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THE CHINESE INK - PAINTINGS OF TSENG YU-HO



River bends. «Receding waters with a hundred windings; banks overgrown by a myriad shrubs: whence comes the boat with creaking oars? ».

In the history of Chinese painting, a golden age is assumed, way back into a fabulous past, where Old Masters tend to acquire mythological stature. As in the case of ancient Greek Masters, art-lovers may proceed to ecstasies in this field practically unhampered by facts.

In attempting to furnish a visual approximation of this golden age, museums gather and hang up scrolls collected according to the same formula that an English amateur of the eighteenth century applied to orthodox Rembrandts: they should be well-browned all-over like an old violin. The darkened varnish that was deemed a badge of honor for the Dutch Master finds a Chinese substitute in accumulated grime, disintegrating silk, and faded ink. Hardly may one distinguish, under the thick patina of time, the lone philosopher - properly the size of a chick-pea - who gapes at a make-

believe waterfall, or gazes at a make-believe moon.

Practising artists remain puzzled and unsatisfied as they squint at these exhibited scrolls however *distingué* their subject-matter. The approach of a painter to a colleague's paintings can be as matter-of-fact as that of a carpenter appraising the joints of a table. For the art-maker, what mystery has been superimposed on the original work by the smoky process of time, the restorer's art, and the patter of commentators has but little charm. An unobstructed view of a single brushstroke could tell him more.

We should be grateful to the young artist, Tseng You-Ho, for painting in mid-twentieth century ink-paintings rooted so firmly in the past as to throw light on the approach of the Old Masters. Her pictures are brushed in the

classical vein, and within the limitations of accepted subject-matter: river banks, mountain scenery, waterfalls. (Fig. 1). In their balance between a willing obedience paid to ancient rules and the release of individuality inherent to the freestroke manner, these works help to clarify the true meaning of tradition.

Chinese ink-painting is an exacting medium. It admits of nothing hidden, nothing stated twice, and no possible stuttering. It is a heroic medium, to which one may apply the praise that Michelangelo reserved for *buon fresco*. The spirit of both these media contrasts with that of oil painting, wherein ruse may masquerade as inspiration; where scumbles, re-touching varnish, and glazes, conspire all to doctor a weak initial concept, or to heal a deficient start.

Matured by slow thought and repeated communions with nature, the execution of an ink-picture must be nevertheless lightning-quick. The plastic rhythm grows on paper at the same time that the brush flashes its curves and zig-zags, musically, but swifter even than music.

No craftiness, no conscious thought even, has time to deflect the motions of wrist and fingers. Here, unlike what may happen in less exacting techniques, the artist can fake neither knowledge nor greatness.

A mystical disposition having cast aside genteel reason at the time of painting, the Chinese master chooses to display on silk or paper his spiritual self, and does it as relentlessly as a farmer nails an owl to a barn door. Painting is understood as a total spiritual disrobing, both shameful and glorious, in the manner of a public self-confession. The brush probes deeper than words could, and brings up subconscious moods, innermost states for which pine, bamboo, plum-tree and orchid act as species of tuning-forks, to prove or disprove harmony between the painter and the universe.

However spiritual may be Chinese painting in its ultimate function, it is not on the metaphysical or intellectual plane that it starts. Perhaps too much has been made of the similarities between ink-painting and brush-writing by literary critics who, in so doing,



Kulangsu: The lion-rock. Pencil sketch from nature.

