

*Differences as a Source of Creativity:
Friendship between Wang Hui and Yun Shouping*

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Abstract

The biography of Wang Hui (1632-1717), a famous seventeenth-century landscapist in China, has been written many times over. While the question of whether to define him as a professional artist or as a scholar-amateur is still being debated, it has not been fully articulated what the sophistication of his identity brought to his work as an artist. Mostly, Wang Hui benefited from his standing at the verge of the professional and amateur realms: he was skilled enough to work professionally on commission, but at the same time, he possessed an intimate understanding of literary nuance. This convergence is evident throughout Wang Hui's career, and particularly in his relationship with Yun Shouping (1633-1690), a more typical scholar-amateur than Wang Hui. Their friendship produced stimulations and inspirations, as well as contradictions and disparities. In realizing the sophistication of Wang Hui himself and of this friendship, both of which represent the intersection of the professional and the scholar-amateur, a new perspective can be revealed in the study of the artist.

Keywords: Wang Hui, Yun Shouping, Chinese Painting, Landscape Painting, Early Qing Dynasty

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Introduction

Wang Hui 王翬 (1632-1717) was born to a family of professional painters in Yushan 虞山 (Changshu, Jiangsu province), in which three generations before him were well-versed in painting.¹ The real turning point in Wang Hui's artistic career occurred when he met the famous literati painters. At the age of nineteen, Wang Hui was accidentally discovered by Wang Jian 王翬 (1598-1677), an accomplished literati painter from Loudong 婁東 (Taicang, Jiangsu province).² Two years later, Wang Jian introduced Wang Hui to his close friend Wang Shimin 王時敏 (1592-1680), another established literati painter. The mentor-protégé relationships and friendships that Wang Hui had formed were very important for the artist in establishing himself as a painter who was active in literati circles.

During the late Ming period, the distinction between scholar-amateurs and professional artists began to blur, which largely resulted from a similar blurring of the lines between commoners and elites in Chinese society.³ The commercialization of literati paintings further progressed: Suzhou artists who “had once been the exclusive province of the scholar-amateurs now sold their works freely, or produced paintings on commission for the ever-expanding market of the merchant class.”⁴ It was also in the late Ming dynasty that professional artists began to adopt literati painting styles.⁵ During the early Qing dynasty, the possibility of painting as both a literatus and a professional emerged for the first time. It was thus possible that Wang Hui created paintings that appealed to amateur tastes on the one hand, and established his studio to receive commissions and sell his paintings on the other. This is the reason why Wang Hui's presence in literati circles does not seem to have been heterogeneous – his commissioned works were widely accepted and appreciated by the literati.

Wang Hui started by absorbing the calligraphic brushwork of the Yuan masters, especially that of Huang Gongwang 黃公望 (1269-1394), from whom his mentor Wang Shimin had mainly studied.⁶ After meeting Zhou Lianggong 周亮工 (1612-1672) and other Nanjing painters, Wang Hui was inspired by their preference for the more descriptive monumental landscape paintings of the Five Dynasties and the Northern Song dynasty.⁷ Although he was born in a family of professional artists without formal literary education, Wang Hui showed an aptitude for learning the scholarly interpretation of art and art history, and a deep understanding of the many subtleties of the amateur taste. He gradually found a way to combine the calligraphic and the descriptive, using skillfully rendered forms to represent the poetry from his mind.

The Shadow of the Friendship

Among Wang Hui's contemporaries, he was especially close to Yun Shouping 惲壽平 (1633-1690). By 1656, Wang Hui had already met Yun Shouping, who would later become famous as a poet and a flower painter, and the two became good friends. The earliest record

¹ Wang Lianqi, p. 78.

² Wang Hui, “Preface,” in *Qinghui zengyan*, 1.

³ Smith, p. 35.

⁴ Yang, p. 12.

⁵ Fulder, p. 19.

⁶ Wang Jin, pp. 97-102. Huang Gongwang was one of the Four Masters of the Yuan. His most famous extant work is *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* 富春山居圖, dated 1350.

