

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 4B. Tang Landscape Painting

What follows is part two of lecture 4, in which we will look at some of the scant evidence that survives for what must have been a great development, now mostly lost, of landscape painting in the Tang period. We're still dealing with a few fragments and some paintings we can take to be copies of Tang works, of uncertain reliability. But even these give us some sense of the very important developments of this period, as we read of them in the writings of the time and later. Landscape was becoming established as a separate genre of painting, still secondary to figure and religious painting but now absorbing the efforts of major masters, and being the principal concern of a few of them. Something approaching "pure" landscape must already have existed in the pre-Tang period, if we believe the writings of Zong Bing and others. But now we can observe the early stages of its development in the Tang.

Image 4.14.0: wall painting (copy) in the tomb of Prince Yide 懿德, early Tang (3000, 39, where the landscape is unclear). The artist is actually known: the name Chang Bian is inscribed on it; he is recorded as a follower of Li Sixun 李思訓. This identification was made, as I recall, in a catalog by Jan Fontein of an exhibition he organized of copies of Tang wall paintings while he was curator at Boston MFA.

Images 4.14.1 through 4.14.4: four slides, one at a time.

Compare Shen Gua 沈括 on views of architecture (Bush & Shih, p. 112).

A "blocky" drawing of landscape is above. I would guess that if we had the original Tang painting, which we'll see in a copy a bit later, *Emperor Minghuang's Journey to Shu*, we would see some such construction of the rocks. They were flattened out by the copyist?

Image 4.15.0: landscape with musicians on an elephant. Painting on leather, from the plectrum guard on a *biwa* 琵琶 (lute) in Shōsōin, Nara, 8th century (3000, 61, p. 69). (Earlier in this lecture, we saw a Bodhisattva banner from the same place. Tang origin, presumably.)

Images 4.15.1 through 4.15.6: six slides, shown successively.

Musicians on Elephant is known also from a tomb figurine—I haven't a slide, but it is well-known. So this is confirmed, not imagined. The musicians are Persians? Lots of "foreigners" in Tang China, especially the capital, Chang'an. In the far distance, with flying geese, is the sunset. This indicates some interest in weather, time of day, etc.

Li Sixun (651–716), and his son Li Zhaodao 李昭道 (ca. 675–741):

These two were major conservative landscapists of the time; they also served in the court. In a famous anecdote, Li Sixun is set against the great Wu Daozi 吳道子／吳道子 (a bit anachronistically) in a story told in a later Tang (9th century) book: both were commanded to paint scenery of a certain place in Sichuan on palace walls; Li spent several months completing his, Wu did his in single day. The emperor of the time pronounced both had attained the "height of excellence." So, a painstaking style, and a quicker and sketchier style, coexisted in the Tang.

The two Lis seem to have codified a type of landscape that had been developing for centuries (we saw an earlier form of it in the *Nymph of the Luo River* scrolls), into a classical style, called "blue-green" or "green-and-gold," characterized by heavy color (mineral pigments), outlined forms, and decorative values. The style was much practiced by later artists, always as an archaic manner of landscape—up-to-date styles were going in very different directions.

Loosely in their manner:

Image 4.16.0: *Emperor Minghuang's Flight to Shu* (明皇幸庶圖), loosely attributed to Li Zhaodao, National Palace Museum, Taipei (3000, 60; Siren 83; Loehr, fig. 39; cf. his fig. 38, 40 [two other versions]). But both Lis were dead by the time of the event it presumably depicts. An 11th century—or so?—copy of an 8th-century original?

Image 4.16.1: whole.

Images 4.16.2 through 4.16.9: eight detail slides, shown successively (alongside whole).

(Other versions of the compositions are extant; Loehr reproduces two and takes them seriously. I don't.)

A number of other paintings were ascribed to Li Sixun and Li Zhaodao, but all are late and not clearly related, in my view (e.g., 3000, fig. 58, landscape with pine trees and palace buildings).

Image 4.17.0: I put this on a bit apologetically; it represents a line of investigation I never followed up and now offer to someone else. This is a painting by Lang Shining 郎世寧, or Castiglione, a Jesuit priest in China in the 18th century who served in court. This is a reproduction as his work. The title, *Sunrise over the Sea*, is also the title of a famous painting recorded as by Li Sixun, as I remember; a very unusual title and subject. I would hazard a guess that Castiglione copied it from some painting then in the imperial collection that may well have been a copy after Tang work. Conjecture; I'll leave it for someone else.

Image 4.18.0: attributed to Zhan Ziqian 展子虔 (Sui dynasty), *Travelers in Spring* (遊春圖, or *A Spring Outing*), in the Palace Museum, Beijing (3000, 57; T&V 6.33; Loehr, fig. 33; Siren 79–80). A copy of the 10th or 11th century?

Image 4.18.1: whole. A short handscroll; it can be seen all at once. Seasonal elements—an image of spring scenery: this new. The clear ground plane (water) stretches into the distance. There is diminution, but it is not carried out all the way. Not much dimming—like *Emperor Minghuang's Journey* in this. The atmospheric perspective comes later. The reliance on heavy color, the individual coloring of things in it, robs the scene of coherence and makes it into a dispersed decorative surface. This will change in later landscape, as artists aim at effects of greater unity.

The nearest objects and people in the painting are already distant from the viewer, seen from far. But they are unnaturally clear—like *Emperor Minghuang's Journey* in this. Seen from the viewpoint of Song painting, this is a fine work but still archaic style.

