Screen Images:
Three Modes of "Painting-within-Painting" in Chinese Art

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This paper has a three-fold purpose. On the most basic level, it studies images of the painted screen, a physical object and a painting format which played an enormous role in ancient Chinese art but has become almost obsolete in modern Chinese life. The major function of a screen (p'ing) is "to shield": in the palace it surrounded the throne; in a household it set off the reception quarter; and in a bedroom it maintained privacy. In all these cases, the screen transformed space into places that were definable, manageable, and controllable. It also functioned as a kind of framed painting, displaying symbolic or representational images that were appropriate to the setting. When a painted screen is portrayed in a painting, however, what it defines and organizes is no longer architectural space but a pictorial one; its flat surface exhibits not just a painting, but a "painting-within-painting." It is therefore no coincidence that screen images became an invaluable means for ancient Chinese painters to structure pictures and to design visual metaphors. Logically, it can be expected that a close analysis of screen images will help reveal the artists' intentions and techniques.

Let us take a painting from this exhibition as an example. Titled Enjoying Antiquities and created by the Ming artist Tu Chin (active ca. 1465–ca. 1509), it offers a close-up of the activities on a tall terrace, a setting which is suggested by a series of railings and the floating clouds beyond them (fig. 16.1). Two large standing screens continue and complete the zigzag outline initiated by the railings, dividing the picture plane diagonally from the lower left corner to the upper right corner. The two triangular spaces resulting from this division are then transformed into a solid earthen foreground and an empty background of clouds and mist. With its distinct structure and decoration, each screen also defines an individual place for portraying figures and events. The screen near the center is heavy and formal; ornate openwork patterns embellish its thick frame of rosewood. The clouds and waves painted on its central panel have a strong symbolic overtone (as they are often indicative of high official rank); their schematic forms echo the openwork patterns on the screen's frame. The man sitting in front of this screen is apparently the master of the terrace and the owner of the antiques displayed on a table beside him. Another man, perhaps a connoisseur of antiques, turns obediently towards him while examining the ancient vessels. Compared with this focal unit centered on a male master with his material possessions and status symbols, the second screen defines a feminine, submissive space. Thin, fragile, and without a strong and sculptured frame, its main feature is a landscape painting executed in broad ink-wash. Positioned behind the first screen, its three leaves enclose a recessed space.
like a back chamber, in which two women, perhaps the master’s concubines or maids, are wrapping and packing antiques—a ch’i-n-lue, handscrolls, albums, a vase, a ting tripod, and a tortoise-shell box.

The two screen images thus index time as well as space, since the women’s activities conclude a narrative in the painting that consists of three consecutive events; the two earlier events being a boy servant bringing in a scroll painting to the master, and the master and his guest examining antiques. These three scenes are arranged along the zigzag line rising from the composition’s lower left corner to its upper right corner. The master is thus the focus of both the spatial composition and the temporal narrative in the painting; and the two screens highlight the gender hierarchy in a traditional Chinese household. Thus the screens’ images do not only play a formal role: as structural elements, they also map social, political, and intellectual fields of meaning in a painting.

We will learn later that these roles of screen images—to organize pictorial space, to construct a visual narrative, and to convey social and political messages—had been recognized long before Tu Chin, and this recognition had led to the invention of a number of basic modes of screen images. Tu’s creativity lay in synthesizing these modes into a complex composition. The second purpose of this paper, therefore, is to reconstruct the historical moment when these basic modes of screen images were invented. In other words, what I want to do is to contextualize and historicize screen images. Instead of approaching them as individual pictorial formulas, I see them as linked solutions to some fundamental artistic tasks at a given historical moment. Artists responded to these tasks as well as to each other’s responses to these tasks; their screen images reveal shared concerns as well as competition for originality and inventiveness.

We find this historical moment in the Southern T’ang, a local regime which lasted about forty years from 937 to 975 A.D. Relatively insignificant in Chinese political history, this short-lived dynasty contributed a great deal to the country’s cultural legacy. In its small court, the twilight of the great T’ang empire gradually faded into a private refinement of the most exquisite elegance. Its last ruler, Li Yü (r. 961–75), was himself a celebrated poet and a famous connoisseur of all kinds of art. His court nourished a generation of influential artists, who were either native southerners or had fled from the north to find refuge in the more peaceful south. Students of Chinese art are familiar with their names: the landscape painters Tung Yu-an and Chü-jan, the flower-and-bird painter Hsü Hsi, and figure painters Chou Wen-chü, Wang Ch’i-han, Ku Hung-chung, Wei Hsien, and Chao Kan. Some of them directly influenced Sung court art; others were later considered forebears of literati painting. Only very few of their works have survived, however. Even some “masterpieces” attributed to them have been proven to be later copies or reworkings; their value as reliable historical evidence has been seriously questioned. But instead of abandoning these copies and reworkings, I want to discover elements of the original works they preserve, as well as traces of the historical situations in which the originals were created. My method, as I have just proposed, is to identify pictorial motifs and compositions in these copies that reflect shared concerns as
well as artistic competition. The third purpose of this paper, then, is to test this method by reconstructing a significant aspect of Southern T’ang art largely based on later materials.

