The Painted Screen

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This short essay contemplates a large problem: What is a (traditional Chinese) painting? The answer seems so self-evident that the question often eludes either an intrinsic analysis of style and iconography or an extrinsic study of social, political, and religious contexts. Both kinds of scholarship equate a painting with a pictorial representation, which is alone reproduced in scholarly works as the object of discussion. Missing here are a painting's physical form—as a framed canvas, a piece of plastered wall, a scroll, an album, a fan, or a screen—and all concepts and practices related to its materiality. An alternative approach, the one advocated here, is that a painting must be understood both as an image-bearing object and as a pictorial image; the collaboration and tension between these two aspects make a work a "painting." As commonplace as it seems, this approach is rarely practiced. When seriously pursued, however, it naturally breaks down the confines between image, object, and context and provides a new ground for historical investigation.

My example for such an investigation is the screen, whose chief virtue lies in its multiple references: a screen can be an object, a painting...

This paper summarizes and develops some points I have made in my forthcoming book, The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting (Chicago, 1996). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

1. For an introduction to these two types of scholarship in art history, see W. Eugene Kleinbauer, Modern Perspectives in Western Art History: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Writings on the Visual Arts (New York, 1971), pp. 1-107.

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medium, something represented in a picture, or all three. In other words, a screen as an architectonic form occupies a three-dimensional space and divides space; as an art medium it provides an ideal surface for painting and is actually one of the oldest painting formats recorded in ancient texts; and as a pictorial representation it has been one of the favorite images in Chinese painting from the inception of this art. With its diverse roles and ambiguous identities, the screen has offered artists multiple options for developing an artistic rhetoric; it also challenges art historians who, instead of seeking straightforward answers to historical problems, want to explore a complex trail that they hope will cut through familiar routes and offer fresh views.

Space, Place

A freestanding screen takes the form either of a single panel raised above the ground or of multiple panels lashed together to surround a seat, a bed, or a dais (fig. 1). The Chinese terms for such objects are ping and zhang, both meaning "shields" or "to shield." The screen is thus a framework whose basic function is to distinguish space. In fact, it is difficult to find another object in ancient Chinese culture whose significance, practical or symbolic, is so entirely bound up with the notion of space.

When a screen is set up, it not only divides an undifferentiated space into two juxtaposed areas—that in front of it and that behind it—but also qualifies these two areas. To the person backed or surrounded by a screen, the area behind the screen has become hidden from sight; it has suddenly disappeared, at least temporarily. He finds himself within an

2. My use of the term medium in this article is based on a classical definition: "any of the varieties of painting as determined by the nature of the vehicle" (The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, ed. William Little, H. W. Fowler, and Jessie Coulson, 2 vols. [1933; London, 1973], 2:1301, s.v. "medium"). The emphasis, therefore, is on "the nature of the vehicle."

3. Other words for screen exist but are often elaborations of these two basic terms: for example, yanzhang or zhangzi (shields or covers; a single-panel screen), pingfeng, pingmen, or mensheng (a door screen), zhangzi (sun blinds), bishang (wall covering), shuping (a screen with calligraphy), huaping (a painted screen), and others. See Michael Sullivan, "Notes on Early Chinese Screen Painting," Artibus Asiae 27, no. 3 (1965): 239–64, esp. p. 239.

encircled area and perceives this area as belonging to him. He is the master of this place. We find an interesting example of a screen playing this role in a painting attributed to the Southern Song master Ma Yuan (active 1190–1225) (fig. 2). Here, a multilayered terrace rises above elaborate palace halls, and a single-panel screen stands on the top level under an oversized canopy. Placed in the open air, the screen neither keeps off the wind nor partitions a walled space; its significance lies in its psychological relationship with the person in front of it—a gentleman who is gazing (with exaggerated tranquility) at some strangely pointed peaks beyond the palatial compound. Standing behind him, the screen blocks any unwelcome gaze from the outside and supplies a sense of privacy and security; it guarantees that he will be the only spectator of the landscape and therefore it defines a place that is exclusively subjected to his vision.

The screen is versatile, but as an architectonic form it always serves this basic role: in the palace it surrounds the throne, in a household it sets off the reception quarter, and in a bedroom it maintains privacy. In all these cases, the screen transforms space into places that are definable, manageable, and controllable. The concept of place is thus political.
I.

A.

FIG. 2.—Viewing Sunset from a Palace Terrace, attributed to Ma Yuan. Album leaf. Ink, color, and gold on silk. 25.2 x 24.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

We do not know when the screen was invented, but by Han times (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) this object had already been frequently mentioned as a political symbol in textual sources. The Book of Rites (Lǐ jì) requires the king in a formal audience to face south while situating himself in front of a screen—a tradition that continued until the fall of China’s last dynasty.4 An important court ceremony, supposedly held at the beginning of the Zhou (ca. 1030–256 B.C.), exemplifies this regulation. “The Positions in Bright Hall” (“Mingtang wei”), the classical essay that records this ceremony, has provided Chinese rulers with a model for constructing a symbolic space pertaining to the country’s political structure. It instructs officials of different ranks to form an inner circle inside the ritual com-

4. See Li Fang, Taiping yulan [Imperial Reviewed Encyclopedia of the Taiping Era], 4 vols. (Beijing, 1960), 4:3127.
pound during the ceremony and orders the chiefs of the four “barbarian tribes” (in the North, South, East, and West) to constitute an outer circle beyond the compound’s four gates. The king, the center of this symbolic universe, gives an audience to his ministers and subjects “with his back to a screen decorated with embroidered axe patterns.”

This screen, the only furnishing mentioned in the text, defines the king’s place and enhances his authority over it. This place is both real (the ritual ground in Bright Hall where the ceremony takes place) and symbolic (a miniaturization of a larger geographic and political sphere known as China). To the king, the screen is both an exterior object and an extension of his body. On the one hand, it encircles; it draws the boundary of the ritual/symbolic place that he claims as his domain. On the other, it seems part of himself. Like his own face, the screen is both something that he is not supposed to see during the ceremony and something that must be seen during the ceremony. Facing the other participants, the king and the screen merge and appear in unison to confront and control the other participants. It then becomes clear that the focus of the ritual/symbolic place is actually this unity, a unity that can become the focus of the place because it manipulates perception. Within this unity the king’s authority is self-definable, and he is able to present his most preferred image to his subjects—a frontal portrait of his royal likeness within the screen’s frame and against the screen’s decorated surface.

Framing, Patterning

The screen thus not only shields and divides (framing in a general sense); it also frames internal and/or external signs with its rectangular frame (framing in a narrow or literal sense). Various scholars have written on the nature of framing as a literary or artistic device. Some suggest that framing creates necessary boundaries and transitions between “realities” having different standards of space, time, ideas, and behavior. Others believe that framing disarticulates texts from contexts and arranges them both in a hierarchy. The recorded Zhou ceremony seems to support both views: the king, seen within the screen’s frame, is conceived as a timeless visual presentation, a portrait, an icon; he is given a different sort of reality. At the same time, the screen secures a hierarchical relationship between the king within the frame and his subjects outside the frame. We


gain similar impressions from a royal portrait created toward the end of China's imperial era, some 2500 years after the Zhou ceremony (fig. 3). It portrays Emperor Xiaozong of the Ming dynasty (r. 1488–1505) in his ceremonial attire. His unique status as the Son of Heaven is demonstrated not by the figure itself but by the lavish furnishings, especially
a large screen, which is painted with dragons rising out of waves and clouds. The emperor’s head, perfectly flat and frontal, appears at the exact center of the screen beneath the large dragon painted on the screen’s central panel and flanked by the pair of dragons on the two side panels.

