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Cover calligraphy  Yan Zhenqing 颜真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman
CHINESE LANDSCAPE PAINTING—THE GOLDEN AGE

Dr George Ernest Morrison was a man of many parts. He was, as we all know, a physician by profession. But he was better known as an indefatigable traveller and explorer. To journalists he was a 'scoop artist'. To the Chinese he was a true friend and wise counsellor.

I well remember when I was a boy in Peking, my father, who was in the Chinese Foreign Service, used to tell me of the extraordinary exploits of the bearded gentleman from Down Under. Decades later, I was to hear about him from Dr V. K. Wellington Koo, my chief in the Chinese Embassy in Washington, with whom Dr Morrison was associated during World War I.

It is fitting for the Chinese residents in Australia to have founded the Morrison Lectureship in his memory. I am honoured indeed to have been chosen to give the Morrison Lecture of 1960, to pay tribute to an Australian who was, as the London Times said at the time of his death in 1920, "a devoted servant" of China and the Chinese people.

I notice that the purpose of the Morrison Lectureship is "to stimulate interest in Australia in the art, science and literature of the Chinese Republic." It appears therefore that I am not departing from the purpose of the Lectureship in discussing on this occasion a chapter in the history of Chinese landscape painting.

The Chinese it may be said, not only love landscape painting, which they call shan shui hua, or 'mountains and waters painting', but are in love with it.

It would seem an idle pursuit for us to speculate as to why, beginning in the early T'ang period, landscape painting gradually gained ascendancy over the painting of religious and human figures. It may have been due to the fact that, in the long period of Buddhist and Taoist predominance in China, figure-painters had literally exhausted themselves adorning every wall in the hundreds of thousands of temples all over the land. Because of the large demand for such paintings by the court and the devout, they were soon done in most
cases by pious hagiographers rather than real artists. Such a situation naturally caused connoisseurs to lose interest in them. For in China a sharp distinction has always been drawn between artists and creators on the one hand and artisans and craftsmen on the other.

The Sung painter and critic, Kuo Hsi 郭熙 once asked: “Wherein lies the reason that the good man so much loves landscapes?” He answered his own question as follows: “It is because the message of the forests and streams, the companionship of the mists and clouds, are always in his dreams.”

Probably the trend towards landscapes was brought about by the almost simultaneous appearance in the seventh and eighth centuries of three great landscape-painters—Wu Tao-tzu 吳道子, Wang Wei 李維 and Li Ssu-hsun 李思訓.

Wu Tao-tzu (Wu Tao-hsüan 吳道玄) lived and worked between the years 700 and 760 AD. He was a truly protean genius, proficient in all categories of painting. He was also a prolific painter, said to have produced three hundred murals and frescoes in his lifetime. Chang Yen-yuan 張彦遠, the ninth-century art historian and critic, called his works “heavenly and divine.” His hands, it was said, seemed to be guided by supernatural power. His linear treatment was like “orchid leaves” or “floating clouds and flowing water,” showing the draperies of his religious and human figures “rippling out as if buoyed by the breeze.” His landscapes were “free and boisterous,” done with light stains and dry ink. He was honoured with the title “the Sage of Painting” even during his lifetime.

Wang Wei (699–759) was a devout Buddhist, a great poet and a masterful painter. It was truthfully said that reading his poems was like feeling a clear breeze blowing gently over a bed of flowers, or seeing a lotus blossom smiling at the wind in a rippled pond. The same might be said of his painting, as Walter Pater did of Botticelli’s: “blending the charm of story and sentiment, the medium of the art of poetry, with the charm of line and colour, the medium of abstract painting.”

Wang Wei preferred to paint in simple black and white, applying the infinite shades of Chinese ink, which the French called encre de Chine, to evoke a mood and atmosphere with refined poetic content. Wang Wei himself said: “In painting, water and ink monochromes are, first, modelling after the character of nature and completing the creative process, placing a thousand miles of scenery within the confines of a few feet, setting the four corners of the earth before our eyes, and depicting the wonders of the four seasons with the tip of the brush.”

