"A Semi-Chinese Picture"

Hubert Vos and the Empress Dowager of China

Virginia Anderson

In June 1905, the artist Hubert Vos entered the imperial palace in Beijing to paint the portrait of the notorious empress dowager of China, Cixi (1835–1908). In letters to his family, he described her theatrical arrival at their first meeting: first came two eunuchs bearing fans, then a dozen attendant eunuchs, followed at last by the empress herself, carried in a golden chair at shoulder height by eight more eunuchs. An awestruck Vos called her the "Goddess of four hundred million people."[1]

Vos, an academic realist painter of society portraits and ethnographic studies—and something of an entrepreneur—had been summoned by the imperial court from his studio in New York City to paint the 70-year-old empress dowager. The empress, who ruled China from 1861 until her death 47 years later, was for both Westerners and the Chinese a mysterious and controversial figure. During her lifetime, she was castigated by her critics as a manipulative and profligate ruler, but equally defended by her admirers as an educated, talented woman who rose above the constraints of her cloistered life to fight for the integrity of her empire.

From his encounter with the empress dowager, Vos created two remarkably curious paintings. One, the full-length commissioned portrait now in the collection of the Summer Palace, Beijing, is an idealized, flattened, symmetrical rendering of the empress as she would have appeared at about 30 years old (less than half her actual age), surrounded by ceremonial décor (Figure 1). Vos kept for himself a second, three-quarter-length portrait, now in the collection of the Harvard Art Museums (Figure 2). This painting is closer in technique to his usual European academic style, but, like the Summer Palace version, depicts the

1. Hubert Vos, *H. I. M. The Empress Dowager of China, Cixi*, 1905. Oil on canvas, 92 × 54 in. Summer Palace, Beijing. Courtesy Arte et Cetera.

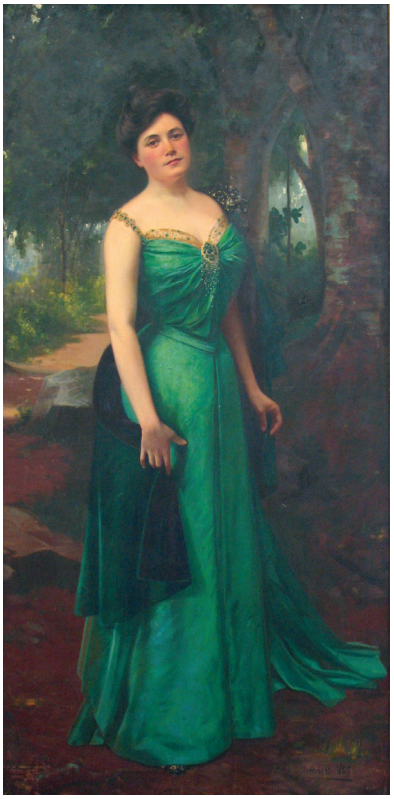
2. Hubert Vos, *H. I. M. The Empress Dowager of China, Cixi*, 1905–6. Oil on canvas, 66 3/4 × 48 11/16 in. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop. Photo by Katya Kallsen © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

seated empress in a boldly frontal pose. Both portraits were hybrids of Vos's Western academic realism and the traditionally codified forms of Chinese imperial portraiture. Both functioned as forms of propaganda, for artist and subject, but in very different cultural contexts: the insular imperial Chinese court and the turn-of-the-century Western art salon. Produced by an adaptable artist and his formidable subject during a pivotal historical moment, the two portraits destabilize conventional dichotomies of East versus West, the artist's gaze versus the subject's passivity, realism versus idealism, and tradition versus modernity.

