
Title of Object

Visiting a Recluse with a Qin

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Attributed to Ma Lin

Culture: Chinese Song Dynasty

Date of Object: 13th century

Country: China

Accession Number: 2013.34.1

File Created: 5/11/2016

Material/Medium: Ink and colors on silk

Author of File: Jung Sook Wendeborn

Department: Chinese, South and Southeast
Asian Art

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

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Tour Topics

Group 2 tour, ancient culture, artist/patron, beauty, innovation/avant-garde, entertainment/music, nature, symbolism, ink wash painting

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Please take a few minutes to look at this painting. What have you noticed first?
2. What are similarities or differences do you see between the landscape on the sarcophagus you just saw and this painting?
3. From the ancient times and even nowadays, the Chinese believe that Five Blessings (or five good fortune) are essential for a good life. They are longevity, wealth, health, love of virtue, and peaceful death. What blessing would you choose if you are asked to add one?
4. If you were to hang this painting at your home, where would you hang it?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

This is a silk painting which is an art form, started in ancient China, with over 2000 years of history.

The painting is also a landscape painting which is considered to be the highest form of Chinese painting.

The painting is attributed to Ma Lin of the late 13th century. Ma artists evolved a formula for painting wherein the pictorial surface is divided in half diagonally: One side is filled with pictorial motifs, while the other side is left empty to suggest vast space.

Ink and Wash Painting method is used on this painting: It has Chinese origin that uses black ink.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Originating from China, silk painting (Chinese: sichouhua 丝绸画) is an art form that involves applying ink and colored pigment to silk cloth. Compared to wood, stone or bamboo of the time, silk was the ideal canvas for painting. It was luxurious and yet easy to cut to any desired shape and light to carry. Silk painting in China is believed to date back as far as the Warring States period (476-221 BC), reaching its height as an art form in the Western Han dynasty (206 BC to 25 AD). Artisans of the imperial courts first used silk as a medium for calligraphy painting, which at the time was thought to be the highest and purest form of painting. They used black ink made of pine soot and animal-based glues to silk scrolls. Up until 2nd century AD silk painting was exclusive to China as a result of their efforts to keep sericulture and silk production a secret. As silk became a highly coveted trading commodity, the art form gradually spread across Asia, making its way to Europe.

Many critics consider landscape to be the highest form of Chinese painting. During the early Song dynasty, images of the private retreat proliferated among a new class of scholar-officials. These men extolled the virtues of self-cultivation—often in response to political setbacks or career disappointments—and asserted their identity as literati through poetry, calligraphy, and a new style of painting that employed calligraphic brushwork for self-expressive ends.

Ink and Washing Painting method was developed in China during the Tang Dynasty art (618-907) and further refined during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The materials used in Wash Painting are very similar to those used in Calligraphy. Wash painters typically grind their own ink using an ink stick and a grinding stone. Ink sticks are usually composed of densely packed charcoal ash from bamboo or pine soot mixed with glue extracted from fish bones. Brushes can be made from goat hair, ox, horse, sheep, rabbit, marten, badger, deer or wolf hair. The ink and wash artist positions the brush vertically above the surface of the paper and controls its rhythmic movements from his shoulders. Exact precision is needed in this form of art as a brushstroke cannot be changed once it is made.

Ma Lin (ca. 1180-after 1256) is a son of famous painter Ma Yuan. Ma Yuan and Xia Gui were two great painters of the Southern Song academy, Ma-Xia school, Chinese school of painting. The aim of their landscapes was to create a feeling of limitless space, a vast atmospheric void out of which a few elements, such as mountain peaks and twisted trees, emerge with subdued drama. Ma and Xia are credited with the fullest expression of this tendency in Chinese painting. Ma Lin was admitted to the Imperial Painting Academy in the Jiatai era (1201-1204) of Emperor Ningzong of the Song Dynasty and, like his father, became a court painter. This painting is traditionally attributed to Ma Lin.

Motifs were sometimes connected to long life through physical attributes. The pine (song松) is regarded as a symbol of longevity because it is evergreen. Unlike most other trees, the pine does not wither during winter and thus represents noble endurance in the face of adversity and is often depicted as a popular and auspicious motif in Chinese decorative arts. The pursuit of longevity has played an unusually notable role in China. Societal respect for the elderly (a generally Confucian value) and the individual's search for longevity or immortality (a loosely Daoist concern) resulted in a preoccupation with long life that was reflected in the visual arts.

Qin playing has traditionally been elevated to a high spiritual and intellectual level. Writers of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) claimed that playing the qin helped to cultivate character, understand morality, supplicate gods and demons, enhance life, and enrich learning, beliefs that are still held today.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This painting is traditionally attributed to Ma Lin of the late 13th century. Ma artists evolved a formula for painting wherein the pictorial surface is divided in half diagonally. One side is filled with pictorial motifs, while the other side is left empty to suggest vast space. Here a scholar is shown being followed by his servant who carries a qin (a kind of lute). A feeling of vague melancholy is a hallmark of Ma Lin. Here, the lonely scholar pausing for a moment to enjoy the transient beauty of the mist-filled landscape strikes a poignant chord.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Information about Chinese Landscape Painting on Silk is available on many online sources. Below are some of the sources:

Landscape Painting in Chinese Art

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clpg/hd_clpg.htm

Art and culture during the Southern Song Dynasty (paintings, antiquities, and books), from the National Palace Museum:

http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh99/southern-song/en_03.html

Chinese Landscape Painting, in a video lecture series by noted scholar James Cahill. This is the episode on Ma Lin:

https://www.youtube.com/embed/Pc_SPFwCZIA

Here is a link to other lectures:

<http://www.jamescahill.info/a-pure-and-remote-view>

Chinese Symbols

https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Chinese_symbols_1109.pdf

Wu Fu (Five Lucks)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wu_Fu_%28Five_Luck%29

Art of Silk Painting, in a video demonstration from the Victoria and Albert Museum:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_Dn2OkwIQg