The third member of the triumvirate, Li Ssu-hsun (751–715 or 722), was a general official in the T’ang Dynasty. With his equally talented son, Li Chao-tao 李昭道, he inaugurated a school of landscape painting distinguished for its meticulous rendering of detail and lavish use of colour. The story is told that the T’ang Emperor Ming-huang 唐明皇 (Hsüan-tsung 玄宗) once commissioned Wu Tao-tzu and Li Ssu-hsun separately to paint the scenery
of the Chia-ling River 嘉陵江 in Szechwan. True to his style of freedom and abandon, Wu did it in one day. Li took several months.\(^4\)

The Lis, father and son, were great colourists. They liked to use blues and greens, sometimes with gold outlines. Their style therefore came to be known as “blue and green” or “gold and blue” landscapes.

The sixth-century painter and critic Hsieh Ho 謝赫, in his book Ku bua p‘in lu 古畫品錄 published in about 500 AD, said that painting was to be guided by six principles (liu fa 六法). It may be assumed that he had in mind primarily the painting of human figures since landscapes were still in their formative stage in his time. But his six principles have come to be accepted in succeeding generations as applying to all categories of painting.

This is not the place for us to go into a discussion of this rather involved subject. It is however pertinent to point out that, of the six principles, the first, ch‘i yin sheng tung 氣韻生動, was considered the most important.

Art critics of China have been discussing the subject of Hsieh Ho’s first principle for more than fourteen centuries. To put it simply, it may be explained by saying that a painting may be considered a work of art if it succeeds in conveying to the discerning viewer the vitality of the atmosphere, defining here the word ‘atmosphere’, as does Webster’s Dictionary, in the sense of “the aesthetic tone or mood of, or harmony of effect in, a work of art.” In other words, Hsieh Ho tried to tell us that, in judging the merits of a painting, we should first determine whether or not it has captured the deportment and demeanour of a live man, which is just another way of saying that a good portrait should not look like a death mask.

However, we must not stop here, because Hsieh Ho’s first principle has been applied to other categories of painting, including landscapes.

Chinese landscape-painters tell us that, in painting landscapes, they are really doing the portraits of the mountains and waters. To them the natural subjects they depict are just as alive as the face of a human being, so mountains and waters, streams and waterfalls, trees and bridges, must all come alive through the pictures.

Finally, a good painting must be able to evoke an aesthetic feeling. It must be something more than a realistic rendering of the subject. It must have character and charm. It must never be vulgar and in poor taste. It must be the work of an artist, not an artisan.

In landscapes, the painting should impart a sense of peace and repose. It may inspire awe and veneration, but it must never shock. It should create in the viewer a sense of identity and affinity, as if he were actually in the picture, walking along the mountain paths and hearing the streams murmur. It was said that an ancient painter, Chang Pao, painted a summer scene that made the viewer feel hot, and a winter scene that made him feel cold. The T‘ang Emperor Ming-huang told Li Ssu-hsün that at night he seemed to be able to hear the water rushing down the ravine in the picture Li had painted on the palace screen. Another man, Tsung Ping 宗炳, had his walls covered...
5 Hsieh Ho's first principle, *ch'i yin sheng tung*, has been translated in a number of ways by European and American writers on Chinese art: "Rhythmic Vitality" (Giles); "The conception should possess harmony and vitality" (Ferguson); "Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement" (Sirén); "Spirit-Resonance, which means vitality" (Acker); "Spirit resonance life movement" (Rowley). "La consonance de l'esprit engendre le mouvement de la vie" (Petrucci); "Rhythmic Vitality or spiritual rhythm expressed in the movement of life" (Binyon); "The harmonizing movement of life-breath" (Contag); "The fusion of the rhythm of the spirit with the movement of living things" (Graham-Byng); "Spiritual element, life's motion" (Hirth); "Spiritual expression and life movement" (Jenyns); "Animation through spirit consonance" (Soper); "A picture should be inspired and possess life in itself" (March); and many others.

Very few, if any, Chinese writers have tried to define Hsieh Ho's first principle precisely. They rather prefer to explain it in a somewhat mystical fashion. Here are a few random examples: "Among the six principles, *ch'i yin sheng tung* is the most important. Anyone can say it, but few can get it. The whole concept consists in capturing the vitality of nature in the manipulation of brush and ink. Only those who are truly in love with clouds and mists can find it. Otherwise, even if one were to copy the old masters all one's life, one would still be a few steps from capturing it." (Wang Hui 王畿 and Yin Shou'ping 閆壽平, in commentaries on Tan Ch'ung-kuang's 田震光, *Hua ch'ian* 花研, and Yiin Shou'ping 1尹寿屏, *Ch'uan shen pi yaa jue* 旋神秘要訣).

