Chinese Art

2. The Song Dynasty

Pinyin spelling mostly approximates to English pronunciation apart from, notably,

Q = "ch" in cheap. X ="sh" in sham. Zh = "j" in jasmine. Z = "ds" hands. C = "ts" as in tsar.

Names are given with surnames first

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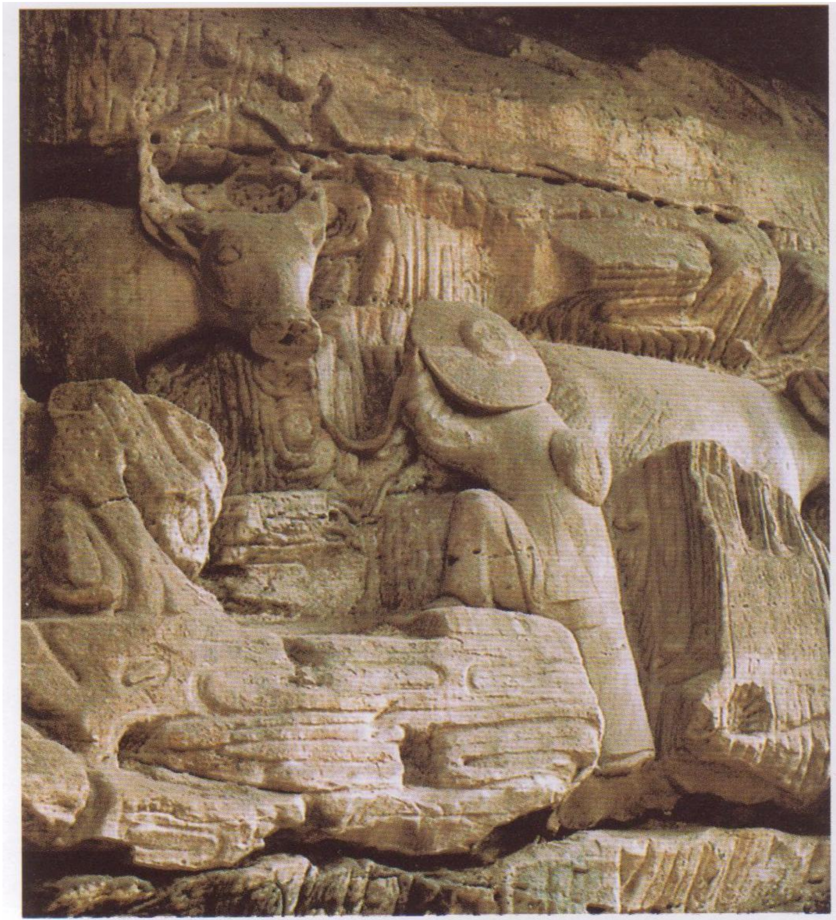
Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (908 - 959) and Song Dynasty (960 – 1279)

The An Lushan Rebellion undermined the central government of the empire and power devolved to the provinces. Slowly the Tang Dynasty died and China disintegrated. As before when the country was divided, Sichuan had a flourishing culture and Chengdu, whence the remnants of the Tang court fled, was distinguished by its scholars, poets and painters. When the country was re-unified under the Song, the court went up to the new capital, Bianjing (modern Kaifeng). Initially, the Song were surrounded by hostile powers. Some were bought off and others dealt with, and the new dynasty at last came to peace. The upper classes no longer engaged in the violent sports favoured by the Tang aristocrats, but cultivated the idea of a civilised life to which many Chinese aspired in later periods (even today): literature, music and painting.

Buddhist Religious Art

The general suppression of Buddhism had started in 845 and the destruction of temples and shrines marked the start of the decline of the religion as a force at court. The Song aristocracy believed in Neo-Confucianism; a synthesis of Confucian moral principles, Daoism and the Buddhist spirit of self-cultivation. However, Buddhism remained a popular religion among Chinese people as the nature of the scenes at cave temples built under the Song attests. Everyday scenes were carved at Dazu temple (1179-1249) as allegories; taming and tending cattle for submission to the teachings of Buddha. The peasant in baggy trousers and straw hat is wonderfully natural.



Pastoral Scene, rock carving Dazu, Sichuan 12th-13th century.

Guanyin remained popular with ordinary people as the focus of devotional practices aimed at personal salvation. But between the 10th and 11th centuries a new image of this saviour developed. The ambiguously-gendered bodhisattva from Dunhuang was transformed into a gentler and more approachable womanly image seated on a rocky outcrop.

Guanyin as the Guide of Souls, from Dunhuang, 10th century (painting on silk)

Water-Moon Guanyin of the Southern Seas, 12th century (painted wood)

This image of Guanyin, calm and tranquil, seated on the rocky shore of the fabled mountain home, Potala in India, was discovered as Chinese shipping expanded and sea-trade flourished. As a saviour relied on by those in peril at sea, Guanyin was worshipped by many in the trade. Guanyin seems less contemplative and more likely to step down from her rock and offer aid to anyone in need. Clay and wood became popular (and cheap) media for Buddhist images.

Figures of *Lohans* – followers of the Buddha who in China were half-saint, half-Daoist adept, living in isolation in mountains - enjoyed a wide popularity from the 10th century on. Sculptures of them were made in dried lacquer (usually only the head) and in clay. Famous pottery *Lohans* were found in caves south of Peking. Slightly over life-sized and seated on bases suggesting the weathered rocks of their mountain homes, they are purely Chinese. Bone structure and anatomy have rarely been displayed so clearly in Chinese art.

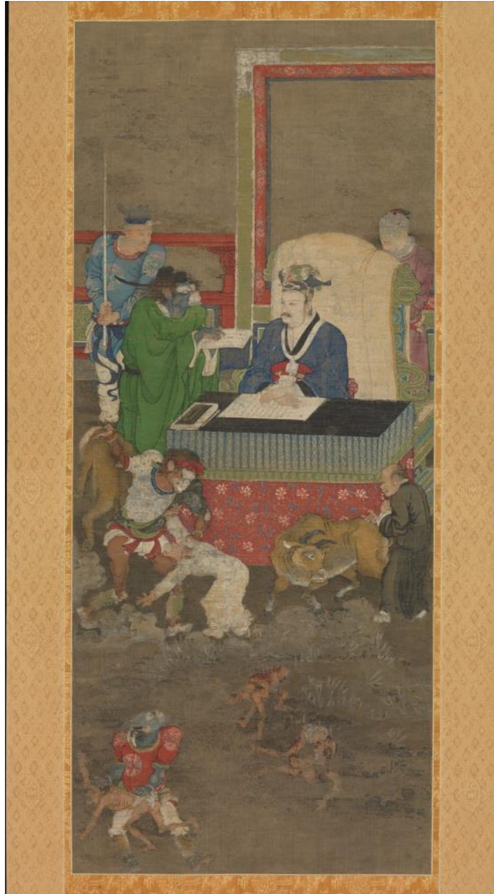
Lohan, Liao Dynasty c 1000, three-colour pottery

The elderly *Lohan* seems ready to talk about doctrine. Unlike some paintings of *Lohan*s, these "*three-colour"* pieces (deep orange-yellow, cream white and shades of green) are not caricatures, but rational and sober. However, statuettes and large-scale figure sculpture were never highly rated by the Chinese as art; these artefacts were used for devotional purposes.

The popularity of Buddhism created a strong demand for images and this was met by the invention of woodblock printing. Beginning in the 10th century, and blossoming by the 12th, Confucian classics, Daoist texts and Buddhist scriptures were printed. However, the Chinese preoccupation with the artist's touch discouraged the recognition of the figurative woodcut as an art form.

Landscape with Buddhist sages surrounded by disciples, from Chapter 13 of the Imperial Commentary, printed 1108, woodblock printed handscroll.

The idea of Ten Hellish Kings, presiding over a bureaucratised hell to which sinners where banished was an innovation in Chinese Buddhism in the 9th and 10th centuries which quickly became the standard view at all levels of society. Pictures rather than texts were used to spread the belief among the population. Hell images had been painted in temples from the 6th century and were part of the repertoire of Tang mural artists like Wu Daozi. As well as acting as focal points for meditation for Buddhist monks, they frightened lay viewers into correct behaviour. During the Song dynasty hell pictures became an important form of donor art, aimed at easing the torments of the souls of relatives of those who commissioned such pictures (a procedure later familiar to wealthy Roman Catholics in Europe). Hell pictures were used in public by tellers of religious tales, who would gather an audience and unroll a couple of scrolls in the market place. The example is from a workshop in the great port city of Ningbo. It is one from a number of almost identical sets to survive, often in Japanese temples to which they were exported at the time of manufacture.



Jin Chushi, *Ten Kings of Hell* (one of the set), Song Dynasty

Chan Buddhist Painting

Although crumbling as a church, Buddhism still played an important role in painting. The Chan sect of Buddhism escaped the general suppression of the religion. Like Daoism, Chan emphasises silence and self-cultivation which frees the mind from all intellectual and material dross to leave it receptive to enlightenment. Chan painters in the Song produced forms which would inspire monk painters into the 17th century.

Guanxiu (also spelled Kuan-hsiu, 832-912), was placed in a Chan monastery as a boy by his parents. As a man he enjoyed a reputation as a calligrapher and a poet. After a lifetime of painting Buddhist subjects in the lower Yangtze region, he came to the court of Wang Jian at Chengdu and it was there that his most important work was produced. His series of sets of sixteen portraits of Lohans were especially celebrated. The images, which Guanxiu said came to him in dreams, are exaggerations bordering on perversity which is one form of Chan art. The bony skulls, huge eyebrows and pronounced Indian features produce grim and ugly caricatures. The last few surviving copies of his work are treasured in Japan where Zen (as Chan was called there) long outlasted its popularity in China. These exaggerated caricatures were not to become the dominant form of Chan painting, as they take too long to produce. For the northern Chan Buddhist, enlightenment was attained through gradual learning and careful preparation. The southern school of Chan Buddhism, however, held that enlightenment was an irrational experience arrived at spontaneously. Naturally enough, most Chan painters opted for the latter.

Guanxiu, Leaves from *Album Depicting the Sixteen Lohans*, 894 (Japanese Imperial Household Collection)

Already in the last century of the Tang, action painting had developed (well before 20th century AbEx) and Chan artists were practising wildly eccentric techniques, fired by the impulse towards irrationality and spontaneity. In *Celebrated Painters of the Tang Dynasty* by Zhu Jingxuan written in the middle of the 9th century, three men were listed in the untrammelled class, rejecting the orthodox. ***Zhang Zao (active late 8th century)*** painted with blunt brushes, sometimes with one in each hand, and with his fingers. Indeed, Zhang was the most admired landscapist of the Tang judging by written commentaries. Zhu Jingxuan said that in his lifetime there were many of Zhang's landscape screens in private collections, and one writer of the 8th century had eight landscape panel scenes. Examples of panel scenes can be seen in the paintings of court life (below). These fragile pieces naturally have not survived. ***Li Ling-sheng (active early 9th century)*** painted in an impulsive spontaneous way, with the help of wine, using abbreviated sketchy brushstrokes and would render a tree with a dot and a stroke. With his splashed-ink technique ***Wang Mo (active late 8th century***), a mad fellow and often crazy with wine, was the most extreme;

> *"… when he was sufficiently drunk, he would spatter the ink onto the painting surface. Then, laughing and singing all the while, he would stamp on it with his feet and smear it with his hands, besides swashing and sweeping it with the brush."*

Fast, instinctive painting, often in monochrome ink, became the hallmark of the Chan School. ***Shi Ke (active mid-10th century)*** was the first practitioner of this method whose works survive. He was a wild and eccentric individual who according to an 11th century historian *"liked to shock and insult people and compose satirical rhymes about them."*

By Shi Ke's time, painters were classified into three grades; *neng* (capable), *miao* (wonderful) and *shen* (divine, superhuman). But for Shi Ke *shen* was not enough for it implied obedience to the rules. For these untamed masters, writers coined the term *yi* – meaning completely unrestrained by rules. The notion of *yi* crops up again and again in Chinese art.

