Toward a Structural Analysis of Chinese Landscape Painting

A critical and historical study of Chinese painting has long suffered from the lack of an acceptable method for dating paintings by style. Mr. Li Lin-ts'an of the National Central Museum in Taiwan has published a series of three articles dealing with this problem.1 In “Rules for Dating Chinese Painting,” Mr. Li lists the study of material, technique, period style, personal style, signature and colophon, and catalogue description as “six methods for dating.”2 In “The Dating of Ink-bamboo Painting,” he samples eighty-eight bamboo paintings attributed to famous masters, from the tenth through the eighteenth centuries, and attempts diagrams illustrating the technical development of the bamboo stalks and leaves. These diagrams show, for instance, “ring joint technique,” “plain joint technique,” “dotted joint technique,” “natural leaves,” “star-shaped leaves,” “feathered-shaped leaves,” etc.3

Mr. Li’s classification of motifs and techniques continues in the tradition of the “Mustard Seed Garden Painter’s Manual” of the seventeenth century. By arranging his motifs chronologically, he hopes to establish certain criteria for dating. His demonstration suffers, however, from two serious difficulties: firstly, he is faced with the problem of circularity: that of having to date a style by means of examples which themselves need to be dated; secondly, motifs are easily imitated and perpetuated in the copies. Even if we assume that all of Mr. Li’s samples are correctly dated and authentic, his diagrams of motifs merely illustrate, as in the “Mustard Seed Garden Painter’s Manual,” the technical traditions of the various masters’ manners. They provide no clue for the actual dating of a painting, or a copy, in the manner of a given master.

I

An interesting appendix to Li’s “Rules for Dating Chinese Painting” shows seven illustrations by the famous contemporary Chinese painter Chang Ta-chien (or Chang Dai-chien), demonstrating the development of the drawing of the hand as seen in Buddhist wall-paintings at Tun-huang.4 Mr. Chang notes, for instance: in the Northern Wei period, the drawing of fingers shows neither joints nor nails; during the reign of K’ai-yüan, (713-742), the hand is plump and soft and has “nails that recede into the finger-tips”; during the middle T’ang, the nails “grow over the finger-tip, tapering to a rounded point”; in early Sung hands, there is a short straight line at the base of the finger nail. Mr. Chang’s demonstration is methodologically meaningful in at least two respects: firstly, since his wall-painting examples are archaeologically discovered and dated, he does not have to concern himself with the problem of later copying and imitation;5 secondly, by describing not only the shape of the finger nail but also how it is grown on the finger-tip, he is observing a morphological detail, which, if verified by all archaeologically dated examples, may constitute a period characteristic that governs all figure paintings of that period. There is, from the point of view of descriptive method, a significant difference between Li’s “star-shaped leaves” and Chang’s “nails that recede into the finger-tip”; the former merely identifies a two-dimensional

Mr. Fong teaches Chinese art at Princeton. This paper is a statement he wrote some time ago in preparation for a book on Chinese landscape painting.

5. There is, of course, the problem of repair and repainting in wall-painting, which often complicates the task of stylistic analysis.
motif without indicating its structural relationship with other parts of the painting, while the latter, by showing concern for the relationship between two motifs, the nail and the finger-tip, begins to describe a structural configuration. Mr. Chang, however, did not carry his sensitive painter's observations far enough to describe the changing structural configurations of the hands of the various periods. For the early-T'ang period, he merely noted that
"the brushwork is gentle and supple; it is capable of describing some of very difficult hand gestures."

When we try to identify and describe an individual manner, we usually note its special form elements, motifs and techniques on the one hand, and its unique expressive qualities on the other. When we try to classify a style, however, we interpret the stylistic peculiarities of an individual work as specific solutions to generic structural problems. While neither motif nor quality gives adequate evidence for fixed positions in time, morphological analysis dealing with successive visual structures in history provides a key for dating a painting. From the structural point of view, before a painting of whatever form elements, motifs or techniques can express a certain philosophy or mental outlook, it presents first a solution to the problem of delineation, modelling and composition. Form relationships seem to change without direct relationship to meaning. An obvious example is that despite the Chinese painter's avowed lack of interest in "form-likeliness," they nevertheless successfully mastered illusion in painting.

