

Wang Mian and Ink Plum Paintings

For Chinese people, the flowering plum tree has been one of the favorite blossoms for more than a millennium. The plum, usually blooming at the end of the winter when the world is still covered by the snow and tingling the air with a faint scent, symbolizes the arrival of the Chinese lunar new year and a turning point from winter to spring. For its auspicious feature, countless paintings use flowering plum as the motif, and elegant works of this subject by many known artists, like Yang Wujiu, Emperor Huizong, Ma Yuan, exist today. However, it is commonly acknowledged that Wang Mian, a later Yuan dynasty scholar, is the most pivotal and representational artist for the plum painting tradition. James Cahill refers Wang Mian to “the most famous of Yuan plum painters”¹; Maggie Bickford titles him as the “founder of the modern ink plum tradition.”² The use of the term “ink plum” here, instead of blooming plum, articulates a significant category of Chinese painting in which Wang Mian was a prominent figure.

To start with, Wang Mian’s close tie with ink plum stems from the broader cultural and political contexts in which he lived. Thus, understanding Wang Mian’s personal biography is vital. Born into a modest family of the gentry, Wang Mian revealed his talent as a child prodigy. However, Wang Mian, like many contemporaries under the reign of the Mongol Yuan, was frustrated by the gloomy prospect of entering an official career. As a Han origin and the descendant of Jiedushi, regional military governors of the Song Dynasty which was conquered and overthrown by the nomad Mongol tribe, he refused to serve the intruder in the imperial government and

¹ James Cahill. *Hills Beyond a River: Chinese Painting of the Yüan Dynasty, 1279-1368* (Japan: Weatherhill, 1976), 160.

² Maggie Bickford. *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 373.

turned into a reclusive life at his hometown Kuaiji Mountain, in nowadays Zhejiang Province. Later on, the flowering plum became the central part of Wang's life, as he planted thousands of plum trees around his residence and sold plum blossoms painting for his living.

Plum blossoms reflect Wang Mian's state of life. Gifted and aspiring but living in an improper time era, flowering plum "metaphorized his lonely stand in a barbarian-ruled world,"³ similar to the plum blooms alone amid ice and snow. On the other hand, Wang's plum blossom had been much more: its capability to blossom in the biting winter made it an emblem of virtue and fortitude. In conjunction with his personality, Wang's painting became a symbol of "integrity and survival in adversity"⁴. Furthermore, his refusal to serve and dissent from the government agency made him an idealized figure for later scholars sharing similar dilemmas to seek spiritual resonance. Consequently, during Wang Mian's time, the core value of blooming plum shifted to a representation of reclusive life and a call for empathetic responses. As a leading figure for this expression, Wang Mian was involved in and played an important role in this transformation. Having historical significance under the Mongol rule, this change gave shape to the establishment of a new painting genre that was closely associated with the literati class, a recurring and inescapable topic of Chinese art history.

The literati class represented a particular social class formed by a meritocracy of intellectuals who had participated in the civil service examinations or were prestigious scholars in the society. They admired the "political and cultural paragons of the past" and regarded maintaining the

³Daria Berg. *Reading China: Fiction, History and the Dynamics of Discourse: Essays in Honour of Professor Glen Dudbridge* (Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 58.

⁴ Maggie Bickford. "Wang Mian." Grove Art Online. 2003.

“moral and aesthetic standards”⁵ as their responsibilities. Literati were familiar with the classics, were knowledgeable about rhetorical devices, and often were great writers as well. By Wang Mian's period, mastery of the brush was already expected of a member of this class. Although in most cases literati were only amateur artists, they didn't imitate court artists and professional painters' style of the realistic and colorful depiction. On the contrary, “proud of their status as amateurs ... expressive calligraphic brush lines were the chief means employed to animate their subjects.”⁶ Literati transformed the painting theory and practice to fit their ideologies, creating a unique scholar-amateur painting mode. Apparently, Wang Mian was one of them.

