

## What is a Hand Scroll?

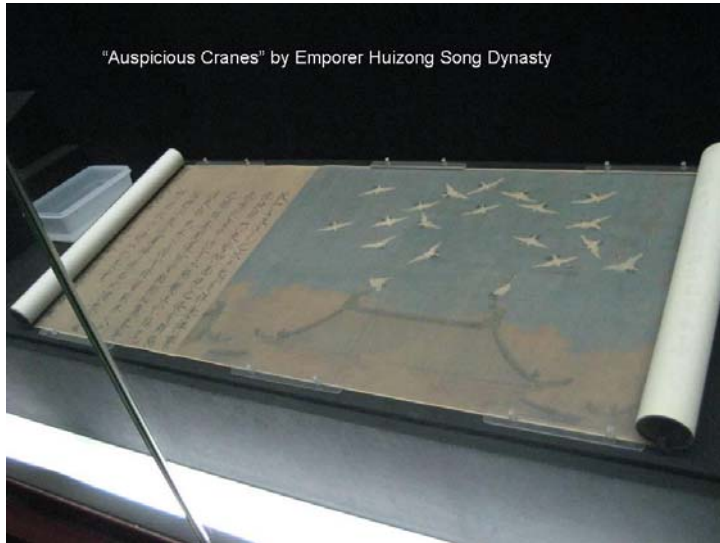
Robert Ponzio, Oak Hall School, Gainesville, Florida

### What is a Hand Scroll?

The hand scroll format is an art form, which finds its origins in ancient Chinese culture. Unlike a traditional Western painting which is meant to hang on a wall, viewed much like a framed window looking out into the world; the imagery depicted in a hand scroll is to be gradually revealed to the viewer as they unroll the scroll upon the table in front of them.



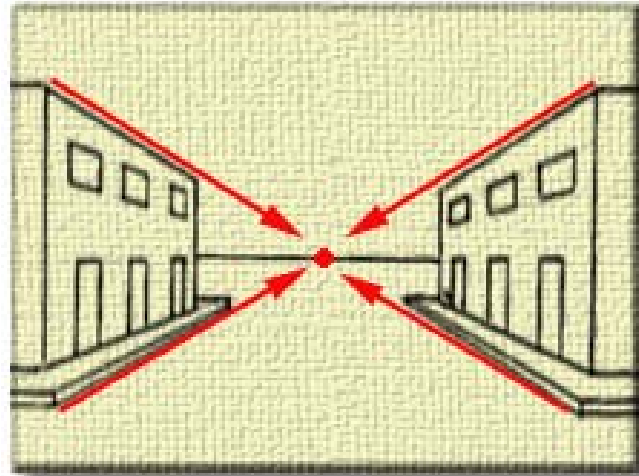
While the scrolls are commonly long, (2'x70' or more), these images are never meant to be exhibited fully unrolled. The edges of hand scrolls are not fixed; they are controlled by the viewer who can move their view back and forth. This viewing experience is very intimate as the Hand scroll format allows only two or three people to examine a scroll at once, revealing maybe 3 or 4 feet as it unrolls.



