1 Emperor Huizong (1082–1135) (attributed), *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk* (detail), circa 1101–1125, handscroll, ink, colour and gold on silk, 37.1 x 145 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Special Chinese and Japanese Fund, 1912 (12.886)

MASTERPIECES OF CHINESE PAINTING 700–1900

HONGXING ZHANG

Autumn Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum

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FROM THE TIME this exhibition was first conceived, we have confined the scope to portable painting on silk or paper. Although stone engravings and mural paintings are important for understanding Chinese pictorial art, those works can only be properly studied in the tombs and temples for which they were made, and therefore are excluded from the main focus of the exhibition. The period we chose to cover arises from the consideration that few paintings securely dating before the 8th century have survived, and that fundamental changes in the main conditions that define the nature of classical Chinese painting have taken place from the early 20th century, including the abandonment of the right-to-left viewing tradition.

This exhibition brings together nearly eighty of the world's great masterpieces of Chinese painting, including devotional banners, hand-held fans, albums and scrolls. Drawn from the foremost collections in China, Japan, Europe and America, the exhibition explores changing artistic concerns and aesthetics over 1200 years. The exhibition considers how these extraordinary works were created, and how they have been appreciated in their own time and over the centuries since. Our overriding aim is to introduce

2 Madame Zu E, the master copyist from the Palace Museum, Beijing, making a replica of a figure in *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*. V&A

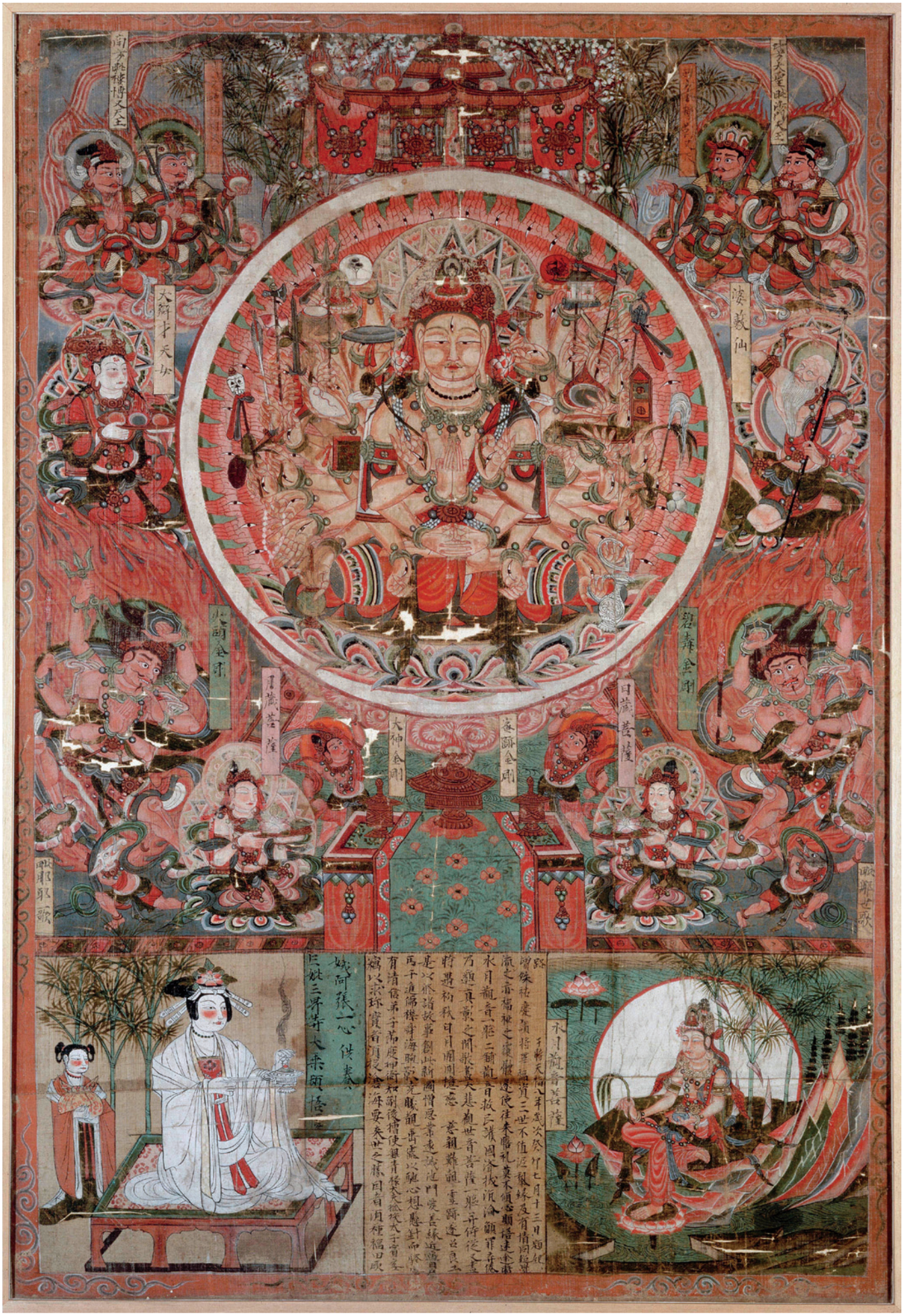
these works and the subject as a whole to new and wider audiences. In the meantime, we are eager to satisfy specialist audiences such as collectors, dealers, museum professionals, artists and academics by providing an accompanying scholarly catalogue and organising an international symposium during the run of the exhibition. Finally, we give greater prominence to the theme of "making" through a display of historical painting materials and techniques and through interpretative means across the gallery, demonstrating the relevance of Chinese painting to "the material turn" in the wider humanities.

