

Professional or Literati: The Ambiguous Identity of Wang Hui

Xiao Sheng [PhD Candidate, Art History, Arizona State University]

Brief Biography of Wang Hui (1632-1717)

- Wang Hui began to learn painting at 15.
- At 19, Wang Hui was accidentally discovered by Wang Jian (1598-1677).
- Two years later, Wang Jian introduced Wang Hui to Wang Shimin (1592-1680). Wang Hui thus had the opportunity to learn and imitate many of the paintings from Wang Shimin's collection.
- No later than 1656, Wang Hui met Yun Shouping (1633-1690) and started their life-long friendship.
- Wang Hui established his career as a professional artist in the 1660s and gradually formed his individual style.



Yun Shouping left a bunch of inscriptions and colophons to Wang Hui's painting, and many of them were clearly not just for social intercourse. . In this album for Wang Shimin, Yun inscribed almost each leaf of this album. While Da Chongguang (1623-1692), a scholar official and art collector, and a major patron of Wang Hui in the 1670s, wrote as the main inscriber of the album on the deliberately preserved blank paper above each leaf, Yun Shouping only inscribed at the margin of the paintings with small-size characters, and sometimes he inscribed twice at a different time when he looked at the painting again ("Inscribed again on the following day"). He truly appreciated Wang Hui's painting and looked at them again and again.

Wang Hui. Leaf F, *Mountain Cascade and Thatched Hut in the style of Wang Meng*, from *In the Pursuit of Antiquity: Landscape after Song and Yuan Masters*, dated 1673. Album of twelve paintings, nine in ink on paper and three in ink and color on paper, 17.6-22.6 x 29.8-33.5 cm. Princeton University Art Museum.

Friendship with Yun Shouping

The earliest record of their friendship dated 1656, on the sixth day of the fourth month, the two young people chatted and drank tea at Wang Hui's study. Yun Shouping painted *Trees and Rocks* in the style of Ke Jiusi (1290-1343), and Wang Hui added bamboos and a slope to his painting. There is a widespread story between them, saying that Yun Shouping painted landscape at first, but after he saw Wang Hui's landscape painting, he turned to the subject of bird and flower.

While Wang Hui was making more and more profits by painting, Yun did not like painting for money and lived a poor life in his late years. Yun once used the allusion of Mi Fu (1051-1107), who was considered the ideal of a literati-painter, to both satirize and persuade Wang Hui.

Yet, Wang Hui and Yun Shouping somehow continued their life-long friendship, until Yun's death. They both shared similar opinions for art and enjoyed the delight of talking about art, making paintings, and attaining enjoyment from it.



Historical Context

During the late Ming period, the distinction between the amateur and the professional began to blur, largely related to the fact that distinction between the commoners and the elite blurred. During the early Qing dynasty, a circumstance of becoming both a literati and a professional painter was provided.

It was possible that Wang Hui painted paintings with literati taste on the one hand and established his own studio to receive commissions or sell his paintings on the other. This is the reason why Wang Hui's presence in the circle of literati did not seem to be heterogenous.

