

Collecting Paintings in China

BY JAMES CAHILL

The collecting of Chinese paintings has always been about as hazardous an occupation as mountain climbing: as foolhardy for those who try it unprepared, as rewarding for those who go at it seriously and do it well. The novice may begin with lesser and somewhat safer elevations (the risk is never entirely absent), but above him lie always the splendid and perilous peaks—works of the early periods, the great schools, the major masters—overshadowing the heights he has already attained, until in the end he attempts them, ready or not. He cannot insure himself against disaster by spending more money. Only a knowledge of the terrain, experience and sure-footedness, with perhaps the services of a competent guide, will better his chances.

The peril lies in the enormous preponderance of spurious works—outright forgeries, copies, misattributed paintings, works of minor artists furnished with false signatures of the great masters—over the genuine pictures by reputable painters that survive, at least from all periods before the eighteenth century. It is no exaggeration to say that virtually every sizable Western collection of Chinese paintings brought together before the last decade or two consists mainly of such forged or falsely attributed pieces. When this situation was at last recognized, not so long ago, the shock of disillusionment was understandably discouraging to collectors, no doubt dissuading some of them from venturing onto such treacherous ground.

Fortunately, a new group of intrepid enthusiasts, who are aware of the dangers and are willing to brave them, has emerged in Europe and America. They are generally both better informed and better advised, and have on the whole done remarkably well. Among those who have put together really significant collections, one can mention John Crawford in New York; Stephen Junkunc in Chicago; Richard Hobart in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Eli Lilly in Indianapolis (whose paintings are now at the John Herron Art Institute); William Finlayson in Toronto; and two Swiss collectors, Franco Vannotti in Lugano and C. A. Drenowatz in Zurich. Others could be added to this list, and still others will be, as the knowledge spreads outward, from museums and universities where Chinese paintings are collected and studied, of what can be had for prices that are often surprisingly low, compared to what one must pay for Western paintings of similar quality and importance.

In the Far East, good paintings have always been available for quite reasonable prices. The materials used tended to cost less than those of Occidental painting, and the pictures, by their very nature, could be produced in a shorter time, and so in greater number. The lifetime output of a recent Japanese master, Tomioka Tessai, for example, has been estimated at around twenty thousand works—a total that includes, to be sure, a great many random improvisations, but also a great many fairly elaborate and finished pictures.

Even now in Japan (as in China until recently) one is likely to find a few good original paintings in the home of a middle-income teacher, doctor or writer, in place of the reproductions and prints that hang on the walls of his Occidental counterpart's living room.

But great paintings were seldom cheap, and the great Chinese collections belonged to people with money: the landowning gentry, the government officials, the prosperous merchants of the cities. For every one who was inspired to collect by a genuine passion for art, there were probably several who paid instead for the prestige that goes with the ownership of art; and these were the favorite victims of the forger. Within a short time after the death of the fourteenth-century master Ni Tsan, we are told, every gentry family in the Chiang-nan region had to have at least one of his paintings. The artist himself had failed to produce enough to supply such a demand, so the forgers obliged. They have been obliging ever since, and bogus Ni Tsans, ranging from very close imitations down to the most preposterous scrawls, now exist by the hundreds.

The unwary and discerning collector has always been fair game for clever dealers, mounters (who would exchange a copy for a good painting, returning the copy neatly mounted and selling the original to someone else), and even the artists themselves, several of whom are reported to have employed ghost painters, or to have signed their names to pictures by others whose works were not so much in demand. The fault in such cases was considered to lie mainly on the side of the collector; if he was not sharp-eyed enough to see through these tricks, so much the worse for him. Something of this attitude survives today, when the most renowned living forger of Chinese paintings (he is also a noted collector, connoisseur, dealer and famous painter under his own name—which shall not appear here) is on the one hand the arch-antagonist of all scholars of Chinese art, since he is constantly adding to the perplexities they face already, and on the other is the admired friend of quite a few of them, including the present writer. Since a really successful forger must have at least as much knowledge and understanding of the things he imitates as a museum curator who studies them and writes about them, an attitude of mutual respect between them is only proper.

