

王

Wang

川

Ch'uan

真

chen

蹟

chi

Alice
Schneider

Chinese dynasties referred to here:

Chou (1122-256 B.C.)

Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 220)

T'ang (618-907)

Five Dynasties (907-960)

Sung (960-1279)

Yuan (1280-1367)

Ming (1268-1643)

Ch'ing (1644-1911)

During the process of cataloging one of Field Museum's thousands of Chinese rubbings, Dr. Hoshien Tchen came upon a note which indicated that another rubbing in the collection which had previously been cataloged might be far more important than we had suspected earlier.

The rubbing of special interest, mounted on a long hand scroll, shows various scenes of what has often been described as the country estate of Wang Wei (687-759), a famous T'ang dynasty poet and artist. It had been taken from a stone engraved in 1617 to reproduce his painting known as the *Wang Ch'uan* (the name he gave to his home) and was entitled *Wang Ch'uan chen chi* ("true picture of Wang Ch'uan").

We had long known that among the several editions of *Wang Ch'uan* rubbings in the Field Museum collection, all from different stones, and all engraved in the Ming and Ch'ing periods, this one was particularly fine. A preface in the scroll by Shen

Kuo-hua, the Ming magistrate who ordered the stone cut, stated that it had been engraved from a "true picture" of Wang Wei's *Wang Ch'uan* done by Kuo Chung-shu. Kuo was a talented Sung artist who followed in the footsteps of Wang Wei a few hundred years later. But Shen did not make clear whether this Sung "true picture" had been a painting or a rubbing. The note Dr. Tchen came across later, written by a Ch'ing scholar named Wang Ting, stated that the 1617 edition was copied from a Sung stone carving.

Even if the 1617 stone had been cut from a painted copy by Kuo, it would be of great value. As a disciple who was said to have continued the earlier master's style of painting into the Sung period, Kuo would have rendered a true likeness. But if Kuo's "true picture" were a rubbing, our 1617 copy of it would be of still greater value—because the Sung model would probably have been traced from the original for the express purpose of rendering as true a likeness as the engraving technique permits. Thus did the Chinese ensure preservation of a masterpiece, and also make reproductions for collectors.

I should point out that a specimen of Chinese pictorial art may be a copy several times removed from what we would call an "original" and still be greatly valued. The late R. H. van

Segments of *Wang Ch'uan chen chi*, rubbing mounted on hand scroll in Field Museum collection, taken from a 1617 stone engraving. Because Chinese hand scrolls are read from right to left, this sequence should properly be viewed from page 10 "backward" to this page.



Gulick, a wise, discriminating student and collector of Chinese art, succinctly expressed how "the traditional Chinese view . . . is fundamentally different from ours. While we insist that a picture actually is painted by the man whose signature it bears or whom it is ascribed to, the Chinese have throughout the centuries considered this as a point of secondary importance; for them works of art serve in the first place to preserve and faithfully transmit the spirit of the [original] artists, they did not particularly care whether this aim was achieved by originals or by good, bona-fide copies."

Why, then, should we attach so much importance to whether the model for this 1617 rubbing was a painting or a rubbing?

We are, of course, primarily interested in authenticating as well as cataloging and preserving our materials. But we are also, to paraphrase Dr. Tchen, "interested in opening questions that other researchers may pursue on a deeper basis," for these rubbings are source materials—the bare facts of Chinese history and culture. In this instance, it can readily be seen why a model for the 1617 rubbing which was itself a rubbing would be of greater value for our understanding of the original than would a model which was a free-hand copy, permitting distortions or expressions of the copyist not found

