

## Case Study

<https://doi.org/10.70731/nv3f4y03>

# A Study on the Schematic Features of Giuseppe Castiglione's "Grand Review of the Qianlong Emperor"

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## KEYWORDS

*Giuseppe Castiglione;  
Emperor Qianlong's Grand  
Review Painting;  
Imperial Equestrian Portrait;  
Schematic Features*

## ABSTRACT

The Grand Review of the Emperor Qianlong, painted by the Qing dynasty court artist Giuseppe Castiglione, is a quintessential equestrian portrait of an emperor, adhering to the Western traditional iconography of imperial horsemen. Research confirms that Lang Shining created two highly similar versions of The Grand Review of the Emperor Qianlong in the fourth year of Qianlong's reign (1739) and the twenty-third year (1758). Analysis reveals that both works adhere to fixed conventions derived from Western classical traditions in aspects such as the emperor's posture and the depiction of warhorses. Comparisons between Lang Shining's Grand Review of the Emperor Qianlong and works such as the ancient Roman Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius, Leonardo da Vinci's related sketches, and Van Dyck's "Portrait of Charles I on Horseback" confirm the transmission lineage and core elements of this Schema in Europe—from the Classical period through the Renaissance to Lang Shining's era. Langgeng, drawing upon his Western artistic background, successfully introduced this archetypal Western imperial equestrian portraiture into 18th-century Chinese court painting, reflecting the profound depth of Sino-Western artistic exchange.

## BACKGROUND OF THE "GRAND REVIEW OF THE QIANLONG EMPEROR" PAINTING

Lang Shining, originally named Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), was an Italian painter from Milan. He received a solid education in Western painting techniques early in his career and primarily focused on religious subjects during his formative years. In May of the 53rd year of the Kangxi reign (1714), Lang Shining was dispatched by the Church to China as a missionary. In the 59th year of Kangxi (1720), he was summoned to the capital and received by Emperor Kangxi.<sup>1(p1-p16)</sup> From this point onward, he served as a court painter in

the Qing imperial court until his death. Regarding the authorship of *The Grand Review of the Qianlong Emperor* (hereafter referred to as *The Grand Review*) (Figure 1), the late Mr. Zhu Jiashui maintained that it was painted by Lang Shining.<sup>2</sup> The author shares this view. Regarding the painting's creation date, *the Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty* records Emperor Qianlong's first grand military review ceremony as having taken place on the third day of the eleventh month of the fourth year of his reign (1739) at Nanyuan. The records state: "The Emperor arrived at Nanyuan, ascended the Imperial Falconry Platform, and entered the circular pavilion. He personally donned armor, fastened his sword, emerged, took up his quiver and bow,

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**Figure 1 | Lang Shining, The Grand Review of the Qianlong Emperor**

1739, Hanging Scroll, Colored Ink on Silk, 322.5 x 232 cm, Collection of the Palace Museum

mounted his horse, and tested his marksmanship. He fired five arrows in succession, all hitting the target.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that *The Grand Review* was painted by Lang Shining in the fourth year of Qianlong (1739). This painting realistically depicts the imposing figure of the twenty-nine-year-old Qianlong Emperor reviewing the Eight Banners troops at Nanyuan. Compositionally, Emperor Qianlong and his horse occupy the central position, dominating nearly three-fifths of the entire canvas and thus becoming the primary subjects of analysis. In the painting, Hongli wears bright yellow armor adorned with golden dragons, his imperial status evident through the lacquered helmet he wears. A red quiver hangs at his right waist, holding over ten arrows. Holding the reins in his left hand and a whip in his right, Qianlong sits upright on his horse with a straight back and a heroic bearing. Beneath him, the steed possesses a well-proportioned, spirited build, its form falling between the robust Tang-style and more slender Song-style depictions of horses. The horse bears a richly ornamented saddle. Its coat is a blend of white and brown, with the back, tail, and lower sections of all four hooves appearing snow-white, while the tip of the tail is a deep brown. The steed's left hind leg is thrust forward, its right hind leg taut, its right front leg braced upright, and its left front leg poised to leap. The artist clearly depicts the horse in motion. Both

