

TRADITIONS OF CHINESE *LITERATI* PAINTING

Introduction

In addition to the traditional ideal that educated gentlemen aspiring to government service should be poets of accomplishment, it was also true that *literati* would often show accomplishment in the art of painting as well. By looking at the way that the members of the governing elite approached the art of painting, we can gain some further insight into the way in which they conceived and tried to live up to the *literati* ideal.

The key division that we will emphasize here is one between men who were called “academic” painters, and those who were seen as painters in the *literati* tradition. What’s the difference? Academic painters were highly skilled craftsmen, who aimed to achieved marvelous effects through their use of colors, realistic or highly conventional representations of people or things, spectacular detail, applications of shiny gold leaf, and so forth. The Imperial court employed many such men, and others made their way in the world by selling their paintings to wealthy patrons and customers. “Academic painters” were professionals, both in their virtuoso skills, and in the fact that they depended on permanent employment as painters, or on selling their paintings to live. While many of these men were educated to some degree, few possessed the literary background of a *literatus*, and none made their way in life fulfilling the Confucian ideal of governmental service. “*Literati* painters,” on the other hand, were amateurs – they painted as a means of self-expression, much the same way they wrote poetry; both forms were inheritances from the Neo-Daoist era of the Six Dynasties. While many fewer *literati* were accomplished painters than were poets (and painting was never an aspect of the exams), in every major place in China there were always many *literati* who either painted on the side, while playing the role of scholar-officials, or who, through wealth, could afford to devote themselves fully to the art of painting.

Literati painting was conceived as a mode through which the Confucian junzi (noble person) expressed his ethical personality. It was much less concerned with technical showiness. *Literati* painters specialized in plain ink paintings, sometimes with minimal color. They lay great emphasis on the idea that the style with which a painter controlled his brush conveyed the inner style of his character – brushstrokes were seen as expressions of the spirit more than were matters of composition or skill in realistic depiction.

While *literati* poetry developed fully during the Tang Dynasty on the basis of long Six Dynasties preparation, painting did not become central to *literati* until later. Although we hear of famous poet-painters of the Tang, because their works have not survived it is difficult to know to what degree their art differed from academic painting. During the late Song, however – that is, after about 1200 – *literati* and academic painting become two distinct streams. Interestingly, although academic paintings were often far more skilled in technique, many felt – and still feel – that the “amateur” ink paintings of the *literati* are the highest form of art in China.

On the pages linked through this page, we will take a look at some representative works of *literati* painting, and many of these will be central to our Wednesday class. We’ll briefly survey here the heights that academic painting reached before the genre of *literati* painting became fully developed, and then focus on a limited number of painters and paintings. The most important of the painters we will look at is a man named Shen Zhou (1427-1509), who lived during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). We will see in Shen Zhou’s approach to his art many key facets of the Confucian-Daoist *literati* ideal, translated into an approach to painting.

Please bear in mind that this reading, which introduces only a few paintings, in no way represents the spectacular range of Chinese painting of all types and eras that we now possess. Chinese art history is one of the richest fields of cultural exploration, and painting is one of its most complex and beautiful areas. This reading focuses almost solely on landscape paintings, only one among dozens of genres.

Early Painting

The earliest forms of Chinese painting that we have date from the last centuries B.C. During the period of fragmentation of the late Zhou (771-221 B.C.), the many different feudal courts of China employed all sorts of artisans, and many rulers lavished attention on court painters. Even during this early period, painting in China is very much a “calligraphic” art. “Calligraphy” means the art of writing words, and in traditional China, all writing was done with brushes, rather than with a “stylus” (pen-like point). The paint lines of early Chinese paintings were made much the way that people brushed the strokes of the characters they wrote in composing letters and other records.

Naturally, the fact that all literate people were accomplished in using an ink brush contributed to widespread skills useful for painting. Although much of the earliest painting we have is of human figures, the great skill of early artists in subtle application of a “calligraphic” line of black ink is already visible.