Wang Mian inherited the tradition of literati painting in his work. Like other literatus, Wang Mian applied calligraphic tools and principles to painting. He painted monochrome plum blossoms with calligraphic brushes and inks on paper, and he used the craft of writing to render the plum blossoms. In Fig.1, the swaying branches reflected the change of ink tonality and the width of the line as the brushstroke went forward. Similar to the left-falling stroke in calligraphy, the branches started with darker ink tonality and thicker lines; under the quick movement and the gradual lifting of the brush, the further away from the tree nodes, lines became thinner and lighter. Therefore, the adoption of the writing technique to painting was a unique phenomenon in Chinese art commonly referred to as painting and writing come from the same origin. To be specific, distinguishing from the work of professional craftsmen, Wang Mian's painting was written rather than painted.

⁵Maxwell Hearn. “Chinese Painting.” In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chin/hd_chin.htm.

⁶ Maxwell Hearn. “Chinese Painting.”

Wang Mian focused on conveying the author's feelings and emotions instead of merely depicting the painting subjects, another distinguishing feature of the literati painting. This was achieved through continuous efforts to simplify the subject of painting. Compared to early dynasty plum paintings such as Fig.2 and 3, Wang Mian's work embraced calligraphic strokes to replace the complex delineations of rugged trunks and branches; and involved painting technique of circled petals ("employed by Southern Song literatus and artist Yang Wujiu"⁷) to replace the colorful and multi-layered plum petals. Moreover, casting aside the previous function as a seasonal indicator, the configuration of the plum paintings changed. Instead of depicting the whole plum tree, Wang Mian often fills the entire painting with only blossoms and branches, the method Bickford has summarized as creating "stylized plum branches with sweeping horizontal or vertical S-curves."⁸ In Fig.1 and 4, the trunks were eliminated and only branches were kept. Furthermore, with the rise of literati painting, ink plum became the only pictorial subject of the painting, forming a distinction with the early plum paintings that contain human figures, animals, and other vegetal motifs. By narrowing the symbolic associations of the plum, the true essence and spirit of the blooming plum were fully presented, along with the artist's state of mind.

Not only did Wang Mian applied calligraphic stroke to his painting technique, but he also wrote poems on the painting surface. Although the coexistence of painting and writing on the same surface has had a long history in China, his incorporation of poems in calligraphic forms on painting revealed the so-called three perfections that literati were the pioneers in combining them

⁷ National Palace Museum. "Features in Painting." <https://www.comuseum.com/painting/flower-painting/features-in-painting/>.

⁸ Maggie Bickford. "Wang Mian." Grove Art Online. 2003.

together. Hearn states that “in such paintings, poetic and pictorial imagery and energized calligraphic lines work in tandem to express the mind and emotions of the artist.”⁹

However, Wang Mian deliberately designed his pictorial space to interact with three perfections further. As mentioned above, Wang’s work had the stylistic cascading S-curves branches that leave blanks within the pictorial plum depiction. By placing his poem into the empty space, Wang Mian creates a conversation among the visual elements of painting, the formal properties of calligraphy, and the textual context of the inscription. These interactions, proposed by Bickford, “produce a coherent and nuance statement”¹⁰ that distinguishes Wang Mian’s work. In Fig.4, Wang Mian created a visual experience that gradually leads the viewer’s attention toward the poem located at the white space between the end of separated long branches. Wang depicts an old solitary plum tree with the inscription which means that a lonely plum tree remains pure in the world of dust, and the reflection of its blossoms in the water looks real. Hence, Wang’s poetry refined the “expressive potential of the subject”¹¹ that exceeded the ability of each art can function alone.

In his poem, Wang Mian’s constant efforts to draw connections between the literati class and his personal identity were observed. Except adopting the circled petals from another literatus painter Yang Wujiu, Wang also drew reference to his literati inheritance. In the poem that he inscribed on the painting of Fig.4, Wang also established a relationship with Wang Xizhi, the greatest Chinese calligrapher for the running script. The poem of Fig.4 is as follows:

⁹ He Maxwell Hearn. “Chinese Painting.”

¹⁰ Maggie Bickford. *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre*, 208.

¹¹ Maggie Bickford. "Wang Mian." Grove Art Online. 2003.

吾家洗硯池頭樹
個個花開淡墨痕
不要人誇好顏色
只留清氣滿乾坤

On top of the pond where I wash the inkstone,
The tree bears blossoms with dim ink stains,
Not looking for praises of great colors,
Only leaves the vast universe with its serene scents.

