

Spring 2006

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Maria Gambarov
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job-162269976@craigslist.org

Maria Gambarov

May 20, 2006

SIT: China-Yunnan

ISP Paper

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Watercolors depicting the scenery, flora, and fauna of China have for centuries been central to Chinese culture. Since the introduction of this culture to the West, they have also captured the imaginations of art lovers throughout the world. The images in these “landscape” and “bird and flower” paintings are inextricable from Chinese history, philosophy, and geography. They thus serve as invaluable windows on China’s past. However, the study of the art of landscape painting in China also reveals evolution, foreign influence, and the revision of traditional principles. It is also apparent upon the study of Chinese painting that the individual artist’s qualities of spontaneity and originality are as important to his or her art as is adherence to the ancient tradition of watercolor painting in China. Landscape painting exists at the nexus of China’s past and its present, of its ancient traditions and its living individuals.

The art students and teachers I met in Kunming during my research placed great emphasis on the preservation and investigation of the ancient tradition of landscape painting in China. As soon as I walked into the traditional painting studio located on the sixth floor of the Art Institute in Kunming, I noticed the scrolls displayed in glass cases along the walls of classroom. These scrolls, I was told, have

survived two thousand years of Chinese history with only minor restoration. A professor insisted that the color was original, and that the ideal technique with which the paintings had been executed had succeeded in truly immortalizing the landscape images. A similar technique is used to this day, he explained. Ink and watercolor are applied to thin paper in accordance with traditional strokes, after which the paper is dried, smoothed with water, and soaked in rice starch to preserve the smooth surface and the color. Despite the fragility of the paper and the fact that the color used is water soluble, the final painting, stretched onto a scroll, can remain intact for the enjoyment of generations to come.¹

The preservation of tradition, in fact, is the main motivation for students who choose to study traditional painting at the Institute. Art schools are generally much more expensive than general or technical universities in China, for the former often lack the government sponsorship of the latter. Nor are the students who pay the high tuition to study traditional painting ensured of lucrative work later in life. “It is very difficult,” explained the professor with whom I spoke, “for these students to find work outside of the academic world. It is just like it is with art students from the rest of the world.” I was told that most of the students working in the studio I visited would become art teachers in local schools or proceed to graduate school and then teach at the university level.² They were all learning to teach, studying art and also

¹ From interviews with students and professor conducted on April 26, 2006 at the Art Institute in Kunming. I had the opportunity to observe a class of students studying traditional Chinese painting, and to speak to them about the techniques they were using as well as what they thought was most important in their work. The professor stressed tradition and the importance of these students in preserving China’s cultural heritage.

² April 26, 2006 interviews.

how to pass their newly acquired knowledge to others so that the tradition of landscape painting in China could live on.

Not all art students, however, are interested exclusively in becoming the guardians of an ancient tradition. I spoke to some students from another studio who explained the importance of becoming familiar with traditional painting, but then studying modern art for which there is higher demand in art markets in China and abroad. “Printmaking, for example, is very popular,” one student told me, “with many bright colors, and also fancy flowers and tropical surroundings.” Although they recognized the value of teaching and preserving ancient ways, these students explained that artists whose work was modern and popular could hope to find fame throughout the world and ensure a very financially comfortable life.³ Painters of traditional landscapes, according to them, would have much more trouble achieving these aims.

I was confronted with the conflict between the traditional and the modern as soon as I expressed interest in studying and practicing Chinese painting. “You can’t do landscapes right away,” the top student in the traditional painting class informed me, “you have to practice strokes, flowers, and insects first.” I told my student-turned-teacher that I would do whatever I was told, and asked her to accompany me to buy books with paintings I could emulate as I began to learn. A few days later, she took me to a local bookstore and handed me a book full of colorful, exotic flowers, insects, and birds. “Paint the flowers first, then petals and branches, then insects.

³ On April 29, 2005, students from the Art Institute accompanied me to stores selling art supplies and books so that I could practice painting. Most of them had had exposure to traditional forms of Chinese painting, but had not chosen traditional painting as a specialty. One of the students was studying traditional painting, and she instructed me as to the books I should purchase to emulate the paintings within it. I conducted several useful, if informal, interviews during this shopping trip.

Don't paint the birds yet," she told me, "First do the other things, that is the traditional way. This book has very good examples of calligraphy-style strokes and traditional coloring."⁴ When I inspected the book in my apartment, however, I was struck by the fact that the images within it were very different from any Chinese painting I had ever seen. Looking at the cover, I read that the book actually contained a collection of modern paintings. Because she felt that some of the techniques used in it could provide a solid foundation in watercolor painting, my teacher was insisting that I emulate modern art before proceeding to the study of traditional landscapes.