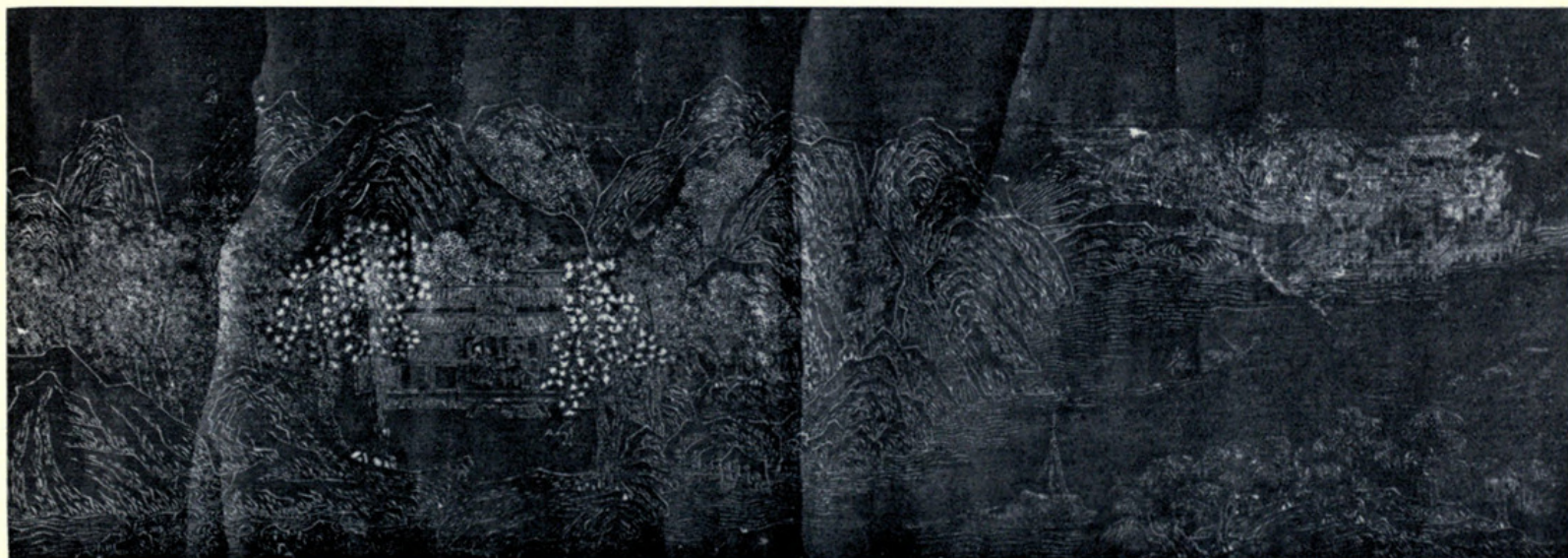
in the original. The art historian, as well as the art lover, could then look upon this 1617 rubbing as a fairly accurate statement of a painting considered by the Chinese themselves to be one of their most important, and one that has not been seen for hundreds of years.

In a 1914 article John C. Ferguson claimed that "the earliest copy [of the *Wang Ch'uan*] which has come down to our present time is that of Kuo Chung-shu of the Sung Dynasty," and that he had had the privilege of studying its details and found that they tallied with a description of our 1617 rubbing of the *Wang Ch'uan* published by Berthold Laufer. (Most of Field Museum's rubbings were collected in the early 1900s by Dr. Laufer, who became one of the Museum's most renowned curators for his wide knowledge of East Asia.) Ferguson also commented that Kuo, out of respect for the earlier master, would never have permitted himself the freedom of imitating only the style of Wang Wei; such a copy would be called a *fan* painting. Kuo made a *lin pen*, which term (used in an inscription on the painting) means a faithful reproduction copied directly from the original, perhaps traced. This painting is now housed in the Metropolitan Museum. The fact that Kuo Chung-shu made a painted copy of the *Wang Ch'uan*

does not rule out the evidence that he also did an engraving.

Many artists made free-hand copies of the original *Wang Ch'uan*. One such painting, and famous in its own right, is an eighteen-foot-long hand scroll in the British Museum by Chao Meng-fu (1254-1322). In an inscription following his signature on the painting, he acknowledges it to be a "free" copy; and it is important to look upon these "free" copies as just that. While a masterpiece, and supposedly based upon the T'ang model, the painting reflects many of the characteristics attributed to the Yuan period of painting. And it is, as Chao implies, an example of his virtuosity.

