

# BAMBOO, LANDSCAPE, MONUMENTALITY: GUAN DAOSHENG'S VIEW BY THE BAMBOO AND STREAMS SCROLL

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The hanging scroll *View by the Bamboo and Stream* (Fig. 1, later referred to as “the *Scroll*”) by Guan Daosheng depicts a serene scene in which modest huts stand in bamboo groves within mountains and streams. However, despite the artist’s virtuosity demonstrated in the work, both this *Scroll* and Guan have received limited scholarly attention, and the reception of Guan and her works has been largely confined by her identity as a woman. In this paper, I aim to reject this gendered approach and establish Guan’s status as an artist *per se* through a close analysis of the *Scroll*. I argue that the *Scroll* presents two major innovations of Guan, namely a new way of representing bamboo and a destabilization of the genre of monumental landscape. By specifying her innovations and their influence, I argue that she was not a mere follower of the existing styles nor a mere “female counterpart” of literati painters.

## **Brush with(out) femininity?: past reception of Guan Daosheng**

As one of the most renowned women artists in pre-modern Chinese art history, Guan Daosheng has been praised for her artistic talents since her contemporary time. For instance, she was included in *Tu hui bao jian* (*The Precious Mirror of Painting*), one of the most influential catalogs of artists from the Yuan Dynasty. However, the text provides no further information except her titles and practices: “Madame Guan, [whose] courtesy name [is] Zhongji, wife of Zhao Wenmin, [given the title] Madam of the Wei Kingdom, excels at painting ink bamboo, plum blossom, and orchid.”<sup>1</sup> More specific evaluations of her works can be found in *Yu tai hua shi* (*Jade Terrace History of Painting*), a Qing Dynasty text edited by woman art historian Tang Shuyu dedicated to women artists. Multiple sources collected in the text praise her works for “not demonstrating the feminine sentiments” and “showing no manner of women and children.”<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, a modern-time review of Guan’s works presents a contrasting view. In Osvald Sirén’s

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<sup>1</sup> Xia Wenyan, *Tu hui bao jian*, vol. 5, no. 111, accessed December 21, 2022, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=207945&remap=gb>. “管夫人道昇字仲姬趙文敏室贈魏國夫人能書善畫墨竹梅蘭。”

<sup>2</sup> Tang Shuyu, “Guan Furen” in *Yu tai hua shi*, accessed December 21, 2022, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=95083&page=41&remap=gb>. See pp. 41, “用筆熟脫縱橫蒼秀絕無婦人女子之態”; pp. 42, “無兒女子態。”

*Chinese Painting, Leading Masters and Principles*, he describes Guan's paintings as "ha[ving] the graceful charm of a woman's brush."<sup>3</sup> Both evaluations emphasize Guan's gender without meaningfully expounding on its significance in relation to her works. Their gendered approaches are simply not useful in terms of analyzing Guan's masterful use of techniques and contribution to Chinese art history.

More recent writings on Guan and her works focus less on her identity as a woman artist and more on her virtuosity and positionality in history.<sup>4</sup> However, most discussions are centered around only one painting, *Bamboo Groves in Mist and Rain*.<sup>5</sup> The popularity of this particular work probably has to do with the fact that it is compiled with the works of other seven prestigious painters from the Yuan Dynasty, who are unsurprisingly all men.<sup>6</sup> Other works, such as *View by the Bamboo and Streams Scroll*, remain less discussed, but nevertheless equally, if not more effectively, demonstrate Guan's artistic ingenuity. I would like to reject the gendered approaches and enrich the discussion on Guan by examining her innovations presented in the *Scroll*, namely a new model of representing bamboo and a destabilization of the standards of landscape paintings, and thus establish her status as an independent artist instead of a mere female counterpart of the literati painters.

