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‘Streams and Mountains Without End: Landscape Traditions of China’

Review: A Genre Flows Through History

At the Met, a 1,000-year journey that begins at the birth of realism and, roughly speaking, the landscape tradition’s genesis as an independent subject.

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'The Four Seasons' (15th century) by an unidentified Ming dynasty artist THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Throughout the past century, as parts of the globe erupted in chaos, American institutions helped save humankind’s common heritage. They systematically acquired cultural treasures endangered in their own countries—doing so in coherent genres and thereby preserving entire traditions of art. A luminous instance of just such an achievement is the Metropolitan Museum’s historic collection of Chinese landscapes, considered to be one of the greatest world-wide. Often kept from the hands of Maoist mobs, these objects could tell adventure stories of brave individuals who smuggled them out to the West over the decades. The museum’s exhibition “Streams and Mountains Without End: Landscape Traditions of China” tells us another story just as crucial: that of the transcendent beauty of the 1,000-year-old living art form so worth saving. And not least for the Chinese themselves—on the day of my visit tourists from China packed the galleries, as they do much of the time.

The curator, Joseph Scheier-Dolberg, says he organized the show along thematic rather than chronological lines to educate the viewer in the genre’s traditions and experiments, its evolution over the centuries, its symbols and inside jokes—in short, to teach us how to understand more deeply what we are viewing. He divided the whole into nine sections, with rooms dedicated to “Streams and Mountains,” “Magical Landscapes,” “Landscape of Reclusion,” “Riverscape” and the like. The objects in the show will change and rotate periodically, but at the outset it features 40 paintings and numerous objects, such as sculptures, textiles, ceramics and woodblock prints,

largely from the Met's collection plus some on private loan. Outside the first room, "Majestic Landscape," we see a claim by an early intellectual of the genre that artists can now reproduce nature so precisely that you need not leave your house. This inscription, from the end of the first millennium, introduces the birth of realism and, roughly speaking, the landscape tradition's genesis as a recognized practice.

Inside we first see two handscrolls from the Ming period (most of the show's paintings are on scrolls). One, by an unknown 15th-century painter, depicts the four seasons horizontally from right to left on silk, and immediately we are immersed in the exquisite visual language of mists and mountains and bodies of water with all the ethereal sensitivity of a refined eye divining nature's forces. The other, a vertical scroll by the renowned 16th-century landscapist Wen Boren, illustrates a contrasting principle, that of the scholar-artist-poet using nature as a vehicle to reflect internal states, an early kind of expressionism. Here the brushstrokes—the ink's texture even—become the painter's object of focus, with close reference to artists of past centuries whose works he owned.



Daoist Robe (17th century) PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

This polarity of the realist and the expressionist runs broadly through the genre and the show itself. Hence in the next section, dedicated to "Poetic Landscape," we see a haunting depiction of a tree-form by Tang Di from 1323 of the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty, one dedicated to a poem from the eighth century. Nearby a landscape by Sima Huai, also Yuan era, rendered in gossamer minimalism floating in white space, refers to two lines from a different poet. Both artists practiced at a time when Chinese gentry-intellectuals alienated from Mongol rule sought refuge in the literati life far from court, consoled in exile by their predecessors and the melancholy mood-echoes in nature. The predicament recurred down the centuries through the Ming and Manchu dynasties and sustained the tradition even into Maoist-era exile abroad.



Tang Di's 'Landscape After a Poem by Wang Wei' (1323) PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Chief among the show's delights are horizontal scrolls so long that a room-length display case doesn't quite suffice. One such is from 1770, a Tintin-like visual chronicle of the emperor visiting river communities, inspecting infrastructure. At one end he is depicted standing on a dam apparently quizzing local officials, while at the other the locals sweep the streets in readiness, because he hasn't arrived there yet. A recent acquisition, a long scroll from 2016 by the living artist Hao Liang, is an absolute masterpiece, worthy of its place in a show full of immortals. The scroll tracks from right to left, in the styles of landscapes from the eighth century (that of obscure Taoist monks) to today, gradually gaining color as in a movie. The present features a Ferris wheel whose pods have detached, and we suddenly notice that they've appeared in past scenes. Landscape art, once the purview of emperor and aristocrat, is now available to all.



Xu Yang's 'The Qianlong Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll Four: The Confluence of the Huai and Yellow Rivers' (1770) PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The curator brings us up to date with a smallish "Landscape of Abstraction" room where we see how modernist and contemporary Chinese artists have innovated with geometric, minimalist and spatter techniques. But perhaps the most poignant comes near the end, a radiant cubist-inspired

celestial landscape from 1986 by renowned collector C.C. Wang, the last of the old literati. He salvaged so many ancient masterpieces under the Communist Revolution's shadow, ultimately settling in New York and bringing them to the Met.