THE ROYAL COLLECTION OF IMPERIAL CHINA

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Cover illustration:
Wandering in the Peach Garden by Wen Zhengming (1470–1559)

Image © CITIC Art Museum
The Aesthetic Heritage of the Chinese People

If the history of humankind’s art were a huge starry sky, the constellation made up of traditional Chinese art would have shone brightly through the ages. This book presents a selection of the most remarkable artists in China’s long history, displaying their original works in large formats and without alteration. For millennia, such masterpieces have captured countless audiences and have come to form the aesthetic heritage of the Chinese people, standing as a symbol of Eastern culture.

In the past, historic conditions and other constraints have kept such masterpieces confined to secured chambers out of the public eye. General readers had difficulty gaining even the merest glance of the entire picture, much less having a closer look at or truly appreciating the work. One key aim of the present volume is to introduce to the general public great works of art that were previously regarded as suited only to the elite classes. It is my sincere hope that the brilliant works of the great masters can become a valuable asset to enrich the lives of a broader range of readers.

—ZHANG ZIKANG
Deputy Curator, National Art Museum of China

Living with the Glorious Paintings of the Chinese People

The tiny Sanxi Chamber in the Forbidden City was frequented by the Qing Dynasty Emperor Qianlong, who often visited it alone so that he could appreciate his collection of authentic old paintings in solitude. In the long years from the Gu Kaizhi era of the Eastern Jin Dynasty to the time of “four Wangs” (four painters surnamed Wang) of the Qing Dynasty – a span of many years – no replicas were made of these great painters’ works.

Today, through digital technology, we can easily outpace earlier generations’ image creation through machine replication. The images reproduced by digital technology are as marvelous and lifelike as if they were the originals. With state-of-the-art technology, we are finally able to get a clear look at huge quantities of classics from ancient dynastic times, including works from the Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. These high-quality replicas are about the same size as or larger than the original works.

Faded ancient paintings are given new life in the detail, quality, size, and even smell of these digital replicas. Contemporary audiences can now have the whole new experience of appreciating these masterpieces. In addition, anyone can have access to a clear, easily understood history of art in their own home, held in their own hands, allowing them the
opportunity to live with the beautiful paintings of the Chinese masters.

The series entitled Dashi Yuandian, a collection of the original works of great painters published by the Citic Art Museum, is the most comprehensive project I have encountered, surpassing almost all the first-rate classics published both domestically and overseas. This collection is also the most affordable high-quality fine art album available for general readers, roughly equivalent to two typical meals.

Court paintings and literati paintings are no longer the property only of the privileged courtly and intellectual classes, nor are they of interest only to so-called professional artists. Instead, this collection belongs to any reader who wants a better understanding of Chinese paintings. The merit of this collection is that it not only invites the appreciation of fine works of art, but it also offers a solid patriotic education.

Are you patriotic? What do you love about your country? With the countless historical memories available to us, this is the ideal time to invite people to open this book about our proud artistic heritage.

—CHEN DANQING
Writer, Painter, and Curator of the Muxin Arts Museum

Testimonials

For millennia, such masterpieces have captured countless audiences and have come to form the aesthetic heritage of the Chinese people, standing as a symbol of Eastern culture. In the past, historic conditions and other constraints have kept such masterpieces confined to secured chambers out of the public eye. General readers had difficulty gaining even the merest glance of the entire picture, much less having a closer look at or truly appreciating the work. One key aim of the present volume is to introduce to the general public great works of art that were previously regarded as suited only to the elite classes. It is my sincere hope that the brilliant works of the great masters can become a valuable asset to enrich the lives of a broader range of readers.

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The cultural achievements of ancient China are an important aspect of the five-thousand-year history of this Asian giant. They are the fundamental truths of the country, and should be promoted as a part of general knowledge.

—SUN JI
Deputy Chairman of the National Committee for the Authentication and Preservation of Cultural Relics
Nymph of the Luo River
(Collected by the Palace Museum)

GU KAIZHI | Western & Eastern Jin Dynasties (266–420)

Ink and color on silk; length 27 cm, width 573 cm

This scroll inspired by Cao Zhi’s “Ode to the Nymph of the Luo River,” a poem from the Three Kingdoms period that describes the admiration Cao held for the Nymph, and expresses the melancholy feeling caused by the insurmountable divide between the goddess and the mortal. The scroll repeatedly depicts the same group of main characters in different scenes, using rocks, trees, and streams to divide each scene. Through this approach, the painting is simultaneously segmented and continuous. Rendered in exquisite, vigorous, yet unadorned lines and color washes resembling the threads produced by silkworms in spring, the brightly colored scroll features a painting technique known as “kong gou wu cun,” used mainly in depicting landscapes, especially of mountains and rocks. The technique is used here to paint mountains, streams, trees, and rocks. Later generations have commented that in the scroll, “figures and boats are disproportionately large compared to the mountains and rivers.”

