The Heart of Ma Yuan

The Search for a Southern Song Aesthetic

Richard Edwards

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Purchase made possible through a gift from an anonymous donor
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Preface

It simply cannot be
heard with the ear
But when sound is
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Then it is understood
—Dongshan (807–869)

I have been drawn, especially in recent years, to the painting of China's Southern Sung, or as it is now written, "Song" (1127–1178). This, in no small part, is because it is the earliest historical period when a sufficient number of works by recognized masters survive to allow belief in their tangible painting history. Earlier times, especially what is so eloquently described of great names in written texts, can only whet the appetite to actually see what is so insufficiently served by the scarcity of object survival. Although texts affirm directions and with the aid of an occasional masterpiece can feed the imagination, the visual world is not the world of words but of forms. The demand is to satisfy the eye, not the ear. This dilemma is succinctly expressed in the encounter between the Tang dynasty scholar-official, Li Ao 李翺 (722–841), and the priest, Yaoshan Weiyan 藥山惟儼 (751–834), an episode re-imagined in a late Song painting by a member of the Ma family, Ma Gongxian 馬公顯. Li Ao, having heard great things about the monk, complained on first confronting him: "Seeing you face to face is not equal to hearing your reputation." Yaoshan's answer was brief: "Why prize the ear but demean the eye?" It was the directness of personal confrontation emphasized by the reduction of verbiage that brought understanding and admitted enlightenment.

Close to the year 1100 the veil begins to lift. Not only are surviving signed works more numerous, there is a growing respect for what might be called the focused eye, a measure of seeing guided by the common word, *yuan* 遠, usually translated as "distance." It is what the painter must do with the tools of brush, ink, and color when faced with the untouched barrier of paper, silk, wall, or other surface in order to realize the magic of presence, a space on or within which the unseen becomes visible in uninterrupted passage from our experience of the world of space and time now flowing into the experience of art. The critic Han Zhuo 韓拙 (act. ca. 1095–1123), writing in 1121, five years before the fall of the northern capital, Kaifeng,

gave this a definition by focusing attention on three such distances, perhaps more accurately described as visual perspectives: broad (*kuo* 闊), hidden (*mi* 迷), and obscure (*you* 幽). Taken together, this trilogy reflects a significant change in aesthetic sensibility. Broad distance defines a spacious sweep extending to the edge of visibility. The hidden distance is quite the opposite in implying the concealing screen of a forward object, including fog or mist, blocking such extension. In turn, obscure distance is a compromise in which objects, though still visible, are reduced to atmospheric suggestiveness. While by no means implying a mathematic single point perspective, the eye becomes an observing eye viewing the passing world from a fixed physical position, watching or gazing upon what is directly present. Both viewer and viewed are joined in a special respect for the eye as it explores the physical world.

Within this time I have selected one of its most famous artists, Ma Yuan 馬遠. While there may yet be a chance for further contemporary accounts to emerge, early verbal descriptions are rare and he has survived, as with so many of his peers, as little more than a name. In fame he is often linked with his fellow artist, Xia Gui 夏珪 (ca. 1180–ca. 1230), equal in contemporary verbal obscurity, but famously further condensed in pairing, as "Ma-Xia," as though searching for a condensed acronym. However limited in quantity, and helped by later hints about style, it is more exactly in the tangible concreteness of painting itself through which one must reach knowledge of "Ma Yuan," anchored hopefully in his own day and offering echoes that reverberate beyond in the succession of dynastic time.