In order to meet the aims of this ambitious project, the exhibition is straightforwardly divided into six main chronological sections, with each focusing on an overarching theme: "Objects of Devotion 700–950", "The Quest for Reality 950–1250", "Embracing Solitude 1250–1400", "The Pursuit of Happiness 1400–1600", "Challenging the Past 1600–1900" and "Looking to the West 1600–1900". The exhibition is designed by the London-based and 2012 RIBA Stirling Prize-winning architects Stanton Williams. Their simple and restrained design approach helps create a clean space division, distinctive atmosphere for individual rooms, and focused and intimate viewing experience for the paintings on display. By concentrating on the themes and narratives in these rooms, I hope that the rest of this article offers an overview of the contents of the exhibition.

The introductory space of the exhibition is devoted to a display that highlights some of the quintessential features of Chinese painting, namely its unique materials, techniques and usage. A large wall-size text panel describes that the Chinese have long regarded painting as a supreme art, equal to poetry or philosophy, and that from early on, art critics debated standards of excellence and discriminated between superior and inferior paintings. The text panel also highlights the fact that Chinese paintings, unlike European paintings, were not made for permanent display. They were precious objects to be viewed—from right to left, in the case of horizontal scrolls—for a short time, from several hours to a few weeks. Most of the time a painting was stored in its box. A display case is carved out of the wall to the left of the wall panel, which contains a large block of hardened mixture of natural ultramarine blue and white chalk and a group of pigment pans, all dating before the 14th century. Immediately adjacent to them is a longer tabletop showcase, featuring a single handscroll, *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk* attributed to Emperor Huizong (1082–1135) from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (**1**). As one of the most celebrated masterpieces in the history of Chinese painting, fittingly, this early painting shows women preparing silk, an invention which allowed the Chinese to create a unique painting tradition.

