

Chinese Landscape Painting

The Golden Age

CHEN CHIH-MAI

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Chinese Ambassador to Australia, graduated from Tsing Hua College, Peking, in 1928. He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, in 1929, and the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Columbia University, New York, in 1933. He was elected to the *Phi Alpha Theta* and *Phi Beta Kappa* honorary societies. Upon his return to China, he was appointed Professor in National Tsing Hua University and Lecturer in National Peking University, where he offered courses on Chinese history and government. After a period of service with the Executive Yüan of the National Government of the Republic of China during the Second World War, he was appointed Minister-Counsellor of the Chinese Embassy in Washington. He served as Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines from 1955 until he was transferred to his present post in Canberra in 1959. During the post-war period, he attended as a Chinese representative many international conferences, including the United Nations, UNRRA, FAO, UNESCO. He has written many articles and books in Chinese. His latest article on Chinese art, entitled 'Random Notes on Chinese Painting', appeared in the *Free China Review*, Taipei.

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CHINESE LANDSCAPE-PAINTING

The Golden Age

CHEN CHIH-MAI

The twenty-second
George Ernest Morrison
lecture in ethnology

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CHINESE LANDSCAPE-PAINTING

The Golden Age

DR GEORGE ERNEST MORRISON was a man of many parts. He was, as we all know, a physician by profession. But he was better known as an indefatigable traveller and explorer. To the journalists he was the 'scoop artist'. To the Chinese he was a true friend and wise counsellor.

I well remember when I was a boy in Peking, my father, who was in the Chinese Foreign Service, used to tell me of the extraordinary exploits of the bearded gentleman from Down Under. Decades later, I was to hear about him from Dr V. K. Wellington Koo, my chief in the Chinese Embassy in Washington, with whom Dr Morrison was associated during World War I.

It is fitting for the Chinese residents in Australia to have founded the Morrison Lectureship in his memory. I am honoured indeed to have been chosen to give the Morrison Lecture of 1960, to pay tribute to an Australian who was, as the *London Times* said at the time of his death in 1920, 'a devoted servant' of China and the Chinese people.

I notice that the purpose of the Morrison Lectureship is 'to stimulate interest in Australia in the art, science and literature of the Chinese Republic'. It appears therefore that I am not departing from the purpose of the Lectureship in discussing on this occasion a chapter in the history of Chinese landscape-painting.

The Chinese, it may be said, not only love landscape-painting, which they call *shan shui hua*, or 'mountains and waters painting', but are in love with it.

It would seem an idle pursuit for us to speculate as to why, beginning in the early T'ang period, landscape-painting gradually gained ascendancy over the painting of religious and human figures. It may have been due to the fact that, in the long period of Buddhist and Taoist predominance in China, the figure-painters had literally exhausted themselves adorning every wall in the hundreds of thousands of temples all over the land. Because of the large demand for such paintings by the court and the devout, they were soon done in most cases by pious hagiographers rather than the real artists. Such a situation naturally caused the connoisseurs to lose interest in them. For in China a sharp distinction has always been drawn between the artists and creators on the one hand and the artisans and craftsmen on the other.

The Sung painter and critic, Kuo Hsi, once asked: 'Wherein lies the reason that the good man so much loves landscapes?' He answered his own question as follows: 'It is because the message of the forests and streams, the companionship of the mists and clouds, are always in his dreams.'¹

Probably the trend towards landscapes was brought about by the almost simultaneous appearance in the seventh and eighth centuries of three great landscape-painters—Wu Tao-tzu, Wang Wei and Li Ssu-hsün.

Wu Tao-tzu (Wu Tao-hsün) lived and worked between the years 700 and 760 A.D. He was a truly protean genius, proficient in all categories of painting. He was also a prolific painter, said to have done three hundred murals and frescoes in his lifetime. Chang Yen-yüan, the ninth-century art-historian and critic, called his works 'heavenly and divine'. His hands, it was said, seemed to be guided by supernatural power. His linear treatment was like 'orchid leaves' or 'floating clouds and flowing water', showing the draperies of his religious and human figures 'rippling out as if buoyed by the breeze'. His landscapes were 'free and boisterous', done with light stains and dry ink. He was honoured with the title 'the Sage of Painting' even during his lifetime.²

Wang Wei (699-759) was a devout Buddhist, a great poet and a masterful painter. It was truthfully said that reading his poems was like feeling a clear breeze blowing gently over a bed of flowers, or seeing a lotus blossom smiling at the wind in the rippled pond. The same might be said of his painting, as Walter Pater of Botticelli's: 'blending the charm of story and sentiment, the medium of the art of poetry, with the charm of line and colour, the medium of abstract painting'.

