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THE WORLD OF *THINGS* IN CHEN HONGSHOU'S (1598/9-1652) PAINTINGS

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how material objects mediated personal experiences, artistic innovation, intellectual discourses, and cultural shifts in early modern China through the depictions of objects in Chen Hongshou (1598/9-1652)'s paintings. While primarily recognized for his figurative works both in his own time and throughout history, Chen's profound interest in material artifacts is manifested in his persistent portrayals of objects. Previous scholarship has interpreted these object images as stylistic reflections of aesthetic trends or as footnotes to the often obscured narratives in his figurative compositions. Yet these studies could not explain the artist's obsession with objects in the first place, nor could they fully account for the enduring impact and unique immediacy of these motifs. Foregrounding the agentic roles of material artifacts and their representations in Chen's artistic practice, this dissertation reveals that the artist deliberately engaged with objects to construct pictorial narratives, evoke sensations, convey emotions, and critically reflect upon the material world as an artist, scholar, craftsman, and practicing Buddhist during a period of social and political transition.

The dissertation engages theoretical issues centered on relationships among artifact, image, text, and idea, and between object and subject. It argues that Chen Hongshou's depictions not only reflected existing ideas about objects found in texts and object designs, but also constructed new discourses surrounding objects and materiality through visual means. Chen's visual expositions function on two levels: they elucidate the objects depicted while revealing and problematizing both the material reality of the painting medium and painting's nature as artifice. This study thus complicates our understanding of how ideas about objects—including artworks as objects—can be formulated, expressed, and enacted through images, while teasing out interrelated histories of painting and material culture.

A throughline of this dissertation is the affective and agentive power of everyday objects as manifested through their pictorial representations. In Chen Hongshou's works, motifs of objects not only function within the pictorial space by assuming critical compositional and narrative roles, but also assert their power beyond the pictorial frames. These commonplace objects, though culturally overdetermined, cannot be reduced to mere symbols; rather, they actively provoke viewers' own experiences of similar objects as three-dimensional, material entities. Tangible yet maintaining an interpretive openness, these pictures guide viewers across time and space to interrogate their relationships with objects and discover truths about their own material surroundings. Equally affected by and acutely aware of the power of objects mediated through his ink and brush, Chen constantly explored new expressions and techniques to capture the objects' inherent vitality, while using these depictions to probe the complex interplay among the materiality of art creation, the subjectivity of the artist, and the agency of art.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT III

LIST OF FIGURES VII

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT XIV

INTRODUCTION: MEDIATING THE IMMEDIATE 1

CHAPTER 1 DOUBLE MATERIALITY 26

- POETIC PICTURES 33
- ENIGMATIC MATERIALS 42
- (IN)TANGIBLE SURFACES 56
- MOVING PAINTINGS 70
- DOUBLE MATERIALITY 78

CHAPTER 2 OBJECTS OF INTERIORITY 84

- ATMOSPHERIC ENSEMBLES 89
- MELANCHOLIC REMNANTS 104
- PENSIVE VESSELS 118
- OBJECTS OF INTERIORITY 131

CHAPTER 3 THE PAINTER'S ROCKS 138

- REINVENTING TRADITIONS 141
- UNBOUND MATTERS 155
- THE ARTIST AND HIS ROCKS 168
- ARTIFICE OF NATURE 183

CHAPTER 4 ANIMATING STATUES 190

IMAGE/PRESENCE 197

ELUSIVE MATERIALITY 211

SYNCHRONIZED BODIES 223

UNSETTLING OBJECTS 235

CODA 238

BIBLIOGRAPHY 243

FIGURES 266

INTRODUCTION 266

CHAPTER 1 269

CHAPTER 2 286

CHAPTER 3 300

CHAPTER 4 316

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 0.1 Chen Hongshou, self-portrait from *Figures, Flowers, and Landscapes*, c. 1633, ink and color on silk, 22.2 x 21.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 266

Figure 0.2 Pages from Lü Dalin, *Kaogu tu*, first printed in 1299, Siku quanshu edition, vol. 1, 1-4..... 267

Figure 0.3 Attributed to Yao Yuehua, *Autumn Flowers in Vase*, Southern Song Dynasty (1120-1279), round fan painting mounted as album leaf, ink and colors on silk, 26.4 x 26.6 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing. 267

Figure 0.4 Chen Hongshou, *Lofty Scholar*, c. 1645, Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 118.6 x 51 cm. Shanghai Museum. 268

Figure 1.1 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*, c.1619, album leaf, ink on paper, 17.8 x 17.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 269

Figure 1.2 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*. 270

Figure 1.3 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*. 271

Figure 1.4 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*. 272

Figure 1.5 Illustrations in *Fang shi mopu*, 1589, woodblock print..... 273

Figure 1.6 Page from *Luoxian biangu jianpu*, 1626, woodblock print. 273

Figure 1.7 Pages from *Shizhu zhai jianpu*, 1644, reprinted in 1952, woodblock print..... 274

Figure 1.8 Illustrations in *Chengshi moyuan*, 1605, woodblock prints. 274

Figure 1.9 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Landscapes, Figures, and Flowers*, 1622, album leaf, ink on paper, image 22.2 x 9.2 cm, inscriptions 22.2 x 9.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 275

Figure 1.10 Lan Ying, *Landscape after Zhang Sengyou*, Ming Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 177 x 92 cm. Wuxi Museum. 276

Figure 1.11 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Landscapes, Figures, and Flowers*. 276

Figure 1.12 Chen Hongshou, *Thinking of Poems in the Shadow of a Pine Tree*, 1643, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk,102 x 50 cm. Wuxi Museum 277

Figure 1.13 Detail of *Lofty Scholar*. 277

Figure 1.14 Attributed to Gu Kaizhi, section of *The Admonitions of the Court Instructress*, probably fifth–sixth century copy, handscroll, ink and colors on silk. The British Museum..... 278

Figure 1.15 Su Hanchen, *Lady at Her Dressing Table in a Garden*, Southern Song dynasty, mid-12th century, fan painting mounted as album leaf, ink, color, and gold on silk, 25.2 x 26.7 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 278

Figure 1.16 Chen Hongshou, *Lady Looking into a Mirror*, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 103.5 x 43.2 cm. Tsinghua University Art Museum, Beijing. 279

Figure 1.17 Illustration of the "Xiezhen" scene in *The Peony Pavilion*, 1617, woodblock print, Qifeng caotang edition. 279

Figure 1.18 Pages from *The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual*, 18th century, woodblock print. 280

Figure 1.19 Wang Shishen, *The Mirrored Reflection of the Moon in Wate*r, Qing Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 119.5 x 53.5 cm. Guangdong Municipal Museum. 280

Figure 1.20 Mural with images of birds and basin in a garden setting in the tomb of Princess Tang'an, Xi'an, Shaanxi. After Chen and Ma, "Xi'an wangjiafen tangdai tang'angongzhu mu," Fig. 12. 281

Figure 1.21 Signed by Huang Quan, *Golden Basin and Pigeon*, likely a Ming copy of a Five Dynasties painting, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 153.7 x 91 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. 281

Figure 1.22 22 Zhu Zhanji, *Golden Basin and Pigeon*, Ming Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink and paper on silk, 86.2 x 47 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei..... 282

Figure 1.23 Fu Zhongzheng, *Pottery Basin and Pigeon,* Qing Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink and color in silk, 157 x 68.5 cm. Tianjin shi wenhua ju wenwu chu. 282

Figure 1.24 Chen Hongshou, *Inclining Woman with Incense Burner*, c. 1639, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 129 x 47.3 cm. Shanghai Museum. 283

Figure 1.25 Chen Hongshou, *Lady Swatting a Butterfly*, c. 1650, folding fan mounted as album leaf, ink and color on gold paper. Suzhou Museum. 284

Figure 1.26 Illustration for *Romance of the Western Chamber*, Min Qiji edition,1640, wood-block print. Cologne: Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst Collection. 284

