

READING A HAND SCROLL: The Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour

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Introduction

One of the most characteristic and original Chinese art forms is the painted hand scroll. It dates back to at least the Period of Disunity (4th C. C.E.) and achieved a high level of sophistication in the Tang and Song Dynasties (618 – 906 and 960 – 1279, respectively). Landscape was the pre-eminent subject of these scrolls. Tang and Song landscape painters evolved an artistic vocabulary that was venerated by later artists, such as the [Orthodox School](#) of the Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1911). [Wang Hui](#), the most celebrated artist of his day, was an Orthodox painter who was selected by the Qing [Kangxi Emperor](#) (1654 – 1722) to document his second [Southern Inspection Tour](#) of 1689. Wang Hui and his assistants recorded that tour in a set of 12 scrolls, two of which (Scrolls III and VII) are accessible in interactive images at: <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/index.html>

Guiding Questions

- Why did the Kangxi Emperor commission these scrolls?
- What techniques did the scroll painters employ to depict long stretches of space and time in a single artwork?
- What elements of traditional Chinese landscape painting from earlier centuries were utilized in these 17th C. scrolls?

Learning Objectives

- Understand the political significance of the Southern Inspection Tour scrolls.
- Become familiar with the elements of traditional Chinese landscape painting.

Source Materials

“Recording the Grandeur of the Qing” at www.learn.columbia.edu/nanxuntu, focused on Scrolls III and VII of the Kangxi Emperor’s Second Southern Tour.

Metropolitan Museum’s “Timeline of Art History” at www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/qing_1/hd_qing_1.htm

Marylin Stokstad, *Art History*, Revised Second Ed., 2005. Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, N.J., Chapter 21, pp. 810-814.

Important Terms

Manchu
Nanxuntu
Kangxi Emperor
Orthodox School
Monumental style
Hand scroll
Lyrical style
Scholar artists
Qi (life force)
Calligraphy
Taoism
Confucianism
Chan Buddhism
Silk industry, Silk Commissioner
Emperor’s privy purse
Emperor’s entourage
Mist
Empty space
Mt. Tai
Suzhou
Chang Gate

Altar tables
Thatched vs. tile roofs
Mandate of heaven
Cosmic order
Pilgrimage
High distance (gaoyuan)
Deep distance (shenyuan)
Level distance (pingyuan)
Moving perspective
Pavilion
Moon gate
Colophons
Collectors' seals

Background

The Qing Empire and Inspection Tours of the Realm

The Qing Empire (1644-1911) in China was established by Manchu invaders from the north, who defeated and replaced Ming Empire (1368-1644). While imperial inspection tours were a longstanding Chinese tradition, the Qing [Kangxi Emperor](#) (1654-1722) was the first to complete six such tours during his 60-year reign. These personal inspection tours served a strategic purpose: Since the Manchu rulers were outsiders or “foreigners” to the native Han Chinese, the emperors wished to win over their subjects in order to consolidate Manchu rule throughout the empire. The inspection tours from Beijing in the north to the populous southern provinces provided an opportunity for the Manchu emperor to familiarize himself with his subjects and vice versa.

The Kangxi Emperor conducted his first southern tour in 1684, one year after suppressing a rebellion. His second tour, in 1689, was longer, more extensive, and involved a more splendid display of imperial pomp. This second tour was commemorated by a set of 12 painted silk scrolls, collectively titled [“Picture of the Southern Tour” \(Nanxuntu\)](#), which took a team of artists eight years to produce. Each scroll was more than 27 inches high and up to 85 feet long. Each scroll resembled a cinematic exposition of the emperor’s itinerary and his activities along the way.

- Scroll III – Mt. Tai
<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/k3.html> of the Second Southern Tour is significant because its pictorial and political climax is the emperor’s pilgrimage to the holy mountain, [Mt. Tai](#). By worshipping there, the Kangxi Emperor fulfilled long-standing tradition of imperial visits to establish the [“mandate of heaven.”](#) The importance of this passage is indicated by its position near the end of the scroll and by its occupying about six feet of scroll.
- Scroll VII: The City of Suzhou (pronounced Soo-joe)

[Scroll 7](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/k7.html) <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/k7.html> comprised a more urban itinerary and focused on the emperor's visit to the southern city of Suzhou, capital of the silk industry. That industry was an imperial monopoly and a major source of income for the "privy purse," or the emperor's personal and palace expenses, as opposed to the expenses of running the government, which were funded by taxes, customs duties, etc. A sign of the importance of this city to the emperor was that it takes up the last one-third of the scroll, and while in Suzhou the emperor stayed with the Silk Commissioner instead of with the provincial governor.

