

For Arthur.
With Best Wishes
W.F.

CHINESE PAINTING

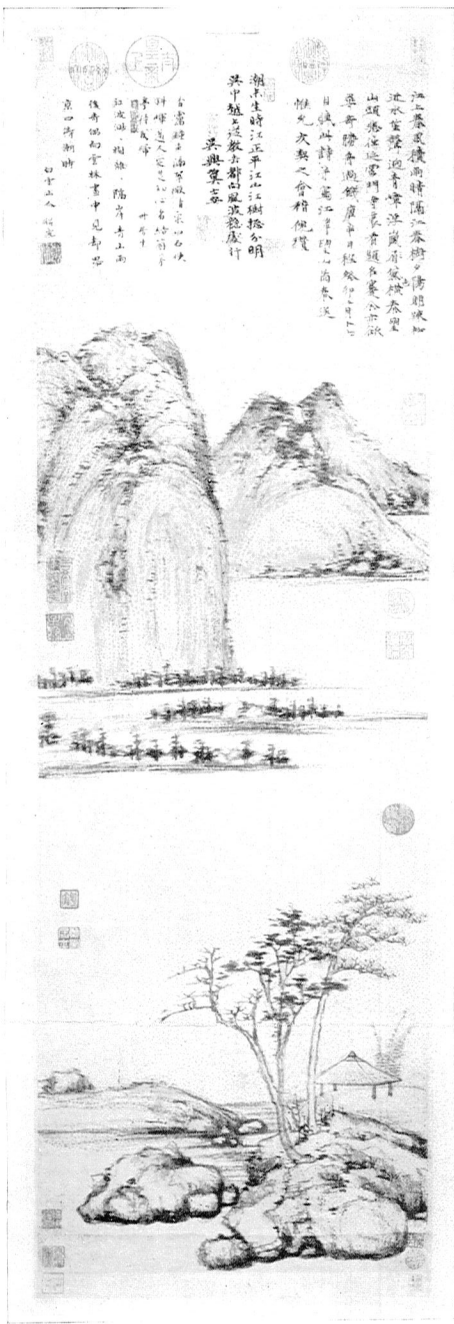
A STATEMENT OF METHOD

WEN FONG

Reprinted from
ORIENTAL ART

NEW SERIES 1963 VOL. IX. NO. 2

THE ORIENTAL ART MAGAZINE LTD.



1. Ni Tsan, attributed to, *Mountains Seen from a River Bank*, dated 1363.
 Courtesy of National Palace Museum, Taichung.



2. Ni Tsan, *The Jung-hsi Studio*, dated 1372.
 Courtesy of National Palace Museum, Taichung.

Wen Fong

CHINESE PAINTING

A STATEMENT OF METHOD¹

CHINESE painting has an unusually long and noble history. Yet, in spite of the existence of a lengthy continuous written record, the exact nature of its stylistic development remains to be defined. The shortage of fully documented works in this field only dramatizes the fact that, without criticism and a theory of style, a writer cannot even make a meaningful catalogue of art objects. Every individual attempt to date a Chinese painting raises all the fundamental problems of analysis and description of a work of art. Therefore, for the historian of Chinese art, it amounts to a practical necessity to begin his inquiry with the theoretical critical problems.

I

We remember the story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. When the robber marked one door with a sign, his opponent easily confused him by repeating the same sign on all other doors. Similarly, the identity of original works is often obscured by copies and forgeries, liberally decorated with supposed signatures, seals and dates of the intended masters. At this stage, the principal task of the historian of Chinese painting is the detection and interpretation of what George Kubler calls the "prime objects."² This, however, is a task fraught with methodological difficulties.

In the London Chinese Exhibition of 1935-36, Ni Tsan (1301-1374), for instance, was represented by two important hanging scrolls: the *Mountains Seen from a River Bank* dated 1363 (Fig. 1) and the *Jung-hsi Studio* dated 1372 (Fig. 2).³ In the U.S. exhibition of Chinese government art treasures of 1961-62, the *Mountains Seen from a River Bank* dated 1363 was retained, while the *Jung-hsi Studio* of 1372 was replaced by a third picture, entitled *Mountain Scenery with a River Lodge*, also dated 1372 (Fig. 3).⁴ All three pictures are accompanied by long inscriptions purportedly by the artist himself. In addition, they had passed through famous private collections of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries before becoming possessions of the emperor Ch'ien-lung (1736-1796).⁵