Born in Maastricht, Holland, Vos (1855–1935) studied painting at the Royal Academy of Brussels, continuing his training in Rome and Paris. He began his career as a social realist, painting interiors and portraits from almshouses, asylums, and hospitals in Brussels and London. During the 1880s, he exhibited widely and received numerous medals from international salons. Moving his studio to London in 1887, Vos continued some of his social realist work, but at this point the focus of his painting shifted to society portraiture, a more lucrative practice that sustained him for the remainder of his long career. Portraits such as his 1891 painting of

the 11-year-old Queen Wilhelmina of Holland demonstrate the artist's sensitivity to both the appearance and the psychological tenor of his subjects.[2]

Peripatetic and energetic, Vos was delighted when the Dutch government appointed him the deputy commissioner for Holland to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.[3] Vos's experience at the fair shaped his life in significant ways. First, he fell in love with America and decided to make it his home, opening studios in New York City and Newport, Rhode Island. In 1897, having divorced his wife and left her and their two children in Europe, he married Eleanor Kaikilani Graham, a member of the Hawaiian royal family and herself a divorcée.[4] His full-length portrait depicts her as a vivacious, elegant woman in a green gown, her hands gathering the folds of a velvet cape around her body (Figure 3).



3. Hubert Vos, *Eleanor Kaikilani Coney Graham Vos*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 86¼ × 41¾ in. Kaua'i Historical Society.

In addition, Vos became fascinated by the myriad ethnological displays at the Chicago exposition, and his interest in portraiture burgeoned with this exposure. He decided to capture the "native types" of the world with his brush:

> *It was during the World's Fair in Chicago, where the officials had brought together the greatest collection of the different people of the Globe ever reunited in one spot at a tremendous expense, that I began to study the works I could get hold of on Ethnology and was shocked to see what poor specimens the principal authors had, to illustrate their very superior works. I thought it might be possible to establish a type of beauty of the different original aboriginal races before they became too much mixed or extinct and soon got to work.*[5]

This ethnographic project, supported by portrait commissions, was the focus of Vos's art, on and off, for the next six years. To begin with, in 1897 he spent eight months on a reservation in Fort Totten, North Dakota, painting Native Americans. He then traveled westward, often accompanied by his wife, to Hawaii, Indonesia,

Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and China. Echoing his earlier professional practices of painting asylum residents and society belles, Vos seems to have selected his ethnological subjects from two ends of the economic spectrum. On one hand, he portrayed the working-class people he encountered, including a Hawaiian musician, a Tibetan lama, and several Indian soldiers stationed in Hong Kong. On the other hand, he frequently painted the nobility to whom his society connections gave him access, as with his portraits of the emperor of Korea and Javanese royalty.[6]

He concluded his travels with a trip to China in 1899, a few months before the Boxer Rebellion began. Vos noted the anti-foreign tensions he experienced in certain regions. As before, he selected a variety of subjects, including an anonymous young woman of Fuzhou and a portrait of a young Manchu man, as well as Yuan Shi-Kai (1859–1916), a viceroy who would later briefly become the first president of China, and Prince Qing (1836–1918), a senior member at court and a relative by marriage to the empress dowager. During this visit, Vos sought permission to paint the empress dowager and her nephew, the Guangxu emperor, but he was unsuccessful.[7]

Vos's project resulted in about 40 paintings, which were exhibited at the Union League Club in New York and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, as well as at the Paris International Exposition of 1900.[8] Most of these compositions were bust or half-length portraits that feature their subjects in a lively manner, with attention to detail in the particularities of the face, clothing, and accessories.

One reviewer concluded, "Mr. Vos has found nothing to prove that racial types are disappearing, and that a world type is being 'crystallized.'" Multiple critics did, however, observe resemblances between the "racial types," with Charles de Kay, for example, noting that the Hawaiian musician could pass for a Provençal, the Javanese prince for a Basque. Mused de Kay, "We are constantly haunted with a vain imagining that Europeans and Americans are possessed of a noble type . . . but are we? . . . Why not confess at once that the world is smaller and the mixture of human races is more ancient than our race vanities have permitted us to believe?"[9] In part, Vos's artistic style and his approach to his subject matter contributed to this kind of analysis. Eschewing impressionism for academic realism, he kept his painting style traditional and conservative. A 1901 critic described his portraits as "delicate, smooth, and accomplished."[10] In keeping with his American and European society portraits, Vos rendered his ethnological subjects with dignity, care, and a certain amount of glamour. The "exotic" was made fashionable and tangible to his Western audience.