While the last two lines corresponded to his ideal and pure reclusion mentioned at the beginning of the essay, it is not so apparent that the first line was a literacy allusion to “Wang Xizhi’s pond for inkstone washing¹²,” indicated by Bickford. To be aware of this point, not only a profound knowledge of literature is required (which Wang Mian as a literatus certainly mastered), but also the fact that both Wang Mian and Wang Xizhi have the same family name Wang and resided in the same region, Mountain Kuaiji, should be realized. Consequently, Wang Mian argued that he shared the same spiritual and aesthetic values with Wang Xizhi in his poem. Through geographic location, Wang Mian established a spatial commonality with former masters, solidifying his orthodoxy as the inheritor of the Kuaiji literati tradition which excelled at playing with ink.

In conclusion, this essay explores Wang Mian’s complex identities as an adherent of the former dynasty, a recluse, an amateur painter selling paintings for his living, a literatus, all of which contribute to his last identity - an eminent figure for the ink plum painting tradition. Through inheriting the literati tradition from the previous master in calligraphy, painting, and poetry, and reshaping the representation and purpose of plum painting, Wang Mian’s works became the characteristic form and iconographic model for the later ink plum genre, and his biography motivated other literati scholars to turn their accomplishments into their expression of resistance and their means of subsistence.

¹² Maggie Bickford. *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre*, 387.

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Appendix

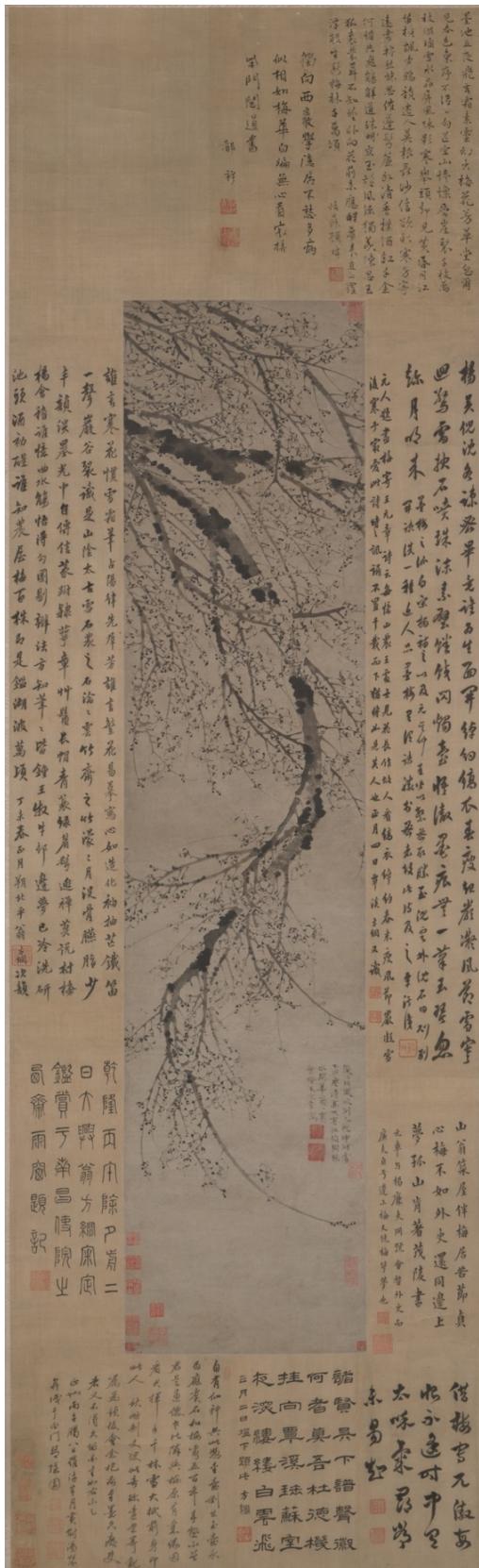


Fig.1 Wang Mian, Ink Plum, ca. 1350s, Yale University Art Gallery.

