

# The Artist and the Landscape:

## Changing Views of Nature in Chinese Painting

By Richard Edwards

SOMETIMES IT IS necessary to re-examine the long view and in doing so learn to understand more exactly what is close. This is particularly true when the long view apparently reveals a continuous unchallenged tradition and seems therefore to assert a kind of changeless truth for which the next step must be unquestioned acceptance. In respect to the civilization of China, who is there to challenge the fact that the Chinese love nature? Who is there when we turn to the arts to quarrel with the proposition that as a reflection of this "love" the Chinese century after century painted landscapes?

What is perhaps obvious, and yet not always remembered, is that in the world of the painted landscape there is truly no Nature. There are only natures, if we drive the point to the limit, as many as there are paintings of those natures. Certainly there may be types and for convenience and understanding one may assemble many under a single heading, but at heart the story of the painting of the landscape is a very personal encounter and is linked to the fact that an almost infinite number of separate "natures" were painted down through the centuries. The broad generality of nature is only to be realized through the separate individual realizations of it.

To state that there are as many natures—or in this case landscapes—as there are individuals perceiving nature is not far from the truth. At the least the proposition makes us aware of the person that is painting the landscape, and that person at a given time. It places our understanding of the "love of nature" on the foundation of a particular perception. It establishes a basis for an acceptance of variety and change so that in our view of history and of individual artists we are pressed to constantly refocus "nature" whenever we confront it anew. Each painting presses upon us a multi-, rather than uni-, form sense of what we are trying to understand.

All this compels us to realize that "nature" is not something just to be accepted. Nor is it easy to define. When we return to the long view of Chinese civilization we cannot now be surprised to discover not only many landscapes but indeed the very opposite: that the nature-landscape was not always present. For centuries, if it was there at all, it was concealed in the abstractions of ornament and symbol, or the symbols of ornament, so that the understanding of streams and mountains can only come to us through the reading of a strange language which indeed may be saying something entirely different. (Pl. 15) Certainly the artist's "love of nature", which I take here to be revealed in love of the visible forms of nature, is not apparent. And this is a matter of no brief time.

From the high sophistication of early neolithic pottery as early as the fourth

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Plate 15 CHINESE BRONZE, ceremonial vessel  
of the type *p'an*, Anyang, 12th-11th centuries B.C.  
Freer Gallery of Art. Courtesy of the Smithsonian  
Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

millenium B.C. down through the varied refinements of bronze culture embellishment there is, exactly, no landscape. At the very outset "love of nature" in China is suspect and as in any other culture is in need of definition. It is questionable that we should translate this seemingly inward view into "fear of nature", but we cannot in these early centuries speak of "normal" nature at all, that is nature in an objective sense. However, knowing when it did not exist we can, perhaps, understand when it began. The one necessity, since objective perception is inconceivable without it, is the simple yet extremely complex ingredient of space. We must begin to find that love of nature, which is exactly to be seen in the painted landscape, where space begins.

HISTORICALLY IT MIGHT be argued that there are earlier intimations, but it is with the Western Han (206 B.C.-9 A.D.) that we can be sure of it, and here one is drawn to one of the most extraordinary of early Chinese paintings, the banner excavated in 1972 from the second century B.C. tomb Ma-wang Tui no. 1 at Chang-sha. It is painted in ink and colors on silk and was found in the tomb of an aristocratic lady, most famous because her body, in the flesh, was so completely preserved within its layers of coffins. Before being draped over the coffin this object was presumably carried as a banner in the funeral procession. What is painted clearly had a direct relation to the deceased and the final rites performed on her behalf.

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BANNER FROM MA-WANG TUI,  
Changsha, Tomb No. 1. Ink and color on  
silk.

Plate 16 (*left*): Detail, upper centre.

Plate 17 (*right*): Detail, top.

For our purposes let us isolate a section and start close to the center (Pl. 16). At this center is a slab-like platform on which are human figures—the slab somewhat mysteriously suspended and ultimately framed on either side by two symmetrically arranged dragons and cloud forms—and on the top a canopy beneath which facing us hovers a bat-like form—while above the canopy is a central medallion flanked by long-tailed birds.

These forms—beasts, birds, dragons—come directly from earlier notions of rather mysterious forms, but they have quite literally stepped aside to allow a kind of cave of space in which the human figure can perform. The human figures here are six. The central one in profile, slightly bowed, hunched of shoulder, leaning on a staff, is indeed important enough in her position and scale, specific enough in her depiction, to be rightly interpreted as a portrait of the deceased. Two figures in smaller scale kneel in allegiance, or service, before her. Three tall, slender yet lesser scale figures stand in attendance behind. These three attendants are arranged in such a way as to overlap each other and thereby to create the illusion of a recession in space. There is thus, clearly, an ambient *around* the central figure and that ambient extends to an even more spacious extent above her. The spaces above have in turn their own depth, as is affirmed by the bat-like figure who in a kind of elemental foreshortening moves directly at us, certainly out of somewhere.

