Ming Huang’s Journey to Shu

The History of a Painting

During its five-hundred-year history, this painting has been admired, looted, rescued, honored, forgotten, found and restored to esteem.

ELIZABETH LYONS

Hanging on the wall of the Museum’s Rotunda is a large Chinese painting on two joined strips of closely woven silk (see cover and Figs. 1-3). The scene is dominated by dander, very jagged mountains painted in strong blue and green colors. A group of people on foot and horseback are winding their way through narrow passes of the mountains. In a clearing in the middle, some of the party have stopped to rest, and an unsaddled horse freed of its burden rolls on the ground. Along the sides and on top a sharp-eyed visitor can see a number of small red rectangles, the seal impressions of the painting’s previous owners during the last four hundred to five hundred years.

This piece came into our collections in 1916, one of a group of 30 rather undistinguished paintings bought from Knoedlers for an average of $500 each. It was catalogued as “Travellers in the Mountains,” and briefly described as being in the Tang “blue and green” style and having seals of the Emperor Ch’ien Lung (1736-1795). Shortly thereafter it sank into the oblivion and neglect of storage. In the late 1960s, I examined the painting and, recognizing its subject matter and convinced of its quality, asked the Women’s Committee to provide funds for its restoration and reframing. There was some official protest on the lines of “we are not an art museum,” and it was suggested that if the work dated after A.D. 1000 it should go to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The problem was resolved on the grounds that it was indisputably in the Tang style and would fit nicely with the Tang sculpture in the Rotunda, where we could use a spot of color.

All was justified when the painting was published by two eminent scholars, Alexander Soper and Max Loehr, the latter asserting it was one of three important paintings on the subject (the other two are in the Palace Museum, Taiwan). The subject is a famous episode in Chinese history, a grand opera drama of love and tragedy which has been told in poetry, plays, and novels for a thousand years, and in modern films. It is the story of the Tang Emperor, Ming Huang (r. A.D. 713-756) and his love for Yang Kwei Fei, an enchanting beauty.

Ming Huang and Yang Kwei Fei

Ming Huang reigned over the most brilliant court in Chinese history and made his capital, Ch’ang-an, the civilized center of the 8th century world. It was a center of art and learning, with the kingdom’s best poets, painters, musicians, and scholars.

Chinese influence extended as far as Samarkand and attracted a stream of foreigners—Syrians, Turks, Persians—to a peaceful city tolerant of all religions.

In 745, when Ming Huang was 60, he met the 27-year-old Lady Yang, a concubine of his 18th son. He soon installed her in the palace, giving her the title of Imperial Princess along with anything she wished, from palaces for her sisters to a constant supply of fresh litchi fruit imported from a thousand miles south. As all of this took most of his time, he gave less and less attention to the affairs of state.

Around A.D. 756, the villain of the drama, An Lu Shan, appeared on the scene. He was a warrior-brigand of Tartar-Turkic ancestry, a very talented and ambitious man who had flattered and bribed his way to court. Once there, he made himself a congenial companion: Yang Kwei Fei adopted him as a brother, and the Emperor treated him as a trusted friend, even taking his advice to replace the Emperor’s Chinese generals with tougher-minded Tartars.

Ming Huang and Yang Kwei Fei were utterly surprised when An Lu Shan, who had gone north to muster an army, used it to capture Honan and Shansi in A.D. 756 and marched on the capital. The court panicked and fled in such haste that they took no provisions for themselves or the imperial guard. After a night and a day they reached an inn at Ma-wei. The escorting soldiers were tired and hungry. Suspecting that Yang Kwei Fei’s brother was in secret communication with the rebels, they killed him and then directed their anger toward Yang Kwei Fei, blaming her for the whole disaster. After long argument, an officer convinced Ming Huang that the soldiers were hostile and might turn on him; the Emperor finally gave his permission for Yang Kwei Fei’s execution.

Ming Huang abdicated in favor of his son, Ch’ang-an was eventually regained, but the ex-Emperor never recovered his spirit. It is said that twice a day he stood in tears before her portrait and mourned her until he died at the age of 78.

The remaining years of the T’ang dynasty are a dismal record of weak rulers, troubles, and defeats. If Yang Kwei Fei is never completely absolved from blame, in time she gradually becomes the tragic heroine of past drama. An Lu Shan remains the black villain—it would be false majesty to criticize an Emperor.

The Historical Record

One of the earliest commemorations of the event is a poem by Po Chih-i (A.D. 772-849). He was a precocious scholar and high official and so famous a poet that his verses were collected and engraved on stone. His best-known work is a very long narrative poem about Ming Huang and Yang...
**Excerpts from “The Everlasting Wrong” by Po Chü-i (A.D. 772-846)**

**Beauty.** From the Yang family came a maiden, just grown up to womanhood, Reared in the inner apartments, altogether unknown to fame. But nature had amply endowed her with a beauty hard to conceal. And one day she was summoned to a place at the monarch's side.

