

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 4A. Tang Figure Painting

The Tang (619–706) was another great, long-lasting, native-ruled dynasty. Once more, like the Han, it was preceded by a short-lived dynasty that accomplished unification but couldn't last: Sui (581–618).

Tang Taizong (唐太宗; Li Shimin 李世民; reigned 626–649) led Chinese troops on a great campaign that reestablished Chinese rule over an extensive empire. He put his father on the throne (reigned 619–626), then succeeded him himself.

Confucianism made a comeback, although Buddhism and Daoism were still strong.

The Tang was a stable, long-lasting dynasty. The greatest poetry written then; the greatest figure painting done. I will show you some examples, along with copies.

Taizong was succeeded by Emperor Gaozong (高宗; reigned 649–683); then, on his death, his concubine Wu Zetian (武則天 / 武则天, reigned 690–705): wiped out rivals, put her inept son on the throne, and finally ruled herself.

The greatest Tang emperor was Xuanzong (玄宗; called Minghuang 明皇; ruled 712–756). His reign, especially, represents a return to humane government. He founded the Imperial Academy of Letters (Hanlin Academy 翰林院.) Great poets under his reign include Li Bo (李白), Du Fu 杜甫, Meng Haoran 孟浩然, and others. Chang'an, the capital (present-day Xi'an), was easily the most cosmopolitan city on earth. There were close contacts, and trade, with Western Asia and beyond (Ed Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*).

(Painting: Yang Guifei bathing, spied on by Xuanzong, probably by Gu Jianlong 顧見龍 / 顾见龙, a 17th-century master.) In his later years, when he was around sixty, Xuanzong became infatuated with the wife of one of his sons, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 / 杨贵妃 (Precious Consort Yang) and brought her into palace as his favorite consort, spent time disporting with her and neglected administration (subject of a well-known poem by Bo Juyi 白居易: "The Endless Sorrow" 長恨歌 / 长恨歌). By midcentury, her family had come to dominate court. She was the close friend of the

Turkish general An Lushan 安祿山／安禄山. He tried to seize power in 755. Emperor Xuanzong fled into Sichuan; Yang Guifei was killed on the way, as troops demanded. The rebellion put down, Xuanzong's son took the throne in Chang'an, and Xuanzong himself returned. But the power of the Tang was broken, and the empire shrunk as local powers reclaimed outlying regions. Another period of disunity followed, called the Five Dynasties period (906–960.) That was a great age of painting, however, to which I'll devote two lectures.

The Tang is another great period of Buddhist art, both sculpture and painting; I used to devote quite a few lectures to it. I'm leaving it out completely now, as announced at the beginning of the series.

Image 4.1.1: tomb of Princess Yongtai 永泰 (died 706 C.E.). See *3000*, 69; Loehr, figs. 22–23, pp. 42–43. (Empress Wu Zetian, after taking over the throne on the death of Emperor Gaozong, wiped out members of the Tang imperial family whom she feared as rivals. We were given quite different stories when taken to tombs on the 1973 delegation trip: the PRC made her into model ruler, as they did with the first Emperor of Qin (title: Qin Shihuang). Jiang Qing 江青 took her as a model. They loved all-powerful rulers and despised Confucius and his followers, whose beliefs they denounced as “secular humanism.”)

Images 4.1.2 and 4.1.3: passageways in the tomb are decorated with paintings; here, just flower paintings, like the walls of the palace. Other: antechamber to tomb chamber proper, which (as I remember) has only shallow stone engravings. (The fence is new.)

Images 4.1.4 and 4.1.5: details from paintings in the outer chambers. A young waiting woman, or a eunuch? Or, more likely, a girl attendant in male dress. There was some cross-dressing in this period. Other: head of male attendant (eunuch?), grinning, with bulging eyes. Much of this kind of inner energy in Tang sculpture and painting.

Image 4.1.6: one of the wall paintings in the antechamber—most often reproduced, for good reason. It was partly destroyed through damage, but preserved parts give us a revelation of the greatness of Tang wall painting, about which we read so much in texts of the time, yet can see so little. The ease of movement, spacing of figures, naturalness of postures, etc., are all marvelous. The Tang was recognized in later periods in China as a great age of figure painting; high points in landscape came later.

