

# HUBERT VOS

## Court Painter of Empress Dowager Cixi

JOHN SEED



1 *H.I.M. The Empress Dowager of China, Cixi*, 1905  
Oil on canvas, 233.7 x 137.2 cm. Summer Palace, Beijing

## An Invitation to Peking

“Now, really, I was struck very strongly by her appearance...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.”<sup>1</sup>

In spring 1905, Dutch-American painter Hubert Vos (1855–1935) received a letter from the Dutch Legation in Peking (now Beijing) informing him that they had been asked to locate him and enquire as to whether he would be willing to travel to China to paint “some high officials”. He had no idea that he would be asked, upon his arrival, to paint a portrait of the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) (1), the dominant political figure of the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Vos had been in China in 1899—a few months before the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion of 1900—but a request he had made to paint the Empress Dowager at that time had been rebuffed. Both the traditional prejudice against reproducing images of the emperor and empress and the difficulties of gaining permission for a foreigner to enter the Forbidden City had worked against him.

When he arrived in Peking in June 1905, after a two-month trip from New York, Vos learned that he had been summoned to paint “the most famous and powerful woman of her time, with the possible exception of Queen Victoria”.<sup>2</sup> A legendary figure, who began adult life at the age of sixteen as a third grade imperial concubine, the Empress Cixi first gained power in 1875. She served as regent over her three year old adopted nephew, the Guangxu Emperor, whom she was bizarrely required to address as “royal father”.<sup>3</sup> The empress “retired” to build a pleasure garden when her nephew came of age in 1889, but then returned to depose and imprison Guangxu in 1898, after the young emperor had launched a radical reform programme recommended by two former imperial scholars.

After making the mistake of encouraging the disastrous Boxer Rebellion—an anti-foreign and anti-Christian movement that eventually necessitated a punitive foreign rescue mission—Cixi fled Peking, pausing only to order the murder of Guangxu’s favourite concubine. She returned as a chastened figure, who worked to improve her reputation by befriending diplomats’ wives, and eventually launched her own reform programme. The empress also began to allow photographic portraits for the first time, and collaborated with her ministers in an attempt to improve her image both at home and abroad. Inviting Hubert Vos to Peking was part of this effort.

### Hubert Vos: The Painter of Notables and Types

Hubert Vos (2) was a painter whose career straddled the rapid historical and artistic shifts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Born in Maastricht, Holland in 1855, Vos trained as an artist in the academic tradition. He studied first at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels under the orientalist Jean-François Portaels (1818–1895), and then in Paris with Portaels’ student, Fernand Cormon (1845–1924), a painter known for historical scenes that often featured bloodshed and sensationalism. Although Cormon worked hard to guide his students towards



2 Hubert Vos (1855–1935)

acceptance in the Paris Salon, it was his “failed” students—including Henri De Toulouse-Lautrec, Emile Bernard and Vincent Van Gogh—who later made their marks as the rebellious progenitors of Post-Impressionism.

Vos, in contrast, remained a committed traditionalist and a critic of Impressionism throughout his career. After winning a Gold Medal at the Paris Salon of 1886 for his oil painting *Room in a Brussels Almshouse*, Vos was described as having been seen swaggering through the village of Pont-Aven wearing a green velvet “Rembrandt” hat and mocking Paul Gauguin for his use of spots of pure colour in a painting of boys bathing.<sup>4</sup> After leaving France, Vos was able to complete his education in Rome, aided by a grant from the Dutch government. He then returned to Brussels, hoping to secure a position as either an academy director or professor.

After finding his options limited by the relative provinciality of Brussels, Vos moved to London where he opened a studio and atelier-style school that eventually served both

<sup>1</sup>Vos, Hubert, “My Dear Friends:”, Letter from Peking, June 28th, 1905, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>“Gossip of New York”, *The Mexico Daily Record*, March 7th, 1910.

<sup>3</sup>Hilton, Isabel, “Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China by Jung Chang” (Review), *The Guardian*, October 25th, 2013.

<sup>4</sup>Mathews, Nancy Mowll, *Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life*, Yale University Press, 2001, p. 72.