GU KAIZHI (c. AD 345–409), known by the aliases Changkang and Hutou, was born in Wuxi during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. He was erudite and talented, good at calligraphy and poetry, and especially adept at painting. He was said to have been perfect at “painting, literary composition, and foolishness.” He is known as one of the Four Great Painters of the Six Dynasties, alongside Cao Buxing, Lu Tanwei, and Zhang Sengyou. He wrote three books on painting, entitled On Painting, Introduction to Famous Paintings of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, and Records on Painting Yuntai Mountain. He proposed several theories of painting, such as “inspirational creation based on associative thought” and “expressing spirit through form,” which had a profound influence on later generations of Chinese painters.
Spring Outing of the Court Ladies
(Collected by the Liaoning Provincial Museum)

ZHANG XUAN | Tang Dynasty (618–907)

*Light color on silk; length 52 cm, width 141 cm*

Depicting a scene from the Tianbao period, this image shows the Tang Emperor Xuanzong’s favored concubine Yang Yuhuan’s sister, Lady of Guo State, and her attendants on a spring outing. The people and horses have little momentum, and it seems they are riding slowly. The details are realistic, and the brushstrokes are impressive. The horses’ liveries and saddles and the people’s clothes are all typical fashions of the golden age of the Tang Dynasty, depicting the life of leisure enjoyed by upper class women of that time.

ZHANG XUAN, born in Jingzhao (in present day Xi’an, Shaanxi Province), was a Tang Dynasty painter. During the Kaiyuan reign, he was appointed painter of the national archives. Known for his noble ladies, palace horses, and gardens of officials, he is usually mentioned alongside another painter of noble ladies, Zhou Fang. Dozens of works by Zhang Xuan are recorded in Tang and Song histories, but none are currently extant. The two most important copies of Zhang’s work that have been handed down were said to have been drawn by the Song Dynasty Emperor Huizong.

“Zhang Xuan excels at figure painting. Best of all are his paintings of noble boys’ and girls’ dwellings, like a path of flowers and bamboo pavilions, all with beautiful and ingenious embellishments.”
—Xuanhe Painting Catalogue

“He was the best of his time at painting children, pommel horses, parclose screens, gardens of officials, official court ladies, and famous people of the time.”
—Zhu Jingxuan
**Court Ladies Adorning their Hair with Flowers**
(Collected by the Liaoning Provincial Museum)

**Zhou Fang** | Tang Dynasty (618–907)

_Ink and color on silk; length 46 cm, width 180 cm_

This painting depicts court ladies in a quiet and spacious garden, living a playful, extravagant life. It is a magnificent Tang Dynasty Palace scroll painting. The women’s full and round forms are decked out in a variety of costumes, with their hair in buns perched high on their heads, adorned with fresh flowers. Their movements are leisurely. They flap butterflies, play with dogs, admire cranes, or simply sit idly. Their maids follow them with fans.

**Zhou Fang**, also known by the courtesy name Zhong Lang, lived in Jingxuan, Jingzhao (present day Xi’an, Shaanxi Province). He was a painter of the Tang Dynasty. Born into a noble family, he served as an official in Yuezhou and later Xuanzhou. He was good at copying and calligraphy. He painted figures and images of the Buddha, but was especially skilled at painting noble women. His figures were full-bodied and dignified, employing colors that were soft and beautiful. His painting was particularly favored by the court’s scholar-bureaucrats. His portrait paintings were known for their divine appearance, and he painted excellent horses, birds, animals, and plants.

“The clothing is painted with power and concision, and the colors used are soft and beautiful. The Bodhisattvas appear dignified and rigorous, and the creation of the water moon Goddess of Mercy is wonderful.”
—Zhang Yanyuan

“His images of the Buddha, celestial beings, figures, and beautiful ladies are all divine masterpieces.”
—Zhang Huaiguan
round brushstrokes alternating with square strokes. The lustrous colors with which he portrayed facial expressions and states of mind were as well-known as those of Zhou Wenju. His most famous work is *Night Revels of Han Xizai*.

“His [Gu's] technique follows the Tang style, with little influence from later artists. His works, like precious jade, deserve to be crowned as a national treasure.”

—Wang Duo

“His [Gu's] technique follows the Tang style, with little influence from later artists. His works, like precious jade, deserve to be crowned as a national treasure.”

—Chen Danqing

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**Night Revels of Han Xizai**

(Collected by the Palace Museum)

**GU HONGZHONG | Five Dynasties and Ten States (907–979)**

*Color on silk; length 29 cm, width 335.5 cm*

This painting depicts the life of a Southern Tang official, Han Xizai. The work breaks up the concept of time through the use of panels, an office desk, musical instruments, and day beds. The five scenes (listening to music, watching a dance performance, resting, playing musical instruments, and saying farewell) are well positioned in a single painting.

In this reproduction of the refinement and elegance of the lifestyle of the Southern Tang literati, it is almost impossible to hide the despondency and emotion Han Xizai feels toward political life. It is a successful portrayal of his complex mood.

