A Curriculum Plan Based on a Sung Dynasty Landscape Artist's Work and Techniques

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A Curriculum Plan Based on a Sung Dynasty Landscape Artist's Work and Techniques

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An Exploration of Sung Dynasty Chinese Landscape Paintings
Focused Around the Works of Yen Wen-kuei

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Abstract

This paper explores Sung Dynasty landscape paintings with focused attention on the works of Yen Wen-kuei. Comparison to Western art is apparent throughout the paper as an aide in using this information to create a unit of study suitable for high school art. The paper focuses around the context of the time period, materials used, style, presentation, viewer involvement, technique and thought process. The exemplar of Yen Wen-kuei is then dissected to give tangible evidence to the study.
An Exploration of Sung Dynasty Chinese Landscape Paintings Focused Around the Works of Yen Wen-kuei

Introduction

Traditional high school art curriculums do not generally include extensive non-Western art. With the educational emphasis on globalization, it is vital to expose high school students to various non-Western art and theories of thought. Within the realm of studying artistic style and meaning, Sung Dynasty landscape art varies from our Western methods. Our Western approach to art has roots in European evolution. The Eastern portion of the world evolved more or less independent of the West. Thus, it only makes sense that the art has come about through different means. Techniques, materials and the thought processes are all different in some ways. This paper takes a look at Sung period landscape paintings, focusing on Yen Wen-kuei, as a launch-pad for creating a unit suitable for high school art education emphasizing non-Western art.

The paper will take a “funnel” approach to the information here. First, I will briefly cover the scholarly setting of the Sung Dynasty in relation to art. This includes touching on the reigning government chance, ideas of thought, and religion and how all of these aspect affect the means of art production. Then, after defining the topic, there will be an extensive portion of the paper devoted to how and why landscape paintings of the Sung Dynasty were constructed. Using this information as a basis, I will introduce one of the masters of the time, Yen Wen-kuei, his style and influences. To go into great detail on any of these areas, especially the thought process would take years of research and be over-sought for the audience intended to gain the most from this work, namely high school educators and students. This paper is presented to
explore Sung Dynasty Chinese landscape art with the intent to gather acceptable information to teach at the high school level.

Context of Time Period

In order to better understand Sung Dynasty landscape paintings, one must first have an idea of the artistic arena in which this style flourished. The general consensus is that although landscape art in China has and will go on for generations, the mastery of landscape painting is during the Sung Dynasty. The first “realistic” landscapes came about in Sui and T’ang times, from 581 to 906 CE (Loehr, 1980). Thus, by the Sung era, lasting from 960 to 1279 CE, landscape painting was not a new invention. Landscapes were merely further developed during the Sung Dynasty. According to Fong (1973), “the monumental landscape style, in the ascendant since the first half of the tenth century, reached its apogee around the middle of the eleventh century” (p. 17). He suggests that the world had never seen landscapes that reach the artistic degree of development as those of the Sung painters. This is agreed upon by other scholars such as Sickman and Soper (1978) who state that, “within the space of little more than a hundred years there occur some of the most imposing names in landscape painting” (p. 203).

This great achievement of landscape painting is the motivation for looking further into Sung paintings. Although most scholars divide the Sung Dynasty into the North (960-1127 CE) and South (1127-1279 CE), for the educational purpose here, we will consider the entire time period of both North and South as the Sung Dynasty. The beginning of the Sung Dynasty was a rebuilding from the crumbling of the Five Dynasties (907-960 CE) in the north and ten kingdoms
coming out of the T'ang Dynasty (618-907 CE) in the south. Michael Sullivan (1984) explained the effects of the political situation on scholarly development as:

The northern Five Dynasties were in a state of such constant civil war that it is surprising that any painting was produced in the north at all. By comparison, the petty kingdoms of the south were peaceful, and the cities and courts of Nanking and Chengtu became havens of refuge for scholars, poets, and painters fleeing from the north, who brought with them the remnants of T'ang imperial culture. By 960 the founder of the Sung Dynasty had conquered the northern states and established his capital at Pien-ching (modern Kaifeng), but it was another fifteen years before he succeeded in mopping up the southern kingdoms and unifying the empire once more. (p. 56)

As the turmoil of changing leadership and redefining boundaries always affects culture bounds, it followed that "intellectual and artistic life during the Sung...was concentrated in the capitals and provincial cities" (Willetts, 1965, p. 291).

One cannot discuss the exterior effects of culture on art without also discussing the theology of the time period. Kuo Hsi, a Taoist master of landscape painting born in Honan Province about 1020, wrote *Essay on Landscape Painting* to his sons. The book later became a text-like guide for many generations to follow. In the forward to Kuo Hsi's *Essay on Landscape Painting* (1959), the point is made that discussing any Chinese art or culture is impossible without also consciously thinking about the religious ideals of China. The book states, "Chinese Taoism and Indian Buddhism profoundly modified by its contact with native thought are the parents of Sung Art" (*ibid.*, p. 11). The religious content and thought so influenced the reasons for painting; one must discuss religion when talking about the art. However, with Taoism,
Confucianism, and Buddhism all intermingling in the culture, there are different motivations to paint during the Sung Dynasty. One example is this simple explanation of Taoist thought on the Confucian style idea of "knowledge for knowledge's sake"

As for knowledge for the sake of knowledge, the Taoist would say in effect, 'You know something? Then make a song, a dance, a silken robe of it. But please refrain from sweeping the room with your sleeves'. (Hsi, 1959, p. 16)

Another view is best described by Li Ch'eng who is thought to have said

Since antiquity the four social classes have not mixed. I am a Confucian scholar, and although I paint, I do it only for my own pleasure. Why should I submit to being a retainer in a great household who grinds and licks his colours and is classed with the hua shih [i.e., men who hold office by virtue of their skill as painters] and other such riffraff? (Sullivan, 1979, p. 63).

As one can see, this is more a view of knowledge for knowledge's sake, which plays into the idea of painting landscapes. Scholars of art held different views of why to paint, but they still had a desire to paint and to learn by the process of capturing nature on a canvas. Thus, with the outlook of beauty on the earth, it is easy to see how and why Sung artists were motivated to paint landscapes above other subject (Hsi1959).