As in the Zhou ceremony, this screen bears painted images. Again, these painted images are not restricted to screen decoration. According to ancient books, the axe patterns covering the Zhou screen symbolize royal authority and should embellish the king’s costume and other ritual paraphernalia as well. In Emperor Xiaozong’s portrait, dragons, now the primary symbol of sovereignty, not only dominate the screen’s front panel but also adorn its sculptured foot, embellish a golden lacquered chair, and are woven into the colorful carpet under the emperor’s feet. Such arrangements are standard in the many ceremonial spaces of the Son of Heaven in the Forbidden City. On the throne in the Palace of Heavenly Purity, shown in figure 1, for example, large or small dragons appear on almost every surface, from the ceiling to the flight of steps leading to the throne backed by a golden screen. One imagines that in a formal court audience, the emperor himself would have put on clothes embroidered with dragons (see fig. 3). What we find here, therefore, is an intrinsic contradiction between framing and patterning: if framing distinguishes text from context, patterning eliminates distinctions between individual physical entities.

This contradiction is essential to Chinese ritual art,8 which is characterized by a strong sense of hierarchy (the result of architectural framing) and an equally strong sense of continuity (the result of decorative patterning).9 A screen’s frame provides hierarchy; its decoration, continuity. Since the screen’s decorative patterns are repeated on other ritual objects such repetition breaks the confines of the frame. What is intended to be framed is not the screen’s surface signs but a subject external to it: the man sitting or standing in front of the screen. Here we return to the unity of the screen and the Zhou king in the court ceremony, but with the additional awareness that in ritual art a screen is never an independent

8. The term ritual art is translated from the Chinese word lìqi, meaning literally “ritual paraphernalia.” Exemplified by numerous ceremonial bronzes and jades, ritual art was the mainstream during the Shang and Zhou periods. Although it lost its dominant position after China entered the imperial era in the third century B.C., it has always been an integral aspect of Chinese art and culture, especially the art and culture of the ruling class. I have discussed the concept of ritual art in my book Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture (Stanford, Calif., 1995), pp. 17–24.

9. About architectural framing and political hierarchy in art during the Shang and Zhou periods, see my “From Temple to Tomb: Ancient Chinese Ritual Art in Transition,” Early China 17 (1988): 78-115, esp. pp. 79–90. As for the ritual continuum in Shang and Zhou art, it is well known that its architectonic forms (for example, wall panels, coffins, screens) and objects (for example, bronzes, jades) bear stereotyped but metamorphic patterns.
object of viewing. It rejects the concept of a distinctive surface that can be turned into an individual painting. Without a surface the screen is not yet a painting medium.

**Surface, Medium**

Michael Sullivan opens his study on screen painting with a dramatic statement: “until the Sung Dynasty the painted screen, or perhaps one should say the painting mounted on a screen, was, with the handscroll and fresco, one of the three most important forms of painting in China. Today, hardly a single identifiable fragment of this screen painting has survived.” He thus dates the decline of the screen as an important painting medium to Song times (A.D. 960–1279). My earlier discussion, on the other hand, suggests that there was neither a place for “screen paintings” in pre-Han ritual art nor, as a matter of fact, for the art of painting in general. Very likely the screen gained its independence during the Han and post-Han, when it gradually separated itself from other types of ritual paraphernalia and luxury goods and finally redefined itself as a kind of framed painting. We find a clear signal of this change in Han literature; attracted by the pictures decorating a screen, a king or a nobleman would turn around to look at and enjoy them. It is said that Song Hong, the chief minister of Emperor Guangwu, who ruled China from A.D. 25 to 57, attended a court audience one day and saw the emperor seated on his throne surrounded by a screen newly painted with images of eminent women. During the audience the emperor frequently turned around to enjoy the fine female portraits. Quoting Mencius, Song Hong said, “it is rare to find a person who enjoys virtue as much as he enjoys material beauty.” Here the emperor was criticized for having been attracted by the image of the painted ladies and having forgotten their moral implications. But his mistake signified a new relationship between the screen and its owner. No longer forming a rigid symbolic unity, they had now split into the subject and object of viewing. In turning around to face the screen, the king abandoned the old ideal of presenting himself as a frontal portrait against the screen’s painted panel. In other words, he now identified himself as a viewer of the screen and thus acknowledged the screen’s independent value as art to be appreciated.

As an art object, the screen requires its own space and place; as a painting medium, its framed surface must be recognized as an independent field. Not coincidentally, in China the awareness of the plane surface was coupled with other important art historical developments, including

12. Ibid.
the appearance of portable painting and the educated artist, as well as the emergence of art criticism and connoisseurship. A famous anecdote about the third-century master Cao Buxing attests to these changes. It relates that Sun Quan, a ruler of the Wu kingdom in the South, once asked Cao to decorate a screen in his palace. By mistake the famous painter dropped his brush and made an ink blot on the white silk mounted on the screen and so he at once modified it into the image of a fly. When Sun Quan came to examine the artist's work, he responded to the screen by trying to whisk the insect off.

In addition to emphasizing the artist's skills and quick thinking, and in addition to suggesting an interest in illusionism at the time, this anecdote signifies a major advance in the conceptualization of the screen: the separation and interaction between the surface and the image. The merit of the image (of the fly) was found in its deceptive power, and it gained this power from its interaction with the surface, since what Sun Quan saw was not just a fly but a fly landing on the white silk. To Cao Buxing the screen had no mystery; it simply bore a painted fly against an empty background. Sun Quan, on the other hand, was not only confused by the fly but was also deceived by the screen, which appeared to him unpainted. Although the artist and the spectator had entirely different interpretations of the screen, they both acknowledged the concept of a surface and approached the screen as a medium for painting.

**Front, Back**

A freestanding screen always has two surfaces, each of which can be transformed into a painting or a piece of calligraphy. This unique feature challenges a conventional relationship between the picture surface and the pictorial space. Viewed independently (a situation that arises when a screen painting is reproduced in a plate), a single side of a screen becomes analogous to an individual painting and tends to assume the fictional quality of a pictorial space. Viewed consecutively (an opportunity that exists when a screen is encountered in situ), a screen's two sides cancel each other's autonomy. An awareness that a screen painting has a reverse side destroys any sense of pictorial illusion but reestablishes the materiality of the medium and redefines the concept of the surface. In other words, instead of erasing the surface, the images confirm its existence. The meaning of the surface thus changes from an unpainted field

to a painted one. I call such an expressive surface a *face*. A freestanding screen has two faces.

In a back-to-back position, the two faces of a screen can never be viewed simultaneously by a single spectator. Their relationship is of a dualistic and complementary nature. This may explain why I have not found any screens that bear continuous narrative scenes on their two sides. Instead, for example, a fifth-century screen from a Northern Wei nobleman's tomb is painted with exemplary women on one side and male paragons on the other side. In a number of ninth-century cave chapels at Dunhuang, a screen behind a sculpted Buddha (the "real" Buddha that is the subject of worship) re-presents a famous Buddha "image" (such as the sacred statue created by the monk Liu Sake) on its back. A third example is a fascinating work from the early Qing court, a freestanding screen consisting of six panels, which bears an enormous picture on one side (fig. 4a). The painting portrays groups of elegant ladies in an imaginary southern landscape. Their greatly differing sizes exaggerate the distance between them, over which they communicate through silent gazes. The ambiguity and disjunction of the figures heighten the dream-like feeling of the painting, an impression that is reinforced by the stillness of the images, the soft tonal contrast, and the gentle bluish color that permeates the whole composition.

