

Lecture Notes, by James Cahill

Note: The image numbers in these lecture notes do not exactly coincide with the images onscreen but are meant to be reference points in the lectures' progression.

Lecture 11B: Great Masters of Southern Song: Xia Gui

With this lecture we arrive at one of the two greatest of all Chinese painters, in my estimation—whenever I was asked who was my favorite, I would answer: for the early period, Xia Gui; for the late, Shitao. (We will have a supplementary lecture on Shitao in the later series.) For Xia Gui, we still need a really serious book-length monographic study. The study of him by Suzuki Kei, presented at a symposium in 1970 (and alluded to in my lecture), didn't really take us very far. I myself wrote the biography of Xia Gui for the 15th edition of Encyclopedia Britannica (1974), but that's very brief. I hope that the lecture that follows, presenting some of his finest works in good images and adding what I hope is useful commentary on them, will inspire some specialist to undertake the serious study of him that we need.

11.19 Xia Gui 夏珪/夏圭 (active 1190s–ca. 1240)

Held position (*zhihou* 祗候) in Academy in late 12th–early 13th c. Very little known about him: scornful dismissal in first collection of notes (late 13th c.) on artists to include him. But greatest of Southern Song Academy masters by my estimation. To some degree, broke out of Academy mold in some of his painting, at least. Represents the grand culmination or transcendence of it.

11.19.1. Attributed to Xia Gui, *Winter Landscape*. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Possessing Pl. 88.

Attribution made by late Ming calligrapher-connoisseur Wang Duo 王鐸. Compositional connection to Li Tang.

Also exists in two other versions, both later copies, and not by the attributed artists:

Attributed to Xiao Zhao 蕭照/蕭照, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Attributed to Gao Keming 高克明, formerly C. C. Wang Collection.

11.19.2. *Men in House Gazing at Waterfall*, fan-shaped album leaf, signed. Palace Museum, Taipei.

May be an early work of Xia Gui.

11.19.3. *Winter Landscape with returning Fisherman*, signed, fan painting. Formerly (?) of

the Yanagi Collection, Kyoto. *Lyric Journey* 1.61.

Theme of "returning." Appears like genuine work of Xia Gui.

11.19.4: Xia Gui, *Sailboat in Rainstorm* 風雨行舟圖/ 风雨行舟图, signed, fan painting, ink and color on silk, 23.9 x 25.1 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 12.891. Loehr 101, *Lyric Journey* 1.19.

Imperial calligraphy on reverse:

*All through my life, a weary sleep is joined to river rain;
For whole days traveling by boat, as wind tears the banks.*

Or, as translated by Wu Tung (curator at MFA Boston):

*The ceaseless river rain always lulls me to sleep,
Winds beat the cliffs all day to move my boat along.*

11.19.5: *Cottage Beneath Trees*, Hikkōen 筆耕園/ 笔耕图 album, ink on silk, 25.9 x 34.3 cm. Tokyo National Museum, TA-487. Loehr 99; Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 300; *Lyric Journey* 1.60. Signature, but not Xia Gui's (?). Painting itself, however, appears to be a Xia Gui.

Near perfect little painting, in its un-showy way. Trees fused into groves, but differentiated by varying brushwork. No prominent brushstrokes; execution somehow fused into image. Intensifies the whole effect of stillness in scene. No longer spots of interest located here and there around the scene; effect of concentration, distillation. No obtrusive technique, or style: unassuming everywhere; little trace even of painter's hand. As if mysterious identification with subject, nature before us, not work of man. Loehr (who sees it as a "landscape with rain and fog") writes: "There is no technical elegance, no display of skill. Instead, we are faced with something more profound, as if it were nature itself."

Regarding Max Loehr, people ask: How can you praise him so, when he got attributions and datings so wrong? Because he so often said the exactly right things about works of art and communicated how to look at paintings to his students.

Other, similar paintings in Japan:

11.19.6: one in Seikado, Tokyo. Hand of artist more obtrusive, but still possibly a Xia Gui.