The nature of that somewhere is more importantly revealed at the next level of the banner (Pl. 17) where indeed we are confronted by a whole panoply of figures, animals, dragons, circular symbols, birds. That somehow we as humans relate to them is affirmed by the presence, in the lower part of this scene, of two symmetrical arranged persons, precisely robed in cap and gown. These two figures seated in a formal space—even at a kind of gate—beneath a large bell have most imaginatively and possibly rightly been interpreted as officials connected with an important part of the rites of death as practised in the south of China in the ancient Kingdom of

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Ch'u, whose center was Chang-sha. These figures may have been responsible for what was known as the Summons of the Soul, Chao-hun 招魂.<sup>1</sup>

Here poetry comes to our aid, for poems which are that very summons have survived in the most famous collection of early southern poetry, the *Ch'u Tz'u* 楚辭. "The Great Summons", Ta Chao 大招, was an effort to bring back the soul of the departed after it had passed that seemingly final barrier of death:

*Green spring follows the old year and the bright sun shines,  
And the breath of spring stirs, quickening all creation.  
Dark winter's frosts melt away. O soul, do not flee!  
O soul, come back! Do not go far away!*

*O soul, go not to the east! . . .  
In the east is the great sea, where the swelling waters billow  
endlessly,  
And water-dragons swim side by side, swiftly darting above  
and below.*

*It is clammy with rain and fog, that glister white and heavy.  
O soul, go not to the east, to the desolate Valley of Morning!*

*O soul, go not to the south! In the south is burning fire  
(for a hundred leagues), and coiling cobras;*

<sup>1</sup>See "Tso-t'an Ch'ang-sha Ma-wang-tui i-hao Han mu" 座談長沙馬王堆一號漢墓, *Wen-wu* 文物, 1972, no. 9, pp. 52-73. Inevitably there are varied explanations of the complex imagery of the banner. The close connection with the Summons of the Soul is argued

by Yu Wei-ch'ao 俞偉超, pp. 60-61. For a discussion in English see, Fong Chow, "Ma-wang-tui. A Treasure-trove from the Western Han Dynasty", *Artibus Asiae*, XXXV (1973), pp. 5-24.

*The mountains rise sheer and steep; tigers and leopards slink;  
The cow-fish is there, and the spit-sand, and the rearing  
python:*

*O soul, go not to the south! There are monsters there that  
will harm you.*

*O soul, go not to the west! In the west are the Moving Sands  
stretching endlessly on and on,  
And beasts with heads like swine, slanting eyes and shaggy  
hair,*

*Long claws and serrated teeth, and wild, mad laughter.*

*O soul, go not to the west! In the west are many dangers.*

.....

*O soul, go not to the north! There is no bourn there to your  
journeying.*

.....

*O soul, come back to leisure and quietness!<sup>2</sup>*

The poem then goes on to describe the delights of living in the land of Ch'u. The parallelism to the painting is rather exact in the sense that there is a "safe" area, a limited part of the world where there is space for humans to move freely, to indulge in all variety of human delights, of food and wine, music and dancing, beautiful women, night revels, hunting parks and elegant courts. And indeed such themes are vital to much that has survived of Han art. But just beyond the gateway, where at least in hindsight we think we might find what we could affirm as *real* nature, we only encounter mystery as in the "unnatural" forms at the top of this banner and as in the east, south, west and north of "The Great Summons".

This, then, is nature: seemingly of vast extension, grasped as encompassing fixed directions, something separated from us, something other than us, something out there that can only be represented as symbol. It is connected with mysteries that affect us directly, but since they are mysteries they are involved with us most exactly when our own existence must face what we do not understand.

THEN AS HISTORY unfolds begins a process in which man becomes more confident in himself. His own image is more clear, and quite literally, with confidence he becomes more able to move in space. In being not only more sure of himself, he becomes as well more aware of what is around him.

It is an oversimplification to claim that the stages are exact, but as one looks at imagery from about the second century on one can see what is happening, and the drive toward the "classic" Chinese view of man and nature is apparent.

Fascinating as it may be, it is not the purpose of this essay to trace these steps but rather to establish the goal—an end which places us securely within a landscape that is most exactly that classic view—the image that can confidently be evoked in praise of China's most secure love of nature. Fan K'uan's 范寬 *Travelling among Mountains and Streams* is such a view and it brings us close to a readily remembered date of about 1000 A.D. (Pl. 18). Whatever else it may tell us it is a painting in praise

<sup>2</sup>David Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'u, The Songs of the South*, Oxford, 1953, pp. 109-110.

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**Plate 18** TRAVELLING AMONG MOUNTAINS AND STREAMS, by Fan K'uan. Hanging scroll, ink on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

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Plate 19 FISHING IN A MOUNTAIN STREAM,  
by Hsü Tao-ning. Handscroll, ink on silk. Section.  
William Rockhill Nelson Gallery, Kansas City.

of the great mountain. Indeed it is the very daring of the artist's conception that allows two thirds of its close to seven feet of silk to be devoted solely to the great peak itself. This is nature's substance in its largest most massive realization. True form is not a statue or an ornament. It is the visible structure of what stands most firmly in the world around us.

