

Addendum A Talking head

Postlude C: Freer Medal Lecture

On November 16 this year, 2010, I will be in Washington D.C. at the Freer Gallery of Art, where I started out my career as a Chinese art specialist sixty years ago. This time it is to receive the Charles Lang Freer Medal, which is given intermittently to honor notable scholars of Asian art; I will be the twelfth recipient. The ones in Chinese art before me begin with Osvald Siren—whom^{as} you know, if you've followed this series, is not someone I have a great admiration for. But the others are my teachers and my heroes: Laurence Sickman, Max Loehr, Alexander Soper, Sherman Lee. I've put together a heavily-illustrated lecture to deliver on that occasion, and we decided to record it as a third Postlude to this series, since it recapitulates quite a few things I've touched on in these lectures and adds some more bits of information and insights. I've tried to make it entertaining as well as informative. I will presumably be introduced by the present director of the Freer Gallery, Julian Raby, so I begin by ^{speaking} referring to him.

Addendum A Part 2

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Postlude B Part II notes.

ON SCREEN: WEN FONG & YANG XIN, who?

Before going on to Part II of this Postlude B, which will treat at length a particular example of forgery, Zhang Daqian's "Riverbank," I want to comment briefly on an aspect of the authenticity problem that I've encountered throughout my long career. That is the way some Chinese collectors and scholars have of asserting, either openly or implicitly, their inherent superiority as connoisseurs because of their being Chinese. As a young scholar, beginning in the field, I was more inclined to take this seriously, and to listen attentively to their pronouncements, which were accompanied by an assertion, open or implied, that if I were only able to read calligraphy fluently as they could, and recognize old collectors' seals and so forth, the rightness or wrongness of this painting before us would be easily apparent. It wasn't long, however, before I realized that people who posed in this way as unshakeably right were just as likely as others to differ among themselves. And that, of course, shook down the whole impressive edifice: if they differed between them, they obviously couldn't all be right, and therefore...and so forth.

IMAGES: XU BANGDA, XIE ZHILIU

Later I was to use the example of the tour of U.S. museums and collections made by two famous Chinese authorities, Xu Bangda and Xie Zhiliu. According to reports from those who accompanied them, they argued constantly, one pronouncing a painting to be obviously genuine, the other with equal vehemence pronouncing it an obvious fake.

IMAGES: PEOPLE AT HEFEI SYMPOSIUM 1984

At the first international symposium on Chinese painting held in China, the symposium on "Huangshan School" or Anhui painters held in Hefei in 1984, I gave a paper which was deliberately somewhat shocking: feeling that foreign scholars needed to respond to what we had been witnessing: Japanese connoisseurs such as Xu Bangda and Xie Zhiliu coming to the U.S. and going around pronouncing some of our prize paintings to be fakes, by doing the same in China.

IMAGES: LEAVES FROM “HONGREN” ALBUM OF SCENES OF HUANGSHAN

Prominent in the exhibition of Anhui school painting in the museum nearby was an album of scenes of Huangshan supposed to be by the leading master of that school, Hongren; I had come to the conclusion, on the basis of its style, the fact that the “Hongren” seals on it didn’t match those on his reliable works, and the close similarity of the leaves to the paintings of his less prestigious contemporary Xiao Yuncong, who also contributed a colophon to it, that it was really by Xiao Yuncong, not by Hongren. Because the symposium and exhibition had been in large part inspired by our seminar-exhibition (*Shadows of Mt. Huang*, 1981)--they were surprised and impressed that a group of foreign scholars had made such a big project about their local school--I was given the place of honor, asked to deliver my paper on the opening night, right after the opening of the symposium. And I gave this paper showing how the famous “Hongren” album must in fact be by Xiao Yuncong. Well, the effect was to shake up the symposium, so that responding to my talk became the main purpose of some of the top-level Chinese participants.

IMAGES: CHANGE ONE SIDE TO XU BANGDA

Xu Bangda told me, privately after my talk, that he agreed with me that the album couldn’t be by Hongren, although he was not sure he agreed with attributing it to Xiao Yuncong. His director Yang Boda, however, marched him off to the museum the next morning, looked at the album leaves with him, and made him give a talk supporting the Hongren authorship, which in fact he didn’t believe in. And so forth--throughout the rest of the symposium this issue kept coming up and dividing the scholars there into arguments. But my main purpose, which was to show that we foreigners could also come to China and question one of their accepted would-be masterpieces, had been made. Jonathan Hay, who was still a grad student working on his dissertation, told me that I shouldn’t have done it; but others, later, felt it was the right thing to do at that time, however upsetting its effect on the symposium.

IMAGE: WAN’GO WENG