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RETHINKING

THE TENTH CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

RETHINKING HISTORICAL EVIDENCE AND METHODOLOGY



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In Chinese history, the monumental Tang and Song dynasties are connected by a brief period known as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (Wudai Shiguo) (FIG. 1). Spanning seventy-two years from 907 to 979 — marking the Tang’s collapse and the Song’s rise — this era witnessed the swift emergence of ephemeral regimes across various regions of China (FIG. 2). Later historians use the term “Five Dynasties” to refer to the succession of governing powers that occupied metropolitan strongholds in the northern heartland or so-called Central Plains of China. In contrast to the Five Dynasties, the rulers of the “Ten Kingdoms” primarily controlled former Tang territories south of China’s heartland. Traditional Chinese historiography, with its focus on unified dynastic rule, often categorizes such fragmented periods as mere “transitions,” their value lying in how they paved the way for the next dominant regime through relentless warfare. Consequently, many historical accounts fold these fifty-three years into the subsequent Song dynasty (960–1279), casting them as its precursor or prologue.

For art historians, however, the significance of this tenth-century period is anything but transitional. Despite the chaos, the period gave rise to some of the most illustrious painters in Chinese art history. By the late eleventh century, during the Northern Song (960–1127), a coterie of eminent painting collectors, connoisseurs, and scholars had rediscovered these tenth-century masters and articulated their lasting impact. Landscape painting, which was ascending to prominence as the leading genre in Chinese art under the dual patronage of scholars and the imperial court, became the focal point of their attention. Different interpretive frameworks and narratives began to take shape. The art historian Guo Ruoxu (fl. 1068–1080) extolled Guan Tong (ca. 907–960) (FIG. 3), Li Cheng (919–ca. 967) (FIG. 4), and Fan Kuan (ca. 960–ca. 1030) (FIG. 5) as the foremost landscape artists of the tenth and eleventh centuries, lauding them as “so profound in

FIG. 1
The Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms in Chinese dynastic history.

FIG. 2
The changing political landscape of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period.

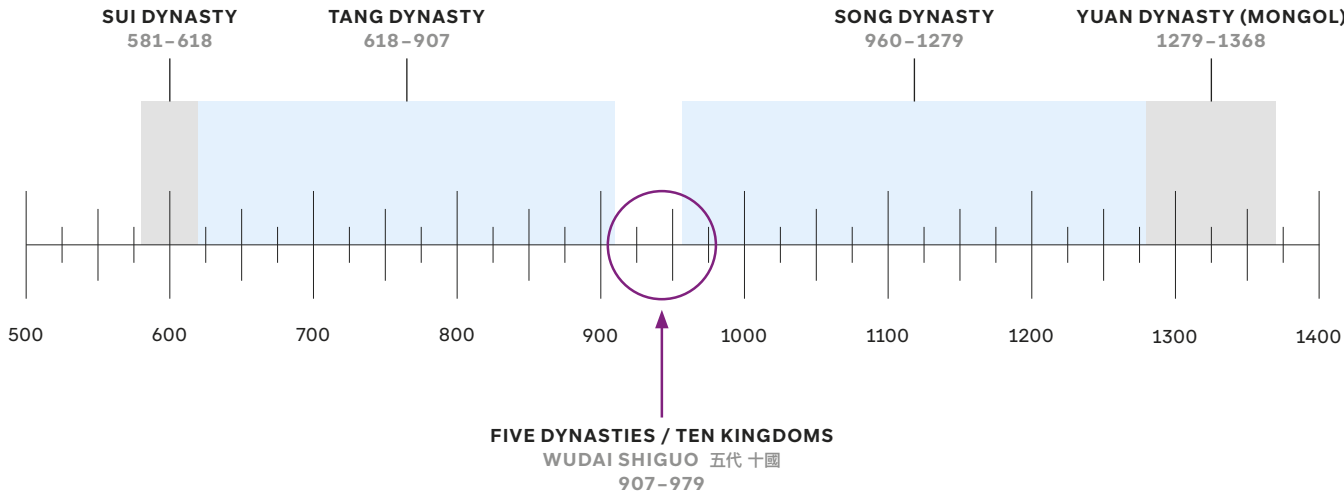




FIG. 3

Attributed to Guan Tong (ca. 907–960). *Travelers in a Mountain Pass* (*Guanshan xinglü tu*). Hanging scroll; ink on silk, 144.4 × 56.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

FIG. 4

Attributed to Li Cheng (919–ca. 967). *A Solitary Temple amid Clearing Peaks* (*Qingluan xiaosi tu*). Hanging scroll; ink and slight color on silk, 111.8 × 55.9 cm. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, purchase, William Rockhill Nelson Trust (47-71).

FIG. 5

Fan Kuan (ca. 960–ca. 1030). *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (*Xishan xinglü tu*), ca. 1000. Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 206.3 × 103.3 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.





