

# Landscape Painting in Chinese Art

By the late Tang dynasty, landscape painting had evolved into an independent genre that embodied the universal longing of cultivated men to escape their quotidian world to commune with nature. Such images might also convey specific social, philosophical, or political convictions. As the Tang dynasty disintegrated, the concept of withdrawal into the natural world became a major thematic focus of poets and painters. Faced with the failure of the human order, learned men sought permanence within the natural world, retreating into the mountains to find a sanctuary from the chaos of dynastic collapse.

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During the early Song dynasty, visions of the natural hierarchy became metaphors for the well-regulated state. At the same time, images of the private retreat proliferated among a new class of scholar-officials. These men extolled the virtues of self-cultivation—often in response to political setbacks or career disappointments—and asserted their identity as literati through poetry, calligraphy, and a new style of painting that employed calligraphic brushwork for self-expressive ends. The monochrome images of old trees, bamboo, rocks, and retirement retreats created by these scholar-artists became emblems of their character and spirit.

Under the Mongol Yuan dynasty, when many educated Chinese were barred from government service, the model of the Song literati retreat evolved into a full-blown alternative culture as this disenfranchised elite transformed their estates into sites for literary gatherings and other cultural pursuits. These gatherings were frequently commemorated in paintings that, rather than presenting a realistic depiction of an actual place, conveyed the shared cultural ideals of a reclusive world through a symbolic shorthand in which a villa might be represented by a humble thatched hut. Because a man's studio or garden could be viewed as an extension of himself, paintings of such places often served to express the values of their owner.

The Yuan dynasty also witnessed the burgeoning of a second kind of cultivated landscape, the "mind landscape," which embodied both learned references to the styles of earlier masters and, through calligraphic brushwork, the inner spirit of the artist. Going beyond representation, scholar-artists imbued their paintings with personal feelings. By evoking select antique styles, they could also identify themselves with the values associated with the old masters. Painting was no longer about the description of the visible world; it became a means of conveying the inner landscape of the artist's heart and mind.

During the Ming dynasty, when native Chinese rule was restored, court artists produced conservative images that revived the Song metaphor for the state as a well-ordered imperial garden, while literati painters pursued self-expressive goals through the stylistic language of Yuan scholar-artists. Shen Zhou (1427–1509), the patriarch of the Wu school

of painting centered in the cosmopolitan city of Suzhou, and his preeminent follower Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) exemplified Ming literati ideals. Both men chose to reside at home rather than follow official careers, devoting themselves to self-cultivation through a lifetime spent reinterpreting the styles of Yuan scholar-painters.

Morally charged images of reclusion remained a potent political symbol during the early years of the Manchu Qing dynasty, a period in which many Ming loyalists lived in self-enforced retirement. Often lacking access to important collections of old masters, loyalist artists drew inspiration from the natural beauty of the local scenery.

Images of nature have remained a potent source of inspiration for artists down to the present day. While the Chinese landscape has been transformed by millennia of human occupation, Chinese artistic expression has also been deeply imprinted with images of the natural world. Viewing Chinese landscape paintings, it is clear that Chinese depictions of nature are seldom mere representations of the external world. Rather, they are expressions of the mind and heart of the individual artists—cultivated landscapes that embody the culture and cultivation of their masters.

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