The Orthodox School of Painting

The so-called [Orthodox School](#) of the Qing era was dedicated to venerating and imitating the landscape painting styles of the Song and Yuan dynasties centuries earlier. During the Song period, painting was elevated to an elite status, along with poetry and calligraphy. Its practitioners were erudite scholars, hence it became known as "literati painting." It embodied an amateur ideal of personal expression that was considered superior to mere technical skill. The literati painters were among the economic and cultural elite and painted to please themselves, not for pay. During the Yuan dynasty of the Mongols (1368-1644), this sense of aloofness intensified when Confucian scholar officials were exiled from the Mongol court and retreated far from the center of political influence in Beijing. They pursued their personal, lyrical styles of art and scorned the professional, commercial artists who served the Yuan court. Their works embodied a mix of religious and philosophical traditions. They drew the viewer into grand vistas of space, amplified by ambiguous passages of mist and empty space. Giving the viewer the experience of becoming lost in the flow of nature had long been an ideal of Chinese painting, drawing on Daoist and Chan Buddhist traditions. Further, the looming craggy mountains were described by literati poet/painters as the "lords" of the world, surrounded by lesser hills and landscape features, conveying a sense that Confucian hierarchy ordered both the natural and human worlds. Another Daoist concept—qi, or life force—was evident in landscapes. According to Daoist tradition, where a stream emerges at the base of a mountain represents a concentration of qi and therefore the perfect place for a scholar to live and contemplate.

- **Orthodox Painters under the Qing**
Three hundred years later, when a second group of Northern invaders, the Manchu, took over China in 1644, the elites were at first horrified but later were relieved to see that the Manchu (Qing) emperors respected Chinese tradition and culture, which they had already largely adopted. The Qing emperors patronized the [Orthodox](#) artists who sought to revive earlier styles.

Ironically, the Qing Orthodox painters reversed the roles of literati and commercial/professional painters of Song and Yuan times. While the preceding literati painters were individualists who shunned commerce or—in the Yuan period—passive rebels who withdrew from the money and glamour of court painting, the new Orthodox painters were deliberate imitators of the past who

were supported by imperial patronage. (In fact, the anti-commercial rebels of the Qing era were known as the [“Individualist”](#) painters.)

- **Scroll Paintings**
The artists of the period produced hanging scrolls, which portrayed a single view in a vertical format, as well as hand scrolls, which required a continuously changing perspective as ever-changing scenes are revealed to the viewer. Hand scrolls were viewed by unrolling sections a few feet wide, progressing from right to left. Passages of poetry, called colophons, were often added to the scrolls by painters, indicating the close association of the two forms of art. Owners of the scrolls often added additional passages of poetry and their personal hand seals.
- **Wang Hui**
The most renowned Orthodox master of the 17th century, Wang Hui, was the chief artist of the Kangxi Emperor’s Southern Tour scrolls. He populated the scrolls with the traditional repertoire of mountains, waterfalls, rivers, trees, rocks, temples, pavilions, bridges, boats, huts, wandering scholars, and fishermen. The Nanxuntu scrolls were documentary and official in nature, and therefore perhaps not conducive to flights of originality. Their style is somewhat dry and literal. Such tendencies can be seen in other works by Wang Hui, including his well known hanging scroll, [“A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines”](#) of 1693. It shows great technical virtuosity, but lacks the emotional poignancy of the literati originals.

Artistic Technique

The physical form of the hand scroll required Qing artists to create a continuously changing perspective, as opposed to the one-point linear perspective adopted by contemporaneous Western painters. Perspective also changes as the eye enters into the depth of the painting, such that objects or figures in the middle distance are proportionate to immediately surrounding objects but may be similar in size to figures or objects that are in the foreground of a nearby part of the painting. Landscape painters tended to divide space schematically into foreground, middle ground, and background. In the farthest background, objects (usually mountains) fade into sketchy outlines. Qing artists used mist as a sort of ellipsis or transitional device to indicate a passage of distance and/or travel time (particularly notable in scroll VII). Mist also added atmosphere and a sense of mystery by partially obscuring the landscape. The viewer was meant to fill in the vague or empty spaces with his or her imagination. Qing artists regarded landscape painting as an interactive form of art. They wrote that the viewer could enter into the painting, stroll around in it, explore it, and even dwell in it.

