

Words in Chinese Painting

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This chapter examines one of the most obvious features of Chinese painting: the words written on them.

The art of Shitao (originally named Zhu Ruoji) provides remarkable examples. Born in 1642, Shitao was approaching sixty Chinese years (*sui*) when he painted *Peach Blossoms Outside my Window* (Figure 22.1). His inscription gives the circumstances:

Spring breeze and gentle rain-come to the window of my mountain lodge;
Even now I paint peach blossoms in their colorful attire.
I laugh at myself that in spite of old age I have not learned to live with leisure,
And must still play with my brush to pass the time.

The easy, rhythmic calligraphy not only complements the branch of flowers, it is also a major element of the art work. The calligraphy enhances the image while the words extend the meaning. Within the Chinese literati tradition, this composition exemplifies the scholarly trio called the Three Perfections in which an artist combines excellent poetry, calligraphy, and painting in one work of art.

Beginnings: Identifying, Labeling, Naming

Although the focus of this chapter is on brush-written inscriptions on two-dimensional surfaces, it is important to remember the role of writing in early antiquity. During the first millennium BCE, inscriptions cast in bronze vessels prepared people for the later integration of writing on paintings. The function of inscriptions in China evolved along with the perception that the written language was pictographic and magical. ("China" and "Chinese" are used throughout even though the term was not formulated until the

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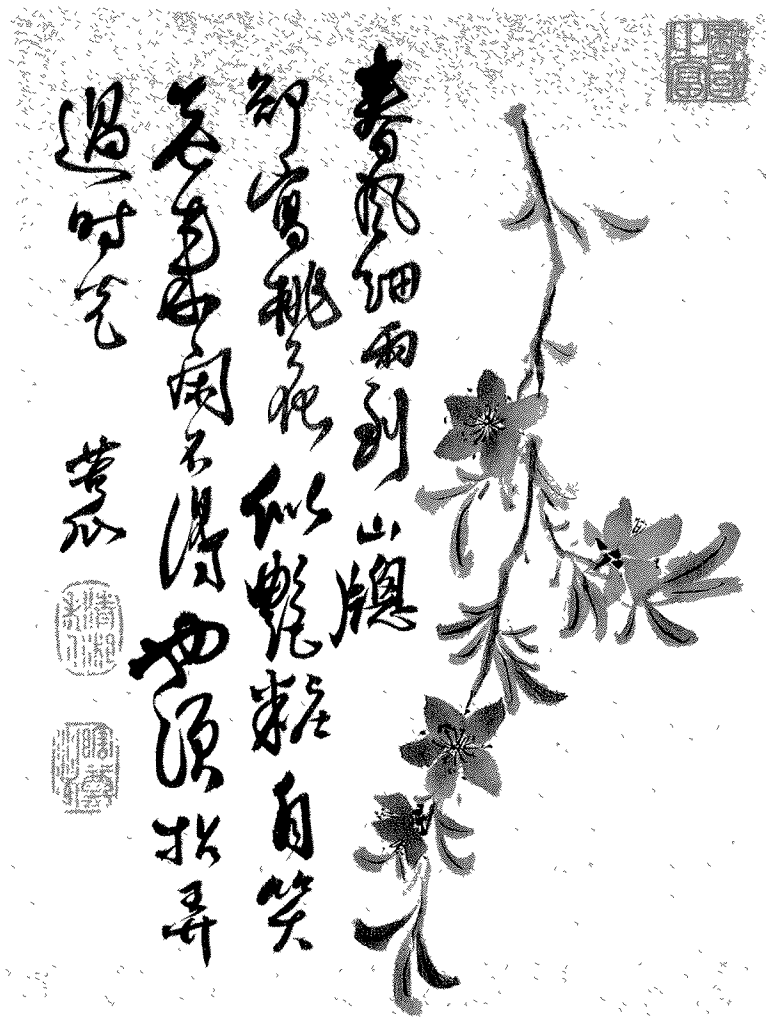
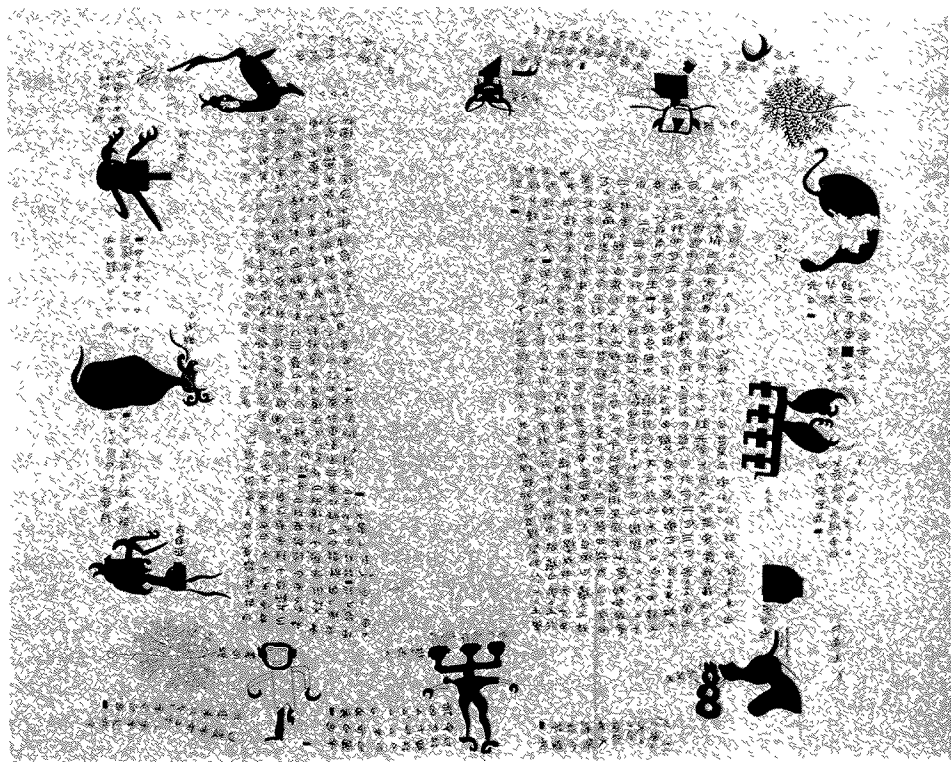


