

China, Asia

Jade Mountain Illustrating the Gathering of Scholars at the Lanting Pavillion

1784, light green jade

The John R. Van Derlip Fund and Gift of the Thomas Barlow Walker Foundation, 92.103.13 22 1/2 ×
38 3/8 in., 640 lb. (57.15 × 97.47 × 290.3 cm)



Key Ideas

Nature has long been the primary source of inspiration for Chinese artists. So has an admiration of the past. The artist who created *Jade Mountain* followed both of these traditions. The particular event that inspired this artist was a gathering of poets that occurred nearly 1,400 years earlier.

Background

This sculpture embodies the long-standing Chinese cultural values associated with landscape and nature. The landscape theme is rooted in a philosophy of nature that can be traced to Confucian and Taoist beliefs as early as 500 CE. Taoism emphasized harmony with the core laws of the universe. Taoist philosophers taught that the way to spiritual understanding and peace was through contemplation of the beauties and mysteries of nature. Followers of Confucius drew their wisdom from the “natural order of things.” From these two philosophies emerged a belief in universal harmony and a desire to live a life in accordance with it.

Seeking to express this philosophy in their work, Chinese poets and painters made landscape a dominant theme, specifically the greatness of nature and its power over humans.

Jade mountains like this one represent the magnificent mountainous landscapes that were highly valued by Chinese philosophers, writers, and artists for over 20 centuries. In effect, they translate the Chinese painting tradition into sculpture.

The Chinese consider jade to be the most sacred and treasured of all precious stones. The word for jade is *yu*, meaning pure, precious, noble, and “right.” Its physical characteristics are believed to express the greatest virtues of humankind: soft, smooth, and glossy—like benevolence; fine, compact, and strong—like intelligence; angular, though not sharp

or cutting—like righteousness; internally radiant—like faith; pure of sound when struck—like wisdom; and able to be broken, but not bent—like courage.

Jade is not native to China. To get the precious stone, groups often traveled as far as 2,000 miles across the difficult terrain of Afghanistan, Siberia, Tibet, and Burma (today’s Myanmar). This piece of jade is from Xinjiang province, at the farthest west reaches of China. Once found, removing the jade from the mountains proved arduous. Workers laboriously chiseled away the largest slabs, for objects like *Jade Mountain*, from the surrounding rocks.

Mia’s *Jade Mountain* was created during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), the last period of imperial rule in China. The Qing [ching] dynasty ruled through traditional Chinese institutions of government, philosophy, and religion. Its rulers also had great respect for Chinese cultural tradition and sought to preserve the achievements of the past and to encourage the arts of the present. One of the first patrons of scholarship and art was the emperor Qianlong [chee-en long], who ruled from 1736 to 1795. His reign is remembered as the last truly creative period in the history of Chinese art. Qianlong, who commissioned this piece, was himself an important painter, calligrapher, and poet, and his collection of Chinese paintings of all periods was one of the greatest ever made.

Jade Mountain

Jade Mountain was carved from one of four unusually large blocks split from a boulder found in Central Asia. Weighing 640 pounds, it is the smallest piece from that series, but is considered to be the largest piece of carved jade in the Western hemisphere.

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Jade Mountain illustrates a poetry gathering held at Lanting (the Orchid Pavilion) in Shaoxing near Mount Kuaiji [gwi jee] in what is present-day Zhejiang province. There, on March 3, 353 CE, the poet Wang Xizhi [Wong She Jurr] invited 41 of his scholarly friends. Relaxing along the orchid-filled banks of a winding stream, the group consumed wine from cups that floated downstream, contemplated nature, and wrote poems for the occasion. These were later assembled by Wang, who wrote a long poem titled *Prelude to the Orchid Pavilion*. Composed of 324 characters in 28 lines, the poem reflects on the meaning and enjoyment of life and death, the past and the present. Because the Chinese consider calligraphy to be the highest of all art forms, and because Wang was regarded as the greatest of all calligraphers, many copies of his poem were soon in circulation. It has received great attention and respect from artists, poets, and calligraphers in China and Japan ever since.

Jade is very difficult to carve. The skill of the artist is evident in the details of the crisply defined ridges of the hills, the leaves on each tree, the delicate cups floating down the brook, and each tiny figure walking the mountain paths. Equally remarkable is the delicately inscribed calligraphy on two sides of the mountain. The long poem seen on the front is Wang Xizhi's famous preface. Its inclusion here is a reminder of the importance of the past and tradition in Chinese art. On the back is a poem by the Emperor Qianlong. (Translations of both are found at the end of this entry.)