FIG. 6
Attributed to Dong Yuan (act. 930s–960s).
Wintry Groves and Layered Banks (Hanling chongting tu). Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk, 181.5 × 116.5 cm. Kurokawa Institute of Ancient Cultures, Nishinomiya, Hyōgo prefecture, Japan.

wisdom as to reach the divine, so exalted in talent as to transcend classification. These three masters stand like a mighty tripod, setting a standard for a hundred generations.”¹ Such lofty praise reflects Guo’s admiration for the grand, monumental imagery that these artists masterfully rendered. Meanwhile, Guo’s contemporary Mi Fu (1051–1107) found his highest artistic ideal in the gentle, ethereal landscapes of Dong Yuan (act. 930s–960s), which he deemed “divine masterpieces of the recent time, unmatched in their sublime elegance” (FIG. 6).² Modern art historians generally uphold this dichotomy, referring to the former as “monumental landscape” and the latter as “southern landscape.” They see the invention of these styles as signifying a watershed moment in the evolution of Chinese painting.³

Following the tradition established by early art historians and critics like Guo Ruoxu, Mi Fu, and others, studies of tenth-century painting have concentrated on individual artists and their extant works. However, recent scholarship has shifted toward a broader emphasis on contextualization, prompting more expansive inquiries beyond the focus on masters and masterpieces. Scholars have begun to probe, for instance, the historical and art-historical contexts that gave rise to these masters. What pivotal innovations in medium, subject, and function emerged during this moment in Chinese art? Where and when did these innovations occur? Did new geo-cultural contexts arise to influence the development of painting? More crucially, is the linear framework of dynastic history still an adequate tool for mapping such artistic progress?⁴ A new approach to historiographical research has also surfaced. By delving into the legacy of Dong Yuan, scholars such as Yin Jinan and Shih Shou-chien have explored the construction of this legacy as a multifaceted historical process.⁵

This brief introduction sets the stage for this book. Its overarching objective is to build on the momentum of recent scholarship and to examine new methodologies and historical evidence for recounting the narrative of tenth-century Chinese painting. The book pursues this goal through three primary avenues. First, this introduction will revisit existing research materials and the geo-temporal framework that defines tenth-century painting, with a particular emphasis on the pivotal role of recent archaeological finds in shaping fresh perspectives on that era’s artistic developments. Chapter One will approach tenth-century painting from a previously underexplored perspective, focusing on the painting formats employed and the viewing conventions associated with them. The following two chapters will draw on newly unearthed archaeological evidence to trace the development of figure painting, landscape painting, and flower-and-bird painting during the tenth century. The conclusion will synthesize these findings and situate tenth-century painting within a broader historical continuum.

RETHINKING
HISTORICAL
EVIDENCE

Traditional scholarship on tenth-century Chinese painting relies on both visual and textual evidence. The visual evidence includes transmitted scroll paintings preserved in private and public collections, while the textual evidence is drawn from books compiled from the eleventh century onward. The persistent debates in this field are, in fact, deeply rooted in the inherent limitations of each type of evidence.

When it comes to visual sources, a fundamental truth is that very few original works by tenth-century painters survive, while copies and forgeries proliferate. Take, for example, the case of Li Cheng. The imperial painting catalogue *Xuanhe huapu* (*Catalogue of Paintings in the Xuanhe Era*), compiled in the early twelfth century, acclaimed him as the “Number One [landscape painter] from past to present.”⁶ Yet Mi Fu, arguably the most influential painting connoisseur of his time, remarked in his *Hua shi* (*Painting Chronicles*),

“I have seen only two genuine works by Li Cheng, but have encountered three hundred forgeries!”⁷ The explanation for such a vast number of forgeries is actually provided in the *Xuanhe huapu*:

After Li Cheng passed away, his fame became still greater and his paintings became even harder to acquire. As a result, those who studied his style all made copies of his paintings of peaks and mountain ranges, streams and rocks, and even went so far as to fake his seals and signatures, which are almost indistinguishable from the genuine ones and have been able to cheat people in the world.

自成歿後，名益著，其畫益難得。故學成者皆摹仿成所畫峰巒泉石，至於刻畫圖記名字等庶幾亂真，可以欺世。⁸

In another passage of his *Painting Chronicles*, Mi Fu remarked that the large scrolls attributed to Li Cheng and cherished by aristocratic families bore only a superficial resemblance to Li's works — mimicking the form but lacking the spirit, much like shop signs that imitate the styles of famous calligraphers. Mi mocked the sheer number of so-called “Li Cheng paintings” in existence: “Even an ordinary craftsman, toiling for his livelihood, could not produce so many. These are all the handiwork of mediocrities borrowing his name. I am even inclined to propose a ‘theory of the non-existence of Li [Cheng’s paintings]!’”⁹ The late James Cahill identified twenty-seven extant paintings attributed to Li Cheng, but he deemed none of them to be authentic originals.¹⁰ Li Cheng’s contemporary Guan Tong may have left behind only one genuine painting, perhaps a section of a multipanel screen or painted hanging (see fig. 32 and related discussion). The case of Li and Guan’s predecessor in landscape art, Jing Hao (ca. 855–915), widely regarded as the progenitor of monumental landscape painting, is similarly bleak, with not a single authentic work surviving. Given these circumstances, we must question how extant paintings can provide a viable foundation for studying these masters, let alone allow us to achieve a comprehensive understanding of tenth-century painting.