> *"Painting in the yi style is difficult, those who follow it … despise refinement and rich colouring and draw forms quite sketchily, but grasp the natural spontaneously."*

Shi Ke's manner is shown in his *Chan Patriarchs*; the faces are depicted in some detail while the clothes are rendered with simple strokes.

Shi Ke, *The Second Chan Patriarch in Contemplation*, 10th century

Shi Ke, *Two Chan Patriarchs Harmonising Their Minds*, 10th century

Court Painting

In Nanjing these developments would have been met with horror. There Emperor Li Yu had recreated in miniature the Tang court and was keen on art. Under him scenes of court life, painted for the Tang by Zhou Fang and Zhang Xuan, were resurrected as a popular subject through Zhou Wenzhu and ***Gu Hongzhong (937-975)***. The latter painted a famous scroll which cast rather too much light on the courtly activities of official Han Xizai. The emperor wished to promote Han to high office but was concerned that Han often missed morning appointments. According to an official report, Han;

> *"allowed women of doubtful reputation to frequent his house, as he liked to listen to their clever singing and playing; but he imposed no restraint on them, and they went in and out and mixed with guests [a euphemism] as they pleased."*

The emperor, concerned that this simply might be malicious court gossip, sent the honest Gu Hongzhong to observe and record one of Han's banquets.

Gu Hongzhong, *Night Revels of Han Xizai* (detail), Song Dynasty copy

The scene looks respectable but the casual attitudes of Han (conspicuous in his tall black hat and lush beard) and his friends, his singing girls, the meaningful glances and the figures half-hidden under bed clothes are highly suggestive. The painting was considered in the 14th century as *"not a pure and fitting object for a high-class collection"* but reveals much about 10th century costume, furniture and ceramics. Fashionable ladies are now slight and slim, not the moon-faced matrons of the Tang. Of particular note are the lavish paintings, which include monochrome landscapes (as mentioned above) forming panels on beds as well as free-standing screens.

Zhou Wenzhu (active late 11th century) was said to have followed the style of Chou Fang, but the monumental solid grandeur of the Tang period was lost. His painting on a fan mounted as an album leaf is more personal – the lad in the tub is having his nose held just before being ducked and the boy on the far right is wriggling anxiously as he is being prepared for the bath. In contrast, the lad leaning on the tub, with his wet hair neatly parted has been through the ordeal and can relish the discomfort of his mates.

Zhou Wenzhu, *Ladies bathing Children*, c 970 (colour on silk)

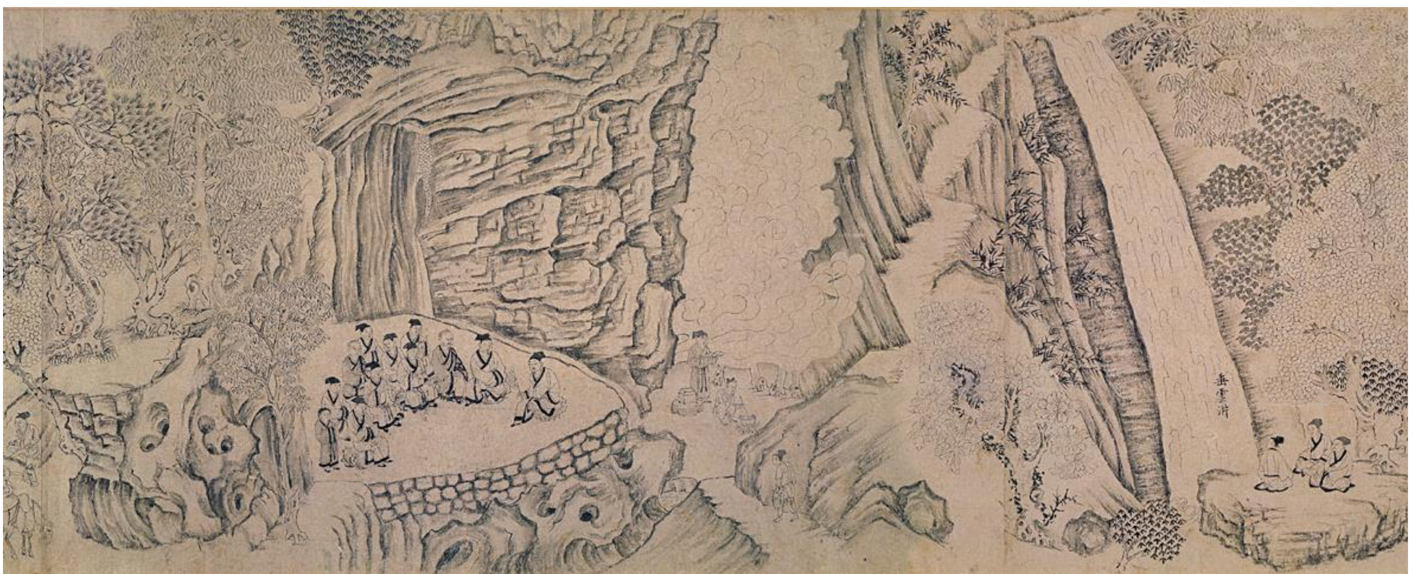
Zhou's *Literary Garden*, one of many records of the intellectual life of the court, is more monumental, but still lacks the serenity of the Tang despite repeating the clever disposition of figures in space. The brief flashes of white, however, are spectacular.

Zhou Wenzhu, *Literary Garden* (detail), late 10th century (handscroll)

The last great exponent of the Tang figure-painting tradition was ***Li Gonglin, better known as Li Longmian (1046-1106)*** from the name of his country estate (of which in emulation of Wang Wei he painted a long panoramic handscroll). He was a court intellectual. His father had a collection of old Tang paintings, which Li studied. In early life he was a famous painter of horses, re-creating Han Gan's style, and was a friend of the emperor's Master of the Stables. Horses were often sent as presents, usually accompanied by grooms. His famous *Five Tribute Horses*, show horse and groom with details such as name, age, place of origin.

Li Gonglin, *Five Tribute Horses* (detail), 11th century

A Daoist told him that if he continued much longer he would become like a horse himself, whereupon he switched to other themes. He spent years copying old masters and all manner of subjects, but his technique was largely restricted to ink line, providing a model for figure painters down to the Ming.



Li Gonglin, *Mountain Villa* (detail), 11th century

Northern Song Landscapes

Between 950 and 1050 a galaxy of great names succeeded each other in *"what must be looked upon as the supreme moment in classical Chinese landscape painting."* The great masters of the 10th and 11th centuries established an ideal in largely monochrome monumental landscape painting to which later painters were to return again and again for inspiration. The elements listed by Gu Kaizhi appear in these landscapes, usually on hanging scrolls, called *shan shui*; "mountain-water" pictures.

Jing Hao (also known as Hongguzi, c855 - 915) had a simple life, supporting himself by farming and spending his leisure hours wandering in the beautiful Taihang Mountains of eastern Shanxi. He is famous for *his Essay on Landscape Painting*, distinguishing between resemblance (which reproduces the outward, formal aspect of objects) and truth (which involves the inner reality): the painter who showed only resemblance produced a dead thing.

Jing Hao, *Mount Lu*, c 900 (hanging scroll, ink on silk)

Jing Hao taught Guan Tong. Guan, Li Cheng and Fan Kuan are regarded as the Three Masters of early Song Landscapes, developing the Northern Song style (as it was called later) characterised by angular strong peaks and a densely compacted composition. Kuo Jo-Hsu, an important 11th century writer on art wrote; *"In talent so exalted as to be beyond classification, these three – like legs of a tripod - will set the standard for a hundred generations."* A prediction that proved correct.

Guan Tong, *Autumn Mountain Shadow*, 10th century (hanging scroll, ink on silk)

Li Cheng, *A Solitary Temple Amid Clearing Peaks*, c 960 (hanging scroll, ink on silk)

Guan Tong (also spelled Kuan T'ung, c 906 – 960)

In Guan Tong's *Autumn Mountain Shadow*, as in all these landscapes, there is no apparent source of light but instead an even illumination. There is no vanishing point. Thus, the viewer's gaze is not fixed and he wanders through the landscape, as if he were on a pilgrimage. An early 12th century catalogue of the Imperial Collections says of Guan Tong;

> *"Most of all it delighted him to paint autumn hills and wintry forests, with groups of cottages, river crossings, hermits, recluses, fishermen selling their catch, mountain-hostelries. Look well at his pictures and you will find yourself transported to the scenes he portrays. You are standing, perhaps, 'on Pa Bridge amid the wind and snow' or travelling up the Three Gorges 'where gibbons scream from either shore'. You who but a moment ago were a common courtier or grubber in the dusty markets of the world are suddenly transformed."*

Li Cheng (919-967)

The description applies equally well to the other early Song landscape artists. Li Cheng was the Chinese ideal of the artist: a man of good family, well educated, wholly devoted to painting and scorning the clamouring of nobles and officials who wanted his work. *A Solitary Temple* is one of the finest early Chinese landscapes. The temple occupies the centre, but small figures are painted in detail. Peasants can be seen in the rustic inn and scholars with wine in the pavilions. These pilgrims are to be joined by a wealthy man riding a mule and his two servants who are approaching the bridge. The painting has only a few touches of colour. Artists preferred the ink used for calligraphy, which linked landscape painting with the learned literary tradition.

