

'Travellers in Snow-Covered Mountains': A Reassessment

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It took about a century for ink landscape painting in China to graduate from one genre among others to a great tradition in its own right. Between the end of the 9th century, as the Tang dynasty (618-907) disintegrated, and the end of the 10th century, by which point the Song dynasty (960-1279) had successfully reunited China after the half-century interlude of the Five Dynasties period (907-60), landscape took over from figures as the most important secular subject. With its metaphoric openness to different interpretations and its enormous structural complexity, landscape alone had the capacity to represent the new social world that was coming into being – a world in which fixed hierarchical positions were constantly being relativized by the fluidity of social mobility. The masters of ink landscape painting created these possibilities of meaning by seeking to depict the imbrication of any motif in a matrix of experiential relations. The surviving monuments of 10th century landscape painting all testify to this formal and thematic potential, but they are few in number, vary widely in quality, and are not always easily placed within the period. *Travellers in Snow-Covered Mountains* belongs to this small corpus of works (Fig. 1). It bears a purported signature of Jing Hao (c.870/80-c.935/40), a Henanese painter active at the end of the 9th century and during the early 10th, who was the patriarch of the northern landscape tradition. The most systematic treatment of the painting is Laurence Sickman's entry in the 1980 exhibition catalogue *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting* (The Cleveland Museum of Art, pp. 12-13). Sickman accepted the presence of one of Jing Hao's names (the *hao*, or sobriquet, Hongguzi) on the painting as an accurate indication of the work's authorship, and succinctly analysed comparative material from Jing Hao's lifetime which, for him, confirmed the attribution. Michael Sullivan (1980), Max Loehr (1980) and Richard Barnhart (1976) have also considered the painting to be an early work. However, these various votes of confidence have not sufficed to give *Travellers in Snow-Covered Mountains* the place it deserves in the history of landscape painting. Indeed, the painting's status as an early work has sometimes been doubted. In *An Index of Early Chinese Painters and Paintings*, James Cahill notes that the signature is a later addition and describes the painting as 'probably after an early design' (Cahill, p. 27). Wen C. Fong presents the painting as '16th century (?)' (Fong, p. 30).

Sickman purchased the painting, mounted at that point as a

hanging scroll and having reportedly come from a tomb in Shanxi province, in Beijing at the end of the 1930s on behalf of the Nelson Gallery. When acquired, the painting was in tatters with some areas completely missing, as can still be seen today. Sickman had the painting pieced together and rebacked as a scroll, with orders that no restoration be undertaken. When he saw the result, however, he concluded that the painting mounter had not followed his instructions. In *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting* he wrote:

Fortunately, the mounter limited his in-painting to strengthening the outlines in only a few areas and re-enforcing some of the figures with white pigment. Although regrettable, the retouchings are minor with two exceptions: one occurs at the top of the central mountain, on the right side where the restorer continued the line from the top of the peak on toward the right, joining it with the outline of the distant peak rather than continuing this strong outline down the right side of the central mountain; the second error occurs in the center of the composition where three small trees have been strengthened and a white line drawn below them, suggesting a small plateau which is not part of the original composition. The retouching is readable in a series of photographs made under ultraviolet fluorescent light by Thomas Chase at the Freer Gallery. (The Cleveland Museum of Art, p. 13)

At some point in the 1950s, Sickman, who had by then taken charge of the Chinese collection at the Nelson Gallery, decided to have the painting remounted by the Freer Gallery of Art as a panel on a Japanese-style frame, as was then the practice at that institution; the painting retains this mounting format today. In the course of the remounting, the painting was wetted, which loosened the fixative holding the original silk to the modern backing silk. As a result, in many places the original pieces of silk have separated and lifted slightly from their backing (Marc Wilson, personal communication).