In the far left corner of the introductory area, there is a specially commissioned film that illustrates how a silk painting is made in a step-by-step process. In the film, Madame Zu E (**2**), a master copyist from the Palace Museum, Beijing, uses the same materials and techniques as a 12th century artist to produce a replica of a figure in the scroll *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*. Not far from the screen, along a wall there is a painting stretcher reconstructed according to a 14th century painting manual and a late 9th or early 10th century half painted and half embroidered banner fragment from the Pelliot Collection in Musée Guimet, Paris, which illustrates a close connection

3 *Bodhisattva in Monastic Dress Standing at Prayer*, 875–925, ink and colour on silk, 67 x 18 cm (painting section). Musée Guimet (Pelliot Collection, MG 22797)



4 *Guanyin of the Thousand Hands and Thousand Eyes*, 943, banner, ink and colour on silk, 123 x 84.3 cm. Musée Guimet (Pelliot Collection, MG 17775)

that once existed between painting and embroidery. Finally at the threshold between the introductory space and Section One hangs a rarely-preserved double-sided painted banner depicting a bodhisattva (3), also from Musée Guimet. It functions as both a divide and a link between the two spaces; more importantly it can be viewed from the front and the back as it would have been during a religious ceremony a thousand years ago.

"Objects of Devotion 700–950" (Section One) features some of the earliest Chinese paintings that survive, most of which are Buddhist devotional or votive banners. They were made by anonymous artists, usually on silk, in intense colours. They date from the Tang dynasty (618–907) and the transitional Five Dynasties (907–960). All the banners on display are rare loans from Musée Guimet in Paris and the British Museum in London, originally discovered in the early 20th century in Dunhuang, a remote town on the ancient Silk Road. Many of the works hanging along the walls in the room are banner fragments that were framed behind glass after entering European/Western collections, while several unglazed works are shown in a glass wall case located at an end of the gallery. These banners depict Buddhas, bodhisattvas and other heavenly beings, as well as the deceased people for whom they were offered. They were hoisted aloft or hung during religious ceremonies and were often made as offerings to deities for the salvation of the deceased. Inscriptions on the banners offer insights into the identity and motivation of the individuals who commissioned them. In the large painting *Guanyin of the Thousand Hands and Thousand Eyes* (Musée Guimet) (4), for example, the inscription towards the bottom explains that the banner was commissioned by a local civil servant, Ma Qianjin, for his late mother and offered during a rite for her in 943. The deceased woman is depicted to the left of the inscription. On the right is Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion. Guanyin reappears in the centre of the banner, in a form with many eyes and arms.