Fan Kuan (c960-1030)

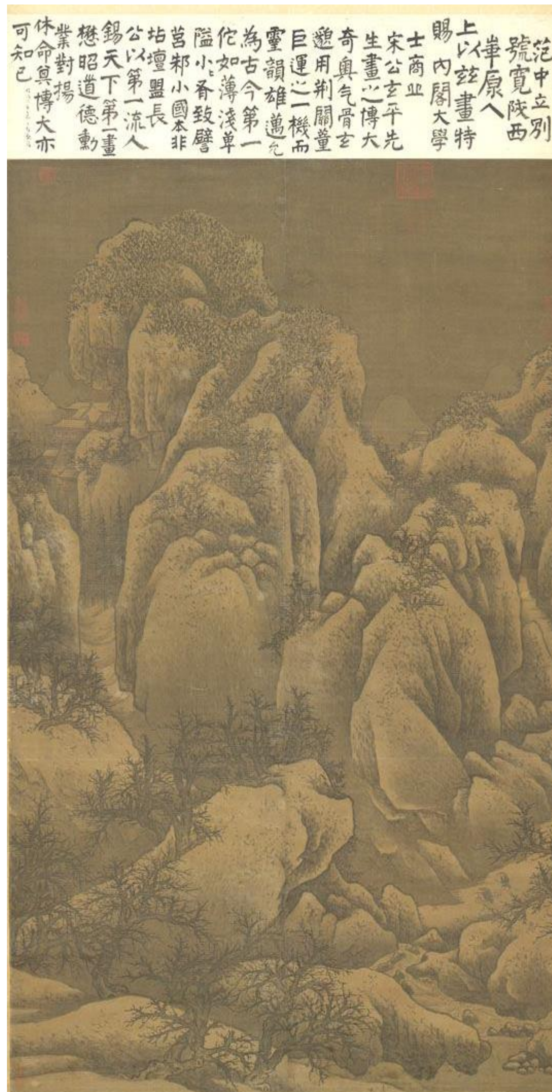
Fan Kuan was born in the middle of the 10th century;

> *"a stern and old-fashioned man, careless in his behaviour, fond of wine and with no command of the ways of the world … To begin with, he studied the art of Li Cheng, but one day woke up and said to himself with a sigh: 'My predecessors have not yet tried to seize the things as they really are; surely it is better to take the things themselves for teachers rather than men'."*

Thereupon he spent the rest of his life as a recluse in the rugged Qiantang Mountains of Shanxi, often spending a whole day gazing at a configuration of rocks or going out at night to concentrate on the effect of moonlight on snow. His *Travellers* is the best illustration of Northern Song landscapes, and considered one of the finest landscape paintings produced by a Chinese artist. A temple amid thick woods on a hill which has a view of a waterfall is approached over a rickety bridge. A rustic peasant drives four loaded mules towards a stream. The minute figure and his beasts emphasise the lonely vastness: *"in China not man but nature was the measure, and that nature was uniquely conceived as the symbol of the universe."*

Fan Kuan, *Travellers Among Mountains and Streams*, c 1000

The grandeur is produced by dramatic contrasts of light and dark in mist, rock and trees. The mountains seem to be alive from the energy of the brushstrokes and the roar of the water seems real. Fan Kuan creates depth by using areas of plain silk or very light ink wash to suggest mist: a device almost universal in Chinese landscape painting.



Fan Kuan, *Desolate Temple in Snowy Mountains*, 11th century

The winter scene of cold hills, leafless trees and pilgrims (bottom right) making their way to a distant temple (top left) is by Fan Kuan, according to the 17th century colophon written above the work. Thick snow coats the mountains and the valley floor. Here, there is no mist to suggest depth. Instead, the sky is dark and threatening. Simple outlines of grey hills hint at a far distance.

Guo Xi (also spelled Kuo Hsi, c 1020 - 1090)

Guo Xi painted at the court of the Northern Song at Kaifeng. He was also head of the Imperial Academy. He was enormously admired by his contemporaries and Kuo Jo-Hsu said of him; *"in this generation he is the single supreme figure."* In his essay *Comments on Landscape* he insists (following Fan Kuan) on the necessity, almost ethical obligation, for the artist to study nature in every aspect and to mark the procession of seasons:

> *"The spring mountain is wrapped in an unbroken stretch of dreamy haze and mist, and men are joyful; the summer mountain is rich with shady foliage, and the men are peaceful; the autumn mountain is serene and calm, with leaves falling, and men are solemn; the winter mountain is heavy with storm clouds and withdrawn, and men are forlorn. The sight of such pictured mountains arouses in man exactly corresponding moods. It is as if he were actually in the mountains. They exist as if they were real and not painted. The blue haze and the white path arouse a longing to walk there; the sunset[1] on a quiet stream arouses a longing to gaze upon it; the sight of hermits and ascetics arouses a longing to dwell with them; rocks and streams arouse a longing to saunter among them."*

[1] Although Guo Xi mentions sunsets, they appear rarely in Chinese art. Neither, indeed, does the sun. This is partly because (as just mentioned) landscape painters favoured an even illumination and partly because the source of light and energy is only the yang element. The few exceptions are almost all depictions in Buddhist art of Queen Vaidehi. She was given sixteen subjects upon which to meditate as a penance, and is usually depicted on her mat in the open looking across desert sands towards the low sun over far mountains.

Guo thought landscapes were vital to refresh the desk-bound scholar-official - *"We can only truly appreciate a great Chinese landscape painting if it has this power to send our spirits wandering".* Landscapes are a source of spiritual solace and refreshment:

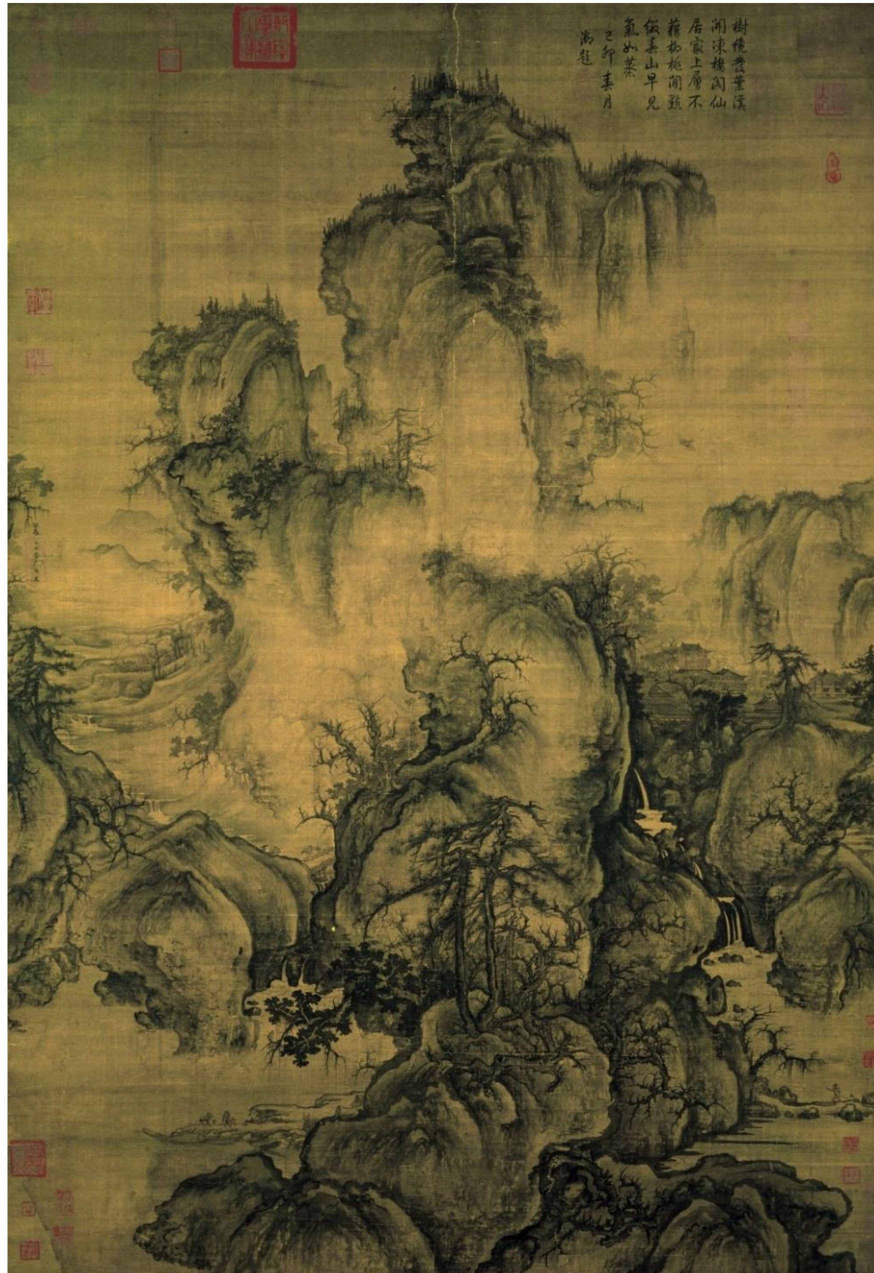
> *"No man of high principles could abandon his responsibilities to society and his family to be a recluse in the mountains". But the "longing for forests and streams, the companionship of mists and vapours" could be satisfied by paintings, thus allowing the "city dweller to sit to his heart's content amid streams and valleys." This "is the ultimate meaning behind the honour the world accords landscape painting."*

We'll shear off at a tangent with Guo's thought. The city-bound scholar could meditate and rejuvenate his spirit in a natural garden, a smaller version of the imperial paradise park [mentioned in Part 1]. The 6th century Six Dynasties period saw the rise of an aesthetic interest in natural gardens, and some garden designers became famous. The natural garden had to have all the essential elements of the cosmos: earth and water, stones, plants, animals and pavilions. Wealthy scholars could afford to have such gardens built, but they were a luxury of the privileged few. The availability of gardens as a source of rejuvenation and meditation was extended under the Tang in a new artificial medium; miniature landscapes on trays called *penjing*. These tray landscapes were found throughout society: imperial palaces, mountain retreats, houses of common people. Like the natural garden, *penjing* had to contain all the elements of the cosmos and it is in this way that they differ from the later Japanese *bonsai* tradition which features only plants. The same pleasure was derived from tending and designing both *penjing* and natural gardens, the difference being that for the former the wandering was mental. From the 8th century*, penjing* have offered Chinese people from all walks of life a refuge and a retreat – an alternative to pilgrimages to mountains, viewing hanging scroll landscape paintings or walking in well-designed natural gardens – yet fulfilling the same purpose; rejuvenation of the spirit.

Penjing by Qingquan Zhao (renowned master)

Now back to Guo. A little like *penjing* in fact, Guo Xi believed that landscape paintings should not be real places. He stressed the free inspiration of the artist as heroic creator. The picture came not from reality, although an artist should sketch from nature to be practiced in representation of elements, but from within the heart and mind of the artist (in this he would be mirrored by Leonardo). Guo's *Early Spring*, his most famous work, is an imaginary view, but contains close studies of trees and rocks and streams, composed in a way that leads the eye from tiny figures in the foreground to the temple on the right and up into the mist or far away to distant mountain peaks. Guo also wrote about his idea of "three types of distance" (high, deep and level), still used in modern times in discussing composition.