It quickly became clear that I would find no clear, indisputable definition of traditional landscape painting. Over the thousands of years that watercolor painting has been popular in China, traditional methods have become infused with modern elements and modern painting echoes traditional subject material and technique. Was there a "correct" way to study painting in accordance with any kind of authentically preserved tradition? I wondered if I should try to emulate ancient artists or contemporary artists, try my hand at complete images or practice details first, paint from nature or from prints in books. Perhaps I could not theoretically be successful at the proper study of traditional painting because I was not Chinese; I was told that foreigners (and females especially) were not historically invited to study the art form.⁵ Despite the ambiguity and confusion I encountered, most of the individuals with whom I spoke agreed in identifying several distinguishing characteristics of what they referred to as traditional Chinese landscape painting.

⁴ April 29, 2005 interviews.

⁵ April 26, 2005 interviews.

Everyone I consulted about such painting stressed the integration of art and philosophy in Chinese culture. In every good traditional painting and, for that matter, in any good Chinese painting in general, are manifest the most important points of traditional Chinese philosophy. By traditional Chinese philosophy my informants usually meant some combination of Taoism, Buddhism, and local culture. They made it clear that art devoid of philosophical truth could not be beautiful, and that certain philosophical points are best communicated through art. Knowledge of one simply cannot exist with the understanding and appreciation of the other. This interdependence was a focal point of a lecture I attended by a local painter of Yunnan landscape. “You can see the philosophy in the composition and in every stroke,” he explained, “this fact cannot be overemphasized.”⁶

One of the philosophical principles most evident in traditional Chinese landscape painting is that of balance. The Taoist principle of Yin/Yang, or the balance of masculine and feminine energy in the universe, permeates every work. Similarly, painters adhere to the principles of fengshui, or the importance of composition and arrangement of natural elements for positive energy. A student of the aforementioned local painter spent some time explaining to me how important it was not to paint a tree from either bottom corner or the center of the page. “There should be some room around the tree,” she told me, “but not too much room. If there is too much or too little room, the painting is not good looking because the balance is

⁶ On April 2, 2006, I accompanied my host mother in Kunming to her art class. She was studying with Gu Qingwei, a local artist who specializes in Yunnan landscapes. His artwork is classified in bookstores as contemporary, though his paintings are obviously influenced by traditional techniques and philosophy. I had the opportunity to attend one of his lectures, during which he emphasized the importance of traditional Chinese painting to contemporary painting done in China.

off.”⁷ The composition of Chinese landscape painting often reflects this balance—a cluster of elements in one area of the scroll is usually offset by a cluster of elements elsewhere.

It is not only in composition that the principle of balance is important. It is also central to the theory of shading and color. “It is like the yin-yang symbol,” spoke the local painter at his lecture, “there is dark but there must also be light. There is filled space but there must also be empty space.”⁸ As I practiced with one of this painter’s students, I was reminded repeatedly not to over-paint but to leave plenty of empty space. “It is as much about what you do not see as about what you do see,” the student told me, “and you do not have to fill the entire sheet. You can leave the rest to the imagination.” The same logic applies to color, if it is at all used in the creation of landscape images. More often than not, the paintings I studied were monochromatic or dichromatic. If two colors were used, however, they were applied so as to maintain a careful balance throughout the landscape scroll.

Similarly, the concept of balance is reflected in the subject matter of traditional Chinese painting, and especially in landscape painting. Traditional landscape painting is referred to as “shanshui,” or “mountain and water” painting. Not only must the composition of a landscape painting be pleasing to the eye and painted in accordance with tradition, but the natural elements from which that composition is constructed are also important. According to tradition, mountains and water represent Yin and Yang, respectively.⁹ They thus bear symbolic value, and

⁷ I received this advice from my homestay mother in her home, as she worked to complete her homework assignment for her painting class and allowed me to try my hand at painting as well.

⁸ April 2, 2006 art class and lecture.

⁹ www.asia-art.net/chinese_tech_brush.html

are not included merely for decoration or to imitate nature. There exist many historical regulations for the painting of mountains and water. For instance, according to 17th century master Wang Kai, mountains are not to be painted devoid of *qi*, or vital energy. In addition, water is not to be included in a painting without a clear indication of source, and effects of mist and clearness are used in linking together a careful composition.¹⁰ Usually, a bird's-eye perspective is employed in landscape painting. This is done to represent nature in its true form, rather than as limited by the everyday human perspective.