Accordingly, the focus of this book will not be through the gateway of contextual social surroundings. Significant and expected as that may appear, such an approach would be based in large part on what others with greater competence have done. As one such scholar has summarized, ". . . there is a remarkably rich, concentrated body of literature that describes in great detail both the landscape of Hangzhou and West Lake and the cultural activities that took place at the Southern Song capital."[1] Moreover, with the arts, context can only yield partial explanations of the essential mystery locked in creativity. Suffice here to generalize. The city of Hangzhou in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the socioeconomic world in which so far as we can guess Ma Yuan spent most if not all of his life, was one of the most sophisticated urban/natural environments that has ever been created: the structure, the commerce, the political push and pull, wealth and poverty, philosophy and religion, the din in crowded streets, the garden spaces, grand temples and great palaces, room for quietness and contemplation

[1] Lee, *Exquisite Moments* (2001), p. 20. For an extensive picture of the city close to Ma Yuan's time see Gernet, *Daily Life* (1962).

near city walls or in surrounding hills. It was an unusual urban setting that brought close the urgency of the ocean-directed Zhe, or Qiantang River as it was called in Hangzhou, with its famous tide bore on one side and on the other the calm of West Lake, rimmed by hill and mountain bringing into view their shifting atmospheric effects. One might claim walking distance to "mountain-water" (*shanshui* 山水), the term that defined the traditional Chinese idea of a landscape, and there could draw extension well beyond to prospects rural and wild. The reconstructed Song imperial palace, backed by the river and overlooking city and lake, was now placed to the east on the commanding height of Phoenix Mountain, its majestic gates and soaring roofs partially hidden by enduring green, much of which was known as a Hill of Ten Thousand Pines. Hangzhou itself carried the name Lin'an 臨安, "approaching peace," also to be translated as "temporary peace" ("temporary" for 150 years).

While art never occurs in a vacuum nor need one praise isolation for its own sake, it must be faced directly. Each of the arts comes wrapped in its own medium: the word of the poet, the musician's instrument, the sculptor's chisel, the brush of the painter, the plan and elevation of the architect. With the potter it is clay; the weaver, the loom; the dance,

the body. In turn responses differ. All end in the mind, many directly, others with indirection, some with apparent immediacy, others over time. Whatever the response, the anchor must be the medium itself, respect for the artist's choice. Leo Bronstein, the much-loved elder colleague of my Brandeis days, honed this for me to brevities: We know the "what" and we know the "how." It is the "what-of-the-how" that matters.

In confronting the artist of the past, one enters a different time and, by so doing, enters the world of history. It is not just "art" but now art woven into the complex fabric of times past. As it becomes history, we must accept its dual function, the history of art. As such the non-verbal arts offer a unique contribution — tangibility. In this they differ from words which, however wonderful, generally are about things, not the thing itself. Only when the written word is closely bound to its calligraphy, a one-time creation, does it enter the unique world of visual tangibility, a direct door to the what-of-the how. Long before the written world freed us to a different kind of history, it was what could be seen and touched, the preserved object, including the lived-in cave and architectural foundations, that told of man's creativity and framed an understanding of early human life. This included what was made of stone, of clay, of earth and bone, more rarely of other perishable materials, of fiber, wood, or even paint. When the physical object was supplemented by the discovery that vanishing speech could be captured by a written word, history acquired a far more expanded and flexible channel to the human mind. Still the visual arts remained and in preservation offered in their concrete forms a unique certainty of fact: the fact that can be touched. Running through all historical writing is the essential dialectic presented by the search for factual evidence and the necessity to refine and direct the fact toward the realm of ideas — facts and ideas. Thus the concreteness of visual fact, the enduring presence, can play a special role. Neither fact nor idea can stand alone. It is ideas about facts that anchor truth.

Here in special focus our study is narrowed to painting: in this case the painting of a single artist. Others are drawn in, but it is essentially the work of a single artist, Ma Yuan, that anchors the argument. Its true beginning is a painting. It ends — often after a long journey of comparative exploration — with painting.