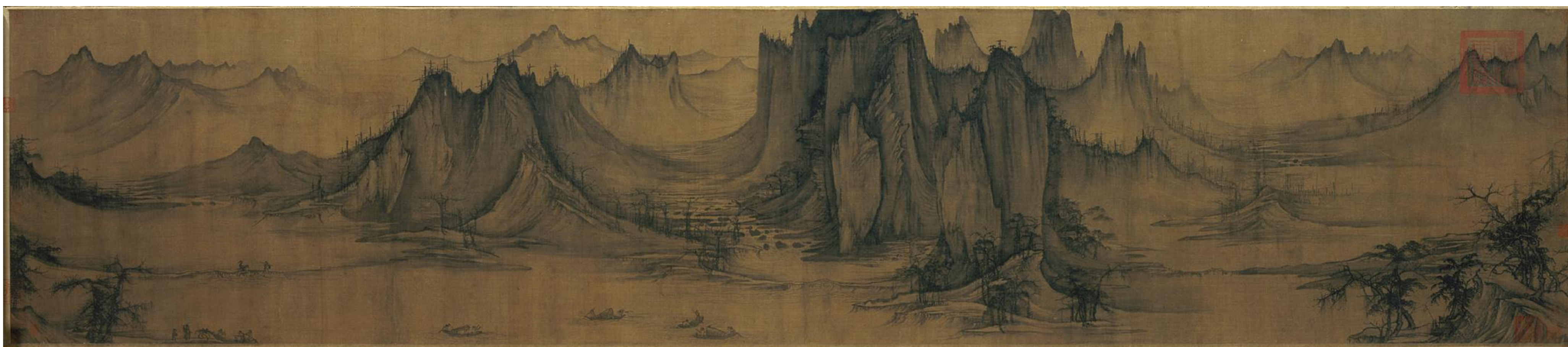
Early Spring contains an indication of how highly Guo Xi was regarded. Halfway down the left edge, in a column of characters which appear to be hanging from a tree, the work is signed and dated by him and sealed in faint red. Seals, usually impressed in red, began to be added to pictures in the 7th century partly as a mark of proud ownership but mainly by approving connoisseurs. Adding laudatory colophons, or inscriptions, was not thought to deface a work (one can hear the shrieks of Western museum curators). Laudatory poems and colophons had been added to 9th century scrolls - the top of Jing Hao's *Mount Lu* (in Part 1) is littered with them - and the practice of commenting on a painting in this way would become widespread by the Ming period. The calligraphy on the top right of *Early Spring* was added by Emperor Qianlong (reigned 1736-1795) of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty.



Guo Xi, *Early Spring,* 1072

The hanging scroll was to be seen all at once, but still to be looked at closely. The viewer was invited to follow the pilgrim across the bridge, up to the temple and on to remoter scenes. A handscroll is never opened fully (in the way they are often displayed in museums and here for convenience) but rolled from right hand to left in segments, which draws the viewer into the scenery – following the artist over bridges, waiting for a ferryboat, walking through a village. Only by shifting perspective is such a journey along the scroll possible. Guo painted a handscroll to mark the retirement of a fellow government official, with the classic feature of tall foreground trees set against a river background. The scroll uses landscape to evoke moods. On the right a refreshing scene with two active men fishing; on the left more subdued activity across a bridge and in the centre two elderly figures approach a pavilion to bid farewell to an old friend; a sense of autumn.

Guo Xi, *Old Trees*, *Level Distance*, c 1080



Xu Daoning, *Fishermen’s Evening Song*, c 1049

A handscroll painting by ***Xu Daoning (also spelled Hsu Tao-ning, c 970 - 1052)*** is almost contemporary with Guo Xi's *Early Spring* but very different. Xu Daoning earned his living as an apothecary and did not belong to the official class. Kuo Jo-hsu, who lived at the same time as Xu, wrote of him;

> *"Early in his career he set great store by a meticulous precision; but as an old man he cared only for simplicity and swiftness of drawing. With peaks that rose abruptly and sheer, and forest trees that were strong and unyielding, he created a special school and form of his own."*

Xu Daoning's *Fishermen* is very simply constructed in this abbreviated style, a highly individual rendition of a landscape. The handscroll, now 82 inches long but originally twice that length again, allows the viewer to follow the fishermen as they sing their way home. Xu's trees are very like Li Cheng's on whom he modelled his early style. This painting drew much attention and Xu subsequently became popular among Chinese nobles as a painter of murals.

Northern Song realistic landscapes could take many forms. ***Zhao Boju (c 1120 - 1182)*** was a master of the "green and blue" style which emerged under the Tang. *Autumn Colours*, with the twist and thrust of the mountains against each other and exquisite detail, is a fine example.

Zhao Boju, *Autumn Colours along Rivers and Mountains (detail)*, 12th century

Handscrolls were used to reveal long panoramas. A famous scroll, almost 10 inches high and over 17 feet long, depicts life in and around the capital Kaifeng at the time of the Spring Festival when families gather to tend tombs. The work is useful today as an insight into life centuries ago. The scroll is attributed to early 12th century scholar ***Zhang Zeduan (also spelled Chang Tse-tuan, 1085 - 1145).*** The vision is cinematic, tracking the river bank like a movie camera. His riverboats show an easy mastery of shading and foreshortening which would not appear again in Chinese painting until centuries later.

Zhang Zeduan, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (details), 12th century

Along the River is among the most renowned paintings in Chinese art, and regarded as one of the best works from the Song dynasty. The original, of which each of the above is about a fifth of its length, remains in the Palace Museum in Beijing. Copies were made in the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The last is housed in the Taipei Palace Museum. That copy and the original are considered national treasures and exhibited only for brief periods every few years.

Southern Song landscapes

These painters of Northern Song landscapes were all men nurtured in the hard and bleak countryside of the north and this was reflected in their style. The painters of the south lived in a kinder environment. The hills of the lower Yangtze Valley are softer, the sunlight is suffused by mist and the grip of winter is less harsh. The Southern Song landscape style features a roundness of contour, but is especially noted for a quality that would become increasingly important in Chinese landscape paintings – the quality of atmosphere, of misty air and limitless space out of which forms emerge, half-revealed. The two famous painters in this style worked at the Nanking court of the great art patron Emperor Li Yu (937-978), who was captured by the Song and killed by poison on their orders.

Dong Yuan (also spelled Tung Yuan, active c 934 - 962)

Dong Yuan from Nanking painted the gentle mountains of that part of China. His compositions evoke a sense of space:

> *"He was skilled in painting the mists of autumn and far open views … his pictures were meant to be seen at a distance, because their brushwork was very rough (said Shen Gua)".*

Dong Yuan, *Mountain Hall*, c 950

Dong Yuan also worked in colour, similar to the blue-green landscape style. His *Dragon Abode* shows more clearly his genius for the depicting space.

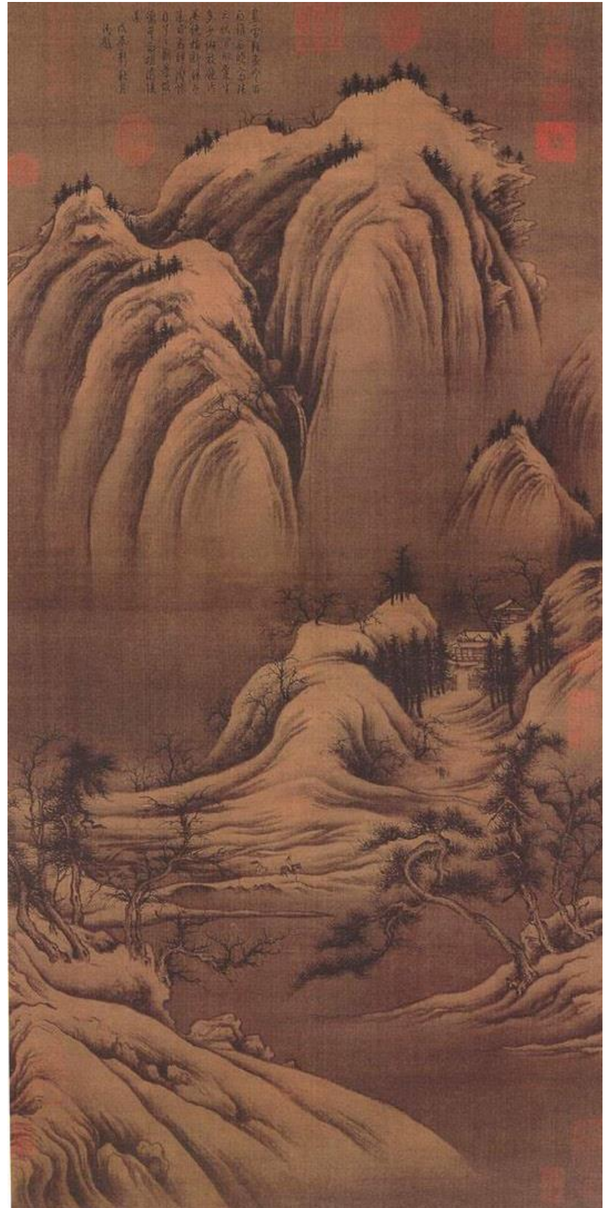
Dong Juan, *Residents on the Outskirts of Dragon Abode*, 10th century

His scroll of scenery along the Xiao and Xiang rivers in Hunan illustrates the revolutionary impressionism he achieved by means of broken ink washes and the elimination of outline. This summer evening shows soft hills, with mist beginning to form in trees, while fishermen go about their business. Over the scene hangs a peace so profound we can almost hear the voices as they call to each other over the water: *"here for the first time an element of pure lyricism appears in Chinese landscape painting."*

Dong Juan, *Scenes Along the Xiao and Xiang Rivers* (detail), 10th century

Dong Juan's pupil, ***Juran (also spelled Chu Jan, active latter half of 10th century)*** was famed for his use of long modelling strokes and accenting dots (*cun*).
He retains his master's rounded contours and soft brushstrokes, but not the horizontal portrayal of space. *Discussing Dao in Autumn Mountains* shows Juran's style, with the dots being employed not just to suggest vegetation but for accents, an innovation. The vertical composition is similar to the Northern Song landscape format, but the hills are softer. His *Snow Mountains* shows the classic softness of Southern Song landscapes, evoking the deep peace and silence of winter snow under heavy skies. The work retains the monumental perspective; the travellers dwarfed by the hills, but the snow is emphasised by the use of dark (instead of light washes for mist) to suggest depth.

Juran, *Discussing Dao in Autumn Mountains*, 10th century



Juran, *Snow Mountains*, 10th century

Literati Painting

Su Shi (also called Su Tungpo or Dongpo, 1037-1101)

Under the Song in the 11th century came a hardening of theories marking a distinction between amateur scholars and professional artisan painters. This theory was created by a group centred on Su Shi, a towering poet, calligrapher and painter, regarded as the pre-eminent Chinese personality of the 11th century. Su Shi stressed a number of themes of scholarly painting: the link between painting and the elite art of poetry; the disinterestedness of the true scholar-painter who will never work for financial reward (*"in matters of calligraphy and painting one does not discuss price: the gentleman is hard to capture by money.")* and the superiority of spontaneous creation over laborious technique. In fact, this spontaneity was part of their affected manner. They were gentlemen and scholars first, and painters only second. Lest they be taken for professionals they often claimed they were only playing with ink, and that a certain roughness or awkwardness was a mark of unaffected sincerity. By choice they painted in ink on paper, deliberately avoiding the seduction of colour and silk.