FIGURE 22.1 Shitao (Zhu Ruoji, 1642–1707), *Peach Blossoms Outside My Window*. Leaf six (leaf F) from *Wilderness Colors*, an album of twelve paintings; ink and color on paper; 27.6 × 21.6 cm. *Source*: The Sackler Fund, 1972 (1972.122f). © Metropolitan Museum of Art, Art Resource.

nineteenth century. Often the implication of the term “China”—a unified state—did not fit the political circumstances.) The inscriptions on bronze objects asserted authority and reinforced the power of the written word. Carefully worded inscriptions commemorated living relatives and reported to deceased ancestors; they recorded enfeoffments, and celebrated military victories. This practice predisposed scholars to accept writing on objects and monuments.

One of the earliest manuscripts yet discovered combines explanatory text and image. Not a conventional painting but an illustrated calendar, the Chu Silk Manuscript (Figure 22.2) dates to about 300 BCE. Pilfered from a tomb near Changsha in the



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FIGURE 22.2 Modern facsimile of "Chu Silk Manuscript," original datable to ca. 300 BCE. Ink on paper. From *Haiwai cang Zhongguo lidai minghua* (Hunan Fine Arts Publishing), 1, p. 3. Currently on loan to the Freer Gallery and Sackler Art Museum, Smithsonian, Washington DC.

southern state of Chu, it guides the reader through the year and advises what can and cannot be done in each month (e.g., may send out an army, cannot marry off a daughter). Characters are interspersed with twelve masked zoomorphic creatures that represent the twelve months. In the original (now on loan to the Sackler Museum of Art, Smithsonian Institution), the plants embellishing each corner are color-coded and said to represent pillars holding up the sky. Both calendar and almanac, the Chu Silk Manuscript gives an account of creation myths and provides commentary on astronomy and astrology (Cook and Major 1999: 171–176).

Straightforward labeling is seen in early tomb art. The Wu Liang family shrines of the mid-second century CE (with some later re-carving) were built of stone. Inscriptions are engraved in blocks that can be read as architectural columns or in cartouches that float at the heads or feet of the protagonists. Whether omens, names of people, or classical stories of warning or disaster, the images are identified by characters that are set off in boxes (Powers 1991).

In this respect, similarities can be seen between the function of words in early to medieval China and the European West. Words in Western medieval illuminated

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manuscripts of the Christian tradition were fit into what were considered natural or appropriate places such as on books or rolls of paper. Thus a prayer or a gospel's title may be written on a parchment book, or on a roll, or might appear to be cut into stone in a niche. Similarly, words incorporated into Chinese pictures are typically names, usually placed in cartouches, functioning as signage or labels. For example, the Loulan Basket (Pyongyang National Museum) of the early second century CE shows scholars engaging in debate. In between the lively figures in animated conversation are their names written directly on the lacquer. From the names we learn that they were heroes and exemplars. This practice of including names of personalities continued in later centuries.

In the Eastern Jin a set of molded tiles bear the names of the *Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove and Rong Qiqi*. Buried around 400 CE at Xishan Bridge near Nanjing, the tiles (now in the Nanjing Museum) depict eight flamboyant individualists. The names next to the figures inspire trust in the identity of the fictive portraits. Similarly labeled but with more sober intent are the names of stories of filial piety neatly chiseled on a stone sarcophagus (Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City). The scenes of filial sons and virtuous women were likely a Northern Wei court production of the 520s or 530s.

Buddhist sutra illustrations were accompanied by words relating stories and parables. The best preserved paintings are at the Central Asian site of the Thousand Buddha caves at the desert oasis of Dunhuang, Gansu Province. The caves, close to 500 in number, date from the fourth to the thirteenth century CE. Buddhist inscriptions on wall paintings functioned as elaborate captions typically compartmentalized in boxes. In Cave 285, which dates to 538/39 during the Western Wei, donors' names are placed in small boxes next to each figure. The dedication is written on a panel, which probably was understood as a stone stele (Dunhuang 1989: pls. 124–128). From the surviving evidence, this partitioning of words into compartments was a feature of most early word-image relationships. These examples show that, prior to the Tang dynasty, most captioning was not substantially different from European practices.

At the same time, however, there were poems written for figure paintings and, in at least in one instance, inscribed on a scroll. The portrait of a Daoist is not extant but the circumstances of its creation are recorded in a poem preface by Zhi Dun (314–366) of the Eastern Jin (316–420). He notes that he was moved to write when he saw the quality of the painting and the literary composition by the painter Sun Chuo (320–377). Praising Sun's encomium for the portrait, Zhi Dun was invited to write a poem, which he did “to the left” (Liu 2011: 145–147). The wording suggests that the portrait was a handscroll and the preface and long poem were written to the left of the image.