Figure 1.27 Chen Hongshou, *Ladies Swatting a Butterfly*, 1650, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 93.7 x 45.7 cm. Shanghai Museum. 285

Figure 1.28 Detail of one leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*. 285

Figure 2.1 Johannes Vermeer, *Music Lesson*, c. 1662-1665, oil on canvas, 74.6 × 64.1 cm. London, Royal Collection. 286

Figure 2.2 Chen Hongshou, *Drying Hair*, Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 58.1 x 105 cm. Chongqing Museum. 287

Figure 2.3 Chen Hongshou, *Drinking and Reading*, hanging scroll, ink and paper on silk, 100.8 x 49.4 cm. Shanghai Museum. 288

Figure 2.4 A woodblock print from *Yushu renfeng* that illustrates how *shufa guan* was worn under a semi-transparent head cap. After Sun Ji, "Mingdai de shufa guan, (di) ji yu toumian," in *Wenwu* 2001(07):62-83, Fig. 4.3 289

Figure 2.5 Chen Hongshou, "Nangyou" leaf from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*, 1651, album leaf, ink and color on paper, 21.4 x 29.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. 289

Figure 2.6 Chen Hongshou, "Jiaoshu" from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion.* 290

Figure 2.7 Chen Hongshou, "Shuju" from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*. 290

Figure 2.8 Detail of *Drying Hair*. 291

Figure 2.9 Chen Hongshou, "Huanyan" from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*. 291

Figure 2.10 Detail of "Nangyou" from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion* 292

Figure 2.11 Lan Ying and Xu Tai, *Washing the Inkstone*, 1659, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper. Tianjin Museu. 292

Figure 2.12 Detail of Jin Tingbiao, *Washing Inkstones and Making Tea*, handscroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei. 293

Figure 2.13 Detail of Du Jin, *Enjoying Antiques*, hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 126.1 x 187 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei. 293

Figure 2.14 Inkstone with inscriptions by Chen Hongshou and others (the image on the right shows Chen Hongshou's inscription with his signature). Shanghai Museum. 294

Figure 2.15 Chen Hongshou, "Fang Zhuang" from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion.* 294

Figure 2.16 Chen Hongshou, "Pinfan" from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*. 295

Figure 2.17 Chen Hongshou, *Pondering the Plum Blossoms*, 1649, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 125.2 x 58cm. Nanjing Museum. 296

Figure 2.18 Chen Hongshou, *He Tianzhang Amid Pleasures*, ink and color on silk, 25 x 163 cm. Suzhou Museum..... 297

Figure 2.19 Chen Hongshou, *Tang Scholar Seeking a Line of Verse*, c. 1651, ink and color on paper, 24.5 x 32 cm. Heilongjiang Provincial Museum. 297

Figure 2.20 Detail of the painting surface in Chen Hongshou, *Lofty Scholar*. 298

Figure 2.21 Detail of the flower vase in Chen Hongshou, *Lofty Scholar*. 298

Figure 2.22 Attributed to Chen Hongshou with the painter's seal, *Flowers Springing from a Dreaming Brush*, album leaf, ink and color on silk, 18.6 x16 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. 299

Figure 3.1 Lan Ying, *Red Friend*, 17th century, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 148.9 x 47.3 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 300

Figure 3.2 Ni Yuanlu, selected album leaves from *Friendship in Stone*, 1640, album leaf, ink and color on satin, each leaf 21.7 x 20.2 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. 301

Figure 3.3 Chen Hongshou, *Elegant Gathering*, c. 1646-47, handscroll, ink on paper, 29.8 x 98.4 cm. Shanghai Museum. 301

Figure 3.4 (left to right a-d) Chen Hongshou, album leaves from *Landscapes, Figures, and Flowers.* 302

Figure 3.5 Unidentified artist, after *Ni Zan's Painting Manual*, dated 1350, leaf 7, "Angular Rocks," album, ink on paper, each leaf 23.6 x 14.2 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. 302

Figure 3.6 Lan Ying, "Autumn Mountains Stretching Peacefully into the Distance," in *Landscapes after Ancient Masters Album*, Ming Dynasty, album leaf, ink on paper, 31.4 x 33.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. 303

Figure 3.7 Lan Ying, *Scroll of an Autumn Bird Resisting Frost*, Ming Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink on silk, 163.9 x 62.3 cm. Shanghai Museum. 303

Figure 3.8 Chen Hongshou, album leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*. 304

Figure 3.9 Detail of Lan Ying, *White Clouds and Red Trees*, 1658, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 189.4 x 48 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. 304

Figure 3.10 Detail of Wang Meng, *Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains*, dated 1366, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 140 x 42.2 cm. Shanghai Museum. 305

Figure 3.11 Wang Meng, *Layered Ridges and Deep Forests*, 1344, hanging scroll, ink on silk, 64.5 x 38.6 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. 305

Figure 3.12 (Left) Chen Hongshou, *Day-lilies, Bamboo and Rocks*, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 107.5 x 42.5 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. (Right) Detail of Day-lilies, Bamboo and Rock. 306

Figure 3.13 Chen Hongshou, *Bamboo, Rock, and Day-lilies*, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 113.3 x 48 m. Nanjing Museum. 306

Figure 3.14 Chen Hongshou, *Plum Branch, Rock and Butterflies*, c. 1639, handscroll, ink on gold paper, 123 x 37.9cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. 307

Figure 3.15 Comparison of details of the rock and the butterflies from *Plum Branch, Rock and Butterflies*. 307

Figure 3.16 Comparison of details of the plum branch (left),the second rock (middle), and the first rock (right) from *Plum Branch, Rock and Butterflies* 307

Figure 3.17 Detail of *Plum Branch, Rock and Butterflies* showing the gold-flecked paper..... 308

Figure 3.18 Chen Hongshou, "Ancient Plum," album leaf from *Miscellaneous Paintings of Chen Hongshou*, c. 1645, ink and color on paper, 24.3 x 31.1cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. 308

Figure 3.19 Su Shi, *Old Tree, Rock, and Bamboo*, Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), undated, section of a handscroll, ink on paper, 26.3 x 50 cm (painting only). Private collection. Source: Christie's. 309

Figure 3.20 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Landscapes and Flowers*, first half of the 17th century, one of twelve folding fans mounted as album leaves, ink and color on gold paper, 24.1 x 52.1 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 309

Figure 3.21 Chen Hongshou, "Xingshi" from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*. 310

Figure 3.22 Detail of "Xingshi" from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*..... 310

Figure 3.23 Chen Hongshou, "Piaoxiang" from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*. 311

Figure 3.24 Chen Hongshou, "Tao Yuanming," leaf from *Venerating Antiquity*, 1653, woodblock print, ink on paper, National Library of China, Beijing. 311

Figure 3.25 Chen Hongshou, "Scholar with Staff and Brush" in *Paintings after Ancient Masters*, album leaf, ink and color on silk, 30.2 x 26.7 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art. 312

Figure 3.26 Chen Hongshou, "Portrait of Tao Yuanming" in *Paintings after Ancient Masters*. 313

Figure 3.27 Chen Hongshou, "A Lady" in *Paintings after Ancient Masters*. 313

Figure 3.28 Attributed to Li Gonglin, *Elegant Gathering of the Western Garden*, handscroll, ink on paper, 47.2 x 1104.3 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. 314

Figure 3.29 "Inscribing on a Wall," in *Sancai tuhui*, 1609, woodblock print. 314

Figure 3.30 Chen Hongshou, "Complete Scene of Figures below Rocks," leaf from an album, ink and color on paper. Shanghai Museum 315

Figure 3.31 Detail of "Scholar with Staff and Brush" in *Paintings after Ancient Masters*. 315

Figure 4.1 Chen Hongshou, *Bodhisattva Guanyin*, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing. 316