**GU HONGZHONG** was a Southern Tang painter from the Jiangnan region during the Five Dynasties period. He served as a court painter for the late Southern Tang Emperor Li Yu. Renowned as the portrait artist who painted Emperor Li Yu, he was proficient at figure painting, using strong,
Cold Crow
(Collected by the Liaoning Provincial Museum)

LI CHENG | Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127)

Ink and light color on silk; length 27 cm, width 113 cm

This painting depicts the sights and sounds of flocks of crows gathering at the border of a wall and in a forest after a winter snow. The tree trunks are painted with extremely light ink, and the branches are thin and expansive, with luxuriant needles on the treetops. The fine branches have the appearance of crab claws. It is a vast, bleak scene.

LI CHENG (919–967) was a painter of the Five Dynasties and early Song period. Known by the alias Xian Xi, he came from Chang’an (present day Xi’an, Shaanxi). His ancestral lineage was of the Tang Dynasty imperial family. During the Five Dynasties period, his grandfather fled to Yingqiu in Shandong Province to avoid political clashes, and thereafter became known as Li Yingqiu. Li Cheng excelled at painting landscapes, having learned from Jing Hao and Guan Tong, then later developing his own style. Mi Fu describes his “light ink like misty dreams and stones like moving clouds,” which has since become the trademark of his work.

“Deep forest snow and chilly air pressing, a flock of crows gather, circling in a state of hunger and mourning.”
—Zhao Mengfu

“Li Cheng is able to create rich expressions with diluted ink. The landscapes he paints come to life even though he’s stingy with his ink, treating it like gold. His level, distant winter forest landscape is unprecedented, with its refined air and clear and open misty woods, although it cannot surpass the work of Wang Wei and Li Sixun. He ranks first among both ancient and modern landscape painters.”
—Huang Binhong
A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains
(Collected by the Palace Museum)

WANG XIMENG | Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127)

Blue and green ink on silk; length 51.5 cm, width 1191.5 cm
This painting depicts rolling hills and vast rivers and lakes. The mountains and rocks in the painting are first drawn with the technique of “ink chapping,” followed by the application of bright blue and green colors, shading the tops of the peaks with blue and green, showing off layers of green mountains. Water patterns are drawn in the water with fast strokes, providing a contrast to the “boneless” coloring. The painting employs a multi-perspective composition, making full use of distance. Level distances are interspersed, creating an attractive picture with ups and downs.

WANG XIMENG (b. 1096) was a Northern Song Dynasty painter. A student of the Huizong painting academy, he excelled at landscape painting. According to Cai Jing’s comments on his scroll A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains, when he was just 18 years old he entered the academy and his creation of landscape painting was overseen by Huizong personally. Before the third year of the Zhenghe period (1113), he produced A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains, then was not heard from any more.

“Often mature masters like to operate by subtraction, or so-called choice and generalization, but Wang Ximeng, who is just 18 years old, is busy with additions. Only at the young age of eighteen will one have such ambition and attention. His painting is not at all chaotic, rambling, or complicated, but is noble and compellingly clear and vivid. This is his talent.”
—Chen Danqing
WANG MENG | Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)

This painting depicts Taibai Mountain and its surrounding scenery in Jing County, Zhejiang Province, focusing on the 20 li of forest in front of the Tiantong Temple. The forest in the painting is dense, setting off the temple pavilion and grass hut, among which horse-riders and monks went their own ways. Trees of dozens of species, with green and crimson leaves intermingled, highlight the serenity of the mountain.

The painting was part of Shen Zhou and Xiang Yuanbian’s collections in the Ming Dynasty, then of Liang Qingbiao and An Yizhou’s collections in the early Qing Dynasty.

WANG MENG (1308–1385), also known by the aliases Shu Ming and the Woodcutter of the Huanghe Mountains, was from Huzhou (present day Wuxing in Zhejiang Province). His maternal grandfather was Zhao Mengfu, and his maternal grandmother was Guan Daosheng. His uncle Zhao Yong and cousin Zhao Yanzheng were renowned painters of the Yuan Dynasty. His landscape paintings were greatly influenced by his family education and from the masters Dong Yuan and Ju Ran. Eventually, he formed a style of his own, drawing upon the strength of various schools. He was excellent at using flexible crisscrossing lines (like loosened ropes), extremely thin lines (like cow hair), dry and heavy ink, and various-shaped dots to express gloomy forest scenes and landscapes in motion. He is referred to as one of the Four Great Yuan Dynasty painters, alongside Huang Gongwang, Wu Zhen, and Ni Zan.

“The power of Wang’s brush can cover great distances. No other gentleman of the past five centuries can compare with him.”
—Ni Zan

“Wang Meng is a great master of landscape painting, particularly in his use of ink.”
—History of Painting

Taibai Mountain
(Collected by the Liaoning Provincial Museum)
In the Mountains (Collected by the Palace Museum)
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Portraits of Six Generations of Masters from Damo to Huineng
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