Although a fair amount is known about the political environment of Chinese history, the theology, and the affects of both on art, the history of Chinese art is a much grayer area. "There are almost no documents about early Chinese painters...no municipal archives; no accounts, or letters from patrons; and no scientific tests yet devised that will establish whether the ink and silk
of a Chinese scroll were made in the tenth century or in the fourteenth” (Sullivan, 1984, p. 58).

Sickman and Soper (1978) observed

Almost anything one may say about the individual styles of these famous painters will be in the realm of speculation. Actually we know very little about them save the traditions that have been handed down by painters, art historians, critics, and collectors. (p. 203)

To make scroll paintings that we specifically look at even harder to decipher, one may look to the process of attributions on the scrolls.

It has probably happened that, when a good and ancient painting came into the hands of a collector and, in his opinion, met the requirements of the traditional style of a given master, the name of that master would be affixed either on the painting itself or the outer label, and so an attribution would begin. (ibid.)

Thus, there are few paintings from the Sung Dynasty that we can confidently claim as works by the actual hand of one master or another. However, each master definitely had a style similar to the others of the period, yet completely his own. This can be seen by observing works traditionally attributed to any of the master artists, even though very few are likely originals (Sirén, 1956). To complicate matters more, there is little clear research on Chinese artists, especially in the Western world. Sickman and Soper (1978) say, “…each painting, its history, and its claims to antiquity, presents an individual problem. There does seem to be, however, a body of tradition about the styles of early painters that is relatively consistent” (p. 203). By looking at paintings of the Sung Dynasty in counterpoint to those of later dates, one can see there are definite similarities in style that argue for this observation. There may be few definite facts
know about various masters, but there is a large body of works of the Sung period than can be compared for knowledge about general styles and techniques.

Viewing a more physical aspect of the Sung period landscapes, a few things should be noted. First, most landscapes of the time were monochromatic with a variation in value but color was used only by a few masters (Siren, 1956). Also, there was a movement away from realism, that according to Sullivan (1979), was due to the social order of things. He states

In the Sung Dynasty, partly perhaps because of the high prestige accorded the scholar, the gap between the educated man and the rest of society began to widen, and scholars began to feel that it was beneath their dignity as gentlemen to know how a waterwheel was constructed (much less to construct one themselves), to depict the daily life of the common people (except in a humorous way), or to soil their fingers with any implement more utilitarian than a writing-brush. ... The effects of the unwillingness to accept the implications of a scientific approach to nature only gradually became apparent in landscape painting, however. There was no sudden break with the monumental realism that Fan K’uan and Kuo Chung-shu had forged; their styles were instead gradually frozen, as it were, into an official court style. (p. 74)

Even through the previous quote, one grasps an idea the sociopolitical and theological ideas of the time affected how and why landscape pictures were painted.
Landscape Painting

With a light understanding of the sociopolitical and theological ideas of the Sung Dynasty, as a basis for exploring landscape painting, the paper henceforth dissects Sung landscape paintings through materials, style, presentation, viewer involvement, techniques, and thought process. Where appropriate, comparison will be made to Western teachings in hopes of aiding the teaching process through previous knowledge. Unlike traditional Western schools of painting which has explored a variety of mediums such as oil, tempera and watercolor, Sung landscape painting is done most consistently with ink on silk (or paper). Here we will explore the traditional materials used to create these masterpieces, as well as the physical appearance of the landscapes. We will then go into the more philosophical techniques, themes, etc., and finally skim the surface of Chinese thought associated with landscape painting.

Materials

Drawing or painting (here used interchangeably) Chinese landscapes is very methodical in the materials used. Unlike Western paintings that have gone through numerous mediums such as egg tempura, oil, acrylic, watercolor, and gouache over time, Chinese landscapes have a history of ink. The ink is drawn onto either silk or paper. The works that have survived of the masters discussed in this paper are most often done on silk. With China being famous for its fine silk, it is natural that paintings were often done on this material. However, by Sung times, paper was also very commonly used for drawings. Artists used chih, or paper, because it was cheaper than silk. The first records of chih used in China date back to 105 CE, meaning that paper was
more than likely in use before then. This is well before the first records of organic-based papers in Europe (Willetts, 1965).

To place markings on the paper or silk, masters used natural hair brushes similar to Western style watercolor brushes. The most common brushes come to a much finer point than Western brushes, yet have a wide diameter at the ferrel, so as to hold a large amount of ink. Artists also used wider flat brushes for large washes. Most commonly, the bristles of a brush would be set into bamboo handles. Kuo Hsi (1959) discussed technique of holding the brush so that one could “practise a free and unhesitating movement of the elbow in the employment of the brush” (p. 61). To an artist, this is a common technique to allow smooth, flowing lines and washes instead of a more sketchy appearance that comes from just moving at the wrist.

*Mo*, or Chinese ink in the form of a stick, is an intriguing substance. It is very traditional to draw/paint with ink in much of Chinese art, not just landscape paintings. Willetts (1965) defines *mo* as “a fluid suspension of black carbon particles in an aqueous solution containing glue” (p. 293). *Mo* is made from one of three types of substances: 1) burning vegetable oils and fats including lacquer (called lamp black), 2) china wood oil, also called *t'ung*, or 3) soot of several woods, pine being the blackest. To make ink sticks, the carbon deposits are placed in pottery jars and liquid glue is added. The best glue is made from donkey hides. The glue is poured through a sieve into the jar at a ratio of two parts carbon to one part glue. This mixture is heated for a few hours, then pounded. Musk and camphor are added to mask the animal glue scent. The substance can then be molded into sticks or disks and left to harden (*ibid.*). The Chinese masters took their inks very seriously. Willetts (1965) states that
No ink-stick was considered mature until it was at least a few years old, and really ancient pedigreed sticks commanded fantastic prices. Thus by the time of Hui-tsung, Li T'ing-kuei's sticks were reputedly worth their weight in gold. (p. 294)

To create ink of various values to draw with, a stick was ground against an ink stone, generally made of slate, which had a shallow well for water. The ground ink would mix with the water to create various consistencies and values of ink that would then be transferred to bowls to dip brushes in.

