based on an analysis of the works of one convert and in such a summary manner that it is not a faithful representation of Zhang’s ideas.

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*The Painter’s Practice* marks an important step forward in the ongoing process of demystification—the exposure of a myth that for centuries has played a dominant role in traditional Chinese art theory, and that, as a consequence, has become part and parcel of our image of “literati amateur painting” of Ming and Qing times. The myth that forms the target of Prof. Cahill’s critique is the image of the painter as an enlightened amateur, aptly described as “a person of deep cultural refinement; he lives quietly, caring nothing for worldly matters, engaged in scholarly pursuits, doing painting or calligraphy as an avocation, to express his emotions, ... presumably giving them to his friends, expecting no recompense other than occasional gifts and favors in return” (p. 4). It is a far cry from sordid reality as it emerges from the wealth of information gathered from a great variety of sources (letters, inscriptions, anecdotes) and presented in this work: the (semi)professional literatus painter, soliciting (or, if he is successful, burdened with) commissions, working hard in his studio or workshop for his living, and in some cases quite openly producing for the market, with price lists, and a regular supply of products marketed by agents and middlemen. On that social level, payment in cash appears to have been quite common, but even if the transaction takes the form of a more “respectable” barter, the gifts received often are of a rather practical nature: food, lodging (or temporary residence at a patron’s home), medicine—even cement for repairing the artist’s house.

As the author makes clear in his first chapter (“Adjusting our Image of the Chinese Artist”, pp. 1–31), the amateur ideal, that took shape in Song times and became generalized in the late Ming, was not wholly fictitious. At all times, also during the late
period, there were individual painters belonging to the upper echelons of the scholar-official class who on account of their status and wealth could more or less conform to it—although even in such cases paintings were often given to friends and relations in expectation of recompense, as part of the guanxi system of mutual obligations. However, the main point made in this chapter concerns the generalization of the amateur image since late Ming times: the fact that it was extended to virtually all literati painters, including those who practised their art as professionals on an income-earning basis. The imposition of such an idealized persona upon the professional elite painter (to be distinguished, of course, from the despised artisanal huashi 畫師 or huagong 畫工) had far-reaching consequences. Since the art had to be freed from the taint of commercialization and “commodification”, paintings were mainly appreciated in terms of personal expression, individual style and brushwork, neglecting such aspects as technical perfection and social function—an over-all “aestheticization and decontextualizing of the Chinese painting tradition” (p. 10).

The propagation of the amateur ideal ran counter to what actually was happening in late Ming society. Due to the overproduction of literati many artistically talented members of the educated elite turned to painting and calligraphy as a regular source of income, whereas, on the other hand, the demand for works of art and antiques was steadily growing due to the emergence of a prosperous status-seeking middle class. The works produced in this context largely consisted of functional paintings for special occasions made to order (birthday and wedding pictures, paintings commemorating retirement, etc.), and of simple, xie yi 寫意 type of works that could be produced in great quantities. But in spite of that commodification of painting and the professionalization of many artists the myth of the disinterested, non-commercial amateur was maintained, forcing the professional painter into a role model that was largely divorced from reality.

The second chapter, “The Painter’s Livelihood” (pp. 33–70), mainly deals with the various and sometimes devious ways in which a painting could be acquired. The sources present us with a wide range of transactional procedures. At the lower end of the scale, paintings could be bought directly from the artist, or at selling points such as art and antique stores, temple fairs and pawnshops. On that level, cash payments were common; they were either made to the artist himself, or to his agent who promoted the