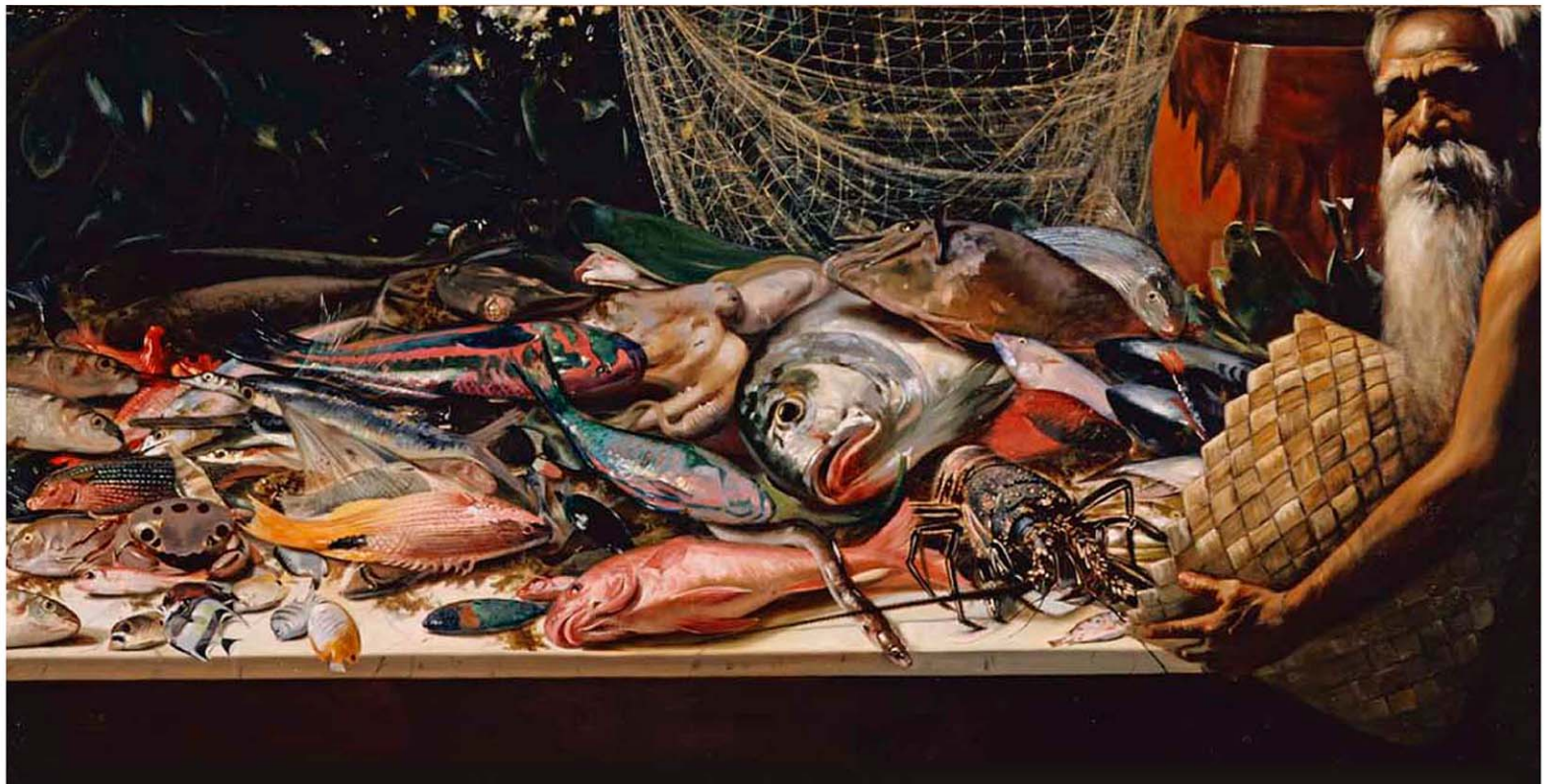
3 *Kolomona: Hawaiian Troubadour*, 1898  
Oil on canvas, 101.6 x 88.9 cm  
Honolulu Museum of Art, Gift of Charlotte  
and Henry B. Clark, Jr, 1994 (7676.1)

male and female pupils. Vos joined several existing art societies, befriended the American artist James McNeill Whistler and founded both a “Society of Portrait Painters” and a “Society of Pastellists”. Painting both genre portraits and commissioned works, Vos climbed the ladder of high society as he completed portraits of Baron de Staal (1890), the Russian Ambassador to London, and the visiting eleven year old Queen Wilhelmina of Holland (1891). Around this time, the critic and painter Walter Sickert described Vos’ portraiture as being “unconventional without eccentricity and impressive by just means and methods”.<sup>5</sup>

During a summer vacation in Ireland, he completed a pastel triple-portrait of three Irish “types”, which won the highest award in an 1890 Dresden pastel exhibition. The success of this work, titled *Home Rulers*, marks the moment when Vos’ interest in representing ethnic characteristics was first noted and rewarded.

In 1892, Vos was appointed to serve as the Royal Commissioner for Holland at the World’s Fair in Chicago. Leaving his London schools under the direction of some of his best pupils, he sailed to America, which he “rapidly grew to like”.<sup>6</sup> At the World’s Fair, Vos was delighted to find “the greatest collection of different people of the globe ever reunited in one spot...” The first hand experience of so much ethnic variety heightened the artist’s existing interests and suggested new projects:

“I began to study 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.”<sup>7</sup>



4 *Study of Hawaiian Fish*  
Oil on canvas, 92.1 x 184.5 cm  
Honolulu Museum of Art, Gift of Robert and Deanna Levy, 1987 (5626.1)

Resolving to devote his career to the recording of ethnic types “in their own countries in their own surroundings with their own climactic influence”, Vos initiated a study of aboriginal Americans that grew to include *A South American Indian of British Guiana* (1893), *Sioux Indian Chief in Buffalo Robes* (1897) and *Chippewa Indian Chief* (1900). The Chippewa portrait was purchased by the Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York and adopted as the trademarked image of its First American Life Insurance Company.

