

Review by Lee Lawrence, [Internet Art Resources](#), December 2000...

## **DREAM OF RED CHAMBER**

### ***An Experience in Traditional Chinese Aesthetics***

The work by the classically trained painter, An Ho, and traditionally made furniture by Henry Lutz present two different aspects of Chinese art: richly colored paintings on silk in a Tang Dynasty technique and furniture whose elegant lines are minimalist in their distillation of Ming aesthetic. But the show does more than simply showcase mastery in two styles of Chinese art; it also invites us to *read* paintings in a different way.

Stepping into this show is like walking into a party in progress, except that the people you meet are 12 life-size fictional women drawn from the 18th century novel "Dream of Red Chamber". Separated by Lutz's delicately carved Ming-style furniture in rich hard woods, the women line the walls as though in a receiving line. You need not have read the book to get something out of the show, just as you need not know the biographies of every person you meet in order for the encounter to prove enriching. In fact, there is something to be said for coming at this cold -- how else can you tell whether the paintings do their job and, more important, how they do it?

All 12 characters look out with mask-like faces, but what may at first glance seem rather homogeneous breaks down on closer examination as your eye travels from the face to the robe, the posture, the gesture, the ornamentation, the jewelry. ***Jia Tanchun***, for example, stands next to an arm chair, one hand behind her back while the other caresses the curve of the chair's arm. The gesture lingers on the wood as does her gaze. Her dress and headdress are simple: a blouse with chrysanthemums and a skirt of solid blue with no embroidery. By contrast, the cushion on the chair bears a rich green-on-green pattern. Now, when our eyes return to the face, it no longer appears mask-like, revealing instead a combination of ambition and resignation. A look at the label fills in the biographical details of the character whose soul has already been revealed.

The same occurs with each painting and, in the end, we come away having interacted with these portraits in a very different way than with their European or American equivalents. In viewing Western portraits, our eye travels first to the face, where it remains to mine every detail of expression. When it takes in the dress and the setting it does so in reference to the face: Does the context confirm or contradict what we have seen in the face? In An Ho's portraits, the gestures speak volumes while the details in dress provide symbolic clues (which the curators helpfully explains in the labels). Armed with this knowledge we return with new eyes to those faces which we might have at first glance dismissed as generic.

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