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## **Shen Zhou**

### **Father of the Wu School**

During the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) painters had a great deal of freedom to cultivate individual styles. They birthed innovative approaches to painting that digressed from the earlier superficial style that painters of the Song Dynasty(1127-1279) had focused on. After the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, the Ming Dynasty(1368-1644) was established under the Hongwu emperor. He ordered all existing master painters to court where he would be able to slowly mold their individual styles to conform to the style of paintings done by Song masters. The style of the Ming court that resulted was known as the Zhe School. The Wu School far from the capital, which was moved to Beijing just after Hongwu's reign ended, and thus far from inperial influence, gave rise to a subversive style that prided individual style and championed scholar painting.(Liscomb 215-254) Shen Zhou is considered the 1<sup>st</sup> great Suzhou master of the Ming Dynasty and the founder of the Wu School.

Born in Xiangcheng, northeast of the city of Suzhou in Jiangsu province, Shen Zhou was a member of the landed gentry. His family's wealth traces to the late Yuan period when Shen Zhou's great-grandfather attained a large plot of

land after the dissolution of Mongol Rule. When the Yuan Dynasty fell and the Ming Dynasty was established, the head of the Shen family was given the position of tax collector under the Hongwu emperor. This appointment ensured the family a steadily increasing fortune, which allowed the male members of the Shen family the freedom to live their lives as scholar artists. His grandfather, father, and uncle all dedicated themselves to entertaining literati friends, to poetry, calligraphy, collecting, and painting.

Growing up Shen Zhou prepared for a life at court. He was well learned and took the necessary official examinations. He enjoyed poetry, painting, and calligraphy. After his father's death, Shen Zhou left the court life deciding he would not proceed with any further tests, but would devote his life supporting his widowed mother. Scholars conjecture that Shen Zhou never intended to take an official position, and took his father's death as the opportune time to renounce the life of officialdom while preserving his reputation and showing filial loyalty in accord with his upbringing. He lived a reclusive life devoting his time to his mother who lived for another fifty years, his artwork, entertaining guests, and contemplating the natural world.

After leaving the court, Shen Zhou built a house for himself, which he named the "Bamboo Dwelling." It was here that he fostered his love of painting and honed his skills learning from his teacher, Ch'en K'uan. Shen grew to be a distinguished painter known for his landscapes, studies of animals and plants, and also for his figures. His landscape paintings show the mountains, gardens,

and bodies of water of South China. In Shen Zhou's early works there is a strong influence from Five Dynasties painters Dong Yuan and Ju Ran, Yuan Dynasty painters Huang Gongwang, Wang Meng, and We Zhen, and other well-known painters of the southern Song Dynasty. It wasn't until he reached middle age that Shen truly came into his own with a marked individual style characterized by thick brush strokes as well as ink wash and attenuated compositions in which the upper portion of the landscape mirrors the lower.

Shen believed that paintings were not commodities, but rather they were an extension of the artist. His family's wealth granted him freedom to paint for himself and for his friends rather than paint for patrons. This freedom allowed Shen Zhou to paint without restrictions. He experimented frequently combining elements of the rigid style of Yuan masters with his own individual style. Shen Zhou did not covet his paintings. Although many hounded him for them, he remained humble and pious. After he withdrew from court life, three prefects offered him positions on their staffs, all of which he declined. The third prefect not knowing Shen Zhou's reputation ordered him to paint for him. Rather than taking a good friend's advice to have the order repealed by a higher official, Shen Zhou rendered the painting on the yamen wall. After a trip to the capital, the prefect learned of Shen Zhou's fame and stature and paid Shen an apologetic visit, and was graciously received. Shen's humility is also apparent in the tzu, or style name which he took, Shih-t'ien, or "field of stones" which signifies

uselessness, a line from Tso-chuan reads “To get what you want in chi is like capturing a field of stones: it is of no use.”(Watson 127)

Shen Chou’s predecessors placed emphasis on the small and the minute in paintings often incorporating far views and empty distance. When paintings were done on a large scale, the textures of rocks, trees, rivers, were all altered through the artist’s interpretation “producing a loss of objective existence and becoming the product of an inward vision.”(Edwards, 6) Shen Chou’s early works reflect this stressing of the small and minute and were all done on small scale either in actual size or in the way they were painted. Shen’s earliest surviving work dates to 1464 and is small in size and delicate in execution. The inscription on the painting reads “She-Shan has for a long time been asking me for one of my illmade and deplorable creations, so at last, unhurriedly, I have done this one, and written a poem on it, to give him.”(Cahill 83) The painting is characterized by stylistic cautiousness. It is a simple composition, but shows individuality in the reflection of the lower half in the upper half, something that Shen goes on to use in his later paintings, and shows a use of constrained dry brushwork in the drawing and fine dotting.