Introduction

Ma Yuan's Family, Patrons, and Style

Ma Yuan is the best known member of a family of artists that laid claim to five, perhaps six, generations of skillful painters. The family offers the most famous example of the refinement of skill under social restraints that prevented Song painters from climbing the ladder of official advancement. As Wai-Kam Ho has pointed out, a decree by the Emperor Renzong in 1056 prevented the transfer of artists into the system of civil service. Artists were required to remain artists and by such careful specialization a focused development of their unique skills was ensured. This often guaranteed transmission from generation to generation.[1] It would appear, at least in part because of such restrictions, that Ma Yuan's career took on special importance. Honing ancestral skills within the Academy and in close association with imperial taste and power, he was able to gain recognition and prestige beyond that of many, if not most, contemporary artists. However, as we shall see, his fame was not restricted to the court alone.

Nevertheless, fame certainly grew from imperial favor and appears responsible for the fact that Ma Yuan, the artist — his style, if not always his precise hand — is preserved for us to a greater degree than any of his contemporaries. A recent study by Lee Hui-shu centering on the personality of Empress Yang has discussed an important group of paintings as proof of this connection.[2] However, no patron can tell an artist how to paint and it must have been Ma Yuan's painting that attracted the patronage. Not unlike Rembrandt for seventeenth-century Holland, Ma Yuan was an artist who carried implications in the art of his time to a differing level of understanding and, in doing so, gave to late twelfth- and thirteenth-century painting in Hangzhou a unique definition. Because of a lack of preserved

1 Ho et al., *Eight Dynasties* (1980), p. xxviii.
2 Lee, "The Domain of Empress Yang" (1994).

works it is impossible to judge to what degree his art depended on a family tradition. We do, however, know of his concern for continuity. The late thirteenth-century recorder Zhuang Su 莊肅 wrote in his brief *Supplement to a Record of Painters Continued* (*Huaji buyi* 畫繼補遺): "Yuan loved his son. Often on his own paintings he wrote that they were done by his son Ma Lin."[3]

Ma Yuan belonged to the fourth generation of this uniquely recorded artist-family line dating back to the closing years of the eleventh century: Ma Fen 馬賁 (great-grandfather), Ma Xingzu 馬興祖 (grandfather), Ma Shirong 馬世榮 (father). As no birth and death dates have been preserved for any of the Ma clan, including the final famous masters, Ma Lin 馬麟 (son) and Ma Gongxian 馬公顯 (a likely grandson), one assumes a generational projection, most securely anchored in what can be pieced together from the activity of Ma Yuan joined to that of son and grandson.

Ma Yuan's most certain activity came during the reign of Ningzong who ruled from 1194 to 1224. Specifically, he was a favorite of Ningzong's Empress Yang, who reached that lofty position at the turn of the century, in 1200. We know more about him than other Academy contemporaries in large part because of this empress, whose courtly influence extends from 1225, when she began her reign as the influential Empress Dowager, until her death in 1233. Her patronage extended as well to Ma Lin, apparently during his early developing years. In this imperial connection, two works of Ma Yuan and one by Ma Lin yield specific dates. For the father, a seal on the lower right corner of *Fisherman on a Winter River* (*Hanjiang dudiao tu* 寒江獨釣圖) carries the legend of the empress' palace, Kunning 坤寧, and a date corresponding to the year 1211: "*xinwei Kunning biwan*" 辛未坤寧秘玩 (Fig. I.1a). A more

I.1a

I.1b

Fig. I.1a Ma Yuan, Chinese, 1190–1235
Fisherman on a Winter River (detail)
National Museum, Tokyo

Fig. I.1b Ma Yuan
Water
(detail from leaf d: ***Lake Glow — Rain Suffused***)
Palace Museum, Beijing

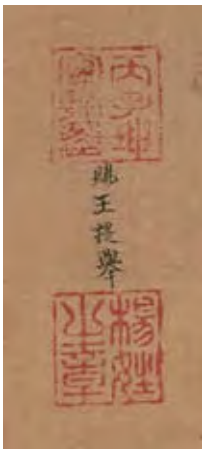
[3] Zhuang Su, *Huaji buyi* (1963), p. 14.

complete seal on the artist's famous *Water: Twelve Views* (*Shui shi'er tu* 水十二圖) with the term "noble consort" (ie. empress): "In the *renwu* year, seal of the noble consort Yang" (壬午貴妾楊姓之章) would in turn conform to the year 1222 (Fig. I.1b). Ma Lin's plum blossom scroll, *Layer upon Layer of Icy Silk Tips* (*Cengdie bingxiao tu* 層疊冰綃圖), carries a seal date corresponding to 1216 (Fig. I.1c).