Artists would use the ink in a variety of strokes and washes to create the landscapes. The brushed on ink would be in a manner similar to calligraphy markings to "draw" trees, villages, etc. in the landscapes. A great effect on the paintings was "achieved largely through a sophisticated use of ink wash" (Fong, 1973, p. 22). Sickman and Soper (1978) defined this use of wash as, "A technical device for creating a sense of depth is that of silhouetting the top or edge of one rock mass or clump of trees against an area of plain silk or very light ink wash suggesting mist" (p. 214). This technique of mist is common to virtually all landscapes of the period.

*Style, Presentation, and Viewer Involvement*

The formats of Chinese landscapes fall into two categories, hanging scrolls and hand scrolls. This paper explores both formats. When simply referring to "scrolls" it can be assumed both formats are being discussed together. Hand scrolls are long, horizontal pieces meant to be looked at a little at a time. Hanging scrolls are vertical pieces to hang upon a wall. Some hanging scrolls were painted as such, in the vertical position. Others were once part of a hand scroll. Most Chinese landscapes are "hanging scrolls," now. At one time the hanging scrolls
were part of a much larger piece. Very few hand scrolls are in tact today as the large horizontal expanses. Sullivan (1979) explained the means of this evolution.

These standing screen paintings, sometimes as large as the largest of Turner’s canvases, challenged the painter to compose on a far grander scale than did the comparatively narrow hanging scrolls and hand scrolls that we see today. They were treated as furniture and as room-dividers in the open-plan pavilions of the Chinese palace or mansion; they were even carried out into the garden to serve as protection from the wind. Not surprisingly, after a few years of this kind of treatment the paintings stretched on these screens became so stained or tattered that they were simply thrown away, or the parts that could be saved were cut up and mounted as scrolls. (p. 61)

These large hand scrolls were meant to be viewed partially. “The hand-scroll is never spread out and viewed in its entirety, because to do so violates its spirit and its purpose” (Sickman & Soper, 1978, p. 212). “Scrolls of this kind are mounted on a roll and are opened from right to left, flat on a table, the viewer seeing no more than about two feet at a time” (ibid., p. 211). This style created a sense of time, almost like a road trip through the painting. Because of this style, multiple perspectives were also needed. These perspectives are discussed later, but it should be noted here that one reason for this is the sense of travel. On a long scroll, if there was only one viewer perspective point, unrolling the scroll would not logically make sense visually. Sickman and Soper (1978) compare this progressive style to that of Western music that is developing a theme. Unrolling the scroll so that the view must “walk” through the painting brings an interesting fourth dimension (time) to a piece of artwork, not commonly placed in Western art (Sullivan, 1984).
The progression of a hand scroll had a format similar to quality short literature. All hand scrolls needed a beginning, middle, and end. There was to be repetition of theme and rhythm consistent in the work, and a balanced variety of major and minor elements to the composition (Sickman & Soper, 1978). A typical composition

...opens with a passage of trees, rocks or buildings quite close to the spectator; the scene then moves back into the middle or far distance, changing rapidly in scale; again elements come close to the foreground and the mountains build up to a dramatic climax as one dominating peak soars beyond the upper confines of the scroll; the view then again pushes back and vistas open to the most distant hills.

(ibid., p.212)

Both large scroll formats are just one of the ways Chinese landscape paintings demand viewer involvement. Sickman and Soper (1978) wrote “Chinese painting...dares to demand a reciprocal effort from the observer...” (p. 204). This is not just a theory developed after studying the scrolls. Kuo Hsi wrote in his An Essay on Landscape Painting (1959) on how there are different types of landscapes; ones a viewer can travel in, gaze upon, ramble through, or dwell in. Kuo Hsi believed that to be able to dwell in or ramble through a painting was the ultimate goal of the artist. The artist was to create a painting that gave the viewer a sense of yearning for the reality of the landscape.

Even though the scrolls are large in format, Sullivan (1979) comments on the fact that most paintings “...are meant to be examined closely, as if one could walk right into them” (pp. 66-67). No detail evaded the artist’s eye nor brush. In discussion a work by Fan K’uan, Sullivan (1979) again gives a wonderful sense of the artists’ goals in viewer involvement.
This is not a picture to stand back from, grand as it is, but to lose oneself in. Fan K’uan’s aim is to make us feel that we are not looking at a picture at all but actually standing on those rocks beneath that great cliff, until, as we gaze on it, the sounds of the world about us fade away, and we hear the wind in the trees, the thunder of the waterfall, the clatter of hooves on the stony path. (p. 69)

The Sung Dynasty landscape ideal was that you (as a viewer) felt like you were in the picture and that you could hear the sounds, feel the atmosphere, and smell the land (Sullivan 1984). To aid in this reality, often the human figure was added to the scape as not more than the size of a pin head to emphasize the vastness of the image (Sickman & Soper, 1978). Also, an artist, although having the liberty to alter a landscape to an ideal setting, had to keep in mind the common sense elements of nature. Kuo Hsi (1959) wrote

An inn and hut stand by a ravine and not by a delta. They are in the ravine to be near the water; they are not by the delta because of the danger of flood. Even if some do stand by the delta, they are always in a place where there is no danger of flood. Villages are situated on the plain and not on the mountain, because the plain offers land convenient for cultivation, while hills are too far removed from arable land. Though some villages are built among the mountains, these are near to arable land among the hills. (p. 60)

By keeping the landscape “true to life”, it is easier for the mind to take a viewer into the composition. Thus are some of the elements of presentation typical to Sung Dynasty Chinese landscapes.
Techniques

When discussing technique here, the term technique is used in a very loose way to encompass various aspects of the physical composition as well as brush strokes. The brush strokes themselves have to be carefully considered, since one cannot undo or cover ink and thus must work quickly with the image already set in mind (Willetts, 1965). Willetts (1965) quoted a Sung scholar, Su Shin as saying

‘To paint the bamboo, one must have it entirely within one. Grasp the brush, look intently [at the paper], then visualize what you are going to paint. Follow your vision quickly, lift your brush and pursue directly that which you see, as a falcon dives on the springing hare – the least slackening and it will escape you.’ (p. 303)

This exudes the confidence of brushwork so commonly seen in Sung landscapes. Sickman and Soper (1978) suggest on this matter, “There is enough ink to suggest perfectly the texture, character, and structure of the rocks, but never so much that the vigorous quality of each brush-stroke is concealed” (p. 214). These brush-strokes are often associated with ax-cuts into wood. Sullivan (1979) discusses these ax-marks as “making effective use of silhouettes and dark ink accents, pushing the foreground over to one corner to open up an unlimited vista into the haze, where the distant mountains seem to float like clouds in the evening light” (p. 79). The brushwork is truly what brings the works alive.

