

INTRODUCTION

A New Vision of Painting

INSIDE THE FORBIDDEN CITY ONE DAY, LATE IN HIS REIGN, THE QIANLONG emperor (r. 1736–95) might have left his office and throne room at the east end of the Hall of Mental Cultivation (Yangxindian) and walked west down its main corridor toward the Three Rarities Studio (Sanxitang).¹ Under Qianlong's patronage, the arts flourished at the Chinese imperial court: the Three Rarities Studio, merely a tiny room at the westernmost end of the hall, was reserved for his enjoyment and connoisseurship of the vast imperial painting and calligraphy collection. Before stepping over the raised threshold into the antechamber preceding the studio, he likely paused at the sight before him. Perfectly framed by the doorway was a room with a distinctive floor of blue-and-white porcelain tiles and decoratively latticed windows that receded to a moon gate, which opened onto a secluded private garden occupied by two men (figure I.1). The older man was presenting a branch of blossoming plum to the younger man, and both were casually dressed in scholars' robes rather than court costume. The scene was one of tranquility, leisure, and personal connection, a sharp contrast to the formality and the political responsibility of the east end of the hall.

Although initially this view appeared real, once the emperor stepped through the doorway its true nature would have been revealed as a special type of eighteenth-century court painting (figure I.2). Scenic illusion paintings (*tongjinghua*) are massive wall- and ceiling-mounted paintings in full color on silk, produced collaboratively by the best



1.2 Anonymous (attributed to Giuseppe Castiglione and Jin Tingbiao), *Spring's Peaceful Message*, mid-eighteenth century. Scenic illusion affixed hanging, ink and color on silk, 201 × 207 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Chinese and Western painters serving the emperor.² These artists blended their different styles and techniques to create monumental illusionistic paintings such as this one, known as *Spring's Peaceful Message* (Ping'an chunxin tu or Meibao chunxin tu), that seemed at first glance to be real, permeable spaces contiguous with the viewer's own space and occupied by real figures and objects.³

The Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723–35) commissioned the first scenic illusions in the late 1720s,⁴ and Qianlong continued this practice from 1736, his first official year on the throne, to 1798, when he commissioned his last scenic illusion just over a year before his death.⁵ The palace workshop archives demonstrate that originally dozens—perhaps even hundreds—of these paintings were installed inside imperial spaces in and around

eighteenth-century Beijing. Today only a handful of those that Qianlong commissioned remain to testify to the scenic illusion phenomenon at the Qing court. More may come to light in the future, but for now, only five single paintings and one complete interior program remain *in situ*; four paintings survive outside their original architectural contexts; and there is visual evidence for three works that have not survived. Now held almost exclusively inside restricted areas of the Palace Museum, three of the extant single scenic illusions were briefly displayed internationally,⁶ but upon their return to Beijing became just as inaccessible as before. The unwieldiness and fragility of these massive paintings severely complicate their handling, photography, and display, consequently circumscribing even scholarly access, and there have been correspondingly few publications.⁷ In spite of their current rarity and their historical, historiographical, and institutional invisibility, scenic illusion paintings offer new insights into late imperial China's most influential emperor. More importantly, however, they also provide a new perspective on how Chinese art integrated or rejected foreign concepts during the height of early modern Sino-European exchange.

Approaching Scenic Illusion Paintings

"Scenic illusion painting" is a connotative translation of *tongjinghua*, the functionally elegant Chinese term that describes the viewer's experience of these paintings: the term literally means "to connect, cross into, or move through" (*tong*) "scenes" (*jing*) that are "painted" (*hua*). Although this was the most common term, many others were used and could even designate the same painting over the course of its production, including "deep-distance paintings" (*shenyuanhua*), "perspectival paintings" (*xianfahua*, literally "line-method paintings"), "scenic illusion perspectival paintings" (*tongjing xianfahua*), and "scenic illusion oil paintings" (*tongjing youhua*). Translating *tongjinghua* both into English and into concise, modern art-historical terminology has proven difficult, resulting in renderings as varied as "panoramic perspective scene" and "illusionistic murals."⁸ It is most often rendered as "trompe l'œil" (tricks the eye), the anachronistic, culturally distant, and heavily weighted Western term now indiscriminately used to designate nearly all illusionistic paintings. Although the Western tradition of pictorial illusionism famously began with the competition between the Greek painters Zeuxis (act. 435–390 BCE) and Parrhasius (act. 440–390 BCE), vividly described by Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) in his *Natural History* (c. 77–79 CE), "trompe l'œil" appeared as a noun only around 1800 to denote a specifically French genre of ultrarealistic, self-contained, framed still-life easel painting.⁹ *Quadratura*, the perspectival Renaissance and Baroque wall and ceiling paintings that rely on visual contiguity between painting and architecture to create the illusion of real, permeable space,¹⁰ played an important role in the development of scenic illusions. But the concept of "moving through scenes" (*tongjing*) originated about half a millennium earlier in the Yuan dynasty, when *tongjinghua* described landscape paintings with a high

isometric or bird's-eye viewpoint that allowed the viewer to move visually through the depths of the entire depicted scene.¹¹ The eighteenth-century Qing reappropriation of this term therefore prioritized native over foreign painting terminology, contextualizing firmly within Chinese tradition this type of painting that integrated Western techniques. Therefore, the translation of *tongjinghua* as “scenic illusion painting” aims to convey the illusionistic viewing experience inherent both in the Chinese term and in these particular paintings within their own unique cultural context of late imperial China.