Mode 1: Screens in a Narrative Handscroll

The Night Entertainment of Han Hsi-tsai, a composition attributed to the Southern T’ang court painter Ku Hung-chung but probably refashioned in the Southern Sung, best illuminates how screen images help construct space, regulate a temporal sequence, and orient the gaze in a handscroll painting (fig. 16.2).2

In the painting’s opening scene, the host, Han Hsi-tsai, wearing a tall black cap, is seated on a dais with an honored guest in a red robe. The room is crowded; it is filled with people and is enclosed by furniture and painted wall-panels on all sides. Members of the company are rigid and formal; everyone’s attention is concentrated upon a girl playing a p’i-p’u-guitar. A large screen separates this scene from the second section, which contains two episodes—a dance scene and a bedroom scene—smoothly connected by two female figures who have just left the living room to retire to a back chamber. The atmosphere becomes more relaxed. Han Hsi-tsai appears as a drummer in the dance scene, and is accompanied by four women on a huge couch-bed in the bedroom scene. The informality is further developed in the third section, which is enclosed by two screens on both sides. With his garment boorishly unbuttoned, Han Hsi-tsai is enjoying a musical performance and the display of feminine beauty. The change of mood again leads us to the fourth and last section, in which the contact between men and women becomes intimate, while Han Hsi-tsai stands in the middle watching. The room is now “empty”—from the first section to this last section, the furnishing has been gradually reduced while the intimacy between figures has been intensified. The illustrations gradually change from descriptive to implicit, and their message becomes increasingly ambiguous and open to interpretation. The painting gradually deepens in eroticism, transforming the spectator into a voyeur.

Although Oswald Siren has asserted that “any attempt to formulate hard-and-fast rules for the spatial design in a picture like this would be futile,”3 the painting clearly combines two modes of spatial representation, both utilizing the screen image as its chief compositional aid. The first mode serves to construct self-contained units (fig. 16.3a); the second mode aims to link these units into a continuum (fig. 16.3b). The artist boldly used large, flat screen panels to cut the horizontal composition; he also carefully hinted that such partitions are by no means absolute. We see that in the opening scene, a maid is emerging from behind a screen to peer at the party in front, and that each of the three screens which separate the four sections delicately overlaps with a figure belonging to the next section. Even more telling, between the last two scenes a woman is speaking to a man across a screen; she points in the opposite direction and seems to be beckoning him into the back quarter. These details create dynamism, linking isolated scenes into a continuous pictorial plane, just as in a musical composition, ties across bar lines, connecting isolated notes into a continuous melody.

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2. Hasegawa Kobunji considers this painting a “deplorable” imitation of Ku Hung-ching’s original work based on a comparison between its figurative types, costumes, and scenes with excavated Southern T’ang figurines and objects; see “An examination of the Night Entertainment of Han Hsi-tsai,” Kokka no. 784 (November 1965), pp. 5–10; pp. 9–10 (in Japanese). Yü Hsiu, however, argues that many details in the painting, especially the costumes, furniture, dance, and utensils, show typical Sung custom; see “On the dating of the handscroll painting ‘The Night Entertainment of Han Hsi-tsai’,” Kuo-chung po-wu-yen yien-k’ao 1993(4), pp. 37–46 (in Chinese).

But these screens not only structure pictorial place; they also regulate a temporal viewing sequence by punctuating the spectator’s motion of unrolling the picture surface. Properly viewed, the painting would be gradually unrolled and would exhibit only one section at a time. The spectator’s experience is, quite literally, a journey into Han Hsi-t’ai’s deep mansion. He penetrates layers of screens to unveil the secrets they conceal. Ku Hung-chung’s screens thus work perfectly with the handscroll format, an extreme form of what I call the “private medium” of visual art: only a single spectator can manipulate its movement and such physical manipulation depends on his psychological response to the painted images. Su Shih (1037–1101) once remarked on a handscroll of inferior quality: “One gets tired after looking at a painting like this for just a few feet!” His words reveal an important impulse in refining the art of the handscroll: since a full presentation of a long handscroll depends on the spectator’s enthusiasm and engagement (i.e., his desire to see the entire painting and hence his labor and patience to unroll the scroll to the end), the exposed images should always fulfill a dual function. On the one hand, these images should be expressive on their own; on the other, they should be “seductive” and stir the viewer’s interest in the following section, which is still rolled up. The unspoken question—“What’s next?”—is typical of a handscroll and can acquire endless variations, while the sense of suspense must always be achieved by dilation. Reviewed in this light, the screen images in Night Entertainment generate a sense of secrecy and suspense: they always exhibit and conceal at the same time, and always allude to things hidden and unseen.

