

Spring 2021 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
The Power of Images in Asian Art: Making the Invisible Visible
Sponsored by the *Society for Asian Art*

Seeing Large in Small: The Power of Scale in Chinese Landscape Painting

Jun Hu, Assistant Professor, University of California, Berkeley
April 16, 2021

Introduction

In the early fifth century, Zong Bing (373-443), a scholar and recluse whose interests straddle Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, wrote what was to become a cardinal text in the Chinese landscape tradition, *Preface on Painting Mountains and Water*. Citing the *Analects*, Zong repeats Confucius's suggestion that taking pleasure in mountains and water is how the virtuous and the wise cultivate their exalted dispositions, for "landscapes captivate the *Dao* by their forms." What then are the benefits of making and contemplating a landscape painting, a medium that is seemingly one step removed from nature? In a passage for which Zong is best known, he argues that painting serves as a mechanism of miniaturization, a reduction that nevertheless still encapsulates what nature has to offer:

"Mount Kunlun is so huge, and the pupil of the eye so tiny, that at a very short distance its full shape cannot be grasped. At a distance of several *li*, however, it may be encompassed within my pupils, and as one goes farther away from it, one sees it becomes smaller and smaller. Nowadays, when I spread out my silk to catch the distant scene, even the form of the Kunlun may be contained within a square inch of space: a vertical stroke of three inches equals a height of several thousand feet, and a horizontal passage of ink over a few feet stands for an extent of a hundred *li*."

In this lecture, we will take Zong Bing's *Preface* as point of departure and consider the significance of scale in Chinese paintings and other forms of landscape design. As it is often the exception that proves the rule, we will conclude our discussion with an extraordinary painting from the early seventeenth century that resists abstraction/reduction/miniaturization in every imaginable way.

Key Sites/Artifacts

Miniature Rock or Brushrest in the Form of a Mountain Range, Black Lingbi Limestone with White Veining, 4.3 x 12.0 x 2.9 cm, Possibly Song (960-1279) to Yuan (1279-1368) Dynasty.

The Astor Chinese Garden Court, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 17th-century style.

Guo Xi (c. 1000-c. 1090), *Early Spring*, Ink and light color on silk, Hanging scroll, Dated 1072, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Wu Bin (c. 1543-c. 1627), *Ten Views of a Lingbi Rock*, Ink on paper, Handscroll, Dated 1610, Private Collection.

Attributed to Wang Shimin (1592-1680), *To See Large within the Small*, Ink and color on silk, Album leaves, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Further Readings

Cheng Ji et al., *The Craft of Gardens* (Better Link Press, 2012).

Lothar Ledderose, “The Earthly Paradise: Religious Elements in Chinese Landscape Art,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and Christian Murck (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 165–83.

Robert D. Mowry and Claudia Brown, *Worlds within Worlds: The Richard Rosenblum Collection of Chinese Scholars’ Rocks* (Harvard University Art Museums, 1997).

Jerome Silbergeld, “Re-Reading Zong Bing’s Essay on Landscape Painting: A Few Critical Notes,” in *A Life in Chinese Art: Essays in Honour of Michael Sullivan*, ed. Shelagh Vainker and Xin Chen (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum of Art, 2012), 30–37.