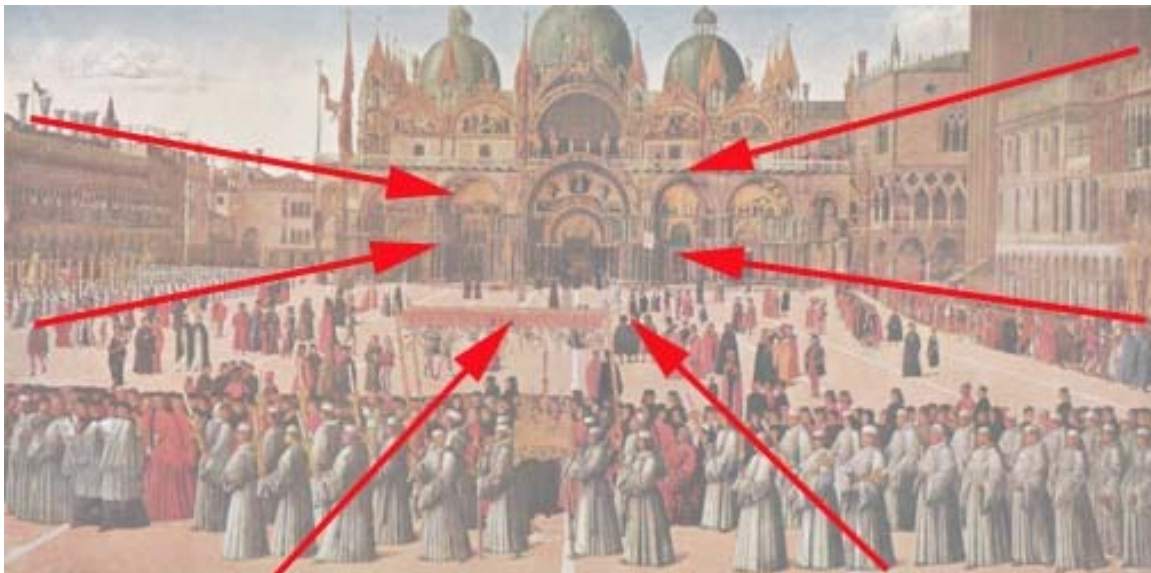
Chinese artists have often exploited this format by manipulating their depiction of space in an effort to allow the viewer to embark on a journey into and through the environment of the scroll. How space is organized is perhaps the most significant difference between traditional Chinese and Western imagery. This lesson hopes to allow students the opportunity to examine the differences between these two spatial constructs and understand how these affect the viewing experience.

## Chinese vs. Western Conceptions of Space:

**Traditional Western depictions of space** are organized based on a receding vanishing point; the artist is in control of what the viewer sees. This type of organization is concerned with reproducing what the eye would see from a fixed vantage point. The viewer is at a single point outside the space. We cannot see over walls, under arches or into private spaces; we are in a sense, outside looking in from a specific viewpoint.



One Point Perspective System



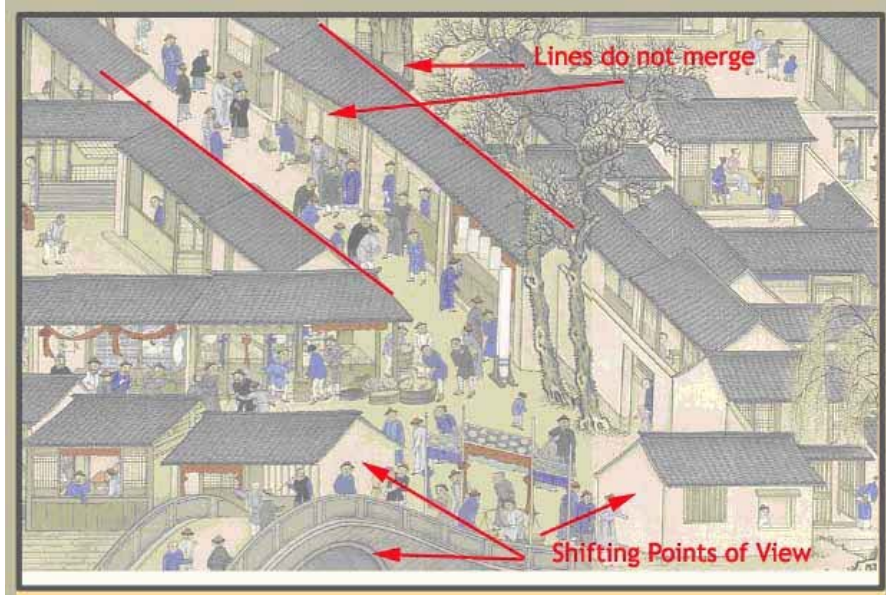
Gentile Bellini's "Procession in Piazza San Marco" shows angles converging on single vanishing point.