Our analysis of the screen images in Night Entertainment gradually shifts from their structural roles in the painting to their psychological impact on the viewer—an impact that generates a voyeuristic gaze. For John Ellis, “The characteristic voyeuristic attitude in cinema is that of wanting to see what happens, to see things unrolling. It demands that these things take place for the spectator, are offered or dedicated to the spectator, and in that sense implies a consent by the representation (and the figures in it) to the act of being watched.” The same words can be said of Night Entertainment: the painting’s handscroll format guarantees the privacy necessary for a voyeur; its moving surface has the potential to realize the desire of “wanting to see what happens, to see things unrolling.” There is also a strong sense of separation between the spectator and the spectacle. The painted figures are all deeply absorbed in their own acts and never raise their eyes towards the onlooker. In this way, they consent to a silent performance for a secret watching eye.

It has been suggested that “distance” is essential for a voyeur as well as for a cinema spectator. But in this argument “distance” is understood in a physical sense as an empty space separating the object and the eye; the spectator must “take care to avoid being too close to or too far from the screen.” This physical gulf is minimized, if not completely dismissed, in the viewing of a handscroll, which instead creates a tension between looking and touching. On the one hand, the painted scene in Night Entertainment rejects the viewer’s direct participation; on the other, the viewer must physically handle the scroll which bears these scenes. The distance required for voyeuristic looking thus has to be established by internal means in the
pictorial representation; and here we return to the screen motif. With its root definition of $p’ing$ or “to shield,” the screen is an ideal mechanism to separate not only individual scenes but also the viewer from the things being viewed. As Night Entertainment is unrolled the viewer’s motion and vision are periodically stopped by screens with painted opaque panels, which constantly readjust the viewer’s relationship to the picture—reasserting their distance, preventing excessive proximity, and creating concrete measures for the degree of attachment and detachment between the spectator and the picture. As in Wen T’ing-yun’s (813–870) poem “A Night Banquet,” here a screen functions as a barrier, but a barrier that opens automatically upon receiving the voyeuristic gaze: “The long hairpins, a pair of dragonflies in her dangling locks; / Where the green fields end and hills slant, painted screens open...”

The screens in Night Entertainment enclose both men and women, whose relationship gradually changes, and this changing relationship constantly redefines the subject and object of voyeuristic looking. Laura Mulvey’s famous formula, “woman as image, man as bearer of the look,” can be best applied to the painting’s beginning section, in which Han Hsi-tsai and his male guests all fix their eyes on a female guitar player. Completely isolated, the musician passively receives and converges the intense looks from the male assembly. Consistent with the scroll’s unrolling motion, this internal male gaze extends and directs the external gaze of the spectator. The following sections repeat this initial composition, but the active/passive heterosexual division is blurred. Han Hsi-tsai is no longer the “bearer of the look” but himself becomes part of the pictorial spectacle, either performing music or standing with his body exposed. This second representational mode is again reversed in the last scene, in which Han Hsi-tsai resumes his role as the “bearer of the look,” but in a very different way from the beginning section. He now appears as a secret voyeur within the pictorial representation: standing among men and women engaged in intimate physical contact, his presence nevertheless goes unnoticed. There is clearly a psychological “distance” separating him as a watcher from the figures he watches. His position and gaze thus duplicate those of the spectator. On the other hand, he can never “mirror” the spectator, because he must continue to ignore the spectator in order to sustain the latter’s voyeuristic gaze.

This reading finally brings us to the famous story which narrates the painting’s creation:

Ku Hung-chung was from south China and served the Southern T’ang emperor Li Yü (r. 961–75) as a court painter. A skilled artist, he was particularly good at portraying figures. At that time Han Hsi-tsai, who held the office of Internal Secretary, was illustrious and all his acquaintances were from the hereditary nobility. Han was obsessed with beautiful singing girls and held endless night drinking parties. He imposed no restraint on his guests, who mixed with his ladies, shouting in wild excitement. His reputation for indulgence spread both inside and outside the court.


Li Yü, the Southern T'ang emperor, valued Han Hsi-tsaï's talent as a statesman and overlooked the matter, but he regretted not being able to see Han's famous parties with his own eyes. So he sent his court painter, Ku Hung-chung, as a detective to Han's night entertainments, instructing him to recreate everything he saw there based on his memory. The painting, the Night Entertainment of Han Hsi-tsaï, was then made and presented to the throne.\(^{11}\)

Written a century later, this record reconstructs the painting's creation from a particular point of view.\(^{12}\) Instead of documenting true events, it personifies the voyeuristic gaze inherent to the painting as identifiable historical figures. Ku Hung-chung the artist and Li Yü the patron are both said to embody this gaze but in different ways. Ku peeped into Han Hsi-tsaï's inner chambers; all images in his painting were supposedly "based on his memory." But Li was "able to see Han's parties with his own eyes" by looking at the picture. We also assume this second position.