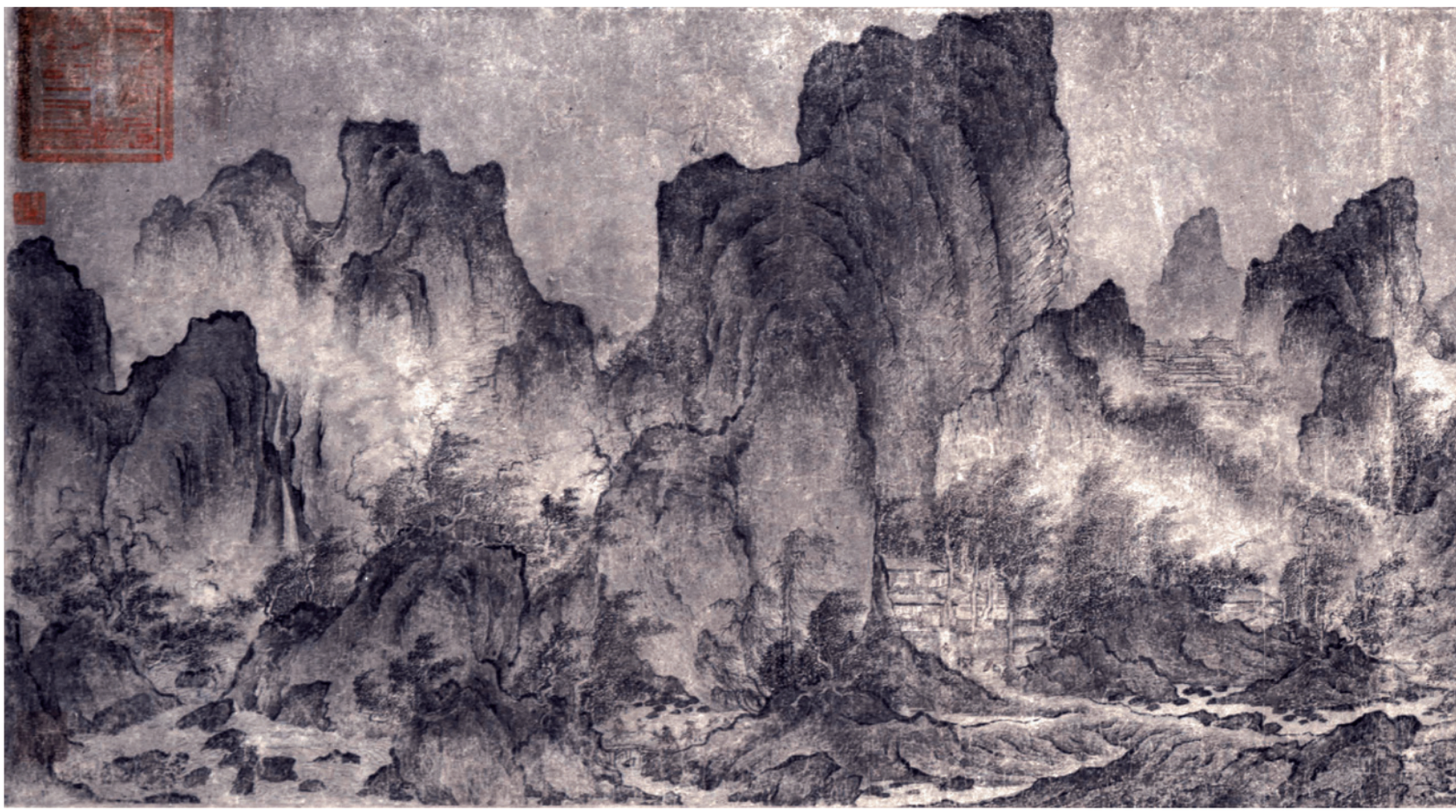
But not all early paintings in this section were Buddhist. There is a tabletop showcase to the right of the section entrance that contains the scroll *The Five Planets and Twenty-Eight Constellations* (Osaka Municipal Museum of Art) traditionally attributed to Zhang Sengyou (active 490–540) (5), depicting stars and planets in human form. This scroll reveals that painters of this period were also inspired by other ancient beliefs, and in this particular case people believed these astrological deities foretold a person's destiny. Through showcasing the scroll, we also demonstrate that as an early painting format evolved from books, handscroll paintings were designed to be read and viewed from right to left.

"The Quest for Reality 950–1250" (Section Two) explores the period when the golden age of Buddhism faded, and new ideas about reason, education and the possibility of improving society took hold. The display in this L-shaped room shows that the art of the Song dynasty (960–1279) was characterised by an enthusiasm for the visible world, interest in secular subjects and the rise of landscape painting. Many works that survive were made by court painters for the interiors of official buildings and domestic houses. They were made in the newly invented format of hanging scrolls and as horizontal "handscrolls" and hand-held fans. Paintings were considered the product of an artist's vision, not mere labour, and painters began to sign their work. Also during this period a subdued palette replaced the bright colours of Buddhist art, reflecting a taste influenced by the growing scholar-gentry class, who also advocated "literati" art combining poetry and painting. Collecting and connoisseurship reached a new level of sophistication. Owners impressed seals onto their paintings, which was a practice that continued through the following centuries.

The works in this room are organised into four thematic zones, beginning with the theme "Cosmic Landscapes" in the area near the entrance. Here we see the depiction of mountain and river scenes, studies of buildings and travellers in the landscape, and paintings exploring the cycle of the seasons, the changing weather and the shifting qualities of natural light. These paintings, either enclosed in huge wall cases or tabletop showcases, reveal that the main concern of the artists was to present new and compelling views of the world. The works, such as *Landscape with Pavilions* by Yan Wengui (967–1030) (Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts) (6) and *Winter Evening Landscape* by Li Gongnian (active circa 1100–1125) (Princeton University Art Museum), also show that these landscape paintings did not record actual places, but were imagined visions of the sublime and eternal. The Chinese word for "landscape" is "mountain and water" (*shanshui*), which refers to the basic elements of the universe. When imagining a landscape, the greatest questions for painters of the Song dynasty were about the cosmic order, humanity's place in it, and the translation of philosophical ideas about the world into images.

