

# A CHRISTIAN CHINESE PAINTER

BY ASCHWIN LIPPE

*Associate Curator of Far Eastern Art*

A small but outstanding painting in this Museum's Chinese collection deserves our attention. It is an excellent example of the seventeenth-century literary school, and the artist—believe it or not—happens to have been a Jesuit priest.

Christianity three times established a beachhead in China, and the last time it looked as if it had come to stay. But today we read once more of missionaries and their flock being jailed and tortured, killed or expelled, and we wonder how the churches will survive this ordeal.

In 635 a Nestorian mission from Syria or Persia arrived at Ch'ang-an, capital of the T'ang dynasty. A few years later a monastery was founded by imperial decree, and the cult soon spread beyond the capital as far as Canton, but it seems unlikely that any but the Syrian and Persian merchants adhered to it. In 845 it was, together with Buddhism, rigidly suppressed throughout the empire.

Nestorianism remained active and successful, though, in the borderlands to the west and north of China and, from these positions, made its second entry into China with the Mongol conquest. The legend of Prester John carried to the West echoes of the Christian kingdom of the Ongüt, whose royal family intermarried with Genghis Khan's dynasty. By 1230, more than a generation before the arrival of the Polos, the church was well established in Khanbalic (Peking) and, after the conquest of the Sung empire, spread out over the country. In 1294 the first Catholic missionary arrived—the Friar Minor John of Montecorvino, who, in due time, became Archbishop of the East. Thanks to the privileges of foreigners, Christianity was fairly extended in China proper during the Mongol rule—there even existed a special government department for the purpose of dealing with the Christian clergy. But, once more, it disappeared completely

after 1368, when the Ming came to power and contacts with the West were broken. By the time the Jesuits arrived two hundred years later they found only some vague memories and relics.

In 1552 Saint Francis Xavier, after two highly successful years in Japan, died off Macao, trying in vain to get to the Chinese mainland. In the same year Matteo Ricci was born, who arrived at Macao thirty years later and was active in Nanking and Peking till his death in 1610. The most prominent of his successors were Johann Adam Schall von Bell and Ferdinand Verbiest.

Ricci soon gained the attention of important Chinese scholars with his discussions of mathematics and other sciences, and with his map of the world, and impressed them by his devotion as much as by his intelligence. High officials, members of the Han-lin academy, even an imperial prince were converted.

The Jesuits brought the gospel and also the Renaissance to China. They represented the cream of European education and science, and they quickly became familiar with the Chinese classics as well as the vernacular. They taught ethics, mathematics, astronomy, geography, psychology, logic, and applied science. Before the end of the Ming dynasty, Jesuits were assigned to the Imperial Bureau of Astronomy, having proved their superiority over the Chinese and Mohammedan schools. At the court of the last Ming aspirant, his wife, his mother, his son and heir apparent, the chief general, and the leading eunuch were all Christians and appealed, in vain, to the Pope and to the Jesuit General for help.

The Ming regime's collapse further strengthened the position of the Jesuits, and in 1644 Schall, who had remained in Peking, was put in charge of the Imperial Board of Astronomy by the Manchu regent and entrusted with the preparation of the calendar. After a brief in-

terval caused by a successful anti-Western intrigue Verbiest became Schall's successor, and the Board remained under Western leadership for nearly two hundred years. The emperor Sheng-tsu (K'ang-hsi period, 1661-1722) was friendly towards the Christians. He studied European sciences, mathematics, and music and employed missionaries in astronomical and literary pursuits, in mapping the empire and negotiating with the Russians, who were then, for the first time, encroaching upon China's frontiers. By 1705 there were probably more than two hundred thousand Chinese Christians.

In the meantime various other missionary orders had established themselves in China, and a bitterly jealous controversy ensued between them and the Jesuits. The theological aspects of this fight—which lasted over a hundred years and was not free from power-politics—were centered around the Jesuits' toleration of the cult of the ancestors and of Confucius, and their adoption of the Chinese term for God (Heaven).