Another recurring theme in traditional landscape painting is that of the harmony between man and nature. If there are signs of human life in landscape paintings, such as temples, pagodas, bridges, homes, or human figures, they are always portrayed as fragile and insignificant compared to the natural elements represented. Elements of human construction are always placed within grand landscapes and are often difficult to find amongst the towering mountains, imposing tree branches, raging waterfalls, and clouds. These paintings, I was told, have always been meant to remind the viewer of his place in the world as subordinate to the natural world around him.¹¹ This reminder was meant to inspire respect for the natural world and the understanding that humans had to live with nature, not struggle against it for survival.

Although human figures are often so tiny they are almost imperceptible in landscape scrolls, the individuality of the painter is far from hidden. In fact, the professor at the Art Institute told me that the mark of a good painter is the ability to

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ April 2, 2006 class and lecture.

express his or her originality, personal style, and personality through the painting. “Paintings differ,” the professor said, “as artists differ. So even when a student studies a master he tries to emulate the style and learn from it, but not to copy exactly. If a painter copies exactly he loses the soul of the painting.”¹² It is because of the importance of expressing the painter’s individuality that the visibility of individual brush strokes is emphasized in traditional landscape painting. Each stroke is meant to express the personal energy of the individual holding the brush. It must be planned but also spontaneous, it must be controlled but simultaneously bear the artist’s unrestricted emotion. In the emphasis of strokes Chinese painting mirrors the traditional art of calligraphy, and everyone with whom I spoke remarked that the two art forms are and have always been closely related.

Calligraphy and painting are related not only because of the emphasis on expression through strokes, but also because calligraphy is almost always featured in traditional landscape scrolls. After having completed the painted image, artists demonstrate their calligraphic skills and take the opportunity for further expression by writing poetry or text related to the subject matter of their scrolls. They complete their works by marking them with stamps bearing their names, so as to communicate to audiences just whose individuality the work they are viewing is meant to relate. The completed scroll bears all of the above elements together—the painted image, the calligraphy, and the stamp. Consequently, painters have traditionally been required to master a variety of different skills.¹³ To these days, students in the traditional

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ www.asia-art.net/chinese_tech_brush.html

painting department of the Art Institute in Kunming study not only painting but also stamp-making, calligraphy, and the art of writing poetry.¹⁴

Perhaps due to the ambiguity surrounding the exact definition of Chinese traditional painting, the informants I interviewed all tended to define the art form in contrast to Western painting. The greatest difference, they explained, is that Western art focuses on the exact replication of the subject matter. Chinese painting, however, is more evocative. As the local artist explained to his students, “we, unlike Western painters, are trying to capture the spirit of the landscape. We are trying to represent the feeling of it, not to create an exact copy.”¹⁵ The professor at the Art Institute echoed this point. “We can leave areas of paintings white,” he explained as he showed me a one student’s work, “no need to fill in the space behind the branch. Its not like Western art. We leave it to the imagination. What is there—mountains or clouds or other branches? This way it involved the person looking at the painting and it makes it more interesting.”¹⁶ Although it is arguable that all Western art ignores the viewer’s imagination in favor of exact replication, it is clear that abstraction and subtlety are valued in traditional Chinese painting for the extra dimension of imagination with which they imbue the painted image.

It is not only because Western art is regarded as perfectly copying the subject matter, however, that it is often contrasted with Chinese painting. Every student, painter, and teacher I interviewed ensured me that Chinese art was much more difficult than Western painting. “In Western oil painting, watercolor painting even, you can correct mistakes,” a student told me, “You cannot cheat like that in Chinese

¹⁴ April 26, 2006 interviews.

¹⁵ April 2, 2006 art class and lecture.

¹⁶ April 26, 2006 interviews.

painting. You have to really understand the brush and the diffusion of the water and if you make a mistake you make a mistake. There is nothing you can do.”¹⁷ Again, it is arguable whether or not mistakes are so easy to correct in Western art, and whether or not the ability to correct mistakes constitutes cheating. However, it is obvious that those involved in the world of Chinese traditional landscape painting are proud of this form of art as something unique and superior to other forms of art in the world. Their appreciation for Chinese painting transcends the appreciation of individual landscape scrolls to a sense of national pride.

