

Su Shi's Artistic Legacy as a Man of Letters: Insights into Song Dynasty Paintings

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Abstract: As a man of letters, Su Shi's poetic art spirit energized the Song paintings. As for painting, Su Shi advocated the idea of "unconscious of the boundary between oneself and the external world", "unity of poetry and painting", and "perfection of form and spirit" in creation and aesthetics. That is to say, he pursued not only the Naturalness but also humanistic and poetic connotations. His art spirit contributed to the formation of the concept of "literati painting". Through exchanges with other artists, Su Shi's poetic spirit spread both inside and outside the imperial court, shaping the overall style of the Song paintings by osmosis.

Keywords: Su Shi; Art Spirit; Imperial-court Decorative Painting; Literati Painting

In ancient China, there was a tradition known as "inscriptions on paintings", namely poems containing additional information, sentiments or comments were added to paintings. This tradition preserved the relations between the poets and the painters and collectors of the paintings, and demonstrated their aesthetic concepts as well. The Song Dynasty represented a mature period of poems inscribed on paintings. Su Shi often revealed his own aesthetic concepts in his poems inscribed on paintings, so that we can get a glimpse of his art spirit today.

1. Unconscious of the Boundary Between Oneself and the External World: Su Shi's Idea on Artistic Creation

Su Shi's art spirit echoes the idea of "transformation into things" and "forgetting the difference and opposition between self and the universe" held by Chuang-Tzu. In the act of art, "transformation of things" means that the creator's own feelings and aspirations are transformed into everything, and "forgetting the difference and opposition between self and the universe" is to forget the existence of the physical body and concentrate one's attention to reach the realm of unity with nature. This creative state of "spiritual interaction with the heaven and earth" represents a combination of Taoism and art, and a unification of the subject (the creator) and the object (the object to be depicted). The realm of "thorough understanding of the universe and consummate painting skills" proposed by Su Shi in his discussion of artistic creation embodies the state of "unconscious of the boundary between oneself and the external world".

In the fall of the second year of the Yuanyou Period of Emperor Zhezong of the Song Dynasty (1087), Su Shi saw his cousin Wen Tong's bamboo painting at a friend's home in Bianjing (today's Kaifeng) and wrote three poems on them. In one of the poems, Su Shi commented on the state of Wen Tong in painting the bamboo as "his body is transformed into bamboo":

As Yu Ke paints, the bamboo stands; while the artist seems to part,
Not just from sight, but from his core, his beating heart.
With bamboo, he becomes one, fresh nuances start,
In every brush and shade, an art so pure, so smart.
Though Chuang Tzu is long gone, his wisdom won't depart,
Who else knows this magic, this masterful art's heart?
(On Chao Buzhi's Collection of Bamboo Paintings by Yu Ke)¹

Another example is that Su Shi praised Li Gonglin's painting *Lao-tzu after the Bath* by saying, "Laozi was leisurely drying his hair in the courtyard after bathing, and it seemed that he forgot about his own appearance. This scene took Confucius and Yan Hui by surprise."¹ From the reaction of the representative figures of Confucianism, we can speculate that the Lao-tzu in the painting may appear in a naked state. Su Shi's praise was also a manifestation of his own sincerity in not caring for the existence of the physical

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body. Su Shi also expressed his feeling that “one should not care any of his or her limbs and bones”, conveying his ideal of freedom and carelessness.

How to get closer to the ideal state of “unconscious of the boundary between oneself and the external world”? According to Su Shi, it is not achieved overnight, but by practicing one’s skills like a butcher [cook]. Following the example set by Wen Tong, Su Shi said that Su Zhe had only learned his “meaning”, while he himself had got a more complete understanding—a combination of reason and method:

Zi You (Su Shi’s younger brother) penned the refined “Ode to the Inked Bamboo” and presented it to Yu Ke: “Consider Pao Ding, known simply for butchering oxen, yet those seeking nourishment for life draw from his mastery. And Lun Bian, a mere wheel-maker, yet scholars find accord with his wisdom. Now, observing the depth you’ve instilled within this bamboo, I can’t help but believe you possess profound understanding. Am I wrong?” Zi You, having never painted, captures only its essence. But for someone like myself, is it not just the spirit that is grasped? I discern its technique as well.¹

In Su Shi’s opinion, one must accumulate painting skills and pay special attention to details to create a “natural work”, not like Su Zhe who thought he could grip the charm as a matter of course.

