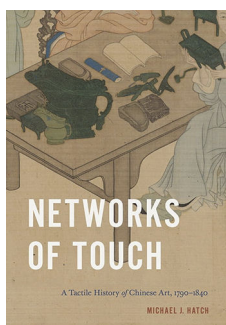



MICHAEL J. HATCH, *NETWORKS OF TOUCH. A TACTILE HISTORY OF CHINESE ART, 1790–1840*

Perspectives on Sensory History, University Park, PA:
The Pennsylvania State University Press 2024, 222 pages with 20
color and 43 b/w ill., ISBN 978-0-271-09557-8 (Hardback).



Reviewed by
Weitian Yan 

The word “touch” sparks many imaginations. It draws attention to the tactile sense through which our body interacts with the material world. The act of touch involves the reception and processing of a complex set of material and empirical knowledge, such as weight, surface texture, temperature, and moisture. By extension, a “heart-touching” story stresses the affects that things exert on people, and the idiom “in touch” implies a desire to maintain close connections and an acute awareness of the ever-changing world. In *Networks of Touch*, Michael J. Hatch draws on the highly provocative and multifaceted nature of “touch” as a sensory concept to develop a new account of the arts of nineteenth-century China, a period marked by sweeping interests in philological and antiquarian studies. The timeframe of the book (1790–1840) is often described as a period of decline, during which regional uprisings and global conflicts began to surface and eventually led to the collapse of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Artistic productions of this period are also often labeled as stagnant and incidental, in contrast to the kaleidoscopic court culture of the “High Qing” era (ca. 1683–1799) and the transcultural modernist movements of the late nineteenth

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
4-2024, pp. 1059–1064

<https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2024.4.108353>



century.¹ Hatch's book re-evaluates this period and its significance, generating fresh insights into how antiquities from the deep past – bricks with mold-cast inscriptions, fragmented steles, early pictorial engravings, and re-discovered bronze vessels – actively invited material investigations, connected friends, fostered an epigraphic aesthetic, and contributed to a turn toward tactile thinking. This interdisciplinary framework brings sensory history to the analysis of visual and material culture in China.

The book revolves around the network of Ruan Yuan (1764–1849). A prominent government official, Ruan held several important positions in the Manchu empire and developed a transregional network of scholars, artists, and craftspeople. As a scholar specializing in *kaozheng* (evidential scholarship), he authored influential exegeses of Confucian classics and led the compilations of several provincial gazetteers, contributing to the methodological shift toward philology. As a resourceful antiquarian collector of bronze vessels and stone inscriptions, Ruan headed two major surveys of epigraphic inscriptions in Shandong and Zhejiang Provinces. Each chapter of Hatch's book focuses on either the works of Ruan or those by Ruan's contemporaries. Through these interconnected cases studies, Hatch shows the proliferation of an epigraphic aesthetic in the second half of the Qing dynasty. Central to this new development, as Hatch argues, was a generational turn toward the sense of touch. Scholars and artists of the period developed an enhanced awareness of the body, in contrast to the mind, as the source of knowledge and pleasure in both intellectual discourse and artistic production.

In the Introduction, Hatch lays out the book's structure and offers succinct definitions of some key terms in the book. To name three examples, he explains "epigraphic aesthetic" as "an appropriation of the stylistic, material, and tactile features of ancient inscribed objects [...] as well as of their reproductive technology, rubbings" (p. 4), "tactile thinking" as "a form of direct apprehension that conjoined sensory perceptions with cognitive processes" (p. 5), and "ink rubbing" as "suspended perceptions of touch" (p. 9). With an emphasis on Confucian classics, Hatch also draws up a brief history of touch in China, in contrast with other sensory modalities (e.g., sight and vision).²

In Chapter 1 "Calligraphy's New Past", we follow the footsteps of Ruan as he began his career in the capital city Beijing and later took on crucial government posts in Shandong and Zhejiang Provinces. In this biographic sketch, Hatch pays close atten-

1

Another important revisionist project that examines painting production during this period is Yeewan Koon, *A Defiant Brush. Su Renshan and the Politics of Painting in Early 19th-Century Guangdong*, Hong Kong 2014.

2

One source that is missing in Hatch's bibliography but could contribute to this history of touch is John Hay, *The Human Body as Microcosmic Source of Macrocosmic Values in Calligraphy*, in: Susan Bush and Christian Murck (eds.), *Theories of the Arts in China*, Princeton, NJ 1983, 74–102.

tion to Ruan's epigraphic and philological activities, in addition to his many bureaucratic responsibilities. Ruan's conscious efforts to understand and re-organize the past were "a tool for better management of the present" (p. 31). Ruan and his contemporaries also celebrated friendship through newly produced inscriptions on portable and handheld stone materials (e.g., seals and inkstones). One intriguing example was the inkstone that bears a portrait of the scholar Guo Lin (1767–1831) on its back and additional inscriptions by Ruan and his friends on the sides (p. 35, Fig. 8). The inscriptions fashion Guo as an unyielding scholar in times of hardship, evoking a long-established literary tradition. Yet when one presses an inkstick against the engraved portrait of Guo to produce liquid ink, the man's body literally endures the grind. The act of grinding ingeniously activated the familiar scholarly character. Comparable studies of material objects, texts, and their allusion to the act of touching are also central in two recent books by Thomas Kelly (2023) and Sophie Volpp (2022).³ In a university seminar, the three publications could be assigned together to examine the affectivity and sensory illusion of different textual media.