Although it may not be true that all Western artists are committed to painting exact replicas of nature or that Western painting is easier, there are characteristics of traditional Chinese painting that distinguish it from most forms of painting in the West. The most obvious point of contrast involves the materials used. Unlike Western watercolor brushes, Chinese brushes are tapered towards a point to facilitate calligraphic strokes and traditional shading methods.¹⁸ Brushes between soft, intermediate, and stiff textures depending on the sort of painting they are used for and are generally made from the hair of goat, rabbit, wolf, weasel or horse.¹⁹ Wolf-hair brushes, which I was encouraged to use in my own practice, are generally considered to be the most versatile.

The paper used in traditional Chinese painting is also very different from Western watercolor paper. In the West, watercolor paper is generally thick to prevent wrinkling and tearing. It is made to prevent the excessive diffusion of water and to provide the artist with more control over the way he or she applies color to a painting.

¹⁷ April 26, 2006 interviews.

¹⁸ www.asia-art.net/chinese_tech_brush.html

¹⁹ www.artzbox.com/articles_chinese/chinesepaintinginfo.htm

Painting in China began on silk during the Warring States (476-221 BC) Dynasty, before paper was invented.²⁰ The earliest paper was made around 100 AD from pulp, old fishing nets, and bark. Today paper is made commercially from various materials. It is called *xuan* in China and rice paper in the West.²¹²² It is very absorbent and allows for ink to diffuse easily, although the degree of diffusion varies somewhat. The artist ensures control of water diffusion and prevents the thin paper from tearing by placing a felt pad beneath the sheet he or she is working on. In attempting to emulate paintings in the Chinese traditional style, I found adjusting to new painting materials to be one of the most difficult challenges.

Chinese watercolors also differ from their Western counterparts in the way color is applied. Most schools of watercolor painting in the West emphasize the importance of using color to simulate realistic shading and lighting effects. These effects are based on a single light-source, and are usually drawn from the careful study of the subject. In Chinese painting, however, color is usually applied to express the characteristics of the subject matter rather than the effects of light and shading. For instance, green may be added to leaves and trees, gray to stones, and blue to water to evoke the characteristics of those natural elements.²³ Color may also be used to embellish a painting, or to assist in the challenge of balancing composition. Finally, color may be used to emphasize the prominence of a main subject or to create the illusion of perspective as objects closer to the viewer are painted to be more vibrant than those further away.

²⁰ www.chinaculture.org/gb/en_artqa/2004-01/19/content_45741.htm.

²¹ www.artzbox.com/articles_chinese/chinesepaintinginfo.htm.

²² It is unclear where the term “rice paper” originated from. Neither the earliest forms of paper used for watercolor painting in China nor the forms used today are made from rice, according to my research.

²³ www.asia-art.net/chinse_tech_brush.html.

Although materials and basic techniques set traditional Chinese artists apart from their Western counterparts, the former are far from agreeing on the specifics of how materials ought to be used or what techniques ought to be employed in any particular work. This disagreement stems in part from the long and varied history of the development of traditional painting in China. Early examples of this art form began to appear as long as 6,000 years ago. Painting evolved through the succession of dynasties and the founding of the Republic of China, through times of war and peace, through times of prosperity and times of hardship. It is no wonder that the painting in China is not a unitary whole but rather a collection of myriad opinions, styles, and techniques.

Scholars generally argue that traditional Chinese painting dates to the Neolithic Age around 4,000 BC.²⁴ In its earliest stages, painting was not valued in its own right for its use in decoration or artistic expression. Rather, painting was intricately linked to other crafts and was integrated into the daily lives of regular people. The aesthetic that would later influence landscape and other forms of Chinese painting at this time found its expression in quotidian items such as pottery and weaponry. It was during the Warring States (476-221 BC) period that painting was regarded as an art form onto itself.²⁵ Artists began to use carbon-based ink as well as vegetable and mineral pigments to work on silk, for paper had not yet been invented.

The developing new art form was influenced greatly by the introduction of Buddhism to China from India in the 1st century AD. Along with religious ideas

²⁴ www.asia-art.net/chinese_brush.html.

²⁵ www.chinaculture.org/gb/en_artqa/2004-01/19/content_45741.htm

came religious images and the need to create new images that would help the religion take root on Chinese soil.²⁶ Art was also influenced by domestic historical developments. The time period from the 3rd to the 6th century was one of violence and political fragmentation in China. One dynasty after the other earned the mandate of heaven only to lose it, unable to maintain unity and prosperity. Along with fear, hunger, and violence, this period witnessed a surge in artistic creativity. The rapid change of political structures imbued Chinese society with a variety of intellectual, spiritual, and artistic ideas.²⁷ These found expression in art, as painters began to explore various directions and modes of expression.