Perhaps it was this sensibility that made Vos's work appealing to the empress dowager. When he arrived in China, the empress had already been on the throne for more than 40 years, since the untimely death of the Xianfeng emperor, who had selected her as one of his concubines. As a woman from a low-ranking Manchu clan, Cixi owed her ascen-

sion to power to the fact that she had borne the emperor's only child. Following years of power struggles, Cixi found herself sole regent of China, supporting—or many would say controlling—first her son, then, following his death, her nephew.

Vos confronted an empress with a notorious reputation in both China and the West. While the first widely read and rather scandalous biography of her did not appear in England until 1910, she was by 1905 already the subject of much gossip and speculation in the Western press. She was accused of virtually imprisoning and poisoning her nephew, having his favorite concubine thrown down a well, and using money allocated to the weakened navy to refurbish imperial palaces.[11] But her initial support of the disastrous anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) did the most to tarnish her reputation among the foreign powers in Beijing and abroad. In a cover illustration from the French turn-of-the-century weekly, *Le Rire* (Figure 4), published several weeks after the Imperial Court declared war on the foreign legations in Beijing, the empress is shown hunched behind a fan, her long thumbnail pointing upward like a claw. In her left hand, she holds a bloodied knife, and several decapitated heads and corpses are impaled on the pike behind her. Powerful images such as this one attributed the murder of Westerners in China directly to the hand of the empress.

4. Charles Lucien Léandre, *S. M. L'Impératrice Douairière de Chine*, front cover of *Le Rire*, 14 July 1900. Widener Library, Harvard College Library.

The traditional sequestering of the imperial family within court walls added to the sense of distrust and suspicion that surrounded her. In the aftermath of the humiliating failure of the Boxer Rebellion, which greatly weakened the Qing dynasty, Cixi sought a rapprochement with the West. The empress dowager realized that in order to assuage the Western powers, she needed to make her court and herself more accessible.[12]

Despite the insular court structure, which hampered her actions and literally walled her off from the realities of everyday life among her subjects, the empress was well aware in 1905 of the powers of image making, as demonstrated by the pageantry of her

awe-inspiring, eunuch-borne arrival, described by Vos. She admired and identified with Queen Victoria of England, whose assumption of power as a young woman, widowhood, and long reign paralleled her own. The British queen was famously media-savvy, distributing images of herself and her family to the press, via painting, photography, and prints, that fostered perceptions of her as a mother and wife who retained her femininity even in the context of her political power. The empress dowager hung engravings of Queen Victoria and the royal family in her own private apartments.[13]

She invited diplomats, missionaries, and (most importantly) their wives into the imperial sanctum where she charmed her guests with entertainment and gifts. The American women who thus had ongoing access to the empress proved to be among her most vocal defenders to their friends and family back home. One of Cixi's frequent guests was Sarah Pike Conger, wife of the American ambassador to Beijing.[14] Conger came to admire the empress dowager and proposed having a portrait painted of her to counter the negative images being published by the foreign press. With this intention, in 1903 Conger invited American artist Katherine Carl, trained at the Académie Julian in Paris and living in Shanghai with her brother, to Beijing. Carl's large oil was shipped to America and exhibited at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904.[15]

Despite the accounts of her that prevailed in the press, the empress was respected and held in high regard by many who met her at court. The Carl commission caused a small rivalry for her favor between the legations.[16] Officials of the Dutch legation, feeling slighted that Holland, with its strong tradition in the practice of portraiture, had been superseded in this instance by the Americans, advocated for Hubert Vos to come paint the empress dowager's portrait. They were perhaps unaware that by the time of his arrival in 1905, he had become an American citizen.[17]