Wang Wei preferred to paint in simple black and white, applying the infinite shades of Chinese ink, which the French called *encre de Chine*, to

¹ Lin Ch'üan Kao Chih, published about 1100 A.D., compiled and edited by Kuo Hsi's son, Kuo Ssu.

² Chang Yen-yüan, *Li Tai Ming Hua Chi*, published in 847 A.D., lists and comments on the famous paintings up to 841 A.D.

evocate a mood and atmosphere with refined poetic content. Wang Wei himself said: 'In painting, water and ink monochromes are first, modelling after the character of nature and completing the creative process, placing a thousand miles of scenery within the confines of a few feet, setting the four corners of earth before our eyes, and depicting the wonders of the four seasons with the tip of the brush.'³

The third member of the triumvirate, Li Ssu-hsün (651-715 or 722), was a general officer in the T'ang Dynasty. With his equally talented son, Li Chao-tao, he inaugurated a school of landscape-painting distinguished for its meticulous rendering of details and the lavish use of colours. The story is told that the T'ang Emperor Ming-huang once commissioned Wu Tao-tzu and Li Ssu-hsün separately to paint the scenery of the Chia-ling River in Szechuan. True to his style of freedom and abandon, Wu did it in one day. Li took several months.⁴

The Li's, father and son, were great colourists. They liked to use blues and greens, sometimes with gold outlines. Their style therefore came to be known as 'blue and green' or 'gold and blue' landscapes.

The sixth-century painter and critic Hsieh Ho, in his book *Ku Hua P'in Lu* published in about 500 A.D., said that painting was to be guided by six principles (*lu fa*). It may be assumed that he had in mind primarily the painting of human figures since landscapes were still in their formative stage in his time. But his six principles have come to be accepted in succeeding generations as applying to all categories of painting.

This is not the place for us to go into a discussion of this rather involved subject. It is however pertinent to point out that, of the six principles, the first, *ch'i yün sheng tung*, was considered the most important.

The art critics of China have been discussing the subject of Hsieh Ho's first principle for more than fourteen centuries. To put it simply, it may be explained by saying that a painting may be considered a work of art if it succeeds in conveying to the discerning viewer the vitality of the atmosphere, defining here the word 'atmosphere', as does Webster's Dictionary, in the sense of 'the aesthetic tone or mood of, or harmony of effect in, a work of art'. In other words, Hsieh Ho tried to tell us that, in judging the merits of a painting, we should first determine whether or not it has captured the deportment and demeanour of a live man, which is just another way of saying that a good portrait should not look like a death mask.

However, we must not stop here, because Hsieh Ho's first principle has been applied to other categories of painting, including landscapes.

³ Wang Wei, *Shan Shui Chüeh*. Although Wang Wei's essay is included in several anthologies on Chinese painting, it is difficult to determine its authenticity.

⁴ The story comes from Chu Ching-hsüan, *T'ang Ch'ao Ming Hua Lu*, published at the beginning of the tenth century. Whether the story is true or not, it has been frequently cited to distinguish the styles of the two masters.

The Chinese landscape-painters tell us that, in painting landscapes, they are really doing the portraits of the mountains and waters. To them the natural subjects they depict are just as alive as the face of a human being, so the mountains and waters, the streams and waterfalls, the trees and bridges, must all come alive through the pictures.

Finally, a good painting must be able to evoke an aesthetic feeling. It must be something more than a realistic rendering of the subject. It must have character and charm. It must never be vulgar and in poor taste. It must be the work of an artist, not an artisan.

In landscapes, the painting should impart a sense of peace and repose. It may inspire awe and veneration, but it must never shock. It should create in the viewer a sense of identity and affinity, as if he were actually in the picture, walking along the mountain paths and hearing the streams murmur. It was said that an ancient painter, Chang Pao, painted a summer scene that made the viewer feel hot, and a winter scene that made him feel cold. The T'ang Emperor Ming-huang told Li Ssu-hsün that at night he seemed to be able to hear the water rushing down the ravine in the picture Li had painted on the palace screen. Another man, Tsung Ping, had his walls covered with landscapes and said that he enjoyed his 'trips' among the famous mountains and great rivers while lying on his divan.⁵

⁵ Hsieh Ho's first principle, *ch'i yün sheng tung*, has been translated in a number of ways by the European and American writers on Chinese art: 'Rhythmic Vitality' (Giles); 'The conception should possess harmony and vitality' (Ferguson); 'Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement' (Sirén); 'Spirit-Resonance, which means vitality' (Acker); 'Spirit resonance life movement' (Rowley); 'La consonance de l'esprit engendre le mouvement (de la vie)' (Petrucci); 'Rhythmic Vitality or spiritual rhythm expressed in the movement of life' (Binyon); 'The harmonizing movement of life-breath' (Contag); 'The fusion of the rhythm of the spirit with the movement of living things' (Cranmer-Bynge); 'Spiritual element, life's motion' (Hirth); 'Spiritual expression and life movement' (Jenyne); 'Animation through spirit consonance' (Soper); 'A picture should be inspired and possess life in itself' (March); and many others.