A number of recent publications have called this scene the earliest known oil painting created by a Chinese artist. In order to stress this significance the compilers of these books have also omitted the image on the painting's reverse side: a piece of calligraphy that copies a third-century rhapsody about a spring festival held near the ancient Chinese capital Luoyang (fig. 4b). The screen's two faces thus present opposing but complementary forms and concepts—written versus pictorial, Eastern versus Western, modern versus archaic. It is therefore the juxtaposition of these two faces that generates the screen's meaning and that should be the subject of investigation. The painting is unsigned, but three seals stamped at the beginning and end of the calligraphy identify the writer as the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722). Since a traditional viewer of a painting often wrote an inscription to record his response to the painted images, here the emperor's calligraphy provides an individual and authoritative reading of the anonymous picture. The relationship between the screen's two faces is thus not only dualistic but also dialectic: the inscribed face was inspired by the painted one but came to control the latter's meaning.

15. What the emperor saw in the painting—what connects the poem and the painting—is an imaginary South, characterized by qualities such as refinement, elegance, delicacy, and ornamentation. This place, as I have argued elsewhere, was a particular cultural and political construct in the early and middle Qing, after the Manchus conquered China and began to approach it as an extended "feminine space." See *my* The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting (Chicago, 1996).
FIG. 4a.—Ladies under Wutong Trees, Kangxi period (1662–1722). Oil painting mounted on a wooden screen. 128.5 x 326 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.
FIG. 4b.—Calligraphy by the Kangxi emperor on the reverse side of the screen illustrated in figure 4a.
When a screen's two faces are further related to the two places before and behind the screen, they acquire the attributes of front and back. These concepts underlie a number of late Ming woodblock illustrations of a famous episode in the romantic play *The Romance of the West Chamber* (*Xixiāng ji*) by the heroine Oriole receives a letter from the hero Zhang Gong via her maid Crimson. Oriole responds to it with outward anger, but secretly she is elated and falls deeply in love. In an anonymous picture created during the Wan Li reign period (1573–1620), Oriole is reading the letter in her private quarters enclosed by a freestanding screen (fig. 5). This screen, however, blocks neither Crimson's secret look nor the viewer's gaze. By arranging the screen diagonally across the foreground with its undecorated back facing outside, the artist forces the viewer to assume the position of a voyeur who is peeping into the girl's bedroom from the space behind the screen. A major difference between this illustration and the one designed by Chen Hongshou in 1639, therefore, is the latter's inclusion of the spectator into the space before the screen (fig. 6). The screen now exhibits its front side and reflects Oriole's emotional state. Its decoration conveys the symbolic overtones of an unspoken message: on its four panels blooming flowers and vegetation are shown in their seasonal sequence, and the most striking image is a pair of butterflies, the traditional symbol of romantic love.

These two compositions are integrated in a third picture, one of the sixteen beautiful illustrations of the play published by Min Qiji in 1640 (fig. 7). The result, however, debases both prototypes. It follows the composition of the Wan Li illustration (see fig. 5), but the screen is turned around to expose its decorated front, so that Crimson is now peeping at Oriole from the space before the screen. Oriole is completely hidden behind the screen, and the viewer is offered two possible ways to comprehend her image—a direct look at her in a mirror and an indirect look at her through Crimson's peeping eyes. The screen painting disassociates itself from Oriole and no longer reflects her emotional state. Depicting a tiny boat on empty water, it expresses Zhang Gong's loneliness and alludes to the letter that Oriole is reading, which conveys Zhang's yearning for her love.


17. This screen painting actually copies an earlier illustration of the play. See Hiromitsu, "*Mindai hanga no seika,*" p. 43.
FIG. 5.—Illustration of act ten of *The Romance of the West Chamber*. Woodblock print. From the edition published by Liu Longtiaoan in Nanjing during the Wan Li reign period (1573–1620).

FIG. 6.—Illustration of act ten of *The Romance of the West Chamber*, designed by Chen Hongshou. Woodblock print. From the 1639 edition published by Zhang Shenzhi.
Fig. 7.—Illustration of act ten of The Romance of the West Chamber. From the 1640 edition published by Min Qiji. Color woodblock print. 25 x 32.3 cm. Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne.

Pictorial Space, Metonomy

This last example brings us into the realm of representation. Up to this point, I have treated the screen as an independent object—a piece of furniture or a freestanding picture that occupies and divides a three-dimensional space. Even when I used some paintings of screens as examples I equated them with reality, deliberately avoiding the fact that a screen depicted in a painting is merely a pictorial image within a larger pictorial composition; what it helps construct is not a real place but a pictorial space projected onto a two-dimensional plane. Reviewed in this
light, the screen in the portrait of Emperor Xiaozong, perfectly frontal and still, establishes a second frame within the painting's overall frame; the dragon on its flat panel sets off the emperor's portrait while echoing other dragon motifs in the painting (see fig. 3). Standing in midground, this screen rejects any attempt by the viewer to look beyond its rigid confines. It seems that the sense of depth must be sacrificed in order to guarantee the figure's dominance over a tightly controlled foreground. Such a pictorial composition thus contrasts sharply with the Ma Yuan painting, which demonstrates a very different role for a screen image in composing a picture (see fig. 2). Instead of erecting an opaque wall to block our view, the diagonal pivoting of the screen guides us to follow the figure's gaze toward the distant peaks; the focus is no longer the man, but the landscape in his vision. The illustrations of *The Romance of the West Chamber* exemplify yet a third mode (see figs. 5–7). Though presenting different views, their designs all rely on the interplay between the two spaces in a painting separated by a screen image.

This kind of reading distinguishes this study from the discussions of two previous writers. Robert van Gulik, who first drew people's attention to the screen in Chinese art, was interested in it as a unique Asian method of mounting and displaying paintings. Sullivan turned to paintings mounted on screens instead and found many old pictures portraying screens with painted panels. (To him, for example, the Ma Yuan painting explains why no great screen painting has survived from the Song; the picture shows how short a screen's life would be if it were placed in open air.) His discussion yielded important results. But its fundamental premise, that painted screen images mimic reality, remains questionable; it was not his intention to examine the function and meaning of a screen image in its pictorial context. Such an examination is the purpose of the present study. From this point onward, I will approach screens depicted in paintings strictly as pictorial images and will explore their relationship with other images as well as with the paintings themselves.

Numerous traditional Chinese paintings employ screen images to construct pictorial space. A colorful album leaf by the famous Ming artist Qiu Ying (1502–1551) depicts three men of letters mingling with their male and female attendants in a relaxed atmosphere (fig. 8). Two men are viewing an ancient album of fan paintings; the third man across the table is picking up an old vessel from a tray held by a servant boy. They are surrounded by abundant ancient objects within the tight enclosure of two large screens, each bearing a painting with a landscape or birds in an untrammeled style. Behind the screens, a large ornamental rock stands amidst a clump of bamboo, representing an idealized "natural" setting.

for the scholarly gathering. The screens thus provide the painting with a basic spatial structure as well as an essential symbolic framework: what they separate and juxtapose are the spheres of culture and nature as understood at the time.

