

Empress Cixi (watercolor on silk) features the Qing Dynasty Empress Cixi, the last empress.

The Empress of Silk

Blending traditional techniques with contemporary storytelling, **Xiang Li** creates luminous watercolor paintings of Chinese royalty on fabric. By Doreen Manning





LEFT
Empress Zhao Feiyan (watercolor on silk) is known for her extraordinary dance skills, beauty and dramatic rise from slavery to the imperial throne.

RIGHT
Empress Lü Zhi (watercolor on silk) is Li's portrait of China's first empress.

Xiang Li's art is luminous in format, expansive in storytelling and larger-than-life in impact—and based on an immense knowledge of Chinese empresses and the dynasties they shaped.

Growing up surrounded by artists in her homeland of China, many of Li's neighbors were practicing painters. Her own father was a portrait artist. Around age 6, Li had the opportunity to draw with Dong Shouping, a well-known Chinese artist who taught at the local university. Li says, "He told my mother, 'Your daughter will become an outstanding artist.' That encouragement meant everything to me. Art became both my passion and my safe space. Early on, I felt this was not just something I liked; it was my life."

"FORBIDDEN" WORK

Specializing in the reproduction and restoration of ancient Chinese paintings at the Forbidden City, in Beijing, China, Li worked as a Master Artist for 37 years—a highly specialized and prestigious position. Being recognized as a Master Artist carries a cultural responsibility—one that extends beyond technical excellence to include the preservation of history and tradition.

As one of the first young students selected to enter the Forbidden City system, in 1974, Li studied directly under top master artists such as Feng Zhonglian and Liu Bingsen, and underwent strict technical training. Only after earning recognition from senior experts was she permitted to work on cultural heritage pieces. "I was fortunate to continue this work for many



Qing Dynasty Empresses (watercolor on silk) showcases female royalty throughout Chinese history.

years, guided by the best teachers in this field," she says.

While this restoration work sharpened her artistic discipline, and she learned to remain faithful to the original creations beneath her brush, Li's own creative voice was developing. "While studying ancient techniques, I was deeply inspired by them," she recalls. "I learned and then gradually began adding my own feelings, almost like keeping visual notes." From studying ancient linework and flat visual structure, Li says she developed her own figure-drawing process, starting with sketches and then extracting pure line expression. "It gave me completely new creative experiences," she notes.

SILKEN STUDIES

In the course of her work at the Forbidden City, Li studied and recreated a wide range of artworks, most of them painted on silk. This eventually inspired her own series, "Chinese Empresses," begun in 2012, that features portraits of 200 historical empresses rendered on silk with gemstone and plant watercolors. The inspiration comes from her nightly walks inside the Forbidden City walls, when Li says she often sensed the presence of the royal women and ladies

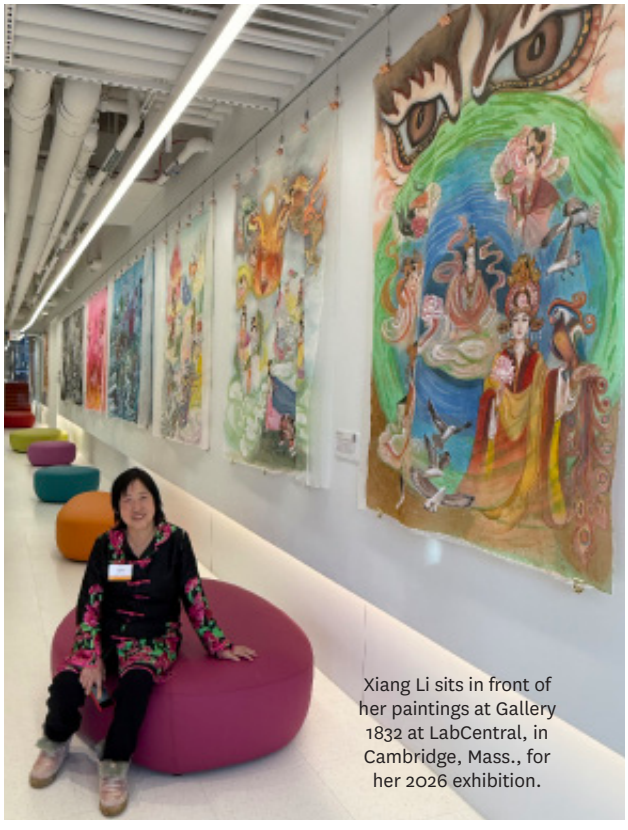
"SILK LETS ME EXPRESS SUBTLE EMOTIONS AND COMPLEX VISUAL LAYERS THAT WOULD BE VERY DIFFICULT ON OTHER SURFACES." —XIANG LI