The figures depicted in the Bellini painting, logically decrease in scale as they are fixed into their spatial positions as dictated by linear perspective. This system, (combined with Chiaroscuro to give the illusion of form), allowed Western artists to accurately depict the illusion of form and space within the fixed edges of the frame. Compositionally, these images are meant to truthfully depict what is perceived by the human eye from a single, fixed viewpoint.

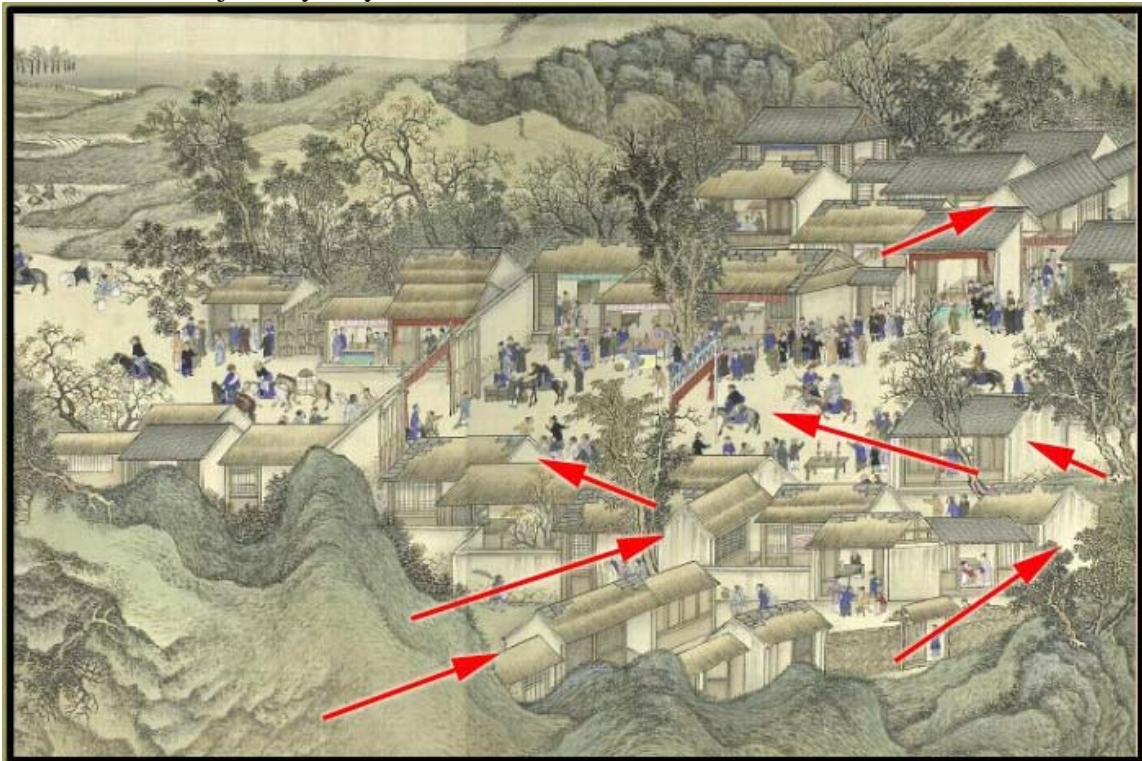


**The traditional Chinese method of depicting space employs shifting viewpoints** which allow the viewer's eye to wander in and through the space. Perspective lines do not merge. This technique of ordering space allows the viewer to see into homes, over walls, and around corners.