An example is a section of a wall painting, reproduced below, from the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220). The painting depicts two Confucian scholars, and the detail at right shows the very fine brush control that allowed the artist to create lifelike expressions with only a few quick strokes of ink.



Han Dynasty wall painting (and detail, right)

The Calligraphic Influence

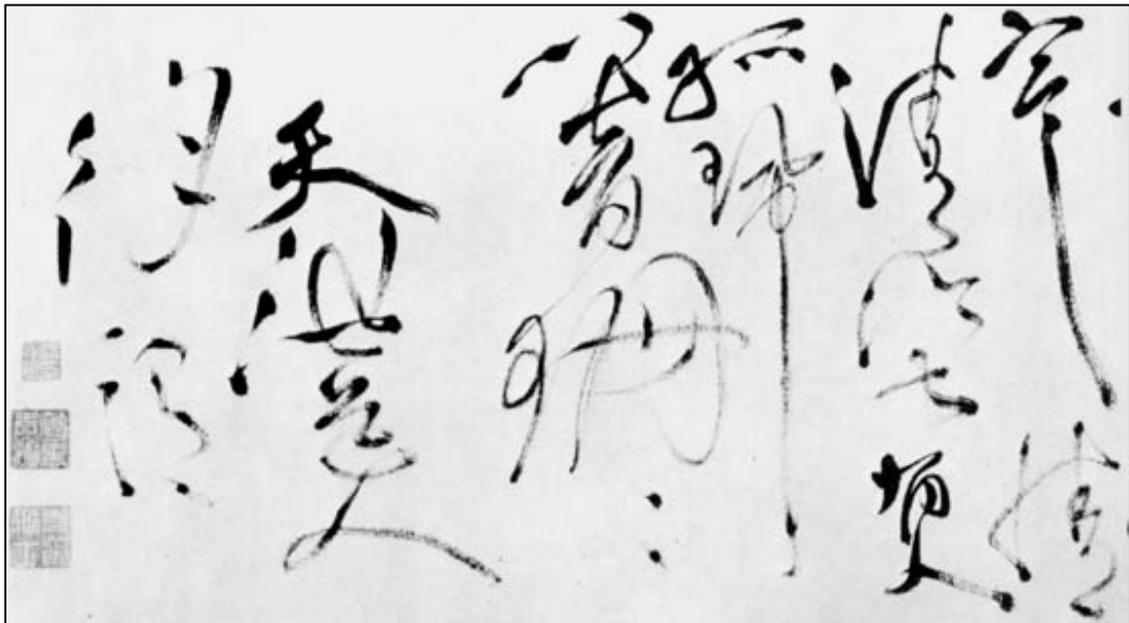
The “calligraphic” use of the brush became in China a separate art form, and one that exerted great influence on *literati* painting. Beginning in the period of the Six Dynasties (220-589), mastery of self-expression through well and distinctively written (actually, “brushed”) characters was an important part of being a well bred member of the elite. A number of men became famous for their fine calligraphy, and examples of their styles were preserved through carvings, which traced their brushstrokes in stone. Over time, men of literary learning tried to master one or more of these classical styles, and bring to

them also a unique individuality. Thus the medium of writing – handwriting, so to speak – became an important way of expressing one’s nature and of reading the character of others. Here are some interesting examples of the art of calligraphy, dating from later eras:

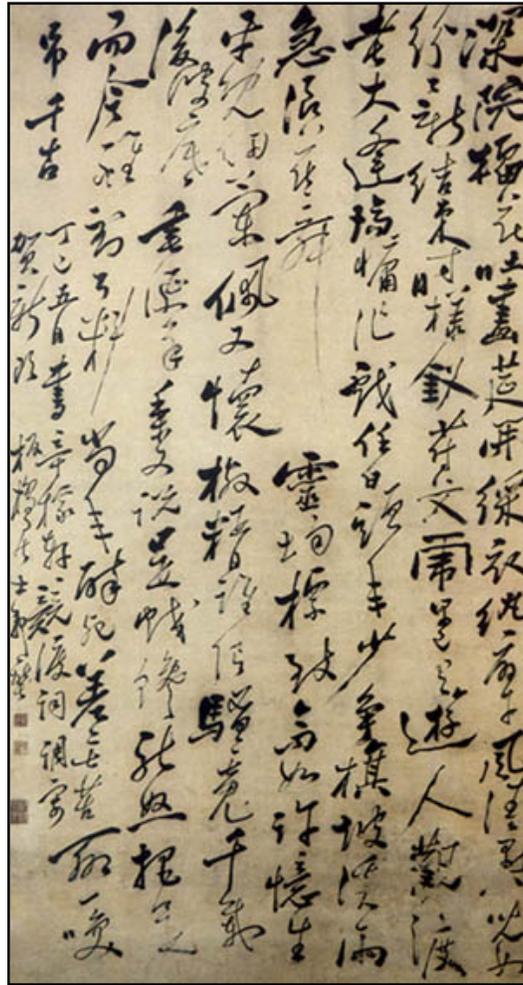


The refined and regular style of Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty

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The free style of the eccentric Ming [1368-1644] literatus Xu Wei (1521-1593)



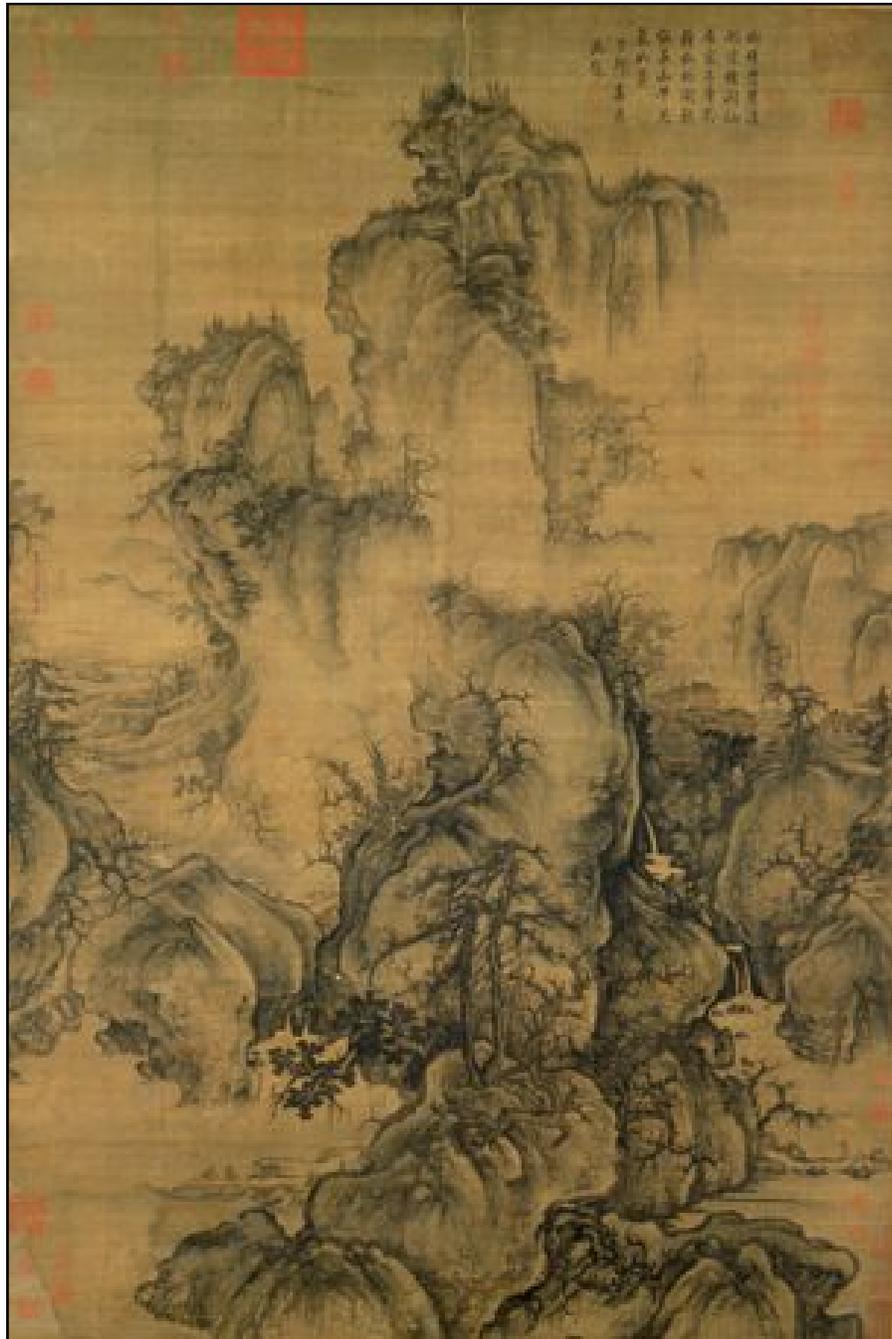
The aesthetic, uneven style of the Qing [1644-1911] calligrapher, Zheng Xie (1693-1765)