Statue of Su Shi near the West Lake at Hangzhou

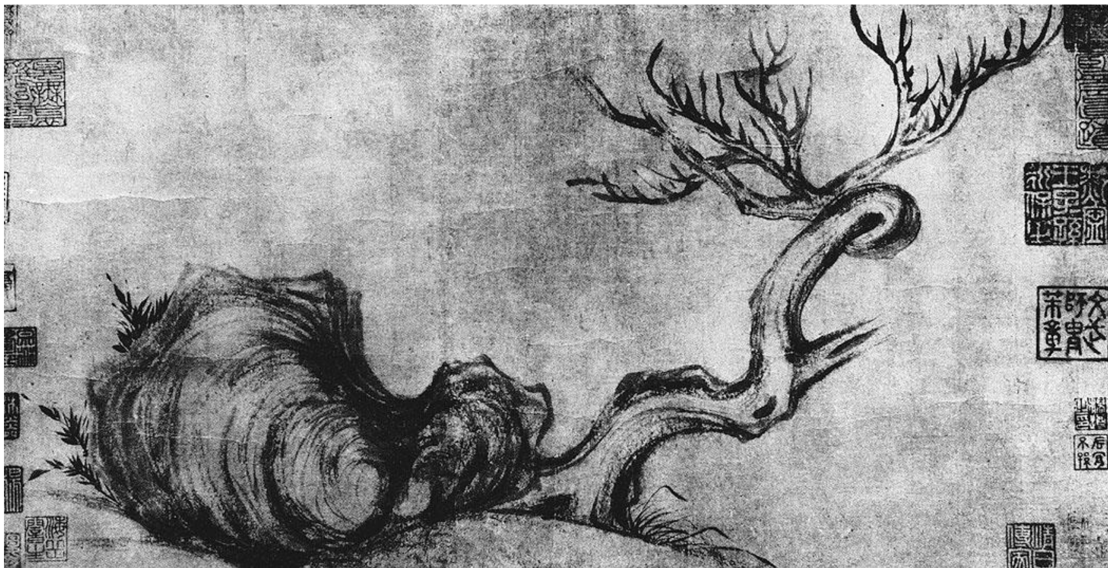
Su Shi propounded two novel ideas:

> the purpose of painting was not representation but expression: *“to discuss paintings in terms of ‘form-likeness’ is to show the understanding of a child.”* The realism of the professional court painter was thus summarily dismissed as mere illustration. To Su and his circle, the aim of a landscape painter was not to evoke in viewers the feeling they would have if they were actually wandering in the mountains, but rather to reveal to friends something of the artist’s own mind and feelings. They spoke of merely “borrowing” the forms of rocks, trees or bamboo which for the moment found a “lodging” for their thoughts and feelings. Instead of “from this you can experience the scenery of Xiao and Xiang” it would be “from this you can discern something about Dong Yuan’s nature.”
>
> the integration of poem and painting where each was equally important.

Su Shi was exiled from his government post for political crimes in 1080, largely because his poetry criticised the reforms of the Chief Minister Wang Anshi, especially the government monopoly imposed on the salt industry. Su was exiled to Hubei for six years to a post which carried no pay. Although he returned when the government changed he was exiled again in 1094. His art and poetry reflected some of his experiences of banishment. The Song scholar, and fellow statesman, Ouyang Xiu wrote about the poetry of his friend, Su Shi, and the lines could apply equally well to his paintings:

> *His recent poems are dry and hard;*
> *Try chewing on some – a bitter mouthful!*
> *The first reading is like eating olives,*
> *But the longer you suck on them, the better the taste.*

A crucial element of the art of the literati was their choice of subject. Su Shi’s tree and rock were popular among the elite. Such paintings do not demand the prolonged effort of landscapes and are, thus, ideal for the expression of spontaneous feeling. Moreover, the pair have meanings which can be contrasted or compared. The tree’s birth, growth, maturity and death, symbolic of man’s striving but inevitable end, versus the rock’s permanence. Alternatively, old trees (generally in Chinese art a cypress or a pine) stripped to their core symbolise the endurance of the human spirit and the scholar’s essential integrity: just like the constancy of a rock. Rock and tree, therefore, are frequent companions in Chinese paintings of the literati in small scenes and in larger landscapes.



Su Shi, *Withered Tree and Strange Rock*, 11th century

Legend associates the origins of bamboo painting in plain ink with a 10th century noblewoman named Lady Li. However, Bo Yuji, the poet of *Song of Unending Sorrow*, wrote about meeting an artist called Xiao Yue a century earlier, in 823-4; *"now well over seventy, his hand shook and his eyes were dim, but he still ranked as the greatest bamboo painter of his day … Xiao was very loath to part with his paintings even though people often spent ages trying to acquire one of them … he painted a clump of fifteen stems and gave them to me as a present."* Bo Yuji wrote how alive Xiao Yue's bamboo was: *"I look up and catch sight of it: it looks like real bamboo and not a painting, I fancy I can hear the rustle of the leaves."* Xiao Yue was the first Chinese artist whose reputation rests entirely on bamboo painting. But only in the Song dynasty did the plant come to stand for the character of the gentleman "bending but not yielding". In part this reflected the sort of career upheavals experienced by Su Shi and the prized ability to maintain one's principles in the face of fickle and ignorant administration. By the early 12th century 'ink bamboo' was listed in painting treatises as a separate branch of the art.

Wen Tong (1019-1079)

Wen Tong, a member of the Su Shi circle, is one of the paragons of literati painting and specialised in bamboo. Wen Tong's work was spontaneous. Allegedly he painted two different bamboo pictures simultaneously with a brush in each hand. The Chinese said "there are whole bamboos in his heart", meaning that he had well-formed plans. He would stroll in a bamboo forest observing closely how the plants grew in different seasons. His *Bamboo* is wonderfully composed as if mirroring the whole in his mind, and Su Shi wrote about this:

> *"Now when painters do it joint by joint and add to it leaf by leaf, will this be bamboo? In painting bamboo one must first have the perfected bamboo in mind. When one takes up the brush and gazes intently, one sees what one wants to paint. Then one rises hurriedly and wields the brush to capture what one sees. It is like the hare's leaping up and the falcon's swooping down; if there is the slightest slackening, then the chance is gone. Wen Tong taught me this way, and I could not achieve it but understood the way it should be done."*

Su Shi wrote a poem in a similar vein:

> *When Wen Tong painted bamboo,*
> *He saw bamboo and not himself.*
> *Not simply unconscious of himself,*
> *Trance-like, he left his body behind.*

This reflected Zhang Yanyuan's comments in 847 in his *Record of Famous Painters*:

> *"the conception was kept whole in the mind before using the brush, so that when the painting was finished the conception was embodied in it ... If you revolve thoughts and pick up your brush consciously thinking of painting, the more you try the less success you will have: the result will be a dead painting. Wielding the brush without being conscious means the hand will not stiffen and the mind will not freeze up and the painting will emerge."*

Chan artists would understand this view. Jackson Pollock hinted at this idea in 1947 (but with very different results): *"when I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I am doing … I have no fears about making changes because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through."*

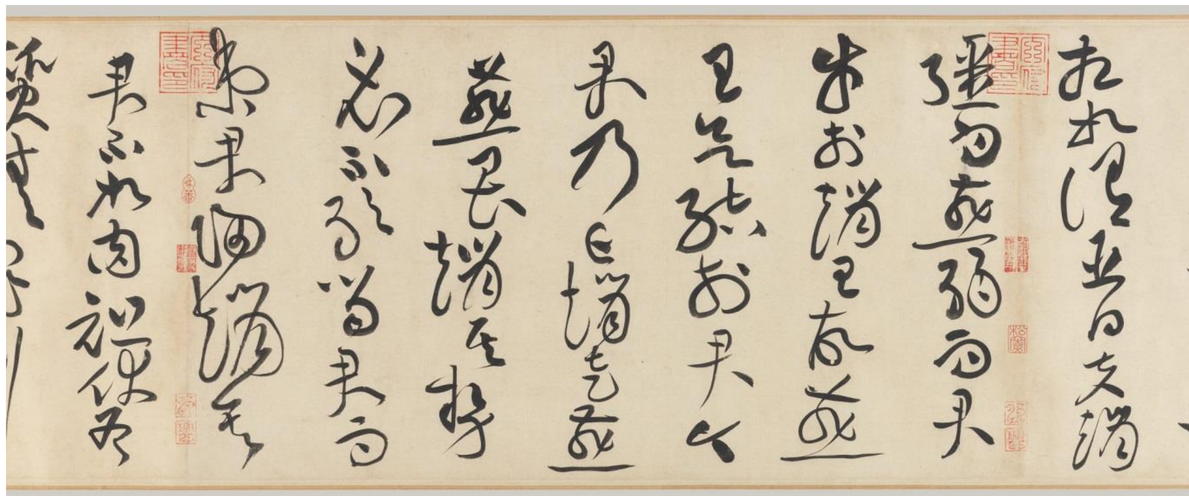
Wen Tong, *Bamboo in Monochrome Ink*, 11th century

Other favourite subjects of the literati were pine and plum which, like bamboo, do not wither in the cold days of winter. These are called the Three Friends of Winter, symbolising steadfastness, perseverance and resilience; representing the scholar-gentleman's ideal. They are common in Chinese art and Zhao Mengjian, a later Song official, painted one of the earliest examples.

Zhao Mengjian, *The Three Friends of Winter*, (leaf from the album; "*Essence of Ink*"), 13th century

Mi Fu (or Mi Fei) (1052-1107)

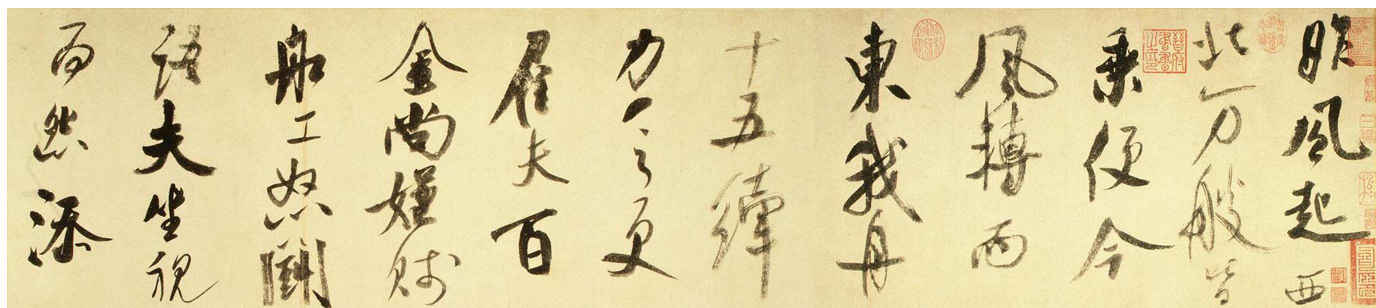
The work of these early scholar-painters was always original, simply because their art was a sincere expression of their personality. Mi Fu would spend long evenings with his friend Su Shi surrounded.by piles of paper and jugs of wine, writing away at top speed until the paper and wine gave out and small boys grinding the ink were slumped in fatigue. As well as painting, the pair studied calligraphy along with ***Huang Tingjian*** (1045-1105) another young friend for whom Su Shi had secured a post as examination grader. Huang became dissatisfied with the rigidity and over-sophistication of the Northern Song style and had little time for Tang calligraphy. He studied Wang Xizhi and Huai Sui [Part 1] and from their styles developed his own wild cursive script. Huang used it in his *Biographies of Lian Po and Lin Xiangru* which tells of the rivalry between the two chief ministers of the Kingdom of Chao during the Warring States period.



