

# Writing an Image:

## Chinese Literati Art

Shuishan Yu



中國文人藝術



寫意

Oakland University  
Art Gallery

Rochester, Michigan

Cover image: Chen Nian (Banding, 1876-1970), *Plum Blossoms*, 1941; ink on paper, 38 x 12 ½ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

# Writing an Image:

## Chinese Literati Art

Shuishan Yu

September 11-November 22, 2009  
Oakland University Art Gallery

## Writing an Image: Chinese Literati Art

### Introduction

Literati art, or *Weren Yishu* 文人藝術, is a Chinese art form nurtured and promoted by scholars. The creators of literati art do not consider themselves as specialized artists, but first and foremost as human beings completed by Confucian moral cultivation and elevated by Daoist integration with nature. Literati art thus emphasizes art as a way of life that, in turn, nurtures the cultivation and moral character of the practitioner. The learning and creative process of art are just as essential as the final product. The four noble arts of literati: calligraphy, painting, *guqin* (a seven-stringed musical instrument with a rich history dating back 5,000 years), and *weiqi* (an ancient Chinese board game), or *qin qi shu hua* 琴棋書畫 in Chinese, are inseparable and equally important in cultivating ideal personality and understanding the supreme truth *Dao* 道.

Literati art thus casts a different look at amateurism, which does not mean unprofessional but rather anti-professional. For the literati artists, great art is created by pure enjoyment and a sincere motivation to share that pleasure. The professional divisions are deliberately abandoned. Built on common philosophical grounds, and sharing common terminologies and ideologies, art, music, literature, theatre, and architecture are often mutually inclusive in the literati tradition, creating an inter-disciplinary framework that provides unique perspectives for the understanding and conceiving of them all. To some extent, they are all means for attaining higher spirituality, not ends in themselves.

Early Literati painting embodied the “three perfections”: poetry, calligraphy, and painting, or *shi shu hua* 詩書畫三絕 in Chinese, indispensable for creating perfection in a finished painting. Later a fourth “perfection” was added, that of carving the artist’s seal. The greatest literati artists were masters of all four skills. However, the technique, principles, and philosophy of Chinese calligraphy remained the most elevated of all literati art forms governing the other “perfections.”

The paintings and calligraphies in this exhibition and catalogue are dated from the Song Dynasty (960–1279) onwards. Organized into five sections of “The Hermitic Scholars,” “The Divine Landscapes,” “The Politicized Animals,” “The Humanized Plants,” and “The Written Images,” they offer a comprehensive introduction to the historical contexts, major themes, and philosophical backgrounds of literati art. This exhibition also aims to call into question the nature of an “image.” Chinese artists often used the word “writing” instead of “painting” when talking about creating an image, for instance “writing bamboo,” “writing landscape,” etc. What is an image? And how much is our response to a painting shaped by the brushworks of writing and the reading and pre-reading of the context? Indeed, looking at these Chinese scrolls, one can see the division blurred and a great image emerging from a writing hand.

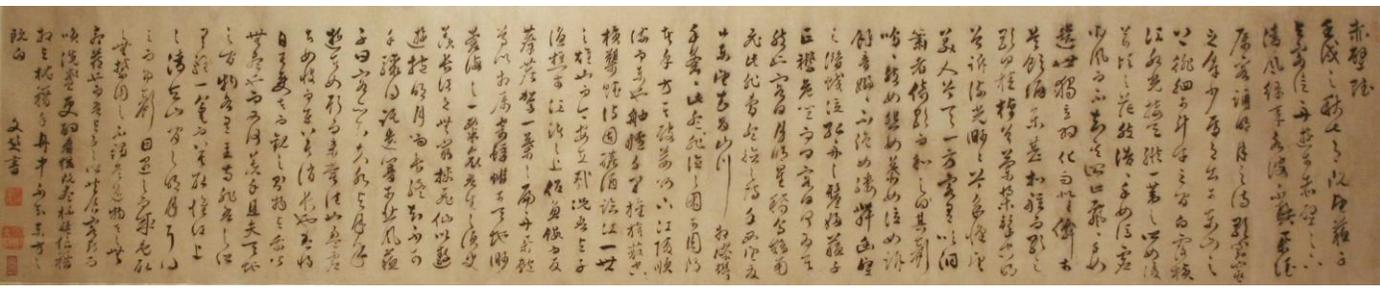
Shuishan Yu, Exhibition Curator  
Assistant Professor of Art History, Oakland University

## Part One

### The Hermitic Scholars



Dai Xi (1801-1860), *Landscape*, Qing Dynasty; ink on silk, 42 x 16 inches, reframed hanging scroll; Collection of the Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI



Wen Peng (1498-1573), Cursive Script Calligraphy of the *First Prose on Red Cliff* by Su Shi, Ming Dynasty; ink on paper, 10 ½ x 52 inches, reframed hand scroll; Collection of Oakland University

In autumn 1082, Su Shi (1036-1101), one of the most celebrated scholars – as well as being an official, poet, calligrapher, painter, and musician – in Chinese history, went on an excursion to the Red Cliff, the famous battle ground on the Yangtze River in south China, where the 3<sup>rd</sup> century general Cao Cao was defeated by the allied armies of Sun Quan and Liu Bei, all three great heroes during the Three Kingdoms Period. Touched by the everlasting mighty nature and the vicissitudes of human history, he wrote a poem, lamenting upon fleeting individual existence. Su’s poetry forever changed the Chinese literati’s perception of nature and landscape painting, which were called “mountains and waters.” For the literati artists, nature was their spiritual home, silent, pure, innocent, and mysterious, far away from polluted human society and corrupted officialdom. They wanted to become hermits.