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That the artist featured these poems on the sculpture shows how important calligraphy and poetry are in Chinese artwork. As early as the 1000s, scholar, painter, poet, and calligrapher were often the same person. Rulers considered themselves to be the

scholarly elite, so it is not surprising that the emperor Qianlong, living in the 1700s, would commission such a work as *Jade Mountain* and compose his own poem for the back. It was not just to remember the historic event of a poets' gathering, or simply a decorative triumph of the jade-carver's art, or yet another copy of the famous poem. Instead, it was a combination of all of these things, uniting in one work the best of the past and the present and embodying for the emperor and other viewers the important virtues of scholarly activity, love of the arts, and unity with nature.

Technique

Qianlong organized palace workshops in several cities to produce jade objects for palace use. The process involved in making large jade mountains like this was time-consuming and expensive. It included eight or nine stages, required several workmen, and took years to complete. Jade, an extremely hard material, is worked slowly by wearing away the jade with an abrasive stone harder than jade, such as quartz dust. At the time, the power for drilling and carving came only from the artist's hands or from a foot treadle that turned a grinding element. The artist's tools were thought to have been wood or bamboo, while the surface was worn down by creating friction between quartz and jade. This type of sculpture, made by carving away or removing stone from a larger piece, is called subtractive sculpture.

About the Artist

Although his name is unknown, the artist who designed and carved *Jade Mountain* must have been an honored and respected member of Chinese society. The creation of any jade object required great skill, patience, and discipline; in addition, the mountain would have called for great scholarship, aesthetic sensitivity, and feeling for life. These qualities make *Jade Mountain* a piece of poetic contemplation, not just technical skill.

Calligraphic Transcription

"Prelude to the Orchid Pavilion," Wang Xizhi:

In the late spring of the ninth year of the Yungho reign (353 CE) a gathering was held at Lanting, the Orchid Pavilion, north of Kuaiji Mountain. The meeting was held to clean and repair the honored graves and all the luminaries came. Young and old alike were gathered together. At this site were steep magnificent mountains of lush forests and elegant bamboo. Here, too, was a clear, rapid running stream, traversing the slope which could be used to float the wine cups. We sat about the banks of this stream. Although lacking the joy of flute and string, a single cup and single poem were sufficient to draw out the deepest emotions. On that day the sky was bright, the air pure and the gentle wind a thing of tranquility. Gazing upward the vastness of the universe could be comprehended; downward one saw the varied abundance of things. All that the mind and eye conceived was best appreciated through the senses. It was a delightful experience! In this generation one is influenced by experiences within his own tiny environment, but one's emotion comes from outside his material existence. Although there are ten thousand moods of fondness and dislike, and a difference between action and non-action, when a man feels joy he is content to know that that feeling may be confined to him alone.

With this acceptance one will never notice the approach of old age. When one is fatigued through thought the feeling is joy, and that emotion will suddenly become a thing of the past. Still, these are the things which excite one's emotions and all achievements and failures are thus transformed and finally come to an end. The ancients stated that birth and death are great events. Such pain! In tracing the course of the emotion involved in building a grave I always feel grieved although I know that birth and death are illusions and that the (legendary) birth of Chi and the demise of Pong are untrue. Our concept of posterity is presently formulated and can be likened to our present view of the past. A sad situation! Therefore, I record and collate all the

writings of my contemporaries. Although the occasion may change from this one and although the next generation may be different from this one, what touches one's heart remains the same. Posterity will be inspired by these verses.

Early in the late spring month of the Chia Chen cycle (1784, copied by the emperor).

(Placed above the copy of Wang Xizhi's poem is the seal of Emperor Qianlong.)

On the reverse side of the mountain is another inscription, a poem written by the emperor himself:

The mountain of jade of Yutian was large.

It was carved to represent a literary gathering.

Elders and youth alike comprised the meeting.

The calligraphy was originally fashioned late in the Yungho reign;

And the writing has been authenticated on numerous occasions since then.

It pleases me that this colophon is genuine.

One should ask in this picture,

Who should be considered to be the man of jade?

By imperial decree, the Chia Chen cycle of the Qianlong reign.

Suggested Questions

1. The sculptor was inspired by a place and an event. What places inspire you? What events inspire you? How would you turn those inspirations into an artwork?
2. Pretend you are taking a walk across this sculpture. Describe what you see. Where did you start? Where did you end? What was the weather like? What did you do?