The Early Height of Academic Painting in the Song

After many centuries where decorative painting and painting of human and animal figures were the most developed forms of visual art in China, landscape painting entered a period of sudden development during the Tang and early Song Dynasties. While we have almost no paintings from the Tang that remain, some of China's most famous paintings come from the early Song (the Northern Song period, 960-1127, before the invasion of North China forced the Song rulers into the South). These are monumental "hanging scrolls," very large paintings on silk that are mounted to hang on walls. They were composed by professional court artists, and the technique used in them departs from the "calligraphic" skills common to all literate people, and attempts to use a very

complex array of brush strokes to convey an effect of “verisimilitude” (that is, the landscapes seem “real”).

Here are two examples. The first, directly below, is “Early Spring,” by Guo Xi (1020-90). (If you wish to explore “Early Spring” more closely, the course website home page has an image of it you can click on to link to a large size version.) The painting on the next page is by Fan Kuan (990-1030), and is called “Travelers By Streams and Mountains.” (You can just see the travelers and their ox-carts, dwarfed by the landscape – almost dots on this web-derived of the painting – towards the bottom.)





The Intimate Academic Style of the Southern Song (1127-1278)

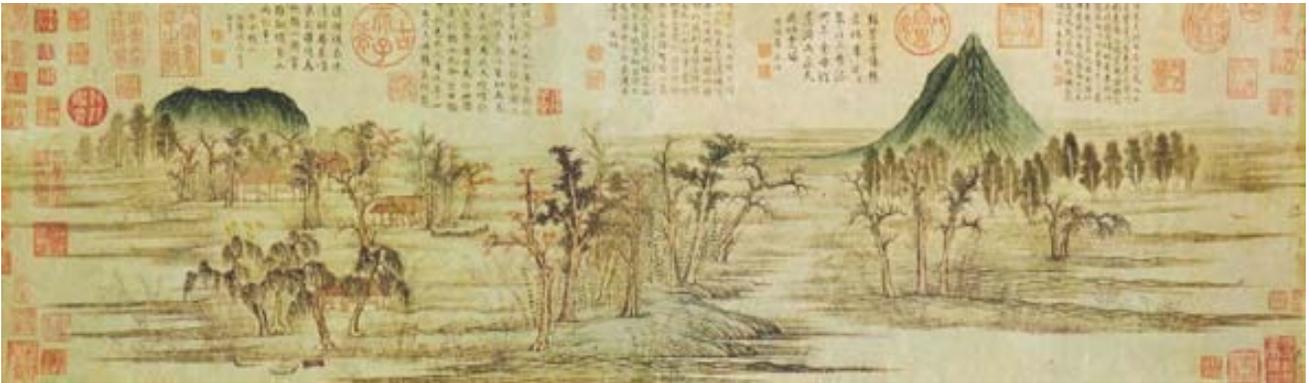
During the latter part of the Song Dynasty, after North China had been conquered by non-Chinese and the Chinese emperors had been forced to move their capital to the South and give up efforts to control all China, academic painting took a new and different turn. Professional painters began increasingly to explore smaller and more intimate forms of painting, even when depicting broad landscapes. In reducing the scale of their paintings, they also developed innovative ways to use abbreviated lines and ink washes to represent effectively landscape features which the Northern Song masters had rendered with intense detail. The less grandiose painting style of the Southern Song was, in effect, an invitation to amateurs. Although the academic painters achieved simplicity through enormous imagination and effort, the skills they employed were more accessible to *literati*, who were, after all, masters of brushwork in the field of calligraphy.