Though few of his original paintings survived, Su Shi is believed by many to be the first literati painter in history. Many great calligraphers paid homage by making copies of his “First Prose on Red Cliff” and numerous paintings were dedicated to it. The one pictured above was written in Cursive Script by Wen Peng, the notable Ming Dynasty painter and calligrapher and son of the great literati artist Wu School founder Wen Zhengming (1470-1559).

The Cursive Script (*Caoshu*) in Chinese calligraphy is characterized by the abbreviation of brushstrokes and the interconnection of characters. Originally a way of fast writing, it was developed into one of the most expressive writing styles by such great calligraphers as Suo Jing Wang Xizhi during the Eastern Jin Dynasty. Since then, numerous individual styles under the cursive umbrella have been produced, ranging from Regular Cursive (*Zhangcao*, the script closer to the more formal Running Script *Xingshu*), to Wild Cursive (*Kuangcao*, the script rivals pure abstract forms, which was extremely simplified, curvilinear, and very hard to read). The work pictured above is in the Regular Cursive style. Wen Peng’s fluent writing captured the spirit of Su Shi’s philosophical monologue in the poem that an individual life would become eternal as soon as one was fully integrated with nature, the central concept of being a hermitic scholar.



Anonymous, *The Scholar*, Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), Korean; ink and color on silk, 90 x 32 inches, reframed hanging scroll; Collection of Oakland University

Most literati, however, were not real hermits. They were scholar officials who passed the high level administrative exams required to serve in the government, like the gentleman in this formal portrait painting. This work, though a Korean piece and most likely not created by a literati, illustrates a typical East Asian Confucian scholar, the type of person who would have created literati art.

It was the lack of freedom in their daily lives that made an imagined hermitic existence so appealing to the literati. Confucius once said, “If the time is right, I will serve the state and help virtuous rulers; if the political situation is bad, I will return to nature in a little boat.” The former was the literati’s real life (though not always with virtuous rulers); the latter was encapsulated in their art practice.



Lu Yingshan, *Tao Yuanming Appreciating Chrysanthemums*, 20<sup>th</sup> century; ink on paper, 51 ½ x 26 ½ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

Tao Yuanming (365-427) was an exception among Chinese literati. Living in the Eastern Jin Dynasty during the Age of Disunion, Tao was considered the first landscape poet. He briefly served the government but resigned and became a hermit, living among farmers in Mount Lu. The reason for his abandonment of his official post was, according to Tao's own writing, "not to bend for five *dou* (an ancient Chinese measure for grain) of rice." Tao's poetry, celebrating the simple peasant life style in pure Acadian sacred nature, provides some of the most enduring themes for literati arts. A famous example was the "Valley of Peach Blossom Springs," where people isolated from the outside world lived in harmony with nature without knowledge of the dynasties after Qin.

In this painting by Lu Yingshan, the hermit poet stands by the fence of his mountain retreat under a blossoming tree, appreciating lavishly growing chrysanthemums. Tao was famous for his love of chrysanthemums, one of the four symbolic plants known as "Four Gentlemen" in literati culture. His verse, "Picking chrysanthemums by the eastern fence, I saw the mountains in the south emerging from the misty distance," captured the serenity of the much idealized hermitic life.



Yan Ciping (active 1119-1162), *Mountain Dwelling after Snow*, Song Dynasty; ink on silk, 57 x 57 inches, hanging scroll; Collection of the Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI

This wintery panoramic hanging scroll has the typical composition of a Song style landscape painting with a detailed foreground and towering background divided by a misty middle distance. A fisherman in a small boat, a herder boy pulling a cow on a bridge, and woodcutters appear sporadically among mountains and water, while a scholar reads in a hut sheltered by trees. This monumental work is symbolic of the literati's spiritual world. Inside the hut exists his scholarly life; outside is his imagined world, the idealized nature ubiquitous in literati painting, poetry, and music.

Yan Ciping was a 12<sup>th</sup> century Song court painter. His father, Yan Zhong, had served in both the Northern and Southern Song imperial painting academies; his elder brother, Yan Cian, and younger brother, Yan Ciyu, were also prominent painters of the time.



**(Attributed) Wang Shiyuan (active 10<sup>th</sup> century), *Cai Yong Reading an Ancient Stele*, Ming Dynasty; ink and color on silk, 75 x 43 inches, hanging scroll; Collection of the Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI**

Cai Yong was a celebrated Eastern Han Dynasty historian and scholar official. He was also a great guqin player and maker. The design of his instrument became known as the “Jiaowei” Style. Cai is shown in this painting reading a stele in a landscape setting. As a memorial structure, the Chinese steles were made to commemorate significant persons or events and thus became symbols of the past. In a painting, a stele often evokes a sense of nostalgia and history, which are both important elements in literati culture.

Wang Shiyuan was a Five Dynasties to Northern Song scholar official and painter. Though attributed to him, this painting is most likely a Ming Dynasty work in his style.



**Zhang Hong (1577-?), *Fishing Boats among Autumn Mountains after Li Cheng*, Ming Dynasty; ink and color on silk, 45 x 18 inches, hanging scroll; Collection of the Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI**

Though yearning to be hermits, most literati might not have necessarily experienced actual life in the wilderness. The main training for literati painters was not direct observation of nature, but the copying of masterpieces from previous generations. Thus, instead of verisimilitude, literati painting emphasized the way nature was captured through brush and ink.

