On Collecting Chinese Painting

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The Wisteria Studio, in the style of Wang Meng (1308-1385), by Wang Hui (1632-1717), Chinese. Dated 1712. Hanging scroll, ink and slight color on paper, 3 feet 10½ inches x 1 foot 11⅜ inches. SL 70.339.5

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EARL MORSE

The first question that greets us when visitors see our collection is always, ''How did you happen to collect Chinese paintings?'' Strangely enough our interest was stimulated by several Chinese artists who came to visit our garden of tree peonies on Long Island some twenty-five years ago. We could always determine the date of the full bloom of these magnificent plants by Wang Chi-chüan's telephone call asking if it was time to come out. Each year artist-teacher Wang spent the day capturing the fleeting moment when the blossoms were at their height. When Mr. Wang presented us with a painting of one of our rare yellow peonies, we were on our way to becoming collectors of Chinese art. Instead of acquiring more paintings, however, for the next fifteen years we detoured with much pleasure into the well-known delights of collecting Chinese porcelains, jades, sculptures, and even a twelve-symbol imperial robe of the Emperor Ch'ien-lung (1736-1795).

It is an artistic dictum more than a thousand years old that one of the highest forms of Chinese art is calligraphy. As the vehicle of expression of the poetry and philosophy so revered in the Chinese culture, the brush, ink, and brushstroke are themselves venerated. Little wonder then that Chinese landscape painting created with the same brush, ink, and stroke should be ranked just under calligraphy in the hierarchy of Chinese art appreciation and above porcelains and jades, which were considered mere decorative arts. Not only did landscapes (the Chinese word consists of two characters, mountain and water) express the adoration of the Chinese for nature, but many included poems by the painter as integral parts of a complete artistic unit, illustrating literary as well as calligraphic skill.

So it was almost fifteen years later, motivated primarily by the intellectual conviction that no collection of Chinese art was complete without a painting, that we acquired The Wisteria Studio,

executed by the Ch'ing master Wang Hui (1632-1717) when he was eighty years old (opposite page). A few years later we added the monumental landscape that Wang Hui painted at twenty-eight — his earliest recorded work (see page 161). Both of these were acquired through our friend and first mentor, Alice Boney, then of New York and now of Tokyo.

We did not expand our collection of paintings further, however, until after our accidental meeting in 1964 with Dr. Wen Fong, Professor of Chinese Art at Princeton University, a scholar in the field of Chinese painting. Professor Fong was writing a study of Wang Hui and wanted to see the examples in our collection. Unfortunately, some years earlier, little realizing its historic and artistic value, I had been persuaded to sell our 1660 painting to a close friend of mine who had much admired it. When Professor Fong saw this picture at my friend's apartment, he insisted I must have it back, and, luckily, the sale was reversed (plus a handsome Ming painting as a bonus to my understanding friend).

With Professor Fong's help, the gap between our 1660 and our 1712 paintings by Wang Hui was closed. Soon afterward he introduced me to the great connoisseur Wang Chi-ch'ien, a fine artist in his own right, whose collection of Chinese paintings contained masterpieces of every period going back 1,000 years. Many of the highlights in our collection came from him. Still there were gaps to be filled, and dealers here and in Tokyo supplied the rest of our Wang Huis except for one — part of a sale of mediocre paintings from an undistinguished collection, and incorrectly attributed in the sales catalogue. With a collector's determination I asked Wang Chi-ch'ien to visit the exhibition with me, and he identified the work as Winter Landscape by Wang Hui, executed when the master was called to the court of the Emperor K'ang-hsi (1662-1722). This fine hanging scroll gave us at least one Wang Hui for each of six decades during which he was active; in all, we had twelve dated examples from 1660 to 1713. It was the kind of comprehensive collection that would enable art historians like Professor Fong to fulfill the hopes of Soame Jenyns, recently retired from the British Museum, who said, "I should like to see a far greater number of studies of individual painters complete with far greater number of illustrations showing their early and late dated works together with contemporary copies and other imitations." Indeed, in assembling these paintings, Professor Fong made several discoveries that led him to rewrite parts of his study of the artist, soon to be published.

It has been an exhilarating experience to build our retrospective of this seventeenth-century master. In appreciation of Professor Fong's help, we have promised to give our Wang Hui paintings to Princeton, where future scholars will be able to benefit from a close study of his artistic development. One of two works we have already given is, by poetic justice, the monumental study done by Wang Hui at age twenty-eight that Professor Fong "rescued" from my friend's apartment.

Is there still an opportunity to acquire with modest means an interesting and gratifying collection of Chinese paintings? Where do you find them? How can you know if they are genuine? How much should they cost?