The story of Vos's encounter with the empress survives primarily through letters he sent back home to his family, and the analysis presented in this paper of his interaction with the empress is reliant on the singular perspective of his voice; the artist may have exaggerated the scope of his contact with the empress for the benefit of his audience. Nevertheless, the terms of Vos's descriptions of his experiences are enlightening, and he is explicit about the impact his fleeting interactions with Cixi had on the creation of the Summer Palace portrait. In his correspondence, Vos emphasized the difficulties of his commission: he had to appear at court at 5 a.m. to meet with the empress and had only four brief sessions with her; his studio, on the top floor of a Beijing hotel, was a sauna in the summer heat; the robes, accessories, and furnishings he had been promised by the eunuchs to use in his studio never materialized and he had to scrounge his own.[18] And yet his fascination with the empress dowager was palpable in his description of her: "Erect, with a tremendous will power, more than I have ever seen in a human

being. Hard, firm will and thinking lines, and with all that a brow full of kindness and love for the beautiful. I fell straight in love with her."[19] Vos's account, which stands in sharp contrast to the image of the demoniacal figure in the *Rire* caricature, conveys the charisma the empress exerted over her visitors.

Vos began his work with a sketch of the empress, outlining her features and blocking in shading. His plan was to make a smaller study of her head and features while she modeled for him, then to create the full-length commission from that study.[20] Following the second session, he said, she asked to see what he had done and through a translator expressed her critique, demanding "no shadows, no shadows, no shadows."[21] Another anecdote he shared with his family demonstrates the awe he felt in her presence and the pride he felt in her attention. In a pivotal moment after the third session, the empress approached Vos, taking his pencil in her own hand and making an experimental mark on his sketch. "This is the nearest ever a white man has been to her," he wrote. In the end, he became a complete convert. "I resolved to paint her as if I were a Chinaman myself," he stated.[22]

5. *Portrait of Lirongbao's Wife*, Qing Dynasty, 18th–19th century. Hanging scroll: ink and color on silk, $69^{15}/_{16} \times 38^{13}/_{16}$ in. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Purchase, Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program, and partial gift of Richard G. Pritzlaff.

The formidable empress had an extraordinary impact on Vos: her imposing bearing, her outspoken critique of his work, his desire to please her, as a result of these factors he adapted his usual practices and conventions to her demands. To a certain extent, this meant setting aside his own European, academic preconceptions about portraiture. Chinese imperial portrait conventions dictated generality over specificity.[23] Facial features were carefully delineated, but by the time of the Qing dynasty, imperial portraiture had become increasingly frontal, symmetrical, and decorative, as in the probably posthumous portrait of the Qianlong emperor's mother-in-law (Figure 5). Renderings of emperors and empresses were more and more schematic and ritualized; there was almost no palpable body under the symbol-laden robes. As a result, imperial portraiture became less the depiction of an individual and more a symbolic representation of the state.[24]

Adding force to the empress's opinions, perhaps, was the fact that she was trained as an artist herself. Most of her surviving paintings date from after the Boxer Rebellion, when she gave them as gifts to foreign visitors. She selected modest subjects—birds, flowers, and pines, or large-scale calligraphic paintings of a single auspicious character. An example of one of these works is *Fungi and Bats* of 1898, a delicately painted still life on a surface of light brown wash now in the collection of the Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.[25] These works were, like Chinese export porcelain, geared toward a non-native audience; they were not produced in fulfillment of exacting Chinese artistic standards, but they succeeded in pleasing the empress's visitors.

Vos grasped what the empress expected of him, despite his own preferences. As he initially noted, "I would have preferred a darker, more mysterious, less symmetrical background."[26] But he adapted to the empress's wishes, and her influence is apparent in the final full-length portrait. Measuring 92 by 54 inches, the portrait is housed in a frame commissioned by the empress. Within the rigidly symmetrical composition, the tiny woman is ensconced among auspicious paraphernalia. The pyramidal stacks of apples, the peacock fans, the bamboo-painted backdrop, and the banner over her head (giving her name and title) dominate the composition. Rendered as requested with no shadows, the empress appears quite youthful, even ageless, and her body seems to disappear within her robes. The peony-decorated fan she holds across her body adds to that effect. Vos reserved his skills in realism for the accoutrements of the throne and surrounding elements, which are rendered in perspective and with shading. The stylistic combination thus incorporates two schemes of visuality, with a result that the painting appears not quite Chinese, and not quite Western. The difference in composition, lighting, and formality is especially apparent when Vos's portrait of the empress is compared with the full-length rendering of his wife Eleanor (Figure 3) or his earlier ethnological portraits from 1893 through 1899. Compared with the naturalism of those works, in which the figure seems to breathe before our eyes, his rendering of the empress is rigid and contained.