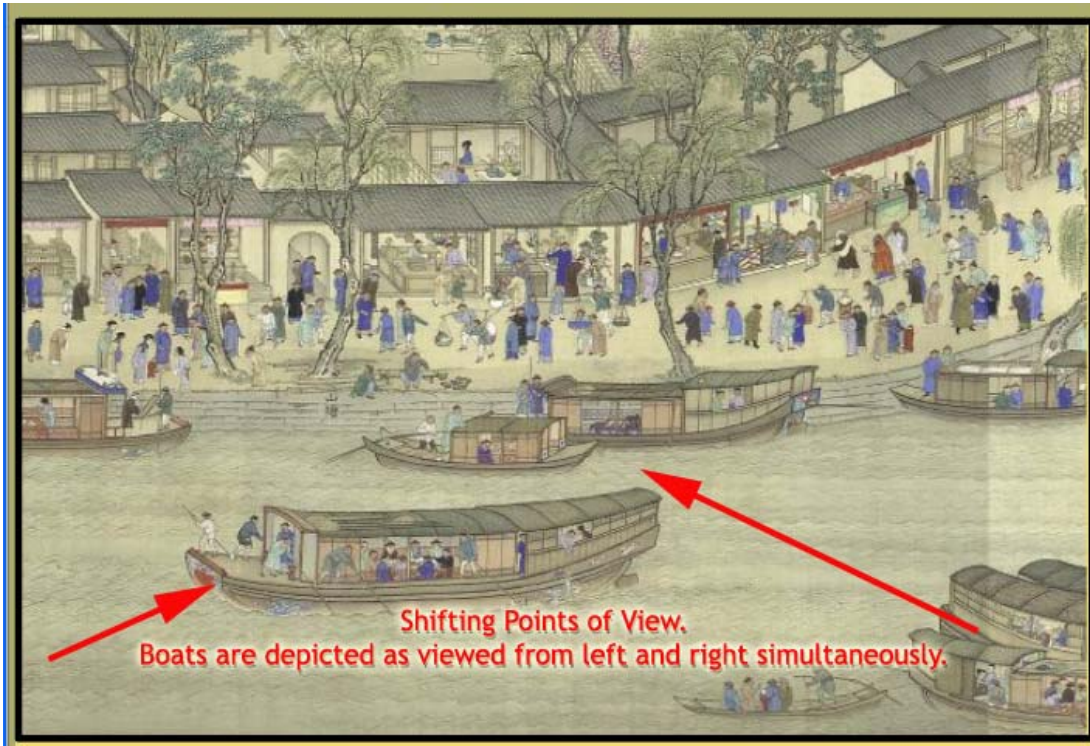
These images are not concerned with reproducing what the eye sees, rather they are meant to express what an individual might discover and experience as they journey through the landscape. We are meant to get a full sense of what is happening in the scene as we become an active participant in the world depicted.



**In Kangxi Scroll 7, Wang Hui utilizes shifting vantage points** which allow the viewer to see the structures from both the left and right sides. Through the use of these shifting vantage points, the viewer remains in control of the viewing experience and can decide where the visual journey may lead them.