The theme of enjoying antiques also dominates a large painting by Du Jin (active late fifteenth–early sixteenth century) (fig. 9). But here

20. In fact, this painting, now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, is executed with a superlative technical finish so typical of Qiu Ying’s style that James Cahill has sus-
two screens no longer differentiate the spheres of culture and nature. Instead, with a distinct structure and decoration, each screen defines an individual place for men or women. 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 (they often indicate high official rank); their schematic forms verge on decoration and echo the openwork patterns on the screen's frame. As in Emperor Xiaozong's portrait, this screen frames the man in front of it, who is apparently the master of the place and the owner of the antiques displayed on a table beside him. Another man, perhaps a connoisseur or guest, stands obediently facing 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 and its corresponding figures are "feminine." This screen is thin, fragile, and without a strong and sculptured wooden frame. Its main feature is a landscape painting executed in broad ink wash. Positioned behind the first screen, the three panels of the second screen enclose a "back chamber" in which two women, perhaps the master's concubines or maids, are wrapping and packing antiques.

These two screen images index time as well as space. The painting has a built-in narrative consisting of three consecutive "stages": a boy servant brings in a scroll painting to the master, the master and his guest examine antiques, and the women put away the objects the men have looked at. 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. As structural elements, the images of the two screens thus map social, political, and intellectual fields of meaning in the painting.

In modern art-historical studies, the creation of a pictorial space is conventionally associated with a certain perspective system—a geometric method that allows the artist to pursue a three-dimensional spatial representation on a flat surface. Realizing that Western "scientific" perspective is inapplicable to traditional Chinese painting, some scholars have tried, quite admiringly in my opinion, to discover an indigenous Chinese perspcted it to be Qiu's reworking of Du's original design. See James Cahill, Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368–1580 (New York, 1978), p. 156. According to Cahill, another version of the left-hand third of the present composition was discovered in a Japanese temple, the Kongôbu-ji on Mount Kôya, as a result of cutting the original painting to make scrolls suitable for hanging in the tokonoma alcove of a Japanese house. Cahill believes that this version agrees better in the calligraphy of its inscription and in its drawing with the other extant paintings by Du Jin than does the Palace Museum version.
Fig. 9.—Du Jin. Enjoying Antiques. Hanging scroll. Ink and color on silk. 126.1 x 187 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.
This attempt, however, has often led to forced conclusions, mainly because its underlying premise remains that a painting, even in a non-Western tradition, must be governed by a highly rational, overarching geometric system, which has priority over individual pictorial images and motifs. The examples I have introduced, however, raise the possibility that in composing a picture, a traditional Chinese artist could have relied on selected images instead. Although these works attest to neither the concept of a geometrically isotropic, rectilinear, abstract, and uniform space nor the “veil of threads” (velo) that Leon Battista Alberti used to reproduce this space on a canvas, these works, with the help of the screen, do convey the impression of spatial division, connection, and extension.

A screen image is therefore among a small group of pictorial signs in Chinese art selected to structure space. Although in reality a freestanding screen is merely one of many furnishings of a palatial hall or an ordinary home, in painting it is singled out as a chief structural or compositional means to construct a pictorial space. In other words, a real screen is part of a spatial whole, but a screen image stands for this whole in a pictorial representation. In fact, we find that a screen image itself is sometimes represented by its own “parts.” In Han pictorial art, a tripartite screen is often missing one side panel, which, if depicted, would block the figure sitting behind it. This convention best proves that the chief function of a screen image is structural, not representational, and that the selection and depiction of this image is related to the phenomenon of synecdoche—part-whole and whole-part relations. We can thus call it metonymic.

Poetic Space, Metaphor

In a well-known formula, Roman Jakobson distinguishes metonymy and metaphor as two different devices or operations in language. The metonymic is based on the principles of contiguity and sequence; the metaphoric is involved with the principles of similarity and substitution.


22. S. J. Tambiah defines metonym as a “figure of speech which consists in substituting for the name of a thing the name of an attribute or part of it” (S. J. Tambiah, “The Magical Power of Words,” Man 3 [June 1968]: 189).


Jakobson took Bühler’s crucial discovery of the axiom that contiguity and similarity constitute the two fundamental dimensions of meaning. Jakobson generalized this by relating it to the Saussurian dichotomy between the syntagmatic (relations of alignment in terms of contiguity) and the paradigmatic (relations of substitution in terms of similarity). [Paul Friedrich, “Polytropy,” in Beyond Metaphor: The Theory of Tropes in Anthropology, ed. James W. Fernandez (Stanford, Calif., 1991), p. 44]
We find that a screen image may serve either role. While contiguity and sequence are necessary features of a composite pictorial space the screen helps create, its surface decoration is often metaphoric, providing an unspoken message with a concrete pictorial form. But we also find that a screen image rarely combines these two functions in equal measure; as a rule it always emphasizes either the metonymic or the metaphoric role.24

It would be too bold to label Chinese paintings with a strong emphasis on spatial representation "realistic," but Jakobson's theory does allow us to relate the two possible roles of a screen image to its two primary formal aspects. This image realizes its metonymic function of constructing a pictorial space through its architectonic form; it performs its metaphoric function of characterizing human figures through its surface decoration, which appears as a painting-within-a-painting. As for this second aspect, the content and style of such a painting-within-a-painting often correspond to the figure(s) in front of it. This correspondence is not always metaphoric, to be sure. As I have shown, the screen in the Zhou court ceremony would bear symbolic patterns (which would also embellish other ritual paraphernalia to transform the ritual site into a visual continuity); this symbolic tradition continued throughout China's dynastic history (see figs. 1 and 3). Nor was the artist always interested in the pictorial motif of a painted screen. In fact, although all known Han dynasty screens bore paintings or engravings, such elaboration was largely omitted when a screen was portrayed in a picture as a compositional feature.

Only after the Han did the screen image appear as a second painting within a larger figurative representation, exhibiting landscapes, figures, flowers, and birds.25 Toward Song times, some painted screen images became increasingly poetic, meaning that their decoration alluded to human feeling, thoughts, and mood, which were otherwise formless in figure

24. Jakobson writes, "in normal verbal behavior both processes are continually operative, but careful observation will reveal that under the influence of a cultural pattern, personality, and verbal style, preference is given to one of the two processes over the other." Therefore,

the primacy of the metaphoric process in the literary schools of romanticism and symbolism has been repeatedly acknowledged, but it is still insufficiently realized that it is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and actually predetermines the so-called "realistic" trend. . . . Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. [Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," pp. 254, 255]

According to Jakobson, the metonymy/metaphor dialectic is not limited to literature but is also seen in the history of Western painting (for example, cubism versus surrealism).

