

This lesson uses two examples drawn from the Princeton University Art Museum's collection of Chinese landscape painting to explore painting during the Song dynasty.

**Intended age group:** Grades 9–12

**Length of lesson:** 60–120 minutes

**Required materials:** Digital images of landscape paintings (including detail images); list of terms for visual analysis; eight poems by Juefan Huihong

### Part 1 (60–75 minutes)

1. Project an image of *Winter Evening Landscape*, about 1120, by Li Gongnian (Chinese, active early 12th century) for the entire class to see. Ask the students to look quietly for one to two minutes. (2 minutes)
2. Facilitate a group conversation about what the students saw. *See below for more on facilitating object-based learning.* (10 minutes)
  - a. What do you see? What else can you find?
  - b. Imagine you are in this scene. What can you hear? Smell? Touch?
3. Summarize the main points of the group conversation. Ask the class, "Where are we as the viewer (e.g., close to the scene? far away? in the air? low to the ground)? How would you enter this scene? Where would you go next?" (5 minutes)
4. Describe the concept of shifting perspective (*see below*) and why artists used it. Ask the students, "How did the artist use shifting perspective? How did it affect your response when you thought about where you were in the painting and how you would move through it?" (5 minutes)
5. Distribute the list of terms for visual analysis. Ask the students to break into groups, and give each group one of the terms on the list. Ask them to discuss how the artist used their assigned concept (e.g., line, shape) to communicate the qualities of this place and/or our relationship to it. (10 minutes)
6. Ask each group to summarize its findings for their classmates. (15–20 minutes)
7. Talk about the period in which this painting was made and the values that it might represent. Discuss in what ways the doctrines of Daoism and Neo-Confucianism (*see below*) would have impacted the painting. Ask the students, "How did this painter view the relationship between humans and nature? How did he communicate those views? What are some of the complementary opposites (*see below*) that you can identify?" (5–10 minutes)
8. Summarize the class's conversation about this work. What can it tell us about the values of the society in which it was made? What can it tell us about the kind of relationship between humans and nature that was appreciated by people in the Song dynasty? (10 minutes)

### Part 2 (60–75 minutes)

1. Divide the class into eight groups. Give each group images of one painting from *Eight Views of the Xiang and Xiao Rivers*, including detail images. Have them discuss everything they see and everything they imagine they can hear, smell, and touch. (5–10 minutes)
2. Give each group the poem by Juefan Huihong that corresponds to their painting. Ask them to read it and discuss with their group how it connects to the painting. What senses does the poet engage? How does the poem compare to their list of things they could see, hear, smell, and touch? (5 minutes)
3. Next, have them identify pairs of complementary opposites in the painting. (For example, in *River and Sky in Evening Snow*: mountain vs. river, rising mist vs. falling snow, stillness of snow vs. activity of market.) (5 minutes)
4. Have the entire class regroup, and ask each group to present “their” painting to their classmates, noting the elements that they found most important in their response to the work. (25–40 minutes)
5. Describe for the students the format of a handscroll and how it would be “read.” What is the progression of scenes in their painting? How would the viewer journey through this space as he unrolled/rolled the scroll? (5 minutes)
6. Conclude the conversation by projecting an image of the hanging scroll and one of the handscroll scenes. What emotions do the painters convey in these scenes? What is the relationship between humans and nature? (10 minutes)

### What is it?

Landscape painting dominated Chinese painting beginning in the tenth century. The word for landscape painting in Chinese, *shan shui hua*, literally means “mountain (*shan*) water (*shui*) painting (*hua*).” Mountains are hard and unyielding; water is soft and fluid. These opposites are an example of the concept of yin and yang—the idea that everything in nature is composed of complementary but opposing forces that interact and change. Complementary opposites is one of several core cultural concepts of the Song dynasty that are encapsulated in many of the period’s landscape paintings.

Two traditional formats for Chinese painting are the hanging scroll and the handscroll (other formats include fans and album leaves). In both cases, artists painted with ink and colored pigments on silk, which was then mounted on another piece of silk. A hanging scroll is usually a vertical composition. Hanging scrolls are hung from the wall using a cord, which is attached to a wooden strip at the top of the scroll. Hanging scrolls are not displayed indefinitely but are taken down to be stored, rolled up, when not in use. A handscroll is usually several meters in length and is used for horizontal compositions. It is kept rolled up and only brought out for viewings. To “read” the paintings, the viewer unrolls the scroll from right to left to journey through the landscape.

Chinese landscape paintings are about nature on a grand scale and about humans’ role in the universe. The act of looking is a contemplative experience. The viewer is invited to wander through the landscape and to identify with any

human figures that are depicted. Handscrolls, both in the unrolling of the scroll and in the visual meandering through it, offer a different experience of time than hanging scrolls do. Artists paid as much attention to the unpainted areas of their compositions as they did to the detailed sections. The empty, or negative, spaces are just as important as the painted, or positive, areas. Artists varied their brush techniques to create thin or thick lines, and the layers of ink provide variations in tone that suggest different textures or distances from the viewer at different points in the scene.

