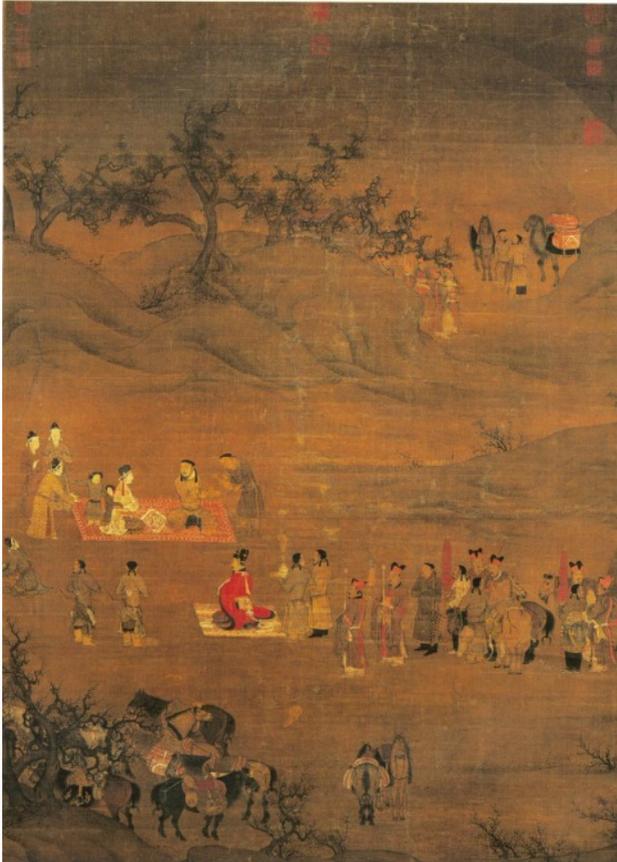


Stories Told in Chinese Painting

Background Notes

Dr Malcolm McNeill - 13 February 2019



Attributed to **Chen Juzhang** (act. 12th c.), *Lady Wenji's Return to the Han*
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei



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Abstract:

This talk introduces the visual narrative systems of pre-modern Chinese painting, exploring its formats, themes and functions. It concludes with a post script on the self-consciously modern narratives of the 20th century.

The stories I will share with you cover eight hundred years of art history, from the 12th to the 20th centuries. We will look at works in a variety of formats, from the cinematic unrolling of a long handscroll, to the singular narrative moment of the hanging scroll, and the serialised action of the painted album. These images encompass a variety of characters: from reclusive monks to femme fatales, from studious scholars to revolutionary soldiers.

This talk examines the characters themselves. It examines how the artistic depiction of these characters in different times informs our understanding of China's changing history. Moreover, it illustrates China's contribution to a world history of visual narrative. Each of these artworks tells multiple narratives: both the story of the world they create, and the story of the world in which they were created.

These introductory notes provide background information to the lecture, rather than a summary of its content. The following few pages introduce the key material formats of Chinese paintings, and the functions of narrative within Chinese artistic and visual culture. A concise bibliography has been included as a post script.

Formats of traditional Chinese painting

Before delving into the details of pre-modern Chinese painting's distinctive narrative modes, let me introduce the media and formats of Chinese painting.

The formats used for pre-modern Chinese painting, in order of historic appearance, are wall painting (c.1100 B.C.E.), banners (c. 300 B.C.E.), screens (c.100 C.E.), hand scrolls (c. 100 C.E.), hanging scrolls (c. 1000 C.E.), round fans (c. 1100 C.E.), rectangular albums (c. 1100 CE), and folding fans (c. 1450 C.E.). Portable formats were suited to temporary display and occasional viewing. As their water-based pigments are highly sensitive to light and humidity, the survival of pre-modern Chinese paintings owes much to conventions for short periods of exposure.

This talk focuses on works in three of these media: handscrolls, hanging scrolls, and rectangular albums. Handscrolls are designed to be viewed in discrete sections, seen in succession as the viewer moves along the object from right to left. Given their intimate scale, these objects are suited to viewing by small groups, rather than prominent public display.