Rome decided against the Jesuits. The Papal legates irritated the emperor, and the official Chinese attitude towards Christianity stiffened more and more. The Yung-cheng period (1723-1735) saw severe persecution, although the Jesuits were still employed. Emperor Kao-tsung (Ch'ien-lung period, 1736-1795) was perhaps more lenient than his predecessors, but religious activities remained, at least in theory, forbidden, and also under his reign persecutions occurred. The church was slowly losing ground.

After the suspension of the Jesuits in 1773 the other orders continued their work, and, early in the nineteenth century, the Protestant missions appeared on the scene. However, the Jesuit period was unique in its success and, if continued, might well have changed the course of China's development and history. The same, by the way, goes for Japan, where, between the arrival of Francis Xavier and the early seventeenth century, Christianity spread in a truly spectacular way.

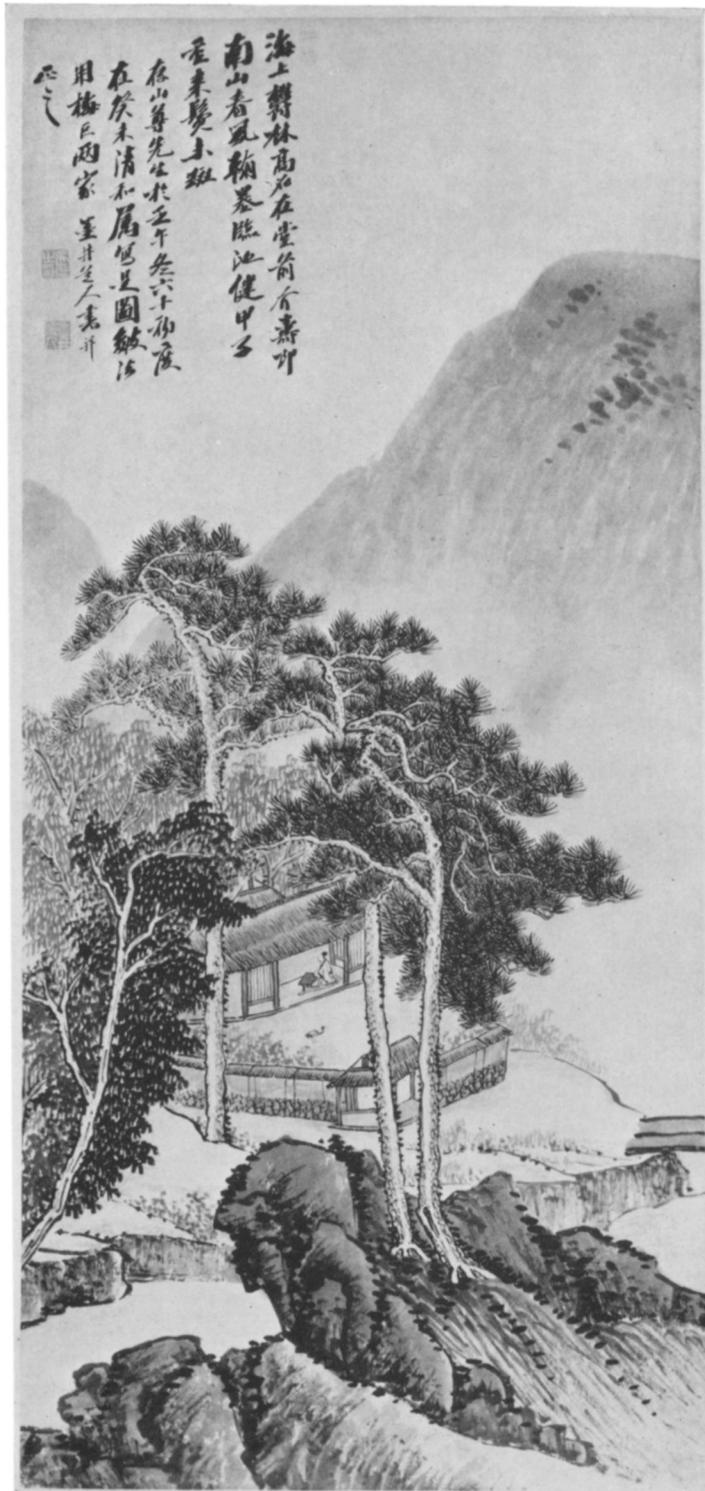
Nestorianism only reached the foreigners, and the first Catholic mission under the Mon-

