Hsi Kang (1746-1803)

奚岡

"Spring Rain on Apricot Blossoms"

Fan painting, ink and color on paper
16.5 x 54.5 cm. (6 1/2 x 21 1/2 in.)

Inscription:

"A little bit of spring mist, moist like a tavern flag,
the red of the apricot blossoms overwhelms the fence of bamboo;
Rain reaches everywhere, the river current is swift,
only the support hums of the knots, established when it was young.
A poem and painting by T'ieh-sheng for the connoisseurship of master elder brother Yu-ts'un."

Artist's seal:

Hsi Kang

Collectors' seals:

Tan-chung ching-chien; Erh-mao hsin-shang

Reddish-pink apricot blossoms dominate the picture, and, as the poem has it, overshadow the pale green bamboo. Both plants grow outward from an earthern embankment on the left which pictorially balances the inscription on the right. The brushwork is quick, the colors lovely, and the effect of the whole is charming, certainly what the artist intended.

Hsi Kang, *tzu* Ch'un-chang, hao T'ieh-sheng, Meng-ch'uan Wai-shih and other names, was registered in She-hsien, Anhui province but was probably born and certainly lived from a very early age in Hangchou, Chekiang province, on West Lake. Truly precocious as a child, Hsi could write in the difficult clerical-script style when only eight years of age and later became well-known as a calligrapher and a poet, one praised by the eminent Hangchou scholar Hang Shih-chun (1696-1773). He was also a major innovator in seal-carving, in which art he was grouped with Ting Ching, Huang I, and Chiang Jen as the Four Great Masters of Wu-lin and considered as well one of the Eight Masters of Hsi-ling.

Hsi Kang's proud and independent character is illustrated by his early biographers with numbers of stories. When Wang Chih-i (1743-1818) was Governor-General of Chekiang province, for example, he was so impressed by Hsi's accomplishments that he offered him honorary title of *hsiao-lien fang-cheng*, which would have given Hsi Kang status comparable to that of a *chu-jen* second-degree holder as well as an audience with the emperor to receive his appointment to sixth official rank, after which he could well have been appointed to office. However, Hsi refused to accept that honor, and adamantly declined even to meet such official luminaries as Juan Yuan (1764-1849) and Ch'in Ying (1743-1821).[1]

By this same time Hsi had earned renown for yet another characteristic, his heavy drinking. "...Frequently he drank until happily and thoroughly soused. Fumes from the alcohol would emerge from the lapels and sleeves of his gown, making all those sitting with him very tired. His would then continuously yell at and argue with those to either side of him, and fly into a rage if anyone ignored him even slightly. People thus regarded him as a *chiu-k'uang*, dipsomaniac."[2] It would thus seem that the cool intellectualism of Hsi's paintings represents not his basic temperament but rather its opposite, manifesting a rational discipline not present in the way he lived.

Hsi's earliest and direct teacher in painting—before the age of 10—was the great Hangchou master Hua Yen (1682-1756), but in his later years Hsi Kang worked mainly in the more orthodox landscape styles emanating from the Four Wangs of the early Ch'ing era, beginning with Wang Shih-min (1592-1680). By the time Hsi Kang was in his 40s, he was famous throughout the empire and even in such foreign countries as Okinawa and Japan. In his later years a series of personal disasters occurred, including the deaths of his younger brother, his three sons and his small daughter, that culminated in a fire which destroyed everything he owned. That event, which probably happened in 1796,[3] was followed by the death of his mother just when his economic situation required that he paint and write far

more frequently than before, a situation which resulted, naturally enough, in a lowering of Hsi's normal standard of quality.

Taking a longer view of Hsi Kang's career, it is clear that in many ways he epitomizes to an exceptional degree the ideal literatus of the later Ch'ing period. Equally versed in all of the scholarly arts, Hsi Kang was also a teacher, and edited the sketchbooks of Kung Hsien (1619-1689) to make them available for students; he also personally trained T'u Cho, Hsu Yueh, and other notable painters. It is with good reason that Hsi Kang was ranked with his close friend Fang Hsun (1736-1799), and with Huang I (1744-1801) and Tai Hsi (1801-1860) as the four great masters of their day.

1. Chiang Pao-ling: *Mo-lin Chin-hua* (postface dated 1825), Taiwan edition, 1975, p. 134.
2. *Ibid.*
3. The legend of one of his later seals reads: *ping-hou chih-tso*, "done after the *ping* year (of 1796)."