

# **Asian Art Essay Prize 2016**

Archaism and the Search for Self:  
An interpretation of Wang Hui's (1632-1717) Landscape

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The painting *Landscape* is painted by the Qing dynasty painter Wang Hui 王翬 when he was seventy-years old (fig.1). Art historians have approached to Wang's later works in light of the artist's biography and his role as an established orthodox school artist.<sup>1</sup> Wang's theory of "Great Synthesis" has been regarded as being influenced by Dong Qichang's new orthodox theory, in which Dong envisioned an ancient "correct" lineage of the so-called Southern School of painting, from Zhao Mengfu to the Four Great Late Yuan Masters.<sup>2</sup> Such account sheds insightful light onto the archaism in Wang's later works. However, it is insufficient in understanding the presence of the artist's self in his works in both ideological and stylistic concerns, if art is perceived to bear the traits of its creator. In this essay, I will explore

Wang Hui's *Landscape* by asking how his individual style is manifested when archaism

Fig. 1 Wang Hui, *Landscape*, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, d. 1702. 113 x 50.8 cm. Houston (TX) US, I.T.Yin and Co. Art Gallery, Baomengtang Collection.

dominates and how this work is related to the artist himself. That Wang Hui's *Landscape* is a conscious statement about the artist himself, his

<sup>1</sup>Duoyun Bian Ji Bu, ed. *Qing Chu Si Wang Hua Pai Yan Jiu* 清初四王畫派研究論文集, (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chu ban she, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Chang, Chin-Sung. "Wang Hui: The Evolution of a Master Landscapist." in *Landscapes Clear and Radiant: the Art of Wang Hui (1632-1717)*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 740.

methodology of artistic creation and later style can be supported by both textual and pictorial evidences.

The painting *Landscape* was painted by Wang Hui in 1702 and measures 113 x 50.8 cm. As a hanging scroll, the viewer is confronted with its overall composition. The composition of this landscape painting is a flowing yet well-balanced design. Viewers are led from the highest mountain peak on the right down to the bottom boulder with the ridges connected. The artist's poem and two red seals are inscribed on the empty space above the mountain peak, balancing with the highest mountain on the right. On the middle left, a vertical waterfall falls into the mountain stream. Through a single-plank bridge, the stream enters into the wide river occupying the bottom of the painting. The diagonal embankment leads from the lower left to the lower right, with the width of the river gradually tapered. Flowing water waves are indicated by medium-length horizontal lines lightly applied. Crossing the river, the viewer enters into the space where a human figure and his habitation is located. The cottages are framed by the boulder leaning to the left and the two huge trees which grow on the ledge and cling to the right.

Wang Hui in *Landscape* consciously drew upon the earlier styles of Song and Yuan landscape paintings, yet Wang's synthesis of the past master painters has transforms into his individual style. Wang Hui once summarized that "I must use the brush and ink of the Yuan to move the peaks and valleys of the Song, and infuse them with the breath-resonance of the Tang. I will then have a work of the Great Synthesis."<sup>3</sup> First and foremost, the thrusting force and dynamism in the composition of *Landscape* can be traced back to the late -Yuan landscape painting. In Wang Gongwang 黃公望 (1269—1354)'s essay "Secrets of Landscape Painting," he thoughtfully wrote,

The mountain peaks should turn and link together, change

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<sup>3</sup> Wang Hui 王翬, "Qinghui Huaba 清暉畫跋 (Wang Hui's Colophons on Painting)", in Wang Hui Hualun Yizhu 王翬畫論譯註 (Beijing: Rong bao zhai chu ban she, 2012), 100.

direction and turn again, with the veins of the mountains branching smoothly throughout. This method makes the mountains come alive, while ten thousand trees march like soldiers in a great army. <sup>4</sup>