**Revelry.** Hair like a cloud, face like a flower, Amid the delights of the Hibiscus Pavilion She passed the soft spring nights.

Three thousand peerless beauties adorned the apartments of the monarch's harem, Yet always his Majesty reserved her for his own, for her alone.

Her sisters and her brothers, one and all, were raised to the rank of nobles.

In the gorgeous palace, piercing the grey clouds above, Divine music, borne on the breeze,梯潜然于各处 all sides.

But suddenly comes the roll of the fish-skin war-drums Breaking rudely upon the air.

**Flight.** Clouds of dust enveloped the lofty gates of the capital. A thousand war-chariots and ten thousand horses moved toward the south-west.

A hundred if beyond the western gate, leaving behind them the city walls, The soldiers refuse to advance; nothing is to be done until She of the moth-eyebrows perishes in sight of all.

The monarch covers his face, powerless to save.

**Exile.** Across cloud-capped mountain-tops they make their way.

Daily and nightly his Majesty is consumed by bitter grief. Travelling along, the very brightness of the moon saddens his heart.

**Return.** Time passes, days go by, and once again He is there at the well-known spot, But from the clouds of earth at the foot of the Ma-wet hill, No sign of her lovely face appears, only the place of death. Eastward they depart and hurry on to the capital at full speed.

**Home.** There is the pool and there are the flowers, as of old. In the hibiscus he sees her face, in the willow he sees her eyebrows: How in the presence of these should tears not flow— But never once does her spirit come back to visit him in dreams.

**Spirit.** A Taoist priest of Lin-ch'ung, of the Hung-tu school, Was able to conjure up her spirit, to summon the spirits of the dead. Anxious to relieve the fretting mind of his sovereign This magician receives orders to urge a diligent quest.

High up to heaven, low down to earth, seeking everywhere. At length he hears of an Isle of the Blest away in mid-ocean.

And there many gentle and beautiful Immortals pass their days in peace. Among them is one whose name sounds upon lips as Eternal. By her he now-white skin and flower-like face he knows that this is she. Subduing her emotions, restraining her grief, she tenders thanks to his Majesty, Saying how pleased she is to be done; she has missed his form and voice; Then she takes out the old keepsakes, tokens of undying love, A gold hairpin, an enamel brooch, and in his great wrong he carries these back. One half of the hairpin she keeps, and one half of the enamel brooch, "Tell him," she said, "to be firm of heart, as this gold and enamel. And then in heaven or on earth below we two may meet once more."

Heaven and Earth, long-lasting as they are, will some day pass away; But this great wrong shall stretch out for ever, endless, for ever and ay.

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(Kiis 1925:169-175)
To portray the rather ignominious flight of a renowned Emperor may always have been considered offensive to proud rulers. Or it may simply be a matter of the Chinese preference for the oblique and subtle approach to a subject rather than an easy and obvious one. In Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts there is a painting of some fluttering banners visible over a hill top. Without a title, only the well educated would recognize the theme as a portrayal of the first Han Emperor victorious entering a city. It is a game the Chinese literati played with increasing delight and frequency throughout the Ming and Ch‘ing periods. The three paintings under discussion are ostensibly pictures of travelers in picturesque mountains, but there are clues to their identity and the site of their route.

The Message of the Seals

Before identifying the seals on our painting, I must remark that the Chinese custom of a collector stamping his name or work of art seems to many Westerners to be a rather peculiar act, one that should be as disfiguring as graffiti on a Rembrandt. As most Westerners can’t read the seals as names, however, the small red stamps often add a kind of snowflake decoration to a painting. It is an ancient and honorable custom. In the Shang and Chou periods, ca. 1600-200 B.C., identification signs were carved on oracle bones, bamboo slips, and clay. With the invention of paper, seals were made of stone and used with a red paste ink made of cinnabar and oil.

The seal itself was a minor work of art designed by an artist and often carved by him. The most common material for seals was soapstone, but jade, crystal, marble, and ivory were also used. A few gold and silver ones are known. They come in all sizes, from the imperial or official ones that are usually large and heavy down to small ones that can be tied to a belt or slipped into a pocket (Fig. 5). They might be a simple unadorned block, or inscribed with a poem or carved with a scene. An artist could have his seal cut in various ways, from left to right, right to left, horizontally or vertically, with the edges of the characters straight or slanted. The manner of cutting usually was not perceptible in the stamped impression, but in case of forgery or confusion of identical names, it was a means of identification by the owner. There were also different recipes for the ink, which was basically powdered cinnabar, oil, and salt mixed in a bowl of cinnamon, pepper and, inexplicably, a pinch of mugwort.

