

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 10A: Bird and Flower Painting: The Early Centuries

This will be the first of two lectures on Chinese bird-and-flower painting through the Song dynasty—this one taking us up to around the time of the Emperor Huizong in the late Northern Song; the next one, 10B, will be on Huizong-period and Southern Song bird-and-flower painting.

In one respect, these lectures have been inconsistent—well, more than one, but one I want to speak about briefly. I announced near the beginning that they would be heavily visual, without trying to deal seriously with questions of meaning and function, what the paintings meant to the people who made and used them, how they functioned in different times and different contexts. Well, I've followed that generally; but I've also spent quite a lot of time talking about the philosophical system that I take to underlie Chinese landscape painting in the different periods. I believe I have things to say about that topic that aren't general knowledge, and landscape painting is the principal theme of this series. But I won't try anything of the kind for bird-and-flower painting. There are rich textual sources, in Chinese and in modern scholarship, about the symbolism of these subjects, and how pictures of them could carry symbolic significance. But that isn't a matter on which I feel I have original things to say, so I leave it alone. About the *stylistic development* of this kind of painting, on the other hand, I can definitely contribute a whole new account, which is what follows.

Lecture dedicated to Ellen Johnston Laing, valued colleague, good friend, and co-chair of my 1977 delegation. Laing is a prolific, wide-ranging scholar and has done fine work on early bird-and-flower painting.

Going back to the Tang Dynasty

What follows is based on a lecture given at the Kyoto National Museum in 1982 (see on my website CLP 6A and B¹). Attempt to construct a style-history for bird and flower painting using

¹ <http://jamescahill.info/the-writings-of-james-cahill/cahill-lectures-and-papers/224-clp-6-1982-qsome-chinese-bird-and-flower-paintings-in-chinese-collectionsq-lecture-kyoto-national-museum> and <http://jamescahill.info/File/CLP6B.pdf>

paintings that had recently appeared in mainland China, from which I had made slides. Much work has been done on bird-and-flower paintings, but based upon literary writings about the artists Huang Quan 黄筌 (ca. 900–965) and Xu Xi 徐熙 (d. before 975). No one, however, has attempted what I am about to do now: a Gombrich-style developmental history.

10.1.1–3: Flower, bird, and animal details from stone engravings and tomb paintings in tombs of Princess Yongtai 永泰 (d. 706), Princes I-de and Zhang Huai 章懷, early 8th cent. See Image 4.1.1 and 4.2.1 from Lecture 4A.

10.2.1–4: Details from Tang tomb wall paintings.

Much of Tang painting is art of outline and color; this is generally true of bird-and-flower painting also. Stone engravings, wall paintings, exhibit use of birds and plants as decorative elements, or establish outdoor/ garden setting for figures. Bird in flight: hoopoe!

Hunting hawks: heavy outlines. Drawing heavier in wall paintings, to be seen from distance.

10.3.1: *Lady with Flying Bird*, fragment of painting from Astana, Turkestan. 8th cent. Same: outline and heavy mineral color.

10.4.1–7: Attributed to Zhou Fang 周昉 (ca. 730–ca. 800), *Palace Ladies with Flowering Headdresses* 簪花仕女圖, handscroll, ink and color on silk, 46 x 180 cm. Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang. See also Image 4.9 from Lecture 4A.

Painting of peony on fan held by girl: pale line with washes of color.

Magnolia flowers at end of scroll: shaded color on blossoms.

Crane: linear outline of feathers and other parts, with strokes of heavy color within these. Seem to shade from one side of feather to other, making them appear slightly turned oblique to picture plane, relieving flatness of design.

10.5 Huang Quan 黄筌 (ca. 900–965)

10.5.1: *Wind Dancer*, from set of *Six Cranes*, supposed to be copy by Emperor Huizong after work by Huang Quan, great 10th cent. master, painted in 944 for ruler of Shu state. From old reproduction book.

Authenticity uncertain, but striking parallel. Crane supposed to be dancing, spreading wings as if catching wind. Argument: Huang Quan may have inherited Tang tradition, based on literary sources.

10.5.2: *Two Cranes and Bamboo*, attrib. to Huang Quan, with purported "Huizong"

inscription. Osaka Municipal Museum. May be a Ming copy of a Tang work.

Huang Quan worked in Shu state (present Szechwan) during Five Dynasties, inherited Tang traditions. Specialist in flower and bird painting. Among many paintings attributed to him, most important is:

10.6.1–8: *Sketches of Birds and Insects* 寫生珍禽圖 (ca. 960), handscroll, ink and color on silk, 41.5 x 70 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Brief inscription said to be by Huang Quan, saying he painted it for his son Huang Jubao, who was also an artist. Instructional painting, giving models for various birds and insects. May be authentic, but whether or not by Huang Quan, still an early and valuable painting. Repertory of models for students, similar to:

10.7.1-3: Anonymous Tang artist, *One Hundred Horses*, handscroll. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Both paintings spread out their images laterally over the surface, render them in clear outline manner, quasi-encyclopedic method of differentiation and classification. Taxonomic process important to painting of this time. Think back to Zhao Gan scroll of fishermen, how it provides a visual catalog of devices used by fishermen, spread out over surface. Horse painting: based on long observation of horses, how they move, how they lie down and turn their heads and interact with grooms and each other.