This landscape by Zhang Hong is a copy of a painting by Li Cheng (919-967), one of the greatest Five Dynasties and early Song Dynasty landscape painters. The inscription in the upper left corner reads: “In mid-spring of the year Bingzi, I was staying at the Baoxuntang Hall of the Qin family in Liangxi, while a guest showed me a painting titled ‘Fishing Boats among Autumn Mountains’ by Li Cheng (Yingqiu). The host then asked me to copy it on white silk. I thus complete this painting, which is, though not exactly (the same as the great original work), may still be worthy of a meal.”

## Part Two

### The Divine Landscapes



Lan Ying (1585-1664), *Landscape in the style of Dong Yuan*, 1955 copy of 1655 original; ink and color on paper, 12 x 9 ½ inches, hanging scroll; Collection of Oakland University



**Zhou Zi (1527-1573), *Landscape in the Style of Gao Kegong and Mi Fu*, Ming Dynasty; ink on silk, 78 x 38 inches, hanging scroll; Collection of the Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, MI**

Landscape in Chinese painting is not only the hermitic home of the literati, but also the sacred realm of the deities. The Daoist immortals dwell in mountains and historically, the Confucian Five Sacred Peaks have been the place where the “Son of Heaven” communicated with various supernatural powers. After Buddhism was popularized during the Age of Disunion, monasteries with pagodas were added to the divine Chinese landscape.

Generally, in hanging scroll landscape painting, spatial depth extends vertically from the bottom to top. The foreground is the domain of humans, the background is the realm of deities, and the misty middle ground makes the transition. In this painting by Zhou Zi, villages with thatched houses, trees and streams can be observed in the lower part of the scroll, while roofs like those of a heavenly palace, suggesting the existence of a temple, emerges from the clouds in the background. In the upper left corner, Zhou’s own inscription comments on the previous masters Mi Fu (Haiyue) and Gao Kegong (Fangshan), whose ink techniques captured the appearance and spirit of cloudy mountains. The brushwork of horizontal dots representing foggy rocks is a signature of Mi’s landscape style.



Anonymous, *Landscape*, 17<sup>th</sup> century and after; ink and color on paper, 49 x 13 inches, hanging scroll; Collection of Oakland University

In this painting, although the images are much simplified and abstract, the basic composition and elements of the previous monumental scroll by Zhou Zi are still apparent. In the foreground, a scholar is seated in front of a table within a thatched hut surrounded by trees and low hills. In the distance, looming peaks hidden behind the heavy clouds suggest the existence of divine beings. Mountains are depicted with vertical brushstrokes, while a few horizontal lines on top of the foggy hills in the middle ground indicate temples or dwellings of immortals.

The scroll is signed “Shenjuzi,” which means “Mr. Hermitic Dwelling” and is clearly a style name. In the upper left corner, a poem by the artist reads, “(I,) the Mountain People, planted mountain flowers for the pleasure of (living in) the mountains; I hence remained indoor and (let) the mountain flowers bloom and fall (alone).” The calligraphies for both the poem and signature are idiosyncratic. The informal cursive handwriting is similar to the Japanese Hiragana in style, which indicates that the artist could be Japanese.



You Wuqu (1910-2006), *Homes in Deep Mountains*, 2001; ink on paper, 54 x 14 inches, hanging scroll; courtesy of You Can

You Wuqu was acclaimed by some reviewers as “the hermit painter” and “the last preserver of literati painting.” He started painting at age 4. During his early years, he had learned painting from such important 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century painters as Huang Binhong (1865-1955) and Chen Banding (1876-1970), and copied styles of many ancient masters. In 1952, he returned to his hometown, Nantong, and started developing his own style. After visiting Mt. Huang in Anhui Province three times in 1979-81, You changed his landscape style dramatically and invented the “water technique,” which he used in conjunction with the two traditional categories of “brushwork” and “ink.” In this painting, while the landscapes in the fore and middle grounds were painted by employing traditional brushwork and ink techniques, the texture and structure of the mountains in the background were created by the natural properties of water, its diffusion and bleeding on paper.

The title of this work reflects the influence of idealized hermitic life, which still remains a dream among contemporary literati. The significance of the simple hut dwellings by the stream were enhanced by the artist’s unique usage of his seal, which appears as part of the interior decoration. As a literati artist, You Wuqu mastered all four skills of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal, and was also renowned for his excellent creations of miniature gardens in potted landscape (*penjing*).



Yu Zengshan (1948-), *Landscape*, 2009; ink on paper, 66 x 13 inches, hanging scroll; courtesy of the artist

Depicted in this landscape painting is the natural phenomenon known as the “sea of clouds”; the microclimate surrounding Mt. Huang in Anhui Province is celebrated for its unique atmospheric conditions. The contemporary literati artist Yu Zengshan, a native of Nantong in Jiangsu Province and student of You Wuqu, has been to Mt. Huang three times to draw upon the “original energy (*yuangqi*)” of the mountain and to experience the constant unpredictable change of its cloudy scenery.

Since his childhood, Yu has studied poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving. The inscription in the lower left corner of the painting includes a poem written in 1981 during a trip to Mt. Huang: “Layers of mountain ranges and the vertical green pines were decorated with red maples. With serpentine uneven narrow mountain trails, danger is everywhere on the trip. The road ahead twists and the road behind is on the cliff side. I feel at ease after passing the Heavenly Gate.”

Most Chinese landscape paintings are not done in situ. Artists first immerse themselves in nature to absorb its beauty. Later, they recollect the most exciting experiences and the best views then complete the painting in their studios like a musician composing a piece of music.