Very few, if any, Chinese writers have tried to define Hsieh Ho's first principle precisely. They rather prefer to explain it in a somewhat mystical fashion. Here are a few random examples. 'Among the six principles, *ch'i yün sheng tung* is the most important. Anyone can say it, but few can get it. The whole concept consists in capturing the vitality of nature in the manipulation of brush and ink. Only those who are truly in love with clouds and mists can find it. Otherwise, even if one were to copy the old masters all his life, one would still be a few steps from capturing it' (Wang Hui and Yün Shou-p'ing, in commentaries on Tan Ts'ung-kuang's book *Hua Ch'üan*). Tan Ts'ung-kuang himself explained: 'The imposing posture of *ch'i* and the calm tranquillity of *yün* are the marks of the masterpieces. A picture the image of which lingers in your mind is a good work. That which vanishes as soon as you take your eyes from it is an inferior picture.' 'We must place the emphasis upon the concept *sheng tung* in order to grasp the concept *ch'i yün sheng tung*. If you understand what is meant by *sheng tung*, *ch'i yün* will come naturally' (Fang Hsün, *Shan Ching Chü Hua Lun*). 'The difference between the work of a scholar-gentleman and that of an artisan is to be found entirely in *ch'i yün*' (Shêngh Tashih, *Ch'i Shan Wo Yu Lu*). 'When the brushwork is graceful, there is *ch'i yün*. This depends upon the scholarship of the painter. If his integrity is high, his knowledge profound, his paintings will carry the smell of books, and when the smell of books is there, *ch'i yün* is present' (Chian Chü, *Ch'uan Shêng Pi Yao*).

Aside from the first principle, the remaining five are easy to explain. The second

In doing the portraits of mountains and waters, the artist must be in full command of the basic techniques. It was on the basis of the differences in technique, more than anything else, that the various schools of landscape-painting, such as the Northern School headed by Li Ssu-hsün and the Southern School headed by Wang Wei, were told apart, on much the same ground as 'one stroke of Rembrandt is as much Rembrandt as is the whole painting'.⁶

The question of technique, it goes without saying, is important also to the connoisseur. An understanding of its basic principles is required in order that we may fully appreciate the artistry of the great masters as well as distinguish the original works from the forgeries.

With particular reference to landscapes, the critics are more or less in agreement that the most basic technique is the *ts'un*, for which unfortunately there is no corresponding term in the European languages. Simply explained, *ts'un* is the brushstroke by which the painter models the faces and fissures of the rocks, not only to give them shape and form, but to bring them into perspective and life. The term has been translated as 'wrinkles', 'shadings', or 'contour-lines'. Perhaps the word 'modelling', which means 'to assume the appearance of natural relief', again on the authority of Webster's Dictionary, is the closest approximate in the English language.

In the T'ang Dynasty, it may be said, the modelling technique was still

principle, *ku fa yung pi*, means brushwork in structural representation of either the bone-structure of a human face or the veins of a mountain. The third principle, *ying wu hsiang hsin*, means precisely to capture the likeness of the subjects depicted. The fourth principle, *shui lei fu ts'ai*, means to apply the right colours to the right objects. The fifth principle, *ching ying wei chih*, means to plan the composition of the picture. The last principle, *ch'üan i mo hsieh*, means to model after the works of the masters.

It may be noted that practically all the attention of critics has been directed to explaining and developing the first principle. While most writers seem to take them for granted, the Ch'ing Dynasty critic, Chou I-kuei, holds a dissenting view the logic of which appears to be irrefutable: 'In my opinion the six principles do not capture the essence of the art of painting. To apply the ancient methods now is like trying to put a square shaft into a round socket. I think that, even if we were to take the six principles as they stand, we should put the fifth principle regarding planning the composition first, then the second principle regarding brushwork, to be followed by the fourth principle regarding colour application. The sixth principle regarding modelling after the masters should not be included at all. *Ch'i yün* in the first principle comes out only after the picture is painted. How can one get the effect of *ch'i yün* before one starts to paint? Those who regard *ch'i yün* as first are connoisseurs, not painters' (*Hsiao Shan Hua P'u*).