⁷ Zhou Lianggong was an art collector and art connoisseur in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties.

of their friendship is dated 1656: on the sixth day of the fourth month, the two young people met at Wang Hui's study, as described in an inscription by Yun Shouping:
春夜，與虞山好友石谷書齋斟茗快談，戲拈柯九思樹石，石谷補竹坡，共為笑樂，時丙申浴佛前二日記。⁸

On one night in the spring, my good friend Shigu (Wang Hui) from Yushan and I drink tea and chat happily at his study. I playfully paint *Trees and Rocks* [in the style of] Ke Jiushi, and Wang Hui adds bamboo and a slope [to the painting].⁹ [We paint] together for laughter and pleasure. I record this at the time two days before the Washing Buddhist Statues Day in the Year of Bingshen (1656).¹⁰

Although many of Yun Shouping's inscriptions, poems, and letters to Wang Hui have survived, Wang Hui is comparatively silent in existing records: his inscriptions were much fewer and shorter than Yun's, and very few of his poems and letters have been preserved. Thus, we cannot learn much about Wang Hui's private relationships and personal feelings directly from his own words. Wang presumably thought about their friendship no less than did Yun, so the disparity in written records is likely due to their differing educational backgrounds and personalities. From Yun's passionate words, a close interaction can be envisioned.

Yun Shouping was no major art collector, but he and Wang Hui elucidated to each other their views on art, which influenced and inspired them both. However, a similar divide would occur between Wang Hui and Yun Shouping: while Wang enjoyed ever more profits from the sale of his paintings, Yun was unwilling to paint for money and spent his later years in poverty. Now it was Yun who could not afford the price of Wang Hui's paintings. While the friendship between the two perhaps cannot be measured by how many paintings Yun acquired from Wang, Yun did complain about the difficulty of obtaining his friend's work. In one case he used an allusion to Mi Fu 米芾 (1051-1107), regarded as an ideal scholar-amateur of the Song dynasty, to at once satirize and persuade Wang Hui.¹¹ In an inscription on the mounting paper of Wang Hui's *Autumn Mountains, Red Trees* 溪山紅樹圖 (National Palace Museum, Taipei, Fig. 1), Yun Shouping wrote:

今夏石谷自吳門來，余搜行笈得此幀，驚歎欲絕。石谷亦沾沾自喜，有十五城不易之狀。置余案頭摩娑十餘日，題數語歸之。蓋以西廬老人之矜賞。而石谷尚不能割所愛。矧余輩安能久假。為韞櫝之玩耶。

Shigu (Wang Hui) came from Wumen (Suzhou, Jiangsu province) this summer. I found this painting in his bookcase. I was amazed to death by it. Shigu was also complacent, as if he would not trade this painting for even fifteen cities. I put this painting on my desk and gently played with it for more than ten days. I inscribe these few words and will return the painting. Although the Old Man Xilu (Wang Shimin) praised and appreciated [this painting], Shigu still could not give up his treasure. How can I borrow it for long and enshrine it in my cabinet for enjoyment?

⁸ Yun Shouping, *Ouxiangguan ji*, 11. 1a.

⁹ Ke Jiushi 柯九思 (1290-1343) was a Yuan painter who was famous for his paintings of bamboo and rocks.

¹⁰ All the translations are those of the author. The Washing Buddhist Statues Day 浴佛日 is on the eighth day of the fourth month, which is said to be the birth date of Shakyamuni Buddha.

¹¹ Mi Fu was famous for his innovation of the conical form of mountains and a dotted pattern which was called "Mi dots."

For a later time, Yun Shouping saw the painting again and inscribed on it for the second time: 偶過徐氏水亭，見此幀乃為金沙潘君所得，既怪嘆且妒甚。不對賞音，牙微不發。豈西廬南田之矜賞，尚不及潘君哉。米顛據舷而呼，信是可人韻事，真足效慕也。但未知石谷他日見西廬南田，何以解嘲。

I passed the water pavilion of Mr. Xu by accident and found that this painting was obtained by Mr. Pan from Jinsha (Wuhan, Hubei province). I felt strange, sighed, and was very jealous. If one is not faced with a person who appreciates his music, one does not play his zither. How can the praise and appreciation of Xilu (Wang Shimin) and Nantian (Yun Shouping) fail to compete even with that of Mr. Pan? The Mania Mi (Mi Fu) leaned on one side of the boat and shouted; [now I] believe that the charming gentleman made that poetic gesture, and he truly deserved my imitation and admiration. Only I do not know how he will escape the ridicule, when one day Shigu sees Xilu and Nantian?