Qianlong's upper body and the horse's face are rendered in a three-quarter right profile. On the third day of the third month in the eighth year of Qianlong's reign (1743), the Archives of the *Imperial Household Department* recorded: “Treasurer Lang Zhengpei received an imperial edict: Lang Shining is to paint ten large paintings of the Ten Steeds. No scenery is required. Submit the draft for review. So ordered.”<sup>4</sup> This refers to Lang Shining's imperial commission for the Ten Horses Paintings. Through comparison with Lang Shining's *Ten Horses*, the horse depicted in *the Grand Review Painting* should be the “Red Flower Eagle,” one of the Ten Horses (**Figure 2**).

## A COMPARISON OF TWO QING EMPEROR QIANLONG “GRAND REVIEW” PAINTINGS

The Palace Museum currently holds two versions of *Emperor Qianlong's Grand Review Painting*. The first, created in the fourth year of Qianlong's reign (1739), is *the Grand Review Painting* previously discussed by the author (hereafter referred to as the “*Unannotated Version of the Grand Review Painting*”). The second *Grand Review Painting* (hereafter referred to as the “*Inscription Version*”) (**Figure 3**) can be definitively dated to the



**Figure 2 | Giuseppe Castiglione's Ten Horses**  
Red-flowered Eagle National Palace Museum, Taipei



**Figure 3 | Lang Shining, Emperor Qianlong's Grand Review**  
1758, Hanging Scroll, 430 x 288 cm, Collection of the Palace Museum

23rd year of Qianlong's reign (1758). This is because the upper left corner of the latter painting bears an imperial poem by Emperor Qianlong, followed by the inscription "Imperial Brushwork, Mid-Winter of the Year of the Tiger" (Wuyin), corresponding to the 23rd year of Qianlong (1758). Professor Zhu Jiashui concurs with this dating based on references in *The Third Collection of Poems Imperially Composed by the Qing Emperor Gaozong*.<sup>5(p. 40)</sup> Regarding the artist of the "Inscription Version," the *Archives of the Imperial Household Department of the Qing Palace* records for the ninth month of Qianlong 23 state: "Eunuch Hu Shijie conveyed the imperial decree: On the rear gold-lacquered wall of the Painting Pavilion, Lang Shining is to paint a large version of the *Grand Review* on white silk. So ordered."<sup>6</sup> However, the version with inscriptions depicts the scene of the military review held on the fifth day of the eleventh month of the twenty-third year of Qianlong's reign, when Hongli used the recent submission of the Kazakhs to the Qing court as an occasion for the ceremony. In terms of timing, Lang Shining's imperial commission to create the "version with inscriptions" predated the actual review by approximately two months. Li Shi, referencing records in *the Veritable Records of the Qing*, posits that the emperor had already ordered ministries to prepare for this grand review in the ninth month of that year, issuing an edict demanding: "All preparatory matters must be urgently addressed."<sup>3</sup> Based on this, it is inferred that the "version with inscriptions"

of *the Grand Review Painting* was likely painted in advance by Lang Shining.