**Mode 2: The "Double Screen" and Pictorial Illusion/Illusionism**

One of the most puzzling compositions in Chinese art history, the Double Screen (ch'ung-p'ing) was invented by Chou Wen-chü, a fellow artist of Ku Hung-chung in the Southern T'ang court. Chou's original painting has long disappeared and only later copies of it exist. In one of these copies, in the Frer Gallery of Art (fig. 16.4), four men comprise a circular cluster in the foreground and are playing or watching a game of chess; a servant-boy is standing alongside in attendance. Like Night Entertainment, this assemblage is centered on a bearded man wearing a tall black hat, whose identity as the host is suggested by his focal position, distinct costume, and rather severe expression. Behind him is a large, single-paneled screen, on which a domestic scene is presented: a bearded man, possibly the master in the reception hall, has now retired into a more relaxed atmosphere. Attended by four women, he is reclining on a platform couch. Two of the women are preparing his bed beside the couch; one is delivering a blanket; and the other is standing behind the master awaiting orders. This second group of figures is again framed by a screen, whose tripartite leaves are decorated with a landscape.

The designer deliberately confused the viewer, who is led to believe that the domestic scene painted on the screen is part of the real world portrayed in the painting. The consistent obliqueness of both "real" and "painted" furniture—platforms, beds, tables, and the chessboard—guide the viewer's gaze into the distance without interruption, and the reduced size of the "painted" figures and objects on the screen suggest their remoteness. The viewer, who is presumably positioned in the living room with the chess players and their audience, seems to see through the screen into an inner chamber, perhaps the master bedroom in the same house. Chou Wen-chü must have designed this visual trick very consciously: the two side panels of the tripartite screen inside the single-paneled screen differ in width, and the angle of their pivots is determined from the viewer's exact standpoint. This design is illogical because such diagonal pivoting could only be seen if this tripartite screen were a three-dimensional object rather than a flat image painted on the first screen, but this "mistake" makes sense because we are deceived by the trick.\(^{13}\)
A number of ancient texts record that Chou Wen-ch'i too painted a version of Night Entertainment of Han Hsi-tsa-t — that he, like Ku Hung-chung, also received Li Yu's order to depict Han's private life. Whether this record is reliable or not, it may shed light on the relationship between Chou's Double Screen and Ku's Night Entertainment. Reviewed in light of figs. 16.5a and 16.5b, the two paintings' subject matter is surprisingly similar. The difference lies mainly in representation: Ku's interlocking "frames" appear as superimposed "frames" in Chou's work. The male gathering at the beginning of Ku's painting is removed to the foreground in Chou Wen-ch'i's picture, against a "transparent" screen which allows the viewer to see the "bedroom" scene painted in the second section of the handscreen. The first two sections of Ku Hung-chung's handscreen are thus condensed into a single-frame picture. Technically, this transformation is achieved by changing the form and function of screen images. All screens in Ku Hung-chung's handscreen are solid pieces of furniture, placed perpendicularly to the painting's plane surface and bearing opaque painted panels. As such, these screens divide a horizontal space and regulate the motion of unrolling a handscreen. Chou Wen-ch'i's screens, on the other hand, are perfectly parallel to the picture plane, and no longer resist the spectator's gaze. In other words, to turn their painted faces into illusions these screens must sacrifice themselves as solid objects. They must become empty windows open onto empty windows; only their solid frames remain to differentiate the painted scenes and to separate the viewer from these scenes. While Ku Hung-chung's screens separate and link a series of frames in a moving picture, Chou Wen-ch'i's screens are themselves frames that index different systems of reference in a single representation. Ku's picture requires physical handling; Chou's picture only encourages the penetration of the gaze. What Chou Wen-ch'i has transformed, therefore, include not only painted scenes but also the painting medium and the way of viewing.

In ancient Chinese writings, the "Double Screen," and in particular the first screen bearing female images, are referred to as huăn, which has three different but interrelated meanings: illusion, illusionism, and magical transformation. When used in the sense of illusion, the term denotes verisimilitude in representation: the spectator feels he is seeing an actual object or space, but knows clearly what he is looking at is a picture. The underlying notion is therefore the dualism of huăn and chên ("real" or "realness") — an illusory pictorial image mirrors reality and thus opposes reality. Illusionism, on the other hand, confuses and dismisses such distinctions: by employing certain media or techniques, the artist is able to deceive not only the viewer's eye but also his mind, at least temporarily. The viewer is persuaded to take the painted for the real. In literature, an illusionistic image often becomes the subject of a magical transformation that brings an inanimate figure to life.