25. We still do not know exactly when this type of image appeared. A famous landscape screen image is found in a handscroll, Biographies of the Benevolent and Intelligent Women, in Beijing's Palace Museum. Although this painting is attributed to the fourth-century master Gu Kaizhi, scholars commonly consider it a Song copy, partly because the landscape painted on the screen shows a typical Southern Song style.
painting (especially because of traditional painters' general lack of interest in depicting any excessive emotional expression on human faces). The qualification of these images as poetic images, and hence of their transformation of the screen's surface into a poetic space, is supported by both traditional Chinese and modern Western discourses on poetry and metaphor. The most authoritative definition of poetry in the Chinese tradition is provided in the "Great Preface" to the first anthology of poetry, Classic of Poetry: "Poetry is where the . . . mind [xin] goes."26

As shown earlier, two painted screens in the illustrations of The Ro-

26. Quoted in Pauline Yu, The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition (Princeton, N.J., 1987), p. 31. For an excellent discussion of this definition and its relationship with poetic imagery, see pp. 31–37. It is interesting to find a similar idea stated by Jacques Derrida: "Metaphor exists only to the extent that someone is supposed to be manifesting by an utterance such-and-such a thought which remains in itself unobvious, hidden, or latent" (Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," trans. F. C. T. Moore, New Literary History 6 [Autumn 1974]: 32). But as Yu has pointed out, whereas in Western discourse the notion of metaphor rests on the distinction between two ontologically distinct realms, one concrete and the other abstract, one sensible and the other inaccessible, a Chinese poetic metaphor "does not allude to a realm that is fundamentally
mance of the West Chamber reflect the minds of the hero and heroine of the play, respectively (see figs. 6 and 7). Another group of examples may demonstrate even more effectively how a screen painting can create a metaphoric space within a metonymic space. In a Song album leaf in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a gentleman, perhaps a scholar or a Taoist, lies stretched out on a low couch of bamboo (fig. 10).27 His eyes are shut, yet his broad face is expressive and he seems to be dreaming. The painter does not describe his dream but rather transforms it into a visual image other from the concrete world or establish correspondences de novo between the sensible and the suprasensible" (Yu, The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition, p. 201).

27. This painting is traditionally dated to the Song: "the very fine silk material on which the picture is painted is evidently of the Sung period, and the manner of execution is of the kind which was used preferably by the academicians at the beginning of the thirteenth century" (Osvald Sirén, Early Chinese Paintings from A. W. Bahr Collection [London, 1938], p. 39). Cahill, however, suggests that it is an early Ming painting after an earlier design. See Cahill, An Index of Early Chinese Painters and Paintings: Tang, Sung, and Yuan (Berkeley, 1980), p. 221.
of hypnotic power: the endless waves covering the alcovelike screen. This example leads us to another album painting portraying a similar sleeping gentleman (fig. 11). A large, leafy locust tree occupies the upper part of the composition; its perfect flatness seems to invite us to perceive it unthinkingly as a painted image in a mural or on a screen behind the couch. But one detail belies this impression: a screen to the far left, shown in a very oblique angle, delicately overlaps the tree’s foliage. The tree must thus be “real” (it is based on this reasoning that the painting acquired its title, Passing a Summer in the Shade of a Locust Tree), while the winter landscape painted on the screen suggests the scholar’s inner feeling of coolness in the shade.

Identical screen decorations may deliver divergent messages depending on their pictorial contexts. Like the winter landscape, the wave patterns on a screen can be associated with both sexes, but coupled with a woman they often allude to her suppressed desire. A fine painting in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is attributed to Su Hanchen (active ca. 1101–1163), a prominent figure painter in both the Northern and Southern Song painting academies (fig. 12). On the fan-shaped album leaf, a young palace lady is seated in front of her dressing table on a garden terrace surrounded by an elaborate marble railing. It is springtime; a peach tree stretches out its blossoming branches, and cut flowers are displayed here and there in vases. But the spring flowers seem only to arouse the woman’s secret sorrow; they blossom and fall in the secluded palatial quarter, just as she is the only one to appreciate her own beauty by gazing in a mirror. Some Chinese proverbs best summarize the painting’s theme: “a solitary flower in love with its own fragrance” (gufang zishang), or “gazing at one’s own image and lamenting one’s fate” (duiyang zilian). The melancholy of a palace lady—her sad awareness of the inevitable fading of her beauty—is a popular topic of Chinese palace poetry and is conveyed by the interplay between her mirror and the screen in

28. This painting was originally attributed to Wang Qihan. The curators of the National Palace Museum have changed its date to the Northern Song. Judging from its drawing style, it is more likely a work by a Ming academic artist.

29. Sullivan, who notices this implication of the screen’s winter landscape, takes the whole painting as a realistic representation of a Song scholar’s daily life: “lying out in the shade on a hot summer day, a gentleman would place behind his couch a snow landscape to make him feel cool” (Sullivan, “Notes on Early Chinese Screen Painting,” p. 251).

30. The Song art historian Deng Chun describes Su’s art in his Hua Ji:

The art of representing women consists in depicting the ways and manners of the inner apartments. Artists like Chou Fang and Chang Hsiian of the T’ang, Tu Hsiao and Chou Wen-ch’i of the Five Dynasties period and Su Han-ch’ên (of the Sung) could do this in a wonderful way. Their art did not consist in painting the rouge and the face powder, the golden ornaments and the jade pendants; they did not consider the representation of such things as art. [Quoted and translated in Siren, Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles, 6 vols. (New York, 1956–58), 2:106]
this painting. While the woman’s charming face is reflected in the mirror, the screen, which also stands in front of her, is painted with endless waves.

In a sense, the screen in Su Hanchen’s painting is also a mirror. But instead of reflecting the woman’s physical likeness, it mirrors her mind. Interestingly, the actual mirror, a favorite motif in Western pictorial art, never became popular in traditional Chinese painting. It is the nonreflective screen that occupies a prominent position comparable to that of the mirror in Western painting. This difference may tell a lot about the different orientations and interests of these two art traditions; while the Renaissance visual mode dwells upon a symmetrical relationship between the natural world and its pictorial re-presentation, the dominant mode in Chinese painting is asymmetrical and emphasizes the metaphorical
linkage between painted images and the observed world, and among the painted images themselves.

**Visual Narrative, Voyeuristic Gaze**

A specific screen image exists only in a specific painting format (for example, the handscroll, the hanging scroll, the album, or the screen) and must be understood in relation to this format. *The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai*, a famous work attributed to the tenth-century master Gu Hongzhong, best illuminates how screen images help construct space, regulate a temporal sequence, and orient the gaze in a handscroll painting (figs. 13a–13d).

In the painting’s opening section, the host, Han Xizai, wearing a tall black hat, is seated on a dais with an honored guest in a red robe (fig. 13a). 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 *pipa*-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 (fig. 13b). The atmosphere becomes more relaxed. Han Xizai 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 (fig. 13c). With his garment boorishly unbuttoned, Han Xizai 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 Xizai stands in the middle watching (fig. 13d). The room is now “empty”—from the first section to this last section, the furnishings have been gradually removed 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 deepens in eroticism, transforming the spectator into a voyeur.

Although Osvald Sirén has asserted that "any attempt to formulate hard and fast rules for the spatial design in a picture like this would be futile," 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; the second mode aims to link these units into a continuum (fig. 14). 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 peep at the party in front, and that each of the three screens that 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 bebeckoning him into the back quarter. These details create dynamism, linking isolated scenes into a continuous pictorial plane, just as in a musical composition ties cross bar lines, connecting separated notes into a continuous melody.