Calligraphy and Poetry as Key Factors in the Word-Image Relationship

Pride in calligraphy was an important factor in the development of inscriptions on the surface of paintings in China. Calligraphy, with its connection to much-admired literature, was ranked above all other visual arts. Scholars took pleasure in the beauty and balance of the characters as well as the shapes of each stroke. Calligraphic theory developed earlier than that for literature and painting, anticipating concerns in those arts. Those concerns included the origins and meaning of art, the effect of art on the mind and on society, and the relationship between an individual's character and his artistic expression, the assumption being that the higher the quality of his character, the finer his art.

Centuries later, the intellectual Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) asserted in a poem on a bamboo painting that painting and calligraphy share a common origin (Bush 1985: 278–279). Zhao Mengfu was thinking not only of the tools of his trade—the brush and ink used for both calligraphy and painting—but also of the common origins of the two arts in literature.

Admiration for poetry contributed to enthusiasm for inscriptions. Scholars prized poetry's ability to describe vivid scenes and its capacity to gently admonish. One attraction was its indirection. The reader was expected to infer the meaning from the poetic motifs and to intuit its deeper significance. This process, with its assumptions of shared elite culture, owed an intellectual debt to the Confucian tradition of extrapolation: Confucius (551–479 BCE) declared that he wanted students who struggled hard at understanding. The *Analects* records his severe criteria, "When I have pointed out one corner of a square to anyone and he does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to him a second time" (Lau 1979: 86). Like Confucius, the educated artist raised a corner through a few visual or verbal clues, and left his viewer to ponder the meaning.

Traditionally poetry was understood as expressing opinions on the body politic, which led to artificial and forced commentaries on the *Classic of Poetry*, a collection of 305 popular songs. Following the Han dynasty (220 CE) and during the free-wheeling Six Dynasties (220–580), poets developed a new focus on the private life of the author. Tao Yuanming (365–427) was an early master of personal ruminations for his own amusement. In a culture that expected loyalty to the state, one of his main themes was the pleasure of retirement, "not as a civilized way to endure exile but as a genuine alternative to public service" (Hartman 1986: 67).

Of the many kinds of verse in the Chinese language, regulated verse (*lǚ shī*) was felt to be the most harmonious form. Despite the restraints of a fixed number of characters (five or seven) to a line and eight lines to a poem, regulated verse still allowed a wide range of expression. Each couplet had a role to perform: introduction, two couplets containing observations without commentary with the chosen motifs providing clues as to the poem's direction, and finally a personal statement or reflection. The lines also had to follow a strict tonal pattern and a rhyming scheme. Tang dynasty regulated verse is most famous, but poets continued to use the form for a millennium and it had a great influence on scholar painting.

In the Tang dynasty the three arts of poetry, calligraphy, and painting were put side by side in a set of art works. The court official Zheng Qian (d. ca. 761) presented Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756) with a scroll of his poems handsomely written in excellent calligraphy and accompanied by his paintings. The emperor is said to have written in large characters at the end, "Zheng Qian's Three Perfections" (*san jue*) (Ouyang and Song 1060[1975]: 5766). In later periods integrating the distinctly different arts of poetry, calligraphy, and painting into one composition became an ideal. In the eighth century, however, calligraphy and painting were likely on separate pieces of silk (or less likely, of paper).

Admonitions of the Court Instructress is one of the earliest extant scrolls to have words written on the surface of the painting (British Museum; see Figure 5.1, Figure 5.2, Figure 5.3, and Figure 7.5). The scroll illustrates Zhang Hua's (232–300) essay on appropriate models for female behavior. The dating of the moral lessons interspersed with accompanying texts is still debated. The attribution to the romantic eccentric Gu Kaizhi (ca. 345–406) made by the Northern Song scholar Mi Fu (1051–1107) was defended

by Richard Barnhart at a conference dedicated to this scroll (Barnhart 2003: 85–88). At the same conference Audrey Spiro argued that the painting is a parody of court manners and plausibly dates as late as the tenth or eleventh century (Spiro 2003: 53–64). Opinions on the dating of this famous handscroll thus stretch seven centuries from the time of Gu Kaizhi in the fourth century to as late as the eleventh century.

A red lacquer screen illustrating some of the same stories provides an interesting comparison for the *Admonitions* scroll. The lacquer screen, which was excavated from the tomb of Sima Jinlong (d. 484) in Datong, Shanxi, has captions written in yellow panels. In the British Museum's *Admonitions* the brush inscriptions on the painting suggest a dating of calligraphy and painting somewhat later than the fifth century lacquer screen but possibly as early as the Tang dynasty.

Corroboration for a possible Tang dynasty dating of the *Admonitions* scroll comes from another portable art work with inscriptions directly on the painting: *The Thirteen Emperors* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). The first six emperors are thought to be eleventh century replacements for the beginning of the scroll (the outside of a scroll is more easily damaged). The remaining seven emperors are stylistically close to seventh century wall paintings at Dunhuang and the inscriptions identifying each king are assumed to have integral to the portraits. Although the attribution to Yan Liben (d. 673), which was made in the eleventh century, cannot be confirmed due to lack of comparative works, the section of seven emperors and their inscriptions may date to the Tang dynasty (Wu 1997: 135).

