A LANDSCAPE BY CHAO MÈNG-FU
IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

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LAURENCE BINYON.


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The Print Room of the British Museum possesses some 200 Chinese paintings. Of these some are insignificant modern productions; but many are of great interest, and a few are of high antiquity and importance. The well-known Catalogue, compiled by Dr. Anderson, includes those acquired by the Museum before 1886. In this work the Chinese paintings are added as an appendix to the far larger collection of Japanese paintings. They number 114; but from this total we must subtract No. 1 which is not Chinese at all, but a magnificent example of the Kosé school of Japan and probably by the famous Hirotaka (12th century A.D.); and we must add 5 works wrongly included in the catalogue of Japanese paintings, of which Nos. 1 and 2, ascribed to Cho Densu, are by a follower of Li Lung-mien 李龍眠 and in the style of that master; the other three are not noteworthy.

Among the Chinese pictures acquired since the Anderson collection was purchased, are two which are pre-eminent and which surpass in importance the finest of the Anderson series. One of these
Part of a painting by Chao Meng-fu in the British Museum.
is the painting by Ku k'ai-chih 顧愷之, of which an account was given in the Burlington Magazine (Jan. 1904) and on which new light was thrown by the learned article of Prof. Chavannes in the T'oung-Pao of July 1904. The other, hitherto unpublished, is a landscape roll, acquired in 1889, by Chao Méng-fu 趙孟頫 (T. Tzü-ang 子昂), one of the great masters of the Yüan dynasty. Born A.D. 1254, a descendant of the founder of the Sung dynasty, he retired, on the fall of that house, into private life till 1286, after which he held official positions at court. He died in 1322. He was famous for paintings of landscapes, flowers, men, and horses. (Giles, Biographical Dictionary, N°. 173). The roll measures 5 mètres 28 cm. 3 mm. in length by 36 cm. in height. It is in admirable preservation; and represents a continuous landscape, painted almost entirely in greens and blues on the usual dark-toned silk. The brush-work is of exquisite delicacy and power; it has the charm that absolute mastery of an instrument always communicates; and no less wonderful is the art by which the varying scenes of the landscape are made to melt and flow into one another.

Water winds in and out among lawns and slopes, from which rise rocks of rich colour and fantastic shape; torrents plunge down the higher crags; summits of distant mountain-ranges hang upon the horizon. In the valleys and open ground are groves of delicate bamboo, herds of deer in little parks, or the roofs of a village, half-seen in a woody hollow. Unrolling the picture, one has the sensation of actually passing through a delicious and strange country. Villas are scattered along the borders of the water, surrounded by fruit trees in blossom; and figures are seen crossing the little bridges which join one knoll to another. The painting ends in climax, as
the winding shores and rocky peninsulas yield by degrees to open
sea; the stillness of the verdant hollows changes to the freshness
of blowing wind, agitating shallow waves and rocking a fisherman's
boat; at last there remains only a vision of wide water and shadowy
peaks beyond.

At the end, besides two seals of the artist and seals of col-
lectors, is an inscription with date and signature in the artist's hand-
writing: Drawings of several views in the style of Wang Yu-ch'êng
Wang ch'uan (i.e. Wang Wei 王維) of the T'ang dynasty, by
Tzü-ang (i.e. Chao Meng-fu), in the 3rd month of the spring of the
second year of Chih-ta (March, A.D. 1309) 1) 至大二年春三
月 慕 唐 王 右 丞 鑲 川 諸 勝 圖。子 昂。Wang Wei was
born in 699 and died in 759. After holding a high office at court, he
was carried into captivity by the rebel leader An Lu-shan 安 禮 山,
on whose death he was redeemed by his younger brother. The rest
of his life was passed in retirement. He is famous as a poet and
almost equally famous as a painter, especially of landscape. He
seems to have been the founder of the literary man's style of painting
Wén jên hua 文人畫, afterwards so prevalent, the style which
became characteristic of the Southern School. The T'ang dynasty
saw a new departure in landscape art. Two opposed schools arose,
the one originated by Li Ssu-hsun 李思訓, the other by Wang
Wei 王維. The latter sought to express a mood, to represent the
soul of things rather than their external form merely. He would
disregard the seasons in his pictures, to combine flowers or fruit as
his fancy chose. A strong idealism pervaded his work.

1) I am indebted for the translation to Prof. Sir R. K. Douglas. Prof. Giles identified
the titles as those of Wang Wei.
This is the master whom Chao Meng-fu has here imitated. A painting of undoubted authenticity by the Yüan artist, dated and signed, is of sufficient importance: but that it should be in the style of the great T'ang painter adds immensely to its value for the student. For it may be doubted if any actual specimen of T'ang landscape exists. A ‘Waterfall’ reproduced in Tajima’s ‘Select Relics of Japanese Art’ Vol. II, has always been attributed in Japan to Wang Wei, but as Mr. Tajima says, the style points rather to the Sung or Yüan periods: in any case, we are not on certain ground. But with the landscape in the British Museum we are on certain ground. Allowing for the natural freedom of Oriental artists in copying an earlier style, we can understand what the T'ang landscape must have been like, as represented by one of its chief painters.

The impassioned sentiment for the beauty of nature which in Europe found no free expression till the 19th century, was already well developed by Chinese painters in the 8th century. Doubtless it was not till the Sung age that this art found its culmination, in that modern intimacy of feeling, joined to an enthusiastic sense for the elemental forces of nature, which makes some of the Sung masterpieces seem creations of today. The T'ang artists had not perhaps arrived at this final stage; but they had, if one may conjecture from this picture, an extraordinary sense for the romantic in nature. So in Europe, we find this sense for romance rather in Claude Lorrain, Gaspar Poussin and Salvator Rosa than in the more ‘intimate’ painters of the later nineteenth century.

The practice of painting continuous pictures on a long roll is doubtless a primitive convention, derived perhaps from the long friezes, appropriate to palace-walls, in which the early art of China
delighted. The conservatism of the Far East has retained this convention to modern times, though the tendency has been to divide the painting into separate subjects.

In the landscape by Chao Méng-fu there is no division; but a sense of unity is given by the gradual climax which lends a meaning to the whole. It would not perhaps be fanciful to see behind this a philosophic idea, — the passage of the soul through the delights of beautiful earth, in groves and parks and valleys, to its liberation among the grand solitudes of mountain, sea and sky.