

Da Vinci vs. China: 4 Ways China Perfected Landscape Painting

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Song Huimin, "Cranes and Landscape," 2002, oil on canvas, 100 x 200 cm
(Courtesy Element Art Space)

Element Arts Space's upcoming group exhibition in Singapore will explore and celebrate Chinese landscape painting through the work of Chen Junde, Guan Puxue, Mao Yigang, Song Huimin, Wang Keju, Wang Lu, and Weng Kaixuan. Running from July 14 through August 31, "Memories of China" will especially look into the resurgence of the art form in China after the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976.

Landscape painting is considered one of the greatest cultural advances in Chinese traditional art. Whether the West came up with the genre first has been disputed: Leonardo da Vinci appears to have drawn the first ever landscape on August 5, 1473. Yet, the genre's rise can be traced back to the Six

Dynasties (220-618 AD) in China. Since then, nature has remained the main source of inspiration for Chinese artists. BLOUIN ARTINFO lists four ways in which Chinese artists perfected the art of landscape painting.

1. Song Dynasty: A sophisticated era in art

The years between 960 and 1279 AD constituted a particularly sophisticated age for China. There were major advances in terms of music, visual arts, literature, and philosophy. During this period, the Chinese had already embraced the arts and started painting landscapes.

2. A different state of mind

A heritage initially grounded in Buddhism and Taoism, which emerged before 1000 AD, had inspired a culture of contemplation. While Western art focused on form, Oriental art was about spirit. Chinese traditional artists were not interested in drawing a mere representation of a mountain, preferring to interpret it through their emotions and feelings. These could therefore be considered “mind landscapes”, as painters attempted to draw the “rhythm” of a branch or waterfall.

3. No distractions

While the West was deeply involved in never-ending wars, European artists shifted their focus to majestic paintings of these battles, fighting for revolution and peace. Meanwhile, Chinese painters during the Song Dynasty were taking landscape paintings to new heights “[of sensitivity and poetry,](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/oct/21/china-landscape-painting)” (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/oct/21/china-landscape-painting>) which the West could no longer reach after Da Vinci.

4. Amalgamation of two artistic traditions

As major Chinese cities started to open up to the outside world, notably Shanghai and Yangzhou in the mid-1920s, artists from the region were exposed to European countries and their artistic movements. Between 1940 and 1950, modern masters such as [Zao Wou-Ki](/artists/-zao-wou-ki-201053) (/artists/-zao-wou-ki-201053) and Chu Teh Chun ventured to Paris and adopted these Western techniques, incorporating them into their landscape masterpieces and innovating the art form further. Consequently, painting in China began to reflect the effects of modernization.

“Memories of China” will run from July 14 through August 31 at Element Art Space.