Some Relationships between Poetry and Painting in China

By **Jonathan Chaves**

SU TUNG-P'O 蘇東坡 (1037-1101) once said of Wang Wei 王維 (701-761) that "there is poetry in his painting and painting in his poetry." This has become the most frequently repeated quotation on the relationship of Chinese poetry and painting, a relationship which has often been discussed by students of these subjects.

There are many ways in which the two arts relate to each other in China—in this paper I would like to call attention to several which would be fruitful areas for more intensive study.

To begin with, poems often can be used as sources by art historians. For example, the important Northern Sung poet Mei Yao-ch'en 梅堯臣 (1002-1060) wrote a great many poems that deal with painting and calligraphy. Some of these are useful for determining contemporary attitudes toward the art of painting. Here is part of a poem by Mei on a picture by the monk Chü-ning 居寧:[1]

On Seeing a Painting of
Plants and Insects by Chü-ning

When the ancients painted swans and
tigers
They turned out looking like ducks and
dogs.
But now I see these painted insects
Successful both in feeling and in form.
The walkers truly seem to move,
The fliers truly seem to soar,
The fighters seem to raise their limbs,
The chirpers seem to swell their chests,
The jumpers really move their legs,
The starers really fix their eyes!
And so I learn that the Creator's power
Cannot match the agility of the artist's
brush.

觀居寧畫草蟲

古人畫虎鵠,
尚類狗與鶩。
今看畫羽蟲,
形意兩俱足。
行者勢若去,
飛者翻若逐。
拒者如舉臂,
鳴者如動腹。
躍者趯其股,
顧者注其目。
乃知造物靈,
未抵毫端速。

It is evident that Mei considers realism to be a primary criterion for evaluating painting. In addition, he expresses the idea that modern artists, such as Chü-ning, surpass the ancients in the field of "flower and bird" painting. Kuo Jo-hsü 郭若虛, an important eleventh century writer on painting, also felt that "in landscape, forests and rocks, flowers and bamboo, and creatures and fish, the ancients are not as good as the moderns."[2]

Another poem by Mei[3] illustrates other ways in which poetry may be of use to the art historian. Here, Mei describes some of the paintings in the collection of a certain Ho Chün-pao 何君寶. The poem begins with a long discursus on water-buffalo painting. Mei explains that it is much harder to paint water-buffaloes than to paint horses, as the fine hairs of a horse can be suggested by an overall hazy treatment, while the sparse hairs of a water-buffalo must be painstakingly depicted. All of this is by way of introduction to a scroll by the famous T'ang water-buffalo painter

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[1] *Wan-ling chi* 宛陵集 (in *Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an*), 10/13a.

[2] Kuo Jo-hsü, *T'u-hua chien-wen chih* 圖畫見聞誌 (in *Mei-shu ts'ung-k'an* 美術叢刊, Vol. II, Taipei, 1964), p. 56.

[3] *Wan-ling chi*, 15/1a-2a.

Tai Sung 戴嵩, which Mei saw at Mr. Ho's house. He proceeds to describe a scene of two water-buffaloes fighting, and his description, although written in the difficult medium of verse, is considerably more detailed than the brief entries often found in the better-known painting catalogues. Toward the end of the scroll, Mei continues, is a red seal with characters which read, "Secretary T'ao." Mei relates how the Secretary, who lived "early in the dynasty", collected many paintings, "not sparing cash or silk." But his descendants, not faring as well financially as their illustrious ancestor, were forced to sell his collection in the market place. In this way the Tai Sung work came into Mr. Ho's hands. This section of the poem would be of invaluable aid to students of T'ang painting, as there are no extant authentic works by Tai Sung, to my knowledge.

Mei goes on to describe in detail a scroll of famous legendary and historical scenes by the famous T'ang figure painter, Yen Li-pen 閻立本 (d. 673), including such episodes as the Dark Lady 玄女, a goddess, handing a magic military talisman to the Yellow Emperor, the last emperor of the Shang dynasty indulging in various perversions, and King Fu-ch'ai 夫差 of Wu entertaining the great beauty, Hsi-shih 西施. As a whole, the poem provides us with a fascinating account of an eleventh century collection of paintings, as well as with detailed descriptions of individual works.

