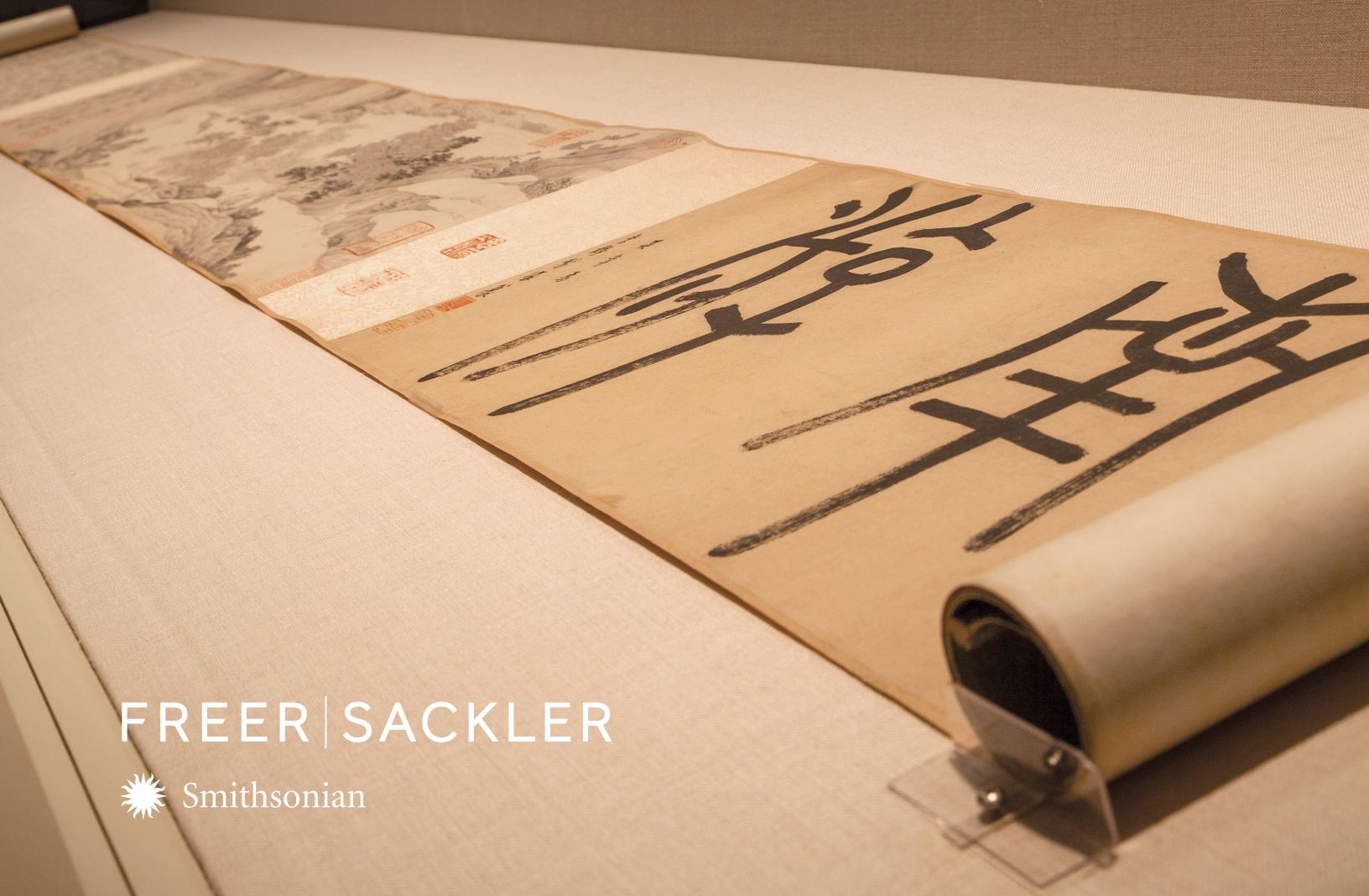


How to “Read” a Chinese Scroll

Freer|Sackler Educator Resource



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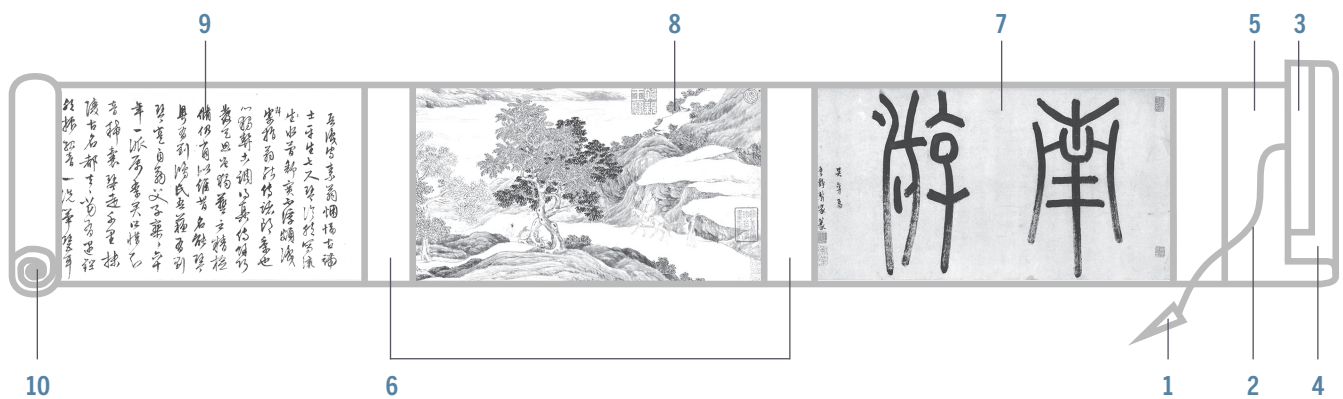
 Smithsonian

How to “Read” a Chinese Hand Scroll

More than just “right to left”

For hundreds of years Chinese painting took three major formats: hand scrolls, hanging scrolls, and album leaves. Important hand scrolls are stored in special boxes and are carefully unrolled and rerolled for viewing a portion at a time by only a few people. Looking at the poetry, painting, and calligraphy on a scroll is like reading a chapter in a book. A Chinese hand scroll is “read” from right to left, the same way classical Chinese writing is read.

One multitalented artist could work on a hand scroll alone, or several artists could collaborate, with one person painting the landscape scene, another composing the poetry, and a third writing in beautiful calligraphy. If the scroll was a gift, such as the one Tang Yin and his friends made for Yang Jijing, each person added calligraphy to compliment the artist or to comment on the artwork. Over the years other artists and later owners of the scroll contributed their own poetry or added their signature seal to show their appreciation and admiration.



- 1 Clasp (biezi) 别子 2 Cord (daizi) 带子 3 Title strip (tiqian) 题籤 4 Protective wrapping (baoshou) 包首
- 5 Inner wrapping (tiantou) 天頭 6 Border silk (geshui) 隔水 7 Frontispiece (yinshou) 引首 8 Painting (huaxin) 畫心
- 9 Colophons (tiba) 題跋 10 Roller end (zhoutou) 軸頭



About the Artist

Tang Yin (1470–1524)

Centuries ago, in 1485, Tang Yin was a teenager with a bright future in China.