## Part Three

### The Politicized Animals



Liu Kuiyao, *Horse under Willow Tree*, 20<sup>th</sup> century;  
ink and color on paper, 12 x 13 inches, hanging  
scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath  
Tagore, Collection of Oakland University



(Attributed) Zhao Mengfu (Zhao Zi'ang, 1254-1322), *Horses*, 1301, Yuan Dynasty; anonymous copy, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Qing Dynasty; ink and color on silk, 11 x 68 inches, hand-scroll; Collection of Oakland University

Although the roots of literati art can be traced back to Shu Shi (1036-1101) in the Song Dynasty, or Wang Wei (701-761) in the Tang Dynasty, or even Tao Yuanming (365-427) in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, its formation and fast development into a mainstream Chinese art form occurred during the Yuan Dynasty, when China was ruled by the Mongols. The Mongol rulers' distrust made it difficult for Chinese scholars to participate in government affairs; at the same time, traditional Confucian morality also required that they did not collaborate with the "barbarian invaders." As a result, many literati during the Yuan Dynasty lost their traditional role as scholar officials. A lot of them became artists instead.

Since literati art was developed in a particular cultural political background, many subjects in literati painting were chosen and popularized because of their symbolic meanings. The use of animals and plants as expressions for personal ambitions or political criticism was also relatively safer under an unfavorable regime due to the ambiguity of the subject matter. The horse had long been a symbol of a talented person and the martial spirit that was needed for building a strong nation. Zhao Mengfu was one of the greatest horse painters in Chinese history. A descendent of the Song imperial family that was conquered by the Mongols, Zhao's service to the Yuan court was much criticized by his contemporaries as well as by later generations. Many believe, however, that Zhao used his art as a way to express his internal struggle and emotional bitterness regarding his service to the enemy.

This hand scroll, though an 18<sup>th</sup> century copy, has the typical style of Zhao's horses. The cavalier parade is divided into three groups, marching in the same direction against a neutral empty background. The riders, dressed in Tang style, carry both bows and books. The rider on the central white horse in the right hand group of five horses is clearly the master, dressed as a scholar and holding a box of books. The multiplication of colors of the robust horses gives rhythm, diversity, and harmony to the entire composition.



Xu Beihong (1895-1953), *Horse*, early 20<sup>th</sup> century; ink and light color on paper, 33 x 12 ½ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

Xu Beihong was a great innovator of 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese painting. The back view of a horse is unusual in Chinese painting. Xu's training in both Chinese literati and Western Neo-Classical traditions imbues his calligraphic brushstrokes with a sensitivity for light and shadow. The contrasts between the broad brushstrokes of the tree trunk and the delicate lines of the willow twigs, as well as the dark ink of the horse and light tone of the ground create a dynamic balance.

Xu was famous for his horse paintings. Living most of his creative life during a period when China was weakened by foreign invasions and constant warfare, Xu used the traditional motif of the horse to express his expectation for national endurance and ultimate triumph. The new twigs sprouting from an ancient tree were probably meant to symbolize the revitalization of China.



Li Keran (1907-1989), *Cowboy*, 1948; ink and light color on paper, 27 ½ x 13 ½ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

While the horse represents power and ambition, the cow or ox is a symbol of bucolic life – the life preferred by the hermitic literati when the political situation is not promising. In 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese art, Li's ox figure was as famous as Xu's horse. He used broad casual washes of ink in combination with fine delicate brushstrokes to capture the image and spirit of the animal. The childlike calligraphy, which reads "the free melody of the flute is from a careless mouth," matches the innocent demeanor of the young boy riding a water buffalo.



Li Kuchan (1898-1983), *The Heron*, 20th century; ink and light color on paper, 50 x 18 ¼ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

While the cow symbolizes the idealized hermitic environment for literati, the heron represents the secluded literati themselves. Free and self-assured, the graceful image of the heron appears frequently in Chinese poetry and painting. In this painting, a solitary large heron is standing in a gnarled old tree. The image, together with the inscription, which reads “a heron sleeping in a sparse willow,” captures the free spirit of a naturally dwelling hermit.

A student of the legendary master Qi Baishi (1864-1957), Li Kuchan was famous for his paintings of birds and flowers. Initially trained at newly established art schools in the 1920s, he later drew his influences from such ancient individualist painters as Xu Wei (1521-1593) and Bada Shanren (1626-1705).



Qi Baishi (1864-1957), *Crabs*, 1950; ink and color on paper, 26 ½ x 13 ¼ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

Qi Baishi was the most renowned painter in 20<sup>th</sup> century China. His paintings of animals and plants expanded the traditional genre of “birds and flowers.” Rather than the time-honored themes of the elegant horse, buffalo, crane, heron, etc., his paintings often featured such humble creatures as mice, shrimps, insects, and even flies and mosquitoes. Qi was, however, a painter who had mastered all the four literati arts of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal. In fact, he considered his seal the best of the four, poetry second, calligraphy third, and painting only the fourth.

Seemingly innocent animals, crabs were sometimes used by Qi to make a political statement. When Beijing was under Japanese occupation during World War II, Qi was invited to the birthday party of the military police commander of the puppet Chinese government. When forced to paint for his host, Qi painted some crabs. To the surprise of all the guests, he added the inscription: “how long will you be able to walk sideways like this?” “Walking sideways (*bengxing*)” is a Chinese expression depicting overbearing behavior. Many people believe that, with this action, Qi was criticizing the Chinese collaborators for their treacherous service to the Japanese.

