ENJOYING THE MOON

By ASCHWIN LIPPE

Associate Curator of Far Eastern Art

An old China hand tells the story how, on a summer evening in Peking, he wanted to show his guests the Nan-hai lake, with its pavilions and lotus flowers, under the full moon. Now this happened to be during the interregnum which followed the incident at the Marco Polo bridge in 1937. The Chinese troops had already left the city, and the mayor was trying to negotiate the entry of the Japanese in such a way as to save all concerned from too much loss of face. So the streets were deserted, all doors and gates were locked, and the party had some difficulty in arousing the gatekeeper of the Nan-hai palace. When he finally did answer their knocks he refused to let them in, holding forth with the equivalent of “Don’t you know there’s a war on?” Our friend explained that they wanted to look at the moon. This was an open-sesame; the doors were flung wide, the car drove in, and the gatekeeper led the visitors to a boat, which he then pushed slowly and silently through the lotus flowers over the silvery lake.

Gazing at the moon is an old and famous Chinese pastime. In congenial company, with a jug of wine and a lute, reciting, laughing and singing, or alone and in silent thought, many a night has been passed, many a poem born. Enjoying the Moon from the Bridge over the Brook is the title of the painting shown on the opposite page. The moon itself is not visible—to show it would probably have seemed vulgar to the artist. We see two scholars sitting peacefully on the little bridge, attended by a servant boy; they are contemplating the grandiose landscape, which is the real subject of the painting. The tiny humans are no more than a clue to its mood; their importance is in direct relation to their size. One of the two is presumably the artist who, in his studio, recreated for us the panorama he had enjoyed and admired. The landscape, half real, half ideal, which he painted from this vision inspired another artist to copy or rather to re-produce it. This latter picture, the one shown here, we do not hesitate to call one of the best Chinese landscape paintings in our collection.

Its composition and organization are strikingly impressive and successful. Starting from the bridge, we pass under the arch of an old tree overgrown with drooping moss. We follow the path through the splendid group of trees on the right, the edge of the forest, over the rocky little glen, to the group of pavilions in the middle ground, whence a figure with lantern and dog is coming to meet us. Two women are standing in the door of the lodge. Here the trees grow hazy and fade away in the mist that overhangs the valley and helps to give depth to the picture. Out of the haze soar the towering mountain peaks, drawing our eyes upwards, dominating the scenery, their bizarre shapes clearly modeled. Stepping back ten or twenty yards from the picture, we feel even more strongly the impact and forcefulness of this great composition.

Let us not forget, however, that in China—just as in the West up to very recent days—composition was and is regarded as less important than technique. This is what so often fools us: a poor copy or a forgery can retain much or all of the composition of a great master. But if it is badly executed it still will be a bad painting. Technique in Chinese painting means brushwork and ink values, pi and mo. Taking a close look at the details of our painting, we recognize the sureness and force of the brush strokes in every line. Our eyes open to the extraordinary richness in ink shades; from the pale, wet ink of the leaves on the right over the exuberant rich black of the pine tree to the mountains with their well-distributed accents of a very dry brush (kan-pi), which the Chinese connoisseur appreciates so much and which here still suggest the distant vegetation. We realize how colorful ink can be, if properly handled. This is an ink landscape; but the
artist has added some light color to it—a lovely pale pinkish brown wash on mountains and rocks, tree trunks, and buildings; some pink on the figures; and perhaps a touch of blue mixed with the diluted ink in the hazy grove around the lodge and the leaves in the right foreground. These light red and blue shades were a favorite color combination with artists who did not follow the more archaic tradition of the stylized blue and green landscapes. Their use of color is more subtle and sensitive, less decorative but just as free from naturalistic tendencies.

The painting carries an inscription by the artist, Ku I-teh, which is cyclically dated in correspondence with 1628. Who was Ku I-teh? The Chinese biographical dictionary of painters (p. 738) quotes the gazetteer of his home prefecture—Sung-chiang in Kiangsu—and another source as saying that he was a nephew of Ku Cheng-i; that he painted landscapes in the style of Wang Meng (died 1385) and also Buddhist subjects, and that he was known for his brilliant and clean brushwork. This is not much information. His uncle, Ku Cheng-i, a grand secretary of the central government during the Wan-li period (1573-1620), is much better known. He was a painter of landscapes in the style of Huang Kung-wang (1269-1354) and founder of the Hua-t'ing school of painters. Posthumously he was honored by being represented at the London exhibition of 1936.

To come back to Ku I-teh, Ferguson lists three recorded paintings by him, two of which were in the collection of the Ch'ing emperor Kao-tsung (Ch'ien-lung). One of these is reproduced in the publication of the Peking Palace Museum (Shu-hua chi, 22, and Pageant, p. 677): it is a landscape in colors on paper, dated 1620, with colophons by the famous Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1696) and his friend, the writer and calligrapher Ch'en Chi-ju (1558-1639)—who, by the way, about 1630 also served as editor of the above-mentioned gazetteer. This very attractive painting is done in a somewhat archaistic style and clearly has nothing to do with Wang Meng.