The painting was completed in mid-August, and Vos presented it at court. He astutely remarked, "The whole get-up is a symbolical and allegorical composition, more like a monument than a portrait."[27] Cixi's pleasure was expressed in English directly to Vos: "Very good, very good," she commented, according to Vos's account.[28] The portrait was a collaboration between sitter and artist. The empress dictated the symbolic setting, the pose, and the idealized rendering of her face and body. Vos translated her vision into a "monument" of fluid oil paint, combining Chinese and European styles into a hybrid image that falls into neither school.

Unlike Carl's portrait of the empress, Vos's painting seems to have been a private commission, intended for the audience of the imperial court. During Cixi's brief remaining lifetime, it would not be displayed in an exhibition or hung in a public place for viewing, nor would it eventually function as a traditional ancestor portrait for acts of reverence toward the empress's spirit. In a way, the very act of having the portrait painted—the empress's gesture of summoning this artist from across the world to capture her likeness—may have been the central point. By inviting Vos, Cixi demonstrated to those at court her newfound "openness" to Western influence and practices. At the same time, Vos responded to her aesthetic and cultural sensibilities enough to create what he felt was, in his words, a "semi-Chinese picture."[29]

The second, smaller portrait of the empress (measuring 66 ¾ × 48 11⁄16 inches), completed by Vos upon his return to New York in 1906, is probably based on the original sketch he began at court.[30] If the Summer Palace painting represents a collaboration between artist and sitter, the Harvard portrait hews more closely to the artist's preferences, while still revealing a certain amount of the empress's influence.

The empress dowager would not have approved of Vos's three-quarter-length image, as compositions that cropped the imperial body were considered inauspicious. This painting, however, was planned not for presentation at the imperial court but for exhibition at the 1906 Paris Salon, and Vos's composition, which honed in on the empress's face and figure, gave his intended audience a sense of the physical immediacy of his subject in a way that a full-length painting would not. This time, he also got his "darker, more mysterious, less symmetrical" background. He used dark, smoky tones and the image of a dragon slithering through clouds to create an atmospheric surround for the empress. Vos's three-quarter-length composition and dark background draw out the beauty of her accessories: we can see the luster of the pearls in her pierced ears, the sheen of her silk robe, the glow of jade bracelets, nail guards, and rings. Adding to the dramatic presentation of his piece, Vos placed the painting in a massive, dark frame decorated with cloisonné panels and corner segments of open carving.[31]

At the same time, he largely adhered to the symmetry, frontality, and rigidity of the Summer Palace portrait, exoticizing his usual, more naturalistic style. As with that version, the empress's body is lost here under the folds of her beautifully patterned robe. Although Vos described this painting as showing the empress "as old as she is," he nevertheless couldn't help deploying the tools of his trade to idealize her. By the age of 70, the empress's skin was damaged from years of the lead-based make-up she wore, and she had suffered a stroke in 1904. In the manner of Chinese ancestor portraits, Vos's treatment of her erased any evidence of her illness.[32] When we compare his supposedly more realistic version with contemporaneous photographs of

the empress, we can see how Vos narrowed her face, shortened the distance between her nose and upper lip, emphasized her eyelashes, lifted her jawline, and softened what few shadows there are, giving her skin an airbrushed smoothness; all of this in keeping with Anglo-European conventions of beauty. The slight shadows at the corners of her mouth soften her forthright expression, so that she is at once severe, imperious, and feminine.