Images 4.1.7 and 4.1.8: two details: an older serving woman with a fan; the younger one holding a fly whisk? Tang figure painters didn't avoid full-face, as later figure painters tend to;

they handled it with ease, using it to catch and hold viewers' attention. This goes along somehow with the whole feeling of openness, stability, in Tang culture.

Images 4.1.9 and 4.1.10: detail of upper body, another of head, of especially well-preserved, especially lovely young serving woman in the center, holding a stemmed cup? The body is rendered with real volume now, well articulated. The fall of her translucent shawl over her shoulders, and over her arm, define three-dimensional forms of her figure as if effortlessly—her cylindrical neck, the way the shawl goes around it, her slightly sly smile... (this is very different from the European ideal of feminine beauty).

With these, and with Tang figure painting more generally, we come to what old art historians, especially German ones, thought of as a "classical moment," when artists seem to arrive at a point toward which they have been striving, and from which they can depart only in a downhill direction. This is an outmoded and artificial concept, but one with some truth. The Tang is indeed the great age of figure painting in China.

Image 4.2.1: wall painting in tomb of Prince Zhanghuai 章懷／章怀. From original (T&V 6-7; cf. 3000, 64-65; Loehr, figs. 20-21, p. 40). The painting is *whole*, from one side of the ramp leading down to the tomb chambers. A party of horsemen rides off on a hunt, with hunting hawks and leopards on their arms and their saddles. (One figure in lower left, turning back, has a hunting cat behind him.)

Image 4.2.2: the horses are differentiated by color; all strong, energetic. This was the great age of raising horses and importing them from western Asia, Ferghana, mostly. "Thousand-*li* horses, blood-sweating horses." Hundreds of thousands of such horses in imperial stables.

Image 4.2.3: horse with all four hoofs off the ground. I won't get into the question of whether this is true-to-life; answering that was a feat of high-speed photographing in the history of photography, which doesn't concern us. Imperial grooms were sometimes foreigners, imported from the west along with horses. There were many foreign, exotic elements in Tang culture (Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand*).

Images 4.2.4 and 4.2.5: closer details. The fleshiness of face of one, with shifty eyes, as against the sharper look of the other, who has a hunting hawk on his wrist. The ability of the artist to differentiate, characterize figures is now at a high point.

Images 4.2.6 and 4.2.7: closer details. The head of the rider and head and forequarters of a white horse. The drawing is sure, form-defining: never to be equaled in later Chinese painting.

And very different from European drawing. Understand that artists couldn't go back and correct, erase, overpaint; they had to get it right the first time—and do whole large paintings that way. (Maybe they could cover with a heavy white undercoating, then paint over; but according to stories, great artists didn't.) Again, note how the reins and bridle, going around the neck and forequarters of the horse, define volume easily. The animation of the animal, its inner life, is striking.

All this makes it especially unfortunate that I can't show you any works by, or even after, the greatest figure painter of the time, or of all time, for the Chinese: Wu Daozi 吳道子／吳道子.

Image 4.3.1: rubbing of a demon. Wu Daozi (ca. 690–ca. 758; active 720s–750s). Greatest of Chinese figure painters of all times, according to texts; nothing survives.

Wu Daozi–related materials:

—Rubbing from a stone engraving: demon (3000, 68; Loehr, fig. 24; Siren 88).

Image 4.3.2: Bodhisattva, banner, ink on hemp cloth, in Shōsōin, Nara, probably Chinese, Tang dynasty in date.

Added image: reversed rubbings from two early Tang stone-engraved designs, with demons, etc.

Wu Daozi began as a painter for Buddhist and Daoist temples in Luoyang. Emperor Xuanzong saw them and gave him a position in court “teaching court ladies writing and fine arts.” Wu was promoted to higher position. He lived in Chang’an, but traveled, especially to Sichuan, and (famously) painted a landscape of the Jialing River. He survived the rebellion of 756 and sack of Chang’an; he was still alive in 758.

A Tang writer says: “Whenever I have seen a painting by Master Wu, I have never found it at all remarkable in ornamental quality. What is incomparable is his brushwork, which is always profusely varied and full of untrammelled energy. Some of his wall paintings were carried out in ink alone.” Another writer: “While common artists fix their attention on the complete outlines, he split and scattered the dots and strokes, and while others observe the likeness of the shapes more carefully, he did not consider such vulgar points.” Another remarks that “one or two of his strokes suffice to make an image emerge...although the brushwork was not thorough, yet the idea was.” Still another writes that his figures remind one of sculpture—one can see them sideways and all around.

