

山水

SHANSHUI

Homecoming

Thorsten Schirmer

Homecoming

By: Thorsten Schirmer

The pure landscape is by far the most important subject of East Asian painting. Its dominance began at the beginning of the Song Dynasty and continues to the present day. Landscape (chin. *Shanshui* = Mountain and Water) painting in East Asia traditionally does not depict real scenes, but rather symbolic or ideal landscapes that are intended to merge the cosmic primordial principle of Yin and Yang into a harmonious unity, with the mountain acting as a symbol for the rigid, masculine Yang and the water as a symbol for the yielding, feminine Yin.

During the 13th century Chinese Mountain and Water painting came under the influence of Chan Buddhism (ja. Zen) and developed a strong emphasis on the misty atmosphere typical of the lower reaches of the Jangzi river. However, the reason for the preferred depiction of such mist-shrouded sceneries lies deeper. From a Zen Buddhist point of view, the dissolution of form in the emptiness could be implemented excellently in this way. The theme of 'homecoming' is often part of these motifs.

The Cleveland Museum of Art houses such an example from the Southern Song Dynasty. The authorship is unclear, but it has an inscription of the monk Xuzhou Pudu 虚舟普度 (1199-1280), a Chan priest of the Wanshou temple near Hangzhou. There is another landscape painting in a Japanese private collection with an inscription of him, which has the same dimensions as the work presented. Presumably the two paintings originally formed a diptych or the wings of a triptych. The inscription reads:

You can step on the mossy stones,
Hold on to the branches.

The green stream accompanies the way home,
Return with singing in the spring moon.

石苔应可践，丛枝幸易攀。
青溪归路直，乘月夜歌还。¹

It seems impossible to say whether Xuzhou Pudu wrote just the inscription as a commentary for a painter friend or whether he is perhaps even the creator of the landscape himself. In the foreground, the scroll shows a densely tree-covered rock that protrudes directly into the picture from the lower right corner. Above it, a steep slope with individual trees rises from the mist-shrouded middle ground, at the foot of which a path leads down into the valley. Two tiny figures wandering down from the mountain preparing to move homewards. Both carry bundles slung over their shoulders. Directly above the steep slope, another tree-lined rock face becomes visible, which rises to the upper right corner. In the background, another rocky peak finally dawns out of the mist.

The scenery is arranged along the diagonal axis running from the top right to the bottom left, the upper part of the picture is shrouded in emptiness. The style is gentle and flowing, the ink dots and wide strokes applied moist, so that the entire composition remains almost free of outlines. Only the two figures are depicted in deep black, stenographically shortened strokes and attract the viewer's eye, although they look tiny in the context of the high rocks and room-filling emptiness. Man as a small part of the cosmos corresponds completely to the basic understanding of the Daoist and Buddhist

1 *Returning to Dongxi at Night* 《夜还东溪》 is a poem by Wang Jie 王绩 of the Tang Dynasty.

Anonymous, *Homecoming* 《归樵山水图》, China, ink on silk, 124.5 x 58.3, 13th Cent., Cleveland Museum of Art





Unkoku Toshitsu (d. 1668), *Homecoming*, ink on silk, 36.4 x 59.2, Museum for Arts and Crafts



Hamburg, Walter Gebhard Collection

image of man.

The moist painting technique of the picture, based on broad gradients and form-dissolving effects, is called "splashed ink" (chin. *Pomo* 泼墨, jap. *Hatsuboku*). In particular, a fragmentary scroll of the monk painter Yujian 玉润, who also worked in Hangzhou as a contemporary of Xuzhou Pudu, has made this technique famous. The Japanese monk painters of the 14th and 15th centuries sought to recreate his style, which was finally formulated by the Zen priest Sesshu Toyo 雪舟等楊 (1420-1506).²

We juxtapose the work from the Southern Song period with a Japanese interpretation of the 'homecoming' theme in the style of Unkoku Toshitsu's *Splashed Ink Landscape* (d. 1668). The Unkoku school, founded by Unkoku Togan 雲谷等顔 (1547-1618), invoked the legacy of Sesshu Toyo. According to tradition, Hatsuboku landscapes were logically part of the fixed repertoire of this dynasty of painters. Toshitsu was a student of Togan and is one of the largely unexplored representatives of the school. Only a few of his works have survived.

In his landscape painted on silk, we see a hiker crossing a shallow bridge between the banks of a river in the direction of an estate on the right edge of the picture. The tiny figure with hat and walking stick bends over and fights against the storm. The course of the river is lost in the empty painting ground towards the centre of the picture and opens up to the foreground into a lake or larger stream. At the bottom right, a group of rocks protrudes from the water surface indicated solely

² For Yujian and his influence on Japanese painting, see Schirmer, Thorsten: *Bergdorf im sich lichtenden Nebel. Yujian and the tradition of Japanese landscape painting in the Hatsuboku style*. Hanover, 2019



by the recessed silk, on which a small boat floats at the lower edge of the picture. Above the rocks, a group of trees sways in the wind, which tilts its crowns against the direction of the figure. This antagonistic effect adds a great deal of tension to the image. This is a frequently used compositional scheme in East Asian painting. Characteristic of the technique of "splashed ink" is the execution of the trees, which Toshitsu forms only from a few wet-on-wet ink stains. In doing so, he dispenses with the execution of the trunks and effectively manages to bring the otherwise almost non-representational-looking group of dots and ink washes into a concrete form with only a branch protruding from the upper crown of the tree. Toshitsu also cleverly places the top tree crown with the bare branch directly in the middle of the picture, drawing the viewer's gaze into a circular movement between the treetop, the left bank of the river and the figure on the bridge. Behind the trees, a property rises out of the mist, indicated by a house roof and a multi-storey building with a flagpole.

Both 'homecoming' versions are united by the atmospheric density of empty space, brought to life by means of a few, fleeting forms. In their sparse execution, reduced to the essence, they allow the viewer to identify with the tiny figures of the hikers. In this way, they evoke in us a feeling that we associate with the concepts of homecoming and arriving. Both works could be interpreted as romantically transfigured landscape scenes. From the perspective of Zen, however, the motif of 'homecoming' stands for much more. It is synonymous with the longing to attain enlightenment. Both paintings express this idea perfectly. Moreover: The scene of homecoming seems like an image of the famous mantra from the Heart Sutra: Form is nothing but emptiness, emptiness is nothing but form.



Men of intelligence and integrity indulge themselves in music, books and paintings by which replace miscellaneous desires.

Jing Hao