The painting pictured here, devoid of the above mentioned political overtones, was painted as a gift and the inscription simply reads “for Mr. Tagore.”

## Part Four

### The Humanized Plants



Yu Zengshan (1948-), *Bamboo and Banana*, 2009;  
ink on paper, 54 x 13 inches, hanging scroll;  
courtesy of the artist



Wang Yun, *Lotus*, 1914; ink and color on paper, 38 ½ x 12 ½ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

The traditional repertoire of plants in literati painting focused on a few specific types chosen for their symbolic meanings in traditional Chinese culture, and for the unique forms they possessed that fostered a rich calligraphic display of brush and ink.

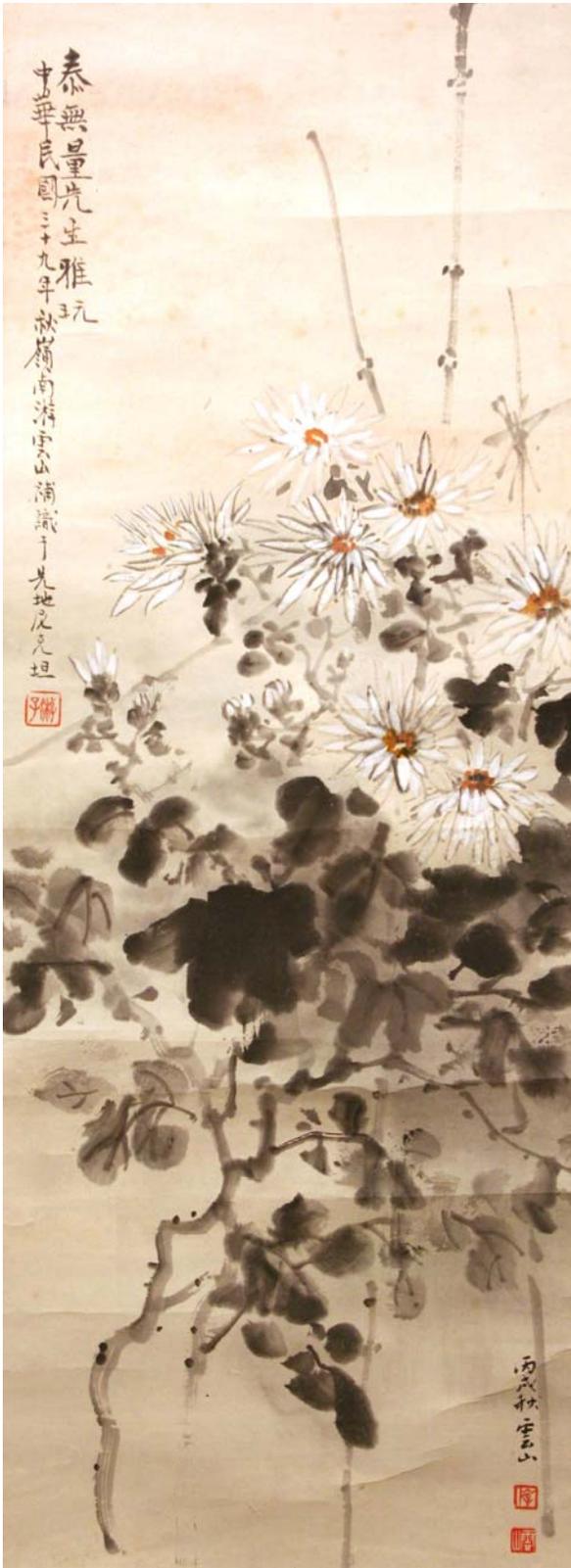
The lotus is a symbol of purity. The beautiful lotus flowers grow from a muddy deposit of silt, symbolic of an ethical man maintaining his moral uprightness even in a corrupt society. From a formalistic perspective, the broad leaves of the lotus plant are perfect for large areas of ink wash and the linear quality of the stems and petals are ideal for the enactment of expressive calligraphic brushstrokes. Together, they have the potential for creating a dynamic balance of contrasts between light and dark, surface and line, wet and dry, curvilinear and straight.



Chen Nian (Banding, 1876-1970), *Plum Blossoms*, 1941; ink on paper, 38 x 12 ½ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

One of the most enduring motifs in literati painting is the “Four Gentlemen,” which refers to four plants: the blossoming plum tree, flowering orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum. These four plants were chosen as a focus for artistic expression in literati culture because of the symbolic meanings conventionally attributed to them, which, according to Confucian ideology, were concerned with the development of a virtuous personality. Numerous works were dedicated to them.

The plum blossom is a symbol of tenacity. Blooming in early spring when the snow is still present, plum trees bring the first flowers to a colorless and thus far still cold world. In this painting by Chen Banding, the inscription reads, “the white snow still covers the frozen village, while the red flowers of plum trees herald the arrival of spring.”



You Yunshan, *Chrysanthemums*, 1950; ink and light color on paper, 21 ½ x 7 7/8 inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

While plum trees blossom first in snow-covered early spring, chrysanthemums are the last to wither in frosty late autumn. Like the plum blossom, the chrysanthemum is often compared to a gentleman during a time of hardship. Loved by the Eastern Jin Dynasty poet Tao Yuanming (Tao Qian), the chrysanthemum is also a symbol of a hermitic life.

You Yunshan was a 20<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist monk and a student of the famous Lingnan School painter Gao Jianfu (1879-1951), who was a promoter of “New Literati Painting” in the 1930s and 40s. This painting was painted for, and dedicated to, Mr. Tagore.