“Natural and perfect” works can only be created with the accumulation of efforts and in a state of being unconscious of the boundary between oneself and the external world. It is worth noting that these ingenious works should be accompanied by the creator’s strong sense of subjectivity and lively imagination, which also reflects the poetic conception. He appreciated the patterns and forms created by nature, but regarded them as the product of the artist’s ingenuity, which is full of humanistic connotations. In the fourth year of the Xining Period (1071), Su Shi dropped in on Ouyang Xiu on his way to Hangzhou, and wrote a poem for his collection of stone screens. In this poem, Su Shi regarded the natural lines on the stone screen as the embodiment of the “magical ingenuity” of the previous generation of painters and marveled at the divine workmanship:

Who gifted this stone screen to the scholar’s abode?
With faint ink marks, their mysteries bestowed.
No vast woods drawn, nor towering tree,
But an ageless pine on Emei’s snow peak, standing free.
Cliffs sheer and gorges deep, in sight, yet beyond grasp,
Where smoky mists with sun’s descent clasp.
With wind it leans, in true form shown,
Only then is nature’s craftsmanship known.
Beneath Guo’s slopes, might Bi Hong and Wei Yan rest,
Their bones might decay, but their spirit’s unbested.
Brilliant thoughts unvoiced, turned to mist and stone,
Lost in the rock, their genius unknown.
Ancient artists, like poets, stood apart from the norm,
Capturing essence, in image and form.
Sir, pen your verses, let not talent be unsung,
Lest those two souls weep, their laments yet unsprung.¹

Both Bi Hong and Wei Yan mentioned in the poem were painters in the Tang Dynasty good at painting pines. They rest in peace in the mountains and forests, or we can say they were “materialized” as part of nature. Su Shi associated nature with the sentiment of “unrecognized talents” in his dynamic fantasy, showing the unity of illusion and the real world and the exchange of natural force and humanities.

2. Excelling in Both Form and Spirit: Su Shi’s Expectation for the Song Imperial-court Decorative Painting

The term “imperial-court decorative painting” refers to the painting style of the ancient royal academy, which represents the model and direction of the art of the times, similar to the term “academicism” often used in the history of art. To understand the characteristics of the “imperial-court decorative painting”, we can first begin with the Imperial Painting Academy—the royal painting academy of the Song Dynasty.

In the Song Dynasty, the Imperial Painting Academy established by Emperor Taizong of the Song Dynasty was used as a place for the creation and study of painting at the imperial court. There was a galaxy of court painters with consummate skills, some of whom were selected from among highly skilled folk painters and some of whom were admitted by examination. The Painting Academy offered a standard model for artistic creation at that time, and reflected the comprehensive level of art in the whole country.

The mission of the Painting Academy was to “serve the Emperor and the nobility with paintings”. Its artistic creation was expected to reflect the ideology of the age and create an atmosphere of peace and prosperity by painting murals or screens inside and outside the palace and temples, as well as portraits of the imperial family and ministers. At the same time, the artistic creation of the Painting Academy also needed to satisfy the aesthetic taste of the emperor. The emperors of the Song Dynasty were mostly art lovers and practitioners, and they were fastidious about the selection and examination of the artists at the Painting Academy.