⁶ The sixteenth-century critics Tung Ch'i-ch'ang and Mo Shih-lung told us that, just as there were the Southern School and the Northern School in Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism in the T'ang Dynasty, so there are two different schools of landscape-painting. This differentiation, the two critics explained, was based upon the difference in technique. Although this theory has been followed by many art historians and critics, it becomes quite confused and obscure when efforts are made to classify the ancient and modern painters. The modern tendency, it appears, is to dismiss the differentiation and to say with the Ch'ing Dynasty critic, Ch'ien Yung, that, 'whether Southern or Northern, the painter who has acquired the mastery of both his brush and his ink must be considered a good painter' (*Lü Yüan Hua Hsüeh*).

in its formative stage. In the Sung Dynasty, a great effort was made to use the technique to bring the outline and the surface of the rocks into fuller correlation.

An eighteenth-century artist once said: 'After having painted for many decades, I may be entitled to ask: What makes a painting a work of art? The most obvious answer is the modelling technique, *ts'un*.'

The artists and critics have given the various types of *ts'un* some extremely descriptive names—'small axe chopping', 'big axe chopping', 'hemp fibres', 'broken nets', 'ravelled ropes', 'cattle hair', 'horse teeth', 'alum lumps', 'rolling clouds', 'lotus leaves', 'brushwood', 'broken ribbons', 'split beans', 'dragging mud through water', 'pulling nails out of mud', and many, many others. Each one of the *ts'un* is identified with some painter, although he might use several varieties of them in the course of his career or even in the same picture.

Having gone, however superficially, into some of the technical aspects of Chinese landscape-painting, we may now turn to examine some of the works of the great masters.

Unfortunately, it is not possible for us to see the original works of Wu Tao-tzu, Wang Wei and Li Ssu-hsün. There are now in existence a few paintings attributed to them, but their authenticity is doubtful. There is a painting in the vast collection of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, called 'Sailing Boats and a Riverside Mansion', which was considered by no less an authority than the Ch'ing Dynasty collector An Ch'i as possibly an original work of Li Ssu-hsün. Whether it is an original or not, the painting is well preserved enough for us to acquire a general impression of the style known as the 'blue and green' landscapes of Li Ssu-hsün and his son, Li Chao-tao. In the same collection there is a picture called 'Emperor Ming-huang's Flight to Szechuan', depicting an event which occurred in the year 755, which may be taken as an illustration of the style of Li Chao-tao.

By the end of the ninth century the glory and grandeur that was T'ang China was clearly spent. The great empire soon began to break up and was followed by a period of confusion and strife for more than half a century. The Chinese historians call this the Period of the Five Dynasties.

It was in this period of storm and stress that the Golden Age of Chinese Landscape-Painting began.

It began with the appearance of a painter by the name of Ching Hao, who escaped from the turmoil of his times by living among the mountains of North China.

Ching Hao was a careful student of nature. He told us in his books how he wandered among the mountains observing their changes from morning to night, from season to season. Once he did thousands of sketches of one

⁷ Kung Hsien (c. 1635-1700), *Hua Chüeh*.



PLATE I Landscape of Lu Shan, by Ching Hao

National Palace Museum, Taiwan



PLATE II Travellers at a Mountain Pass
by Kuan T'ung

National Palace Museum Taiwan



PLATE III *Taoist Temple in the Mountains*, by Tung Yüan

National Palace Museum, Taiwan



PLATE IV *Seeking Truth in the Mountain*, by Chü-jân
National Palace Museum, Taiwan

李成寒林平野

枯朽樹出老
松枝薄，寒
身影雪時
向龍泉經一
再索條此景
寫意也
豐采初畫
滿魁



PLATE V Trees on a Winter Plain, by Li Ch'êng

National Palace Museum, Taiwan



PLATE VI *Snow-Covered Landscape*, by Fan K'uan

National Palace Museum, Taiwan



PLATE VII *Recluse in a Mountain Abode*, by Kuo Hsi

National Palace Museum, Taiwan



PLATE VIII *Mountains and Pines in Spring*, by Mi Fei

National Palace Museum, Taiwan

pine tree which caught his fancy. His ambition was to do the portraits of the mountains and waters.

In doing such portraits Ching Hao laid down certain rules. 'In painting landscapes', he said, 'the whole picture must first be conceived in the mind before taking up the brush.' Here he was following the concept proclaimed earlier by Wang Wei, which has been accepted without question by all Chinese painters in succeeding generations.

The Chinese, as we know, paint on paper or silk, unless they are doing murals and frescoes. They use Chinese ink and pigments diluted to varying degrees by water. Such mediums permit no corrections or after-thoughts. Painters in oil can put on layer after layer until perfection is achieved. The Chinese must work in an impromptu fashion, 'like the buzzard swooping down at the very moment the rabbit jumps out'. Furthermore, the slightly absorbent nature of the silk or paper they use rules out any pause or hesitation.