In the illustrated version of *The Grand Review*, the proportions and positioning of Emperor Qianlong and his steed within the painting are largely consistent with those in the non-illustrated version. Judging by his facial features, the 48-year-old Hongli appeared more composed than he did nineteen years prior, yet his heroic bearing remained undiminished. The artist rendered the emperor's likeness in a realistic style. Regarding the emperor's armor, Zhang Qiong contends that both versions depict him wearing bright yellow armor adorned with golden dragons. However, the following differences exist between the two paintings: First, the armor in the Qianlong 23rd year painting features a breastplate, absent in the Qianlong 4th year version. Second, the helmet in the Qianlong 23rd year painting is depicted as "made of leather," while the Qianlong 4th year helmet appears metallic in the portrait, with slight variations in the arrangement of Sanskrit inscriptions and ornaments. Third, the 'quiver' worn by the Emperor in the Qianlong 23rd year portrait was made of silver-threaded satin, while the 'quiver' in the Qianlong 4th year portrait was of plain red leather. Furthermore, the pointed-toe boots worn by the Emperor also differed.<sup>7</sup> In the illustration, Emperor Qianlong still holds the reins in his left hand, while his right hand remains hidden behind the horse and is thus unseen. Comparing this with the "unlabeled version" of *the Grand Review Painting*, it





**Figure 4 | Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius**

Height: 2.4 meters, Collection of the Capitoline MuseumsThe image of the foal



**Figure 5 | Equestrian Statue of Gattamelata**

Height: 3 meters, Located in front of the main entrance of the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua

is highly probable that the object held in Qianlong's right hand in this image is still a riding crop. The Qianlong Emperor has a bow slung over his left hip and a quiver attached to his right hip containing over ten arrows with ornate feathers. His steed is pure white, with its right hind leg stepping forward, left hind leg tensed, right front leg supporting vertically, and left front leg suspended in the air. Both the figure's upper body and the horse's face are depicted in a three-quarter left profile. Comparative analysis reveals numerous commonalities between the two *Grand Review Paintings*—from the figures' postures, armor, and held objects to the horses' head and limb positions. The similarity in armor primarily stems from the constraints of Qing imperial ceremonial dress protocols. The many other shared characteristics further confirm that both *Grand Review Paintings* were created by the same artist: Lang Shining.

In the two *Grand Review paintings* created by Lang Shining, the numerous similarities in the forms of the horses and the emperor likely stem from the artist's early experience with Western painting. During his early studies of Western art, he encountered and emulated the Western paradigm for depicting emperors on horseback, resulting in the consistent appearance seen in his subsequent two *Grand Review paintings*. This equestrian

portrait style traces back to ancient Greek and Roman depictions of Western monarchs on horseback. This raises the following questions: What similarities and differences exist between Lang Shining's *Grand Review paintings* and ancient Greco-Roman equestrian portraits? Were there contemporary painters of his era who also depicted emperors on horseback? What connections and distinctions exist between them?

## COMPARISON BETWEEN THE “GRAND REVIEW OF THE QIANLONG EMPEROR” AND WESTERN EQUESTRIAN PORTRAITS OF MONARCHS

The earliest extant Western equestrian statues of monarchs date back to the Roman Empire, with the most representative example being *the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius* (Figure 4) created in the latter half of the 2nd century AD.<sup>8(p103)</sup> This Stoic philosopher sits firmly atop his sturdy steed, his right hand extended forward as if summoning something or issuing a command. The raised right hand clearly follows the formal conventions of ancient Roman imperial portraiture, a convention confirmed in the earlier sculpture of



Figure 6 | Leonardo da Vinci,  
The Adoration of the Magi (detail)  
The image of the foal

