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Gao Shuang

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The Evolution and Impact of the Compositional Forms in Sesshu's Paintings

Gao Shuang

Abstract

Chinese culture reached Japan through centuries of steady transmission, and Sesshu, the Japanese ink painter who traveled to Ming China to study, stands among the artists who carried it forward. He learned the techniques and ideas of Chinese painting while he was there, and of everything he studied, Chinese landscape painting stayed with him longest. His compositions give the surest measure of what he brought home, and this paper reads his pictures with that question in view: which of his compositional habits came out of Song and Yuan painting? After an account of his life and artistic background, the discussion moves through individual works and closes with the painters his art reached. Sesshu carried the techniques and spirit of Chinese painting back to Japan, helped build Japanese painting, and kept the two traditions in close contact. Reading his paintings closely makes his influence and standing in Japanese painting clearer, as well as the long exchange between the two countries.

Keywords:

Sesshu; Japanese ink painting; composition; impact

Over the long history of contact between China and Japan, Japan has been a major channel through which Chinese culture and art reached its people. Ambitious Japanese individuals have frequently traveled between China and Japan, introducing China's excellent traditional culture and art to Japan and integrating them with their local culture. The fields of Chinese and Japanese painting are closely connected and share many commonalities. As an outstanding representative of Japanese ink painting, Sesshu studied in China during the Ming Dynasty, "traveled almost everywhere, and became the first key figure from Japan to study in China." ¹Although his study time was short, he profoundly understood the essence of Chinese painting. During his time in China, Sesshu delved into the techniques and cultural concepts of ink painting, especially landscape paintings. He combined the composition and expressive

techniques of Chinese landscape painting with Japanese culture, forming a unique style. Through in-depth study, Sesshu mastered the skills and methods of Chinese painting, comprehended the philosophy and artistic spirit contained within, and had an important impact on cultural exchange between China and Japan.

1. Life and Works of Sesshu

Sesshu (figure 1) was an ink painter from Japan during the Ming Dynasty and is revered in Japan as the “sage of painting through the ages.” He was a revolutionary painter who had been a monk at the Shokoku-ji Temple in Japan and studied painting under Tensho Shubun, a famous landscape painter from the same temple. Shubun's painting philosophy greatly influenced Sesshu's painting aesthetic. Shubun admired the ink painting style of the Song and Yuan dynasties in China, especially the works of the Southern Song period. At that time, Shokoku-ji Temple was a well-known painting center in Japan, where Sesshu often imitated Chinese landscape paintings, showing great interest in the painting techniques and compositional forms of painters from the Northern and Southern Song periods. He adopted the style of the Southern Song Dynasty and studied in China during the Ming Dynasty, applying the style and skills of Song and Yuan dynasty ink paintings to his works to depict and express natural landscapes. He integrated real landscapes with his emotions and imagination, becoming a successor of the Song and Yuan painting style, making an important and indelible contribution to the spread of Chinese culture and art overseas, and playing a special role in the history of Sino-Japanese painting exchange.



Figure 1. *Sesshu*. 76.1×35.1cm, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

Sesshu's earliest paintings were mostly religious figures. They have a serious, devout atmosphere that reflects his interest in Buddhism and Zen. Over time he drew more widely on the painting styles of China's Tang, Song, and Yuan periods, and his work absorbed the techniques of Chinese landscape painting to depict natural scenery and everyday customs. In 1464 he left Shokoku-ji Temple and began to work on his own. His painting style gradually matured, becoming freer and bolder.

In 1467, Sesshu had the opportunity to visit China during the period of the Ming Dynasty. During this time, he completed many works, such as *Autumn Landscape*, *Winter Landscape*, and *Scenery of the Tang Land*. After returning to his country, Sesshu actively explored the creation of ink painting. He went into the mountains and waters to experience them and sketch, and created a group of outstanding representative works with a distinctive personal style that truly reflects the local landscape of Japan such as *Broken Ink Landscape*. In 1502, Sesshu created the *View of Ama-no-Hashidate*, considered the pinnacle of his artistic achievements, showing magnificent natural landscapes and exquisite compositional skills. Taken together, Sesshu's works have pioneering contributions in infusing ink painting with national sentiments and have profoundly impacted subsequent painters. Other representative works include *Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons*.