In July 2008, I had the opportunity to examine the painting over two days in the Conservation Studio of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. At the suggestion of Senior Conservator Scott Heffley, we studied the painting under a succession of lighting conditions: natural north light, ultraviolet radiation, warm incandescent light and infrared reflectography. Finally, we examined critical parts of the painting under a microscope at various levels of magnification. This in-depth technical examination, while broadly confirming Sickman's sense of the age and importance of the

(Fig. 1) *Travellers in
Snow-Covered Mountains*
Attributed to Jing Hao
(c. 870/80-c. 935/40)
Hanging scroll mounted as
a panel, ink and white and
vermillion pigment on silk
Height 135.9 cm,
width 75 cm
Purchase: William Rockhill
Nelson Trust (40-15)
(Photography by
John Lamberton)



work, now makes it necessary to correct aspects of his characterization of the painting as an artefact.

1. Although ultraviolet-induced fluorescence confirmed the strengthening of contour outlines in the places that Sickman noted, as well as in the main part of the mountain, those lines are interrupted by numerous physical breaks where the lines do not continue over the intervening modern backing silk from the 1939 restoration (Fig. 1a). Moreover, under the microscope the restoration ink has the same aged appearance as the original ink. It would appear, therefore, that the strengthening of important contour outlines was not done in 1939 but during a much earlier restoration. The purpose, however, would have been the same: to clarify an image structure that had become difficult to make out because of the combined effects of damage and the darkening of the silk ground. It should be noted that strongly contoured distant mountains were a feature of northern landscape painting in the early 10th century, as seen in a mural depicting a horizontal landscape screen in the 924 tomb of Wang Chuzhi (d. 923), a military governor of the Later Liang dynasty (907-923), located not far from Beijing (see Hebei Sheng Wenwu Yanjiusuo and Baoding Shi Wenwu Guanlisuo, col. pl. 18).

2. The outline of the right side of the peak did not originally continue down the right side of the mountain. At present, there is a point where the line of the right side of the peak stops and two other outlines begin, one leading up into the highest of the three distant peaks and the other leading up into the lowest of the three, which is also the closest to the central peak. A small loss of silk here left the Beijing mounter unclear as to which of the distant peaks originally linked up with the central peak, and



(Fig. 1b) Detail showing the signature in the lower right corner



(Fig. 1a) Infrared detail showing the mountains on the top left

so he hedged his bets, not attempting any in-painting. In fact, the right side of the central peak originally continued into the contour of the closest of the distant peaks, pushing the tallest distant peak back in space.

3. The principal in-painting contribution of the Beijing mounter involved the use of white pigment, largely but not only on the modern backing silk, as can be seen in the largest rock at the bottom of the composition, where he did some limited reconstruction of the image. Whether the 'error' in the centre of the composition 'where three small trees have been strengthened and a white line drawn below them, suggesting a small plateau' (The Cleveland Museum of Art, p. 13) is a modern intervention or a much older one remains unclear.

These various observations bear heavily on the transmission of the painting. Its reported recovery from a tomb is consistent with the absence of any impressions of collectors' seals on its surface. If the painting had circulated during the period from the mid-16th century onwards, it could hardly have avoided attracting such seal impressions, a common practice of the period. Thus, assuming the painting was placed in a tomb, this would most likely have happened prior to around 1550, at the most conservative estimate. In this scenario, the painting would have been remounted and restored prior to being placed in the tomb, by which time the silk would already have darkened significantly.