When we turn to textual evidence, we encounter similar challenges regarding historical authenticity. To begin with, we do not actually possess any contemporary records of tenth-century painters. The earliest accounts of these artists come primarily from two late Northern Song writers: Liu Daochun (ca. 1028–1098) and Guo Ruoxu. Both composed their works in the second half of the eleventh century. Liu’s *Wudai minghua buyi* (*Supplement on the Famous Painters of the Five Dynasties*) includes a preface dated 1059, and his *Shengchao minghua ping* (*Critique of Famous Painters of Our Glorious Dynasty*) was written around the same period or slightly earlier. Guo completed his *Tuhua jianwen zhi* (*Records of Paintings Seen and Heard*) before 1074. Thus, they were writing from a context that was vastly different from that of the early to mid-tenth century when Jing Hao, Guan Tong, Li Cheng, and other pioneers of landscape art were actively pursuing various new styles.

Modern art historians have extensively examined the rise of “literati art” (*wenren hua*) from the mid- to late eleventh century, a time when influential scholar-officials began exerting significant influence over painting and painting criticism. These scholar-officials approached painting as an essential medium for lofty gentlemen to convey their emotions and ideas, and their writings on painting reflect these concerns.¹¹ Therefore, when we encounter repeated emphasis on literati values in their accounts of past tenth-century masters, we should not immediately accept these texts as unfiltered historical evidence. Instead, we must question to what extent these records reflect the authors’ own literati mentality (*wenren xintai*).

Several cases substantiate this literati perspective among scholar-critics during the eleventh century. For example, Liu Daochun provides the earliest record of Jing Hao in his *Supplement on the Famous Painters of the Five Dynasties*. Writing 150 years after Jing's time, Liu immediately identifies the artist as "a Confucian scholar who comprehensively understood the Classics and historical writings, and who was skilled at composing literary works." After verifying Jing Hao's literati bona fides, Liu felt compelled to add that Jing found refuge in Mount Taihang amid political chaos and practiced painting for his own enjoyment.¹² In *Critique of Famous Painters of Our Glorious Dynasty*, Liu also offers the earliest accounts of Li Cheng, identifying him as a Song painter despite the fact that Li spent most of his artistic life before the establishment of the Song and died before the Song unified China. As with Jing Hao, Liu first emphasizes Li Cheng's scholarly credentials, noting that he came from a distinguished Confucian family and could compose literary works as a boy. He then

recounts an episode from Li's life that underscores Li's identity as a literati artist. Through Li's own words, Liu recounts that when a powerful royal relative named Sun Sihao attempted to recruit him, Li replied to a friend that he was a Confucian scholar who understood his destiny, but also that his love for mountains and streams was intrinsic to his nature — he painted them as a pastime. "How can I rush to serve those in power and place myself among common craftsmen?"¹³ While there is no way to verify the authenticity of this speech, Liu Daochun elsewhere in *Supplement on the Famous Painters of the Five Dynasties* notes that Sun Sihao presented a painting by Gao Yi to Emperor Shenzong (r. 1067–1085). Sun would have had to be at least 120 years old if he had indeed tried to enlist Li Cheng before Li died around 967.¹⁴

Guo Ruoxu completed his *Records of Paintings Seen and Heard* before 1074, some fifteen years after Liu Daochun wrote his texts around 1059. Therefore, Guo could synthesize and expand on Liu's accounts of tenth-century masters while also making general observations about the superiority of literati art based on preexisting literary evidence. For instance, in the book's introductory chapter, in a section titled "On 'Spirit Resonance' Cannot Be Obtained Through Learning," Guo asserts, "Upon observing ancient wonders, [it is evident that] these were primarily created by talented and virtuous men of noble status and reclusive scholars. With benevolence and artistic pursuits, they explored the profound and subtle, and their refined sentiments were entrusted to their paintings."¹⁵ Similar statements frequently appeared in writings on painting from the late eleventh century onward. Although these historical texts remain crucial evidence for studying tenth-century painting, they all internalize the prevailing literati ideology of the authors' times and project it onto artists from a century earlier.

In comparison, another dimension of these early texts is more technical, yet it holds equally critical implications for shaping our understanding of tenth-century painting. Those familiar with these works will recognize that their entries on individual painters are notably concise, offering scant details about the artists' life experiences or artistic journeys. This brevity is understandable, given that ancient Chinese writings on painting primarily emphasized general assessments of artists' talent and achievements rather than providing detailed biographical accounts. To illustrate this point, here are three examples from Guo Ruoxu's *Records of Paintings Seen and Heard*, which have been cited by all subsequent art historians when discussing each of these painters:

Guan Tong: (His given name is also written as 種 or as 童, as seen on a painting in Wang Wenkang's collection). A native of Chang'an, he was skilled at painting landscapes. He studied under Jing Hao, and was known for surpassing his teacher. He was famous in his day, and no one dared to challenge his supremacy. His surviving works include the *Zhao Yang Mountain Villa, Clearing after Rain in the Mountains and Streams at Dusk, Landscapes of the Four Seasons, Early Morning Journey along the Peach Spring*, and others.