2.1 Criteria for the Imperial-court Decorative Painting

At the early stage of its establishment, the Painting Academy absorbed the experiences and talent of some painters from the Five Dynasties period. These painters already possessed mature artistic accomplishments and knew well about the kind of works meeting the emperor’s needs. In general, the main criteria for the imperial-court decorative paintings were “neat and refined” and “resemblance”. “Neat and refined” means an exquisite picture, for example, the regal painting style of Huang Quan and his son appealed to the audience for its gentle coloring effect in the absence of contour lines and the splendid yet elegant aura at the imperial palace. Huang’s painting style became the standard observed by the Painting Academy in the early Song Dynasty.² The painter Xu Xi, who was famous for artistic conception (rather than workmanship), was rejected by the Painting Academy for not complying with Huang’s painting styles.³ The resemblance in appearances, namely realism, means that painters depict the shape of things clearly on the basis of workmanship. When Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty selected the members of the Painting Academy, he deliberately emphasized the compliance with the standard of resemblance.⁴

These strict requirements seem to suppress individuality and lack of romantic charm, so the imperial-court decorative painting is sometimes regarded as a rigid art form in contrast to the literati painting. In addition, according to the introduction of Su Shi’s art spirit in the preceding paragraphs, the standard of the imperial-court decorative painting seems to deviate from Su Shi’s artistic concept of “unconscious of the boundary between oneself and the external world”. Su Shi’s reviews on the paintings did criticize the notion of resemblance.

2.2 Su Shi’s Comments on “Resemblance”

In the second year of the Yuanyou Period of Emperor Zhezong of the Song Dynasty (1087), Su Shi wrote two poems titled “Two Verses on Viewing Wang Zhubao’s ‘Broken Branch’ Paintings” for the paintings of the chief minister of Yanling prefectural governor (today’s Xu Chang of Henan Province) when he was a member of the Imperial Academy. The poems contain Su Shi’s comments on the imperial-court painters as well as his famous aesthetic viewpoints, which are of great significance in the history of art.

If art’s merely mimicry, in essence quite slight,
Then such discernment is but child’s naive sight.
If verses stay shallow, surface and plain,
That poet’s heart and soul, they surely disdain.
Both poem and picture, the same rhythm trace,
With divine finesse and a pure, subtle grace.
Bian Luan’s birds, alive in each strand,
While Zhao Chang’s flowers in spirit stand.
But to Wang’s art, these two scarcely hold,
His canvas sings stories, tales boldly told.
Who’d have thought a speck of red, so small,
Could evoke endless spring, capturing all? (Verse I)

Slim bamboo, like a hermit, stands so deep,
 Maiden-like flowers in their tranquil sleep.
 Birds on the boughs in harmonious play,
 Amongst blooms, the rain seems to sway.
 Feathers paired, on the verge of the flight,
 Leaves all around, rise to the sun's light.
 See the bee with its delicate feat,
 Clear honey clings to its nimble feet.
 When an artist boasts Heaven's touch so true,
 Spring's essence flows in each stroke and hue.
 Knowing you, Sir, have a poetic soul,
 Lend this vivid scene words that make it whole. (Verse II)¹

It is generally believed that the view of “If one appreciates and evaluates paintings only by looking at the appearance of the painting, one’s insight is similar to that of a child” in Su Shi’s poem constitutes a criticism of the imperial-court decorative painting for being particular about “resemblance”. What’s Su Shi’s attitude towards this painting style on earth? What’s his attitude towards “resemblance”? We need to discuss this issue in the context of the whole poem.

In the poem, Su Shi mentioned two artists: Bian Luan and Zhao Chang. Bian Luan was a famous painter in the Tang Dynasty, List of Tang Dynasty Famous Paintings praised him for his talent to “exhaust the shapes of feathers and capture the delicate beauty of flowers” in fine arts. The Emperor Dezong of the Tang Dynasty even ordered him to paint the peacock presented by foreign countries.⁵ Zhao Chang, a court painter, was a promoter of Huang Quan’s painting style by inheriting the “boneless” drawing technique. Both painters, belonging to the school of the imperial-court decorative painting, were representative of the pursuit of resemblance and workmanship. Su Shi lavished praise on the paintings of the chief minister of Yanling based on the works of Bian Luan and Zhao Chang. It should be noted that although these two paintings of the chief minister of Yanling have not survived, their subject matter—flowers and birds in branches—is a typical model of the imperial-court decorative painting. Bian Luan and Zhao Chang were also famous for their works featuring this subject matter. The figures mentioned in the two poems belonged to the school of the imperial-court decorative painting characterized by resemblance and craftsmanship.