The paintings on this page are by perhaps the two most celebrated Southern Song painters. The “album leaf” (small silk painted page) at the right is by Ma Yuan (11545-1235), and the “handscroll” below is by Xia Gui (1195-1224). Handscrolls, unlike hanging scrolls, were not meant for display. They were stored rolled in wooden boxes, and were only removed and viewed, section by section, when the owner wished to enjoy the painting or to share it with intimate guests.



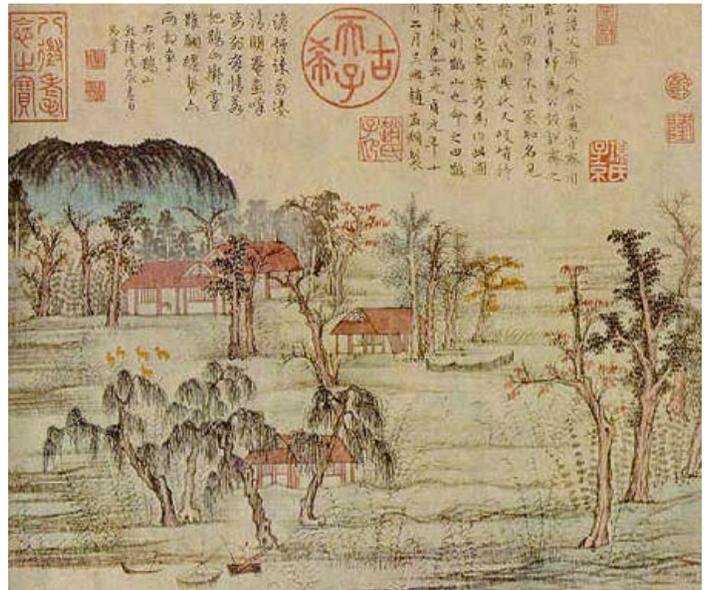
The Watershed of the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368)

In 1279, all of China was overrun by the armies of the Mongol empire. Although Chinese *literati* ultimately learned how to live with Mongol rule and many members of the educated class cooperated in continuing government along the “Confucian” lines of the traditional Imperial state, many members of the elite were alienated from the government, and sought ways to avoid service. In effect, this freed a substantial number of educated men – many exam graduates from the late Song – from burdens of government responsibilities. A certain number of these men turned for fulfillment to artistic achievement, and it was the portion of these who devoted themselves to painting who truly established a tradition of *literati* visual art. Lacking the type of technical training that had characterized earlier academic painters, the Yuan *literati* applied their control of brushwork, derived from calligraphy, to the development of a new perspective on what art could achieve. Look, for example, at this handscroll and detail by the Yuan artist Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322). Notice how the effort at “verisimilitude” (making things



look realistic) has completely vanished. Mountains, trees, and grass are now rendered very simplistically, without any real care for relative size. Even more, the sky is now covered with writing (the red seals of ownership were added later by collectors, including some self-important emperors). The interest has shifted from the landscape to the painter – it’s his act of reinterpretation of nature which is now the focus.

