THE WATERFALL

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In Chinese painting of the last thousand years color has not played the role it has enjoyed in the West. Since the Sung and, especially, the Yuán dynasty it has been chiefly confined to religious art and portraiture—the domain of the artisan—to some archaizing schools of landscape (blue and green), and to traditional genre and flower painting. In the main stream of Chinese painting it was largely replaced by ink, with its infinite variety of shades. Even when it was used by the great masters of monochrome landscape the emphasis remained on the work of brush and ink, which was only heightened and accentuated by delicate shades and washes in color.

It has been argued that color was neglected by the Chinese because they considered it, like light and shadow, something superficial, fleeting and illusive. As a matter of fact, the ascendency of ink painting seems to have been due first to the rise of the so-called gentlemen painters and later, and more particularly, of the literati. The theories of gentleman painting (shih-tai-fu hua) were aesthetic and had nothing to do with sociology. By the time they became prominent, with Su Shih (Su Tung-p'o) and other artists of the Sung dynasty, gentlemen as a class had long since taken over painting and the skilled but uneducated craftsmen were relegated to decorative religious paintings, murals, and portraits, which were considered inferior tasks. The gentlemen painters opposed professionals of more or less equal social standing, the court painters and academicians.

The painters living in the country were, of course, more independent in their life and more individualistic in their art than the members of the Imperial Academy of Painting. The latter, strictly bound by traditional patterns, emphasized copying of the old masters, preparation of a picture by a series of sketches, and striving after form. The former insisted on spontaneity, on inner truth as compared with outward similarity, on the expression of feelings and ideas. The poet painter was their ideal; poetry and painting were for them sister arts, or rather one and the same art of self-expression, different in means only. Su Shih called painting “poetry without sound”—Lieder ohne Worte. He also said, “To judge painting by form and similarity is to put oneself on a level with a child.”

The identification of the artist with nature, a basic prerequisite of these aesthetic theories, is a thought that clearly shows the strong Taoist influence on the Chinese philosophy of the period.

Some of these ideas actually go back as far as the Tang dynasty, when ink painting came into use. Already in that period Chang Yen-yuan (A.D. 847) opposed ch'i-yün (“spirit-consonance”) to form and brushwork to color. He also emphasized the intimate relationship of painting and calligraphy, both relying on the same strokes of the brush.

These theories were to play an ever increasing role and practically determined the growth of what is generally called “literary” Chinese painting. Further developed by various writers in the two hundred years after Chang Yen-yuan, Su Shih gave them great prominence and Mi Fu (Mi Fei) and his son first put them into practice. The following Yuán dynasty brought, with the great change in the style of landscape painting, the gentlemen’s victory over the academic mannerists. The tradition of the Yuán masters was dominant until late in the Ch’ing dynasty.

The theories of gentleman painting led into the even more radical ones of “literary painting” (wen-jen hua)—a term first used in the Ming dynasty, particularly by Tung Ch’i-ch’ang and his followers. The literati, not content with staying away from the court, refused that old Confucian duty of taking part...
in public life. They studied the old masters but tried to catch their spirit rather than their style. They studied and made sketches from nature and tried to grasp its essence, its inner life.

Like the gentlemen painters the literati represented a way of life and a basic approach to art rather than a particular style. These basic tenets are what they tried to express in their art. The manner or bearing, the attitude of refinement as against vulgarity, constituted the spirit of a gentleman in painting (Chang Keng, Fang Hsûn). Painting was compared to poetry and to music: “The method of painting is the same as that of poetry and essay-writing. Only if it has the spirit of a piece of writing, can one talk of painting.” “The Tao (Way) of music is altogether the same as that of painting. The sharp or flat (key) of a tone is like the spirit-consonance of a painting; the order of tones like a painting’s framework; the tones’ rising and falling like brush and ink in a painting” (Wang Yüan-ch’i). The calligraphic quality of the line was emphasized: “Somebody asked: what is the idea of that gentleman painting? The answer was: it is all comprised in just one word—write. This phrase hits it perfectly. One must write and not draw (delineate)—that is painting. Once one begins to delineate a painting, it is already a vulgar piece of craftsmanship” (Wang Hui). This reminds us of what Chang Yen-yüan had said about the relationship between painting and calligraphy. And through all these centuries we find again and again that the gentlemen painters, the artists of the “Southern” school, the literati, liked to use the term “write” instead of “paint.” Calligraphy and painting in China use the same means, have the same technique. Writing further implies the spontaneous and alive in the brush stroke more than drawing. And as T’ang Hou (1390) said of the use of the word “write” in painting plum blossoms, bamboo, or orchids, “Of the purest of flowers the painter must write down the idea; it does not lie in outward form and likeness.”