Therefore, the focus of Su Shi’s poem is not on the argument that “those emphasizing resemblance are more or less as naïve as children”, but on the fusion of nature and poetry in the paintings, i.e., “a small lump of light color brings us all the beauty about spring” and “the birds are about to flutter their wings with the swaying of the bamboo leaves”, which has not only the natural charm but also the human and poetic connotations. Therefore, it’s not proper to conclude that this poem is only a criticism of “resemblance”.

From the perspective of the development of fine arts, resemblance is the foundation of painting technique and the accurate depiction of objects. In his discussion on painting, Su Shi, instead of criticizing resemblance, attached great importance to it. He held that works of art centered only on the “doctrine” (inner thoughts) and ignoring the form were void. That’s to say, works of art need to express the inner thoughts through skills, and only the combination of form and doctrine can make a work real and powerful. For example, Su Shi praised the works of He Haoran for their perfect resemblance to the objects in his poem titled For He Haoran.¹

Western art had always emphasized realism from the sculptures of the ancient Greco-Roman period to the portraits of the Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo even carried out autopsies to study the structure of the human body. Their pursuit of lifelike realism did not result in a loss of creativity, but rather showed their profound attainments. Even among the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters, their early works were also realist, such as Monet’s Luncheon on the Grass and Van Gogh’s Shoes. Without the stage of realistic creation, their expression of inner states and complex emotions would have no foundation to fall back on. In the development of Chinese paintings, the pursuit of “resemblance” is undoubtedly an embodiment of progress. Chuang-Tzu’s idea that “one should master the objective law of a thing through repeated practice” is another form of “realism”—the result of repeated refinement. Su Shi emphasized the concept that the creator should build his or her subjective consciousness on the basis of realism in order to

achieve the unity of form and spirit, and subject and object. This is the vision of a professional artist and painter.

3. There is Something in Common for the Poem and Painting: Su Shi Promoted the Formation of the Aesthetic Concept of “Literati Painting”

In the two poems written by Su Shi for the paintings of the chief minister of Yanling prefectural governor, there is a sentence: “Both poetry and painting require skills, but the skills are only consummate if it makes the work appear natural.” It is also a famous viewpoint of Su Shi on painting, which directly reflects Su Shi’s art spirit and also the aesthetics practiced by the “school of literati painting” later on.

The scholar painting (called the literati painting later on) is an art concept in contrast to the imperial-court decorative painting. To put it simply, different from the strict standards of the imperial-court decorative painting, the scholar painting pursues the natural realm of “unconscious of the boundary between oneself and the external world” in its creation based on the temperament of the painter. Its focus is the expression of disposition but not the demonstration of painting skills. The scholar painting came into being under the influence of Su Shi’s poetic spirit.

In the third year of the Xining Period of Emperor Shenzong of the Song Dynasty (1070), Su Shi wrote an article entitled *On Painting in the Tsing-yin Temple* in the capital city of Kaifeng, offering his unique insights into painting. In this article, Su Shi put forward the idea that “there is a common sense in the landscape”, which is very important. The so-called “common sense” refers to the poetic spirit like “Taoism” and “spirituality” connected with nature. Su Shi categorized mountains, rocks, bamboo and wood as “having common sense”, but categorized people, birds, palaces, and utensils as “having normal form”.¹ It is thus clear that “literati painting” is characterized by a simple distinction focusing on “common sense”.