An anonymous painting of *Orioles on a Cherry Tree* (*Yingtao huangli* 櫻桃黃鸝), the only further dated painting inscription/seal by Empress Yang, conforms to the year 1213 (Fig. I.1d).[4] Skeletal as it is, these dates clearly anchor an important period — just over a decade — of her patronage.

Imperial favor in the arts, however, was not just a matter of pictorial needs. Rather it fitted comfortably into a wider pattern of sophisticated taste, particularly in the realm of calligraphy. This had already been made visible in the early twelfth century, when among other artistic skills the Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1126) was noted for his "golden wire" writing. Gaozong (r. 1127–1162) in his retreat to the south not only re-established the Painting Academy, but continued as a champion of the writing brush. He practiced continually in a range of historical styles. This passion included, close to his own day, a fondness for the calligraphy of Mi Fu 米芾 (1052–1107/8), whose son Mi Youren 米友仁 (1074–1151) was for a time to hold position in his court. With Gaozong leading the way, a dominant imperial style was established which in turn reverberated through the imperial line. This included the skill of empresses, a tradition going back to the Northern Song. His own Empress Wu appears to have been a mentor for the future Empress Yang when the latter was introduced into the court. There is also little question that the demand for the imperial hand far exceeded the ability to fulfill it, and led to numerous "ghost writers," not excluding using the empresses themselves. Furthermore, calligraphy, by virtue of social class and intellectual accomplishment, was not considered fitting for Academy painters. However, its relevance to the accomplishments of painting was not to be denied. Thus it became common practice for the same aristocracy that supported the Academy to unite its calligraphy to the pictorial accomplishments of others. The verbal, both as classical text and poetry, readily became a prized — to some perhaps the most prized — element in juxtaposition to pictorial expression.[5]

Yet Ma Yuan was not just recognized by the court. Unusual for the painting history of this time are a comment and poem that link him with one of the wealthiest personalities of the late Song, Zhang Zi 張鎡 (1153–



I.1c

I.1d

Fig. I.1c Ma Lin
Layer upon Layer of Icy Silk Tips (detail)
Palace Museum, Beijing

Fig. I.1d Anonymous
Seal of Empress Yang
Orioles on a Cherry Tree (album leaf)
Shanghai Museum

[4] Cahill, Index (1980), p. 190, and *Zhongguo gudai shuhua tumu*, vol. II, p. 61. *Zhongguo meishu quanji*, "Painting" (1987), vol. 4, pp. 134–35, text p. 49.

[5] Lee, "The Domain of Empress Yang" (1994), p. 10 ff. Murray, *Ma Hezhi* (1993), p. 21 ff.

1211?), a man of position and literary pretension. From Lin Shuen-fu's translation of Zhou Mi's 周密 (1232–1308) account recorded in his *Eastern Qi Jottings* (*Qidong yeyu* 齊東野語), we catch a glimpse of Zhang Zi's extravagant character:

> Chang Tzu (Zhang Zi), who had the courtesy name of Kung-fu and the style of Yueh-chai (Frugality Studio) was a great grandson of King Hsun-chung-lieh (Chang Chun, a favorite general of Emperor Kao-tsung, who gave him the honorific title of "wang" or "king"). Being able to write poetry himself, he was befriended by all the eminent scholars and officials of the time. The elegance of his gardens, ponds, music, singing girls, utensils, and curios excelled in the sub-celestial realm. Once in his South Lake Garden he built Riding-the-mist Pavilion among four ancient pine trees, using big iron ropes to suspend it in the air and to tie it to the trunk of the pines. On nights when the wind and the moon were pure, together with guests he would ascend the pavilion with a ladder. Swaying above the mists made one feel as if he were carrying a flying immortal under the arm and ascending into the skies.