Microscopic examination of the seal-script signature, which reads 'Hongguzi', or 'Master of the Broad Valley' (in reference to the Taihang mountains in Shanxi), revealed that the white pigment used for the signature was ground much more coarsely than that used in areas where the pigment is clearly original (Fig. 1b). The signature was thus written using a different pigment; this disparity of materials strongly suggests that it is a later addition, albeit a very old one, since under magnification the strokes of the signature characters are discontinuous across cracks in the silk. This technical evidence is consistent with the anomalous presence of a signature – rare on early landscape paintings – and with the use, more common in post-Song works, of an informal *hao* rather than a formal name. Despite the small size of the characters, the calligraphy has a clear style. Written in a free manner that dispenses with a strong vertical axis, it appears to be post-Song, and most probably Ming (1368–1644), in date. The placement of the signature in the bottom right corner, which was usually reserved for interventions by later collectors, may be an indication that the name is not so much a signature as an attribution. Whether honest attribution or deceptive signature, it seems probable that the name was added at some point prior to the painting entering the tomb, perhaps at the moment of remounting. (Only the discovery of the same coarsely ground white pigment in areas of early restoration would confirm that the signature was added at the same time as the pre-tomb restoration.) Since a genuine Jing Hao would have been considered a very great treasure, the presence of his name on the painting helps to explain the (probably Ming) tomb-owner's original acquisition of the work and decision to take it with him in death.

A striking aspect of the painting is the very high-quality materials used. In 1952, an X-ray radiograph of the central group of trees revealed that the white pigment has a high content of lead (Scott Heffley, personal communication). Under magnification, the pigment can be seen to be very finely ground; this is true also of the vermilion. Under magnification, minute particles of a transparent material were found dispersed across the vermilion passages, suggesting that it was protected with a coating of transparent fixative. Moreover, the silk has an impressively dense and even, plain-weave structure with weft and warp threads of comparable diameter, similar to that seen in 10th or 11th century landscape paintings such as *The Riverbank* or *Summer Mountains* (see Hearn, figs 7 and 8) (Fig. 1c). Unlike the silk used for those paintings, however, it comes from an unusually wide bolt, 75 centimetres as opposed to the 50- to 60-centimetre width that is standard for 10th and 11th century landscape paintings. This may indicate that the silk came from a temple source, since very wide bolts of silk were sometimes used for Buddhist mandalas in the 9th and 10th centuries.

Remarkably, the painting retains most of its original image structure. While much, though by no means all, of the heavy lead white pigment has flaked off, a complex, layered facture (more complex than that described by Sickman, quoted by



(Fig. 1c) Detail showing the silk structure in the area around the donkey rider

Sullivan in *Chinese Landscape Painting*, p. 155) has ensured that the basic elements of each motif still survive. The painter began by laying out the entire composition in ink, producing a relatively detailed image that included texture strokes and underdrawing, including facial features for some of the more important figures. In a second stage he used a thin white wash to block out many of the motifs and parts of motifs, such as tree trunks, that were to be represented as snow-covered; in those areas, where the heavy white pigment (added later) has flaked off, this thin wash has been exposed to view, and has possibly been strengthened by the 'ghost' of the lost heavier pigment. The next stage of painting most likely involved taking specific areas of the composition to completion, first by adding the heavier white pigment (or vermilion, for the architecture), and then by painting details in ink on top of the pigment. Some smaller motifs, such as the leaves of trees, were probably painted directly in heavy pigment at this stage; what we see of the leaves today is almost entirely a 'ghost' image. But in the tree trunks and rock surfaces in particular, the heavy white pigment did not wholly cover the initial white wash, some of which was left exposed; in addition, the white pigment varied in hue, with the artist sometimes adding vermilion in different degrees to give it a warm tone and sometimes leaving it pure and relatively cold and brilliant in its effect. In its original state, therefore, the range of whites against the undarkened



(Fig. 1d) Detail showing the artist's own repainting of the building on the lower left

silk would have created a rich, shimmering effect. In a few areas of the painting – specific trees and figures – all the layers of facture described are still visible under magnification. Finally, the artist reviewed the whole, making necessary additions and corrections. At the bottom left, for example, he felt that the building he had painted was too small relative to the size of the figures standing in the courtyard; with the loss of pigment, the effaced building is now visible again within the silhouette of the larger overpainted building (Fig. 1d).