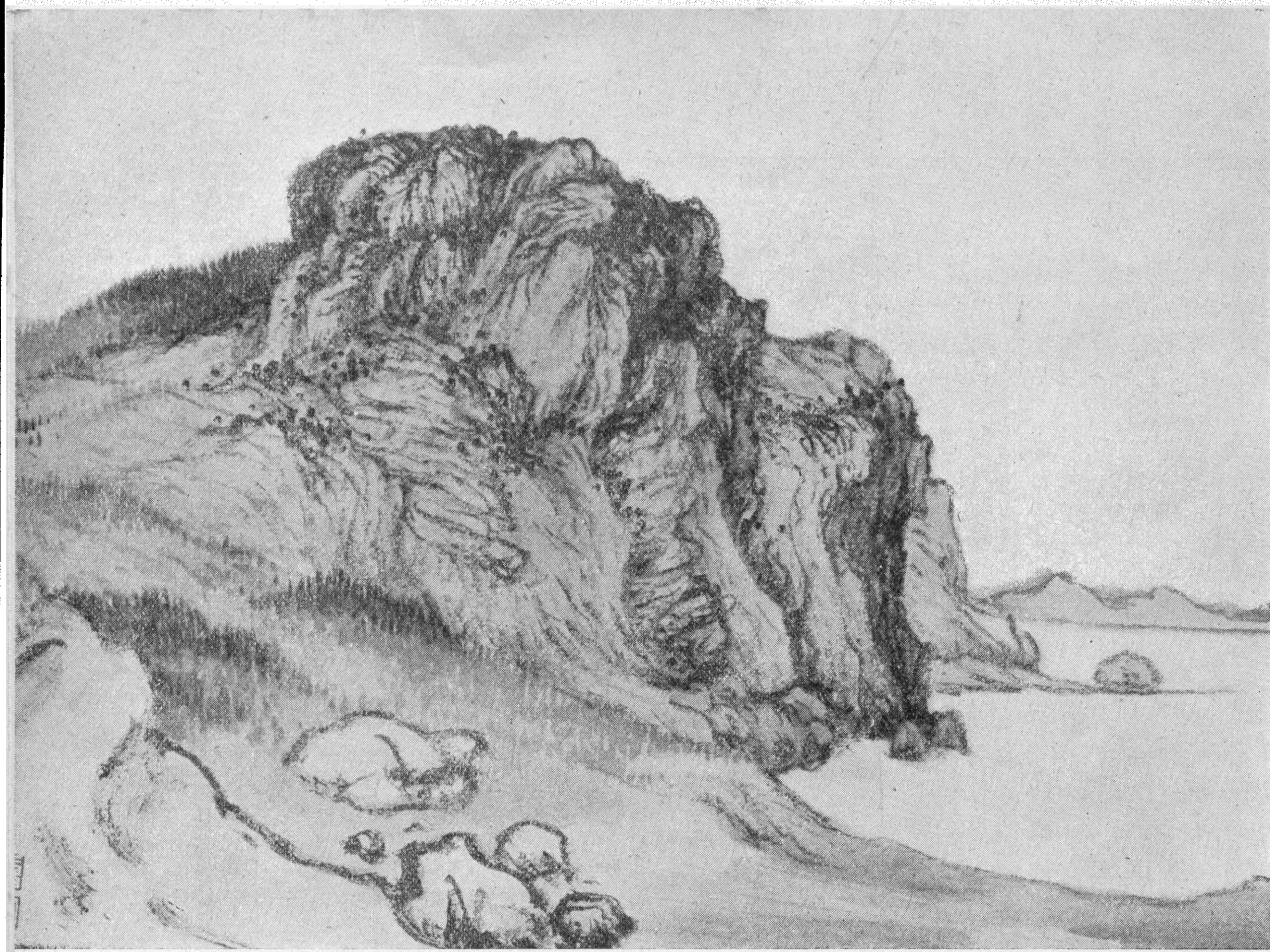


River bank. A brush sketch.

felt that they honoured painting all the more. In truth, there are conceptual incompatibilities between ideograms and pictorial subject-matter. The hieroglyph that means « tree » correctly proposes an image so devoid of personality as to fit all possible kinds of trees. It is true that the tree which the Chinese painter « writes » with the brush is not either nature's own. It has suffered metamorphosis to fit within the strange other world - two dimensional in fact and monochrome - of ink-painting. Yet, the painted tree is endowed with physical substance; retains its own height, girth and density; and grows a web of branches as characteristic as fingertip whorls, valid only for this one tree.

Other senses than sight collaborate with sight. Tactile experience guides the brush that renders the asperities of rocks or the furrows of tree-trunks as convincingly as would actual ink-rubbings lifted from the surface of the model. The mottled, streaked, or splashed, areas that pass for foliage lean on texture more than on form; beyond texture, they capture the smell of the dew-damp shoots or of the dry leaves of autumn. So close to the senses remains the painted realization as to suggest an inception incubated at leisure within the senses before it acquired a visible body.

