SOUTHERN SUNG LANDSCAPES:
THE HANGING SCROLLS

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“Alone, aloud in the raptured ear of men
We pour our dark nocturnal secret; and then,
As night is withdrawn
From these sweet-springing meads and bursting boughs of May,
Dream, while the innumerable choir of day
Welcome the dawn.”

No one should, and few do, ask poets to be ornithologically accurate when they sing of birds; but it has always troubled me, for instance, to have that sharp-eyed observer Stella Benson pass off a flock of those small white-throated crows one sees in China as a flock of migrating starlings, and this in early September. For poets the nightingale is less an actual bird than the symbol of the poet’s own heart throb; in poetry it is indeed a lovely bird. “Beautiful must be the mountains whence ye come,” says Mr. Bridges, and then puts contradiction into the throats of the nightingales: “Nay, barren are those mountains and spent the streams,” the nightingales reply. Once I lunched in a particularly small and unattractive oasis in Turkestan which sounded like a romantic place as it was said to be famous for its tigers and its nightingales, but I neither saw the switch of a striped orange tail nor heard the feeblest chirp of any bird. Oh, poor sad nightingales! Where did you go? Back into the lovely lines of Keats and Shelley?

One thing is certain: the nightingales did not go into the beautiful actuals of Sung landscape painting. In Sung painting birds appear almost portraitwise in pictures devoted solely to birds; they also appear as tiny grace notes in the long horizontal landscape scrolls—as items in the pageant of the day, the movement of the hours—where the painter, wishing us to enjoy the feeling of movement, includes birds in flight and human beings walking and invites us too to stroll in his panorama. But in the large hanging scrolls of the school called Southern Sung birds appear scarcely at all. There must be some reason for this and it may well be that, whereas in the horizontal scrolls the painter desired to convey the idea of hills and streams as they would be seen if the beholder moved through them, in the large hanging scrolls he wishes the beholder to be in complete harmony with and so completely quiet in the particular scene to which he is invited.

The hanging landscape scrolls attributed to the Southern Sung school are supposed to be the expression of that contemplative phase of Buddhism called Zen in Japan and Chan in China. We have been told much of this philosophy and its symbolism. Often in these landscapes there is a scholar (or sometimes two scholars), very tiny in comparison to the scene he sits in. We are informed that we can gauge the profundity of the scholar’s mind by the loftiness of the mountains in the distance. We are further told that when gnarled, ancient trees appear they are the symbols of the scholar’s years; that, when hung with vines, the vines symbolize the chains of habit impeding the growth of the tree; and that when the painter calls our attention to a small picture of a morning glory, a flower which blooms briefly and fades, we are to understand that the morning glory which appears for an instant, the pine tree which appears for some hundreds of years, and the mountains which hold up their heads for almost countless millions are all one and the same—in the long run, each is relatively only a moment of time.

Such thoughts as these can make a human being feel very noble and wise if he accepts his place in this majestic scheme, or it can make him feel very ignominious and resentful if he does not accept it. And just there, in the attitude towards nature, is a great difference be-
Landscape with Scholar and Attendant, style of Hsia Kuei (1180-1230), Southern Sung school. From the Bahr collection. Fletcher Fund, 1947
West must attempt to conquer the winds with frail machines, harness the streams with brittle dams; it has even succeeded at long last in hatching that monster the exploding atom, which at the least scares almost everybody to death—all but the very brash who believe they can enslave it. Of this attitude you will find little or nothing in China. The West attempts to dominate nature. The Chinese accept it as they find it and seem to understand their place in the world as being part of it. They make no such sharp distinction between man and beast as the West does. The West does not allow that entity called a soul to any living thing save man. The Chinese believe that the soul, before it reaches perfection, may return and return again; not only may your soul or mine return according to our deserts in the body of a better human being, but it may return in the body of a venomous serpent or a monkey or even in a plant or a lump of jade. For the Chinese it is the same spirit force that lives in mineral and plant and animal. Hence the Chinese look upon natural things with an eye and feeling more intimate than is common to the West. The scholar seated under the ancient pine looking out upon the lofty hills is not alone; he is part of them and they of him.

