

Wen Zhengming (1470-1559) *Wintry Trees* 1543 British Museum

Medium: Hanging scroll, ink on paper

Size: 90.5cm high x 31cm width unmounted

Location: made in Suzhou, S.E. China now in the British Museum



ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: Chinese scroll painting had a high status, particularly when the subject was landscape.

*“China had a highly literate society that greatly valued poetry and brush-written calligraphy, which, along with painting, were called the Three Perfections, reflecting the esteemed position of the arts in Chinese life.”*¹

“Landscape painting is traditionally at the top of the hierarchy of Chinese painting styles. It is very popular and is associated with refined scholarly taste. The Chinese term for

¹ <https://smarthistory.org/imperial-china-an-introduction/>

“landscape” is made up of two characters meaning “mountains and water.” It is linked with the philosophy of Daoism, which emphasizes harmony with the natural world...

Chinese artists do not usually paint real places but imaginary, idealized landscapes. The Chinese phrase ‘woyou’ expresses this idea of “wandering while lying down.”²

The subject of the scroll, a landscape with bare trees in winter shows a stream meandering through a grove of trees without human presence. The latter is unusual.

The calligraphic inscriptions in Chinese on the image are highly valued and Craig Clunas explains they are both the “best index of the personality of the artist” and of his “moral character”.³ The inscription top left is explained by the British Museum as “*The painter's inscription explains that he made the painting for a Mr. Li Zicheng, who brought a gift to condole with him on the occasion of his wife's funeral. Because of the similarity of names, they discussed Li Cheng's style of wintry trees. Wen Zhengming thanked Li Zicheng by painting this work of bare trees for him, over ten hours. Wen Zhengming signed it, noting his age of 73 years.*”⁴

The seal is the equivalent of a signature, to establish authenticity. The carving of a personal seal was considered to be the craft of a gentleman.

Formal elements of style:

The composition is affected by the tall narrow format of scroll paintings, and the placement of the calligraphy and seals at the top also adds to the overall verticality, and division into three sections linking to the trees right foreground, the taller central clump and the balancing trees to the left. The meandering path of the stream and placement of rocks takes one’s eyes back into the distance with the smallest and sparsest trees back left. The rather dry application of thin lines of ink leads to a sense of bareness and suggests winter as does the total lack of colour. Tonal modelling of trunks and rocks effectively creates three-dimensional effects with a heaviness and weight to the rocks that counters the spindly branches. The lack of a single light source or cast shadows similarly suggests the low cool light of cloudy winter sky.

Wen Zhengming chose suitable brushwork by looking back to the work of a Yuan master five hundred years previously, that of the landscape artist Li Cheng (919-967). British museum curator Rawson describes the work as similar: “Its spare, rather dry brushwork again repeats the deliberately simple, austere quality that is the feature of many so-called literati paintings.”⁵

Li Cheng was said to “treasure ink like gold” and did many landscape paintings with diluted ink, thus rendering the scenery like in a dreamy mist. He defined the soft, billowing earthen formations of the Shandong area terrain with “cloudlike” texture, interior layers of graded ink wash bounded by firmly brushed, scallop-edged contours. Li Cheng is remembered especially for winter landscapes and for simple compositions in which he set a pair of tall, rugged, aging evergreens against a low, level view of desiccated landscape. For example, *Travelers in a Wintry Forest* is said to have been

² <https://smarthistory.org/chinese-landscape-painting/>

³ <https://henitalks.com/talks/wen-zhengmings-wintery-trees-mourning-and-reciprocity/>

⁴ https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=269699&partId=1

⁵ https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=269699&partId=1

painted to show the desolate scenes of winter because "men of virtue are now found only in the wilderness." The scene is a microcosm of the natural cycle of growth and decay, with the great pine, symbolizing the virtuous gentleman, surrounded by trees ranging from youthful saplings to a shattered ancient hulk. The stoic silence of the wintry forest is matched by the unyielding spirit of the scholar on his donkey—the noble recluse who has entered the mountains to rediscover in nature the moral order that is lost in the human world."⁶



DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

The smarthistory website explains the process:

In China, painters and calligraphers were traditionally scholars. The four basic pieces of equipment they used are called the Four Treasures of the Scholar's Studio or *wenfangsibao*: paper, brush, ink and inkstone. A cake of ink is ground against the surface of the inkstone and water is gradually dropped from a water dropper, gathering in a well at one end of the stone. The brush is then dipped into the well and the depth of intensity of the ink depends on the wetness or dryness of the brush and the amount of water in the ink.

