129, pp. 103-04.
- 3 *Tianjiu* (or *paijiu*) is a Chinese gambling game, played with a set of thirty-two dominoes, also known as *tiengow* or *paigow* in Cantonese.
- 4 For the general collections that hold such pictures in Europe, see Jung Eun Lee, '18th-19th Century Spread of New Images of Antiquities between China and Korea: Focusing on Chaekgado', diss. Taipei (National Taiwan University) 2020, pp. 39-42; Christer von der Burg, 'Wenfangtu: Prints of Scholarly and Other Objects', <https://chiwoopri.wordpress.com/2021/05/19/wenfangtu-文房圖-prints-of-scholarly-and-other-objects/> (published online on 19 May 2021, consulted 1 June 2026); Kee Il Choi Jr, 'From Lieux to Meubles: Chinese Woodblock Prints and French Marquetry of the 1770s', *Furniture History* 57 (2022), pp. 129-55, esp. p. 136. For those in the Count's Study, Zámek Veltrusý (Veltrusý Chateau), Bohemia, see Lucie Olivová, 'Gusu mubanhua chuan dao Jieke guizu zhuzhai' [Suzhou woodblock prints in the Czech noble residence], *Yishu shoucang yu jianshang* [Art Collection and Appreciation] 18 (2021), pp. 120-23. For those in the Chinese Bedroom, Milton Hall, in Cambridgeshire, England, see Emile de Bruijn, *Chinese Wallpaper in Britain and Ireland*, London 2018, p. 44.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Infrared reflectography (IRR) is a non-invasive imaging technique. Infrared radiation penetrates paint layers that are opaque to visible light and interacts with underlying materials, which absorb or reflect infrared light to varying degrees. Carbon-based media, such as black inks or pigments, are highly absorbent to infrared light, producing high-contrast images, sometimes of previously hidden features. Reflected radiation of *A Cupboard Containing Various Objects* was captured by an infrared-sensitive camera and processed to reveal details beneath the painted surface. The painting was imaged using an Apollo IRR camera operating in the 900-1700 nm range.
- 7 See footnote 4.
- 8 Lee 2020 (note 4), p. 41.
- 9 Von der Burg 2021 (note 4).
- 10 Choi 2022 (note 4), pp. 129-55.
- 11 Nancy Berliner (ed.), *Juanqinzhai in the Qianlong Garden, The Forbidden City, Beijing*, London 2008.
- 12 Shigeru Aoki and Hiromitsu Kobayashi (eds.), *"Chūgoku no yōfūga" ten: Minmatsukara Shin jidai no kaiga, hanga, sashiebon*, Tokyo 1995, pp. 449-71.
- 13 Byungmo Chung and Sunglim Kim (eds.), *Chaekgeori: The Power and Pleasure of Possessions in Korean Painted Screens*, Seoul 2017.
- 14 Yu and Peng eds. 2023 (note 2), nos. 128-132, pp. 102-09.