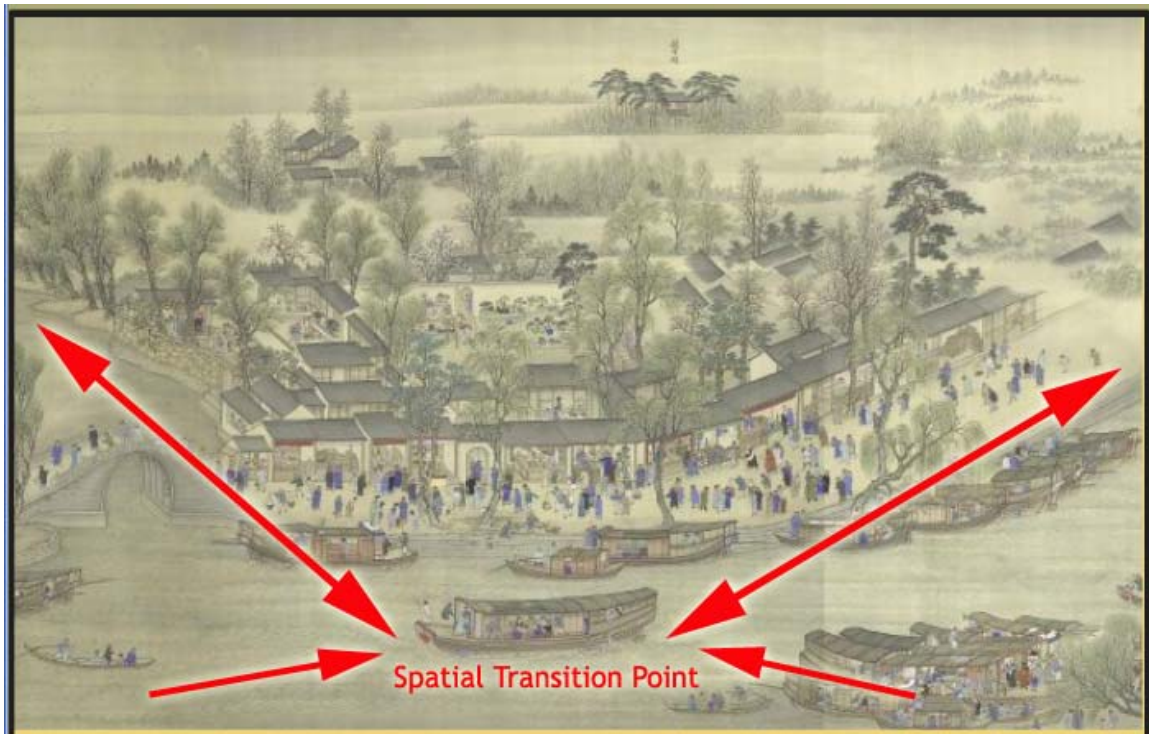
In Kangxi Scroll 3, Wang Hui also utilizes shifting viewpoints.



These shifting viewpoints can also serve as an area of spatial transitions between changing scenes.



## **Transition Points:** **Effecting the Viewer's Sense of Time, Space, and Distance Traveled**



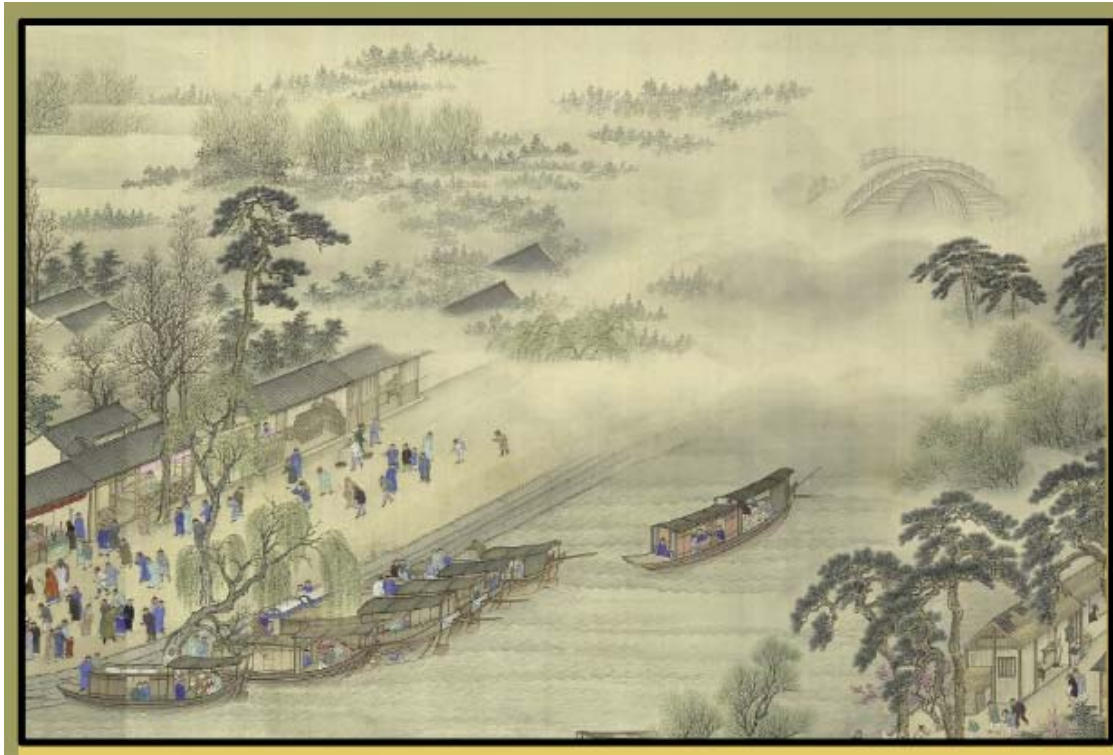
Wang Hui, working with the traditional Chinese conceptions of shifting space has employed a creative means of transitioning from one space to the next. This technique is also impressed upon the viewer as to enhance the perception of the passing of time. In Kangxi Scroll 7, we can see how Wang Hui utilizes a thick fog to fade out from one scene to the next.



