Wu Hung (paintings dated 1650-1690)

"River Landscape, after T'ang Ti"

Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk
180.5 x 54.5 cm. (71 1/8 x 20 1/2 in.)

Inscription:
"Done after the Yuan master T'ang Ti, called Tzu-hua, and respectfully presented to old master Huang for his corrections by Wu Hung from West of the River."

Artist’s seals:
Wu Hung chih-yin; Yuan-tu

Curving in an S-configuration up the surface of the picture, a continuous landmass defines the shore of a river or lake from the near foreground to high above where cliffs protrude aggressively over the houses below. This clear sense of moving up and back through pictorial space is accomplished mainly through the arrangement of forms, a progression that is supported by dark accents that guide the eye along the contour lines of rocks, banks, and trees. So effective is this manipulation of abstract or formal elements in the painting that the result appears natural, as if the connective rhythms of the universe had been made manifest.

Within the strong visual framework created by these natural elements, the human activities appear milder and more refined, and this too seems appropriate for portraying the subtleties of civilized discourse. Two scholars converse in an upper room of the large villa, the close and rewarding intimacy of their discussion emphasized by the bold strength of the surrounding trees that encircle the house protectively. The painting is thus as compelling in details as it is overall, and the means by which the scene was created are as expressive as the images themselves—all in all a most impressive performance by a master painter.

The artist’s inscription here identifies the Yuan painter T’ang Ti (1286?-1354?) as the source of his inspiration. Extant paintings by T’ang (figure 1) generally feature strong brushwork, dramatic contrasts of light and dark shading, elongated pines, and vigorous compositions, all of which are found in the present work, suggesting that the artist had in fact seen some original work by T’ang Ti.

Fig. 2. Pan Ch’i, Wu Hung: "Portrait of Kuan Mei" 1650, after Liang Po-ch’uan: Chung-kao Hsien-hsing-hua Huai-chi (Hong Kong: Tai Yip, 1993), pl. 24.

Wu Hung, ān Yuan-tu ("distant limits"), was
born in Chin-ch'í, Kiangsi province, but was brought up and lived during much of his later life in Chiang-ning, the modern Nanking in Kiangsu province. Wu himself said that he had loved to paint even while very young but he made no mention of his teacher. It is therefore worth noting that numbers of famous painters lived in his neighborhood during his youth, including Wei Chih-huang, Wei Chih-k'o, Tsou Tien and Tsou Che. Wu's earliest extant painting known at present, the landscape background of a portrait painted in 1650 of the famous Nanking courtesan Kuan Mei (figure 2), shows him already as a mature artist with a personal style, one ideally suited to set off by contrast the delicate image of the singer painted by Fan Chi.

In 1654 Wu Hung traveled north, across the Yellow River to Honan province and the Hsueh-yuan, "Snow-garden" estate of Hou K'o, a chin-shih degree holder of the year 1616, and Hou Fang-yu (1618-1655). Probably introduced to those important collectors by Chou Liang-kung, who had visited the Hsueh-yuan in 1639, Wu Hung soon came to the attention of the important connoisseur-collector Sung Lo (1634-1713), later to become governor of Kiangsi province, and was able to study the collection of old masterworks bestowed by the Shun-chih emperor (r. 1644-1661) on Sung Lo's father, Sung Chi'uan (1598-1652). Sung Lo also introduced Wu Hung to the even more famous collector Liang Ch'ing-piao (1620-1691), who commissioned Wu to copy some Yuan-period works in his collection. Wu was also introduced, by Chou Liang-kung, to Sung Wan, another major collector-connoisseur of the north. The mid-1650s thus marked a major turning point in the art of Wu Hung; for his later paintings manifest a new and strong interest in the northern tradition of landscape painting. This marked change was noted also by Chou Liang-kung: "...During the period 1653-1654 he crossed the Yellow River and traveled to the Hsueh-yuan. When he returned home, his brush and ink work were completely transformed; free and spontaneous, rich and elegant, his works synthesize the merits of all the earlier masters but present them in terms of his own ideas." By 1655 Wu was home again, adopting around this time the by-name Chu-shih, "Bamboo historian," as though to emphasize the particular interest a northerner would have had in that typical plant of the south. No dated paintings by Wu are presently known from the period between 1655 and 1663, and again between 1668 and 1672, suggesting that he may have been mainly elsewhere during those years. In 1669 a grand celebration was held in honor of Chou Liang-kung, and Wu was among those present, being described by the scholar Huang Yu-ch'i (1629-1691) as follows:

"The bamboo historian from Lin-ch'uan (in Kiangsi province) by nature is heroic and magnanimous, his jaw is square, his mouth wide, his speech a flowing stream; Like a frosted branch his old brush is freely waved about while Suchou's silk-makers are kept busy throwing their weaving shuttles."
Fig. 4. Wu Hung: "Autumn Visit to Riverside Village," after *ibid.*, pl. 142.

Fig. 5. Wu Hung: "Landscape," after Chung-hao Kuo-tai Shu-hua T'u-mu (Beijing: Wen-wu, 2000), vol. 22, p. 137, no. Ching 1-4015-5.
One of Wu Hung's masterworks from this later period is a portrait he painted in 1672 of Ch'iao Lai's estate at the juncture of Thorn Stream with White-horse Lake at Pao-yang near Yangchou (figure 3). The general composition here—the placement of the boat in relation to the two-story house with lake beyond—is quite similar to the arrangement of these same pictorial elements in the present painting, and the frequency with which he used variants of this composition (figures 4-5) suggests that he in fact lived there for some considerable period of time. One of Wu Hung's latest known works, the "River Sails by Colored Mountains" (figure 6) of 1675, was painted, according to the inscription, "beneath the thirty-six peaks of Yun-lin and Pai-ma." The Yun-lin Mountains, located near Wu's home in Chin-ch'i, Kiangsu province, were famed for the thirty-six peaks which constituted the range, so this is a clear reference to his birthplace. Pai-ma, however, was located in Kiangsu province, so Wu seems to have used this formulation to indicate that each of his paintings represented the sum total of his life to that point. Wu Hung met with Sung Lo in 1679, beyond which date only two paintings are known, one from 1683 (figure 7) and the other from 1690 (figure 8), both inscribed as having been painted "beneath the thirty-six peaks of Yun-lin and Pai-ma."

Wu Hung clearly impressed his contemporaries as much by the nature of his personality as by his very individual and creative style of painting. Chou Liang-kung noted: "...Fan Chung-li (of the early 11th century) was called K'uan ('wide') because of the breadth of his mind, and Yuan-tu (Wu Hung) too is named Hung ('broad'). He is a fine figure of a man and he and his paintings have richness to spare, lacking even a speck of the usual petty attitudes. The cases of Fan and Wu argue that among those artists whose brush and ink work are admired throughout the world are none who are not broadminded. The names of Wu and K'uan will be transmitted to posterity together, and those who unroll their paintings cannot but line up in order to bow down before them..." Sung Wan (1614-1673) also took note of the elemental force suggested by Wu's style of painting: "The Yellow River descends from the heavens and flows into the Eastern Sea; its ten-thousand li length must be inscribed on one's heart and mind. Only he with 'distant limits' (i.e. Yuan-tu or Wu Hung) is adequate to represent it." 10

Wu Hung's achievements in painting were also the result of his ambition: "He has loved painting since childhood and in that art, being unwilling to settle down behind another's fence, he has opened up a path of his own..." 11 The paintings of Wu's mature period, including the present "River Landscape after T'ang Ti," demonstrate the inventiveness of his personal style; his strong and attractive brushwork is clearly visible but the pictorial forms are also organized into monumental compositions akin to those of early Sung and Yuan masters, resulting in pictures of great visual beauty capable of standing on their own, apart from any special art-historical or conceptual pleading. As was concluded by Chou Liang-kung in a poem sent to his friend: "...Having the wisdom and bravery of those who overturn the world, and the heart and mind of those who open and sustain the myriad things of

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Fig. 6. Wu Hung: "River Sails by Colored Mountains" 1675, after Chang-huo Ku-t'ai Shu-hua Tu-mu (Beijing: Wen-wu, 1993), vol. 12, p. 250, no. Wan 1-437.