Figure 4.2 Detail of *Elegant Gathering*. 317

Figure 4.3 Chen Hongshou, *Children Worshiping the Buddha*, c. 1650, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 150 x 67.3 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. 318

Figure 4.4 Chen Hongshou, "Meditation" scene from *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*, 1649, handscroll, ink and color on silk, 31 x 289.5 cm. Drenowatz Collection, Rietberg Museum, Zurich. 319

Figure 4.5 Illustrations to *Xinjuan gujin mingju liuzhiji: Qiannü lihun*, woodblock prints on paper, 17th century. From *Zhongguo fojiao banhuan quanji*, vol. 37, pp. 91 and 92. ... 319

Figure 4.6 Details of the Boddhisatva statue in *Elegant Gathering*. 320

Figure 4.7 *Lotus Sutra*, woodblock print on paper, 1696. From *Zhongguo banhua quanji*, vol. 1, fig. 290. 320

Figure 4.8 Illustration to *Xihu erji*, woodblock print on paper, Ming Dynasty, 17th century, From *Zhongguo banhua quanji*, vol. 4, fig. 203. 321

Figure 4.9 Illustration for *Shishi yuanliu yinghua shiji*, woodblock print on paper, Ming Dynasty. From *Zhongguo fojiao banhuan quanji*, vol. 33, p. 135. 321

Figure 4.10 Frontispiece to *Foshuo yueshang nüjing*, 1640, woodblock print on paper. From *Zhongguo fojiao banhuan quanji*, vol. 37, p. 128. 322

Figure 4.11 *Cibei daochang shifa bianxiang tu*, Ming Dynasty, woodblock print on paper. From *Zhongguo fojiao banhuan quanji*, vol. 37, p. 148. 322

Figure 4.12 Frontispiece to *Lotus Sutra* (detail), Song dynasty, woodblock print on paper. From *Zhongguo banhua shi tulu*, vol. 1, p. 6. 323

Figure 4.13 Illustration in *Shishi yuanliu yinghua shiji,* 1486, woodblock print and hand-colored on paper. Library of Congress Rare Book Collection, Washington D.C. 323

Figure 4.14 Attributed to Su Hanchen, *A Group of Children at Play*, 17-19th century, round fan mounted as an album leaf, ink and color on silk, 21.6 × 21.6 cm (unframed). Yale University Art Museum. 324

Figure 4.15 Faces of the Buddha and a boy in *Children Worshipping the Buddha*. 324

Figure 4.16 Left to right: reproductions of *Children Worshipping the Buddha* from the *Zhonghua zhenbao guan* website, *Chen Hongshou quanji*, and the Palace Museum website. Composite by the author. 325

Figure 4.17 The chattra of Baochu Pagoda in Hangzhou. Recast in 1997 according to the Ming original. 325

Figure 4.18 Detail of *Children Worshipping the Buddha*. 326

Figure 4.19 Detail of *Children Worshipping the Buddha* seen from two digital reproductions. Composite by the author. 326

Figure 4.20 "The Knowledgeable Old Lady" scene from *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*. 327

Figure 4.21 "Reciting Poetry while Drunk" scene from *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*. 327

Figure 4.22 "Talking Music" scene from *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*. 327

Figure 4.23 Detail of the "Meditation" scene in *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*..... 328

Figure 4.24 *Curly-Haired Youth*, Tang dynasty, first half of 8th century, earthenware with green lead glaze. Art Institute of Chicago. 328

Figure 4.25 Close-up details of the colossal Vairocana statue in Fengxian Shrine, Longmen Cave, Luoyang. 329

Figure 4.26 The repeated hand gestures in the "Meditation" scene in *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*..... 329

Figure 4.27 (Left) *Portrait of the Renzong of Song Dynasty*, Song Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink and paper on silk, 188.5 x 128.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei; (Right) *Portrait of Confucius*, leaf from *Zhisheng xianxian banshen xiang*, album leaf, ink and color on paper, 33.3 x 24.3 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. 330

Figure 4.28 Carved images on Xingzhi Stele at Kaiyuan Temple in Xingtai, Yuan Dynasty, ink Rubbing. Central Academy of Fine Arts Library, Beijing..... 330

Figure 4.29 *Portrait of Confucius*, first half of 12th century, ink rubbing. Confucius Temple in Quzhou. 331

Figure 4.30 Chen Hongshou, *Transmitting the Classics* (left) and its detail (right), c. 1649. hangings scroll, ink and color on silk. Wenzhou Museum. 331

Figure 4.31 Chen Hongshou, *Lady Xuanwen Giving Instruction on the Rites of Zhou*, 1638, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 172.8 x 55.7 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art. 332

Figure 4.32 Chen Hongshou, *Appreciating a Painting* (left) and its detail (right), c. 1647, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing. 332

Figure 4.33 Chen Hongshou, *Child Playing*, c. 1650, one of two album leaves framed together into a hanging scroll, ink on paper, 11.5 x 21.3 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 333

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Introduction: Mediating the Immediate

This is a dissertation about the sensorial, intellectual, and emotional experiences surrounding material things that profoundly inform and shape our very existence as human beings. More specifically, it is a study of the intimate and immediate encounters with made artifacts—encounters that are, nevertheless, simultaneously personal and universal, and can be mediated across media and transcend the boundary of its own historical moment. The protagonist of my study is Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬 (1598/9-1652),[1] whom James Cahill deemed the painter who "dominate[d] late Ming figure painting" and one of the two "most original, most complex, altogether greatest masters of the period."[2] At once a scholar, painter, print designer, and Buddhist practitioner, Chen narrated and reflected upon his own engagements with various kinds of material artifacts in his art, and perpetually invites his viewers to immerse themselves in and ponder the material world of seventeenth-century China—as well as of their own—through his painterly craft.

A rare self-portrait of the artist, made around 1633 and now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, offers us a vignette of Chen Hongshou's physical and mental entanglement with material artifacts—and his artistic approaches to them (Fig. 0.1).[3] In this small album leaf, the sorrowful image of the artist, robes loosened and barely maintaining his composure, sits on banana leaves and steadies himself against a stack of books. The large wine

[1] Chen Hongshou's birth year remains contested among scholars. While many believe that Chen was born in 1599, some scholars contend it was more likely to be 1598. Due to this unsettled debate, I reference his birth as 1598/9. A discussion of Chen's birth date can be found in Huang Yongquan 黃湧泉, *Chen hongshou nianpu* 陳洪綬年譜 (A Chronicle of Chen Hongshou's Life) (Beijing: renmin meishu chuban she, 1960), 141-4.
[2] James Cahill, *The Distant Mountains: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Dynasty*, 1570-1644 (New York: Weatherhill, 1982), 244. The other one is Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1639), although his brilliance mainly manifested in his landscape paintings.
[3] Wan-go Weng 翁萬戈, *Chen Hongshou de yishu* 陳洪綬的藝術 (The Art of Chen Hongshou) (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chuban she, 2021), 145.

jar with its lid askew, and the small wine cup placed conveniently close to the figure's hand, reveal the hidden narrative that he has been drinking prior to this moment. The slightly crooked body of the jar and the tilted cup precariously balancing between the arm and the books further contribute to the composition's overall sense of instability—details that externalize the figure's vulnerable physical and mental state of intoxication. One's attention, however, may be drawn to the intricate pattern and the meticulously depicted clasps on the book sleeve, or the skillful rendering of the "Buddha's finger" citrus on the tall plate. While showcasing the painter's masterful command in capturing a variety of textures and materials, these pictorial elements stand in stark contrast with the spontaneous silhouettes and simple coloring of the drinking utensils. Their freewheeling configuration, however, grants these objects a strong sense of animation, as if they were swaying in sympathy with the tipsy figure.