At age fifteen, he received the highest scores on exams that would one day lead him to a promising career as an official in the emperor’s government. Tang’s intelligence and his skill at calligraphy impressed the scholars and artists in his hometown of Suzhou. When he was twenty-eight years old, Tang left Suzhou to take more exams in Nanjing, the provincial capital of the Ming dynasty. Like the national college entrance exams given in China today, these tests were the key to a successful professional career. Again, Tang scored extremely well—but he was accused of participating in a cheating scandal. Even though he was later found to be innocent, Tang Yin lost all chances of holding a position in the imperial government.

After Tang returned home to Suzhou, his friends scolded him for partying too much. He could also be serious, and he sometimes practiced Buddhist meditation for days. Tang sold his artwork when he needed money. His hand scrolls blended traditional styles from earlier generations with his own personal approach to painting. Tang Yin’s career may not have started the way he once imagined, but through his mastery of calligraphy, poetry, and painting, he made a significant contribution to the world of Chinese art.

Detail above, cover, and interior poster:

TRAVELING SOUTH 明 唐寅 《南游圖》 卷

Tang Yin (1470–1524)

China, Ming dynasty, 1505

Handscroll; ink and color on paper

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment

Freer Gallery of Art F1953.78

A Letter of Recommendation

A gift of music, art, and poetry

Tang Yin admired his best friend, Yang Jijing, for his skill on the *qin* (pronounced chin), a seven-stringed instrument similar to a zither. In the spring of 1505, Yang left his hometown of Suzhou in search of success in the city of Nanjing. Tang Yin and ten of his friends painted a hand scroll for Yang Jijing as a going-away present. To express his hope that Yang would have a pleasant and safe journey, Tang painted a traveler on a road surrounded by gently rolling hills. It is not a realistic depiction of what Yang would see on his journey from Suzhou to Nanjing. Instead, it's an imagined landscape of what Tang Yin wanted his friend to experience.