Wang Hui have studied and modelled after the Yuan master painter. While both Wang Hui and Huang came from Changshu, Jiang Su province today, the similar physicality of the landscape which might have inspired the two artists also sheds light onto their shared artistic considerations. Secondly, in *Landscape*, Wang Hui deliberately cooperates a variety of texture strokes and created his own all-embracing style. Especially in the portrayal of vegetation, Wang's brushstrokes, ranging from parallel thrust-like strokes to round moss dots, are formally similar to the newly formulated calligraphic Juran idiom in the paintings of Yuan painter Wu Zhen 吳鎮 (1280—1354).<sup>5</sup> An earlier riverbank painting, attributed to Dong Yuan 董源 (943 - 962), encapsulates Dong's Southern landscape style characterized by its softly shaded mountain forms and his hemp-fiber texture strokes (fig.2).<sup>6</sup> The vision of reclusion and "quitter style" of Dong's *Riverbank* was said to be transformed into "a new, dynamically expressive landscape style in Wang Meng 王蒙 (1308-1385)'s riverbank painting (fig.3).<sup>7</sup> Wang Hui adopted an even innovative approach in his *Landscape* by situating the softly modelled rock forms in a rather energetic composition. Wang congruously synthesized quiescence of Dong Yuan's painting and the dynamism of Wang Meng. Wang's closest friend Yun Shouping 惲壽平 (1633 - 1690) once commented that Wang Hui was able to synthesize "even [among] styles that had always been considered incompatible."<sup>8</sup> Wang Jian also echoed with Yun Shouping,

Painters who possess the qualities of beauty and elegance may yet lack

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<sup>4</sup>Huang Gongwang 黃公望, "Xie shanshu jue 寫山水訣," as translated by Fong, Wen C in "Riverbank," in *Along the Riverbank*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 69.

<sup>5</sup> Fong, Wen C, "Riverbank," in *Along the Riverbank*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 34.

<sup>6</sup> (Fong 1999) p34

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Zhang Geng 張庚 (1685—1760), *Guochao huazheng lu 國朝畫征錄*, trans. Wen C. Fong, "Wang Hui and Repossessing the Past," in *Landscapes Clear and Radiant: The Art of Wang Hui (1632-1717)*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art), 86.

roundness and fullness; and those who have power and strength may yet be partly in style and resonance. As for Wang Hui, all of the desirable qualities seem to be present. It may be said that not a single hair in his painting is to be regretted. This painting is deep and calm and quietly aloof. The primal breath seems to flow magically through it. It is one of the great masterpieces and should be carefully treasured.<sup>9</sup>

Wang Hui was well-known for his capability to model the past paintings, yet what is innovative of his archaism is the congruous unity as he has achieved in *Landscape*.

Other than stylistic concerns, Wang Hui's *Landscape* is self-referential. While the pictorial world is physically located in the artist's hometown, the notion of reclusion envisioned by Wang Hui also coincides with the sequestered state of mind around the time when *Landscape* was painted. As indicated by the Wang Hui's own poem inscribed in *Landscape*, the painting depicts the region of Wu River which is located in the artist hometown. The inscription reads,

A straight bridge over winding stream by the clear water,  
Morning mists rise from deep mountains with jade green vegetation.  
Who cut the water of the Wu River with sharp scissors,  
And turned it into rain drops that echo in the blurry space...<sup>10</sup>

The inscription invites a closer examination of the subject matter of the landscape. Wang Hui draws upon the freshness and serenity of the landscape. The sense of freshness is conveyed through his emphasis on the clarity of the water and the early morning scene. Meanwhile, the serenity of the landscape is indicated by the depth of the mountains and the possibility that even the sound of water droplets into the air can be heard. While the pictorial space is flattened out by overlapping and compact mountains, the emptiness of the indicative cloud and mist suggests the depth of the landscape. Distant mountains composed of green

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<sup>9</sup> Wang Jian 王鑾 (1598-1677), "Colophon on *Landscape in the Style of Wu Zhen*," trans. Whitfield, in *In Pursuit of Antiquity: Chinese paintings of the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Morse. Exh. Cat* (Princeton: Art Museum), 1969, p143, no. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Wang Hui 王翬 (1632-1717), "Inscription on *Landscape*," trans. Yin I.T. in *Bao Meng Tang Cang Hua 寶蒙堂藏 (Chinese Painting Collection from the I. T. Yin and Company Art Gallery)* (Beijing: Wen wu chu ban she, 2001), 180.