In an exhibit of late Ming and early Ch'ing painters recently shown at the Art Institute of Chicago, there was a hand scroll entitled *Wang Ch'uan Villa*. It was painted by Wang Yuan-ch'i (1642-1715). The accompanying catalog to the exhibition mentioned that it was based on a "1617 engraved version of the famous *Wang Ch'uan* composition attributed to Wang Wei," which Wang Yuan-ch'i referred to as a "popular stone engraving." Though his picture too is a "free" copy, it is interesting that of the several rubbings from various stones available in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as painted copies, he chose



this 1617 version as his model.

China has produced many major painters, both before and after Wang Wei, but he has a unique place in the long history of China's pictorial art in that he has been credited with creating the Ch'an (Zen in Japanese) Buddhist school of landscape painting. It came to be known as the "Southern" in contrast to the "Northern" school. These are not geographical terms; rather, they express styles and approaches—the "Southern" using light ink-washes and relying upon intuition and suggestion, as against the stricter attitude of color over outline preferred by the "Northern." These distinctions, as so often happens, were really interpretations by artists and art critics of following periods, but they set Chinese landscape painting into two models—not truly always clear from each other—and for one thousand years followers of the two schools vied with each other on merits.

Thus, the possibility that the 1617 stone could have been copied from an early Sung stone could be as exciting to the Chinese art historian as would be the discovery of a new fossil species to a paleontologist.

Why did Wang Wei and his period, the T'ang, assume such importance? It was one of China's most expansive

periods—politically, militarily, economically, and artistically. The country was unified and strong, its borders and influence extended far, and the arts reflected this vitality. Although the T'ang dynasty is perhaps better known by collectors and art museums in the West for its tomb pieces of majestic human and animal figures, it was for the Chinese their great period of poetry and calligraphy. It was also a period of innovation in painting, greatly influenced by Taoism and Buddhism, when new patterns of tradition became established.

Wang Wei was one of these innovators. He was a successful physician and poet in his early twenties. He served briefly as an assistant minister to the Emperor Hsuan Ts'ung until imprisoned for a time by rebel forces. After his young wife died when he was only thirty-one, he retired to a country villa. There he spent the remaining thirty years of his life in the meditations of Buddhism, writing poetry, and painting. Wang Wei's poems are said to be paintings, and his paintings poems. The scenes he painted and often accompanied with poetry were largely of the beautiful landscape of the Lan-tien District of Shensi Province in northern China.

There has been an adulation given to Wang Wei few Chinese artists have

enjoyed. In the long annals of Chinese art criticism, he is almost without criticism. In fact, it was said that when Wang Wei painted a banana tree growing in snow, it was plausible. None of his paintings exist today. It is questionable whether any paintings of T'ang artists still exist; those which claim to be T'ang are suspect. It is therefore with great respect and reverence that we turn to the copies of early masterpieces—either paintings or the rubbings from engraved copies.

What exactly are rubbings?

For one thing, most Chinese rubbings are not rubbed. The term "rubbings" usually means to us an image produced by placing paper over a hard surface and actually rubbing the back with chalk or crayon to get an impression of the engraved or relief design underneath. This is how we might, for instance, take a rubbing of a coin or an old gravestone. But the Chinese have for centuries used a much more refined technique, which is technically called ink squeeze. The paper is applied wet, gently tamped into the engraved parts, and before it is completely dry India ink is evenly and carefully patted over the surface. When the paper is peeled off, only that part which covered the raised elements of the hard surface appears black. Thus we usually see white lines on a black background



because the design on the stone is usually incised. When the impression is taken from a surface with the design in raised relief, the print will appear as black on white. If the hard surface from which the rubbing is taken is fairly smooth, like bronze or wood, the print may be difficult to distinguish from a wood-block print, which is made by inking the block and pressing it on the paper.

The Chinese wet process for taking rubbings does not imply that they wish to go out of their way to make a seemingly simple process complicated; the wet process gives a more successful print. It does not smudge (unless poorly done), and if the rubbing is carefully stored—better yet, mounted and stored—it can survive for centuries.

We have mounted rubbings in our collection going back to the Sung period. In fact, many of these rubbings have survived the stones from which they were taken, primarily because they were easier to care for.

It should be pointed out here that engravings on hard surfaces did not begin with the objective of taking rubbings. In fact, the Chinese had been engraving in bronze as well as stone long before paper was invented in the second century, permitting rubbings. Engravings were objectives in

themselves, a form of preservation of what the Chinese considered their finest expression—writings—which were esteemed above all else.