In the second half of the first chapter, Hatch offers a close reading of two influential essays by Ruan, "Southern and Northern School of Calligraphy", and "Northern Steles and Southern Letters". According to Ruan, the history of Chinese calligraphy is best illuminated through the southern and northern schools. These two stylistic lineages, divided for the first time by Ruan, stress a contrasting set of aesthetic pursuits. The style of the south, "free and loose", is most associated with the sage of Chinese calligraphy Wang Xizhi (303–361) and his followers, while the style of the north, "awkward and rough", is most found on early steles and other stone monuments. Ruan favored the "northern school" for its ancient origin and perceived authenticity. These essays marked a watershed moment in the history of Chinese calligraphy. While previous scholars had begun using early stele inscriptions as ideal calligraphic models, it was Ruan who first put such a belief in writing and set in motion a new canon of calligraphic styles.

Chapter 2, "Obliterated Texts", examines a series of haptic encounters in Huang Yi's (1744–1802) *Engraved Texts of the Lesser Penglai Pavilion*, a printed collection of "double outline" tracing copies of some fragmented early stone engravings. A close friend of Ruan, Huang gained fame largely through his personal pilgrimages to ancient monuments and sites in Henan and Shandong Provinces. The "double outline" method refers to an ancient technique that traces the contours of Chinese characters. Hatch proposes that the ten-volume publication is not simply "descriptions of calligraphic texts" but "images that explored the surfaces of material objects" (p. 61). Printed images in the book encourage an experience of early

3

Thomas Kelly, *The Inscription of Things. Writing and Materiality in Early Modern China*, New York 2023; Sophie Volpp, *The Substance of Fiction. Literary Objects in China, 1550–1775*, New York 2022, especially the section titled "Touching Recession. The Painted Wall", 155–160.

inscriptions via bodily terms – cleaning the mossy and eroded surface of the original stone monuments, tightly pressing paper onto stone to make ink rubbings, and tracing the rubbings to make additional copies. Hatch also argues that the enthusiasm for “double outline” copies brought heightened attention to the shape of brushstrokes, which is one defining feature of the epigraphic aesthetic in calligraphy, shared by several contemporaries of Huang and Ruan. Adding to the author’s observation, I wonder how the application of “double outline” technique on different material surfaces may complicate our understanding of Huang’s project. After all, the “double outline” method had long been used in transferring inked calligraphic works onto stone, and sometimes also in seal carving.⁴ Both reverse the medium transfer of Huang’s project, and both engaged human hands.

While the previous two chapters primarily deal with the changes in the field of calligraphy, Chapters 3 and 4 explore the development of the epigraphic aesthetic in painting. Chapter 3 “Epigraphic Painting” takes the reader through the narrative, style, and reception of the handscroll *Presenting the Tripod at Mt. Jiao* by Wang Xuehao (1754–1832). Celebrating Ruan’s donation of an ancient tripod to the Dinghui Temple at Mt. Jiao in modern-day Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Province, this painting depicts the tripod with a group of figures on a ferry, in an expansive riverscape. Hatch demonstrates the novelty of this seemingly conservative work by contextualizing it with other paintings by noted Qing artists, including Jin Nong (1687–1764), Luo Ping (1733–1799), and Qian Du (1763–1844). The latter group introduced epigraphic aesthetic to painting by applying “double outline” technique and broken and awkward brushwork. In contrast, Wang’s painting and its appendix of ink rubbings draw forth a desire to hold and touch the original tripod. Such imagined tactile responses to paintings of this kind, argues Hatch, was a feature of the epigraphic mode of image making. Hatch’s engaging analysis aside, the striking topographical feature of Wang’s painting begs some questions (p. 81). Given the prominence of Mt. Jiao in the painting tradition of China, did Wang build his picture on any earlier representations of the place? Relatedly, why did Wang make his image look like a representation of the West Lake (p. 87)?