(Attributed) Wen Tong (1019-1079), *Bamboo and Snow*, 18<sup>th</sup> century and after; ink and white pigment on paper, 66 x 26 ½, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

As one of the “Four Gentlemen,” some features of bamboo have been compared to the ideal Confucian personalities of the literati. Bamboo breaks instead of bending under pressure, just like an upright gentleman would die rather than submit to evil forces; the empty interior of a bamboo section is a symbol of modesty (“*xuxin*” in Chinese, which literally means “empty heart”), a very positive and desirable personality trait in Confucianism.

This snow covered bamboo painting attributed to Wen Tong perfectly illustrates the humanized qualities of the plant. The color and technique of this painting is unique. In order to highlight the snow, the paper was first blacked with ink; then white pigment was applied for the general shape of the branches; finally, brushstrokes of black ink were painted on the white areas to give details to the leaves. The result of such a procedure makes the painting look similar to a black and white woodblock print.

The inscriptions in black ink above the painting were written by a late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century collector who once owned the scroll, recording the circumstances of his acquisition and claiming its authenticity. The white inscription within the painting and the black inscriptions under it were written by friends of the collector, commenting on the great quality of the work.

Wen Tong was a Northern Song (960-1127) literati painter, a cousin of Su Shi, and a key figure in the development and popularization of bamboo painting.



You Wuqu (1910-2006), *Pine Tree*, 1981; ink on paper, 40 x 14 inches, hanging scroll; courtesy of You Can

In addition to the “Four Gentlemen,” there is another group of humanized plants known as the “Three Friends of the Winter,” which refers to the pine, bamboo, and plum tree. All three flourish in snow and thus are symbols of endurance and determination. The pine tree is also a symbol of longevity.

This extremely calligraphic painting by You Wuqu is inscribed in Seal Script (*Zhuanshu*) with two Chinese characters meaning “The Dragon.” The pine tree, as well as the brushstrokes of Chinese calligraphy, is often compared to a dragon, the powerful and benevolent creature in Chinese mythology.



Qi Baishi (1863-1957), *Morning Glories*; ink and color on paper, 27 x 12 ½ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

As in the field of animal painting, Qi Baishi expanded the repertoire of plants in the traditional “Birds and Flowers” category. Instead of the symbolic plants that represented Confucian ideals in personality, Qi included many common plants in his works, like these, the morning glories. Discovering beauty in the most humble things, Qi’s paintings of plants highlight the delight of life with a humorous tone.



Suichu\* (1971-), *Bamboo Album*, 2009; ink on paper, 26 album leaves, 7 ¾ x 11 inches each; courtesy of Shuishan Yu

In this painting, the traditional format of sequential album leaves and the conventional theme of bamboo are used to express the artist's understanding of literati art. The work starts on the right with a single brushstroke, which could be understood as both a calligraphic element and a bamboo leaf. With different combinations of similar brushstrokes, the subsequent album leaves display a variety of bamboos of different types and situations. The painting ends with a poem composed and written by the artist.

The inscription at the beginning on the right reads "bamboo has the manner of a gentleman." The inscriptions within each painting frame bear a Chinese character that defines a specific type of bamboo, followed by a brief explanation of that character. Thanks to the literati's love of bamboo, there are many different words for bamboo in the Classical Chinese vocabulary.

The illustration reprinted here only shows part of the album leaves. The red squares are all the artist's seals. The poem at the end of the album reads:

*With light ink, I wrote these secluded bamboos.  
 The branches are like "flying white" and the leaves are like water.  
 I do not envy Su Shi, who once commented that one could eat a meal without meat but  
 should not dwell in a place without bamboo.  
 I often feel ashamed that Li Ling, the Han Dynasty general, had surrendered to his enemy  
 and thus hurt his moral integrity.  
 The pure wind from the azure heaven cannot blow them away,  
 Which always return after being covered by the yellow dust of the vast earth.  
 Alas, it is the same bamboo as that extolled by numerous ancient masters! How are you?  
 For many thousands of years, we are still touched by the same thing and sound the same cry.*

\* Suichu is the style name of Shuishan Yu, Professor of Art History at Oakland University and curator of this exhibition.

## Part Five

### The Written Images



Zhang Xuelou, calligraphy in the Seal Style  
(*Zhuanshu*), 1949; ink on paper, 26 x 8 ½ inches,  
hanging scroll; Collection of Oakland University



(Middle) Xiao Sun (1883-1944), *Landscape after Ni Zan*, 1943; ink and light color on paper, 49 x 13 inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

(Sides) Wang Shizi (1885-1950), calligraphy in the Seal Style (*Zhuanshu*), a pair of narrow hanging scrolls (couplet), ink on paper, 59 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 7 inches; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

The integration of calligraphy in painting was one of the greatest contributions of literati scholars' participation in art. Not only are paintings directly inscribed with calligraphy, but also the very aesthetics and principles of calligraphy become the ideals for painting. The painting in the middle has been executed with the same brushstrokes in black ink as the calligraphies on the sides. As in calligraphy, going over mistakes or repairing brushstrokes in the painting is not desirable. The independent aesthetic quality of the brushwork that could show the psychological and physical movements of the artist must be preserved. On the other hand, the pictographic nature of the Chinese writing system enables the complexity and richness of calligraphy to rival that of painting.