2. Two Different Artistic Periods of Sesshu's Painting

Sesshu's artistic development can be divided into two periods: studying in China and creating after returning to Japan.

2.1 Sesshu's Creation During the Study in China

During his study in China, Sesshu was deeply influenced by Chinese landscape painting. He studied Chinese painting techniques, aesthetic concepts, and cultural traditions in China, especially in-depth research on the works of landscape painters during the Song and Yuan dynasties. Most of his stay in China went into copying the older masters, and the copying taught him what mattered in Chinese painting. Once home, he gave up imitation. The expressive techniques he had learned were now put

at the service of Japanese subjects, his own country's scenery and traditions, and the landscapes he painted from that point carry a distinctly Japanese character. In composition, in the handling of ink, and in the ideas behind the pictures, his style was his own, and it helped steer the later course of Japanese landscape painting. The works of these two periods show different artistic styles and expressions, representing two important stages of Sesshu's artistic development.

According to *A History of Painting in Japan*,² Sesshu was sent by his father to the Hofukuji Temple in Soja, Okayama Prefecture, when he was eleven or twelve years old, becoming an apprentice monk. He then went to the Tofuku-ji Temple, one of the five mountains in Kyoto; the Shokoku-ji Temple where he studied under Shunrin Shuto, becoming his Dharma heir; and he learned ink painting from Tensho Shubun, the regular painter for the shogun's family at the temple. In 1467, at the age of 48, Sesshu experienced an important turning point in his life and went to Ming Dynasty China on a diplomatic ship organized by the Ouchi family. As a monk and painter, Sesshu learned much from the Chinese painting world.

Sesshu created a set of works called *Four Landscape Scrolls of the Seasons*, which includes four paintings depicting the four seasons with Japanese characteristics.³ These works use silk as the canvas, each is 149.0 centimeters long and 75.8 centimeters high, all without signatures or seals, and the theme of the works revolves around human activities in each season. The composition of *Four Landscape Scrolls of the Seasons (Spring)* (figure 2) adopts the “half-summer” method, with the focus of the scroll being on the middle ground and the partially obscured mountain on the right. The picture shows a progression from near to far, depicting the slope and dike. The middle ground is a small stream that has just thawed, flowing out slowly; the water flow is thin and continuous. The distant mountain is faintly visible in the morning fog, creating a distant, poetic, and vast space. In a detail of the scroll (figure

2-1), the scene depicts three willow trees with newly sprouting branches. In the composition, the huge rocks in the foreground are arranged in a “Z” shaped layout, and the gradually unfolding scroll depicts the branches swaying in the wind in the distance, growing to the left and right, with lush branches and leaves, echoing the foreground and background. The small stream flowing in the deep distance continues the folding branch composition popular in the Song Dynasty. The near, middle, and distant scenes are evenly distributed in the picture, using the unique perspective of Chinese painting, presenting a balanced and stable feeling.

Four Landscape Scrolls of the Seasons (Summer) (figure 3) adopts a panoramic, far-reaching composition, incorporating the far-reaching method of Song landscapes. The close-up view shows layered, receding boulders and slopes, an old tree stretching upwards, the clear spring rushing down and pouring into the pool, and the mountain paths twisting and turning from the left side of the middle ground into the picture, leading to the deep woods and pavilions. Out of these elements the rhythm of the painting is made. A traveler walks along, the master of the pavilion leans over his fence, a child stands holding a fan; the ink is kept quiet and the brushwork never loses confidence. The whole painting reveals a profound and clear mood, reflecting the refreshing and cool feeling of summer. As Guo Xi, a painter of the Northern Song Dynasty, said in *The Lofty Message of Forests and Streams*: “The landscape contains paths to traverse, sights to behold, places to explore, and spaces to inhabit that can be wandered in, and paintings that are up to this point are all of wonderful quality.”⁴



Figure 2. *Four Landscape Scrolls of the Seasons (Spring)*. 149.0×75.8cm, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

Figure 2-1. Detail of figure 2.

