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LUDWIG FERDINAND GRAF
Vienna, 1868 - 1932

PORTRAIT OF THE ENVOY YANG TCHENG
1906

Oil on canvas; inscribed on a label on the reverse: Ludw. Ferd, Graf / Porträt d. chines. Gesandten/ Yang Tscheng
215 x 140 cm.

PROVENANCE

Private collection, Vienna, until sold at Im Kinsky, Vienna, 19 June 2018, lot 329.

EXHIBITED

1906 Vienna, 19th Hagenbund Exhibition, III-VII/1906, cat.no.11 (with b/w ill.);
1907 Venice, 7th Biennale di Venezia, Venice, cat.no.8;
1908 Dresden, Great Art Exhibition, V-X, cat.no.1408;
1909 Merano, Hagenbund Exhibition, spring;
1911 Prague, Special Exhibition of the Hagenbund in the Art Association for Bohemia, XI-XII, cat.no.85;
1914 Göding/Moravia, Hagenbund Exhibition, V-VIII, cat.no.15;
1925 Vienna, 50th Hagenbund exhibition, V-VI, cat.no.3 (with the dating 1906);
1933 Vienna, Hagenbund memorial Exhibition, 6-28 November, cat.no.24 (with the same dating, b/w ill.);
1993 Schloss Halbturn, Die verlorene Moderne. Der Künstlerbund Hagen 1900-1938, 7 May to 26 October 1993, cat.no.56.

LITERATURE

Die verlorene Moderne. Der Künstlerbund Hagen 1900-1938, Catalogue of the Österreichischen Galerie in Schloss Halbturn, 7 May - 26 October 1993, cat.no.56, ill. p.107;
Ludwig Ferdinand Graf 1868-1932. Eine Entdeckung, Catalogue of the Österreichische Galerie, Belvedere, Vienna, 25 October 1995 - 7 January 1996, WV no.115, p.163 (with ill.)

In this arresting full-length portrait, more than two metres in height, the Austrian painter Ludwig Ferdinand Graf depicts the important Chinese diplomat, politician, ambassador and minister, Yang Tscheng (also known as Yang Tcheng or Yang Sheng) in 1906, at the time of his appointment as Minister (ambassador) to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

This exceptional portrait is a rare example of a celebrative - yet surprisingly anti-academic - representation of a Chinese ambassador by a Western artist of this period. While a more common image during The China Trade period between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, such portraits were highly unusual at the beginning of the 20th century, when photographs were normally preferred to document such occasions (on the subject see J.C.Dobkin, 'Chinnery and Houqua: Questions of Attribution', in *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 48, 2013, pp.205-216).

This canvas is a rare and extraordinary testimony to the attire, symbols and image of a leading scholar-official at the end of Qing dynasty - and therefore a rare opportunity to deepen the understanding of a Chinese state portrait - but conducted as a manifesto of Viennese Impressionist painting. Unsurprisingly this canvas - a celebration of both the sitter *and* the artist - remained one of the most ambitious, iconic and published in Graf's *oeuvre* - celebrated in numerous international exhibitions, including the VII Biennale di Venezia in 1907.

This portrait is, in its ability to combine cultures and aesthetics, uniquely accomplished.



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The sitter: Yang Tscheng (1867-?)

Born in Tungkun Hsien, Guandong province, in 1867, Yang spent six years in Japan at an early age, and upon his return to Canton he joined the Tungwen college and studied there for about six years. From Canton he moved to Beijing, joining the Peking Tungwen college for another six years. He was then sent to Germany as a student and finished his education at the Leipzig and Berlin universities, devoting himself primarily to the study of law and military tactics. Returning to China in 1895, just before the Boxer Rebellion, he became Professor of German and Law at Beijing University. In 1901 Yang was appointed by Zaifeng, Prince Chun, to accompany him on his special mission to Germany to convey China's regret for the murder of the German diplomat Clemens von Ketteler (1853-1900). His role in this mission must have been crucial, as after his return he was appointed a Taotai of Shantung, holding the posts of Diplomatic Commissioner, Director of Mining Administration, and Director of Railways. Afterwards he was also made director-general of the military and police affairs.

At this point of his career he was made Chinese Minister (ambassador) to the Austro-Hungarian empire in Vienna, where he served for two years, between 1905 and 1907, before becoming ambassador in Berlin for another two years, and Holland.

The present portrait immortalises all the power and confidence of these exceptional achievements in his career.