The description goes on to tell of a hall filled with "unusual fragrance," courtesans carrying wine, and musical instruments and various flower decorations including red peony head ornaments. Colorful floral combinations were varied: "In general if they pinned white blossoms in their hair, they wore purple garments, purple blossoms, pale yellow garments, and yellow blossoms, red garments." Most significant in this elegance, which must be thought generally to stand for the high level of material living in Hangzhou of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, was Zhang's own philosophical justification. In these villa-garden splendors was a path to enlightenment. They were accepted in "gratitude for what heaven has given":

> For in the realm of light what is not game? If one can always keep his heart pure, detached from all grasping and clinging, and in the realm of distinction, can always enter the undifferentiated *samadhi*, then for him, to be in the bedroom or a wine shop is no different from going through the places of enlightenment, and sounds of music and the singing voices are nothing but conversations of supreme wisdom (*prajnā*).[6]

[6] For the above and following quotations and evaluation of Zhang Zi (Chang Tzu) see Lin, *The Transformation* (1978), pp. 26–33.

Both a sense of the richness of life and the sadness of its passing gave to Zhang Zi in his time what Western sensibility might describe as an abiding feeling of *fin-de-siècle*. Zhang cited a late Han poem: "To make merry you must seize the moment / How can you wait to the years to come? / Fools are grudging of expenses . . .", mentioning an immortal of Daoist legend (Wangzi Qiao 王子喬) as impossible to match. He further wrote in a 1202 introduction to a collection of his poems that in 1187 he had turned his old residence, located in the northern outskirts of Hangzhou, into a Buddhist temple, carefully naming there the multiple features of his Cassia Retreat, as he called it. His restless search for perfect surroundings led him in 1200 to rearrange the entire villa-garden complex, commenting, "Although my days of public service are many, I will not let them surpass in number my days of leisure."

For Zhang, however, life did not appear to end in contentment, at least in Hangzhou. He was later caught in a plot to get rid of the chief councilor, Shi Miyuan 史彌遠 (1164–1233), and exiled to Guangxi Province where he died close to the year 1211 or 1212. While in terms of material richness Zhang Zi was certainly not "grudging of expenses," his generosity has also been cited by another observer as extending to "entertaining scholars who were living in the mountains and forests or beside the lakes and seas."[7] This, as with his own poetry (which as a whole has not survived), confirms a strong link to the literatus. The love of "things," a dominant feature of Hangzhou life, slipped readily as well into Buddhism, for the "moment" and "things" were not distant from that indescribable *gongan* 公案 (Jp. *kōan*) that stimulated the enlightenment claimed by Chan Buddhists.

Zhang's comments about Ma Yuan are found in a single preserved poem. A brief introduction defines Ma Yuan as having inherited the skills of the craft from his great grandfather, the flower and bird artist Ma Fen at the beginning of the twelfth century, declaring that Ma Yuan was especially skilled at both landscape and figure painting and thus was commissioned by Zhang to paint his garden retreat. Moved by the result, Zhang in turn was inspired to compose a poem to show to him:

The world has true painting	世間有真畫
beginnings established by poets	詩人斡其初
The world has true poetry,	世間有真詩
reverberations defined by skilled painters	畫工綴其餘
High and deep, what moves and grows	飛潛與動植
all are depicted, the Great Mystery defined	模寫極太虛

7 Lin, *The Transformation* (1978), p. 35.

The Creator loathing secrets exposed,	造物惡泄機
no rest in his handiwork	藝成不可居
How the vulgar differ, banality suffused	爭如俗子通身俗
Everywhere piled money, boosting foolish wealth.	到處堆錢助癡福
Surely ghosts and spirits will not weep at their writing	斷無鬼神泣篇章
Nor know mountains and rivers concealed in their scrolls.	豈識山川藏卷軸
For me, and my poetry addiction, hair as fine silk thread	我因耽詩鬢如絲
And you, with your painting addiction, wasting away.	爾緣耽畫病欲羸
Yet even were we to toss brushes to the chamber pot and tear up the silk,	投筆急須將絹裂
True painting, true poetry would never disappear.[8]	真畫真詩未嘗滅

