

Introduction

In 1835, an itinerant monk and epigraphy scholar named Liuzhou (1791–1858) visited the city of Suzhou to call on the governor of Jiangsu Province, Chen Jian (1786–1839). The governor, like many of his peers, collected antiques, and he had a particular affinity for clay bricks from the Han dynasty—rough earthenware blocks decorated with mold-cast inscriptions, geometric patterns, or linear images of animals and figures. Bricks with inscriptions were the most highly prized because they recorded archaic writing styles. Their simple rectilinear texts stood out from the fired clay in thin, ragged ridges to name early regnal dates and sometimes people or places. Over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, calligraphic taste among elites had shifted to favor the writing styles found on such objects because they were considered to be unpretentious, forceful, and honest.¹ Chen Jian had a marvelous collection of early bricks, and Liuzhou had come to help him document them (fig. 1).

The handscroll Liuzhou provided to Chen archived twelve of his most prized bricks in a series of ink rubbings. But rather than using the common approach of rubbing the inscription face of each brick in a linear sequence of flat impressions down the handscroll, Liuzhou implemented a relatively new process for depicting antiquities called “full-form” or “composite” rubbing (*quanxing ta*), a technique specially formulated to convey the three-dimensional nature of an object in a two-dimensional format. Liuzhou began with renderings of the text-bearing faces of each brick, which he carefully arranged at right angles to each other, overlapping them in a way that obscured the inscriptions in favor of a more engaging composition. After Liuzhou completed this stage of the work, Chen gathered a group of selected friends—fellow collectors, monks, and various of his favored aides—inviting them each to add a painting to one of the twelve rubbings laid out in the composition. When they had finished, Liuzhou added



Fig. 1 Liuzhou et al., *Floral Offerings in Ancient Bricks* (detail), 1835. Composite rubbings of ancient bricks with in-painted flowers by various artists. Ink and color on paper, 25 × 141 cm. Zhejiang Provincial Museum.

selective impressions of each brick's sides to create spatial depth, often in-painting to smooth out transitions. The overall image presented Chen's collection as a fictional garden of flourishing "potted scenes" (*penjing*) that appeared to nest within or stand in front of one another in a unified picture plane that gently receded away from the viewer, as if revealing a desk in his study on which he curated his choice antiques for optimal viewing and gardening pleasure. The small floral compositions his friends brushed on top of, and stemming from, the rubbings transformed their ink surfaces from a collection of archival documents into a verdant scene. Through a variety of painting styles, and representing a full range of diverse auspicious flora, Chen's friends concretized their connections with him, and with one another, while gaining the cultural capital associated with the study of these remnants from the ancient past.

The novelty of such images may not be apparent to a modern viewer. But for early nineteenth-century elite audiences, Liuzhou's hybrid rubbing-paintings were startling and evocative. Ruan Yuan (1764–1849), a political juggernaut of the early nineteenth century and a patron of Liuzhou, described the surprise of seeing one of these full-form rubbings done for him: "From it one can see the form of the entire bronze . . . looking at this is as if looking at the original vessel." Elsewhere, he marveled, "the dimensions [of the image] are true; I've held the original [bronze] in my hands."² Ruan's comments stand out because

within the literati arts, images rarely aimed to reproduce a sense of visual reality, much less a tactile one.³ But in these productions, the sense of touch was paired equally with vision to convey the pleasures of real interactions with antiquities.

Full-form rubbings challenged the boundaries between real and fabricated, an ambivalence that audiences embraced. As prints made by direct contact with an object's surfaces, they were perceived to be truthful documentary records done with an apparent minimum of artificial interference. But as pictures, they forced viewers to grapple with their nearly opposite effect—the obvious manipulation of the rubbings to produce fictional scenes with spatial and affective dimensions. This unification of archival technologies with painterly processes in a single image confirmed direct sensory experience while encouraging imaginative projection, uncanny properties that made Liuzhou's pictures ideal devices for literati networking. The enthusiastic inscriptions and colophons added to them by elite Qing-dynasty scholars attest to their dual roles of commemorating relationships to the revered objects of the past and providing a format to bond individuals in contemporary networks of friendship and obligation.