The viewing experience for scenic illusion paintings comprised four phases: the imperial viewer's initial deception by the pictorial illusion, his recognition of the reality of the painting, his identification of the significance of its subject matter, and finally his simultaneous appreciation of both the illusion and the painting as a single meaningful entity.¹² As the viewer approached an installed scenic illusion, its deceptive, erasive style and wall-encompassing format supported the superficial illusion of reality by effacing the artists' labor, thereby denying the work's materiality and medium specificity. In the second phase, the composition of the painting (which was customized for the site), the particularity and significance of its architectural location and its logical imagery together buttressed the viewing experience. The painting was physically part of the real architectural space, and its subject matter was always absolutely appropriate for and even expected in that space. Only after recognition of the work as a painting cemented its materiality would the viewer reframe the experience as “viewing a painting” (albeit an unprecedented type of work) and evaluate the meaning of the subject matter. Ultimately, one enjoyed both the visual illusion and the knowledge that the work was a painting without one aspect weakening the other. As marvelous as the illusions were, the representational techniques supporting them made the paintings marvelous in themselves. The way that pictorial illusionism initially destroyed the materiality of the painting thereby redeemed itself, modulating any disappointment through the practical magic of the techniques and the revelation of the underlying meaning, which resituated both the work and the imperial viewer within more familiar cultural territory. This did not diminish the imperial viewing experience of scenic illusions, but rather enhanced it, and acknowledged the viewer's superior refinement. Only a truly sophisticated viewer could simultaneously perceive and appreciate the illusion of space, objects, and figures alongside the meaningful reality of the painting as two aspects of a single experience (rather than two alternating experiences) without being troubled by such phenomenological doubleness.¹³

Scenic illusions therefore did something that traditional Chinese paintings did not: for an extended moment, the viewer had no sensory data that would support differentiating the painting from reality. In traditional Chinese paintings, typically portable works with distinctive ink brushwork that pointed to a recognizable artistic identity, the viewer's world extended only up to the borders and the surface of the object. However, with scenic illusions that world continued seamlessly into the painting, creating a provocative alternative to the medium-specific nature of most viewing practices and the dominant

formats of scrolls, albums, fans, and screens. Traditionally, a portable painting was physically present and identifiable because its format, viewing customs, and storage practices all demanded that viewers engage it with the knowledge that it was a painting well before actually seeing brush traces on paper or silk. This knowledge created a sense of anticipation that encoded all ensuing thoughts and actions with the meaning “viewing a painting” and physically connected the viewer with the material object identified as a painting prior to seeing the work. Furthermore, by the Qing dynasty the vocabulary that had developed specifically for “looking at a painting” (*kan hua*) or “reading a painting” (*du hua*) implied an acquired skill particular to the learned elite gentleman capable of truly contemplating or scrutinizing (*guan*) a work: “scholars contemplate, while peasants (along with women, children, and eunuchs) just look.”¹⁴ Before the elite male implicitly understood to be the appropriate viewer even physically saw a painting, therefore, he was already firmly situated within a complex preconditioned visuality.

In contrast, the emperor encountered a scenic illusion without performing any of the physical movements or thought processes that typically preceded “viewing a painting,” such as unrolling a scroll or opening an album, and initially received no visible contextual or material clues to suggest that the view was a painting. Scenic illusions typically did not receive seals or inscriptions (traditional marks of authorship, ownership, appreciation, and pictorial surface), which eliminated another key cultural process that instantiated paintings as such. In short, the combined aesthetic and kinesthetic experience that prepared the eighteenth-century Chinese elite male viewer to “view a painting” was short-circuited: he simply entered a room and, without any preparation or expectations, faced a scene that appeared real. Discovering that the view was merely a realistic painting then forced him to question his perceptions and his sophistication: historically, realistic and illusionistic painting was generally considered a lesser art form suitable for the undereducated populace who could be deceived by such things, while the educated gentleman was not fooled by such superficial visual trickery. For the sake of the illusionistic effect, therefore, scenic illusion paintings initially sacrificed the entire established set of criteria and viewing practices that historically defined Chinese paintings as art, and thus questioned the trustworthiness of the viewer’s senses.

This did not mean that scenic illusions were disconnected from works that were unquestionably defined as paintings. Although the architectural illusion is original, the motif in the center of the *Spring’s Peaceful Message* scenic illusion is related to an earlier work, a small hanging scroll with the same title (figure I.3). This scroll, produced decades earlier by the Italian Jesuit lay brother painter Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688–1766), depicts the favor that the Yongzheng emperor bestowed on Qianlong while the latter was still a prince. As a young man with demonstrated intellectual and physical abilities, Qianlong enjoyed a special relationship with his grandfather, the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722), which is thought to have influenced Yongzheng’s decision to officially (but secretly) declare this favorite son the future heir when he ascended to the throne in 1723.

1.3 Giuseppe Castiglione, *Spring's Peaceful Message*, c. 1727–28. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 68.8 x 40.6 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing, Gu5361.



The successive Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong reigns define the High Qing era (1661–1799), which is often considered the golden age of the Manchu Qing dynasty.¹⁵ Scholars generally agree that some time during Yongzheng’s reign, Castiglione pictured the special relationship between the ruler and his intended successor in the small version of *Spring’s Peaceful Message*, a unique visual allusion to the future of the dynasty.¹⁶ Against a brilliant blue mineral background that suggests a cloudless sky, a device common to European but not Chinese painting (and notably not repeated in the scenic illusion), the two men are again dressed in scholars’ robes, and Yongzheng is passing Qianlong a branch of blossoming plum. Although the garden is only barely suggested through a decorative rock, a flowering tree, and tall green bamboo on slightly grassy ground, these few natural elements create mass and volume with subtle shading and highlights in a largely European manner.