Soon after, the death of his mother caused him to leave official circles for three years. At the end of the period of mourning, Viceroy Chang Jen-Chun of Liang-Kiang (Kiangsu-Anhui-Kiangsi) appointed him Military Councillor with two additional posts, Diplomatic Commissioner and Commercial-Advisor.

After the outbreak of the First Revolution in November 1911, Yang retired to Shanghai. Later, he went to Shantung and became Chief Secretary of the Police Administration of that province. In 1913 he was appointed Commissioner for Foreign Affairs of Jiangsu and also Taotai or Intendant of Shanghai Circuit. In October 1915 he was relieved of these posts.

In June 1919 Yang was, for the third time, appointed Commissioner for Foreign Affairs of Jiangsu province. In January 1920 he was awarded the Second Class Tashou Paokuang Chiaho. In May 1920 he was relieved from the Commissionership. In October 1920 he was awarded the Second Class Wenfu. In August 1922 he was appointed Shanghai vice-president of the Chinese Red Cross Society. In January 1923 he was awarded the First Class Tashou Chiaho.

At the end of his extraordinary career, in 1924, he was appointed vice-president of the Chinese Red Cross. A photograph dating to the 1920s shows Yang radically different in his westernised official attire, highlighting the importance of the present portrait as a historical document of the ending Qing era (fig.1).



Fig. 1 Yang Tscheng in a later photograph, c.1920, From 'Who's Who in China' 3rd ed, in *The China Weekly Review* (Shanghai), 1925, p.910

The painter: Ludwig Ferdinand Graf and The Hagenbung

Born in Vienna in 1868, Ludwig Ferdinand was the son of the painter Ludwig Graf. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna with August Eisenmenger, Christian Griepenkerl and Leopold Carl Müller. Like many ambitious artists of his generation he studied in Paris, at the Académie Julian, and after being influenced by Impressionism and, in particular, the art of Paul Cézanne. He also stayed in Brittany and travelled to England, Belgium, Holland, Germany and Italy. In 1894 Graf returned to Vienna, embarking in a successful career that brought him to participate, in 1928, to the Summer Olympics in Amsterdam, an edition that included painting within its competitions.

In 1901 he joined the Hagenbung and in 1909, soon after taking the present commission, became its president (fig.2).



Fig. 2 Joseph Urban, Cover illustration of Hagenbund, c.1904-5

The Hagenbund, or Künstlerbund Hagen, was a group of Austrian artists who originally worked and exhibited in Vienna Künstlerhaus. Overshadowed by the more famous Secession, they, too, aimed to rebel against the academic establishment and formed their own organization in 1899. The group included stage designers Heinrich Lefler and Joseph Urban and, after World War I, were joined by, among others, Oskar Kokoschka. They refused both the Secession and Expressionism on essential questions of aesthetics, and Graf placed himself as one of the leading Impressionists in Austria.

His production, dominated mainly by landscapes (fig.3), posters (fig.4) and portraits, sometimes reached unexpected and personal results, like in the present portrait and in the two religious paintings *Mary* and *Christ* (1910, fig.5).



Fig. 3 L.F. Graf, *Schwimmbad*, 1905
Oil on canvas, Österreichische Galerie,
Belvedere, Vienna

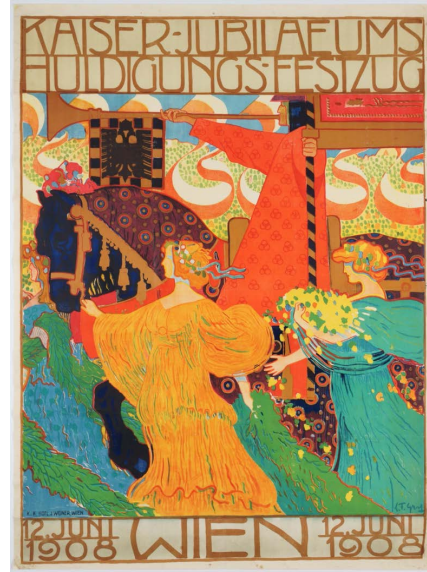


Fig. 4. L.F. Graf, Poster for the
emperor anniversary pageant,
1908

Klimt Foundation, Vienna
Österreichische Galerie,
Belvedere, Vienna
Österreichische Galerie,
Belvedere, Vienna