It is said that to ensure to posterity the truth of the Confucian classics, which had been distorted by many generations of copyists, the Han Emperor Ling had these classics collated and standardized once and for all by ordering that they be engraved in stone, and thus began the great stone carvings of China which lasted over two thousand years.

Not so. The tradition is probably much older. Still extant in Peking are stone carvings that are memorials in poetic form to a great military success. It is now thought that they date from the seventh or eighth century B.C. But it is conceivable that carving in stone began even earlier.

Quite possibly the Chinese invented paper because they were looking for a material which lent itself to print making in order to extend the engravings. Silk had been tried very early without much success. In any event, there is strong evidence that by the third century A.D. paper had been perfected well enough to make rubbings, and that by the fifth century, when European countries were still struggling with sheepskins, the Chinese were producing rubbing prints as a

“mass medium.” By the Sung period, rubbings of famous calligraphies were already sought after as collectors’ items.

By the Ming dynasty, pictorial art had reached such a state of perfection that there was little new to be said or reached for. Many critics have considered it a period of artistic decline, including some who lived in the Ming. By the same token, reverence for the older masters increased, and engravings of old paintings, as well as engravings of calligraphy, became more common and also sought after as collectors’ items. Some of these prints, if rendered by a good engraver, were valued above contemporary paintings or free-hand copies of older paintings, possibly because they were truer likenesses of the originals.

The skills of the copyist and engraver in transmitting a style of painting or calligraphy are of utmost importance. In early days there were special court engravers who worked exclusively for the emperor. Later it became a proud trade, and very often we will find the name of the engraver as well as that of the calligrapher or painter cut into stone. Engravings, depending on the detail, demand much time and infinite patience. To reproduce the original as exactly as possible, a tracing of it must first be made and



transferred onto the stone, then carved into it. The technique can pick up the calligraphic lines of a painting but must sacrifice the freedom of the brush stroke, and cannot possibly reproduce the nuances of ink wash (although attempts to do so have been made). The harsh nature of stone does not easily yield the fluid lines created by a brush, but some results are amazing.

The quality of the rubbing from the 1617 stone indicates that the copyist and engraver knew their trades well. This judgment is confirmed in the scroll itself. The prefatory remarks written on the scroll by Shen Kuo-hua (who had the stone cut) first explain that when he was magistrate of Lan-tien District, he discovered that the copy there of Wang Wei's *Wang Ch'uan* painting was coarse looking and not even representative of the Wang Ch'uan landscape. He goes on to state that he ordered Wang Wei's "true picture" in the collection owned by Yang Pai-fu be cut on stone, this "true picture" being a copy made by Kuo Chung-shu (Sung dynasty); that Kuo Sou-lu was appointed to copy it for the new stone carving; and that his fine work is praised for being an exact copy of the Sung dynasty edition. Several colophons of appreciation also follow the picture, including one by the collector Yang Pai-fu and one by

the engraver of the new stone. We are encouraged regarding the accuracy of this 1617 edition by all these testimonials; plus the fact that the Sung copyist was a fine artist and disciple of the Wang Wei "Southern" school; plus the knowledge that the print of this Sung edition used as a model was borrowed from a recognized collector.

Good rubbings are no longer easy to obtain, and are certainly not inexpensive. Many of the stones from which they were made are gone or unavailable and the craft of the engraver is dying out. Quite likely it is already gone. We are therefore fortunate at Field Museum to have received from Dr. Berthold Laufer one of the best and most encompassing collections of rubbings ever assembled—including, among other things, a prize in the 1617 edition of the *Wang Ch'uan chen chi*.

As a postscript about Chinese rubbings in general, perhaps it should be noted that the mulberry paper used is very delicate and highly responsive to changes of temperature and light. Rubbings should therefore be exhibited as sparingly as possible, and with caution. While a few of the rubbings in Field Museum's collection go back to the Sung period, most are of comparatively recent vintage—not

more than 300 years old—and fairly well preserved only because these regrettably strict measures are taken. A few are on permanent display, however, in the China exhibits on the second floor.

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