In the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907), figure painting became widely popular.²⁸ Along with landscape and “animal and flower” genres, this style would become one of the major classifications of traditional Chinese painting. The painters Zhang Xuan and Zhou Fang emerged as masters of the new style and came to influence masters of figure painting in the Song Dynasty (960-1127).²⁹ Although sometimes portraits were made to immortalize the rich and famous, figure paintings usually represented common people in everyday situations. Mountains, water, animals, birds, and flowers were used strictly as background details in these images, if at all. Nevertheless, the techniques of stroke and coloring that developed at this time would come to be reflected in the representation of flora and fauna as well as in landscape

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

scrolls. To this day, many teachers believe that the study of figure painting can help establish a solid foundation for the study of other genres of traditional Chinese art.³⁰

By this point in history, painting was regarded as indispensable to Chinese culture. Beginning with the Five Dynasties (907-960), every dynasty in China had an art academy staffed with the best artists from throughout the territory under that dynasty's rule. These painters wore government uniforms and subsided on government payroll, indicating that the development and preservation of painting had become a high governmental priority.³¹ Thus, during the Song Dynasty (960-1127), an Imperial Art Academy was established to promote the work of China's most masterful painters.³² Although landscapes had been regarded as subjects for painting from the 4th century, it was with the founding of these academies that the art of the watercolor landscape developed into one of the most beloved and influential genres of traditional Chinese painting.

Two major schools of landscape painting came into existence at about this time, though both had had adherents as early as the Tang Dynasty. The Northern, or Academic, school of painting emphasized contour drawing or *goule*. Details in paintings were carefully outlined and colored to provide solidity and unity to the image as a whole. The Southern, or Literary, school focused more on individual strokes. Adherents of this school used bold brush strokes and ink washes to allow for free artistic expression and dynamic, flowing images.³³ Artists in this school were generally more concerned with the emotions evoked upon gazing at an impressive

³⁰ April 26, 2006 interviews.

³¹ www.chinaculture.org/gb/en_artqa/2004-01/19/content_45741.htm

³² *Ibid.*

³³ www.artzbox.com/articles_chinese/chinesepaintinginfo.htm.

landscape than in the accurate representation of natural elements. Thus, they have been equated with the artists of the Impressionist movement in the West. To this day, both the meticulous (*gongbi*) and the freehand (*xieyi*) styles of painting continue to influence artists in China and abroad.

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) the development of landscape painting was pioneered by the “Four Great Painters”—Ni Zan, Wei Zhen, and Weng Meng. The works of these masters bear many of the characteristics still central to traditional Chinese landscape painting today, and had a great influence on paintings produced during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties.³⁴ The Ming Dynasty witnessed the founding of the Wumen Painting School, which infused traditional Chinese painting with novel approaches and ideas. After the Manchu invasion of 1644, many artists of this school expressed their sadness in tranquil nature scenes that remain well-known to this day.³⁵

By the end of the Qing Dynasty, the Shanghai Painting School had emerged as a group of artists devoted to the preservation of tradition in traditional painting. With the founding of the Republic of China, the painters of the Shanghai Painting School came to represent the transition of traditional Chinese painting from a classical to a modern art form.³⁶ Classical regulation and ancient masters were still studied and revered, but painting began to evolve to reflect modern influences and sensibilities. The May 4th movement in 1919 inspired artists to learn from the West.³⁷ As artists in America and Europe experimented with new forms of

³⁴ www.chinaculture.org/gb/en_artqa/2004-01/19/content_45741.htm.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

expression, painters in China integrated some of these new forms into ancient art of traditional painting.

Given the long and varied history of landscape painting in China, it is no wonder that it is difficult to define “Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting” with any precision. The term “traditional” is problematic, considering that techniques and approaches towards painting have changes so much over the history of the development of Chinese painting and given the incorporation of various historic views into contemporary painting. “Landscape” is also a problematic term in this classification of painting, considering how intricately tied the subject matter of landscape paintings can be to that of figure and “bird and flower” painting. Many paintings not classified as “landscape” paintings nevertheless contain many landscape elements in the background, and students are encouraged to study all types of painting because the techniques used in all are related. Although highlighting differences between Chinese and Western painting can be informative, defining Chinese painting as that which Western painting is not seems to do injustice to both artistic traditions.