But as has already been suggested, it is space which is the true proof of the landscape. To exist the landscape must be "out there". The landscape rejects the spaceless "within" and establishes its truth, the statement of that which can be "loved", by its extension beyond the point where we stand. Thus to the form that is ultimately mountain is linked the space that is ultimately far distance. When Fan K'uan saw nature as mountain, others saw the greatness of nature more surely as extension. Hsü Tao-ning's 許道寧 Fishing in a Mountain Stream (Pl. 19), probably painted very close to the time of Fan K'uan's masterpiece, reveals that love of distance. It is an extraordinary accomplishment: the taking of a flat surface of wall or paper or silk and transforming that flat matter into the reality of infinite distance. "... with one small brush I can draw the vast universe."<sup>3</sup>

The notion of great mountains and far distances can, however, be expressed in another way. Our experience of mountains is in fact of something massive, powerful and high, and when in nature we are able to gain a physical vantage point and look out upon that nature, we do in fact see great distances. Despite the temptation to evoke mystic incantations of the *tao* 道 or dwell on the oft repeated wonders of "spirit-rhythm and life-movement" *ch'i-yun sheng-tung* 氣韻生動, philosophical and

<sup>3</sup>Attributed to Wang Wei (415-43) as quoted in Shio Sakanishi, *The Spirit of the Brush*, London, 1939, p. 44.

aesthetic ideals established when landscape either did not exist at all or was in its infancy, it may be that at heart the Chinese artist was trying to convey something quite simple and direct. This is the way mountains *look* to the eye. This is the way distances *are*. What power is there in distance if it does not extend forever? Or in a mountain that does not stand staunch and tall? In a word, landscape was caught in the realistic intent. The old symbols were rejected. Instead, the artist used newly discovered artistic conventions—a process of invention which took several centuries—to convey the immediate reality of moving over broad areas of water or of deep valleys, of capturing the rugged fractured rocks of lofty summits to which might cling the growth of strong persistent trees.

Hsia Kuei 夏珪 (act. c. 1190-1225) insofar as we know him was perhaps the greatest master of the broad view of nature (Pl. 20). Painting in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century he leads us persistently and always from statements of physical fact into the relation of those facts to a broad continuum—visually, space—and because of the vast extension of that space, into the reaches of time.

But it is the persistence of a respect for physical reality that within the Chinese tradition sets aside Hsia Kuei and his contemporaries and which gives their art, in what is now the late Sung, a special meaning within a tradition that has generally thought to have been more concerned with the arbitrariness of the romantic and inward imagination. Only as we accept this can we understand the Sung landscape. Realism in the visual arts is, inevitably, the visually real. Hence it is most persistently affirmed by those artists who are concerned with the look of solid shapes and the appearance of exact surfaces. But what shape looks like and what texture appears to be depends on light. Hence the true realist in the art of painting is he who seeks to

Plate 20 A PURE AND REMOTE VIEW OF  
STREAMS AND MOUNTAINS, by Hsia Kuei.  
Handscroll, ink on paper. Section showing near and  
far distance. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

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**Plate 21** A PURE AND REMOTE VIEW OF STREAMS AND MOUNTAINS, by Hsia Kuei. Section showing sky reflected in distant water.

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**Plate 22** A PURE AND REMOTE VIEW OF STREAMS AND MOUNTAINS, by Hsia Kuei. Section showing piled-up cliffs, temples and figures.

place those shapes and textures, not in some generalized ambient but in the specific context of specific light—which inevitably must also mean specific time. Following this logic, the great realist in the modern western tradition is Claude Monet, for he sought to affirm that to see a thing as it really is one must see it as exact light reveals it to us.

To move further along the Hsia Kuei scroll (Pl. 21) it is indeed the subtle presence of light that reveals his rather special visually realistic intent. For in a vast space of water and sky we are looking not just at white paper, or paper generally washed with light ink, but at a rather specific wash of ink in the sky which is distinctly caught again in an echoing wash across the water below. It is the reflection of thin clouds in the sky upon the mirror-like surface of the lake—a phenomenon to which any one can attest who has seen the glassy sea or lake beneath a sky touched with thin flat stretches of clouds.

This desire to fill one's eyes with "things", even as fragile a "thing" as light, is further affirmed as we move to a suddenly emerging rocky section of the scroll (Pl. 22). Not only is rock, as compared to water and sky, a sharply contrasting substance, but the substance itself is filled and seemingly the deeper we go, the more we find. Ultimately, hidden caves (left center) reveal men deep in the heart of a powerfully structured nature.

Ma Lin 馬麟, an artist of the next generation from Hsia Kuei, painted his well-known Evening Landscape close to the date of 1254. It is now in the Nezu collection in Tokyo.<sup>4</sup> Seemingly reduced as are the elements, it is an extremely concrete—if you will, real—landscape. Our view-point is high but it is direct, and we catch on the far horizon the rose of a sunset glow. It is the light of an exact time of day. And the notion of the reality of the moment is made certain by the foreground where we catch the darting shapes of swallows skimming the water, possible only because the artist has made a moment when he has stopped the movement of a wing, arrested at a single time the arrow of flight.