Collecting paintings, then, was a contest in which one pitted one's discernment against the adversaries: dealers, forgers, rival collectors. The risk one ran was of spending a lot of money on paintings that would prove to be worthless. The rewards were harder to define. Curiously, they did not lie simply in the acquisition of beautiful or valuable objects. In particular, the thought of possible financial gain through resale was a motive no collector would have acknowledged. In the Confucian system, no action can be more worthy than its motive (and an action with no motive at all, beyond a sense of its inherent rightness, is



Ni Tzan (1301-74), *A Spray of Bamboo*. Signature of the artist, and poem inscribed by his friend Ch'ien Wei-chan; seals of Hsiang Yuan-pien (1525-90) and Keng Chao-chung (1640-87). Collection Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.

most worthy of all); so a collector impelled by such a mercenary aim can only be a bad collector. This is not to say that no Chinese ever collected as an investment, with an eye to future profit; but only, as all readers of Lin Yutang know, that the Chinese could admit the worst of the human condition and aspire to sagehood all at once. And to the charge of hypocrisy which must be brought against such thinking by any adherent of current Western philosophies, the Chinese would reply by pointing to all the instructive articles on "art as an investment" that have appeared recently in our popular magazines, and remark: we may have been guilty of it in practice, at times, but not of approving it in principle.

The great eleventh-century painter-connoisseur Mi Fu wrote: "One should not discuss the prices of calligraphy and painting. Gentlemen do not, in fact, like to acquire such things for money at all; instead, they exchange them among themselves. This is the refined way of doing it.

People today, when they get hold of a single good object, pretend it is of life-and-death importance to them. This is ridiculous. Anything that pleases a man's eyes, if he looks at it long enough, will eventually seem tiresome to him; then it is time to trade it for something new to enjoy. Thus he obtains a double pleasure, since his desire is fulfilled once more."

This latter piece of advice may sound odd to the Occidental art-lover, who has been led to believe that a good work of art should not wear thin. But Mi Fu's even more famous and influential friend Su Shih (better known as Su Tung-p'o) states the case against tenacity in collecting even more positively. Composing a dedicatory essay for a friend's "Precious Painting Hall" to caution him against this error, he begins with some standard Confucian-Taoist strictures against overattachment to material things, and goes on to say: "Now, of all enjoyable things, paintings and calligraphy are best suited to giving men pleasure

without affecting them adversely. But if one becomes attached to them, the result is unspeakable disaster." He himself, he says, collected with passion when he was young, worrying constantly over whether he would lose something he owned or fail to acquire something he didn't. Then one day he laughed at himself and said: "You despise wealth and honors, yet adore old calligraphy; you have little concern for life and death, but much concern for paintings. This is contradictory." Thereafter, he changed his whole attitude; he still collected calligraphy and paintings, but parted with them after enjoying them, without regret, "as if they were mist passing before my eyes, or the songs of birds striking my ears. How could I help but derive joy from my contact with these things? But when they are gone, I think no more about them. In this way, they are a constant pleasure to me, but not an affliction to me."

If it was on Confucian grounds that the mercenary and avaricious collector was castigated, it was also in Confucian terms that more worthy reasons for collecting were stated. Collecting came to be, like most other activities proper to the scholar-gentleman (including painting), a means of self-cultivation. The best way to deepen and refine one's own mind, the Chinese felt, was to understand the subtlest workings, and emulate the nobler qualities, of the minds of others. Painting, which most later theorists saw (with poetry and calligraphy) as revealing the personality and character of its creator, the very workings of his mind, was an aid to such understanding, helping to provide a continuity in thought and feeling among men far separated in time. The fifteenth-century artist Shen Chou wrote on a painting he owned:

Men of today and men of the past cannot see each other; but, when their works survive, it's as if they had never died.

