THE HIDDEN TREASURES OF CHINA
A VISIT TO FORMOSA

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From time to time in recent years our attention has been focused on Taiwan, with daily news in the papers about the situation in the Formosa straits. But few people realize that Taiwan is not only of strategic and political significance but also the repository of one of the greatest art collections in the world.

There has been a lot of speculation among lovers of Chinese art as to what became of the great treasures of China, notably the former imperial collection, most of which had once been housed in the Palace Museum in Peking. A selection from this vast collection had been shown in London in the winter of 1935/36. Peking was occupied by the Japanese army in July 1937. Long before this happened, by 1934, the cream of the Palace Museum collection had been gradually packed in many thousands of cases and shipped to Nanking, where also the objects from the London exhibition returned.

Nanking soon had to be abandoned, and the art treasures were moved again and again, finally to hiding places in Szu-ch’uan and Kuei-chou, where they remained till the end of the war.

In 1945 Horace H. F. Jayne, Vice-Director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, had the opportunity to spend a day at one of these hide-outs, where he saw a number of paintings, including some that had been shown in London.¹ After this brief and dazzling glance many years were to pass once more without any Western eyes being able to see these great treasures. Even their whereabouts remained for much of this time unknown or obscure to the Western world. Finally we learned that they had returned to Nanking, when the rapid deterioration of the military and political situation made a new decision necessary. Apparently another selection was made, because of the limits of available transportation, and evacuated to Taiwan, where it was stored, again in a hide-out in the countryside. Nobody in the West knew how much had been lost, damaged, or destroyed during these numerous and dangerous wartime travels; nobody knew the size or the quality of the selection taken to Taiwan, nor its state of preservation or its safety in the hot and humid climate.

In 1953 a visit to New York by Dr. Han Lih-wu, Director of the Museum and Library Administration, cleared up some of these questions. And during the International Congress on Art History and Museology held at the Metropolitan Museum in 1954 Dr. Hu Shih announced the intention of the government of the Republic of China to send an exhibition of their art treasures to this country. Still nobody from the West had seen the collection for many years, and all we knew was that, for the time being, it remained boxed and crated in vaults or caves and could not be inspected without great technical difficulties.

It was with considerable anticipation, therefore, that, having received a travel grant from the Metropolitan Museum, I began to correspond with the Chinese authorities about studying the collection. Finally I was assured by Dr. Han that my visit to Taiwan was agreeable and that I would be able to see some of the art treasures collected there.

This still left me in the dark as to how much I would be able to see, but anything was better than nothing. It was difficult to prepare a list of desiderata, as no descriptive or illustrated catalogue existed and one could only go by the incomplete and imperfect reproductions in the various Palace Museum publications, the London catalogue, etc.

Armed with a stack of notes and full of expectations, I arrived in Taiwan in the last days of July 1954. Most kindly received by Dr. Han, I

¹An account of Mr. Jayne’s visit can be found in the Bulletin, vol. iv, no. 4 (December 1945).
Traveling through Gorge and Mountains, by Fan K'uan (active 990–1030).
Chinese Government Collection ("Ku-kung Shu-hua Chi," vol. 9)
spent a few days in Taipei (the capital), paying calls on and having dinner with various trustees of the collections, who included a number of former cabinet members and prominent scholars.

I was eager to get to Taichung, in the center of the island, near which the collections are stored, and it was only there, at our first business meeting, that I learned from Dr. Han that every facility would be given to me to see anything I wanted to see. As a matter of fact, I not only saw practically all the four hundred paintings on my lists but several hundred more, as well as many pieces of calligraphy, k'o-ssu (tapestry), bronze, and porcelain.

This was unheard of; even when, many years ago, these objects still were in the Peking palace it was difficult or impossible to see a particular picture one might ask for. Even the galleries with objects on exhibition were not always open to the general public. And now that everything was packed and crated, sealed and counter-sealed, this good fortune was more than I had dared hope for in my boldest dreams.