Ku I-teh's inscription on our painting contains a

*Enjoying the Moon from the Bridge over the Brook,* painted in 1628 by Ku I-teh after Wang Meng (died 1385). H. 60 3/4 in. Gift of John C. Ferguson, 1913
dedication to a friend and—more interesting—it states that the picture was copied after Wang Meng. It may be baffling to hear this painting called a copy, yet the artist called it so himself and used the term lin—to copy in the presence of the original! We must bear in mind, however, that the technique of Chinese ink painting makes it obligatory to “write” a picture down in a spontaneous and calligraphic manner—hardly the Western idea of copying. The vigor and spontaneity in every detail of Ku’s painting show his mastery of this technique, in which any weakness, any hesitancy would otherwise show inevitably and unalterably in the brush strokes. Still, we may take it for granted that his version corresponds fairly closely to the Wang Meng picture—of which, unfortunately, no reproduction can be discovered. This is evident from the composition. In many of the reproduced paintings attributed to Wang Meng we find a strongly accentuated group of trees in the foreground; a village or some pavilions in the middle; towering mountains in the background (compare To So, p. 171) which sometimes rise out of the mist in exactly the same manner (see Ku-kung, 29). It is even more obvious in the style of painting, especially in the wrinkles or veins that model and bring to life the shapes of rocks and mountains—without reference to the fleeting play of light and shadow. In his last years, Wang Meng used an altogether dry brush; so this picture would correspond to a somewhat earlier but fully mature period of his work.

In the colophon by Tung Ch’i-ch’ang on the top part of Ku’s painting, Tung mentions the title of the Wang Meng picture, “Enjoying the Moon from the Bridge over the Brook,” and we are able to trace its history in the literature of recorded paintings. Tung Ch’i-ch’ang writes (see Pei-uen, 86, 9) that it showed a panorama near the T’ai-hu lake, with the Tung-t’ing mountains in the background. For that reason the painting also went under the title “The House in the Woods near the Great Lake.” He points out the insistence on detail and the abundant and flourishing vegetation, which we also recognize in Ku I-teh’s painting. Another contemporary of Ku’s, Chan Ching-feng, also describes the Wang Meng picture (Pei-uen, 99, 6). He feels in it the atmosphere of early dawn—maybe in response to the same pale colors that we admire in Ku’s version. Chan Ching-feng tells us that he saw this picture in the collection of Ku Chung-fang, who is no other than Ku Cheng-i, the uncle of Ku I-teh. Later, toward 1680, the painting was reported to be in the house of a certain Han Ts’u-liang and finally it wound up in the collection of Emperor Kao-tsun (Ch’ien-lung). As it could not be found in the record of paintings which have disappeared from the former Imperial Collection we checked with the record of objects from the Peking Museums that were removed to the South in 1933 and 1934 and finally found it listed there (vol. iv, p. 59). This means that it probably still exists, perhaps in Formosa by now.

In his colophon on our Ku I-teh painting, Tung Ch’i-ch’ang goes on to say that in this “copy” the pupil far surpassed his master. This statement contains, perhaps, a certain amount of polite and poetic exaggeration. We need not dismiss it too lightly though. Tung, a scholar, artist, and high official at the end of the Ming dynasty (in 1628 he had recently resigned from the presidency of the Board of Ceremonies), played a most important part as an art critic and historian and was the outstanding exponent of the new aesthetic trends, which emphasized the literary painting (Wen-jen hua) as the artistic ideal. As an artist he was more famous for his calligraphy than for his paintings. Tung and his well-known friend Ch’en Chi-ju were neighbors of Ku I-teh and appreciated his work; and Tung also had seen the Wang Meng picture in the
Detail of the painting on page 231
Detail of the painting on page 231. At upper left, seals of Liang Ch'ing-piao (1620-1691)

234
house of Ku's uncle, so he knew what he was talking about.

The interest of these artists in Wang Meng is not accidental, for Wang was one of the so-called Four Great Masters of the Yuan dynasty, whose art marks the beginning of a new period in Chinese painting, though they themselves claimed the artists of the early Sung dynasty as their spiritual fathers. The influence of the Yuan painters became prevalent in Ming times with the ascendancy of the literary school, and it was to remain, in a further stage of development, the leading tradition with the great Ch'ing dynasty artists. The other three great Yuan masters were Huang Kung-wang, Wu Chen, and Ni Tsan. The fate of Wang Meng was a tragic one: he got involved in a treason case and, though innocent, died a miserable death in a Ming prison.

Genuine works of the famous Yuan painters have become very rare, and extremely few exist in this country. So it is also as a glorious reflection of Wang Meng's painting that our picture deserves attention. There is another proof that our Ku I-teh answers to the highest standards of Chinese connoisseurship: it carries the seals of Liang Ch'ing-piao (1620-1691). Liang probably was the most knowledgeable and discriminating Chinese collector of all time; of him it may truly be said that he had "the taste of angels." He mainly collected old masters, and the comparatively few "modern" paintings he acquired had to stand up to the best that the great earlier period had produced.

Some readers may still be hampered in their response by the idea that this painting is a copy inasmuch as its composition is not original. The appreciation of Chinese painting in general has suffered from similar reservations: it is sometimes called academic, traditional, and lacking in integrity. Such criticisms, based on too limited an acquaintance with authentic and good Chinese paintings, are easily refuted. Though tradition has been stronger in China than in the West (especially if we include the last seventy-five years in Western history of art) it left a wide enough margin for the originality of the artist. And fortunately Chinese artists seem to have suffered less from the urge to prove their creativeness by trying to be original at all costs. When they actually copied another composition, as Ku I-teh did here, they probably felt much the same as a musician interpreting and rendering a piece of classical music.

This picture is historically important as a reflection, equal in rank, of a great Yuan dynasty painter whose work is hardly accessible to us any more; it is interesting because of its background, for it stems from an artistic and intellectual coterie that had an enormous influence on the history of so-called "later" Chinese painting. What is more—it is a great landscape painting in its own right, as demonstrated by its brilliant technique. This judgment is well supported by two of the most outstanding connoisseurs in Chinese art history, men of the seventeenth century. And we feel confident that the Westerner of the twentieth century, in spite of different background and associations, will not fail to agree with it.

Inscription by Tung Ch'i-ch'ang