How then did such hybrid rubbing-paintings come to be? How could two such vastly different methods of image-making cohere in the same artwork without viewers experiencing a sense of disjuncture?⁴ Furthermore, what are the implications of Ruan Yuan's claim that these images reproduced and verified the combined senses of vision and touch? How did such appeals to the sensing body operate within the literati arts, which have been primarily interpreted through their various modes of historical and textual citation? To understand the complex set of perceptual and intellectual interactions Liuzhou's images demanded of their viewers requires stepping back one generation further, to the turn of the nineteenth century, when a shift in aesthetics began to occur. While Liuzhou's work is remarkable, it was not the isolated product of individual genius. It developed as part of a larger cultural phenomenon that emerged beginning in the late eighteenth century, a shift in visual thinking instigated by the importance and popularity of epigraphy.

Liuzhou's work, like that of many of his contemporaries, presumed a fundamental visual, historical, and cultural knowledge of ancient inscriptions. The early nineteenth-century popularity of epigraphy (*jinshi xue*) grew from the larger philological turn of the mid- to late eighteenth century, often described with the phrases "evidential research" (*kaozheng xue*) or "Han (dynasty) learning" (*Han xue*). This move toward philology as the intellectual bedrock for elite culture reordered the priorities of scholarship, politics, history, and even epistemology in China for the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Authors were expected to forgo the kinds of abstract metaphysical rhetoric made popular by Song- and Ming-dynasty scholars in exchange for evidence-based arguments grounded in sources that had been verified by the assiduous study of textual recensions and concrete material inscriptions. Through close comparisons of

the features of early language, including etymology, phonology, and graphology, eighteenth-century scholars sought to pare the many competing versions of classical texts to their most authentic meanings and to cast extraneous or false interpretations aside. These revisions were political by nature, because the classical texts being amended also provided the fundamental rhetoric for elite social interaction and bureaucratic advancement.⁵

Ancient inscriptions in stone, metal, and clay, like the ones Chen Jian collected and Liuzhou documented, proved invaluable to scholars engaged with the philological turn because of their material durability, which gave greater historical certainty to the forms of language cut or cast into them. As philological networks expanded in the eighteenth century, hundreds of scholars produced thousands of tomes of text describing these concrete early sources of language and reproduced tens of thousands of rubbings taken from original objects, circulating them for comparison among scholars throughout the empire.

The proliferation of interest in these objects instigated an epigraphic aesthetic—an appropriation of the stylistic, material, and tactile features of ancient inscribed objects like steles, bronzes, and clay bricks, as well as of their reproductive technology, rubbings—in the work of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century artists, scholars, and artisans. This book describes that epigraphic aesthetic in full for the first time, from its late eighteenth-century roots in philology to its blossoming across the spectrum of early to mid-nineteenth-century elite visual and material cultures, including the brush arts of calligraphers and painters, as well as the crafts of teapot makers and inkstone carvers.⁶

As with practitioners of evidential research, those who took part in the epigraphic aesthetic aimed to critically engage with existing canons by means of a return to the exemplary forms of the ancients. Ruan Yuan's essays recuperating a "northern" genealogy of calligraphic brushwork from the obscuring effects of the dominant "southern" school of calligraphy (chapter 1) may be the clearest expression of this challenge to existing canons, but evidence of widespread efforts to reimagine literati taste in this period can be found across media: from Huang Yi's focus on decaying stone material over calligraphic legibility in his printed reproductions of classical stele rubbings (chapter 2) to the rise among painters of a new "awkward" aesthetic based in epigraphic sources rather than the brushwork of past painters (chapter 3); from Chen Hongshou's emulations of ancient inscriptions in his seal carving, finger painting, and teapot making (chapter 5) to the subtle critique of inherited brushwork traditions posed in Ruan Yuan's treatise on marble landscape screens from Yunnan Province (chapter 6). Articulating these changes brought on by the epigraphic aesthetic refutes long-standing scholarly presumptions of creative stagnancy in early nineteenth-century Chinese literati art.⁷ With these historical biases put aside, how do we understand the arts of this period? What realizations can we bring to the study of literati arts more broadly speaking?