I am happy to express on this occasion my appreciation of the really overwhelming hospitality, kindness, and co-operation which I encountered during the month I spent in Taiwan. The trustees of the collection and the chief executive, Dr. Han, as well as the curators and advisers—the latter including the seventy-seventh generation descendant of Confucius—did everything they could to make my stay satisfactory and agreeable. The extraordinary impact of the works of art I was allowed to see and study, combined with the friendship and company of these men and with the beauty of the “Ilha Formosa,” made the time I spent there absolutely unforgettable.

A small half-hour’s drive from Taichung, across rice paddies and fields of cassava and plantain and through a village teeming with children and animals, brings you to the hamlet of Pei-kou. Next to the hillside, which is pierced by caves or tunnels, shelters against possible air raids, there have been built three concrete “godowns” (warehouses), which house the art treasures and books of the Chinese government collections. These three buildings, in a walled enclosure watched by armed guards, are surrounded by huts and small houses for staff members, workers, and guards and a Japanese-style hostel for visiting scholars and officials. The neighborhood of Taichung is about the driest part of the island, but this does not help much, especially in the month of August. The sun burns relentlessly, and one feels it even in the bits of shade which bamboos and fruit trees offer. However, the air inside the godowns is relatively cool and dry and provides relief even during the hottest hours of the day. The buildings have no windows; a pair of large folding doors on each side are the only source of light. Except for two aisles connecting the facing doors and a narrow passageway along the wall, the godowns are filled with stacks of crates piled high and resting on beams to keep them off the floor and protect them from dampness. As a matter of fact, among the many hundred pictures I saw there were extremely few, perhaps a handful, that showed any evidence of exposure to humidity (mildew spots). Some of the objects that are not endangered by the climate, as, for instance, porcelains, are now stored in the caves in the hillside.

In the aisle where we worked there were a table or two (for hand scrolls and albums and a glass of tea) and a few chairs; the hanging scrolls were hung up side by side on one of the walls formed by the piled-up crates. On a dark, rainy day there was not much light—electricity has not been installed because of the fire hazard—but generally it was quite sufficient. Here during one wonderful month I spent day after day, interrupted only by lunch and siesta, in the company of curators and experts. Twice a day the seals were broken, doors and cases were opened; twice a day they were closed and sealed again, and signed by the curator in charge.

While I was there a complete check-up of all the thousands of crates was nearly completed. It had revealed, I was told, that not a single object was missing and that some cases actually contained more than was on the lists. As to the quality of the selection that was evacuated to Taiwan, it seems to include nearly all the first-class objects. Only very few of the paintings I had listed could not be located and had presumably been left behind. In other words the cream of the collections, well preserved and
kept intact through all vicissitudes, is now actually in Taiwan.

The present government collection consists of the rare books (over 120,000 volumes) of the National Central Library of Nanking and the selected art treasures of the National Central Museum, Nanking, and the National Peking Palace Museum. The Nanking collection, much smaller in size than the Peking one, is also a part of the former imperial collection. In earlier days it had been kept in the summer palace at Jehol and later in the Peking palace but in a different wing or building from the Palace Museum.

The bulk of the imperial collection was built up by the Ch’ien-lung emperor (1711–1799); it was further enriched with various additions made by his successors. The present government collection, however, is not completely identical with the former imperial collection. Many objects disappeared from the latter; some were given as presents, many more were exchanged for copies by dishonest artists and courtiers or changed hands in other ways; finally, a large group of important paintings and calligraphies were given away by P’u-i (Hsüan-t’ung, the last emperor) or taken along to Mukden when he became emperor of Manchukuo.

The Ch’ien-lung emperor was an insatiable collector but perhaps not a very discriminating one. Though he had very competent artists and scholars as advisers he made mistakes and was sometimes deceived and cheated. But the fact that a picture was in one of the imperial collections of previous dynasties (dispersed at their downfall), or in a famous private collection, is often a valuable guide to us.