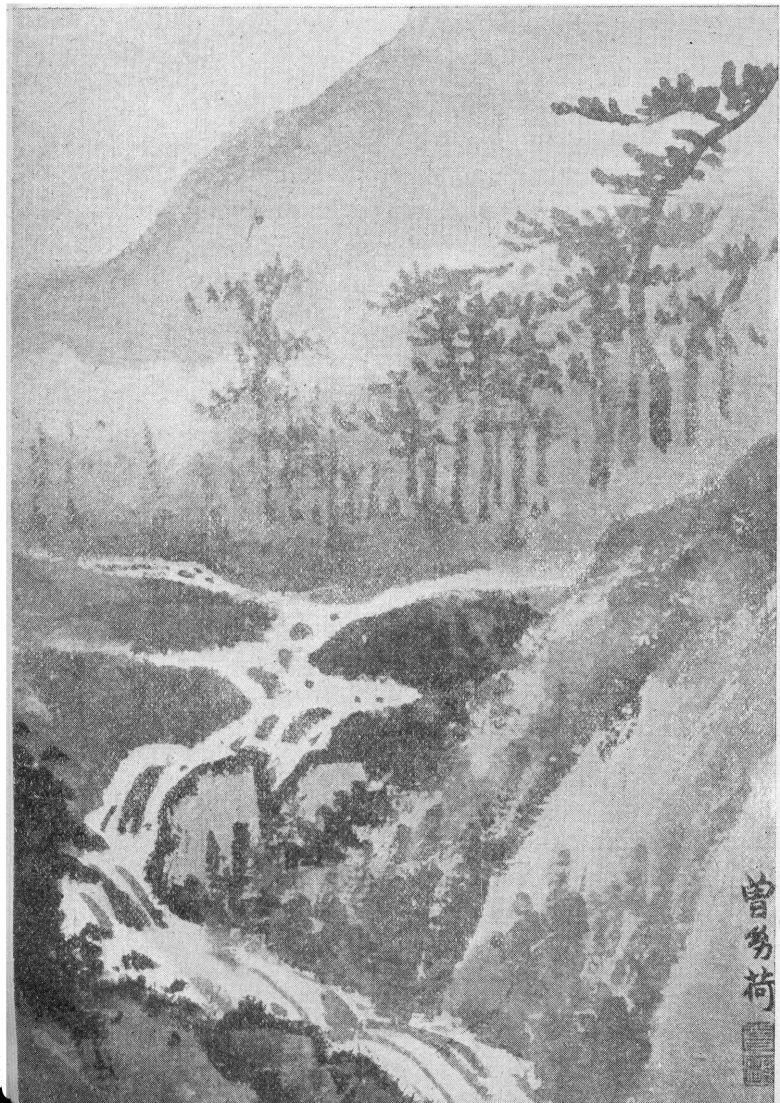
Thanks to the readiness of Tseng Yu-Ho in opening for me her notebooks and portfolios, I now realize more clearly the similarities that attend the business of picture making the world over. Her first step towards a picture is shown in a series of lead-pencil drawings that are, she assures me, done directly from the model. Made in a medium with which the West is familiar and with their quota of formal style as yet faint these drawings are important for an Occidental, to help isolate what is art itself from the *chinoiserie* that, regardless of quality or intent, spells for us exotic magic. Motives are mostly rock-shapes and tree-trunks, some thin, erect, and budding; some wounded, struck by lightning, or armless from great age. There is a minimum of modelling, but form in the round is mainly achieved by the thick or thin of the pencil stroke, manipulated so as to approximate the brush (Fig. 2). In the case of the tree-studies, there are no backgrounds, no diminishing companion trees to carry the eye towards middle distance, and no horizon line. The fog that sets its opaque film right behind the model may be construed as an acceptance of the optical fact of unfocused vision, unlike our manner of moving our



Seashore near
Pei Tao Ho.
Album leaf.

sight-range back and forth, so as to sharpen all outlines. There is a quiet charm in these attentive notations, coupled with a disregard

After the rain.



of all-over effect, and a submissiveness to the model that reminded me of sketches made by the young Corot in the same vein.