This is a fundamental shift and it



is central to *literati* painting. This enormous region of Chinese landscape art is not devoted to Nature – it is devoted to man’s response to Nature. Nature – and painting – has become a means for expressing the artist’s unique self and perspective. Although this is a very Neo-Daoist idea, most *literati* artists “Confucianized” it by laying emphasis on the notion that the aspect of the self that was expressed also reflected one’s moral self-cultivation and stance towards society.

The Yuan Masters

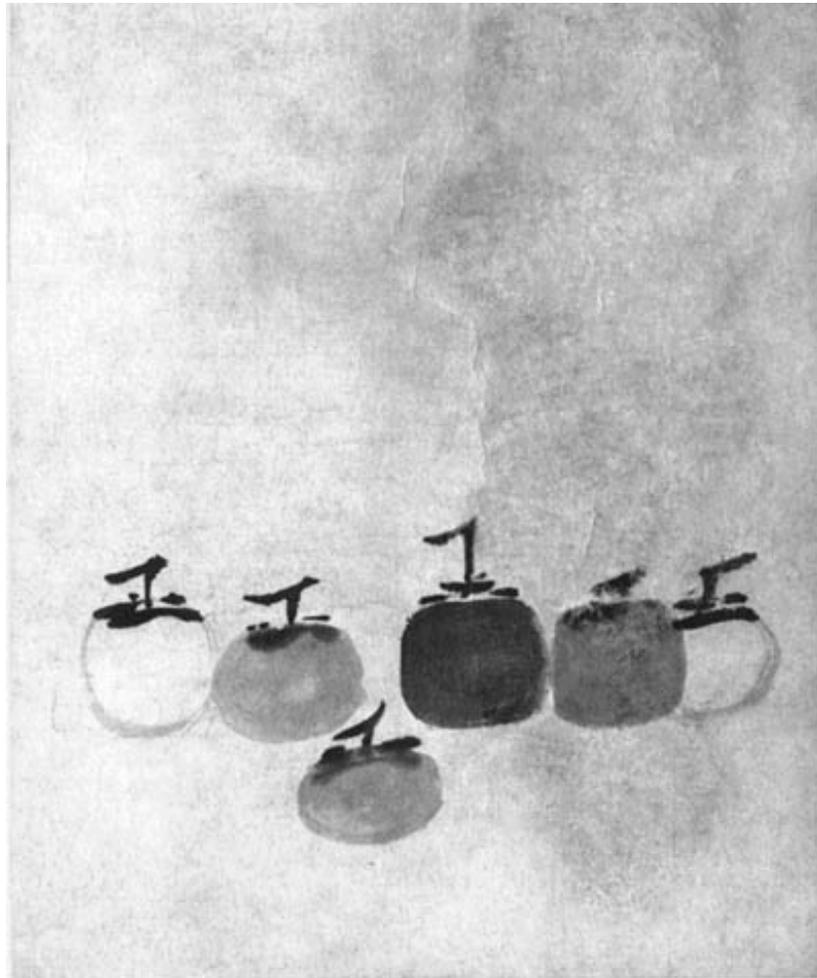
The tradition begun by men like Zhao Mengfu, was enlarged through the rest of the Yuan Dynasty, and a number of exemplary *literati* painters developed simple but distinctive styles that were so admired that they came to be regarded as models for later painters (much the way that earlier, exemplary calligraphers had been models for later men). Great *literati* painters of the next 500 years would begin by adapting their calligraphic skills to the styles of these Yuan models of visual art as they learned how to paint. Settling on one or more as their primary models, they then would, if they were men of talent, develop original ways to enlarge on or depart from those styles, in paintings that were essentially new innovations, though always firmly within traditions of the past.

