

The Selection of “Song Paintings”: Publicizing the Palace Museum Collection of Paintings in the 1930s and Its Contribution to the Refactoring of Chinese Painting History

Chen, Yun-ru

Graduate Institute of Art History
National Taiwan University

Abstract

As the name implies, “Song paintings” refer to “paintings produced in the Song dynasty.” However, exactly what kind of works fall into the category of “Song paintings” or can be placed in the “Song dynasty” category? Varying rationales and decisions about it have been made in the course of Chinese painting history, but the selection processes from different times in the past for “Song paintings” should not be relegated to the dustbin of history as research and study techniques advance. In particular, during the 1930s and not long after the Palace Museum had been established, the vast private collection of paintings held by the Qing dynasty court were publicized in large numbers, leading to a new structure and standard for understanding “Song paintings.” Materials on works of painting and calligraphy in such periodicals and publications as *Palace Museum*, *Weekly of the Palace Museum*, and *Calligraphy and Painting in the Palace Museum* would become the cornerstone for later studies on “Song paintings.”

The present study first introduces the situation behind the three above publications and then analyzes the features of their lists for selecting “Song paintings” as well as examining their selection criteria. This is supplemented by information on the exhibitions held by the Palace Museum in its early years, seeing how these two facets worked to create the notion of “Song paintings.” Finally, with the style of Northern Song landscape painting as an example, the study examines the process by which the Palace Museum’s collection of paintings became public in the 1930s. It shows that besides selecting paintings by famous masters in Chinese art history, of large size, and with inscriptions, the traditional connoisseur’s notion of quality in “brush and ink” was continued. And by means of this tradition, on the one hand it reveals an underlying reliance upon previous records and documents in the inner workings of the Palace Museum. On the other hand, it also demonstrates how scholars benefited from direct contact with the artworks. Afterwards, the “Song paintings” in the collection of the Palace Museum would become

an important group of works in the later study of Chinese art history and can be called a key to the formation of “Song paintings.”

Keywords: Palace Museum, cultural history of publishing, exhibition history of the Palace Museum, Song paintings, museum studies

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)