

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 12B: The Beginnings of Chan (Zen) Painting and Muqi

Important references and readings for Chan painting:

Helmut Brinker and Hiroshi Kanazawa, *Zen Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1996. Major publication.

Contains history of Chan/Zen; Chapters on "Zen Aestheticism and Theory of Art," "Zen symbols and Metaphors," etc. Careful studies of many kinds of Zen painting.

Helmut Brinker, *Zen in the Art of Painting*. London and New York: Arkanat, 1987.

Shorter, easier to read.

Gregory Levine, et al. *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

I just read the essay "Two (or More) Truths: Reconsidering *Zen Art* in the West," by my younger colleague at U.C. Berkeley, Greg Levine, in the *Awakenings* exhibition catalog about writings on "Chan/Zen art," and would be frightened off attempting this lecture if I were not too old and impenetrable for that. Good essay, anyway.

Background for Chan Painting:

Likelihood of art-historical connection of Chan painting to literati painting is very strong, but the evidence for that has not been explored enough by others. Several of Su Dongpo's group, especially Huang Tingjian, were strongly devoted to Chan, although came mainly from Neo-Confucian background.

12.7.1-13: Fanlong 梵隆 (monk-painter, active early 12th c., follower of Li Gonglin 李公麟), *Sixteen Arhats*, handscroll, ink on paper, 12 in. high, Freer Gallery. Reproduced in Skira 94, Suiboku 4/54–57.

Scroll has hidden signature in it—I found it after it was bought by Freer on my recommendation from C.C. Wang. Great series of colophons from 14th c. onwards. Seems reliable; important connection I bet. In tradition of Li Gonglin and *baimiao* painting and later Chan Buddhist painting.

Arhat seated in chair, hand held up, meditating. Acolyte stands behind chair, turning to

look back at Central Asian foreigner clutching a small lion brought as tribute.

Pair of arhats seated in chairs. An acolyte pours water over the hand of the one on the right.

Detail of tree and bamboo reveal relation to early literati painting, such as the Red Cliff scroll by Qiao Zhongchang 喬仲常 (See Lecture 8B, images 8.31).

Arhat leaning against pine as wind blows through his robes. Two deer at left bring him offerings. Poetic, moody. Drawing of figure, enlarged and relaxed, anticipates some late Song Chan paintings. From *baimiao* to looser, broader style. Muqi, artist we'll treat later, carries this further; later Chan paintings further still.

Arhat accompanied by tiger conversing with Confucian figure. Retinue of demons follows behind.

Waterfall descending from lotus pond; boulders not rendered with texture strokes, but loose strokes of the brush.

End of scroll: Arhat in seated meditation on a ledge behind a waterfall. To his right, a serpent slithers away; he is so removed from the world that even the snakes do not bother him.

An important painting for Li Gonglin literati tradition and later Chan painting.

12.8.1–5: *Tradition of Guanxiu*. Nelson-Atkins Gallery of Art, Kansas City, reproduced in *Eight Dynasties* catalog, no. 68. There dated to Southern Song.

An odd Arhat scroll. Guanxiu 貫休/贯休 was an eccentric monk-painter of the 10th c. who painted arhats (see the two examples of Guanxiu's arhat paintings in the Japanese imperial collection).

Collectors' seals and inscriptions—"acceptable" to literati and emperor who followed their lead. Fitted literati notion of Chan painting.

Arhat leans against tree branch; a deer brings him an offering of flowers. Big, strong, continuous brushstrokes. Pair of monks accompanied by deer. Another seated arhat. No depth, expressively or formally. Good, but not as good as Fanlong scroll.

12.9.1–4: Seal of Zhiyong Laoniu (1114–1193; old articles by Shimada, see my Index p. 77, about Moryoga, or *wangliang hua*: "apparitional painting."), *Ox and Herdboy*. Yabumoto Kozo, Amagasaki. Sogenga 29.

Subject: probably no. 4 in *Ten Oxherding* series: "Calling the Ox." Cf. *Zen Painting and Calligraphy*, no. 49.

12.10 Li Que 李確/李确 (active mid-13th c.) Recorded pupil of Liang Kai 梁楷, member of Song Academy

12.10.1: Triptych of Bodhidharma (central), flanked by Fenggan and Tiger (right) and Budai Laughing at Moon, signed (left). Fenggan and Budai by Li Que; Bodhidharma by another artist. Inscription written above by 13th c. Chan monk. Myoshinji, Kyoto. Siren 351, Zen 7, Suiboku 4/45–46.

12.10.1a: Budai 布袋 (J. Hotei): semi-mythical 9th–10th c. monk, wandered around carrying huge bag of trash. Said to be incarnation of Maitreya, Buddha of future.

12.10.1b: Fenggan 豐干/丰干 accompanied by tiger. Figure drawn in loose, pale brushstrokes; tiger drawn more firmly and carefully.

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

Read Chuang Su on him, in Bush and Shih 138–39: dismissive of Chan painters, said of Muqi that his paintings not for "elegant diversion," but suitable only for Buddhist's chamber or Daoist's rustic hut.

Chinese writers, from around his time onward, speak slightly of him as painter of vegetables and other plants, birds, as well as tigers and dragons, wild geese, landscapes, figures—great variety of subjects, all in free and easy fashion. His way of painting described as "coarse and ugly, not in accordance with ancient canons, not for refined enjoyment." Blind spot in critics: both his subjects and his style kept him from receiving critical approval. The Japanese, by contrast, admired and acquired his works, treasured them, saw him as great master. Like the case of Liang Kai—curious, significant split.