One of the most discussed topics of technique when referring to Sung Dynasty landscape art is that of perspective. As stated before, the masters used a shifting perspective, which followed the idea of the progressive, unrolling scroll. This perspective could be compared to Western medieval ideas of the continuous narrative with multiple viewpoints in one composition (Sickman & Soper, 1978). However, beyond medieval times in the West, the idea of changing
perspectives is one of the most drastic differences between Western art and the art being
discussed here. Sullivan (1984) posed the predicament as follows

How was it then, one might ask, that the Chinese painter, who insisted on truth to
natural appearance, should have been so ignorant of even the elementary laws of
perspective as the West understands it? The answer is that he deliberately
avoided it, for the same reasons that he avoided the use of shadows. (p. 155)

Being brought up under the influence of Western though, we do not see a changing perspective
as “correct” to the eye. Yet, Willetts (1965) discussed the continuous narrative style through the
thoughts of Shen Kua.

Landscapes, he says, have to be viewed “from the angle of totality to grasp the
whole”- in other words, with a shifting perspective that does not limit the viewer
to a fixed point but moves, like the gardens of suburban houses we see from the
window of a moving train, creating a continuous series of vanishing points. (pp.
72-74)

Each portion of the composition is shown in “its most typical or pictorially satisfactory aspect”
(Sickman & Soper, 1978, p. 206). If these large scroll works were to only have one view point,
the viewer would miss a great majority of the scene. Hence, artists created multiple perspectives
at once so the viewer could gain access to all necessary information (Sullivan, 1984).

Add to the idea of shifting perspective the “rules” of scale, and the true vastness and
beauty of the landscapes start to breathe. Kuo Hsi (1959) had many things to say on the topic of
scale. We start by looking at his thoughts on scale due to viewer point of view.

A mountain viewed at a close range has one appearance; a mountain viewed at a
distance of several miles has another. When viewed from a distance of scores of
miles, it has still another. The change of appearance caused by the varying degree of distance from the object is figuratively know as ‘the change of shape with every step one takes’. The front view of a mountain has one aspect; the side view another; the back view still another. The ever changing view of the mountain from whatever side one looks is described as ‘different shapes of a mountain as seen from every side’. Thus a single mountain combines in itself several thousand appearances. Should we not realize this fact? (p. 40)

He also talked about using a focal mountain and basing scale around that mountain. In painting a landscape attention must first be given to the large mountain which may be called the master peak. When this is decided upon, other details come next: the perspective and proportions should be worked out in relation to the master peak, which will dominate the whole region-that is why it is called the master peak. Figuratively speaking, its relation to the others should be that of an emperor to his subjects, a master to his servants. (ibid., pp. 58-59)

Lastly, from Kuo Hsi’s *An Essay on Landscape Painting* (1959), we listen to the master discuss scale of related parts.

Mountains have three degrees of magnitude. A mountain is larger than a tree, and a tree is larger than a man. If a mountain at a distance of several scores of miles does not have the size of a tree, then it is not a large mountain. If several thousand trees at several scores of miles do not have the size of a man, then they are not large trees. The part of a tree used in comparison with men is the leaves. The part of a man used in comparison with trees is the head. A few leaves correspond in size to a man’s head, and a man’s head to a few leaves. The size of
men, of trees, and of mountains arise out of this category of proportions. These are the laws of magnitude.

If one wishes to paint a high mountain, one should not paint every part, or it will not seem high. When mist and haze encircle its waist, then it seems tall. If one wishes to paint a stream stretching afar, one should not paint its entire course, or it will not seem long. When its course is interrupted and shadowed, then it seems long. (p. 50)

Add to the shifting perspective and the carefully calculated scale the sense of illumination, and the drawings really do breathe life. “[In Chinese paintings] there is no apparent source of light but rather an over-all, even illumination which in its intensity and emphasis may vary from one part of the picture to another…” (Sickman & Soper, 1978, p. 206). The argument for the illumination follows that of the changing perspective.

Although perspective, scale and light are arguably the most important aspects of drawing techniques in the Sung landscapes, there are a few other ideas that should be noted. The eye of the viewer is led through the image by overlapping forms (Sickman & Soper, 1978). “Height is obtained by expressing an upward force. Depth is obtained by piling layer upon layer. The effect of distance is obtained by the use of misty lines which gradually disappear” (Hsi, 1959, p. 49). Kuo Hsi (1959) also has a couple of other valid ideas dealing with technique. First, Too much emphasis on the slopes and banks makes the work crude; too much emphasis on calm and quite, trite; too much emphasis on human figures makes the work commonplace…(p. 46)

He greatly emphasized balance between the extremes. We leave technique with an excerpt from his Essay that sums up this balance as well as perspective and harmony.
To learn to paint landscape, too, the method is the same. An artist should identify himself with the landscape and watch it until its significance is revealed to him. The rivers and valleys of a fine landscape, viewed at a distance, show their contours; viewed at close range, they show their component parts.

The clouds and atmosphere of the real landscape are not the same throughout the four seasons. In spring they are bright and harmonious; in summer dense and brooding; in autumn thin and scattered; in winter dark and gloomy. When an artist succeeds in reproducing this general tone and not a group of disjointed forms, then clouds and atmosphere seem to come to life.

...The wind and rain of the actual landscape are best studied at a distance; at close range, the intricacies of their motion interfere with the artist’s comprehension of the scene as a whole.

...A man on the mountain gives a clue to a path; a pavilion on the mountain gives a clue to an excellent view; the woods of the mountain with their light and shade indicate the far and the near; the streams of the mountain, now continuous and now intercepted by ravines and valleys, mark the shallowness and the depth of the water; ferries and bridges indicate human activities; fishing boats and tackles indicate the purposes of men. (ibid., pp. 38-39)

Thought Process

The ultimate goal of Sung painters was to create an essence of reality in their paintings, as well as evoke great emotion from the viewer. As stated above, one cannot discuss Chinese art without bringing in Chinese theology. It is the ideas of intermingling religions and thought
ideals of the time that shape the thought processes which motivate the art of the Sung Dynasty. Just as Christianity in medieval times influenced how art was created and the emotion art evoked, lifestyle choices and religious ideals influenced Chinese art of the Sung Dynasty at least subconsciously. Here we look at the thought process of landscape work and give thought to where these ideals came from as well as how the emotions used in painting were manipulated.