The first work, *Winter Evening Landscape* by Li Gongnian, is a hanging scroll. At the bottom (the front of the space, closest to us), trees stripped of their leaves grow on and next to several outcroppings of rock. At the top (the back of the space), mountains appear out of the mist and clouds. Li contrasted the powerful monumentality of the mountains with the ephemerality of the mist. He varied his brush strokes to convey the delicate texture of the bare tree branches and the solid forms of the rock.

The second work, *Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, is a set of two handscrolls by Wang Hong. The popular theme of the eight views was credited to Song Di (ca. 1015–ca. 1080), a scholar-official and painter. Although Song Di’s work did not survive, it was well known at the time. Many artists painted versions of the eight views inspired by Song Di. Princeton’s scrolls appear to be the earliest of these paintings still in existence today. The paintings and their associated poetic labels (by an anonymous author) inspired the Buddhist monk Juefan Huihong (1071–1128) to

write poems that evoke evening and autumnal scenes. Wang Hong's paintings, which date to about 1150, were thus inspired by both Song Di's paintings and Juefan Huihong's poems. The lush and mountainous Xiao–Xiang region was seen as a place of retreat or even exile, and the poems and paintings convey the duality of a sense of mourning or loss in a space of great beauty.

The use of first-person perspective in some of the poems, coupled with the small figures in the paintings, encourages the viewer to imagine themselves in the scene. Chinese paintings often incorporate "shifting perspective," which presents a point of view that moves up and down, near and far (in contrast to the fixed perspective used in the West). In Wang Hong's *Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, for example, the distant mountain peaks are depicted so that they appear to be level with the viewer, accentuating the sense that they are situated at the edges of the horizon. Alternatively, the villages and groupings of boats are painted as though from a birds-eye perspective. These multiple viewpoints encourage the viewer's eyes to wander through the scene. We look across at the distant areas, and we look down at the paths that humans travel. The shifting perspective also heightens the emotional impact of the paintings. The mountains appear to loom over the viewer, while the distant areas—painted with a wash of ink—are hazy and indistinct.

### Who made it?

#### **Political context**

The history of imperial China is marked by the rise and fall of successive dynasties, or lines of rulers descending from the same family. These two works were made during the Song dynasty,

a period of cultural refinement that also looked back to the artistic achievements of the Tang dynasty (618–907) in the arts of poetry, painting, and sculpture. Rebellions in the mid-eighth and ninth centuries weakened the dynasty's ability to defend itself, and it collapsed in the early tenth century. After the collapse of the Tang dynasty, the north of China was divided into five kingdoms during what is known as the Five Dynasties period. A general from one of the dynasties, Zhao Kuangyin, succeeded in unifying China. He established the Song dynasty (960–1279) and ruled as the Taizu Emperor.

The Taizu Emperor put civil, not military, officials in charge of the government in order to prevent the rise of leaders who might challenge his rule. This change led to the position of the scholar-official (*shi*), collectively called the literati, and a rigorous system of civil examinations. Literati were expected to cultivate their skills in the arts of calligraphy, poetry, and painting. The scholar-official was one of four classes in society; the others were landowners and farmers, craftsmen and artists, and merchants and tradesmen. Scholars, poets, and painters—many of whom had retreated into nature during the period of political disintegration—now came to the capital city, Bianliang (modern Kaifeng) from other parts of unified China, bringing with them the artistic traditions of the Tang dynasty.

The Song dynasty was raided by the Jurchen Jin, a dynasty to the north of the Song, in 1125. The capital was destroyed, and many members of the court were captured. The dynasty reorganized in the south, with a new capital city at Lin'an (present-day Hangzhou). (A map is available at Columbia University's Asia for Educators website: <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/songdynasty-module/outside-rivals.html>.)

### ***Philosophical context***

During the Song dynasty, three religious philosophies, known as the three doctrines or three teachings, were seen as operating in harmony: Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Dao means “The Way”—the path to immortality, the origin of the world, and the progenitor of the forces of yin and yang. According to Daoism, humans do not preside over nature, nor was nature created for humans’ benefit. Instead, humans must learn to live in harmony with nature. Neo-Confucianism flourished during the Southern Song. This philosophy advocated for a return to the basics of Confucian teachings. Followers sought to refine their inner selves through their search for absolute truth in nature. Two key concepts are *li*, the governing principle that gives each thing its inherent nature, and *qi*, the vital force or energy that occupies all things.

