

How to Read Chinese Landscape Paintings



Rivers and Mountains in Late Spring by Li Xubai

Medium: Painting, Painting-Hanging Scroll. Ink and light colors on paper

Size: 96 7/8 x 48 11/16 in. (image); 128 5/16 x 56 1/2 in. (without roller)

Creation Place: China

Style: 21st Century

Inscriptions: Inscription and Seal at left edge, above center, in black

Chinese inscription lower right corner, in red, seal

At left edge, ULQ, in red: three seals

Physical Description: predominately light green and grey; irregular green mountain peaks with several buildings partially hidden by foliage; several areas of stair steps visible between foliage; waterfalls

Credit: Collection MIA; The Ruth Ann Dayton Chinese Room Endowment Fund

Accession Number: 2008.24

Artist: Li Xubai, born 1940

Role: Artist

Nationality: Chinese

Life Dates: born 1940

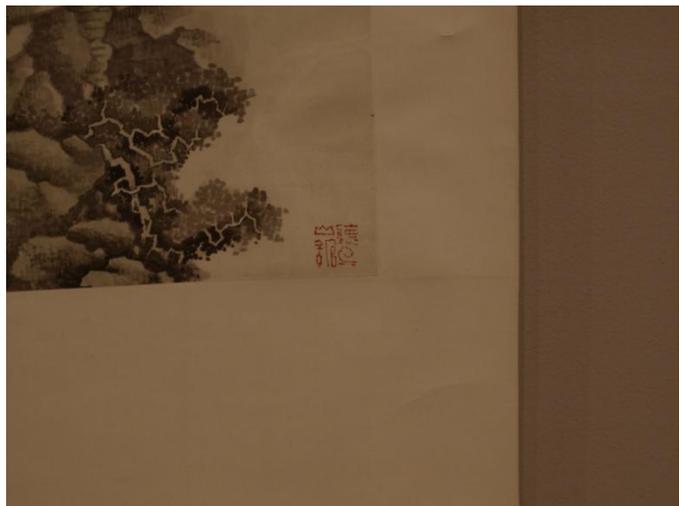
[Rivers and Mountains in Late Spring: Gallery Label - Current](#)

Born in Fujian province, People's Republic of China, Li Xubai has lived and worked in Hong Kong and now resides in Toronto, Canada. Li considers himself a poet first and a painter second who introduces the emotional content of his poetry into his landscape paintings. Both his poetry and paintings while contemporary still draw formal inspiration from the T'ang and Sung dynasties (618-907, 960-1279).

To Li, Chinese painting is not stagnant, but a continually evolving tradition and his interest in the past, like most literati artists, is to find a model or lineage that best suits his own aesthetic temperament. His study of old paintings is enriched through direct encounters with nature and literature. The traditional Chinese view sees nature as a powerful, but benevolent force in constant flux. This mood is certainly captured in this towering landscape. It's monumentality and massing of forms is certainly reminiscent of 12th century ink landscapes, but his disciplined brushwork, crystalline rock formations, and rhythmic interplay of solid and void are personal reflections of the artist's inner vision rather than historical interpretations.

Li hews close to tradition in his choice of a monumental landscape scene done in the classic brush-and-ink style. A poet as well as a painter, Li incorporates the "three Perfections" of Calligraphy, Painting and Poetry into this hanging scroll. However, upon close inspection and in comparison to other hanging scrolls displayed nearby Li's stippled, daublike brush strokes create an illusion of tangible forms rather than a closely observed and carefully described scene. In the attached, full-length photograph of the scroll the patches of mist seems to caress an emerging ink drawing of a Scholar's Rock. In the tradition of ancient Chinese landscape painters Li gives us an emblematic landscape of phantasmal views in which to wander rather than a portrait of nature.

Painting Surface: Paper. **Ink:** black and green. **Composition:** high-distance. **Format:** Hanging Scroll . **Seals:** 4 seals. **Colophon:** poetry.



How to Read Chinese Landscape Paintings – to ‘read’ a painting is to enter into a dialog with the past

1) **Painting Surface** -

- 1) Paper – Various degrees of weights and amount of sizing; known as rice paper in English. This surface lends itself to more spontaneous brushwork.
- 2) Silk – treated with alum and glue which makes it less absorbent than paper. Applying paint to a silk surface requires more painstaking techniques, building up ink and colors carefully and gradually in layers. Discolors with age.