Over and over again one catches in the painting of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in China the love of physical reality—often made more intense by a concentration on a moment of that reality's existence. This is true of the landscape; it is true even more precisely of the loving care with which little things may be lifted out of the landscape, or at least from living nature, for our inspection. Thus there is constant delight at this time in painting a flower, an animal, a bird or even an insect. Ma Lin shared those interests. In a beautiful small album leaf attributed to him (Pl. 23) we are taken close to the selected subject and see not only an angled branch, the impeccable downward thrusting spears of bamboo, the star-like rosettes of plum-blossom, but in the lower part of the painting their answering shapes from reflection in the water. The fleeting facts of light are once again an integral part of what the artist wishes to convey.

Even though it has not been generally so interpreted, Mu Ch'i 牧谿's famous Six Persimmons<sup>5</sup> may only be six pieces of fruit sitting on an imaginary table in

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Plate 23

DARK FRAGRANCE AND  
SCATTERED SHADOWS, by  
Ma Lin. Album-leaf, ink and  
color on silk. National Palace  
Museum, Taipei.

<sup>4</sup>Osvald Sirén, *Chinese Painting, Leading Masters and Principles*, London, 1956, vol. III, pl. 294.

<sup>5</sup>Reproduced in Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of China*, Baltimore, 1968, pl. 107B.

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**Plate 24** HOSTELRY IN THE MOUNTAINS, by Yen Tzu-yu. Album-leaf, ink and light color on silk. Freer Gallery of Art. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

front of us. There are in fact both square and round persimmons which you can purchase in the Chinese market.

STILL THERE IS a limit to the preciseness of this reality. The Chinese artist does not stop the growth of his nature, does not freeze his grasses as does Albrecht Dürer in his famous Clump of Turf.<sup>6</sup> And if we return to the view, the landscape, the European artist does not seem to exactly match his Chinese counterpart. We can capture a similar intent, however, within the late realistic landscape tradition of China—the late Sung—and the late realistic landscape tradition in Europe. Constable's Waterloo Bridge of around 1823-24 in the Cincinnati museum is worth comparing with Yen Tzu-yü 閻次于's Hostelry in the Mountains, a painting of the second half of the twelfth century (Plates 24, 25). Once one gets over the contrast between the colors of oil paint and the more subdued colors of ink and light wash, the two paintings show remarkable similarities.

The frame of the western painting is like the limited, squared-off album format of the Chinese painting—something to suggest the limited and, in one case, the exactly framed view. We approach each from a similarly direct, eye-level (slightly raised) point-of-view. The rise of land at one side against which can be seen the extension of great spaces toward the other side is similar in both. In both, clouds play across those spaces and add to our perception of the depth of that view. Darker foreground definition across the bottom of each picture helps project our view back into the contrasting lightness behind it.

It is only when we look closely into the very matrix of the painting that we can understand what is the major difference. When we look thus at Constable's painting we realize that forms tend to disappear. There is no outline, only rather irregularly placed daubs of paint, an illusion which the eye fuses into the reality of human

<sup>6</sup>See Benjamin Rowland, Jr., *Art in East and West*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1965, pp. 108-109 and plate 45.

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**Plate 25**

**WATERLOO BRIDGE**, by  
John Constable. Cincinnati Art  
Museum, Cincinnati. Gift of  
Miss Mary Hanna.

figures (Pl. 26). It is a kind of magician's trick: "It's the mind: the mind is fooled first and then the eye accepts what the mind believes, and it doesn't see what it really did see."<sup>7</sup>

With Yen Tzu-yü's painting, no matter how tiny, no matter how small, somehow the form still holds and it holds in a very special way. It holds because the Chinese artist will not surrender the notion of line. For example, behind the clusters of pine needles are fused areas of wash, but the needles—as tiny individual separate lines—are still there. Nor do the minute figures (two) become areas of ink or color. They are still exactly and precisely defined travellers carrying their burdens to the mountain village (Pl. 27).

**Plate 26 (left): WATERLOO BRIDGE**,  
by John Constable. Detail.

**Plate 27 (right): HOSTELRY IN THE  
MOUNTAINS**, by Yen Tzu-yü. Detail.

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<sup>7</sup>A modern card-sharp, Frank Garcia, explaining his art as noted in the Detroit Free Press, Friday, April 11, 1975, p. 1-C.

Taken right into the heart of things, the Chinese artist will not let go of what we can define as basic structure. The fundamental idea—in this case the pine needle, the man—cannot be abandoned. The *concept* lies at the core of reality. In contrast, the nineteenth century European artist surrenders idea to experience. Everything is sacrificed to the view, indeed, the immediate view, and for a specific pair of eyes. It works if the interaction of particles of paint and the psychology of the eye and mind make it work. Indeed the whole process in the recent history of western art has been defined by Ernst Gombrich as a process of “making and matching”.<sup>8</sup> You try combinations of paint. If they work in capturing the reality of the view, you go on. In this process the studio is inevitable anathema, for the studio is a return to the abstraction of the idea. Only as nature is before the eye can one find what it truly is.

In this exact surrender to what a direct view of the environment will bring, it would seem that the end result can only lie in beautiful dissolution. Any who know of the work of Claude Monet will realize that many of his canvasses are just that. What was left was to begin again. One had to return to the idea. After (indeed, still contemporary with) Monet came Cézanne.