### **Bamboo and *Shu hua tong yuan***

The first innovation presented by the *Scroll* is Guan's unprecedented way of depicting bamboo. Despite the abundance of bamboo paintings throughout Chinese art history, the representation of the motif has been rather standardized in two major categories: *goule* (勾勒) and *mozhu* (墨竹).<sup>7</sup> In the *goule* method, exemplified by *Finches and Bamboo* by Song Huizong (Fig. 2), the painter outlines the shapes of the bamboo leaves and stalks with fine lines. The *mozhu* method, exemplified by Wen Tong's *Ink Bamboo* (Fig. 3), uses bolder brushstrokes to depict pieces of stalk and leaves with blocks of ink color. Guan's representation of bamboo in the *Scroll* differs from both models. The stalks and leaves are represented by single strokes without meticulously outlining their shapes as one does in the *goule* method. The strokes are also more

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<sup>3</sup> Osvald Sirén, *Chinese Painting, Leading Masters and Principles* (New York: Ronald Press, 1956-58), 4: 24.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Jennifer Purtle, "The Icon of the Woman Artist: Guan Daosheng (1262-1319) and the Power of Painting at the Ming Court c. 1500," *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, ed. Dana Arnold, Deborah S. Hutton, Rebecca M. Brown (John Wiley & Sons: West Sussex, UK, 2011), 290-317; Purtle, "Guan Daosheng and the Idea of a Great Woman Artist," *Oriental Art* 49, no. 2 (March/April, 2018), 1-9; Shane McCausland, "Private lives, public faces—relics of calligraphy by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322), Guan Daosheng (1262-1319) and their children," *Oriental Art* 46, no. 5 (2000), 38-47.

<sup>5</sup> All three articles in the last footnote discuss Guan Daosheng's significance and her artistic style with the example of *Bamboo Groves in Mist and Rain*.

<sup>6</sup> *Yuanren Jijin* Juan (Scroll of *Yuan* Compilation), National Palace Museum, Taipei.

<https://theme.npm.edu.tw/opendata/DigitImageSets.aspx?sNo=04014706>. The scroll collects the works of eight artists including Zhao Mengfu, Guan Daosheng, Ni Zan, Wu Zhen, Ma Wan, Zhao Yuan, Lin Juan-e, and Zhuang Lin.

<sup>7</sup> Wang Shih-hsiang, "Chinese Ink Bamboo Paintings," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, 1948/1949, Vo. 3 (1948/1949), 49. "kou le [gou le] bamboo" and "mo chu [mo zhu]" ink bamboo.

reserved and delicate in contrast to the thick strokes in the *mozhu* method. Highly gestural and reminiscent of the calligraphic strokes of *dian* (dots), these short thin lines obfuscate the boundaries between the painting and calligraphy and reflect the idea of *shu hua tong yuan*, the homogeneity of calligraphy and painting.

The notion of *shu hua tong yuan* was first advocated by Guan's husband, Zhao Mengfu.<sup>8</sup> He writes in the epigraph for the work *Xiu shi shu lin tu* (Figure. 4):

Stones are *fei bai* and woods are *zhu*. To depict bamboo, one must excel in the Eight Principles. Had one understood this, they would know that calligraphy and painting are essentially the same.”<sup>9</sup>

Here, Zhao compares the representation of different motifs with various calligraphic techniques and particularly emphasizes the relationship between bamboo and the Eight Principles, the eight basic strokes in Chinese calligraphy. In his own paintings (Fig 4 and Fig 5), the slender bamboo leaves already demonstrate a simplification towards calligraphic strokes. Yet, Guan's *Scroll* advances the integration of *shu hua tong yuan* with the representation of bamboo by taking it to an almost literal level. The orderly arranged bamboo leaves spread downwards (Fig. 6), resembling the configuration of the Chinese character for bamboo “竹,” which is derived from the graphic of a pair of stalks with two drooping leaves.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Guan's innovative delineation of bamboo in the *Scroll* shows her artistic ingenuity through an intentional obfuscation between the two artistic practices of painting and writing. Moreover, her radicalization of *shu hua tong yuan* in this work also demonstrates her unique understanding and visualization of the idea and distinguishes her from a mere follower of Zhao's theory.

### Destabilizing monumental landscape paintings

Another innovation of Guan in the *Scroll* is her destabilization of the standards for the genre of landscape painting. For one thing, the *Scroll* synthesizes the conventions of vertical composition, which is more common among Northern Song landscape paintings, and horizontal composition, which is a characteristic of Southern Song landscape paintings. Similar to Fan Kuan's *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (Fig. 7), a typical piece of Northern Song landscape hanging scroll, we see in the *Scroll* a procession of foreground, middle-ground, and background through the

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<sup>8</sup> Chu-Tsing Li, “Recent Studies on Zhao Mengfu's Painting in China,” *Artibus Asiae*, 1993, Vol. 53, No. 1/2 (1993), 197.