Chen Hongshou left a long inscription on the painting, detailing his emotional dismay upon hearing the devastating news that the Ming forces had once again lost several thousand *li* of territory to the Manchus. While providing a context for the figure's drunkenness, nowhere in the text does it mention anything about the objects the painter so meticulously and thoughtfully portrayed in the picture. In fact, in *Collected Writings from the Baolun Studio* (*Baolun tang ji* 寶綸堂集), a voluminous posthumous anthology of Chen's writings compiled by the artist's son Chen Zi 陳字 (1634-1711), few texts directly address Chen's interactions with material artifacts.[4] The artist's long-term interest in and profound thinking about things and their materiality, instead, is evidenced through his persistent and attentive depictions of objects—

[4] The most recent critical edition of *Baolun tangji* is included in the complete works of Chen Hongshou edited by Wu Gan. It is based on the Guangxu-era reprint of the anthology, supplemented with material from the Harvard Library edition printed around the same time. See Wu Gan 吳敢 ed., *Chen Hongshou ji* 陳洪綬集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2012). This edition, being the more recent and complete, is the primary edition referenced throughout this dissertation.

mainly everyday objects that he and his contemporaries would have been very familiar with, such as drinking vessels, vases, mirrors, fans, basins, inkstones, scholarly rocks, and religious figurines. Besides Chen's early attempts in depicting standalone groups of objects in almost still life-like fashion, these objects most commonly appear alongside human figures that Chen Hongshou has always been best known for, even though these figures often appear within otherwise minimalist settings.[5]

But Chen Hongshou's objects rarely disappear into the backdrop. Set off from plain backgrounds and portrayed with rich and sometimes perplexing details, these inanimate things complement the figural tableaus yet firmly assert their thingly presence. In many cases, such as the album leaf discussed above, the human character directs our attention to the artifacts by gazing at, touching, or handling them. That is to say, even in Chen's figural works, quite uniquely, these objects function as more than mere footnotes to the human subjects, but themselves become focal points within their respective compositions.[6] This dissertation aims, in

[5] Chen Hongshou has been primarily known as a figure painter both in the eyes of his contemporaries and of modern scholars. As a result, most studies have been devoted to understanding the styles, subject matters and sociohistorical contexts of his figurative paintings and prints, and to uncovering the life and experiences of the painter through these works. Such studies include: Kohara Hironobu 小原宏信, "Chin Koju Shiron" 陳洪綬試論 (An Essay on the Works of Chen Hongshou), in *Bijutsushi* 美術史 62(1966): 56-70 and 64 (1967): 113-28; Cahill, *The Distant Mountains,* 244-66; Julia M. White ed,, *Repentant Monk: Illusion and Disillusion in the Art of Chen Hongshou* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017); and Tamara Heimarck Bentley, *The Figurative Works of Chen Hongshou (1599-1652): Authentic Voices/Expanding Markets* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

[6] Many scholars have considered the narrative and metaphorical connotations of these objects—how they contribute to our interpretations of the figures. Some important discussions on this topic include: Cahill, *The Distant Mountains*, 244-66; Wang Cheng-hua 王正華, "Nüren, wupin, yu ganguan yuwang: Chen Hongshou wanqi renwu hua zhong jaingnan wenhua de chengcian" 女人, 物品, 與感官慾望: 陳洪綬晚期人物畫中江南文化的呈現 (The Late-Ming Culture of Sensibility: Women and Objects in Ch'en Hung-shou's Late Figure Painting, 1645-1652), in *Jindai zhongguo funü shi yanjiu* 中國近代婦女史研究, 10 (2002): 1-57; Zhou Hao 周顥, "Kaogu tu ji leisi gu qiwu tupu yu chen hongshou de huihua zaoxing" 考古圖及類似古器物圖譜與陳洪綬的繪畫造型 (*Kaogu tu*, other catalogs ancient artifacts, and Chen Hongshou's artistic styles), in *Guohua jia*, vol. 5(2006): 62-5; Wu Hung 巫鴻, "Gu yu jin de xieshang: Chen Hongshou de nüxing shijie" 古與今的協商: 陳洪綬的女性世界 (Negotiating Past and Present: Chen Hongshou's World of Women) in *Zhongguo huihua zhong de nüxing kongjian* 中國繪畫中的"女性空間" (Feminine Space in Chinese Painting) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2019), 399-401.

part, to foreground Chen Hongshou's depictions of material objects—their pictorial treatment, compositional function, and conceptual significance. My inquiry begins with some rather basic questions: What drove Chen Hongshou's longtime obsession in depicting objects? How and why did he render objects in various distinctive visual manners? How do these objects interact with subjects both within and beyond the pictorial space? What insights do these images offer about the artist's personal engagement with objects, and how do they reflect and complicate broader perceptions and understandings of the material world during the late Ming (1550-1644) and early Qing (1644-1750) period?

A man of his time, it should not surprise us that Chen Hongshou looked at material artifacts with a keen eye. The last decades of the Ming dynasty witnessed crucial developments in the cultures surrounding material objects, marked first and foremost by the intensified publishing of what has often been referred to by modern scholars as "connoisseurship literature." More precisely, the years between 1580 and 1620 constituted a peak moment, during which over a dozen works within this genre were published or reprinted. This includes, among many others, the earlier *Gegu yaolun* 格古要論 (*The Essential Criteria of Antiques*), reprinted in both 1596 and 1600, *Zunsheng bajian* 遵生八箋 (*Eight Treatises on the Nurturing of Life*), first published in 1591 and reprinted at least twice before 1620, and *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志 (*Treatise on Superfluous Things*), published in 1620.[7] Although these texts vary in their scope, content, format, tone and specific concerns, they share a newly emerged interest in ranking and evaluating objects based on their visual and material characteristics, as well as a refreshing

[7] For a comprehensive list and chronology of connoisseurship literature published during this time, see Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 34-5.

emphasis on the aesthetic enjoyment derived from collecting and appreciating material goods.[8] For Ming educated elites, their material possessions and the ways in which they engaged with the material world not only served as status markers at a time when social status became increasingly fluid, but were also considered venues to cultivate and express self-identity, individuality, emotion, and moral values.[9] Born into a declining family of scholarly officials, Chen Hongshou spent his youth amid the material luxuries of late-Ming elite society. Despite later moments of financial struggles, Chen's extensive familial and regional connections to prominent cultural figures allowed him to remain immersed in the sophisticated world of art collecting and material connoisseurship.[10] His childhood mentor and father-in-law Zhang Baosheng 張葆生 (1575-1645), for example, was an avid collector of ceramics, wooden furniture, jade, and bronze vessels. Zhang Baosheng's passion for collecting and obsession with his prized possessions are documented in an essay from *Dreamlike Memories of Tao'an* (*Taoan Mengyi* 陶庵夢憶) written by Zhang's nephew and eminent essayist Zhang Dai 張岱 (1597-1689).[11] A lifelong friend of Chen Hongshou, Zhang Dai was himself an ardent collector and connoisseur who amassed an impressive collection of both antique and contemporary artifacts,

[8] See Robert van Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur, Serie Orientale Roma* 19 (Rome, 1958); Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, Chapter 1 and 2.

[9] Craig Clunas first noted that for Ming scholarly elites, the driving force behind such an eagerness to establish an elaborate system of engaging with objects was their desire to reinforce their social and cultural dominance against the newly emerged urban elite at a time when one's social status became increasingly fluid. See Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, Chapter 6. Also see J. P. Park, *Art by the Book: Painting Manuals and the Leisure Life in Late Ming China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 7-10. Wu Renshu 巫仁恕's book *Piwei shehua: Wanming de xiaofei shehui yu shi dafu* 品味奢華: 晚明的消費社會與士大 (*A Taste of Luxury: The Consumer Society and Literati in Late Ming*) (Taiwan: Liaojing chuban shiye gongsi, 2019) also discusses some of these issues. For the relationship between collecting and one's intrinsic qualities, see Maram Epstein, *Competing Discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 110. A similar point has been made through a case study of the collecting and connoisseurship of scholar's rocks in Judith Zeitlin, "The Petrified Heart: Obsession in Chinese Literature, Art, and Medicine," *Late Imperial China* 12, no. 1 (1991): 1-26.