The picture 'Landscape of Lu Shan' (Plate I) is perhaps Ching Hao's only work in existence. It is his conception of the massive mountain Lu Shan in Kiangsi Province. It is about a thousand years old and is somewhat faded. However, it is still clear enough to show Ching Hao's sculptural rendering of the towering peaks and deep valleys.

Ching Hao told us that in landscape-painting composition is all-important. 'The trees depend on the mountains for their structure; the mountains take the trees as their clothes. The trees must not be so dense as to conceal the grace and elegance of the mountains; the mountains must not be so crowded as to distract from the radiance of the trees. . . . The shapes of the peaks should not be repeated. The tops of the trees should be irregular.' In another passage Ching Hao said: 'Clouds at the waist of the mountains, streams through the rocks, houses closed in by trees, paths dotted with travellers, stones standing out in three dimensions, roads branching out into forks, trees emphasised at their tops, mountains brought into relief by their bases and banks.'⁸

Kuan T'ung, who lived in the first half of the tenth century, received personal instruction from Ching Hao. Some critics think he surpassed his master in his accomplishments. He was said to have worked so hard at his art that he frequently eschewed both food and sleep. 'It delighted him', it was said, 'to paint autumn hills and wintry forests, village cottages, rustic ferries, recluses and retired gentlemen, fish-markets and country-inns . . . leaving the viewer with the feeling of being far above and beyond the hustle and bustle of urban life. . . . The more cursory his strokes, the stronger the atmosphere; the briefer the scene, the deeper the meaning'⁹ (Plate II).

⁸ The quotations from Ching Hao are taken from his work *Pi Fa Chi*.

⁹ *Hsüan Ho Hua P'u*, the catalogue of the Northern Sung Imperial Collection published in 1120 A.D.

It is an interesting commentary that, while the Chinese poets like to versify on the glories of spring and to lament pathetically its fleeting nature, the painters seldom indulge themselves in such a theme, although poetry and painting are supposedly closely allied in the Chinese conception of the arts. Autumnal scenes, to a painter like Kuan T'ung, are appealing, not so much because of the rich colours of the foliage, but because of the solemnity of the season, the impending coming of winter, as when a man who has passed the prime of his life faces the future with dignity and poise. Autumn and winter scenes, it may be said, have always been the favourites of the landscape-painters, while the pines and the bamboos, the plants which are able to withstand the rigours of the elements, have been popular with the scholars who dabble in the arts as a pastime.

The turmoil of the Five Dynasties finally came to an end in the year 960, exactly a thousand years ago. Through a series of seemingly fantastic manoeuvres, Chao K'uan-yin was proclaimed the Son of Heaven, the founder of the Sung Dynasty.

The political situation at the time was anything but comforting. The Sung realm was confronted by the Khitan and the Juchin Tartars in the North. At court, dissension prevailed between the reformists and the conservatives, involving some of the greatest figures in Chinese learning. It would seem that this was hardly the soil for the growth of the creative arts. However, Sung China turned out to be one of the most glittering epochs in Chinese culture.

In the field of landscape-painting, the chief artificer was Tung Yüan, who worked between the years 947 and 970. 'His pictures', it was said, 'came straight out of his heart. In depicting mountains and waters, rivers and lakes, wind and rain, streams and valleys, the changing light and shade on the peaks, the clouds and mists and snow on the trees, the numerous precipices and ravines, the rolling sand-banks and abrupt cliffs, he conveys the feeling that the viewer may actually be living in such surroundings.'¹⁰

Tung Yüan was one of the most highly praised painters in the history of Chinese art. Even the eccentric and cantankerous Sung artist, critic and collector, Mi Fei, who seldom had anything good to say about anybody, proclaimed that Tung Yüan's works were 'simple and unaffected, showing the highest taste'.¹¹ A later critic gave him the title 'the Dragon in Painting'.¹² A still later critic compared Tung Yüan's place in painting to that of Confucius in philosophy.¹³

Mi Fei's dictum that Tung Yüan's paintings are 'simple and unaffected' seems to summarize the critical acclaim. When seen at close quarters, Tung

¹⁰ Ibid. ¹¹ Mi Fei, *Hua Shih*, published about 1105 A.D.

¹² Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636), *Hua Yen*.

¹³ Wang Yüan-ch'i (1642-1715), *Lu Tai T'i Hua Kao*.