<sup>9</sup> Zhao Mengfu, *Zhao mengfu wen ji*, ed. Ren Daobin (Shanghai: Shanghai shu hua chu ban she, 2010), 236. “石如飞白木如籀，写竹还于八法通。若也有人能会此，方知书画本来同。”*Fei bai* refers to the flying white technique in calligraphy and *zhu* refers to the seal script.

<sup>10</sup> See Purtle, “The Icon of the Woman Artist,” 298. Purtle discusses the graphic and Chinese character of bamboo in detail: “Bamboo is a perfect subject for expressing the cohesion of these graphic modes. The character for bamboo (竹), unlike some characters that generate meaning through phonetic associations, is a straightforward, pictographic rendering of this plant: the lower portion of the character represents two straight stalks of the plant, the upper portion of the character represents its jaunty leaves. Consequently, the writing, calligraphy, and painting of bamboo all participate in the graphic replication of bamboo stalks and the angular leaves of the plant.”

island with pavilions, the huts among bamboo, and remote mountain peaks.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the sinuous waterway in the *Scroll* suggests a zigzag pathway, which is commonly employed in vertical compositions to invite the viewer to enter the pictorial scenes. However, unlike Northern Song landscape paintings, which primarily focus on the depiction of mountain rocks, the *Scroll's* dedication to delineating streams and the misty atmosphere recalls the hazy and expansive scenes from Southern Song handscroll landscape paintings (Fig. 8). Moreover, different from the Northern Song paintings' exaggerated scale contrast between the mountain bodies and the miniature architectures and figures, the *Scroll's* arrangement of elements in clusters and in similar scales reminds one of the panoramic view in Southern Song landscape handscrolls.<sup>12</sup> In short, Guan's *Scroll* could be understood as a Southern-Song-style handscroll landscape transposed to the compositional principles of Northern Song hanging scrolls.

An investigation of Guan's biography would suggest that this synthesis of Northern Song and Southern Song styles was not an unconscious coincidence. As the wife of high official Zhao Mengfu, Guan was exposed to "the vibrant intellectual and artistic life of the capital and access to the works of past masters in the palace and other collections."<sup>13</sup> With this favorable environment, she was able to study the works of old masters and was certainly familiar with past traditions.

Furthermore, the *Scroll* also pushes the boundaries of landscape painting by combining the genre with the motif of bamboo. Before the *Scroll*, bamboo has been rarely included in monumental landscape paintings, and even so, it would only play a peripheral role (Fig. 9). Even in a similar work from an earlier date by Guan herself (Fig. 10), it is hard to notice the clustered bamboo at first glance, and the visual focus is still placed on the mountain peaks in the background. In contrast, bamboo plays an unquestionably dominant role in the *Scroll*. Not only has Guan enlarged the portion of the middle-ground where the largest grove of bamboo stands, but the stream also encircles the bamboo grove, forming a blank margin to highlight its presence. Her incorporation of bamboo into a landscape painting is also significant as bamboo was almost exclusively presented in close-ups and devoid of environmental context in earlier works, such as Emperor Huizong and Wen Tong's works (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). Situated in wild openness, the bamboo is almost monumentalized in the *Scroll*.

Due to the lack of historical records, it is impossible for us to know the exact intentions behind Guan's artistic decisions. Nevertheless, based on her writings and

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<sup>11</sup> See Wen Fong et al., "Chapter Five: Monumental Landscape Painting," in *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 128 and 130. He discusses the significance of creating layers in Northern Song monumental landscape painting.

<sup>12</sup> See Duan Xiaolin, "A Topographic and Affective Place: Landscape through the Sightseer's Eyes," in *The Rise of West Lake: A Cultural Landmark in the Song Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 113-114. She discusses the pivotal role that panoramic view plays in Southern Song landscape handscrolls.

<sup>13</sup> Xu Shiduan, "Guan Daosheng," in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: Tang Through Ming 618-1644*, 96, ed. Lee, Lily Xiao Hong and Sue Wiles (Armonk, N. Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2014), 96.

