

An illustration in a traditional Chinese style depicting four women in a domestic setting. Two women stand in the background, one with her arm around the other's shoulder. In the foreground, two women are seated at a low wooden table, focused on a board game with numerous small pieces. The women are dressed in richly patterned and colored garments, including red, green, and brown. The background is a solid warm brown, and the floor is covered with a repeating hexagonal pattern.

Belle Painting

of Ancient China



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主 编: 李向平

副 主 编: 林武汉

统筹策划: 荆孝敏

撰 稿: 刘奉文

图片编辑: 蔡 程

装帧设计: 仁 泉

翻 译: 邵 达

责任编辑: 荆孝敏 王莉

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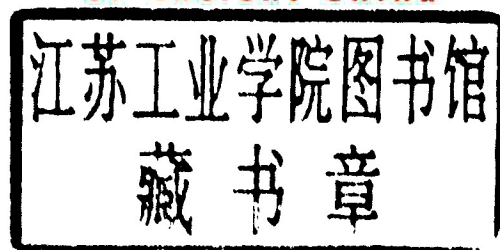
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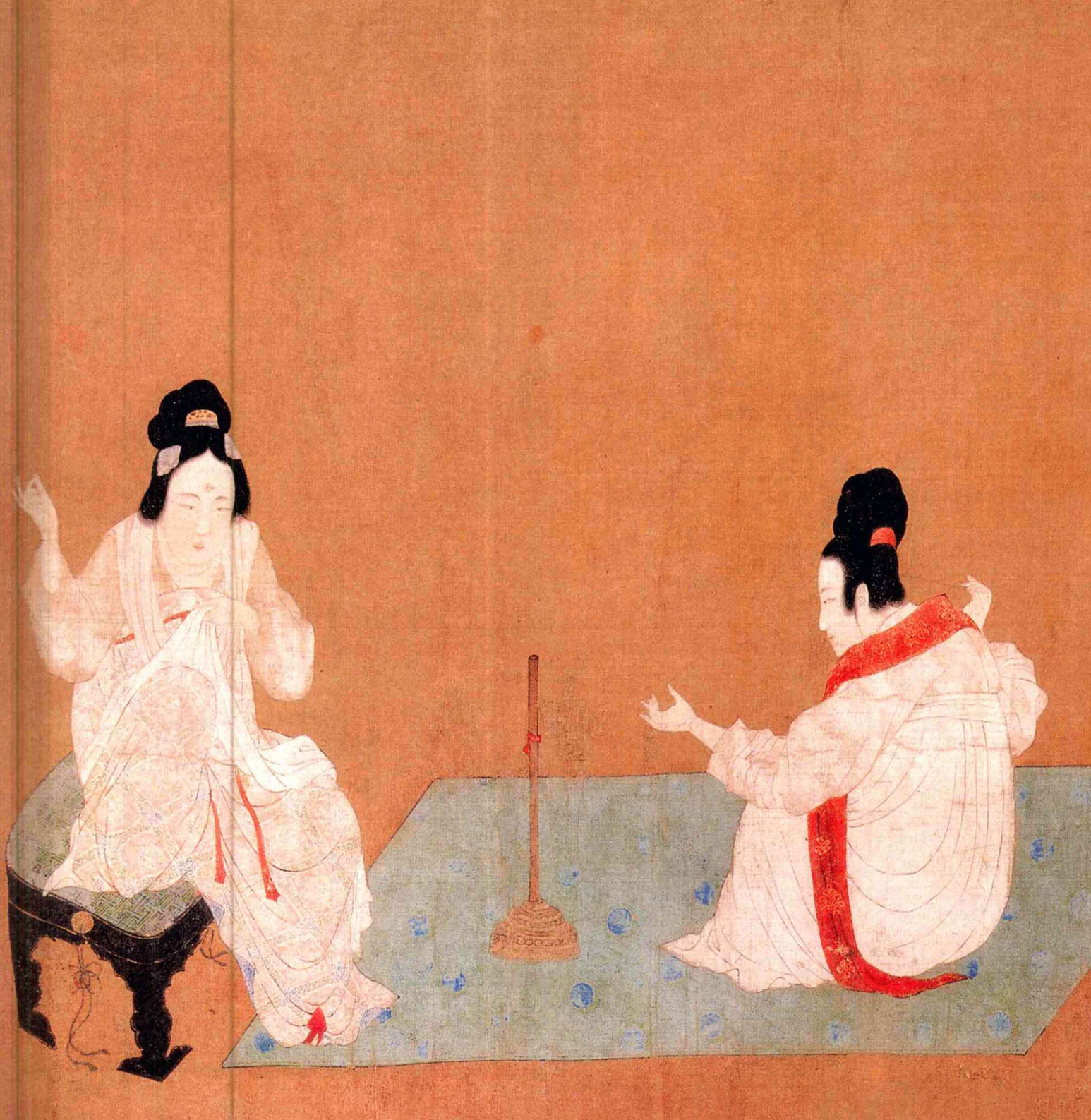
Associate editor in chief: Lin Wuhan

Overall planner: Jing Xiaomin

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Preface

If taking the “Figure, Dragon and Phoenix” -- unearthed from the Chu tomb of the Warring States Period (475–221 BC) in Changsha of Hunan Province -- as the earliest one, the traditional Chinese belle painting has had a history of over 2,400 years. Further discoveries have been made in the No.1 tomb of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 25) at Mawangdui of Changsha.

During the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420), painter Gu Kaizhi (c. 345–406) was noted for his women-themed artwork such as the “Nymph of the Luoshui River” and the “Admonitions of the Instructress to the Palace Ladies.” Since then, no more acting

as foils, women began to come to the fore in figure paintings.

Belle painting met its heyday in the flourishing Tang Dynasty (618–907), and continued to prosper during the war-ridden years of the Five Dynasties (907–960) and the Ten States (902–979). Since the short-lived regimes were replaced as frequently as if they were on a merry-go-round, those emperors such as Li Yu (also known as Li the Last Monarch, 937–978) of Southern Tang (937–975), one of the Ten States, unable to plan out their days, gave themselves over to painting and writing full-time so that they could temporarily forget the impending perils.

Though not a successful ruler, Zhao Ji (1082–1135) or Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127) possessed a remarkable talent for painting. Largely owing to his promotion, painters of the Northern and Southern Song (1127–1279) dynasties had scored considerable achievements in traditional Chinese painting, of course including belle painting. And the paintings of beautiful women drawn by some Song survivors during the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) established by the Mongols were most valuable.

Deeply influenced by the movement of “back to the ancients,” the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) had produced a number of

pseudo-classic paintings of beautiful women, with many being massive works. Interestingly, unlike the plump Tang Dynasty girls, the heroines of the Ming paintings all have a slender figure, reflecting a change in aesthetic standards then.

With the introduction of the technique of Western painting, the imperial-court painting of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) took on an entirely new look. All in all, mainly drawing material from the life of court ladies, belle painting of ancient China holds up a mirror to the times they lived in. Those paintings are not only art treasures but also prized historical materials.

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around in the eighth century. Zhang was best known for his "Court Ladies Preparing Newly-Woven Silk" and "Duchess of Guo State Going on a Spring Outing," while Zhou for his "Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers." Images of court ladies also appeared in renowned figure painter Yan Liben (?–673)'s representative work "Emperor Taizong Receiving Tibetan Envoys on a Sedan Chair."