關同 (一名種, 又王文康家圖上題云童)。長安人, 工畫山水。學從荆浩, 有出藍之美。馳名當代, 無敢分庭。有《趙陽山居》《溪山晚霽》《四時山水》《桃源早行》等圖傳於世。¹⁶

Zhou Wenju: A native of Jurong in Jiankang, he served Li [Yu], the last lord [of the Southern Tang kingdom], as painter-in-attendance in the Hanlin Academy. A skillful painter of secular figures, carriages and horses, buildings and trees, and landscape. He was at his finest in rendering gentlewomen, in a manner which was generally similar to Zhou Fang's but had an even greater delicacy of loveliness. His surviving works include *Royal Members Traveling in Springtime, Beating Clothes, Ironing Silk, Woman Embroidering*, and others.

周文矩, 建康句容人, 事江南李後主為翰林待詔。工畫人物、車馬、屋木、山川。尤精仕女, 大約體近周昉而更增纖麗。有《貴戚遊春》《搗衣》《熨帛》《繡女》等圖傳於世。¹⁷

Dong Yuan: [style name] Shuda, was a native of Zhongling. He served the Southern Tang court as deputy director of the Inner Park. He was good at painting landscapes. His monochromic ink images resemble paintings by Wang Wei, whereas the colored ones are similar to those by Li Sixun. He was also skilled in depicting cattle and tigers, [to which he gave] well-rounded, sleek bodies and lightly ruffled coats. With a full complement of spirit, these works transcend conventional standards. His extant works include *Landscape of Lake Cang, Landscape in Color, Grazing Cattle in Spring Marshlands*, images of cattle and tigers, etc.

董源, 字叔達, 鍾陵人。事南唐為後苑副使。善畫山水, 水墨類王維, 著色如李思訓, 兼工畫牛虎, 肉肌豐混, 毳毛輕浮, 具足精神, 脫略凡格。有《滄湖山水》《著色山水》《春澤牧牛》《牛》《虎》等圖傳於世。¹⁸

These are obviously highly condensed summaries of the painters' lives and artistic endeavors. When later art historians use such records as foundational sources, they can hardly escape the tendency to reduce a historical artist to a homogenized stereotype.

However, the history of painting — whether Chinese or otherwise — demonstrates that the career of any significant painter is a complex process, characterized by continual adjustments in style and subject matter. In this context, the simplistic understanding of tenth-century painters does not reflect historical reality but rather stems from the limited historical knowledge available to later generations.

Until recent years, these extant pictorial and textual materials constituted the entirety of historical data available to researchers of tenth-century painting. As a result, connoisseurship — focusing on authentication and dating — became central to art-historical education and practice. Intense debates emerged around each famous scroll, often yielding no definitive consensus but only competing hypotheses. A key example is the controversy surrounding *Riverbank* (*Xi'an tu*), attributed to Dong Yuan (FIG. 7), which the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York — its collecting institution — succinctly outlined in a press release:

Riverbank was the subject of controversy when it was purchased from C. C. Wang in 1997. One prominent scholar, James Cahill (1926–2014) of the University of California, Berkeley, argued that the painting was not a work of the 10th century but a forgery by the 20th-century artist Zhang Daqian (1899–1983). Out of deference to Professor Cahill's stature and firm in the belief that the painting could withstand the scrutiny of the field, The Met's experts convened a symposium to address the painting's authenticity, inviting leading scholars from around the world to weigh in. The proceedings were published as *Issues of Authenticity in Chinese Painting*. Since that time, Professor Cahill's minority opinion has grown increasingly marginal, and the scholarly consensus that *Riverbank* is indeed a masterpiece of early Chinese landscape painting has grown stronger. It was exhibited in Taipei at the National Palace Museum in 2006 alongside that museum's 11th-century masterworks by Fan Kuan and Guo Xi, and at the Shanghai Museum in 2012. That these museums, among the most respected custodians and interpreters of Chinese painting in the field, share The Met's belief in *Riverbank*'s authenticity speaks to the solidity of The Met's dating and its acceptance among Chinese painting scholars.¹⁹

While Cahill's opinion has indeed become increasingly marginalized, scholars who generally agree with the Met's dating still hold divergent views regarding the painting's authorship and historical standing. Some believe that it was created by Dong Yuan himself; others consider Dong's signature a later addition, with the painting being an anonymous work from the tenth century; still others propose placing the painting within a broader chronological framework. Since none of these arguments is compelling enough to persuade all scholars, the painting's historical significance remains uncertain. The museum's website aptly reflects this ongoing ambiguity:

Though three other early attributions to Dong Yuan survive, there is no scholarly consensus on which, if any, of these works represents the real Dong Yuan, and there is significant stylistic range even within this small corpus. Given such a limited and murky sample, it is impossible to establish the kind of certainty

FIG. 7
Attributed to Dong
Yuan (act. 930s–960s).
Riverbank (Xi'an tu).
Hanging scroll; ink and
color on silk, 220.3 ×
109.2 cm. The Metro-
politan Museum of Art,
New York, ex coll.: C. C.
Wang Family, gift of
Oscar L. Tang Family,
in memory of Douglas
Dillon, 2016 (2016.750).



necessary to support a firm attribution, let alone an idea of a chronology within Dong Yuan's oeuvre. For this reason, the Museum does not claim *Riverbank* to be a firmly identified work from the hand of the master, preferring instead to present it as one of a constellation of plausible attributions. The painting's importance rests not chiefly in its relationship to Dong Yuan, but in its majesty and completeness as a monument of early landscape painting.²⁰

This last statement holds true if we consider *Riverbank* as an example of so-called "early landscape painting" in a broad sense. However, when the investigative focus narrows to the tenth century, as this study does, the painting's uncertain dating, provenance, and authorship render it a piece of questionable historical evidence. Many renowned extant masterpieces attributed to tenth-century painters share similar issues, and the impasses surrounding them are likely to persist.

Fortunately, a new type of visual evidence now provides scholars with more direct channels to explore the world of tenth-century painting. This evidence stems from archaeological surveys and excavations. The majority of these new materials are images from underground tombs discovered and published over the past fifty years.²¹ Among these finds are two intact silk paintings from an aristocratic tomb at Yemaotai, Liaoning province, probably created from the mid- to late tenth century.²² Both mounted in the format of a hanging scroll, they offer a paired example of painting genres, "landscape" (*shanshui*) and "flower and bird" (*huaniao*) (see figs. 40, 41).

Other invaluable new materials include tomb murals painted to mimic real-life screens and hangings of the time that show images of human figures, landscapes, and flowers and birds. An earlier example is a landscape mural from the tomb of a certain Madam Cui, who died in 904 (see fig. 143). As discussed in Chapter Three, this image attests to a new type of landscape composition emerging at the beginning of the tenth century or earlier. Two slightly later landscape murals found in the tomb of the warlord Wang Chuzhi and dated to 924 illustrate the further development of this composition and demonstrate more refined brushwork (see figs. 136, 144). Wang's tomb is also adorned with murals depicting numerous flower-and-bird images in the format of wall panels and large screens (see figs. 177, 185). Regarding figure painting, a royal graveyard at Baoshan near the Upper Capital (Shangdu) of the Liao dynasty yielded two types of human images: one depicting Khitan peoples (see figs. 60, 61), the other historical Chinese figures (see figs. 69, 71). As will be discussed in Chapter Two, these two types of figural images provide rich material for exploring the legacy of Tang figure painting in Liao art, as well as the interactions between different painting traditions during the tenth century.

In addition to tomb-related materials, a significant collection of painted banners and scrolls, originally stored in the so-called Library Cave at Dunhuang, allows us to view tenth-century portable paintings in their original formats (see figs. 25–28). Equally important are the other Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, which include dozens of large caves constructed during the tenth century, showcasing landscapes and larger-than-life portraits of their powerful patrons (see figs. 99–102, 171).

Of course, archaeological materials have their own limitations as historical evidence. Unlike transmitted scroll paintings, none of these unearthed images and Dunhuang paintings has identifiable authorship, and the quality of their artistry varies significantly. However, their authenticity is indisputable, allowing us to directly engage with actual historical issues. These materials provide information that transmitted paintings cannot. They all possess clear provenance, most are datable, and some even have precise dates. The portable scrolls from Yemaotai and the Library Cave at Dunhuang retained their original mounting at the time of their discovery, enabling us to study this form of tenth-century painting as a specific medium. Moreover, we know the exact architectural contexts of these images and, in many cases, their patrons and ritual or ceremonial purposes.

Recognizing both the limitations and advantages of this new data gained from archaeological research, this book will integrate it with traditional materials to establish a new evidential foundation for the study of tenth-century painting.²³ The traditional materials used in this study consist of two types of extant paintings — those generally accepted by scholars as genuine tenth-century works, and early copies of significant tenth-century paintings, as well as early textual records of tenth-century painters and artistic activities. This expanded pool of evidence has the potential to revolutionize the study of tenth-century painting by redefining its scope and objectives. The scope of the book will be discussed in the following section. As for research objectives, while it remains essential to illuminate the works of famous painters, a more pressing and transformative task is to harness all available sources to develop a general understanding of tenth-century painting, encompassing its geographical distribution, chronological development, and its changing painting formats, subjects, and styles.