On the following are paintings by two of the most famous of Yuan period painters. The upper scroll shows the spare ink style and empty landscape of Ni Zan (1304-74) – perhaps the most austere of the Yuan masters. Ni Zan’s painting is in the hanging scroll style, but note how dramatically reduced the ink and detail is compared to the hanging scrolls of the Northern Song masters reproduced earlier. How little ink Ni Zan uses to create a hauntingly chill landscape! Beneath Ni Zan’s work is a section from a handscroll by Wu Zhen (1280-1354), a hermit-artist who often celebrated lone fishermen in his work. Wu Zhen painted in several basic styles, using a dry brush sometimes, one wet with ink other times, but always creating scenes that conveyed the attraction of Nature, usually with only one or two isolated people lodged within it.



Zen painting – an exceptional tradition

Although it is not along the main lines of our topic, it is important to note one other contributor to the tradition of *literati* painting – Buddhism, and specifically Zen. During the late Song, among the non-professionals who took to painting as a form of self-expression (or, perhaps, no-self-expression) were Zen monks and lay practitioners. They worked towards a highly reduced form of brush painting – just as Zen, the Buddhist school which prized nothing but meditation itself, was the most stripped-down form of Buddhism. The painting below, by a 13th century Song painter who went by the pseudonym of Muqi, is celebrated as the ultimate in painterly simplicity. Six persimmons are represented by ink lines and washes so elementary that it would seem like a school kid could have done them (the same type of comment later made of Picasso in the West) – yet the rendering and placement of the persimmons was an unprecedented artistic innovation.



The fruition of *literati* painting in the early Ming – Shen Zhou

By the time the Yuan emperors were driven from China in 1368, and a new dynasty under Chinese rulers established – the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) – *literati* painting was a firm tradition. *Literati* paintings were prized above academic paintings by most educated people, who understood their goal of revealing the inner character of the painter and communicating, through depictions of nature, man, or objects, virtues, strength of purpose, and sensitivity towards the conditions of human life.

So important had painting become, that some *literati* chose to focus their entire lives on mastery of the art, rather than pursuing government careers, even though their rulers were no longer alien to China. In the increasingly urban and educated society of Ming China, these men actually made considerable income from their work, either in the form of cash “gifts” or of other goods “traded” for their art. *Literati* circles at the highest levels often included among a group of close friends (who, acting as a mutual support group, were often a force to be reckoned with in local society and politics) painters who would inspire group activities the way that premier poets did. In fact, poetry and painting began increasingly to overlap. Often *literati* painters would present paintings to friends with the invitation to write on them poetry and short essays. In this way, paintings sometimes seem to become more group expressions than mere individual expressions of the painter, capturing an essential Confucian element of sociality.

One of the most famous of all *literati* painters was Shen Zhou (1427-1509; his portrait is at right), who lived on China’s east coast, not far from the modern Shanghai region. Over the next

few pages, we view some of Shen Zhou’s paintings, looking at them as a kind of summation of many aspects of *literati* painting. We will then close by looking at one work by a student of Shen Zhou’s.



Shen Zhou & the Yuan Masters

Shen Zhou was noted for the extremely broad range of styles he commanded. He devoted himself to painting as the sole focus of his life -- he was an accomplished poet, but undertook no government responsibilities or other arduous employment. His exceptional skills gained him many kinds of financial support from family, friends, and patrons, and he taught many students as well.

The styles Shen Zhou mastered first were those of the various Yuan masters, and their influence is clearly visible throughout his life. Shen Zhou painted many works that could easily have been mistaken for original Yuan paintings, but they were never regarded as plagiarized imitations or “mere” copies. The high valuation of tradition made it acceptable for painters to go so far as to produce precise replicas of “classical” models – it was as if, having absorbed through practice the techniques of these older masters, the later imitator had in fact “embodied” the model, and the replica was as much a form of his own self-expression as the original had been of the master’s.

Compare the two paintings on this page. The one at right is an unusually bold wet brush experiment by the Yuan master Wu Zhen, discussed earlier (though there is some doubt whether Wu Zhen himself painted it). The one below is by Shen Zhou.