The painting depicts a snow-covered landscape centred on a mountain that shelters a temple complex of unspecified religious character on two levels, upper and lower. The better-preserved upper temple is drawn with great assurance directly onto the silk in vermillion. As is generally the case for northern landscape hanging scrolls of the 10th century, the composition is organized in two halves above and below the horizontal axis. Above is the mountainscape with its secluded temple, while below are habitations, paths and figures. The 25 figures are organized in five vignettes (Fig. 1e). On the right, the largest group is dominated by a man on a donkey moving to

the left. Underdrawing of the features of the heads, visible only with infrared reflectography and which unfortunately proved too difficult to capture on a reproducible image, shows that the rider and his steed are both looking ahead, happy to be reaching the end of their journey. In front of them lie a cottage and, spanning a pond, a bridge. The bridge makes a strong visual link between this figure and a family group of five, including small children, who stand waiting in the courtyard of a second cottage on the left. Above the bridge a path leads up through a gully to the lower temple: two figures stand to the side to make way for a descending person leaning on a servant's shoulder. This vignette with its double narrative implication of ascending and descending movement effectively functions as a shifter between the upper and lower halves of the composition. Over to the left, beyond the waiting family group, the artist has depicted another encounter, between four male figures carrying loads and a woman with a child on her back. A little further on, a scholar followed by two servants contemplates a small waterfall (Fig. 1f). Today, our knowledge of Northern Song (960-1127) landscape paintings makes the figures seem outsized relative to the mountain

(Fig. 1e) Detail showing the narrative elements



elements; a more relevant context, perhaps, is Tang murals depicting narratives in landscape settings. By that criterion, the figures are more likely to have appeared convincingly small to contemporary viewers. The aforementioned overpainting of a building demonstrates that a more realistic relationship between figures and setting was an active concern of the artist.

As a landscape, the painting does not belong to the *shanshui* genre of 'mountains-waters' but is better described as a 'mountains-trees' painting. From a strictly landscape point of view trees dominate the lower half of the composition, while in the upper half they compensate for their smaller size by their numbers. All told, several hundred trees are depicted. The mountain itself is built up in an additive, aggregative manner, cohering as an overall form in part because its silhouette recalls the depicted figural form of Avalokiteshvara on Mt Potalaka – a popular 10th century theme and one which Jing Hao is known to have painted. Sickman noted as archaic features of the landscape 'the multiplicity of overlapping shapes and the ponderous overhang of the mountain crest' (The Cleveland Museum of Art, p. 13). To these may be added the strongly outlined distant mountains, the organization of figures in vignettes and, as just noted, the importance attributed to trees. The damaged condition of the painting, however, led Sickman to underestimate the artist's command of three-dimensionality and recession; high magnification of undamaged areas reveals an artist capable of modelling trees and rocks with the utmost plasticity (Figs 1g and 1h), while infrared reflectography and warm incandescent



(Fig. 1f) Infrared detail showing the two groups of figures on the left

light make visible the impressive spatial lucidity of the constituent scenes. Sickman's analysis of the artist's approach to texturing strokes retains all its pertinence today:

A great variety of brushstrokes are used – thin and thick, straight or wavering – together with numerous dots and dabs. It is evident that these strokes had not yet evolved into a consistent system, harmonious throughout, and susceptible to codification. The general method of modeling form in a somewhat sketchy manner with broad ink washes seems to evolve from techniques already present in the T'ang dynasty. (ibid.)

This approach would eventually lead to the more integrated treatment of rock surfaces seen in another major monument of early landscape painting in the Nelson-Atkins collection, *Solitary Temple below*



(Fig. 1g) Detail showing the main group of trees



(Fig. 1h) Detail showing the tree and rocks on the lower right

Brightening Peaks, attributed to Li Cheng (919-967) (Fig. 2). Viewed under a range of lighting conditions and with the aid of magnification, the morphology of *Travellers* can be seen originally to have been remarkably animated by the brushwork, which possesses a nervous energy that echoes the twisting forms of the largest trees. Another distinctive formal feature is the highly definite and limited colour scheme, restricted to whites, blacks and reds. Such colouristic restraint suggests that *Travellers* originally belonged to a pair or set of scrolls, perhaps seasonal in their themes, since it cries out for an answering painting dominated by blues and greens. The orientation of the mountain, too, seems to demand a compositional response from a second landscape.

