

An Introduction to

A

Comprehensive

Collection

of

Ancient

Chinese Paintings

I. An Introduction to *A Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings*

A Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings, a project by Zhejiang University and Zhejiang Provincial Administration of Cultural Heritage, is by far the world's most comprehensive collection of pictures of paintings in ancient China. A total of 232 books under 62 volumes cover a sum of 12,405 pieces (sets) of Chinese paintings on paper, silk (including brocade and damask), linen, and other materials from 263 museums and other cultural institutions at home and abroad.

The project started in 2005 and has concluded its planned publication in 2024. It is the first time in history that a nation has made such a comprehensive and systematic collection and synthesis of its ancient paintings worldwide, offering the artistic resources to be shared and utilized by the entire world.

Thanks to the most advanced image acquisition and digital processing technologies, *A Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings* has restored the true essence and spirit of ancient paintings to the greatest extent possible, accomplished lossless restoration of ancient painting images, and fundamentally solved the problem of the dispersion of famous paintings, as well as the dilemma of collecting and utilizing cultural relics.

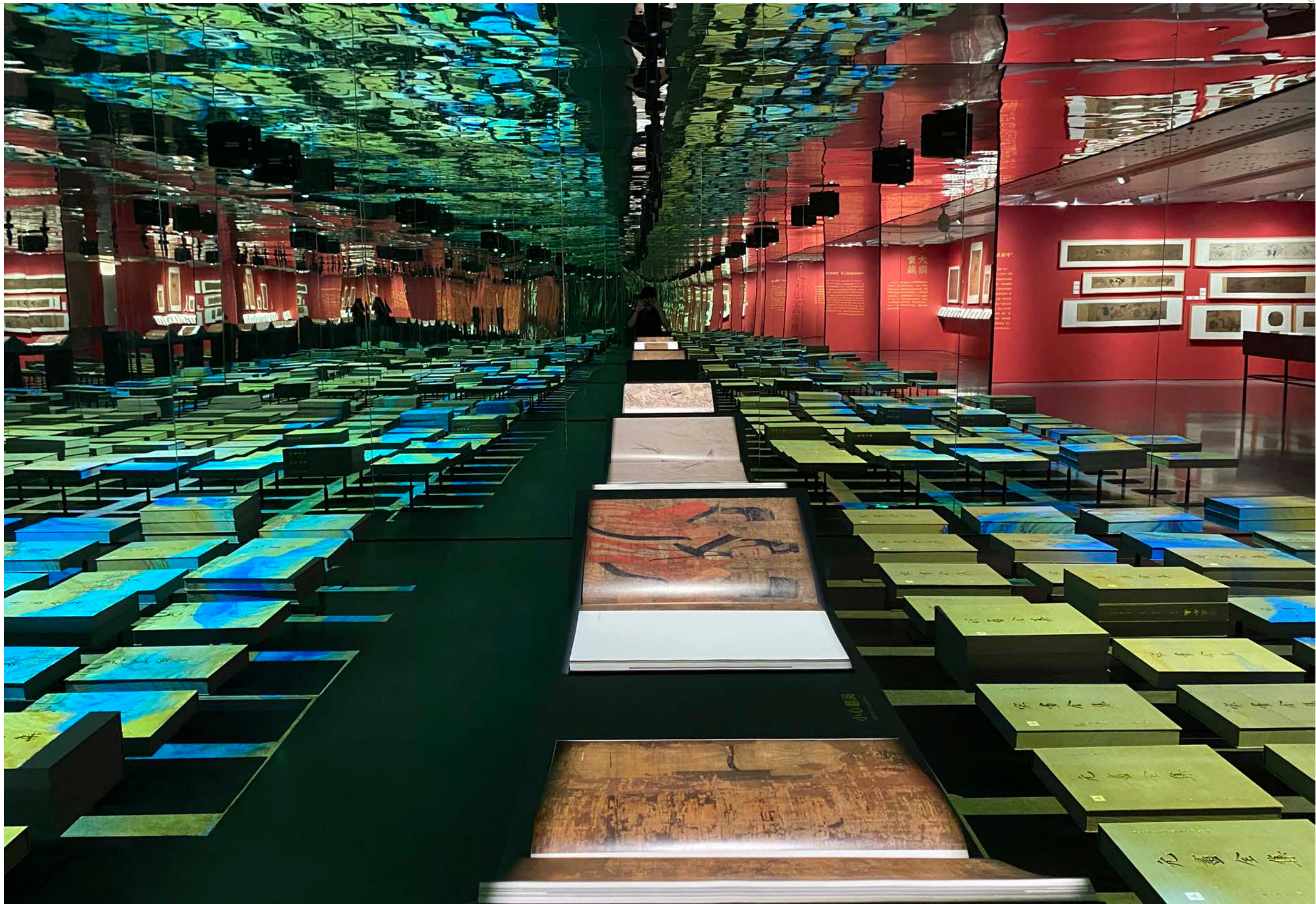
The collection provides significant insights into the evolution of human civilizations. It promotes the connection and innovation between classical artistic traditions and contemporary society, which is an “encyclopedia” for the study of ancient Chinese art and culture, as well as an irreplaceable eternal record of human classical art history.