Figure 3. *Four Landscape Scrolls of the Seasons (Summer)*. 149.0×75.8cm, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

In *Autumn Landscape* (figure 4), Sesshu demonstrates his unique compositional style. This painting adopts a panoramic and far-reaching composition, skillfully integrating natural scenery into the picture. He uses bold brushstrokes to express the autumn scene, starting from the lower left corner of the painting with a curved path that leads the viewer deeper into the painting. In the distant view, the rolling hills, blue sky, white clouds and autumn leaves form a magnificent natural picture. The activities of the characters in the picture add life and emotion, making the whole picture more vivid and flavorful. Sesshu uses delicate ink and brush and compositional techniques to show the mood of the autumn landscape to the fullest, giving people visual and spiritual pleasure and leaving a profound impression. The artist draws a path that bends and extends along the water towards the center of the picture from the lower left corner of the picture, places two figures in conversation in the middle of the path as a focal point, and then draws the pavilion and the distant mountains, showing a solid and clear spatial depth. All the scenery is concentrated at the bottom of the picture, while the upper part is a vast space. This compositional technique corresponds to the *Winter*

Landscape (figure 5), painted around 1467-1471.



Figure 4. *Autumn Landscape*. 46.4×29.4cm, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

Figure 5. *Winter Landscape*. 46.4×29.4cm, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

The *Tang Tosa Landscapes Scroll* (figure 6) is a horizontal panoramic scroll painting by Sesshu depicting the landscape he encountered while traveling on the Xijin Ferry in Zhenjiang. This work adopts the compositional form of the traditional Chinese long scroll, a format that lets the viewer move through the picture free of fixed time and place. Large areas of blank paper open up a sweeping view of the Zhenjiang landscape. Da Chongguang, in his *Huaquan*, remarked “Emptiness is difficult to depict; reality becomes clear while the void is perceived; the divine is unpaintable, yet true scenes compel divine ones to emerge. When spatial arrangements conflict, painted areas often become superfluous; the interplay of emptiness and reality creates wondrous realms where unpainted spaces transform into exquisite scenes.”⁵ Sesshu looks for order and structure in the inked parts of the painting and for something more elusive in the empty spaces; for him the real wonder lies in what is left blank. His handling of negative space here shows how closely he had absorbed the Chinese landscape tradition, and it gives a good measure of his ability as a painter.



Figure 6. *Tang Tosa Landscapes Scroll*, Kyoto National Museum.

Tang Tosa Landscapes Scroll is a long scroll, a format common in Chinese landscape painting. A characteristic of scroll painting is that the scroll unfolds to show continuous scenes and episodes, giving the viewer a sense of continuity in time and space.⁶In this long scroll form, Sesshu has linked a number of sights and attractions that he saw during his travels in China.

The composition of a long scroll requires consideration of the transition and connection between scenes. In *Tang Tosa Landscapes Scroll*, Sesshu cleverly arranges the landscapes, architecture and characters so that each section of the scene stands alone while maintaining a natural connection with the preceding and following scenes. This layout gives the whole scroll a coherent narrative flow.

This work utilizes both near and far perspectives to convey a sense of spatial depth. In the foreground he puts detailed trees, boats, and people; in the middle ground, buildings, hillsides, and roads; and in the background, distant mountains and sky sketched in pale ink. The picture owes its depth and sense of space to this stacking of the three registers.

The habit of dotting a landscape with small human figures has a long history in Chinese painting, and Sesshu followed it without hesitation. Travelers, monks, fishermen, other small persons turn up everywhere in his pictures, each one placed so the eye has an activity to settle on and, with it, the start of a story. These figures also keep the image from reading as empty ground. The viewer has to find them before following them, and the search itself draws the eye deeper into the scenery.

Sesshu also draws rhythm out of contrast, setting still things against things in

motion. A boat drifts across the water in the foreground; the mountain behind it holds its place. The pairing fills out the composition, and the depth of the scene comes from the same opposition.

Sesshu painted *Tang Tosa Landscapes Scroll* during the years he studied in China, and it ranks among the best of his works from that period. Almost nothing in the picture escapes the influence of the Chinese landscape tradition. He took the format of the scroll itself, with a view that keeps unfolding as the paper is turned; he took the habit of stacking one distance behind another; the careful placement of small figures, the pairing of stillness and motion, and the use of ink from pale wash to nearly dry stroke were likewise habits he learned in China. Where he is original is in the joining: the parts are so well fitted that the whole sequence of scenes reads as one continuous landscape.