Aside from the first principle, the remaining five are easy to explain. The second principle, *ku fa yang pi* 骨法用筆, means brushwork in structure representation of either the bone-structure of a human face or the veins of a mountain. The third principle, *ying wu xiang* 影物象形, means precisely to capture the likeness of the subjects depicted. The fourth principle, *sui lei ju ts' au* 相類賦彩, means to apply the right colours to the right objects. The fifth principle, *ching ying wei chih* 程應位置, means to plan the composition of the picture. The last principle, *chuan i mo bsieb* 傳移模寫, means to model after the works of the masters. It may be noted that practically all the attention of critics has been directed to dismissing the differentiation and to say with Ch'ien Yung 錢泳, that "whether Southern or Northern, the painter who has acquired the mastery of both his brush and his ink must be considered a good painter" (Lü yüan hua bsiæb 畫園書學).

In painting portraits of mountains and waters, the artist must be in full command of the basic techniques. It was on the basis of differences in technique, more than anything else, that the various schools of landscape painting, such as the Northern School headed by Li Ssu-hsun and the Southern School headed by Wang Wei, were told apart, on much the same grounds as "one stroke of Rembrandt is as much Rembrandt as is the whole painting." 6

The question of technique, it goes without saying, is important also to the connoisseur. An understanding of its basic principles is required in order that we may fully appreciate the artistry of the great masters as well as distinguish original works from forgeries.

With particular reference to landscapes, critics are more or less in agreement that the most basic technique is *ts'un* 動, for which unfortunately there is no corresponding term in European languages. Simply explained, *ts'un* is the brushstroke by which the painter models the faces and fissures with landscapes and said that he enjoyed his "trips" among the famous mountains and great rivers while lying on his divan.5
of the rocks, not only to give them shape and form, but to bring them into perspective and life. The term has been translated as “wrinkles,” “shadings,” or “contour-lines.” Perhaps the word “modelling,” which means “to assume the appearance of natural relief,” again on the authority of Webster’s Dictionary, is the closest approximate in the English language.

In the T’ang dynasty, it may be said, the modelling technique was still in its formative stage. In the Sung dynasty, a great effort was made to use the technique to bring the outline and the surface of the rocks into fuller correlation.

An eighteenth-century artist once said: “After having painted for many decades, I may be entitled to ask: What makes a painting a work of art? The most obvious answer is the modelling technique, ts’un.”

Artists and critics have given the various types of ts’un some extremely descriptive names—“small axe chopping,” “big axe chopping,” “hemp fibres,” “broken nets,” “revelled ropes,” “cattle hair,” “horse teeth,” “alum lumps,” “rolling clouds,” “lotus leaves,” “brushwood,” “broken ribbons,” “split beans,” “dragging mud through water,” “pulling nails out of mud,” and many, many others. Each one of the ts’un is identified with some painter, although he might use several varieties of them in the course of his career or even in the same picture.

Having gone, however superficially, into some of the technical aspects of Chinese landscape painting, we may now turn to examine some of the works of the great masters.

Unfortunately, it is not possible for us to see the original works of Wu Tao-tzu, Wang Wei and Li Ssu-hsün. There are now in existence a few paintings attributed to them, but their authenticity is doubtful. There is a painting in the vast collection of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan called “Sailing Boats and a Riverside Mansion,” which was considered by no less an authority than the Ch’ing-dynasty collector An Ch’i as possibly an original work of Li Ssu-hsün. Whether it is an original or not, the painting is well enough preserved for us to acquire a general impression of the style known as the “blue and green” landscapes of Li Ssu-hsün and his son, Li Chao-tao. In the same collection there is a picture called “Emperor Ming-huang’s Flight to Szechwan,” depicting an event which occurred in the year 755, which may be taken as an illustration of the style of Li Chao-tao.

By the end of the ninth century the glory and grandeur that was T’ang China was clearly spent. The great empire soon began to break up and was followed by a period of confusion and strife for more than half a century. Chinese historians call this the Period of the Five Dynasties.

It was in this period of storm and stress that the Golden Age of Chinese landscape painting was born.

It began with the appearance of a painter by the name of Ching Hao who escaped from the turmoil of his times by living among the mountains of North China.