The Chinese, having never surrendered the idea, presumably never had this problem. But they were clearly uncomfortable with the extent to which they had carried their realistic endeavors. The mainstream of Chinese painting in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries shows that discomfort. This can often be seen in the way a painter of that time paints a flower or a bird or an animal. And when we turn to the landscape, the landscape clearly has a different look from the Sung.

In Huang Kung-wang 黄公望's famous Fu-ch'un Mountains 富春山居 of 1350 (Pl. 28) the definition of “things”—rocks, landpits, architecture or boats, trees,

Plate 28 DWELLING IN THE FU-CH'UN MOUNTAINS, by Huang Kung-wang. Handscroll, ink on paper. Section. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

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<sup>8</sup>E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, New York, 1960. See, for example, p. 183 ff. and pp. 296-297.

hillsides—is nowhere near as precise as the standard Sung view, and space is distinctly limited. Space does not stretch seemingly forever. Thus a flat curtain of wash suffices to define a mountain peak. And the sky is not so much the receding sky as the flat paper of the scroll. But mostly the difference is seen when one goes close, quite exactly, bores into the very heart of the painting to see how it is constructed. Here one picks up an extraordinary overlay and interweave of brushstrokes—lines, touches of ink, washes, overlapping darks and lights, movement in seemingly endless varied directions; ink bleeds into paper; paper seems to invade areas of ink; the architecture is lop-sided; there are no exact boundaries; one form overlaps another form; form is seen through form.

What, then, has happened to our clearly conceived idea? Where has the inviolable concept vanished? One cannot preserve what is not there. No longer primarily concerned with the optics of a view, the kind of idea that made that view a viable reality is no longer to be found. Instead, the whole painting has become an idea. Huang Kung-wang tells us that he took three years to complete this painting. He was not during all this time sitting (either in fact or imagination) in front of his view. Most of the time the scroll lay rolled up, unfinished. Then from time to time, as ideas came to him, he brought it back, unrolled it, worked on it a little, then rolled it up again. The patron grew impatient. He wondered if he would ever get his scroll.

The controlling factor in what is being created here is no longer the view, is no longer objective nature. The controlling factor is the artist himself. We have moved from the objective to the subjective. It is the idea in the artist's mind that determines the nature he reveals. To discover the world—as had the Sung—is, somewhat paradoxically to open the door to a rejection of that world. Or more positively, since it is clear that the Chinese are still painting landscapes, it is to rescue the landscape from the fragile existence of the moment and imbue it with notions of permanence—in this case the assurance of the artist's experience of that nature, a nature which because it is transformed into the vision of art is lifted out of time and can go on forever. This is no less than Cézanne's efforts to make impressionism permanent "like art in the museums" or to "revive Poussin in contact with nature".<sup>9</sup> For China this transformation was accomplished more than 500 years before the French experience.

The result in the fourteenth century was the flowering of the beauty of a new idea, or series of ideas about nature. This is what Yuan landscape is about, and the most valued of these ideas have been enshrined in Chinese critical appraisal in the distinctly definable styles of the so-called four great masters: Huang Kung-wang, Wu Chen 吳鎮, Ni Tsan 倪瓚 and Wang Meng 王蒙.

IT IS ONE OF the lessons of history that forms, somehow, will not remain the same. After the Yuan—it only lasted seventy years—came the Ming (1368-1644). Still, views of nature persist. The noble mountain is there. Level distances may stretch out before our eyes. Flowers, animals, bamboo, the little things drawn out of the land-

<sup>9</sup>These observations are found respectively in: p. 250. and Paul Rewald, *Cézanne*, New York, (1948) Maurice Denis, *Théories 1890-1910*, Paris, 1920, 1968, p. 135.

scape may still fascinate the painter. However, there is a difference. Of course there are currents and cross-currents, copies and new inventions, details and generalities. But one does not normally confuse a Ming painting with a Yuan painting.

One inescapable fact is a return to what might be called an objectification of nature. In painting an album of flowers in 1533 Wen Cheng-ming 文徵明 speaks of sitting in a pavilion with flowers all around him. . . .<sup>10</sup> Hsü Wei 徐渭, also painting in the sixteenth century, applies the ink on stalks of bamboo with a conscious sense of light and dark so that the brushstroke becomes the vehicle not just for expressiveness but for a clear revelation of the illusion of unmistakable three-dimensional roundness.<sup>11</sup> The great Ming painter, Shen Chou 沈周, says he painted a famous album of flowers, animals and birds—in 1494—as they looked.<sup>12</sup> And if we extend his view into a landscape setting we are in a well-known painting, *Watching the Mid-autumn Moon*, presented with scholars gathered in the night at an open, rustic pavilion to feast bathed in the light of the full moon at that specific time of seasonal fulfillment and remembrance.<sup>13</sup> Only the time is even more specifically recorded in the writing that follows the scene as being not the fifteenth, but the fourteenth, for only then can one catch the festival at its precise fresh purity before it has been tainted by the observance of others on the proper but very ordinary day itself. And certainly this notion of being in direct contact with the facts of one's surroundings—the facts of nature—persists so that the great independent painter, Tao-chi 道濟, working in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries of the Ch'ing period, is, in his grand and towering landscape of Mount Lu, now in the Sumitomo collection in Japan, declaring that such a mountain is not the result of his dependence on somewhat similar mountainscapes of the Sung but of his own direct perception. Why, he complains rhetorically, can one not do them as one ordinarily sees them?<sup>14</sup>