Return to 10.6: *Sketches of Birds and Insects* 寫生珍禽圖

Insects: wasp, depicted accurately, as though illustrating entomological treatise. All outline-and-wash.

Birds: They exhibit something new: In addition to lightly bounded (outlined) shape and color, fine strokes of ink rendering texture of their plumage. Not coincidental that this is around the same time texture-stroke (*cunfa* 皴法) system being developed in landscape painting.

Sparrow: fine hatching of soft strokes that replace, or enhance, the color washes of Tang style. Advance in naturalism, maybe kind of thing that earned for Huang Quan the reputation for *xie-sheng* 寫生, "drawing from life." But all this remains within firm outlines.

10.8 Huang Jucai 黃居棗 (933–after 993)

Huang Quan's third son; was Hanlin Academy *daizhao* 待詔 under Hou-shu state in (modern) Szechwan. In 965, came to Song along with ruler of Hou-shu, became Han-lin *daizhao* 待詔 under Northern Song. Various honors. "Inherited family style."

10.8.1–4: Ascribed to him, old and fine: *Partridge with Sparrows in a Thorn Bush*²
 山鷓棘雀圖/ 山鷓棘雀图 (ca. 975), hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 97 x 53.6 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. Reproduced in *Chinese Art Treasures* (1961), Pl. 16. No signature, but convincing attribution made in Huizong catalog, this painting (with Huizong inscription and seals etc.) recorded there.

Composition: Reliably 10th c. composition, seen also in tomb paintings of the time: rock-and-plants with birds for main middle-ground group; and single large partridge in front of this. Partridge done in outline and color with some texturing in the feathers.

10.9.1–5: Painting of *Rabbits and Sparrows, with Bamboo and Flowering Plants* (ca. 3rd quarter of 10th c.), from Liao tomb near Shenyang.

I showed other one, *Daoist Retreat*, in Lecture 5. Roughly contemporary and compositionally comparable to Huang Jucai's work. Near middle-ground group with plants and sparrows. A little bit crude in execution. Sparrows shown in different postures, done in outline and color with some texture strokes for markings, heavy white pigment over it. We will return to the lower part of this scroll later in the lecture.

10.10.1–4: Attributed to Cui Bai 崔白 (act. 1050–1080), handscroll of sparrows, Palace Museum, Beijing. Signed, but signature not reliable; essentially an anonymous work. (We will see a major, reliable work by Cui Bai later, signed and dated 1061.)

But why was this ascribed to Cui Bai? He was a virtuoso, painting in a freer, looser manner than his predecessors, giving birds and animals in his pictures more animation and life. Similar to the horse scroll, this painting depicts sparrows in a variety of ways and poses, showing their liveliness and diversity: Bird hangs upside down; another in flight with wings outspread (old motif).

Detail of birds: some use of white pigment, washes of brown, strokes of ink for markings, fine strokes for soft plumage. But these are *no longer enclosed within firm, clear boundaries*; instead, washes and brushstrokes make up substance of bird, simultaneously defining its three-dimensional form and describing its surface patterns. This new mode of depiction brings about a great increase in the sense of liveliness and lifelikeness; approximates better the way a bird is perceived by the eye: not set off from surrounding space, tactilely soft but also softened by

² Editor's note: The bird in foreground has also been referred to as a pheasant. *Chinese Art Treasures* (1962) lists the painting's title as *Pheasant and Sparrows among Rocks and Shrubs*. *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (1997) lists the painting as *Pheasant and Small Birds by a Jujube Shrub*.

movement, by atmosphere, by immediacy of perception. Another major development in portrayal of birds, which we can provisionally credit to Cui Bai, or at least to this period (the Northern Song).

10.11.1: Attributed to Song Ruzhi 宋汝志. (13th c. Academy master), *Young Sparrows in a Basket*, album leaf.

Wonderful example of how the new way of rendering, with images of birds made up of unbounded brushstrokes, greatly enhances the immediacy and animation of the picture. Anecdotal picture: young birds excitedly awaiting the return of their mother with something to eat, to the point where they are about to overturn the basket. Amazing that the artist was able to paint the basket without reducing it to a dull repetitive pattern.

Other developmental paths

10.12.1–6 (Returning to Image 10.9): Painting of *Rabbits and Sparrows, with Bamboo and Flowering Plants* (ca. 3rd quarter of 10th c.), from Liao tomb near Shenyang.

Rabbits: fine strokes for fur within outlines again. Not a great painting, but good.

Lilies: At some points, heavy mineral color gives substance to the forms, which stand out from the silk. Heavy pigments applied over ink lines obscure the line drawings; this may suggest a new reading for the term *mogu* 沒骨, usually rendered as "boneless style" (i.e., "without bones") color only without outlines or ink structure. Instead, I proposed in an old lecture, it may mean "sunken bones" since character *mo* also has that meaning, and that *mogu* refers to the ink outlines "sunken" below the color pigments.