It is important to realize, however, that a screen image does not play these two roles (to construct an individual spatial unit and to link two adjacent spatial units) simultaneously. The reason is that the work is a handscroll. In both painting and viewing, a handscroll is literally a moving picture with shifting loci. (A hanging scroll or mural does not move; what moves is the viewer or his gaze.) A handscroll, when handled and

32. Sirén, Chinese Painting, 1:168.
33. The term handscroll is a literal translation of the Chinese word shoujuan (shou means "hand" and juan means "scroll"). Many scholars have commented on this type of picture; here is a standard description offered by Jerome Silbergeld:

Handscroll paintings ranged from less than three feet to more than thirty feet in length; the majority were between nine and fourteen inches high. Paintings were mounted on a stiff paper backing; those of greater length were often painted on several sections of silk or paper joined together. At the left was attached a round wooden roller, about which the scroll was wound when not in use and which was occasionally decorated with a knob of ivory or jade. At the right was a semi-circular wooden stave which kept the scroll properly stretched from top to bottom. The painting was viewed from right to left, as one reads in Chinese, unrolling a bit at a time from the roller and transferring the excess to a loose roll temporarily maintained around the stretcher on the right. About one arm's length was exposed at a time for viewing. [Jerome Silbergeld, Chinese Painting Style: Media, Methods, and Principles of Form (Seattle, 1982), pp. 12-13]

I would add that after viewing such a painting, the spectator rolls it back, again section by section, to the beginning of the scroll. This can be done quickly and mechanically, but some connoisseurs prefer to combine it with a "reversed" reading of the picture from left to right, while halting now and then to review some details of specific interest.

FIG. 15.—Composition of *The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai* as conceived in the process of viewing the handscroll. Top: receding of furniture. Bottom: positions of screen images.
viewed properly, is a series of consecutive subframes, not a monolith in a single frame. (A hanging scroll has an overall frame enclosing all internal divisions.) The screen images in *The Night Entertainment* thus not only divide and connect the four sections of a long picture but also punctuate the spectator's motion of changing the painted surface. Gradually unrolled, the scroll exhibits only one section at a time, and the spectator never sees the entire painting as consisting of four sections. The earlier diagrams of the painting's spatial structure (see fig. 14) should thus be revised to combine both spatial and temporal dimensions (fig. 15). The result is, quite literally, a journey into Han Xizai's deep mansion: the spectator penetrates layers of screens to unveil the secrets they conceal.

A handscroll, therefore, is 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 or her psychological response to the painted images. The famous Song writer and art critic Su Shi (1037–1101) once remarked about 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 (that is, his or her desire to see the entire painting and hence 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 up 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 suspense must always be achieved by dilation. Reviewed in this light, the screen images in *The 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 Night Entertainment* thus gradually shifts from the painting to the viewer and defines the viewer's exploring vision as 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 *The Night Entertainment*: the painting's handscroll format guarantees the privacy necessary for a voyeur; its mov-

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The painted screen 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 toward 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 The Night Entertainment rejects the viewer's direct participation; on the other, the viewer must physically handle the scroll that 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. As mentioned earlier, the root definition of screen is "to shield." The screen is therefore an ideal mechanism to separate—not only individual scenes but also the viewer from the things being viewed. As the viewer unrolls The Night Entertainment, his or her motion and vision are periodically stopped by painted screens, which constantly readjust his or her relationship to the picture—reasserting distance, preventing excessive proximity, and creating concrete measures for the degree of attachment and detachment between the spectator and the picture. As in Wen Tingyun's (ca. 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."


38. It is therefore necessary to question Metz's polarization of two kinds of art, one relying on the "senses at a distance" (sight and hearing) and the other depending on the "senses of contact" (touch, taste, and smell): "the main socially acceptable arts are based on the senses at a distance, and . . . those which depend on the senses of contact are often regarded as 'minor' arts (e.g. the culinary arts, the art of perfumes, etc.)" (IS, p. 59). Both senses are involved in viewing a handscroll painting.

The screens in The 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 Xizai and his male guests all fix their eyes on a female pipa player. Completely isolated, the passive musician 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 Xizai is no longer the bearer of the look but becomes himself part of the pictorial spectacle, either performing music or exposing his chest. This second representational mode is again reversed in the last scene, in which Han Xizai resumes his role as the bearer of the look, but in a very different way from the beginning section. He now appears as an invisible voyeur within the pictorial representation; standing among men and women who are 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. Yet 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 cited in almost every introduction to the painting:

Gu Hongzhong was from south China and served the Southern Tang emperor Li Yu [r. 961–975] as a court painter. A skilled artist, he was particularly good at portraying figures. At that time Han Xizai, 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 Yu, the Southern Tang emperor, valued Han Xizai’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, Gu Hongzhong, as a detective to Han’s night entertainments, instructing him to re-create everything he saw there based on his memory. The painting, The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai, was then made and presented to the throne.41


Written a century later, this record reconstructs the painting’s creation from a particular point of view. Instead of documenting true events, it personifies the voyeuristic gaze inherent to the painting as identifiable historical figures. Gu Hongzhong the artist and Li Yu the patron are both said to embody this gaze but in different ways. Gu peeped into Han Xizai’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. It is this second position that we also assume.

**Metapicture**

At the beginning of this paper I asked a question: What is a (traditional Chinese) painting? To answer this question is also to locate (traditional Chinese) metapictures, which, in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, “explain what pictures are—to stage, as it were, the ‘self-knowledge’ of pictures.” Because I approach a painting both as an image-bearing object and as a pictorial image, a metapicture’s “self-knowledge” must also be twofold, in terms of both medium and representation. An early example of such works is Zhou Wenju’s (tenth century) Double Screen.

Zhou’s original painting has long disappeared, and only later copies of it exist. In one of these copies in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., four men compose a circular cluster in the foreground and are playing or watching a game of chess; a servant boy is standing alongside in attendance (fig. 16). Like The 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 confuses and puzzles 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 chess-

42. For different accounts of the painting’s creation and the authors’ varying agendas, see the section “Breaking Textual Enclosures” in my The Double Screen.
FIG. 16.—Double Screen, attributed to Zhou Wenju. Short handscroll. Ink and color on silk. 31.3 x 50 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
board—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 (fig. 17a). Zhou Wenju 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.  

A number of ancient texts record that Zhou Wenju painted a version of The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai—that he, like Gu Hongzhong, also received Li Yu's order to depict Han's private life. Whether we can identify Double Screen as this lost painting or not, it seems to condense Gu Hongzhong's multiframed handscroll into a single-framed picture. Reviewed in light of the two pairs of diagrams in figures 17 and 18, their subject matter is surprisingly similar. The difference mainly lies in representation: Gu's interlocking frames appear as superimposed frames in Zhou's work. The male gathering at the beginning of Gu's painting is removed to the foreground in Zhou Wenju's picture, against a "transparent" screen that allows the viewer to see the "bedroom" scene painted in the second section of the handscroll. Technically, this transformation is achieved by changing the form and function of screen images. All screens in Gu Hongzhong's handscroll 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 handscroll. Zhou Wenju's screens, on the other

44. Based on this argument, another version of Double Screen in Beijing's Palace Museum is a less faithful copy. The copier painted the tripartite screen with equal side panels. Although this correction is totally logical, the clever copier has lost the whole point of the "illogicality" of the original design. As soon as this correction is made, the tripartite screen becomes static and opaque; the viewer's gaze is blocked, and the illusionism, which so strongly characterizes Zhou Wenju's original work, is destroyed.