Huang Tingjian, *Biographies of Lian Po and Lin Xiangru (detail),* c 1095

Holding the brush perpendicular to the paper Huang Tingjian wrote with his wrist and elbow suspended. Thus, he followed through on each stroke with the power of his entire arm and body rather than flicking the brush merely with wrist and fingers. He held the brush firmly and solidly.

Mi Fu had various clerical posts and from 1081 spent ten years travelling China studying private collections of ancient calligraphy and painting. In 1099 he was assigned to a state waterways agency, supervising the collection and transportation of grain tax from the Lake Tai area to the capital. For this work Mi Fu travelled in a houseboat bearing the sign *The Mi Family Calligraphy and Painting Barge*, and containing his collection of calligraphy and painting scrolls. He also studied ancient styles. During his time on the barge he produced *Poem Written in a Boat on the Wu River*.



Mi Fu, *Poem Written in a Boat on the Wu River (detail),* 1100.

Su Shi described Mi's calligraphy as "*a sailboat in a gust of wind, or a warhorse charging into battle*". Whereas Huang's calligraphy is tightly controlled, Mi's is loose and spontaneous. He believed the brush should be held easily with a light touch: *"let the palm arch loosely and freely, so the brush movement can be swift and natural, and can happen unintentionally … the pressure of the fingers on the brush should not always be the same; let it be natural and spontaneous."* Emperor Huizong asked Mi Fu to compare his calligraphy with his contemporaries, Mi Fu replied: *"Huang Tingjian draws his characters, Su Shih paints his … I sweep mine*."

Mi Fu was a caustic and eccentric character. He was fixated on cleanliness which kept him constantly washing and he allowed no one to touch his paintings. He had a fascination for fantastically eroded rocks, which he collected. One reason for his nickname of "Madman Mi" was because he addressed his favourite rock as "my elder brother".

In painting landscapes Mi Fu abandoned the drawn line completely. Given his absorbing interest in calligraphy this is may be surprising, but perhaps he enjoyed the contrast. Mi Fu formed his mountains with rows of blobs of wet ink laid on paper with the flat of the brush, evocative of the misty southern landscape he knew so well. His work is expressionist, capturing his mood. Forms dissolve. The building is intentionally drawn in a playful way.

Mi Fu, *Mountains and Pines in Spring*, c 1100

Mi Fu's art was not widely appreciated among contemporaries outside Su Shi's circle. He was regarded as wet and splashy with no control. Later, however, he was celebrated as a rare example of the untrammelled style. The painter and commentator Yun Shou-ping (1633-1690) crystallised the view that Mi was the originator of the *i* (or free) style,

> "*Not to follow the trodden path is called having a scholarly air; not to go in for the taste of the time is called being of untrammelled quality. The creation of this current began with the two Mis [Mi Fu and son Mi Youren] and attained a peak in the Yuan period, spilling over to the beginning of the Ming. Consider its brush and ink; they are outstanding for relaxed spontaneity. Savour its flavour; it excels for a lonely plainness. Although it rejects the square and avoids the round still it is extremely lovely and complete."*

His striking Mi-dot technique was softened slightly by his son ***Mi Youren (1086-1165)*** to achieve breadth and luminosity with the simplest of means.

Mi Youren, *Cloudy Mountains,* (scroll and detail), 1130 (Cleveland Museum of Art)

Bird and Flower Paintings

Emperor Huizong (referred to also as an artist as Zhao Ji) was the last emperor (reigned 1101-1125) of the Song who ruled Northern China. During his reign the use of art to bolster imperial legitimacy reached a new intensity as the empire came under threat. Auspicious signs that cosmic powers blessed his rule were sought and portrayed in banners on special occasions. Such signs might have been seen in the sky, or be strange animals or wonderfully shaped rocks. Cranes are a powerful symbol of Heaven's blessing. The emperor painted a flock allegedly seen swirling above and perched on his palace buildings in an expression of divine support.

Emperor Huizong, *Auspicious Cranes*, 1112

Huizong was born in 1082. He was not brought up to be emperor, devoting his youth largely to art, but circumstances placed him on the throne. He was amiable but superstitious and weak. His passion for art resulted in a collection of 6,396 paintings by 231 artists. Huizong listed paintings by category; the seventh was "Domestic Animals and Wild Beasts", and the eighth "Flowers and Birds". These were dominant themes at the court academy. The emperor imposed a rigid orthodoxy which laid the foundation for decorative compositions using enamel-bright colours. Paintings were painstaking; birds painted feather by feather and flowers stamen by stamen. Naturally, the emperor painted in this way; quiet careful studies of birds on branches – a style which dominated court art until the 20th century.

Emperor Huizong, *Golden Pheasant and Cotton Rose*, 11th century

Emperor Huizong also painted *Finches and Bamboo,* signed with his cipher and set in a spring morning. The bamboo leaves, their tips singed by the harsh winter, have just regained their jade-green lustre with pink tendrils sprouting from each branch. The sleek male finch on the swaying lower branch sings to the female above who looks away coquettishly.

The composition is beautifully balanced. The bamboo stalks and rock outlines crisscross, and the basic rhythms of the design are repeated in the Emperor's cipher on the right, which also serves to fill the outline of the rocky overhang. The image is an enchanted vision of an emperor in retreat from a troubled empire. He was keen on the natural world and spent hours in his pleasure gardens studying and painting rare birds and flowers. Comparing his work with Cui Bai's *Magpies and Hare* (four pages below) it is evident that the Emperor rejected the dynamic and changing reality in favour of an optimistic vision of a harmonious and balanced world.

Emperor Huizong, *Finches and Bamboo*, 11th century

The art of painting flowers received a powerful stimulus from Buddhism which used them in decorative borders and in paradise scenes. By the 10th century "bird and flowers" became recognised as an independent category, and two of the most celebrated masters worked during that era. ***Huang Quan (903-965)***, is said to have invented a revolutionary technique of flower painting at the court of Wang Jian in Chengdu, working almost entirely in delicate transparent washes of colour (the boneless technique). This style was considered decorative and eventually became popular with professionals and court painters.

Huang Quan's great rival at Nanjing, ***Xu Xi (937 – 975),*** had a very different technique, drawing leaves and flowers swiftly in ink and ink wash, adding only a little colour. This found favour among the literati. No paintings by these two survive but their techniques remained popular with future flower painters.

Huang's son, ***Huang Jucai,*** began working at the Song court in 965. He successfully combined elements of both styles in hanging scrolls, sometimes using clear firm outlines (branches) but also faint lines or simply washes (blossom).

Huang Jucai, *Parrot and Insect among Pear Blossoms*, second half of 10th century

Critic Shen Gua commented on the work of the three:

> *The two Huangs' flower paintings are marvellous in their handling of colours. Their brushwork is extremely fresh and finely detailed. The ink washes are almost invisible, and are supplemented only by washes of light colours. Their sort of painting you might call sketching from life. Hsu Hsi [Xu Xi] would use his ink and brush to draw in a very broad way, add a summary colouring and that would be all. With him the spiritual quality is pre-eminent, and one has a special sense of animation. Huang [Quan] disliked his technique, called his work coarse and ugly, and rejected it as being without style."*

Over a century later paintings by the Huangs still existed, according to a list compiled by Kuo Jo-hsu: *"peach-blossoms, falcons, pure white pheasants, rabbits, doves by a golden bowl, peacocks, tortoises and cranes."* Evidently, animals also appeared in bird-and-flower paintings.

The most famous 11th century painter in this category was ***Cui Bai (also referred to as Tsui Po, active 1050-1080)***. He also painted dragons and Buddhists frescoes. Cui Bai was appointed Scholar of the Arts in the emperor's Painting Academy, but; *"he was by nature careless and indulgent and incapable of any practical handling of affairs and so resigned his post."* Nevertheless, Cui Bao is so illustrious that his name became appended to the majority of bird-and-flower paintings.

Cui Bai, *Wintry Sparrows*, Second half of 11th century

Cui Bai is particularly well-known for his painting of *Magpies and Hare*, known as the 'double happiness' as 'two magpies' in Mandarin Chinese is pronounced the same as 'two happinesses'. The hare is a masterpiece of realism in pose and form; his startled reaction to the magpies with his ears flat and paw frozen in apprehension is so convincing the harsh cries of the birds almost are audible. The trees are detailed and the green leaves of the young bamboo form a contrast with the warm orange of the tree's foliage. In contrast, the land and rocks are produced in broad brush-strokes. The composition is novel, forming an S-shape, across which the beaks of the magpies form a diagonal to the quivering nose of the hare.

Cui Bai, *Magpies and Hare*, 1061

Emperor Huizong's painting of *Auspicious Cranes* may have been prescient after all - his rule continued for another 14 years. However, his interest in art and pleasure blinded him to the inevitable; in the end he was rather like Cui Bai's hare, oblivious until the alien creatures were upon him. In 1126 his capital at Kaifeng was captured by the Jin Tartars marauding through China from the north. The emperor and 3,000 members of his court were carried off as captives to Mongolia. Huizong died there in 1135. His art collection was lost when the capital was sacked. The Tartars pressed south, crossing the Yellow River, but they retired to their more northern spoils in 1138. Huizong's son established the Southern Song court at Hangzhou.

Later Song Landscape Painting

These remnants of the Song (known as the Southern Song) attempted to recapture the splendour of the old life in the ‘temporary’ capital at Hangzhou. An Academy of painting in the service of the court was recreated and painters received ranks within the organisation as well as special marks of imperial favour such as the prestigious Golden Girdle. Service within the institution often was hereditary. The loss of half the empire and the ever-present threat of further barbarian incursions had little effect on Chinese art: history painting has never been the prominent genre it was to be in Western art. Academy subjects remained landscapes, birds and flowers and scenes of palace life.

As an aside, a new genre of painting flowered in the Southern Song court. The theme of “children playing” had appeared in Tang dynasty art, but it was in the Song that paintings of the subject became popular. Perhaps this was the (unconscious) reaction to the strife with neighbours; a desire for the innocence, joy and harmony of childhood recreation. ***Su Hanchen (active mid-12th century)*** who travelled south from the old Song court to Hangzhou was the acknowledged master and produced delightful pictures.

Su Hanchen, *Children at play in Autumn*, 12th century

Su Hanchen, *Children at play in Winter*, 12th century

Despite this innovation landscapes are remembered as one of the great contributions to Chinese art from the Southern Song period. The classical Northern Landscape tradition was brought to the Southern Song by ***Li Tang (c1050 – 1130)*** who is credited with a monumental style based on the large axe-stroke *cun*, a description of his method of hacking out angular facets of his rocks with the side of his brush. *Myriad Valleys* shows this style. Unusually for the period, the painting is signed, down the pale spindle of the light grey narrow peak immediately to the left of the large central massif: *"Painted by Li Tang of Heyang in the spring of the 'Jiachen' year [1124] of the Xuanhe Reign of the Great Song (*皇宋宣和甲辰春河陽李唐筆*)."*

Li Tang, *Wind in Pines among Myriad Valleys*, 1124

The blue-and-green style of landscape was another tradition brought south. Chao Po-chu, who had worked for Emperor Huizong and moved south to Hangzhou was best noted for this. Another member of the old Song Academy, Chiang Tsan continued Juran's small accenting dot style.