Differing from many illusionistic paintings in Western art history which have been linked to pictorial realism, illusionism never led to the dominance of representational art in imperial China. Rather, it remained an isolated artistic style frequently associated with two specific conventions: the screen as a "framing" device and the female image as the object being framed. Illusionism is thus often considered a property of a particular object or medium — the painted screen, especially
the “screen with women’s images” (shih-nü p’ing-feng). A persistent theme in ancient Chinese tales is that a woman portrayed on a screen could come to life; the Chinese version of Pygmalion’s myth was invented in this particular context. Whereas in such stories the screen plays a central role in romantic love, in other tales the belief in the magic power of a painted screen invokes terror. The fear is that the owner of a screen might lose control over his illusionistic ladies. Since he possesses and controls these images only with his gaze, danger arises when he falls asleep and becomes temporarily powerless: the painted women come alive, not in a romance but in a nightmare. Such a “dangerous” screen with women’s images could even become a political portent to presage dynastic decline. Transmitted from one regime to another, it was always linked with nightmare, death, disorder, and especially female dominance over political affairs. Its poisonous influence threatened not only an individual gentleman but the patriarchal state.

Whether romance or political satire, these tales reverse the relationship between a painted screen and the spectator, who has become extremely vulnerable to the bewildering power of the screen’s illusionistic decoration. Consequently, different methods were imagined to exorcise a bewitched screen with women’s images. The simplest method was to destroy it physically. Another method was to remove it from sight: by concealing it and locking it up, a man discards his role as spectator of the screen and therefore hopes to escape its evil influence. A third, more sophisticated strategy is to re-identify a painted image as an image. Thus some stories end with a counter-magical transformation: a woman who has come out of a screen painting resumes her original place on the screen’s flat panel. Unfortunately, all three solutions are negative. In order to avoid the danger of a screen painting, one has to eliminate the painting itself—either its physical existence (destroying the screen), its visual impact (concealing the screen), or its illusionism (re-identifying the woman as a pictorial illusion).

There is one positive solution, but it is subject to a strict rule. When a painted woman becomes real in the viewer’s imagination, she must still be confined in a sealed space and must not threaten the viewer’s conventional territory. The result of this fantasy is a strange screen which, instead of being solid and opaque, has a “transparent” surface. It is said that King Sun Liang of Wu (r. 252–58) once ordered an extremely thin glass screen made for him. When he held parties on cool and clear nights, he would set the screen up in the moonlight and ask his four most favored concubines to sit inside. “Watching the ladies from outside,” the anecdote goes, “there seemed no separation between them and the guests; only the women’s perfume was sealed inside.”

We know that this kind of large glass screen could not have possibly existed in the third century. The question thus becomes why people imagined such a transparent screen: it did not block one’s view and thus did not fulfill a screen’s basic function of creating a practical enclosure. The answer must be that although the line between the male exterior space and the female interior space had become invisible, the separation between the two spaces was still there and could be mentally envisaged. The advantage of this screen was that it not only divided these two
spaces, but also allowed people to see into both of them. It was commonly understood in traditional China that women in a household were not supposed to be exposed on a public occasion, even in front of the master’s male guests. This anecdote offers a compromise between this social restriction and private desire: Sun Liang allowed his male guests to watch his ladies but be unable to “feel” them. But what kind of thing can only be “seen” but not “felt”? The answer is clear: a painting. In fact, what Sun Liang showed or intended to show to his guests were not his consorts, but their “portraits” inside the screen’s frame.

No matter whether Chou Wen-chü’s painting was inspired by Sun Liang’s screen, it was designed to fulfill the same task. The painting’s subject is the life of a man, who is engaged in both the inner life of the boudoir and the male external world. Of these two images, however, only his social presence is represented as “reality” in the painting; his private life can only be shown as an illusion—a “painting-within-painting.”

Mode 3: The Landscape Screen and the Image of the Mind
Our third Southern Tang painting, Collating Texts, was made by Wang Ch’i-han, a contemporary of Ku Hung-chung and Chou Wen-chü and also a “Painter-in-Attendance” in Li Yü’s court. The Hsiian-ho Painting Catalogue, however, distinguished him from the other two court painters and described him as a “scholar artist”: “He liked to paint mountain forests and deep valleys, hermits among cliffs and recluse diviners; [his works] bear no dust [of the human world] and have nothing to do with the taste of an urban marketplace.”22 Unlike Ku Hung-chung and Chou Wen-chü, who mainly painted portraits of their royal patrons and court ladies, Wang Ch’i-han depicted subjects such as “A Lofty Gentleman” or “Ancient Worthies.”23 His only surviving painting, Collating Texts in Nanjing University (fig. 16.6), reveals the same literati interest.