Now mounted as a hanging scroll in imperial yellow brocade, this small painting was originally executed in a format that seems to have appeared only in the Qing dynasty.¹⁷ “Affixed hangings” (*tieluohua*, literally “apply-and-remove paintings”) are typically small to medium-sized paintings or calligraphy that are often bound around the edges with a strip of fabric or paper and affixed directly to walls without any attendant mounting. China has a long native tradition of monumental illusionistic murals that share some important similarities with scenic illusions, but scenic illusions are not murals painted directly on walls. Instead, they are a variation on affixed hangings. These significantly larger and heavier versions were produced on multiple pieces of silk joined smoothly together, often with thick backing paper applied for strength and stiffness before being affixed to walls and ceilings. In at least one case, scenic illusions were even mounted on woven bamboo support structures installed onto the surfaces of the walls, perhaps to help minimize the effects of a building’s shifting and settling on the painting, and therefore to maintain the illusion.¹⁸

Although the small affixed hanging of *Spring’s Peaceful Message* did not cover an entire wall in the Hall of Mental Cultivation as the scenic illusion does, and the two works are not known to have been simultaneously mounted in the hall, the smaller affixed hanging painting was originally installed there and inspired the much larger illusionistic work. Today, the scenic illusion of *Spring’s Peaceful Message* remains *in situ* on the westernmost wall of the Hall of Mental Cultivation, but what little scholarship it has received has considered it only as a tangent to the small hanging scroll version.¹⁹ Yet the two are inseparable, and the introspective poem with which Qianlong inscribed the *Spring’s Peaceful Message* scroll is also applicable to the scenic illusion:

*Portraiture was the specialty of Giuseppe Castiglione,
Who painted me during my younger years.
Entering the room, this white-haired one
Did not recognize who this was.
Inscribed by the emperor in late spring 1782.*

This poem has typically been interpreted as a commentary on how Qianlong, grown wrinkled and portly at age seventy-two, after nearly five decades on the throne, barely recognized the slim young prince in the scroll as his former self. However, when read as applying to both the scroll and scenic illusion versions of *Spring’s Peaceful Message*, the poem, in another negation of phenomenological doubleness, implies two layers of initial misrecognition. Not only had Qianlong aged so much that he did not recognize his younger self in the painting, but the scenic illusion also deceived him into misperceiving the view as real.²⁰ It was extremely uncommon to inscribe a poem on a scenic illusion, not least because of its difficulty but more importantly because an inscription would have destroyed the all-important illusion. Instead, as in this case, related poems

were sometimes inscribed on smaller related works, or else simply recorded as part of the emperor's writings. Linking scenic illusions to Qianlong's poetry and the portable paintings that make up the majority of Qing court commissions helps break down the artificial divisions found in most scholarship between portable paintings and wall paintings.²¹ More importantly, rather than treating scenic illusions as isolated entities, retaining this link engages them as part of the larger body of works alongside which they were originally produced and that often influenced them.

Appealing to Sight and Touch

Standing in front of *Spring's Peaceful Message*, Qianlong could not but have appreciated just how much the illusion created a garden where there was only a wall and extended the perceived space of the entire Hall of Mental Cultivation. Walls and bodies are two of the most complex and significant boundaries in Chinese culture.²² To diminish both of them simultaneously, all scenic illusions use adaptations of European illusionistic painting techniques and depth cues to visually replace walls with spaces and objects that appear to exist tangibly in three dimensions. In order for a viewer to understand a two-dimensional picture (a painting) as a projection of three-dimensional space (reality, or at least the illusion of it), he or she must interpret numerous visual cues in the picture as representing distance and depth in the real world. To create this effect, painters use a variety of depth cues, including

- linear perspective (to suggest deep spatial recession);
- foreshortening and angular distortion (so objects appear to project or extend into space);
- occlusion (an object that occludes another is probably in front of it);
- size constancy (of two objects of presumed equal size, the smaller is farther away);
- resolution (fewer visible details indicate distance);
- contrast (objects with less light and shadow contrast are likely farther away);
- color (hue changes on comparable objects suggest the darker object is farther away);
- shadows (the position, distortion, and shape of shadows indicate relative location);
- reflectance and scattering (the amount of reflected or scattered light varies relative to light source and viewer).²³

With such depth cues employed in them, scenic illusions do not constitute a failure of normal perception; rather, they result from perfectly normal perceptual capabilities functioning as they should, but producing a nonstandard percept.²⁴ The responses of

seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Chinese viewers to European art consistently demonstrate that they were able to see the illusions in those paintings, indicating the legibility of most Western pictorial depth cues in the High Qing visual world despite a painting history that did not privilege such representations. However, the act of picturing now *looked* different than it did before, raising the question of how Chinese visuality was also changing in response to sustained contact with European representational modes. Broadly defined as the social aspect of vision, visuality is useful as a heuristic device to investigate the relationship between vision and representation in cross-cultural contexts.²⁵ When approached in this way, evidence demonstrates there is no single early modern visuality derived from any particular place (including Europe), and that perhaps the only shared value across early modern visuality is its willingness to engage the foreign.²⁶ That willingness varied somewhat with class and social status in early modern China, but there is no question that Western techniques affected Chinese visuality in ways that have yet to be fully understood.

Among the depth cues found in scenic illusion paintings, the importance of linear perspective is particularly clear in *Spring's Peaceful Message*. When faced with a perspectival painting, the viewer interprets apparent distance and depth through the perceived position of objects relative to the horizon line and to the apex of the visual angle (the angle at which a viewed object subtends at the eye). In other words, the closer to the horizon and visual angle, the farther away an object appears, especially when size constancy is also at work. To create the impression of a room that recedes away from the viewer, *Spring's Peaceful Message* uses *pavimento*, a common Renaissance pictorial device in which the straight lines of a tiled or paved floor create the orthogonals of linear perspective receding to its single vanishing point. Linear perspective was entirely intelligible to Chinese viewers; however, *chiaroscuro* and obvious shading failed spectacularly as depth cues because of traditional Chinese aesthetics. Chinese viewers typically interpreted dark shading and sometimes even cast shadows as dirt on the surface of a painting or as indicating dirty faces and soiled clothing. Qianlong himself vehemently disliked it, thereby ensuring its near absence in scenic illusions, where light and highlight (rather than light and shadow) lend mass and volume to objects and rooms. Figures sometimes and landscapes often cleave more to Chinese than to European conventions, as is seen in the area of the *Spring's Peaceful Message* presented as outside in the garden (figure 1.4), where the figures are depicted with the flatter, more surface- and line-oriented aesthetics of traditional Chinese figure painting rather than the volumetric possibilities of Western painting. The unpainted background landscape, distinctive texture strokes on the rocks and tree trunks, highly stylized plant foliage, and complete lack of either cast shadows or modeling are what one would expect in a traditional Chinese landscape painting, and not in a *quadratura*. Nevertheless, this blend of three-dimensional European perspectival illusionism with traditional Chinese representational modes is what ultimately helps lead the viewer to recognize the scene as a painting.