Chinese landscape painting is part of a continuous tradition going back to Wang Wei (699-759) in the "golden age" of the T'ang period (618-906). Even though the likelihood of finding a genuine T'ang painting has been so remote as to be considered impossible, fascination with antiquity created a great demand by collectors in the United States fifty years ago for paintings of the Sung period (960-1279). Most of these paintings have by now gravitated to museums, where their study by scholars familiar with the scientific analysis of paper, silk, and ink as well as the history of Chinese collecting and art has led to the conclusion that very few of these paintings are of the period, and only a minor fraction are important works in good condition.

That so many paintings were incorrectly dated is not necessarily a function of the avarice of dealers who might knowingly misrepresent a work to a collector looking for ancient scrolls by great artists at bargain prices. Indeed, many legitimate copies — sometimes down to duplicated signatures and seals — have been made as exercises in virtuosity by artists who revere the past. Further complicating the problem of distinguishing originals, copies, and forgeries are the Chinese beliefs that it is inelegant for serious

connoisseurs and art critics to expose tricks of dishonest dealers and painter-forgers, and that authenticity of signature is secondary to the quality of the painting itself. If a copy or forgery succeeds in preserving the spirit of earlier masters, in Chinese eyes it is an authentic work of art in its own right.

The tradition of copying ancient works has often proven valuable in providing a record of masterpieces created in the ages before photography. An example is the charming composition attributed to Wang Hui but carrying the seal and signature of the Yüan master Huang Kung-wang (1269-1354), whose authentic work is represented by only one painting, now in the Palace collection at Taipei. Perhaps Wang Hui, already well known and greatly admired, felt his individual style was so self-evident that no one could be deceived by what seems to be a patent forgery. While that may have been so in his own day, twentieth-century scholars have differed on the attribution of this work — one assigning it to Wang Hui, another to his friend and contemporary Yün Shou-p'ing (1633-1690). Only after many discussions did they finally agree that the painting was by Wang Hui. The scholarship required in solving puzzles like this is beyond the grasp of most aspiring collectors, who would be well advised to abandon their attempts to discover a "lost" Chinese equivalent of an El Greco or a Rembrandt.

Rather, collectors now might try to acquire the more abundant paintings of the Ming period (1368-1644). A cautionary note must be sounded, however: in recent auction sales in New York, masterpieces from this period have begun to fetch prices comparable to significant Western paintings of the same age. Yet the opportunity to buy a fine Ming painting, of 1500 or after, does still exist.

One is even more likely to find — at relatively modest prices, less than that of a Picasso or Matisse lithograph — paintings of artistic merit from the Ch'ing period (1644-1911), which, I believe, are the most undervalued objects of collectors' interest. To find examples of leading masters does require study and a continuing search at dealers and auction rooms. Thanks to a recent change in the law removing the ban on importation of objects of Chinese origin, it pays to pursue the search in Europe and the Far East as well as at home.

One final hint about the acquisition of antique paintings is a restatement of the universal rule — buy what you like and pay what you can afford. If the work is what it is claimed to be — a stroke of good fortune; if not — it still appeals to you, so the fact that it is a copy or forgery should not diminish its aesthetic value for you.

Alternatively, you can follow the advice of an ancient connoisseur, who wrote over three hundred years ago in a pamphlet addressed to the would-be collector: "It is a mistake to value only antique pictures and despise modern ones. With the passing of time the number of antique scrolls grows less and less. If one insists on collecting only antique paintings, one will end up with nothing but fakes." The enticing field of recent Chinese paintings ranges from landscapes by traditional masters to the new and exciting developments of abstract art — the favorite style of younger painters in New York, Hong Kong, and Taipei. Charming and decorative works can be bought from the artists here and abroad for a pittance. In addition to aesthetic delights, the ownership of contemporary paintings carries with it membership in the small but growing group of aficionados in the oldest continuous tradition of art connoisseurship — collecting Chinese scrolls.

ABOVE

Autumn Colors among Streams and Mountains (detail), by Shen Chou (1427-1509), Chinese. Handscroll, ink on paper, 7 13/16 inches x 21 feet. SL 70.339.6