Ching Hao was a careful student of nature. He told us in his books how he wandered among the mountains observing their changes from morning
The quotations from Ching Hao are taken from his work *Pi fa chi* 筆法記, and *Hsüan hou hua p'u* 宣和畫譜, the catalogue of the Northern Sung Imperial Collection published in 1120 AD.

In another passage Ching Hao mentioned:

clouds at the waist of the mountains, streams through the rocks, houses closed in by trees, paths dotted with travellers, stones standing out in three dimensions, roads branching out into forks, trees emphasised at their tops, mountains brought into relief by their bases and banks.\(^8\)

Kuan T'ung 關仝, who lived in the first half of the tenth century, received personal instruction from Ching Hao. Some critics think he surpassed his master in his accomplishments. He was said to have worked so hard at his art that he frequently eschewed both food and sleep. “It delighted him,” it was said,

to paint autumn hills and wintry forests, village cottages, rustic ferries, recluses and retired gentlemen, fish-markets and country-inns ... leaving the viewer with the feeling of being far above and beyond the hustle and bustle of urban life ... The more cursory his strokes, the stronger the atmosphere; the briefer the scene, the deeper the meaning.\(^9\) (Figure 2)

It is an interesting commentary that, while Chinese poets like to versify on the glories of spring and to lament pathetically its fleeting nature, painters seldom indulge themselves in such themes, although poetry and painting are ...
Figure 1
“Landscape of Lu Shan,” by Ching Hao (source of Figures 1–8: National Palace Museum, Taiwan)
supposedly closely allied in the Chinese conception of the arts. Autumnal scenes, to a painter like Kuan T’ung, are appealing, not so much because of the rich colours of the foliage, but because of the solemnity of the season, the impending coming of winter, as when a man who has passed the prime of his life faces the future with dignity and poise. Autumn and winter scenes, it may be said, have always been the favourrites of landscape-painters, while pines and bamboos, plants which are able to withstand the rigours of the elements, have been popular with scholars who dabble in the arts as a pastime.

The turmoil of the Five Dynasties finally came to an end in the year 960, exactly a thousand years ago. Through a series of seemingly fantastic manoeuvres, Chao K’uang-yin was proclaimed the Son of Heaven, the founder of the Sung Dynasty. The political situation at the time was anything but comforting. The Sung realm was confronted by the Khitan and the Jurchen Tartars in the North. At court, dissension prevailed between the reformists and the conservatives, involving some of the greatest figures in Chinese learning. It would seem that this was hardly the soil for the growth of the creative arts. However, the Sung turned out to be one of the most glittering epochs in Chinese culture.

In the field of landscape painting, the chief artificer was Tung Yuan, who worked between the years 947 and 970. “His pictures,” it was said, “came straight out of his heart. In depicting mountains and waters, rivers and lakes, wind and rain, streams and valleys, the changing light and shade on the peaks, the clouds and mists and snow on the trees, the numerous precipices and ravines, the rolling sand-banks and abrupt cliffs, he conveys the feeling that the viewer may actually be living in such surroundings.”

Tung Yuan was one of the most highly praised painters in the history of Chinese art. Even the eccentric and cantankerous Sung artist, critic and collector, Mi Fu, who seldom had anything good to say about anybody, proclaimed that Tung Yuan’s works were “simple and unaffected, showing the highest taste.” A later critic gave him the title “the Dragon in Painting” (hua chung chih tung 畫中之龍). A still later critic compared Tung Yuan’s place in painting to that of Confucius in philosophy.

Mi Fu’s dictum that Tung Yuan’s paintings are “simple and unaffected” seems to summarize the critical acclaim. When seen at close quarters, Tung Yuan’s brushwork appears to be rough and careless and does not seem to represent the objects depicted. When seen from a distance, the radiance of the scene comes through, subtle, clear, and deep.
Tung Yüan’s paintings were generally inspired by the scenery he found near his home south of the Yangtse River, a region noted for nature’s gentleness and grace. Unlike Ching Hao, who came from the North where the mountains are massive and forbidding and the weather severe, Tung Yüan painted scenes which are unadorned and subdued. “The essence of his works,” it has been said, “is the naturalness of their mood and deportment.”