of court who once lived there, and felt their loneliness and strength. "I began researching deeply and started this series to express their stories and emotions," she says.

Most of the pieces measure 72x36 inches, with about a dozen oversized paintings measuring 13x6½ feet, and feature empresses throughout Chinese history—from the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.) to the Manchu Dynasty (1912). Each panel is a rhythmic history lesson on a fluttering tapestry, reflecting not only the historical figures themselves, but also the cultural distinctions and values of their respective eras. Each summarizes the influence of the individual while offering visual storytelling that references the tastes and aesthetics of the time. Li represents each woman true to her place in history, with layers of meaning swirling around in vibrant hues and symbolic narration.



The scope of Li's work is impressive, which is apparent in the oversized **Eastern Jin Dynasty Empresses** (watercolor on silk, 13x6½ feet).



Xiang Li sits in front of her paintings at Gallery 1832 at LabCentral, in Cambridge, Mass., for her 2026 exhibition.



ABOVE Mother-daughter team Fei Wu and Li take in Li's gallery exhibition at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology at Harvard University. Wu serves as Li's manager.

BELOW Li restores part of an intricate silk portrait of an original Qing Dynasty empress painting at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



DEPTH & BREADTH

According to Li, the use of silk as her work surface supports painting techniques often unachievable on paper or canvas, such as transparency painting, painting from both sides and extremely delicate layering—especially vital for the narrative flow of her work. "Silk lets me express subtle emotions and complex visual layers that would be very difficult on other surfaces," the artist says.

Painting on silk isn't for the faint of heart, however. The material is notoriously unforgiving, and each work requires five to six layers of paint that cascade across the silk before being immediately absorbed as the artist works. Some pieces can take up to eight months—from inspiration to the repeated process of painting, drying and repainting. It's a demanding medium, but a noble format for the historic and sweeping mythology her subjects convey.

"It is expensive and technically difficult," Li says of the material. "One mistake can ruin the entire piece. But I enjoy mastering something that is difficult and respected. When I successfully control silk, it brings me great joy and satisfaction."

ACROSS THE OCEAN

In 2019, Li visited her daughter, Fei Wu, who lives in Massachusetts. As the world quarantined during the COVID pandemic, Li's short visit stretched into months. When Wu and her family purchased a new home, Li also moved in—and into the next chapter of her artistic life. With Wu acting as her manager, exhibitions in major East Coast museums and galleries soon followed, introducing Li's work to new audiences while inspiring new growth in her own artistic practice. "Seeing collections in museums here deeply inspired me," the artist says. "Coming from the palace environment into this global art center opened my eyes. I have learned and grown so much."

Another evolution in Li's work has been a modernization of her artistic lens. Trained in a deeply traditional imperial system, she says it was difficult to step outside that world. "My daughter introduced modern thinking and helped me grow again," she says. "Together, we represent the past and future. That is very meaningful to me. My daughter always reminds me: Art is love. Art is service. Art connects people through generosity. I believe this deeply."

For an artist using a paintbrush that dips into both the ancient and modern worlds, Li says there are still many works left to create. "My dreams are not finished," she notes. "As long as I can paint, I will continue turning those dreams into reality."

Massachusetts-based writer Doreen Manning is a regular contributor to Artists Magazine *and other arts publications.*

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