gols did not last long enough to gain a solid foothold. Through the Jesuits Christianity addressed itself for the first time to the educated Chinese, to the ruling class of learned gentry.

In addition to the exceptional gifts of the Jesuit missionaries there is another reason for their success—the world was still one; the rapid development of materialistic natural sciences had not yet split it in two. Intellectually scholars of the East and West still spoke the same language. Schall as well as Kepler, with whom he corresponded, made horoscopes—a practice still authorized by the church. In Europe as well as in China educated man believed that God—or Heaven—showed satisfaction with human affairs, or the lack of it, by portents such as comets, eclipses, or droughts. The learned Jesuits understood very well the importance of regulating the calendar to harmonize human activities with God's universe.

But the contact with Western thought and learning was too short to leave any lasting influences outside of the calendar reform. Actually, the impact, through the Jesuits, of China on the West was much stronger and had more far-reaching consequences. The translations, descriptions, and correspondence of the Jesuits profoundly influenced Leibniz, A. H. Francke, and Christian Wolff, as well as Diderot, Voltaire, and Quesnay. Wolff, incidentally, was exiled from Prussia for his speech *De Sinarum philosophiae practica*; he was called back by Voltaire's disciple Frederick II. It is thus ironical that China gave heavily to Europe's Enlightenment, which, in its turn, laid the ground for a development that was to lead the West very far away from the East. Also, the Jesuits, intermediaries in this cultural exchange, helped to bring about their own demise, for enlightened Europe turned more and more against them, till finally their order was suspended.

In the realm of the fine arts we find a similar situation. Ricci imported Western religious art; a court painter of the K'ang-hsi period studied Western perspective with the Europeans under whom he served in the Imperial Board of Astronomy; in the Ch'ien-lung reign, Giuseppe Castiglione and other Jesuit priests



*A Scholar's Lodge in the Mountains, by Wu Li (Simon Xavier A Cunha). Painted in 1703. Gift of John C. Ferguson, 1913*

were active also as painters and exercised some influence. However, Chinese artistic influence on the West, especially in the Rococo period, went much farther and left its mark on architecture, gardening, furniture, wallpaper, textiles, lacquer, and, last but not least, porcelain.

Chinese sculpture and painting did not share in this popularity. The missionaries did not take to it; Ricci blamed the Chinese painters for ignoring proper perspective and modeling by shadows, which left their works "dead and without life." Not a single painting of the great masters of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties found its way to the West before the twentieth century. At the same time, though Ricci's disciples showed admiration of Western religious art, the learned gentlemen painters had little appreciation for the European style. Still, one of the outstanding Chinese Christians of the Jesuit period, a noted scholar artist, was the painter Wu Li (1632-1718).

Wu Li studied painting under Wang Shih-min (1592-1680) and Wang Chien (1598-1677) and was an intimate friend of Wang Hui (1632-1717). With these three he belongs to the so-called "Six Great Masters of the Ch'ing Dynasty." Wang Shih-min and Wang Yüan-ch'i (1642-1715)—another painter of this group—put Wu Li above the famous Wang Hui, in which they were followed by some later connoisseurs like Pi Lung and Liang Chang-chü. However, Wang Shih-min's judgment may have been influenced by the fact that, while admiring Wang Hui's skill and talent, he could not but prefer Wu Li as a human being. Wang Hui, son of an antique dealer, lived by his painting. He was much in demand, and his careful copies of old masters are said to have often been sold as originals. He was out for money—which shocked and embarrassed an impoverished scholar gentleman like Wang Shih-min. Wu Li, from the same social milieu, devoted himself to music, poetry, philosophy, and painting. His paintings were not for sale—he gave them away to his friends. Wu Li and Wang Hui, however, born in the same village, remained close friends till the end of their lives, though in the last twenty years they did not see much of each other, because of Wang

Hui's business trips and Wu Li's devotion to his priestly vocation.