This seemingly bombastic poem is truly rather playful and in that playfulness indicates unmistakable friendship. Grandly asserting the tradition that true art reveals a creativity rivaling nature itself, he contrasts this with the corrupt and useless pursuit of art for material gain. Then turning to Ma Yuan and himself he offers a lighter, more modest stance, seeing what he calls an addiction or devotion to art in the framework of Buddhist teaching. The terms *yin* 因 ("cause") and *yuan* 緣 ("secondary cause") are taken from the Buddhist compound *yinyuan* (*Hetupratyaya*), the "cause" in "cause and effect" on which all existence depends and from which Buddhist teaching sought release. The reward of their addictions was a worn-out old age. Yet in the end he will not admit defeat and asserts, we can assume with a wry smile, the ironic conclusion: despite Buddhist truths, which were we to follow in throwing away the tools of our craft, the creativity of great and true art — poetry and painting — would still not disappear.

It must be added that this ironic touch is characteristic of the writer. How else explain that one of the richest personalities in late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Hangzhou, noted for his palatial dwellings and gardens, his extravagant festive entertainments, would define himself and his surroundings with the style name, Studio of Frugality (*Yuezhai* 約齋)? It must be remembered, too, that he justified his seemingly extravagant outward life by the more significant truth of a pure heart and thus, as mentioned above, "to be in the bedroom or a wine shop is no different from going through the places of enlightenment." Similarly one is led to think from this poem

[8] Zhang Zi, *Nanhu ji* (1983), ch. 2, p. 23. Helped by other translations. See Lee, "The Domain of Empress Yang" (1994), p. 180; Murck, *Poetry and Painting* (2000), pp. 240–41. I am indebted to Murck's discovery of *jixu* as a Song term for a vessel, related to both tea and wine as a warmer, but also for urine. The latter seems the more appropriately destructive. See *Hanyu dacidian*, vol. 7, p. 460.

that in the endurance of art — despite corruption by seekers of wealth — "true painting," "true poetry" rested on a similar reality, far more significant than the outward appearance of the aging of these two friends. After all, we can assume that Ma Yuan, painter of many Buddhist subjects, was surely, as Zhang Zi, much versed in Buddhist teachings.

What, then, of the artistry of the painter Ma Yuan? Even severely limited by the number of surviving paintings either by him or closely following his style, the range of subjects is considerable. They touch on accepted categories of Chinese interest: figure style (Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist); landscapes, including prominent figures, animals and birds in landscape settings, and selected branches of flowers. An unusual scroll details studies of water. An overriding quality associated with many of these subjects can also be defined in compositional terms as they were said to be "leaning on one corner" (*bianjiao* 邊角). In truth, however, this was a quality found among other painters of his time, although the intensity of Ma Yuan's brush may have made his expression of the mode more obvious. In the Ming dynasty it acquired the summation: "one corner Ma" (*Ma yijiao* 馬一角). This also burdened him with pejorative political implications since he was a painter nurtured by a dynasty that only ruled over part of China. A contrary view suggested that he also might paint "complete views" (*quanjing* 全景).