In October 1897, Vos was in Washington when the former Queen Lili'uokalani made a visit as part of her campaign to protest the annexation of Hawai'i. Travelling with Lili'uokalani as a lady-in-waiting was her cousin, Eleanor Kaikilani Coney (Princess Kaikilani Graham), a beautiful divorcée. Vos was apparently immediately smitten. A mother of two young children—John and Anne—Kaikilani was “tall, handsome, very commanding in her presence”. She had accompanied Lili'uokalani on her continental trip to help protect her from the curiosity of on-lookers, who jammed into railway stations anxious for a glimpse of exotic Hawaiian royalty.

Vos proposed to Kaikilani three days after meeting her. She hesitated, wanting to be married in Honolulu, but Vos “intercepted” her as she began her return trip west by rail and they were married in St. Paul, Minnesota on November 5th, 1897. The artist's first wife, Aline, along with their two children, Isolde and Marius, remained in Europe. The couple started their honeymoon in Honolulu—where Vos made his first three portraits of Hawaiian Polynesians and a fishmonger presenting detailed specimens of a local catch (3, 4)—then, leaving Kaikilani's children with her mother, they set off on a grand painting tour that would end just before the turn of the century. During the trip, Vos sought out and recorded subjects in China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea and Tibet, painting both “composite” portraits designed to record racial characteristics and individual portraits of nobility.<sup>8</sup>

In an autobiographical letter written in October 1911, Vos recounts many anecdotes and shares his observations about the various people he painted. For example, he found the people of Java, where he stayed for four months, “hard-working, jovial, hospitable and appreciative”. He also describes making several visits to Japan, and comments that he and other “first class artists” had done justice to the “looks and charm” of the Japanese people.<sup>9</sup>

Vos was the third Western painter to visit Korea. Another—the trader, painter and adventurer, Arnold Henry Savage Landor—had spent several months there beginning in December 1890, later recalling that its “king and princes were very anxious to see what ‘European painting’ was like, as they had never yet seen a picture painted by a European”.<sup>10</sup> The Scottish artist Constance Taylor had visited in 1894. When he arrived in Seoul—probably in June 1899—Vos was given full access to the royal court through Mr Leigh Hunt, who owned several gold mines in partnership with the emperor. Vos first painted a portrait of Min Sangho (1870–1933), a cousin of the king who had been educated in the United States, and who he regarded as “the purest type” of Korean man (5). After Emperor King Kojong (1852–1919) saw Min's portrait, he asked Vos to paint himself and also Crown Prince Sunjong (1874–1926). Their life-sized portraits hung in the Toksu Palace until they were destroyed in a large fire in 1904.

In her 1979 article in *The Korea Quarterly*, Christine Palm revealed that Vos' grandson and namesake—Hubert D. Vos—was in possession of copies of the portraits of King Kojong and Min Sangho, and also a landscape of Seoul. Vos had referenced his full-length copy of the emperor's portrait in his autobiographical letter, stating that it “created nearly a revolution in that doomed country (Korea) when the time came for me to leave and take my pictures with me”.<sup>11</sup> The three re-discovered paintings were put on display at the Korean National Museum of Contemporary Art in July 1982. One of them—*Landscape of Seoul*, which includes a view from the window of the US Legation headquarters where the artist stayed—remains in the collection of the Korean National Museum of Contemporary Art.

<sup>5</sup>Sickert, Walter, *The Complete Writings on Art*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>Vos, Hubert, Autobiographical letter to Dr Ten Kate, October 9th, 1911, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>De Kay, Charles, “Painting Racial Types”, *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 38, no. 60, June 1900, pp. 163–169.