**GEOGRAPHICAL
AND
CHRONOLOGICAL
SCOPE**

In this study, “tenth-century painting” replaces the term “Five Dynasties painting.” The rationale for this change is twofold: geographical and chronological. Geographically, examples of tenth-century painting have been discovered in regions far beyond the territories of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (FIG. 8). Many were unearthed from archaeological sites located in the far north of China, in territory that had been part of the Liao Empire, established by the Khitans in 916. Another source of tenth-century painting is in southwest China, where the Kingdom of Dali emerged as a significant cultural center following its establishment in 937. Still another vital source is the previously mentioned Dunhuang caves, located in northwest China in territory governed by the semiautonomous Returning to Righteousness Army (Guiyi Jun). These distant regional centers maintained ongoing interactions with the Song after its founding in 960 and throughout the rest of the tenth century.

Traditional texts have led art historians to focus primarily on two centers of tenth-century painting, namely, in the Southern Tang (937–975) capital Jiankang (present-day Nanjing) in Jiangsu and in the Shu capital Chengdu in Sichuan province. However, archaeological finds from other areas, such as the central and southern regions of Hebei province, where the tombs of Madam Cui and Wang are located, provide critical insights into the development of painting beyond these metropolitan hubs.

FIG. 8
Centers and locations of major archaeological finds of 10th-century painting.

FIG. 9
The Song conquest of other regional powers after 960.

Chronologically, the establishment of the Song in 960 did not represent a definitive turning point in the history of Chinese painting. In fact, two of the Ten Kingdoms — the Later Shu (934–965) in the southwest of China and the Southern Tang in the southeast — remained vibrant centers of painting until 965 and 975, respectively (FIG. 9). It was only after these dates that the painting collections and court painters of these former kingdoms were transferred to the Song. Some of the relocated painters were already advanced in age when they arrived in the Song capital and passed away soon after — Huang Quan, for example, a renowned flower-and-bird painter from Shu, who died in 968. Others, however, were still

in their prime and continued to work until the end of the tenth century and into the early eleventh century. Notable examples include Huang Quan’s son, Huang Jucai, who lived and painted until at least 993; the monk painter Juran, who was commissioned to paint at the Jade Hall (Yutang) in 992; and Gao Wenjin, who oversaw the mural painting project at the Palace of Bright Response from Jade Purity (Yuqing Zhaoying Gong) in the Song capital beginning in 1009. The most fitting designation for all these artists is “tenth-century painters,” rather than confining our understanding of them to the Shu, Southern Tang, or Song. ▲



RETHINKING THE TENTH CENTURY

CHAPTER ONE

INNOVATIONS IN PAINTING MEDIUM



Chinese painting underwent two pivotal developments in the tenth century involving the painting medium, specifically, in the area of formatting: the invention and widespread adoption of the hanging scroll (*guazhou* or *lizhou*) and the reinvention of the traditional handscroll (*shoujuan*). From this period onward, these two formats became the primary forms of Chinese painting, interacting dynamically in a way that continually fueled artistic creativity.

A painting is an integration of the painted image and the medium that conveys it. While the image typically garners primary attention, the medium dictates the manner of viewing. Major painting traditions worldwide have undergone a transition from architectural and decorative painting to portable, independent forms, paralleling the emancipation of painting from ceremonial and utilitarian roles. In China, this development gave rise to two distinct types of scroll painting, the handscroll and the hanging scroll, each with its own historical trajectory and viewing conventions.¹ During the tenth century, these two portable mediums rose to prominence out of the dominant painting formats of the preceding era.

PAINTING FORMATS BEFORE THE TENTH CENTURY

Various types of painting mediums emerged between the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) and the Tang dynasty (618–907). Through a survey of archaeological evidence and textual records of pictorial works,² we can identify four primary painting formats in established use before the tenth century: handscrolls, painted screens, painted hangings (a type of *huazhang*), and painted banners used in ritual and religious contexts.

Handscrolls

The handscroll is a long, narrow, continuous horizontal format that was originally used for writing texts. It emerged as a medium for painting no later than the mid-second century CE. Historical records indicate that the Confucian scholar Cai Yong (132–192) made a painting titled *A Small Version of Exemplary Women* (*Xiao lienü*).³ Some of the bas-relief carvings on the renowned Wu Liang Shrine (constructed in 151) in Jiaxing county of southwestern Shandong province, particularly those depicting ancient sovereigns and narratives of virtuous women and men, were apparently copied from long, horizontal scrolls.⁴ This tradition persisted in



FIG. 10
Attributed to Gu Kaizhi
(345–406). *Wise and
Benevolent Women*
(*Lienü renzhi tu*), Song
copy of a 4th- or 5th-
century painting, detail.
Handscroll; ink and color
on silk, 25.8 × 417.8 cm.
Palace Museum, Beijing.



the post-Han period, as evidenced by a Song dynasty copy of *Wise and Benevolent Women* (*Lienü renzhi tu*) attributed to the fourth-century master Gu Kaizhi (345–406) (FIG. 10) and *The Thirteen Emperors* (*Lidai diwang tu*) attributed to the early Tang master Yan Liben (ca. 600–673) (see fig. 44).⁵ Further evidence of Tang handscrolls includes images of “gentlewomen” (*shiniü*) or upper-class ladies by Zhang Xuan (713–755) and Zhou Fang (730–800), such as *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk* (*Daolian tu*) by Zhang, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (FIG. 11). Additional evidence includes Wang Wei’s (701–761; alt. 699–759) *Wangchuan Villa* (*Wangchuan*), later transferred to a stone carving.