Traditional Chinese connoisseurship, of course, accepts all three pictures as authentic Ni Tsans. In order to understand this, we must follow the steps by which the Chinese connoisseur 'authenticates' paintings. "In judging a painting," wrote T'ang Hou of the fourteenth century, "one must examine first the silk, then

the brushwork, and finally, the ch'i-yun, 'spirit-resonance'.⁶ Thus the traditional Chinese stylistic description deals both with the physical aspects—considered under the heading of 'brushwork'—and the 'spiritual' qualities of a painting. Tung Ch'ich'ang (1555-1636), for instance, had carefully noted that "to paint in the style of Ni Tsan, one must use the 'oblique' stroke (meaning, the stroke was made with the brush held obliquely, so that the tip of the brush was pushed to one side of the stroke). The stroke may be light or it may be heavy; but one must never employ the 'round' (or the centred) stroke. This is because the wonder of a Ni Tsan lies in a certain elegance (hsiu) and sternness (ch'iao) in his brushwork."⁷ While the obliqueness of the individual brushstrokes, which results from a special kind of brush-technique, is a distinct physical feature, and therefore clearly describable, hsiu and ch'iao, here rendered, somewhat inadequately, as 'elegance' and 'sternness,' are vital, but indefinable, expressive qualities. Tung went on to say: "The paintings of Yü-weng (Ni Tsan) may be considered as belonging to the 'i' (untrammelled) class . . . Although there were many able painters during the Yüan period, most of them had based themselves on the Sung tradition, merely adding to it touches of the new feeling for freedom. Wu Chen was full of spirit. Huang Kung-wang had an especially fine air. Wang Meng preserved many ancient principles. All three masters, however, possessed certain ostentatious habits. Ni Tsan alone appeared antique, plain, and natural. He was the only man since the 'Madman' Mi [to excel in such qualities]."⁸

¹ The present paper is the first chapter of a book on Chinese Painting, which the author is preparing. It was read, in a condensed version, at the fifty-first annual meeting of the College Art Association of America, held at Baltimore on January 25th, 1963.

² George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, Yale University Press, 1962.

³ *Illustrated Catalogue of Chinese Government Exhibits for the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London*, Commercial Press, 1936, Vol. 111, Painting and Calligraphy, p. 160, Nos. 84, 85.

⁴ *Chinese Art Treasures: A Selected Group of Objects from the Chinese National Palace Museum and the Chinese National Central Museum, Taichung, Taiwan, 1961-1962*, pp. 162-163, Nos. 84, 85.

⁵ According to the seals on these paintings, the *Mountains Seen from a River Bank* (Fig. 1) was in three of the most famous early Ch'ing private collections: Liang Ch'ing-piao (1620-1691), Pien Yung-yü (1645-1702), and An Ch'i (1683-ca. 1742); the *Mountain Scenery with River Lodge* (Fig. 3) belonged once to the famous early Ch'ing collector Keng Chao-chung (1640-1686) and apparently spent the early years of the eighteenth century in the hands of a Manchu collector named A-er-hsi-p'u; the *Jung-hsi Studio* (Fig. 2) came through the hands of the same Manchu collector A-er-hsi-p'u.

⁶ Hua-lun, *Mei-shu Ts'ung-shu* edition, Western binding, Vol. 14, III/7, p. 11. In this particular passage, T'ang Hou was discussing how to judge Six Dynasties paintings. Wisely he noted: "Out of ten pictures, perhaps one or two may be trusted. Those with imperial colophons and seals are particularly not to be trusted."

⁷ Hua-yen, *Mei-shu Ts'ung-shu* edition, Western binding, Vol. 2, I/3, p. 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33. The original for 'ostentatious habits' is 'Tsung-heng-hsi-ch'i,' which means, more literally, "the practised air of [going in a] crisscross [fashion]." This describes the swaggering manner of a virtuoso who lacks the subtler qualities of restraint and moderation. It means the same thing as 'huo-ch'i,' fiery (or hot) air, or 'chien-pa-nu-chang, a drawn sword and an opened bow.' On the other hand, according to the literati aesthetics, there is no quality higher than 'tan, plainness'—meaning, to be free from all traces of artificiality, affectation, and ostentation.