[10] Wang Huangsheng 王璜生, *Chen Hongshou* 陳洪綬 (Changchun: Jilin meishu chuban she, 1996), 14-23.

[11] Zhang Dai, "Zhongshu gudong 仲叔古董," in *Taoan Mengyi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shiju, 2007), 77-8.

ranging from precious ink slabs and inkstones to scholarly rocks, ornate lanterns and other refined *objets d'art*.

Whereas most of Chen Hongshou's contemporaries expressed their love and knowledge for material things primarily through written words, Chen himself chose to articulate his material sensibilities almost exclusively through visual representation—the reason for which we can only speculate. Chen Hongshou was as prolific a writer as he was as a painter. Yet while his visual art spans a broad spectrum from scholarly gravitas to playful humor, his writings focus most often on his life experiences and moral convictions against the solemn backdrop of political turbulence during the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. Wan-go Weng attributes Chen's distinctive literary personality to his adherence to the Confucian ideals of state loyalty and filial devotion, which in effect prevailed over the Buddhist sentiment of detachment and the Daoist way of withdrawal also present in his writings.[12] We may read Chen's political and didactic written voice as compensating for his frustrated ambition for an official political career in a waning dynasty and his unrealized aspiration to gain formal scholarly status through the examination system.[13] Painting, by contrast, came almost naturally to Chen Hongshou, who was already celebrated as a child prodigy of painting and whose artistic reputation pursued him throughout his life. This artistic talent, however, was both a blessing and a burden. It served as Chen's primary source of income throughout his life, enabled his brief service at the imperial court, and sustained his active presence within the elite intellectual circles. Even then, Chen was never fully reconciled with his identity as a painter, and sometimes even viewed his painting career with disdain.[14]

[12] Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 335.
[13] This has been discussed in Wang, *Chen Hongshou*, 23-38.
[14] This is mentioned in an early Qing biography of Chen Hongshou by Meng Yuan 孟遠. See Meng Yuan, "Chen Hongshou zhuan 陳洪綬傳" (Biography of Chen Hongshou), in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 659-660.

Looking at his works, however, it is clear that painting—and by extension, print design—also offered Chen a refuge from life's harsh realities, an emotional outlet, and a source of genuine pleasure, particularly when creating works free from market demands. Perhaps it was this very nature of painting that allowed Chen Hongshou to approach it with less solemnity and more experimentation and spontaneity. For the same reason, the painted medium also lent itself to Chen's scrupulous portrayals of daily life and its material pleasures—subjects that found little space in his weightier literary works. Throughout the dissertation's four chapters, we will see that although Chen Hongshou's pictorial engagement with material objects was inseparable from his lived experience within the historical and political contexts of the late Ming and early Qing period, in depicting these objects, the painter frequently adopted a tongue-in-cheek playfulness that not only enriched their interpretive possibilities but also expanded their discursive potential.

Chen Hongshou's pictorial engagement with material artifacts, however, did not emerge in a vacuum, and may find its root in the *jinshi* 金石 tradition. Originally referring to the study of metal and stone (literally *jin* and *shi*) in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), *jinshi* later became an umbrella term in modern scholarship encompassing all premodern study of historic artifacts, and can be loosely translated as antiquarianism.[15] Central to the *jinshi* tradition is an extensive body of illustrated catalogues depicting ancient artifacts, including sections from Nie Chongyi 聶崇義 (fl. 948-964)'s *Sanli tu* 三禮圖 (Illustrations to the Ritual Classics), Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007-1072)'s *Jigu lu* 集古錄 (Collected Records of Antiquity), Lü Dalin 呂大臨 (1044-1093)'s *Kaogu tu* 考古圖 (Illustrated Investigations of Antiquity), and *Xuanhe bogu tu* 宣和博古圖 (Illustrated

[15] For a discussion of the understanding of *jinshi xue* in modern scholarship and its dialectical relationship with antiquarianism, see Jeffery Moser, "Why Cauldrons Come First: Taxonomic Transparency in the Earliest Chinese Antiquarian Catalogs," *Journal of Art Historiography* 11 (2014): 1-23.

Catalogue of Antique Objects from the Xuanhe Hall) commissioned by Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1101-1125).[16] A defining characteristic of these printed catalogues is their entries pairing textual descriptions of ancient artifacts with illustrations in the form of line drawings and rubbings (Fig. 0.2). While collectively aiding readers in apprehending the objects as vehicles of ancient wisdom and morality and serving as authoritative design manuals for craftsmen of ritual objects, the juxtaposition of texts, illustrations, rubbings—which trace the texture and form of the objects through physical contact and could thus be seen as indexical to the actual objects—presents distinctive aspects of objects in unique ways, highlighting the particular capabilities of each medium.[17] Most relevant to our discussion, though, is the insistence on printed illustrations across the *jinshi* canons. While the underlying rationale within the medieval context lies beyond the scope of my study, it suffices to note that Song antiquarians clearly considered visual representations able to reveal dimensions of antique objects and ancient thought that neither textual descriptions nor rubbings—despite their indexical relationship to the physical objects—could capture.[18] Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, *jinshi* catalogues continued to be reprinted and adapted, and were widely accessible. Late imperial painters, including Chen

[16] The most recent and comprehensive study of this set of materials is Jeffrey Moser's *Nominal Things: Bronzes in the Making of Medieval China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).
[17] These aspects of *jinshi* catalogues have been discussed in, among others, Wu Hung, "On Rubbings: Their Materiality and Historicity," in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays In Honor of Patrick Hanan*, ed. Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 29-72; Sena Yun-chiahn Chen, "Ouyang Xiu's Conceptual Collection of Antiquity" in *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Alain Schnapp (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), 212-229. Also see Hsu Ya-hwai 許雅惠, "Song, Yuan 'Sanli tu' de banmian xingshi yu shiyon: jianlun xinjiu liqi biange (宋、元《三禮圖》的版面形式與使用：兼論新舊禮器變革)" (The Sanli tu during the Southern Song and Yuan periods: formats and functions in the context of emerging antiquarian type of ritual objects), *Taida lishi xuebao* 60(2017): 57-117.
[18] Jeffery Moser relates the necessity of pictorial illustrations in the *jinshi* catalogues to the presentation of order and clarity essential to Song antiquarianism inquiries. Moser's argument on this issue is extremely complex and multilayered, and is presented across various chapters of his book. See Moser, *Nominal Things*.

Hongshou, clearly drew inspiration from or even directly referred to *jinshi* illustrations in their portrayals of antique objects.[19]

As the following chapters will show, beyond visual resemblance, Chen Hongshou, like the Song antiquarian scholars before him, understood pictorial representations of objects as uniquely capable for evoking experience and thought, both articulate and abstract. This idea is all too familiar for us with the now widely accepted recognition that "philosophy is mediated not only by language but also by the entire range of representational practices, including images."[20] The relationship between art and thought, as well as the ability of art to reach beyond what language could conceptualize, have also been extensively studied and theorized, though mostly within the western context.[21] While following the steps of these existing bodies of scholarship, it is important to note that in the case of Chen Hongshou's art, the "thought" that the artist conveyed through his object depictions is often heuristic rather than doctrinal. More often than not, the emphasis falls not on fixed meanings *per se* but on the process itself—the experience of looking, thinking, and engaging with the physical artworks and the objects therein, their processes of making, and immediate presence. For these reasons, while my study is always situated within the historical context, my writing, sometimes deliberately dwelling on details and

[19] See Zhou Hao, "Kaogu tu ji leisi gu qiwu tupu yu chen hongshou de huihua zaoxing," 62-5; Wang Yumin 王玉民, "Chen Hongshou renwu hua zhong guwu zhi neiyun yanjiu" 陳洪綬人物畫中古物之內蘊研究 (The Aesthetic of the Ancient Artifacts in Chen Hongshou's Figure Paintings), in *Guohua jia*, vol. 1(2011): 68-9; Wang Xiaoli 王曉麗, "Chen Hongshou Huazhong qiwu ji hanyi" 陳洪綬畫中器物及涵義 (The Meanings of Objects in Chen Hongshou's Paintings), in *Shuhua shijie* 書畫世界, vol. 177(2016): 85-6; Wang Xiaoli, "Chen Hongshou Huazhong qiwu zhi fenlei yanjiu" 陳洪綬畫中器物之分類研究 (A Categorization of the Objects in Chen Hongshou's Paintings), in *Meishu jiaoyu yanjiu* 美術教育研究, vol. 19 (2016): 8-11.