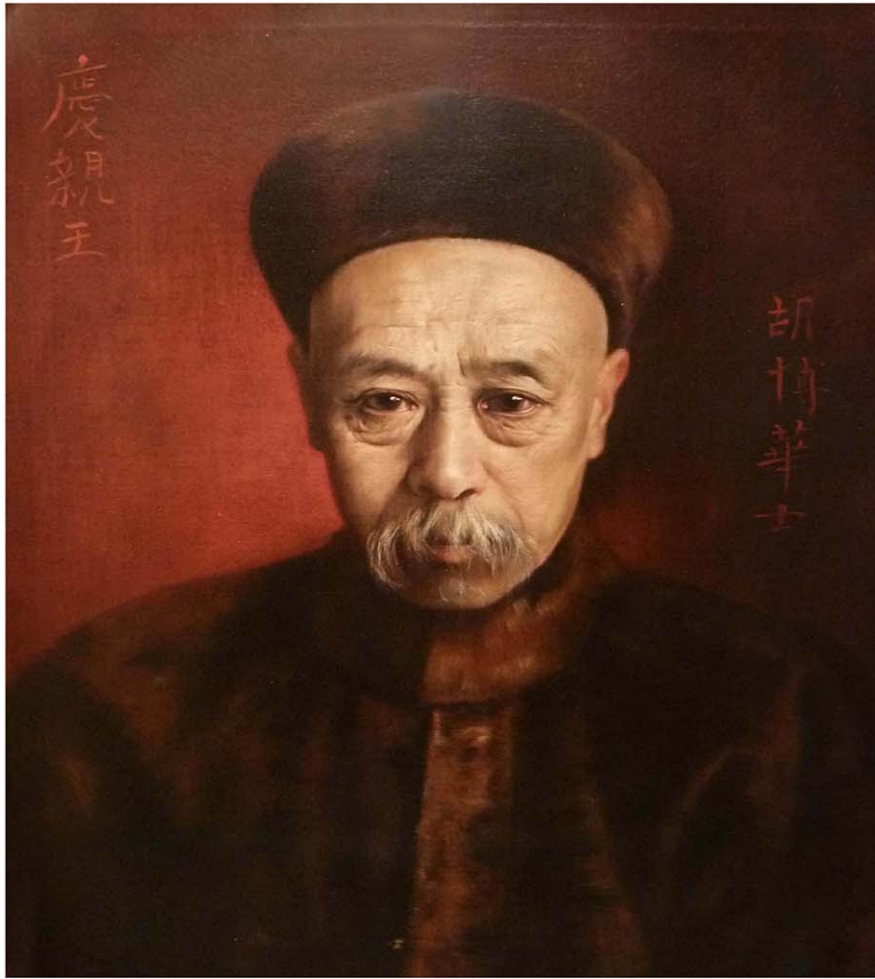
<sup>9</sup>Vos, Hubert, Autobiographical letter to Dr Ten Kate, October 9th, 1911.

<sup>10</sup>Savage-Landor, A. Henry, *Corea or Cho-sen: The Land of the Morning Calm*, 1895, Chapter XI.

<sup>11</sup>Vos, Hubert, Autobiographical letter to Dr Ten Kate, October 9th, 1911.



5 *Min Sangho*  
Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 61 cm  
Private collection



6 *Prince Ching*, 1898–1899  
Oil on canvas, 61 x 52.7 cm  
Collection of the Capital Museum, Beijing  
Donated by Hugh and Susan Vos

During his first trip to China, which began with a stop in Hong Kong, Vos set up hotel studios and relied on local officials to help him locate “types” for his portraits. In 1898, in a Hong Kong hotel studio, Vos painted *Sikh, British India*, modelled on a soldier who had formerly served Queen Victoria in London, and also a *Punjabi* and a *Kattack* from the Himalayas. Near the end of his time in China, Vos was able to obtain “a few sittings” with His Excellency Prince Ching (1836–1918), the uncle of the emperor and the Premier of China. Vos made two portraits of Ching, keeping one for himself (6) and presenting another to “His Excellency”; the Empress Cixi would later see this portrait in Ching’s palace.

Vos briefly returned to the continental United States via Hawai’i in November 1899, and then travelled with his wife to Paris for the International Exposition, where thirty-two of his *Types of Various Races* were to be displayed.<sup>12</sup> The exposition, which featured exhibits from fifty-eight nations, attracted more than fifty million visitors during a nine-month period. Vos’ paintings were displayed in the American Pavilion—as he was now a naturalised US citizen. As an anonymous critic noted in an October 1900 commentary, Vos’ works could be viewed by Salon jurists as being primarily ethnological documents:

“I am not attacking Mr Vos nor his art, and I welcome him to the ranks of American painters. He has done good work in portraiture, and even these less

successful racial type pictures are interesting and valuable to the ethnologist and the physiognomist. But they did not belong in the American Pavilion.”<sup>13</sup>

After the Paris Exposition, Vos settled on the East Coast where he re-activated his career as a society portraitist, opening and maintaining studios in New York, Newport and Bar Harbor. It must have surprised and pleased him in 1905 to be called back to Asia to paint a “notable”, who turned out to be the “most important sitter” of his life.

### **In the Court of Empress Dowager Cixi**

When he arrived in Peking on June 10th, 1905, Vos was summoned to the home of a minister—Wu Ting Fang—and informed that he was to paint the Empress Dowager Cixi: his portrait of Prince Ching had impressed the empress and led to the request. Vos was, in fact, the second American to paint Her Majesty. The artist Katharine Carl had visited China for nine months from the summer of 1903, and had painted four portraits of the empress. In her 1906 book, *With the Empress Dowager of China*, Carl later recounted that her efforts had been hampered by restrictions and conventions placed on her by the royal court:

“I was obliged to follow, in every detail, centuries-old conventions. There could be no shadows and very little perspective, and everything must be painted in

such full light as to lose all relief and picturesque effect. When I saw I must represent Her Majesty in such a conventional way as to make her unusually attractive personality banal, I was no longer filled with the ardent enthusiasm for my work with which I had begun it, and I had many a heartache and much inward rebellion before I settled on the inevitable.”<sup>14</sup>

Vos, writing home from Peking on June 28th, 1905, had a very low opinion of Carl’s efforts, having seen one of her portraits of the Empress Dowager at the 1903–1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, a massive exposition that featured over five million square feet of exhibition space presented in ornate “palaces”:

“I had seen the picture of Miss Carl in the St. Louis exhibition and which is at present, I believe in the White House in Washington, which was a blank and told nothing.”<sup>15</sup>

In the same letter, Vos describes in minute detail the problems, preparations and events surrounding his efforts to create a more memorable portrait that would transcend the efforts of his predecessor. After a nervous, sleepless night, Vos arose at 3.30 a.m. on June 20th, and donned full evening dress, including pinned decorations and a perfumed handkerchief. Upon finishing a breakfast of two eggs and coffee, he found himself “in a terrible state of excitement” at his inability to locate a rickshaw. Using his “choicest swear words”, it took Vos twenty minutes to summon a rickshaw, which took him first to Minister Wu Ting Fang’s home and then through the gates of the Forbidden City. Inside the gates, where he found himself “dumbfounded of the beauty and the cleanliness”, Vos was guided past gardens and then onto a gilded boat which carried him through paths cut in lotus gardens; when he disembarked he was told, emphatically: “Now you are on forbidden ground!” With “about fifty eunuchs” carrying his paraphernalia, he was then led into a waiting room where tea was served, then through a courtyard and garden, and across a marble stoop into a covered courtyard with open houses on all four sides.

In this “most perfect studio arrangement” stood an erected throne on a Brussels carpet that Vos singled out as being “un-Chinese”. Behind the throne was a large screen on which was hung a curtain backdrop representing a bamboo grove. In addition to the throne, Vos noted an ebony armchair with yellow satin cushions framed by beautiful flat vases, each containing a pyramid of apples. Two gold dogs and a peacock feather scene completed the tableau, which Vos found less than ideal. He told Wu Ting Fang that he would have preferred a “darker, more mysterious, less symmetrical background”. After adjustments—which included having the court eunuchs carry the entire arrangement to the other side of the hall so that light would enter from the left—Vos sipped tea in a waiting room until a procession became visible through the window: “...and then a gold chair carried by eight eunuchs at shoulder high, Her Majesty, the Empress and Goddess of 400 million people...” Fifteen minutes later, Vos re-entered the courtyard to find the empress—surrounded by eunuchs—seated on the throne as he had arranged it. After making three low bows at the end of the Brussels carpet, Vos was ready to begin.

For this first sitting, Vos decided only to take photographs of the empress. His first photo was a failure, as Vos “dared not make her look at me”. After directing her favourite eunuch to stand behind the camera, Vos snapped six more photos at random, still avoiding direct eye contact but hoping that he would capture her eyes glancing at her favourite. Then, informed that Her Majesty was “tired”, Vos found his first session at an end. Of the photos taken that day, which Vos developed with the help of a clerk from the London Mission, he obtained four that were “fairly good”. None of Vos’ photos of the empress have survived.

During the next day’s 5.00 a.m. session, Vos painted the empress from a low stool set near her throne. After only forty-five minutes the Empress Dowager came over to scrutinise the study in progress and, through a translator, offered a string of admonitions:

“I had to make the eyes go up, no shadows under or above the eyes, the eyes wide open, the mouth full and up, not drooping, the eyebrows straight, the nose no shadows, no shadows, no shadows, no wrinkles!”

Vos now fully understood the limits of his commission: “I had, I was told, *to paint her as she told me*”. It was also made clear that he would not have a chance to rest: the empress had appointed four mornings for the sittings and “not an official in the empire would dare suggest any change”. After a cold bath and a whisky and soda, Vos prepared a new study of his subject’s head—“this time young and beautiful with very light shadows”—which he took with him to his third consecutive 5.00 a.m. session. While waiting for the empress, Vos was escorted into a palace bungalow and shown one of the portraits left by Katharine Carl. Vos found the face of Carl’s portrait “blank” and “without any charm”, and was struck by the realisation that even his new idealised study might not satisfy his sitter. Fortunately, that was not the case. After inspecting the new picture with her ladies-in-waiting, Her Majesty sent word to Vos that she was pleased.

Adjusting the picture in her presence, mainly by adding colour, Vos also sketched details of Empress Cixi’s nose, eyes and mouth. Then, the empress “stood up and came near me and took my pencil and made a line on my notebook”; he later recalled: “This is the closest a white man has been to her”. Her Majesty asked Vos if he had been offered refreshments after the sittings, and when he replied that he did not like Chinese food—but that he did like whisky—the empress sent him home in a carriage with four bottles of champagne. The third sitting, during which the empress smoked two pipes and even smiled at Vos, had gone well.

For the final session, Vos was told that the empress was not feeling well, and was asked if he could paint her in her room. He was taken to Her Majesty, whom he found sitting

<sup>12</sup>De Kay, Charles, “Painting Racial Types”, *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 38, no. 60, June 1900, pp. 163–169.

<sup>13</sup>*The Collector and Art Critic*, “Paris-Pittsburgh”, 1900.

<sup>14</sup>Carl, Katharine A., *With the Empress Dowager of China*, The New York Century Co., 1907, p. 161.