But these were ideals; such Confucian-oriented responses to paintings surely did not supplant the simpler and more direct varieties of aesthetic experience. The important thing, in any case, is that the value of the work of art, for the Chinese as for most of us today, lay in its capacity to stimulate a special kind of experience, with a special intensity; it was not an object with an inherent, immutable value, to be appraised in some objective and final way, as if by divine judgment. Mi Fu makes this clear in his observations quoted above; as the intensity of the experience fades in the individual, the work loses its value for him. The Chinese retarded this deterioration of aesthetic impact by keeping their best pictures rolled up, or stored in albums,

except when actually looking at them or showing them to friends. Nothing would have appalled them more than the reduction of a great painting to a banality by over-exposure, over-publicizing, over-reproduction; they would have seen that by the time it appears in the Sunday supplement and on the postage stamp, it has ceased to be a work of art at all. On the other side, one must admit the evils of under-exposure; in pre-Communist China it was practically impossible for anyone who did not move in the right social or intellectual circles to see more than a few good paintings.

Whatever the defects of the Chinese system, it kept them healthily free from the notion of the Masterpiece. With a few exceptions—Huang Kung-wang's *Fu-ch'un Mountains* scroll, which we shall speak of later, is one that comes to mind—there are no universally eulogized "masterpieces" in Chinese painting. We now speak of many early paintings as "masterpieces" because they are the finest examples of particular schools and artists that happen to have survived; but we have no reason to suppose that the artists or their contemporaries thought of them as in any way unique. Minor works were also treasured; if the painting was valuable in conveying some qualities of the painter's mind, then it need not be imposing, or elaborate, or carefully finished, to do this. A collector would take more pleasure and pride in owning a sprig of bamboo drawn spontaneously—and a bit carelessly—by Ni Tsan than a more technically competent but depersonalized picture of the same subject by nobody in particular.

The closest things to "masterpieces" were the so-called *ming-chi*, "famous relics," for which the proper Western parallel might be "generally accepted old-master canvases." The *ming-chi* were works that had passed through the hands of great connoisseurs, bearing the vermilion impressions of their collection seals and recorded in their catalogues. They were prize acquisitions because, with their ascertainable histories, they were supposed to be of more likely authenticity (a far from safe assumption, in fact), and also because anyone possessing such a painting could think of himself flatteringly as taking his place in a long succession of illustrious owners. Both to publicize their own successes and to aid in tracing such lineages, quite a few of the leading collectors after the sixteenth century compiled and published catalogues of major paintings they owned, sometimes adding descriptions of those they saw in other collections or on the market. When one finds the seals of a known collector on a painting, and a description in his



Hsiang Yuan-pien (1525-90), detail from *River Landscape*. Collection John M. Crawford, Jr., New York.



Ch'iu Ying (c. 1510-51), detail from *Landscape after Li T'ang*. Seals of Hsiang Yuan-pien and others. Collection Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

catalogue that seems to agree with it, the chances are good that it is the same painting he owned. But, as always, one must also allow for the ingenious forger, who will produce a scroll that matches a catalogue description in every detail, or embellish an old but unimportant picture with spurious seals and inscriptions until it fits.

Although it is not at all uncommon to find seals of the Sung and Yüan dynasties (tenth to fourteenth centuries) on paintings of those periods or earlier, the systematic use of collection seals is a practice that seems to have become popular in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The collector whose seals are to be seen on more paintings than any other, and who applied them in greater profusion than any other (a single scroll may bear as many as fifty), was Hsiang Yüan-pien (1525-1590), known also by his sobriquet Mo-lin or "Ink Forest". He compiled no catalogue, or if he did it has not survived. In the absence of any such record of what he really owned, the dealers and forgers have felt all the more free to stamp copies of his seals over thousands of their wares, and have ended by defeating their purpose, since no one now is much impressed by the presence of his seals on a painting. Even if we discount these "posthumous acquisitions" of Hsiang's, however, and count only paintings that can be fairly credibly traced back to him, his collection must have been huge (as it was reputed to be in his own time) and contained a good many excellent and early pictures, although one has the impression that he was more voracious than discerning. Evidently a man of orderly habits, he classified his scrolls according to a private system; his classification marks, small characters of uncertain import, are to be seen written in the lower corners of many paintings. At the very end of the scroll, after the colophons, he often wrote a brief record of when and from whom he acquired it, how much he paid for it, and whether he found it necessary to have it remounted.