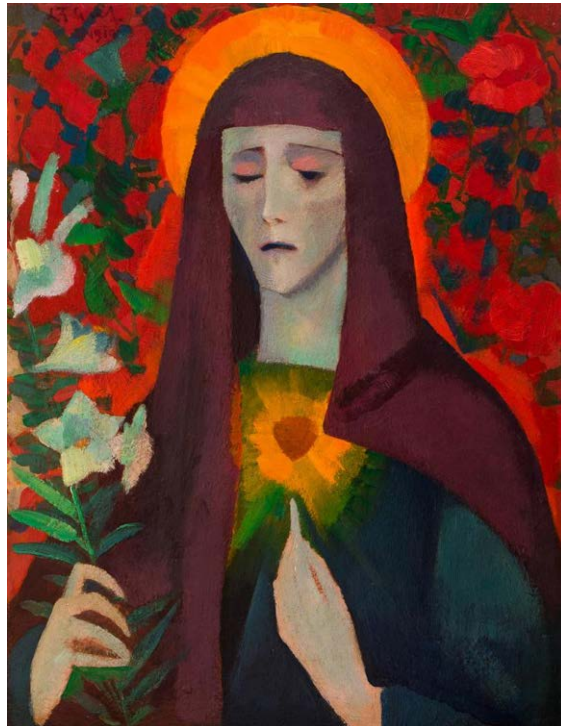


Fig. 5 L.F. Graf, *Christ and Mary*
Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 cm each, Giese und Schweiger, Vienna

The portrait: the celebration of a late-Qing dynasty scholar-official in Europe by an anti-academic painter

In a self-confident pose, with an implied stepping movement forward (or to the viewer's left) the 38-year old ambassador turns his gaze to the side and makes direct contact with the painter (and viewer), suggesting the hint of a smile.

The painter focuses on a few, relevant details, such as the tour de force in the rendering the exceptional Dragon robe (*longpao*), a traditional calf-length surcoat of blue satin with embroidered dragons, worn by scholar-officials who were ministers of the Qing dynasty in China (1644-1911). The one worn by Yang seems to be especially old and fine, and is extremely close to the Emperor's festival robe now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (fig.6)



Fig.6 Emperor's Dragon robe, Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Qianlong period (1736-95)
Metropolitan Museum, New York

While the cut and design of the robes are standard, the embellishments and motifs often vary: in this case, the tapestry-weave silk (*kesi*) is embroidered with gold thread motifs (see H. Heroldova, *The Dragon robe as the professional dress of the Qing dynasty scholar-official, in Annals of the Náprestek Museum*, 37/2, 2016, pp.49-72). The sitter is holding his precious jade belt-fitting, in a posture that resembles the affectation of a Renaissance prince, and he is also prominently showing a jade plaque hanging on his side. The voluntarily simple background features an impressive porcelain vase to the left, and on the right, below the Chinese inscription with the sitter's name, there is the Qing official winter headwear (*Qingdai guanmao*), a headgear worn by officials. This detail, that could easily go unnoticed, may

have been the one the sitter cared about the most, as it shows a series of symbols that are a celebration of the sitter's high status: the red ruby finial is worn by first grade officials, the highest rank, while the large, stylised peacock feathers on the side were bestowed by the Emperor to his officials who had accomplished meritorious services (fig.7).



Fig. 7

Above: Portrait of Qin Gewnral Fu Heng, c.1760 (detail)

Below: L.F. Graf, *The envoy Yang Tcheng* (detail)

Graf succeeded in the difficult task to celebrate the sitter in a state portrait aiming to power-representation and filled with institutional symbols, but without compromising the coloristic and impressionist trademark of his art. Despite the obvious official nature of the portrait, the sitter is defined by a natural, almost humoured expression, and the red carnations on the left are almost an Impressionist painting within the painting (fig.8).



Fig. 8 L.F. Graf, *The envoy Yang Tcheng* (detail)

The canvas was first presented at the Hagenbund exhibition in 1906, and soon considered a masterpiece by the artist precisely for his ability to achieve the sitter's official representation while remaining true to his style:

'Ludwig Ferdinand Graf takes first place. His main work is the life-size portrait of the Chinese envoy Yang-Tscheng in full figure, dressed in a splendid blue and white flowered costume, which has been in his family for three hundred years, adorned with ancient jade jewellery and so on. A vertical strip of writing on the wall gives the sitter's name in the original. The artist has fused the exoticism of the motif with much delicacy, without allowing himself to be animated to any side leaps, with his stylising style of painting. He achieves a quiet piquancy which, also through a certain glistening essence, is reminiscent of old Chinese porcelains.'

(from Ludwig Hevesi, 'Aus dem Wiener Kunstleben', in *Kunst und Kunsthandwerk*, vol. 9, Vienna 1906, p.252; quoted in *Ludwig Ferdinand Graf* 1995, p.163)