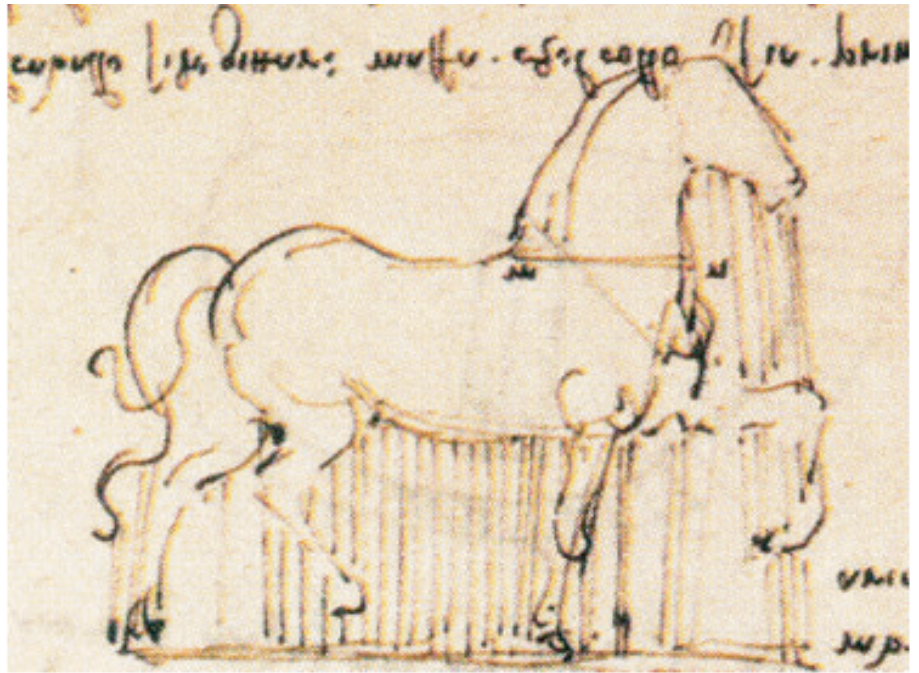


Figure 7 | Leonardo da Vinci,  
Detail from Sketch for the Casting of the Equestrian Statue of Sforza Manuscript II,  
Royal Library of Madrid, 1490 The image of the foal

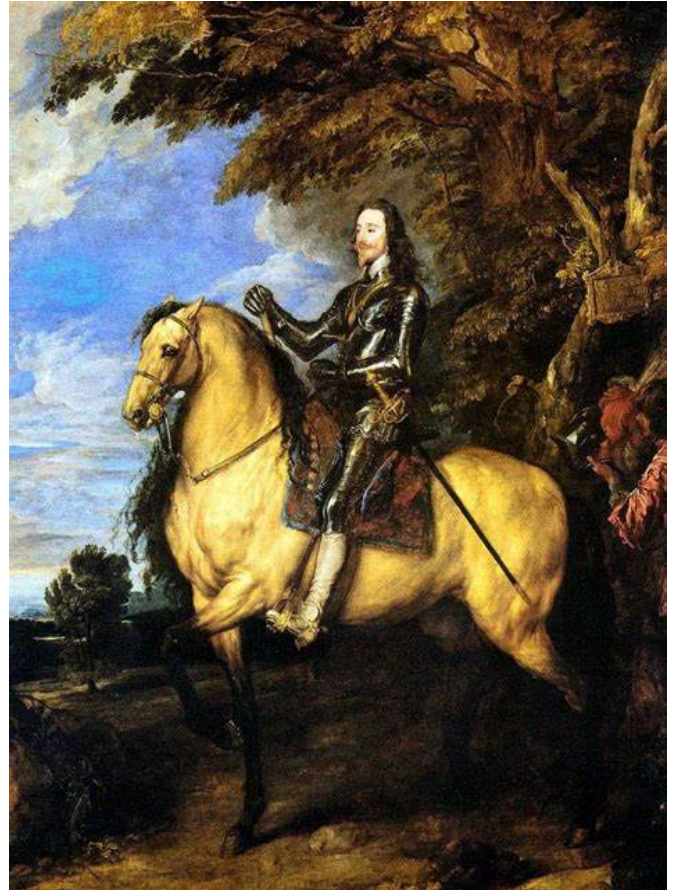
*Augustus*. Aurelius's left hand grasps the reins, though the horse's bridle is no longer visible today. The horse's left hind leg is stepped forward, while its right hind leg is tensed. Unlike the *Great Review*, the front legs are positioned with the right hoof suspended in midair and the left front hoof bearing weight. Both the figure's upper body and the horse's face are turned to the right. This equestrian statue clearly shares numerous similarities with the imagery in the "Great Review," particularly in the depiction of the steed. *The Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius* is one of the few fully preserved bronze equestrian sculptures from ancient Rome. "Pagans" mistakenly identified the sculpture's subject as a depiction of the Roman Emperor Constantine. This work stood before the Porta del Leto in Rome until 1536, when it was relocated to the Capitoline Hill within Rome's city limits.<sup>8(p103)</sup> For Renaissance artists eager to revive classical art, it was only natural that this sculpture became a model for equestrian statues. Donatello's *Gattamelata* (Figure 5) may serve as an example.