II. Historical Phases and Characteristics of Ancient Chinese Paintings in *A Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings*

A Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings showcases how China's expansive natural and cultural landscapes inspired its painters across dynasties, who expertly captured nature's spirit through meticulous observation. This rich tapestry of flora, fauna, and life scenes reflects the Chinese philosophy of "unity between man and nature", of upholding morality and benevolence, unity in peace and harmony, the social culture of harmony in diversity and inclusiveness, as the persistent pursuit of truth, kindness, and beauty of the Chinese people.

From a historical perspective, ancient Chinese paintings are renowned in the world of art with a long history and profound accumulation, a galaxy of painters and canons, art lineage and traditions, distinctive national features in varying stages, and everlasting styles and charms.





1. The Rise of Forms and Momentum:

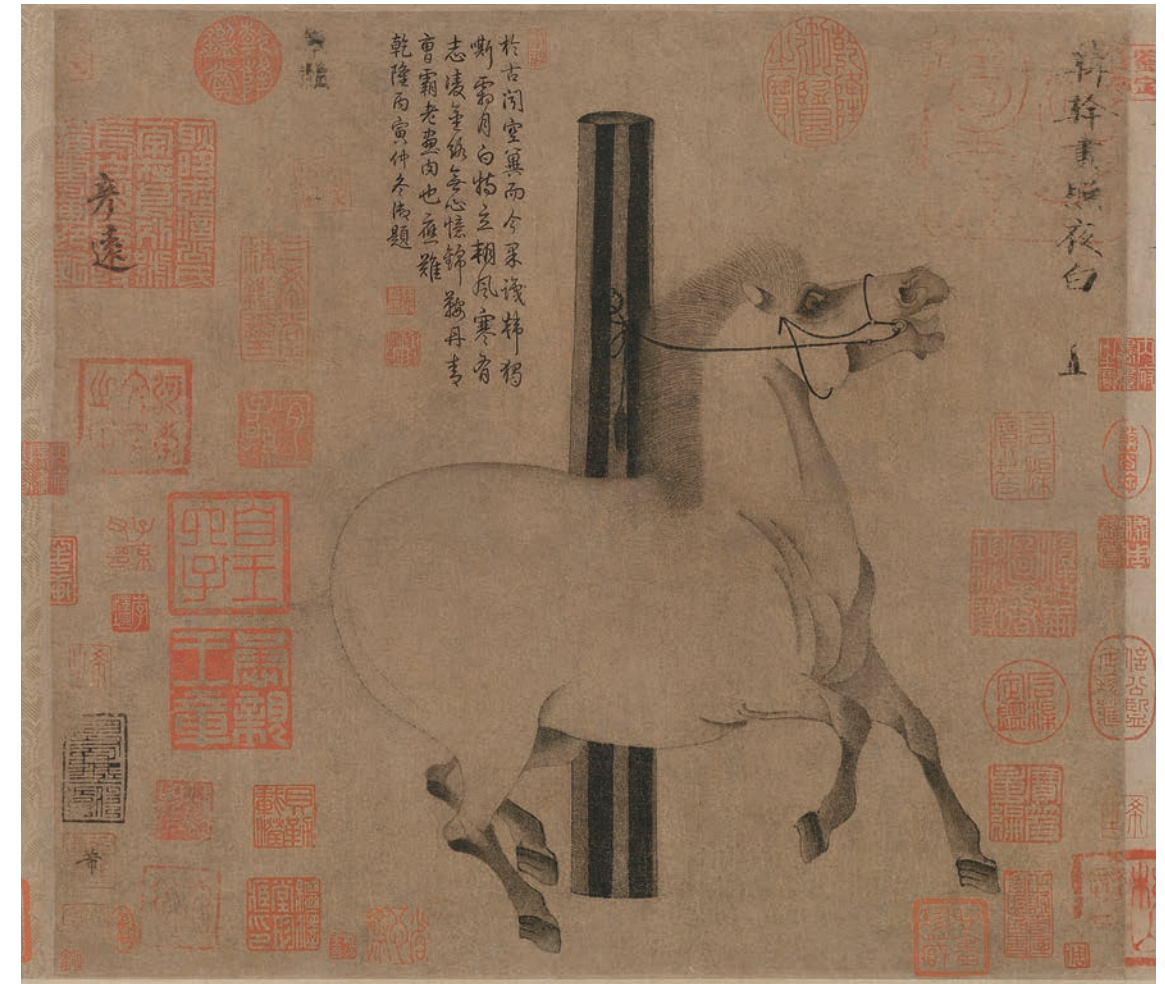
Paintings from the Pre-Qin period to Tang Dynasties

