

山水

SHANSHUI

The Art of Hu Jiang: Hu Jiang's Clouds

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Auspicious Rhythm of the Golden Mountain 《金山祥韵》 68x48 cm



Hu Jiang's Clouds

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(I)

To appreciate Hu Jiang's landscape paintings is to marvel at his clouds. Clouds appear in nearly all his landscapes. He does not paint clouds deliberately, yet under his brush, the sky always unfolds in rolling mists, and mountains are forever wrapped in haze and vapor. A simple blank space on the canvas becomes an ethereal, lofty realm of clouds, boundless in spirit. Without clouds, Hu Jiang's landscapes would lose their vitality; without clouds of infinite form and charm, his work would lack its unique aesthetic identity and rare artistic value.

(II)

Hu Jiang's clouds drift among layered peaks and ridges like lakes, rivers, waves, or tides. Works such as *Spring Dawn Over the Green Lake* 《绿湖春晓》, *Green Mountains Upon Mountains* 《江山叠翠图》, and *Warm Spring in the Apricot Grove* 《杏林春暖》 all make masterful use of clouds.

Clouds move with the mountains; mountains gain grandeur from clouds; waters grow elegant through clouds. In this way, Hu Jiang's landscapes reveal a three-dimensional aesthetic appeal.

Ethereal, delicate, expansive, and majestic — these are the essential aesthetic qualities of the clouds in Hu Jiang's art.

Hu Jiang uses clouds to fully express the idea of distance

Ancient Chinese landscape painting developed two sets of "Three Distances" 三远. First, Guo Xi 郭熙 stated in *The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams* 《林泉高致》: "A mountain has three distances: High distance: looking up from the foot to the summit; Deep distance: peering from the front to the back of the mountain; Level distance: viewing distant mountains from near ones."

Shortly after, Han Zhuo 韩拙 proposed a new "Three Distances" in *Complete Notes on Mountain and Water Painting* 《山水纯全集》: "Broad distance: near banks, wide waters, and remote mountains; Vague distance: misty wild mountains, hidden from sight; Secluded distance: extreme subtlety, faint and ethereal."

Hu Jiang's paintings embody high distance, level distance, broad distance — each work a different vision, exhausting all realms of "distance". And clouds are clearly the key element in expressing this aesthetic depth.

Hu Jiang uses clouds to capture the momentum of mountains

All things live by energy; where momentum stands, form stands. Hu Jiang builds momentum through clouds and mist, using emptiness to convey substance, uniting yin and yang in a harmonious whole.

Many of his paintings recall monumental works of cursive calligraphy. In scrolls stretching over ten meters, mountains roll endlessly, rosy clouds steam among the peaks, and mist surges through forest seas with surging momentum. Executed almost entirely in traditional ink, the spaces between black and white — especially the uninked blank areas — flow with vital energy. Mountains twist and rise like dancing dragons, their grandeur filling the canvas and stirring endless imagination in the viewer.

Hu Jiang uses clouds to portray the majesty of mountains

Lingnan landscapes are known for their delicate grace. Hu Jiang, a southern artist painting in a northern manner, infuses subtle elegance with robustness and strength. He textures trees, rocks, and mountains with repeated brushstrokes to achieve a profound, solid quality.

Compositionally, he often makes the lower part of the painting dense and solid, while the upper section opens into empty distance. This gives the whole canvas great tension, neither hollow nor vague. Clouds are his essential visual language.

Using emptiness to define or support substance, through tonal shifts and light-and-shadow contrast, the ethereal lightness of clouds sets off the rugged strength of mountains. Thus the moist, bright, and far-reaching landscapes of Lingnan become vast and majestic under his brush.

For these reasons, Hu Jiang's art has earned high praise from leading masters. Li Baolin, a disciple of Li Keran and acclaimed as "another peak of Li School landscape", commented: "He has mastered the most important soul of landscape painting — brush, ink, and artistic conception. He deeply observes and accurately expresses the moist character of the South, with a strong Lingnan style. His paintings are unified, powerful, and highly individual."

Chen Jinzhang, a leading figure of the Lingnan School, stated: "Within nature, mountains, rivers, clouds, and waters hold endless mystery. A painter who copies only form achieves little height. A true master seeks the pulse of mountains, the spirit of rivers, their rhythm and structure, contained within a small canvas. Even a single peak suggests endless ranges; even a small stretch of water conveys a vast tide." And Hu Jiang, he said, has truly grasped this essence of landscape.

“Hu Jiang sees mountains as magnificent and lofty. He consciously rejects the restrained elegance of small-scale scenes, pursuing instead a broad, expansive vision rooted in Chinese spirit and dignity. His depiction of clouds and water blends Chinese and Western techniques, finding a personal language between realism and abstraction.”

(III)

Ji Kang 嵇康 of the *Three Kingdoms* wrote: “Eyes follow the wild geese home; hands strum the five-stringed lute.” Gu Kaizhi 顾恺之, the Jin Dynasty painter, noted from an artistic perspective: “Strumming the lute is easy; painting the gaze following geese is hard.”

Tao Yuanming’s 陶渊明 famous line: “Picking chrysanthemums under the eastern fence, calmly I see the southern mountains.” Painting “picking chrysanthemums” is simple; capturing the calm serenity of “calmly seeing the mountains” is extremely difficult. A Tang poem evokes a similar mood: “The peony’s splendor shines like a drunken blush at dawn; its fragrance permeates the air, moistening the garments at night.” The first image can be well rendered by many painters, yet few can truly depict the “scent” in the second.