That Ming painters were concerned with a direct confrontation of their surroundings is further indicated by a favorite Ming compositional device whereby forms in the top and bottom of a picture may be sharply cut by the edge eliminating the possibility of further extension both higher and lower and thereby quite literally thrusting us directly into the subject: the rocks and trees and hills and cliffs and water of nature herself. That such devices are proof of a realistic intent is indicated by their use in western art as well when the artist seeks direct confrontation with what he paints. Thus the early seventeenth century realist Caravaggio may cut off parts of his powerfully realized figures. And we know it in our own time in the close-up of the camera.

We can thus find innumerable examples in Ming China of what after the introspection of the Yuan might be described as a return to the realistic purpose. But still a Ming painting is not a Sung painting. How can we account for what is usually a clearly visible difference? What kind of realism is Ming realism?

In Ming landscapes, as we have suggested, the great mountains do indeed return,

<sup>10</sup>*Ku-kung shu-hua lu* 故宮書畫錄, Taipei, 1965, ch. 6/p. 47. ton, D.C., 1962, p. 77.

<sup>11</sup>James Cahill, *Chinese Painting* (Skira), Geneva, 1960, p. 154.

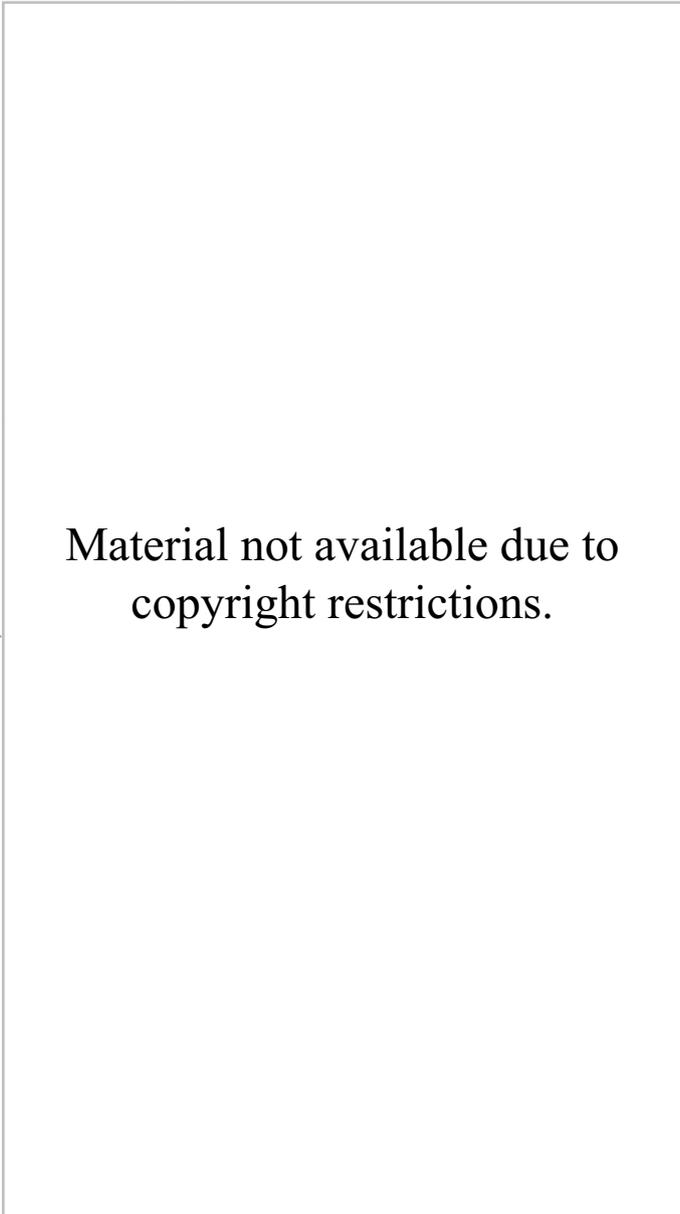
<sup>13</sup>Edwards, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Edwards, *The Field of Stones*, Washing-

<sup>14</sup>University of Michigan, *The Painting of Tao-chi*, Ann Arbor, 1967, p. 23.

but over and over again in a very special way. Paintings are so numerous as to allow generalization. Often we climb the heights and with our eye and mind travel both up and back. But when we get to the top, we are often confronted with strong black areas which in the rather deep value of the ink are as dark as those in the lower foreground. Even when we had thought we were travelling far we are brought back to the front plane of the picture—to the same forward plane at which we began our journey.

Certainly some Ming artists can come very close to the kind of exact precision that marks classical Sung painting. Such an artist was T'ang Yin 唐寅 (1470-1523). Looking at his *Clearing after Snow in a Mountain Pass* (Pl. 29) and particularly a



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**Plate 29** CLEARING AFTER  
SNOW IN A MOUNTAIN PASS,  
by T'ang Yin. Hanging scroll, ink  
and light color on silk. National  
Palace Museum, Taipei.

