Sparse Trees and Pavilion, a Fan Painting by Wang Meng (ca. 1308–1385)

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Sparse Trees and Pavilion (Figure 1), Wang Meng’s only extant fan painting, now mounted as an album leaf, entered the Metropolitan Museum in 1991. It has since been joined by one of Wang’s most impressive large vertical paintings, The Simple Retreat (Figure 2). Painted in monochrome ink on silk (now significantly darkened), this landscape combines and unites a conventional “literati” scene of a recluse in a hut under a pair of protecting trees with inscriptions by the artist in standard script and seals on both right and left sides.

The equal importance of calligraphy, poetry, and painting was emphasized in China as early as in the eighth century, when the term “Three Perfections” came to refer to the inclusion of all three art forms in one work. Wang Meng’s small fan painting from the late Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) extends this integration further, however, presenting an early example of an innovative dualism of “painted” poem and “written” painting, in which picture and poem are mutually dependent in style and content. The pictorial component can and should be read as part of Wang’s poem, which describes the scene as follows:

In the empty forest, the leaves are dancing with themselves to the whistling sound of the wind
In the thatched pavilion [I am sitting] alone under the noonday sun.
In the southerly breeze green waves ripple all day long
Wearing a cotton cap and coarse cloth [I feel] no summer heat.
This country man’s home is located near Yellow Crane Peak
In the evening [I will] enter the empty grotto, and listen to the mountain rain.

Shuming, inscribed [this] for Weiyin.

Wang Meng (ca. 1308–1385), one of the most influential painters and later designated as one of the Four Masters of the late Yuan dynasty, is well known for his large, narrow, vertical works, which became particularly expressive in his later years. Wang, whose style name was Shuming, was born to a culturally prominent family in present-day Wuxing, Zhejiang Province. He was a grandson of Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), the paragon artist and statesman serving the Mongol government in the first half of the Yuan dynasty. Wang, too, initially pursued an official career. Early in the 1340s, however, he retired to Yellow Crane Mountain, northeast of modern-day Hangzhou, where he enjoyed literary gatherings, the company of literati friends, and traveling around Lake Tai. Wang may have started his painting career at this time, yet his earliest extant dated work that is generally accepted as genuine, Dwelling in Seclusion in the Summer Mountains (see Figure 4), is from 1354. In 1368 he accepted office under the newly established Ming dynasty (1368–1644), reentering the government bureaucracy.

In the preceding Song dynasty (960–1279) “literary men” (wen shi) or scholar-gentlemen (often translated as “literati”), began to strive to express their inner feelings directly and unpretentiously, in contrast to the professional academic painters working for the court, who sought to reproduce nature as realistically as possible. Although all literati artists composed poetry, it was only in the Yuan dynasty that they started to inscribe their paintings with their own poems. These Yuan literati artists, all well-known calligraphers, committed themselves to “writing” paintings in just the same way they practiced calligraphy; their brushwork became calligraphic and expressive. Zhao Mengfu was the first to state that, from a methodological point of view, painting and calligraphy were equals and that his paintings were “written.” Eventually, painting, poetry, and calligraphy appeared integrated, at times to the point where each component breathed the sense of the others and was essential to the spiritually expressive whole, as in Wang Meng’s fan painting.
The round-fan format confines the painter to a small area, requiring sure calculations to avoid aesthetic imbalance. Round painted silk fans on long handles appear in eighth-century Chinese paintings, indicating their existence by that time. Commonly produced either for the court or for the art market, the fans, in contrast to European ones, were used by women and men of all social strata. Their mounting as album leaves, usually for collections, appeared in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) and enjoyed great popularity during the Southern Song (1127–1279). The small fan format could be used for reduced or cropped views of larger compositions—including landscapes, figures, and birds and flowers—as well as for intimate and personal works.

Inscriptions, especially by the artist, are rare on extant paintings from before the fourteenth century, and they are especially rare on small works and fans. A few Southern Song fans by court artists bear short poems, nearly all inscribed by members of the royal family, for whose use and delight those academic works were produced. Such paintings often also bear signatures, and occasionally titles and dates. These inscriptions are usually supplementary to the painting rather than an integral part of it. Wang Meng’s Sparse Trees and Pavilion is therefore an exceptional example in which the painting and calligraphy are not only by the same hand but also complement each other and are interdependent, thematically and, especially, compositionally—responding to each other spatially and stylistically.

