THE CHINESE ART & CULTURE TOUR

Valuables

In Shanghai rich young Amanda buys dead insects in amber from a shop as dark as a vault. Where jade cutters hunch, she scoops up handfuls of stones, raking them into her purse, twittering how they look just like quail’s eggs.

At the carpet factory she picks out a rug swarming with dragons, nestled in wool too white for anyone else to afford. She rolls it up like a sausage, so many dollars per pound.

Later, in a town full of farmers, she yawns through schoolrooms, fidgets through institutes, hurries to prowl the back streets for more loot. Soon she comes running, her eyes big as bowls. “It’s true! They do eat rats. An old woman grinned and offered me one by the tail!”

“Tut,” says the guide, descendant of Wu, king of this province famous for gardens and silk and small-fingered girls who embroider cats. He smiles with centuries of charm: “The people of Suzhou want foreign ladies to know how well we take care of pests.”

Mischief

In the Forbidden City under a cold dazzling sun we take pictures of men in fur hats grinning, showing jagged teeth and breathing out frost like smoke from campfires hidden under rough coats.
Kin to the Khans, these men with tawny faces come from provinces up north, teased by forbiddance, tickled to be tourists in their wildest outfits for curious western women with cameras who giggle, find them irresistible, and go  Click! Click!

The Look

In the upstairs jade factory young men and women in gray suits bend over drills and emery wheels to shape gardens of green stone. They look like machines themselves, faces blank, fingers moving as if oiled and geared. They stop only to exercise their eyes to a recorded march with scratchy, barked commands. Then quickly they resume chiseling ornate leaves, birds, phoenixes that look as though artful monks on a mountaintop carved them with years of meditation.

They were picked, we learn, for their dexterity, spatial knack, ability to follow a plan. Their workplace is cold as a cave. In back of the room near a stove that gives barely enough heat for fingers to move, one young man suddenly looks up. While the others keep on carving, his eyes lock onto mine. Insolent, hot. He wants to throw down his flowery statue, stalk toward me and grab my wrist,
push me down into his chair behind
mountains of frozen stone, hissing,
“Work, you lazy white dog!”

**Bamboo**

Off a back street courtyard, a gray room
flowers with bright brush paintings
by elderly men and women who gather
to meet us. They wear old Mao suits
as if they have slept in them for years.
They sit shyly while their leader demonstrates
how to paint bamboo on silk.

But we are tired.

We have seen too much bamboo already.
During the question period we hardly ask
anything. We walk around slowly, smiling
at the walls, wondering what these people did
before they got old. Worked in the silk mills,
picked soybeans? One small woman shuffles
up to me and points out her painting above us,
a blood-red peony. She tells me she speaks
a little English. I look for a suitable
question to give her.

“What did you do
before you retired?” She bows her head as if
receiving a blessing, answers, “For China
throughout seven provinces I designed
railroad stations. Also my design,
this next picture of bamboo.”

**The Wild Dinner**

Chinese city dwellers call far-out Guilin
wilderness. Ancient poets and painters
grew blissful over its sugarloaf peaks,
clouded shrines, criss-cross thickets
of pine and bamboo that fueled the mists
of their minds. Later, half a century ago,
these limestone caves proved useful in hiding from bombs. Refugees huddled where we now stand. Today the travel bureau jazzes the caverns with red and blue lights, applies nicknames that out-do Disney for tourists, the newest frontier.

Tonight’s farewell feast is billed “The Wild Dinner.” In a private room above untamed peasants we drink strange beer, sing loudly what sounds like Sino-American hillbilly. When twisted meats of mysterious origin arrive steaming, our guide translates with difficulty. This is—how you say—the delicious “flying fox.” We munch, guessing squirrel. Other beasts we leave tangled in rice as we swallow fiery maotai, toasting South China wildness.

Months later the flying fox leaps out on Sunday afternoon TV, flexing its black wings, grinning like a miniature hyena: the notorious giant fruit bat of Southeast Asia. As its leathery body flops before me, I redefine my ability to adjust to wild things.

**Partings**

We applaud over littered banquet plates and Qingdao beers, start loudly singing American camp songs mixed with Chinese ditties hardly anyone understands, but everyone keeps grinning and toasting Mr. Yi.

Mr. Yi is leaving home to be married. He is bashful. After more songs, his face grows damp as Mr. Yang, his fellow guide,
presents him with a wedding gift:
a bed comfort of bright red silk.

Asked to solo, Mr. Yi demurs, hangs
his head, mumbles when his friend
calls his voice the best in the province.
But later, on the way back to the hotel,
as the darkened bus rocks us to sleep,
a quavering tenor rises against silence.
This is no brazen shriek of Chinese opera.
It’s a child lost. An animal snared. We
clutch our sweaters around us. After the wail
subsides, Mr. Yi tells us under dark’s cover
the name of his song from ancient China,
“Saying Goodbye to a Friend.” In our light
applause I seem to hear the sound of water
lapping against the sides of our bus, a boat
full of strangers, pulling away from shore.