Hanging scrolls offer vertically orientated picture planes. Unlike horizontal handscrolls, the vertical hanging scroll tends to focus on a singular subject. Therefore, they tend to evoke narrative by framing of a singular moment of action from a previously familiar series of events. These singular images are well suited to prominent display.

The rectangular album format is comprised of several discrete leaves, often bound within either a silk or wooden front and back cover. These albums offered a potential for serialised narrative images, moving from clearly delineated scenes. While this potential was occasionally utilised, albums were more often sites for composite collections of thematically linked images.

Situating Narrative Painting within the Art Theory of Pre-modern China

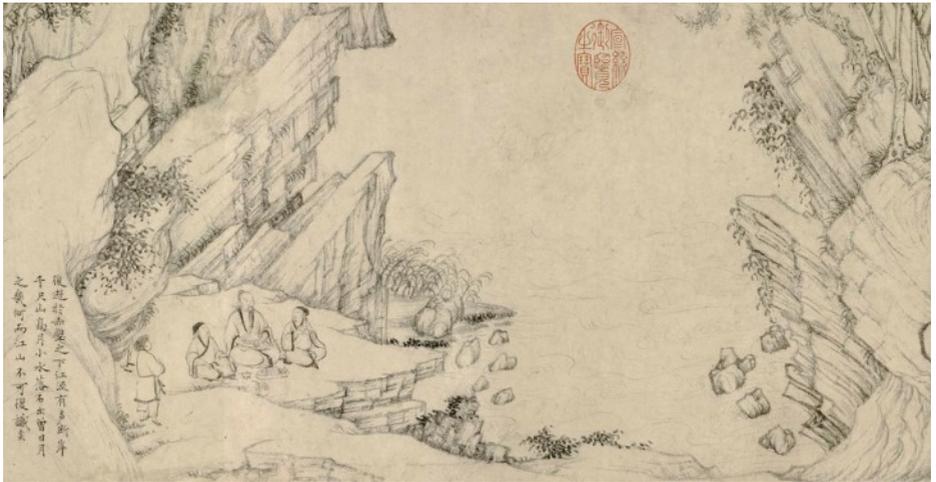
Narrative painting falls outside of the historic typologies of China's brush arts. Historic inventories of imperial Chinese painting collections, beginning as early as the 12th century, make no mention of narrative. Paintings are instead divided into landscapes, bird and flower paintings, figural subjects, and Buddhist and Daoist works. The latter two of these categories of painting unquestionably contained images with discernible stories. However, the narrative function of these images was not the foundation by which they were categorised and valued in the pre-modern period. Given that narratives fall outside of the traditional typology of Chinese art, studies of pre-modern Chinese paintings have tended to focus on historically recognised genres, and overlook the centrality of storytelling to Chinese visual culture.

Functions of Narrative Imagery in Pre-modern China

Despite the absence of a conscious categorisation of narrative from the typological framework of pre-modern Chinese art theory, stories were central to the visual arts of the successive dynastic periods. Loosely categorised, narrative images tended to fall into one of three main types: the didactic, the religious, and the literary.



Anonymous, *Bodhidharma Crossing the Yangzi on a Reed*, Yuan dynasty (1271-1368).
Hanging scroll, ink on paper. Cleveland Museum of Art.



Qiao Zhongyan, *Second Prose Poem on the Red Cliff*, CA. 1150.
Handscroll, ink on paper. Nelson Atkins Museum.