These things are pleasant to know. It is also an interesting and productive entertainment to try to discover what the Chinese were thinking of and what they meant by the six canons of painting laid down by Hsieh Ho. It is pleasurable to contemplate the meaning of the chi-yun sheng-tung, “spirit resonance life movement,” or of “naturalness,” tsu-juan; “effortlessness,” the i; “universal principles,” the li; “bone means,” ku-fa; “structural strength,” shih; “pictorial reality,” another character pronounced shih; “seasonal aspect,” ching; “brush,” pi; and “ink,” mo. These searches and contemplations are the agreeable pursuits of Orientalists. Very fine pursuits they are too, but when almost all the scholars engaged upon them assure the reader that without all this and a good deal more there is nothing in Chinese painting for him and that he cannot understand a thing without it I am inclined to vulgarly exclaim, “Oh, go chase yourself!”
The essentials of this world we find ourselves in, and any pictorial manifestation made by any painter from the prehistoric cavemen down, are perfectly simple and available to anybody with eyes. One would have thought that all this chi-chi about the mysterious East was outmoded long ago; but it seems to persist and break out with new virulence and new stupidities. In the lectures on art I have heard and in the books I have read I have never heard or seen it said that in order to admire the Sistine chapel or the galaxy of saints in Orcagna's Paradise one must be either a Catholic or even a Christian; only scholars ask which saint is which or determine Saint Catherine by her wheel or Saint Agnes by her lamb. Then why, when we are confronted by the presentment of such simple things as hills and streams and trees with gentle scholars contemplating them, are we told that without a lifetime of study and research we cannot possibly understand them?

Is this not a silliness? Of course it is. Civilization and the human mind seem bent on weaving intricate webs and schemes and getting caught by them. One new, complicated fantasy after another they get up and call them sciences and humanities. While little men are bent on this the universe goes quietly upon its way. The sun rises and sets where it is bound to set, the moon waxes and wanes, and cleverer and cleverer as he grows man is unlikely to upset them much.

One room of the Metropolitan Museum is devoted to landscapes in the style of the T'ang and Sung dynasties; this is one of the most beautiful rooms in the world. Here hang a score of great landscapes, mostly in what is called monochrome, painted on silk which was never white but which has darkened considerably with age; painted in ink, not ink as we know it, watery and pale, but ink ground down from hardened blocks of pure black, ink which when handled as the Chinese do is capable of variations and subtleties of shading far more telling, profounder somehow, than any play of color. The effect of a number of them is cumulative; they seem to catch light and spirit (ch'i, perhaps) one from another until in one comparatively small room a kind of magic is generated, and this small square cube becomes so powerful that it stands out against, it displaces like a foreign body, the day and age wherein it finds itself assembled out of the past. It is an agreeable and curious experience to enter this room. More than in other rooms the noisy hum
River Valley in Mist, Southern Sung school. From the Bahr collection. Fletcher Fund, 1947
of Fifth Avenue is forgotten, and the outrageous roar of the airplane (a sound as evil as the
whir of the dentist’s drill increased a thousandfold) seems shut completely out. Just as the
children in the Nesbit story could walk from their shabby London house through their amu-
let and find themselves in the past, so in this room one walks into China and the Chinese
mind of eight hundred years and more ago. Here in the landscape paintings of the Southern
Sung school one will find the expression of the harmony between man and nature at its most
harmonious moment. It is the school most ad-
mired by the Chinese themselves, a state of
mind rarely if ever recaptured by them in later
painting.