1.4 Detail of figures in garden, *Spring's Peaceful Message* scenic illusion (figure 1.2).

Unless one is near enough to this painting to touch it, however, there are no visible brushstrokes, particularly in the area that depicts the floor, walls, and ceiling. This lack runs counter to essential aesthetic values in the traditional Chinese brush arts, which valorize the artist's visible presence in his brushwork. However, this erasure of the artists' identities as well as of the technology of representation perfectly suited the collaborative and therefore typically anonymous working processes of the Qing imperial painting academy (Huayuanchu). Scenic illusions were uniquely produced by the Wish-Fulfilling Studio (Ruyiguan), the separate elite branch of the painting academy where the European missionary artists worked alongside the emperor's best Chinese and Manchu painters.²⁷ The Wish-Fulfilling Studio's archives (hereafter abbreviated RYG) are therefore the primary documentary source for these paintings, recording commissions, requested changes, installation locations, artists' identities, and more that have otherwise been lost.

As scenic illusions were particular to these artists, *Spring's Peaceful Message* would have been immediately identifiable as their work once the illusion had been dispelled.

Despite the important role that European pictorial techniques play in scenic illusions, neither the production of these paintings nor their definition as scenic illusions depended on the presence of European hands: Chinese Wish-Fulfilling Studio painters were producing scenic illusions on their own at least as early as 1738.²⁸ Yet without an artist's hand immediately visible in the brushwork, there was also no sign of brushes, pigments, or silk. By concealing the process of creation, the agency of the artist, and any material sign that scenic illusions were paintings rather than reality, these erasures initially directed the viewer's attention to the spaces, objects, and figures depicted instead of to the depiction itself, allowing the paintings to appear to become what they represented.

As Qianlong would have seen it through the doorway in figure I.1, the illusion of *Spring's Peaceful Message* is compelling because everything in it appears to be part of the viewer's world, and therefore creates the desire for touch that generally accompanies illusionistic painting. The complexity of this urge that links sight and touch is increasingly resulting in interdisciplinary studies of vision, cognition, perception, neuroaesthetics, and even neuro-art history, and is essential to fathoming the relationship between psychology and physiology that underpins the perception of illusionistic paintings.²⁹ Perceptually, the formula is simple: if an object seems to project into the viewer's space, then it must be real, and is therefore touchable. Neuroscience has revealed that visual perception is not defined by a positivist need to either validate or disprove what we see by touching it, but is instead inseparable from the physical preparation for performing an action. It is this interdependence of perception and action that compels a viewer who sees an illusionistic work to touch it.³⁰ The viewer has no expectation of cognitive dissonance or incoherent perception because experience teaches us to trust our senses, particularly the sense of sight. Unlike sight, concentrated in the head, the sense of touch pervades the body through the skin, the largest organ, which in the Chinese tradition was the primary "boundary of affective exchange" between the body and the world.³¹ As the "sensory faculty that shapes our social connections," touch connects us physically with others in the myriad contact gestures that define our relationships and their varying levels of intimacy.³² In the case of the hand in particular, touch comprises both agency and receptivity in touching and being touched in return.³³

Given the consistent legibility of most European pictorial depth cues in late imperial China, as well as early modern Chinese theories of vision that linked sight and touch with the idea that objects pushed toward the eye,³⁴ perspectival illusionistic paintings in eighteenth-century China resulted in the same "anthropologically constant interaction between sight and touch" as they did in Europe.³⁵ The temptation to touch deeply engages the scenic illusion viewer with the world of the painting, and transmutes the merely visual into the real and tactile. Given the "emotional valence of touch,"³⁶ the most powerful temptations are naturally human: the figures in scenic illusions, which sometimes

directly engage the viewer, provide the nexus between the viewer's tangible body and the intangible sense of sight, personally drawing the viewer forward into the depicted world. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century comments, as well as the literary record, indicate that touch was often responsible for a viewer's recognition of what he saw as a painting: viewers did not understand a seemingly permeable space to be a wall-mounted illusionistic painting until they touched it, or even accidentally bumped into it. The same visual depth cues in the painting that drew viewers forward to touch the objects depicted, however, also moved them inexorably toward the discovery of the painting's materiality and the collapse of the illusion.

Touch was always only a means to an end, however. Whether by intellectual recognition or haptic connection, scenic illusions were always discovered as paintings and were enjoyed as such, even though all their features initially conspired to conceal that identity. Their deceptions were extended by the perfect viewing position prescribed by both linear perspective and the surrounding architecture, which directed the viewer into place. But the illusion always disintegrated in the end, thereby giving rise to the moment of recognition necessary to the disjunction between first seeing the scene and then understanding that it was a painting. The goal of illusionistic painting in general is not permanent deception (which is impossible), but instead astonishment or amazement at one's own misperception.³⁷ Illusionistic paintings "lose their *raison d'être*" without the viewer's willing complicity in balancing his or her perception of real space with the acknowledgment of a mere flat painted surface.³⁸ That Qianlong repeatedly commissioned and engaged with views that he knew to be only paintings demonstrates just how enjoyable he found both visual illusions and these paintings in particular.