Yüan's brushwork appears to be rough and careless and does not seem to represent the objects depicted. When seen from a distance, the radiance of the scene comes through, subtle, clear, and deep.¹⁴

Tung Yüan's paintings were generally inspired by the scenery he found near his home south of the Yangtse River, a region noted for nature's gentleness and grace. Unlike Ching Hao, who came from the North where the mountains are massive and forbidding and the weather severe, Tung Yüan painted scenes which are unadorned and subdued. 'The essence of his works', it has been said, 'is the naturalness of their mood and deportment.'¹⁵

'Taoist Temple in the Mountains' by Tung Yüan (Plate III) shows a group of rather elaborate buildings partly hidden by rocks and pines. Three gentlemen, attended by their pages, are seen standing on a bridge, apparently enjoying the music of the murmuring stream. The treatment of mists around the peaks is particularly interesting, with some of the trees barely revealing their tops above the floating clouds. It is truly a masterpiece conveying the sense of serenity and peace.

To the expert connoisseur, Tung Yüan's major contribution was the final perfection of the *ts'un*, the modelling brushstroke so basic to Chinese landscape-painting. Improving upon the technique of his predecessors, Tung Yüan employed straight lines floating down the mountain-side, bringing them close together and occasionally allowing them to overlap, in order to create third dimensional effects in the treatment of rocks. This is the 'hemp-fibres' brushstroke of which Tung Yüan was the principal innovator and from which many of the other varieties were evolved.

The same brushstroke, 'hemp-fibres', was further developed by Tung Yüan's contemporary Chü-jân, a monk of K'ai Yüan Ssu.

In many ways, Chü-jân may be said to have brought the tradition of Chinese landscape-painting to its culmination, characterized by great breadth and depth. In his work entitled 'Seeking Truth in the Mountain' (Plate IV), two men are seen in a hut, the one with his back to us having come all the way to seek instruction from the retired scholar who is living as a recluse in the deep mountain. It is a quiet, contemplative scene, suggesting that truth is not to be sought in the din and dust of the market-place.

Ching Hao, the master in the Period of the Five Dynasties, taught that trees in the distance should have no branches shown. Chü-jân in this picture gives us an illustration of how trees should be treated in depth: the trees in the foreground show their branches and foliage, those in mid-distance have no visible branches, and those high up in the peaks are represented by bold dots. In executing the dots, Chü-jân took pains in trying to hide the marks of his brush, to conceal the manipulation of the instrument. It was said that

¹⁴ Shen Kua (1030-90), *Mêng Ch'i Pi T'an*.

¹⁵ Yün Kê (Yün Shou-p'ing) (1633-90), *Nan T'ien Hua Pa*.

he wielded his brush as if it were suspended in mid air, turning and twisting like 'a dragon in flight'. Even to the professional painter, 'it is a technique which cannot be explained'.¹⁶

Ching Hao, Kuan T'ung, Tung Yüan and Chü-jân, or Ching-Kuan-Tung-Chü as the Chinese call them, were the four great masters of the Golden Age. Together they set the pattern for succeeding generations to follow. Even the most antiquity-minded critics had to admit that they excelled all the landscape-painters before them. A European expert of Chinese art, the late Raphael Petrucci, said of them: 'They pursued the study of relations of tones and values of shading up to the limit of extreme delicacy, and if they mingled colour at all with their subtle evocations, it was with a feeling of unequalled restraint.'¹⁷

In this forest of giants, there were a few others who must also claim our attention.

Li Ch'êng, who worked between the years 960 and 990, came from a celebrated family of scholars. But his ambition was not to become a high official, as scholars would be in his days. He chose to lead a quiet life and to paint landscapes for his own delight. He loved to paint desolate winter scenes, with bleak and stony crags, gnarled trees, and leafless branches. He depicted these with a dry brush, 'so miserly was he with his ink that it might have been gold'. The Chinese painters have always believed that there is nothing straight in a tree, at least a tree which deserves to be painted. This dictum is fully shown in Li Ch'êng's painting, 'Trees on a Winter Plain' (Plate V). It shows simply two towering pines with a few small trees scattered about. There is nothing else in the picture, not even a lonely crow flying around.

The Chinese manuals on landscape-painting teach the beginner to start with the trees, just as in painting portraits the manuals say he should start with the nostrils. The branches must be made so to dispose themselves that the light and the shade, the front and the back, the right and the left, as well as the tension created by some branches seeming to push themselves forward and others seeming to yield, are all carefully planned and arranged. The painter may begin with a large tree, putting a smaller one beside it, as if the young is helping the old. It may also be done by beginning with a small tree and putting a larger one beside it, as if the old is leading the young. Any grouping of trees is to be made as if they are members of a family, each with a posture of its own but somehow related to one another. They should never be made to stand like a bundle of firewood.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Chinese Painters: A Critical Study*, translated by Frances Seaver (Brentano's, New York, 1920), p. 76.