Every Chinese painting is at once representation, decoration and abstraction; it is the arranging of form elements to create a semblance of nature that exists in its own right. From the representational point of view, Chang's illustrations show the development of the drawing of the hand from a two-dimensional silhouetted shape to a three-dimensional and fully articulated, grasping organ: each stage is characterized by certain structural problems and solutions. The Northern Wei hand was neither joints nor nails, because it is conceived as a silhouetted form without organically differentiated components. The early T'ang emphasis on complex hand-gestures reflects an interest in conquering the technical difficulties in representing a hand. Both the short nails "that recede into" the finger-tip and long ones "that grow over" the tip show the middle-T'ang concern for organic details. Finally, the "short straight line at the base of the finger-nail" seen in the early-Sung paintings represents an increasing interest not only in modelling but in decorative stylization as well; both tendencies are typical of the representational art of the tenth century.

The modern notion of a "period style" is based on Wölfflin's famous assumption that "every artist finds certain visual possibilities to which he is bound. Not everything is possible at all times." As an abstract concept which deals with the structural principles rather than specifically identifiable motifs and qualities of a work of art, however, a "period style" exists only as an idea.

*In his well-known article on "Style" (in Anthropology Today, edited by A. L. Kroeber, Chicago 1953, pp. 287-312), Meyer Schapiro notes that the word "style" is generally used to describe three different aspects of a work of art: 1) form elements or motifs, 2) form relationships, 3) qualities (including an over-all quality which we may call "expression"). Following this definition, we might say that the Chinese critics have traditionally emphasized form elements and qualities, but neglected form relationships, in their stylistic descriptions. See my article, "Chinese Painting: A Statement of Method," Oriental Art, new series, vol. IX, no. 2, summer 1963, pp. 73-78; also my article, "The Problem of Ch'i'en Hsian," The Art Bulletin, XLI. September 1960, p. 188.

† In The Shape of Time (Yale University Press, 1962), Professor George Kubler writes: "the structural forms can be sensed independently of meaning. We know from linguistics in particular that the structural elements undergo more or less regular evolutions in time without relation to meaning. . . . Similar regularities probably govern the formal infrastructure of every art" (pp. viii-viix).
While it is a natural process of the mind to comprehend facts through generalization, the historian is caught forever in a seemingly absurd circle of having to understand individual facts in terms of a general theory although the latter can be formulated only on the basis of individual facts. Faced with a paucity of established stylistic facts in Chinese art history, earlier Western art-historians tended to lean too heavily on metaphors and Western analogies in their characterizations of Chinese stylistic developments. Professor Ludwig Bachhofer, for instance, saw Chinese art as going through the familiar Wöllfinian cycles of graphic, plastic and ornate—or, archaic, classic and baroque stages. However useful it was as a pedagogical device, Bachhofer’s dating of individual objects, on the basis of a Stilgeschichte on the Wöllfinian model, appeared dogmatic; in one reviewer’s words: “There is first of all an a priori framework into which works of art in evolutionary progression are made to fit. . . . [Bachhofer is] an art-historian who regards style as the be-all and end-all of art history: style is a kind of sinister autonomous force

Erwin Panofsky describes this circular methodicus as an “organic situation.” See Meaning in the Visual Arts, Doubleday Anchor Books, New York 1955, pp. 8-10, and 35, n. 3. E. H. Gombrich discusses the problem as follows: “The paradox of the historian’s position seems to me precisely that the cherished particular can only be approached on a spiralling path through the labyrinth of general theories, and that these theories can only be mapped out by those who have reached the particular. Think of the exciting adventure of deciphering an ancient script which is not far from everybody’s mind today. The individual inscription is studied for what we can learn of the secrets of the script, and the script in its turn for what it will tell us of individual inscriptions. To divorce the one from the other would not only be foolish, it would be impossible.”