The Necessity of Space and Place

As paintings intended to decorate (rather than visually replace) their supporting walls, ordinary affixed hangings were typically much smaller than the walls and were displayed continuously for long periods of time. Sometimes they were removed and replaced with other paintings, moved to other locations to decorate those spaces, or remounted as scrolls, as the small version of *Spring's Peaceful Message* was some time after being removed from the Hall of Mental Cultivation.³⁹ Using a monumental wall-encompassing version of the affixed hanging format for scenic illusions theoretically implies that one could move them from one wall to another, as long as the dimensions were the same. However, the paintings were tailored precisely to the size and form of the structure, down to its distinctive decorative features. Removing or dissociating scenic illusions from their original locations therefore destroys their original effects. Nevertheless, their physical features still suggest something of the original settings, even if those have been lost. Composed and fitted to cover the entire area of the supporting surface, untrimmed paintings suggest the original size of that surface, and the placement of apertures in an unmounted

painting would have corresponded to doorways and windows in the original space. If there had been a doorway or windows in the west wall of the Hall of Mental Cultivation, for example, they would have been incorporated into the composition of *Spring's Peaceful Message*. Instead, the moon gate in the painting creates a fictive aperture in the wall, which is otherwise entirely covered by the painting.

Successfully integrating a scenic illusion visually into a space also required that the real architectural frame surrounding the painting be incorporated into the painting itself in order to correspond to the viewer's expectation of the surroundings. Indeed, it is this continuation of the surrounding architectural frames (what has been described as architectural colonization of an illusionistic painting's borders) that suggests the works are emphatically *not* paintings.⁴⁰ In the scenic illusion of *Spring's Peaceful Message*, the porcelain-tiled floor (an unusual element that differed markedly from the standard dark stone flooring of the Forbidden City) and latticed windows were repeated in the work, as was the latticework at the top and upper corners of the painting that mimicked the latticework surrounding the real doorway into the room in figure I.1. Other paintings still *in situ* also demonstrate the consistent practice of painting architectural elements continued from or very similar to those in the real room into the extreme foreground of the paintings, serving to increase the illusion by linking the painting to that particular space and site.

Beyond the visual contiguity of painting and architecture, scenic illusions had to present subjects that would not have been out of place in their surroundings. Furthermore, because scenic illusions derived their subjects and meanings from how and why Qianlong used the sites where they were installed, the subject also had to carry a deeper meaning related to the significance of the building to him personally. The growing study of interiors within art and architectural history has demonstrated that occupant and interior each helps create the other, particularly in the case of monarchs and their palaces.⁴¹ Most individual, named spaces in the Qing imperial palaces and garden residences carried a particular meaning, even spaces as small as a single room in a larger building, such as the Three Rarities Studio within the Hall of Mental Cultivation. The name of a site often alluded to this meaning, conveying something of the function of the space as well as a network of historical and literary allusions personally significant to the emperor. For example, Qianlong named the Three Rarities Studio after three pieces of early calligraphy by the most famous calligraphers in Chinese history, which he succeeded in acquiring for the imperial collection. Objects such as these are still part of the former Qing imperial collection, and are also seen in the small *Spring's Peaceful Message*, as connoisseurship of antiques in a garden was equally appropriate for literati and for emperors. Although the same antiques are not repeated in the scenic illusion, the fact that the studio was just to the left of the painting implied that real objects from the studio could be brought out into the fictive garden for connoisseurship. To understand a scenic illusion, therefore, one must not only understand the building in which it was installed, but also how Qianlong engaged with it as the primary intended occupant in his own private space.⁴²

Wish-Fulfilling Studio archives reveal that in addition to numerous locations within the Forbidden City, scenic illusions were originally installed across the full range of imperial sites in and around Beijing, including but not limited to imperial palaces, residences, gardens, and parks. The Central and South Seas (Zhongnanhai) park located just west of the Forbidden City may still hold scenic illusions *in situ*,⁴³ but it is now the Chinese government center, with no access whatsoever granted to scholars. The Perfect Brightness Garden complex (Yuanmingyuan) is located in the northwest corner of Beijing, six miles from the Forbidden City, and was originally both a garden retreat and a fully functional alternate government center for a dynasty that disliked spending time in the Forbidden City. Its name now refers to the complex of multiple neighboring gardens in this area of Beijing, including the Eternal Spring Garden (Changchunyuan), although these were conceived and constructed separately in the eighteenth century. Today both the Perfect Brightness Garden and the Eternal Spring Garden lie in ruins, but originally they may have contained the greatest number of scenic illusions. Nearby, paintings were also installed at the southern-style Carefree Spring Garden (Changchunyuan), where Qianlong's mother (the empress dowager Xiaosheng [1693–1777]) lived, and at the Fragrant Mountain (Xiangshan) retreat west of the Perfect Brightness Garden.⁴⁴ “Travel palaces” (*xinggong*) housed the emperor on his many imperial tours throughout the empire, and scenic illusions were installed there as well. At the Mount Pan travel palace (Panshan) outside Beijing, for example, a complete program of wall and ceiling paintings was installed at the Attracting Victory Pavilion (Jingshengxuan).⁴⁵ Scenic illusions were even installed 150 miles outside Beijing at the imperial summer residence at Chengde, known as the Mountain Retreat for Escaping Summer Heat (Bishu Shanzhuang).⁴⁶ These few locations are only the most important and best known of the sites with scenic illusions, which could be found essentially anywhere Qianlong spent time, and especially in places that were important to him.