(Beginning of Mist / Transition- Kangxi Scroll 7)

This creative transition technique allows the artist to shift perspectives; and allows the viewer to become lost in a journey through time and space. Elements of the landscape and architecture are subtly revealed as they peak out of the mist, allowing the viewer to

gain a sense of traveling over a great distance. As the mist ultimately disappears, we then find ourselves in the next town.



End of Mist / Transition – Kangxi Scroll 7)

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In Kangxi Scroll 3, a winding path with travelers disappears into mist. This is a device which Wang Hui utilizes to indicate them embarking on a long journey, deep into the countryside...



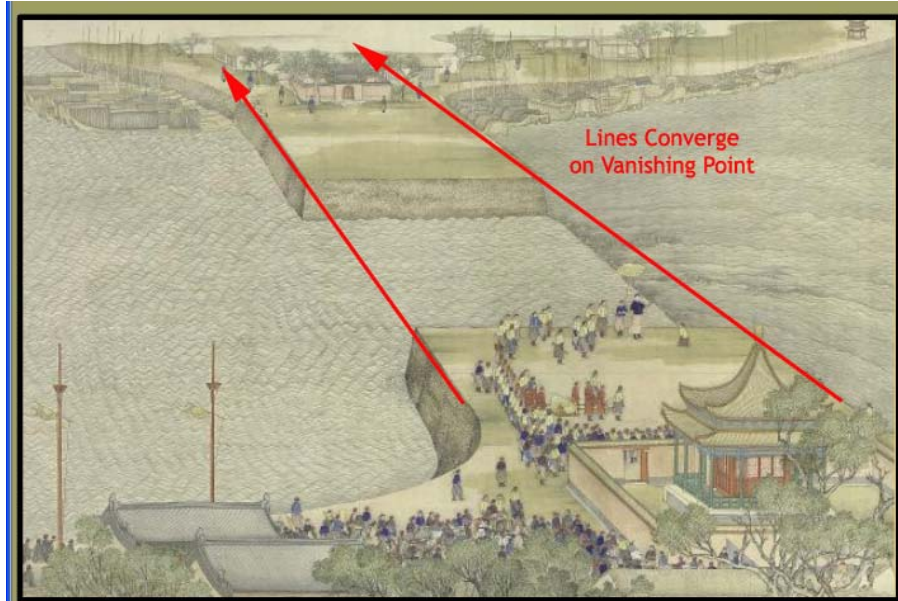
...they eventually reappear after an immeasurable passage of time and distance.



