A Turning Point in the Meaning of Landscape Painting in the Northern and Southern Song Period: A Discussion of the Art Historical Position of Li Tang's Landscape Painting

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Abstract

The development of landscape painting in the Northern and Southern Song periods can be divided into two distinct stages. The first centered around the style of Li Cheng and Guo Xi in the Northern Song, focusing on the monumental effect of the central peak. The latter is represented by the Southern Song styles of Ma Yuan and Xia Gui, illustrating the scenery often associated with palatial gardens. The transition between landscape painting of these two periods can be found in Li Tang, a court artist who fled the Northern Song capital of Bianjing (Kaifeng) and resumed service under the Southern Song Emperor Gaozong. Li Tang's style of landscape expression opened a new path of development in the Southern Song, so this study examines the art historical position of Li Tang in the context of landscape painting at the time.

This study calls into question the former notion that the painting style of Guo Xi had been abandoned by the court of Emperor Huizong. Based on the results of a comprehensive and detailed optical study of Li Tang's "Windy Pines Among a Myriad Valleys" (*Wanhe Songfeng*), particular attention appears to have been placed in the painting on the formation of pine forest scenery in a secluded valley and its comparative importance. This secluded pine-filled valley can, in fact, be seen as an extension of the idea of "reverberation" (*jianpu*) for flowing water as recorded in Guo Xi's *Lofty Message of Forests and Streams* (*Linquan Gaozhi*), whereby Li Tang synthesized elements from previous styles to create a new style. Seen from the viewpoint of this relationship, we can reexamine the art historical position of Li Tang's landscape painting within the context of Northern and Southern Song art, demonstrating his inheritance from the past and establishment of a foundation for the future.

The function of Li Tang's landscape painting in terms of its expression involved synthesizing and revising the idea of "reverberation" of waters for the "secluded valley pine trees" in "Windy Pines Among a Myriad Valleys," thereby changing the meaning in painting in the process. The transformation in painting meant that the distant perspective in the Guo Xi landscape with its monumental peak, which can be called the pursuit of a "macrocosmic landscape," turned to a close-up perspective in Li Tang's landscape to express "reverberation" with pine trees, creating a new goal of "close-up landscape." Li Tang's landscape painting was established upon the foundation of this "close-up landscape," and several followers of Li Tang in the early Southern Song developed it even further. In such works as "Buildings on a Mountainside" (*Shanyao Louguan*) and "Intimate Scenery of River and Mountains" (*Jiangshan Xiaojing*), for example, this tendency towards a "close-up landscape" increasingly emphasized the relative proportion of vicarious appreciation in the painting, enriching the expression of a "close-up landscape" even further.

The transformation in the meaning of landscape painting was a gradual process with many different possible causes. This study, however, proposes to start with a possible connection between Li Tang and the Painting Academy inaugurated by Emperor Huizong, pointing to the attention paid to the meaning of the landscape at his court, indeed reinforcing the pluralistic tendencies in the meaning of landscape painting in the late Northern Song and early Southern Song period. With this in mind, the influence of Li Tang's landscape on the Southern Song, in terms of the transformation in painting meaning, perhaps can be viewed as a derivation of the activities at Huizong's Painting Academy.