Fig. 7. Wu Hung: "Travelling Through Autumn Mountains" (detail) 1683, after Chang-huo Ku-t'ai Shu-hua Tu-mu (Beijing: Wen-wu, 2000), vol. 22, p. 346, no. Ching 1-4774.
antiquity, are you not the (later 12th century Sung
dynasty General) Ch'en T'ung-fu of painting?

Not nearly so prolific a painter as his contemporary
Kung Hsien (1619-1689), Wu Hung nonetheless
left a significant body of work, one that fully justi-
fies his honorable ranking within the pantheon of
Nanking artists of his day.

One of the earliest known references to the
"Eight Masters of Chin-ling (Nanking)" occurs in a
colophon written in 1683 by Tai Hsien (1613-
1685) for the painting by Wu Hung illustrated here
in figure 7: "Painting is something which changes
over time, but it also manifests the spirit of place.
First there was Master Tai Ch'in in Hangchow and
then Master Wu Wei in Chiang-Isi. In the middle
years Suchou in particular flourished and the robe
and bowl (of succession) were handed down from
generation to generation and students of the school
were everywhere in Kiangsu and Chekiang. It
remained like this for one hundred years but today
Nanking must be considered the successor. Chou
Liang-kung has spoken of this glory and of the eight
who have become famous..." Chang Keng, in his
Kuo-chiao Hua-ching Lu of 1735 lists the names of
eight artists but includes Hsieh Sun, a Nanking
painter who seems never to have been mentioned
by Chou Liang-kung in any context. While the
present group of eight thus may not be identical
with the original, Wu Hung and Kao Ts'en (see
catalogue 15) were major painters in Nanking as
well as good friends of Chou Liang-kung, and there-
fore it is certain that they were among the earliest
grouping of those masters.

A poem sent by Chou to Wu Hung suggests the
unassuming life lived by the artist as he matched
his talent and vision against the masters of the past:
"Beyond the curtain clouds roll and unroll
in the blue sky,
Near you there seems to be only the village
market;
The withered pawlonia (lute) is broken but
still there are guests,
Your marvelous paintings penetrating to
spirit are shown only to me;
After rain you leisurely stroll with staff
beyond the flowers,
Facing the wind you open a book in shade
of willows;
When deep in your cups do not become
fixated on the pleasures of Ch'ing-ch'i
(and remember that) we both have lived in
Pai-ma and Yun-lin."

1. Chou Liang-kung: Tu-hua Lu, Hua-shih T'ung-
shu edition, vol. 4, p. 2076. The Tu-hui Pao-
889) of the later 17th century states that Wu
"was from Chin-ch'i in Kiangsi but his home
was in Chin-ling (Nanking)..." The legend of
one of Wu's seals reads Chiang-tso chuang-yu,
Ch'ing-ch'i Chin-ch'i, "from left of the river to
right of the river, from Ch'ing-ch'i (Nanking)
to Chin-ch'i (in Kiangsu)." Wu also referred to
himself, as in his inscription on the present
painting, as from West of the River, i.e. from
Kiangsi as opposed to East of the River, which
was the area around Nanking. The modern
dictionary Chung-liao Mei-shiu-chia Jen-ming
281, gives the artist's name as Hung (Hung), a
character of the same meaning as Hung (Hung)
but one never used by the artist in any of his
inscriptions known to me.

2. See the excellent study of Chou Liang-kung
and painters associated with him by Hongnam
Kim, The Life of a Patron, (New York: China
Institute in America, 1996), especially maps
pp. 8-9 for locations of artists' residences.

3. A "Landscape" handscroll formerly in the Sumi-
tomo and C.D. Carter collections is dated to
1637, thirteen years before the next dated work, or to 1697, seven years later than the next earlier work.


5. Kim, *op.cit.*, p. 44.


8. Both places were also referred to by Chou Liang-kung in his biography of the artist: "Wu Hung...and I have both lived at Yun-lin and Pai-ma..." See *Ibid.*. Although only Chou's grandfather had actually lived in Kiangsi, Chou himself had lived in Yangchou when posted there in 1645-46, during which period he spent much time aboard his boat named Chiu-yuan, "garden that follows."