[20] See W. J. T. Mitchell, "Four Fundamental Concepts of Image Science," in *Visual Literacy*, ed. James Elkins (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 16.

[21] See, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); James Elkins, O*n Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Leo Steinberg, "Words that Prevent Perception," in *Renaissance and Baroque Art: Selected Essays by Leo Steinberg* ed. Sheila Schwartz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 1-33.

meandering through various observations and interpretations, seeks to reenact the prolonged attention, suspension, and contemplation that these objects constantly demand.

The affective power of objects evoked in Chen Hongshou's works relates closely to the specific types of objects the artist chose to portray. True to the cultural sensibilities of his era, Chen demonstrated meticulous attention to his objects' materials, decorative styles, and interactions with human figures—aspects that came to carry layers of semantic and cultural meaning codified in contemporaneous connoisseurship literature. At this point, it is necessary to define more precisely what I mean by "objects" within the contexts of Chen Hongshou's works and my discussion. The objects in this dissertation primarily encompass material things that are fabricated or modified by human hands, as opposed to living beings. These include a wide range of "superfluous things"—objects that, to borrow Craig Clunas' words in his discussion of Ming connoisseurship literature, are "not just high-status and high value works like painting, calligraphy, and early bronzes, but also a whole range of contemporary products necessary to the presentation of self in elite life."[22] My "objects" also largely overlap with Jonathan Hay's definition of "decorative objects" in the Ming-Qing context—pleasurable things (*wanhao zhiwu* 玩好之物) "whose original physical context was the elite residential interior," and "utilitarian artifacts whose appeal to the senses is as important as their ostensible functions."[23] Additionally, it is worth noting that the objects that captured Chen's interest are not necessarily ostentatious in their monetary or aesthetic value; throughout this dissertation, we will repeatedly encounter seemingly modest objects that remained peripheral in Ming-Qing literary attention and, consequently, modern scholarly consideration.

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[22] Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 13.
[23] Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 8 and 21.

The diverse range of objects in Chen's visual repertoire, however, is unified by their shared everydayness. Whether zithers, garden rocks, or small religious figurines, these were the things that the artist and his contemporaries encountered, used, and were captivated by on a daily basis. Even for a modern viewer, most of these objects remain readily recognizable in both their materials and functions. Within the Chinese visual context, the articulations of the poetics of everyday objects can be traced to the *huaniao* (flower-and-bird, 花鳥) painting tradition and related literary practices surrounding manmade things. Although *huaniao* paintings most commonly feature motifs of small animals, insects, flowers and plants that evoke symbolic meanings derived primarily from traditional poetry,[24] depictions of manmade objects could occasionally be included. In Guo Ruoxu 郭若虛 (c. 1080)'s *Tuhua Jianwen Zhi* 圖畫見聞志 (A Record of Things Seen and Heard about Painting), for example, " [a painting of] cut branches of various flowers in a glass vase 琉璃瓶中雜花折枝" is mentioned as an example of the kind of paintings that Dong Xiang 董祥—a Northern Song (960-1127) court painter known for his skillful paintings of flowers and trees—was particularly good at.[25] In the list of over two hundred paintings by Xu Xi 徐熙 (937-975) included in the *huaniao* section of *Xuanhe Painting Catalogue* (*Xuanhe huapu* 宣和畫譜, preface dated 1120), the titles of four paintings clearly indicate the presence of manmade artifacts. Among the listed items are a painting of a "flower jar, sketched from life" (*Xiesheng huaweng tu* 寫生花甕圖), two paintings of "porcelain flower jars, sketched from life" (*Xie liuli huaweng tu* 寫琉璃花甕圖), and a painting of "fruit arranged

[24] Robert E. Harrist, "Ch'ien Hsüan's 'Pear Blossoms': The Tradition of Flower Painting and Poetry from Sung to Yüan," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 22 (1987): 53–70.
[25] Here I adopt the translations by Alexander Coburn Soper in *Kuo Jo-Hsü's Experiences in Painting (T'u-hua Chien-wên Chih): An Eleventh Century History of Chinese Painting, Together with the Chinese Text in Facsimile* (Washington, D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1951), 67. The original text can be found in *Huashi congshu* 畫史叢書, ed. Yu Anlan 于安瀾 (Zhengzhou: Henan daxue chuban she, 2014).

in a jade vase" (*Cuiping chaguo tu* 翠瓶插果圖).[26] Significantly, these titles not only identify the containers—rather than the flowers—as the main subject, but also emphasize their particular visual and material characteristics.[27] Therefore, although none of these paintings has survived, it would be reasonable to assume that in these compositions, the painters must have put equal if not more attention into depicting the containers than the flower and fruit branches contained therein, in a similar fashion to some European still-life compositions. A surviving painting by Yao Yuehua 姚月華 with an inscription by emperor Ningzong (r. 1195-1224) might serve as an example (Fig. 0.3).[28] Here, a flower bouquet rests in a vase on top of a carved stand. Noticeably, the careful shading on the vase and the recession of the stand give the objects a strong sense of physical presence and three-dimensionality.

[26] Translations in consultation with Amy McNair's translations. See McNair, *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 605. For the orginal text, see Emperor Huizong 宋徽宗敕編, *Xuanhe huapu* 宣和畫譜, in Lu Fusheng 盧輔聖 et al., *Zhongguo shuhua quanshu* 中國書畫全書, vol. 2, 60-131. McNair originally translated *xiesheng* in these instances as "drawing-under-color." In her discussion of common terminology, she explains that "The term *xiesheng* 寫生 found in painting titles actually denotes two utterly different techniques. In the titles of flower paintings by masters who worked in color, I translate it as 'drawing-under-color,' following the description of this technique by Shen Kuo (1031–1095)...[which refers to] ink drawing overlaid with colors…The other technique represented by *xiesheng* does allow for a more literal translation: 'sketched from life'" (McNair, 62-3). For the paintings by Xu Xi, McNair adopts the first translation based on Mei Yaochen (1002-1060)'s poem that mentions a colored paintings by the painter; but the entry in *Xuanhe Huapu* clearly mentions that Xu Xi sketched from life: "He often roamed about in his vegetable garden, and each scene he encountered he depicted at once." (McNair trans., 600-1.)

[27] Notedly, Soper translates *liuli* 琉璃 as glass, while McNair translates it as porcelain. As Eileen Hsiang-ling Hsu has explained, "written in various homophonic characters, *liuli* is most frequently encountered in Chinese texts as referring to opaque glass or gemstones, but it can mean 'glaze' or anything with a glass-like surface. According to historians of Chinese glass technology, *liuli* in pre-Tang (618-907) texts denoted all sorts of artificially manufactured objects made from silica-based material." See Hsu, *Monks in Glaze: Patronage, Kiln Origin, and Iconography of the Yixian Luohans* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 39. As for *cuiping* 翠瓶, Amy McNair has translated it as "kingfisher vase." While *cui* 翠 could be a shorthand of *cuiniao* 翠鳥 (i.e. kingfisher), more commonly, it refers to the material jade, or simply the color green.