## Influence of Western Perspective on Qianlong Scrolls

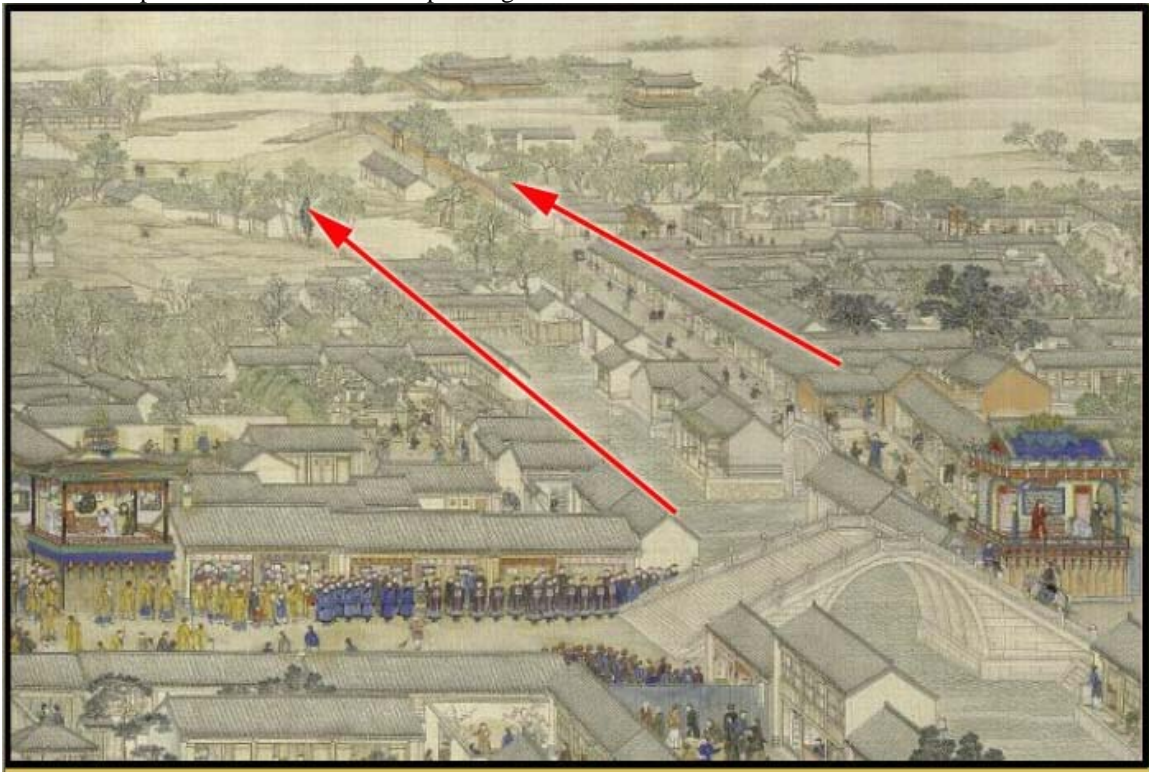
The depictions in the Qianlong scrolls created by artist Xu Yang are very different than that of the Kangxi scrolls. Influenced by the presence of Giuseppe Castiglione and other Jesuit Monks at the Chinese court, these scrolls show a space that is starting to recede in a traditional Western fashion.

In the Qianlong Scroll Number 4, one can see how the lines are converging on a single vanishing point. This system of order limits the how the artist can depict space and restricts the traditional, fluid, spatial viewing experience. Lost are the changing viewpoints as seen in the Kangxi scrolls, as is the viewer's ability to explore in and around corners, down alley ways, and through the landscape.



The figures depicted in the Qianlong scroll, are rendered in full Chiaroscuro, and follow the dictates of the perspective system, they decrease in scale and are fixed in space much like the Bellini painting.

