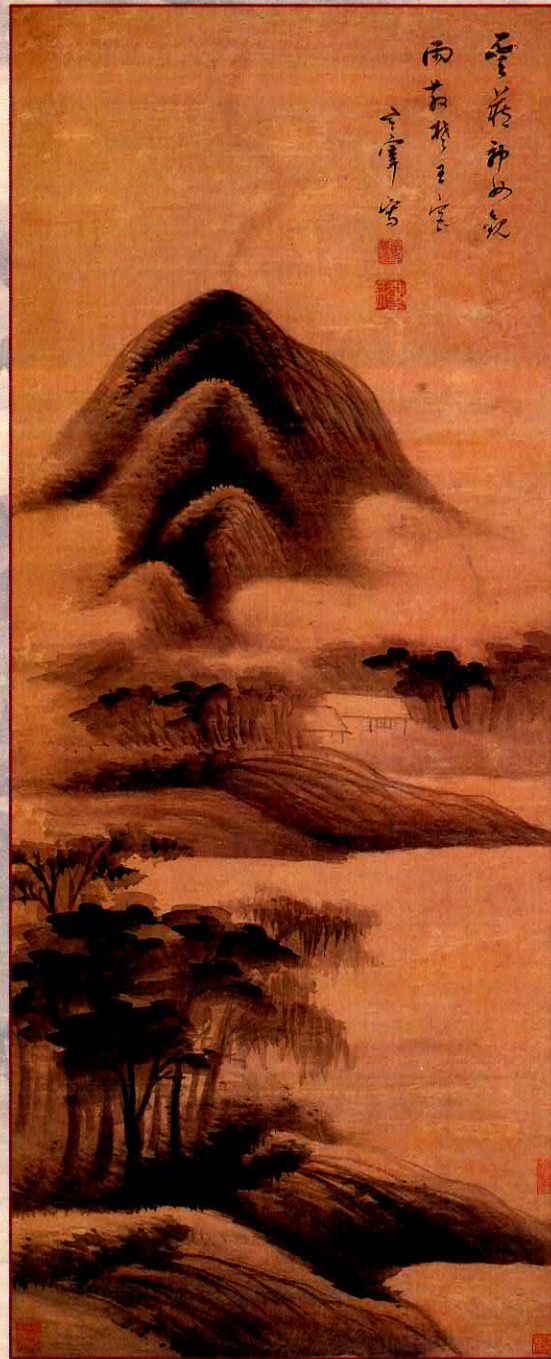


Homage to Old Masters in Chinese Landscape Painting



A Selection from the Xubaizhai Collection

Introduction

During the Five Dynasties (907–960) and the Northern Song (960–1127) periods landscape became a major category of painting in China. Without many precedents to refer to, painters of those periods had to find their own way to depict nature. As the techniques they developed were adopted and practised repeatedly by the later generations, their styles became formalised and eventually evolved into models — subjects of imitation. The artists of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties tended to be more imitative of former masters. Although some of them claimed that their styles were modelled after the old masters, the final production of their works, in fact, showed individual creativity. Such claims were merely the tribute they paid to the old masters.

In practice, there are three ways of imitation: *mo*, *lin* and *fang*. *Mo* is to reproduce an exact copy by tracing or transferring. *Lin* is the capturing of the overall likeness of the original picture laid before the artist, not only of the form but also of the spirit. *Fang* is the least restrained mode. By studying extensively the style, composition and technique of one or several works of a particular old master, the artist freely interprets the manner of the master in his own painting. Thus, it may not have an exact likeness of any special work of the old master. While artists assimilate the stylistic essence of old masters, they are not restrained by the established practices. Such an innovative way of adapting old styles makes the dynamics of the tradition of Chinese painting continue to evolve. Understanding of historical antecedents and imitating the brush techniques of old masters have become important aspects in the execution and appreciation of Chinese painting.

After the style of Dong Yuan

Dong Yuan (?–962), also known as Dong Beiyuan, was an influential painter in the Five Dynasties. The majority of his works are the gently rolling knolls and distant banks of Jiangnan, south of the Yangtze River. He invented the “hemp-fibre texture stroke” to depict the rounded hills. At the same time, he lavished many dots and dashes to highlight the foliage and alum-heads on the slopes.