Added image: calligraphy by Tang calligrapher and monk Huaisu 懷素／怀素, “Autobiographical essay” (CAT 114). An example of “wild” draft script (*kuang caoshu* 狂草書／狂草书). Wu Daozi is said to have studied calligraphy with the great master of his time, Zhang Xu 張旭／张旭; his painting was also done in fast, free-flowing line. Crowds assembled to watch when he painted a wall; he would paint a round halo with a single movement, and they would all gasp. When he did a hell scene, it was so terrifying that butchers and fishmongers, the pariahs of the Buddhist world because they took life, changed their professions and took to lives of good works.

Image 4.3.3: monk in rage, fragment found in Central Asia.

Image 4.3.4: demon, fragment found in Central Asia (reproduced in Bussagli book on Central Asian painting in the Skira series). This fragment is remarkable as showing very different styles as possible in the Tang—especially remarkable because the demon recurs.

Image 4.3.5: demon seen in handscroll painting by early Yuan artist Gong Kai 龔開／龚开 (early 13th century), representing the demon-queller Zhongkui 鍾馗／钟馗 and his retinue of demons. Tang motifs and styles flood back into China with Central Asian peoples who come with the Mongol conquest—I have an article on this.

Images 4.4.1 and 4.4.2 (together): attributed to Wu Zongyuan 武宗元, 11th-century follower of Wu Daozi, *Procession of Five Heavenly Rulers* (Siren 119). Another version is in the Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

The last two sections, showing a colophon by Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫／赵孟俯 (early Yuan dynasty), written in 1304, which attributes it to Wu Zongyuan; he matches it up with a recorded scroll. An earlier colophon, from the 12th century, had attributed it to Wu Daozi.

Images 4.4.3 and 4.4.4: two sections further back. Now it is generally accepted as an early Song painting, possibly by Wu Zongyuan.

Images 4.4.5 and 4.4.6: attendants crossing a bridge, carrying banners, etc. All are identified in characters written above them. Not really very exciting as a painting, although important. One theory, which I believe is probably right, is that it is a cartoon of a wall painting, or else a copy of a wall painting, of the kind that was evidently made and kept in the temple to guide artists who had to repair it or replace parts of it. Makes good sense as that; not as a scroll meant to be looked at and enjoyed. From this, we can imagine powerful wall painting...

Images 4.4.7 and 4.4.8: two more. The painting was owned by C. C. Wang; it was one of his treasures. People in China reportedly wanted to get it back. He resisted parting with it. It has now disappeared, along with other important paintings Wang owned, at the time of his death, whereabouts still unknown. (That is a sad story I don't want to tell.)

Image 4.5.1. attributed to Yan Liben 閻立本/阎立本 (d. 673). He was the most important figure painter of the early Tang and served under Taizong and Gaozong. Several important handscroll paintings have been attributed to him; the best known, which I'm leaving out, is *Portraits of the Emperors*, in the Boston MFA (3000, 53; T&V 6–26; Siren 72–75). It's fairly early and important, but very dull.

—Also attributed to Yan Liben is *Tang Taizong Receiving the Tibetan Emissary* (event of 641), in the Palace Museum, Beijing (3000, fig. 31, p. 61). A Song copy, probably. Symmetry between the two parts of the composition, but also a contrast in status. Effective.

Image 4.5.2: Detail.

Image 4.6.1. attributed to Zhou Fang 周昉 (active ca. 790–810), *Ladies Playing Double Sixes*, in the Freer Gallery (Loehr, 29; Siren 109). Zhou Fang came from an aristocratic family in Chang'an, served in the imperial court, and painted gentlewomen, palace ladies. Many paintings are attributed to him.

Image 4.6.2: detail of the scroll. I published this in the Skira book, discussed its psychological insight, relationship between figures, the kibitzer, momentary quality, etc. But then saw, in the Palace Museum collection in Taipei, another version of the scroll:

Image 4.6.3: a Ming copy, which had two extra figures at the end. So, I assumed the Freer scroll had had these figures also, but they were somehow missing. Then, a dealer friend in Europe, Jean Pierre Dubosc, wrote that he had acquired a fragment of an early figure painting with two figures.

Image 4.6.1: back to the whole. Part of the painting in the Freer had had white color added, painted from the back when remounted; the missing fragment didn't have this, so it didn't quite match. But it was more complete.... I published an article on this event titled "The Return of the Absent Servants." Among other things, addition of these two explains the two figures at the beginning:

Image 4.6.4: detail of two girls with a water jar.