MEI YAO-CH'EN was a poet who was interested in painting. With poets who were also painters, we come closer to the heart of our theme. In the West, such a combination of talents was rare—one thinks of Michelangelo, best known as a painter but an excellent poet as well. But only in William Blake do we find a figure who corresponds somewhat to the Chinese conception of the poet-painter. Blake too, in addition to being adept in both arts, combined them in integral works, particularly in his illuminated books, such as *Jerusalem*. And in Blake, as in Chinese art, the relationship between text and picture was often complex, each offering a counterpoint to the other.

Poet-painters are more frequently encountered in China. Perhaps the most famous are Wang Wei and Su Tung-p'o. To their names should be added those of an important circle of Ming poet-painters who flourished in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries—Shen Chou 沈周 (1427-1509), his pupil Wen Cheng-ming 文徵明 (1470-1559), and Wen's friend, T'ang Yin 唐寅 (1470-1523). All three men are best known as painters, but all were fine poets as well, in particular Shen Chou. In fact, one Chinese writer complained that "although Shen has written some outstanding poems, they have been obscured by his fame as a painter."[4] Because no authentic paintings by Wang Wei survive, and few if any by Su Tung-p'o, the works of these Ming artists, who form the core of the so-called "Wu" school 吳派, provide more accessible sources for the study of our subject.

Su Tung-p'o was the central figure in the first circle of true *wen-jen* 文人, or literati poet-painters. Other members of the circle were the poet and calligrapher, Huang T'ing-chien 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), the painter Li Kung-lin 李公麟 (c.1040-1106), and the painter, calligrapher and critic, Mi Fu 米芾 (1051-1107). Something of the spirit which prevailed among these men is suggested by a poem written by Huang T'ing-chien about a picture entitled *Herdboy with Bamboo and Rock*, jointly painted by Su Tung-p'o and Li Kung-lin. The poem is preceded by a brief prose preface:[5]

> Su Tung-p'o painted a clump of bamboo and a fantastic rock. Li Kung-lin added a slope in the foreground and a herdboy riding a water-buffalo. The picture, full of life, has inspired these playful verses:

題竹石牧牛 并引

子瞻畫叢竹怪石。伯時增前坡牧兒騎牛，甚有意態。戲詠。

Here's a little craggy rock in a wild place,
shadowed by green bamboo.
A herdboy, wielding a three-foot stick,
drives his lumbering old water-buffalo.
I love the rock! Don't let the buffalo rub
his horns on it!
Well, all right, let him rub his horns—but
if he gets too rough he'll break the
bamboo!

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[4] Quoted in *Ming shih tsung* 明詩綜, 26/1a.

[5] P'an Po-ying 潘伯鷹, *Huang T'ing-chien shih hsüan* 黃庭堅詩選 (Hong Kong, 1958), p. 31.

野次小崢嶸,
幽篁相倚綠;
阿童三尺箠,
御此老觳觫。
石吾甚爱之,
勿遣牛礪角!
牛礪角尚可,
牛鬬殘我竹!

Here we have another aspect of the poetry-painting relationship in China—a poem inspired by a painting. Such poems often went beyond mere description of the painting in question, and became vehicles for the expression of the poet's own feelings. Another example would be Su Tung-p'o's own superb poem about a painting by his contemporary, the landscapist Wang Shen 王詵:[6]

Inscribed on the Painting "Misty River and Tiered Mountains" in the Collection of Wang Ting-kuo

Saddening my heart, a thousand tiers of mountains along the river
Shimmer with blue-green colors across the sky like clouds or mist.
Are they mountains? Are they clouds? It's hard to tell,
But when mist opens and clouds disperse, the mountains remain.
Here I see two verdant cliffs, shadowing a deep valley,
And a hundred cascades that fly down the cliffs,
Twist through forests, coil around rocks, hide and reappear,
Then rush down to the valley mouth to form a stream.
The stream grows calm, the mountains open, and the foothill forests end;
A tiny bridge and rustic shops lean against the mountain.
Travelers pass beyond the tall trees;
A fishing boat floats, light as a leaf;
The river swallows the sky.

Where did the Governor find this painting,
Its limpid beauties brushed by such a sensitive hand?
Where in our world is there such a place?
I'd go there now, and buy myself an acre or two of land!
But I remember an isolated spot at Fan-k'ou, near Wu-ch'ang,
Where the Gentleman of the Eastern Slope resided for five years.
Spring breezes rippled the river; the sky was vast.
Summer rain clouds curled up at dusk; the mountain glowed.
Crows shook branches of red maple leaves before my river home;
Winter snows, dropping from towering pines, woke me from my drunken sleep.
The flowing waters of Peach Blossom Spring are in this world;
Why insist that the Wu-ling story was only a fairy tale?