The first large scale dated work is “Lofty Mount Lu” which was done in the style of Wang Meng. Painted when Shen Zhou was forty one, the work was a gift for his teacher Ch’en Ku’an. In the epigraph Shen writes that the main peak of Mount Lu represents Ch’en Ku’an himself. The painting is imposing, filled with contorted mountains, and at first glance seems to be a single mass brimming

with texture and detail. It's tall narrow composition and verticality was to be a characteristic of paintings of Wu School artists. It is at once "eclectic and virtuosos, demonstrating a mastery both of old styles and if the manipulation of complex assemblages of abstract from that none of his contemporaries could equal."(Cahill 85)

As Shen Zhou continued to experiment with texture and composition, an individual style developed. Two works done during his forties exemplify his style, they show a reverence for Yuan masters, but also a stylistic inventiveness. At 36 feet long and dated to 1479, the landscape Shen painted for Wu K'uan took a full three years to complete. The painting was done as a present to thank Wu K'uan for writing his father's tomb inscription. This holds with a traditional practice of the literati still done today. Literati often repaid debts to their friends or equals through their arts, and monetary payments were considered to be low-class and even insulting.(Edwards 45-52) The painting shows the countryside around Soochow, following a path that disappears and reappears over bridges and around hills. The landscape is seen close-up except when the horizon or open sky is visible, and the entire painting is filled with cliffs, trees, rivers, and walls. There is a stability to the painting not seen in earlier ones. No longer is there any twisting, tilting, or attenuation, the masses are skillfully rendered with tactile surfaces. An important characteristic of Shen Chou's style, the brushwork is firm and bears an all-over consistency.

Painted in 1492, “Night Vigil” is a record in picture and prose of the experience Shen Chou had deep in meditation. The inscription is lengthy.

Detailing his meditation, it is akin to a diary entry, Shen writes,

“Now tonight all sounds and colors come to me through this state of tranquility and rest....it is not that these sounds and colors do not exist at other times, or that they do not strike one’s ears and eyes. My outward form is usually slave to external things, and my mind takes its direction from them.”(Cahill 90)

He does not relate the meditations to the process of artistic creation, but it illuminates his beliefs and those of Ming literati. The Ming literati believed that there was a direct relationship between external phenomena and one’s experience of them, between perceived images in nature and the transcription of these images into art. Verisimilitude or “form likeness” is not the goal of literati artists. An attempt to represent the world in a photographic way misses the point. Rather, realism in art should convey the artist’s experience and understanding of the world. Night Vigil is the epitome of Shen Zhou’s style. Edwards says of the painting,

“As we view it, we are looking at Shen Chou. Forms are carefully selected...there is variation in texture: sometimes dry, sometimes wet. Brushstrokes are combined to create darkness, eliminated to suggest light.”(Edwards 65)

The painting shows a diminutive figure, drawn simply, sitting at an open window at the exact center of the composition making it apparent that the figure is the subject of the painting. Scholars have identified that this is in fact the artist's self-portrayal. Nighttime is suggested by a darkening of the ink wash in some areas and a deliberate paleness in others.

In Shen Chou's late works he aims to effect a "greater strength of surface design, a greater firmness and massiveness in his forms, and a new clarity." (Cahill 94) A work that is exemplary of this late style is a handscroll called "The White Cloud Spring." The composition takes the viewer through notable sites in and around Suzhou starting with Tiger Hill. Throughout the scroll sites are labeled with small characters written in the Shen's hand indicated that the scroll was made for someone not familiar with Suzhou. "The White Cloud Spring" is done on silk a medium on which Shen rarely worked as his dry-brush style of drawing is not suited to be done on silk. The drawing is done in broad pale lines and "freely placed ts'un" form the shapes of the mountains. It is believed that Shen's aim was to correct some of the vices that colored the works of other literati painters including, an "overemphasis on sensitive brushwork, too slavish imitation of past styles." (Cahill 94)

As Shen Zhou grew to be an old man, other artists had already begun imitating his style. Painters of the Wu School including his student Wen Chengming, Lu Chih, and Ch'en Shun began taking up some features of his late style especially the use of broad pale brush strokes. Overall Shen Zhou was a very

influential painter as the founder of the Wu School and the champion of individualism in painting during the Ming Dynasty. His landscapes show not only a reverence for older styles, but also a desire for innovation and experimentation with newer styles or brushwork and composition.



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