In *the Equestrian Statue of Gattamelata*, Gattamelata wears military attire with a sword at his side, holding the reins in his left hand and a horse-control device in his right. The horse's left hind leg is stepped forward, its right hind leg braced taut, its right front leg supporting its weight, and its left front leg suspended in midair. The rear hooves' posture largely mirrors that of the horse in *the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius*, while the front hooves adopt an opposite stance—though consistent with the front hooves in the *Grand Review*. The horse's head is turned three-quarters to the left, while

the figure gazes straight ahead. *The Equestrian Statue of Gattamelata* stands as Italy's first bronze equestrian sculpture. This work revived the classical Greco-Roman model for imperial equestrian portraits and established a paradigm for subsequent artists depicting rulers on horseback.

The depiction of horses in Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci's work *The Adoration of the Magi* (Figure 6) and his analysis of a *Sforza Equestrian Portrait* (manuscript) (Figure 7) helps clarify why Western imperial equestrian statues consistently adopt the three-hoof-standing, one-hoof-forward stance. It also reveals the continued inheritance of this motif from ancient Greek and Roman imperial equestrian imagery. The horse in *The Adoration of the Magi* (detail) has both its left front and right rear hooves raised. This depiction of a horse in motion, with two hooves elevated, conveys an air of leisurely striding because the horse bears no load. This explains why historical depictions of emperors on horseback in motion typically show three hooves on the ground. Examining *the Sforza Equestrian Statue* (manuscript), the horse's four-hoofed stance aligns with that in *The Grand Review*. To prepare for the Sforza statue, Leonardo specifically studied the Roman equestrian statue *Regisole* (destroyed in 1796) during his 1490 mission to Pavia. This statue depicted a horse in a walking posture on the road.<sup>9</sup> Leonardo also documented this experience in his notebooks and commented on the *Regisole*: "Just as with the statue in Pavia, movement is more valuable than anything else. Imitating ancient works is more valuable than imitating mod-





**Figure 9 | Jean-Baptiste Tiepolo, *The Conquest of the Moors by Saint James the Greater***  
317 x 163 cm, Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

←  
**Figure 8 | Anthony van Dyck, *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I***  
367 x 262.1 cm, Collection of the Louvre Museum, Paris, France

ern ones... (This horse's) trot approaches the posture of a free horse. Where natural vitality is lacking, artificial means must be employed to compensate."<sup>10</sup>(p203-p204)

The equestrian portrait of a monarch closest in style to those of Lang Shining's era is *the Portrait of Charles I on Horseback* (**Figure 8**), completed around 1638. In this painting, Charles I also holds the reins in his left hand. The front legs of the horse are positioned identically to those in *the Grand Review*, while the hind legs are reversed. Both the figure and the horse are slightly turned. The composition of the work is also remarkably similar to that of *the Grand Review*. According to Anthony van Dyck's biography, the artist spent six years studying in Italy (1621-1627), residing and painting in

cities including Genoa, Rome, Venice, and Milan .<sup>11</sup>(p466-p475) During his time in Italy, the artist likely encountered the classical model of equestrian portraits from ancient Greece and Rome, subsequently incorporating this tradition into his later works.