Ultimately, the "one corner" ideal is a positive one. It confirms Ma Yuan's ability to compress formal representation. Ambiguously, less may be more. Contraction becomes a guiding principle. The open hand is closing toward a fist. This is a direction that applies to detail as well as the whole. Thus later efforts to describe his handling of the brush, brush and ink, are precisely consistent: a "squeezed brush" (*jiabi* 夾筆) for defining leaves; "rocks square and hard" (*fangying* 方硬, Fig. I.2a); surface texturing reduced to an

I.2a

Fig. I.2a Ma Yuan
Scholars Conversing beneath Blossoming Plum Tree (detail)
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

I.2b

I.2c

I.2d

Fig. I.2b Ma Yuan
Bare Willows and Distant Mountains (detail)
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Fig. I.2c Ma Yuan
Egrets in Winter (detail)
National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China

Fig. I.2d Ma Yuan
Fayan Wenyi and His Teacher Luohan Guichen (detail)
Tenryū-ji, Kyoto

"axe-stroke" convention ("great axe-strokes," *da fupi cun* 大斧劈皴, Figs. I.2b–c), an implied abrupt, chopping angularity from a slanting brush; line might be shaped in a not-unrelated triangular extension, a so-called "nail-head rat-tail" form (*dingtou shuwei* 釘頭鼠尾, Fig. I.2d), the nail referring to a forged nail that we know as well in the West. A differently expressive use of line, a vibrant stroke, acquired the term, *zhanbi*, "trembling brush" (戰筆 or 顫筆, Fig. I.2e); the small significant form of a pine needle cluster might take the precise shape of the "wheel of a cart" (*chelun* 車輪, Fig. I.2f), or more loosely expressive, a "butterfly" (*hudie* 蝴蝶); even the flow of water appears not to

I.2e

Fig. I.2e Ma Yuan
Egrets in Winter (detail)
National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China

I.2f

Fig. I.2f Ma Yuan, after
Landscape Album Paired with Imperial Poetry Inscriptions
(detail from leaf j: *Discussing Dao under the Pines*)
Private Collection

I.2g

Fig. I.2g Ma Yuan
Water (detail from leaf b: ***Layers of Waves, Towering Breakers***)
Palace Museum, Beijing

have escaped the possibility of metaphorical definition, in this case outward movement and toughness, in the term "fighting water" (*doushui* 鬥水, Fig. I.2g). All perhaps participated in the generality, "exact severity" (*yanzheng* 嚴整), a description that also fits an alleged fondness for the burnt blackness of his ink — "charcoal ink" (*jiaomo* 焦墨).[9] Surviving examples carry much of this.

Taken as a whole, the terms applied to Ma Yuan's art lead us away from the dangers of over-definition. Expansion is contained. The result is the controlled rather than the casual. We appear to be faced with an inventive and penetrating strength that avoided the superficial, a total effort to express new depths of understanding. With this in mind, what better beginning than to turn to his paintings of winter. Winter's snows reduce the land to the purity of shape. The fallen leaf opens our view. Trees are in skeletal mode, evergreens offering contrasting compactness. With the shortening of day, light and dark take on special qualities, their contrast the more certain. The range of visibility extends from clouded gloom to snow-reflected light. We will see much of this as the seasons and subjects unfold in displaying his finest surviving works.

9 Edwards, *Ma Yuan* (1976), pp. 113–14.

Postface

There is little more to say, only a brief summing up. For now it is finished. In many ways my view of Ma Yuan may appear to be a personal view. But is that not what confronts every observer of the work of art: the person attempting to understand what the artist has presented? This must always be considered, however, with the acceptance of flexibility. The person who sees, reads, hears, even touches, walks through, or perhaps wears the result of an artist's expression may have a different understanding in morning as opposed to evening, in bright light as opposed to dim, in countless differing circumstances, even youth as opposed to age. Neither the person viewing nor the work of art itself exists in a vacuum.

This is especially true of the non-verbal arts. They depend in large part not on the wonder of words but on actual physical experience. They cling to presence, music to the ear, visual arts to the eye. Still, words remain a necessary bridge, but in doing so we must accept limitation. As with a foreign language, we need translation. However, also as with that language, the translation is seldom if ever considered equal to the original.