¹⁸ The above is a summary of instructions in *Chieh Tzu Yüan Hua P'u*, commonly translated as *The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual*, published between 1679 and 1701, with many later editions.

Li Ch'êng's painting shows two large trees of approximately the same size. The five smaller trees are of varying heights. Following the precept of the manuals, this picture evidently tries to depict a family group, the husband and the wife with their five children standing together to face the rigours of life.

The manuals also teach that in painting trees it is necessary to show their hard struggle to attain maturity, suggesting the parallel circumstances in human life. This is why the painters like to depict old trees in the winter, leafless and weather-beaten but solid and defiant. This reminds us of a passage of John Ruskin which says: 'In a tree they [the chief lines] show what kind of fortune it has had to endure from its childhood; how troublesome trees have come in its way, and pushed it aside, and tried to strangle and starve it; where and when kind trees have sheltered it, and grown up lovingly together with it, bending as it bent; what winds torment it most; what boughs of it behave best, and bear more fruit; and so on.'

Another landscape painter of this period, Fan K'uan, lived in the North and spent his life among the ranges of Ts'in Ling, absorbing freely the wonders of nature. In an age of immortals, he was brave enough to declare that 'it is better to learn from nature than from the old masters'.

Fan K'uan's 'Snow-Covered Landscape' (Plate V) is a lightly coloured painting on silk. It produces an interesting effect by having a group of temple buildings in the upper left-hand corner and a gateway to the right of the main peak, suggesting that the temple can be reached by a path behind the main peak. Then, the presence of two men in the lower right-hand corner suggests that the temple may also be reached from the foreground. To the Chinese connoisseur these are clever devices to achieve depth as well as to make the entire composition interesting and intriguing, a scene which is worth the trouble of painting.

Hsü Tao-ning, also of the Northern Sung Dynasty, came from humble origins, a herb druggist by profession, who literally forced his way into *élite* society by sheer ability and perseverance. He was probably the only Chinese artist known to have operated a sidewalk studio.

His picture, 'Heavy Snow on the Mountains', shows an old man walking along the snow-covered path. He is apparently on his way home, which may be seen in the centre, after having gathered firewood to warm his hut on this cold day. Of particular interest in composition is the faint image of a distant peak in the upper left-hand corner. Here we have another example of the many ways in which the Chinese artists try to convey depth and distance.

Kuo Hsi, who lived in the latter half of the eleventh century, used to paint huge murals, taking advantage of the vast space to give his talents full display. He was a master craftsman, and made many notes on the art

of landscape painting which his son compiled into a book entitled *Lin Ch'üan Kao Chih* (*The Great Message of the Forests and Streams*). Of course such a book can be most helpful to the novice. At the same time it must be held responsible for making landscape-painting overly formalized and stereotyped. It was the forerunner of many manuals written in subsequent centuries, telling the beginner exactly how to do a tree or a rock, where to put a bridge and a human figure, and so forth.

'Recluse in a Mountain Abode' by Kuo Hsi (Plate VII) contains all the elements of a typical landscape—the 'host peak', the 'guest peaks', the distant hills, the waterfall, the stream, the trees, the houses, the bridge, the fishermen, the recluses, the travellers, even the pavilion and the pagoda, all properly arranged and correctly placed.

Kuo Hsi was not only a master craftsman but also an accomplished artist. Although he made no important innovations either in composition or technique, he was in full command of what had been developed up to his time.

Kuo Hsi's classical style differed sharply from the dilettante Mi Fei (1051-1107), who was in every way a rebel, a non-conformist, in the world of Chinese art. An eccentric so extreme that his friends called him a lunatic, Mi Fei was first of all one of the greatest calligraphers, with a style as graceful as it was distinguished. He was also a most discerning collector and critic.

Mi Fei liked to dabble in painting, mostly hills and trees shrouded in clouds and mists, such as his picture called 'Mountains and Pines in Spring' (Plate VIII). In doing such scenes, he departed radically from the tradition of the old masters. His chief innovation was the 'Mi dot', which meant that, instead of modelling his rocks with some varieties of *ts'un*, he used a profuse accumulation of dots to achieve the desired effect. He refused to paint on silk, preferring paper or even a piece of rag, sometimes using the broken end of a piece of sugar-cane as his brush. His style came to be known as the 'Mi style of clouds and mountains' and was praised for having done away with the 'bad habits' of the old painters.¹⁹ The path he blazed, however, was difficult for others to follow and was carried on successfully only by his talented son, Mi Yu-jên, and in the Yüan Dynasty by Kao Kê-kung.