If we use the 'oblique' brushstroke and this all-important, but vague, feeling of "hsiu-ch'iao" (elegance and sternness) as the only criteria for judging the authenticity of a Ni Tsan, there is no reason why the pictures in question cannot all be accepted as original works by the master. Indeed, in all three pictures, the familiar Ni Tsanesque pictorial motifs are present: the lonely and empty pavilion, the rounded or squared-off boulders with dry and 'oblique' modelling strokes, the stiff, 'stick-like' trees in turn decorated with round, vertical and horizontal foliage dots, and the small thorny plants which grow between the larger trees. Although the *Mountains Seen from a River Bank* (Fig. 1) seems a bit indolent and sentimental, and the *Mountain Scenery with a River Lodge* (Fig. 3) is dry and dull, who is to say whether or not they are 'elegant' and 'stern'?⁹

In the catalogue of the recent U.S. exhibition, we find the *Mountains Seen from a River Bank*, dated 1363 (Fig. 1), described in the following words:

"There are some long texture strokes done in both wet and dry brushwork, and a few flat, horizontal dots. Most of the details are executed in dry brush over lighter wet strokes. The lonely and austere quality of this landscape is expressed with a noble sensitivity which reflects the character of the artist."¹⁰

For the *Mountain Scenery with River Lodge*, dated 1372 (Fig. 3), the comments in the catalogue include the following remarks:

"The same general compositional pattern was used by the artist for most of his landscapes . . . There are few flat dots; otherwise, the painting consists of dry brushwork over wet strokes done in a sketchy, seemingly careless manner which conceals its strength and discipline . . . An austere mood breathes through a cool, grey day."¹¹

The mention of 'long texture strokes' in the picture dated 1363 (Fig. 2) refers to the so-called 'hemp-skin' modelling technique which Ni Tsan adopted, according to Ming critical sources, from Tung Yuan and Chü-jan of the tenth century. From a narrative-biographical point of view, it might be argued that the picture dated 1363 (Fig. 2) is a softer and more youthfully sentimental Ni Tsan, leaning heavily on the conventionalized Tung Yuan-and-Chü-jan 'hemp-skin' modelling technique. Using these three pictures as 'monuments' for reconstructing the artistic life of Ni Tsan, it would be quite easy to suppose that from the relatively gentle and pretty style of 1363 (Fig. 1), he eventually moved on to something which Tung Ch'i-ch'ang could later describe as 'stern' and 'antique.' The *Mountain Scenery with a River Lodge*, dated in the third month of 1372 (Fig. 3), may be said to represent the craggy, 'antique' phase of Ni Tsan. The treatment of rocks and trees in this picture is rough and unkempt to the point of near confusion. Finally in the *Jung-hsi Studio* (Fig. 2), which is dated in the seventh month of 1372, those qualities of 'plainness' and 'naturalness,' which characterized all works by Ni Tsan, found their fully matured expression. The lines

are calm, deliberate, and masterfully controlled, and their use is succinct and economical. The sublime state of being 'i, untrammelled' has finally been reached.

⁹ The traditional Chinese connoisseur believes fervently that the pi-i, brush-idea or the handwriting, of a painter is as inimitable and unmistakable, as the voice of a familiar singer. This is all very true except that an authentic feeling for the authentic touch of a given artist can only be intuited from truly authentic works. Basing oneself on attributed works, one's feeling for a Ni Tsan can be no more than a mere composite image of all the Ni-Tsan-esques.

¹⁰ *Chinese Art Treasures*, p. 162.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.



3. Ni Tsan, attributed to, *Mountain Scenery with a River Lodge*, dated 1372. Courtesy of National Palace Museum, Taichung.

While the importance of brush-technique, motifs and form-types to the description of a Chinese painting is self-evident, a mere typological analysis of the formal elements is certainly not enough to characterize a style.¹² Morphologically, the *Mountains Seen from a River Bank* (Fig. 1) and the *Mountain Scenery with a River Lodge* (Fig. 3) are utterly different from the *Jung-hsi Studio* (Fig. 2). In the latter picture (Figs. 2 and 5), both the rocks and the trees are tactually described. They are carefully constructed with many layers of subtly graded brush-lines and ink-washes, so that in spite of the gently blurred contours, there is still an unmistakable sculpture-like quality about them. The renowned 'oblique' brushstroke—notice, especially, the upper border lines of the rocks—cuts a neat and lively three-dimensional pose. Every line made by the brush, in modelling the form, is actually blended into it. The tree branches in this picture are gracefully and convincingly drawn; they seem to project out of the picture and recede back into it. The leaf-dots are clearly related to the branches. From the thickest portion of the tree trunk to the smallest twig or the tiniest dot, every part of a tree is rhythmically as well as structurally integrated into an organic whole, breathing, it seems, at every turn, the very essence of growth and vitality. Finally, the horizontal 'moss-dots' on the rocks, wondrously executed with such a lightness of touch and easy grace, are superbly calculated to define the shapes of the stones. They help to enhance the crystal-like quality of the rocky facets, and, at the same time, accentuate their grouping.