Before he was thirty, Wu Li's poetry and painting won the praise of famous scholar critics of his time. His painting was—like that of his teachers and that of their master Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)—much influenced by the style of Huang Kung-wang and other masters of the Yüan dynasty. Wang Shih-min said of him: "Already in his youth he surpasses by far his contemporaries, and nobody can foretell how great his future progress may be." Wu Li studied Confucian philosophy and also became an intimate friend of a learned Buddhist priest as well as of a pro-Christian censor who was cashiered in connection with the intrigue against Schall. Returning home from the capital to Ch'ang-shu, he became acquainted with the local Jesuit missionaries and, a few years later, about 1679 or 1680, was baptized with the name Simon Xavier. In 1681 he decided to travel to Rome but for some reason was detained at Macao and stayed there. His mother and his wife being dead and his daughters married, Wu entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus at Macao in 1682. In 1688 he was ordained to the priesthood by the first Chinese ever to become a Catholic bishop. In the same year Wu adopted the surname A Cunha.

There are no dated pictures of his from 1681 till 1690—no wonder, when we think that, past the prime of his life, he had to absorb a huge amount of knowledge, all quite new to him and written in foreign languages, yet indispensable for his vocation. "However much I study day after day, I fear my progress is but slow," he says in a poem. And, "Since I began to study my religion I have left my painting brush and ink slab untouched." On Wang Hui's sixtieth birthday he addressed him: "In recent years you cannot rival me, the madman; in art, however, I yield you place." "Madman" refers, with irony, to his religious life. As to yielding his place in art, he obviously painted very little in his later life, but Pi Lung writes: "During the last thirty years of [Wang Hui's] life [his output] became too numerous because of the great demand. It still had the customary

skill of the professional painter but the spiritual consonance was gone. [Wu Li], however, attained in his later years, after he had returned from Macao, the utmost in extraordinary mastery. His brushwork showed more and more classical strength and boldness; he was able to grasp the quintessence of ancient painting."

Wu spent the rest of his life in ceaseless and devoted missionary work, mainly at Chiating and Shanghai. He died and was buried in Shanghai.

In Macao he made the acquaintance of Western art but remained immune to its influence. In his notes we find remarks on the total difference of European manners, customs, languages, and writing. He goes on to say: "Our painting does not seek formal likeness nor does it tread the beaten path [of tradition]; that is what we call inspired and untrammelled. Theirs follows entirely the traditional patterns of light and shadow, fore- and background [perspective], and formal likeness, on which they work laboriously. . . . Also, their use of the brush is not at all the same as ours."

Looking at our painting by Wu Li we see that it is, indeed, totally free of any Western influence. It shows the bold and classical strokes which Pi Lung pointed out, the elegant and smooth style, the perfect tone, the master's hand of which Liang Chang-chü speaks. Another critic wrote: "Yü-shan [Wu Li] is a man of exalted character and elegant taste . . . the tone of his picture is profound and perfect, his stroke is lofty, comprehensive, and calm." We read of Wu's "refined and upright character," of his "unsullied character and natural goodness." These and similar acknowledgments of admiration for Wu's character are closely related to the appreciation of his art, which, according to Chinese tradition, is necessarily an expression of the artist's character and taste. Wu Li himself wrote: "The ancients who excelled as men of letters did not seek for promotion; the masters of painting did not look for praise." And he quotes Su Shih: "I write in order to express my heart [mind]; I paint to give vent to my thoughts. I may wear a coat of grass and eat wild plants, but I will not court anybody's favor." Wu Li continues: "Neither kings, dukes, nor noblemen could have

*Mountains and River, landscape painted by Wu Li around 1703. In a New York private collection*



[these men] at their beck and call: they could not be moved by success or poverty. The Tao [Way] of painting can only be attained by those who possess the Tao.”