During the Ming dynasty the two greatest and most influential representatives of the literary school were Shen Chou (1427-1509) and his younger friend and pupil Wen Cheng-ming (1470-1559). Both were poet painters, and both, especially Wen, were famous calligraphers. The album leaf from Kansas City, painted when the artist was eighty years old, shows Wen at his best (ill. page 66). Calligraphic and spontaneous brush strokes in deep and light shades of ink vary with a masterly use of the dry brush in a compact and powerful composition. Old tree and rock also have a symbolic connotation, of age and of integrity. Together with the

*The Waterfall, painted in 1559 by Chü Chieh, school of Wen Cheng-ming. Ink on paper. Gift of John Ferguson, 1913*
Detail of the painting by Chü Chieh on page 61
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bamboo they form the well-known group of the “three pure ones.” When we recall the idea of the artist’s identification with nature, with, for instance, a bamboo, possible only when he has the same moral qualities that are symbolized and associated with it, when he is completely in tune with it, the gnarled cypress and the hollowed rock get the overtones of a self-portrait.

The Chinese art histories tell us that one of Wen Cheng-ming’s most gifted pupils was Chü Chieh, by whom there is a very fine painting in this Museum’s collection. The composition, with its piled-up mountains reaching high into the sky, is typical for Wen and the group of painters around him. So is the extensive use of the dry brush with accents of dark, wet ink; so are the twisted tree trunks and the withered cypresses. A detail of the distant peaks and cliffs from which the waterfall descends reveals a delicate and sensitive brushwork. Each kind of tree is well defined and typified in foliage and growth, and the beautiful big one in the foreground proudly carrying its weirdly groping branches, its thousand boughs and twigs, seems to be the principal character of the painting, more than the scholar sitting under it who gazes at the falls.

Chinese monochrome paintings have sometimes been compared to Western drawings, especially to drawings with the pen, which ask for a spontaneity comparable to that of the Chinese brush. And while, for example, some works of Hsia Kuei might make us think of Rembrandt’s ink drawings, Chü Chieh’s painting could suggest somebody like Altdorfer, Dürer, or Bruegel. Look at the landscape frame of Dürer’s famous etching of Saint Hubert, or at similar works by Cranach; look at Altdorfer’s lovely pen drawing of a Danube landscape (1511). We get even closer when we turn to Bruegel’s beautiful drawings—the hilly landscape in London, the rocky mountains of the Waltersburg, the grandiose views of the Alps in Paris and in The Morgan Library (all about 1553). True, where Dürer has a romantic castle rise in the background Chü Chieh shows us a fortress of rocks built by nature herself towering into the sky. But Dürer’s linear style, where each stroke has its function and its beauty, is something a Chinese would appreciate. Altdorfer’s poetic and sensitive landscape, based on the impressions of scenery he had actually seen, has something general and eternal in character. This very quality Chü Chieh and most other Chinese artists strove for, who painted studio landscapes, imaginary though nourished by memories and sketches. Bruegel discovered nature when he traveled over the Alps to Italy. His landscapes, at least in part, are done after nature. But they are transformed by his attitude towards nature, which for him is alive, animated by a spirit pervading the whole universe. His mountains are living, breathing, growing; so are the grasses, brushes, and trees they produced. The vital principle of this universe is what the artist seeks to show—an attitude practically identical with that of the Chinese gentleman or scholar painter. Dürer’s studies of plants and flowers show a realistic approach just like the anatomical studies of Vesalius. However, as we are not in the confessional here, the possible intentions of the artists are not the only thing that counts. And their works are, with all the interest in the forms of nature, imbued with a poetic spirit, a search for inner reality or, to use a Chinese term, for the “inherent reason” which distinguishes them from the dull and superficial realism of the nineteenth century and its descendants. The differences between Eastern and Western painting and drawing remain great, but we believe them to be essentially differences of technique.

To come back to our artist Chü Chieh, the Chinese sources do not tell us very much about him. He came from Wu-hsien, the Soochow of today, which produced so many painters. As a youth he became a pupil of Wen Cheng-ming or perhaps first of one of his sons. Wen’s influence was very strong in his painting and also in his calligraphy and poetry. One of the best painters among Wen’s followers, he is also praised by some critics as the outstanding poet of the group. His poetic works, known as The Swineherd’s Collection,
The Waltersburg, drawing by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, about 1553. Bowdoin College Museum

have appeared in many anthologies.

