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LOT 217
PROPERTY OF A NEW YORK COLLECTOR
A PORTRAIT OF A BEAUTY
QING DYNASTY, 19TH CENTURY

oil on canvas with gilt-foil ground, seated with one arm poised on a table, hands resting in the lap gathering up a swathe of fine red silk, wearing a crisp blue silk robe bordered with elaborately embroidered roses and butterflies, the hardstone clasp suspending a string of pearls and bright green jadeite beads, with a pair of matching jadeite and gold bangles on each wrist and a pair of jadeite and gold triple-loop earrings, the long black hair pulled up and secured with jadeite and flower hair pins, her oval face of pale complexion with a slight blush in the cheeks, the dark almond-shaped eyes with direct, open gaze, the background gilt, wood frame
Height 27 in., 68.6 cm; Width 19 1/2 in., 49.5 cm

ESTIMATE $200,000-300,000 USD
PROVENANCE
Collection of William Haynsworth.
Sotheby's New York, 9th and 10th October, 1987, lot 40.

CATALOGUE NOTE
The startling perfection of the figure in combination with the evident Western style painting has long generated an association of the sitter to one of the great beauties of the time, the Qianlong emperor’s consort Xiang Fei, ‘The Fragrant Concubine’ and to the finest European painter in the imperial court, Giuseppe Castiglione known as Lang Shining. Despite the evident loveliness of the subject, and the clear quality of the artistry there is no evidence to support either attribution.

Other versions of the subject are known. One example, (fig. 1) from the collection of Mme. Chiang Kai-Shek, with the sitter wearing a red robe and lacking the gilt ground, is illustrated in Cecile and Michel Beurdeley, Giuseppe Castiglione, A Jesuit Painter at the Court of the Chinese Emperors, Fribourg, Switzerland, 1971, no. 83 where the authors comments specifically on the long standing speculation on both the identity of the lady as Xiang Fei and the artist as Castiglione. Another closely related version (fig. 2) but described as “A Chinese Lady, Artist Unknown” is in the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art and illustrated in Late Qing China Trade Paintings, Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong, 1982, no. 28. The painting closest to the present portrait now in the Sze Yuan Tang Collection, (fig. 3) is illustrated in Patrick Conner, Paintings of the China Trade, The Sze Yuan Tang Collection of Historic Paintings, Hong Kong 2013, no. 129; the painting is remarkable in that it appears to be the only other example with a gilt background and is rendered in a very similar manner indicating that the two may well be by the same hand.

The number of paintings said to represent Xiang Fei include two other works attributed to Castiglione; one depicts a Chinese beauty dressed in European armor now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, and illustrated in Beurdeley, op. cit.p. 73, no. 84 and the other entitled “In the Garden of the Eternal Spring” with a scene of the emperor seated with a woman at his side. Current scholarship considers the paintings to be most likely done by other hands.

Castiglione and the emperor’s predilection for Europeénerie encouraged a large school of followers. Jiao Bingzhen, Leng Mei and Zeng Jing were three major names painting in the Western style at the time and as none of these works are signed it is nearly impossible to attribute their authorship with certainty.

The identification of these elegant beautiful women as Xiang Fei needs a closer look. The story of the foreign concubine taken against her will from her far western homeland captured the romantic ideals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Her narrative was embellished to fit a variety of parables; the virtue of chastity whereby she chooses death rather than succumb to the Emperor’s advances; patriotic defiance as she once again rejects the emperor's attempts to win her over assuring her own death rather than betray her Islamic Turkic origins; and feminists have rallied around her too (the image of her in European male armor being a favorite) as she willingly martyred herself rather than lose her right to choose her destiny. Historical records indicate that the truth is far less dramatic. Historical documents reveal Xiang Fei, who entered the imperial household in 1760, as having been a dutiful consort. She gave birth to a daughter, rose to a high rank and died in 1788, five days after being presented with a gift of ten early spring tangerines from the emperor. But facts never get in the way of a good story and Xiang Fei has inspired a multitude of images, plays, and even an opera not only in China but also in the West. Devotees of her story have co-opted any plausible resource to bolster the legend of the iconic beauty.

This extends to a poem written by the Qianlong emperor in 1790:
“On this Beijing lake’s southern bank, resenting its remoteness,
Dawn and dusk alike for thirty years, the portrait has hung there,
Looking back on my eight years I fear they were but trifles,
My abdication is now five years away, if only I may receive heaven's favor.


The language is wistful of course but the image of the emperor pining after a portrait of his beloved ‘Fragrant Concubine’ seems to have emerged from the somewhat enigmatic language and been used in recent years to substantiate her lofty status.

It is more likely that the painting represents a feminine ideal. Images of flawless, alluring women, painted in either suggestive or passive attitudes were sought after by the male elite in need of distraction. The present painting represents the absolute pinnacle of the genre.

A similar painting with a vase of flowers to one side was sold at Koller, Zurich, 30th - 31st October 2012, lot 416. A painting nearly identical to the former was sold at iGavel, New York, 5th May 2010, no. 17773053. Both of these examples lack the rare gilt background of the present work.

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Fig. 1
Collection of Madam Chang Kai-Shek

Fig. 2
Hong Kong Museum of Art

Fig. 3
The Sze Yuan Tang Collection of China Coast Paintings