Further down on the right are the paintings grouped under the theme "Re-imagining the Sacred", which show that despite the end of the golden age of Buddhist art, religious icons were still commissioned for ceremonies. In the two late 12th century paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, originally part of a set of one hundred votive hanging scrolls produced in Ningbo and later mounted in frames, two groups of *luohans*, disciples of the historic Buddha, are dropping coins from the clouds to destitute mortals or receiving gifts from foreigners in a bamboo grove. These works show that *luohans*, as a subject matter, had become as popular as the majestic Buddhas and bodhisattvas. To their right is a portrait of *Planet Deity Shuixing (Mercury),* traditionally attributed to Zhang Sigong (active 1175–1225) and also from the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. If one compares it with the same figure in the Osaka scroll *The Five Planets and Twenty-Eight Constellations* mentioned earlier in the first section, it is clear that the painter here took a more naturalistic approach. The most impressive among all the works under this theme and indeed in this entire room, however, is *Nine Dragons* by Chen Rong (circa 1189–1268) (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) (Cover). The picture section of the long handscroll is unrolled in full and placed in a tabletop showcase running down the centre of the room. Here nine energetic dragons cavort among dynamic clouds, waves and rocks, demonstrating the artist's extraordinary imagination, his intricate manipulation of brush and ink, as well as his spontaneity as an artist—in certain areas he continued painting despite wrinkle defects in the paper's surface. To highlight the status of this scroll in the history of Chinese painting and the role of collectors in the making of Chinese painting in a broader sense, a jade seal of Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799) (The Palace Museum, Beijing), dating to 1787, is intro-

5 Zhang Sengyou (active 490–540) (attributed), *The Five Planets and Twenty-Eight Constellations* (detail), 700–800 or later, handscroll, ink and colour on silk, 27.5 x 489.7 cm. Osaka Municipal Museum of Art (42, I-121)



6 Yan Wengui (967–1030), *Landscape with Pavilions* (detail), circa 1000–1030, handscroll, ink and light colour on paper, 32 x 161 cm. Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts

7 Ma Yuan (active 1175–1225), *Bare Willows and Distant Mountains*, late 12th century, round fan mounted as an album leaf, ink and colour on silk, 23.8 x 24.2 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Special Chinese and Japanese Fund, 1914 (14.61)

8 Mao Song (active 1127–1150) (attributed), *Monkey*, 2nd quarter 12th century, hanging scroll, ink, colour and gold on silk, 47 x 36.5 cm. Tokyo National Museum (TA 297)

duced to the display and placed next to the scroll. The seal's mark can be seen on the scroll at the far left.

At the far end of the room is a display along the wall, entitled "Nature up Close", focusing on a new taste for the small and delicate during the second half of the Song dynasty. Here one sees that the intimate formats of the hand-held fan and the album leaf were the ideal medium for small paintings commissioned by members of the imperial family or of elite society. According to documentary sources, fans were carried during seasonal events and also displayed in flower shows alongside the flowers to demonstrate their beauty. Such small masterpieces on display include *Qidan Falconer with Horse* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) traditionally attributed to Hu Gui (active about 907–60), *Bare Willows and Distant Mountains* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) by Ma Yuan (active 1175–1225) (**7**) and *Bamboo Twig with Grasshopper* signed with the name of Wu Bing (active 1190–1250). These elegant paintings often focused on a fragment of a larger scene: an incisive description of a single figure, animal, plant, or even a tiny insect. In contrast to the monumental landscapes captured on large scroll paintings, the images on fans and album leaves showed the grandeur of the world in microcosm. The most captivating work in this group is a portrait of a monkey, now mounted as a hanging scroll and in Tokyo National Museum's collection, which appears in a state of contemplation (**8**). The skilled artist, possibly Mao Song (active 1127–1150), carefully painted each strand of its fur over a light brownish-red undercoat, and then added touches of gold to the eyes and fur.