Chü’s family was under the jurisdiction of the Department of Textiles and probably connected with the Soochow imperial silk factory. The powerful Superintendent of Weaving heard of his fame and summoned him to present himself. When Chü would not obey, the furious magistrate accused him of defrauding the treasury, had him arrested, and ruined the family. Thereafter Chü lived frugally in
a few rooms in the near-by hills, among hermits and bonzes. Happy in his poverty and solitude, he kept his integrity and painted for his pleasure. Whenever he happened to make some money with his brush, he would assemble his friends for a party. And when he had nothing to eat at all, he would rise early, “write” a scroll with some sparse pine trees before distant cliffs, and call a boy to barter it for rice to cook. At the age of fifty-nine he died.

This digest of the usual anecdotes shows us the scholar painter Chü Chieh if not as he was, at least as he was supposed to have been. With all the poverty, integrity of character, and generosity with wine, he must, somewhat to our surprise, have been able to raise and support a family, for we know from other sources that he had at least one son, also a painter. There are three more remarks in these texts which are of interest. One says that his painting and his calligraphy were both alike, clear and lovely. The other calls his style terse and full of meaning and goes on to say that it had the mood or atmosphere of the Sung painters. The third calls it delightful refinement. All these characterizations define qualities which seem to be evident also in our painting: clarity combined with a restrained and refined elegance, and also a certain terseness and scholarliness which may well go back to ancient traditions but which seems to us to be typical for this group of wen-jen, of literary painters of the sixteenth century.

Few paintings by Chü Chieh are known through publication. The Stockholm National Museum owns a landscape dated 1576 attributed to him. Of several pictures in the former Palace Museum in Peking two have been published. One, a copy of Wen Cheng-ming's Drinking Tea, is dated 1534. It follows fairly closely the painting by Wen of 1531, which was also in the Palace Museum. The other, a grandiose mountain landscape dated 1582, is called The Old Drunkard's Pavilion after the famous prose poem by Ou-yang Hsiu (translated by Giles). This late date is confirmed by an album of 1583, described in the Ch'ien-lung catalogue, and by a poem of 1582, in which Chü speaks of having been ill for years. A small but charming dry-brush landscape formerly in the Chang Ts'ung-yü collection, dated 1574, is now owned by a New York dealer.

All these pictures fit in well with ours in
style and technique. The copy after Wen, however, poses a problem. If he died at fifty-nine Chü would have had to paint it at the age of ten at the most, which would make him a veritable child prodigy. Child prodigies existed in China perhaps more often than in our parts of the world, their education frequently beginning at the age of three. But such precocity would have been duly and gladly recorded by his biographers. And the note about the age he reached stems from the local chronicle, which culled it from Ch’ien Ch’ien-i, a poet and essayist born in 1582, whose anthology was printed in 1649—a fairly early source.

The artist’s inscription on our painting reads as follows: “In the i-wei year of the Chia-ching reign (1559) on a day of the Little Cold season (approximately January 6—20) Hsüan-chin dropped by to pay a call and produced this paper, pressing me for a painting by my clumsy brush. At that time I had been ill and had long neglected brush and inkstone. In a disorderly way I daubed and rubbed; surely one must find it awful. May Hsüan-chin not be offended with my soiling his beautiful paper. Inscribed by Chü Chieh.” We have not been able to identify his friend Hsüan-chin, to whom also some of his poems are dedicated.

The inscription in the upper right, by the Ch’ien-lung emperor, is one of his mediocre poems, distinguished by the usual literary allusions. It speaks of the spring in the rocks, falling from lofty peaks over many thousand feet, which goes on flowing away for nobody knows how many miles; it speaks of the hermit who dips his feet in the water, his hair let down, and of the new vistas opened up by the artist. Like other colophons and encomiums it has perhaps the merit of mentioning some of the associations of ideas which would pass through the mind of an educated Chinese in front of a painting. It is dated 1761 and accompanied by the seals of the emperor and his collection. As the painting is not included in the first supplement (1793) to his famous catalogue (1745) it must have been given away by him between 1761 and 1793, for which the double-dragon seal with the characters “gracious gift” probably is the token. Before it was acquired by the emperor, it had been, as attested by two seals, in the famous collection of Liang Ch’ing-piao (1620—1691), whom we had occasion to mention previously. His seals, far more than those of the emperor, confirm our claim that we have here a very fine example of the wen-jen hua, or literary school of painting.

“Literary” painting has existed in the West during all periods and particularly in the Renaissance. We are also used to poems having at least one double bottom. And in spite of all attacks, we still prefer literary painting to Grandma Moses, in China as well as here. However, even if we disregard the literary overtones and associations of ideas, the technical quality of this ink painting as well as its loving understanding of nature will speak to us directly enough.