45. The Southern Song art historian Zhou Mi (1232-1309) first recorded this work, a painting on paper of seven to eight chi (eight Chinese feet) long, which represented "lifelike figures that could have only come from Wenju's hand" (Zhou Mi, Yunyan guoyan lu [Paintings That Have Passed before My Eyes], in Congshu jicheng [Collected Collectanea], no. 1553 [Changsha, 1939], juan 2, p. 32). Several decades later, in the early fourteenth century, the Yuan art historian Tang Hou saw two versions of Zhou's Night Entertainment and considered them "somewhat different in subject matter" from Gu Hongzhong's painting of the same title (Tang Hou, Huajian [Painting Connoisseurship] [Beijing, 1962], p. 22). Xia Wenyan, another Yuan writer, stated in his Tuhui baojian that "Zhou Wenju and Gu Hongzhong both [or together] painted the 'Night Entertainment of Han Xizai'" (Xia Wenyan, Tuhui baojian, juan 3, p. 35).
FIGS. 17a and b.—Interrelationship between Double Screen and The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai.
FIGS. 18a and b.—Subframes in The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai and in Double Screen.
hand, are all perfectly parallel to the picture plane and no longer resist the spectator’s gaze. In other words, these screens must sacrifice themselves as solid objects. To turn their painted faces into illusions they have to become empty windows open onto empty windows; only their solid frames remain to differentiate the painted scenes and to separate the viewer from the scenes. While Gu Hongzhong’s screens separate and link a series of frames in a moving picture, Zhou Wenju’s screens are themselves frames that index different systems of reference in a single representation. Double Screen is thus not only a metapicture in Michel Foucault’s sense of a “representation . . . of Classical representation.”

Zhou Wenju also transformed the painting medium and the way of viewing; when The Night Entertainment is converted into Double Screen, the physical motion of unrolling a handscroll is replaced by the penetration of the gaze.

A metapicture must be reflective, either reflecting on other pictures or on itself. The former is interreferential; the latter, self-referential. While Double Screen reinterprets and re-presents The Night Entertainment, it is also a self-referential metapicture and realizes its self-referentiality in terms of both medium and representation. Old texts record that this painting first appeared on a freestanding screen and was remounted as a hanging scroll only after it entered the Song royal house. It was therefore designed as a screen painting (an image-bearing object) that represents a series of painted screens (images of image-bearing objects). Although these nested, concentric spaces seem to regulate first- and second-order representation and to distinguish successive levels of reading, the essence of this work, I would argue, is the tension between image and medium. The image painted on a screen always struggles to achieve its independence as an optical illusion; a screen’s frame always destroys such illusion and allows one more screen to be painted on its surface. As a metapicture, therefore, Double Screen is not about the principle of duplica-

46. A frame, according to Uspensky, is both a prerequisite for and a consequence of an “artistic text”: “In a work of art, whether it be a work of literature, a painting, or a work of some other art form, there is presented to us a special world, with its own space and time, its own ideological system, and its own standards of behavior” (Uspensky, A Poetics of Composition, p. 137). When an artistic text has internal divisions, as Stewart observes, each smaller “text” is marked by a changing frame, as part of “a system of differences in relation to any other world. To step into the artistic text is to transform the external into the internal and the internal into the external. And each transformation opens up the possibilities of transformation itself” (Stewart, Nonsense, p. 23).


48. We may borrow Mitchell’s term to call such a painting, which is both interreferential and self-referential, a “meta-metapicture” (Mitchell, Picture Theory, p. 58).

49. See Lu Xinyuan’s (1834–94) colophon in the version of Double Screen in the Freer Gallery of Art.
tion and repetition (as a “picture-within-a picture” normally is), but about
the dialectical relationship between medium and image—each in an ef-
fort to assert its primacy in order to produce the other.

**Illusion, Illusionism, Magical Transformation**

In ancient Chinese writings, Double Screen and similar images with
deceptive power are referred to as *huan*, which has three different but
interrelated meanings: “illusion/illusory,” “illusionism/illusionistic,” and
“magical transformation/conjuration.” When used in the sense of illusion,
the term denotes verisimilitude in representation; spectators feel they are
seeing an actual object or space but know clearly that they are looking
at a picture. The underlying notion is therefore the dualism of *huan*
and *zhen* (“real” or “realness”)—an illusory pictorial image mirrors reality
and thus opposes reality. Illusionism, on the other hand, confuses and dis-
misses such distinctions; by employing certain media or techniques, the
artist is able to deceive not only the viewer’s eye but also his or her mind,
at least temporarily. The viewer is persuaded to take what is painted for
what is real.

Differing from many illusionistic paintings in Western art history
that have been linked to pictorial realism, illusionism never foresaw a
dominant representational art in traditional China. Rather, it remained
an isolated artistic style frequently associated with two specific factors: 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 wom-
men’s images” (*shiniu pingfeng*). 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. One
such story relates that the Tang dynasty scholar Zhao Yan saw a screen
painted with a woman of unearthly beauty. “There is no such beauty
in this world,” he said to the painter. “If you will let the woman come to
life, I will take her as my dear wife.” The painter—actually, Divine Painter
(Shenhua)—told Zhao that the woman’s name was Doubly Genuine
(Zhenzhen) and that she would come alive if Zhao kept calling her name

50. As John White proposes in his classic study of Western perspective,

> Illusionism is an ugly word in modern critical usage. Yet, to the early writers
> the illusionist effects that artificial perspective put within the artist’s reach were
> amongst the most praiseworthy, as well as the most revolutionary of its attributes.
> It is, indeed, the revolutionary aspect of the new realism that accounts for much of
> the emphasis laid upon it. [John White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (Cam-
> bridge, Mass., 1987), p. 189]

51. A detailed discussion of the history of this type of screen is included in my *The
Double Screen*. 
for a hundred days. The method worked and Zhao married the woman. One year after the marriage the woman gave birth to a boy. Zhao's happiness was short-lived, however; one of his male friends warned him that the woman was a demon and gave Zhao a magic sword to hang in his bedroom. That night the woman saw the sword. Sadly she said to her husband, "although I am not a demon, I can no longer stay here since you suspect me." So she again became a portrait on the screen. To Zhao's amazement, a small boy now stood beside her in the painting.52

Whereas in this story 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 problem 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. It is said that after Yan Yanzhi's (384-456) favorite concubine died, he was troubled by her memory one night. Suddenly he saw a woman emerging from the screen surrounding his bed. As she moved toward him, the heavy screen collapsed onto his body. After this nightmarish event Yan became ill and soon died.53

A "dangerous" screen with women's images could even become a political portent to presage dynastic decline. Transmitted from one regime to another, such screens were always linked with nightmare, death, disorder, and especially female dominance over political affairs. Their poisonous influence threatened not only an individual gentleman but the patriarchal state. Recorded in the Informal Biography of Yang Taizhen, one such screen is called The Multicolored Illusion. Commissioned by Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty (r. 581-604), it bore images of famous beauties in Chinese history. Crystals, pearls, and various kinds of gems embellished the ladies' clothes as well as the objects and musical instruments they held in their hands. The screen's uncanny workmanship was indeed supernatural. But as soon as it was created the Sui dynasty perished; Princess Yicheng, the owner of the screen at the time, died tragically in the barbarian North.

