

Investigation into Inscriptions on Song Dynasty Paintings

Wang Yao-ting

Former Curator

Department of Painting and Calligraphy, National Palace Museum

Abstract

Excellent works of painting and calligraphy with recognizable inscriptions and clear documentation of provenance are especially valuable. Inscriptions by authors are key elements in determining the authenticity of works of painting and calligraphy. The Song Dynasty format of inscription is very much in the same vein as the letter formalities of the Tang and Song Dynasties. The family name is written bigger than the given name and there is a gap the width of one character between the family name and the given name. The bigger character represents respect for the family name, while the smaller one shows humility. Those who worked in the imperial court were bound to comply with the rules of the system, and authorial inscriptions had to follow the format of government documents. When artists presented their works to the emperor, they generally referred to themselves as “Your Servant”. The size of the characters and the space in inscriptions that read “Your Servant” generally followed a specific set of rules. By contrast, Northern Song Dynasty inscriptions which did not have “Your Servant” followed different formats. In the Southern Song Dynasty, both types of inscriptions continued to exist, but the convention of bigger family names and smaller given names gradually diminished, although it was still the norm.

The inscriptions on Song Dynasty paintings discussed in the present study are taken from existing works from that period. Examination of inscriptions is one of the most basic ways to determine the authorship of paintings. While the themes of the paintings are diverse and show individual stylistic differences, authorial inscriptions are relatively simple. The inscription formats cited in the present study are just a few examples and are by no means comprehensive. However, when formats diverge from convention, researchers can investigate to discover the reason and try to locate supporting materials, which may open a path for the study of Song Dynasty paintings.

Keywords: Song Dynasty, inscription, court painters, bigger surnames and smaller given names, inscription format.

(Translated by Shih-han Huang)