At the moment this school is out of fashion
with the rising generation of Orientalists. It is
always interesting to note changes of fashion.
Just now the long-neglected Ming paintings
have become the center of interest (and dazzling
things they are too), but whoever would have
thought that contemporary taste would turn
and cast contumely on the landscapes of South-
ern Sung, which even ten years ago were gener-
ally revered and sacrosanct? They still are to
the old and wise. But my astonied ears are as-
saulted with protests. I hear that in the first
place almost no authentic paintings of the Sung
dynasty exist and that probably none of these
large hanging scrolls are either of the period or
by the painters to which they are attributed.
This is bearable because nobody ever made
great insistence on this point anyway. Granted
that the names and dates of all of them are mat-
ters for dispute, whoever painted them or when,
they are reflections dim or clear of a great school
of landscape painting, and, as such, every one
of them has value. But when I hear more, when
I hear that Western connoisseurship was de-

rived from the Japanese, and that the Japanese
through all these centuries overrated Sung
painting, and that Sung painting was at best, I
gather, no very great shakes, then I am startled
and cry out “Halt!” A lion bitten by a mouse
could be no more surprised than I at this idea.
Goodness, one has seen Western taste in land-
scape swing from Corot to Courbet, from Cour-
bet to Monet, from Monet to Cézanne, from
Cézanne to Van Gogh; but while taste changes,

few contemporary critics are so brash as to tell
us that Corot was no good at all—they will allow
that Corot might come back to favor. Is Sung
landscape painting about to be put on the shelf
by a generation of vipers and our galleries filled
with the stormy virtuositities or suave insipidi-
ties of the Ming and Ch‘ing landscapes? I hope
not.

The landscape paintings in the style called
Southern Sung were painted by men who, as
most men do, liked being out of doors and liked
to look at rivers and mountains. They set down
with brush and variations of black ink the es-

sence of the world they saw, and what they set
down in a fashion simple and direct is available
to any human eye. That phrase “the essence of
the world they saw” is correct but a little too
simple to explain what, although it is a very sim-
ple thing, seems to upset Western writers about
oriental pictures almost more than anything
else. These writers, quite calm when confronted
by the fantasy landscapes of Corot or Claude
Lorrain, suddenly develop a postcard eye when
confronted with a Chinese landscape. They find
it profound and wonderful—the outcome of
Chan contemplation and I do not know what
all—that the Chinese painter, having learned to
draw a mountain or a tree, does not confine
himself to a postcard view but selects and sets
down mountains and trees as he chooses; often
when he gives his pictures place names—“The
Eight Famous Views,” for example—the scenes
are recognizable, though they would not do for
a geographical survey. And the scene is often
beautiful. These are landscapes of the mind,
poetical, majestic, free. There is no doubt that
they differ from Western landscapes, but while
this is partly attitude of mind it is more a mat-
ter of practical things like selection and tech-
nique. Westerners, when they talk of painting,
usually mean oil painting or at least fresco; it
seems never to occur to them to compare line
drawing or gouache to Chinese painting, which
is essentially water color developed to an im-
portance where it must be considered “paint-
ing.” The Libor Studiorum of Turner and these
Chinese monochromes I speak of have points of

technique in common. Just as the Chinese

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Summer Landscape, style of Hsia Kuei (1180-1230), Southern Sung school.
From the Bahr collection. Fletcher Fund, 1947
learned to paint the suggestion of a particular species of tree, so Turner, more haphazard, learned to vary the forestration of a hillside so that one can pick out in his jottings different kinds of trees.

An essential thing in these Sung landscapes is, I think, that by choice the painters simplify and understate. Understanding clearly the nature of the various components of their landscapes, they choose the details freely and place them as they choose. They paint a shadowy outline of distant hills and put one pine or willow tree in the foreground and a tiny man. Each hill or tree or human being is by itself realistic enough (if by realistic we mean having an actual likeness), and the whole is in a sense realistic. We who look at these pictures may respond as one does to a line of poetry or a musical phrase. Certainly there has never been a more lovely presentment of nature than these Sung monochromes in the history of landscape painting.

The subject of Southern Sung landscapes was originally intended to appear in the series of articles entitled “Birds.” It has itself, however, developed into a series of articles, which will appear in successive issues of the Bulletin.

The lines with which the present article opens are from “Nightingales,” one of the Shorter Poems of Robert Bridges; they are used here by permission of the Clarendon Press, Oxford.