Some of the latter-day critics consider the Mi style, father and son, as the forerunner of the type of Chinese painting known as the *wên jên hua*, or 'literary man's painting', a product of the scholar-gentlemen who used painting as a medium to express their personality and thoughts. Such paintings are done only to satisfy the scholar-gentlemen themselves, but they are nevertheless highly valued, partly because of the eminence of the scholar-gentlemen and partly because these works generally have a flavour of their own, 'the smell of books', certainly never vulgar and never in poor taste.

The rulers of the Northern Sung Dynasty, particularly the last ruler,

¹⁹ Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, *Hua Yen*. See n. 12 above.

Emperor Hui-tsung, were avid patrons of art. During his 25-year reign (1101-26), Hui-tsung built the Academy of Painting into one of the busiest departments of government, with hundreds of artists in daily attendance, even with some on duty at night. Talent flocked from the four corners of the land to the capital city of K'ai-fêng to take the examinations presided over by the Emperor himself. The successful candidates were given appropriate honours in the Academy. The outstanding ones were rewarded with the 'Golden Girdle'.

'In my leisure hours', Emperor Hui-tsung said, 'I only love painting.' The Academicians were summoned often to the imperial presence to paint scenes in the palaces and gardens, to collate the imperial collection, to pass critical judgment on the stream of new items coming in. The Emperor himself was an artist of stature and painted in practically all categories.

At the Academy, in the course of time, conventions were set up distinguished by their pedantry and preciosity. The examinations were held on themes which bordered on petty cleverness, such as the cutest way to represent the fragrance of the flowers, the song of the birds, the murmur of the stream, the crispness of the autumn air. Keen power of observation was the order of the day. For instance, the painters were once called upon to do pictures of a peacock strolling in a litchi grove. None of the entries met with the Emperor's approval. Later, by imperial decree, it was explained that all the painters had failed to notice that 'when a peacock climbs a rock, it raises its left leg first'.²⁰

The true artists, it stands to reason, objected strongly to such meaningless manoeuvres. To them, a true artist is a man who has 'read ten thousand books and travelled ten thousand miles'. When he does a landscape, he is portraying the cosmic awareness of his own personality which the Chinese call 'the hills and valleys in his heart'. He must rise above the mundane things of life. He must cultivate an affinity between the dignity of the human person and the amplitude of nature. As Chuang Tzu, the ancient philosopher, said: 'When the mind is in repose, it becomes the mirror of the universe, the speculum of all creation.'

'The way of painting', the Ming critic Tung Ch'i-ch'ang said, 'is to hold the universe in your hand. There will be nothing before your eyes which is not replete with life. So the great painters often lead long lives. As to those who depict nature minutely in bits and pieces, they are the servants of nature and their lives are often short.'²¹ It may be mentioned that Michelangelo lived to be 89.

The true artist, it follows, is a noble person, one who conducts himself in accordance with the highest moral standards. Foremost in the Confucian

²⁰ The Ming Dynasty critic Wang K'o-yü, in his book *Shan Hu Wang*, tells a great many fascinating stories of the Sung court in the reign of Hui-tsung. ²¹ Hua Yen.

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scheme of values is loyalty. In the changes of dynasties, it has been customary for the true artists to choose the road of retirement and even death rather than to switch their allegiance to the new rulers. The few who did change sides found themselves excluded from the halls of eminence. A renegade simply cannot be regarded as a noble person, and as Kuo Jo-hsü, the Sung critic, explained, only noble souls and high characters can produce truly great art.²² This is just another way of saying with John Ruskin that 'all lovely art is rooted in virtue'.

In the year 1126 the Tartars captured the city of K'ai-fêng. Emperor Hui-tsung was carried off to the North where he died in captivity nine years later.

The Sung court moved to the South and set itself up in the city of Hangchow, which later gained world renown through the pen of the Venetian traveller Marco Polo as the city of Quinsay. There on the banks of the Ch'ien-t'ang River and the shores of the Hsi Hu (West Lake), one of the most scenic spots in China, the artists gathered, with achievements which were in many ways as glittering as those of K'ai-fêng.

But the great masters of the Five Dynasties and the Northern Sung Dynasty had succeeded in making landscape-painting the most respected genre, the foremost of the thirteen categories of Chinese pictorial art. There were indeed many stylistic changes in subsequent generations, but the Ching-Kuan-Tung-Chü pattern has never been basically altered. It is on this ground that the period of the tenth and eleventh centuries has come to be known as the Golden Age of Chinese Landscape-Painting.

²² T'u Hua Chien Wen Chi, published 1078-1085 A.D.



