

OBJECT IN FOCUS

**Portraits of Shi Wenying and Lady Guan (details)**



China

Qing dynasty, 18th century or later

Hanging scroll, ink, and colors on silk

83 1/16 x 44 3/4 in; 83 3/8 x 44 13/16 in

Purchase—Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program and partial gift of Richard G. Pritzlaff. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, S1991.120 and S1991.121

**Describe**

This pair of paintings are ancestor portraits, which are formal, forward-facing portraits of deceased ancestors used for family worship. The paintings depict Shi Wenying, a lieutenant-general appointed by the Kangxi Emperor (reigned 1661–1722), and his wife Lady Guan. They each sit in a round-backed chair in a frontal and symmetrical pose. Matching chairs and carpets visually connect the portraits. The settings are otherwise blank, drawing our attention to the sitters. Lady Guan wears full court dress ([see F2015.7](#)) as we can tell from the highly decorated hat, robes, and set of court jewelry. She wears three earrings in each earlobe, indicating she was a Manchu woman (Chinese women generally wore a single pair of earrings). She also holds Buddhist prayer beads in her left hand. General Shi wears a thick fur coat and a very noticeable “two-eyed” peacock feather in his hat. The number of eyes indicates status. They are imperial rewards that reveal Shi’s high rank. Both paintings have inscriptions that record honors the couple received from the court.

**Analyze**

An ancestor portrait is traditionally in the hanging scroll format and depicts a full body image. Obviously, it would require an accurate record of the face but almost equally important is a detailed depiction of the clothing. This signifies the person’s social standing and brings glory to the family. Lady Guan’s face is, however, more masklike compared to her husband’s. This corresponds to a practice of secluding women from unrelated men, including professional artists.

The painter had to rely on her relatives' descriptions of her facial features, hoping to achieve some personal likeness, such as the sharp chin and narrow eyes of Lady Guan. While a sense of realism is crucial when depicting the face, artists avoid making the setting look realistic because the ancestor is not supposed to be present in the physical world. For example, the carpets in these two artworks were painted parallel to the picture plane, much like a panel of wallpaper.

## Interpret

Ancestor portraits are typically commissioned by the family members of the deceased ancestors. They are often made as pairs of scrolls with a husband and wife portrayed individually. They are displayed (usually hung above altars) during domestic ritual ceremonies, especially those during the Chinese Lunar New Year. Some families also hang ancestor portraits on occasions when they want to report good news, such as introducing a new bride to deceased parents.

## Inquire

- Look carefully at these two portraits. Make lists of things that are similar and different about them. What do these differences suggest about the roles of men and women at the Qing dynasty court?
- Imagine you could have a conversation with the man or the woman depicted in these portraits. What questions would you ask to learn more about their lives?
- Research formal court clothing of the Qing dynasty. Then, make notes about the colors, patterns, and symbols that can be found on the garments shown in these paintings. Explain your findings to a classmate.
- Ancestor portraits still play a role in Chinese culture today. Do your own research online or by speaking with people you know and find an image of a contemporary ancestor portrait displayed in a home. Describe the significance of this portrait for its owners.

## Resources

View these objects online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/S1991.120/> and <https://asia.si.edu/object/S1991.121/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>



天承運  
奉

皇帝制曰麟閣副敷首重統我  
之寄龍牙建績九筮上將之  
材既專制乎一軍宜申錫以  
三命爾都統加二級石文英  
訂誼經遠馳驅越聲夙裕韜  
鈴載協丈人之志勤抒藝宗  
克彰元老之猷勤節曲以嚴  
明威揚禁旅秉旌尾而整暇  
望峻中樞惟居重以叙輕爰  
推恩而錫福欣逢慶典用昇  
光榮藉以覃恩特授爾階光  
祿大夫錫之詰命於殿既曾  
報功天語特宣夫風語揚休  
拜命臣心益勵夫鷹揚崇獎  
欽承嘉猷勿替

初任三等侍衛二任都統三  
任加一級四任今職

康熙三十六年七月十九日  
頒

正白旗漢軍都統石公六十  
二歲像

音

康熙歲次丙申閏三月初日  
敬書





天承運 奉

皇帝制曰臣能報國心豈戀乎  
室家婦充相夫窈自邀乎綸  
綍既壹儀之濟羨宜朝命之  
均霽爾都統加二級石文英  
繼妻關氏有美能舍無傲自  
遂敦修內政四德信其能兼  
蹈履前徽百禄宜其式荷茲  
以覃恩封爾為一品夫人於  
戲嶼龍文於戴諸載揚貞順  
之風敬聖羽於文茵益著榮  
嘉之則尚勤女誠用任官方  
康熙三十六年七月十九日  
領  
初任三等侍衛二任都統三  
任加一級四任加二級正白  
旗漢軍都統石公蘭老夫人  
像  
音  
康熙歲次丙申閏三月初日  
敬書