Over the course of these chapters, careful attention to the epigraphic aesthetic's effects across a range of materials reveals this generation's remarkable interest in the sense of touch. This sensory turn stemmed directly from the popularity of rubbings to document and exchange knowledge about epigraphy. A rubbing's usefulness to scholars ostensibly lay in its accurate and largely unbiased replication of an ancient carved or cast text. However, a rubbing's nature was not linguistic. Instead, rubbings replicated the experience of surface contact with an object. Capturing inscribed language was incidental to this process of archiving surface. As a consequence, rubbings made information about text inextricable from information about its material support, compressing the two in a single textured plane of monochromatic ink, a moment of suspended apprehension that did not separate cognition and sensation.⁸ As a result, when connoisseurs pored over rubbings, they read them both linguistically and tactilely, looking for authenticity in the forms of ancient words as well as the traces of their material decay. Likewise, when scholars, artists, and artisans engaged with the epigraphic aesthetic in the production of new artwork, they replicated both the textual forms and the material effects recorded in rubbings, emphasizing the sense of touch in particular to capitalize on its direct appeals to viewers.

Each chapter of this book points toward a slightly different use of touch and is situated within a different range of material and interpersonal possibilities. Collectively, the chapters show that the production and reception of early nineteenth-century visual and material culture among elites relied on what can best be described as tactile thinking—a form of direct apprehension that conjoined sensory perceptions with cognitive processes. For this generation, to touch was to understand. Liuzhou's full-form rubbings (chapter 4) manifest this trend most conspicuously, but across the arts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, literati increasingly relied on tactile references to verify historical or textual knowledge (chapters 1 and 2), to establish a sense of immediacy between images and their audiences (chapters 3 and 4), and to create greater intimacy among members of elite social networks (chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5). Tactile thinking guided the arts and culture of the early nineteenth century, creating a generation of elites that handled their relationships with one another through tasteful references to a new vocabulary of touch grounded in the authoritative language and surfaces of the past—a generation of tactful literati.⁹

To tell this story of the epigraphic aesthetic, its challenges to artistic canons, and the generational turn toward tactile thinking with some degree of focus, the following chapters gather their materials from one network of elites loosely centered around the public servant Ruan Yuan, one of the most influential government officials of the early nineteenth century. His career included terms as governor or as governor-general of six different provinces and the eventual title of grand secretary in the Qing imperial palaces in Beijing.¹⁰ He was also a prolific author and scholar responsible for writing, editing, compiling, or

publishing nearly ninety books and essays on history, literature, geography, phonetics, and, of course, epigraphy.¹¹ Ruan published at least twelve works on epigraphy during his career, including individual object studies, collection catalogs, and the production of major provincial epigraphy catalogs in three of the locations where he served: the twenty-four volume *Epigraphy Gazetteer for Shandong Province*, the eighteen-volume *Epigraphy Gazetteer for Zhejiang Province*, and the sixteen-volume *Record of Epigraphy in Guangdong*. Ruan's resources and influence enabled him to fund large-scale scholarly projects, but they could only be enacted with the help of a network of talented scholars, and his various friends, artists, scholars, and aides constituted one of the best-developed hubs of epigraphic exchange in the early nineteenth century. As Ruan advanced in the Qing bureaucracy, he accumulated a broad network of more than four hundred associates. Of those, at least sixty were employed directly as aides, assistants, editors, authors, researchers, and artists in the production of his published works.¹² They, in turn, depended on Ruan to establish their own networks and reputations. A well-placed mentor was key to maintaining privilege, especially in the early nineteenth century, a period of diminishing opportunities for the sons of elite families.¹³ If the epigraphic interests of this generation can be centered around any one individual, Ruan Yuan is a worthy candidate.¹⁴

Chapter 1, "Calligraphy's New Past," explores Ruan Yuan's central position in the proliferation of epigraphy studies and the subsequent epigraphic aesthetic that resulted from it in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Particular focus is given to his application of epigraphic data toward a rethinking of the calligraphic canon. Beginning with his development as a scholar, chapter 1 goes on to trace the significant role epigraphy studies played in his career, including his sponsorship of other epigraphy scholars, the use of epigraphy for scholarly networking, and the production of epigraphically inspired art objects to concretize personal relationships. Epigraphy was more than an academic predilection for this generation. It was a visual and scholarly language through which elites communicated their taste and erudition to one another. Within networks such as Ruan's, bronzes and stones served both as sources for the comparative study of early written language and also as personal gifts, objects of civic generosity, or inspiration for the production of more things. When landmark birthdays occurred, private studios were erected, or important books were published, then new seals or headboards were carved in archaic script styles and given as gifts. When ancient tombs or shrines were repaired, new steles were inscribed in emulation of old steles and erected to honor the event. Inscribed objects were the means by which Ruan Yuan's network of scholars secured their personal relationships and their public personas.