“Taoist Temple in the Mountains” by Tung Yüan (Figure 3) shows a group of rather elaborate buildings partly hidden by rocks and pines. Three gentlemen attended by their pages are seen standing on a bridge, apparently enjoying the music of the murmuring stream. The treatment of mists around the peaks is particularly interesting, with some of the trees barely revealing their tops above the floating clouds. It is truly a masterpiece conveying the sense of serenity and peace.

To the expert connoisseur, Tung Yüan’s major contribution was the final perfection of the ts’un, the modelling brushstroke so basic to Chinese landscape painting. Improving upon the technique of his predecessors, Tung Yüan employed straight lines floating down the mountain-side, bringing them close together and occasionally allowing them to overlap, in order to create third dimensional effects in the treatment of rocks. This is the ‘hemp-fibres’ brushstroke (p’i-ma ts’un 披麻皴) of which Tung Yüan was the principal innovator and from which many of the other varieties were evolved.
The same brushstroke, 'hemp-fibres', was further developed by Tung Yüan's contemporary Chu-jan巨然, a monk of K'ai Yüan Temple開元寺.

In many ways, Chu-jan may be said to have brought the tradition of Chinese landscape painting to its culmination, characterized by great breadth and depth. In his work entitled "Seeking Truth in the Mountain" (Figure 4), two men are seen in a hut, the one with his back to us having come all the way to seek instruction from the retired scholar who is living as a recluse in the deep mountain. It is a quiet, contemplative scene, suggesting that truth is not to be sought in the din and dust of the market-place.

Ching Hao, the master in the Period of the Five Dynasties, taught that trees in the distance should have no branches shown. Chu-jan in this picture gives us an illustration of how trees should be treated in depth: the trees in the foreground show their branches and foliage, those in mid-distance have no visible branches, and those high up in the peaks are represented by bold dots. In executing the dots, Chu-jan took pains in trying to hide the marks of his brush, to conceal the manipulation of the instrument. It was said that he wielded his brush as if it were suspended in mid air, turning and twisting like "a dragon in flight." Even to the professional painter, "it is a technique which cannot be explained."16

Ching Hao, Kuan Tung, Tung Yüan and Chu-jan, or Ching-Kuan-Tung-Chu巨然董巨, as the Chinese call them, were the four great masters of the Golden Age. Together they set the pattern for succeeding generations to follow. Even the most antiquity-minded critics had to admit that they excelled over all the landscape-painters before them. A European expert of Chinese art, the late Raphael Petrucci, said of them: "They pursued the study of relations of tones and values of shading up to the limit of extreme delicacy, and if they mingled colour at all with their subtle evocations, it was with a feeling of unequalled restraint."17

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16 Ibid.
In this forest of giants, there were a few others who must also claim our attention.

Li Ch'eng 李成, who worked between the years 960 and 990, came from a celebrated family of scholars. But his ambition was not to become a high official, as scholars would be in his day. He chose to lead a quiet life and to paint landscapes for his own delight. He loved to paint desolate winter scenes, with bleak and stony crags, gnarled trees, and leafless branches. He depicted these with a dry brush: “so miserly was he with his ink that it might have been gold.” Chinese painters have always believed that there is nothing straight in a tree, at least in a tree which deserves to be painted. This dictum is fully shown in Li Ch'eng’s painting, “Trees on a Winter Plain” (Figure 5). It shows simply two towering pines with a few small trees scattered about. There is nothing else in the picture, not even a lonely crow flying around.

Chinese manuals on landscape painting teach the beginner to start with trees, just as in painting portraits the manuals say he should start with nostrils. Branches must be made so to dispose themselves that light and shade, front and back, right and left, as well as the tension created by some branches seeming to push themselves forward and others seeming to yield, are all carefully planned and arranged. The painter may begin with a large tree, putting a smaller one beside it, as if the young is helping the old. It may also be done by beginning with a small tree and putting a larger one beside it, as if the old is leading the young. Any grouping of trees is to be made as if they are members of a family, each with a posture of its own but somehow related to one another. They should never be made to stand like a bundle of firewood. 18

Li Ch'eng’s painting shows two large trees of approximately the same size. The five smaller trees are of varying heights. Following the precept

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18 The above is a summary of instructions in Chieh ts'zu yüan hua p'u 芥子園畫譜, commonly translated as The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual, published between 1679 and 1701, with many later editions.
of the manuals, this picture evidently tried to depict a family group, the husband and the wife with their five children standing together to face the rigours of life.