There is no question that the other two pictures (Figs. 1, 3) are of much lower quality. The drawing in these pictures (Figs. 1 and 4, 3, and 6) is often harsh, confused, and redundant. The significant differences between these pictures and the *Jung-hsi Studio*, however, are those which actually suggest a different set of visual and structural principles. The brushwork of these pictures (Figs. 4, 6) is both freer and more independently asserted than that of the *Jung-hsi Studio*. Instead of the well-constructed masses which seem to breathe, live and grow naturally in space, there are now rock-and-tree shapes with busily textured surfaces, which seem to slide in and out of the pictures like pieces of flat stage sceneries (Figs. 1, 3). In the *Mountains Seen from a River Bank* dated 1363 (Fig. 4), the 'hemp-skin' modelling lines, now a calligraphic mannerism, have become uniformly shaped and distinctly kinesthetic. Rather than describing tactually the concave and convex surfaces of the rocks, they try to suggest visual fusion with multiple overlapping strokes. The horizontal foliage dots, being loosely piled on each other, have now only a superficial two-dimensional relationship with the branch system—the latter itself being represented in a strictly two-dimensional manner. As a group, the three trees in this picture, which are laterally spread out in the shape of a

Chinese folding fan, are seen as a flat, silhouetted pattern against the blank whiteness of the river water. Finally, the blanket of horizontal 'moss dots' on the rocks and the cliffs (Fig. 1), which harmonizes with the horizontal foliage dots both near and far, serves also largely decorative rather than representational purposes. In the *Mountain Scenery with a River Lodge* dated 1372 (Fig. 6), all the leaves of the five different trees in the foreground have become fused into one unified area. There is no longer any intelligible relationship between the branches and the foliage. In their overall appearance of fuzziness, which results from the mixed use of multiple overlapping brushstrokes and dots of different ink-tones, the trees and rocks in this picture are at once patternistically decorative and impressionistic.

In overall composition, the differences between these two pictures and the *Jung-hsi Studio* are equally striking. The *Jung-hsi Studio* of 1372 (Fig. 2) is designed in terms of the traditional Sung, vertical and frontal tripartite division of the picture-plane, which begins with a clearly and completely defined 'earth' at the bottom, continues into an extended view in the middle, and ends with an appropriate strip of 'heaven' on top. The spatial organization shows a formal, rationalized and self-contained unity, with most of its depicted elements

¹² In his memorable article "Style" (in *Anthropology Today*, edited by A. L. Kroeber, University of Chicago Press, 1953, p. 289), Meyer Schapiro wrote: "Although there is no established system of analysis and writers will stress one or another aspect according to their viewpoint or problem, in general the description of style refers to three aspects of art: form elements or motives, form relationships, and qualities (including an all-over quality which we may call the 'expression')." Schapiro pointed out that "form elements or motives, although very striking and essential for the expression, are not sufficient for characterizing a style. The pointed arch is common to Gothic and Islamic architecture, and the round arch to Roman, Byzantine, Romanesque, and Renaissance buildings. In order to distinguish these styles, one must also look for features of another order and, above all, for different ways of combining the elements." (Ibid.)

4. Detail of Fig. 1.





5. Detail of Fig. 2.

6. Detail of Fig. 3.



terminating, logically completed, at the three lower sides of the picture. Being so complete and so self-sufficient, it appears isolated and separate from our space, like a vision contained in a glass bowl. As a result, there is a definite psychological distance between such a picture and the modern viewer, a feeling which undoubtedly contributed to what the Chinese described as the 'ku-i,' or the 'antique feeling.' To be sure, the viewer may step into the picture and roam around—the foreground boulder touching the bottom edge of the picture serves as an admirable repoussoir. In doing so, however, he will find himself in a picture world that is wholly removed from his own.