Because all extant early handscrolls have been remounted during transmission, their original formats are unknown. However, based on Zhang Yanyuan’s (815–877) discussion of mounting methods in *Record of Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties* (*Lidai minghua ji*), the sophisticated formatting technique we now know as a handscroll had been developed at least by the ninth century. He begins the section “On Mounting, Backing, Ornamental Borders, and Rollers” (*Lun zhuangbei biao Zhou*) by stating that Fan Ye (398–445) first invented the various techniques of mounting paintings, which became more elaborate over the centuries.⁶ Zhang Yanyuan emphasizes the importance of the roller end’s appearance, noting that it was crafted from various materials, ranging from sandalwood to amber, crystal, and white jade, and was sometimes embellished with tortoiseshell and gold.

FIG. 11
Zhang Xuan (713–755).
*Court Ladies Preparing
Newly Woven Silk*
(*Daolian tu*), Song copy
attributed to Emperor
Huizong (r. 1100–1126).
Handscroll; ink, color,
and gold on silk, image
37.1 × 145 cm. Museum
of Fine Arts, Boston,
Chinese and Japanese
Special Fund (12.886).

Drawing from this and other records, we can infer that the handscroll had achieved its mature form before and during the Tang. Typically measuring about 25 to 40 centimeters in height, a handscroll painting could vary in length from less than a meter to several meters. At the beginning of the scroll is a semicircular wooden stave known as *tiangan*, which ensures that the scroll remains properly stretched from top to bottom. A silk cord (*taodai*) and a fastener (*biezi*) are attached to the stave to secure the rolled-up scroll (FIG. 12). A wooden roller (*digan*) is affixed at the very end of the scroll, around which it is wound when not in use.

The viewer of a handscroll first encounters the backing of protective silk (*baoshou*), which bears the title label (*tiqian*) (FIG. 13). After loosening the fastener and opening the scroll, one proceeds from right to left as the frontispiece (*yinshou*) comes into view, followed by the pictorial or image portion (*huaxin*), and concluding with the colophon section (*tuowei* or *weizhi*) containing remarks inscribed by appreciative owners and viewers of the scroll. Vertical strips (*geshui*) are sometimes used to separate these three parts of the scroll.⁷

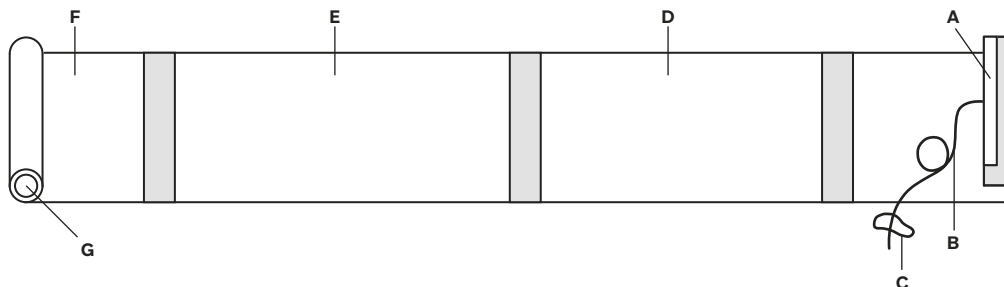


FIG. 12
Structure of a handscroll: (A) label, (B) cord, (C) fastener, (D) frontispiece, (E) painting, (F) colophon paper, (G) roller.

FIG. 13
Rolled-up handscroll. Shen Zhou (1427–1509). *Poems on Falling Flowers in Running Script*. Ink on paper, 28.5 × 286 cm. Private collection.



Painted Screens

The late Michael Sullivan (1916–2013) once observed, “Until the Song Dynasty, the painted screen, or perhaps one should say the painting mounted on a screen, was, along with the handscroll and fresco, one of the three most important forms of painting in China.”⁸ Ancient texts such as the *Book of Rites* (*Li ji*) record that painted screens were used in court ceremonies as early as the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046–256 BCE). During the Eastern Han (25–220 CE), this item became distinct from other types of ritual paraphernalia and was regarded as a form of framed painting. We find a clear indication of this shift in Han literature, where it is recorded that a king captivated by pictures on a decorative screen would turn to admire and enjoy them.⁹

A freestanding screen could take the form of either a single panel raised above the ground or multiple panels fastened together to surround or stand behind a seat, bed, or dais. Archaeological excavations reveal that multipanel screens became particularly popular from the sixth century and into the Tang dynasty, when tomb murals and stone carvings frequently depicted screen paintings. Aristocratic Tang tombs often featured a painted mural on the wall behind the raised coffin platform. These painted murals, composed of six, eight, or more vertical panels, simulated actual Tang-period screens displaying images of beautiful women, virtuous gentlemen, flowers and birds, and landscapes (FIGS. 14–17).

