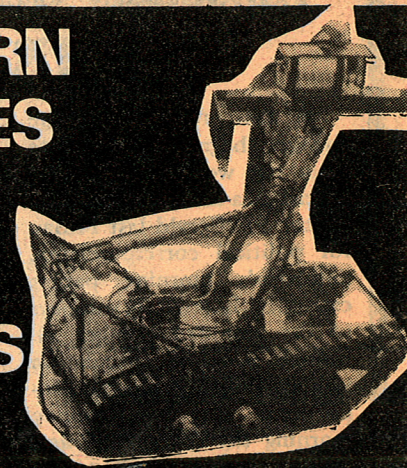


# hibernia WEEKLY

**NORTHERN  
TROUBLES  
BOOST  
BRITISH  
EXPORTS  
(P.10)**



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## China Syndromes

Rosc '80 has got off to a flying start with the opening of the Arthur M. Sackler loan exhibition of Chinese Painting in the National Gallery. Twenty-four artists are represented with forty-one paintings, ranging in time from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries, though mostly belonging to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They belong to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and to the Art Museum, Princeton University.

Dr Sackler is also his own creation: medical doctor, researcher into the causes of schizophrenia, millionaire, connoisseur and art benefactor, he began adult life with only his degree. Having "learned how to accumulate money", he then "had to learn to give it away" and the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, Washington, was the result.

Except for the expensive and scholarly catalogues, all the costs involved in mounting the exhibition have been borne by the Foundation. This includes the re-designing of the Drawings Room to make a more suitable background for the pictures. New screen walls have been erected which carry wood and perspex cases at eye level, wall covering

art

Kate  
Robinson



of a warm and subtle mauve-grey which absorbs light, and a new system of indirect lighting, essential in this case where direct lighting would have damaging effects, and here and there the decorative appearance of great plants in brass pots. It is a gracious transformation which also adds to the available wall-space, and it will remain intact when the collection later returns to its home.

The Chinese, in contrast to the peoples of the West, observed life through art. There was no organized system of religion: they preferred the art of living in the world; not given to rationalization, they loved poetic and imaginative thinking and, instead of scientific study, they chose fantasies of astronomy, alchemy, geomancy, and fortune-telling. Knowledge of the natural sciences thus never developed, and neither did religion in the Western sense evolve. There, the spirit-realm and matter-realm are one. The cultural climate arose from Taoism and Confucianism,

both of which sought "inner reality" or fusion with the cosmic principle (Tao) in a union of opposites: male and female, violence and peace, finite and infinite, in which dynamic each was needed for completeness. The human race was part of nature, in harmony with it, neither dominating nor controlling it. It is true to say that everyone was an artist, and that response to life was governed by this artistic sensitivity. Art became the vehicle of profound thoughts and feelings on the mystery of the universe. Poetry was its sister.

High standards were demanded of the artists. Hsieh Ho named the traditional "Six Techniques of Painting" adding that few had ever mastered them all although "there have been artists who have been good in some one aspect". The works of Tao-chi, seventeenth century painter, are the centre-piece of the exhibition, and in his flower paintings we may see "the lifelike tone and atmosphere" which is the first requirement of the master. Orchid, bamboo, plum and chrysanthemum, known as the "Four Friends" or the "Four Gentlemen" were a special challenge to the painter: here they simply thrust with life, the strength and mobility of the bamboo shoots and leaves contrasting with the evasive charm of the orchid's lines and colour.

"Among Peaks and Pines", one of a group of album-leaves by Tao-chi, reflects the oneness of man and nature: the scholar who sits on the edge of the precipice is as much part of creation as the mountains and trees and infinity; this composition also illustrates the second requirement of the painter to

"build his structure through his brushwork" which he has done with great delicacy, and create his vast space by the superpositioning of his mountain-masses and trees. "The forms of things as they are" and their "appropriate colouring" can be seen in the flower-paintings in the delicate washes over the inked lines, and also in the "Mountain Peaks of Tao-chi", where the colours give credence to distances and masses. The fifth requirement was "Composition", and the sixth relates to calligraphy which was the highest art of all, "transcribing and copying". In this collection there are many albums and scrolls with long accompanying colophons sometimes written by the artist himself, sometimes added at a later date by a friend, or sometimes even centuries later by an admirer of the painter.

The reason for the elevation of calligraphy to such an esteemed position among the arts was, in a sense, practical: there are thousands of characters in written Chinese; an educated person could read an inscription from a distant area with a different spoken dialect, or written a thousand years before.

Since the meaning of these characters remained unchanged, basically, they were a means of uniting this whole civilization across time and space: as a consequence, the written word was venerated as the highest expression of a civilization. Training in calligraphy was complex and strict; it was a study which every educated child had to follow. From calligraphy developed painting in black (Chinese) ink without colour, which became one of the most prestigious forms of art; and the bam-

boo plant became an important interpretive subject in ink painting because its formation allowed it to be illustrated with strokes similar to those used in calligraphy.

Tao-chi was the last of the painters who had seen the great private collections of traditional landscape paintings before they were gathered up by Chien-lung and confined to his own palace. It was mandatory that artists got to know the traditional methods of landscape painting, so by this act Chien-lung caused the death of the tradition. Because of this, all later landscape painting was considered to be "inferior" in much the same way as the Ukiyo-e prints were regarded with scant esteem in Japan until the nineteenth-century European painters discovered their merits.

So Tao-chi was the last great landscape painter who had access to these traditional forms. However, to paint in the Chinese tradition did not mean merely copying formulae: as Tao-chi said himself: "The beards and eyebrows of the ancient masters cannot grow on my face, nor their lungs and bowels (thoughts and feelings) be transplanted into my stomach (spirit)". Each artist had to breathe new life into his creations. Here Tao-chi is shown as both traditionalist and innovator. In "Plum Branches" the artist shows the branches moving back in depth, a break with tradition, as plum branches had never been painted in this way before. Many copies were made of his work, some noticeably inferior. Some of these are on display.

Hopefully the exhibition will give a new impetus to the interest in things Oriental, to the benefit of our own Chester Beatty Collection.