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Plate 30  
CLEARING AFTER SNOW  
IN A MOUNTAIN PASS, by  
T'ang Yin. Detail.

detail from it (Pl. 30) we see the tight substance of the mists, the exactness with which the trees melt into this surrounding ambient. But again we see how a dark accent—here an evergreen—jumps out at us. It is the kind of arbitrary variation that for the Ming artist inevitably added an element of vitality to his painting.

This might, perhaps, be interpreted as a new twist to the realistic purpose, whereby the artist is unwilling to let things disappear into a normal space and thus uses such a device to bring them back into our consciousness. But the more we examine the “things” that are so depicted, the more we realize that they are not shown as exactly convincing natural objects. The foreground rock of a painting by Wang E 王誥 of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is certainly strong enough and exact enough in terms of the sureness of the black ink that describes its shape. But what we see is a brilliant sharp pattern (Pl. 31) echoing in its tense aliveness the taut shape of the figure that approaches it. The artist is not interested in conveying the rock-like qualities of the rock. Generally speaking a similar contrast could be found if one were to compare Ming flowers to Sung flowers, Ming birds or animals to Sung birds or animals.

WHAT THEN HAS happened to our return to realism? Despite the boldness of Ming forms, they are not unaffected by the subjective view of the Yuan. Insofar as looseness, or an arbitrary treatment of ink-values, is a product of personal choice as opposed to objective recording, we seem to be confronted with a kind of hyphenated view of nature—a subjective-objective approach to reality. But there is another factor—a major factor—that is an inevitable part of later Chinese painting. It is a factor well-known to anyone who has considered at all this period of Chinese art. It is the factor of style: the degree to which, from the Yüan dynasty on a painter was bound to paint not according to his direct perception of nature, but according to how someone else had seen nature.

There is not time here to give clear illustrations of how a series of varied styles of the past may have operated on a later artist. Max Loehr has expressed the situation in complete, perhaps over-complete, terms: “All art of significance, all true art from now on is an intellectual art.”<sup>15</sup>

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Plate 31 CROSSING A BRIDGE  
TO VISIT A FRIEND, by Wang E.  
Hanging scroll, ink on silk. National  
Palace Museum, Taipei.

<sup>15</sup>Laurence Sickman (ed.), *Chinese Calligraphy and Painting from the John M. Crawford Collection*, New York, 1962, p. 37.

I want, however, to deal with one painting. This is a very impressive, a rather large, a very strong mountain landscape painted by Shen Chou (1527-1509). From the single figure in the lower center the landscape carries the title of the Staff-bearing wanderer, *Tz'u-chiang t'u* 持杖圖 (Pl. 32). It is a landscape in the style of the fourteenth century artist, Ni Tsan, and behind that it reflects an adherence to the styles of the great tenth-century southern masters: Tung Yüan 董源 and Chü-jan 巨然.

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Plate 32 THE STAFF-BEARING WANDERER, by Shen Chou. Hanging scroll, ink on paper. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

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Plate 33 JUNG-HSI STUDIO,  
by Ni Tsan. Hanging scroll, ink on  
paper. National Palace Museum,  
Taipei.

As for dependence on Ni Tsan, Shen Chou has caught Ni's interest (Pl. 33) in a vertical composition ranging from bottom to top, his care in isolating a few select elements (Shen Chou, for example, has only eight trees) and in the rather spare manipulation of ink—brushstrokes and washes—which allows a great deal of the untouched paper to remain untouched. But the painting is completely Shen Chou in the firmness with which each piece or part of the landscape is rendered, in the way in which those surely conceived parts are fitted together and in the ultimate message of the powers of nature which this—somewhat paradoxically—creatively *new* landscape has revealed.

If we start with the foreground we are aware of the firmness of riverside path, the dike, the bridge, the rounded mounds of land, the exactness of those eight trees. At the same time that these elements are individually exact, their relation to each other is precisely structured. This is particularly true of the way a central foreground tree reaches up to exactly fill—or be precisely framed by—the valley space in the middle distance. And then we move on to tight knots of form which despite their blurred outlines or rather freely textured surfaces build up to the sure mountain masses at the top of the picture.

But to understand the painting one has to return again to the tiny single figure in the center foreground and having seen the shape of the top-most mountains one realizes that there is an unmistakable correspondence between the shape of this full-grown firmly based scholar and the ovoid flat-based shapes that tower layer on layer into the great heights above. The figure leans slightly to the left and it is exactly in such a slightly leaning cave-like space that he is framed by the two trees that im-

mediately surround him. In turn, the background picks up this leftward tilt. We are led there by the left-hand tree. For in the upper middle distance the largest land-mass is to the left. The lesser cliff-like land to the right picks up, however, with the angled line of its plateau the same angle as the staff that the scholar far below holds in his concealed hand. And this plateau in turn directs us to the furthest range of hills, capped—as the scholar himself is hatted—with the dark flat wash of hill. This, it might be added, in characteristic Ming fashion limits our extension into distance.