The manuals also teach that in painting trees it is necessary to show their hard struggle to attain maturity, suggesting the parallel circumstances in human life. This is why painters like to depict old trees in the winter, leafless and weather-beaten but solid and defiant. It reminds us of a passage of John Ruskin which says: “In a tree they [the chief lines] show what kind of fortune it has had to endure from its childhood; how troublesome trees have come in its way, and pushed it aside, and tried to strangle and starve it; where and when kind trees have sheltered it, and grown up lovingly together with it, bending as it bent; what winds torment it most; what boughs of it behave best, and bear more fruit; and so on.”

Another landscape painter of this period, Fan K’uan 范寬, lived in the North and spent his life among the ranges of Ch’in Ling 秦嶺, absorbing freely the wonders of nature. In an age of immortals, he was brave enough to declare that “it is better to learn from nature than from the old masters.”

Fan K’uan’s “Snow-Covered Landscape” (Figure 6) is a lightly coloured painting on silk. It produces an interesting effect by having a group of temple buildings in the upper left-hand corner and a gateway to the right of the main peak, suggesting that the temple can be reached by a path behind that peak. Then, the presence of two men in the lower right-hand corner suggests that the temple may also be reached from the foreground.
To the Chinese connoisseur these are clever devices to achieve depth as well as to make the entire composition interesting and intriguing, a scene which is worth the trouble of painting.

Hsü Tao-ning, also of the Northern Sung Dynasty, came from humble origins, a herb druggist by profession, who literally forced his way into élite society by sheer ability and perseverance. He was probably the only Chinese artist known to have operated a sidewalk studio.

His picture, "Heavy Snow on the Mountains," shows an old man walking along the snow-covered path. He is apparently on his way home, which may be seen in the centre, after having gathered firewood to warm his hut on this cold day. Of particular interest in the composition is the faint image of a distant peak in the upper left-hand corner. Here we have another example of the many ways in which Chinese artists tried to convey depth and distance.

Kuo Hsi, who lived in the latter half of the eleventh century, used to paint huge murals, taking advantage of the vast space to give his talents full display. He was a master craftsman, and made many notes on the art of landscape painting which his son compiled into the book entitled Lin ch'uan kao chih. Of course such a book can be most helpful to the novice. At the same time it must be held responsible for making landscape painting overly formalized and stereotyped. It was the forerunner of many manuals written in subsequent centuries, telling the beginner exactly how to execute a tree or a rock, where to put a bridge and a human figure, and so forth.

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**Figure 7**

"Recluse in a Mountain Abode," by Kuo Hsi
“Recluse in a Mountain Abode” by Kuo Hsi (Figure 7) contains all the elements of a typical landscape—the “host peak,” the “guest peaks,” the distant hills, the waterfall, the stream, the trees, the houses, the bridge, the fishermen, the recluses, the travellers, even the pavilion and the pagoda, all properly arranged and correctly placed.

Kuo Hsi was not only a master craftsman but also an accomplished artist. Although he made no important innovations either in composition or technique, he was in full command of what had been developed up to his time.

Kuo Hsi’s classical style differed sharply from the dilettante Mi Fu (1051–1107), who was in every way a rebel, a non-conformist, in the world of Chinese art. An eccentric so extreme that his friends called him a lunatic, Mi Fu was first of all one of the greatest calligraphers, with a style as graceful as it was distinguished. He was also a most discerning collector and critic.

Mi Fu liked to dabble in painting, mostly hills and trees shrouded in clouds and mists, such as his picture called “Mountains and Pines in Spring” (Figure 8). In doing such scenes, he departed radically from the tradition of the old masters. His chief innovation was the “Mi dot” (Mi tien 米點), which meant that instead of modelling his rocks with varieties of ts’ un, he used a profuse accumulation of dots to achieve the desired effect. He refused to paint on silk, preferring paper or even a piece of rag, sometimes using the broken end of a piece of sugar-cane as his brush. His style came to be known as the “Mi style of clouds and mountains” and was praised for having done away with the “bad habits” of the old painters.19 The path he blazed, however, was difficult for others to follow and was carried on successfully only by his talented son, Mi Yu-jen 米友仁, and in the Yuan Dynasty by Kao K’ê-kung 高克恭.

