

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 11A: Great Masters of Southern Song: Ma Yuan

Lecture 11 deals, in four parts, with the four artists of the late Southern Song period whom I take to be towering figures—well, Ma Lin may be short of towering, but very fine—who make this, for me, one of the great ages of painting in world art. It is an age that has, however, been badly neglected, largely because of the strong negative reaction against the painting of the Southern Song Academy (in which all these artists worked) among most literati critics from the early Yuan dynasty on. Xia Gui received some praise from a few later critics, Dong Qichang among them, but the others weren't given much credit. Instead, the big critics all went on and on about Dong Yuan and Juran, Li Cheng, those elusive 10th-century masters whose original works were scarcely to be seen, except in copies and school-works. I would like to see those appraisals reconsidered, on the basis of surviving paintings, and much more weight given to these four masters. The first, Ma Yuan, is perhaps the easiest to like, and has been so much imitated that it's almost impossible to construct an *oeuvre* for him—a body, that is, of extant work. But I'll try.

Picture of Richard Edwards: Let me start off by crediting my colleague and old friend Richard (“Dick”) Edwards, now retired after teaching for many years at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, with important writing on Southern Song Academy painting. He planned a great exhibition that was never carried out, but contributed important writing on the period and its artists, with special insights. He recently published a book on the first artist we'll treat, Ma Yuan. (I should add that a major exhibition of Southern Song painting was held at the National Palace Museum in Taipei in fall of 2010,¹ a follow-up to its earlier exhibition of Northern Song painting.)

Richard Edwards, *The Heart of Ma Yuan: The Search for a Southern Song Aesthetic* (Hong Kong University Press, 2011)

Richard Edwards, *The World Around the Chinese Artist: Aspects of Realism in Chinese*

¹ Editor's note: *Dynastic Renaissance: Art and Culture of the Southern Song* 文藝紹興：南宋藝術與文化特展/ 文艺绍兴：南宋艺术与文化特展 (2010) at The National Palace Museum, Taipei.
<http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh99/southernsong/index.html>

Painting (Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1987)

Fascinating reading for Hangzhou in the 13th c., much on the Academy:

Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250-1276*. (Stanford University Press, 1962). Based on translations from Chinese texts: many of them survive from this period and slightly later. Much detail about life in Hangzhou.

The Ma-Xia school 馬夏派/ 马夏派 was once the most popular of all schools of Chinese painting in West; what came to mind when people thought about old Chinese painting. Less so now, but this came about because of collections in Japan, and Fenollosa transmitted that taste to Western scholars. Ma Yuan's fan-shaped album leaf with willows in Boston MFA sometimes reproduced in books on world art as single example of Chinese painting. Immediately accessible and likeable. Represents culmination of that transformation of Li Tang landscape type into something smaller-scale, more poetic, warmer in tone, idealized—that took place in Hangzhou Academy.

Two main figures, Ma Yuan and Xia Gui; Ma Yuan's son Ma Lin often added in as third, as I will do. Ma Yuan was 4th generation in a family of painters in Academy—others don't concern us. Ma Yuan served in Academy in late 12th and early 13th cent. No dated work. So many close followers and later imitations that problem of deciding which are really his is complicated. He specialized in simple, lyrical pictures—like Yan brothers, but departed more from Li Tang model, more original. Gave Li Tang style "one twist" etc.

11.1 Ma Yuan 馬遠/ 马远 (active ca. 1190–1230)

11.1.1: Attributed to Ma Yuan, *Landscape in Storm*. Seikado, Tokyo. Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 285; Loehr 96.

Begin with one still close to Li Tang manner. Dark, on silk, little color. From Li manner is silhouette of trees, something in construction of mountains, etc.

Flat area of foliage, with fine drawing of leaves. But, new: dramatic function given to trees, more calculated planning of composition. Nature seen less for itself now, objectively, as in Northern Song; rather, nature used for expressive purpose, emotional tone, even certain manipulation.

11.1.2: Ma Yuan, *Banquet by Lamplight* 華燈侍宴圖/ 华灯侍宴图 (ca. 1200), unsigned, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 111.9 x 53.5 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Exists in two versions:

11.1.2a: Good version, originally cataloged in Imperial Collection as "Anonymous, Song":
Reproduced in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Pl. 123; *Chinese Art Treasures*, Pl. 56;
Possessing the Past, Pl.86, *The Lyric Journey* 1.30.