Chinese paintings burgeoned in the 5th century BC as a kind of cultural institution, and they became the dominant expression of Chinese art in the 1st century BC by replacing the primitive patterns and images. Early Chinese paintings were mostly painted on murals and foldable screens in palaces and temples, with some on-hand scrolls and silk banners. They served the state, religious communities, and political-cultural elites, conveying political initiatives, religious beliefs, and ideologies. These early and medieval paintings leaned towards collective expression and societal functions.

The societal role of these paintings of this period shaped their genres and forms. Figure paintings in this period were prevalent, depicting political, religious, and ideological narratives. As Tang Dynasty society diversified in the 8th century AD, other subjects like landscapes, flowers, and animals emerged as independent genres, with landscape painting ultimately becoming the primary genre in later Chinese painting.

The primary purpose of political, religious, and ideological communication is to “persuade”. Therefore, paintings conveying these messages are often lifelike and realistic in style, which was also a hallmark of the pre-Qin period, Han and Tang Dynasty paintings. Artists mastered the techniques of perspective, depth, light, and shadow by the 1st century AD, establishing an indigenous tradition of realistic representation.

Influenced by early motifs, Chinese artists frequently used line drawing. However, with the influx of Buddhist statues from India and Central Asia in the mid-5th century AD, the color dyeing technique came into vogue. This method was creatively transformed in the 8th century AD by master painter Wu Daozi and others, who reintroduced traditional line drawing and replaced pigments with monochrome ink, creating the most fascinating type of Chinese painting known as ink wash paintings.



Night-Shining White

Tang Dynasty Han Gan

30.8 × 34.0 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies (Partial View)

Jin Dynasty Gu Kaizhi

24.4 × 343.8 cm

The British Museum

2. The Pinnacle of Classical Art:

Art of Paintings in the Song Dynasty

The paintings of the Song Dynasty inherited artistic traditions of the pre-Qin era, as well as that of the Han and Tang dynasties; meanwhile, they display unique features of their own, ushering in a period of unprecedented brilliance in the history of Chinese painting.