Image 4.7.1: attributed to Zhou Fang, *Tuning the Lute and Drinking Tea*, in the Nelson Gallery (Loehr, 28; Siren 110).

Image 4.7.2: when it was purchased by Larry Sickman for the Nelson Gallery, it looked like this. The silk had been cut away? This was commonly done—shown in the Liaoning version of *Nymph of Luo River* scroll attributed to Gu Kaizhi and in the Freer Gallery Zhou Fang (but more visible there).

Image 4.7.3: Sickman had the painting remounted in Japan, using the mounter Meguro Kōkakudō. I could talk about him at length—I spent long periods of time with him, learning, talking. He was trained by Chang Ta-ch'ien 張大千／張大千 to do Chinese-style mounting, so he could do Chang's work (maybe including Chang's forgeries—I'm unclear on that). Anyway, he did a great job on this scroll.

(Some of the old ways of relating figures remain, as in the Freer scroll, the pairing and mirroring of figures, etc. It is symmetrical, as favored in the Tang. But the painting departs from that to make subtler expressions. My details were all made before the remounting, so they show damage but are still good:)

Images 4.7.4 through 4.7.11. eight details. The colors may reflect the period of the copy, Song. There is use of trees, one near the picture plane, the other near-middle distance, to establish the depth of picture, along with a volume of flat rock and the placement of ladies. The palace ladies are plump, relaxed. Pictures of this kind were popular as supposedly supplying the great curiosity among people outside court about what went on in court. They also made up an early form of what would become the genre of beautiful-women (*meiren* 美人) paintings.

Image 4.8.1: also attributed to Zhou Fang, surviving only in a late artist's study sketch: painting of Minghuang and Yang Guifei having sex, with the help of palace ladies. This painting is recorded in catalogs, especially one late Ming catalog of the noted collector Zhang Chou 張丑／張丑. The *fenben* 粉本 (study) copy in the collection of Dutch collector Ferris Bertholet included in an exhibit based on his collection at Musée Cernuschi in Paris in 2006, "Le Palais du printemps," for which I wrote an essay. About this painting I wrote:

"Secret Play on a Spring Night," the painting that was acquired in 1618 by Zhang Chou (1577–1643), who believed it to be a work by the Tang master Zhou Fang and describes it in detail

in his catalogue, was a handscroll. Although the original painting is presumably long lost, the large *fenben* or study-copy in the exhibition (no. 5a) matches Zhang Chou's description in every respect, besides exhibiting a style distinct from that of all other erotic paintings known to me."

Image 4.9.0: on an immeasurably higher aesthetic level—from the ridiculous to the sublime—and not a copy at all, although somewhat later than Zhou Fang—maybe a century later?—is a painting attributed to him in the Liaoning Museum: *Ladies with Flowered Headdresses* (3000, 74; T&V 6–27, Loehr, figs. 26–27). It may have been originally mounted as a low screen. People at the museum said they had found evidence of that in remounting it. The subject of this painting has been much debated (by Ellen Laing, Hsingyuan Tsao).

Image 4.9.1: right half (first half) of scroll. Three ladies, with a girl attendant holding a fan, and a little dog.

Image 4.9.2: left, or second, half, with fourth stately lady standing at end by a flowering bush; there is another smaller figure, dressed like the ladies; and another small dog, as well as a crane. A woman at the end holds an insect, like a cricket or grasshopper, which she has caught. Another one holds a flower.

Images 4.9.3, 4.9.4, and 4.9.5: three slides, two figures each, moving closer in.

Images 4.9.6 through 4.9.14. nine slides, all shown alone, successively. This painting, in its splendor of color, richness of detail, and sureness of drawing, is equaled perhaps only by certain Buddhist paintings—I remember one in Japan. But those are outside our view.

Image 4.10.0: attributed to Han Gan 韓幹／韩干, *Tethered Horse* (*Zhaoye bo* 照夜白／照夜白, "Shining White of Night"), in the Metropolitan Museum, N.Y. (3000, 77; T&V 6.33; Siren 99–100).