Ruan's work culminated in two essays, "Southern and Northern Schools of Calligraphy" and "Northern Steles and Southern Letters," which summarized the radical changes he and his peers enacted on the established calligraphic

canon by means of so many anonymously engraved stones from the deep past. The celebration of anonymity was groundbreaking in calligraphic culture, as it decoupled the general style of the text from the personal biography of the calligrapher, allowing for an entirely new canon that drew its authority from direct contact with antique objects.¹⁵ Ruan's essays also offer the clearest articulations of the terms and logic of the early nineteenth-century epigraphic aesthetic and therefore provide a conceptual foundation for the book's subsequent chapters, which explore the various visual and material cultures produced under the spell of ancient inscribed objects.

Material knowledge rose to the fore among epigraphically influenced scholars because the authenticity of early texts was largely established through close attention to their supports. Epigraphy specialists scrutinized corrosion, erosion, chipping, and fracturing in all types of stone and metal as key features for properly dating an object. Was the wear on the stone or bronze consistent throughout? Were there areas that had been retouched or altered over the years? Did extant objects accord with historical records of their texts as found in classical rubbings or other published records? Chapter 2, "Obliterated Texts," addresses such material fixations through a close reading of Huang Yi's (1744–1803) book *Engraved Texts of the Lesser Penglai Pavilion* (1800). The book reproduced woodblock-printed images of Huang's renowned collection of antique rubbings from famous ancient steles, adding transcriptions as well as the texts of various commentaries and colophons appended to the original rubbings by friends like Weng Fanggang (1733–1818) and Ruan Yuan. For his printed reproductions of the rubbings, which were themselves reproductions of the stone steles, Huang made the peculiar choice to use an outlining technique. This decision focused visual attention to the edges of characters, where the material signs of degradation in stone were most pronounced, signaling the authenticity of the original inscribed texts through evidence of their material age. But at times, Huang's fascination with reproducing the destruction of the text's material support created illegible, amoeba-like forms, nullifying the words and highlighting a dominant, tactile interest in the surfaces of the object. Furthermore, the hollow shapes created by this technique lacked a simulacrum of calligraphic brushwork, emptying the inscriptions of any implied relationship to a specific calligrapher's body. Huang's prints, when seen in relation to Ruan Yuan's essays, point to a generational desire to vacate established genealogies of calligraphic style in favor of new canons based on the material authority of anonymous ancient sources.

The ragged-edged features of Huang's prints found their way into the styles of contemporaneous calligraphers, but the overt fascination with aged surfaces and archaic forms moved beyond a single medium. Chapter 3, "Epigraphic Painting," extends the discussion of the epigraphic aesthetic from calligraphy to its fellow brush-based art, painting. From the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on, paintings and colophons by Jin Nong (1687–1764), Luo Ping

(1733–1799), Huang Yi, and Qian Du (1763–1844) reveal the purposeful manipulation of brushwork in landscape and figure paintings to allude to the material properties of inscriptions and images found in ancient stone and metal. The ideal quality pursued by painters and epigraphy connoisseurs was the “antique and awkward” (*guzhuo*), a descriptor that further tested the dominance of canonical literati styles and was applied both to the art of the past and the present. “Antique and awkward” art, sometimes described as just “awkward/unstudied” (*zhuo*), bypassed the affectations inherent in citations of canonical brush masters and instead sought a direct path to the principles of the ancients. To focus this discussion, chapter 3 centers on a handscroll painting that would at first glance appear to manifest none of the obvious traits of an epigraphic aesthetic. Made for Ruan Yuan in 1803 by the landscape painter Wang Xuehao (1754–1832), *Presenting the Tripod at Mt. Jiao* commemorated Ruan’s donation of an important inscribed Han-dynasty bronze to a temple in Zhenjiang. Wang painted the monochromatic landscape image in the canonical “orthodox style” of early Qing-dynasty painters like Wang Hui (1632–1717) and Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715). But as the later colophons added to the painting show, when viewers saw this landscape, they not only viewed it through the lens of orthodox lineages of brushwork in landscape painting; they also visualized the surfaces of the bronze at the center of the narrative, suggesting that the epigraphic aesthetic affected a comprehensive shift in the perception of early nineteenth-century art.