After much research and hours spent interviewing informants and observing students and artists at work, I decided that the best way for me to get a sense of what “Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting” really is was by attempting it myself. I found that actually putting what I was learning into practice allowed me greater insight into the nature of the tradition of watercolor painting in China than any amount of research could ever have afforded. What follows is my account of my practical study of Chinese landscape watercolor painting.

I decided to begin my study of Chinese landscape watercolor painting by emulating a modern artist who paints mostly the flora of China's tropical regions. At first, I was confused as to how this genre was related to traditional painting. However, as one of the students I spoke with pointed out, the contours of the plants were indisputably influenced by calligraphic brushwork and the Literary style of the Southern school of landscape painting. The contours were done first and allowed to dry, after which shadows and hints of color were applied to the paper to create a translucent effect reminiscent of stained glass.

An immediate challenge I found was the method of holding and handling the brush. I was told not to rest my elbow or wrist on the table or paper. Additionally, I was to hold the brush closer to the end than to the tip, and I was to try to move the brush quickly and decisively as I applied ink or color. I found this very difficult to adjust to, considering that the use of the brush was not so regulated in any other form of painting I had ever tried. It was also tempting, at first, to drag the brush and move slowly so as to ensure precision. I found quickly, however, that this approach made it impossible to emulate the spontaneous, energetic quality of the brushwork in the paintings I was studying.

After my first painting, I felt much more confident in my use of the brush, and much more accustomed to the sort of strokes used in the Literary style. I decided to attempt elements from older landscape masters, and to simulate the images of misty mountains that I had always associated with Chinese landscape painting. Every

teacher and student with whom I had spoken had made it clear that I ought not attempt to copy the composition in an image directly. Rather, it was better to study the logic behind the composition and the shape of the mountains. After such study, I could be inspired by the works of masters to construct my own compositions and I could know intuitively where to paint a darker shadow and where to paint more mist.

This was one of the most interesting challenges I encountered. After such study, I began to view the works I was studying differently. No longer were they mysteriously arranged lines and shadows that had the appearance of mountains. Now I saw the sense of every stroke and the balance of composition, and I began to understand why Master Wang Kai warned so adamantly against painting mountains with no *qi*.

I was also attracted to the work of another modern painter, who uses loose washes of color and ink to represent coastal and rural scenes. Just like the other contemporary works I studied, these painting seemed to bear no resemblance to traditional paintings at first glance. There was not even the contouring brushwork drawn from calligraphic technique. However, I soon realized that the lines did echo the bold brushwork valued by the Southern school. The bird's eye view perspective and inexact proportions were also reminiscent of older paintings I had studied.

Also, I noticed that the human figures and homes in these paintings were tiny in comparison to the overall composition. I noticed that once I included the small figures in my own attempts at this style, the rice paddies, lakes, and mountains suddenly looked more grand and awe-inspiring. Evidence of human life, though

painted small and often hidden, was indispensable for highlighting the grandeur of the human's surroundings.

I spent days practicing painting in the above modern and ancient styles. I attempted intricate and more abstract landscapes from centuries past. I came to appreciate the precision in the flower paintings and the loose freedom of the contemporary landscapes. I even practiced several figure paintings to become more adept at the brushwork, which is common to figure and landscape paintings. After a few weeks, I realized both how much I had learned and how much I had yet to learn. I was becoming more comfortable with using an unfamiliar brush, making decisive strokes, controlling the diffusion of water, and organizing elements into a pleasing composition. I also became aware of how important each of these skills is to Chinese landscape painting, and how many more weeks and years I would need to begin to master them.

I was struck in my research by the interrelatedness of the ancient and the modern in Chinese painting, as well as that between the ancient masters and the living individual painter. I came to wonder how my experience during this independent study project would influence the painting I do myself. I thus made three paintings without reference to the work of any particular master, modern or ancient. I painted a scene I had grown to love from India, a plant that I had seen in a Lijiang home, and a couple seated in a local café in Kunming. I was pleasantly surprised by how many new possibilities for representing these subjects I had found through my experience with Chinese painting. It became clear to me that Chinese painting would continue to evolve just as it always has, growing from the

introduction of new ideas and, in turn, informing the work of artists throughout the world. As for me, I was excited to continue my study of Chinese painting and to discover how this study could influence my own work. To get the most out of my painting and my studies, I would have heeded the advice of Master Wang Kai:

“If you aim to dispense with method, learn method.

If you aim at facility, work hard.

If you aim for simplicity, master complexity.”³⁸

³⁸ www.asia-art.net/chinese_tech_brush.html.

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