Xiao Sun was a painter in Beijing who first followed the conventionalist painters of the early Qing Dynasty such as the "Four Wangs," but later turned to such eccentric painters as Shi Tao and Mei Qing. Wang Shizi was a painter and calligrapher working in Shanghai. His couplet here was written in the Seal Script, the official script of the Zhou Dynasty (11<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) that retained much of the pictorial quality of the earlier Bone and Shell Script (*Jiagunwen*) of the Shang Dynasty (17<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE). The couplet reads, "By waters and mountains, I built four to five rooms to become a hermit; planting flowers and vegetables, I opened up two to three acres of wasteland to learn to be a farmer."



(Middle) Qi Baishi (1863-1957), *Frogs*, 1948; ink and color on paper, 40 ½ x 13 ¼ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

(Sides) Yu Youren (1879-1957), calligraphy in the Cursive Style (*Caoshu*); a pair of narrow hanging scrolls (couplet), ink on paper, 68 ¼ x 17 ½ inches; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

Just as in calligraphy, Chinese painting could also be executed in a variety of brushstroke styles from conservative, to standard, to semi-cursive, to cursive. In the central painting, Qi Baishi used broad and spontaneous brushworks to capture the general shapes and, most importantly, the life spirit of the plants and animals, rather than the meticulous details, very similar to the cursive style calligraphy by Yu Youren on the two sides. Upon close examination, the painted brushstrokes are not very different from that of calligraphy.

Yu Youren was an eminent calligrapher known for his Cursive Script works. He was also an important political figure in Republican China. The couplet reads, “The ambitious plan is as extensive as the faraway winds and clouds; the virtuous ideology is as pure as heaven and earth.”

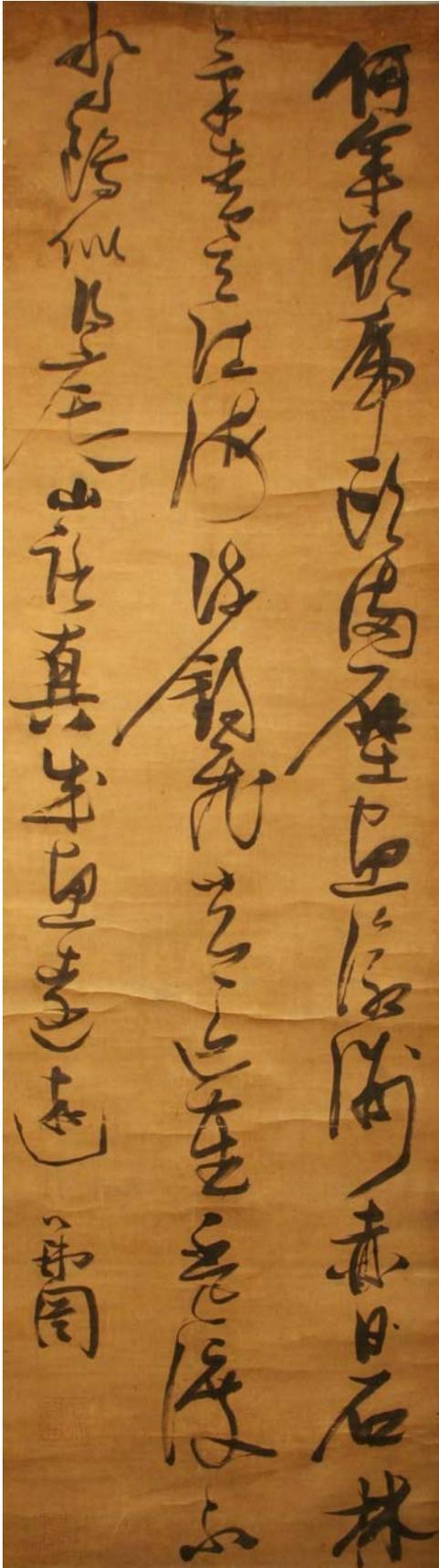


(Middle) Zhang Daqian (1899-1983), *The Bird*, 1948; ink and color on paper, 27  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 14  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

(Sides) He Shaoji (1799-1873), calligraphy in the Running Style (*Xingshu*); a pair of narrow hanging scrolls (couplet), ink on paper, 62  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 12  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

In this group, the couplet scrolls were written in the Running Style (*Xingshu*), a script more formal than the Cursive Style (*Caoshu*) and more cursive than the Formal Style (*Kaishu*); the painting in the middle was executed in a similar degree of cursive-ness. While the intertwining brushworks in light ink delineated an impressionist tree trunk, more careful brushstrokes were applied to capture some details of the bird and leaves.

Zhang was trained in mainland China but fled to Taiwan after the communist take-over in 1949. He was celebrated for his preservation copies of the Dunhuang wall painting and his ability to mimic many historical styles. He Shaoji was a Qing Dynasty scholar, official, poet, and calligrapher. His calligraphy style had been based on and inspired by the Northern Wei Dynasty stele inscriptions. The couplet here reads, “The cold and lonely thoughts of snow and moon followed my steps; supporting my chin with my hand, the delightful scenery of mountain and streams came into my imagination.”



Zhang Ruitu (1570-1641), calligraphy in the Wild Cursive Style (*Kuangcao*); ink on paper, 75 x 21 ¾ inches, hanging scroll; Gift of Professor and Mrs. Amitendranath Tagore, Collection of Oakland University

This work of calligraphy is in the Wild Cursive Style (*Kuangcao*), the most expressive script in Chinese writing. Hard to read, the rich and complicated patterns of black lines created by rhythmic and energetic brushstrokes can almost be appreciated as an abstract painting. Following the brushworks, the motions of the calligrapher's hand when this work was being created could be traced, similar to the action paintings by the 20<sup>th</sup> century abstract expressionist painters, like Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline.