For his Salon audience, Vos countered negative images of the empress prevalent in the West with a visually compelling, dramatic, but stylistically eccentric portrait. Using his conservative, realistic style blended with some characteristics of imperial portraiture, the artist presented for his viewers his vision of the empress: charismatic, powerful, wealthy, and exotic. He advertised his skills and his social and political connections, as the portrait demonstrated his personal access to the "Goddess of four hundred million people," a woman who remained largely inaccessible and controversial to Westerners. Her status was reflected in the reception accorded to Vos's portrait at the Salon exhibition: it was not placed on the line, an honor usually accorded to sovereign portraits.[33]

Vos had grand hopes for his paintings of the empress and their impact on his career. He wrote, "The book of a reigning dynasty is a secret closed book and comes only to light . . . when her dynasty ends. Then her life and her reign will be written and I will figure in it."[34] In terms of his own career and critical reception, he was correct. Within the chronicles of Cixi's life, however, Vos's portrait is merely a footnote. The portrait she commissioned served her aims at the time, demonstrating her openness to Western culture and modernity to her intimate audience at court. But the portrait's existence was for a long time overshadowed by the great political upheavals that took place shortly after her death in 1908, and lost within the cloud of scandals and rumors that obscured the accounting of the empress's life and reign. For us, the two paintings remain as the unusual evidence of the encounter between two cultures, two aesthetics, and ultimately, two individuals.

Notes

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1. Hubert Vos and Eleanor Kaikilani Vos, "Adaptation of His Letters From Peking by his Wife, Lani, Thinking of a Magazine Article," (typed transcript), undated, 5, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum curatorial file, 1943,162.

2. For Vos's background, see "Hubert Vos Dead, Portrait Painter," *New York Times*, 9 January 1935, 19; Hubert Vos, "Autobiographical Letter," in István L. Szénássy, *Hubert Vos, Dutch-American Painter* (Stamford, CT: Stamford Museum and Maastricht, Netherlands: Bonnefantenmuseum, 1979), 9; and *Rulers of the Far East: An Exhibition of the Works of Hubert Vos* (New York: The Holland House Corporation of the Netherlands, 1944). Vos's portrait of Queen Wilhelmina is reproduced in Anne van Grevenstein-Kruse et al., *Hubert Vos: en het verhaal van een portret* (Amsterdam: Arte et Cetera, 2008), 21.

3. Vos, "Autobiographical Letter," 9.

4. See "A Day's Weddings," *New York Times*, 6 November 1897, 7, and "A Romantic Marriage," *New York Times*, 7 November 1897, 5. The latter article explained that Mrs. Vos was a cousin of the ex-queen of Hawaii, and divorced from John Graham.

5. Vos believed there were different conceptions of beauty among the various races of the world. He wrote, "Of course the distinction I claim as original and most deserving in my opinion is, to do for the aboriginal races what has been done for centuries for the Caucasian races by so many gifted portrait painters." Vos, "Autobiographical Letter," 9–10. His notion that the different races were quickly vanishing was timely as it was at the 1893 Chicago Exposition that Frederick Jackson Turner presented his paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"; see *The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner*, ed. Everett E. Edwards (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1938), 185–229.

6. Through his friend Leigh Hunt, Vos received access to Korean nobility, so that he was able to make portraits of Prince Min-sa-ho, the American-educated cousin of the emperor, and the emperor himself. In China, Vos's friend General Norman Munthe introduced him to Yuan Shi-kai, who recommended him in turn to Prince Qing. Vos, "Autobiographical Letter," 10–11.

7. Ibid., 11.

8. "Hubert Vos Dead," *New York Times*, 19.

9. For the quotes, see "Are Racial Types Dying Out?" *New York Times*, 1 November 1907, 8; and de Kay, "Painting Racial Types," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 60, no. 2 (June 1900): 169.

10. "American Studio Talk: Notes on Art in New York," *International Studio* 13 (April 1901): 150. See also István L. Szénássy's analysis of Vos's style in "Addenda H. Vos," in Szénássy, *Hubert Vos, Dutch-American Painter*, 21.