The Five Planets and Twenty-eight Lunar Mansions has identifications and explanations written in between the figures in formal seal script (Osaka Municipal Museum). The handscroll is thought to have been produced in the Northern Song but was attributed to the early sixth-century painter Zhang Sengyou. That this and other attributions were debated is highlighted in the scroll's colophons. Dong Qichang (1555–1636) attributed the scroll to Wu Daozi (act. ca. 710–ca. 760) and Dong's contemporary Chen Jiru (1558–1639) attributed the same scroll to the Tang dynasty artist discussed above, Yan Liben (Little 2000: 132). The eleventh century saw an upsurge in antiquarianism which may have contributed to the efforts to identify the artists of anonymous works.

The Northern Song (960–1127) Integration of Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting

What gave impetus to the combining of poetry, calligraphy, and painting into one work in the eleventh century? It seems to relate to the scholar class coming into its own. At the end of the Northern Song (early twelfth century) the practice was adopted by the court of Emperor Huizong (r. 1100–1125).

In the previous Tang dynasty (618–906) the civil bureaucracy was largely staffed by aristocrats with family privilege to bolster their credentials. In the late seventh century a reign of terror brought ruination to hundreds of aristocratic families. The instrument of that reign of terror, however, did not want to leave any talent unexamined. Both gentry and commoners were permitted to take special decree examinations. Under the next major dynasty, the Song, the first emperors needed officials for the civil bureaucracy and wanted talented men loyal to them. The examination system was dramatically expanded. Important posts required the passing of certain

Manchu emperors' enthusiastic demonstrations of their command of traditional Chinese culture were politically calculated but not hollow. When inscribing Chinese paintings, Manchu emperors wrote in Chinese. The Qianlong emperor prided himself on his calligraphy and poetry and enjoyed responding to paintings (as we saw in Figure 22.4). We may protest today that the Qianlong emperor's multiple inscriptions overwhelm some paintings, but it was his prerogative to inscribe the paintings and objects that were imperial family property.

The Qianlong emperor occasionally created a scroll of his own poetry, calligraphy, and painting. The hanging scroll *Mount Pan* was painted by the emperor at his Mountain Villa of Peaceful Lodging. Some eighty kilometers northeast of Beijing, Mount Pan has stunning scenery. In 1745 the Qianlong emperor wrote that he would inscribe the scroll every time he visited, which he did 34 times between 1745 and 1793. The landscape follows the style of the Yuan (Southern School) master Huang Gongwang. The calligraphy enshrines the style of Dong Qichang. The 34 ruminations function like a diary, recording his visits and his reactions to the landscape, to growing old, and to governing (Holzwarth 2005: 437).

Silent Poetry and Vernacular Painting

Even while the Qing emperors were inscribing their poems on antique paintings, the decorative tradition of painting without inscriptions flourished in the palace rooms that they inhabited. Auspicious and appealing, *tieluo* were in effect wall coverings with no signatures let alone poetic inscriptions. They were pasted on the walls of most residential halls in the Forbidden City.

James Cahill rightly argues that the Chinese painting field has been hobbled by the tenacious values (he would say dogma) of literati painting theory. He has argued that equating high-mindedness and quality with scholar-amateurism, brushwork, calligraphy, self-expression, and disdain for representation is to miss out on a world of interesting art that represents the aspirations of the Chinese middle class. Many of the vernacular paintings made for women reveal a range of topics not dealt with in literati painting. Vernacular paintings rarely have inscriptions and when they do, they are often added later (Cahill 2010: 23–25). But something more interesting than a mere rejection of literati esthetics may have been happening. It could be that these painters were adopting the European practice of maintaining a clean surface to avoid disrupting the illusion of depth.

Conclusion

Words on and around paintings are natural extensions of the media of soft brush and black ink on paper or silk. By painting in ink, scholars, including emperors, were emphasizing the link to calligraphy and literature. Most literati paintings are in monochrome ink and with brushwork intentionally casual. Some highly realistic paintings, however, use color and contain symbolism of the sort that scholars appreciated.

Painting formats allowed artists and collectors to do different kinds of inscribing. Handscrolls were the most flexible because the owner could introduce a title sheet, or a preface before the painting, and could endlessly add colophons to the "tail" of the

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handscroll” because this pattern of repetition occurs most often when a painting has been cataloged, treasured, and surrounded by luxurious materials that serve to declare its importance.

On the first few inches of the long handscroll of horses being put out to pasture, Li Gonglin (ca. 1041–1106) inscribed the title in the antique seal script (*zhuan shu*): *Copy of Wei Yan's Pasturing Horses* (Beijing Palace Museum). Like Old English scripts proclaiming pedigree, seal script signaled the importance of the work. The wording of this and other formal titles includes “picture” (*tu*), so the translation technically should be *Copy of Wei Yan's Picture of Pasturing Horses*.

In the early twelfth century the Huizong imperial court (r. 1101–1125) appropriated many of the newly established painting practices of the educated elite. Although the court preferred the more expensive silk for both paintings and written documents, several paintings attributed to Huizong are on paper. The examinations in the court's Painting Academy awarded those painters who gave the most subtle interpretations of poetic couplets (Bush 1985: 135). An occasional painter, Huizong created monochrome works as well as strikingly beautiful polychrome paintings (*The Five-color Parakeet* in Boston, *Auspicious Dragon Rock* in Beijing Palace Museum, *The Cranes over Palace Gate* in Liaoning Provincial Museum) some of which he or his “substitute brushes” (*daibi*) inscribed. He assembled a vast collection of paintings, commissioning over a thousand works documenting auspicious omens. The entire project asserted imperial authority, especially in the religious and cultural realms. Emperor Huizong was exercising the legitimate power of the court in establishing civilizing norms.