Scholars agree that Chinese paintings evoke great emotion, in the viewer as well as coming from the artist. Sullivan (1979) comments “good painting could not be imitated because it was the expression of the thoughts and feelings of an individual” (p. 81). He describes how the viewer can feel the emotion of the artist. He states that “We note the unemphatic brushwork and feel the calm, relaxed atmosphere, the sense of nature softly breathing, the mood of a quiet evening by the waterside not only seen but felt in the artist’s innermost being” (ibid., p. 59). Landscape artists were to put all they had emotionally into a painting. In pursuit of their ideals, Chinese painters drew heavily on the spiritual grounds of their culture.

Again, to gain a better grasp of these feelings we turn to three excerpts from Kuo Hsi’s *An Essay on Landscape Painting* (1959). The excerpts speak for themselves.

In painting a scene, irrespective of its size or scope, an artist should concentrate his spirit upon the essential nature of his work. If he fails to get at the essential, he will fail to present the soul of his theme. Discipline should give his picture dignity. Without dignity depth is impossible...Therefore when the artist is lazily forcing himself to work and is failing to draw from the very depths of his resources, then his painting is weak and soft and lacking in decisiveness...His fault is that of not putting his whole soul into his work. (p. 36)
Kuo Hsi also speaks of how once the soul is put into the work, it will naturally come out of the brush.

...If he can develop a natural, sincere, gentle, and honest heart, then he will immediately be able to comprehend the aspects of tears and smiles and of objects, pointed or oblique, bent or inclined, and they will be so clear in his mind that he will be able to put them down spontaneously with his paint brush. (ibid., p. 52)

As with much of the thought of the time, he also discusses the importance of studying the subject to understand the emotion of the topic.

Let one who wishes to portray these masterpieces of creation first be captivated by their charm; then let him study them with great diligence; let him wander among them; let him satiate his eyes with them; let him arrange these impressions clearly in his mind. Then with eyes unconscious of silk and hands unconscious of brush and ink, he will paint this marvelous scene with utter freedom and courage and make it his own. (ibid., p. 43)

For those who needed inspiration, it is said that they turned to poetry. Sullivan (1979) wrote

This is of course not the first time that poetry has been the inspiration for landscape painting, but the idea that a painter might have ready to hand a store of such verses to draw upon when he needed a subject suggests that the relationship between painting and poetry, which was later to become so typical a feature of the Chinese landscape tradition, was already beginning to become conventionalised.

(p. 64)

Kuo Hsi made the connection by saying, “...poetry is a picture without form, and painting is a poem with form” (Hsi, 1959, p. 53).
Although motivations lie in putting forth great emotion into the landscape paintings of
the Sung period, the ultimate goal was to achieve the essence of reality. Two ways of stating this
are “...the art of the painter lay in grasping the ultimate reality and not the mere illusion of
reality, in abstracting the spirit from the form” (Sickman & Soper, 1978, p. 204) and “...the great
achievement of the Chinese artist ‘is to fuse the spiritual and the material’” (Hsi, 1959, p. 13).
Although these statements may sound diametrically opposite linguistically, their intents are the
same. Sung landscape artists wanted to capture the essence of the landscape so as to create an
ideal reality; to create a truth in the painting.

Whence came this passion for truth? It was not merely a reaction against the
extravagant, undisciplined gestures of the late T’ang expressionists. It was rather
a reflection of the restoration of Confucian seriousness of affairs. Probably at no
time in Chinese history was the belief so strong that through reason and study one
could come to an understanding of the world; and at no time was debate among
scholars and civil servants more lively and intense. (Sullivan, 1979, p. 70)

Since this truth or reality was supposed to be the essence of the physical world not a
mirror image of a scene, artists had the liberty to add in forms such as lakes and waterfalls where
they felt necessary to achieve the ideal concept of that reality (Sickman & Soper, 1978). Many
Western schools of art pursued more “realistic” images through the process of creating mirror
images of a scene. The generalization of a specific Sung landscape was in place due to the
thought that a shape was important only if it was a part of what made that object the embodiment
of the ideal object to the artist (Sullivan, 1984).

Artists’ emotional involvement and creating a truth were the two strong-holds of Chinese
thought that influenced how and why landscapes were drawn. However, it was also important
for the landscapes to affect the viewer. Sullivan (1984) says "This power in a great Chinese landscape painting to take us out of ourselves was vividly recognized as a source of spiritual solace and refreshment" (p. 158). By creating a work that the viewer must engage in, the artist placed the viewer in a soothing environment of the landscape that could be thought of as meditative.

Yen Wen-kuei

His Life and Influences

What is known about Sung artists is more or less speculation and stories passed through generations. We do know Yen Wen-kuei was active during the second half of the 10th century and into the 11th (Sickman & Soper, 1978; Sirén, 1956) and it is thought he lived from about 967 CE to 1044 CE (Loehr, 1980). According to Sirén (1956), Yen Wen-kuei was born at Wu-hsing in Chekiang. He goes on to tell the tale of Yen Wen-kuei’s life thus:

According to the tradition reported in Shêng-ch’ao ming-hua p’ing and elsewhere, he served first as a soldier, but left the army in the reign of the emperor T’ai-tsung (976-997) and went to the capital, expecting to make his living as a painter. The beginning was not so easy; he was obliged to sell his pictures in the T’ien-mên street, but there he was observed by a high official and painter, the Edict-complier Kao I, who was greatly impressed by the artistic merit of his work. The painter-official asked imperial permission to employ Yen Wen-kuei as an assistant for painting trees and rocks in certain pictures to be executed in the Hsiang-kuo temple, and as Yen proved his talent to the satisfaction of the emperor, he had
thenceforth a rapid career as a painter. He became a member of the Academy and a *tai chao* at court. (214)

