

Wu Li (1632-1718)

吳歷

“Dwelling in the Mountains, after Yuan Master” 1674

倣元代 山居圖

Hanging scroll, ink on paper
50.3 x 28.0 cm. (19 3/4 x 11 in.)

Inscription:

“During the fourth lunar month of the year 1674, I followed the ‘Dwelling in the Mountains’ by a Yuan master for presentation to Master Qingshanyu. Wu Li called The Ink-well Daoist.”

Artist’s seal:

Wu Li zhi yin

Collector’s seal:

Shaomu baojian

Published:

Kokka number 266; Tokyo, July, 1912;
Shincho Meigafu, Hakubundo, 1917, pl. 17;
Shina Meiga Hokan, 1936, pl. 798;
Shin Meiga Sen, Kyoto, n.d., pl. 36;
Guo Wei-qu: *Song Yuan Ming Qing Shuhuaqia Nianbiao*, Beijing, 1982, p. 275.

A desiccated old tree, the trunk hollowed out as though struck by lightning, dominates the foreground, rising almost to the upper border of the picture. To the right, in the middle ground, is an outcropping of rock while to the left is a thatched hut hard by a bamboo grove. The curtain that forms the front wall of the structure is drawn back, revealing an empty interior, one that yet invites the visitor to enter and enjoy the peace of the riverside setting. Although hurt and damaged by events, the tree had survived those calamities and still bears leaves, suggesting a general theme for the painting of perseverance despite hardship and adversity.

The interior texture strokes appearing on the foreground earthen forms and the rocks were derived distantly from the 10th century style of Dong Yuan as seen through works by Yuan literati followers. The short vertical strokes that help articulate those forms are also characteristic of that tradition, marking the present artist as one who followed the orthodox tradition of painting

as defined by the great calligrapher, painter, and theorist, Dong Qichang (1555-1636).

Wu Li (1632-1718), the artist, was considered one of the Six Great Masters of the early Qing era. His teacher was the eldest of the six, Wang Shimin (1592-1680), who in turn had studied directly with Dong. Originally named Wu Qili, Wu Li was born in Changshu, Jiangsu province. His father, a government official in charge of grain-tax shipments on the Grand Canal, died while working in the north when Wu Li was only a few years old. Wu and his two elder brothers were thus brought up by their mother. Exceptionally gifted, Wu progressed rapidly in a number of artistic and literary fields. His talent in music was developed through study with Chen Min, a master of the lute as well as a poet and painter. Wu and Wang Hui (1632-1717) were exact contemporaries and both studied painting with Wang Jian (1598-1677) and then with Wang Shimin. The latter is said to have shown his collection of Song and Yuan masterworks, or at

least copies of them, to Wu, who produced his own copies in smaller scale. The high quality and sensitivity of these copies suggested to Wang Shimin that a special affinity existed between his pupil and the ancient models. The young artist was also introduced to the major intellectual currents of his day through study with the neo-Confucian philosopher Chen Hu (1613-1675) and through his friendship with the Buddhist monk Morong, who was often visited by Wu at the Xingfu Monastery.

Wu Li's involvement with Christianity, the religious force that dominated his life from around 1670 onward, began with his baptism while a boy. Since the earliest missionaries to Changshu had established themselves as neighbors to the Wu family, there is a strong possibility that his parents were among the earliest local converts to Christianity and had their children baptized at birth. According to the *Haishang Molin*, Wu Li passed the first or lowest level civil service examination but seems to have had no further inclination to employ his talents in government service. There was little in his experience to suggest that such was a wise or even honorable course of action; his painting teachers Wang Shimin and Wang Jian had both withdrawn from government service after encountering difficulties. Wu thus turned to painting in order to support his mother, his wife, and his two children, though he seems never to

have derived the same level of personal satisfaction from painting, as did Wang Hui.

Christianity began to have an ever-increasing attraction for Wu Li and eventually claimed virtually all of his time and energy, culminating in his ordination in 1688 as a Catholic priest. The process seems to have begun around 1670 when Wu accompanied a Christian censor named Xu Zhijian on a trip to Beijing. Earlier, in 1655, Xu had been cashiered for writing the preface of a work propagating the Christian faith. In 1669 all those who had been condemned were pardoned, and it was thus that Xu returned to the capital in company with his friend. The artist stayed in Beijing for more than one year, and it is possible that the present painting, dedicated to Xu in 1674, was done on Wu's departure for Changshu, or possibly it was sent to his friend after he had arrived home.

Wu Li elsewhere compared painting to a game of chess, in which the classic styles of Song and Yuan masters functioned as the pieces to be manipulated in the course of the creative struggle. Since the results would vary from painting to painting, there are a variety of approaches visible in Wu's work. A "Landscape" in the Beijing Palace Museum collection (fig.1) is of modest size but far more complex than the present work while featuring similar interior texture strokes and vertical dottings on the forms. "Dwelling in the Mountains" seems to have been designed specifically for Xu Zhijian, intended to encourage his friend to hold fast to his faith come what may.



Fig. 1. Wu Li: "Landscape," after Howard Rogers: *Masterworks of Ming and Qing Painting from the Forbidden City*, Lansdale, 1988, cat. 51, p. 85.