Other pencil notations order together the single elements in tentative compositions. Already here, formats differ sharply from Occidental ones. The note-book itself, made in Peking, has long, thin pages that encourage the concept of the scroll, to be unrolled horizontally or hung vertically. Occidental formats may deviate only slightly from the square because we are accustomed to view the parts of a picture simultaneously, and from a centralized point. In the case of the Chinese, the implied mechanism of successive readings makes away with a fixed center and results in panoramas. The Oriental artist composes not only with solids and space, but equally with the principle of change that, like that of movement, presupposes the picture along a span of time instead of a single moment.

One of the slightest scribblings is also one of the more striking projects. It is jotted along a thin strip of paper, three inches wide and three feet long. In accordance with the cinematic principle, it displays the sights of a two day boating party along the banks of a river. The artist makes use of a system of dots and dashes so light that it barely disturbs the whiteness of the paper; yet this shorthand — that stands for the future and more elaborate shorthand of the brush — states convin-

cingly both the subject matter and its subjective values.

A third type of notation uses only the brush. Though it gathers together a number of objects, there is no attempt at formal balance, or rather it composes in vignette fashion, a loose fit within an irregular oval shape. Such a sketch is that of a fishing boat seen through foliage, treated as a kind of ink-play (Fig. 3). The wet looking surface is modulated, rather than divided, by the sliding of values that ooze into each other as a testimonial for the speed that moved the brush. More than did the previous ones, these works escape Occidental parallels, as they cover ground uncharted by our own terms of art criticism. Broadened at will by wrist movements, line expands to area or thins again into line. Darks fade imperceptibly into blacks and outlines are blotted out by washes. The one quality that a painter recognizes at once is *la fuerza del mango*, the strength shown in the manipulation of the brush.

Next come album leaves in which previous pencil and brush notations fuse in all-round compositions. Elaborations along the lines of tradition add to the well-observed trunk its ragged foliage, and to the bare rock its spattering of moss (Fig. 4). Perhaps because these album leaves are wider than high, themes are based on the horizontal, and are mostly pastoral in mood. In these tranquil notations of the countryside, charm of tint and the inviting slope of low hills suggest a morning stroll through mist, whose slow rising reveals translucent suggestions of forms, snatched from the ever-present reality of space (Fig. 5).

In the large size vertical scrolls, the mood rises to epic grandeur. Over the earth-bound scene, beyond the trailing clouds that are reserves of paper-whiteness, peaks loom that stretch the relationship of objects to verticality. A torsion imbued with elements akin to those of our baroque style wrings like wet cloth the shapes of nature (Figs. 6-7). Grass tufts acquire a quasi-organic animation as each blade bends downward in mimicry of spider legs, or rises as a scarab's feeler. Tree trunks pattern their restlessness after that of animal trunks. The slopes of mountains are now vertical and pocked with erosion, suggestive of imminent collapse. Even the architecture of pagodas and pavillions leans askew.



The Wicked grove. «I could not hold back the branches that floated out of my brush».



The torrent.

In spite of the different medium and exotic subject matter, these torsions and elongations awake a memory. I have seen and experienced them once before, looking at El Greco's « View of Toledo ».

The theme of nature in Chinese art is often stripped of its seriousness when it is presented by the kind of speaker who is at his best when lecturing to garden clubs. Perhaps certain plants displayed in full-color pictures hold the interest of the flower-lover; and entomologists may approve of the parasites that suck their blooms or chew their leaves, be they praying mantis or fireflies. However, the best of ink-paintings, like their Occidental counterparts, prefer being themselves to being slices of na-

ture. Out of the enormously varied repertoire of objective forms, the ink-painter accepts but a very few; in the same sober way, he shrinks from the vast array of prismatic colors to the single range of greys. In ink-painting, beauty does not depend on that of the subject matter, which is as often a shorthand of decay as it may be of spring. Ink-trees are mostly beyond the ministrations of well-meaning tree surgeons. Ink-flowers deserve only rarely florists' ribbons. Rocks, bamboos, men and roots, all are ruthlessly equated to the common denominator of ink. To appreciate these works, it is well to remember how the reality of stains and splashes cohabits with what they purport to represent (Fig. 8).

Jean Charlot



Bamboo. « An attempt to capture the inspiration of Su Tung-p'o ».