Sirên (1956) also places Yen Wen-kuei in among a total of six great painters he sees as the best known of the time. They are: Li Ch’êng, Fan K’uan, Tung Yüan, Chü-jan, Hsü Tao-ning and Yen Wen-kuei. These masters later were proclaimed part of a “Southern School”, although the grouping was of “stylistic designation that included a host of monochrome landscape-painters from various part of the country without any distinction in regard to their motifs or places of activity” (*ibid.*, p. 209). At the time Yen came to the capital, Fan K’uan’s presence had already been felt, and influenced his work. Chü-jan was also active at this point. It is noted that he too probably influenced Yen’s style. Yet, Yen Wen-kuei noted his first master as “the obscure Hao Hui from Shansi” (Loehr, 1980, p. 137). As far as Yen’s influence on others, Loehr (1980) writes

In the triad representing the first decades of Sung three temperaments are clearly distinguishable: the placid and somewhat formalistic Chü-jan; the monumental, rational and classic Fan K’uan; and the dynamic and impetuous Yen Wen-kuei. The masters who followed, Hsü Tao-ning and Kuo Hsi, turned to the older Li Ch’êng for inspiration, although Yen Wen-kuei may have remained influential in the case of Hsü Tao-ning to some extent. (p. 138)

Thus, this gives a general idea of Yen’s place in history. Why though, were Yen’s works considered some of the best?
His Works

Yen Wen-kuei was a Sung Dynasty master who was “renowned for his minute descriptions of nature” (Fong, 1973, p. 17). Loehr (1980) believes that “for the first time it happens that from among the extant attributions there emerges a small body of works so consistent in style that it would seem arbitrary to question their validity” (p. 137). It is very true that although Yen may have been influenced by Fan K’uan, or starts his composition in a style reminiscent of Tung Yüan, or raging hills and peaks like Chü-jan (ibid.), Yen Wen-kuei created a style very distinct and personal. Siren (1956) describes this balance of influence and independence as

The design of the mountains, which seem to be bulging out of the picture, reminds us of corresponding parts in Fan K’uan’s pictures, though the whole thing is rendered on a smaller scale with a brush-work that is almost cuttingly sharp. Everything is stated with absolute clearness, the painter leaves us in no doubt as to the construction of the houses or the outfit of the travelers, even though they are no larger than pin-heads. (p. 215)

Yen Wen-kuei’s minute painting style has been both praised and criticized by scholars. Siren (1956) said the “the painter was particularly trained in boundary painting, his brush-work is lacking in ease and seems a little wooden…. [He uses] an almost excessive accuracy of detail” (p. 215). Yet, Siren (1956) also praises this detail by stating such things as “He excelled in minutely painted small pictures” and Yen painted with an “almost meticulous exactness as a draughtsman and [a] great ability to render larger views within narrow space…” (p. 214).

Loehr (1980) speaks more of the emotion surrounding Yen Wen-kuei’s paintings, namely drama.
He says,

Yen dramatizes; he loves profusion and turbulent movement; his forms are not free of conceits. His contrasts of light and dark, of shaded peaks set against luminous mists, have a flickering suddenness. The trees in the Osaka scroll are swept by fierce gusts of wind. Scattered in clumps all across, they compete with the terrain forms in diversity and jerkiness of rhythm. The dead branches that hover above the clumps are an ‘invention’ of Kuan T’ung which now seems a bit old-fashioned. But this does not detract from the fact that, on the whole, the trees are free of traditional foliage patterns and are treated in a rather spontaneous and impressionistic manner. The dynamic character of all this is enhanced, finally, by the heavy, sudden accents in the outlines of the hillocks and boulders, mountains and cliffs. These accents are scarcely necessary for objective definition; they are graphic in nature, frills, conceits. (p. 138)

To gain a better perspective of Yen Wen-kuei’s personal style, it is easier to look at specific works. We turn to Sickman and Soper (1978) and their critique of Yen Wen-kuei’s Temptles amid Mountains and Streams. The atmosphere through the mist gives depth within the mountain forms. There are an infinite number of varied shapes, ridges, gorges, and winding paths that add to the mystery. On speaking of the mountain forms themselves, Sickman and Soper (1978) say

A basic mountain shape of precipitous sides and weather-rounded top crowned by dense vegetation is repeated from the foreground, through the middle ground and into the far distance, ever increasing in height until the lesser peaks seem to cluster around and buttress up one great central mountain mass. (p. 207)
This style of “piling up” mountain peaks was common to Sung Dynasty landscapes, but Yen had a distinct way of making his mark, with a shape different from other artists, almost like a signature. Sickman and Soper (1978) also comment on the shape of these mountains, “The rock outlines are fluidly drawn with undulating lines descriptive of rugged forms. All the surfaces are closely textured with small ink dabs and washes running the entire tonal gamut” (p. 208).

Finally, they talk about how the highly detailed components come together. “Detailed as the picture is, all elements are related to and dependent on one another, carefully worked together into a single unit existing in atmosphere and spatial depth” (ibid., p. 208).

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to explore Sung Dynasty landscape painters, with focused attention on Yen Wen-kuei, to create a launch-pad for teaching non-Western art in a high school curriculum. First, the relevant context of the Sung Dynasty was touch upon. The Sung Dynasty (960 BCE – 1279 BCE) was a change in leadership from the Five Dynasties as the Five Dynasties crumbled. This created an environment where artistic and scholarly life was concentrated in metropolitan areas. The religious ideals of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism also influenced how art was thought of. The idea of painting a landscape was held at a high ideal due to the naturalistic approach the religions take to life.

The actual paintings vary greatly from typical Western schools of art. Materials are thought to be as important as the subject depicted. Silk or rice paper was used because of the availability. The process of creating ink sticks and ink from the stick was a highly valued skill. Using but one medium, artists worked to create a range of tonal depth and brush stroke diversity.
The format of a scroll, whether hand or hanging, is also a concept not common in Western art. Using a very large scroll format, the perspective in Chinese landscapes was an ever changing viewpoint to move the viewer through a story. Brush strokes were confident and quick, creating minute detail in grand scale works. A variety of scale is used, again, to walk the viewer through the picture. The actual goal of a painting was to create the essence of reality and to evoke emotion in the viewer.

This culminates in the study of one artist, Yen Wen-kuei. Very little is known about any artist of the Sung period, including Yen. It is believed that Yen first was a soldier before a painter. He excelled later as a painter, and is considered to be among the master painters of the Sung Dynasty. His works are known for the incredible minute detail and meticulousness in strokes.