11.20.1: another (copy) from former Iwasaki Collection now in Minneapolis (?). From the hand of a copyist. Calligraphic brushstrokes that don't belong to the Xia Gui style.

11.19.7: Anonymous, *Floating on an Autumn River*. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Would like to think that this is a Xia Gui. Scholar in boat approaching the foggy shore.

The Grand Masterpiece:

11.19.8: *A Pure and Remote View Over Rivers and Mountains* 溪山清遠圖/ 溪山清遠圖 (ca. 1200), handscroll, ink on paper, 46.5 x 889 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

(My title for this whole series taken from this.) *Possessing* Pl. 87 (best and complete reproduction); Skira 85; *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Paintings*, no. 125; *Chinese Art Treasures*, no. 57; Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 305–7.

Shown here, the copy in the Met, which includes a lost opening section:

11.19.8b: Formerly attributed to Xia Gui, *River Landscape after Xia Gui*, handscroll, ink and color on silk, 59.4 x 487.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 13.220.18.

Cf. *Possessing* Fig. 70: copy of lost opening section? Several copies of *Pure and Remote View* in existence.

First Section: *A Pure and Remote View* an extended expression of the “lyric journey.” The scholar exits the thatched cottages and embarks on a journey through nature.

Second Section: Path winds around mountain.

Third Section: People arriving at temple.

Fourth Section: Recession into misty distance.

The original *Pure and Remote View*:

First Section: Foreground rocks and trees, hills in the distance; excellent rendering of mass and form.

Second Section: Boulder in foreground, mist behind; people arriving at a temple

Third Section: Qianlong Emperor’s inscription above (ignore it); Buddhist pilgrims entering temple; at temple entrance, scholars and servants are seated. Temple drawn amid trees; no one else capable of such skillful integration of buildings and trees. No showy brushwork.

Fourth Section: Old scholar and servant approaching enormous boulder

Fifth Section: Recession of river shoreline. Experience of seeing something through mist aptly reproduced.

Sixth Section: Walled city in the distance.

Seventh Section: Misty, empty space; boats on the water. (Ignore Qianlong’s obtrusive seal.) Large cliff to the left interrupts the quietude of the stretch of water. Roofs of temples glimpsed above the leafy trees atop the bluff.

Eighth Section: Rocky forms and masses form a transition section

Disappearance, or at least radical reduction, of texture strokes—but brilliant use of tonal values. Rocks: not so elegant as Ma Yuan's; trees more loose and free. Quiet, truly remote, profound. My "Lyric Journey" program exemplified here. Embodies an extreme clarity of thought and vision. (In saying that, I echo Max Loehr.)

Trees again fused into groups, but differentiated within, by varying brushwork. Some sense of movement in execution, but stillness in scenes. Polished, terse: culmination of whole movement—but hard to think where it will go from here. Rids landscape of all heaviness, substance dissolves, mist penetrates, one has glimpses through the mist.

Ninth Section: Covered bridge, the return of thatched houses by the bank.

11.19.8c: Two sections of Japanese copy. Suzuki Kei paper in 1970 symposium: these closer to the original (I think he's wrong). I cite Robert Treat Paine's observation: two wine shops side by side, a theme of "competition" that would not be found in Chinese painting.

Tenth Section: More signs of human habitation, cluster of thatched houses. Nearer and farther trees separated by ink tonality.

Eleventh Section: Looming mountain peaks over an area of misty gorge, which seems to indicate area beyond the edge of the handscroll.

By comparison, Ma Yuan's paintings seem rather dramatized, artificial. Nothing of this "hand of the artist" in real Xia Gui. Ma's is an imitable style; Xia Gui's scarcely is. Xia Gui's style underlies a lot of great painting in Muromachi-period Japan, but hardly followed up in China.

Can be seen as culmination of one grand movement—or perhaps culmination is Northern Song landscape, this is last flowering. Landscape painting has been developing in certain directions: more subtle use of ink monochrome for atmosphere and space, softening of forms, more and more spacious paintings, with less of solid masses. By the time of Xia Gui, total mastery. Where can landscape painting go from here? We will see (in Chan/Zen painting): further dissolution, into what might seem a dead end. But that's a false art-historical construction with deterministic aspects that need to be avoided, so I take that back.