It is said that Mi Fu was so obsessed with painting and calligraphy that once, to obtain a piece of calligraphy that he loved, Mi Fu shouted that he would jump from a boat into the river if the owner did not give the piece to him.¹² Yun Shouping likens himself to Mi Fu, lamenting that he is so obsessed with Wang Hui's painting that he wants to do the same. However, the allusion is meant not only as a poetic gesture to follow, but also as satire: Yun suggests that he has no choice but to follow Mi's behavior because Wang did not give his paintings as gifts to those who truly appreciated his work, like Wang Shimin and Yun Shouping himself.

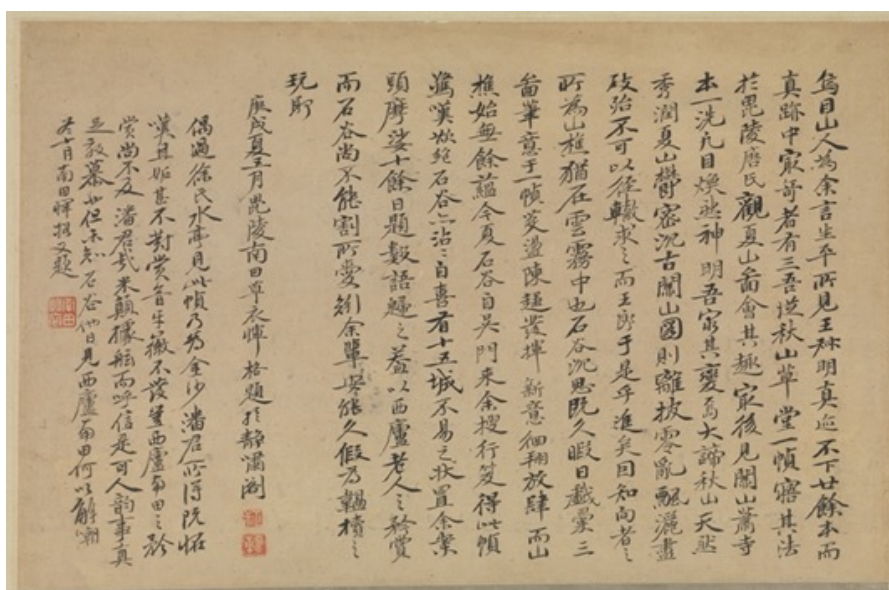


Figure 1: Yun Shouping's inscriptions on the mounting paper of Wang Hui's *Autumn Mountains, Red Trees* 溪山紅樹圖, dated 1670. Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 112.4 x 39.5 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The distinction between the professional and the scholar-amateur, though largely blurred, was still an essential difference between Wang Hui and Wang Shimin. Wang Hui's standing rose along with the market's demand for art, at a time when literati were selling their paintings while professionals were imitating literati aesthetics. The old conventions had changed: painting for profit did not decrease its literary and artistic value. While the ideal of paintings

¹² Zhou Hui, *Qingbo zazhi*, 5. 10a.

done as personal gifts was still appealing to Yun Shouping, this notion held no great significance for Wang Hui.