Zhang Ruitu was a Ming Dynasty scholar official renowned for his Cursive and Wild Cursive Style calligraphy.



Wu Hufan (1894-1968), *Landscape Album*, 1920; ink on paper, 24 album leaves, 11 x 16 ½ inches each; courtesy of Shuishan Yu

One of the favorite formats of traditional Chinese painting is to put calligraphy and painting side by side in album leaves. Concentrate on these pages and you will see the division between writing and painting blurred and a great image emerging from a writing hand.

## Chronology of Chinese History

Xia Dynasty (2070 BCE – 1600 BCE)

Shang Dynasty (1600 BCE – 1046 BCE)

    Early Shang (1600 BCE – 1300 BCE)

    Late Shang (Yin: 1300 BCE – 1046 BCE)

Zhou Dynasty (1046 BCE – 221 BCE)

    Western Zhou (Feng, Hao: 1046 BCE – 771 BCE)

    Eastern Zhou (Luoyi: 770 BCE – 256 BCE)

        Spring and Autumn Period (770 BCE – 476 BCE)

        Warring States Period (475 BCE – 221 BCE)

Qin Dynasty (221 – 206 BCE)

Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE)

    Chu-Han Warfare (206 – 202 BCE)

    Western Han Dynasty (Chang'an, 202 BCE – 8 CE)

    Xin Dynasty (9 – 23)

    Eastern Han Dynasty (Luoyang, 25 – 220)

Age of Disunion / Six Dynasties (220-589)

    Three Kingdoms (Wei, Shu, Wu: 220-280)

    Western Jin (265-316)

    Eastern Jin (317-420) and Sixteen Kingdoms (304-439)

    Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589)

        Northern Wei (386-534)

        Southern Song, Qi, Liang (502-557), Chen

Sui Dynasty (581-618): Daxing (Xi'an)

Tang Dynasty (618-907): Chang'an (Xi'an)

Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907 – 960)

    Five Dynasties (Liang, Tang, Jin, Han, Zhou: 907-960)

    Ten Kingdoms (902-979)

Song Dynasty (960-1279)

    Northern Song (960-1127)

    Southern Song (1127-1279)

    Liao Dynasty (947-1125)

    Jin Dynasty (1115-1234)

    Western Xia (1032-1227)

Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368)

Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)

Twentieth & Twenty-first centuries

    Republic of China (1912-1949)

        Republic of China in Taiwan (1949 – present)

    People's Republic of China (1949 – present)

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dick Goody for his various contributions to this exhibition. He first suggested that I might curate an exhibition in the OU Art Gallery last winter, and in the following months we have worked closely together planning the exhibition. I am also grateful for his editorial suggestions regarding the exhibition catalog. I would also like to thank Jacky Leow for her careful registrarship with lending institutions and for her close reading of a draft of the catalog. I also owe Lisa Ngote many thanks for her excellent suggestions regarding the exhibition texts and Andrea Eis for her final proofreading. The wonderful Chinese furniture and fixtures in the “literati studio,” without which the exhibition would have been much less interesting, are on loan from Richard Stamps, Bonnie Abiko, Linda Benson, and Chris Lee. Yin Zheng and Mark Stone offered me some great ideas about the literati events in conjunction with the exhibition. And Duncan Cardillo, Michael Martin, Peter Ott, and Katherine Borg were most helpful in securing the acquisition of scrolls from Flint Institute of Arts and the Kresge Library.

I am indebted to many friends in China. Zhao Jin helped me to locate and borrow some contemporary art works from a variety of individuals. You Can and Yu Zengshan generously loaned their precious works to me. Xu Yi offered great hospitality during my stay in China. I would also like to thank the following institutions for their support to make this exhibition and other related literati events a success:

The Judd Family Endowed Fund  
Religion and Society Theme, College of Arts and Sciences, Oakland University  
Mei’an Guqin Society, Nantong, China  
Department of Art and Art History, Oakland University  
Oakland University Art Gallery  
Flint Institute of Art  
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies, Oakland University  
Department of Music, Theatre, and Dance, Oakland University  
International Studies, Oakland University

Shuishan Yu  
August 19, 2009

Writing an Image: Chinese Literati Art  
Curated by Shuishan Yu

Catalogue written and edited by Shuishan Yu

Oakland University Art Gallery  
Department of Art and Art History  
College of Arts and Sciences  
208 Wilson Hall  
2200 North Squirrel Road  
Rochester, MI 48309-4401  
(248) 370-3005  
www.oakland.edu/ouag  
Director, Dick Goody  
Assistant to the Director & Registrar, Jacqueline Leow

Catalogue designed by Shuishan Yu  
Printed by Arbor Oakland

ISBN 978-0-925859-50-1

Copyright 2009 Oakland University Art Gallery. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the Oakland University Art Gallery.

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY EXHIBITIONS ARE MADE  
POSSIBLE THROUGH THE GENEROUS CONTRIBUTION OF  
INDIVIDUALS, COMPANIES AND FOUNDATIONS.

**Directors' Circle: \$1,000 – \$2,499:**

Barron Family Foundation  
Phebe Goldstein  
Joyce LaBan  
Elaine Ohno  
Teri Takai

The above gifts were made between June 2008 and June 2009.  
Oakland University Art Gallery apologizes for any inaccuracies or omissions.

This exhibition was made possible in part by The Kresge Foundation, Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs, National Endowment for the Arts, the College of Arts and Sciences, Oakland University, and the Judd Family Endowed Fund.



