The Path in Mid-Ming Landscape Painting

Lihong Liu

Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

LL1219@NYU.EDU

“Nothing makes an inroad without making a road. All creative action, whether in government, industry, thought or religion creates roads.”


I am writing a dissertation chapter that aims to understand the difference between two popular formats of painting in the mid-Ming: the long hand scroll and the tall hanging scroll. The issue I want to explore across these paintings is the depicted path. The path was used by artists to indicate bodily presence and motion through the landscape, and it created a formal infrastructure for viewing the painting. In the Suzhou area the land was irregularly cut through by numerous water courses, and bridges were major connecting structures. Bridges made possible a network of paths extending from within the city to the city environs. This historical-geographical reality grounded the everyday life and space that those artists experienced. Paths connected studios, buildings, temples, and gateways, enabling sociability and sightseeing. Paths offered choices, which allowed people to enjoy distractions on their way. Paths divided visual fields, encouraging self-conscious framing of scenic units. Paths, above all, became sites.

The period term for path is jing (径), the narrow road that only allows walking and wandering. However, the scale may vary on even a single path, because it sometimes connects to broader ground or to sightseeing platforms, which create pauses. But everything it connects directly is a place that the sightseer’s footstep can reach. Thus, in this sense, I refer to the “footstep fields” depicted in mid-Ming paintings. The “pathscape” phenomenon was unprecedentedly prominent in mid-Ming Suzhou landscape
paintings. Shen Zhou (1427-1509), in his late career, contributed to this practice. He represented pathways in his economical and unconventional forms and compositions. Wen Zhengming (1457-1559) elaborated the pathscape in more meticulous and complex pictorial spatial constructions. The artworks on which I will focus are four works by Wen Zhengming: two long handscrolls, Bridge of the Tiger Mountain (虎山桥图) and Heavy Snow on the Mountain Pass (关山积雪图), and two tall hanging scrolls, Casual Chatting under Green Shade (绿荫清话图) and Streams Contending among Ten Thousand Valleys (万壑争流图).

The first part of my presentation will discuss the role that the path plays in the artist’s construction of pictorial space by creating a fictional continuity of narrative. The intermissions between the artist’s acts of painting in paintings on such a scale privileged consideration of the relational space between things and scenes depicted. I will argue that such continuity is notionally achieved through the viewing process, as in any long handscroll. What is at issue in the mid-Ming Suzhou landscape handscroll is the way the path, at the same time, deconstructs linear narrative by multiplying choices of viewing. It controls, but also liberates. The negotiation between the two processes fosters framing and unframing of the momentary foci it evokes. But what frames what? Do mountains frame valleys? Do trees frame roads? In Wen Zhengming’s purposefully elongated hanging scrolls, what kind of space did he try to construct by depicting a winding path? And what the viewer was supposed to see in that commonly practiced painting format in the mid-Ming?

These questions lead to a second consideration: the commonalities between, and specificities of, the two formats. Painting, like site-making, reveals the malleability of space in the transfer between formats at that time. I will explain this using the period term buzhi (relational positioning), a key notion for my dissertation. But format, too, became thematized at that time. The depiction of hanging scrolls and
hand scrolls in albums and fans was a notable phenomenon. What is at issue when artists represent conspicuously recognizable painting formats in their paintings?

Finally, I will also discuss the related issue of time. From both textual and visual sources, I have been trying to understand how temporality is folded into the creation and viewing of the paintings. Time does not only imply a sense of continuity, but also of the moment and, to people at that time, a sense of “here and now.” The fragmentation of time was part of their discourse of artistic practice and daily life. What one wonders, though, is why artists were always talking about their procrastination?

The representation of the path belongs to the whole issue of what Richard Edwards has called “realism” in mid-Ming paintings. I consider the path to be the most “intimate” sign connecting the artists’ experience of their environment with their social networks, because their feet physically touched paths, creating what people at the time called fujing (抚景). As a visual motif, the path unifies and also multiplies pictorial space, holding a spatially maximized image in place. By drawing on the anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s theory of “art as a cultural system” (1976) and the “social history of imagination,” my approach to this issue is to connect formal and spatial analysis with the meaning and function of art.