10.13.1: Fragment of Tang Buddhist painting from Turfan (Central Asia) region: hand of Bodhisattva holding flower.

Traces of ink drawing of flower can be seen below and at the tip of the petals; elsewhere it is concealed by the heavy color pigment.

10.14 Xu Xi 徐熙 (act. Early Song)

Most difficult problem in early bird-and-flower painting: identifying style of Xu Xi.

10.14.1–5: Attributed to Xu Xi, *Bamboo, Old Tree, and Rock*, Shanghai Museum.

Appears to be unsigned; inscription (seen by Wai-kam Ho) written upside-down in archaic script on tree: "This bamboo is worth more than 500 pieces of gold" (c.f. inscription on Li Song's *The Knickknack Peddler*, image 9.36.1).

Painting distinguished by penetrating realism. Brushwork so subservient to description that one can scarcely speak of brushwork (*bifa* 筆法) at all—as if came into being thru some magical process, without human hands. Combination of reserve technique—light leaves and stalks etc. set off against darkened ground—and the reverse—dark leaves against lighter silk. The artist shifts from one to the other imperceptibly, without calling attention to it. Others have suggested that this was accomplished using wax-resist technique, but this doesn't go very far in accounting for what we see.

Details reveal extraordinary effect of this manner of rendering by light and dark: incredibly realistic; one is unconscious of artist's hand, being instead absorbed into the subject: eroded rock, lacelike, tattered leaves portraying the vicissitudes of nature, weather, and the seasons upon living things. A powerful, wonderful painting, but little studied. If we try to imagine how his colored painting may have looked, a painting such as this may give a clue:

10.15.1–2: Anonymous, *Peonies*, fan painting, Palace Museum, Beijing.

Shading, three-dimensional rendering of leaves and blossoms.

10.16.1–8: Attributed to Zhao Chang 趙昌 (act. 11th c.), handscroll, Palace Museum, Beijing.

Zhao Chang attribution doesn't mean much, but we include the painting here because Xu Bangda 徐邦達 (1911–2012), connoisseur and scholar at the Palace Museum, suggested it could be by close follower of Xu Xi, because it agrees in style. I don't see it and I don't agree, but we'll look at the painting anyway. Probably by later Song artist specializing in butterflies and insects, perhaps from the Piling School 毘陵. Some plants drawn in fairly heavy line with color, others in just color washes. A fine painting but not particularly associated with Xu Xi or anyone else.

10.17.1: Attributed to Qian Xuan 錢選 (1235–1305) [incorrect attribution], *Early Autumn* (15th c.), handscroll, ink and colors on paper, 26.7 x 120.7 cm. Detroit Institute of Arts, 29.1.

Handscroll from the Piling School; closely resembles the work of Sun Long 孫隆 (15th c.). Superb painting and color without outlines, similar to, but much finer than previous scroll attributed to Zhao Chang. Draws viewer into the warm, damp atmosphere of pond life, with lotus leaves, frogs, dragonflies, and various other plants and animals. See also *Parting at the Shore* (Weatherhill, 1978).

As we come to late Northern Song, must take into account the effect of literati painting theory on bird-and-flower painting. A crucial development in painting of the 11th c. was the new popularity of the theme of wild geese and reeds in riverbank settings.

10.18 Hui Chong 惠崇 (monk-artist, ca. 965-1017)

Known for his paintings of wild geese; his works bear inscriptions by literati-poets such as Su Dongpo.

10.18.1–3: Anonymous, Northern Song? *Landscape with Geese and Other Birds*, hanging scroll. Palace Museum, Beijing. Reproduced in *Lyric Journey*, no. 1.3.

Probably similar to what Hui Chong would have painted, but less poetically subtle. For more about poetic painting, see publications by Alfreda Murck.

10.19 Liang Shimin 梁師閔 (early 12th c.)

10.19.1–8: Liang Shimin, *Fine Snow on Reedy Sandbanks* 蘆汀密雪, handscroll, Palace Museum, Beijing. Signed, genuine work. Title given by Huizong. Reproduced in *Lyric Journey*, no. 1.4.

Liang Shimin served as an official under the reign of Huizong, and was also an amateur painter and poet. Painting opens with bamboo and bare tree growing by rock, the same subject being painted by amateur artists, such as Su Dongpo, at this same time, etc. He is praised in the *Xuan-he hua-pu* for painting that is careful and restrained, in contrast to the paintings of scholar amateurs. According to the *Xuan-he hua-pu*, Liang's work is "refined and delicate, not careless; disciplined, not loose," thus distinguishing his work from literati amateur painting (compare with works by Su Dongpo). A quiet scroll, not much happening: various ducks and geese on sand spits.

Signed, "Painted by your subject, Liang Shimin," addressed to Emperor Huizong, so he was playing to the emperor's tastes for poetry and painting.

This part of lecture ends here; the second part will treat major dated works by Cui Bai, then Huizong and his Academy masters, and later Southern Song Academy bird-and-flower painting. Download and read: my lecture, on which this was largely based, but with more discussion etc., as CLP 6B on my website; also opening pages of *Lyric Journey* on these same paintings and problems.