

A Portrait of Ambition: Yu Zhiding's Thatched Cottage at the Western Stream

This article introduces *Thatched Cottage at the Western Stream*, one of the great surviving portraits of the Kangxi-period painter Yu Zhiding (ca. 1647–ca. 1716). Though the sitter's identity has been lost over time, the painting remains an enlightening case study in the mechanics of Yu's approach to art, which combined strikingly naturalistic portraiture with a broad knowledge of art history to merge men of his day with paintings of the past. After introducing the role of portraiture within the power dynamics of the Kangxi court, the article presents the story of Yu's journey from a commoner's birth near Yangzhou to the heights of power in Beijing. It then turns to a detailed discussion of *Thatched Cottage*, positing Yu's use of historical styles as expressions of the ambitions of his patron, his historical moment, and indeed himself. The argument concludes with an attempt to determine the identity of the sitter through an investigation of Kangxi-period documents and other sources.

Keywords: Yu Zhiding; portraiture; Kangxi; Qing court; Chinese painting.