<sup>15</sup>Vos, Hubert, “My Dear Friends:”, Letter from Peking, June 28th, 1905.

at breakfast surrounded by “heaps of beautiful young princesses” and “everywhere the most gorgeous curios”. As the empress prepared for the session, she gracefully bowed to Vos and responded to his questions about how he might paint the details of her portrait, informing him that her jewellery, rings and dress would all be sent to his studio later for him to record. While Vos painted, Her Majesty made small talk, asking Vos about his wife and home life while drinking tea from a jade cup, as a eunuch sitting on his knees supported its gold holder above his head. After smoking two pipes and asking Wu Ting Fang how to say “very good” in English, she faced Vos with a smile, proclaiming his day’s work to be “very good!”

After four exhausting days, Vos was finally able to rest and then begin work on a 90 × 54 inch canvas, the largest he had ever painted. “I made up my mind”, he wrote to his wife, “that the Chinese do not wish to understand shadows, so I will make a semi-Chinese picture with all the realism in the still-life part. I will endeavour to please her and her court.”<sup>16</sup>

### Three Portraits of the Empress

By the middle of August 1905, Vos had completed his final, full-length portrait (1). It was presented at court in a special carved frame commissioned by the empress. The picture is understandably formal: “more like a monument than like a portrait”, according to Vos.

Vos later referred to this full-length picture as a “lineless portrait”. The empress had given the artist clear instructions: “She did not wish me to paint an old woman, but the Empress of China, and no decay of years or lines or age or sorrow must be reproduced”. By idealising features of the Empress Dowager—who, at seventy-two, was recovering from a stroke the year before and whose skin had been damaged by years of wearing lead-based make-up<sup>17</sup>—Vos ultimately created a portrait that feels somewhat inert and doll-like; it offers up few indications of the Empress Cixi’s inner drive or force of character. The claw-like golden fingernail sheaths that cover the pinkie and ring fingers of her hands—which hold an oval fan decorated with a peony rose, a symbol of nobility and peace that the empress cultivated in her gardens—offer the picture’s only hint of threat.

As Vos explained to *The New York Times* in December 1905: “The main color of her costume is imperial yellow: the ornaments are lilac, being in symbolic shapes that signify longevity and happiness”.<sup>18</sup> The empress is supported by a high-backed chair of polished ebony and carved wood, and sits on yellow cushions. Her feet rest on a footstool covered with imperial silk. On her head is a stiff arrangement of false hair—the Manchu coiffure—studded with flowers, jades, pearls and jewels: in her ears are rings of pearls in different sizes. Above the empress hangs a painted signboard that reads, from left to right:

“Great Pure Kingdom” (the name of the present dynasty), “Tzu Tsi” (the name of the empress), “Empress Dowager” (Imperial Empress Dowager). The original signboard was made for Vos by the first calligrapher of the palace: he copied them so carefully that he later claimed “no Chinese believes that I could have written them”.<sup>19</sup>

When Vos departed Peking in the autumn of 1905, he left with a new name—Hua-Shih-Hupo (being a transliteration of “Vos Hubert”)—bestowed on him by the highly pleased Empress Dowager, who felt that his given name should come after his surname in accordance with Chinese tradition. He was also given an honorary title: “Commander of the Double Dragon”.<sup>20</sup>

After returning to the United States, Vos completed a second 66¾ × 48¾ inch three-quarter length portrait, *H.I.M., The Empress Dowager of China, Cixi* (1835–1908), 1905–1906, (7) relying on his “study from life, data, sketches, photos, etc.” It was exhibited in the 1906 Paris Salon, but not in the same section as other portraits of sovereigns. The second portrait also later appeared in a Vos exhibition in New York. Vos avoided mentioning the 1906 Salon when he told a reporter in 1910 that the portrait had never before been exhibited, since showing it before the empress’ death would have been a “gross betrayal of confidence”.<sup>21</sup>

This second portrait (7) is a much more evocative painting that recasts the Empress Dowager through the lens of European notions of exoticism. Endowed with a very different tonality than the painting left behind in China, the portrait has a smoky chiaroscuro atmosphere that allowed Vos to experiment with lighting effects and mood. It also incorporates a different background—a brown-hued dragon screen—and no longer includes orange cushions, or the flowers and plates of apples that had framed the empress in the full-length portrait. Surrounded by an ornate carved frame that delineates a modified oval—which helps focus the composition on its subject—the Empress Cixi now radiates a mixture of vulnerability and determination that had been suppressed in her full-length portrait. It remains, arguably, the finest portrait of Vos’ career.

The empress appears once more in *Harmonie* (8), an interior that Vos exhibited at the 1912 Paris Salon, now in a private collection. Vos’ three-quarter length portrait appears in the upper left part of the picture. The painting, which is likely set in the artist’s summer home in Newport, Rhode Island, also includes a large screen and a cabinet full of Chinese antiques, some of which had been presented to Vos in 1905 as departure gifts: “When I finished my work, she (the empress) sent me decorations and some wonderful gifts: bowls of priceless jade, exquisite crystals and two glorious peach blow vases”.<sup>22</sup> The title of this painting refers both to the music being played and to the aesthetic and cultural harmonies generated by the union of East and West.