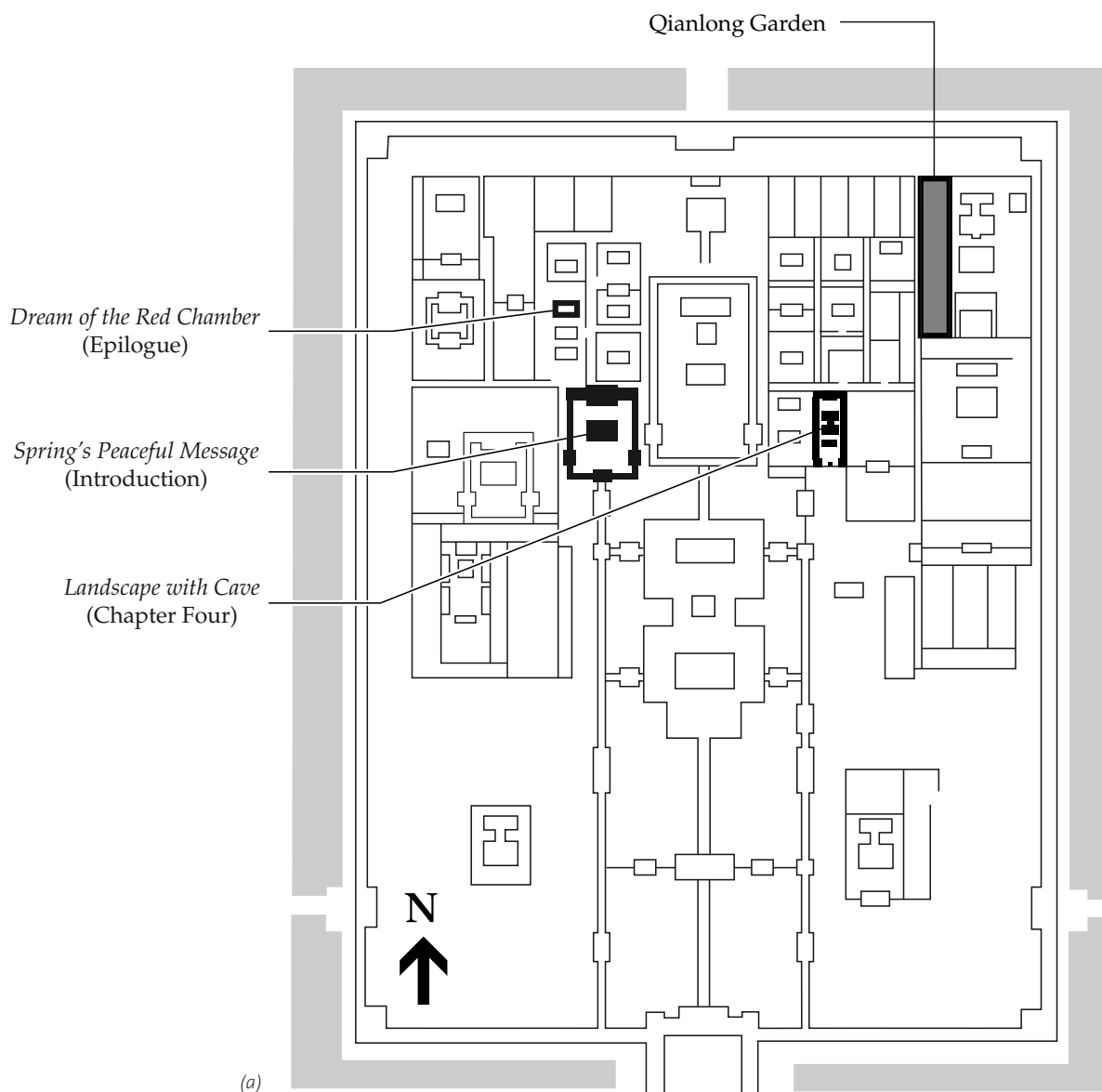
For various reasons, the vast majority of scenic illusions have been lost, along with their original locations. The skills necessary to create and repair these works largely died out with the core group of Qianlong's Chinese and European Wish-Fulfilling Studio artists.⁴⁷ Many works were likely destroyed in the political upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Any scenic illusions still mounted in the Perfect Brightness Garden in 1860 would have been looted, ruined, or lost in the conflagration set by marauding foreign troops during the Second Opium War (1856–60). Although archives demonstrate that the Forbidden City's Established Happiness Palace (Jianfugong) also had scenic illusions, the fires that eunuchs set there in 1923 to hide evidence that they were stealing from the imperial collection would have destroyed any paintings still *in situ*. Today, most of the paintings *in situ* are in Qianlong's Forbidden City retirement compound, the Tranquil Longevity Palace (Ningshougong). The delicate condition of all the extant paintings demonstrates their extreme vulnerability to damage from having been installed permanently or for long periods of time, suffering from exposure to the drastic

changes of Beijing's harsh climate. Despite these near-complete losses, mapping even the few surviving scenic illusions and visual records of lost works illustrates the diversity of spaces in which they could be found (figures I.5a–b, I.6).

Regardless of their current location, scenic illusions must be considered relative to their original place and spatial context, which often can be reconstructed only textually.⁴⁸ While the primary documentary source for scenic illusion production is the Wish-Fulfilling Studio archives, Qianlong's poems are the key source for interpreting their meaning. Few of the approximately forty-three thousand poems credited to Qianlong are notable literary achievements, but they demonstrate how these sites themselves sometimes provoked the commissions, and more importantly reveal the personal meanings that he drew from the various sites and their paintings. Although Qianlong almost certainly projected a constructed self-image in poetry, his poems written for and about the architectural sites that contained scenic illusions, as well as those inscribed on or written about other paintings related to them, are consistently more personal than average. In addition, scenic illusions were sometimes commissioned to imitate others produced earlier and installed elsewhere, creating a chain of references and meanings that evolved with time and place and is often only visible in relation to Qianlong's poetry. The poetry is therefore as inseparable from those sites as the scenic illusions originally installed there, and they function in concert to illustrate what the site meant for Qianlong.