11. J.O.P. Bland and Edmund Backhouse, *China Under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tzŭ Hsi* (London: William Heinemann, 1910). As one of the first biographies of Cixi, it was widely read and initially well received, but later discredited. Hugh Trevor-Roper in *The Hermit of Peking: The Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse* (New York: Knopf, 1976) exposed Backhouse as a con man who had forged or looted rare books and documents he bequeathed to the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Arthur Hummel's entry on the empress dowager remains a reliable if brief biography; Hummel, "Hsiao-ch'in Hsien Huang-hou," *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period (1644–1912)*, vol. 1 (A–O), 295–300, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943). More recent studies have attempted to open the historical records to find a more accurate representation of her actions. See, for example, Sue Fawn Chung, "The Much Maligned Empress Dowager: A Revisionist Study of the Empress Dowager Tz'u-Hsi," *Modern Asian Studies* 13, no. 2 (1979): 177–96, doi:10.1017/S0026749X00008283. Sterling Seagrave also gives a sympathetic portrait in *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

12. As Arthur Hummel wrote, "Her attitude toward foreigners was now one of gratitude for having spared her from deserved humiliation and for allowing her to return to power." Hummel, "Hsiao-ch'in Hsien Huang-hou," 299.

13. Grant Hayter-Menzies discusses Queen Victoria's distribution of images of herself and her family to the press as an example that Cixi looked to late in her own reign, *Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Princess Der Ling* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 200, 213.

14. Conger documented her experiences at court in letters to her family, now in the collection of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University. See Sarah Pike Conger, *Letters from China, With Particular Reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909).

15. Initially, the empress was resistant to having her portrait painted, as traditionally that was an honor reserved for the deceased in China; Grant Hayter-Menzies, *Imperial Masquerade*, 193–95. Imperial culture emphasized the sequestering of the royal family; for the empress dowager to suddenly allow photographs of herself to be made available and to commission both Carl's and Vos's painted portraits was revolutionary. Lin explains the initial resistance and eventual acceptance of photography by the imperial court, and the exchange among international rulers of images of themselves; in 1902, Cixi had received a family photograph from Czar Nicholas II of Russia. Xunling

(1874–1943), the son of Lady Yu Geng, senior lady-in-waiting to the empress, was allowed to take photographs of the empress dowager during the period 1903 to 1905; a number of these are in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, and the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian has 44 photonegatives. See Lin Jing, *The Photographs of Cixi in the Collection of the Palace Museum*, trans. Shaoyi Li (Beijing: Forbidden City Publishing House, 2002). Like Vos, Katherine Carl made two portraits. One she gifted to the empress dowager; the other was transported to the U.S. for exhibition. This latter portrait was in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum until recently, when it was transferred to the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. Carl wrote a memoir, *With the Empress Dowager of China* (New York: The Century Company, 1905).

16. According to a 1905 *New York Times* article, when Carl was appointed to paint the empress's portrait, the U.S. Embassy took "all the honors" and the other legations "turned through envy and jealousy the color of jade and saffron." "Painting an Empress: Hubert Vos, K.C.D.D., the First Man to Portray the Dowager Empress of China," *New York Times*, 17 December 1905, X8.

17. See "Painting an Empress," X8.

18. Letter from Hubert Vos to "My dear Friends," (typed transcript), August 18, 1905, 4–5. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum curatorial file, 1943.162.

19. Vos and Vos, "Adaptation of His Letters From Peking," 6.

20. "I shall take a small canvas and paint the head from life in 2 sittings and paint the larger canvas afterwards from that and with the help of the photographs." Letter from Hubert Vos to "My dear Lani," (typed transcript), June 12, 1905, 5. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum curatorial file, 1943.162. There is some debate about whether or not Vos took photographs of the empress. No such photos exist today in the family collection; conversation of the author with Dr. Hubert D. Vos, the artist's grandson, 13 July 2009. When asked in an interview if he took photos of the empress, the painter replied, "Yes, indeed. But of course they are for my own use. I would not have them developed in China for fear the photographer might sell copies"; "Painting an Empress," *New York Times*, X8. He noted that photographs of the empress were for sale in Chinese bookstores.

21. "She now looked at my work and talked and pointed at different parts of my picture, and Wu Ting Fang translated and told me I had to make no shadows under or above the eyes, the eyes wide open, the mouth full and up, not drooping, the brows straight, the nose no shadows—no shadows, no shadows, no shadows, no wrinkles. . . . Finally, I began to understand that I was not allowed to paint realistically." Vos and Vos, "Adaptation of His Letters from Peking," 7.

