

75.

A Dali Stone Landscape Panel

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61.0 x 33.5 cm. (24 x 13 ¼ in.)

Qing dynasty

清

19th century A.D.

The white marble is shot with natural black, grey and reddish-brown inclusions that resemble a hilly landscape with ancient craggy trees in silhouette fading into the mist on the left and dotted delicate foliage along the tops of the hillocks. Gray swirls below the dark images add dimension to the landscape scene. The stone is not completely flat but slightly dished in places.

Something found in a forest, by a lake, at the seaside. A rock hammered by water into an eccentric sculpture, a piece of wood magically crafted by nature into stone, a root curled by the ages into an impenetrable knot. This was joy to the Chinese. To add to this joy, a special kind of stone trapped in a mountain in east central Yunnan was just waiting to be found and at least by the Tang dynasty, Cangshan in Dali prefecture was discovered to offer up a kind of stone that could literally be sliced and polished into landscape scenes. When the primeval limestone of this region metamorphosed into white marble, minerals trapped in the fabric produced a range of colors that seemed to course through the stone—predominantly black and grey but also reds, browns, and even greens. When cut into slabs, the natural patterns in the stone suggested the appearance of mountains and hillocks, trees and clouds. However, these images might not have looked to the Chinese like actual landscapes as much as they did landscape paintings.

During the Ming dynasty collectors of these Dali stones noticed a similarity between the soft, misty, amorphous scenes and the paintings of one of the most venerated of literati-painter-critic-collectors of the Song dynasty: Mi Fu (A.D. 1051-1107) (fig. 1). John Hay, however, in discussing “Stone Pictures,” noted “The suppression of brushwork in his paintings, the soft, blurry images with an absence of line is precisely what one sees in the misty, cloudy landscapes of Dali marble” but went on to suggest that rather than being a springboard for a fascination with the Dali marble landscape panels, Mi Fu “was himself inspired to his special landscape style by such stones.”¹

In the *Yunlin shipu*, “Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest” of A.D.1127, the author-

collector-rock hound Du Wan enumerates and describes in detail well over a hundred types of rocks he encountered in his travels pursuing the subject and notes a number of natural stone landscape “pictures” that were characteristic of stone found in Zhejiang and Anhui provinces.² While we have evidence of the use of such panels during the Song dynasty—whether actually from Dali or not is unclear—through the literature of luminaries of the period including Mi Fu himself, Song-dynasty paintings demonstrate their actual use. A work from the Ming period based on a Song model depicts a table with a stone panel inset, and it was during the Ming and Qing when the popularity of these stone pictures skyrocketed (figs. 2-3).

Xie Huan of the early Ming painted a contemporaneous gathering of important Ming-dynasty officials in “Literary Gathering in the Apricot Garden,” showing the use of a stone landscape panel fashioned into what is called an inkslab screen (figs. 4-5). Inkslab screens were already popular among Song-period scholars several centuries earlier. They served to focus on the inscriptions that had been written on the ink slabs by repeating them onto the face of the stone that was then mounted as a freestanding screen. This would then be displayed on a desk along with the inkslab and other writing paraphernalia. The stand itself may also be **designed to hold further** writing accouterment, as demonstrated by an example from a late Ming dynasty burial (fig. 6), the tomb offering a treasure trove of writing implements owned by the deceased. Many such screens, including the excavated example, are not inscribed but would still have functioned as décor, such as an example in the Mengdiexian collection (fig. 7).

The present panel is of a size that would have been suitable as an ink slab screen but at some point was mounted as a wall hanging, thus intended to bring something of nature into the confines of one's living space, both the material and the image gifts from nature.³

1. John Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth: The Rock in Chinese Art*, China House Gallery, China Institute in America, New York, 1986, p. 86.

2. Edward Schafer, *Tu Wan's Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest: A Commentary and Synopsis*, Berkeley, 1961.

3. For a most informative study on this subject see Curtis Evarts, "Ornamental Stone Panels and Chinese Furniture," *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*, Spring 1994, pp. 4-26. Sarah Handler's "The Chinese Screen: Movable Walls to Divide, Enhance and Beautify," *Journal of the Classical Chinese Furniture Society*, Summer 1993, pp. 4-31 is also most illuminating.



Fig. 1: Mi Fu (A.D.1051-1107), attributed, "Grassy Hills and Leafy Trees in Mist," Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., after Oswald Siren, *Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles*, vol. III, London, 1956, pl. 188.

Fig. 2: Anonymous, "Children Playing in a Garden," Ming dynasty, 15th-16th century, after *Kaikodo Journal*, XXV, Spring, 2009, no. 32, p. 93.



Fig. 3: Detail of fig. 2.



Fig. 4: Xie Huan (15th century), "A Literary Gathering in the Apricot Garden," dated A.D.1437, Metropolitan Museum, New York, after <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/41478>.



Fig 5: Detail of fig. 4.

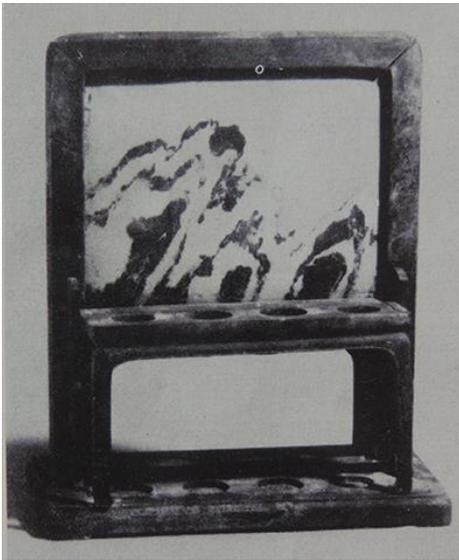


Fig. 6: Ink slab marble screen, excavated from the tomb of Zhu Shoucheng, d. 1581, Shanghai, after *Wenwu*, 1992:5, pl. VI :3.



Fig. 7: Ink slab marble screen, Qing dynasty, after *Enlightening Pursuits: Scholar's Objects from the Mengdiexuan Collection*, University of Hong Kong exhibition, Hong Kong, 2006, no pl. 24, p. 113.