Artistic contributions from the Imperial Academy of Painting, literati, and folk painters reflected the Song Dynasty's sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts, culminating in diverse paint-

ing styles and genres. Notably, the style of the painters from the Imperial Academy of Painting, known as the "Court Style", was the most representative in the Song Dynasty. Simultaneously, the integration of theories and practice further boosted the art of Chinese painting.

In Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), landscape masters like Li Cheng, Fan Kuan, and Guo Xi presented robust, realistic, and eternal depictions of both natural and social life. Bird-and-flower



Old Trees, Level Distance

Song Dynasty Guo Xi

37.3 × 104.4 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

artists such as Zhao Chang and Cui Bai exhibited meticulous, realistic styles inspired by Neo-Confucian ideals and the theory of “studying the phenomena of nature”. This era also saw the rise of literati paintings, with contributions from Su Shi, Wen Tong, and others, who introduced motifs like ink plums and bamboo. Figure painting also flourished in religious, portrait, story, and folk customs paintings, with notable works like Zhang Zeduan’s *Life along the Bian River at the Qing Ming Festival*. Representative painters included Li Gonglin, Wu Zongyuan, Zhang Zeduan, and Wang Juzheng, among whom Li created a new style of figure paintings with his line drawing in light and clear ink.

With Hangzhou as the capital, the Southern Song era witnessed an evolution in landscape paintings, transitioning from the majestic, overwhelming and complex screen-like Northern Song style to an ethereal, flexible, elegant, and hazy Southern Song aesthetic, offering significant space for poetry, calligraphy, and painting integration. Renowned artists included the Four Great Painters - Li Tang, Liu Songnian, Ma Yuan, and Xia Gui, literati painter Mi Youren, green landscape painter Zhao Boju and Zhao Bosu. A simple, unrestrained painting style innovated by Muxi and other monks greatly impacted Japanese painting trends. Figure paintings diversified in themes, from rural life to historical narratives, while bird-and-flower paintings distanced themselves from the Northern Song’s strict realism, turning towards cherished themes like plums, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemums.



Finches and Bamboo

Song Dynasty Zhao Ji

33.8 × 55.4 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

3. Literati Standards:

Art of Paintings in the Yuan Dynasty

The paintings of the Yuan Dynasty featured a multifaceted development model and the popularity of the literati style, which reflected the ethnic diversity and the literati spirit.

Landscape paintings, popular in Yuan, symbolized the literati's spiritual world. Early painters like Zhao Mengfu, Qian Xuan, and Gao Kegong studied traditional landscapes and struck a new path in landscape paintings by "resorting to the past". In the mid and late Yuan Dynasty, Huang Gongwang, Wang Meng, Wu Zhen, and Ni Zan, the Four Great Painters of Yuan brought Chinese landscape art to new heights with their personalized brushwork and reclusive temperament. The popularity of literati landscape paintings was linked to political unrest, the abolition of the imperial examination, Zen Buddhism's influence, and the literati's hermitage lifestyle. Ni Zan's *Clearing Autumn Skies over a Fishing Village* shifted the landscape expression from a detailed natural depiction to the artist's inner world representation.

The Yuan Dynasty's bird-and-flower paintings, influenced by the Song Dynasty style, witnessed innovation and development, which strove to express the painters' emotions and thoughts. Artists refined the Song Court Style and adopted motifs like the Four Gentlemen in Plants - plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum. Simplicity and plainness were highlighted, with monochrome ink as the chosen color.

Despite Zhao Mengfu and others' significant contributions, figure paintings declined due to social conflicts and the escape from the secular world. Buddhist and Taoist paintings developed during this era and were characterized by the "freehand brushwork" style, evident in Yan Hui's *Immortal Li*, which echoes the technique of Liang Kai from the Southern Song Dynasty.