Hsiang collected in an age when the rift between the professional and amateur (scholar-artists, "literati") schools of painting was as wide as that between abstract and figural painting today, and reflected as radical a disagreement over basic questions of artistic purpose and value. Hsiang himself indulged in a kind of painting that stands at an extreme of amateurism; at the same time, he admired and collected works of the great traditional masters of the Sung dynasty, and was an enthusiastic patron of the leading professional painter of his day, Ch'iu Ying. A picture by Hsiang may seem hard to accept on the basis of value criteria implicit in a picture by Ch'iu; yet Hsiang had no trouble in accepting both, and indicates as much by impressing the same seals of proud ownership on both. Chinese critical theory had by this time arrived at such diversity and complexity as to allow such multiple-standard connoisseurship. Hsiang could believe fondly that his own painting achieved, through expressive brushwork and highly individual distortions, that subtle revelation of personality which was the central purpose of painting as it was practiced by the scholar-amateurs; and he could justify his approval of Ch'iu Ying's painting, if he felt constrained to do so, by pointing out that Ch'iu had evoked, with considerable success, the style of the great Sung landscapist Li T'ang. Personal expression and stylistic allusion were both valid and desirable qualities in painting; decorative beauty, craftsmanship and representational accuracy, by contrast, were suspect, if not positively deplored by leading critics.

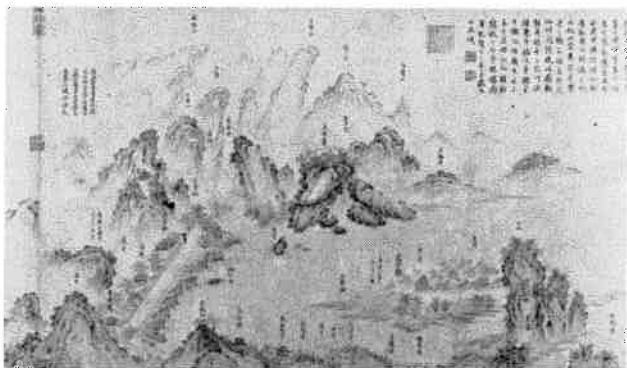
Here, then, was another pitfall for the collector: when he bought paintings that appealed to him, he was likely to find that the arbiters of taste scorned them because they were appealing; if he bought paintings that seemed to him skill-



Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636), *River Landscape*.
Poem and prose inscription by the artist.
Collection Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

fully executed, someone was sure to inform him loftily that an artist afflicted with skill should endeavor to hide it, not to display it. Standards were current that must have struck the simple picture-lover as entirely topsy-turvy. In Hsiang Yüan-pien's time, however, they were still open to argument, and some respectable collectors could prefer publicly the romantic scenes of the Southern Sung to the cooler styles, more dependent on abstract values, of the Yüan Dynasty masters. A generation later, they would hardly have dared to do so. A young man whom Hsiang employed as a tutor—and who probably learned more than he taught, since he used the opportunity to make a thorough study of Hsiang's painting collection—went on to become a kind of dictator of artistic standards, a synthesizer and most vociferous exponent of ideas which, although not entirely original with him, came to be identified with him. This was the great Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636). No collector of later times could have justly claimed to be quite free of his influence in choosing and appraising paintings. Tung distinguished (through a certain forcing of the material, one must admit) two traditions in painting: a "Southern School," made up chiefly of the scholar-artists, who painted in an expressive, spontaneous manner; and a "Northern School," made up of professionals and academy painters, whose styles tended to be careful and decorative. One hardly needs to add that the Southern School was "in," and the Northern School "out." Tung's austere artistic standards, which rigorously excluded all "sweetness" and "prettiness," and his insistence on the necessity for combining individualism with art-historical stylistic references to painters of the distant past, are well exemplified in his own works, which are decidedly "Southern School."