Then in 1127 political chaos befell the Song dynasty. Barbarians swept in, carried thousands of imperial clansmen off to the north, and occupied the northern regions of China. What did this catastrophe do to the practice of inscribing pictures?

Southern Song (1127–1272)

In 1131 the court settled in coastal province of Zhejiang in the city of Hangzhou managing to continue the dynasty, which came to be called the Southern Song. They promoted illustrations of poetic themes choosing the most canonical of texts, the *Book of Odes*. The 305 poems gathered from all over China were anthologized around 600 BCE; they were said to have been personally compiled by Confucius (551–479 BCE). In the twelfth century emperor Gaozong and his “substitute brushes” inscribed the poetic text first and the official Ma Hezhi painted the illustrations (Murray 1993). All are on silk. Alternating text and image was the most conservative way to integrate poetry and painting.

Earlier in the twelfth century a handscroll shows the approach that would become the standard. Qiao Zhongchang (act. late eleventh–early twelfth century) imagined Su Shi's *Second Outing to the Red Cliff* in the magnificent landscape attributed to him (Nelson-Atkins) (Figure 22.3). In ink on paper—not unprecedented but still new in the early twelfth century—each passage of the poem is illustrated in a continuous landscape. As if to ensure that the poem would not be lost, Qiao inscribed the entire text into the painting, high and low, on water, rocks, cliff faces, and on the ground. Because the high quality of the painting comes close to matching Su Shi's stellar poem, and because the legible calligraphy in eight neat passages is not overly assertive, the effect is pleasing.

1742) who contributed one seal. After entering the imperial collection, the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–1795) inscribed a poem at top center with verses responding to Ni's poem and affixed eleven seals.

Ming Dynasty: The Literati Esthetic Becomes Dominant

The Mongol Yuan dynasty did not last long. A native Chinese dynasty replaced it in 1368. In the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Zhe School paintings display vivid ink wash and brushwork but in terms of inscriptions, they rarely have more than a signature. Professional artists such as Jiang Song (act. ca. 1500), who did not directly participate in the literati tradition, still imbibed the esthetic importance of ink. Their clientele wanted paintings that conformed, at least minimally, to the tradition of men of culture. Market forces encouraged the Zhe School artists to comply.

Thus monochrome painting with inscriptions that had originally been practiced by the educated elite became popular in the general society and among professional painters. This was a style that declared one's literary credentials and superior taste.

Some collectors recorded their discoveries, how they examined a scroll and determined its content. Dong Qichang acquired a landscape of uncertain authorship and unidentified subject in Beijing in 1597. At the time he was tutor to the Heir Apparent, a prestigious and promising position. Waikam Ho proposed that it was when Dong *lost* this position in 1599 that he chose the painting's title, *Xiao and Xiang Rivers* (Beijing Palace Museum). Waikam Ho wrote that the simple title conceals depths of thought and emotion, for it links the painting and its owner to the literary tradition of great ministers who were exiled to the Xiao-Xiang region in Hunan Province (Ho 1992: 7–9). In 1599 Dong Qichang wrote an account of acquiring the scroll, of recognizing the hand of his tenth century ancestor Dong Yuan, and of identifying the subject. He transcribed it in strong, fluid calligraphy on blue paper and had it mounted at the beginning of the handscroll as a preface to the landscape.

Because Dong Qichang's connoisseurship carried great authority, he profoundly influenced the content of inscriptions when he formulated the Northern and Southern Schools of painting. The designations are not geographic but rather are based on the Northern and Southern Schools of Chan (Zen) Buddhism that described different approaches to enlightenment. Dong's preferred lineage was the Southern School associated with sudden enlightenment. For the Southern School Dong listed inspired scholar-amateur painters including his putative tenth century ancestor Dong Yuan. He had less sympathy for the northern or gradual school listing primarily professional artists. Denigrating the meticulous detail and technical virtuosity of professional painting, Dong Qichang condemned well-crafted pictures as second rate at best. Thereafter, when a scholar-official set out to paint, he would choose models—most often from the Southern School—that suited his social position.

The Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

The Qing dynasty emperors were proud of their Manchu heritage. They had rules (albeit widely ignored) instructing the imperial clan to speak only Manchu. They also had a vast empire to control and needed to demonstrate competence in Mongolian, Tibetan, Uighur, their native Manchu, and Chinese.

Comparisons with Western Europe

In the European west, words written on the surface of illustrations or paintings were seen as belonging to a different category from painted signs. This was felt still more when one-point perspective of the Renaissance articulated recession into depth. The eye registers the two categories—words and spatial illusion—in different ways. Once one-point perspective began to dominate Renaissance pictures, words on the surface became intrusive because they worked against the spatial effects, especially the illusion of depth (Schapiro 1996: 118–119). Perhaps for that reason, inscriptions largely vanish from the European painting tradition. When they do appear, for example in the painting of one Bruno di Giovanni, he was criticized by Giorgio Vasari for failing to articulate visually his intended message. Painters of Western European narratives assumed that viewers would know the story (Carrier 2000: 41).