1. *Landscape after Rain* by Dong Qichang

In this painting, Dong Qichang (1555–1636) combined the styles of Dong Yuan and Mi Fu (1052–1107), a famous artist in the Northern Song period. Knolls in the foreground and the distant mountains are painted with “hemp-fibre texture stroke” of Dong Yuan’s style. The foliage painted by dots is modelled after Dong Yuan and is also mixed with the dots of Mi’s style. The simple composition and large portions of blank space in the painting are reminiscent of Mi Fu’s technique. This painting reflects Dong Qichang’s interest in techniques rather than the realistic features.



2. *Landscape in the Style of Dong Yuan* by Wang Shimin

In the inscription, Wang Shimin (1592–1680) claimed that he painted after Dong Yuan’s style. However, he also combined the features of several Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) masters in the painting. The hill at the beginning section is painted in Dong’s “hemp-fibre texture stroke” and the slanted flat-topped ledges nearby are reminiscent of the style of Huang Gongwang (1269–1354) of the Yuan dynasty. The mountains from the middle to the end of the scroll are painted in “roiling clouds texture stroke” of Guo Xi (ca. 1020–ca. 1100) of the Song dynasty. The composition of the cliffs at the end of the scroll is obviously different from



Dong Yuan's panoramic landscapes of Jiangnan. The painting manifests that Wang was not confined to the style of a particular old master.

3. *Landscape after Dong Yuan by Dai Xi*

Dai Xi (1801–1860) depicted two earthy hills, which dominate the whole composition, with interwoven “hemp-fibre texture stroke” and horizontal dots. The contrast of light and shade is employed to enhance the volume of the hills, which is close to the style of Dong Qichang rather than Dong Yuan's. Though Dai Xi followed the style of Dong Yuan, his execution of brushstroke was much restrained. This reflects that imitation of old masters in Chinese painting became somewhat a mannerism in the middle and late Qing periods.



After the style of Mi Fu

Mi Fu (1052–1107) was a famous painter and calligrapher in the Northern Song dynasty. His landscape paintings capture the cloudy and misty atmosphere. By applying both the wet and dry ink dots and dashes, which are called the “Mi dots”, Mi Fu attained a high proficiency in the use of ink which was known as “ink-play”. The unique style in landscape of Mi Fu and his son Mi Youren (1074–1151) earned them the title “Cloudy Mountains of the Mi-Family”.

4. *Landscape in the Style of Mi Fu by Chen Chun*



Chen Chun (1483–1544) is famous for his freestyle painting. He collected a landscape painting by Mi Youren so that he was able to imitate it directly. However, Chen was not constrained by it. He used ink and wash and a few large dots to represent the mountains and trees instead of employing the standard “Mi-Family” technique by using dots all over the picture. The house and the bridge were also painted in a few simple lines. In acquiring Mi's typical style, Chen also showed his individual creativity in the painting.

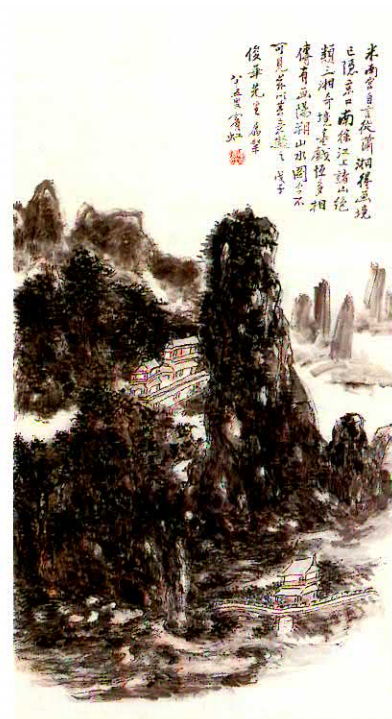
5. *Landscape in the Style of Mi Fu by Wu Changshou*

Wu Changshou (1844–1927) seldom painted landscapes. This landscape in the style of Mi Fu, which was not done in Wu's typical brushmanner, is highly commendable. He stated in the inscription that it was modelled after Mi Fu's handscroll of drizzle and cloudy mountain landscape. However, a scene of pouring rain is presented in the picture instead. There is a strong contrast between black and white. Dots in ink and wash are painted in a bold and vigorous manner. The painting demonstrates how Wu interpreted Mi's technique as his own language for re-creation.