The final theme in this room is "Poetry and Painting". The most celebrated scrolls on display include Emperor Huizong's *Auspicious Cranes* from the Liaoning Provincial Museum (**9**) and Qiao Zhonchang's (active 1075–1125) *Illustration to the Second Prose Poem on the Red Cliff* from the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City. These paintings show that during the Song dynasty, the old concept of painting as wordless poetry and poetry as painting without image was revived. Literati artists, led by Su Shi (1037–1101), promoted the relationship between the two arts, and their work began to influence court art. This emphasis on poetry led to a new type of painting in which the ultimate goal was to create the experience of poetry. In many cases paintings illustrated poetry and poems were inscribed onto the image.

Immediately adjacent to the display of "Poetry and Painting" is a smaller room, Section Three. This space, visible from Section Two through glass showcases, is titled "Embracing Solitude 1250–1400" and is devoted to one of the most turbulent periods in Chinese history, an era that saw the decline of the Song dynasty, the rise and fall of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) and the war that established the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Court artists carried out commissions for the new rulers, but the most striking innovations in painting of this time came from monks and scholars, also known as literati, in the south of China. Many of these well-educated artists chose not to serve the new regime. They lived in seclusion, worked independently of the imperial court and officialdom, and made paintings for personal reasons, often as gifts to like-minded friends. Their simple subject matter is laden with literary, philosophical and political meaning. Through their work, painting moved from imitating reality to expressing emotions and inner thoughts. This meant the usage of simpler forms, austere colours and inclusion of self-penned poetry. Black ink on

9 Emperor Huizong (1082–1135) (attributed), *Auspicious Cranes* (detail), circa 1112, album leaf mounted as a handscroll, ink and colour on silk, 51 x 138.2 cm. Liaoning Provincial Museum (ZONG 4848 SHU 150)

white paper became the medium that expressed the aesthetic of solitude.

Several paintings in the room by early Yuan dynasty literati painters such as Gong Kai (1222–1307) and Zheng Sixiao (1239–1316) are selected because they reveal vividly a grief over the fallen Song dynasty and their continued loyalty. However, the display as a whole is designed to juxtapose works by "literati" artists with those by monks in order to provide interesting comparisons. Literati painters were trained in painting, calligraphy and poetry and aimed for perfection in all three disciplines. They wrote their own poems, and painted simple subject matter, including noble steeds, lone orchids, plum blossom, old trees and wintry landscapes, but their works had complex philosophical and political meaning. They show a strong preference for the aesthetic of "plainness" (*pingdan*), as exemplified by those works of Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), Wang Mian (1287–1359) and, above all, Ni Zan (1306–1374) (**10**). In the display we further use a digitally manipulated image of *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) by Ni Zan, to reconstruct the painting before later collectors added their marks and an inscription, hence revealing the tranquility and simplicity of its original state.

Despite strong bonds between scholars and monks during this difficult period, paintings created by monks—customarily also called Chan paintings—cannot be more different, as shown by *Two Chan Patriarchs Harmonising Their Minds* (Tokyo National Museum) (**11**) traditionally attributed to Shi Ke (active 934–965). Made as visual aids to meditation, Chan paintings typically were rendered with extremely simplified forms and excited brushstrokes, sometimes in pale tones that led to the genre being known as "apparition painting". By doing so, artists intended to capture the immateriality of all things and the extraordinary moment of experiencing enlightenment.