The Light of the Friendship

Wang Hui might have once responded to Yun Shouping's expectation. Still, few records indicate that Wang commonly made presents of his paintings to Yun. It seems more likely that in most respects, Wang Hui had not changed. Painting to him was still a craft which he had used to make a living throughout his life, and he did not usually give his paintings away even to Yun. However, these differences did not deter their friendship, which continued until Yun's death in 1690. In his inscription for Wang Hui's *Night Parasol Trees, Autumn Shadows* 晚梧秋影圖, dated 1686 (Palace Museum, Beijing, Fig. 2), Yun writes:

与石谷立池上，商論繪事，極賞心之娛。時星漢晶然，清露未下，暗觀梧影，輒大叫曰好墨葉好墨葉。因知北苑巨然房山海嶽點墨最淋漓處，必濃澹相兼，半明半暗。乃造化先有此境，古匠力為摹倣，至于得意忘言，始洒脫畦徑，有自然之妙，此真我輩無言之師。王郎酒酣興發，戲為造化留此景致，以示賞音，抽豪灑墨，若張顛濡發時也。修為先生見而愛之，因以為贈。他日貽之文孫蔚兄以成世契。南田惓壽平。

I stand by the pond with Shigu and we discuss painting. This exhausts the enjoyment of appreciating with our hearts. Now that the constellations are shining and the morning dew has not [yet] fallen, we look at the shadows of [the leaves of] parasol trees in the dark, and we then shout that they are “fine ink leaves, fine ink leaves!” Therefore, we know that [for] Beiyuan (Dong Yuan), Juran, Fangshan (Gao Kegong), and Haiyue (Mi Fu), the most incisive and vivid part of their dotted ink must have been both dense and clear, half-light and half-dark.¹³ It is thus Nature that first conceives such images, and the ancient artists tried to imitate them. They finally obtained the traces and forsook the words. They became free from the ordinary fields and paths, conceiving the wonder of the natural features. [Nature] is really our tacit mentor. Mr. Wang drinks wine to his heart's content and his interest is inspired, so he captures this scene of Nature for fun, to show to those who appreciate his tone. He extracts his brush and sheds the ink, just as when Mania Zhang (Zhang Xu) soaked his hair [with ink].

Yun Shouping records this event in words, and Wang Hui records it in his painting. He paints the parasol trees on the right side with the “fine ink leaves” 好墨葉 they discussed, “both dense and clear, half-light and half-dark” 濃澹相兼，半明半暗. The two small figures standing together in conversation at the left must be Yun and Wang themselves. This is a vivid record of the friendship between Wang Hui and Yun Shouping. It reveals how they talked about painting, made paintings, and captured enjoyment from these activities. The act of creation began with their observation and perception of the “fine ink leaves.” They must have felt and appreciated the natural scene as they felt and appreciated the paintings of Dong Yuan, Juran, Gao Kegong, and Mi Fu. It was in this spirit that they saw the fine ink leaves, which Wang put his brush to the paper to represent. Each of the two friends must have derived equally intense pleasure from encountering these fine ink leaves, so that they were able to share the same vision and collaborate on the painting. It is interesting that, although at times he satirized Wang with literary allusions, Yun also praised him with a similar allusion, by comparing Wang to the calligrapher Zhang Xu 張旭 (c. 675 – c. 750) in the Tang dynasty,

¹³ Dong Yuan 董源 (? - c. 962) and Juran 巨然 were famous landscape painters of the Five Dynasties. Gao Kegong 高克恭 (1248-1310) was a famous landscape painter in the Yuan dynasty.

who drunkenly soaked his hair with ink and created wonderful cursive scripts.¹⁴ Though it seems contradictory, it attests to the sophistication of Wang Hui as an artist and as a person.



Figure 2: Wang Hui. *Night Parasol Trees, Autumn Shadows* 晚梧秋影圖, 1686. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 76.8 x 41 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Conclusion

The answers to questions of whether art should be made for recreation or for a living, for oneself or for others, are not necessarily binary; the disparity between the professional and the scholar-amateur certainly exists, but all human beings struggle to reconcile different situations and intentions in life. Wang Hui could be at times a professional artist who painted for the market, and at other times a literati-artist who painted to entertain himself and his friends. There was not a contradiction within the artist – only differences in time and place. While it is not possible to definitively state that the friendship with Yun Shouping was the impetus for Wang Hui's creativity, the records and resultant works indeed revealed great excitement and pleasure. Wang Hui must have been stimulated, motivated, and inspired by his friend, and his artworks, as products of exchange and collaboration, show more improvised and less restrained characteristics.

¹⁴ Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Tang shu*, 202. 11b.

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