Scholars of Chinese painting are often grateful to the seals as aids to identification, although they can also be pitfalls of deception or frustration. Chinese artists and collectors don’t stick to one seal or even one name. They may use a nickname, the name of their house, a literary allusion, or the name of their favorite cat. Those who can be identified today have been catalogued by V. Contag and C.C. Wang under “Fancy Names,” in Seals of Chinese Painters and Collectors of the Ming and Ch‘ing Periods (1966).

The seal is not a guarantee of date or authenticity. A collector may put his seal on a copy or a forgery, perhaps through ignorance, perhaps merely because he has accepted it “as in the style of,” and sometimes for deception. A genuine painting may be given the seal of an earlier period for the same reasons.

Modern collectors owe a debt to Contag and Wang for their corpus of Ming and Ch‘ing seals. Some fifty years ago there was a gathering of experts in Shanghai for the purpose of determining the authenticity of paintings from the imperial collections that had become the property of the Chinese Republic, and are now in Taiwan. Contag and Wang saw the value in comparing a large number of seals. Fortunately they had access to the greatest paintings of the region and in five years had compiled a corpus of 9,000 seals, photographed in great detail with a fingerprint camera. In 1966 they added a supplement from Western collections. The seals on The University Museum’s painting are not included because the piece was still immured in storage and unknown to them.

Two of the ten seals on “The Journey to Shu” are small and lightly stamped, and the impressions are so fuzzy that they cannot be read even under magnification. It is possible that they could be brought out by x-ray or sophisticated laboratory analysis, and it might be worthwhile doing in the future the rare chance that they could be Sung or Yuan. Pre-Ming seals of private individuals were usually modest in size; they were occasionally used with a sticky paste and powdered cinnabar and frequently did not produce a clear impression.

The earliest sealable is that of Hsiang yu-an-pien, Tzu Ch’ing hao M’o-lin, also known by the name Tien-lai-tao, Hsiang Yen chu-shih, or Hsiang Mo-lin, the name on the seal used here (Fig. 6). He was born in 1523 and died around 1590. He came from a wealthy family in Chia-hsing, Chekiang, and was able to amass a large and famous collection of paintings said to be comparable in size and quality to the imperial collections. His seal on a painting was considered by collectors of the time to be an affidavit of quality.

At the end of the Ming Dynasty, sometime around 1644, his collection was taken over by the commanding officer of the Manchu army. No doubt some of the paintings were destroyed, others were sold or passed on as gifts, and many of his best eventually went into Emperor Ch’ien Lung’s collection. Our “Journey to Shu” survived and was in the hands of at least one other collector before it passed into the royal collection. There are two seals of An Ch‘i, who was born in 1683 and died after 1742 (Fig. 7, top, and Fig. 8). Little is known about him except that he was an official in Hopei and Korea.
The next seals are those of the Emperor Ch'ien Lung (Fig. 9). The top seal shown in Figure 9 merely notes that it has been seen by him, perhaps about the time he acquired it. Below it is the seal of the Ning Shou palace, the building in which he placed it. Figure 10 shows another seal of the Emperor.

In Figure 7, beneath the gourd-shaped seal of An Chi', is a seal of the Academy of Calligraphy that was only awarded to works of high merit.

Figure 11 shows the last two seals. The oval seal reads 'given/bestowed (by the Emperor)." Beneath it is a square seal with a character of a pair of outstretched hands in the upper left corner. It reads, 'carefully/respectfully received by Minister . . . .' The name character has been damaged, but we know from official records that when the Emperor retired he gave the painting to his Minister of State, Ying Ho.

All of the three surviving versions of the Ming Huang story were in Ch'ien Lung's collection. One wonders if along with his artistic appreciation of them he also saw a moral lesson. After all, he was a hard-working ruler, an able administrator, and a patron of letters who had compiled the great descriptive catalogue of the Imperial Library. He did not neglect the affairs of the state for the affairs of the heart, and he reigned for sixty prosperous years without personal scandal.

After Ch'ien Lung there is a gap of a century in the known history of the painting. A penciled note by Helen Fernald, curator at The University Museum until 1933, says that a letter from a John Ferguson states that he bought the painting in Peking from a descendant of the Minister Ying Ho. It must have remained in that family's possession for around a hundred years as an honored gift to their ancestor.

The story of the T'ang Emperor who inspired this work continues to live in literature and painting, in plays and film. During its ca. five-hundred-year history, this painting has been admired, looted, rescued, honored, forgotten, found and restored to esteem. Once it was a prize of connoisseurs and an Emperor, a work seen only by a small elite circle of admirers. It is now a treasure of an American academic institution, available to viewing by the general public; but on the wall of The University Museum's Rotunda, it also remains among friends of its own time and country.

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She helped set up the Museum's exhibition "Buddhism: History and Diversity of a Great Tradition" and was co-author of the catalog for the exhibit. She has also written a number of articles for Expedition.

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