These Chan paintings also tell fascinating stories specifically about their appreciation, collecting and re-making over time. Contemporary Chinese critics dismissed them as uncontrolled and unrefined, but they were highly prized in Japan, which explains why most surviving examples are found there. Japanese owners often cut up horizontal scrolls and remounted them as hanging scrolls, such is the case for *Two Chan Patriarchs Harmonising Their Minds*. They displayed these precious possessions on opulent mounts during the tea ceremony when high-ranking guests visited. In China, paintings were rarely mounted like this on such rich fabric. In a nearby showcase an album containing fragments of similar rich fabrics was used as a sourcebook for Japanese-style mounting, further highlighting the physical transformations of paintings and different tastes between Chinese and Japanese connoisseurs.

If the mood in Section Three can be described as austere and sombre, then that of Section Four is gentle and joyful. Entitled "The Pursuit of Happiness 1400–1600", this narrow and long gallery is devoted to the prosperous and stable period of the Ming dynasty, during which the imperial court, scholar-gentry and wealthy merchants all desired paintings for entertainment and enjoyment, and as symbols of status. Major cities in the south of China such as Nanjing, Suzhou and Hangzhou became important centres for painting to rival Beijing in the north. Silk painting became popular again and expensive pigments reappeared on artists' palettes, as shown by *Saying Farewell at Xunyang* (The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art) possibly painted by the

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Ni Zan (1306–1374), *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu*, 1372, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 94.6 x 35.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Dillon Fund, 1973 (1973.120.8)

11 Shi Ke (active 934–965) (attributed), *Two Chan Patriarchs Harmonising Their Minds*, 1200–1300, hanging scrolls, ink on paper, 35.3 x 64.4 cm. Tokyo National Museum (TA 162)

Suzhou professional artist Qiu Ying (1494/5–1552). Images became more decorative and were often painted as sets or in albums. Paintings such as *The Four Pleasures* (Tokyo National Museum) traditionally attributed to Ren Renfa (1255–1327) or *Pomegranates, Autumn Mallows, Chrysanthemums, Blue Magpies and Rooster* (The Palace Museum, Beijing) by the court painter Lu Ji (active 1488–1505) were often made for display during seasonal festivities and special occasions. Subjects ranged from romantic scenes and episodes from history and literature to rare birds and plants, people at

work or play, as well as portraits, private gardens and local scenery.

Some may feel *Court Ladies in the Inner Palace* (Shanghai Museum) by Du Jin (active circa 1465–1509) is particularly interesting, as it includes sections that show women of the imperial court playing ancient football (*cuju*) and a form of golf (*chuiwan*). Both games were invented in ancient times and the women in Du Jin's painting are probably meant to be historical figures. It is unlikely that the painting represents the activities of contemporary women as foot binding had become prevalent by the Ming dynasty.

Others may find poignantly moving the fine *Portrait of Shen Zhou at Age Eighty* (The Palace Museum, Beijing) painted by an anonymous local artist in 1506 and displayed at the deep end of the gallery. Dressed in simple scholarly attire, this great Suzhou painter is captured in old age in a modest pose with hands folded across his chest. The two inscriptions on the painting show him thinking about his life and whether it has been a virtuous one:

"There are those who think the eyes are rather small,
Or the jaw too narrow;
Since I don't know how I look,
I cannot tell what is missing [in the portrait].
Of what importance of use my face and eye?
My only fear is lacking virtue.
Drifting through these eighty years,
Now is death only a wall away."

The exhibition concludes in a huge space that contains both Section Five "Challenging the Past 1600–1900" and Section Six "Looking to the West 1600–1900", devoted to the influence of the Old Masters on the one hand and impact of the West on the other hand; these have been the two most significant themes in the narrative of classical Chinese painting over the last three hundred years. The two sections are divided by a sixteen-metre long tabletop showcase running down the centre of the gallery. As no solid partition wall is introduced, this not only creates more breathing space for large-size works, but also encourages cross-section comparisons and contrasts.