[28] In fact, there are many Song Dynasty examples of flower arrangements in vases or baskets, although barely any text could be found that speaks to how they might have been categorized at the time. Such is the case with Yao Yuehua's painting—there is no mention of this particular painting or the painter prior to the Qing Dynasty imperial painting catalog *Shiqu baoji* 石渠寶笈 (Collected Treasures of the Stony Moat).

We can readily understand why artifacts were featured in *huaniao* paintings. At least since the Song Dynasty, the material and craftsmanship of plant pots and vases had become an essential aspect of the art of flower arrangement.[29] From the entries on flower arrangement in the early 12th-century *Suosui lu* 瑣碎錄 (Record of Classified Activities) to the more detailed accounts in the late 16th-century *Pinghua pu* 瓶花譜 (Catalog of Vase Flowers), connoisseurs of flower arrangement across time agreed that pairing the cut branches with the right type of containers could both help preserve the plants' physical freshness and enhance their aesthetic appeal. Naturally, motifs of jars and vases came to accompany flowers and plants in both visual and literary depictions. Images of potted plants and arranged flowers, either as the central subject or as motifs accompanying human figures, can be found in many of the works of Chen Hongshou. We will come back to the relationship between Chen's works and the *huaniao* tradition in the first chapter.

But what is also shared between living things in nature—the principle subject matter of *huaniao* paintings—and inanimate artifacts is their major role in classical literature as sources of poetic inspiration and generators of profound meanings.[30] In fact, quotidian objects, including plant containers, have long been considered a site of poetic engagement in their own rights. The expressive potential of daily objects is most clearly articulated through the tradition of the "ode on things" (*yongwu fu* 詠物賦 and *yongwu shi* 詠物詩), where writers imbue mundane, often small objects—from brushes, flutes, and round fans, to mirrors, sitting mats, and broomsticks—with symbolic meanings that are inspired by their functions, appearances, materials, trajectories,

[29] Yang Zhishui, "Songdai huaping" 宋代花瓶 (Flower Vases in the Song Dynasty), in *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan*, no.129 (2007.1), 48-64.
[30] Harrist, "Ch'ien Hsüan's 'Pear Blossoms'." Also see Li-ling Hsiao, *The Eternal Present of the Past: Illustration, Theatre, and Reading in the Wanli Period, 1573-1619* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 33.

and cultural histories.[31] While *yongwu* poetry reached its first peak in the Six Dynasties (220-589), it continued to be influential as a literary genre during late Imperial times. The sustained interest in *yongwu* poetry during this later period is marked by the many anthologies of *yongwu* poems compiled in the Ming and Qing dynasties.[32] It should also be noted that *yongwu* poetry constitutes merely one genre in a rich spectrum of object-centered writing, ranging from riddle-tales (where objects take human form while retaining certain material qualities that serve as clues to their identity), object-biographies modeled on official histories, narratives of unusual objects in strange tales, as well as the extensive connoisseurship literature.[33] These texts not only reflect but also generate interest in material things among late imperial writers and readers, and were repeatedly drawn upon in Chen Hongshou's selections and renderings of objects in his compositions.

Beyond objects' cultural entanglements with literary traditions, for Ming-Qing literati, the poetics of the everyday was also intimately connected to tangible experiences with material surfaces. The sensuous pleasure of decorative objects have been eloquently explored in Jonathan

[31] For a comprehensive study of the various topics of *fu* on objects from early through early medieval China, see Liao Guodong 廖國棟, *Wei Jin yongwu fu yanjiu* 魏晉詠物賦研究 (A Study of the Ode on Things in the Wei and Jin Dynasties) (Taibei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 1990) and Tian Xiaofei, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 295–98. For discussions of the *yongwu* literature in later historical periods, see, for example: Mariana Zorkina, "Describing Objects in Tang Dynasty Poetic Language: A Study Based on Word Embeddings," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 5 (2018): 250 - 275; Yan Zinan. "An Object-Oriented Study on Yongwu Shi: Poetry on Eyeglasses in the Qing Dynasty," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 79, no. 2 (2016): 375–97.

[32] This includes Yu Yan's 俞琰 (fl. 1724)'s *Yongwu shi xuan* 詠物詩選 (Selected poems on things) that includes *yongwu* poems from the end of the Six Dynasties through the end of the Ming Dynasty, and the imperial *Peiwen zhai yongwu shixuan* 佩文齋詠物詩選 (The Peiwen Studio's Collection of Poems on Things) printed in 1706.

[33] For a discussion of riddle-tales, object-biography and their connection to the odes on things, see Judith T. Zeitlin, "The Ghosts of Things," in Laureillard, Marie, and Vincent Durand-Dastès ed., *Fantômes dans l'Extrême-Orient d'hier et d'aujourd'hui - Tome 1*. Paris: Presses de l'Inalco, 2017. Web. <http://books.openedition.org/pressesinalco/1449>; Craig Clunas has mentioned the influence of the *yongwu* tradition on late Ming connoisseurship literature, especially as seen in *Shiyou tuzan* 十友圖讚 (Illustrated Praises of My Ten Friends) written by Gu Yuanqing (1487-1565). See Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 52.

Hay's study *Sensuous Surfaces*, which has become a foundational text for discussions of material things within and beyond the Chinese context, including this one. Hay summarizes his thesis in the introduction of the book:

> The sensuous surfaces of luxury objects simultaneously embody metaphoric and affective potential; this potential actualizes itself through our pleasurable experience of the objects [……] Luxury objects think with us materially in order to create the pleasure in the beholder that will allow them to fulfill their most fundamental function as decoration. This function, I submit, is to connect us visually and physically to the world around us, to weave us into our environment, in ways that banish the arbitrary and create a sense of meaningful order. While all art mediates our relation to the world, in the process necessarily establishing a ground of connectivity such as I have just described, decoration has the particular characteristic of identifying the entirety of its mediation with connectivity, *eschewing the possibilities of critical distance* associated with other modes of art-making.[34]

Hay therefore locates the agency of material artifacts in their unique capacity to establish immediate physical and sensuous connections with their beholders—an understanding that greatly informs and will be echoed in my analysis of Chen Hongshou's pictorial engagement with objects. However, in this dissertation, I further argue, repeatedly, that Chen's art precisely reveals how material objects engender direct tactile and emotional engagement while retaining the space for "critical distance." First emerging in my discussion of Chen's early "still-life" works in Chapter One but resonating throughout the dissertation, I maintain that Chen's artistic treatment of objects captures and sets into motion the means by which certain objects prompt the beholder to step back, analyze, and contemplate the objects and one's embodied relationship to them—often by beckoning and then complicating or even withholding access to the very immediacy they promise.[35]

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[34] Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 13. Emphasis mine.

[35] At one place in *Sensuous Surfaces*, Hay discusses pictorial representations of objects—specifically, photographs—as leading to a "paradoxical stimulation of a desire to touch that is then denied is a function of the specific viewing distance that is enforced," through which the objects are effectively turned into "objects of

Since Chen's objects exist as pictorial representations, this process of critical attention—which hinges on the tension between the instantaneity of and removal from objects' material presence—is predicated upon the everydayness of the objects in question. In fact, these objects that Chen chose to portray were oftentimes so deeply woven into the Ming-Qing everyday experience that the sensorial engagement Hay describes became inseparable from the objects' very being, therefore making it possible for pictorial representations alone to summon their material and tactile qualities—aspects of the objects that could now be *felt* through the eyes and the mind.[36] Therefore, through his paintings, Chen was able to bring forth these objects and their associated lived experiences, which could otherwise dissolve into the mundaneness of everyday life, and further hold them in suspension between the real and the pictorial. As the objects participate in the pictorial narrative of each composition, the viewer completes the objects through drawing upon their own experience and knowledge—which is then put under scrutiny when brought into the painting's hermeneutic space. Chen thus enables viewers to, paradoxically, intimately experience the objects' innate materiality and visceral force vividly evoked by their images, while, with the absence of the physical objects, creating for them a reflective distance as the viewers contemplate their own bodily, intellectual, and emotional existence in relation to the objects on a deeper, more conceptual level. This aspect of Chen's object depictions finds its most compelling expression in the works examined in Chapter Two

desire." (69) My discussions echo Hay's observation to some extent, but pushes it further to argue for the discursive potential of these images that is beyond the evocation of sensuous desire.

