

Forbidden Asia

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ISBN: 978-1-78042-721-8

*"She dusts the pillow, perfumes her red hairnet,
Swivels the lamp and slips off her clothes.
Her maids know the night will be long
But no call means they may go home."*

— Dai Hao, 6th century



Main Artists

Anonymous Master of the Kangxi Period	11, 15
Eisen, Keisai	239
Eishō, Chōkōsai	165
Harunobu, Suzuki	133, 135
Hokusai, Katsushika	139, 195, 207
Koryūsai, Isoda	127, 137



Kunisada, Utagawa	237
Mei, Xu	13
Morohira, Hishikawa	145
Pupil of Utagawa Kuniyoshi	243
Shun'ei, Katsukawa	161
Utamaro, Kitagawa	149



BOUND HAPPINESS - CHINESE EROTICISM

The aim of Taoist art and culture was to reach a state of harmony that would lead Man, confronted by a chaotic universe, towards a new serenity. In this spiritual context, love represented for the Chinese a force which was supposed to unite

Illustrations from *Qinglou Duoying*, published as 'Selected Scenes from Verdurous Towers'

Colour woodcuts from an album, late Ming period
(first half of the 17th century), 26 x 25 cm

The Muban Foundation Collection

'Verdurous Towers' is the veiled Ming term for a brothel





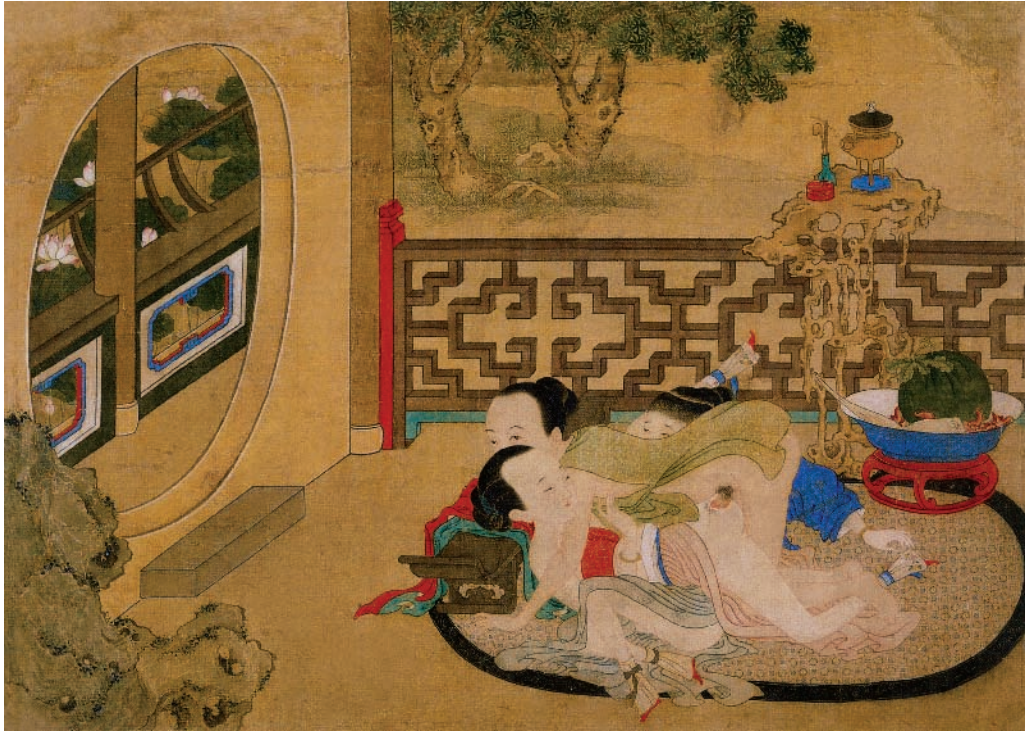
sky and earth in balance and maintain the reproductive cycle of nature. Eroticism thus became an art of living and formed an integral part of religion (to the extent that such western notions can be applied to philosophical thought of this kind).

Taoist religion assumes that pleasure and love are pure. 'In order to gain some

Anonymous Master of the Kangxi period

(1662-1722)

Painting on silk from an 8-page album, 39.5 x 55.5 cm





understanding of Chinese eroticism,' writes Etiemble, a great connoisseur of Chinese art, 'we need to distance ourselves from the notion of sin and the duality between the corrupt body and the holy spirit.' This ideology lies at the very base of Christianity. Erotic Chinese art reflects the extent to which we are 'morally corrupt' and 'full of prejudices'.

Painting on Silk from
an 8-page album, Kangxi period

Xu Mei, (1662-1722)

Silk, 42.5 x 74.5 cm

Courtesy: Collection Guy & Myriam
Ullens Foundation, Switzerland





The Yin-Yang pairing introduces us directly into the world of Chinese eroticism: The 'path of Yin and Yang' signifies nothing less than the sexual act itself. One of the best-known sayings of ancient Chinese philosophy, 'Yi yin yi yang cheh we tao' ('On the one side yin, on the other yang, this is the essence of Tao')

Anonymous Master of the Kangxi period

(1662-1722)

Painting on silk from an 8-page album, 39.5 x 55.5 cm





indicates the fact that sex between a man and a woman expresses the same harmony as the changes between day and night, or summer and winter. Sex symbolises the order of the world, the moral order, while our culture stigmatises it as evil.

In this sense, master Tung-huan wrote in his *Art of Love*, 'Man is the most sublime creature



Scene from Roupuyan, 'The Prayer Mat of Flesh'

18th century

Painting on paper, 37.5 x 37.5 cm





under the skies. Nothing which he enjoys can be compared to the act of sexual union. Formulated according to the harmony between the sky and the earth, it rules Yin and dominates Yang. Those who understand the sense of these words can preserve their essence and prolong their life. Those who do

Chinese Wedding Tablet

18th century

Painting on silk and appliqué relief mosaic pictures made from different coloured jade, mother-of-pearl, and ivory
They serve to instruct newly married couples





not grasp their true significance are heading towards their doom.' The split in the Universe between Yin and Yang is all the more important because these two inseparable principles mutually influence each other.

We know of a great many Chinese manuals whose purpose was to provide an

Painting on Porcelain Vase (detail)

18th century, 11.3 x 13 cm





education in the art of love-making for young couples; this education would cover desire, morality, and religion. In these texts, the sexual act is always referred to metaphorically, with terms such as 'the war of flowers', 'lighting the great candle', or 'games of cloud and rain'.

Painting on Silk

18th century, 31.5 x 34 cm





They are also full of images referring to various sexual positions:

- unfurling silk
- the curled-up dragon
- the union of kingfishers
- fluttering butterflies
- bamboo stalks at the altar
- the pair of dancing phoenixes
- the galloping tournament horse
- the leap of the white tiger
- cat and mouse in the same hole



Box Featuring Erotic Images

Painted on glass





In Chinese aesthetics, nothing is ever named directly and without beating about the bush. Instead, things are referred to obliquely, and any transgression of this tradition is considered vulgar. Even the European notion of 'eroticism' would be too direct. They would prefer to substitute the term 'the idea of spring'.



Chinese Porcelain Tile

19th century