Ludwig Bachhofer, A Short History of Chinese Art, Pantheon Books Inc. New York, 1946. According to Professor Bachhofer, the development of Shang bronzes “took its natural course, from the simple to the complicated,” moving from the “graphic” to the “plastic” and finally to the “ornate”; the Chou begins with “a new cycle started on a new basis with very simple tectonic forms and ended with complex plastic forms.” Similarly, “it was impossible . . . to keep sculpture from completing its cycle [of archaic, classic and baroque].” In painting, the major cycle, according to Bachhofer, ends with the “baroque” phase of Southern Sung. With Chao Meng Fu (1254-1322) there began a “neo-Classicism in which many artists saw salvation from the utter destruction of form wrought by a baroque style . . . [by turning] deliberately to the linear art of the great T’ang masters.” “Mannerism” and “eclecticicism” dominated the remaining centuries, with apparently only brief interruptions such as when neo-classicism was fully re-instated by one of the great painters of the sixteenth century, Ch’in Ying.

which in all ages and in all climes inexorably induces artists to produce works of art in a certain preordained fashion.

It is of course distressing to those who value the individuality of a work of art to have that individuality ignored by generalizations and classifications. To most scholars, documents, literary evidence, and above all, the individual qualities of the artist and his work remain the central important concerns of art history. Professor Max Loehr has suggested that perhaps the dating of copies is not important; “As long as we have no means of ascertaining the authenticity of individual works and attributions [by documentary and historical means], the historian is constrained to concern himself with the question of the authenticity, not of discrete works but of their styles.” He makes a careful distinction between “authenticity” and “importance”; copies and imitations of famous masters’ works can be very important, while archaeological evidence may be authentic but unimportant. “The importance of a work,” he writes, “depends largely on [the historian’s] insight into its one-time stylistic newness.” A new style is a new idea. . . . The historian is interested in the inceptions of styles, not in their perpetuation. In his quest to understand an “important” stylistic “idea,” he prefers the evidence of later copies to that of the archaeologically recovered works of the period, trusting himself to the “importance” of the “idea” in the copies. He lines up all the copies and attributions in a distinct manner, meticulously studies and tabulates their motifs, then makes an intuitive leap to an “insight into its one-time stylistic newness.”


Loehr writes: “It is conceivable that we might arrive at a fairly accurate idea of the history of Chinese painting on the basis of copies and imitations, if these are understood in their stylistic sequence, and it is equally conceivable that a body of undubitable original works (if there is a way of establishing their genuineness) may not yield an historically intelligible sequence.” (Ibid.)

Ibid., p. 188.

In his recent book, Chinese Landscape Woodcuts from an Imperial Commentary to the Tenth-century Printed Edition of the Buddhist Canon (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), Professor Loehr makes a “catalogue of [sixteen] motifs typical of the four woodcuts and of various paintings [attributed to the T’ang and Sung periods] in which the same motifs occur” (p. 42). He then summarizes the qualities which these motifs share in common: “They are bold, even drastic motifs . . . There is an element of exaggeration in them, not controlled by rational restraint nor leavened by the experi-
But a true historical synopsis must embrace both conceptual discipline and individual facts. How can we formulate an historical development of Chinese painting which, in short, combines the idea of periodic change in pictorial structure (or form-relationships) in painting, with the knowledge of continuous individual manners characterized by individual motifs (including form elements and techniques) and expressive qualities?

We must study the archaeologically recovered early works for the only remaining evidence of fixed visual positions during the early periods. It has frequently been pointed out that archaeological data (including firmly datable works such as those in the Shôsôin Treasury in Nara, Japan) are of only limited value, because they represent the work of anonymous craftsmen rather than of ranking artists and, as such, tell us little of the great creative moments of the time. The significance of such data, however, lies in their indubitable authenticity. Archaeological materials showing early Chinese landscape painting through the late-thirteenth century are found from Japan to innermost Asia, and these offer a clearly definable stylistic development. That widely scattered works should appear in a linked sequence of change is important. Even though these works may not mark the stylistic frontiers of their times, they indicate a set of visual positions that must be taken into account whenever the dating of an attributed work is in question.

