

Mountains and Water: Chinese Landscape Painting

9 February – 28 August 2005

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Admission free

In China, painting and calligraphy are the most highly regarded forms of art. This exhibition is the first in a series of displays exploring the traditions and qualities of Chinese painting, focusing on landscape, birds, flowers and insects, religion, figure painting and modern painting. All of the works displayed come from the British Museum's permanent collection, which is one of the finest outside China. Aspects of the famous Admonitions Scroll will be used in each of these exhibitions.

Chinese painting is traditionally classed in a hierarchy of subject matter, with landscape the most important and popular subject, associated with refined scholarly taste. The Chinese term for landscape is made up of the two characters meaning 'Mountains and Water'. Landscape is also linked with the philosophy of Daoism, which emphasises man's harmony with the natural world. This includes a natural balance of male and female elements in the universe. Mountains represent the male Yang element and water the female Yin element. Mountains were a perennially popular theme in Chinese painting. They are associated with religion because of their proximity to the heavens: looking at paintings of mountains was therefore thought to be good for the soul. Landscapes were not painted from life however, but were idealized and imaginary. Wen Zhengming's 'Wintry Trees' (1470-1559) is an imagined desolate landscape evocative of loss and mourning. It was painted for a man who had made a contribution to the cost of the funeral of the artist's wife. Artists often collected miniature mountains, carved out of different stones, to place on their desk as an inspirational reminder of the natural landscape. Examples of these objects will also be on display.

The exhibition includes works painted onto ceramics, fans or mounted as albums, though most of the paintings are in the form of hanging scrolls. These scrolls were not intended for permanent display but were unrolled in a ceremonial act for special viewings. This is partly due to the delicate nature of the ink and colour used, which would fade if exposed for too long. Connoisseurs of Chinese painting did not view the work from a distance, as in the West, but approached close to 'read the painting' as it was revealed one scene at a time. Paintings often incorporated both calligraphy and poetry as men of culture were expected to be accomplished at all three of these 'excellences'. Inscriptions on paintings sometimes described how or when a painting was produced or for whom.

As part of their training, artists were expected to study the styles of earlier masters, either producing copies of these earlier works or using them as inspiration for their original creations. Fu Baoshi (1904 - 65) for example was an admirer of the 17th century individualist painter called Shitao, so much so that he changed his name to Baoshi which means 'Treasuring Shi'. His work 'Mountain Landscape' used wild spirals of brushwork imitative of Shitao. Wang Yuanqi's 'Landscape' acknowledged his debt to Huang Gongwang in his inscription on the painting, though he felt his efforts in replicating Huang's brush work were 'ineffectual'.

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