The scroll also served as a letter of recommendation. In the poems to the left, Yang's friends compare him to legendary musicians. They also demonstrate their mastery of the “three perfections” of calligraphy, poetry, and painting. When Yang Jijing showed the scroll to a potential patron in Nanjing, his friends knew it would send the message, “We are accomplished gentleman artists, we have the skills to prove it, and we think this man is talented.”



BELL YUNG PLAYING A QIN

Performance at Freer|Sackler, May 13, 2016

Podcast available at asia.si.edu/podcasts/related/yung/progNotes.asp

Ming Dynasty

1369–1644

In China the arts flourished during the three centuries of cultural rebirth that marked the Ming dynasty. Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), a Chinese general, overthrew the Mongol rulers of the previous Yuan dynasty and built a new empire. He chose the large, wealthy city of Nanjing as his new capital. China prospered through foreign trade in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Emperors of the Ming dynasty restored many of the ancient Chinese cultural traditions, such as narrative and realistic painting. They also reestablished the imperial examinations that determined who could become a government official and perhaps an elite member of the imperial court. These jobs opened the door to financial and social success. During this vibrant period the gentleman artists in Suzhou, a major city east of Nanjing, were free to spend their time visiting with like-minded scholars and practicing the “three perfections” of painting, poetry, and calligraphy.



Guiding Questions

What do you see happening in this section of the hand scroll? Describe the scene from right to left, as if you are unrolling the scroll.

Which specific details in the hand scroll make you think that?

How do you think Yang Jijing felt when he received this artwork? How might he have used it?

Additional Resources

We invite teachers of all levels to adapt this resource so that it fits your curriculum. Use the poster to spark classroom discussion or to inspire student assignments in art, social studies, science, music, Chinese language, and language arts.

Educators: Arts of China, Painting pinterest.com/freersackler/educators-arts-of-china-painting
Use this board to find out more about Chinese paintings—albums, hand scrolls, and hanging scrolls—from the museum’s permanent collection that show traditional Chinese subjects such as landscapes, animals, flowers, and bamboo.

Safe Handling Practices for Chinese Hand Scrolls youtube.com/watch?v=enCWYmbj8Ew
Watch Freer|Sackler conservators demonstrate the best way to handle a Chinese hand scroll. Scholars today use these techniques to “read” the fragile works of art.

Arts of China: Resources for Educators asia.si.edu/explore/listByArea.asp?browseTopic=5
Find basic information about China, objects with in-depth information, introductions to different forms of Chinese art, and lesson plans. Freer|Sackler education staff and teachers in the Washington, DC, area created these resources.

Painting with Words asia.si.edu/paintingwithwords
Explore the calligraphy, painting, and poetry of gentleman scholars during the Ming dynasty. This exhibition website provides additional information about technique as well as transcriptions and translations of some of the calligraphy on view at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery from April 16 through July 24, 2016.

Open F|S asia.si.edu/collections/edan/default.cfm
Search, download, and create resources for your classroom using our digital collection. More than 40,000 high-resolution images of Asian works of art are available to download free. Explore the diverse collections of Asian art in the Freer and Sackler Galleries from anywhere in the world, whenever you like.

Learning Standards

NCHS

World History Era 6, Standard 3A. The student understands the extent and limits of Chinese regional power under the Ming dynasty.

NCSS

D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.13.3-5. Use information about a historical source, including the maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose to judge the extent to which the source is useful for studying a particular topic.

D2.His.13.6-8. Evaluate the relevancy and utility of a historical source based on information such as maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

Common Core

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

NAEA National Core Arts Standards

Anchor Standard #7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard #8. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard #11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

Freer|Sackler

Smithsonian Institution

Address

1050 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20013-7012

Hours

10 am to 5:30 pm daily
Closed December 25
Admission is FREE to the museum, exhibitions,
and public programs

Reserved Tours for Students

To reserve a tour, please schedule at least four weeks in advance using the online form available at asia.si.edu/visit/schooltours.asp#reservation.

Self-Guided Student Groups

If your group of ten or more people plans to visit the galleries on your own, please let us know by registering at least a week in advance using the online form available at asia.si.edu/visit/self-GuidedForm.asp. Space in the galleries is limited, and advance registration for groups helps us avoid crowding.

General Information

asia.si.edu

AsiaTeachers@si.edu

Other questions? Call 202.633.4880



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China, Ming dynasty, 1505

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