In Chapter 4, “Tactile Image”, Hatch develops attentive and critical reading of a group of radically experimental works by the Buddhist monk Liuzhou (1791–1858). Known as “the epigrapher-monk”, Liuzhou gained recognition from Ruan through his skills in making “full-form rubbing”, a new technique to capture the complete impression of an ancient object through the creative assemblage of rubbings tapped from different sides of the object. The completed work “blurs the boundaries between rubbings and painted images” (p. 97), generating “the sensations of an object that is no longer present” (p. 103). In some of Liuzhou’s extant works, mini-

4

Robert E. Harrist Jr., Copies, All the Way Down. Notes on the Early Transmission of Calligraphy by Wang Xizhi, in: *East Asian Library Journal* 10, 2001, 176–196.

ature figures were added to caress, nod to, or kneel on rubbings of ancient objects. In another example, *Wishing a Century of Long Life*, Liuzhou collaged rubbings of different material objects to make the character *shou* (“longevity”). All these works offer unprecedented visibility and construct a fictive space for tactile and bodily encounters. One issue, which has been briefly addressed by Hatch, is the relationship between Liuzhou’s Buddhist background and his artistic production (pp. 112–113). I wonder if the Buddhist conception of sensory illusion has any implications in Liuzhou’s works. What did the ability to evoke tactile responses mean for a Buddhist devotee in the nineteenth century?

The next chapter, “A Tactful Literatus”, focuses on the versatile artist Chen Hongshou (1768–1822). The craft of Chen, in Hatch’s view, speaks about the increased importance of tactile experience in the apprehension of epigraphic materials. Once an aide to Ruan, Chen achieved distinction in a broad array of artistic genres, including calligraphy and seal carvings that simulate carved and molded inscriptions, “boneless” finger paintings, and “purple clay” teapots that engender bodily imaginations rooted in classical poems and inscriptions. Hatch describes Chen’s artistic corpus collectively as “brushless arts”, stressing that these works moved beyond earlier brush ideals and presented a series of bodily marks to his audiences.

The last chapter, “The Limits of Touch”, explores two counter cases in which little sense of human touch was involved but other forms of sensory imagination (sight, sound, smell, and taste) became prioritized to bring forth somatic responses. The first case is Ruan’s book *Paintings in Stone*, a compilation of comments and inscriptions made by Ruan and his friends on picturesque marble stones of Dali, Yunnan Province. The project started when Ruan took on his last provincial post as the governor of Yunnan and Guizhou. For Ruan, his excitement came from the natural patterns on marble stones that resemble canonical paintings in history. Such an attempt to chart a history of painting in stone signifies a return toward “direct and unmediated contact with the world” (p. 156). If one wishes to expand on this chapter, a transhistorical and transregional analysis of Ruan’s book project might yield more exciting discoveries. The enjoyment and appreciation of stone materials has a long history in China. In the eighteenth century, the harnessing and manipulation of different stones and gems were also a hallmark of the Manchu court culture. How does Ruan’s project compare with early literati connoisseurship of rare stone materials? Was it related in any way to the sourcing of local stone products by the Qing imperial workshops? The second case is concerned with how Qian Du, a classicist painter in the network of Ruan, made use of engraved pictures and poems to interweave a web of multi-sensorial experience. Hatch invites the reader to ponder how literati arts could stimulate different sensory experiences and what a sensory history of Chinese art might look like. The book ends with an epilogue, in which Hatch calls for a reassessment of these artists as harbingers of the modern

visual culture that came into full blossom in the early twentieth century.

The most significant intervention of the book is Hatch's attention to the role of non-visual senses in the production and reception of material objects. This framework is in line with recent efforts in the broad fields of sensory history and visual culture to redress the primacy of sight and examine the sensate body as a whole.⁵ For the study of late imperial China, Hatch's project contributes to the ongoing explorations on the sensual perception of art objects, and the embodied modes of knowledge production.⁶ One question that lingers throughout the book is how the reader should connect those non-visual senses to the Chinese terms used by Ruan and his contemporaries. Hatch has pointed out a variety of critical vocabularies of touch, including *ji* 跡 (traces), *mo* 摸/摹 (touch, caress, or copy), and *ta* 拓/搨 (rub).⁷ It could be useful to contextualize the different ideas of "touch" in the writings of Ruan and his acquaintances. How did Ruan and his friends view the "body (*shen* 身)" as a perceptual organ? How did they talk about the issue of hands in the production of painting and calligraphy? A few specific examples would better situate the significance of "touch" in nineteenth-century art criticism.

Lucidly written and ambitiously conceived, *Networks of Touch* is the first English monograph that provides a systematic and critical treatment of many major yet understudied artists in nineteenth-century China. Hatch successfully brings life to the lived experience of individual figures and the embodied experience of their artworks. Comments and questions I raise in this review stem from my enthusiasm for this project. The book's inquiry into tactile thinking offers a new way to look at the Qing antiquarian culture and will generate more discussions to come.

5

For examples, see W. J. T. Mitchell, There Are No Visual Media, in: *Journal of Visual Culture* 4/2, 2005, 257–266 (December 12, 2024); Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past. Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 2007.

6

For a review essay on these recent attempts, see Jennifer Purtle, Ways of Perceiving Late Imperial Chinese Art, in: *Art History* 36/5, 2013, 1070–1076 (December 12, 2024). For discussion on embodied knowledge of Qing China, see Dorothy Ko, *The Social Life of Inkstones. Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China*, Seattle 2017.

7

The term *ta* is discussed in the main text but missing from the Glossary of Foreign Terms (pp. 170–171).