biography, the monumentalization of bamboo could likely be interpreted as a self-assertion of her status as an accomplished painter in the Yuan literati milieu. For one thing, Guan uses the motif of bamboo as a symbol of virtue and her personal emblem in many of her writings.<sup>14</sup> In *Inscribed on My Own Painting of Bamboo*, she projects her melancholic sentiment onto bamboo and interacts with it emotionally.<sup>15</sup> Her *Rhyme-Prose on Tall, Slender Bamboo* also personifies the plant and praises it for having “exalted virtue” and “stand[ing] above vulgarity.”<sup>16</sup> More importantly, the *Rhyme-Prose* alludes to *Prose on Ink Bamboo* by Wen Tong, who was regarded as an expert of bamboo paintings.<sup>17</sup> In this way, Guan claims herself a position comparable with the previous master. The interpretation of Guan’s monumentalization of bamboo as a self-assertion of status is further buttressed by her dismissive attitude towards the view that “she was “transgressing propriety” by intruding on the hitherto almost exclusively male domain of painting bamboo,”<sup>18</sup> as testified in a surviving epigraph by Guan for a lost work:

Well, to play [with] brush [and] ink [is a] thing [that] men [are] good at. [Yet] today I made this [painting]. [Is it] not very much [the case that I have] overstepped the bounds? Despicable, despicable.<sup>19</sup>

### **Possible influences of the Scroll**

Last but not least, the *Scroll* deserves more scrutiny because it expanded the repertoire of Chinese ink painting. We can find traces of the two aforementioned innovative aspects presented by the *Scroll* in later works by other artists. For instance, in *Garden of the Inept Administrator* (Fig. 11), Wen Zhengming also uses the calligraphic approach to depict bamboo leaves. More vertically-composed landscape paintings highlighting the water and mist emerged, including *Rong xi zhai tu* (Fig. 12) by Ni Zan and *Hua xi yu yin* (Fig. 13) by Wang Meng.

It must be conceded that, due to the lack of historical records, whether these artists were directly influenced by this particular *Scroll* remains unclear. Nevertheless, because of Guan’s reputation, Wen Zhengming and other Yuan Dynasty artists certainly knew her practices and were likely to have seen her works. In addition, Wang Meng as Guan’s grandson and Ni Zan, as one of the major promoters of Guan’s reputation<sup>20</sup>, were definitely familiar with her works. Moreover, because no

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<sup>14</sup> Purtle, “The Icon of Woman Artist,” 298-301.

<sup>15</sup> Purtle, Jennifer. “Guan Daosheng,” in *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism*, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 128.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>17</sup> Purtle, “The Icon of Woman Artist,” 300.

<sup>18</sup> Xu, 97.

<sup>19</sup> Purtle, “The Icon of Woman Artist,” 300.

<sup>20</sup> Purtle, “Guan Daosheng and the Idea of a Great Woman Artist,” 5. “It is clear that the status attained by Guan in her lifetime (and shortly thereafter) required the constructive engagement of male critics. These included ... the painter Ni Zan, ...”

similar examples previous to the *Scroll* have been found, Guan's two innovations represented here indeed have enriched the visual language of Chinese painting, whether or not these three artists were directly inspired by the *Scroll*.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Guan Daosheng's *View by the Bamboo and Streams Scroll* presents two major artistic innovations in Chinese art history. The painting breaks away from the traditional representations of bamboo and visualizes Guan's unique understanding of *shu hua tong yuan*. The *Scroll's* composition also destabilizes the standards of landscape paintings through a synthesis of vertical and horizontal compositions and a combination of bamboo with the genre. As reflected by later works, these innovations expanded the visual languages of Chinese ink painting. Thus, Guan should be considered an accomplished artist in her own right instead of a mere follower of existing ideas or only a female counterpart of the mainstream, male-dominant literati culture.

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## FIGURES



Fig. 1. Guan Daosheng, *View by the Bamboo and Stream Scroll* (竹溪攬勝軸), dated 1309 B.C. (Yuan Dynasty), Hanging Scroll, 57.2 x 27.5 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei





Fig. 2. Emperor Huizong, *Finches and Bamboo*, early 12th century (Northern Song Dynasty), handscroll; ink and color on silk, 33.7 cm x 55.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39936?when=A.D.+1000-1400&what=Paintings&ft=bamboo&offset=0&rpp=40&pos=2>.