III

The development of landscape painting shown by archaeological evidence from the pre-T'ang (before 7th
century) to the early Yüan period (late 13th century) is one ranging from ideographic motifs to the creation of illusionistic space. The principal elements in Chinese landscape painting are mountains (or rocks) and trees. Archaic representations of mountains and tress closely resembled their ideographic forms: 

16 Four paintings on biwas in the Shōsōin, all dated before 756, show the three principal schemas: “Sitting under a Mountain” represents the “high-distance,” “Hawks and Ducks” represents the “flat-distance.” “Tiger Hunt” and “Musicians on an Elephant” (fig. 2) represents the “deep-distances.” In the 9th century Buddhist silk banner from Tun-huang (fig. 3), the top scene is a “deep-distance,” the middle is a “high-distance,” and the bottom one is a “flat-distance.”

Each mode of representation corresponds to a way of seeing. Archaic graphic conventions (cf. fig. 1) reduced, transposed and re-created nature; the words of the late fourth-century landscapist Tsung Ping explain this approach: “A vertical stroke of three inches may equal a height of several thousand feet; a horizontal passage of ink of a few feet may represent a distance of a hundred miles.”

represented no mere retinal impressions of nature, but images of the macrocosm. In Chang Huati’s (twelfth century) words: “Painting distinguished the ‘black’ of heaven from the ‘yellow’ of the earth; it disclosed the secrets of the yin and yang of creation. . . . Whatever can be comprehended through the figures of the diagrams [of the Book of Changes] may be represented with physical form.” The Southern Sung treatment of simplified landscape forms in mist, archaeologically exemplified by the Karákhts fragment (fig. 5), is described in a text by Han Cho (12th century). In Sailboat in Rain attributed to, and acceptable as by, Hsia Kuei (ca. 1190-1230) at Boston (fig. 8), there is no ground-plane that actually links or holds the objects, but the space depicted is unified and continuous. Frontal silhouettes of mountains and trees are made to float and fade into a void, representing a mist which ties the elements in a sequential fashion, motif by motif.

The illusionistic technique shown by the wall-painting of 1265 (fig. 6) is explained in a text by Huang Kung-wang (1269-1354), which in turn perfectly describes the drawing and brush technique seen in the famous handscroll by Huang, Dwelling in the Fu-ch’un Mountain of 1350 (fig. 10). The most important work for the study of early Yuan painting is the short handscroll Autumn Colors in the Ch’iao and Hua Mountains, dated 1296, by Chao Meng-fu (1254-1322) (fig. 9). As a work that exemplifies the Yuan scholar-painting aesthetics, the painting is well known for its use of arcaic motifs and calligraphic brushstrokes. Yet in spite of their differences in form elements and brush idioms, there are great structural similarities between this handscroll and the ar-

\[\text{Fig. 8. Hsia Kuei (ca. 1190-1230), Sailboat in Rain, Boston Museum of Art.}\]

\[\text{Fig. 9. Chao Meng-fu (1254-1322), Autumn Colors in the Ch’iao and Hua Mountains, dated 1296, National Palace Museum, Taiwan.}\]

(cf. fig. 2, 3 and 4), philosopher-landscapists systemati-
cally translated natural phenomena into different sets of interdependent yin-yang relationships. As motifs, there were for instance “earthen mountains” (t’u-shan) and “rocky mountains” (shih-shan), densely foliaged trees and bare branches. In technique, there were brushed lines and inked dots or washes. The “principles” (li), so often discussed by early-Sung theorists, referred to both the principles of nature and the principles of pictorial structure. What was observed in nature must be articulated in theoretical principles as well as pictorial forms. The part-by-part compositions of the Northern Sung, here seen in the magnificent hanging scroll in the Palace Museum in Taiwan, attributed to, and commonly accepted as by, Fan K’uan (ca. 990-1030) (fig. 7) by revealing different views of landscape in a controlled sequence,
Chi-pan Loehr has formulated this problem well: “Tentatively I would conclude . . . that changes of style are not caused by immanent forces; that ‘immanence’ is a construct derived from an apparent logicality in sequences of style; that this logicality stems from the rational and conscious act of innovation achieved by an individual artist; and that without the creative individual’s mind there would be no change, no sequence, no logicality, and no inevitability to speculate upon.” (“Some Fundamental Issues . . .”, p. 189).
difference is more important than the fact that they both worked within an illusionistic structure. Similarly, it means little to say that Ming painting is “decorative” and Ch'ing landscape is “abstract,” unless we can relate the Ming surface decoration and the Ch'ing abstract space to the scholar-painters's expressed interest in calligraphy and the aesthetics of hsieh-i, or “idea-writing.”