Perhaps Zhuangzi had it right:

> Words exist because of meaning. Once you've got the meaning you can forget the words. Where can I find someone who has forgotten the words so I can have a word with him?
>
> 言者所以在意 。得意而忘言。吾安得夫忘言之人而與之言哉。[1]

It is with this in mind that I leave you a view of Ma Yuan. The words I use should not be considered as absolute. However they must be recognized as establishing a foundation for authenticity. Without that how can one write history, especially with an art carrying the uniqueness of a physical

[1] From "External Things." Translation based on Watson, *Complete Works* (1968), p. 302.

presence? It is on such a foundation that the visual arts offer a special place in history. Without question there are plenty of gaps staring at us. Only a fraction of Ma Yuan's works have survived. Others may differ as to how one connects the dots to emerge with a coherent presentation. Such views I remain open to accept.

One view difficult to accept, however, is the notion that a great artist's creativity may be held hostage to complex arguments of social deconstruction that appear to fascinate so many. A great deal is being written — I believe the operative word is "discourse" — as to how we must redefine the history of art along such lines. Perhaps this is clearest as it involves the ever-present East-West duality. No one can deny environmental differences. What is not so clear, however, is the fact that an artist's creativity can close the gap. A direct example of this comes from Peter Hessler in his popular *River Town*, recording experiences of teaching English literature in distant Fulin on the western edge of the Yangtze River. The focus was on a Shakespeare sonnet. To quote him directly:

> Four centuries ago, Shakespeare loved a woman and wrote a poem about her. He said it would make her beauty live forever — that was his promise. Today the year is 1996, and we are in China, in Sichuan, next to the Yangtze River. Shakepeare never came to Fulin. None of you have ever been to England, and you have not seen the woman Shakespeare loved four hundred years ago. But right now every one of you is thinking about her.

He was faced with silence, a silence in which he shared their respect and awe. He admits to having read or heard the poem countless times ". . . but I never heard it truly until I stood in front of my class in Fulin."[2]

Quite simply, there is nothing wrong in being aware of environment. Indeed borrowing from other disciplines may be stimulating and revealing. After all deconstruction is an attempt to do much of what I am doing, using words to define the ever-flexible gap between the wordless and the observer. (Does the discourse have to be cloaked in such a difficult vocabulary?) No matter, an artist's creativity is not the same as the setting. Far from being reflective mirrors, artists define the world in which they live. That is why we must pay special attention to them whether as in the collective quality of a craft or as a recognized individual. A skilled artist opens up a world that others have been unable to realize, and in doing so has the ability to reach beyond time-certain and speak directly to the human condition.

[2] Hessler, *River Town* (2001), pp. 42–43.

Picasso, whose creativity would be difficult to deny, was also not embarrassed to use words. "To me," he once said, "there is no past or future in art. The art of the great painters who lived in other times is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was."[3]

Not as direct as Picasso, I have approached Ma Yuan with an effort to explore his artistic surroundings, a situation more widely exposed but ending at the same point — the timeless triumph of an artist's creativity.

This is perhaps not too different from China's traditional grasp of historical time. There, too, time was anchored to a deep sense of return. This is expressed in the dating system of ten "stems" and twelve "branches" whose differing combinations end after sixty years, and begin again. To reach the age of sixty is to return to the year of one's birth. This is not to be seen as simple mathematical maneuvering, certainly not exact repetition. A spiral might be a more appropriate image. The stems are *tiangan* 天干, "heaven-stems," and the branches are *dizhi* 地支, "earth branches," thus declaring a cosmic authority. The reality of heaven and earth cannot just let go of the past. Time's wholeness demands the rejection of a single line. Once again Leo Bronstein has offered me a compelling idea: "The past is what we are within it."[4] If I may turn back to the West with yet another artist who outlives his time, as T. S. Eliot brings his expansive *Four Quartets* to a close, he echoes a similar return:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.[5]

3 *The New Yorker* (March 26, 2007), p. 41.
4 Edwards, "Introduction" (1969), p. xiii.
5 Eliot, *Four Quartets* (1943), p. 39.

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