The scholar, the man, inevitably becomes a vital core—a seed—from which grows and radiates the whole dynamic life of the painting; and from this focal firmly placed center the shapes which define Shen Chou's natural scene move upward toward the left, back to the right and ultimately are centered so that the furthest hills remain firm. But it is a center that is not an exact center, rather an implied axial line whose sureness rests on the dynamics of shape reacting with shape. Thus there is always the strong subtle quality of movement. This is a mountainscape that grows upward and also expands outward so that the mountain is not just there as a shape but as a force. It is the spirit, if you will, the "breath" of the mountain that makes it live.

I have spent some time in analyzing this painting because not only is it a Ming painting by an important artist, not only is it, I think, a great painting, but it stands as a kind of symbol of what painting in China from the post-Sung period—from the end of the thirteenth century—is about. Here, of course, the emphasis is on what happened to that post-Sung change in the Ming period.

NOW I MIGHT turn directly to the symbols of words. The Chinese experience clarifies three major factors in the creation of a painting: the artist, that is the individual creator; nature, that is the objective world around the subjective self, the world upon which the artist draws for his visual materials; and style, that element in any artistic tradition which tells us how other artists have recreated nature, or, as the tradition becomes more complex, recreated a combination of nature and style. Thus we have, quite simply:

Artist	Nature	Style
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Our problem is, at a given time, to appropriately grasp their relationship. In the Sung view the relation between artist and nature is direct. Style, always important in any art, is however incidental to one's commitment to use it to record the substance of nature. We can thus arrange our three verbal symbols as follows:

Nature	Artist	Style
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In the later, or post-Sung view, it is the artist's withdrawal to a deliberately chosen position that establishes the uniqueness of the situation:

Nature	Artist	Style
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He affirms a special kind of freedom. Here he remains unfettered by a direct attachment to visible nature—unfettered, but not unrelated. Nature has not been rejected. The landscape still remains. But always the artist is free to move. He is not only free in his direct commitment to nature but in his commitment to the new and conscious factor of style which he has now elevated to a position which at the very least is of an importance equal to nature itself. It must be remembered, however, that in the Chinese landscape tradition style is not so much a rejection of nature as it is a further adjustment in the artist's involvement with nature itself—nature, as it were, once removed but at the same time further refined by the creation of another artist's brush.

The result may best be seen as a kind of free artistic wandering. The artist may be close to objective nature, or he may be closest to a dependence on style, or he may be far removed from both, creating almost totally his own notions of what nature and style should be:

Nature	Style
Artist	

Nature	Style
	Artist

Nature	Style
Artist	

The artist can withdraw, but he never breaks—completely. That is why the Chinese artist never was able to paint a painting that could be said to be related to the modern western movement of cubism. For so much of what is “modern” in western art (Pl. 34) depends on a break with one's direct attachment to observe

Plate 34 NIGHT FISHING AT ANTIBES, by Pablo Picasso. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.



physical reality. It is a realignment, no doubt, in terms of the complex realities of the modern industrial-scientific world, but whatever the causes, a direct reading of painting affirms that it is a break that the Chinese have never been willing to consider. Nor can we relate it to some kind of "time-lag" caused by China's failure to enter the world of the contemporary West with proper speed and enthusiasm producing thereby the necessary conditions that could result almost automatically in creating "modern" art. Time can hardly be the problem, since we have already seen that centuries ago Chinese artists were creating paintings analogous to those of one of the most modern of western artists, namely Cézanne, who himself was on the very threshold of cubism. No, it is rather the exact reluctance of the Chinese artist to desert nature in the name of style and personal independence that creates the gap. For what happens in cubism is that the artist *makes* his own picture. There may be suggestions of physical reality, but such a picture is essentially what the artist has made out of the things of his craft: his line, his color, his forms. This is why, for example, collage can be a serious art-form in the modern west. Thus, through his own making, his own art, the artist creates what is real. It is the artist making form rather than repeating form from nature; or to put it another way, much of contemporary western art places the locus of meaning in physical matter itself which, as in a laboratory, is no longer permitted to rest unchallenged in nature's quiet ambient.

THE COURSE I have tried to chart here in Chinese painting has moved us from a world in which distances and the realities they embraced were looked upon with apprehension and dread to a time of their complete acceptance as areas of contemplation, visual wandering and delight—an established source of enduring truth and beauty. And then came a rejection of those self-evident and accepted truths in favor of the individual's right to accept them only in terms of a conscious personal relationship.

But always there has been one consistent fact in this changing landscape—the balanced approach of an idea, or ideas, firmly related to man's necessary comprehension. Early it was the idea as symbol. In Sung painting it was the retention of the clarity of the idea that prevented a surrender to total reliance on immediate experience. Thus the idea of object, of man, was preserved inviolate at the heart of great nature. Finally the idea, firmly caged in the consciousness of the artist himself, was expanded to embrace that unique combination of self, nature and style that accounts for the later Chinese landscape. This is another way of saying that the landscape, far from suggesting a departure from, is closely tied to the basic humanism of Chinese civilization.

Since death is by definition the cessation of vital activity, and life the persistence of those activities, can we not attribute the endurance of the landscape tradition in China to its ability to change and ultimately to establish itself on a basis of dynamic relationships that would not permit an easy end?