One of my elders and betters, who never spares the scalp, once suggested that in writing of recent accessions curators should confine themselves to the pithy information of the registrar’s record and let the object and its public meet unprejudiced by witless words. In presenting this painting I long to follow his advice. It is a work of such greatness, destined to have so many fine words written about it and to rejoice so many clear minds and eyes, that for once an inverterate gabbler is fairly tongue-tied.

To say this much is necessary: Painting on silk. Chinese. Early Sung dynasty. Probably eleventh century (some would say tenth). Subject, a white tribute horse with escort, moving through a mountain landscape.

A few clues to placing it in time and provenance are pertinent. There are many details of the landscape that have close likenesses to landscapes traditionally ascribed to Kuo Hsi (about 1020-1090). The towering pine tree in the right foreground is to be found in a fine landscape illustrated in plate 73 of The Pageant of Chinese Painting; the convoluted branches of the tree at the extreme left, through which we catch glimpses of banners, are to be found in another, reproduced in plate 69 of the same book; and the distant landscapes placed right and left of the great central cliff and the mountaintop itself, as well as the middle river landscape, have likenesses to a painting in the Bahr collection attributed to Kuo Hsi. But without pressing the resemblance to this particular artist, it can be shown that every element of the landscape has its analogy in paintings that today we are sure belong to the early Sung period. The great retreating cliffs at the left are close to those in the large landscape in Boston attributed to Fan Kuan, and the incredible gully in the left foreground has the authority of the landscape details of the Hokkei mandala. The red trees at the left are like those in The Deer Park, a painting from the Chinese Imperial Collection that was shown in London in the winter of 1935-1936 to the awe of all who saw it. Inch by inch and detail by detail our picture can be linked to the best we know of early Chinese landscapes.

But there is something else in this picture—the mundane procession that moves boldly across the landscape and dares to assume an equal importance. Now this is a rare thing and one to pause over. We have been taught, and quite rightly, I think, that the Chinese love to paint majestic landscapes with tiny philosophers sitting tranquilly in them or tiny processions threading their gorgeous way in and around great hills. We are told that this is because the Chinese realize man’s place in time and space, that he is a tiny creature compared with the hills and the sun and moon. But we are also told, and rightly again, that though his span seems short (as against that of a mountain or even a pine tree) man may have a spaciousness of mind that is timeless, so that when we see a tiny philosopher under a great pine tree looking calmly at distant mountain ranges we can judge his quality by the height of the pine and the grandeur of the peaks. Although this is one of those aftertruths got
up to explain an impression, some such intuitive idea may have unconsciously commanded these paintings.

The peculiar thing about our picture is that across one of the most majestic of Chinese landscapes there moves a procession of riders, bejewelled and glittering, so sure of themselves that they seem completely unaware of the scene through which they pass. If this were a European painting we could say, "Here is the Renaissance—man taking over his birthright." In late Chinese painting, it is true, there are pictures in which man dominates the landscape, but not in early Chinese painting; and not in either early or late Chinese painting have I seen one in which the interest is equally balanced. In this respect our picture seems to be what biologists call a sport. One might, however, advance an explanation for it: as a courtly compliment the painter was depicting the passage of one of the famous tribute horses of the T'ang emperor T'ai Tsung. (If so, this is the only time a painter weighed imperial glory against immortal hills.) Such a suggestion may go too far in guesswork, but something of the sort is happening.

The procession itself, without the landscape, is an enchanting thing and full of clues to help us place the picture. Its accoutrements have analogies to those in T'ang paintings (these are the gewgaws), but its essential elements are those of early Sung. We may therefore guess at a T'ang subject painted by a Sung artist. Among the details that by themselves can be compared to T'ang counterparts we have the trappings of the horses, the huge tassels depending from the bridles, the bits of bronze on the reins, the masks of the horses (which are elsewhere to be found only in a sketch from Tun Huang), the gilt-bronze-trimmed caparisons on the rumps of the horses of the Tatar warriors, the helmets of the warriors themselves, the emblems of office on the outriders (as in the frescoes of Wan Fo Hsia)—no end of details have their analogies with those of T'ang pictures. The horses themselves and the easy postures of their riders, however, are Sung. (Remember the stiff-legged T'ang horses in pottery and on the walls of Tun Huang, and then the low-slung, furry beasts of Sung as they are in the four panels of The Return of the Lady Wen Chi in Boston and in the album leaf in Cleveland.) The riders, too, are depicted with a certain pleasantness and lack of austerity that is characteristic of Sung painting. Surely these are Sung horses and Sung riders.

There are several technical features in the painting for which we cannot as yet find any parallels. Two main schools of landscape painting developed in the T'ang period—one the highly-colored school of Li Ssü-hsün, a dazzlement of green and blue cliffs often touched on the outlines with gold; the other, the monochrome school of Wang Wei, associated with the contemplative Ch'an sect of Buddhism—mystic and poetical. This landscape rightfully belongs to the second class, but it is a contradiction because the great receding shoulder of a cliff at the left is edged with soft smudges of gold that bring the light upon it with wondrous luminosity. This is the main part of the landscape so treated, and it is to be noticed that it is the cliff behind the imperial tribute horse. Furthermore, the rocks in the foreground have three subtle shades of color. Scarcely more than a suggestion but quite definitely there in pale, neutral shades are a faint blue, terracotta, and yellow. This is something that we have not seen before.

The picture is without documentary evidence (save in its inherent qualities). It has no signature, real or false, and the remains of two collectors' seals are illegible. It was purchased in Peking from a lesser dealer a few years back by a collector of great judgment and discernment, and was brought to New York and acquired by Charlemagne E. Wells, from whom the Museum bought it. With the enormous mass of material in the Orient it is not surprising that such things occasionally happen, particularly when a country is as troubled as China has been. Sometimes after the event we can trace back a history and an ownership; it is to be hoped that we can do so with this.

By some miracle the painting, which, if one looks close, is badly damaged, has scarcely—if indeed at all—been retouched. There was an
The Tribute Horse with Escort, moving through a mountain landscape. A Chinese painting on silk of the early Sung dynasty, probably eleventh century. 44\(\frac{7}{8}\) x 32\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches.
Two Tatar guardsmen, a detail from the Tribute Horse
A groom leading the tribute horse
A rocky crag and distant mountains, a detail from the Tribute Horse
Pine trees and distant landscapes, a detail from the Tribute Horse
instant's doubt about the faces of the Tatar horseman to the left and the halberdier immediately following the warriors, but the closest inspection with a magnifying glass shows no trace of overpainting, and it seems to have been a deliberate and successful attempt of the artist to characterize the coarseness of the Tatar and the groom.

This is a very great picture and bound to give endless pleasure to those who see it. We hope soon to publish a picture book with details from it, because, splendid as it is as a whole, in detail it is almost inexhaustible. At first glance one sees the austere splendor of the landscape and the great pine trees; one sees the glittering procession and feels the movement of the almost musical pattern of the horses' hooves and the light breeze animating the pennons. With leisure one is aware of the fine rocks in the foreground and follows back to the distant landscapes right and left of the central range of mountains. In the middle foreground there is a river landscape, and each tree is a beauty in itself. There seems to be in this whole picture no corner, no brush stroke even, that is without purpose and meaning.

An official and a bowman, a detail from the Tribute Horse