But the rivers and mountains are fresh and pure, while I am covered with dust;
There may be a path that leads to them, but it's hard to find.
With many a sigh, I return the scroll,
And wait for a friend who lives in these mountains to send me a poem, "Come Back!"

書王定國所藏
烟江疊嶂圖

江上愁心千疊山,
浮空積翠如雲煙,
山耶雲耶遠莫知,
煙空雲散山依然,
但見兩崖蒼蒼暗絕谷,
中有百道飛來泉,
縈林絡石隱復見,
下赴谷口爲奔川。
川平山開林麓斷,
小橋野店依山前,
行人稍度喬木外,
漁舟一葉江吞天,
使君何從得此本?
點綴毫末分清妍。
不知人間何處有此境?
徑欲往買二頃田。
君不見武昌樊口幽絕處,

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[6] Ch'en Erh-tung 陳邇東, *Su Tung-p'o shih hsüan* 蘇東坡詩選 (Hong Kong, 1965), pp. 212-213.

東坡先生留五年。
春風搖江天漠漠,
暮雲卷雨山娟娟,
丹楓翻鴉伴水宿,
長松落雪驚晝眠。
桃花流水在人世,
武陵豈必皆神僊?
江山淸空我塵土,
雖有去路尋無緣。
還君此畫三嘆息,
山中古人應有招我歸來篇。

The opposite phenomenon also occurred—that is, painting might be inspired by poems. To take another example from the Su Tung-p'o circle, the second of Su's famous pair of prose-poems on the Red Cliff inspired a superb handscroll by the little-known painter, Ch'iao Chung-ch'ang 喬仲常 (active first half twelfth century), a follower and possible relative of Li Kung-lin. In this work, now in the John M. Crawford, Jr. collection,[7] Ch'iao has been faithful to the text in such details as the shadows of Su and his friends which appear at the beginning of the scroll, possibly the only known depictions of human shadows in Chinese painting, but has added details which do not appear in the poem, such as the horse and the sleeping groom in the stable. The text of the poem is divided into sections which are inscribed at various stages along the scroll, possibly by someone other than the painter himself. Thus painting, poetry and calligraphy are brought together in a single work of art.

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[7] *Chinese Calligraphy and Painting In the Collection of John M. Crawford, Jr.* (New York, 1962), pp. 72-75 and plates 15, 16.

Plate 58 ON THE RED CLIFF. Handscroll by Ch'iao Chung-ch'ang, illustrating Su Tung-p'o's second prose-poem by this name. John M. Crawford, Jr.'s collection. Beginning section.

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Plate 59 ON THE RED CLIFF, by Ch'iao Chung-ch'ang. Section.

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Plate 60 ON THE RED CLIFF, by Ch'iao Chung-ch'ang. Section.

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THE PRACTICE OF inscribing poems on paintings, or on special sections of paper or silk attached to the paintings for this purpose, was another aspect of the poetry-painting relationship. The poem might be a work by a poet of the past, or by the artist himself, and the calligraphy might be written by the artist, a friend of his, or a later owner or connoisseur. When painter, poet and calligrapher were the same person, the result was that unique product of Chinese literati culture, the work of art in which three forms of expression perfectly complement each other and create a whole which is more than the sum of its parts.

A perfect example of this is a small handscroll by Wu Chen 吳鎮 (1280-1354), one of the Four Masters of Yuan painting, in the John M. Crawford, Jr. collection.[8] Wu has inscribed a poem of his own composition in the upper right-hand corner or the picture. The poem may be translated,

West of the village, evening rays linger on
red leaves
As the moon rises over yellow reeds on
the sandbank.
The fisherman moves his paddle, thinking
of home—
His pole, lying in its rack, will catch no
more fish today.

漁父圖

紅葉村西夕照餘，
黃蘆灘畔月痕初;
輕撥棹，且歸與，
掛起漁竿不釣魚。

The poem adds two images which are entirely absent from the painting—those of the village and the moon ("moon shadows" in the original text), —and colors the leaves and reeds red and yellow, although in the picture they are done in shades of gray ink. We learn that it is sunset, and that the fisherman is thinking of returning home. Because these imagistic and psychological enhancements of the picture are expressed in words, they affect the viewer on a subtler level than the purely visual, and deepen his experience of the total work of art.

