VIEWS FROM A SCHOLAR'S STUDIO*

Literati painting is a special category in Chinese art. It refers to the work of the educated elites in contrast to that of professional painters. Painting has historically been seen as a recreation of scholars, in which the brush strokes and ink play are vehicles to express their emotions, thoughts, and most importantly their spirit; thus literati painting can be seen as an 'image of mind'. The new display of Chinese and Japanese painting, opening in November 2014 in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, focuses on this specific topic and introduces the essence of literati painting and the life of the literati through selections from the museum's collection.

In the category of literati painting, bamboo is one of the most popular motifs. It was said that it began when a literati sat in his study at night and noticed the shadows cast from the bamboo plants in his garden onto the paper window of his study, which he then replicated in an ink painting. The motif of bamboo is considered to be a metaphor for the grace and resilience of the scholar. A painting of bamboo is also seen as an 'elegant gift'; created by the scholar and given to his colleagues, family members, close associates, or to pupils and teachers as a token of their friendship and emotional bond. Furthermore, bamboo is also connected with the imagery of the Xiao and Xiang rivers; *Xiaoxiang* is a conventional subject matter of Chinese classical poetry with the symbolic (and melancholic) meaning of the unjust exile of a talented government official by an unappreciative ruler. The bamboo paintings presented in this exhibition are examples of this specific painting genre (fig. 1).¹

Although literati painting is an independent painting genre, this doesn't mean that the literati had no social contact with professional painters. On the contrary, at times literati were important patrons. The painting *Dongshan Villa* by the 18th century professional painter Yuan Jiang, who was active in the region of Yangzhou, is a representative work of this kind of relationship. The painter was commissioned to depict the literati's villa and his life within.²

In contrast, Japanese society has never had a social class of literati, but at the beginning of the 18th century, Japanese artists became interested in the mind-set of the Chinese literati. A new painting genre within Japanese art emerged named *Nanga* (or *Bunjinga*). Under its influence, Japanese painters started imitating Chinese literati painting using art books or painting manuals printed by wood-block and adopting the subject matter of the literati's life and their retreats. This trend lasted until the beginning of the 20th century. Paintings by Kishi Ganku (1749-1839) and Suzuki Shonen (1848-1918, fig. 2) can be seen as a Japanese reflection of Chinese literati painting and literati life.³

Fig. 1
Zheng Xing, *Ink Bamboos*,
 hanging scrolls, ink on paper,
 140,9 x 66,8 cm., China, 1675-
 1750, Rijksmuseum, inv.n. AK-
 MAK-1455-A t/m D, on long-term
 loan from Society of Friends of
 Asiatic Art.

Fig. 2
 Suzuki Shonen,
Summer Landscape,
 hanging scroll, ink on
 paper, 176,5 x 96 cm.,
 Japan, 1908, Rijks-
 museum, inv.n. AK-
 MAK-1728, on long-term
 loan from Society of
 Friends of Asiatic Art.

Fig. 3
Water Dropper, China,
 second quarter of the
 17th century, Rijks-
 museum, inv. AK-RAK-
 1972-3.

In this exhibition, a simple desk of an 18th century literati is displayed, on top of which are placed a Chinese hand-scroll painting, a brush rest, and water dropper (fig. 3). Viewers are not only invited to enter the studio of the literati but also the world of the literati's life and spirit.⁴

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notes

- * Display on view from 12th November, curated by Menno Fitski and Ching-Ling Wang.

1. AK-MAK-1455-A t/m D; AK-MAK-97-A/B.

2. AK-RAK-1991-7.

3. AK-RAK-1999-5-A/B; AK-MAK-1728.

4. AK-RAK-2008-3; AK-RAK-1991-6; AK-RBK-1955-7; AK-RAK-1972-3.