In his fan painting Wang creates a dense view of tall trees framing a pathway to the recluse’s hut. The work is dedicated to an absent friend, Weiyin, to whom Wang may have sent the fan as an intimate gift. The composition of the painting is dominated by two imposing trees, covering much of the fan’s surface but set off by an equal amount of space at either side. The dark receding ground plane and Wang’s signature and seal on the left side are juxtaposed with the long inscription on the right. A slightly brighter vertical division is a remnant of the fan’s original central spine. A path leads from the lower left between the two groups of trees directly into a hut, empty but for a robed figure at the far right. His gaze to the right has no visible object. Instead, the narrative focal point of the composition appears to be the area immediately in front of him, where the calligraphy is set as if resting on blades of grass and is framed by branches of the tree (Figure 3). There seems to be an interactive force between the figure and the writing, suggesting an intangible yet strong link between the scene depicted and the abstract medium of the calligraphy. A leaning tree shields the hut, its foliage touches the inscription. The tree’s leaves resemble Wang’s blunt characters, which are written in a stubby form of standard script and almost appear as long hanging branches, establishing yet another correspondence between writing and painting.
The pictorial content of *Sparse Trees and Pavilion*—trees, a pavilion, and a figure in a shallow foreground space—appears generic, since the composition lacks a middle ground or distant vista. The scene resembles a close-up detail from Wang Meng’s vertical painting *Dwelling in Seclusion in the Summer Mountains*: the pavilion with two interacting figures in the center, set in a grand landscape (Figure 4). But in contrast, the pavilion in *Sparse Trees and Pavilion*, in spite of the presence of a lone figure, appears virtually deserted, and the vast surrounding landscape of the vertical painting is absent, here substituted by Wang’s poem.

Poem and painting describe the same scene, yet the poem extends and enlivens the pictorial imagery. While the painting appears static, the poem conveys a vivid sense of the summer breeze blowing through trees, grass, and pavilion. Though the poem tells us it is noon, the hottest part of the day, Wang, “the country man” in the pavilion, feels comfortable in his loose garment. In the evening he will return to the “grotto” (a metaphor for the wilderness retreat of a Daoist recluse), perhaps his retirement place near Yellow Crane Mountain, and will listen to the steady and monotonous mountain rain, which may express Wang’s nostalgic or melancholic sentiment. Wang may be looking out toward Yellow Crane Mountain, but his gaze is almost level with the dedication at the end of the poem, suggesting that his inner thoughts are with Weiyin. The poem inflects this tranquil and contemplative pictorial scene with a distinctly gloomy and lonely mood: Wang describes his environment as “empty,” without sound or signs and bereft of other living beings, and himself as being “alone.” This interdependence of poem and painting sheds new light on the
classical theme of eremitic retreat, which achieved great popularity in the fourteenth century. It stresses the tension between movement and stillness, the sounds of nature and emptiness, thoughts and loneliness.

It is the poem that brings to life the otherwise undetermined picture, conveying Wang Meng’s innermost feelings, which only Weiyin, the recipient of the painting, might comprehend fully. Perhaps Weiyin knew the place Wang depicts. It is tempting to think that the two groups of differently sized trees stand perhaps for two persons or families, or two different generations or ages. Not only do they frame the way to the pavilion, but one of the trees shields the poet and reaches out to Weiyin’s name in the dedication. The inscription, part poem and part dedication, suggests that the fan was an intimate gift. The mention of a cooling breeze that animates the leaves and grass may even point to the fan’s practical use.

Weiyin (the artist’s style name) may be identified as the well-known poet Chen Ruzhi (1329–1385), some twenty years Wang Meng’s junior. He and his younger brother, the famous painter Chen Ruyan (1331–1371), were prominent figures in artistic and literary circles in Suzhou. Both were close friends of Wang’s. As Richard Vinograd has pointed out, the two brothers had very different personalities. Chen Ruzhi was indifferent to official service, whereas his brother Ruyan served the Mongol government. In the autumn of 1361, Chen Ruzhi and Wang Meng seem to have spent some time together, traveling, visiting friends, and composing poems. Sparse Trees and Pavilion may either reflect nostalgic thoughts about this experience or express Wang’s anticipation of his friend’s visit to his retreat. A painting date of about 1361, consistent also with Wang’s painting style at that time, therefore seems likely.