Thereafter, in the third year of the Yuanyou Period of Emperor Zhezong of the Song Dynasty (1088), Su Shi proposed the concept of the “scholar painting” for the first time when appreciating the landscape painting of the official Song Zifang (whose style name was Hanjie): Hanjie’s painting works are really scholar’s painting.¹ The standard of the scholar painting lies in its commonality and spirituality. It should be noted that Su Shi’s evaluation of Song Zifang’s painting was only: “a little novelty can be found from them”. Su Shi didn’t go any further in defining the scholar painting. Nonetheless, Su Shi’s love of literati ink painting was obvious, for example, he held the painters of the previous generation like Wang Wei and Wu Daozi in high esteem. Su Shi once inscribed commenting words on one painting¹ and one mural¹ created by Wang Wei.

The “literati painting” is the annotations of men of letters to Su Shi’s “scholar painting”. This painting style regards the ink and wash halo dying as its main technique, and is noted for being natural, exuberant, free and fresh. It absorbs Su Shi’s aesthetics in artistic creation—“unconscious of the boundary between oneself and the external world” and “poetry and painting are similar”. The literati could not do without ink and wash in their creation of poems and calligraphy. The use of ink in painting was like an extension of poetry and calligraphy, expressing a sense of broad space and the most genuine form of life with the simplest style of creation. Different from the imperial-court decorative painting, the literati painting doesn’t pay much attention to brushwork and colors because that seems to limit their free imagination (of course, in fact the painting skills of the literati are not good at all). Wen Tong’s ink bamboo painting and Mi Fu’s freehand brushwork with ink are all of this type of creation. More importantly, the literati painting is characterized by a strong sense of subjectivity and humanism on the part of their creators.

Su Shi’s paintings naturally belong to the literati painting, and he was especially good at painting the bamboo and stone. Su Shi claimed that “Although I belong to the Huzhou school, both my bamboo and stone paintings have earned fame for me”. From the only two surviving paintings (see Figure 1), we can see Su Shi’s painting style falls in the category of capricious freehand brushwork. His painting couldn’t stand comparison with his calligraphy in the level of quality. Su Shi himself also said he could only choose one from twenty paintings created by him. However, the spirit of “poetry and painting are similar” represented by him exerted an influence on the history of Song paintings through the communication and exchanges between the “literati painting” and the imperial-court decorative painting.