### ***The artists***

We do not know much about either of these artists. Li Gongnian was a prison official in Hangzhou. The Princeton University Art Museum’s painting is the only surviving authenticated work by him. His signature and seal are on a rocky outcrop beneath the cliff at the right. Wang Hong was a professional painter from Shu (present-day Sichuan province) and possibly served at court. There are only a few known extant works by him, and he used a variety of styles in these paintings.

### **What can it tell us about the culture that made it?**

After the disintegration of the Tang dynasty, many learned men retreated to the countryside, preferring to engage with nature rather than with the uncertainties found in urban centers. Even after the reunification of China in the Song dynasty, the literati still yearned to escape the pressures of daily life at court through retreat into nature. If a person lived in a developed area, looking at and contemplating a landscape painting would give that person an opportunity to imagine being in and developing a harmonious connection with nature.

Landscape paintings often contain symbolic meaning. Mountains were considered the home of the immortals and therefore sacred. Tall pine trees symbolized the virtuous man, while a tolling bell was a reference to the fleeting nature of human existence. In their presentation of idealized forms from nature, landscape paintings also provide one way of exploring the principles of *li* and *qi*. A landscape painting shows nature not as the human eye sees it but according to the inherent principles of the natural world it depicts. The painted scene thus becomes a microcosm of a moral and orderly universe.





**Li Gongnian (Chinese, active early 12th century), Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), *Winter Evening Landscape*, ca. 1120.** Hanging scroll; ink and light colors on silk, 129.6 x 48.3 cm (painting). Gift of DuBois Schanck Morris, Class of 1893 (y1946-191)



**Wang Hong (Chinese, active ca. 1131–ca. 1161), Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), *Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers*, ca. 1150.** Pair of handscrolls; ink and light colors on silk, 23.4 x 90.7 cm (average for each painting). Edward L. Elliott Family Collection. Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund (y1984-14 a–b)

- *Wild Geese Descending to Sandbar*
- *Returning Sail off Distant Shore*
- *Mountain Market, Clear with Rising Mist*
- *River and Sky in Evening Snow*
- *Autumn Moon over Lake Dongting*
- *Night Rain on Xiao and Xiang*
- *Evening Bell from Mist-Shrouded Temple*
- *Fishing Village in Evening Glow*

## Facilitating Object-Based Learning

The goal of object-based learning is that students find their own paths to answers through close looking and discussion. Begin by giving the students a minute or two to look silently at the projected image. Silence can sometimes be uncomfortable for both the teacher and the students, but resist the urge to speak before the time has elapsed. This allows the students to look closely and find details that they might not have noticed with just a cursory glance. When the time is up, ask, “What do you think is going on here?” or, “Tell me what you see.” They should answer your questions based on what they see, using visual evidence to support their ideas. As their guide, your job is to ask them open-ended questions—that is, questions that do not have a yes or no answer or an A or B answer. For example, ask, “What do you think is happening here?” instead of “Is this person playing an instrument?” or “Is this a camel or a horse?” Rather than giving students the answers outright, help guide them to a better understanding by asking clarifying questions or by making connections between students’ observations. For example, if a student says that she thinks the objects are made out of wood, ask, “What do you see that makes you say that?” Ask her to point to specific elements of what she sees that make her think that they might be wood. If one student thinks that an animal is a horse and another student thinks that it is a camel, ask the students to point to elements that might support one hypothesis versus the other—for example, what might a camel have that a horse would not? You can provide additional information to fill in the gaps at the end of the conversation, but aim to have the students uncover as much as they can from their own observations first.

## Terms for Visual Analysis

**Line:** A continuous mark with a length and direction. Lines can be straight, wavy, broken, short, or long.

**Shape:** The use of a line or lines to enclose space. Two-dimensional shapes can be organic (irregular) or geometric (shapes with strong lines and angles, such as circles, rectangles, and triangles).

**Space:** The area around and between objects. Positive space refers to the space taken up by an object; negative space refers to the space around that object.

**Color:** An aspect of the appearance of an object and light sources that can be described by hue (what we would classify as red, orange, yellow, etc.), lightness (how much black or white is mixed into the hue), and saturation (how pure or intense the hue is).

**Texture:** The surface quality of an object—is it smooth, rough, soft, bumpy, etc. In paintings, texture is often implied—that is, we imagine that a representation of a tree trunk is rough or bumpy, even if the paper it is painted on is smooth.

**Contrast:** A large difference between two things, such as light and shadow.

**Scale/Proportion:** Scale is a ratio used to determine the relationship between a representation and the thing it represents; proportion describes the relationships among parts of a whole.

**Mass/Volume:** Mass refers to the amount of matter an object contains, while volume refers to the amount of space it takes up. For example, an inflated balloon can have a low mass but a high volume.

**Balance:** The way that elements in a work of art are arranged to create a feeling of stability (or, if there is a lack of balance, instability).

**Perspective:** How an artist creates a sense of depth in a representation of space.