

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 12C: *The Six Persimmons*

12.11 Muqi 牧溪 or Fachang 法常 (active 1220s–1280s)

12.11.6: *Six Persimmons* 柿图, ink on paper. Daitoku-ji, Kyoto.

This small painting can be taken to represent the confrontation between Chinese literati's bitter rejection of Muqi and the reverence shown to him by Japanese and foreign Zen believers, who see his work as beyond analysis.

But what if we tried to analyze it stylistically, art historically? Muqi has lined up six persimmons in a row, of various sizes and not uniformly spaced. The stems point in different directions. Most significantly, he has skillfully varied the ink tonality, from very dark to very light.

Compare with:

12.12.1: Attributed to Tan Zhirui, *Tall Bamboo and Rock*, late 13th-early 14th c., hanging scroll, ink on paper, 82.8 x 30.5 cm., Berkeley Art Museum. Reproduced in *Sōgen-ga* catalog, Pl. 41.

Similar grouping and use of ink tonality to focus gaze on darkest, central object of the group, allowing eye to take in the group as a comprehensive image.

12.13.1: Color photograph of six persimmons from Yoshiaki Shimizu. The photograph, however, does not come close to Muqi's painting. The persimmons are too similar, no unification into one composition, no change of tonality.

12.14.1: Handscroll copy after Muqi, where the copyist has made his eleven persimmons all uniform, dull and repetitive.

12.11.7: Muqi, *Chestnuts*, Juko-in, Daitoku-ji, Kyoto.

The two paintings were probably cut from handscrolls and mounted for tea ceremony use.

Other vegetable paintings attributed to Muqi:

12.11.8a: *Cabbage*, ink on paper, 37.4 x 64.9 cm. Imperial Collection, Tokyo.

12.11.8b: *Radish*, ink on paper, 37.4 x 64.9 cm. Imperial Collection, Tokyo.

May originally have been album leaves.

Back to comparing *Persimmons* with:

12.15.1: Copy after Muqi, *Drawings from Life: Birds, Vegetables and Flowers*, c. 1265, handscroll, ink on paper, 44.5 x 1017 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. Another similar scroll in collection of Palace Museum, Beijing, which bears colophons by Shen Zhou. See also James Cahill, "Continuations of Ch'an Ink Painting into Ming-Ch'ing and the Prevalence of Type Images," *Archives of Asian Art*, Vol. 50, (1997/1998), pp. 17–41.

The Taipei scroll opens with a series of blossoming flowers, moves on to fruits and vegetables, and ends with a pair of shrikes and a pair of pheasants.

Compare handscroll shrikes with:

12.11.9: Attributed to Muqi, *A Bull-headed Shrike on a Pine-trunk*, hanging scroll. Formerly Setsu Collection, Tokyo. Reproduced in *Siren*, Vol. III, Pl. 343.

12.16.1 and 12.16.2: Bada Shanren 八大山人/Zhu Da 朱耷 (1626-1705), two shrike paintings

The Taipei scroll shows what happens when Muqi is "cleaned up" and made expressively mild.

Detail of hibiscus/rose mallow (left), Muqi original in Japan (right). Copy done in orthodox and controlled brushwork. Original much rougher, dark tonality in center, much more exciting. Muqi's works gaze back out at the viewer and demand attention. His works survived in Chinese collections as cleaned-up copies. This Taipei handscroll bears the seals of famous collectors, such as Xiang Yuanbian 項元汴/项元汴.

What makes a painting Chan? The easy answers are:

1. Subject matter: history and people of Chan sect
2. Ritual use
3. Painted, collected, admired by masters of the sect

If we remove the name Muqi from the *Persimmons*, would it still be Zen? Yes. Why?

Displays qualities of the enigmatic and profound, but depicts everyday persimmons. The painting is simple and immediate; it is immediately seen as a whole. It makes no references to anything outside itself or to other levels of meaning.

See article by Victoria Contag, "The Unique Characteristics of Chinese Landscape Pictures," *Archives of Chinese Art* [*Archives of Asian Art*] 6 (1951). She draws a parallel between the Confucian theory of knowledge which requires information to be reduced to a recognizable

system, and literati painting styles, which sets up a system of forms and brushwork, as exemplified in orthodox landscapes. In these landscapes, the image is supposedly unimportant and repetitive. It is not to be appreciated as a picture; twentieth century connoisseurship developed out of studying these orthodox landscapes. I compared the landscapes to Japanese tea ceremony scoops: supposedly, only the connoisseur can tell apart their subtle differences. I argued that just because they were difficult to appreciate, they were not necessarily representative of higher taste.

Contrast Muqi's *Persimmons* with Song paintings that make literary, poetic, historic references. In Zen, viewer and viewed do not stand apart, but occupy a continuum. Chan artists cut through the overlays of style and literary references to present direct, unmediated image without intrusion of styles. This was unacceptable to Confucian literati scholars.

In the next lecture, we will look at Muqi and Yujian's ink monochrome landscapes.