On the other hand, the *Mountains Seen from a River Bank* dated 1363 (Fig. 1) is composed of flat, horizontal strips of water and triangular patches of earth and mountains, which, in running insistently beyond the picture borders, seem to spill over directly into our own space. The picture begins with a body of water stretching across the bottom of the picture. The island is now broken into a series of boulders, diagonally placed from lower right to upper left, with water running through them. The background elements appear in two separate stages: Heralded by a series of horizontal sand bars covered with tiny trees and running clear across the width of the picture, the first tall cliff rises abruptly on the left of the picture. Behind this, two connecting tall mounds block the view on the right, dividing the water into a series of horizontal lagoons. The design is thus accomplished by a series of dramatically accentuated verticals and horizontals in the picture plane, which are framed first between the tall vertical borders of the preciously narrow format, and then woven into a coherent pattern by such diagonal design lines as those indicated by the slanting tops of the trees and the mountain bases arranged in echelon. Spartially, in place of a smooth, convincing progression into depth as seen in the *Jung-hsi Studio* of 1372 (Fig. 2), the spectator's eye is now led to skip along the picture plane vertically without any reference to an imaginary receding ground plane—the strips of water between the different stages of mountain boulders being completely flat, void areas. Rhythmically, the elements in the *Jung-hsi Studio* seem to be revolving in a smooth, close circuit, with significant shapes and design lines touching the picture borders in concentric fashion. In the *Mountains Seen from a River Bank* (Fig. 1), which is a design cut off and organized by the frame, the vertical elements, accentuated by the tall narrow format, are harshly intersected by horizontal lines which run straight across the picture surface. The composition of the *Mountain Scenery with a River Lodge* dated 1372 (Fig. 3) apparently follows the same principles as that of the picture dated 1363 (Fig. 1). Again, we have a precious segment of nature, in a rather more diffused form, which is framed and organized by means of pronounced diagonal design lines in the picture plane. In place of a well conceived vista in depth, we have here,

once again, an essentially flat, tapestry-like, decoratively patternistic design.

III

Such morphological divergences as those which we have just observed in these three pictures are too fundamental in nature to be explained as mere variations within an artist's own life works. In their treatment of the same motifs and form-types, one finds the familiar Ni Tsanesque vocabulary of rocks and trees employed, as it were, in entirely different syntax and compositional patterns. One suspects somehow that the pedantic, recondite and over-sophisticated picture dated 1363 (Fig. 1) can no more be accepted as an earlier work of the artist who made the powerfully expressive picture of 1372 (Fig. 2) than, let us say, a pre-Raphaelite could be taken as an early and unusual Raphael.

It was Wölfflin who first showed us the way to a systematic interpretation of stylistic peculiarities in a work of art in terms of generic stylistic problems. It would perhaps be interesting to test the problems raised by our morphological analysis of the Ni Tsan attributions with Wölfflin's famous morphological principles. According to Wölfflin, 'linear' description, tactual 'multiplicity,' and formal 'clearness' are all interdependent qualities which, in his formulation of the 'history of Style,' necessarily preceded the 'painterly' mode, visual 'unity,' and 'unclearness.' In a slightly different way, Riegl came, independently no doubt, to a similar conclusion that the whole history of representation had been a long and continuous movement from the 'haptic' to the 'optic' ways of visualizing things.

One quickly finds, however, that the Riegl-Wölfflinian stylistic schemas, deriving as they did from the study of well-documented 'monuments' from specific periods in Western art, are basically unsuited for the critical task of determining the dates of undocumented works. Although the 'linear' and the 'painterly'—and the 'haptic' and the 'optic'—are genuinely opposed stylistic types, the appearance of each as a visual property in a work of art is often only a part of the total expression or purpose. As such stylistic qualities not only occur, but indeed, recur frequently, in different stylistic contexts, our notion of 'early' or 'late' with regard to an undated painting is necessarily relative to a certain point of departure. Wölfflin's stylistic categories were not created, however, for defining such points of departure in the history of art. Nor, indeed, were they equipped to reconstruct total stylistic contexts.

Furthermore, it is well known that the Riegl-Wölfflinian stylistic theories imply an historicism which tends to propagate deterministic dogmas. In both their stylistic schemas, 'Style' with a capital 'S' was seen as an irresistible and autonomous force, independent of representational meaning and expression, and vigorously progressing along a pre-determined evolutionary path.

The concept of 'necessary movement' was important to both these writers. The course of evolution from one "mode of seeing" to another was, according to Wölfflin, internally determined—or 'virtually given.' Riegl's *Kunstwollen*, the 'will-to-form,' was indeed a sort of a "ghost in the machine, driving the wheels of artistic developments according to 'inexorable laws'."¹³ To apply such concepts to connoisseurship is to grant currency to the notion that stylistic changes are caused by collective, supra-individual forces rather than by individually thinking and feeling artists.