A further contrast with Western art is evident in the divergent aims of European and Chinese inscriptions. Western medieval manuscript illustrators were transmitting information and therefore, among all the visual embellishments, clarity was a priority (Schapiro 1996: 137–139). Chinese poetry was at heart a lyric form in which the poem sought to capture the ineffable. To the extent that they were striving to be poetic, Chinese painters felt it necessary to be indirect—even obscure—in their visual and verbal language.

The Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1272–1368)

Assembling inscriptions was not new in the early fourteenth century, but Qian Zhongding's solicitation must have been one of the most systematic. In 1302 the former official Zhao Mengfu painted an understated landscape for his friend Qian Zhongding (Beijing Palace Museum). At the opening right edge of the ink-monochrome painting Zhao Mengfu wrote in informal regular script "Water Village." Cherishing the painting, Qian had it mounted into a handscroll. The painting's success is in its understatement, refined brushwork, and simplicity. Through the title and small details—such as descending geese, fishermen at work, and cottages remote from one another—Zhao created an image of living on rivers and lakes and by implication rejecting service at the imperial court. Personally inscribing it four times (if we include his transcription of a nephew's poem), Qian Zhongding invited 43 friends to write colophons. The act of assembling fifty some colophons was a social exchange that benefited Qian Zhongding and gave recognition to the colleagues whom he invited to add inscriptions (Liu 2011: 184–188).

The Yuan dynasty amateur painter Ni Zan (1301–1372) inscribed his poems and dedications on paintings to commemorate an occasion. Said to use ink as if it were gold, Ni Zan fashioned compositions that implied that he was far from the center of society and government: vast expanses of river with no people present, only trees that stood for self and friends. Epitomizing the word-image relationship, *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu* (Figure 22.4) was painted after visiting a Daoist recluse named Bowan who lived on the mountain named in the title. Ni Zan inscribed a poem at the upper right about the pleasure of the day's visit and dated the painting equivalent to January 1372. The painting's ownership can be traced by the seals through the collection of Xiang Yuanbian (1525–1590) who added eight seals and the collection of An Qi (1683–after

hanging scroll, dated
1.3 × 52.4 cm, overall
Dillon Fund. 1973.
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Painting Became a Vehicle for Expressions of Discontent

The eleventh century painting titles began to change from identifications to evocations of a mood or suggestion of a scene. These four-character titles were fundamentally different from the descriptive names of earlier centuries. The new four-character titles shared features of poetics—indirection, evocativeness, atmosphere—and they enriched the meanings of images through association with literature. The title *Geese Descending to Sandbars* (*Pingsha luo yan*) draws on the tropes of exile poetry in which wild geese are a metaphor for talented men. Therefore geese on the sand bars of southern lakes were an image for men out of office, either voluntarily or otherwise. The geese are no longer flying in a neat hierarchical wedge in the sky, which was read as “in heaven near the emperor,” but rather are noisily scattered on banks.

Su Shi and his contemporaries encouraged the creation of paintings that visually resembled poetry in structure and function. Paintings of this sort behave like poetry in that the viewer must ponder meanings that are not immediately apparent, guided only by a brief title, usually of four characters. A classic example is the *Eight Views of Xiao Xiang* in which the eight landscape scenes visually recreate the requirements of the highly structured regulated verse (Murck 2000: 70–71, 211–225).

Another important shift in the eleventh century of the Northern Song was the choice of text to be painted. The scholar-officials participating in the forging of a new painting-poetry relationship had playful attitudes and sometimes serious grievances. Writing about their own experiences, Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, and other friends were composing poems for new paintings. They were also illustrating lines from Six Dynasties and Tang dynasty poems as when Sima Huai and Mi Youren interpreted lines from the Tang dynasty poet Du Fu (712–770).

Titles shape expectations and influence our reactions to a work of art. We expect the subject matter of the painting to conform to the description. The title of one of China's best known paintings, *Spring Festival along the River* (*Qingming shanghe tu*), was taken from a colophon written many decades, perhaps a century, after the painting was finished (Beijing Palace Museum). The title and attribution of the unsigned, undated scroll was taken from options provided by Emperor Zhang Zhu in a note written in 1186. Mounted into the handscroll following the painting, it says in part:

Zhang Zeduan ... read books when he was young ... Later he practiced painting ... According to Mr. Xiang's *Evaluation of pictures* (*Pinglun tihua ji*), *Regatta on the West Lake* and *Spring Festival along the River* belong to the divine class.

Zhang Zhu didn't say that he was viewing *Spring Festival along the River*, but of the two titles he mentions, it fits best. During the last two decades, the title has been debated both to consider its aptness and to analyze its meaning. Does “*Qingming*” refer to the spring grave sweeping festival, or does it refer to Peace and Brightness, or in the tradition of multivalent poetic lines, does it mean both?

The paraphernalia of a handscroll provides multiple sites for a title. For a fine handscroll, the title may be displayed six or seven times: on the storage box, on the cloth wrapper, on the tags attached to the wrapper, on the carved jade clasp, on a strip pasted on the outside scroll mounting, on a handscroll's title sheet (*yinshou*), on a slip mounted at the right side of the painting, and on the painting itself. I say “fine

Layer of Icy Thin Silk (Beijing Palace Museum) is one of the most feminine of Song court paintings.