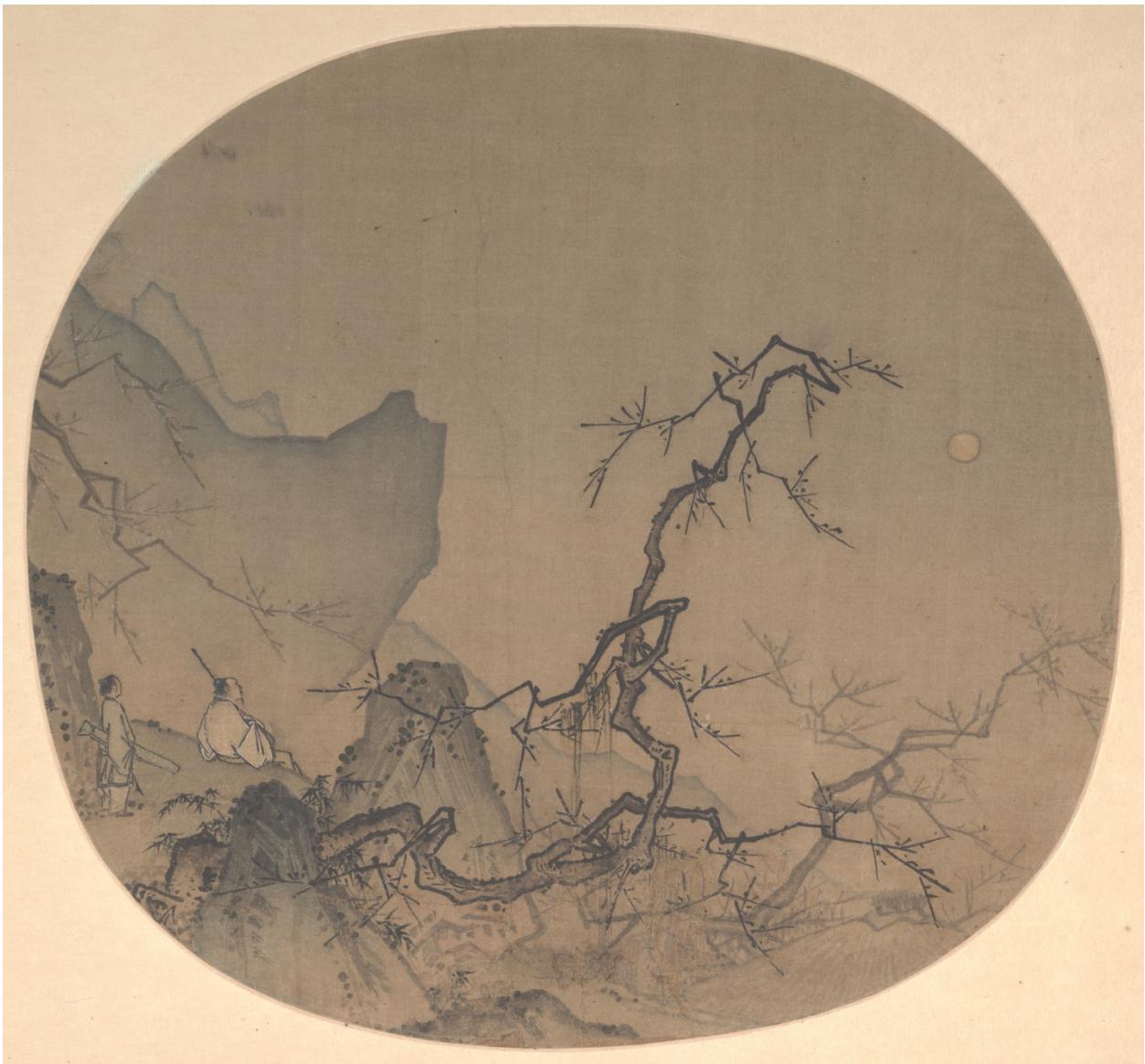


Fig.2 Ma Yuan, Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight, early 13th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig.3 Unidentified Artist, Sparrows, Plum Blossoms, and Bamboo, early 13th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig.4 Wang Mian, Ink Plum, The Palace Museum.