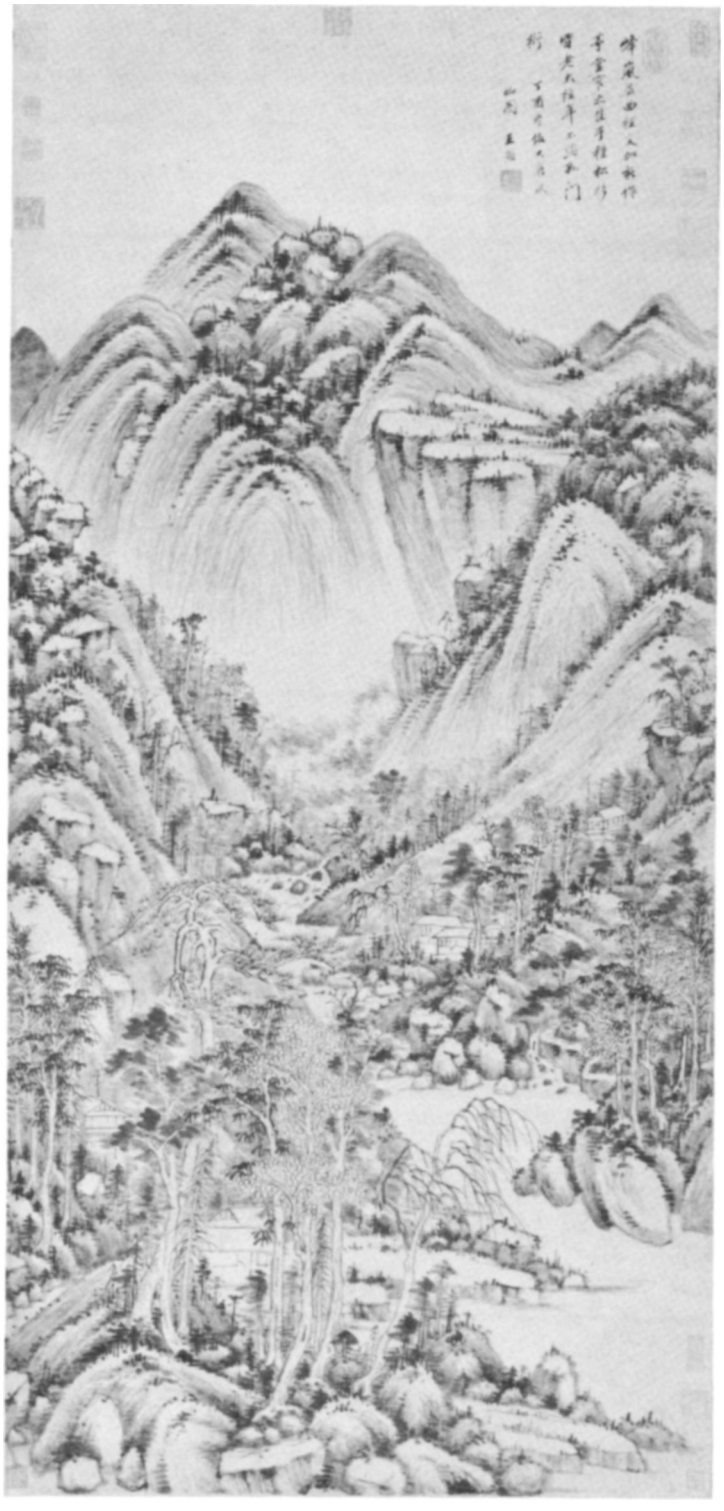
LEFT

Painting from an album of scenes in the Cho-cheng-yüan (Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician), Soochow, by Wen Cheng-ming (1470-1559), Chinese. Dated 1551. Album of 8 painted leaves with facing pages inscribed with poems, ink on paper, average dimensions of paintings, 10½ x 10¾ inches. SL 70.339.7

Two paintings from an album of landscapes after Sung and Yüan masters, by Wang Hui. Dated 1673. Above: In the style of Tung Yüan (X century), ink and slight color on paper, 8⅝ x 12 7/16 inches. Below: In the style of Kao K'o-king (1248-1310), ink on paper, 8¾ inches x 13 3/16 inches. SL 70.339.12

Dwelling in the Fu-ch'un Mountains (detail), by Huang Kung-wang (1269-1354), Chinese. Dated 1350. Handscroll, ink on paper, 12⅞ x 251 inches overall. The Chinese National Palace Museum, Taiwan

Landscape in the style of Huang Kung-wang (1269-1354), by Wang Shih-min (1592-1680), Chinese. Dated 1666. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 4 feet 8⅜ inches x 1 foot 10⅛ inches. SL 70.339.8



Landscape in the style of Huang Kung-wang, by Wang Chien (1598-1677), Chinese. Dated 1657. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 3 feet 9¼ inches x 22⅛ inches. SL 70.339.9

Landscape in the style of Huang Kung-wang, by Wang Hui (1632-1717), Chinese. Dated 1660. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 5 feet 8½ inches x 2 feet 11¼ inches. SL 70.339.10

Snow Clearing, after Li Ch'eng (918-967), by Wang Hui. Dated 1669. Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 3 feet 7½ inches x 14 inches. SL 70.339.11

Landscape in the style of Wu Chen (1280-1354), by Wang Hui. Dated 1675. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 2 feet 2 7/16 inches x 15 7/16 inches. SL 70.339.13