Inscription as translated in *Chinese Art Treasures*, pg. 123: "Back from court, pages
proclaim imperial summons..."

Real one: Hush of twilight; light washes of ink for haze, shadowy depths of trees, etc.
Probably done on imperial order, to illustrate poem written above. Hui-shu Lee believes she can
identify actual occasion reproduced in painting.

11.1.2b: Less good, signed as "Ma Yuan" version, *Banquet by Lantern Light*, hanging scroll,
ink and color on silk, 125.6 x 46.7 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. Reproduced in Loehr 97,
Possessing the Past, Fig. 69.

London Exhibition of 1935–36: Chinese selection committee had deliberately (I think)
sent the wrong versions (i.e., the copies, of all the earlier paintings), but in this case, believing the
signed Ma Yuan *Banquet* to be the real one, sent the unsigned one (i.e., the right one), by mistake!

Artist lacks the same conviction as Ma Yuan; moves the foreground plum trees further
down, so as not to obstruct the dancing figures on the terrace; fills in the background with trees
and ridges.

Cf. Ming painting (for composition): Dai Jin 戴進 (1388–1462), *Returning Late from a Spring
Outing*, Reproduced in Cahill, *Chinese Painting* (Skira), 122.

11.2.1: Signed "Ma Yuan," *Landscape with Dancing Peasants*, hanging scroll, ink and colors
on silk, 192.5 x 111 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. Reproduced in *Lyric Journey* 1.31.

Not an authentic Ma Yuan, too heavy-handed; however, often reproduced as a Ma Yuan.
It may seem that I am being especially hard on Chinese colleagues. But that's because I'm talking
about Southern Song paintings, which they have traditionally downplayed, and, I think,
undervalued. If I were talking about Yuan, Ming, or Qing painting, I would be paying constant
tributes to C.C. Wang and others for their reattributions and other discoveries. Nobody has it all
right, certainly not myself, although I talk sometimes as if I did.

Two signed fan-shaped album leaves by him in Boston MFA, among finest surviving
Southern Song paintings, most often reproduced:

11.1.3: *Landscape with Willows, Returning Farmer* [*Bare Willows and Distant Mountains*]
柳岸遠山圖/ 柳岸远山图, fan painting, ink and color on silk, 23.8 x 24.2 cm. Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston, 14.61. Siren 289, Loehr 95.

Nearly everything in the painting echoes the shape of the fan—characteristic of Ma Yuan. Hill in the back nearly textureless, with a little bit of blue coloring. Weary farmer returning home; we will return to the theme of “returning” later in the lecture.

11.1.4: *Scholars Conversing Beneath Blossoming Plum Tree* 梅間俊語圖/ 梅间俊语图, fan painting, ink and color on silk, 23.4 x 25.2 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 14.62. Reproduced in Cahill’s *Southern Song* book, no. 17.

Two men under plum tree: symbolic, but also embodied in forms, rounded angularity, beauty of line. Framed by the arching plum branches.

Space and depth not achieved by the difficult means essayed by Northern Song landscapists—diagonal recessions, vistas along river valleys etc.—this more like small passage from Guo Xi, with repoussoir trees, space opening behind. Moves from clearly defined forms to misty to near-hidden in mist. Done in planes: no continuous recession. From Northern Song to this, similar to the movement from Beethoven to Chopin. The titanic feat of conquering certain problems, developing certain techniques and expressive means, gives way now to confident use of them; to easy, seemingly effortless manipulation of devices that had been well absorbed, becoming common property. I referred to Ma Yuan and Xia Gui, at the end of my old article on “Rocks in Early Chinese Painting,” without showing their works, as “like members of a younger generation, spending lightly a hard-won heritage [from Fan Kuan, Li Tang, etc].” Maybe a bit too negative—might not write that today, especially about Xia Gui.