Collectively, these first three chapters describe changes in the core literati practices of calligraphy and painting, where the effects of the epigraphic aesthetic were primarily, and perhaps most, evident. Scholars and artists reoriented the brush-based arts of calligraphy and painting toward new canons of style grounded in the material features of these authoritative early bronze, stone, and clay objects. Calligraphers changed character composition by adopting the orthography of early inscribed or cast texts, and they made material references to the textures of broken stone or corroded metal surfaces to signal their relationship to authentic epigraphy sources. In painting, purposefully archaic compositions harkened back to early modes of image construction, while dry, stippled brushmarks simulated the material qualities of worn stone and metal surfaces recorded in rubbings of ancient objects. But the epigraphic aesthetic was not just a stylistic choice. It affected deeper changes in the literati arts.

The subsequent three chapters extend the description of the epigraphic aesthetic beyond the brush arts to explore its intermedial aspects and to reframe it around a preoccupation with touch. Because close description and analysis of ancient inscribed objects lay at the heart of epigraphy studies, direct contact between scholar and object was prioritized. If direct contact could not be had, then a facsimile that came as close as possible to replicating touch, such as a rubbing, would also do. In many ways, the reduplicative technology of rubbings acted as the prime image model for early nineteenth-century artists and scholars,

challenging brushwork's long-standing role as the principal bearer of stylistic authority among literati. As images born immediately from their object referents, rubbings could be appreciated as corporeal manifestations of antique objects and have been described in scholarship as shed skins or as akin to relics.¹⁶ However, as this book argues, rubbings are best described as suspended perceptions of touch, as acts of direct apprehension made available for the sensation of other viewing bodies.

Touch was essential to both the culture of rubbings and the classical brushwork traditions of calligraphy and painting, yet the sensation of touch was constructed and perceived quite differently in each. Whereas a viewer saw brushwork as a set of the artist's bodily traces left suspended in ink and paper, they understood rubbings as direct facsimiles of touch with an object's surfaces. Through one, audiences reconstructed the physical experiences of another person. Through the other, they bypassed human bodies altogether to touch the material world directly. This nineteenth-century reorientation of touch away from the bodily traces of canonical artists and toward the direct surface sensations of art objects not only enabled early nineteenth-century artists and scholars to move beyond stagnant brushwork genealogies; it also allowed them to more easily move between mediums, to conjoin previously separate image-making practices, and to reassert the role of the senses as a primary means by which audiences could engage with artworks. To begin to understand the developments of this tactile thinking, chapter 4, "Tactile Images," offers an artistic biography of the aforementioned Liuzhou, the so-called epigrapher-monk, focusing in particular on his new mode of making rubbings, the "full-form" or "composite" style. Full-form rubbings shifted the nature of rubbings back toward the realm of painting by adding dimensionality, which established the surrounding paper as a scene in which events could occur. When combined with in-painted figures, composite rubbings compressed the difference between two very different representational schema, taking advantage of the visual and tactile qualities of each to create new hybrid images that asserted the role of direct sensory experiences.

But what then happens to the viewing conventions of each medium? How factual was a composite rubbing with painted figures or flowers to an epigraphy aficionado? For a viewer accustomed to the principles of viewing brushwork as the transmission of the artist's thoughts and bodily gestures, did these images qualify as paintings? Are these even the right questions to ask? Perhaps the defense of medium-specific principles mattered very little to this generation. At least this is the case for Chen Hongshou (1768–1822), the subject of chapter 5, "A Tactful Literatus." Chen was a former aide and mentee of Ruan Yuan, and his work best exemplifies the turn toward touch that epigraphy inspired in the literati arts. His artistic explorations began with seal carving and calligraphy and then grew to include painting. When Chen moved on to his own government career as a minor official in Zhejiang Province, he developed a close connection to the

nearby potters of Yixing, and to Yang Pengnian (fl. early nineteenth century) in particular. Collaborating with these artisans, Chen and his coterie of friends, many of them also Ruan Yuan's aides, produced customized teapots inscribed with their calligraphy and paintings. When his teapots are considered alongside his finger painting and seal carving, tactility rises to the fore as a guiding sense for his artistic production, while the brushwork canons that dominated older literati image-making fall to the side.