The tradition of Dong Yuan's soft landscapes also lived on. The handscroll *Dream Journey through the Xiao and Xiang Rivers* was painted around 1170 to console a Chan priest whom, while having made several pilgrimages, regretted never having travelled to the Xiao and Xiang region. The work, by an artist known only by his surname, combines wonderful grandeur with serenity of mood. Distance is shown through subtle grades of ink tone. The survival of a handful of paintings in this style enabled artists to carry the Dong Yuan tradition through the succeeding Yuan dynasty.

Li, *Dream Journey through the Xiao and Xiang Rivers (detail),* 12th century

The area around Hangzhou, the southern capital, was a land of lakes surrounded by gentle hills, a scene far removed from the imposing peaks beloved of the Northern Song landscape painters. In the hands of the Southern Song painters, these lake scenes became unashamedly romantic with their wide distances, low hills and silhouetted trees. Evocative of gentle sadness, evenings and half-light, they are above all elegant paintings. The Southern Song artists used only ink and increasingly paper instead of silk as that allowed greater variety in texture.

Ma-Xia School

Ma Yuan (1160/1165 – 1225)

The really original landscape style developed under the Southern Song was that of the Ma-Xia School. In the West this has come to represent the quintessence of Chinese landscape painting, and was to have a profound influence on the development of landscape painting in Japan. The Ma family was successful at the Southern Song court at Hangzhou. Five generations are known to have produced work for the court from about 1100 (before the move south) until after 1250. Ma Yuan is the most famous and had as a patron Empress Yang (1162-1232), herself a prolific poet and calligrapher.

Ma Yuan rejected the monumental style of the Northern landscape painters and instead painted evocative scenes of the individual dwarfed by nature. The tonal contrasts of Fan Kuan and Guo Xi, the claw-like roots and trees of Li Cheng and ax-strokes of Li Tang are all used, but the overall effect is one of deep feeling. Without the ability to evoke feeling, the style degenerates to the decorative and is easily imitated – which Ming professional artists and painters of the Kano School in Japan seized on. What is new in Ma Yuan's work is the sense of space achieved by pushing the landscape to one side, thus opening up a vista of limitless distance.

Ma Yuan, *Walking on a Mountain Path in Spring*, early 13th century

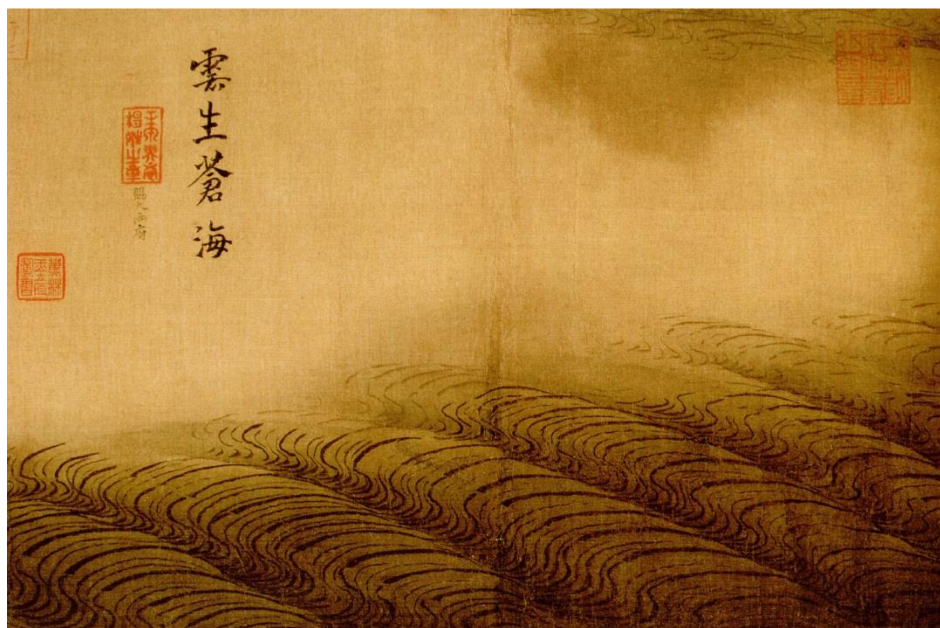
A gentleman with his servant in a garden setting was one of Ma Yuan's favourite themes. *On a Mountain Path in Spring* with a poem by Yang Meizi, consort of the Emperor Ningzong, is one example and shows Ma Yuan's "one-corner" style (Western steelyard-balance compositions are similar). The figures, with the trees and rocks, make the mass of the weight in one corner. The dramatic lines of the tree branches and the direction of the gentleman's stare and the two birds take the eye across the misty space into the distance; the bird in flight is symbolic of far vistas.

Ma Yuan painted many night scenes and the atmosphere is often redolent of a poetic melancholy that perhaps hints at the underlying mood of Hangzhou in an age of deepening anxiety. *Watching the Moon* is an example, which exploits brilliantly the contrast of black ink against a luminous expanse of mist. Most of Ma Yuan's compositions have a delicate balance between surface and depth.

Ma Yuan, *Watching the Moon under the Pine*, early 13th century

Ma Yuan, *Three Friends of Winter (Pine, Bamboo and Plum),* early 13th century

Ma Yuan produced albums of small pictures. One celebrated plum blossom; used by the Song to symbolise both female beauty and the aloofness of the ideal scholar. Ma Yuan's album had couplets written by aristocrat and official Zhang Zhi. *Clouds Rising* is small but beautiful depiction of mist from an album of water paintings.



Ma Yuan, *Water Album leaf – Clouds Rising from a Green Sea*, late 12th century

His mastery of cloud and mist, distance and detail can be seen again in *Dancing and Singing*.

Ma Yuan, *Dancing and Singing (Peasants Returning from Work),* early 13th century

Xia Gui (also spelled Hsia Kuei, active 1195-1224)

Ma Yuan's contemporary Xia Gui also worked at the Academy at Hangzhou and was awarded the Golden Girdle. Xia Gui is more expressionist and he seems to stab and hack with his brush. Ma Yuan's brushwork is sharp and spiky in the scenery which surrounds the *Four Sages*, but Xia Gui shows more brilliance in *Pure and Remote View of Hills and Streams*. His brushwork is as much part of the scene as the water-scape and rocky shore.

Ma Yuan, *The Four Sages of Shangshan*, c 1220

Xia Gui, *Pure and Remote View of Streams and Mountains (detail)*, 12/13th century

Xia Gui, *Pure and Remote View of Streams and Mountains (detail)*, 12/13th century

Xia Gui's decisive outlines and his blobs and drops can be seen in the softer landscape handscroll, *Twelve Views From a Thatched Cottage*. Only a third of this remains, but the titles written by Emperor Li-tsung (reigned 1225-1264) identify the four scenes.

Xia Gui, *Anchoring at Evening on the Misty Bank & Fisherman Playing the Flute in the Quiet Dusk*
from *Twelve Views From a Thatched Cottage,* 13th century

Xia Gui, *The Ferry Returns to the Village in the Mist & Distant Mountains and Wild Geese*
from *Twelve Views From a Thatched Cottage,* 13th century

Like Ma Yuan, Xia Gui produces a sense of space and atmosphere, using tone cleverly for depth and silhouetting foreground detail against the infinite distance. Xia Gui also produced albums, so popular with the Southern Song, and these have simple but effective compositions. The distant hills are rendered delicately.

Xia Gui, *Album Leaf – Landscape*, 13th century

Xia's style appealed strongly to the Ming painters of the Zhe School [Part 4], but his austerity and sparing use of *cun* eluded his imitators. Ma Yuan's son, ***Ma Lin (c 1180 – 1256)*** replicated the style and also the theme of the gentleman and servant with tree, but rarely attained the profound emotional impact.

Ma Lin, *Quietly Listening to the Wind in the Pines*, 13th century

Liu Songnian (1155-1224) entered the Hangzhou Academy as a student and stayed for 40 years. He was primarily a figure painter, but is regarded as one of the Four Great Masters of Southern Song (together with Li Tang, Ma Yuan and Xia Gui). His talent at rendering meticulous detail in atmospheric settings is clear in his most important work; *Landscapes of the Four Seasons*; *Spring* and *Summer* (on the left), *Autumn* and *Winter* (on the right).

Chan painting in the Southern Song

The energy of Xia Gui's brushwork in *Streams and Mountains* was replicated by that of Chan Buddhist masters who lived in monasteries in the hills across West Lake outside Hangzhou.

> *"For them the extremely rapid, always abbreviated recording of subjects from nature in a few pools of wash or staccato brush-strokes, made for a transmission from mind to painting of the instantaneous and intuitive perception of the oneness in the workings of nature that dominated Chan Buddhist thought."*

The subjects of Chan paintings covered a wide range but fall into a few classes; simple nature studies, abbreviated landscapes and figures (most often of Chan Patriarchs). Two painters of the Southern Song were outstanding.

Liang Kai (c 1140 – 1210)

Liang Kai began his career at the Southern Song Academy under Ningzong (1195-1224) and was awarded the Golden Girdle. He painted the usual court stuff, but late in life for some reason abandoned the Academy and retired to a temple taking with him the brilliant brush style of Xia Gui, whom he must have known in Hangzhou. Liang Kai is most famous for originating or developing the "x*ie yi*" (sometimes translated as "sketch style") of painting; the subject or atmosphere is evoked with minimal use of detail. Liang drank heavily before painting (he called himself Liang the Crazy), yet his portraits are witty and the verve of their ink puts them in the finest tradition of the Chan.

Liang Kai, *Li Bo Strolling*, 12th century

Liang Kai, *Drunken Immortal*, 12th century.

It is easy to imagine the great poet Li Bo constructing inspirational verse under the complicated rules governing Chinese *modelled* or *ruled* poetry. (The length of a line of poetry must be limited to a certain number of characters, usually 5 or 7, and the poem was restricted to 4, 8 or 12 lines. The maintenance of rhythms, the pattern of tones, the parallelism of words and the selection of rhymes were also stipulated. These rules govern *modern* Chinese poetry called *shih*. Freer forms of poetry are written, including the *fu* type, originating in the 4th century BC).

Li Bo strolls absorbed in this intellectual exercise through scenes he fails to register. The simplicity of his poetical imagery and the necessary highness of mind are conveyed with wonderful economy. As is the deep contemplation of the *Immortal* with his perception improved by wine.

