

Revisiting Two Dong Yuans (active ca. 937-76): Paradigms in Early Chinese Monumental Landscape Painting

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Abstract

This study is divided mainly into three parts. The first presents an argument for accepting *The Riverbank* and *Wintry Groves and Layered Banks* as authentic works by the paradigmatic master Dong Yuan (active ca. 937-76), followed by an introduction to the development and import behind the history of the “three distances” (*sanyuan*) of visual expression in painting: “high distance” (*gaoyuan*), “level distance” (*pingyuan*), and “deep distance” (*shenyuan*). These three modes became the paradigms for fully expressing early Chinese monumental landscape painting. Bringing up the idea of “stopping and seeing” (*zhiguan*) proposed by the Tiantai Buddhist master Zhiyi in Zhejiang during the sixth century provides evidence for the path of formation and means of expression in the “three distances” landscape modes. The second part of the study analyzes several early and clearly datable Chinese paintings to serve as prime objects that demonstrate how the compositional formula of *The Riverbank* was part of the context of landscape painting at that time. By showing that the origins of Dong Yuan’s style as being related to the expression of style in other works around the same time, it creates a credible linked solution to the development of early Chinese landscape painting. *Wintry Groves and Layered Banks*, which offers a progressive retrospective of the archaic “level distance” formula, clearly differs from the naturalistic manner exhibited in *The Riverbank*. In *Wintry Groves and Layered Banks*, Dong Yuan took a step forward in attaining a revivalistic abstract of “schematic” thinking that transcends external appearance in the natural world and puts into practice the aesthetic realm of “Regarding Nature as one’s teacher outside, and thinking of the Mind as one’s origins inside.” Finally, the third section analyzes the influence of *The Riverbank* on later generations and takes a cross-cultural macroscopic view of the issues surrounding this painting, incorporating trends in current thinking and studies. Going beyond a stylistic comparison, this study examines the notion of “re-presentation” in traditional modes of Chinese visualization and its opportunities for self-expression.

Keywords: Dong Yuan, *The Riverbank*, *Wintry Groves and Layered Banks*, “three distances,” “stopping and seeing,” landscape painting