Chinese Paintings

of the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries

from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Morse

Last year the Art Museum of Princeton University presented a fine exhibition of some thirty Chinese landscape paintings from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Morse of New York, entitled In Pursuit of Antiquity. The show was a study of Wang Hui (1632-1717), the leading painter of the Orthodox School. In addition to major paintings by this artist, the show included excellent works by Ming masters like Shen Chou, Wen Cheng-ming, and Tung Ch’i-ch’ang who influenced the painter, as well as pictures by his teachers Wang Shih-min and Wang Chien and by his contemporaries Wu Li and Wang Yüan-ch’i. The Metropolitan Museum is fortunate to be able to present a selection of these landscapes, which will be on view in a gallery of the Far East Department from November 19 to January 4, 1971. Following this note is a short article in which Mr. Morse reveals how he came to acquire these paintings.

By the seventeenth century, the professional school of painting had lost its vigor, and the wen-jen-hua (literary-man-painting), a direct outgrowth of the Sung gentleman-amateur tradition, held the field. The literati, or scholars as they are also called, were divided into two groups. The orthodox artists believed that it was in the styles and techniques of the “old masters” that their own fulfillment in the creation of landscape painting was to be achieved. Opposed to the Orthodox School were the individualists—the innovators—exemplified by the two monk-painters Tao Chi and Chu Ta, whose paintings may be seen in the Museum’s current exhibition Masterpieces of Fifty Centuries.

Three basic formats are used in Chinese painting: vertical, or hanging, scrolls, which vary considerably in size; horizontal or handscrolls, which measure a foot or more in height and may be up to thirty feet long; and album leaves, which are generally about one foot in height or length, and can be square, rectangular, round, or fan-shaped. Their beauty is that they can be enjoyed readily and intimately. Scrolls are rolled and stored away easily; they can be changed according to mood or season. Probably the first moving picture conceived by man, the handscroll is unfurled by the viewer section by section as he composes his own frames. It is certainly the most personal and inventive format, as no two individuals will unroll the scroll in the same manner.

To the Chinese, painting, calligraphy, and poetry are closely allied. Using the same brush, ink, and calligraphic techniques, the artist affixes to his painting a poem often of his own composition. Connoisseurs and collectors frequently add their seals as well as inscriptions and colophons to the painting.

The Chinese brush with an elongated triangular tip, when charged with ink, allows a great variety of strokes. Ink is made by mixing pine soot with glue and

Photographs of the paintings in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Morse were supplied by The Art Museum, Princeton University
can be used for velvety blacks as well as almost any shade of gray. Because monochrome paintings have always been favored by the Chinese, any color that is used is generally subordinated to the ink tones.

Depending on the qualities desired, the artist paints on either silk or paper. In general, silk is more suitable for creating a painting with washes, while both wet and dry brush respond well on paper.

The Morse paintings reproduced here show the varied idioms and imageries of late Chinese landscapes. For example, the style is boldly abstracted and dash- ing in the large hanging scroll entitled Shaded Dwelling among Streams and Mountains by Tung Ch’i-ch’ang. In The Colors of Mount T’ai-hang, Wang Hui has achieved a masterpiece. Beginning with a dense mountain landscape, the hand- scroll unfolds beautifully into endless space. The Cézannesque manipulation of form and color in Wang Yüan-ch’i’s long horizontal scroll is stirring and powerful; it achieves a writhing composition known as “dragon vein.” On the other hand, the handscroll Passing the Summer at the Thatched Hall of Inkwell by Wu Li, a symphony of silvery gray, evokes a poetic and quiet mood.

Although the vastness of nature dominates these pictures, man is included. A humble fisherman, a group of scholars, or merely a pavilion or a simple plank bridge indicate his presence and imply his oneness with nature.

FONG CHOW, Associate Curator in Charge
ABOVE

Shaded Dwelling among Streams and Mountains (and detail), after Tung Yüan (X century), by Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636), Chinese. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 5 feet 2¾ inches x 2 feet 4 5/16 inches. SL 70.339.1
Wang-ch'uan Villa, by Wang Yüan-ch'i (1642-1715), Chinese. Dated 1711. Handscroll, ink and color on paper, 14 1/16 inches x 17 feet 10 1/2 inches. SL 70.339.3