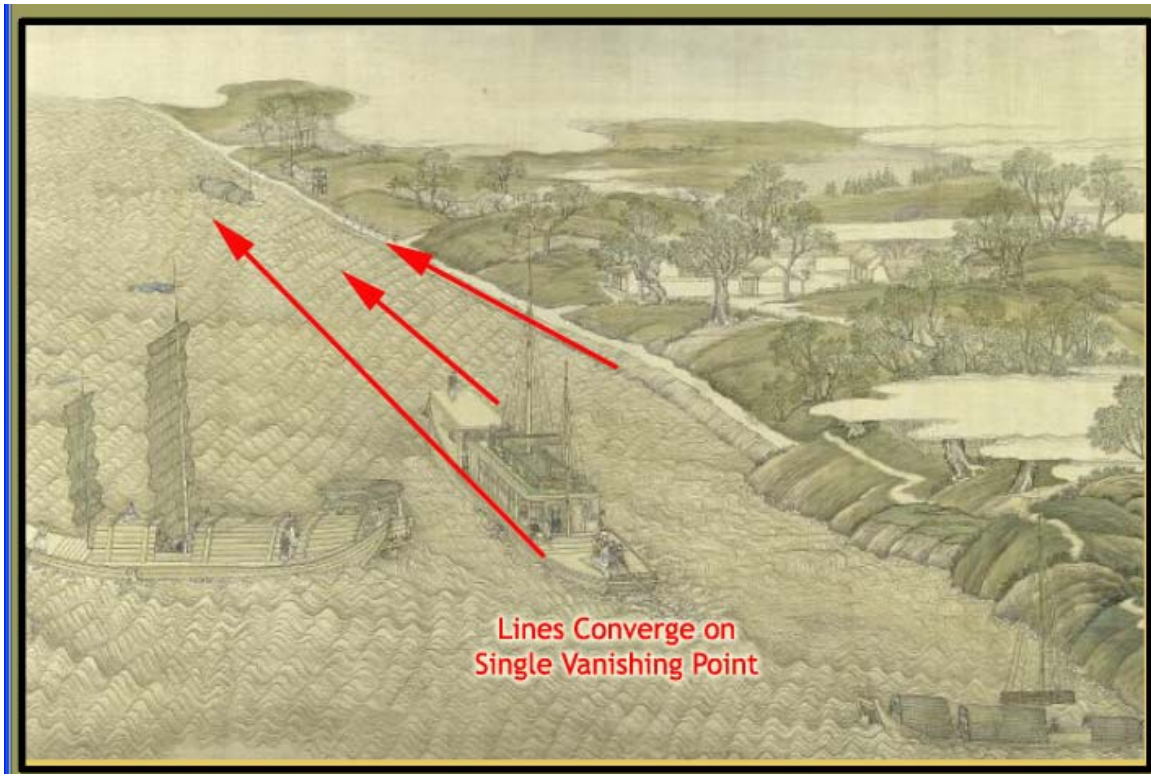
In the Qianlong Scroll Number 4, Xu Yang utilizes fixed vanishing points.





In Qianlong Scroll Number 6, Xu Yang also utilizes fixed vanishing points

This traditionally Western way of depicting space places the viewer in a fixed position outside the scroll looking in. Rather than being an active participant in the journey, moving in and through the scroll, the viewer is now made to follow along a predetermined path from right to left, limiting the traditional viewing experience. These factors also combine to restrict what the artist can reveal to the viewer as he works to maintain these limited vantage points throughout the duration of the scroll.



According to the “*Recording the Grandeur of the Qing*” website:

*“A comparison of the two artists' approaches to the representation of space in the tour scrolls reveals the limitations of translating the European style to the Chinese scroll format. Influenced by the Western technique of linear perspective, Xu Yang strives in the sixth Qianlong scroll to maintain a consistent vantage point in his representations of the Grand Canal and the route of the Qianlong Emperor into Suzhou....Though the European style added a certain kind of illusionary realism to the depiction of Qianlong's southern inspection tour, it could be argued that it also detracted from one of the most important functions of these scrolls as historical documents, which was to highlight the significance of the emperor's visit to important sites such as Tiger Hill and the Grand Canal”.*  
<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/comparison-silk.html>