The 18th-century Venetian painter Giovanni Battista Piazzetta (1682–1754) created a historical painting titled *The Conquest of the Moors by Saint James the Greater* (**Figure 9**). Completed around 1750, the work depicts the Battle of Clavijo, portraying Saint James the Just vanquishing the Moors. In the scene, Saint James, clad in a flowing white robe, charges valiantly across the battlefield atop a snow-white steed. His left arm embraces the tricolor flag, while his right hand wields a

sword that has just struck down a Moorish soldier. The halo above his head and the angel in the upper right corner signify divine support for the battle, hinting at the underlying religious conflict. In this work, the central figures of the protagonist and his horse remain positioned near the lower center of the composition, occupying a significant portion of the space—a consistent approach seen in both versions of *The Grand Review* and *The Equestrian Portrait of Charles I*. However, due to the vertical format of this painting, the sky occupies a larger proportion of the upper portion of the canvas. Unlike previous equestrian portraits of monarchs, which typically employed a side view, the artist here adopts a frontal perspective. The horse's left front hoof is poised to strike, while its right front hoof provides vertical support. The left hind hoof steps forward, and the right hind hoof is obscured by the body of a soldier about to fall. However, considering the horse's movement characteristics and the depiction of hooves in the aforementioned works, it can be reasonably inferred that the horse's right hind hoof is likely positioned backward and tense. The horse's head is turned three-quarters to the right, while the figure's upper body leans slightly leftward, his face tilted upward and to the right. Compared to the “*Unwritten Version*” of *The Grand Review Painting*, the only differences between the two works lie in the opposite positioning of the horse's front hooves and the differing orientation of the figure's body. All other morphological characteristics remain fundamentally consistent.

Comparative analysis reveals that from ancient Greece and Rome through to the era of Giuseppe Castiglione, a standardized iconographic formula for depicting imperial equestrian portraits existed and circulated in the West. This formula generally comprised the following elements: 1. The figure's upper body remains upright, with the left hand holding the reins and the right hand either grasping a weapon, holding a horse-control device, or raised. 2. Among the horse's front hooves, one serves as the supporting hoof while the other is suspended in mid-air; among the rear hooves, one is tensed while the other is positioned forward. 3. The figure is turned either to the left or right. 4. The horse either gazes straight ahead or turns its head to one side. These characteristics provided a reference for depicting imperial equestrian statues in a slow-moving state. This formula possessed considerable flexibility, allowing artists to introduce subjective interpretations that resulted in various variations within their works. The formula can be traced back to *the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius* from the Roman Empire period. Following the Renaissance, Italian sculptors were the first to emulate this model, which subsequently spread to painting. Centered in Italy, this model radiated to contemporary regions including the Netherlands, Germany, France, and Spain. For instance, the equestrian portrait of *Philip II* and *the Equestrian Portrait of King Francis I of France* both exhibit the quintessential characteristics of this pictorial scheme. However, this style is by no means the

only form, as many extant Western equestrian portraits depict horses with their front legs raised high. Representative examples include *The Equestrian Portrait of Charles V*, *The Equestrian Portrait of Philip III*, and *Napoleon Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass in the Alps*.

## CONCLUSION

As a foreign painter who journeyed to China, Lang Shining devoted nearly his entire life to the Qing court. Simultaneously, he introduced Western religion, culture, and artistic techniques to China during the first half of the 18th century, enabling the Chinese upper classes of that era to gain a deeper understanding of the West. Artistic techniques and subjects commonplace in Western art circles at the time undoubtedly gained expanded significance in China through the eastward transmission of Western learning by Lang Shining and other Western painters. Just as the Western imperial equestrian portrait format was merely a common template for depicting monarchs among Western artists, this format inevitably exerted a powerful influence on contemporary Chinese court painters. Lang Shining's contribution lay in introducing this equestrian portrait style to early 18th-century China, likely shaping imperial equestrian portraiture not only during his own era but also throughout the subsequent Qing dynasty.

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