2.2 Sesshu's Artistic Activities after His Return to Japan

After returning to Japan, Sesshu visited mountains and rivers throughout the country and attached great importance to sketching. He actively devoted himself to creating ink paintings, combining the techniques he learned in China with local Japanese aesthetics, pursuing a painting style compatible with Japanese customs, and using realistic techniques to depict the scenery, creating many classic works. *View of Ama-no-Hashidate* (figure 7) is his representative work created after returning to Japan at the age of 80. This painting depicts the famous Japanese scenic spot Amanohashidate. It shows the panoramic view of this scenic spot from a bird's-eye perspective, full of vivid details and magnificent momentum. Almost none of the Zen monk painters of the Muromachi period had ever been to China. The images they painted in ink paintings came from Tang paintings, and the landscapes they painted were “imaginary landscapes” that “made paintings from paintings.” Sesshu directly witnessed the magnificent scenery in China and learned painting ideas. He based his paintings on Japanese scenery to eliminate the traditional Chinese landscape painting model and create unique Japanese landscape

paintings. In *View of Ama-no-Hashidate*, Sesshu cleverly incorporates the far-reaching method of painting landscapes used in the Song Dynasty. He uses flexible brushstrokes to depict Hashidate with moist, slightly green ink. In particular, to highlight the white sand of Amanohashidate, he applied the thickness of the sea ink and added the use of volumetric ink techniques in distant mountains to demonstrate Sesshu's unique realm based on Song paintings. This technique expresses the natural scenery of Japan. From this work, you can feel Sesshu's passion for Japanese nature and his efforts to understand it.



Figure 7. *View of Ama-no-Hashidate*, partial, ca. 1501, Kyoto National Museum.

In China, Sesshu studied on the front lines of the painting world and gained a deeper understanding of traditional Chinese painting theories. However, as he mentions in his colophon to his *Broken Ink Landscape* (figure 8), he was only partially satisfied with what he had learned in China. At the time, the Ming Dynasty was dominated by the Zhejiang School, a style that broke with the patterns of Song ink painting and tended to be more dynamic in composition and brushwork. Although Sesshu came into contact with, and learned from, the Zhejiang School style, it still needed to be fully harmonized with his Japanese aesthetic pursuits. His works, often painted without contour lines and with broad splashy strokes, still maintain a clear structure despite the use of ink in a more expressive manner. This demonstrates Sesshu's inherent sense of stability and structure in his paintings.



Figure 8. *Broken Ink Landscape*. 148.6×32.7cm, Kyoto National Museum.

Sesshu, a prominent figure in Muromachi period ink painting, pioneered a new direction. He renewed his appreciation for the greatness of Song Dynasty paintings, and at the same time he returned to the foundational practice of sketching from life. As a Zen monk, Sesshu built upon the Song Dynasty's court painting style and integrated Zen Buddhist philosophy with a deep understanding of nature, thereby refining the technique of ink painting. He put his spiritual world into his landscapes and gave them a distinctly Japanese aesthetic. *Birds and Flowers of Four Seasons* (figure 9) is one of the works he painted after returning to Japan. It shows how well he had mastered Chinese technique and how closely he knew Japan's natural scenery. Of all his flower-and-bird pictures, this one displays most plainly his command of composition and brushwork and the thought that went into the design.

Sesshu wanted the two sides of a screen to carry equal weight, but he would not balance one side by repeating the other. A tall tree might anchor one side; on the other he would set flying birds, or a clump of flowers and grass dense enough to answer the tree. The sides never match each other, yet the whole screen holds

steady.

Rhythm mattered to him as much as balance, and so did variety. He made up his mind about the position of every flower, the lean of every branch, the amount of open space around every cluster; from decisions of this kind the painting receives its flow. Gestures are often made to answer one another, as when a bird flies one way while a branch bends the other way. Two such movements cross the surface, and the eye follows the exchange.⁷

Every section of the screen shows the same attention to crowding and to emptiness. Flowers and birds are massed in tight clusters, then the silk is left bare, and the two states set up a rhythm between them. That alternation is what gives the surface its depth.

He sets motion against stillness here as well. Birds fly and water runs past flowers and grasses that stay where they are, so the calm of one part throws the activity of another into relief. The viewer's eye keeps crossing from the quiet stretches to the busy ones and back, and that movement is largely what holds attention.