washes in light tones further illustrates the depth. The mountain peaks are depicted with semi-accurate hemp-fiber texture strokes as well as short and dense contrary brushstrokes around the edges, indicating the softness of soil and the wide profusion of vegetation. The portrayal of hometown is a recurrent subject in Wang Hui's oeuvre. At the age of 37, Wang Hui painted *Maple Forest at Yu Mountain*, in which he portrayed magnificent scenes of his hometown region Yu Mountain in the late autumn (fig.4). Wang Hui's *Maple Forest at Yu Mountain* might be inspired by Ming Artist Qiu Ying's *Fishing by the Brook* which shares the same subject (fig.5). The undulating mountains and vivid color scheme of both paintings provide viewers with a carefree visual experience. As argued by Xue Yongnian, Wang Hui in *Maple Forest at Yu Mountain* created the precedent of expressing the true feeling towards landscape through archaism.<sup>11</sup>

When Wang Hui painted *Landscape* in 1702, he has returned back to his native region from the capital as an imperially approved master painter. Kangxi Emperor, a Manchu emperor, found the need to conduct the six inspection tours to southern China to assert his personal vitality and the legitimacy of Qing empire's governance over Han China.<sup>12</sup> Wang Hui, a widely recognized master painter at the time, was in charge of the *Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour*. Not willing to accept the official position offered by the Qing court, Wang decided to seclude himself from the outside world and lead a relaxing life in his "house closed to the the river and with a door facing the green mountain."<sup>13</sup> Wang Hui in his later stage of life therefore will have less need to glorify the landscape in his painting as he used to, nor was it necessary for him to be too conscious of the tastes and expectations of the

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<sup>11</sup> Xue, Yongnian. "Wang Shigu Yishu de Zai Ren Shi 王石谷藝術的再認識." In *Wan Hui Jing Pin Ji 王翬精品集*, (Beijing: Ren min meishu chu ban she, 1998),2.

<sup>12</sup> Krahl, Regian. "The Kangxi Emperor: Horseman, Man of letters, Man of science." In *China: the Three Emperors, 1662-1795*. edited by Evelyn S. Rawski and Jessica Rawson, (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005), 210-239.

<sup>13</sup> Wang Hui 王翬 (1632-1717), "Qinghui Huaba 清暉畫跋 (Wang Hui's Colophons on Painting)", in Wang Hui Hualun Yizhu 王翬畫論譯註 (Beijing: Rong bao zhai chu ban she, 2012).

patrons.<sup>14</sup> As it was described, the shoes of those who want Wang Hui's works occupied the artist's court yard while Wang Hui, regardless of the temptations offered, only gave paintings to those he chose to.<sup>15</sup> By including the solitary scholar figure who immerses himself in the contemplation of nature, Wang Hui envisioned a reclusive pictorial world with which the artist would be willing to identify.

Another layer of self-reference of Wang Hui's Landscape is veiled in the inscribed poem. Yin I.T mentioned that Wang Hui's idea that one can even cut the Wu River with sharp scissors because of its serenity was borrowed from the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712- 770).<sup>16</sup> However, I found Yin's interpretation insufficient in understanding the artist's intention. While the inscribed poem is correlated with the landscape scenery of the painting, I will argue that Wang Hui consciously identified himself with the Tang master painter Wang Zai, to whom Du Fu's poem is addressed to. Du Fu's poem reads,

A straight bridge over winding stream by the clear water,  
Morning mists rise from deep mountains with jade green vegetation.  
Who cut the water of the Wu River with sharp scissors,  
And turned it into rain drops that echo in the blurry space...<sup>17</sup>

Du Fu, knowing both the painter Wang Zai himself and his works in person, spoke highly of Wang Zai's serious attitude towards artistic creation. Wang Zai was said to spend a long time contemplating his subjects before painting them. Wang Hui noted himself that he "(I) was able to master the blue and green color scheme only after I have contemplated the method for

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<sup>14</sup> Chang, Chin-Sung. "Wang Hui: The Evolution of a Master Landscapist." in *Landscapes Clear and Radiant: the Art of Wang Hui (1632-1717)*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 740.

<sup>15</sup> Tang Dai 唐岱 (1673-1752 Dai), "Hui Shi Fa Wei 繪事發微," in *Meishu Cong Shu 美術叢書*, by Binhong Huang and Shi Deng (Shanghai: Shenzhou guo guang she, 1928).