Thorns, Bamboo and Quiet Birds

Yuan Dynasty Zhang Yanfu

76.2 × 63.5 cm

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art





Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu

Yuan Dynasty Ni Zan

94.6 × 35.9 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Quails and Sparrows in an Autumn Scene

Yuan Dynasty Wang Yuan

151.1 × 75.0 cm

The Cleveland Museum of Art



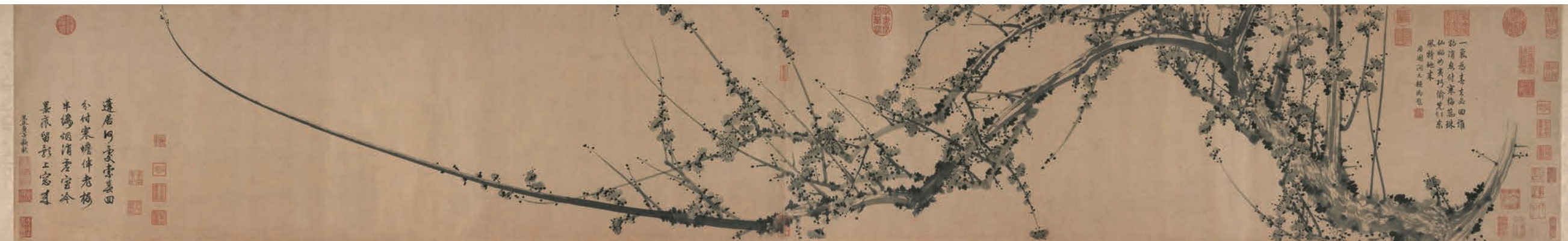


Man and Horse

Yuan Dynasty Zhao Mengfu, Zhao Yong and Zhao Lin

30.2 × 178.1 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art



A Breath of Spring

Yuan Dynasty Zou Fulei

34.0 × 223.1 cm

Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

4. Diversified Schools of Painting:

Art of Paintings in the Ming Dynasty

Ming Dynasty painting developed two main routes: the thriving Court Style and Zhejiang School during the Yongxuan period (1403-1435), and the revival of literati paintings after the Zhengjia period (1436-1566). Four Great Painters of Ming—Shen Zhou, Wen Zhengming, Tang Yin, and Qiu Ying—and others like Dai Jin, Xu Wei, Dong Qichang, and Chen Hongshou significantly influenced this period.

Early Ming Dynasty maintained Yuan Dynasty's literati painting popularity. After that, however, artists geared back onto the track of the Song painters, symbolized by the rise of Court Style and Zhejiang School due to retro trends and Ming emperors' aspirations to revive the Institutions of the Song Dynasty. Notably, Dai Jin's diverse work gained significant recognition, propelling the Zhejiang School.

The Court Style and Zhejiang School dominated for about a century until mid-Ming. Literati paintings continued evolving, inspiring professional painters. Then, with influences from Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming, the Suzhou Literati School began to flourish again. By late Ming, Songjiang School emerged, eventually replacing the dominant Suzhou Literati School.

In figure painting, early Ming painters followed Song's court style or Zhejiang school style, whereas late Ming painters invented a style known as "deformationism." With the arrival of western missionaries in the late Ming Dynasty, figure painting, in particular, was also influenced by Western art. Besides, The bird-and-flower paintings of the Ming Dynasty, such as the Court Style represented by Bian Jingzhao and Lü Ji and the freehand by Chen Chun and Xu Wei, made breakthroughs and remarkable achievements while inheriting their predecessors.



A Spring Gathering

Ming Dynasty Shen Zhou

26.5 × 131.1 cm

Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution



Garden of the Inept Administrator

Ming Dynasty Wen Zhengming

26.4 × 27.3 cm each

The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Watching the Waterfall

Ming Dynasty Xia Kui
195.6 cm x 101.6 cm
The Art Institute of Chicago

Banana Leaves, Bamboos,
Plum Blossoms and Rocks

Ming Dynasty Xu Wei
166.4 cm x 91.0 cm
The Museum of Far Eastern
Antiquities, Stockholm



5. Integration of the Best:

Art of Paintings in the Qing Dynasty

The Qing Dynasty was a time of stylistic integration, synthesizing the best of different painting schools and blending Chinese and Western techniques.

