

Ding Yuangong (mid-17th century)

丁元公

“The Four Sleepers” 1645

四睡图

Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk
120.0 x 49.0 cm. (47 1/4 x 19 1/4 in.)

Inscription:

“During the year 1645, the second of the Shunzhi era, on the day of Ascending the Heights (the ninth day of the ninth lunar month) I used the ideas of the monk Taichan and painted ‘The Four Sleepers.’ Yuangong.”

Artist’s seal:

Yuangong shuhua

A bearded figure with shaven head, clad in red robe, stands with arms clasped behind him, one hand grasping a fly-whisk. He gazes upward, seeming in pensive thought, toward the mountain-top where rest three figures, one reclining on a tiger. Textured and washed for three-dimensionality, the mountain rises above a river that extends into the distance where clouds mask a recession to distant peaks. The blue-green coloring and simplified drawing of the four figures above lends an air of naivete, a conscious reference to styles of times long past.

The subject is highly unusual. The most prominent of the four figures is easily identified by his tiger companion as the mid-7th century monk Feng’gan; the other two would then be his protégés, the Buddhist laymen Hanshan and Shide. Shide, meaning “one who gathers or picks up,” worked in the kitchen of the Guoqing Temple on *hanshan*, “Cold Mountain.” According to tradition, Shide became friends with the impecunious hermit-poet Hanshan, who took his name from the mountain on which he lived, and provided Hanshan with leftovers from the temple’s kitchen. From the poetry written by Hanshan, we know that on occasion he sought out Feng’gan, the abbot of the Gaoqing Temple, in order to receive personal instruction. In Feng’gan’s preface to the collected poetry of Hanshan, he stated that the laymen Hanshan and Shide were more enlightened than the monks in his monastery. The present image thus portrays one abbot, his tiger companion, and two secular friends—a poet and a dishwasher—in a sleep as deep as death itself.

The red-robed figure is more difficult to identify. Usually a Buddhist-type figure wearing a red-robe would be identified as Bodhidharma,

the 6th century founder of Chan Buddhism in China. But there is no particular reason why that figure would be portrayed gazing at the four sleepers as though he would like to join them in the oblivion of sleep. Another possibility is that the red robe is a pictorial device intended to recall the Ming dynasty, the emperors of which bore the surname Zhu, which means cinnabar red. A similar usage can be found in works by Xiang Shengmo (1597-1658), who in 1644, the year the Ming dynasty fell to the invading Manchus, portrayed himself in a landscape that was done entirely in red. The figure in the present painting may thus have been a surviving member of the Zhu family, who may well have wished to leave the dusty world of the present for the peace and safety of the bucolic past.

A surviving rubbing of a painting by Ding Yuangong (fig. 1) suggests that he knew at least one member of the former imperial family. “Portrait of Shitao” is inscribed “On a Spring day in the *dingyu* year, done at the request of Kuguo dahoshang (‘The Great Monk Bitter Melon,’ or Shihtao) by Ding Yuangong.” Intriguing as this may seem, there is room for reasonable doubt about the date of the image, which seems to portray a monk of mature years. If *dingyu* is equated with the year 1657, Shitao (1642-1707) would have been a scant fifteen years of age; if the *dingyu* year was sixty years later, 1717, Shitao would have been dead for ten years and incapable of requesting a painting from Ding. In the apt formulation of Chinese scholars, the question must *daikao*, “await further investigation.”

Ding Yuangong was born in Jiaying, Chekiang province. As a painter he was skilled at landscapes and Buddhist images, which are

said to have become more elegant as he grew older. In his earliest biography, the *Tuhui baojian xuzhuan* of around 1680, it is noted that

“he later shaved his head and became a monk,”¹ suggesting that he was already of some age at that point.

1. *Tuhui baojian xuzhuan*, *Huashi congshu* edition, vol. 1, p. 876.



Fig. 1. Rubbing after a “Portrait of Shitao’ by Ding Yuangong,” 1657/1717, after Wen Fong, “A Letter from Shih-t’ao to Pa-ta-shan-jen and the Problem of Shih-t’ao’s Chronology,” *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, XIII, 1959, fig. 7.