The Sung Dynasty is said to be the high point in Chinese landscape art. Yen is only one example of this. However, he is a great exemplar of how non-Western art varies greatly from Western schools of art. It is vital to teach this difference both of thought and process in art so as to gain a better understanding of both our own traditions and ideas beyond what we have grown to know.
References


Non-Western Art Unit of Study: Sung Dynasty Landscape Paintings
Non-Western Art Unit of Study: Sung Dynasty Landscape Paintings

Overview: There will be three lessons, taught in a progressive manner to help students build on previous knowledge into a culminating project. The first lesson will be an abstract lesson, based in the thought process of Sung landscapes. The second lesson will be a much more academic lesson dealing with exercise and technique. The third and final lesson will merge these two areas into one final project.

Lesson 1 This lesson will explore the thought process of Chinese artists. Students will need to find a “landscape” around their environment that they are passionate about. Students will be allowed to use any medium to create a landscape. The goal here is to achieve the essence of the landscape, altering the “exactness” if necessary to achieve an ultimate truth about the landscape. Students will learn how the Sung painters moved the viewer’s eye through the landscape and try for a similar composition. If needed for motivation, poetry will be used.

Lesson 2 The purpose of this lesson is to learn techniques associated with the paper, ink and brush of Chinese painting. Also, there will be lengthy critiques of master works to discuss the composition, perspective, and light of Sung landscapes. First, warm-up exercises will be done to teach students washes, graded washes, confident line making, color variation and get the students used to grinding ink, holding a brush, etc. Once each student has created various warm up pieces, the class will move on to studying master landscape artists of the Sung Dynasty. Students will choose a favorite work and compose a copy of a small detailed area of the landscape. This is to help the students understand how ink must be applied to achieve the look of that artist. Students may have to create multiple copies to get one of high quality.

Lesson 3 This lesson is to combine Chinese ink drawing techniques with the thought process involved in creating Sung landscapes. To also add a challenging aspect to the project, these will be collaborative pieces. Students will be put in groups of 4 to 5 students. Using ideas from their previous landscapes, the students will decide on a landscape that has the most meaning to all of them. Then, students will work together to create a composition that follows the rules of Sung landscape art and the ideas of hand scrolls. Each students composition will be his or her own, yet each student has to blend their landscape into ones to the right and left of them. The group will work on one long scroll, each within their own area. Students should try to achieve the flow of a scroll, meant to only be seen a few feet at a time

Throughout the lessons, students will engage in classroom discussions, essay tests, and homework (in journals) as well as art creation. Below are the three art lessons of the unit detailed out in one unit plan.
Title: Sung Landscape Painting
Grade Level: Advanced High School
Unit Title: Non-Western Art

Class time: 50 minutes Number of class periods: 20

Michigan Content Standard:
CS I: All students will apply skills and knowledge to perform in the arts:
1. Apply materials, techniques and processes with sufficient skills and knowledge to perform in the arts.
2. Intentionally use art materials and tools effectively to communicate ideas.
3. Be involved in the process and presentation of a final product or exhibit.

CS II: Creating—All students will apply skills and knowledge to create in the arts.
1. Apply materials, techniques and processes with sufficient skills and knowledge to create in the arts.
2. Create artworks that use organizational principles and functions to solve specific visual arts problems.
3. Describe the origins of specific images and ideas and explain why they are of value in their artwork and the work of others.

CS III: All students will analyze, describe and evaluate works of art.
2. Identify intentions of artists, explore the implications of various purposes, and justify analyses of purposes in particular works.
3. Describe how expressive features and organizational principles cause response to works of art.
4. Reflect upon the characteristics and assess the merits of one’s personal artwork.
5. Reflect and analyze the personal experiences that influence the development of personal artwork.

CS IV: All students will understand, analyze, and describe the arts in their historical, social and cultural contexts.
1. Reflect on how the subjects, ideas, and symbols of artworks differ visually, spatially, temporarily, and functionally with respect to history and culture.
2. Describe the functions and explore the meaning of specific art objects within various cultures, times, and places.
3. Analyze relationships of works of art to one another in terms of history, aesthetics, and culture, and justifying conclusions made in the analysis and using conclusion to inform personal artwork.

CS V: All students will recognize, analyze, and describe connections among the arts; between the arts and other disciplines; between the arts and everyday life.
4. Compare characteristics of visual arts within a particular historical period or style with ideas, issues, or themes I the humanities or sciences.
Visuals and resources: - An Exploration of Sung Dynasty Chinese landscape Paintings Focused Around the Works of Yen Wen-kuei, paper
- Yen Wen-kuei's Works Critiqued, a personal critique
- See images in appendix

Procedures: Essences of a Landscape
- Intro entire unit
- Give students rubric for grading-to be attached to sketchbook
- Brainstorm local landscapes
- Classroom discussion of Sung master landscapes
  - Hanging scroll format
  - Ultimate truth ideas
  - Essence achieved through adding/deleting exactness
  - Movement of eye
  - Changing perspective
  - Light source
  - Stacking elements to achieve monument space
  - Minute details/scale of space
- Develop own landscape
  - May use any media
  - Try for similar composition
  - Explanation of landscape and how used Sung principles of design
- Homework during lesson (in sketchbook)
  - Five ideas of potential landscapes
  - Ten thumbnail sketches of landscape layout
  - Detailed notes of classroom discussions

Master Reproduction
- Introduce materials (brushes, ink, grinding of ink stick, paper)
- Let students explore brush use on own (using India ink)
- Discuss proper use of materials
  - How to hold brushes
  - Tonal changes (more ink and less water creates darker tone)
- Exercises (may be done in India ink)
  - Flat wash, must create three final flat washes (three tones)
  - Graded wash, must create two final graded washes (one light, one dark)
  - Ten step color variation chart, final must be neat and clean
- Discuss confident brush strokes and knowing ahead of time what is to be painted
- Practice confident brush strokes in buildings, leaves, and figures
- Create a final “confident” picture
- Discuss techniques of Sung painters
- Student choose favorite Sung painter to create replica of a detailed area
- Final replica must be done in ground ink from stick (needs to be striking composition and close replication)
- Vocabulary quiz over materials
- Homework during lesson (in sketchbook)
  - Short journal entry on motives for choosing specific artist
  - Practice exercises
  - At least 5 thumbnails of replica composition to find most striking
  - Detailed notes about concepts, vocabulary, etc.

