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Dear Colleague:

My brother is a devotee of Chinese novels, those which date back to the eighteenth century as well as those which have come right off the press. He is more deeply rooted in Chinese culture than I. Hence, it is with a note of sadness that he confesses to certain deficiencies in Chinese literature (particularly novels) as compared with those of the West. One exception is the depiction of love, which he feels is more subtle in Chinese works, including potboilers of no other literary worth, than in Western novels, including the greatest.

We then got on to painting. Both Chinese and Western artists have aspired to realism. Chinese art is famed for its portrayals of landscape which, as Arthur de Carle Sowerby and Joseph Needham have shown, are far more realistic than uninformed viewers have assumed. Faithfulness to external reality is, in any case, strikingly evident in pictures of the smaller, discrete units of nature. Think of the horses and their bearded grooms (a popular theme since the T'ang dynasty), the birds, the fishes, and the flowers. But Chinese artists have turned a blind eye to the underside of life--dirt and decay, suffering and death. Their tradition would not have considered varicose veins and dirty feet, as a Caravaggio in Europe had done. And Caravaggio could do so not only because he was a genius but because his art developed out of centuries of close attention to thieves on the cross and to blood stained Christs. Rembrandt's "Slaughtered Ox" is inconceivable to Chinese aesthetic imagination. Chinese artists portray live birds and vigorous plants; their European counterparts do the same but, in addition, they depict still lives that show clear signs of decay.

At the Claudio Bravo exhibition (currently at the Elvehjem Museum), I was struck by his wrapped canvases. The wrapping itself has considerable appeal, but what is underneath? Something a great deal more marvellous? What is going on here--some kind of joke characteristic of our self-conscious, teasing times? I then read in Edward Sullivan's catalogue essay that way back in the seventeenth century artists such as Antonio Forbora and Cornelis Gysbrechts used to paint the backside of canvases. Reality has a front accessible to the senses. But it also has a back. There is this great curiosity in the West about what lies behind or underneath that seems absent or less well developed in the Far East--at least, in the aesthetic realm. Certain themes are taboo. Chinese science and art have suffered as a consequence. Yet the taboo against the explicit depiction of sexual love has forced Chinese writers to represent precisely that love with great power and subtlety.

Best wishes,

*Yi-Fu*