Understood as a later, probably Ming, attempt to place *Travellers* in the history of landscape painting, the interpolation of the Hongguzi name deserves respect. The painting might almost be an illustration of the principles explored in Jing Hao's famous essay on landscape painting, *Bifaji (Pi-fa-chi)*, most of which is devoted to trees rather than mountains or rocks, and which conceptualizes landscape in a way that is innocent of any fully developed concept of landscape as *shanshui* (Munakata, 1974). Sickman notes:

From Ching Hao's *Pi-fa-chi* one gathers that in the definition of form and the texturing of surfaces he advocated fluid brushwork – broadening and thinning, turning, pausing, now slow, now swift – with all the variety of that used in the cursive style of calligraphy. The all-important ink wash was employed to model the forms, defining highlight and shadow, uniting and blending with the outline drawing and inner texturing so that they are muted. (The Cleveland Museum of Art, p. 13)

In *Travellers*, the ink wash was replaced by a thin wash of white pigment but to much the same effect, as may be seen in a detail of a relatively undamaged section of the right side of the painting (see Fig. 1h). The brushwork of the trees, which Sickman compellingly compared to a Tang pine-painting fragment discovered on one of the Otani Kozui (1876-1948) expeditions (see Sullivan, pl. 30) and to the trees in the background of the *Hokkedō Kompon Mandala* (see Matsushita Takaaki, 'Hokke-dō kompon mandara ni tsuite' ['Regarding the Hokke-dō kompon mandara'], in *Bijutsu kenkyū* [Journal of Art Studies], no. 186, May 1956, pp. 1-6) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has a fluidity that largely disappeared in Chinese painting in the course of the 10th century. It survived, though, as late as mid-century, for it can be seen in more insistently linear form throughout Wei Xian's (act. early to mid-10th century) *Lofty Scholar* in the Palace Museum,



(Fig. 2) Detail of *Solitary Temple below Brightening Peaks* showing the cliff face. Traditionally attributed to Li Cheng (919-67), Northern Song period (960-1127). Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. Height 111.8 cm, width 56 cm. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust (47-71). (Photography by Robert Newcombe)

Beijing (see *Zhongguo Lidai Huihua: Gugong Bowuguan Canghua Ji* [Chinese Paintings Throughout History: The Palace Museum Collection], Beijing, 1978, vol. 1, pp. 94-95). To this writer, all the evidence suggests that *Travellers in Snow-Covered Mountains* is a landscape painting of extraordinary age, dating from the lifetime of Jing Hao or shortly thereafter. Detailed technical examination of the work has revealed a higher quality of painting than was visible from earlier reproductions, but which is unfortunately not fully reflected in printable images. Yet, because its compositional conception arguably lacks the power and surprise of the work of the greatest masters, and the execution approaches the mechanical in a few places (the water surface, the leaves of trees), the painting's limitations cannot be attributed simply to historical position, making its attribution to an artist of Jing Hao's transcendent reputation overly optimistic. The scroll is, however, in its own right the work of a master, and at the same time takes

us closer to the art of Jing Hao than any other surviving artefact. To recognize these qualities of the work is to realize the importance of *Travellers in Snow-Covered Mountains* for our understanding of the history of Chinese landscape painting.

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Marc Wilson, Director and CEO of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, generously put the resources of the museum at my disposal and took the time to discuss the painting with me on several occasions. Scott Heffley, Senior Conservator, engaged in a detailed discussion of our observations, without which this article would not have been possible, and also read an earlier draft. My grateful thanks go to both of them. I bear sole responsibility for the opinions presented here.

The paintings illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 are in the collection of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

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