

Women artists of the late 19th century: continuity and change at the sunset of imperial China

ABSTRACT

Increasing attention to the history of Chinese women artists gives further impetus to re-evaluation of their artistic contribution. Here I focus on developments in women's art in the later part of the 19th century, entering into an interrogation of the assumption that the century had witnessed its decline in tandem with the decline of the Imperial China itself. A focus of the article is the 2017 Zhejiang exhibition, which has served to further intensify the imperative for research. Adopting a perspective based on gender and class, this paper examines the work of the female Chinese artists of the late 19th century both in the traditional Jiangnan area, which had been the epicentre of culture and economy, and in the newly developing trade areas, most notably Shanghai. There a vibrant art market emerged, bringing significant opportunities for women artists from broader social strata. This dynamic is illustrated by the particular example of Ren Xia. In these circumstances significant changes took place in the context of the presence of continuity in women's aesthetic production, while a traditional male discourse remained hegemonic.