Begin with his most reliable and most conservative works:

12.11.1: *White-robed Guanyin, Crane, and Gibbons* 觀音猿鶴圖/ 观音猿鹤图, triptych, hanging scrolls, ink on silk, 13th c., 173.9 x 98.8 cm each. Daitokuji, Kyoto. Signed. *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 128; T&V 7–47; Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 336-339; Loehr 109–11; Suiboku 3/1-3; Skira 97 (gibbons only).

Triptych, large paintings on silk, ink only, except for spot of red on crane's head. Probably not a triptych originally: central piece signed, others only with his seal. So, single Guanyin plus pair.

12.11.1a: *White-robed Guanyin*: Most popular bodhisattva, Kannon in Japan. Shown here in feminized form. Sits by water, contemplatively, flask with willow beside her. Drawn in

smooth, continuous strokes in light ink, similar to Liang Kai's style, a quality of drawing largely responsible for effect of painting. Figure self-enclosed: set within dark background.

Image of the White-robed Guanyin also shown in a painting within a painting of 500 *Arhats* (late 12th c.). Supposedly Li Gonglin the first to paint White-Robed Guanyin as an ink on silk painting.

12.11.1b: *Crane*: Striding out into the foreground from a thicket of bamboo, similar composition to *Shakyamuni Leaving the Mountain*.

When it was still believed that the three paintings were intended as a triptych, it was thought that Guanyin represented true enlightenment, and the crane and gibbons represented obstacles to that goal. The crane seeks in vain for longevity, and gibbons are a mockery of human intellect, which leads nowhere in Zen.

12.11.1c: *Mother Gibbon and Child*: Tree diagonally moving inward, one downswept branch: just that—no more—consistent with standard Southern Song compositions, but only that aspect.

Tree, detail: shows difference between him and scholar-painters, why they spoke slightly of his brushwork. C. C. Wang still did, saying that the brushwork was “bad.” I would argue that Muqi's brushwork was not “good” in the literati sense because he was trying to achieve something else, something Zen.

Detail of downswept branch: Very good rendering of pine needles.

Detail of gibbons (not monkeys, as I stupidly labeled it in old Skira book): Mother gibbon shown full-faced, transfixes viewer with her gaze. In Southern Song painting, very unorthodox to show figures full-faced, especially not animals. She clutches her baby protectively, as if shielding it from a hostile world.

My own feeling has always been that while perhaps there may be some Chan Buddhist connections here, it is not necessary to explain everything in this or other works of Muqi, style or subject, in terms of Chan: some of his works have obvious Chan associations, others haven't.

12.11.2: *Dragon and Tiger* 龍虎圖/龙虎图, 1269, pair of hanging scrolls, ink on silk, 136.5 x 80 cm each. Daitokuji, Kyoto. Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 342 (*Tiger*); Zen 10; Suiboku 3/71-2; *Exquisite Moments* (2001), Pl. 35.

These also used as side pieces for triptych. Signed and inscribed by Muqi. Powerful and threatening.

12.11.3: *An Arhat in Meditation encircled by a Snake*, signed and seal. Seikado [Private

Museum], Tokyo. Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 335; Suiboku 3/8. Accepted as a reliable work.

Arhat on ledge among mists; serpent coiled around him. The landscape forms seem to push in on him; comparable to Liang Kai's *Shakyamuni Emerging from the Mountains*. Also similar to the Fanlong scroll: both arhats sit wrapped up in themselves, completely self-absorbed, oblivious to ominous environment, unharmable. Muqi's arhat sits with eyes closed, or blank; either way, unseeing to the outside world.

12.11.4: *Jianzi/Xianzi with Fish Net* 蜺子和尚圖/蜺子和尚图, ink on paper. Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 334. Muqi seal, accepted by Japanese scholars; date of inscription above suggests it might be early work of his.

Loose and sloppy brushstrokes, deliberately undisciplined to catch inner enlightenment. Drawing style may remind us of Liang Kai's *Sixth Patriarch Chopping Bamboo*. Among paintings of this style, maybe most reliably by Muqi.

12.11.5: Budai (Jap. Hotei), hanging scroll. Kyoto National Museum. Formerly in a private collection (Fuji? Shimada's patron and advisee.)

A painting that delights by breaking the rules: Hotei lies horizontally across the painting, leaving lots of space above and below. His staff is also placed perfectly horizontally under him. Marvelous, loose, brushstrokes depict this gross figure leaning against his bag, hand on belly, feet exposed under him. Three dark strokes to define the closed eyes and mouth.

Attributed to Muqi:

12.12.1: *The Fifth Patriarch with a Hoe*. Matsunaga Memorial Museum, Kanagawa. Suiboku 111/23. Inscription is 14th c., only attributed to Muqi.

He was, before he became a Zen patriarch, a planter of pine trees, so shown here with a bunch of pine seedlings hanging from his hoe.

12.13.1: *Swallow and Hanging Willow Branch* 柳燕圖/柳燕图. Tokugawa Museum, Nagoya. Suiboku 111/75. Fine late Song work of a type often attributed to Muqi in Japan. His seals are found on many similar works of this kind. See also image 12.52.1 in Lecture 12D.

(Compare with *Mynah Bird on Pine*, also attributed to Muqi. Siren, Vol. III, Pl. 343; Suiboku 3/11.)

12.11.6: *Six Persimmons* 柿圖/柿图

Muqi's most famous and most reproduced work. We were taught that we should just look at it and not say anything; however, I have many things to say about it in the next lecture.