The painting’s main figure is a scholar sitting behind a small desk at the lower right corner of the composition. A pile of books, brushes, and an open scroll on the desk seem to suggest that he is in the midst of writing. But instead of concentrating on his work, he is absorbed in the idle act of picking his ear and is therefore sometimes called Man Cleaning His Ear. A servant boy has just entered the room and seems to be reporting some trivial matters to his day-dreaming master. Both the awkward positioning and the mundane content of this scene de-emphasize its importance. The focus of the painting are two juxtaposed images in the center of the composition—an enormous screen stretching across the full width of the picture and a large low table in front of the screen. The artist must have deliberately portrayed the scholar in fine brushwork, while using bold lines and dark ink to delineate the screen’s unusually thick frame and the table’s strong and sturdy legs. The dominance of the screen and the table is thus established by multiple factors: their central position, size, weight, and the drawing style.

The significance of these two objects also lies in the images they bear. The table supports books, scrolls, and a stringed musical instrument—all typical paraphernalia of a learned scholar. The screen, on the other hand, is painted with a panoramic

20. The creation of one such screen, called the Multi-colored Illusion, which bore images of famous beauties in Chinese history, was considered one of the fall of the Sung dynasty (581-604). When the Tang began to decline, it went to Yang Kuei-fee (Yang T’ao-ch’i, 718-756), the celebrated consort of Emperor Hsüan-te; and the most renowned fresco palette in Chinese history. Her elder brother and his country’s factotum, Yang Kuei-fei (701-766), set up in front of his bed. So that the screen, the entire room, and the whole wall would appear as the beautiful beauties who had destroyed past dynasties. Personalized, he lay there with eyes and ears open, only after the lady returned to her position on the screen was he able to move. He immediately sealed the screen up and locked it in a dark chamber. But he could not prevent the political turmoil that followed his imagined dream: the powerful warlord Lu shih rebelled against the central government; the emperor’s feud, and Yang Kuei-fei was killed. T’ai-chien wai-chuan (Informal Biography of Yang Taishen), cited in this, pp. 221-234.


22. Chao-p’o hsiau-p’u, chuan 4, p. 1124. A similar statement is found in Hsia Wen-yen, T’ah-i hsiau-p’u, chuan 5, p. 33.

landscape—verdant peaks soaring above lakes, willow trees growing on river banks, and a remote mountain range half-hidden in mists and clouds. The focal image of this landscape, a country villa on level ground at the foot of the high peaks, appears on the screen's central panel. The juxtaposition of the screen and the table offers a number of clues for reading the painting. It is possible that the two groups of images—those on the table and on the screen—highlight the two main aspects of the scholar's life: the books and musical instrument indicate his refined intellectual activities; the rural landscape and the thatched villa symbolize his retirement into the wilderness. It is possible that the landscape, which appears almost like real scenery behind the screen's "transparent" panels, reflects the scholar's mind: ignoring his routine "indoor" work, he imagines a place in the wilderness. It is also possible that these images imply a narrative. The scholar is about to take a journey: he has packed a few articles—some books and a musical instrument—on the table; he is sitting there waiting; the servant boy has come to report that the carriage is ready; and the destination of his journey is the villa painted on the screen.

Although it is difficult to decide which reading is closer to Wang Ch'i-han's original plan, all these readings result from his choice to forge a direct relationship between a scholar and a landscape screen. I say "choice" because he rejected two other contemporary modes of screen images exemplified by Chou Wen-chü's *Double Screens* and Ku Hung-chung's *Night Entertainment*. Although the screens in the *Night Entertainment* are painted with mountains and trees, these scenes are standard interior decoration without apparent relationship to the figures and events in the painting. Although one of the two screens in Chou Wen-chü's picture bears a landscape, this screen is secondary and serves as a backdrop for the gentleman and his ladies portrayed on the first screen. Wang Ch'i-han's choice, therefore, is to dissociate the image of a landscape screen from interior decoration, story telling, or illusionism, and to use it instead as a cultural symbol and a visual metaphor. It is symbolic because it signifies a scholar's individuality and spiritual freedom; it is metaphorical because it provides an unspoken message with a concrete pictorial form. This is exactly how this work was appreciated by its scholarly audience. Many distinguished literati added colophons to the painting. The three earliest writers, Su Shih (1036–1101), Su Ch’е (1039–1112), and Wang Hsien (1048–1104?), were all Sung leading scholars and noted advocates of literati arts. Their reading of the painting is characterized by intimacy and self-engagement. Wang Hsien, who happened to have had an earache earlier, identified himself with the painted scholar and found the landscape on the screen a metaphor for enlightenment.