The viewer’s interaction with Sparse Trees and Pavilion will likely begin with trying to access the work. Wang Meng offers at least two accesses, one conventionally pictorial and the other calligraphic, thereby establishing a bidirectional narrative. The beginning of the path at the lower left and the orientation of the pictorial elements (such as the leaning tree and the figure in the hut) toward the poem on the right open an entrance on the left and trace a walk along
the path toward the person in the pavilion—the very route Wang himself had followed—yet extended into the space beyond, perhaps as a reflection of his inner self. The long poem at the right, on the other hand, represents the other section of his inner self. The long path toward the person in the pavilion—the very route Wang's second signature, “Shuming,” brackets the pictorial content at that side. Thus, the image is “read” as a continuation of the written lines, and the poem's spirit is woven into the painting's narrative.\(^3\)

Wang Meng's Sparse Trees and Pavilion, at first glance a conventional inscribed literati fan painting of the late Yuan, extends the integration of calligraphy, poetry, and painting found in earlier Yuan works. Whether Wang's dualistic composition of “painted” poem and “written” painting is the result of a deliberate effort or governed by the constraints of the small size remains the artist's secret. He certainly seems to have composed his work to intimate his ideas: placing himself at the margin of the pictorial image, where he looks straight into his thoughts in the form of his poem, he express his inner self while honoring a friend, and matches painting and calligraphic style as well as composition to create a narrative path through the picture. Moreover, a number of Wang's later large paintings reveal a similarly sensitive and intricate interplay between writing and painting.\(^3^1\) In any case, Wang's small work illuminates the prodigious ideas discernible in paintings of the late Yuan.

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NOTES

1. The work was originally untitled. See Fong 1992, pp. 458–59, pl. 107.
2. “Picture of the Simple Retreat” (Su An Tu) is dedicated to a Daoist master whom Wang Meng refers to by the same name, Su An. See Hearn and Fong 1999, pp. 118–24. Dedication “acquired a succinct form” in the early Yuan dynasty, comprising both the “dedicator's and the dedicatee's names in signature” (Zhang 2005, p. 619). Some of these dedicated works were used for expressing social relationship, or yingchou. See Zhang 2005, p. 619. James Cahill (1980, pp. 337–44) lists 113 works attributed to Wang Meng. He regards 25 of these as genuine, including The Simple Retreat. He lists Sparse Trees and Pavilion as a minor work, possibly genuine.
3. On the literati class in China and its transition in the Tang and Song dynasties, see Bol 1992. Literati painting is here understood not just as painting by literati (as in the Song) but as an art form, which only started in the Yuan dynasty, that integrates equally important parts of painting, calligraphy, and poetry into one entity. See also Jonathan Hay's consideration (2009, p. 103) of Yuan literati painting as a distinct art form. For the most recent scholarship on Yuan painting in general, see Ars Orientalis 37 (2007, published 2009), which contains papers of which earlier versions were presented at the conference “New Directions in Yuan Painting,” held at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia on December 2, 2006. In that volume, see especially Harrist 2007, on Yuan literati painting, and Chang 2007, on a work by Wang Meng.
4. The fan bears a total of five seals: one artist's seal at the end of each inscription and three collector's seals.
5. The “Three Perfections” (sanjue) denotes not only the matching of poetry, calligraphy, and painting in one work (Sullivan 1974) but also the ability of the artist to excel in all three fields (Qi Gong 1991, p. 11).
6. Although the concept of contextual integration of inscriptions in paintings had already developed in the early fourteenth century, during the Yuan dynasty a further significant evolution took place that went beyond the combination found in earlier Yuan works and also differed from the praise of the Tang dynasty poet-painter Wang Wei (699–761) by the Song literati Su Shi (1037–1101), whose statement that Wang's paintings are poems and his poems are paintings did not refer to the integration of picture and writing. A complete “dissolution” and interchangeability of pictorial and idio graphic elements takes place, for instance, when characters assume the function of image parts, as in the painting Mount Baiyue (ca. 1360) by the Daoist Leng Qian (active second half of the fourteenth century), where a mountain surface incorporates an inverted Chinese character. A later example is Buddha (1760), by Jin Nong (1687–1763), where the characters of a “nimbus”-like inscription in “archaized” calligraphy surround and meld with the figure.
7. Author's translation based on that of Wen C. Fong (1992, p. 460), with kind suggestions added by James C. Y. Watt.
8. The first major artist who consistently inscribed his paintings with his own poems seems to have been Qian Xuan (ca. 1235–before 1307). Shou-chien Shih (1984) emphasizes the interdependence of painting and poetry in the work of Qian Xuan, who seems to have favored the horizontal format. Two exquisite paintings by Qian Xuan are in the MMA: Wang Xizhi Watching Geese and Pear Blossoms. John Hay (2001, p. 193) states that the unification of painting and poetry by artists such as Qian Xuan and Zhao Mengfu was motivated by “the search for expression of the self.”
9. See, among others, Hearn 2008, p. 80. Zhao Mengfu often used the verb xie (write) in his inscriptions and dedications, emphasizing that he “wrote” both the calligraphy and the painting. Wang Meng, however, uses ti (inscribe) in the dedication of his fan painting. While literati favored paper over silk as the optimum medium for self-expressive brushwork, many continued to use silk for more formal pieces. Compare Hay 1994, p. 132, on the transition from silk to paper in the Yuan, and Hay 1985, for the painter’s “discovery of surface.”
11. Ibid., p. 7. Banneret-shaped bamboo fans have been found in Chinese tombs. An example is that of Margravine Dai in Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan Province, of the second century B.C., excavated in 1972 (ibid., p. 23, pl. 8).
12. The history of inscriptions starts with signatures on paintings in the tenth century; see Zhang 2005. Round fans inscribed exclusively
with calligraphy seem to have existed by the fourth century. The Sage of Calligraphy, Wang Xizhi (307–365), is said to have inscribed fans with his calligraphy (Lederose 1979, p. 22). A few contemporary fan paintings—such as Recluse Fisher, by Sheng Mao (active ca. 1310–60), in the MMA—bear the date, the title of the work, and the signature of the artist but no poem or dedication.