**Collaborative Hand Scroll**
- Discuss new project in light of past two creations
- Classroom discussion of hand scroll format
  - Ever-changing land to keep eye “traveling” through picture
  - How scroll is to be viewed (little at a time)
  - How technique combines with thought
  - Emotions evoked in paintings
  - How students might evoke emotion in own works
- Review of all concepts learned
- Test
- Place students in groups of 4-5
- Group work
  - Decide on one landscape
  - Students brainstorm composition
  - Students allowed to sketch final composition on hand scroll paper
  - Divide areas up by student, but emphasize how one area must blend into another
  - Allow students to grind ink and work on their section of the hand scroll
- Final presentations of scrolls
- Homework during lesson (in sketchbook)
  - 5 individual thumbnails of composition
  - Detailed notes about concepts
  - Short journal entry with final evaluation of unit and specifically how working in a group affected the last project.

**Follow-Up:** Students will use information learned in unit to help influence future works.
Overall Assessment: Students will be graded on the following rubric.

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Total (out of 400)
Yen Wen-kuei’s Works Critiqued
Yen Wen-kuei’s Works Critiqued

The following is my own interpretations of three of Yen Wen-kuei’s works, based upon the information and knowledge gained through this research as well as general knowledge from studying art at the university level for four years. My attempt here is to solidify the theories and ideas already presented through concrete, physical examples. These are to be used as study aides in the art lessons.

First though, I would like to give my overall impressions of Yen’s style when studies next to other master works. The landscapes are by far the most detailed of any Sung master. Yen creates a very “stacked” look with many layers piled upon one another. Although this does give some sense of depth, it seems to show more the huge size of area he is trying to encompass. Compared to the works of a master such as Kuo Hsi, Yen’s works do not leave much “breathable” room in the composition. Every inch is stacked with details. Even the branches and leaves of trees are individually rendered. Yen was a master of minute detail, culminating in the human form being painted so small that only two to three strokes can be allowed in the space. Yet, Yen Wen-kuei could easily give the essence of the human, showing posture, intent and emotion with these two to three strokes. The color used by Yen is fairly muted. He has a wide range of value, but no drastic color changes such as that of Ma Yuan. Yen uses very strong structured lines, especially when it comes to the architecture of buildings in the landscape. Yet, this high quality of line is very expressive and not a solid contour.
Mountain Streams and Temples, hand scroll (three part image)

This hand scroll identifies with the tradition hand scroll format. It is a very long, horizontal painting, meant to be read part at a time. The viewer travels through the image with ease. Where the mountains jut to the upper most confines of the silk, trails for “rambling” are pushed to the foreground, yet as the mountains decrease, there is a minute drawbridge that leads the view back into the depths of the huge rock forms. In other areas, the land is slightly flatter. The eye wanders to the back depths of the landscape, perusing over the temples and the finite, sharp structure of every board and tile used to create each building.

Mountainstream and Temples, hanging scroll, 40 15/16" x 18 11/16" (image plus two detail images)

This is a hanging scroll that uses the ever-changing perspective. As you move up the picture, it seems that you are always at eye level with what you are looking at. This is achieved through local shadow but no overall light source. Vast height is created through many layers of “flattened” rock. Individually, the rocks are formed with light and dark areas of ink to create dimension, yet as they are painted one on top of the other, it tends to “flatten” the picture, adding emphasis to the height of the image instead of depth. Height is furthered by mist not painted (no ink placed there) between the stacks of mountains. Since you cannot see the area between rocks where the mist is, it seems to enlarge that area. This picture is also very typical of Yen, with minute detail at every turn. As seen in the detail views, every log on the houses are drawn, every roof tile painted with care. Even the smallest of human figure is painted to show mood through posture.
Strange Peaks and Ten-Thousand Trees, ink drawing, 9 5/8” x 10 ¼” (fan shaped image)

Although this is not a scroll format-hanging or hand-the drawing is typical of Yen. Washes of various tonal qualities are laid in to give form to the rocks. Mist, or areas of the drawing that are not painted give depth to the rock formations. On top of all of this are confident, tiny detailed lines. Thought has been given to each leaf on each tree, whether in the focal point or in the distance. Each leaf or line elsewhere is definitive and strong giving the painting the aura of being concrete and real. Often, when there are large amounts of mist used in a drawing or painting, the image has a mystical feeling. This painting does not. It simply says “here I am” and “this is the way I look”. It is a strong, confident piece.
Appendix 1

1. *Essence of a Landscape* project exemplar using Photoshop

2. *Master Reproduction* exercises (flat wash, graded wash, gradient, confident line exercise)

3. *Master Reproduction* ink exemplar

4. *Collaborative Hand Scroll* project exemplar
Flat Wash #1
Flat Wash #2
Flat Wash #3
Graded Wash #1
Graded Wash #2
10 Step GRADATION
Appendix 2

1. *Mountain Streams and Temples*, hand scroll, three part image

2. *Mountains stream and Temples*, hanging scroll, 40 15/16” x 18 11/16”
   a. Ink Painting
   b. Two details
   c. Colophon information

3. *Strange Peaks and Ten-Thousand Trees*, ink drawing, 9 5/8” x 10 ¼”
SUBJECT MATTER

Landscape

Low buildings on valley floor, storied ones among sheer rising cliffs; small fig. and animal details.

MATERIAL

Ink and very light color on silk

COLOPHON

Yes

ARTIST'S INSCRIPTION

...Emp. Ch'ien-lung

11th cent.

FORMAT

Hanging scroll

40 15/16 in. x 18 11/16 in.

( 103.9 cm. x 47.4 cm. )

SEALS

17

...Liang Ch'ing-piao (1620-1691)

Ts'ang-yen

T'ang-ts'un Shen Ting

...An Ch'i (1683-after 1742)

An I-chou Chia Chen Ts'ang

...unidentified

REMARKS

Tsan Te Yu Chi K'uai Jan
Tzu Chu

Chiang Tzu-hou Shih I Ko

...Ming Imperial seal

Ssu Yin (half seal)

ARCHIVE

# 104
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# 111