Tung Ch'i-ch'ang's critical system in theory restricted the audience for painting by setting high intellectual and moral qualifications as requisites for its appreciation as well as its creation, but in fact it helped to inaugurate the greatest period of Chinese collecting. Like the socially ambitious clamoring for membership in an "exclusive" club, collectors hastened to ally themselves with the supposedly small group of connoisseurs who could understand painting on the terms laid down by Tung and his circle. As always, the forgers were ready to help supply the demand thus created. A few years before Tung's death, and surely inspired by his pronouncements, a clever dealer named Chang



Anonymous (thirteenth century), detail from *Panorama of the Yangtze River*. Formerly attributed to Li Kung-lin. Inscription by Ch'ien-lung Emperor; seals of Kao Shih-ch'i (1645-1704) and others. Collection Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

T'ai-chieh gathered some two hundred pseudo-antique paintings, most of them purportedly by "Southern School" artists; composed for them laudatory inscriptions "by" equally accepted artists of later times (this to remove all doubt from the customer's mind—a picture approved by an O.K. painter must be an O.K. picture); and, as a final guarantee of respectability, published a catalogue "recording" them all, the "Record of Precious Pictures." Some of the paintings are still extant, and are kept as curiosities by collectors in the Far East, who know perfectly well their real nature.

The greatest collector of the seventeenth century, the possessor of perhaps the surest eye among all Chinese collectors, was Liang Ch'ing-piao (1620-1691). The presence on a painting of his sparsely and carefully placed seals consistently indicates, if not positive authenticity, at least high quality. Like Hsiang Yüan-pien, he left no catalogue, and the extent of his holdings can only be reconstructed by a careful survey of works bearing his seals. His younger contemporary Kao Shih-ch'i (1645-1704), by contrast, left two catalogues: a public record of his collection, printed during his lifetime, and a private list, preserved in manuscript and published only much later, in which he gives a franker estimate of the paintings and tells how much he paid for them. The prices range from one or two taels (ounces of silver) up to four hundred taels, which Kao paid for a pair of landscape scrolls attributed to the Sung master Li Kung-lin. One of the scrolls is now in the Tokyo National Museum, the other in the Freer Gallery of Art. Kao divides his paintings into categories: "For presentation to the Emperor," "For gifts," "To be treasured forever," etc. It is revealing that the first category is made up almost entirely of pieces he considered forgeries, and for which he had paid practically nothing.

In Kao Shih-ch'i's time this was a safe course; the reigning K'ang-hsi Emperor (on the throne from 1662 to 1723), while he commissioned the compilation of a huge encyclopedia of writings in calligraphy and paintings, was not really much interested in either. In the following century, under the Ch'ien-lung Emperor or Ch'ing Kao-tsung (reigned 1736-96), a collector had to be more careful in what he presented to the throne, for Kao-tsung was an art enthusiast of some discrimination. Through his untiring quest for *ming-chi*, and his imperial prerogative for acquiring what he found in one way or another, he managed to bring together, during the sixty years of his reign, a major portion of the important early paintings still existing. Substantial parts of the collections of Liang Ch'ing-piao and Kao Shih-ch'i had passed into the hands of a Korean salt merchant named An Ch'i (1683-c.1750); and An, financially ruined by a public-works levy—he had offered, whether voluntarily or under pressure from above is not clear, to rebuild a city wall at his own expense, and went bankrupt doing so—was forced to sell them all. The majority entered the Forbidden City, to swell the imperial collection. There, along with the rest, they were catalogued by a staff of court scholars, and the imperial seals impressed on them, in prescribed number and in a set pattern, which did not vary even when this application amounted to a defacing of the picture.