13. Also, fans entirely inscribed by Southern Song emperors sometimes formed a pair with painted fans. A pair of fans in the Cleveland Art Museum includes one painted by the court painter Ma Lin (ca. 1180–after 1256) and another inscribed with a Tang poem by the emperor Lizong (r. 1224–64); collaborative works that are believed to have been “originally mounted together, back to back, as a single functioning fan” (H. Lee 2001, pp. 104–5, pls. 23, 24). See also S. Lee 1964, pp. 30–31, pls. 5, 6; and Harrist 1999.

14. The handsclor Fisherman, by Wu Zhen (1280–1354), also in the MMA, is another good example of the successful integration of calligraphy and poetry into painting, yet in Wu’s work it seems less developed than in Wang’s. The inscription appears blocklike, set apart from and subordinated to the painting (acting more as a caption). There is no exchange between the rowing fisherman and the inscription, and it is unclear whether Wu identifies himself with the person in his work. In Wang’s painting this subordination is not only compositionally dissolved, but “these few millimeters of white, the calm sand of the page” (Foucault 1983, p. 28) are omitted in favor of an incipient melding of picture and characters. Regarding subordination, see Hay 1985, p. 117. A certain “cartoon-like simplicity and directness” has been observed in Wu’s painting style (Hearn 2008, p. 94). See also Cahill 1976, p. 73.

15. On the right side Wang left a space between his courtesy name (Shuming) and the character wei (meaning “for”) above and the dedicatee’s name and his seal below. Not only does this echo his signature (Shuming) and his seal on the left, but the three characters (Shuming and wei) on the right are written at the same height as the two characters (Shuming) on the left.

16. This recalls the truly sparse and austere paintings by Ni Zan (1306–1374), but Ni’s inscriptions appear less integrated than Wang’s. For examples of his works in the MMA, see Hearn 2008, pp. 98–105, pls. 22, 23.

17. In other paintings the gaze is usually directed at something. For example, the protagonist in Qian Xuan’s short handsclor Wang Xizhi Watching Goose observes goose swimming in the lake, as does the figure in Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains, a handsclor painting by Huang Gongwang (1269–1354) in the collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei. In Wang Meng’s Dwelling in Seclusion in the Summer Mountains (Figure 4) the master in the pavilion looks toward the attendant. See also Jonathan Hay’s discussion (1989) of the groom’s gaze in Zhao Mengfu’s painting Horse and Groom in the MMA and John Hay’s discourse (1994, pp. 137–38) on “Who is gazing in Ni Zan’s poem? . . . It is a hut that gazes.”

18. The depiction of trees with an exaggerated tilt is not unusual in Chinese painting and can be seen in other formats. For instance, in his horizontal work Twin Pines, Level Distance in the MMA (Hearn 2008, pp. 78–83), Zhao Mengfu depicts one of the two pines leaning leftward toward the center of the picture. Such trees may be read in a number of ways: as bearing symbolic significance, fulfilling a compositional function, pointing toward something important, creating a sheltering frame for the narrative focus, or suggesting space. Other Yuan dynasty fan paintings of this kind include Angling in the Autumn River by Sheng Zhiu (active late fourteenth century) and Recluse Fisher, by Sheng Mao (ca. 1310–1360), both in the MMA (Fong 1992, pp. 457, 455, pls. 106, 104). The former is not inscribed; the latter bears only a signature and date.