6. *Landscape after Mi Fu* by Huang Binhong

Among the imitations of Mi Fu, the majority was inclined to follow his simple and elegant style. Huang Binhong (1865–1955) took a different approach in this painting. Knowing that rice paper was highly absorbent of water, he applied “dark, dense, thick and heavy” ink to convey the richness and moisture of the mountains. Although this painting, in terms of appearance, is very different from Mi Fu’s landscape, it is imbued with the same sense of vividness through a different approach. For Huang Binhong, this landscape is an expression of his admiration and respect for the former great master rather than a work of imitation.



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Hong Kong Museum of Art

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Xubaizhai Collection Catalogues (published):

1. A Gift of Heritage—Selection from the Xubaizhai Collection of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy (1992)
2. Xubaizhai Collection Catalogue—Fan (painting and calligraphy) (1994)
3. Xubaizhai Collection Catalogue—Album (painting) (1995)
4. Xubaizhai Collection Catalogue—Vertical Scroll (painting) (1997)

After the style of Huang Gongwang

Huang Gongwang (1269–1354) was one of the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty. He was influenced by Dong Yuan and Juran (fl. ca. 960—ca. 986). In his later years, he lived in seclusion in the Fuchun Mountains from which he sought inspiration to paint the famous long handscroll *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*. In the handscroll, mountains are modelled by the wavelike “long hemp-fibre texture stroke”, an apparent element of Dong Yuan. For painting towering mountains, he sometimes added flat-topped ledges sideward to enrich the composition. Huang together with other three members of the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty are regarded as the zenith of literati painting.

7. *Landscape after Huang Gongwang for Xu Hangong* by Dong Qichang

Depicted in this scroll is the landscape of a range of undulating hills with scattered trees. The triangle-shaped peaks are painted in “long hemp-fibre texture stroke” and the bush is painted in horizontal dots. These techniques are particularly close to the style seen in Huang Gongwang’s *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*. But unlike Huang, Dong applied dark and wet ink in this painting. Besides, Dong presented the landscape in a clear and plane composition with simplified and abstract forms of the mountains as well as the unrealistic proportions of trees. Dong’s style made a great impact not only on his period but also on the late Ming and early Qing dynasties.



8. *Landscape after the Style of Huang Gongwang* by Wang Yuanqi

Wang Yuanqi’s (1642–1715) understanding of Huang Gongwang’s composition, brush techniques and depiction of objects was gained through Dong Qichang and his grandfather Wang Shimin. The tips of the few tall trees in the foreground are connected with the hillside in the centre of the picture. The circuitous mountains lead the view to the dominant mountain peak in the background. Wang Yuanqi named this link-up technique “Longmai” (dragon veins). He deliberately left the blank space between mountains to represent the steam of clouds, ensuring that the composition is not too compact. This variation from the style of the old master makes Wang Yuanqi’s landscape distinctive and individual.



9. *Landscape in the Style of Huang Gongwang* by Wu Zishen (FA90.44)

Wu Zishen (1893–1972) stated in the inscription that he imitated the style of Huang Gongwang through Wang Yuanqi’s composition and Wang Shimin’s application of color. The trees and rocks are painted with great accuracy in a restrained brushmanner. The arrangement of the pine trees and the piling mountains are apparently modelled after the style of Huang Gongwang, but in a more formalized fashion. By the end of the Qing dynasty, the tradition in imitating Huang Gongwang’s style has become a mere formality. For instance, the “Y”-shaped crack on the rock surface is one of the major features after Huang Gongwang, which was commonly practised in the Qing dynasty.



After the style of Ni Zan

Ni Zan (1306–1374) was one of the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty. He was a good friend of Huang Gongwang. Most of his paintings depict the scenic Lake Tai of Jiangshu in extremely simple composition: a foreground with a pavilion and sparse trees, an expanse of water and a distant shore. Ni Zan’s fastidious and aloof characters are always reflected by his parched brushwork and the application of dry and sparing ink. He modelled the horizontal rock layers with the slanted “folded belt texture stroke” and the moss-dot accents to render a spatial perspective. His paintings, without any figure, evoke a mood of detachment and tranquillity that is coincided with the sentiment of the literati.