Not to diminish originality: Ma Yuan thoroughly original. But his originality lies in creating a new, entrancing mode of painting; no single painting seems to reveal any grappling with difficult formal and representational problems; everything seems to be at his disposal, used for distinct purposes. Kind of perfection here: not so much rightness, with respect to nature, life or natural order; rather aesthetic, technical perfection. Southern Song Academy paintings give impression that they were conceived whole, executed without moment of faltering; everything in place, couldn’t be changed. Nothing that seems arbitrary, accidental. Loss of naturalness, to a point—kind seen, for example, in Xu Daoning’s 許道寧 (ca. 970–1051/1052) work (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City), with shaggy, tangled trees, odd outcroppings and hillocks—total change.

11.1.5: *Walking on a Mountain Path in Spring* 山徑春行圖/ 山径春行图, album leaf, ink and light colors on silk, 27.4 x 43.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. TandV 7-33, Skira 82, CAT 52.

Addition of figure reduces interest of scenery; becomes setting for him, or what he contemplates or experiences around him. Doesn't have same objective existence as early landscape. Figure very conscious of surroundings: stands in posture expressive of his responses—sets this off, again, from Northern Song. Enjoyment of nature is very theme of work.

11.1.6: *Through Snowy Mountains At Dawn* 曉雪山行圖/ 晓雪山行图, album leaf, ink and white on silk, 27.6 x 40 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. CAT 53.

Like Li Di pictures in subject, but another aspect of same theme: here, wood-gatherer with firewood and charcoal. Wood-gatherer blows on his hands, feeling cold. Significant that scholars and aristocrats in these paintings never shiver, or get rained on—less pleasant aspects of nature affect only lower classes.

11.1.7: *A Palace at Evening*, fan-shaped album leaf, ink and colors on silk, 24.7 x 25.3 cm. Shanghai Museum. *Lyric Journey* color plate 2, cf. 1.21.

Palace or temple at twilight, yellow moon in gray-green sky. Favorite time of day for Southern Song painters, inspires speculation: living and working in sheltered enclave, maybe conscious of impending end. Famous poetic couplet: beauty of evening sky, but foretells coming of night. . . Shanghai Museum attributes this fan painting to Ma Lin, but I think Ma Yuan.

11.1.8: *Viewing Sunset from a Palace Terrace* 雕臺望雲圖/ 雕台望云图, album leaf; ink, color, and gold on silk, 25.2 x 24.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 291.

(Read from *The Lyric Journey*, 51-52: “A sense of the unconsummated pervades these Southern Sung academy-style pictures, along with a piercing feeling of lateness and loss...”) Strong recommendation (would require it if I could): read *Lyric Journey*, pp. 47-72.

11.1.9: *Scholar Viewing a Waterfall*, album leaf, ink and color on silk, 25.1 x 26 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973.120.9. *Beyond Representation*, Pl. 51.

Companion to: *Scholar and Servant on Terrace* (not shown), Skira 83. Less sure of authenticity.

11.1.10: Another fan-shaped painting of scholar gazing at waterfall. National Palace Museum, Taipei (?).

When I was still teaching, my friend Marian Diamond published an article about the effect of negative and positive ions upon the brain. Negative ions give sense of exhilaration. Positive ions in the air are depressing to the brain. Lots of negative ions at the base of waterfalls. Where are there lots of positive ions? In front of computers.

11.3.1: Ma Yuan follower, *Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight*, fan painting, ink and color

on silk, 25.1 x 26.7 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1986.493.2.

11.4.1: Attributed to Ma Yuan, *Solitary Angler on the Wintry River* 寒江獨釣圖/寒江独钓图, small hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk, 26.7 x 50.6 cm. Tokyo National Museum, TA-140. Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 290.

Cut by tea ceremony master from larger hanging scroll! Maybe by the hand of Ma Yuan.

11.5.1. Attributed to Ma Yuan, *Landscape with Scholar Gazing at Moon*, hanging scroll. Atami Museum.

Space plays more positive role in these paintings, solids set against it, attention of figures absorbed into space; one's eye drawn from solid matter into it—artist persuades us to lose ourselves in it, and experience has touch of mystical (some try Zen interpretations.) But diluted mysticism, cf. romantic poetry in West. Done too easily to be convincing. (Siren on Ma Yuan's paintings: "They reflect ideas that reverberate beyond form and dissolve into space." Oof. Why one can't read Siren with benefit and pleasure any more.)