19. A breeze generally alludes to virtuous men. According to the Analects of Confucius (Lunyu) (12.19), “the moral character of those in high position is the breeze, the character of those below is the grass. When the grass has the breeze upon it, it assuredly bends” (translation from Sakami 1939, p. 90).

20. Here the pavilion looks more like a public one in a scenic spot, as opposed to the one in Dwelling in Seclusion in the Summer Mountains (Figure 4), which appears to be attached to a private residence.

21. The term “mountain rain” often expresses melancholia or nostalgia. Zhao Mengfu uses it in one of his poems together with “sighing.” According to a saying, “before the mountain rain starts, wind has already arisen”—signifying an omen that can be noticed before difficulties have surfaced.

22. Jonathan Hay (1989, pp. 132–33) cites Richard Barnhart in mentioning Gu Kaizhi’s alleged statement “In real life a person never bows or stares when there is nothing in front of him.” Hay hypothesizes that the groom’s gaze in Groom and Horse indicates Zhao’s self-image, returning “our gaze as he would have returned his own.”

23. Images of hermits in landscapes go back to the Six Dynasties period (220–589). It is usually said that the locus classicus for these hermit scenes is the poetry of Tao Yuanming (365–427), one of the most influential Chinese poets. He is best known for his poem “Peach Blossom Spring,” about a utopian land hidden from the outside world—a model for escapism and retirement. In the late Yuan “the wilderness hermitage or pavilion sheltered by old trees became the metaphorical shorthand for the scholar-recluse’s retreat, where traditional values were treasured and sustained” (Hearn 2007, p. 100).

24. The expression of “desire” in painting has been discussed by John Hay (1994).


26. Ibid., p. 152.


28. The “entrance” into a Chinese painting depends on the format. In horizontal scrolls it is naturally on the right, and in vertical scrolls it is very often one of the lower corners. The end of the composition in the former is usually at the left end of the scroll, though in some examples the movement goes back to the beginning. After having roamed in a vertical painting, one can “exit” it at the “entrance” point. The “arboreal gate” as the geometrical center of the painting will not be discussed here.

29. In contrast, Zhao Mengfu’s Twin Pines, Level Distance is a horizontal scroll that opens only from the right. It bears two inscriptions. The title and signature next to the two pines on the right offer an intimate opening image, whereas the long inscription at the far left of the painting does not provide contextual access.

30. The fan’s mounting, with the spine bisecting the work, enhances the message of the poem-painting. In the right half, both names are written and Wang is shown looking at the inscription, expressing a momentary sense of nearness to Weiyan. This contrasts with the “lonely” left side, bearing only Wang’s style name Shuming and the past and future loneliness in the “grotto.”

31. These include Bamboo and Rocks (dated 1364; Suzhou Museum), which was painted for and dedicated to Zhang Deji; Reading in Spring Mountains (undated; Shanghai Museum); Writing Books under the Pine Trees (undated; Cleveland Museum of Art); and

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Small Retreat on the Foot of Mount Hui (Indianapolis Museum of Art). Bamboo and Rocks has a close correspondence of pictorial and written image, a “contextual entry,” and framing by inscriptions. Three poems, the date, and a dedication are written consecutively, from right to left, from the right side to the center. The columns of the writing seem to be extensions of the bamboo leaves, and the bottom characters follow the contour line of the right rock. Reading in Spring Mountains has an inscription (poem) that rests on the mountain, nestling against its silhouette. The brushwork of the characters and the uneven, slightly inclined columns of the writing match the texture and appearance of the background mountains. Writing Books under the Pine Trees further exemplifies the use of two inscriptions as “brackets” and access points for a narrative path: a poem, written in seal script at the upper right, leads down into a small glade with the protagonist’s hut. Continuing toward the left, the “reader” finds more buildings behind trees and, at the middle left on a mountain slope, the author’s signature with a dedication in standard script. Small Retreat on the Foot of Mount Hui has a nicely integrated inscription, comprising title, dedication, and poem, that leads into the picture from the right. The style of the seal script is echoed in the painting style of the trees, some of which lean toward the inscription as if attracted, establishing a link between written and pictorial image across the blank water surface.

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