<sup>16</sup> Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770), "Xi Ti Wang Zai Hua Shan Shui Ge Tu 戲題王宰畫山水圖歌," See Yin I.T. in Bao Meng Tang Cang Hua 寶蒙堂藏 (Chinese Painting Collection from the I. T. Yin and Company Art Gallery) (Beijing: Wen wu chu ban she, 2001), 180.

<sup>17</sup> Wang Hui 王翬, "inscription on Landscape," trans. Yin I.T. in *Bao Meng Tang Cang Hua 寶蒙堂藏 (Chinese Painting Collection from the I. T. Yin and Company Art Gallery)* (Beijing: Wen wu chu ban she, 2001), 180.

three decades.”<sup>18</sup> It is therefore reasonable to infer that Wang Hui, in his *Landscape*, identified himself with Wang Zai 王宰, the master Tang painter.

In sum, that *Landscape* is self-referential can be unfolded in three layers. First and foremost, *Landscape*, while stylistically informed by Song and Yuan paintings, is representative of Wang Hui’s individual style. The archaism in Wang Hui’s *Landscape* is not confined to mere modelling. Various styles of old master painter, seemingly incompatible, were congruously synthesized by Wang Hui and transformed as part of Wang’s own style. Secondly, *Landscape* meanwhile reflects Wang Hui’s personal preference for reclusive life style. Having rejected the official position offered by the court, Wang came back to his birthplace and envisioned, in *Landscape*, a world of reclusion which he would like to identify with himself. Last but not least, identifying himself with the Tang master painter Wang Zai in the inscribed poem, *Landscape* is meanwhile a statement of Wang Hui’s philosophy behind his artistic creation. For Wang Hui, art came from no where but endless effort and contemplation.

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<sup>18</sup> Wang Hui 王翬, “Qinghui Huaba 清暉畫跋 (Wang Hui’s Colophons on Painting)”, in Wang Hui Hualun Yizhu 王翬畫論譯註 (Beijing: Rong bao zhai chu ban she, 2012), 100.



Fig. 2. Attributed to Dong Yuan, *Riverbank*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, c. 1300. 221 x 109 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

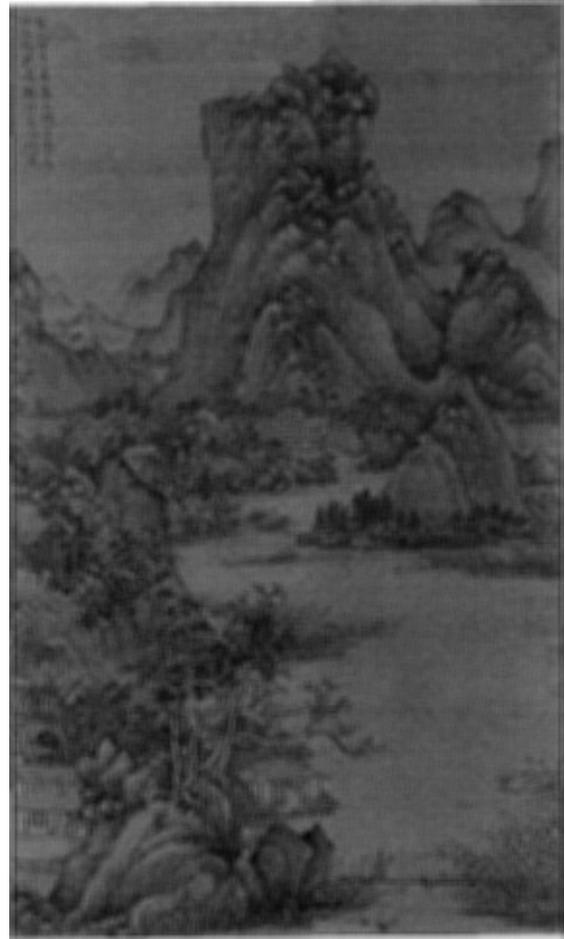


Fig. 3. Wang Meng, *Dwelling in Seclusion in Summer Mountains*, dated 1354. Hanging scroll, ink on silk, 56.8 x 34.2 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 4. Wang Hui, *Maple Forest at Yu Mountain*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, c. 1668. 146.4 x 61 cm. Hunan Provincial Museum, Hunan.



Fig. 5. Qiu, *Fishing by the Brook*, handscroll, ink and color on paper, c. 1300. 127 x 38.5 cm. Hunan Provincial Museum, Hunan.

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