11.6.1: Series of untitled album leaves

11.7.1: Attributed to Ma Yuan, *Composing Poetry on a Spring Outing*, section of a handscroll. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, 63–19. *Eight Dynasties* 51.

11.8.1: Attributed to Ma Yuan, *Two Chan Patriarchs*, founders of Chan sects. Tenryuji, Kyoto.

One of three from original series of five. Maybe by him.

11.1.11: *The Priest Dongshan Wading the Stream* 洞山渡水圖, hanging scroll, ink and light color on paper, 77.6 x 33 cm. Tokyo National Museum, TA-138.

Setting established with minimal means, yet still achieves spaciousness and atmospheric feel. Inscription supposedly by Yang Meizi.

11.1.12: *Ten Scenes of Water*, album leaves, mounted in a handscroll. Palace Museum, Beijing. Loehr Fig. 98.

Probably done for imperial patron. Decorative capturing of power of water. Various bodies of water shown: Yangzi, Yellow River, Lake Dongting, etc.

11.1.13: *Daoist Magician Riding Dragon, with Servant*. Signed. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Little-noticed, genuine work?

11.1.14: *Plum Tree and Ducks by a Stream*, signed, hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 31.5 x 18.5 in. Berkeley Art Museum, 2000.29. *Sogenga* catalog, no. 18

Lines of plum branch fluid, not harsh.

11.1.15: *Ducks in Water Beneath Blossoming Plum*, signed, album leaf. Palace Museum, Beijing. Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 288.

11.1.16: *Egrets on a Snowy Bank* 雪灘雙鷺/ 雪滩双鹭, hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 59 x 37.6 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

11.1.17: *Bamboo and Sparrows*. Yamato Bunkakan, Nara.

11.9.1: *Ducks and Bamboo by a Stream*. Signature of Ma Yuan. *Eight Dynasties* 54.

But not a Ma Yuan. A Ming imitation.

11.10.1: Attributed to Zhao Boju 趙伯駒/ 赵伯驹, *The Han Palace* 漢宮圖/ 汉宫图, album leaf, ink and colors on silk, 24.5 cm. diameter. National Palace Museum, Taipei. Skira 81, TandV 7-35, *Possessing* Pl. 83; CAT 42.

Attribution to Zhao Boju made by Dong Qichang, but actually a later work, time of Ma Yuan, perhaps by him. Only 9-1/2" wide but great amount of detail. Depicts Mid-Autumn Festival.

11.1.18: Attributed to Ma Yuan, *Landscape with Buildings and Tall Pines*, pair of fan paintings, ink on silk, 24.2 x 24.8 cm. Osaka Municipal Museum.

See *Lyric Journey*, pg. 28-29. Calligraphy by Emperor Guangzong of a poem by Tang poet Bai Juyi. Whose voice are we hearing in the painting? The scholar in the terrace: Emperor Guangzong, Bai Juyi, Ma Yuan?

11.11.1: Painting in Japanese collection: Recluse seated at stone table before a cave entrance. Cliff face overhung by large pine.

11.12.1: Attributed to Ma Yuan, *Heralding the New Year*, Shanghai Museum.

11.13.1: Painting of scholar and servant in landscape setting, ink and colors on silk, 122 cm. h. Liaoning Museum.

Inscription by Emperor Ningzong (r. 1195-1224), presented on the occasion of a birthday (cf. Ma Lin's *Listening to the Wind in the Pines* [Lecture 11C]).

11.14.1: Copy after Ma Yuan, horizontal painting of scholar and servant beneath pine tree. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

11.15.1a, b: Attributed to Ma Yuan, pair of album leaves attributed to Ma Yuan. Former Juncunc Collection.

11.16.1: Attributed to Ma Yuan, *Conversation in a Cave*, fan painting, unsigned, ink and color on silk, 24.8 x 25.2 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Collection of A. W. Bahr, 47.18.30.

11.17.1: Fan painting of scholar observing egret

11.18.1: Attributed to Ye Xiaoyan 葉肖巖 (act. mid-13th c.), fan painting of scholar watching deer.

11.1.19: Attributed to Ma Yuan, similar composition to Ye painting.

11.1.20: Untitled album leaf, scholar with servant.

Theme of “lateness” and “return” in Southern Song painting will be returned to in next lectures.