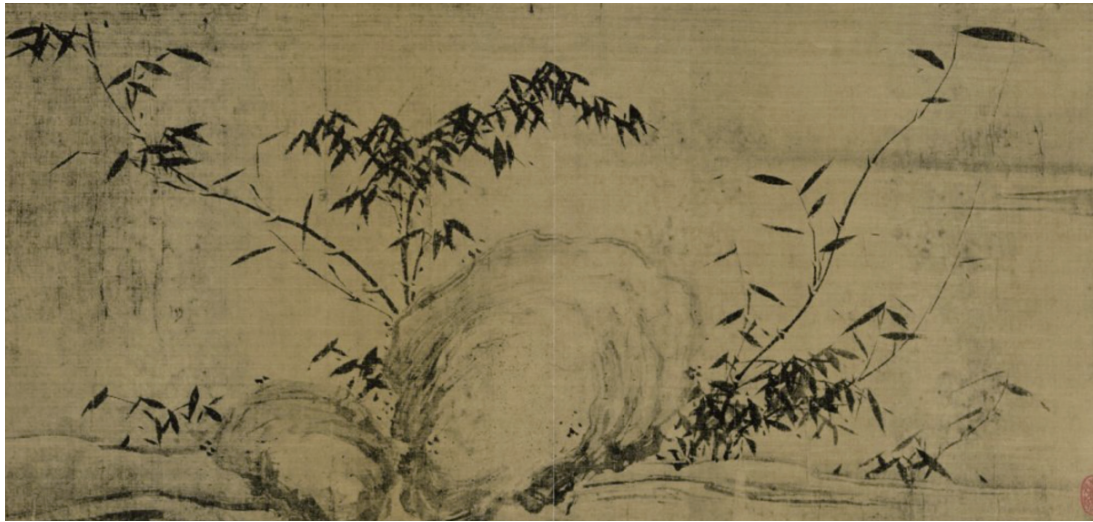


Figure 1 Xiaoxiang Bamboo and Stone

4. Inside and Outside the Court: The Spread of Su Shi's Literati Spirit

As mentioned above, the Imperial Painting Academy of the Song Dynasty represented the highest level of art in that era. In the early years after it was established, those creating the imperial-court decorative paintings were only the court painters and artists. After the rise of the “literati painting” led by Su Shi, its poetic spirit also influenced the development and innovation of fine arts in the Song Dynasty through exchanges inside and outside the court.

4.1 Gatherings of Men of Letters

The relatives of the Song imperial family served as a bridge connecting people inside and outside the court. They generally entered the court through the imperial examinations or by marriage, and had exchanges with literati painters and painters of imperial-court decorative paintings. Among them, Wang Shen was a typical example. In the second year of the Xining Period of Emperor Yingzong of the Song Dynasty (1069), Wang Shen married the daughter of Emperor Yingzong and was appointed the Emperor's Son-in-Law Commandant and Zuowei General. Wang Shen, a versatile artist, often discussed painting skills and exchanged views with court painters, so he based his ABC of painting on the imperial-court decorative painting. In addition, he got a collection of paintings and calligraphy from famous masters in the previous dynasties in his home, and named his collection room “Bao Hui Tang” (Painting Treasures). He often invited scholars and celebrities to gather together here. Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, Li Gonglin, Mi Fu and Qin Guan were all his guests. In this artistic community, the poetic spirit of the literati painting was fully developed. Su Shi spoke highly of Wang Shen's landscape paintings: “The forest landscape painted by the Emperor's Son-in-Law Commandant can be rated as the best of our times, and it cannot even be imitated by any other painters.”⁶

In the third year of the Yuanyou Period of Emperor Zhezong of the Song Dynasty (1088), Su Shi saw the painting *The River and Mountain in a Mist* by Wang Shen at his friend Wang Dingguo's place, and inscribed a poem on it out of sincere appreciation. The painting is now in the collection of the Shanghai Museum, so I am fortunate to view it in person. The painter adopted a variety of painting techniques, including the delicate brushwork of the imperial-court decorative painting and the ink and wash halo dying of the literati painting, producing a contrast of light and shade and a lingering charm. Both Wang Shen and Wang Dingguo were implicated in Su Shi's Wutai Poetry Case. They sympathized with each other because of common experiences and interests. Su Shi's poems, brimming with deep artistic connotations, tried to integrate his own life experiences and state of mind and those of the painter Wang Shen and the collector Wang Dingguo into the scenery presented in the painting. Here are some lines from his poem creating an extremely beautiful artistic conception:

(1) Above the great river, the mountains invoke a sense of sorrow from the heart, while the green trees on both sides of the river appear like clouds and mist.

(2) The fishing boats on the river resemble a leaf.

(3) The crimson maple trees and the crows lodge by the riverside, while snow accumulates on the ancient pines, appearing as though they are drunken.

(4) The old friend in the mountains should be inviting me to return.¹

The painting *The River and Mountain in a Mist* and Su Shi's inscription on it demonstrate the diversified pursuits in life the Northern Song scholars and painters in their extolling of a pure and delicate spiritual realm.

Painter Chen Zhigong, who was also a friend of Su Shi, was able to paint lifelike wild geese. Su Shi once wrote a poem¹ to praise Chen's paintings. The wild geese painted by Chen achieved the same effect as the birds painted by the chief minister of Yanling prefectural governor.

In addition, the discussions about painting the ink bamboo between Su Shi and Wen Tong and the exchange of views on rubbings from calligraphers' inscriptions and strange stones between Su Shi and Mi Fu enriched the poetic spiritual world created by the get-togethers centered on Su Shi. In this way he obtained the qualities of detachment, romantic charm and fusion of poetry and painting.