They are like cold butterflies perching in the flower chambers;
Embracing her rouge heart, she remembers the old fragrance.
Blooming to the frosty tips, she is even more adorable;
This must be the beauty of the Han palace.

The first three lines leave the subject ambiguous. Only with the last line do we learn the true subject of the poem. “The beauty of the Han palace” is a carefully cultivated tree of “palace plum blossoms,” which in turn is likely Yang Meizi herself (Lee 2010: 196–197, 202–205).

How a written text functions pictorially in relation to fictive space can be seen in the paintings of Qian Xuan (ca. 1235–ca. 1300). Qian lived at the end of the Song dynasty and into the Mongol Yuan dynasty. His surviving paintings, almost all handscrolls on paper, are inscribed with his own poems that were commentaries on his life and that alluded to painful events of the Mongol conquest. His practice (seen in Wang Xizhi *Watching Geese*, Metropolitan Museum of Art) was to paint a picture that was intentionally archaic, making few concessions to verisimilitude. Opening the handscroll, one comes first to a painting that concludes with a crisp edge even while the paper continues. Next appears a poem. Having the text follow had the effect of turning the painted image into a visual preface for his poetry. About memories and ideas, his poems and frankly schematic paintings broke new ground in the poetry–painting relationship.

Seal Legends

To the extent that seals (popularly called chops) insert words onto paintings, they must be considered in the word–image complex. Like inscriptions, they sit on the surface of the paper or silk, contradicting the depth of the image. Seals were affixed by the artist, inscribers, and private collectors. Toward the end of his reign, Emperor Huizong’s (r. 1100–1125) court created the distinctive Xuanhe mounting (named for the Xuanhe period, 1119–1125). It featured a set of seven seals placed in a precise sequence and complemented by silk mounting (Ebrey 2008: 114–116). Sometimes the seals provide art historians with a fairly complete history of a scroll’s ownership. More practically, a seal imprint at the join of two sheets of paper functioned as a marker for matching up the paper during the process of remounting a handscroll. With the development of literati painting, vermilion seal impressions became increasingly important. From the fourteenth century affixing one or more seals was seen to enhance the composition, the chromatic appeal, and the semantic dimensions of a work. Following the precedent of Emperor Huizong, some collectors in the Ming dynasty adopted the practice of affixing sets of seals. For example, the prolific collector Xiang Yuanbian (1525–1590) selected from his collection of over sixty seals eight seals that he affixed as a set (see Figure 22.4). To design and make their own seals, scholars chose softer stone for ease of carving. They could celebrate their promotions as did the late Ming dynasty official, calligrapher, painter and connoisseur, Dong Qichang, or they could declare their affinity for bamboo as Shitao did when he carved the legend “Cannot for a day be without this gentleman.” During the required twenty-seven months of mourning for a parent, scholars used black ink for their seals.



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7(section), Northern
50.4 cm. Source: The
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career. In 1216 he
quatrain. *Layer on*

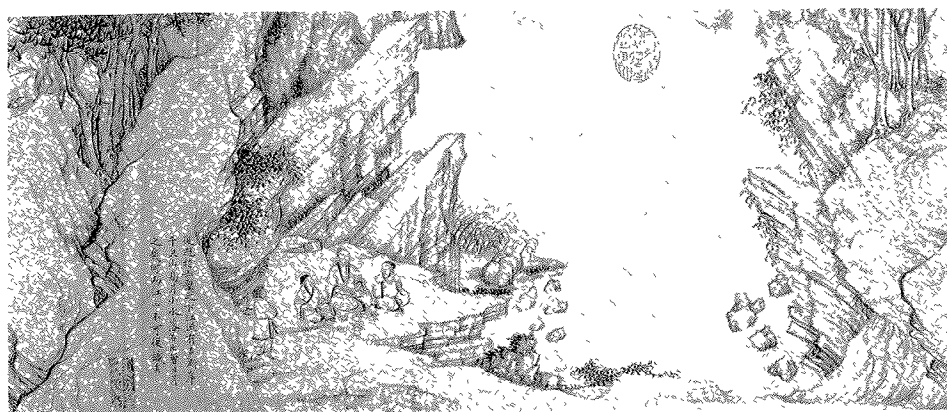


FIGURE 22.3 Qiao Zhongchang (act. late eleventh–early twelfth century). *Su Shi's Second Ode to the Red Cliff. Illustration to the Second Prose Poem on the Red Cliff*(section), Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). Handscroll; ink on paper; overall 29.5 × 560.4 cm. *Source:* The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: Nelson Gallery Foundation, F80-5. Photo: John Lamberton

The inscriptions, however, work best when they are written on representations of water or ground where there are no spatial contradictions. Where the writing is on cliff faces, especially on one that slopes back, the inscription appears to stand upright, separated from the rock on which it is written. This is an example of the mental dissonance that Meyer Schapiro described when the eye registers two categories of signs differently (Schapiro 1996: 119).

In the Southern Song, the territory was smaller with fewer positions in the imperial bureaucracy. The south of China flourished as never before: cities had great restaurants, theaters, Buddhist monasteries, and Daoist temples. Although holding government office was still prestigious, many of the educated elite disengaged from government. They hosted sophisticated literary gatherings, wrote and printed books, experimented with painting, and collected a variety of objects.

Pairing a fan with a poetic couplet was a Southern Song innovation. In the imperial capital Hangzhou and environs, painted silk fans were produced in the hundreds of thousands for the market and as imperial gifts. Mounted on opposite sides of a round frame, a silk painting of landscape, flowers, or auspicious plants would be paired with a poetic sentiment. Those fans that survive are mounted in the album format on facing leaves.