The emperor also was not very discriminating in the means he used to acquire a work of art or
a collection. If the imperial desire and the offer of a rich reward were not persuasive enough he did not shrink from using pressure. The salt merchant An Ch’i was induced to rebuild the city wall of Tientsin, which ruined him financially and forced him to sell his precious collection.

Among the bronzes there are a considerable number of important pieces, of archaeological and also of historical interest because of their long inscriptions.

I saw only a few jades and none of the lacquers, cloisonnés, gold and silver ware, carvings in crystal, agate, or rhinoceros horn, or other miscellanea. The collection of porcelains is extremely large (well over 20,000 pieces) and of a very high over-all quality. The various Sung wares especially are represented in a way that may be unique in the world. The small selection I was able to see and study ranged from very good to unique and was absolutely dazzling. During the hours I spent there the austere concrete walls and raw wooden crates of the godown were transformed into an emperor’s palace.

The collection of k’o-ssu (tapestries), which range from the Sung through the Ch’ing dynasty, is also extraordinary. Particularly the Sung pieces are of a perfection in technique and pictorial taste that makes it difficult to believe that these pictures were woven.

The calligraphies are another treasure hoard without equal. Calligraphy has always been esteemed by the Chinese as highly as painting, and in front of these marvels even an untrained Western eye cannot but be deeply impressed by the beauty of this last vanishing art. The earliest specimen is a leaf written by a famous artist of the fourth century.

The main purpose of my visit had been to see and study the paintings. This was so exciting a proposition because the imperial collection, or what is left of it, contains, I believe, by far the largest group of authentic and important early Chinese paintings in existence. Actually Pei-kou is the only place in the world where, with luck, one can see a substantial number of Sung and Yüan pictures really painted by the famous great masters, with many minor and anonymous ones to boot.

There has been some argument in recent years about the relative merits of Early and Later Chinese painting, largely based on ignorance and misunderstanding. It is futile, I think, or at most it has only a subjective value, to compare Jan van Eyck and Vincent van Gogh or to weigh the relative merits of Leonardo and Cézanne. What the Western proponents of Later Chinese painting did was nothing more than to catch up with the judgment of Chinese critics and collectors of the last few hundred years, who had not lagged in their admiration for the early masters but simply found that too few of their works were existing or available any more and naturally turned their interest to younger and equally deserving artists. The same thing is happening in the West, where the proportions are even more lopsided. This situation cannot be redressed by chanting the unique and superior quality of the great Sung masters while at the same time giving as examples late and weak echoes of their works, which, faute de mieux, are sometimes taken for the real thing.

The collection of the Chinese government is actually strongest, in quantity and in quality, in paintings of the Sung and Yüan dynasties, which are so rare everywhere else. The Ming dynasty still is very well represented, while the Ch’ing paintings are relatively fewer in number and do not show the full scope of the later development. On the other hand, the percentage of copies or otherwise inferior pictures gets progressively smaller as we come to the later dynasties.

I saw about fifteen paintings attributed to the T’ang dynasty and the same number purporting to date from the Five dynasties. However, no original T’ang painting seems to be left in the collection, and only a very few can, with some degree of certainty, be attributed to the following period.

Of the approximately 175 Sung paintings I was shown there were at least fifty that by the highest critical standards can only be classified as good and very good or unique. Many of them are extremely impressive in their grandeur and of a breath-taking beauty. It was a revelation to see and study these paintings, which represent the peak of earlier Chinese pictorial
art—and perhaps the highest peak Chinese painting ever reached during the long centuries of its existence. Clearly they are among the greatest works of art produced anywhere or at any time, and it is a shame that they should be so little known and so difficult to see. It is easy to understand the extraordinary and lasting impact the early masters had on the later development of Chinese painting, and it is obvious too how little of their greatness has been retained in the many feeble copies that have found their way to our shores.