Landscape painting during the early Qing era was characterized by the School of Imitation of the Ancients, represented by the Four Great Painters of Qing — Wang Shimin, Wang Jian, Wang Yuanqi, and Wang Hui. Other notable influences included the Xin'an School, the Four Monks — Yuanji (Shitao), Zhu Da (Bada Shanren), Kuncan (Shixi), and Jianjiang (Hongren), and the Eight Masters of Jinling, each contributing unique aesthetic perspectives. Most landscape painters in the mid and late Qing learned from many ancient masters without blindly following them.

In the Qing Dynasty, the literati painting style was prevalent in the bird-and-flower paintings, with painters pursuing the vigorous and fascinating brushwork of the Yuan and Ming dynasties while making specific innovations, such as the improved boneless painting technique by Yun Shouping, the Court Style that applied fine brushwork in heavy colors and boneless techniques, the realistic style due to the incorporation of Western landscape paintings into bird-and-flower paintings, as well as various styles of new features of the Shanghai School.

Figure painting evolved in line with changing social structures and lifestyles. Artists like Wang Hui and Yang Jin captured grand imperial themes, while folk painters like Jin Nong and Hua Yan portrayed scenes closer to everyday life, reflecting the influence of the burgeoning commodity economy. The Shanghai School, represented by artists like Xugu, Zhao Zhiqian, Ren Bonian, and Wu Changshuo, added a modern twist to all genres, ushering in a new phase of Chinese painting that aligned with the substantial societal shifts of the period.

Landscape in the Style of Huang Gongwang

Qing Dynasty Wang Shimin

134.6 × 56.5 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art





Landscape

Qing Dynasty Shixi

125.8 cm x 54.7 cm

The Museum of Far Eastern
Antiquities, Stockholm

Peonies

Qing Dynasty

Yun Shouping

118.4 x 71.8 cm

The Cleveland Museum of Art





Plum Blossoms (Two of the Twelve Leaves)

Qing Dynasty Jin Nong

25.4 × 29.8 cm each

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

6. Beauty with Diversity and Integrity: Exchanges between Civilizations in the Art of Paintings

Art and culture have long served as major bridges for the exchanges between different civilizations. Ancient Chinese paintings, evidencing history with pictures, provided an interpretation with Chinese characteristics in promoting a community with a shared future for mankind.

The Silk Road, enabling dialogue between Chinese and foreign civilizations, assisted the localization of Buddhism in China, as evident in Buddhist paintings discovered in Dunhuang. Moreover, the eastward dissemination of Chinese paintings to Japan since the 3rd to 6th centuries significantly influenced Japanese “Kara-e”. Similar influence reached Goryeo (present-day Korean Peninsula) through diplomatic and trade routes. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, exchanges between China and the West led to a fusion of artistic concepts and techniques. European missionaries adapted Western paintings to Chinese aesthetics, and Chinese painters incorporated Western elements into their work, driving the changes in art aesthetics for different civilizations.



III. Conclusion

Ancient Chinese paintings, an art of representation and expression, integrate the depiction of objective objects and the expression of artists' individual emotions. As an integral part of the Chinese civilization system, the artistic images of ancient Chinese paintings are valuable and function as cultivators, shapers, and inheritors of Chinese civilization, and play an essential role in cementing the collective identity and social consensus of Chinese civilization. They record history and reflect the present by traversing eternal art time and space. The appreciation and interpretation of the paintings are a kind of dialogue between the classical art tradition of thousands of years and the contemporary world. They are a precious memory of human civilization.

The UNESCO's *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (2021 Edition) has defined the Outstanding Universal Value of cultural heritage this way: "Outstanding Universal Value means cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole." *A Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings* presents the Outstanding Universal Value of ancient Chinese paintings to all human civilizations. They are of history and of the present; they belong to China and more, to the entire world.