Attributed to **Qiu Ying** (1494-1552), *Red Cliffs*
Handscroll, ink and color on silk, 29 x 522.4 cm.
Christie's, Fine Chinese Paintings, 20 March 2018, New York. Lot 27

Didactic tales of moral exemplars were intended to shape the qualities of their viewers. Drawing on precedents from antiquity, artists and their patrons used readily intelligible stories to shape and reinforce social norms. At a basic level, these paintings were objects intended to transform through moral instruction. By framing an historic example of good conduct, didactic narrative paintings were intended to modify the behaviour of their viewers. They provided a model to emulate that would be familiar and accessible to the viewer. While a line of didactic prose on the idealised conduct of the gentleman could be memorised and recited by rote, the image of a human form enacting that conduct was more readily empathisable. However, read within the context of their own time, these images provided a vehicle for commentary on the societies in which they were made. This was particularly pronounced in court art, where the intended viewer was often the emperor, or the imperial family. Such social commentary was often highly flattering or optimistic, presenting historic narratives that put a positive spin on a contemporary situation.

A Southern Song (1127-1279) court painting of *Wen Ji returns to the Han*, attributed to Chen Juzhang (act. 12th c.) is a clear use of an historic didactic model to address a contemporary court audience. This painting depicts a pivotal moment in a classical tale of abduction, exile, and eventual return home. Lady Wen Ji, the recently widowed daughter of a prominent Chinese scholar, was abducted by the Khan of a nomadic people, the Xiongnu, in the 2nd century of the common era. Lady Wen was forced into marriage, never expecting to see her home again. This painting focuses on one pivotal moment in this protracted story: the arrival of a Chinese emissary who successfully negotiates Lady Wen's ransom and return. This paradigm of exile was particularly pertinent for the 12th century Southern Song court. In 1126 the Jurchen Jin had overthrown the Northern Song, capturing the capital at Kaifeng. The Song had fled south, re-establishing themselves in Lin'an, modern day Hangzhou. However, the emperor Huizong and many of the imperial family remained prisoners of the Jin in the north. To the Southern Song, historic exemplars like Wen Ji were paradigms of tenacity in the face of foreign capture, who offered a tantalising promise of eventual reunion.

Religious narratives on Buddhist and Daoist subjects sought to demonstrate the efficacy of their faiths. Within a pluralistic religious society an accessible illustration of the potency of one's religious practice was key to attracting followers and elite patronage. For example, paintings of the Buddhist Patriarch Bodhidharma frequently deploy one of three key scenes from his biography to demonstrate both his personal gravity, and his transcendent capacity for supernatural feats. The frequently depicted image of *Bodhidharma Crossing the Yangzi River on a Reed* records a supernatural feat that demonstrates the spiritual efficacy of the patriarch. It was believed that such abilities were the by-product of advanced spiritual cultivation, and that their manifestation was indicative that the person who enacted them had attained enlightenment. These paintings are part of a rich artistic tradition sponsored by Buddhist abbots, dating from the 13th century. Their commissioning cemented the abbot's authority by visually demonstrating the credentials of their monastic lineage. By focusing on a single point in the patriarch's rich biography, the artist and patron emphasise his authority and efficacy.

Literary narratives provided visual illustrations to canonical works of prose and verse. These were most often in the form of the extended prose poem, or *fu*, and in later periods frequently provided illustrations to popular novels and plays. Written sources provided artists with an engaging focus for their viewers, anchoring their compositions around scenes that would be readily familiar. Moreover, the narrative specificity of an easily identifiable source text added a heightened sense of drama over a generic figural scene. In addition to engaging viewers through a compelling story, the use of literary subjects provided artists locus for the formation of cultural identity. Painters who were nominally vernacular artisans could borrow cultural authority for the elite scholar class of the past by creating images based on their work. Artist, patron and viewer alike were engaged in this process.

Perhaps the most widely reproduced of these narratives was the *First and Second Ode on the Red Cliff* by preeminent 11th century poet, polymath and statesman Su Shi (1037-1101). This tale recounts two successive journeys to an historic site in the middle reaches of the Yangzi river. Through centuries of reproduction and re imagination the visual tropes for the depiction of this scene developed conventions of their own. At points they became detached

from the original source text, and produced new iterations of the historic events of Su's journey in the mid 11th century. As such, they illustrate the agency of visual narrative over its textual counterpart. This agency underscore the importance of understanding how pictures tell stories, not simply reflecting but shaping the histories and art histories of the times in which they were made.

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