Another work of this kind is the hanging scroll, *Drunken Fisherman by a Reed Bank*, also in the Crawford collection,[9] by T'ang Yin, one of the Wu school painters referred to earlier. The poem in the upper right-hand corner of the picture is again by the artist himself, and reads,

Punting pole stuck in the reeds, he ties up
his boat;
Late at night, the moon climbs to the top
of the pole.
The old fisherman is dead drunk—call
him, he won't wake up—
In the morning he rises, frost-prints on
the shadow of his raincoat.

釣題魚翁畫

插篙葦渚繫舴艋，
夜深月上當竿頂;
老漁爛醉喚不醒，
滿船霜印簑衣影。

Here again, the poem contains images which are not seen in the painting—the frost and the shadow of the fisherman's raincoat—and refers to the psychological state of the fisherman; in this case, he is drunk! In addition, the slightly off-balance, spiky calligraphy echoes the swaying, sharp-leaved reeds below, and also, perhaps, hints at the fisherman's inebriation. Obviously, the poem is not merely a description of the painting, nor the painting an illustration to the poem—the poem, the painting and the calligraphy are complementary elements of an aesthetically integrated creation.

STILL ANOTHER aspect of the relationship between poetry and painting in China is the fact that the two arts share the same images, and that these tend to be traditional, or conventional. An excellent example is the fisherman as an exemplar of Taoist freedom, an image which occurred in the poems and paintings of Wu Chen and T'ang Yin just discussed. In painting, the image can be traced back to a T'ang catalogue, the *Chen-kuan kung-ssu hua-shih* 貞觀公私畫史 by P'ei Hsiao-yuan 裴孝源 (preface dated 639), where a painting of a fisherman is attributed to a Six Dynasties painter.[10] The image then continues to occur throughout the history of Chinese painting. In poetry, the *locus classicus* is the poem on the fisherman in the *Ch'u Tz'u* 楚詞 anthology, the poem in question being dated by David Hawkes to the third century B.C.[11]

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[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108 and plate 29.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139 and plate 39.

The standard images of both arts were, in fact, catalogued in two important encyclopedias, both published in the early eighteenth century. One, the famous *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (*Chieh tzu yuan hua chuan* 芥子園畫傳, translated as *The Tao of Painting* by Mai-mai Sze, Bollingen, 1956), appeared in its final form in 1701. This work is a collection of all the traditional images of Chinese painting—mountains and rocks, painted in various styles, trees and flowers of many kinds, birds and insects, temples, villas, and scholars and fishermen in boats.

The other encyclopedia is the *P'ei-wen yün-fu* 佩文韻府, the *P'ei-wen Treasury of Rhymes*, published in 1711, but using material going back to the Yuan dynasty. This is a compendium of poetic images and phrases, each of which is quoted in chronologically arranged passages. Every image in the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* can be found here as well. Under the heading "fisherman" (*yü-fu* 漁父), the passages quoted range from the *Ch'u tz'u* poem to a couplet by Su Tung-p'o:

I should meet the old fisherman here,
Winding his way through the reeds.

應逢古漁父，
葦間自延緣。

That poetry and painting shared the same traditional images suggests a similarity in the creative process of both arts. The point also gives rise to an important question: how does the artist express his individuality in an essentially conservative artistic milieu? An interesting passage from the writings of the late Sung thinker and poet, Ho Ching 郝經 (1223-1275) may help to throw some light on this problem. "The writers of past and present," he states, "have not necessarily sought to make the style (*fa* 法) of another person their own style. They have only comprehended the basic patterns (*li* 理). When one has fully comprehended the basic patterns of Heaven and Earth, then creativity will inhere in the Self (*wo* 我)."[12] The idea appears to be that mere imitation of others is not creativity—intense personal experience must precede any form of artistic creation. But the stuff of that experience will ultimately consist of the essential truths which the great artists of the past have also discovered. Thus the poet and the painter will reach a point where the expression of an individual perception and the expression of the Absolute are one and the same.

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[10] In *Mei-shu ts'ung-k'an*, Vol. I (Taipei, 1963), p. 45. The painter's name is Shih I 史藝.

[11] David Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'u: The Songs of the South* (Oxford, 1959), p. 88.

[12] Quoted in Kuo Shao-yü 郭紹虞, *Chung-kuo wen-hsüeh p'i-p'ing shih* 中國文學批評史 (Hong Kong, *Hung-chih shu-tien* 宏智書店), p. 271.