Deterministic theories, one hopes, are dying myths today. Instead of the 'history of Style,' we are now interested in the histories of stylistic changes and those of the changing styles. In retrospect, Wölfflin's great success in reducing stylistic features to generic theoretical concepts seems to be matched only by his failure to reconcile the human artistic purpose with his 'history of Style.' While genetic histories and dialectic theories of the dynamics of style in general have no use for human purpose, art history is quite meaningless without it. In describing a change, we must therefore reconstruct the alternative choices which existed before the change, so that every stylistic feature may appear, in its full significance, as a purposeful solution to some special artistic problems. In Gombrich's words: "What matters here from the point of method is that an act of choice is only of symptomatic significance, is expressive of something only if we can reconstruct the choice situation . . . If every change is inevitable and total, there is nothing left to compare, no situation to reconstruct, no symptom or expression to be investigated."¹⁴

The shortage of firmly documented works in the field of Chinese painting is richly compensated for by the extraordinary wealth of literary material, which includes a goodly number of critical testimonies by masters from the earlier centuries. The evidence of these texts is vital to our understanding of the Chinese artistic and critical problems. The close alliance between painting and calligraphy, both in theory and in practice, apparently conditioned the Chinese visualization from the very start. Imitation of nature always played a decidedly secondary role to the suggestion of life-rhythm, which is a quality both desired and attainable in the writing of the ideo-pictographic script as well as in the drawing of the conceptualized pictorial images. In landscape painting, this meant the suggestion of the essential principles of growth, relatedness, rhythm and structure in nature, through shorthand symbols such as texture strokes and foliage dots. As the real objective of the Chinese painter was the 'spirit' rather than the mere physical appearance of the thing, visible improvements in representational skill in the history of Chinese art were looked upon as mere incidental changes.¹⁵ In fact, in Chinese art

¹³ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1960, p. 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

criticism, the importance of representational problems has been consistently played down, since the greatness of a painter was measured solely according to his success in attaining the fixed ideal of chen, the 'real,' which, in representing, in the last analysis, nothing other than the eternal Tao, or the 'Way' of the universe, appears rather remote from the mere mechanics of picture-making.

As any significant artistic creation ultimately becomes devoid of meaning when it is turned into a convention, Chinese landscape painting, which was built upon an ideographic vocabulary, was constantly threatened by the dangers of growing formalism and sterility. The thousand years of painting history in China, between the eighth century and the eighteenth century, may be seen as a series of broad movements of stylistic change: as each leading style gradually turns into a mannersim and, in due course, peters out, new leaders appear, deriving their vigour and inspiration from exploring some old neglected stylistic alternatives, effecting, withal, a new energetic return to the old ideal of chen, or 'realness.' Yet the very critical neglect of the more concrete representational problems in Chinese art seems to have resulted in the general inability of the traditional critic to look beyond individual biographies, schools and influences in accounting for stylistic changes. For all his laudable intent in judging the quality and the authenticity of a picture by its 'spirit' rather than by its physical features, the Chinese connoisseur failed to differentiate the uses of the same ideo-pictographic motifs in the earlier solutions from those in the later ones. The traditional history of Chinese painting thus parades

the names of the painters and their familiar brush-techniques, motifs and pictorial themes in the fashion of the famous *Mustard Seed Garden Manual* of the late seventeenth century. With continuous stylistic traditions dangling without fixed visual positions in time, it is like an unfinished grand tapestry design, with only magnificently coloured warp threads stretched out, unbound and unrelated to one another.

The task which confronts us is therefore two-fold: On the one hand, we must describe, interpret, and reconstruct the stylistic changes in Chinese painting as conscious and specific solutions to generic stylistic problems, and formulate these solutions into a sequence of related, though clearly differentiated, form-categories. Such a morphological sequence in time will help us not only to measure the distance between an original and a copy, but also to define more precisely the nature of a continuing stylistic tradition. On the other hand, through relevant literary sources and an exhaustive study of general attributions, copies and replicas, we must attempt to reconstruct the original vital moment of creation, when a mere alternative suddenly turned into a unique and purposeful choice, by discovering, whenever possible, the least corrupted—if not actually the original—'text' for every principal pictorial theme. In short, we must study the great 'prime objects' in Chinese painting as unique and individually meaningful creations, while learning, at the same time, to generalize about them.

. . . .

¹⁵ Similarly, in connoisseurship, the 'spirit' was valued more than the physical aspects of style. Thus T'ang Hou of the fourteenth century wrote: "To look at a painting is like watching a beautiful woman. The air (feng), the spirit (shen), and the subtle suggestions of the bone-structure (ku-hsiang) often reside beyond the physical features." (*Hua-lun*, loc. cit., p. 8).