Kao-tsung somehow found time to compose (surely with help from his scholars) thousands of inscriptions, mostly in the form of doggerel poems, made up of conventional allusions to the subject matter of the paintings, scraps of information about their artists, and opinions on their

relative merits, which he inscribed in a rather flaccid calligraphy on the pictures themselves. His dual role as collector-connoisseur and monarch was not without its anomalies. As the former, he was fallible; as the latter, he was not. There was, for example, the affair of the *Fu-ch'un Mountains* scroll of Huang Kung-wang (1269-1354). The acceptance of this scroll as a high point within the scholar-painters' tradition, to which everything earlier led up and from which everything later declined, was almost an article of faith for followers of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang's doctrine. The Emperor could not rest until he had captured this greatest of prizes. In 1745, he did (or thought he did), and immediately wrote on it a jubilant inscription expressing his satisfaction over possessing at last the very scroll which, as he did not refrain from pointing out, had been one of the chief treasures of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang himself. In the following year, he acquired—from An Ch'i, whose final downfall occurred in 1746—another version of the scroll, the one which is now recognized as the original. This was the version that had passed through the great collections, and was recorded in the famous catalogues. It was this version that was missing some five feet at the beginning: a previous owner named Wu Chih-chü, in the early seventeenth century, had staggered from his deathbed to throw the scroll into the fire, determined that it should accompany him into the afterlife; it had been rescued by Wu's son, but the opening passage was so damaged that it was cut off. All the evidence in favor of this new acquisition, however, failed to convince Kao-



Tao-chi (1641-c. 1717), *View of a City, with Junks on a Canal*. Seals of P'an Cheng-wei and K'ung Kuang-t'ao (both nineteenth century). Private collection, Washington, D.C.

tsung, who had already accepted the copy as authentic; a collector can admit to having been taken in by a fake, but not an emperor. He instructed one of his court connoisseurs to inscribe his judgment on the newly acquired scroll, pronouncing it the forgery, while he himself continued to add his imperial calligraphy to the copy, until he had occupied every blank area and brought the total to no less than fifty-five inscriptions. The original thus escaped destruction a second time, and was one of the outstanding pieces in the recent "Chinese Art Treasures" exhibition from Taiwan.

Kao-tsung's hoard was passed on to succeeding Manchu emperors more or less intact, and private collectors of later times had to compete for what was left. The nineteenth century produced, among other notable connoisseurs, P'an Cheng-wei and K'ung Kuang-t'ao, both of whom used their seals with restraint and taste. The greatest collector of recent times was P'ang Yüan-chi of Shanghai, the remains of whose collection, still considerable although greatly depleted, were acquired by forced sale from his widow by the Shanghai Museum a few years ago. Perhaps his most worthy successor is Chang Ts'ung-yü, who at one time owned an impressive group of important pictures; they are now dispersed all over the world, while Chang himself, divested of his treasures, serves in the national museum in Peking as a "people's connoisseur."

Such is the latest phase of the long history of collecting paintings in China, and one that must ultimately bring that history to an end. The Communist regime, with motives that are in part commendable, sees to it that paintings pass from private hands into public museums, and perverts into an "art of the people" the products of what has for centuries been a deliberately unpopular tradition. The paintings, originally intended for intimate enjoyment under conditions of privacy and quiet, are for the first time being seen by thousands of people (a gain, on democratic principles) under conditions that in effect alter their very nature (a loss, by any principles at all). Meanwhile, the same thing is taking place outside China: the finest paintings are steadily and irretrievably entering museums, leaving ever fewer for the private collector. It is not yet too late, but anyone who thinks of building a collection of Chinese paintings would do well to start soon.



Top: Copy after Huang Kung-wang, detail of *Dwelling in the Fu-ch'un Mountains*. Palace Museum Collection, Taiwan.

Bottom: Huang Kung-wang (1269-1354), *Dwelling in the Fu-ch'un Mountains*. Palace Museum Collection, Taiwan.