Vos also painted a number of still life pictures of Chinese

<sup>16</sup>All quotes and descriptions after the quote from Katharine Carl’s book can be found in the transcript of an 11-page letter Vos sent from Peking, “My Dear Friends:”, June 28th, 1905.

<sup>17</sup>Anderson, Virginia, “A Semi-Chinese Picture: Hubert Vos and the Empress Dowager of China”, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup>“Painting an Empress”, *The New York Times*, December 17th, 1905.

<sup>19</sup>Vos, Hubert, “My Dear Friends:”, August 18th, 1905.

<sup>20</sup>Williams, Rianna M., “Hawaiian Ali’i Women in New York Society: The Ena-Coney-Vos-Gould Connection”, p. 156.

<sup>21</sup>“Gossip of New York”, *The Mexico Daily Record*, March 7th, 1910.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.



7 H.I.M. *The Empress Dowager of China, Cixi*, 1905–1906  
Oil on canvas, 170 x 123.7 cm  
Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum. Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop  
Photo by Katya Kallsen © President and Fellows of Harvard College





8 *Harmonie*, 1910  
Oil on canvas, 170.2 x 102 cm  
Private collection

antiques (9, 10, 11). His two trips to China both whetted his collector's interests and established a new genre in his oeuvre.

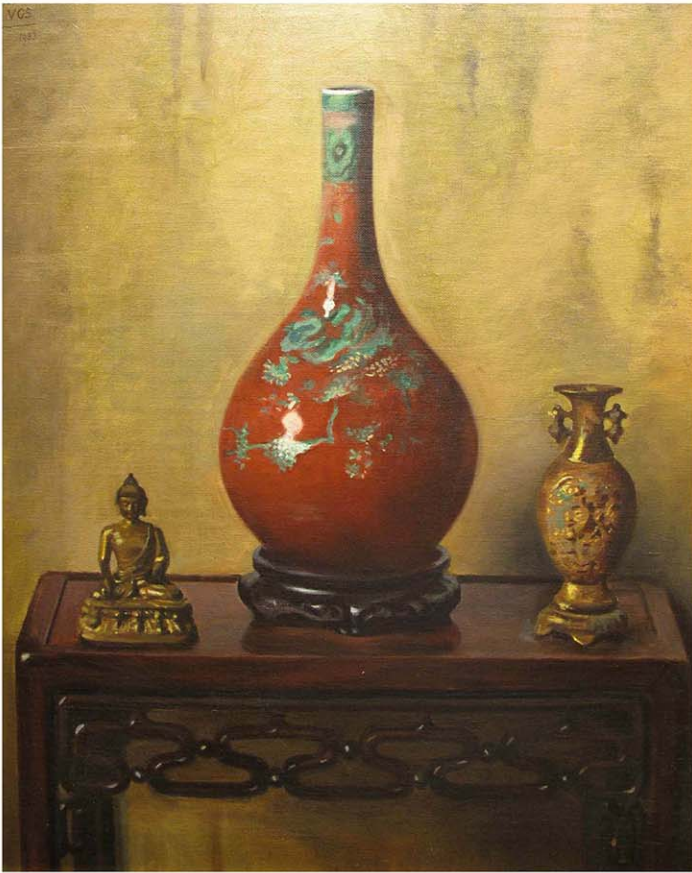
### Conclusion

The Empress Dowager died in 1908. The day before her death, the empress allegedly poisoned with arsenic-laced yogurt her thirty-eight year old nephew, Guangxu, who had been under house arrest for several years.<sup>23</sup> The Qing dynasty—a fragile vestige of China's feudal past—lasted three more years.

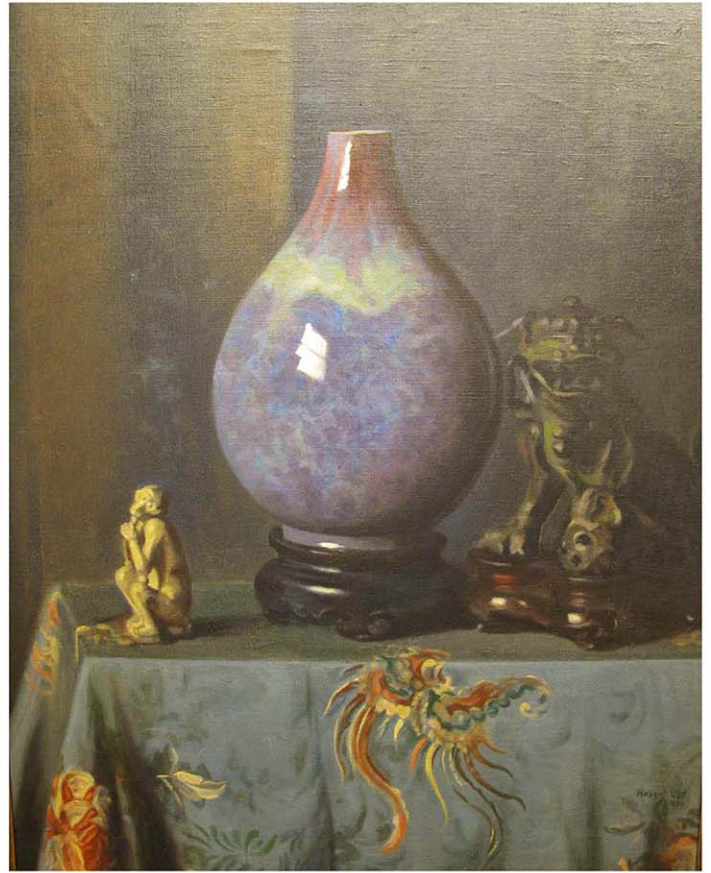
Hubert Vos' full-length portrait of Cixi remained in the