As expected for most perspectival paintings, the space of each scenic illusion resolves only at a single vanishing point. It therefore has only one perfect viewing position, which also implies the presence of the imperial viewer at a particular position in the original space. Consequently, the physical experience of scenic illusions differs from traditional Chinese paintings in two ways. First, Chinese paintings typically prescribed neither a fixed viewing position nor a fixed angle of representation. Second, the portability of most traditional Chinese painting formats, and their transmission through multiple owners over generations or even centuries, indicates that site-specificity played no consistently meaningful role in producing a painting's meaning for its owner. Through the painting-architecture relationship, which creates visual contiguity, linear perspective creates specificity of sight and site in the holistic viewing experience of scenic illusions.⁴⁹ For scenic illusions, therefore, recovering the original architectural context and its meaning to Qianlong are essential to understanding how a painting originally appeared and what it meant.

When both versions of *Spring's Peaceful Message* are considered specifically in relation to the significance of the Hall of Mental Cultivation, it becomes apparent that the hall, reserved as it was for the imperial residence and offices, was an entirely logical place for the emperor and his chosen successor to be together.⁵⁰ The surrounding architectural context not only provided the visual frame that helped create the illusion, but, as the place of the emperor's daily business, also encouraged the mindset necessary for interpreting the meaning of the painting. The hall became the center of imperial governance during Yongzheng's reign, when he relocated the imperial residence and office suite from the



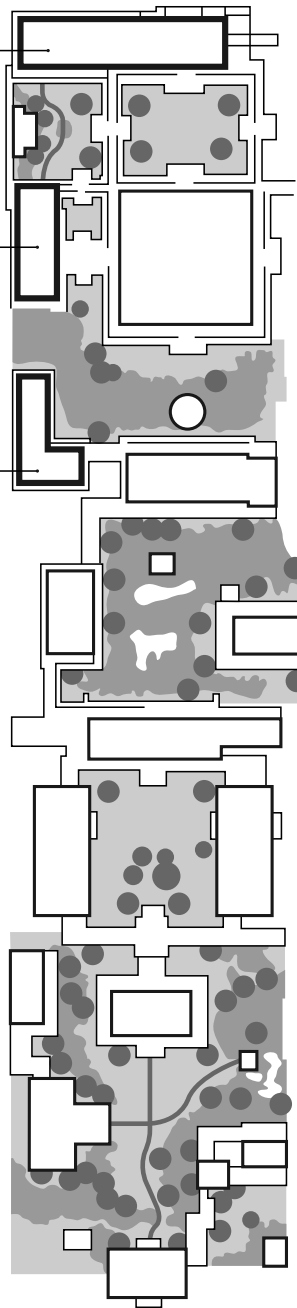
1.5 Original locations of all known extant scenic illusions or visual evidence for lost paintings originally in the Forbidden City (a) and Qianlong Garden (b; *opposite*). Diagrams by Barry Levely.

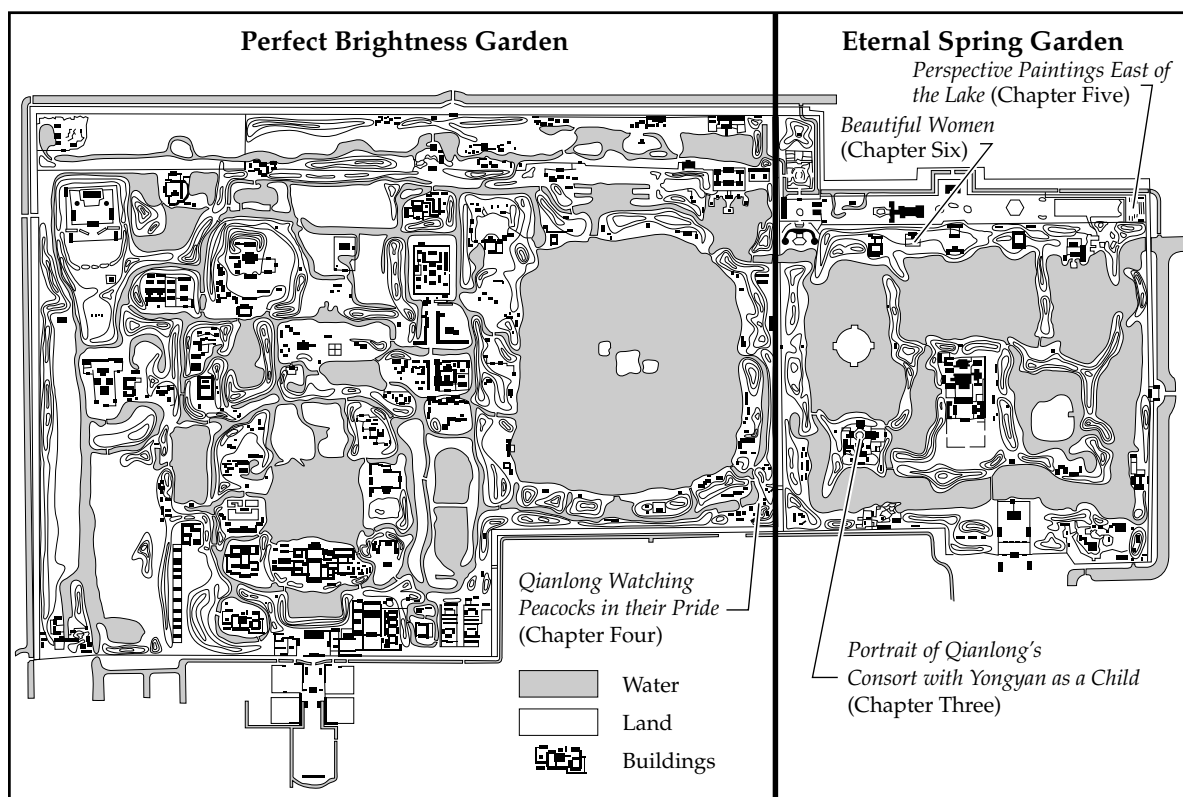
Studio of Exhaustion
from Diligent Service
(Chapter Six)

Bower of Purest Jade
(Chapter Three)

Supreme Chamber of
Cultivating Harmony
(Chapter Three)

(b)





1.6 Original locations of all known extant scenic illusions or visual evidence for lost paintings originally in the Perfect Brightness and Eternal Spring Gardens. Diagrams by Barry Levely.

