

47. Yuan Jiang [Yuan Chiang] (ca. 1670-ca. 1755)

“Palace within the Mountains” 1714

Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk
222 x 113.3 cm. (87 3/8 x 44 5/8 in.)

Inscription:

“During the fifth lunar month of the year 1714, I followed the brush ideas of a Yuan master. Painted by Yuan Jiang from Hanshang (Yangzhou.)”

Artist’s seals:

Yuan Jiang zhi yin; Wentao



A magnificent palace structure stands on the bank of a river, with another villa or perhaps an extension of the first appearing across the water, highlighted by an enormous garden rock, in the middle ground. Misty peaks in the distance highlight the moon appearing in the sky above. To the left of the palace, appearing in small size beneath adjoining trees, appears a procession consisting of some important person in a sedan chair with bearers and other servants holding lanterns to light the way. At the entrance several attendants stand waiting for his arrival. On the second floor above are other figures, standing on an open area above a lower section in which a landscape screen is visible, one done in ink-wash. At the highest level is a group of people listening to a musical performance being given by a man playing a long horizontal flute.

The entire scene was intended to evoke the utmost level of luxury and culture, the kind of lifestyle dreamed of by people who enjoyed no more than a fraction of these delights in a similar work done by the same artist of “Penglai, Isle of the Immortals.” (fig. 1). The *Hanshu*, “History of the Han dynasty,” records an expedition that attempted to locate the islands of the immortals, and perhaps identified at least one of them with Japan: “These three spirit-mountains are said to be within the Bo Sea and not too far distant. Sages, various immortals, and elixirs of everlasting life are to be found there. The birds and animals are all white, and the palaces and towers are made from yellow gold and white silver. The mountains appear cloud-like when viewed from a distance but as one gets closer they suddenly recede from the ship and, in the end, one is never able to reach them. The lords of the world all would like to be there.”

To reside in golden palaces, to associate with transcendent beings, and, most of all, to live forever are indeed the dreams of powerful rulers and merchants, and these dreams were given appropriate visual form in the present painting, which focuses on a magnificent palace complex. One striking characteristic of the present painting is the manner in which some portions of the structure are lightened in tonality, perhaps a pictorial allusion to the “palace and towers made from yellow gold and white silver...” Graded washes to model the forms,

overlappings to establish spatial relationships, and atmospheric recession into depth are all naturalistic devices applied here to basically non-naturalistic ends. The plausibility of the scene is again asserted by the various figures who calmly converse or walk about in seeming disregard for the metamorphosing environment. The very normality of these figures and their activities encourages the viewer to join them; to do so is immediately to be impressed by the organic power inhering in the monumental masses as well as by the secular power suggested by the human constructions.

The *jiehua* or “ruled-line drawing” of the architecture here marks the artist as a follower of a tradition associated especially with the medieval period and with courtly painting. In his inscription, the artist indicates that he was following the style of a Yuan master, and one possibility of a work he may have actually seen is “The Han Gardens” by the Yuan master Li Rongjin (fig. 2). The painting thus carries connotations of wealth, power and privilege that support the denotative subject, and the whole would glorify any owner by associating him with the greatest patrons of the past.

The artist, Yuan Jiang, was born in the garden city of Yangzhou in Jiangsu province. Little is known of his life, but extant paintings dated to the year 1691 and a recorded painting dated to 1756 suggest a working life of more than sixty-five years. Stylistically Yuan Jiang was associated quite closely with the Yangzhou painter Li Yin and may have been Li’s pupil. Yuan’s talent and technical proficiency brought him around the year 1708 to the attention of the Chinese bannerman and official Gao Qipei, who hired Yuan, Lu Wei, and others to provide the finishing brushwork for his own large, finger-painted works. Gao lived in the Liang-Zhe region between 1706 and 1715, and Yuan probably worked for him during the earlier years of that period.

During the late 1710s and early 1720s Yuan Jiang painted far more often, also for a widening clientele who called him to Nanjing, to Hangzhou, and by 1724 to Beijing. According to the *Guochao huazheng xulu*, Yuan Jiang was summoned by the Yongzheng emperor (r.1726-1735) to serve the court as a painter-in-waiting. The *Guochao Yuanhua Lu* also lists Yuan as a court painter active during the Yongzheng era. Yuan’s court service has been denied on the grounds that none of his paintings are signed “your servitor,” standard practice in the case of paintings done for presentation to the throne. However, the *Huaren puyi* states that Yuan was selected to enter the wai or “outer” painting academy. This branch organization was established by the Yongzheng emperor in his favorite palace, the Yuan Ming Yuan, built for him by his father in 1709 but extended and elaborated by him after his accession to the throne in 1723. Yuan could well have worked mainly on the decoration of the palace and have been recommended for service by Gao Qipei, who in 1723 had been transferred to the capital. The director of the government organ that controlled court painters was Prince Yi (1683-1730), ad brother of the emperor, and at least one of Yuan Jiang’s extant paintings bears Prince Yi’s collection seal.

For the thirty years between 1726 and 1756 there are records of eleven paintings by Yuan Jiang; this stands in strong contrast to the nearly one hundred paintings known for the thirty years preceding 1726. Yuan Jiang is said to have spent many years in Shanxi province working for a salt-merchant family, and it is possible that following a three-year tour of court duty Yuan worked in Shanxi before returning home to Yangzhou, where most commissions were then handled by his son, Yuan Yao. The fantastic nature of many of Yuan Jiang’s

paintings can be related to the demands of Yangzhou's nouveau riche merchants for the exotic and the startling. However, other artists situated similarly did not pursue those same goals, and patronage can be considered only a partial explanation for the nature of his paintings. Another fact would certainly be the influence of Yuanji (1642-1707), especially his stimulating theories. Yuanji severely criticized Yangzhou and other contemporaneous painters for “imitating the footsteps” rather than the “heart” of their models and for remaining confined by earlier styles rather than transforming them on the basis of their own feelings and experiences. Yuan Jiang may thus be considered a professional artist who continued the late Ming revival of certain aspects of Tang styles but also as one who informed those derived schemata with his own very distinctive personal vision.



Fig. 1. Yuan Jiang: “Penglai, Isle of the Immortals” 1708, after Howard Rogers: *Masterworks of Chinese Painting from the Forbidden City*, Lansdale, 1988, cat. 58, p. 92.

Fig. 2. Li Rongjin: “The Han Gardens,” after *Gugong shubua tulu*, Taipei, 1990, vol. 4, p. 157.

