

Unit 2: Guided Reflection

People in China, including painters and observers, have engaged in the practice of landscape painting and observation since China's Northern Song dynasty (960-1125) and probably long before. The painters were called "scholar-hermits" and they were highly revered in Chinese society. "Chinese elite culture at this time valued the figure of the scholar-hermit: a man whose knowledge of calligraphy, poetry, and art earned him a high place within the governmental civil service, but who simultaneously yearned to pursue these crafts outside of tedious city life" (Brown 289). The painting of landscapes generally takes place in the outdoors. "To discover their individual characteristics, you look at them from nearby" (Brown 291). However, viewing landscape paintings can take place in any physical space. "When spread out on an ambitious scale it should still have nothing superfluous. Restricted to a small view it should still lack nothing" (291). It is recommended by Guo Xi to physically view them "from a distance" (291). When painting landscapes, the painter goes to the countryside to observe what they will paint, and the action of painting is also involved. For the observer, this practice involves mentally preparing to view the image and physically viewing the paintings. For this practice, the painters would use their hands to paint, and their eyes to view the landscape. They would use paint, paintbrushes, and canvas to create the landscapes. The viewers use their eyes to observe the landscape paintings. To guide the mind silently, the painter would think about the significance of landscapes. The painter's goal was to convey a mood or idea, and to do so effectively, the painter would have to take into consideration all of the aspects of the landscape that they were trying to portray. The painter is trying to create a landscape that one would be "suitable for wandering and living" (291). The painter should focus on trying to portray the beauty and spirituality of a particular landscape. "It is with this mind that a painter should

create and a critic should examine” (291). Thus, the viewer should also focus on the beauty of a landscape, and should view it with an open mind attuned to nature. The painting and observation of landscape paintings has been an activity which has occurred regularly in China for over a thousand years since the Song dynasty, and probably longer. An unfamiliar reader should know that the act of painting and viewing landscapes has more than simply aesthetic goals. Those who paint landscapes mean for the viewers to be completely immersed in the spirituality of the landscape. It has a more philosophical underlying theme than simply the appreciation of how beautiful nature is. “To look at a particular painting puts you in the corresponding frame of mind, as though you were really on the point of going there” (293).

There are three terms which are helpful to understand when analyzing Song dynasty landscape painting and observation. The first is nature. Nature, in this context, includes the physical forces of the world along with natural and manmade formations that are part of the environment; the place in which humanity dwells. It is important to realize that nature in the context of Guo Xi’s “On Landscape Painting” does in fact include humanity. “Nature is a space inhabited by humankind, with pathways, hermits’ dwellings, and temples on the mountainside. . .nature is not something separate from humanity” (290). Nature is very significant when considering landscape painting because it is the subject of these paintings. When painting landscapes, the artist must make sure to create an image of nature that is vivid enough to encompass the viewer and take them to that place in their mind. “It is generally accepted that in landscapes there are those through which you may travel, those in which you may sightsee, those through which you may wander, and those in which you may live” (291). Nature is extremely significant to this practice because that is what is being used as a tool to transcend and become more tuned in to one’s spirituality. Landscape paintings are paintings of nature, including

mountains, clouds, mist, trees, and rivers, and “hints at human activity” (292). Images of these elements of nature are supposed to take a person to a different frame of mind, one where they are more reflective. “To look at a particular painting puts you in the corresponding frame of mind, as though you were really on the point of going there. This is the wonderful power of a painting beyond its mere mood” (293). The majesty and brilliance of nature serves, in this particular practice, as a catalyst for reflection.

The second term which is helpful in this analysis is the mind, which is our faculty for perceiving the world. When viewing landscape paintings, being in the right state of mind is the key for fully appreciating the power of the painting. “Look with a heart in tune with forest and stream, then you will value them highly. Approach with eyes of arrogance and extravagance, then you will value them but little” (291). Guo Xi emphasizes that state of mind that one must be in to properly paint and view landscapes. In order to properly paint a landscape, one must be in tune with nature and focus on the various significant aspects, including the season, time of day, the angle, and the distance. If one is not in the proper state of mind, they might not take into consideration all of these elements and the painting will be lacking in realism. The mood that the painter is trying to portray won’t be conveyed properly. When viewing a landscape, one must also be in the proper state of mind in order to fully appreciate it. “To look at a particular painting puts you in the corresponding frame of mind, as though you were really on the point of going there” (293). If one is rushed or viewing it with arrogance, then they will not fully appreciate all of the aspects of the landscape which come together to make it a spiritual experience. The mind is an extremely important element of this practice because it is the key component involving reflection.

The third term which is helpful in the analysis of landscape painting and observation is the Song Dynasty. The Song Dynasty was an era in China that lasted from 960-1125 CE and hosted one of the most brilliant cultural epochs of China. “The Song dynasty is particularly noted for the great artistic achievements that it encouraged and, in part, subsidized... The greatest poets and painters in the empire were in attendance at court.” (EB “Song Dynasty” p. 1). The Song dynasty is significant in this practice of landscape painting and appreciation because it provides an element of community in this analysis. The court, which was an important feature of society during this time, encouraged and esteemed painters and artists. “Chinese elite culture at this time valued the figure of the scholar-hermit” (289). Because the culture of the Song dynasty respected art, and sometimes even endorsed it, art was sought after, and therefore produced in abundance. “Guo Xi was one of the most important landscape painters of China’s Northern Song dynasty (960-1125)” (289). Had the Song dynasty not been as appreciative of art, the practice of landscape painting might not have been esteemed as greatly, and Guo Xi may not have written “The Significance of Landscape.”

My daily practice reminds me of the painting and observation of landscapes because I see a parallel with the set-up of both practices, along with the actual practice itself. In the painting of landscapes, the artist would have to set up their materials and get themselves in the right state of mind to prepare them to paint what they wanted to portray to the viewers. When the landscapes are painted, they are painted outside, and when they are viewed, they are viewed inside. In my daily practice, I have to set up my materials as well, including paints, paintbrushes, and paper. I also prepare myself by getting in the right state of mind for what I want to paint. When I do my daily practice, I like to paint outside as well, but sometimes I have to paint inside. There is mental preparation involved in both the practice of landscape painting and observation and in my

daily practice, which consists of getting oneself in the proper state of mind to convey or absorb a particular mood and idea. The significance of the landscape had to be taken into consideration, and when I prepare to paint for my daily practice I also have to think about the significance of what I want to paint, and the mood that I want my viewer to experience from looking at it. I believe that there is a parallel between my daily practice and the landscape painting and viewing because both of these practices involve evoking specific moods and emotions, depending on what the artist wants to convey in each particular painting, and they are both very spiritual.

There are also some very prominent differences between my daily practice and landscape painting. My paintings are done on a very small scale, while the landscape paintings are mostly large-scale works of art. Landscape paintings consist of many different and detailed elements, and my paintings are often very simple. My paintings are done in a matter of minutes each day, while the landscape paintings are done over a longer length of time. The moods and emotions involved in the landscape paintings have a little bit more of a religious nature than my daily practice.

In conclusion, the painting and observation of landscape paintings was an extremely important aspect of practice and reflection during the Song dynasty in China. Nature, mind, and the Song dynasty are all very significant terms when analyzing this practice, and it is important to understand these terms because they all help to explain elements of practice, reflection, and community. There are many parallels between landscape painting and my daily practice, as well as a few contrasts. In understanding what is involved with the creation and viewing of landscape paintings, one can understand the elements of practice and reflection which are involved with my daily painting and hopefully better appreciate the aspects which make up both of the different practices.