After the founding of the Tang dynasty, the screen was reclaimed from alien lands and restored to the imperial collection. But when the regime began to decline, it again went to a woman, Yang Guifei (also known as Yang Taizhen, 719-756), the celebrated consort of Emperor Xuanzong and the most renowned femme fatale in Chinese history. It is said that one day she brought this screen to her home (a definite sign of

52. Songchuang zaji [Notes from the Pine Window], in Gujin tushu jicheng [A Compendium of Books Past and Present], ed. Jiang Tingxi et al. (Shanghai, 1834), p. 2213. The most brilliant presentation of this theme is Pu Songling's tale "The Painted Wall." For a fascinating discussion of this tale, see Judith T. Zeitlin, Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale (Stanford, Calif., 1993), pp. 183-99.

53. See Yi yuan [The Garden of the Strange], in Gujin tushu jicheng, p. 2213.
her family's seizing power from the Tang royal clan). Her older brother and the country's de facto dictator, Yang Guozhong (d. 756), set it up to surround his bed. As soon as he lay down, all the historical beauties came off the screen. "I am the one who loved the sound of tearing silk"; "I am the one who dwelled in a chamber of pure gold"; "I am the one who danced on a lotus flower"; "I am the one who destroyed the kingdom of Wu"; "I am the one whose tears spotted bamboo." More than thirty or forty ladies introduced themselves in turn. Then several dozen singing girls and dancers, newly arrived from the ancient Chu palace, began to sing a prophetic song: "the three lotus flowers [in your family] are all of our kind; the younger Yang will harvest what the elder Yang has planted." Completely paralyzed, Yang Guozhong lay there with eyes and ears open; only after the last lady resumed her position on the screen was he able to move. He immediately sealed the screen and locked it in a dark chamber. But he could not prevent the political turmoil that followed his inauspicious dream. The powerful warlord An Lushan rebelled against the central government; the emperor fled and Yang Guifei was killed.54 The Tang dynasty was never able to recover from this defeat.

Whether romance or political satire, these tales reflect the paradox of a screen with women's images and the dilemma faced by its owner. Zhao Yan's story is bound up with the idea that a painted beauty on a screen, like love itself, is most real and at the same time most illusory. Doubly Genuine first appears as a portrait, but her name implies that she could be realer than reality. Once a truly devoted viewer (and lover) appears, she changes her status from an image to a real woman in his imagination. But this conceptual shift from illusion to illusionism is dangerous because it confuses a painting with reality and because it omits the distinction between the subject and object of viewing. Thus, to Zhao's friend, who represents a more conventional and dispassionate approach, the resurrected Doubly Genuine could be nothing but a "demon." Such suspicion toward a screen with women's images becomes explicit in the two stories about "dangerous" screens summarized above. In both Yan Yanzhi's and Yang Guozhong's cases, once a painted woman comes to life, she ceases to be a passive object of admiration and acts according to her own wishes; this transformation inevitably leads to death and destruction. This male anxiety is represented by Yang Guozhong: paralyzed, he listens to those painted beauties and watches them coming and going, unable to say or do anything to stop them.

These stories thus 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. Even Zhao Yan, who married Doubly Genuine, is not a hero; he is deceived by an illusion and

misled by a friend. His whole love affair is engineered by Divine Painter, who created the screen and conjured up the lady. In a sense, this story reflects a patron's secret suspicion toward the artist; the whole unfortunate event results from the artist's ambition to close the boundary between lifelike and life. This suspicion also goes the other way: if a painter/magician can transform an image into a real woman, he must also be able to turn a real woman into an image—a supernatural ability that would allow him to seize a woman from her legitimate owner with the aid of a screen. It is therefore told that Emperor Xuanzong favored a very beautiful concubine, Lady Wang. But she was frequently troubled by strange dreams, in which she was invited to a party held by an unfamiliar man. The anxious emperor told her that if the dream occurred again, she should leave some marks in the place where she was taken. So that night when Lady Wang was again invited to the party, she secretly put ink on her hand and left a mark on an object she leaned against. The next day the emperor's detectives found the mark in a Taoist temple; the lady's fingerprints appeared on a plain screen.55

Although these stories reflect an underlying male anxiety, most of them have happy endings, and their conclusions suggest different methods imagined to exorcise a bewitched screen with women's images. The simplest method, of course, was to destroy it physically; Emperor Xuanzong thus burned not only the screen but also the whole Taoist temple where the screen was found. Another method was to remove the screen from sight; by concealing it and locking it up, a man (such as Yang Guozhong) discards his role as spectator of the screen and therefore hopes to escape its evil influence. A third, more sophisticated, strategy is to reverse the magical transformation and to reidentify a painted image as a painted image. Thus Doubly Genuine was finally transformed from life back to lifelike. She resumed her place on the screen's flat surface, along with her son, as proof of her magical transformation and love affair. Unfortunately, all three methods 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 (reidentifying the woman as a pictorial illusion).

There is a possible solution in favor of artistic imagination, 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. In other words, to permit both pictorial illusionism and the voyeur's psychological security, there must be a distance between the spectator and the spectacle, a distance that, in Christian Metz's words, "transforms the object [back] into a picture (a 'tableau vivant') and . . . tips it over into the imaginary" (IS, p. 62). The result of this fantasy is a strange screen that, instead of being

55. See Tangmoyishi [Stories from the End of Tang], in Gujin tushu jicheng, p. 2210.
solid and opaque, has a "transparent" surface. The painted female images on it may come to life, but the screen's frame can never diminish. It must continue to "enclose" the women and to separate a feminine interior space from a masculine exterior space.

An anecdote about such a screen relates that King Sun Liang of Wu 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."56

We know that this kind of large glass screen could not possibly have 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 interior and exterior 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 space but also allowed people to see into both spaces. It was commonly understood in traditional China that women in a household were not supposed to be exposed on public occasions, even in front of the master's close male friends. This general attitude is exemplified by an episode from Tang history. Once, at a party, Li Bo (701–762) asked the host, Prince Ning, to present his favorite concubine to the guests. Granting the famous poet's request, the prince first set up a screen decorated with the images of the seven treasures and precious flowers and then ordered the beautiful woman to sing a song behind the screen.57 Sun Liang found a different compromise: he gratified his friends' visual pleasure but reinforced the women's inaccessibility. But we may further ask, What kind of thing can only be seen but not felt? The answer is clear: painting. In fact, what Sun Liang showed or intended to show to his guests were not his consorts but their "live images" framed by the transparent screen. Prince Ning, on the other hand, let only his concubine's voice out; what the guests saw were the seven treasures and precious flowers—images alluding to the woman behind the screen.58

We thus come full circle and return to the two places separated by a screen, only now the screen also permits communication between the two places.

56. Chier Xiaoming lu [Nicknames of Attendants], in Gujin tushu jicheng, p. 3128.
57. See Kaiyuan tianbao yishi [Stories from the Kaiyuan and Tianbao Era], in Gujin tushu jicheng, p. 2210.
58. This recalls Metz's theory about the "'perceiving drive": "as opposed to other sexual drives, the 'perceiving drive'—combining into one the scopic drive and the invocatory drive—concretely represents the absence of its object in the distance at which it maintains it and which is part of its very definition: distance of the look, distance of listening" (JS, p. 59).
places by transforming one place (and its occupants) into representation or metaphor. All the concepts discussed in this essay—space and place, framing and patterning, surface and medium, metonymy and metaphor, image and gaze—thus coalesce in this instance to answer the question of what a (traditional Chinese) painting is.