The last chapter, chapter 6, "The Limits of Touch," turns to a book written by Ruan Yuan later in his career, *Paintings in Stone*, and to several works of art by Qian Du to describe examples of early nineteenth-century literati artistic practice that would, at first glance, appear to stand in counterpoint to this generation's tactile thinking. Ruan Yuan's book celebrated the absence of human touch in the naturally occurring "stone paintings"¹⁷ cut from Dali marble in Yunnan Province, crediting their creator as the heavens themselves. At the same time, he had these immaculate images inscribed with poems for friends that compared their textures to the brushwork of canonical literati painters. How then could these stones be both untouched by man and also reflective of paintings by the best of men? An analysis of his text and the Dali stones he gave as gifts offers a lens through which to understand the relationship of touch to perception and to the larger epistemological principles that framed the production and reception of art among early nineteenth-century literati. Likewise, the work of Qian Du, a close friend of many of the central practitioners of the epigraphic aesthetic, refrained from emphasizing touch above the other senses. Instead, Qian Du's work demonstrates an evenly distributed interest across the senses, prompting us to imagine early nineteenth-century tactile thinking as part of a spectrum of sensory experience to be found in the literati arts, and perhaps even at the heart of it. By testing the limits of touch, and of this book's argument, the last chapter explores the larger implications of tactile thinking on the field of Chinese art history.

As a history of touch in early nineteenth-century Chinese art, this book links the study of Chinese art history with sensory history, a relative newcomer among the methods of Chinese studies.¹⁸ Over the last generation, historians of the Western world have produced a substantial volume of work that historicizes the senses, allowing us to understand the ways that period-specific values were articulated through and imposed on the body, and revealing the importance of the senses to the construction of identity, the production of knowledge, and the organization of society.¹⁹ These studies also demonstrate the variability of the premodern senses. While we may experience phenomena in the present through physiological processes of vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch that we have in common with historical actors, the social and cultural constructions of our senses differ, often substantially. So what was touch within a premodern

Chinese sensorium? And what do we make of the emphasis on touch in the arts of the early nineteenth century?

While the collected chapters of this book aim to answer the second question, any response to the first question is complicated by several factors. For one, to describe a premodern discourse of the senses may overstate their conceptual importance. This is true at least within early Chinese thought of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), when many of the formative concepts of Chinese philosophy took shape. No specific theory of the senses existed among thinkers of this period. Instead, early references to sensation can be found primarily in discussions of knowledge and ethics. When the senses were discussed in these texts, their number and nature were variably defined. Often, references to eyes and ears alone could stand in for sensory activity at large, while touch was frequently left unmentioned. Following from this, existing sensory histories of Chinese culture primarily focus on vision and sound, whereas a cultural history of touch has yet to be written.

One common arrangement of the full spectrum of senses relied on the metaphor of five sensory officials (*wu guan*), which were governed by the heart-mind (*xin*). In this bureaucracy of the body, each sensory capacity affiliated itself with a bodily location, from which it differentiated (*yi* or *bian*) the phenomena of the world through the acts of affinity (*hao*) or knowing (*zhi*). Eyes had an affinity toward understanding color and form, just as the ears did sound. Smells were the objects of the nose, and the mouth comprehended flavors. The “bones, body, and skin” (*gu ti fu*) understood “cold and hot, smooth and sharp, light and heavy,” and sought “pleasure and ease.” This is the aspect that corresponds most closely to what we might call a sense of touch. The heart-mind presided over these sensory officials and further differentiated discourses, reasons, and affects.²⁰

The sensations that these sensory capacities experienced existed in their own right as relational dynamics between subject and object, not as the unchanging properties of one or the other.²¹ Furthermore, sensory perceptions were not the raw materials from which knowledge was constructed, because knowledge was not conceived as a collection of concepts abstracted from experience and ordered into principles by the rational mind. Instead, both sensation and knowledge were directly perceived in a manner that did not separate body and mind. Perceptions were likewise conceived as acts of correspondence with the world, achieved through resonances with the fundamental relational patterns (*li*) that structured it.²² Noble people distinguished themselves by the ability to know these structural patterns and relay them to others, whether in the form of an essay, a poem, a painting, or any other mode of literati textual and material culture. By nature, these forms suspended the perceptions of their makers, even while their authority was based in citational practices that elevated textual knowledge to a prime position.