Twelfth Section: Rocky mass pushes the viewer further towards the end of the scroll. Swirling water establishes ground plane.

Xia Gui, and Southern Song Academy painting generally, was rejected and belittled by dominant literati critics at beginning of Yuan. As example, see Bush and Shih, pp. 138–40, excerpts from Chuang Su, writing ca. 1298, who calls Xia Gui's paintings "exceedingly vulgar and

bad." But Xia Gui's greatness recognized by some later critics: Dong Qichang, late Ming, wrote favorably about him: "followed Li Tang, but painted in more terse and abbreviated manner ... In making things fade away or disappear (in his landscape) he had the two Mi's at the tip of his brush . . . Most painters round off the square to make the curve, but he puts corners on the round to make a square of it..."

End of scroll: Hostel among trees at base of sloping landform. A quiet ending.

Historical note: Suzuki Kei paper for 1970 Taipei International Symposium on Chinese Painting, published in *Proceedings* (1972): 417–443: "Hsia Kuei and the Pictorial Style of the Southern Sung Court Academy." Kei took *Pure and Remote* scroll to be Yuan-period court tracing copy, and recognized no originals at all. This prompted Max Loehr to quote Voltaire: "If God didn't exist, we would have to invent him." Same with Xia Gui.

11.21.1a, b: (Redux from Lecture 9A, images 9.7.1 and 9.7.2): "Li Tang" pair of landscapes in Kotoin, Kyoto. *Possessing*, Fig. 71. Anonymous 13th c. works, after Xia Gui.

11.19.9: Painting in Freer Gallery, old collection, published by Bachhofer, Loehr: original may have had Xia Gui signature, but lost when badly remounted.

Mist in valley, hiding the middle ground; bluff, huge rock in foreground. No figure, or path, or house—another painting in which no intrusion of human element. No artificiality at all; composition has no obvious plan; complete naturalness. Sold cheap to foreigner (Freer), chance survival.

More by Xia Gui:

11.19.10: Album leaf, Indianapolis Art Institute. Evening scene, returning fisherman.

11.19.11: Signed, album leaf, Palace Museum, Beijing. Scholar sitting alone in house among bamboo and trees. Maybe early Xia Gui.

11.22.1: Album leaf, winter scene of men in house by riverbank. Signed, but too showy to be Xia Gui's signature. Brushwork too harsh and angular.

Others, not by him:

11.23.1: *Landscape with Man and Servant Walking on Path*, hanging scroll, ink on silk. Shimizu Collection. *Suiboku* 11/49 etc. Signed, but may or may not be by Xia Gui. Could be close follower. But a fine painting.

11.24.1: Xia Gui manner, *Man in Pavilion*, Palace Museum. Much poorer painting than previous.

11.25.1: *Moonlit Landscape with Man and Servant Traveling*. Attributed; datable to 13th cent,

by priest-calligrapher's inscription. Kimbell Art Museum.

11.26.1. *Landscape in Wind and Rain*, signed, ink on paper. Formerly Kawasaki Collection. Copy? Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 301 (right). Lively brushwork, but Xia Gui normally isn't. Xia Gui-like crests; a wonderful painting. Unsure of Xia Gui or not.

11.27.1: Attributed to Xia Gui, *Conversation on River Bank*, album leaf, ink and color on silk, 27 x 39 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. CAT 58. An imitation.

11.28.1. Attributed to Xia Gui, *Twelve Views from a Thatched Cottage* 山水十二景圖/山水十二景圖 (ca.1225), handscroll, ink on paper, 28 x 230.8 cm. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City. *Three Thousand Years*, Pl. 126; Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 303–4; Loehr 100; *Eight Dynasties* 58.

Probably a close copy after Xia Gui. Also exists in other versions. Foliage, dots, tree details too detached.

11.29.1: *Ten Thousand Miles on the Yangtze River*, long handscroll. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Impressive seals and colophons, but obviously Ming painting, mediocre quality. Was in 1935–36 London Exhibition to represent Xia Gui!