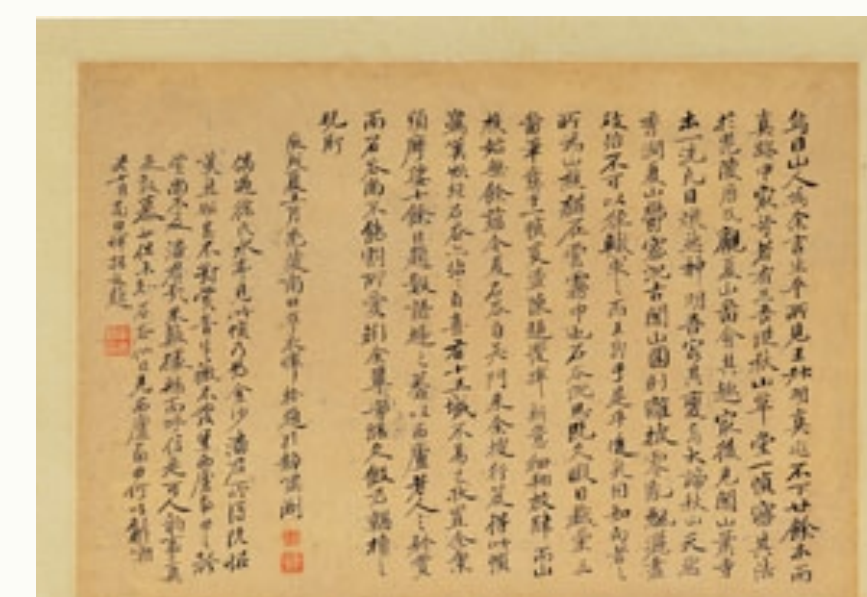
Yet the distinction between the professional and the amateur, though largely blurred, was still the essential difference between Wang Hui and Wang Shimin. Wang Hui rose with the demand of the art market, living in a period when literati sold their paintings and professionals forged the literati taste. The common ideas had changed: painting for profits did not decrease its literary and artistic value. While the ideal of painting for non-profit personal gifts was still appealing to Wang Shimin, Yun Shouping, and other literati-artists, it was not the same case for Wang Hui and had no ground of becoming his ideal.



Wang Hui, *Parasol Trees at Night and the Autumn Shadow*, 1686. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 76.8 x 41 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

"In the autumn of *bingyin* year (1686), Mr. Wang Shigu [Wang Hui] and I are both guests in the garden pond of the Jade Peak [Kunshan]. Every night we enjoy the cool in the leisure time after work. I stand on the pond with Shigu and we discuss painting. This exhausts the enjoyment of delighting our hearts. Now that the constellations are shining and the dew in the morning has not dropped, we look at the shadow of [the leaves of] parasol trees in the dark, and we then shout that they are fine ink leaves, fine ink leaves! Therefore, we know that Beiyuan [Dong Yuan, ca. 934-962], Juran, Fangshan [Gao Kegong, 1248-1310], and Haiyue [Mi Fu, 1051-1107], the most incisive and vivid part of their dotted ink must have been both dense and clear, half-light and half-dark. It is thus the Nature that conceives such kind of appearance first, and the past artists tried to imitate it. They finally obtained the traces and forgot the words. They began to be free from the regular fields and paths, conceiving the wonderfulness of the natural features. [The Nature] is really our tacit mentor. Mr. Wang drinks wine to his heart's content and his interest is inspired, so he captures this scene of the Nature for fun, to show ones who appreciate his tone. He extracts his brush and sheds the ink, just like the moment when Mania Zhang [Zhang Xu, ca. 675-750] soaked his hair [with ink]."

(Yun Shouping, 1686)



↑ Mounted paper born with Yun Shouping's inscriptions.

Wang Hui. *Autumn Mountains, Red Trees*, dated 1670. Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 112.4 x 39.5 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

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"Shigu [Wang Hui] came from Wumen [Suzhou] this summer. I found this painting from his bookcase. I was amazed by it to death. Shigu was also complacent, as if he would not trade this painting to even fifteen cities. I put this painting on my desk and gently play with it for more than ten days. I inscribe a few words and give it back. Even the Old Man Xilu [Wang Shimin] praised and appreciated [this painting], Shigu still could not give up his treasure. How can I borrow it for long and enshrine it in my cabinet for enjoyment?"

"I passed the pavilion near water of Mr. Xu by accident, and found that this painting was obtained by Mr. Pan from Jinsha [Wuhan, Hubei province]. I felt wield, sighed, and was very jealous. If one is not facing a person who appreciated his tone, one does not play his zither. How can the praise and appreciation by Xilu [Wang Shimin] and Nantian [Yun Shouping] even not compete Mr. Pan? The Mania Mi [Mi Fu, 1051-1107] stood on the boat and shouted, I believe that is a satisfying pursuit. That is enough to be followed and admired. Only that I don't know one day when Shigu see Xilu and Nantian, how can he get away with the ridicule?"

(Yun Shouping, 1670)

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