The ethical dimensions of the senses are clear in early texts. Discussions of sight and sound often carried with them negative connotations of indulgence or wonton behavior, pointing to the fact that sensory perceptions were as social and political as they were personal.²³ The tactile realm of the “bones, body, and skin” had additional political and social dimensions, as its object was “pleasure and ease” (*yu yi*). Among early Chinese thinkers, pleasure was primarily an ethical concern, a fact clearly underscored by the rhetorical pairing of pleasure in opposition to anxiety or insecurity, rather than its typical counterpart in Western epistemology, pain. The action of taking pleasure (*le*) directed itself toward experiences that sustained the long-term well-being of the body, the family, or the state, and not toward the pursuit of selfish, short-term joys.²⁴ If touch was the sensory mechanism most directly affiliated with the politics of pleasure in classical Chinese thought, then the rise of tactile thinking as a result of epigraphic aesthetics in early nineteenth-century literati art also indicates this generation’s preoccupation with feeling its way toward new social and ethical relations with each other and with the past.

Unlike sight, sound, smell, or taste, touch had no privileged location or organ among early thinkers. It was perceived not just in the hand but by the whole body, across its outer surfaces and within its inner structures.²⁵ This dispersion of the site of sensation makes touch the hardest sense to track over various developments in Chinese sensory thinking. In Chinese visual culture, to find touch, one often finds the body in general or, more specifically, traces of the body. In its earliest forms, the term trace (*ji*) described a footprint, the mark of a moving body’s contact with the world. Both the tangibility and the suspended action of a trace were important to its early valences, and the term was adapted by Buddhists, neo-Confucians, antiquarians, and literati alike.²⁶ Each culture imagined connection with the bodies of the past through evidence of physical contact suspended in relics, carved words, brushmarks, or other intermediaries. This ability of one body’s touch to remain sensible in material form for the appreciation of another body distinguished touch from the other major senses, sound and vision. Contact was less fleeting, more concrete, and, moreover, vision and sound always stood separate from the body. Touch confirmed presence and bridged the distance between one body and another, even, and especially, across time.²⁷

Between early discussions of the senses and the later period described in this book, any number of genealogies of touch exist. The fundamental structures of sensation may have been established in the early texts of the Warring States period, but naturally, the role of perception in relation to knowledge did not remain unchanged through the subsequent intellectual shifts of classical, medieval, and early modern China. The introduction of Buddhism in the Later Han dynasty (25–220), and the revivals of Confucian thought in the Song dynasty (960–1279) and Ming dynasty (1368–1644), referred to collectively as neo-Confucianism, marked the greatest inflection points in theories of knowledge and

sensation until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Each mode of thinking brought such varieties of new discourses for understanding the body and its relationship to the mind that summarizing them would require separate books.²⁸

To the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century proponents of evidential research and Han learning whose writings spurred the developments described in this book, the aspects of Buddhist and neo-Confucian epistemologies that deserved the greatest criticism were the privileging of the immaterial over the concrete and the reliance on the heart-mind to intuitively perceive underlying principles of the world. As Yan Yuan (1635–1709) put it, “Principles are only empty words; how could they exist in things?” For Dai Zhen (1724–1777), “[By] describing empty abstractions as if they were concrete things . . . later scholars were thus unable to gain any knowledge about actual, existing concrete things.” These seventeenth- and eighteenth-century materialist approaches reconsidered the classical positioning of sensation as a relation that existed between the self and the world. When it came to the senses, Dai wrote, “Taste, sound, color are in things and not in us.” While Dai left touch out of his array of sensations, Yan Yuan elaborated on it specifically, saying, “Things can be explained only by the tangible handling of them.”²⁹ To sense the physical properties of a thing, and to handle it, specifically, was to understand it.

This generational turn toward touch was entangled with other modes of artistic production that suspended the body’s tactile sensations. In painting and calligraphy, the verb to touch or caress with the hand (*mo*) was popularized from the late medieval period onward as an act of copying, particularly the copying of a canonical master’s work. Through the hand, and with brushwork (*bi*) as intermediary, painters or calligraphers felt their way back to the intentions and the knowledge of a respected historical figure. Likewise, when painters from the late Song dynasty onward called attention to the surfaces of their images through a tactile emphasis on brushwork and texture, they created transsubjective sites for the physical projection and definition of self.³⁰ More recent to the period of this book, artisans of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties designed the surfacescapes of decorative objects to engage the sense of touch as it existed throughout a viewer’s body, including its proprioceptive and affective dimensions.³¹ Surface contact, across media, provided the means for connection and projection. While each of these modes of touch remained important around 1800, the rise of epigraphy, and its primary tool, the rubbing (*ta*), shifted the terms of surface connectivity. Broken into its two individual components, the word “rubbing” places a hand alongside a stone, drawing our attention to Yan Yuan’s emphasis on “tangible handling,” specifically, the contact between a scholar’s body and a stone or metal object from the deep past.

