

Wang Mansheng (b. 1962)

王满晟

“Revered Elder, No. 5” 2016

尊老图

Unmounted scroll, ink on paper  
33.0 x 19.2 cm. (13 x 19 in.)

Artist's seals:

*Ban Sheng; San Ren Ju; Wang Mansheng yin*

The lower trunk and branches of a bristlecone pine are isolated against the blank ground of the paper, seeming to grow out of the paper itself. Overlapping strokes and some shading create the illusion of solidity and the tree thus defines its own space on the plane surface. Visual interest comes from the varied twists and turns of the tree but even more from the brushwork, which features dry and rhythmic strokes that establish the upward moving life of the tree. Although simple in arrangement, the image perfectly captures the idea of a Revered Elder, the heart and soul of an ancient tree.

As in a large painting done in 2014 (fig. 1), the artist worked with worm-eaten brushes and Hudson River valley reeds, which yield implements capable of producing unusual and unpredictable effects, creating five or six lines or dots with a single stroke. In the artist's own words, “This current series was painted with those worm-eaten brushes, using 飛白 “flying white” and 白描 “ink monochrome” techniques to do the tree studies. Trees are such an integral part of Chinese landscape paintings. For this reason, I think, everywhere I go I've paid great attention to all kinds of trees, especially old trees, which can be hundreds or even thousands of years old. Their growth has been influenced by the climate, the weather, the wind, the soil, so their shapes are very special. On my travels to the American West and Southwest I especially study juniper, cypress and bristlecone pine. The bristlecones in particular live at elevations around 10,000 feet, and many have survived for 4,000 to 5,000 years (fig. 2). Because of the harsh environment, they are very sculptural; their wood is extremely dense

and hard as a rock. Some have been struck by lightning and burned, standing there bare of bark. They match in many ways elements of Chinese literati sentiment as expressed in paintings of scholar rocks and 羅漢 “Lohan.” For about a decade I have been sketching and taking photos, trying to find a good form to capture their spirits. This series is part of that study. Some trees are based on photos, some are composites of several trees. Each painting is almost like a portrait of a 羅漢, with a certain character and wisdom.”

Mansheng Wang is constantly experimenting with formats and materials including various types of ink and paper, painting on pottery and porcelain, and woodblock printing, and oil painting on paper and canvas. Born into a humble family in Shanxi province, he began his study of calligraphy and painting independently at the age of seven. A young teenager during the Cultural Revolution, Mansheng took refuge in those turbulent years in practicing calligraphy. Later he was a top student at Fudan University in Shanghai where he majored in classical Chinese literature while also devoting much of his time to the study of old master paintings in the Shanghai Museum. After graduating in 1985, Wang worked as a director of cultural programming at China Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing, producing documentaries on the art and culture of China and Tibet. His position took him to Tibet, where he did a documentary and was profoundly affected by Buddhist art. In 1996 he immigrated to the United States where he began life as an artist, and today leads a relatively quiet but immensely creative life with his family in the Hudson River valley outside of New York City.



Fig. 1. Wang Mansheng: "In Search of Old Trees," 2014, after *Kaikodo Journal* XXXI, Spring, 2015, cat. 59, p. 131.

Fig. 2. Bristlecone Pine, Inyo National Forest, California, after *National Geographic*, March, 2017, p. 52.

