# *Nymph of the Luo River* in Three Styles

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Gu Kaizhi's *Nymph of the Luo River* exists today only as three copies, for the original painting is lost. Each copy depicts the same set of images, which were originally adapted from a poem by Cao Zhi. Yet, the copies differ immensely in certain aspects of their style. All three copies date to the Song Dynasty, so it is unsurprising that the aesthetic qualities of the material and paint are similar throughout the works. The differences in style are more prevalent upon examining the arrangement of composition within each copy, because the use of line, color, and space greatly differs from one copy to the next. Although the copies are heavily damaged in certain areas, the detail of several encounters with the nymph can be identified in each work. The copies of *Nymph of the Luo River* utilize different styles in order to uniquely illustrate the detail of the encounters with the nymph, although the works are still united their use of the same iconography, and therefore iconology.

Line is used in each work as the primary method to apply detail, which is in agreement with Kaizhi's naturalistic art style; the lines are mostly uniform and are meant to give an easily interpretable sense of what is depicted in favor of a realistic one. For instance, the clothing of the figures in every encounter is very basic, consisting of only a few layered, curved lines that hint at drapery. Yet, line is the hardest element by which to differentiate between the pieces, because line is the foundation that allows for the painting to have a distinguishable subject.

Color, though faded, shows what each copy stylistically chooses to emphasize. The Freer Gallery of Art copy utilizes muted tones, where the surrounding nature is not nearly green, rather a muddier brown instead. The emphasis is therefore on where color is concentrated, specifically in the noble's red piece of clothing that signifies his nobility, and the black clothing on his followers, which very clearly makes them distinct and separate. Meanwhile, the nymph is portrayed with black hair, which is most likely done to complement the red of the noble. The

Liaoning Provincial Museum copy employs the same red accent on the noble, but uses the color less sparingly. Here, the nymph is red, mirroring the color arrangement and providing symmetry instead of a complement as with the previous copy. Additionally, red is held by the followers on the right, and green is present dully in the background, giving a small impression of nature's significance in the scene. The Palace Museum copy is the least restrained in its use of color, portraying nature in a full green tone that makes nature as significant to the image as the figures are. More colors are used as well, with both red and yellow used to distinguish the noble, and white used as both clothing and skin tones. The color arrangement is also mirrored here, as the nymph utilizes every color of the palette, with black, red, green, yellow, and white in her figure, giving the sense of symmetry once again between the left and right sides.

The composition of each copy is hard to distinguish due to degradation of the works, but it can be observed through the use of space and arrangement. It is difficult to do a proper compositional comparison between the copies because the works have degraded, leaving areas completely blank, and also different encounters of the nymph exist in each copy, although they are similar enough to compare. The two most prominent encounters involve the nymph running away in the first encounter, and sitting under an umbrella in the second. The Freer Gallery of Art copy depicts a vast empty space in between the seated nymph and the noble, which may have been caused due to damage, but seems to be relevant stylistically due to the emptiness of the ground that pervades the piece. This emphasizes the figures rather than nature. Meanwhile, the Liaoning Provincial Museum copy fills the space between the running nymph and the noble with dragons and a river, making a much more crowded composition that emphasizes the event's placement within nature. The Palace Museum depicts both scenes with full illustrations of nature, but stylistically diverges from the other copies due to its frugal use of space; the nymph is

much closer to the noble in both encounters. Therefore, the emphasis is on the connection between the nymph and the noble.

It is apt to compare the two distinct encounters of the nymph due to the similar iconographical depictions in the separate scenes. The copies are most similar in this aspect, as the different encounters employ the same iconographic details in order for the reader to identify the subjects and extrapolate themes from the work. We can identify the nobility of the central male figure due to his colorful and luscious attire, as well as his contrast against his followers. This is further distinguished by how he exhibits an expressive gesture and is positioned under the umbrella. These details are equally present in both encounters, solidifying the noble's prestigious position. The nymph is iconographically portrayed through her curvature and separation from the male figures; because the nymph is depicted with a sense of movement from the crowd, she can be seen as elusive. Her elusive nature is also mimicked in the water that surrounds her in both encounters, even when she is seated, for the water's fluidity directly contrasts the solidity of the ground the noble walks on. Furthermore, the nymph's movement is still observable while she is seated due to the depiction of her cloth blowing in the wind.

*Nymph of the Luo River's* iconology can be interpreted as a universal moral lesson about the voyeuristic advances of men towards women. The constant movement of the male group towards the nymph never ends; this is especially apparent in the second encounter with the nymph where she is seated, because even without running away the nymph is able to escape the male grasp. Furthermore, there are fewer followers supporting the noble in the second encounter, possibly signifying the loss that is achieved through the futile pursuit of the nymph. The noble may outlive his followers, but there is no implication that he will reach the nymph; the pursuit of women should not be a chase, and the noble will not reach the nymph regardless of his status.