10. *Spring Outing* by Shen Zhou

At the beginning section of this handscroll, Shen Zhou (1427–1509) combined the styles of Huang Gongwang and Ni Zan. He employed the “long hemp-fibre texture stroke” of Huang Gongwang to paint the hills and adopted Ni Zan’s dark ink dots. Ni Zan rarely painted figure in his landscapes, whereas, Shen Zhou retained some of the features of the Wu School by putting in several huts with people inside in the middle section of this scroll that reflected the literati life of his time. The creek in front of the house leads to the large area of water in the distance. Shen Zhou employed a horizontal composition to achieve Ni Zan’s image of a boundless river. At the end of the scroll, the style of Ni Zan is most clearly seen in the sparsely scattered bare trees and the rocks painted in the “folded belt texture stroke”.



📖 11. *Rising clouds in the Southern Mountains* by Yun Shouping

Yun Shouping (1633–1690) adopted the typical composition of Ni Zan—“one river, two banks”. In the foreground is the slight slope scattered with spare trees. He replaced Ni Zan's lone pavilion with several huts. Behind the slope is a large area of blank space representing the river. Across the river are the mountains and sandbank in the distance. Yun Shouping employed Ni Zan's unique “folded belt texture stroke” to paint the slope in the foreground and the cliffs in the background. The composition renders a deeper perspective to the viewer. The six tall trees of different species are reminiscent of Ni Zan's style. But the foliage is painted in ink wash more frequently than those by Ni Zan.



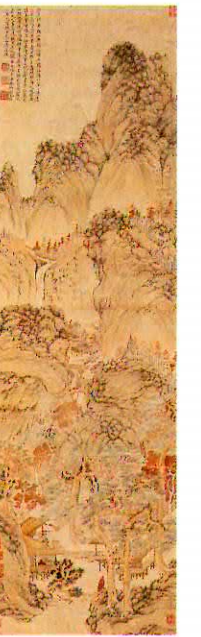
📖 12. *Landscape* by Li Jian

In the foreground, Li Jian (1747–1799) painted the huge rock with dark moss-dots which is characteristic style of Ni Zan. The pavilion, sparse trees and the bamboo are also obviously modelled after Ni Zan. In this landscape there is hardly any trace of human being, which indicates the state of mind of literati living in seclusion. However, unlike Ni Zan who painted the distant mountains with dry “folded belt texture stroke”, Li Jian applied ink wash and rhythmic brushstrokes in the depiction of his distant rolling mountains. Apparently, Li Jian was not confined to the style of Ni Zan.



📖 13. *Landscape after the Style of Wang Meng* by Lu Zhi

Lu Zhi (1496–1576) was a member of the Wu School of Painting. In this painting, the arrangement of rocks is executed after the style of Wang Meng. Nevertheless, his refined brushwork and the use of vivid colours distinguish him from Wang Meng. Lu Zhi successfully incorporated the meticulous style of brushwork into the tradition of literati landscape painting. On the other hand, the composition of the picture with piling mountains is modelled after the style of his teacher Wen Zhengming.



📖 14. *Landscape after the Style of Wang Meng* by Wang Hui

Wang Hui (1632–1717) was one of the Four Wangs of the Orthodox School of Painting. The Four Wangs were all influenced by Dong Qichang. In the picture, the thick pines are juxtaposed in an interlocking manner and the pine needles are stretched like folding fans. The shape of the rocks, which conveys a sense of movement, demonstrates the characteristic style



of Wang Meng. However, Wang Hui did not employ Wang Meng's dense “ox-tail texture stroke” and “unraveling rope texture stroke”, nor did he adopt Wang Meng's dots in dark ink. He retained his distinctive style by applying the colours of light malachite and ochre instead.

After the style of Weng Meng

Wang Meng (1308–1385) was one of the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty. He became a hermit and lived in the Mount Huanghe in his middle age. Most of his works depict the secluded life. He used the overlapping layers of the “unraveling rope texture stroke” and the “ox-hair texture stroke” to build up the towering mountains of a dense composition. The combination of these two types of stroke, the compact composition and the application of the vigorous ink dots together create the sense of coherence and movement of undulating mountains.

📖 15. *Pines and Springs in the Style of Wang Meng* by Shangrui

Shangrui (1634–after 1728) was a monk painter. The mountains in the top centre and the left are painted in “ox-tail texture stroke” and the pines are apparently modelled in the style of Wang Meng. However, the bushes lined up neatly along the ridge are reminiscent of the style of Huang Gongwang. The pattern of the distant mountains and the fine brushwork are close to the style of Wang Hui. The scene on “visiting friends in the deep mountains” featured in the picture is a typical theme in the Ming and Qing dynasties, which is different from the spirit of seclusion presented by Wang Meng.