"Challenging the Past 1600–1900" showcases two groups of literati artists. The group known as Traditionalists believed that art had achieved perfection during the Song and Yuan dynasties, hence they called for a revival of literati painting. Prominent among these conservative artists were Dong Qichang (1555–1636) and four landscape painters known as the "Four Wangs"—Wang Shimin (1592–1680), Wang Jian (1555–1636), Wang Hui (1632–1717) and Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715). Coming from scholar-official families that allowed privileged access to the best art collections, they believed that the only way to become a great painter was to understand the lineages of different styles, and choose the "correct" one to follow and infiltrate old masters' methods and ideals. Traditionalist art attracted the support of the imperial court and would continue to dominate the art world until the end of the 19th century.

Another group of artists featured in this section includes artists with distinct personal styles working outside the establishment. These artists valued individuality over imitation of artists of the past. Collectively they became known as Individualists. Instead of following the methods and styles of old masters, they drew inspiration from other sources. Some artists, such as Fa Ruozhen (1613–1696), turned to the beauty of their local surroundings, and others, like Chen Hongshou (1598–1652) and Zheng Xie (1693–1765), found inspiration in theatre, popular woodblock prints and ancient stone engravings. Still others, such as Shitao (1642–1707) and Bada Shanren (1626–1705), were influenced by their own lives. The Individualists were overlooked by the imperial court and had to wait until the 20th century for recognition.

The most striking pieces in "Challenging the Past 1600–1900" are two monumental-sized paintings, *Landscapes in the Manner of Old Masters* (Shanghai Museum) by Wang Jian and *Flowers on the River* (Tianjin Museum) by Bada Shanren, each of which, incidentally, was painted by the respective artist at the age of seventy-two. The former, displayed in a huge four-metre by ten-metre wall case, consists of ten hanging scrolls from a set of twelve, which reinterpreted the work of various old masters. Inscriptions on each of the paintings explain which old master's work he was following for the composition. The other epic piece, the fourteen-metre long *Flowers on the River* by Bada Shanren, is unrolled to its full length in the central tabletop showcase. This is the longest work this tragic prince, monk and artist ever created, and it is thought to be an autobiographical, melancholic reflection on his life. From right to left, lotus flowers go from budding, through full bloom to death.

Standing in the gallery, one finds that Wang Jian's set of twelve hanging scrolls and Bada Shanren's fourteen-metre long handscroll are mirrored by two paintings of the same monumental scale in "Looking to the West" (Section Six). Sharing the same central tabletop showcase with Bada Shanren's scroll on the opposite side is the court artist Xu Yang's (1712–circa 1779) twelve-metre long handscroll *Prosperous Suzhou* (Liaoning Provincial Museum), which depicts a breathtaking panorama of 18th century urban life. It succeeds in creating a sense of vast space and distance by combining the multiple vanishing points of Chinese perspective with European linear perspective. Behind it is Yangzhou painter Yuan Jiang's (active circa 1680–1730) *The Palace of Nine Perfections* (12), a set of twelve hanging scrolls displayed in a huge wall case. Instead of having individual compositions in a set like that of Wang Jian at the other end of the gallery, Yuan Jiang's scrolls form a continuous spectacular view in which the legendary Tang dynasty imperial retreat is re-imagined. In his inscription, Yuan Jiang says he is "emulating antiquity". This interest in historic Chinese painting was possibly stimulated by an awareness of recent Western influence.

Fascination with European painting was not confined to landscape painting, but was also felt in the revival of portraiture, as shown in both *Portrait of Wang Shiming* painted by Zeng Jing (1564–1647) in 1616 and *Portrait of Gao Yongzhi* (The Palace Museum, Beijing) by Ren Yi (1840–1895) in 1887. As a whole, the works in this last section show that Chinese painters looked to European art in a variety of media, which inspired methods and imagery unknown before.

The story of classical Chinese painting ended in the early 20th century, when political, social and cultural upheavals created the demand for new ways of making, displaying and viewing paintings. However, in today's China traditional painting is still one of many competing art forms.

12 Yuan Jiang (active circa 1680–1730), *The Palace of Nine Perfections* (detail), 1691, set of twelve hanging scrolls, ink and colour on silk, 207 x 563.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase, Gift of the Dillion Fund, 1982 (1982.125a-1)