Some of the latter-day critics consider the Mi style, father and son, as the forerunner of the type of Chinese painting known as wen jen hua 文人畫, or “literary man’s painting,” produced by scholar-gentlemen who used painting as a medium to express their personality and thoughts. Such paintings were done only to satisfy themselves, but they are nevertheless highly valued, partly

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19 Tung Ch’i-ch’iang, Hua yen. See n.12 above.
because of the eminence of these scholar-gentlemen and partly because their works generally have a flavour of their own, “the smell of books,” and are certainly never vulgar and never in poor taste.

The rulers of the Northern Sung Dynasty, particularly the last, Emperor Hui-tsung, were avid patrons of art. During his twenty-five-year reign (1101–26), Hui-tsung built the Academy of Painting into one of the busiest departments of the government, with hundreds of artists in daily attendance, and some on duty even at night. Talent flocked from the four corners of the land to the capital city of K'ai-fêng to take the examinations presided over by the Emperor himself. Successful candidates were given appropriate honours in the Academy, while outstanding ones were rewarded with the “Golden Girdle” (chîn tzu yü tai 金紫魚袋).

“In my leisure hours,” Emperor Hui-tsung said, “I only love painting.” The Academicians were summoned often to the imperial presence to paint scenes in the palaces and gardens, to collate the imperial collection, to pass critical judgment on the stream of new items coming in. The Emperor himself was an artist of stature and painted in practically all categories.

At the Academy, in the course of time, conventions were set up distinguished by their pedantry and preciosity. Examinations were held on themes which bordered on petty cleverness, such as the most ingenious way to represent the fragrance of flowers, the song of birds, the murmuring of streams, the crispness of the autumn air. Keen power of observation was the order of the day. For instance, the painters were once called upon to depict a peacock strolling in a litchi grove. None of the entries met with the Emperor's approval. Later, by imperial decree, it was explained that all the painters had failed to notice that “when a peacock climbs a rock, it raises its left leg first.”

True artists, it stands to reason, objected strongly to such meaningless manoeuvres. To them, a true artist is a man who had “read ten thousand books and travelled ten thousand miles.” When he does a landscape, he is portraying the cosmic awareness of his own personality which the Chinese call “the hills and valleys in his heart.” He must rise above the mundane things of life. He must cultivate an affinity between the dignity of the human person and the amplitude of nature. As Chuang Tzu 莊子, the ancient philosopher, said: “When the mind is in repose, it becomes the mirror of the universe, the speculum of all creation.”

“The way of painting,” the Ming critic Tung Ch'i-ch'ang observed,

is to hold the universe in your hand. There will be nothing before your eyes which is not replete with life. So great painters often lead long lives. As to those who depict nature minutely in bits and pieces, they are the servants of nature and their lives are often short.”

It may be mentioned that Michelangelo lived to be eighty-nine.

The true artist, it follows, is a noble person, one who conducts himself in accordance with the highest moral standards. Foremost in the Confucian
scheme of values is loyalty. In the changes of dynasties, it has been customary for the true artists to choose the road of retirement and even death rather than to switch their allegiance to the new rulers. The few who did change sides found themselves excluded from the halls of eminence. A renegade simply cannot be regarded as a noble person, and as Kuo Jo-hsü, the Sung critic, explained, only noble souls and high characters can produce truly great art. This is just another way of saying with John Ruskin that “all lovely art is rooted in virtue.”

In the year 1126 the Tartars captured the city of K’ai-fêng. Emperor Hui-tsung was carried off the North where he died in captivity nine years later.

The Sung court moved to the South and set itself up in the city of Hangchow, which later gained world renown through the pen of the Venetian traveller Marco Polo as the city of Quinsay. There on the banks of the Ch’ien-t’ang River 錢塘江 and the shores of the West Lake (Hsi Hu 西湖), one of the most scenic spots in China, artists gathered, with achievements which were in many ways as glittering as those of K’ai-fêng.

But the great masters of the Five Dynasties and the Northern Sung had succeeded in making landscape painting the most respected genre, the foremost of the thirteen categories of Chinese pictorial art. There were indeed many stylistic changes in subsequent generations, but the Ching-Kuan-Tung-Chü pattern has never basically been altered. It is on this ground that the period of the tenth and eleventh centuries has come to be known as the Golden Age of Chinese landscape painting.