Fig. 3. Wen Tong, *Mozhu* (Ink Bamboo), scroll, 131.6 cm x 105.4 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 4. Zhao Mengfu, *Xiu shi shu lin tu* (*Elegant Rocks, Sparse Trees*), 27.5 cm x 62.8 cm, ink on paper, National Palace Museum, Beijing. <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/231246.html>



Fig. 5. Detail of Zhao Mengfu, *Ku mu zhu shi tu* (*Dry woods, Bamboo and Rocks*) from *Compilation of Yuan Masters*, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

<https://theme.npm.edu.tw/opendata/DigitImageSets.aspx?sNo=04014706>

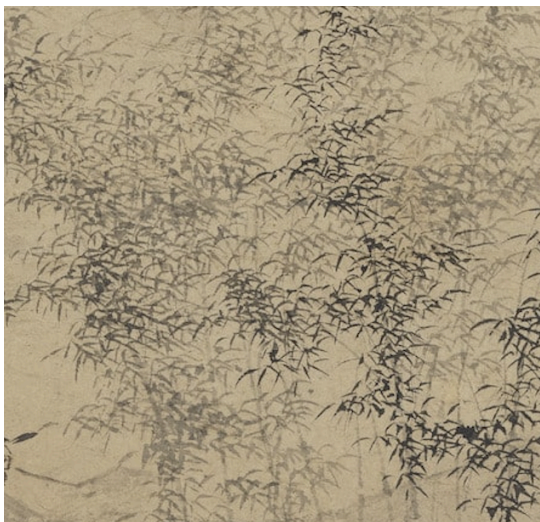


Fig. 6. Detail of *View by Bamboo and Streams*.



Fig. 7. Upper left: Fan Kuan, *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, ink and light color on silk, 206.3 x 103.3 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 8. Xia Gui, *Remote View of Streams and Hills*, handscroll, ink on paper, 46.5 x 889.1 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 9. Detail of Zhao Mengfu, *Zhuyuan mingquan tu* (Courtyard of Bamboo and Rippling Spring), Yuan Dynasty, hanging scroll; ink on silk, 95.8 cm x 58.5 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. <https://digitalarchive.npm.gov.tw/Painting/Content?pid=1253&Dept=P>. The bamboo behind the wall of the courtyard is almost invisible.



Fig. 10. Guan Daosheng, *A Homestead in a Bamboo Grove at the Foot of High Mountains*, dated 1296, Moriya Tadashi, Kyoto. In Osvald Sirén, *Chinese Painting*, vol. 7, Plate 25.

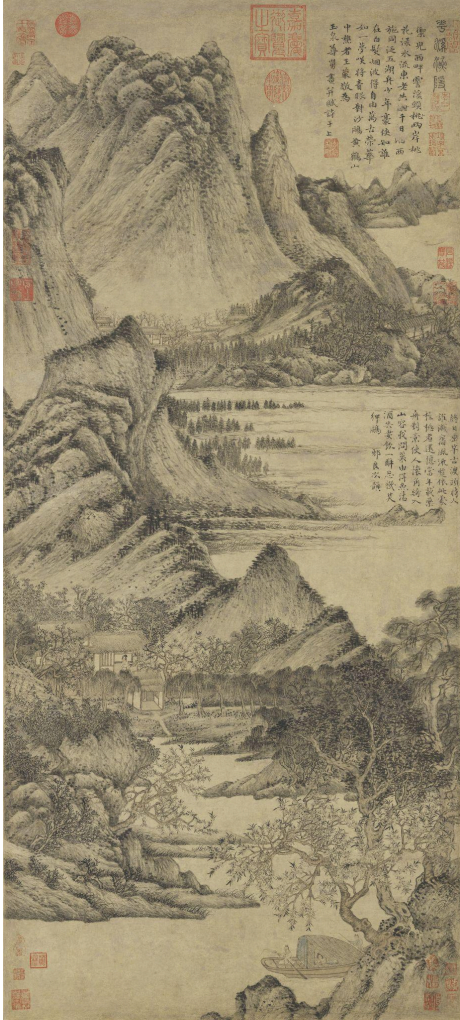


Fig. 11. Wen Zhengming, *Garden of the Inept Administrator*, 1551, album leaf, ink on paper, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39654?depts=6&what=Paintings&ft=bamboo&offset=160&rpp=40&pos=182>



Fig. 12. Ni Zan, *Rong xi zhai tu*, 1372, 74.7 cm x 35.5 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.  
<https://digitalarchive.npm.gov.tw/Painting/Content?pid=610&Dept=P>



Mid: Wang Meng (1308 - 1385), *Hua xi yu jin*, 129 cm x 58.3 cm, ink on paper, National Palace Museum, Taipei, <https://digitalarchive.npm.gov.tw/Painting/Content?pid=709&Dept=P>.