Of course, Wang Ch'i-han was not the first person who perceived nature as the image of a lofty, scholarly mind—this idea had emerged as soon as the art of landscape painting began. To the Buddhist recluse Tsung Ping (375–443), mountains were sacred and embodied divine wisdom and moral principles, and freedom meant that his own spirit merged into them. When his infirmities no longer allowed him to meditate in real landscapes, Tsung Ping traveled in his mind through painted scenery. It is recorded in his biography that on the walls of his
chamber he depicted all the mountains that he had visited in his lifetime. He told his friends: "I strum my lute with such force because I want all the mountains to resound..." 24 Tsung Ping's chamber has long since disappeared. But a tomb excavated recently sheds light on his lost painting. Located at Lin-hsi in present-day Shantung Province, the burial is dated to 551 during the Northern Ch'i rule (550–577), though the deceased, Ts'ui Fen, spent most of his official life in the Eastern Wei court (534–550). The mural appears as a painted screen surrounding the tomb chamber, with its eight rectangular panels depicting a series of gentlemen (or manifestations of a single gentleman) in nature. 25 The chief landscape elements include strange rocks and tall trees, reminiscent of Tsung Ping's sacred landscape in which "grottoed peaks tower on high and cloudy forests mass in depth." But a more crucial factor connecting this screen with Tsung Ping's lost murals is the harmonious relationship between man, nature, literature, and music. Whether composing a poem or playing a lute, a figure portrayed on this screen finds peace in his arts as well as in the tranquil landscape. He is content and seems to be dreaming; his eyes are shut and his gentle facial expression reflects inward contemplation. Without much difficulty we can trace this image to the portraits of the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove. 26 In both cases, a Chinese intellectual is represented as a refined individual who finds personal freedom in self-expression and unspoiled nature.

The tradition of the scholarly "landscape screen" continued into the T'ang and found its chief representative, not surprisingly, in the quintessential scholar painter Wang Wei (700–?61). Wang's reputation as a poet and painter was inseparable from his passion for the Wang-ch'uan Villa, his country estate which he described repeatedly in both images and words. The T'ang artist honed Chu Ching-hsiau (9th century) saw a version of Wang's Wang-ch'uan Villa painting in Ch'ang-an's Temple of a Thousand Blessings (Ch'en-fu tzu), and considered its powerful landscape imagery a direct reflection of the artist's lofty mind: "Mountains and valleys, crowded close, turned this way and that, while clouds and water streamed by. His conceptions left the dusty, everyday world behind, and marvels grew from his brush-tip." 27 Chu did not document the painting's form, however. It is Chang Huaikuan (active 713–741), a contemporary of Wang Wei, who recorded that the painting was painted on a screen in the temple's West Pagoda Precinct. 28

While Wang Ch'i-han's Collating Texts clearly followed these precedents, it also inspired many later works of the same genre. The best of these portraits the famous Yuan literati painter Ni Tsan (1301–1374) in front of a landscape screen (fig. 16.7). The life of Ni Tsan has been well studied and need not be repeated here. 29 A more relevant issue is his painting style which, though also well known, provides a key to understanding this landscape screen. Rare among Chinese painters, Ni Tsan insisted on a single subject, a single style, and even a single composition throughout the later part of his life. The great majority of his paintings follow a simple pattern: a river bank in the foreground, surmounted by a few undernourished trees; a broad stretch of water; and earthy hills beyond. The result is a disjointed composition which destroys any sense of real space. When one of Ni Tsan's friends painted this portrait for him in the 1340s, he thus perceived the master and his art as two halves

25. For a good reproduction of this mural, see Zhegguei meishu quanji (Treasures of Chinese Art: Painting) 12 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1989), pl. 59.
28. Chang Huaikuan, Hua-tsun (Opinions on Painting), cited in Hsü Sung, T'ang liang-ching ch'eng-fang kao (An Examination of the Components of the Two T'ang Capitals) (Beijing: Ch'ang-hua chu-eh, 1983), p. 114. The screen probably stood there until 845, when Emperor Wu-tsong engaged a violent attack on Buddhists and destroyed the temple.
of a whole. He depicted the physical Ni Tsan as though he were thinking about composing a painting. Holding a brush in one hand and a piece of blank paper in the other, Ni Tsan is seated motionless, his face expressionless. His eyes are vacant and he gazes steadily before him; his mind has been transported to a place beyond the mundane world—a place reflected on the screen behind him. It is a landscape painted in Ni’s unique style. Juxtaposed with Ni Tsan’s physical likeness, it reveals Ni Tsan’s inner and more essential existence.