Mountains are the quintessential subject of Chinese landscape paintings. Orthodox painters drew on a traditional definition of three classifications of space in the treatment of mountains:

- ”High distance” (gaoyuan)—“From the bottom of the mountain looking up toward the top.”

- “Deep distance” (shenyuan)—“From the front of the mountain peering into the back of the mountain.”
- “Level distance” (pingyuan)—“From a nearby mountain looking past distant mountains.”

Student exercise: Reading the Scrolls

Students will need internet access to visit afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/index.html

They should read all the introductory material, as well as the following subsections: “The Qing Emperors” – section on the Kangxi Emperor

- “The Qing State” – section on the Emperor and the Mandate of Heaven
- “Qing Art” – from the start through the section on Representing Space and the External World
- “Southern Inspection Tours” – in its entirety.

Students will then divide into two groups. One group will analyze the Tour III <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/k3.html> scroll and the other group will analyze the Tour VII scroll <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/k7.html>. They should examine the scroll in detail from start to finish, reading the text explanations of all the stops along the way. Each group will prepare oral and written reports on their findings. Each group will divide up the reporting into four sections, which will answer the following study questions:

Section 1: Power & Authority

A. How did the emperor’s tour exemplify the values and politics of the early Qing dynasty? What was the meaning of the phrase “mandate of heaven”? How did this tour relate to the emperor’s status?

B. Why did the emperor visit Mt. Tai?

C. What impression of Chinese society under the Qing is conveyed by this scroll? Support your answer with specific examples.

D. Who accompanied the emperor and why?

E. What does this scroll show of how the Chinese people regarded the emperor?

F. Can you identify the emperor in the scroll? How is he portrayed? What interpretations can you draw about how the emperor was viewed in Qing society?

Section 2: Landscape & Nature

A. What was the Orthodox school of Qing landscape painting? To what extent were the painters of the Southern Inspection Tour scrolls inspired by earlier landscape paintings of the Song, Yuan, and Ming?

B. Name as many typical elements of a traditional landscape painting as you can. Can you find those elements in these scrolls?

C. How does this landscape relate to Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist concepts? Discuss the symbolic meanings of mountains, rivers, forests, and humans in Qing landscape painting.

D. How do the painters of the Southern Inspection Tour scrolls organize space? How did they differ from Western conceptions of pictorial space? How do they represent objects in the far distance?

E. What is the role of mist in the scroll paintings?

F. What types of landscape, animals, vegetation, communities, and people did the emperor encounter on his way?

G. Compare the scale in which people and their dwellings are presented in comparison with the scale of natural surroundings. What interpretations can you draw about how the Chinese viewed man's relationship to nature?

H. At the start of the journey, in the middle ground, is a group of oxen, including a mother licking a newborn calf. Why do you think the artist included this image?

Section 3: Sacred Spaces

A. In what ways did Mt. Tai qualify as a "sacred space"?

B. What religion(s) was it associated with?

C. How did the emperor's visit to Mt. Tai relate to his role in maintaining the "cosmic order"?

F. Temples are a common element in traditional Chinese landscapes. How are they typically placed in the landscape? How does the depiction of a temple encourage the viewer to "dwell in the landscape."

Section 4: Narrative in Art

A. Why were the scrolls created?

B. For what audience was the scrolls intended?

C. Who painted the scrolls? What materials were used?

D. How does one view a hand scroll?

E. What was the meaning or purpose of the written passages and hand-stamped seals on the scroll?

F. How does the scroll function as a narrative?

G. What limitations did the physical medium of the scroll impose on the artists, and how did they deal with those limitations? Discuss with regard to perspective and geographical orientation of the scroll.

H. How was mist or empty space used as a narrative or transitional device?

Websites for Reference:

Columbia University, Dept. of Art History & Archeology, Visual Media Center
“Recording the Grandeur of the Qing,” <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/index.html>

Metropolitan Museum of Art
“Landscape Painting in Chinese Art,”
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clpg/hd_clpg.htm

“The Qing Dynasty (1644-1911): Painting,”
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/qing_1/hd_qing_1.htm

Asia Society
“Lesson Plan: Attitudes Toward Nature in Taoist Art,”
<https://asiasociety.org/attitudes-towards-nature-daoist-art>

Internet Public Library
“Art History Resources on the Web: Chinese Art,”
<http://witcombe.sbc.edu/ARTHchina.html>