The aim of structural analysis is to reconstruct the formal problem to which stylistic changes must correspond as linked and purposeful solutions. In this reconstruction, historical and literary records, artistic treatises, as well as attributed works which constitute the bulk and essence of the available visual material must necessarily play an even more important role than the archaeological evidence. Literary records usually ignore the common and stress the unique; annals of art record the great moments of creative invention in much the same way as dynastic histories emphasize the heroic exploits of the great leaders. The stylistic development deduced from the archaeological evidence, on the other hand, represents a history of style without knowledge of individual contributions. With the help of literary records, individual contexts and critical purposes can be reconstructed.

Attributed works must be studied in the light of not only archaeological and literary evidence, but also all other attributed works. I suggest that the following considerations may eventually bring order to the complexities of Chinese painting history: First of all, we assume that the manners of the ancient masters underwent visible structural alterations in each century at the hands of their admiring imitators. When a painter paints in the manner of an ancient master, he borrows first the obvious identifying brush idioms, form elements and compositional motifs. If he hopes to produce a close likeness of his model he also tries to capture its expressive qualities. In expanding the original solution and giving it fresh understanding, however, the copyist deviates from the original and makes subtle structural changes, thus bringing his work to a new visual position. The copyist, in short, shows in his work not the real ancient master, but a transmitted and transformed image of him. While qualitative differences are difficult to argue about, structural changes can be more easily detected and described. 22

Secondly, since the visual material in the Chinese painting field abounds in copies and imitations, it lends itself to Professor George Kubler's idea of “formal se-

22 An exact tracing copy may preserve much of the original structure, but it suffers from a lack of spontaneity in execution. For various methods of forgery, see my article, “The Problem of Forgeries in Chinese Painting,” Artibus Asiae, Vol. XXV, 2/3, 1962, pp. 95-119.
sequences” and “linked solutions.” Copies and derivations of a single composition, done in various periods, form one kind of sequence. Imitations and forgeries of works of a given master, done in various periods, form a second kind of sequence. Signed works of well-known painters of different periods that are deliberately couched in the distinct manners of some earlier masters, say, “Huang Kung-wang,” “Wu Chen,” “Ni Tsan” or “Wang Meng,” form yet a third group of sequences. Properly studied, all the works in different sequences should appear in series of linked solutions, beginning with the original work, or its closest copy, and passing through successive stages of replication and transformation. Since these sequences, or continuous traditions, form parallel stylistic movements, they will corroborate, enrich and modify each other, eventually filling out a general stylistic development through the different periods.

Thirdly, to prove the authenticity of an individual work, we must go beyond structure. To prove that one of two attributed works in a stylistic sequence is an original and the other a later imitation; or forgery, we must give in order the following evidence: firstly, that the “correct” painting is structurally, a work of the period to which it is attributed; secondly, that together with literary and other attributed material, the painting not only contributes to the understanding of the personal style of the master, but also explains the transmitted image of the master’s manner in later periods; and finally, that the “wrong” painting can be explained and placed in a later period, within the attributed master’s stylistic sequence, or tradition. When the best of the attributed works are established as original masterpieces, or their close copies, they will reveal the great moments of creative progress.

El Greco

These saints do not believe
That God can forgive. Not
All the Prophets’s reassurances
Can shake their prideful intelligence.
No, not even love, given fully
Or received, makes any difference.

—Thomas B. Brumbaugh