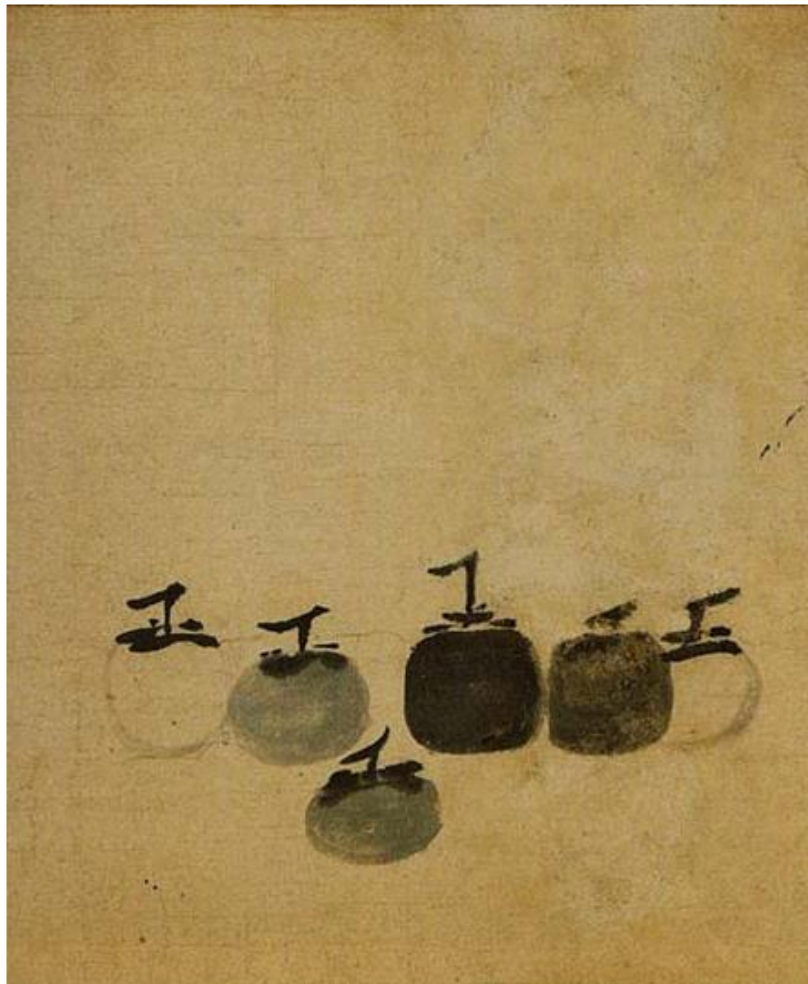
Liang Kai painted the *Sixth Patriarch*, Hui Neng, crouching and, with evident concentration, lopping the branches from a bamboo stalk. Any monk would have been expected to perform this simple chore, perhaps daily, to prepare bamboo for use in building, so perhaps the Chan placed special significance in the task – bamboo being a symbolic plant. Liang Kai produces movement and energy through the angular drawing of the Patriarch's rough clothing (Giotto would use simple folds of drapery with the same result). The grip of the hand on the knife is convincing. The tree and the ground are brushed in simply with a broken stroke called "flying white". Despite the economy the composition is carefully constructed and there is no carelessness (studied or otherwise) which often mars the work of lesser Chan artists.

Liang Kai, *The Sixth Patriarch Chopping Bamboo*, 13th century

<u>*Mu Qi (also referred to as Muxi Fachang, c1200-1270)*</u>

Although Liang Kai withdrew to a temple there is no evidence he took vows. In contrast, the other great Chan painter of the Southern Song, Mi Qu, was a Chan priest. Drawn south, as much by the beauty of the scenery as by the threat of northern hordes, Mi Qu re-founded the abandoned monastery, the Luitongsi, on the shores of the Western Lake at Hangzhou. Mi Fu dominated Chan painting of the region throughout the 13th century. Any subject would do - landscapes, birds, tigers, monkeys, bodhisattvas – all were the same to him. In all he sought to express the essential nature of inner life. His famous *Six Persimmons* is *"the supreme example of his genius for investing the simplest thing with profound significance … passion has congealed into stupendous calm (Arthur Waley)."* Chans believed the transcendental experience could not be described in words, but might be evoked by a painting of a plant or a landscape. All living things partake of divine essence.

> *"Most striking and common to all the best Chan painting is the way in which the artist rivets the viewer's attention by the careful painting of certain key details, while all that is not essential blurs into obscurity, as in the act of meditation itself. Such an effect of concentration and control is only possible to artists schooled in the disciplined techniques of the Ma-Xia School. The brush-style of the literati, for all its spontaneity, is too relaxed [the studied carelessness mentioned above] and personal to meet the challenge."*



Mu Qi, *Six Persimmons*, 13th century

Some landscapes are attributed to Mu Qi. One of the best is in the Nezu Art Museum in Tokyo and illustrates the reference to the Ma-Xia School in the quote above. In the paintings of the school, bare silk or ink washes of mist are used to suggest vistas which are half-concealed but come into view momentarily. This sort of transient manifestation is actually how inspiration was experienced by Chan Buddhists, and so has a deep significance.

In Mi Qu's *Eight Views from the Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, the transience of appearance in the Ma-Xia School is taken further. Rocks, mountains, trees and dwellings seem unstable even dissolving, as if the inner life of them is felt only briefly. Mi Qu's landscape started a direction in Chan Buddhist painting which later was taken to the extremes with scenery being lost in puddles of ink.

Mi Qu, *Eight Views from the Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, 13th century

Most of Mi Qu's paintings are preserved in private collections in Japan, and they also can be found in Japanese temples. The best example is a set of three large panels, perhaps originally painted for Mi Qu's revitalised monastery. The centre panel shows Guanyin, white-robed and (as was usual by now in China) seated on a rocky shore overlooking the water. The rhythm of the simple thick lines defining Guanyin's robes creates a sense of power and serenity, complemented by the expression of deep concentration on the Bodhisattva's face. The side panels show a crane in a bamboo grove and a mother ape huddling her young in the branches of a pine tree.

Ordinarily to the Chinese the dragon was a benevolent and generally auspicious creature, bringer of rain and emblem of the emperor. To the Chan the dragon meant far more. When Mu Qi painted a dragon suddenly appearing from the clouds, he was depicting a cosmic manifestation and at the same time repeating the idea expressed in his dissolving landscape forms - the momentary, elusive vision of truth that comes to the Chan adept.

Mu Qi, *Guanyin, Monkeys and Crane*, 13th century

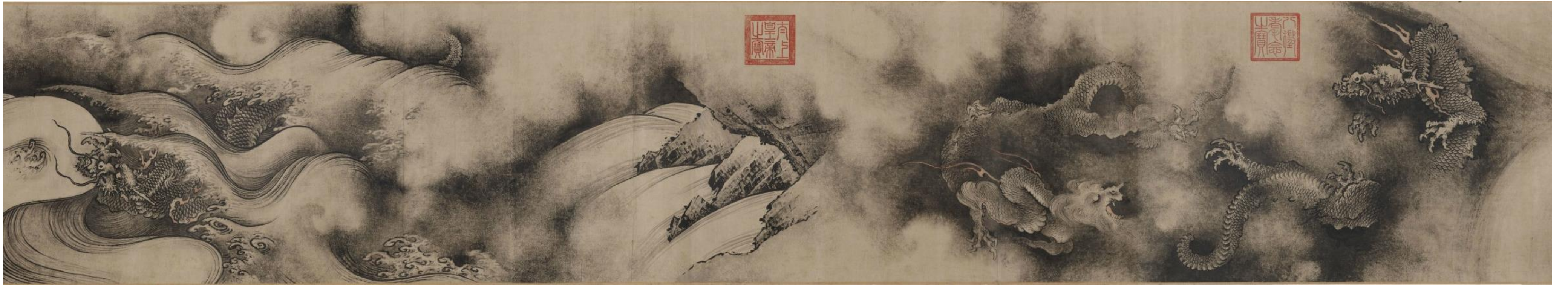
Mu Qi, *Tiger-Dragon* diptych, 13th century

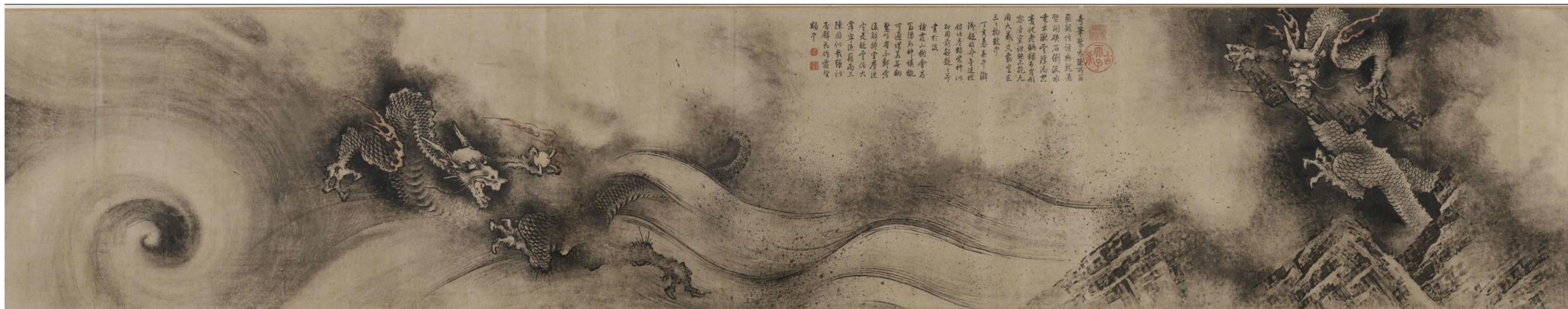
To the Daoists the dragon was an all-pervading force that momentarily reveals itself only to vanish and leave us wondering if we have seen it at all.

> *"Hidden in the caverns of inaccessible mountains or coiled in the unfathomed depths of the sea, he awaits the time when he slowly rouses himself to activity. He unfolds himself in the storm clouds; he washes his mane in the blackness of the seething whirlpools. His claws are in the forks of the lightning, his scales begin to glisten in the bark of rain-swept pine trees. His voice is heard in the hurricane which, scattering the withered leaves of the forest, quickens the new spring. The dragon reveals himself only to vanish." (Okakura Kakuzo, The Awakening of Japan, 1905)*

Cao Buxing in the 3rd century was the first prominent painter to specialise in dragons, but the greatest of all was ***Chen Rong (also known as Chen So-weng, c 1200-1266).*** He gained his civil service degree in 1235 and held several posts in government in the first half of the 13th century. He was, like many officials, a poet as well as a painter. His fame rests on the wonderful dragons he painted with a somewhat unorthodox technique, described by his contemporary, Tang Hou. When Chen Rong was drunk he would give a great shout, seize his cap, soak it with ink, and smear it about on the paper to produce a design and afterwards finish the details with a brush. His celebrated *Nine Dragons* might have been produced thus – dragons with brush and clouds with cap: in the original an imprint of the textile of Chen Rong's hat can be seen in the clouds.

Chen Rong's dragons turned out not to be auspicious for the Chinese. The invasion of China from the north continued. By the opening years of the 13th century hordes of Mongolian tribes swarmed out of their plains and began a series of conquests that forged an empire from the southern tip of Korea to the shores of the distant Caspian Sea to the west. Hangzhou fell to the Mongols in 1276 and three years later, after futile resistance further south, the Southern Song dynasty came to an end. No matter what the Mongols might bring, all the main strands, styles and genres of Chinese painting have been established by the end of Song, some already with rich traditions. Chinese art was already much more varied and developed than Europe would manage to approach for another four centuries or more. These astonishing and vibrant advances in Chinese painting occurred in a period while the West slouched in its Dark Ages.





Chen Rong, *Nine Dragons*, 1244

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