I previously mentioned that the Chinese selection committee probably intentionally selected the wrong paintings for the 1935–1936 London Exhibition. In the 1937 Nanjing Exhibition, on the other hand, they were able to select the great early paintings, none of which went to London.

Xia Gui is an artist who badly needs an in-depth study, someone to create an *oeuvre* for him.

11.19.12: Xia Gui, *Autumn Moon on Dongting Lake* 洞庭秋月圖/洞庭秋月圖, signed, hanging scroll, 189.6 x 108.9 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, 1919.126.

From the “Eight Views of the Xiao-Xiang” theme. Collectors’ seals of Xiang Yuanbian and others. Poem at top by unknown imperial hand, translated on Freer website: “Oranges fragrant, from every shore green and yellow emerge...”¹ Believable as a genuine Xia Gui.

11.19.13: Xia Gui, *Landscape with Drying Nets [A Fisherman's Abode after Rain]* 雨餘煙樹圖/雨餘烟樹圖, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 144.5 x 101 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 14.54.

Much retouched. Also exists in other versions, but this one a fine and convincing work.

¹ <http://www.asia.si.edu/SongYuan/F1919.126/F1919-126.Documentation.pdf>

11.19.14: Xia Gui, *Mountain Market, Clear with Rising Mist*, signed, album leaf, ink on silk, 24.8 x 21.3 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 13.100.102.

See also: Wen Fong, *Beyond Representation*, p. 177. Wen Fong argues that the painting is a genuine Xia Gui and represents a scene from "Eight Views of the Xiao-Xiang." I disagree with the thematic attribution, but agree that it is a real Xia Gui. The subject is one we have seen in works of Li Tang: two travelers follow a path up a mountain toward an inn.

11.30.1: Follower of Xia Gui, Pair of landscapes, hanging scrolls. Private Collection, Japan.

An absurd attribution to Mi Youren.

11.31.1a: *Returning Home in a Driving Rain*, fan painting, ink and color on silk, 25.6 x 26.4 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1982.7.3.

Thatched houses and bamboo beneath leafy trees on the shore.

11.31.1b: *Windswept Lakeshore*, fan painting, ink on silk, 26 x 27 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1973.121.11.

Traveler by boat alighting on shore.

Both album leaves are in the category "almost Xia Gui."

11.19.15: Signed, Fan painting. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Another moving image of lateness and return. Seals by prominent collectors.

11.32.1: Attributed to Xia Gui, *Swinging Gibbon*, fan painting, ink and color on silk, 24.8 x 26.5 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978.1. *Eight Dynasties*, no. 59.

Subject outside of Xia Gui's normal range and signature appears to read "Xia Lin." Cliff does not resemble Xia Gui's cliffs; gibbon appears done by good, but not extraordinary, Academy artist.

11.33.1: Attributed to Xia Gui, fan painting. Palace Museum, Beijing

Copy by heavy-handed follower. Recluse playing *qin* by the water.

11.34.1: Attributed to Xia Gui, *Cows*, fan painting, ink and light color on silk, 23.3 x 25.2 cm. Tokyo National Museum, TA-487.

Better chance of being by Xia Gui, or similarly talented artist. Herd boy urges buffalo into water.

Why was Xia Gui's following so sparse and lacking in identifiable works? One reason is the bad reception he received in his own time, with critics calling his work "extremely vulgar and loathsome." Also, to early Yuan critics, the late Song was associated with an age of Chinese

weakness. Xia Gui's early Yuan critics can be compared to our contemporary critics who endorse abstract expressionism and deride representational painting, placing an emphasis on brushwork, not picture.

Monochrome ink painting comes to a climax in Xia Gui's works, a development that was not continued; a huge loss. The monumental monochrome landscape type of the Northern Song led to the works of Guo Xi and others, under whose hands the pictorial medium achieved unparalleled effects of space and light. Those achievements were then sacrificed to landscapes rendered as visual perceptual experiences. Xia Gui was the inheritor of these forms, but the tradition was not continued.