22. In a 1905 interview, Vos commented, "I resolved to paint her as if I were a Chinaman myself, not omitting, of course, the technical qualities in which our painting differs from the Chinese and Japanese, but imagining myself an Oriental imbued with reverence for what is greatest in Chinese art, thoroughly saturated with the national awe for antique ceremonial objects." "Painting an Empress," *New York Times*, X8.

23. Alan Priest, "Portraits of the Court of China," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, 1, no. 5 (January 1943): 185. doi:10.2307/3257047.

24. Wen C. Fong, "Imperial Portraiture in the Song, Yuan, and Ming Periods," *Ars Orientalis*, 25 (1995): 47–60. Fong traces this shift, taking place beginning around 1500, to the influence of Tibetan mandala painting. "Tibetan influence continued to be felt at the imperial court through the fifteenth century, and imperial portraits after Xuande [the Xuande emperor, r. 1425–35] became increasingly frontal, culminating in a new, symmetrically balanced and flatly decorative hieratic composition, in the style of a Tibetan mandala." 57. See also Jan Stuart and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Worshiping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2001), esp. 117–41. On symbolic representations of the state, see Fong, "Imperial Portraiture," 57–58.

25. Claudia Brown and Ju-hsi Chou, *Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire 1796–1911* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1992), 10, 36. The scroll is reproduced on page 12. Attributions of Cixi's work are complicated by the fact that she had a number of women artists (known as "substitute brushes") working for her who produced some of these paintings; see Marsha Weidner's catalogue entry for *Pine and Fungi (May You Have Great Fortune and Longevity)*, 156–59 in Weidner, et al., *Views from the Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists 1300–1912* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1988). Thanks to Robert Mowry and Melissa Moy for bringing the Harvard scroll to my attention.

26. Vos and Vos, "Adaptation of His Letters from Peking," 5. The Summer Palace portrait was extensively restored in 2007–08. See Anne van Grevenstein-Kruse et al., *Hubert Vos: en het verhaal van een portret* (Amsterdam: Arte et Cetera, 2008).

27. Vos, "My dear Friends," 18 August 1905, 2.

28. Vos was almost certainly paid for his commission, although he playfully denied it in the press; see "Painting an Empress," *New York Times*, X8. In a letter to his wife, he said that he set an initial price for the commission thinking he was being summoned to paint ministers to the court, and that had he known his true subject was the empress, he would have doubled his price; Vos, "My dear Lani," June12, 1905, 3.

29. Vos and Vos, "Adaptation of His Letters from Peking," 10.

30. After completion of the full-size portrait, he wrote: "I have in the meantime my study from life, data, sketches, photos, etc. to paint a second picture for myself for exhibition and this time as old as she is . . . . I am gathering the different details I may need, so I am able to paint this picture in New York." Letter from Hubert Vos to "My dear Lani and Friends," (typed transcript), August 29, 1905, 5. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum curatorial file, 1943,162. It is unknown whether or not the empress was aware of the second portrait.

31. Of the 786 photographs of the empress in the Palace Museum collection, only one is a half-length composition; the others are all full-length. The photo is listed in an inventory as "1 Large Half-Length Imperial Portrait in Flowery Dress and with Hair Decoration," in Lin, *Photographs of Cixi*, 14. Lin notes the negative connotations of cropped compositions, 22. The frame was almost certainly made in China during Vos's stay there.

32. Hayter-Menzies, *Imperial Masquerade*, 267. Stuart and Rawski note how portrait painters in the late Qing dynasty, influenced by photography, could create a composite image that erases evidence of illness and instead project the subject's "heavenly endowed visage and venerable old age," *Worshiping the Ancestors*, 174.

33. One American writer compared the empress dowager to a "shrewd old Scotchwoman." "Are Racial Types Dying Out?" *New York Times*, 8.

34. Vos, "My dear Lani and Friends," August 29, 1905, 5.