Summer Palace until it was damaged in the 1950s. In 2008, Anne van Grevenstein of the Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg was commissioned to restore the poorly maintained canvas to its former state. The restoration process, which took twenty days, became the subject of a book, published in the Netherlands, and a sixty-four minute Dutch-language film directed by Micaela van Rijckevorsel. The portrait is now on permanent display in the Summer Palace.

In August 2011, Hubert Vos' grandson—Hubert D. Vos—donated six Vos portraits of Chinese subjects to Beijing's Capital Museum. They depict statesman Li Hongzhang (1823–1901) (12), warlord Yuan Shikai (1859–



9 *Gifts from Empress Cixi I*  
Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 61 cm  
Private collection  
Photo: China Guardian Auctions Co., Ltd



10 *Gifts from Empress Cixi II*  
Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 61 cm  
Private collection  
Photo: China Guardian Auctions Co., Ltd



11 *Still Life with Kangxi Famille Verte Vase, 1932*  
Oil on canvas, 140.7 x 91.8 cm  
Honolulu Museum of Art, Gift of Robert  
and Deanna Levy, 1987 (5627.1)

1916) (13), who later became the first president of China, Yikuang (Prince Qing), a Manchu boy, the daughter of an official of the Fujian navy, and a Suzhou girl from an aristocratic family. The six portraits were on display at Beijing's Capital Museum between September 8th, 2011 and February 5th, 2012.

The 1905–1906 three-quarter length portrait of the Empress Dowager is in the collection of Harvard University's Fogg Museum, where it resides—in superb condition—in its original carved frame with cloisonné embellishments. Floating above the empress' head is a painted plaque that bears the following inscription in Chinese: “Respectfully painted by Hubert Vos”.<sup>24</sup>

In a biography published in 2013, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China*, author Jung Chang casts the empress in a new light. Chang points out that under the Empress Dowager Cixi, China became a modern industrial state, acquiring railways and electricity.

<sup>23</sup> Lim, Louisa, “Who Murdered China’s Emperor 100 years ago”, *NPR World News*, November 14th, 2008. Web, June 10th, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Harvard University (Visual Information Access), Record for H.I.M., The Empress Dowager of China, Cixi (1835–1908).



12 *Li Hongzhang*, 1899  
Oil on canvas, 25.4 x 17.8 cm  
Collection of the Capital Museum, Beijing  
Donated by Hugh and Susan Vos



13 *Yuan Shikai*, 1898–1899  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 49.6 cm  
Collection of the Capital Museum, Beijing  
Donated by Hugh and Susan Vos

The empress, who managed her all-male cabinet through a silk screen, also abolished “death by a thousand cuts” and ended the practice of foot-binding.<sup>25</sup> The new understanding of the empress that emerges from the pages of Chang’s book concurs with the assessment of Hubert Vos, whose first-hand experience of the empress put him in a rare position to comment. In a 1910 interview, Vos recalled the Empress Dowager as “a woman of marvelous will”.<sup>26</sup> “Cruel she was, no doubt, according to Western standards”, Vos philosophised, “But she was not, I think, more cruel than circumstances and the civilization of her country compelled her to be.”<sup>27</sup>

Vos later worked in Paris and New York—specialising in society portraiture—painting notables including Countess Czaykowska, Judge Elbert H. Gary and Senator James W. Wadsworth. Vos and his wife moved in high society: their names often appear in accounts of glamorous New York and Newport parties held before and after the First World War. After his stepdaughter, Anne, completed her education at a Paris convent, she married Jay Gould, the millionaire grandson of the Gilded Age financier and railroad magnate of the same name. For many years, Vos’ personal portrait of the Empress Dowager was kept on display at his New York studio at 15 West 67th Street. A 1919 news clip-

ping records that Vos’ studio was open to the public every Sunday afternoon from 4.00 to 6.00 p.m. Active as a portraitist until his death from pneumonia in 1935—one of his last portraits was of Hugh D. Auchincloss, the stepfather of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy—Vos always considered the experience of painting the Empress Dowager as the summit of his career. His grandson, Hubert D. Vos, puts it this way: “Painting the portrait of the Empress Cixi was the single biggest event in my grandfather’s very eventful life”.

<sup>25</sup> Hilton, Isabel, “Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China by Jung Chang” (Review), *The Guardian*, October 25th, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> “Gossip of New York”, *The Mexico Daily Record*, March 7th, 1910.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

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