In sensory histories of the early modern Western world, touch must often be reclaimed from the obscuring effects of a sensory hierarchy that elevated vision above the “lesser” senses from the nineteenth century onward. Vision has long

been considered the principal sense associated with the rational mind, Enlightenment-era ideals, and modernity. Yet, as sensory historians have shown, the nonvisual senses have been just as central to the development of modernism in its various manifestations.³² In Chinese art, modernity is likewise closely affiliated with vision. Recent studies of early twentieth-century Chinese painting describe the emphasis that advocates of modernization placed on optical vision and sketching from life.³³ While the modern visual bias certainly affects histories of early modern Chinese art, a textual bias has arguably asserted greater distorting effects, making the role of the senses themselves the real reclamation project for a sensory history of the period.

Existing frameworks of interpretation in the study of Chinese literati art tend to focus on the textual aspects of an artwork, including its inscriptions, colophons, and especially the citational dimensions of brushwork genealogies. This follows from the roots of literati art beginning in the Song dynasty, when gentleman artists distinguished their work from that of artisans by disavowing similitude in favor of images that conveyed the underlying principles of the world. Their paintings diagrammed the world as much as they depicted it and were closely affiliated with the arts of writing.³⁴ The merits of a textual approach to the interpretation of literati art have often enabled Chinese art historians to differentiate this field of study from its early modern European counterparts and even elevate it to conceptual art *avant la lettre*. However, this has also created an artificial divide between the intellectual and bodily pleasures of experiencing an artwork. Just as the early nineteenth-century literati described in this book sought a renewal of the past through tactile information, this book aims to recenter the body in the production and reception of Chinese literati art and thereby repair later anachronistic divisions between the mind and the body. In this respect, it is part of a growing trend in Chinese art history, exemplified by Jonathan Hay's *Sensuous Surfaces* (2010) and Dorothy Ko's *The Social Life of Inkstones* (2017). Hay's application of affect theory to early modern Chinese decorative arts enables a new manner of understanding surface decoration as a medium in its own right, one that "thinks with" its audience without separating cognition from sensuous pleasure.³⁵ Ko describes the craft of inkstone carving in the seventeenth century as a fundamentally embodied practice of material knowledge that was conjoined with the textual cultures of *wen* (writing, literature, civility). In doing so, she argues that the cultural positions of artisan and scholar began to blur from the seventeenth century onward, as artisanal knowledge increased in popularity among scholars and as scholarly work became more craft-like. These shifts presaged the rise of evidential studies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the intellectual trend that shaped the scholarly world of this book's primary actors.³⁶ Both Hay and Ko highlight the agency of the art object in crafting culture and individual identity, and both works foreground the bodily nature of knowledge as the conjoining of sensory and textual

understandings.³⁷ This book explores similar ideas within a spectrum of classical literati art forms—calligraphy, painting, seal carving, teapot manufacturing, and full-form rubbings—that are so intertwined with textual knowledge that, until now, their sensory appeals have gone largely unacknowledged. While a full sensory history of literati art would be beyond the scope of any book, by following the particular emergence of tactile thinking in this generation, surprising features emerge to liberate the literati arts from their text-bound narratives and to introduce larger questions about the nature of literati knowledge on the cusp of modernity in China.

One last note on the term “literati” will be useful before starting. Throughout the book, I use the term literati to refer broadly to those members of the educated elite who negotiated their relationships with peers through references to a shared knowledge of classical Chinese texts and artworks. The English term is convenient, even if it may be somewhat anachronistic, as the closest Chinese term for this, *wenren* (lit. “lettered person”), was only sometimes used as an identifier among early nineteenth-century elites. The term *ru* (roughly, “Confucian,” but encompassing more than just adherence to Confucian thought) had more traction as a group identifier among philologists and government officials of the eighteenth century but lacks the dimensions of class and education conveyed by the word literati.³⁸ A general skepticism toward the cohesiveness of literati identity has been expressed among art historians, particularly in relation to Yuan-dynasty painting history.³⁹ More recent scholarship points to the blurred distinctions between the social statuses of craftspeople and literati in the increasingly commercialized world of early modern China.⁴⁰ Taking heed of the porous nature of this term, I nevertheless retain it in following chapters, as it is the best descriptor for those who contribute to a culture in which social capital was built by means of objects that cited a shared knowledge of classical history, literature, and the arts.