Ink cakes were made from carbonized pinewood, oil and glue, moulded into cakes or sticks and dried. The most prized inkstones were made of Duan stone from Guangdong province, although the one shown here is made of ceramic. Brushes had very pliable hairs, usually made from deer, goat, wolf or hare. Wrist rests gave essential support while painting details. Other equipment used on a scholar's desk includes brush washers, seals, seal paste boxes, brush pots and brush stands...

⁶ <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-li-cheng.php>

Chinese paintings are usually created in ink on paper and then mounted on silk. This is done using different formats including hanging scrolls, handscrolls, album leaves and fan paintings.⁷

It should be remembered that Imperial China produced the first plant fibre paper.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Wen Zhengming was a prominent Chinese painter, scholar, and calligrapher during the Ming ('bringer of light') dynasty (1368-1644). Born on November 28, 1470 in Suzhou, south east China, he became a scholar at the local court in 1523 yet resigned from this post only three years later to devote the rest of his life to calligraphy and painting. Along with Shen Zhou, Tang Yin, and Qiu Ying, he came to be regarded as one of the Four Masters of the Ming dynasty.⁸ Wen Zhengming was upper class and wealthy and did not produce work on commission.

This painting is unusual, firstly because there is no sign of humanity, and secondly because it has a very specific context of personal loss. Wen Zhengming married the daughter of a high-ranking official and *jìnshi* named Wu Yu around the year 1490. Little is known about Wen's wife herself, whose personal name was not recorded. But after she died in 1542, Wen painted *Wintry Trees* for a guest who arrived with a gift to mourn her death.⁹ A series of complex rituals are likely to have taken place over a number of days.

In his Heni talk¹⁰ Professor Craig Clunas explains this in detail. The inscription includes the precise date of 25th January 1543 when Mr. Li Zicheng travelled a great distance to visit to make offerings for the death. The formality of the inscription suggests Wen Zhengming and him were not close friends. It is also unusually precise in terms of time taken, 10 hours. Clunas suggests that it was painted at a "time of personal loss and his feelings may well be complicated" - and hence the work raises interesting questions about "winter, personal change and the human life cycle." We might say it links the particular to the universal, the individual to all of humanity.

During the Ming dynasty, Emperor Jiajing who reigned from 1521 to 1567 was a fervent follower of Taoism¹¹ (also known as Daoism) and tried to suppress Buddhism. For Taoism death is not regarded as it is by Christians, as a salvation to escape from this world towards heaven; rather one's aim in life is to become perfectly aligned with the natural world and with the cosmic forces that sustain it. Although Wen Zhengming is not regarded as a Daoist artist it is interesting to consider the broader context. *"Chinese art, particularly landscape paintings, suggest a very different relationship between humans and nature. Daoists speak of a harmony among all aspects of nature and say "Heaven and earth and I live together." The harmony in nature is illustrated in the balance between such things as water and mountains. Waterfalls and mountain peaks make up much of Chinese landscape painting, and people seeking to understand the secrets of the power of nature, the Dao, often contemplate those paintings when they cannot go the countryside and view an actual mountain or waterfall. In many, if not most, landscape paintings,*

⁷ <https://smarthistory.org/chinese-landscape-painting>

⁸ <https://www.comuseum.com/painting/schools/four-masters-of-the-ming-dynasty/>

⁹ . <http://www.artnet.com/artists/wen-zhengming/>

¹⁰ <https://henitalks.com/talks/wen-zhengmings-wintery-trees-mourning-and-reciprocity/>

¹¹ https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dao/hd_daoi.htm

humans have a place. They are participants in the natural scene, but they do not dominate it.”¹²

WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

The work was owned by the Chinese Emperor in the eighteenth century as can be seen from a seal, and he also wrote a poem on the scroll, a sign of its significance for Chinese culture.

Given the precise context of the work the quiet stylistic characteristics of the scroll, without specific identifiable topography, are entirely appropriate for the sense of loss, with the cycle of the seasons paralleling the human life cycle.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder *Hunters in the Snow* 1565 oil on wood (Vienna)

Albrecht Altdorfer *Landscape with Double Spruce* c. 1521 etching (Met, NY)

Further reading:

[Clunas, Craig](#) (2004). [Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming, 1470-1559](#). University of Hawaii Press. ISBN [0824827724](#).

¹² <https://asiasociety.org/attitudes-towards-nature-daoist-art>