The powerful short strokes and strong lines, similar to Wu's calligraphy, are still quite typical of the artist's old age, when they are combined with an increasing use of the dry brush. This is confirmed by the date of our painting (1703) and of the one reproduced by Ch'en Yüan (1704). A large composition, illustrated on page 127, is probably of the same period.

The artist's inscription on our painting, beginning with a poem, reads about as follows: "Above the sea, in a dense wood, there are the big rocks; in front of his lodge he prayed for a life long-lasting as the Southern Mountains. While the spring breeze blew over brush and ink he firmly studied calligraphy; sixty years have gone by, and his hair is not graying yet.

"The venerable Mr. Ts'un-shan had crossed the sixties in the winter of 1702. In 1703, in the fourth month, he charged me with painting this picture. For the method of texture strokes I employed the style of Wu Chen and Chü Jan. Written by Mo-ching Tao-jen."

The force and concentration of Wu Li's calligraphy is strikingly apparent also in his painting. Every stroke, from the elegant pine twigs to the bold accents by which the rocks are punctuated, is loaded with energy and disciplined by technique. The accents on rocks and trees do not claim to be a realistic representation of the grass and moss that grow there; they have become a structural part of the ideal landscape, which, itself, is reduced to its essentials—mountain and water, trees and rocks. The group of trees, beautifully drawn, composes a frame around the modest scholar's lodge. The ink tones vary between a rich dark black and very light tones and washes, giving the painting color and depth. In spite of the nervous tension of the brush strokes it conveys an atmosphere of lofty serenity which reminds us of what has been said about the artist.

In the larger composition a more grandiose landscape is piled up. Our eye follows the river upstream, through gorges and hills into the distant mist and clouds from where the silent

peaks rise high into the sky like solitary giants. The lonely fisherman emphasizes the calm and stillness of the valley. The rocks show a beautiful dry-brush texture, set off by dark accents, and the dark trees and peaks are balanced by the empty white surfaces of river and clouds.

The atmosphere of the painting is very much the same as that of ours. Historically, it shows the same ancestry—the influence of the great Yüan masters as transmitted by Tung Ch'ich'ang, Wang Shih-min, and Wang Chien. But in both paintings these influences have been thoroughly absorbed and transformed into the very personal and individual style of Wu Li. Details of the composition—the dark tree in the lower left, the bridge, and the flat rocks—are very close to our painting. The calligraphy too shows the same period. Once more—not a trace of European influence.

The flower painter Tsou I-kuei (1686-1772) has left us an interesting comment on Western painting: "The Westerners are skilled in geometry, and consequently there is not the slightest mistake in their way of rendering light and shade, near and far. In their painting the figures, buildings, and trees all cast shadows, and the colors and brush they use are entirely different from the Chinese ones. Their shadows stretch out from broad to narrow and are defined by three corners. When they paint houses on a wall, people almost feel like stepping into them. If a student of painting is able, with discretion, to adopt one or two points from them, he will surely catch the eye. But these painters have no brush manner whatsoever; although they possess skill, they are simply artisans and can consequently not be classified as painters."

The emphasis on brushwork and poetic expression is typical of the "literary" school of painting. Only the gentleman-scholar-painter was believed capable of attaining the technical mastery of the brush necessary to express the refinements of character and education which again he alone could possess. From this point of view Western art, and particularly those examples of it that were accessible to the Chinese, was bound to appear vulgar and clumsy. And it is not surprising that the great Christian painter Wu Li remained impervious to it.