Note how both the brush technique (actually adapted from an even earlier Song period artist named Mi Fei), the general rendering of nature, and the theme of the solitary traveler, armed with an umbrella, braced against the forces of nature are common to both. Is Shen's painting a "Neo-Daoist-style" expression of his unique genius, or "Confucian" self-shaping through imitation?

Shen Zhou's "Poet on a Mountaintop"

Shen Zhou exemplified *literati* painting in another way – his blending of poetry and painting, the arts of words and images. Many of Shen Zhou's paintings include poems of his own – many also include poems composed by friends.

The painting below is one of Shen Zhou's most famous. The scholar alone in nature seems to be looking out not over a chasm of rocks and clouds, but directly at the poem that Shen has placed before him.



The poem reads as follows:

White clouds sash-like
 wrap mountain waists,
 The rock terrace flies in space,
 distant, a narrow path.
 Leaning on a bramble staff,
 far and free I gaze,
 To the warble of valley brook
 I reply with the cry of my flute.

Shen Zhou, “Listening to the Cicadas”

“The Poet on the Mountaintop” celebrates the lone man in the midst of nature, remote from society. But Shen Zhou’s paintings, like many *literati* paintings, also celebrate friendship and the bonding between members of the *literati* class. The painting below shows a *literatus* asleep in his countryside retreat, surrounded by the vibrations of locust calls, being visited by a friend.

The intermingling of natural patterns (such as the vibrating leaves) and human patters (such as the bamboo fencing) is a characteristic of much of Shen Zhou’s work. Again, there is a poem by Shen Zhou – but this time, we see another tradition of *literati* painting, as it’s a poem added by another *literatus* hundreds of years later. Paintings, as tangible objects inscribing a person’s character, were viewed as vehicles for communication long after the death of the painter, and owners of paintings frequently shared their responses to the painting by joining their work to the painter’s on the silk or paper itself, or by inviting an admired poet or calligrapher to do so (thus increasing the monetary value of the painting!). In this case, the latter day poet has employed the rhyme scheme of Shen Zhou’s



original poem to write his response, thus preserving in new form the Six Dynasties tradition of poetic interplay.

Shen Zhou’s legacy – Wen Zhengming’s “Old Trees . . .”

Shen Zhou was only one of tens of thousands of *literati* painters, but the wide variety of works he produced in his long life and his universally acknowledged sensitivity and gentleness of spirit gave his work added influence. So also did the fact that he numbered among his pupils outstanding artists who established a regional “school” of painting to carry forward and develop in different ways the inspiration of Shen Zhou – both his absorption of prior tradition and his many innovations and original ideas. One of Shen Zhou’s most prolific and celebrated pupils, Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), painted the work pictured here. It exemplifies in a striking way principles of *literati* painting.

The painting, “Old Trees By a Wintry Brook,” appears at first to be a depiction of nature – but it is clearly not. Tree branches end abruptly, with no apparent reason; the brook flows uphill; the landscape to the left trails into what seems to be mist, but on the right, there is nothing behind the rocks but empty paper.

Wen Zhengming’s work is an idea about nature and about ink and paper. The painting makes no effort to fool us into thinking we are looking into a world beyond the paper – it makes a strong statement that it is nothing but ink, paper, and the artist’s hand and mind. By renouncing any attempt at focusing on the objects of the painting, and instead foregrounding the medium and the technique, Wen Zhengming has produced a work that is remarkably “modern,” even as in its brushwork and the motifs of nature it selects it seems to fit easily into established *literati* tradition.

Wen’s work expresses perfectly the central theme of thousands of *literati* paintings – painting was a medium that, in Confucian manner, borrowed tradition in order to perfect self-expression and communication. And the vehicle for self-expression, in Daoist manner, was most often images of nature and the theme of the solitary man, or group of friends, alone in the vastness of the natural Way.