A newly discovered tomb mural painted to simulate a landscape screen, which will be referenced multiple times in this book, merits an introduction here. The tomb containing this mural, located in Fuping near Xi’an, Shaanxi province, was looted in 1997. The robbers took the portable funerary objects but left this and other murals largely intact. Later, archaeologists entered the tomb chamber, photographed the pictorial murals, and circulated the photographs among scholars, generating considerable interest.¹⁰ The tomb was finally excavated in 2017, and a stone epitaph was uncovered, revealing the identity of the deceased to be Li Daojian, a great-grandson of the founder of the Tang dynasty, Li Yuan, known as Emperor Gaozu (r. 618–626) in the genealogy of the imperial clan. Li Daojian was posthumously titled Heir Apparent Prince of Lu. He died in 738, leaving a securely dated tomb for archaeological and art-historical research.

FIG. 14
Simulated “gentle-women” screen, 8th century. Polychromatic mural in a Wei family tomb. Nanliwangcun village, Xi’an, Shaanxi province.



FIG. 15
Simulated flower-and-bird screen, 8th century. Polychromatic mural in Astana Tomb No. 217. Xinjiang.



The mural occupies the central portion of the west wall above the coffin platform (FIG. 16). It consists of six vertical landscape scenes depicting soaring mountain peaks and deep gorges (FIG. 17). Three aspects of the painted image confirm that it was designed to represent or simulate a real-life multipanel screen. First, the six panels are tightly connected, with only thin gaps between them. Second, in at least two places the painted three-dimensional edges of the screen's frame are visible. The painter clearly intended to show that the screen's frames and supports were made of wood by coloring them light brown in imitation of wood. Third, the frames of the painted screen appear to rest on the raised coffin platform,

on the same level as the two standing male assistants painted on the mural's left side. Thus, the entire six-panel landscape screen and the two figures are represented as if they existed within the same three-dimensional space and ground as the coffin platform (see fig. 16). The landscape scenes of the screen were composed as independent pictures. However, due to their identical subject matter and similar compositions, the six panels collectively create the impression of a panoramic view of mountains and streams surrounding the coffin bed.

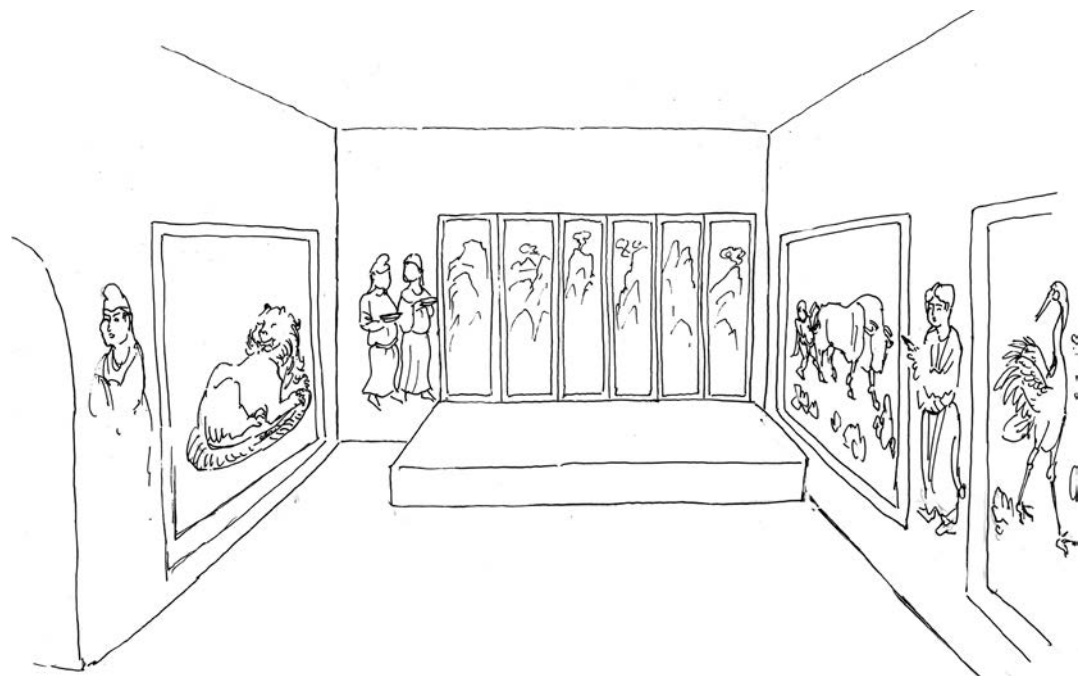




FIG. 16
Drawing of the interior
of the tomb of Li Daojian
(d. 738). Fuping, Xi'an,
Shaanxi province.

FIG. 17
Simulated landscape
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