Image 4.10.1: The whole scroll, with seals and inscriptions. In recent times, the painting was owned by Sir Percival David, a British ceramic specialist, who in late years determined to take on the big subject of early Chinese painting as he had done for ceramics. Crippled, he couldn't move easily, and he never learned Chinese. Tragic. His widow, Sheila David, Lady David, kept his few early paintings, along with a lot of fine ceramics, in the Percival David Foundation, which eventually sold this and several other paintings to the Metropolitan Museum.

Image 4.10.2: inscription on mounting: two people saw the painting together in 1138, and one inscribed this on the mounting. The Qianlong emperor (乾隆皇帝) wrote too much, too fluidly; he was not a good calligrapher.

Image 4.10.3: A horse alone, tethered to a post, pulling against the tether—full of spirit. A famous steed within a great many that Minghuang had in his stables: This is the only horse painting we have that stands a chance of being a real survival from the Tang: the provenance and pedigree, ascertainable from seals and inscriptions, strengthen this possibility. And, given the difference between wall painting and small paintings on paper, necessitating finer drawing, etc., it is not out of keeping with wall painting seen earlier.

Image 4.10.4: forequarters of the horse are especially well preserved—the hindquarters were repainted.

Image 4.10.5: head. Extraordinary sense of inner life, energy.

(Image 4.11.0: comparative material: “Han Gan” *Horses and Grooms*, in Musée Cernuschi, Paris. Forgery by Chang Ta-ch’ien.)

Images 4.11.1 through 4.11.4: Four slides, shown successively.

Image 4.11.5: Self-portrait of Chang Ta-ch’ien.

Image 4.12.1: Li Zhen 李真, *Portrait of the Monk Amoghavajra* (不空金剛像／不空金剛像) Loehr, fig. 30, p. 55; Siren 113). This painting was brought to Kyoto by Kōbō Daishi in 804, one of five—only this one is well enough preserved to be seen. Kept in Tōji, a temple in Kyoto.

Images 4.12.2 and 4.12.3: two details.

Image 4.13.0: attributed to Wang Wei 王維／王維 (anonymous, 9th–10th century), *The Scholar Fu Sheng* (伏生受經圖／伏生受經圖; Cahill, *Chinese Painting*, p. 18; Siren 90). We’ll see landscapes associated with Wang Wei later in this lecture. This is only a loose attribution; there was probably no real association with Wang Wei.

Image 4.13.1: the whole scroll, with seals and writing. It can be matched up with a scroll recorded in the catalog of Emperor Huizong, *Xuanhe huapu* (宣和畫譜／宣和畫譜). It has a series of inscriptions beginning in 1133. A special treasure. It entered a Japanese collection in the early 20th century, when Japanese were spending big sums of money to acquire the kinds of paintings their collections lacked, paintings of the Southern School, etc., while much of China was in turmoil, people willing to part with major pieces. Wang Wei was founder of the Southern School.

But apart from that, and the solid background reflected in seals and evidence of ownership, it is a deeply moving painting.

Image 4.13.2: I knew this painting from visits to the Abe Collection during my Fulbright year; I reproduced the figure in my Skira book.

Image 4.13.3: detail of the upper part of the figure. The age of the figure, and age of the scroll, are somehow in harmony.

I used this painting to make an argument about Legalists vs. Confucianists (see “Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting,” a conference paper from 1958 published in a volume titled *The Confucian Persuasion*, edited by Arthur Wright and David Nivison).

The work is the very emblem of the Confucian ideal of passing on the wisdom of the past to future generations—taking the role of a link in the transmission of cultural materials. It became the basis for much art theory in China, as I argued in my paper, and eventually the basis of literati painting theory, on an ideal level.

But for me, more than that—the painting has personal meaning. When asked about my philosophical or religious orientation, I used to answer, semifacetiously, that I was Neo-Confucian. But this is indeed the ideal that drives me to make this series of recorded lectures, while I still can, to set down for younger generations and for posterity something of what I think I understand and know, which is in danger of being lost unless I do. Not just my own knowledge, that is, but something of what I learned from the great teachers I talked about in the first lecture. However imperfect my understanding and transmission may be, it’s still supremely worth doing. So here I am, posing as a latter-day Fu Sheng, more overweight than emaciated, about to be eighty-four and much reduced in mobility by two heart attacks, using a new medium to pass on old, or at least old-person’s, wisdom. And with that, before I lapse into sentimentality, which I try rigorously to avoid, I end this first part of lecture 4, on Tang-period figure painting. The second part, on landscape of the Tang, will follow.