Images 4.18.2 through 4.18.9: eight details: the painting represents another version of line-and-color manner and blue-green style in early form. Hard-edged clouds. Architecture and figures can be spotted here and there in the painting; it rewards careful looking. The painting presents a kind of quasi-narrative, involving people roaming riverside on a spring day, others waiting for the ferry, etc. Entertaining. All that will disappear from landscape of the next few centuries, which has more serious purposes than entertainment.

Image 4.19.0: Wang Wei 王維 (699–759), a great poet, one of the major ones active in the best period. He established his villa at a place called Wangchuan 輞川 south of the capital, Chang'an. He lived through the rebellion and was forced to take office under An Lushan; he suffered for it after the reestablishment of Tang rule.

Image 4.19.1: (rubbing from an engraving of work supposed to be by Wang Wei; I'll talk about it later). As a painter, Wang Wei was not rated very high by Tang critics, but he was raised to the highest level later. He was said to have used ink monochrome, and *pomo* 破墨 (broken ink) style. Nothing really survives to testify about what this really was—some new development in ink-monochrome painting? (It's not "splashed ink.") Wang Wei was credited with founding a whole school of cultivated painters; "literati painting" critics took him as their forefather. Su Shi 蘇軾, or Su Dongpo 蘇東坡, even ranked him above Wu Daozi, writing in a poem: "Though Master Wu Daozi was supreme in art, / He can only be regarded as an artisan-painter. / Wang Wei soared beyond images, / Like an immortal crane released from the cage." We don't know what lies behind this judgment; can't know what Su Shi knew of Wu and Wang. Maybe this was only the beginning of the literati bias that poisons painting theory and criticism in later times by limiting it mainly to the opinions of the literati, who can only see the work of literary, cultivated men as necessarily superior to work by "artisan painters," as they eventually come to call them. Wang Wei, in any case, had an ideal combination of attributes: poetry, calligraphy, and painting. Nothing of his work survives, except in distant, unreliable copy.

Images 4.19.1, 4.19.2, and 4.19.3: ink rubbings from stone engravings made after a 10th-century artist's copy of Wang Wei's series of paintings of his villa and its surroundings, the *Wangchuan tu* 輞川圖. The original wall paintings were copied shortly after his time; the copies are preserved, engraved? (3000, 78 [complete but illegible]; Siren 91).

Images 4.19.4 and 4.19.5: two sections from many handscroll copies based on rubbings of engravings. Numerous copies were made from the engraved designs, some purporting to be original Wang Wei works. (See the whole volume by Kohara, in the *Bunjinga suihen* series; also, 3000, 78 [complete but unreadable]).

Image 4.19.6: attributed to Wang Wei, *Boat on Snowy River* (雪江圖), an album leaf in a lost mixed album (Siren 97; Sullivan; Sherman Lee). The leaf is supposed to represent his graded-ink wash technique (*pomo*). But here, we not only can't judge the closeness of the painting to Wang Wei, we can't even *see* the painting—if anyone knows where it is, write me.

Image 4.19.7: attributed to Wang Wei, *Clearing after Snowfall along the River*, in the Ogawa collection, Kyoto (Siren 92–93; cf. Loehr, fig. 41; Siren 94–96 [another version]). The painting was much appreciated by the late Ming critic-theorist Dong Qichang 董其昌; he took it as reflecting the real style of Wang Wei. Wen Fong wrote an article on it; he takes it more seriously than I do. It doesn't seem to me earlier than late Ming, after maybe a Song original.

Image 4.20.0: *Hokke Mandala* (法華曼荼羅), a great and famous painting now in the Boston MFA, from Japan—the Japanese claim it as Japanese; most (still?) see it as Chinese, 8th–9th century in date—that is, a genuine Tang painting. It represents the Buddha preaching his great sermon on Vulture Peak, a story in the Lotus Sutra, in which the historical Buddha lays out the grand plan of the universe of Mahayana Buddhism.

Image 4.20.1: but what interests us now is the landscape seen behind the Buddha, on both sides; it is visible only with infrared photography. It is like ink-monochrome landscape. Creviced, with fissured forms; “layered” in the Chinese term. The shading has a graded wash from one to the next; this established the look of a receding, eroded mountainside. In the distance, a winding river, far hills. Paths going around forms suggest the other side. Trees are twisted in grotesque shapes. Bleak grandeur: a quality sought in early Chinese ink-landscape painting.

Image 4.20.2: other side. A rare example of ink-monochrome landscape from the Tang. Maybe Wang Wei made some stylistic innovation that helped open the way for this? I can’t say. This was the topic of the first dissertation completed under Wen Fong at Princeton, by Kiyō (Kiyohiko) Munakata, who went on to publish an annotated translation of an essay by the great 10th-century master Jing Hao 荆浩. I was a reader and friend.

Image 4.21.0: a fragment from a Buddhist banner, found in Central Asia, 8th–9th century in date (3000, 80). The banner shows pine and cypress trees. A sense of growth and survival under harsh circumstances (we will see a whole school of landscape painting that pursues this aspect of nature). But there is also the sense of brush movement—curling, slightly hooked strokes for twigs. The shading of the trunk is for cylindricality. These suggest a new direction, along with the *Hokke Mandala* landscape details: instead of color, ink monochrome; instead of visual beauty, something harsher, stronger; instead of lush scenery, a bleaker scene, emphasizing difficulty of survival. We will see landscape that follows this new direction developing in centuries that follow, during the Five Dynasties and Northern Song periods. The artists collectively worked to find brush-stroke equivalents, so to speak, for materials in nature—tree branches and twigs, the textures of rocks and hillsides, etc.—that convey the appearances of those things, enough for the artist’s purposes, while also conveying growth and change and a grand coherence within the great organic world that is their subject, all through brilliantly varied but controlled brushwork.

But before we get to that, a lecture on other kinds of Five Dynasties painting.