The former is mere form; the latter is spirit — and that is where the true challenge lies. As the saying goes: “When the song ends, the figure vanishes, transformed into flying clouds — this cannot be achieved by brush and ink alone.”

The wonder of Chinese art lies in the realm of infinite spirit beyond form. A great painter must rise beyond copying appearances to mastering spirit, using spirit to govern form.

Clouds are hard to fix in shape; by nature, they belong to the realm of spirit. Hu Jiang’s excellence lies precisely in this: while using light and dark ink to define solid mountains, trees, and rocks, he at the same time captures the very spirit of clouds, creating numerous outstanding works.

(IV)

No great art arises without roots. Hu Jiang’s clouds have deep foundations.

First, Hu Jiang’s clouds are rooted in tradition. Wang Xizhi 王羲之 said: “Describe the forms through technique, convey the spirit through emptiness. Link the void to the solid, join the broken parts as one, and discover the inner balance.”

Xiang Shanweng 香山翁 (Yun Xiang 恽向) noted: “Understand: ten thousand trees, not one stroke is tree; ten thousand mountains, not one stroke is mountain; ten thousand strokes, not one stroke is merely stroke. Presence is absence; absence is presence — this is transcendence.”

Dai Xi 戴熙 observed: “The realm of painting gathers like an oncoming storm, floats like clouds breathing in the sky.”

Guo Xi wrote: “If you want a mountain to be tall, do not paint it entirely — let mist lock its waist, and it becomes tall. If you want water to be far, do not paint it to the end — let it fade and twist, and it becomes far.”

Hu Jiang has truly understood these principles.

Canyon Clouds and Mist 《峡谷烟云》 68x68 cm





晴窗隱居
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From tradition, he grasped the way of emptiness and substance. Through clouds of varied forms, his landscapes achieve: motion within stillness, rhythm within movement, transcendence within the ordinary.

He also deeply absorbed the principle of black and white: "Value white as black; the unpainted spaces create wonderful realms." Treatise on Painting *Hua quan* 《画筌》 states: "To achieve emptiness is difficult; yet when forms are clearly defined, emptiness emerges. Spirit cannot be painted, but a true realm gives birth to the spiritual essence."

When appreciating Qi Baishi's paintings of shrimp, viewers perceive the creatures as vivid and alive. In Li Keran's landscapes, dense forests unfold. Though the sky is not painted, it manifests naturally; though the river is not depicted, water flows of its own accord. The blank space stands for sky, water, and snow alike.

Hu Jiang, too, excels in "knowing white, guarding black" 知白守黑. In his art, clouds assume vital importance, equal to brush and ink themselves.

His clouds further inherit the styles of the Song and Yuan dynasties: the floating mists of Li Sixun 李思训, he paints mountains, rivers, trees, and stones in a forceful, vigorous style, presenting both the allure of distant landscapes and a profound spiritual essence; the grandeur of Wang Ximeng's 王希孟 *Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* 《千里江山图》; the distance and emptiness of Ma Yuan 马远; the misty elegance of the Song masters: "Misty hills imbued with spirit, clouds vanishing with the flowing wind." Echoes of the "enigmatic distance" of the Two Mi 二米 and the misty *Jiangnan scenes* 《湘图》 of Dong Yuan 董源 can also be found in his work.

His roots were further strengthened by his teachers: Guan Shanyue, Li Xiongcai, Chen Jinzhang of the Lingnan School. Masters such as Li Baolin broadened his vision, adding vastness, depth, and majesty to his already moist, luminous style.

Ultimately, Hu Jiang's clouds are rooted in the actual landscapes of Dianbai, Maoming, in western Guangdong. Nature is the ultimate teacher. Raised by the sea, at the foot of Yanjing Ridge and Fushan Ridge, he absorbed the very essence of sky, earth, mountains, and clouds.

(V)

Hu Jiang's clouds are uniquely his own.

"Learn from nature; pain from the heart" 外师造化，中得心源. Shi Tao 石涛 said artists must "draw water from their own well", "When I paint this on paper, my heart enters the spring river. River blossoms unfold with me; river waters rise with me. The universe dwells in my heart; the world rests in my hand."

Hu Jiang understands that however deep one's traditional learning, one must eventually move beyond it. Great art requires a distinct personal language. Wisely, he found his signature: clouds.

As Chen Jinzhang noted: "He skillfully blends academic aesthetic sensibility with national craft taste, applying his understanding of calligraphic line and sculptural mass to the ink and brush of landscape painting."

His style is grand, his technique refined: spreading, arranging, washing, rendering, texturing, rubbing, dotting, line, plane, detail, and structure — all precise, meticulous, and exquisite.

Yet his most distinctive feature remains his clouds. As Hu Jiang himself said: "I emphasize sketching from life, focusing on the elements of landscape in nature. I integrate understanding of *fengshui* principles — yin and yang, opening and closing, vital energy, flow of *qi* — deepening my experience of natural atmosphere. I seek to fuse the true beauty of the natural world with subjective consciousness, creating a new spiritual imagery: a second nature that can be seen, travelled, and inhabited — a spiritual home for the soul."

"The heart gives birth to all methods; the heart ends, all methods end.", "Clouds drift idly from the hills." (Tao Yuanming)

An ethereal world requires an ethereal heart. Hu Jiang possesses just such a sensitive, aesthetic soul.

After years studying sculpture at the art academy, and long after middle age, he picked up the brush again, "conducting an experiment against fate". He dared to break the misconception that "Lingnan landscape lacks grandeur", expanding the depth and breadth of Lingnan's beauty.

If you look closely, Hu Jiang never actually paints clouds —yet in every painting, clouds surge and breathe.



Fushan in Early Spring 《福山初春》 45x360 cm