4.2 The New Style of the Song Art

At the beginning of the establishment of the Painting Academy, the painting technique of Huang Quan's fine brushwork and color setting was regarded as the main standard. However, the communication between court painters and scholars made the poetic spirit of literati paintings popular in the court. Wang Shen's works were a combination of the characteristics of both the imperial-court decorative painting and literati painting. Such communication further contributed to the refinement of court paintings and actually shaped the painting style throughout the Song Dynasty.

Cui Bai was a court painter selected from the common people. He was closely associated with the painter group including Wang Shen, and was influenced by the literati spirit and the ink techniques. Similar to Wang Shen, Cui Bai and Wu Yuanyu added ink halo dying to their fine brushwork and color setting, resulting in a sense of vastness and distance, hence the change in the creation model of the imperial-court decorative painting.

The poetic spirit of the literati painting also influenced the examination system of the Painting Academy. Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty made poems the content of the examination for the entry of the Painting Academy. It required candidates to create paintings based on the poems, usually landscape painting with a sense of space, such as *No One Crosses the Wild Water* and *A Lonely Boat Moored at the Bank for the Whole Day*. These topics were suitable for the ink and wash halo dying. In addition, the Painting Academy adopted the education of cultural classics for the painters to enhance their literary sensibility. Song Zifang and Mi Fu were the only two doctors in painting recorded in historical literature, and both were representatives of the literati painting. Thereafter, the institutional setup of the Painting Academy was increasingly complete, and different official positions and specialized courses were set up, which removed the barrier between scholar-bureaucrats or professional painters and academy painters. This also enriched the connotations of the imperial-court decorative painting at the end of the Northern Song Dynasty. Zhang Zeduan was admitted to the Painting Academy through examinations. The *Riverside Scene* at Qingming Festival created by Zhang demonstrated his solid technique in the depiction of urban life other than that of the imperial aristocrats. It becomes an all-time masterpiece for blending realism and humanism.

All the emperors of the Southern Song Dynasty loved Su Shi's works, and a large number of court paintings and calligraphy works featuring his poems appeared. Emperor Gaozong and Emperor Xiaozong of the Song Dynasty copied Su Shi's *The Second Ode to the Red Cliff* and *The First Ode to the Red Cliff* respectively. Most of Empress Yang's prefaces and postscripts used many quotes from Su Shi's poems. Taking a *Night Stroll with Candles in Hand*, a painting by Ma Lin, an academy painter during the reign of Emperor Ningzong, depicts a courtyard at night with candles' light shone on the begonias in full bloom in the garden. This painting drew its material from Su Shi's *Ode to Begonias*:

The flower in east wind exhales a tender light;
 And spreads a fragrant mist when the moon turns away.
 I am afraid she'd fall asleep at dead of night;
 A candle's lit to make her look fair as by day.⁷

Eventually, the landscape painting, which has the most genuine spirit of the literati painting, became the focus of the Song court paintings. And their expression transitioned to the poetic expression of a side of the mountain and a part of river/lake from the large-scale landscape painting with multi-tier spaces. Robert L. Thorp (US) said in his *Chinese Art and Culture* that “The universal characteristic of the late Song landscape painting is to evoke a deep psychological concern in the viewer, requiring the viewers to mobilize their perception and even to actively participate in the painting in order to get a clear understanding of its meaning.”⁸ Court painters, professional painters, scholar-bureaucrats and artists in the cities maximized the theme of “indulging oneself in the beauty of landscape”, which represents the ethos of the Song Dynasty and the spirit and power in people’s hearts. The Song paintings exude the literati spirit inspired by Su Shi in every detail. They are a combination of aesthetic ideas of “unconscious of the boundary between oneself and the external world”, “poetry and painting are similar”, and “excelling in both form and spirit” in artistic creation.

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