Palace of Heavenly Purity (Qianqinggong) on the Forbidden City's central axis to this more protected space closer to the Grand Council (Junjichu), akin to a privy council. Yongzheng and Qianlong were therefore the first two Qing emperors to use the hall as the center of the emperor's life in the Forbidden City. The image of Yongzheng giving Qianlong a branch of flowering plum, typically a symbol of spring and renewal, in this particular space therefore symbolized how Yongzheng transferred the authority to rule to Qianlong when Qianlong was in the springtime of his life, visually confirming him as Yongzheng's successor.⁵¹ Without the significance of the architectural reference, the small version of *Spring's Peaceful Message* seems to be simply a costume portrait of the two Manchu emperors in Han scholars' robes, just another of many with a tenuous relationship to reality. Had the scenic illusion been removed from the Hall of Mental Cultivation, it too might be interpreted that way, but remaining in place there has preserved both its effects and its meaning in the original context. Furthermore, *Spring's Peaceful Message* is one of only two extant known scenic illusions depicting Qianlong. Since images of the imperial visage were historically as venerated as the emperor himself and could not be destroyed,

it is likely that few scenic illusions depicted him; otherwise more would have survived.⁵² Surviving *in situ* therefore adds another layer of significance to this rare scenic illusion portrait.

Crossing Pictorial Boundaries

The sheer volume, meticulous detail, and general incorporation of Western techniques in High Qing court painting as a whole encourage the viewer to treat them as realistic and representationally accurate, making it easy to succumb to Qianlong's pictorial presentation of himself and his reign. Depicted more often than any emperor before him, he adjusted his presentation relative to the various roles he played for contemporary audiences and how he wanted posterity to perceive him, rendering his pictorial identity both discursively and historically mobile.⁵³ Such control over his perceived image is epitomized by the fact that in 1795, after reigning for sixty years, he formally abdicated the throne in favor of his son Jiaqing (r. 1796–1820) as a filial gesture to avoid surpassing his grandfather Kangxi's sixty-one-year reign. But he retained control of the empire until his death in 1799, not even vacating the imperial residence in the Hall of Mental Cultivation. Yet the depictions of Qianlong's many accomplishments in paintings do not always measure up against the truth of events during his reign, which laid the foundation for the "destructive nexus of social disintegration and economic decline that would lay waste to so much of Chinese society in the 1800s."⁵⁴ Qianlong may not have left the empire better off than when he inherited it, but court painting produced under his patronage suggests otherwise.

Where this carefully constructed image fractures, revealing something of the real man who was emperor, is in scenic illusion paintings. Scenic illusions and their specific messages differ markedly from the rhetoric and propaganda of the emperor's carefully controlled presentation in the majority of Qing court paintings. Originally installed in some of Qianlong's most private spaces, scenic illusions offer his personal (and even secret) thoughts on the major issues of his reign, including empire, ethnicity, identity, longevity, and legacy. Although perhaps not all of the original scenic illusions were as intensely symbolic as those that have survived, and some level of imperial rhetoric is always involved, these works are extant largely because of their personal connection to *this* emperor who had them installed in spaces that were important particularly to *him*. The specific circumstances of each painting's production link them to different moments in the imperial biography, a connection strengthened by the relationship of each work to places deeply meaningful to Qianlong, such as his retirement compound and personal art connoisseurship studio, which were preserved even centuries after his death.

Beyond the personal connection to Qianlong in scenic illusions, institutional, perceptual, and semiotic frames that are not immediately visible also affect the paintings and their meanings.⁵⁵ Scenic illusions were influenced as much by Qing imperial culture as they were by the literature, political events, artistic trends, and popular interests of

eighteenth-century China, and by the expanding world it was encountering. The aesthetics of illusion inherent in these works is characteristic of Qianlong's interests, but is also part of a much larger empire-wide trend that predated his reign. Qianlong's personal interest in Western artistic ideas was fueled as much by the artists at his court as by foreign objects acquired via trade in the port of Guangzhou (Canton), diplomatic gifts that nations from around the world regularly offered as tribute, and occidentalizing works produced domestically by Chinese artisans to meet the popular demand for such things, which extended far outside the court.⁵⁶ Scenic illusions are therefore not an isolated aberration in the narrative of Chinese painting, or a breakdown in the global spread of Renaissance perspective, but the most impressive and dynamic illustrations of how Chinese visual and material culture were evolving in response to a constellation of period trends.

Scenic illusion paintings therefore cross multiple boundaries in Chinese art. Most simply, they cross the physical boundaries of the painting surface and the supporting wall, and thereby those between illusion and reality. Historically and historiographically, they also challenge the supposed purity of Chinese painting and the previous scholarly avoidance of deeply probing works that obviously incorporated European ideas, crossing the boundary between East and West in art history. Earlier characterizations of Chinese works of art that visibly integrated European ideas often criticized them as products of "European influence," and therefore unworthy of study, although that approach has recently changed dramatically.⁵⁷ Scenic illusions might seem to fall within a third, Sino-European or "intercultural" space of inquiry that exists somewhere between Chinese and Western art history.⁵⁸ Yet even that assessment distances them from the overarching narrative of Chinese art history, which has long since integrated earlier works with elements from India, Japan, and elsewhere in Asia, but is still negotiating the role of Western incorporations before the fall of the imperial system in 1911. Instead of occupying some nebulous third space, therefore, as complex products of the multicultural Qing court scenic illusions should be considered a new evolutionary moment in Chinese painting, which has never been purely Chinese. The many boundaries that scenic illusions cross demonstrate the need to continue broadening the very definition of Chinese painting, mandating a revised narrative that places the Qing dynasty generally, and the eighteenth century specifically, in a more prominent position within the history of Chinese art.