_Coda: The “Pure Screen”_

This portrait of Ni Tsan, however, is also the last painting in which a landscape screen reflects an individual mind. A more general phenomenon from the Sung to Ming was that the landscape screen gradually lost its specific connections with literati. No longer an exclusive symbol of scholars, it was employed indiscriminately in representations of any figure: secular or sacred, scholar or commoner, man or woman. This pictorial motif was popularized and standardized; its meaning was “emptied” and reinvented. On the other hand, this process of proliferation forced scholar artists to try even harder to escape being assimilated into the general culture, for the essence of literati art lay in intellectualization and self-differentiation. The new images produced through such attempts, however, could never escape popularization and were inevitably adapted by painters outside literati circles.

It is no coincidence that when images of the landscape screen prevailed in society, amateur literati artists found attraction in a chaste, white screen (su-p’ing). Such screens appeared in the later works of Wang Meng (ca. 1301–1385) (fig. 16.8) and were also favored by his contemporaries such as Chao Yuan (d. after 1373), Chen Chü-yen (ca. 1331–before 1371), and Hsu Pen (active ca. 1372–1397). Some early Ming amateur painters continued this tradition, but it was Wen Cheng-ming (1470–1559) of the mid-Ming who made this image a firmly established pictorial convention in literati painting (fig. 16.9). Both Wang Meng and Wen Cheng-ming favored a pair of thatched huts, each containing a white screen. This image seems to deliberately echo a poem written by Po Chü-i in the ninth century, entitled “The Pure Screens”:

_I built a thatched hut under Incense Burner Peak;
I placed two screens beside the east and west walls.
Every night, they send the moonlight into my room;
Every morning, they surround me like white clouds.
Long have I cultivated a noble spirit;
Inner and outer, my heart and you, the screen,
reflect each other’s brilliance._
Oh, my screens, do you see that in the palace and the houses of great lords, 
screens are made of embroidered silk.
These are decorated with chains of jewels, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, 
with shining mica sheets attached.
These are embellished with five metals and the Seven Treasures, 
which mingle together and reflect one another.

The eyes of the rich are only delighted by such screens; 
They can sleep peacefully only when surrounded by them.
But my pure screens—Oh, my screens—
Isn’t it that things have their own nature and use?
You have nothing but wooden bones and a paper face, 
Where can you stay but my thatched hut?

For Po Chü-i as well as for Wang Meng and Wen Cheng-ming, a pure screen is idealized as their soulmate or double. It is humble in appearance, and so it embodies a scholar’s noble spirit; it is plain and white, and so it can reflect moonlight and resemble floating clouds, both traditional symbols of Nature. But could this literati “pure screen” escape the appropriation of popular culture? Some painters indeed tried to preserve its literati identity even when they themselves had gone commercial. Thus T’ang Yin (1470–1524) accompanied his “scholarly” self-portraits only with plain screens (fig. 16.10a). However, when he employed historical figures to allude to his love affairs with beautiful singing girls, he surrounded the figures with screens painted with colorful landscapes or flowers and birds (fig. 16.10b). For a professional artist such as Yu Ch’iu (active 2nd half of 16th century), however, a plain screen became a universal prop equally appropriate for depictions of scholarly gatherings and semi-erotic drawings of beautiful women. The image of the pure screen thus repeated the fate of the landscape screen to become a general property of Chinese culture. With its white, undecorated surface, it also put an end to the painted screen as a “painting-within-painting.”
Figure 16.1
Yu Chin (ca. 1465–ca. 1509),
Enjoying Antiques. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 126.1 x 187 cm.
National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 16.2
Kao Hung-chung (active 10th century),
Night Entertainment of Han His-
tual. Ink and color on silk, 12th-century copy, 28.7 x 335.5 cm. Palace Museum,
Beijing.
Figure 16.2
Composition of the Night
Entertainment of Fan Hsi-tsan. (a) seating of famous men, (b) positions of screens. images
Figure 16.4
Double Screen, attributed to Chou
Wen-ch'ü, handscroll, ink and color on silk, 37.3 x 50.0 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Figure 16.5a
Sub-frame in the Double Screen and the Night Entertainment of Han Hai-t'ai.

Figure 16.5b
Viewing the Double Screen and the Night Entertainment of Han Hai-t'ai.
Figure 16.6
Wang Ch'i-han (10th century), Collating Texts. Handscroll, ink and color on silk, 28.4 x 65.7 cm. Nanjing University Library, Nanjing.

Figure 16.7
Anonymous (14th century), Portrait of Ni Tsan. Handscroll, ink and color on paper, 28.2 x 60.9 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.
Figure 16.8
Wang Meng (ca. 1301–1385),
Retreat at the Foot of Mount Hui.
Handscroll, ink on paper, 28.2 x 73.7 cm. Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Figure 16.9
Wen Cheng-ming (1470–1559), A Study by Old Trees.
Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 52.4 x 31.3 cm. Collection Unknown.
Figure 16.10e

Figure 16.10b
T'ang Yin (1470–1524), Tao Ku Presents a Poem. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 168.8 x 102.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.