2) **Ink**

- 1) Black ink is made from lampblack, a substance made by burning pine resins or tung oil; colored pigments are derived from vegetable and mineral materials. Both are manufactured by mixing the pigment source with a glue base, which is then pressed into cake or stick form.
- 2) Black used for ‘ink-and-wash landscape’ paintings and for calligraphy; black ink is very resistant to fading.
- 3) Colored pigments used for ‘blue-and-green landscape’ paintings and for ‘flower-and-bird’ paintings
- 4) Inks are ground and mixed with water to achieve tones and various consistencies.

3) **Landscape Composition**

- 1) level-distance – (pingyuan) a view across a broad lowland expanse
- 2) deep-distance – (*shenyuan*) view past tall mountains into the distance
- 1) high-distance –(*gaoyuan*) picture plane dominated by vertical elements; view of towering mountains.

4) **Format** – The tactile experience of unrolling a scroll or turning leaves is an integral part of active viewing

- 1) Hanging Scroll –Vertical format; displays an entire painting; typically 2 to 6 feet in length
- 2) Hand Scroll - typically between 9 and 14 inches in height but may vary greatly in length with only a portion viewed at any one time. Viewed from right to left.
- 3) Album leaves - quite small and intimate in scale, and often juxtaposed poetry and painting on facing pages
- 4) Fan - well suited to abbreviated, lyrical images

5) **Brush**

- 1) Round, tapered tipped brush that is finer than brushes used for water color in the West
- 2) Made from rabbit’s or sheep’s hair

6) **Artists**

- 1) Professional – court sponsored, highly realistic execution, prescribed subjects and set themes that reinforce Confusion thought.
- 2) Amateur – scholar-official ‘literati’ beginning in the Yuan Dynasty; rarely sold works; “mind landscapes” embodied:
 - i) Learned references to the styles of earlier masters.
 - ii) Calligraphic brushwork expressed the inner spirit of the artist and animated the subject.
 - iii) Went beyond representation to convey the inner landscape of the artist’ heart and mind.

7) **Style**

- 1) ‘white painting’ (*haihua*) Tang dynasty term to describe monochrome painting with ink shading
- 2) ‘plain drawing’ (*baimiao*) denotes line drawing without shading

8) **Technique**

- 1) To suggest recession:
 - i) Shift in scale
 - ii) Increasingly paler ink
- 2) To suggest motion or moisture in the air:
 - i) Sketchily rendered figures

9) **Seals or ‘chops’**

- 1) Carved in a soft stone and impressed with a waxy, oil-based ink paste in vermilion red (cinnabar), the seals use an ancient script type that was in use mainly during the Zhou and Qin dynasties; stamped onto works by the artist and/or successive owners. When placing a red seal on a monochrome painting, it is said to be “adding the eye to the dragon”.
- 2) The names inscribed on the seal stone are typically the literary or personal name of the owner

10) **Colophons or Inscriptions**

- 1) Early narrative paintings in the Chinese tradition often displayed text in banners next to the figures depicted; portions of the associated narrative text were also frequently found interspersed with sections of the painting. Beginning around the 11th century, however, poems and painted images were designed to share the same image space.
- 2) Although this practice was common at court, it was with the scholar painters that the practice of writing on the painting surface became firmly established. Literati painters also appended notes concerning the circumstances of creation of particular paintings. The content of these inscriptions typically included the appreciative comments of later viewers and collectors and constituted a major source of enjoyment for connoisseurs, who felt a connection to art aficionados and scholars of the past through their writings.

11) Philosophy

- 1) Chinese artists have always sought inspiration more from the history of their own artistic tradition than directly from nature, and have primarily pursued and realized their individual vision through the reinterpretation of that tradition rather than by inventing new and different ways to depict nature.
- 2) Aim is to capture the life force of the subject as well as the outer appearance
- 3) Landscape painting must not express a given moment from a given viewpoint so much as a general truth, beyond time and space.
- 4) Monumental landscape represented a connecting of heaven and earth with people playing a small part in the balance of a large universe. This expressed the Confucian idea of man cultivating humility in nature.
- 5) Viewers of Monumental landscapes were to identify with the human figures and to “travel...dwell or ramble” within the landscape.

The Three Perfections

Calligraphy

Painting

Poetry

‘four precious things of the library’

Brush

Ink

Inkstone

Paper

Questions for starting a conversation

- Describe to me what you see.
- Do you think this is a real place? Why or why not?
- Notice the Chinese writing in the upper left hand corner. Don’t you wish you could read Chinese? What do you think is written there?
- If you could be in this painting where would you want to be? What do you think you would hear? What is the weather? Temperature? Time of day?
- Compare this painting to a painting nearby.

<http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/painting/4ptgtech.htm>