Yang Meizi (1162 or 1172–1233) was imperial consort to Emperor Ningzong (r. 1194–1224). Her rise from obscurity as a performer to imperial consort was nothing short of amazing. Her contribution to the history of word and image were quatrains that were given to her favorite court painter as inspiration for his paintings. Deeply involved in the arts and patronage, her poetic couplets were so suggestively erotic that a fourteenth century connoisseur speculated that she was having an affair with the court painter Ma Yuan (act. 1190–1225). Ma Yuan's son Ma Lin (act. first half of thirteenth century) followed in his father's career. In 1216 he painted delicate branches of plum blossoms beneath Yang Meizi's quatrain. *Layer on*

examinations. These changes had the effect of putting the educated class firmly in power (Bol 1992: 53–58). What's more, the new technology of printing made possible the dissemination of knowledge and the creation of illustrated catalogs to re-establish correct ritual practice.

Northern Song painting underwent a fundamental change as well. Some of the newly empowered scholars began to paint. They associated their works with poetry and embraced an amateur method of painting stressing that they were not lowly artisans but members of the educated elite. The eleventh century integration of poetry and painting was a decisive turning point in Chinese painting history and generated a new system of evaluation based on evocative lyric expression rather than likeness.

At the beginning of the Song dynasty, judging from one example, signatures were hidden in landscapes. The monumental landscape by Fan Kuan (ca. 960–1030) *Traveling among Mountains and Streams* has a tiny signature concealed among leaves above the path on the right side of the picture (Taipei Palace Museum). Fan Kuan's convincing spatial recession is preserved.

Later in the eleventh century, Guo Xi's large landscape hanging scroll *Early Spring* (Taipei Palace Museum) was inscribed with the title, the date equivalent to 1072, and his signature. The small inscription, which seems to hang from branches on the left edge of the composition, has been accepted as original to the work of art, making it one of the earliest author-titled paintings. It is plausible that *Early Spring* was commissioned by emperor Shenzong (r. 1068–1085) or perhaps the title was written as a guide to reading the painting.

In the hierarchy of the arts, poetry traditionally was considered superior to painting. The polymath Su Shi (1037–1101) argued that the two arts should be comparable. He wrote an aphorism that is strikingly close to Horace's (65–8 BCE) formulation "As in painting, so in poetry" (*Ut picture poesis*). Su Shi wrote "Shaoling's writings are pictures without forms, Han Gan's paintings, unspoken poems." Echoes of this language are found in many other contemporary epitaphs equating poetry with painting. For example, Su Shi's friend Huang Tingjian (1045–1105) called painting "silent poetry" or "soundless poem" (*wu sheng shi*) and poetry "sounding paintings." He wrote on a Li Gonglin work: "Master Li had a phrase he didn't want to express in words, / So with light ink he sketched out a 'soundless poem'" (Bush 1971: 25).

While there were many who were influential in bringing painting into the realm of the educated elite, surely a key individual was Su Shi. It is significant that Su was raised far from the court, in Meishan, Sichuan Province. His father was an independent thinker and scholar who encouraged independent thinking in his sons. In 1057 when twenty years old, Su Shi traveled to the capital to sit for the examination for the imperial bureaucracy. He wrote well-argued essays filled with clear precedents quoted by memory from the Classics. His brilliance, combined with his outspoken nature, got him into trouble with the imperial court several times. When he fell afoul of the court, he used his knowledge of literature to complain so obliquely that only a few of his closest friends understood his message. But other more transparent poems were popularly circulated and understood. They caused his exile to the south to successively distant destinations. Eventually his works were banned and his sons prohibited from taking the imperial examinations. The court outlawed scholar-officials of similar persuasion from participation in government as well as their children. Why is this relevant to the topic of words and images?

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scroll. Sheets of paper could also be added to albums to accommodate inscriptions. Handscrolls and albums were the most private of formats as they were never left out on display as they are in museums today, but rather were closed up and stored away. Folding fans when in use could display one's good taste (see Chapter 15, this volume). Hanging scrolls were the most public place to inscribe a comment and only those confident of their calligraphy dared to do so.

In later eras, words on paintings continued earlier functions including identifications of motifs and people; messages of devotion to deities (mostly Buddhist); congratulations to friends on birthdays and promotions; models for manners and behavior; assertions of legitimacy; historical stories and narratives. With scholar involvement from the eleventh century on, messages of solidarity and sympathy increased as well as political opposition through subtle, sometimes encoded, exchanges between likeminded friends. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, some inscriptions included art historical and self-referential content.

Calligraphy could be an important esthetic element on a painting (as in Figure 22.1) as well as an assertion of individuality and scholarly credentials. Inscriptions attested to one's literacy and intellectual prowess. Inviting others to inscribe was a compliment to their poetic ability, their calligraphic skill, and documented their inclusion in a group. In a society that was everywhere hierarchical and relied on granting mutual benefits, inscriptions on paintings valorized one's personal autonomy while recognizing others' importance.

SEE ALSO: Bai, Calligraphy; Bush, Poetry and Pictorial Expression in Chinese Painting

Chinese Terms

daibi 代筆
lvshi 律詩
sanjue 三絕

shi 實
wusheng shi 無聲詩

xu 虛
zhonggu 中古

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