The four sections of *Birds and Flowers of Four Seasons* are given one season apiece. Spring brings blossom and restless birds, summer green leaves and cool water. In autumn the foliage turns gold and the birds prepare to leave; in winter the branches stand bare and the birds grow quiet. Each season keeps its own mood, and out of the difference between the four moods comes the painting's emotional depth and its life.

Read as a whole, these choices come from a skilled painter whose method was his own.⁸ He kept the essentials of Chinese painting, ran them through a Japanese sense of design, and the flower-and-bird pictures that resulted look like no one else's.



Figure 9. *Birds and Flowers of Four Seasons*. Part 1, from the 1580s to the early 16th century, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

3. The Influence of Sesshu's Painting on Later Generations

Sesshu's stay in Ming China was short, and it was not an easy one. The language was strange to him and the customs unfamiliar; the crossing had been dangerous, the climate was new, and winning the confidence of Chinese painters cost him real effort. Yet what he saw and studied there stayed with him, and once he was home it redirected Japanese painting. He told younger painters to study nature directly and to treat landscape and the passing seasons with reverence, as a way of honoring nature and thinking about life. Later ages have valued him for the meaning of his pictures as much as for their brushwork, and his career marks a genuine turning point in the history of Japanese painting.

In Japan he went on working from nature, keeping the Chinese brush manner but choosing subjects of his own. Sketching out of doors fed real feeling into the finished pictures, and he turned out many realistic works that are unmistakably Japanese. No single painter did more for the growth of ink painting in Japan. He also trained students, and they carried his manner forward. Unkoku Togan took up and developed Sesshu's style; his *Landscape Screen* shows it clearly, and he was skilled in both ink landscape and figure painting, with works such as *Ink Landscape with Figure* and *Pavilion Landscape Screen*. Hasegawa Tōhaku, known for his spare, minimal style, also learned from Sesshu, as his *Pine Trees Screen* shows. Many other painters drew on Sesshu, and together they kept his art alive and kept

Japanese painting moving.

Sesshu studied Chinese culture closely and did much to spread it in Japan, which makes him an important figure in the history of exchange between the two countries. The critic Koguchi Seiichiro put it well: “What makes Sesshu Sesshu is his ability to fully assimilate the Song and Yuan painting styles, adhering to their principles in every line and stroke.”⁹Sesshu spent his life fitting ink painting to Japanese circumstances and, in doing so, kept the art of China and Japan in conversation.

Sesshu also linked the two painting traditions, and his influence reached back to China. Chinese painters studied his landscapes for their style and depth and found in them a source for their own work. The two traditions have always borrowed from each other. Chinese painting spread to Japan and grew into something new there, and Japanese painters learned Chinese methods while adding a character of their own. That exchange continues today and keeps both countries' art moving. Sesshu's style and working methods shaped the painters who came after him; they set the ground for Japanese landscape painting, and they helped bring Chinese literati painting together with Japanese art. His place in the development of Japanese painting is central.

Henan University

Gao Shuang (1995-) is a master's degree graduate student at Henan University, majoring in the direction of Chinese landscape painting.

Editor: Yao Xiao

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雪舟繪畫的構圖形式演變及其影響

高爽

摘要：在中日文化交流史上，中國對日本的文化傳播起著重要作用。其中，日本水墨畫家雪舟是一位突出的代表，他在明代曾到中國留學，學習中國繪畫的技法和理念，深受中國山水畫的影響。本文以雪舟的繪畫構圖形式為切入點，對其對中國畫的借鑒進行了梳理。首先介紹了雪舟的生平和藝術背景，然後通過分析他的繪畫作品，探討了他的構圖手法和對宋元繪畫的借鑒。最後，文章闡述了雪舟的繪畫對後世的深遠影響，他將中國繪畫的技法和精神傳播到日本，為日本繪畫的發展做出了重要貢獻，同時也促進了中日兩國繪畫交流的發展。通過對雪舟繪畫的分析和探討，可以更深入地瞭解他對日本繪畫藝術的影響和地位，以及中日兩國繪畫傳統的交流與發展。

關鍵字：雪舟；日本水墨畫；構圖；影響