The great landscapists of the Early (Northern) Sung period have kept their fame in China to this day, and they deserve it. Fan K’uan’s Traveling through Gorge and Mountains, perhaps the greatest painting in the whole collection, is absolutely overwhelming. But there are a number of others that left an equally unforgettable impression. At least one picture is certainly an original painting by the unfortunate emperor Hui-tsung, who lost the northern half of his empire, and his freedom, to the Tartars.

The greatest surprise was the hand scrolls, which are not too well known even among professionals, and, having been exposed less than the hanging scrolls, are in an extraordinary state of preservation. Among them there are some gems of which I do not know the like.

The Late (Southern) Sung period, with its very different style, which became so popular in Japan and through Japan in the West, is also well represented, though not a single large painting by Ma Yüan has survived and only one by Hsia Kuei, a hand scroll with a river landscape. It is of an extraordinary beauty, skill, and force and far surpasses everything I have ever seen in this style. Besides the many beautiful landscapes there are also several outstanding figure paintings from the Sung dynasty, as well as an impressive collection of emperor portraits. A fair number of good bird and flower and genre paintings in the academic tradition round off the Sung paintings.

I saw about 155 pictures from the Yüan dynasty. In this group no less than sixty paintings must be considered as good or very good and better. There are a number of the exquisite bamboo paintings that

became such a fashion during this period. The landscapes, however, are again the most important pictures. The great landscapists of the Yüan dynasty, like the bamboo painters, went back for inspiration to the Early Sung masters. But they profoundly changed the development of Chinese painting by creating what was to be called "literary painting"—a trend that remained dominant through the following centuries. Their greatness is shown by the masterpieces of the government collection in unique splendor and profusion. One of the most beautiful is perhaps Ni Tsan's Looking at Distant Hills from the River Bank—a noble and serene painting.

As to the paintings of the Ming dynasty, I was shown about 165, of which seventy-five were classified by us as good or very good. Viewed by themselves and not in the embarrassing presence of the great earlier masters, perhaps an even higher percentage would have to be thus classified. The outstanding works here are pictures by the Four Great Masters, as well as those of the painters who marked the beginning of the period, creating a synthesis of style elements from the preceding Yüan masters that had much influence on all further development. The Chê school also, which carried on the tradition of the Southern Sung masters, is well represented, and finally the leading artists of the end of the Ming dynasty, whose influence dominated the following dynasty.

As my time was not unlimited I concentrated on the earlier periods. The painters of the Ch'ing dynasty are beginning to be represented abroad and the Palace collection is, for this period, not so complete as for the others. The great Individualist painters, for instance, are almost totally absent. Of course there were also Lang Shih-ning (Castiglione) and other court painters influenced by the West, who are interesting from a historical point of view.

If we check with the catalogue of paintings sent by the Chinese government to the London exhibition in 1935 we realize that few of their very best pictures were included and that the rest was of somewhat uneven quality. This is evident in the case of the earlier periods, pre-Sung, Sung, and Yüan, which, for good reasons, furnished the bulk of the material chosen. With the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties the average quality and the percentage of first-class works get progressively higher. This gives a general picture that is somehow contrary to reality and hardly does justice to the unbelievable wealth, especially of early material, in this collection.

The selection of paintings for the London show was criticized at the time by Yukio Yashiro and other scholars. However, this weak spot was compensated for by the very high over-all quality of this great exhibition, which covered all fields and phases of Chinese art and to which not only the Chinese government but government and private museums and collectors throughout the world contributed.

When I discussed this subject with my Chinese friends, the curators and advisers of the collection, they pointed out to me that a number of paintings of the very best quality were so frail and, not having been remounted in hundreds of years, in such poor physical condition that it was not advisable to include them in the exhibition.

This is certainly a valid reason, and, in any case, so many of the paintings mentioned are unique and irreplaceable that the reluctance of their trustees to send them abroad is perfectly understandable. However, it is to be wished that an exhibition of Chinese art treasures in this country, of which Dr. Hu Shih has held out a hope, may show a more representative selection of paintings than that sent to London. Only if this is possible can the place that Chinese painting deserves among the great arts of this world be duly appreciated.