[36] The two-way translation between the three-dimensional and the two-dimensional has been discussed by a great many art historians and philosophers of. A relevant and particularly interesting discussion of "tactile pictures" and the modalities and transmutations of senses, particularly between vision and touch, can be found in an article by Dominic M.M. Lopes, who argues that "pictures are not essentially visual and that vision is not uniquely perspectival." See Lopes, "Art Media and the Sense Modalities: Tactile Pictures," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 47, no. 189 (1997), 425-440.

through the interrelated lens of the interior and interiority, but it remains a main thread throughout the dissertation.

Indeed, the discursive and reflective potential of Chen Hongshou's painted objects is made possible—and effectively encouraged—by their unique position at the intersection between three-dimensional objects and two-dimensional images. While Chen Hongshou vividly portrays the objects' visual characteristics and material textures to evoke embodied experiences through images alone, a disjunction still exists between the actual and the depicted, one that is both inevitable in the process of transmediation and sometimes strategically heightened by the artist himself. This disjunction moves viewing beyond mere recognition into a moment of estrangement from the otherwise familiar encounters with commonplace objects. In this sense, Chen Hongshou's subtle painterly disruption of the viewer's daily interaction with things parallels Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, which, as Richard Deming suggests, demonstrate how "the ordinary, when brought to the level of consciousness, is revealed to be a site of philosophical complexity."[37] Deming further points out that Warhol's estranging objects, removed from their everyday contexts yet constantly referencing back to them, allow viewers to "invest themselves in objects of the most ordinary and familiar kind and to be better equipped to discern the threads of life," thus serving as "a vehicle for the act of thinking [...] about the self and about the self in relation to the world"[38]—an observation that strikes surprisingly close to my interpretation of many of Chen Hongshou's works. But an even closer comparison can be drawn to the depictions of the material world in Dutch paintings made around the time of Chen Hongshou's life. In discussing small-scale still life paintings by Adriaen Coorte (1683-1707),

[37] Richard Deming, *Art of the Ordinary: The Everyday Domain of Art, Film, Philosophy, and Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 121.
[38] Ibid., 164 and 165.

Hanneke Grootenboer argues that the uneventfulness and lack of immediately discernible meaning in these highly realistic pictures of common objects lead the viewer to notice their seemingly familiar yet strange visual details, which prompt reflection and interpretation beyond the semantic meanings of the objects and pictorial narratives of the paintings.[39] Similarly, in case studies across the four chapters, Chen Hongshou leaves seemingly minute, unexpected details—a fuzzy outline, a slightly crooked shape, or an exposed underdrawing—that open paths to alternative readings of the pictures and experiences of the objects in and beyond the pictorial space. These subtle visual cues problematize the objects' expected visual and material existences, and, at their culmination, transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, as demonstrated by Chen's renderings of Buddhist statues discussed in Chapter Four.

Furthermore, one kind of object that consistently figures into Chen Hongshou's artistic exploration of artifacts, as well as their materiality and affect, is the physical medium itself—whether handscroll, hanging scroll, album leaf, or fan—along with the ink, pigment, paper, and silk that constitute the material presence of the picture. Chen Hongshou was extremely self-conscious when it comes to painting, both in terms of his artistic approaches, and of the very act of painting itself. While the former concern is articulated most clearly in an essay that Chen wrote,[40] the latter is evidenced in his repeated depictions of figures caught in various stages of making paintings. We will encounter many examples of this in various case studies of paintings in this dissertation. While these works serve different analytical purposes, they share one notable characteristic in their meticulous attention to the material details of the painting process. Chen not only portrays painting utensils with precision—the inkstones with water pooled in their

[39] Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Pensive Image: Art As a Form of Thinking* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).
[40] This essay was inscribed on a now lost painting for Chen's friend Lin Tingdong 林廷栋. A transcription can be found in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 22-3. This inscription is also discussed in Chapter Three.

centers, ink sticks with their tops ground flat, half-filled water jars, brushes with inked tips, and sometimes brush stands—but also vividly depicts the physical supports of painting themselves, such as the draping silk of a scroll, which becomes tangible for viewers in the Ming-Qing era and us alike through the actual painting itself as a silk hanging scroll (Fig. 0.4). For the painter, to portray objects, painting instruments or not, means to first engage, visually and physically, with the material components and tools involved in the painting process. In fact, as Chen animates the tension and negotiation between the depicted and the depicting, the works articulate ideas and initiate experiences both of the objects depicted, and of the artistic media themselves as material objects. The "double-materiality" of Chen's object depictions, first introduced in Chapter One, remains a recurring theme throughout my discussion. The artist's simultaneous conjuring and deconstruction of the affective power of things, achieved through his manipulation of material matters yet ultimately untamable by the painter, will be particularly addressed in Chapter Three through the motif of scholarly rocks.

* * * *

In this dissertation, I explore the threads that I have brought out above through Chen Hongshou's visual depictions of objects. While the chapters are organized thematically rather than chronologically, within each chapter, I present the examples largely in chronological sequence, both for the sake of clarity and to reveal, from various perspectives, how Chen's engagements with material objects developed throughout his life and career. The first chapter lays the groundwork for the entire dissertation by examining Chen's earliest close depictions of material objects—including the painting mediums—and his critical engagement with contemporary intellectual trends around material culture that shaped his understanding of objects during his formative years. The second chapter reinterprets some of Chen's most well-known

figurative compositions by elucidating the crucial roles of depicted objects in constructing and activating various dimensions of interiority that operate within and beyond the pictorial space. Building on the first two chapters, the third and fourth chapters further investigate the critical roles of material objects in Chen's artistic practices and their evolution over time through the artist's depictions of two specific kinds of objects: scholarly rocks and Buddhist statues. Whereas the Chen's engagements with the rock motif lead us to intimately experience his mental world when confronted with the objects that become the subjects of his creation, his portrayals of Buddhist statues amplify the latent liveliness that permeates almost all the objects in his visual repertoire—a quality cultivated by the artist yet completed and actualized by the viewer.

My study is indebted to foundational scholarship that established the chronology of Chen Hongshou's life and his core corpus. This includes Huang Yongquan's 1960 account of the artist's life events based on careful examination of primary texts,[41] and Kohara Hironobu's 1966 articles that trace the stylistic evolution of Chen's art.[42] I find myself frequently referencing Wang Huangsheng's wide ranging survey of the artist in 1996, as well as Wan-go Weng's 1997 book that catalogues and discusses Chen's oeuvre recently reprinted in 2021.[43] Weng's family collection constitutes the majority of Chen Hongshou's works in North America museums, and his connoisseurial evaluations have provided invaluable insights for my analysis, especially regarding works I have not yet examined in person. My research also builds upon important

[41] Mainly, the poems with clear dates from Chen's anthology *Baolun tang ji*, the various versions of the biography of Chen Hongshou, and the Chen family ancestry record that Huang discovered during his fieldwork to the area near the tomb of Chen Hongshou (*Zhaibu chenshi zongpu* 宅埠陳氏宗譜). Huang Yongquan, *Chen hongshou nianpu.* Another notable study that exclusively deals with the writings of Chen Hongshou and his self-representation in his literature is Anne Burkus-Chasson's dissertation. See Anne Gail Burkus, "The Artifacts of Biography in Ch'en Hung-Shou's 'Pao-Lun-t'ang Chi'" (PhD. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1987).
[42] Kohara Hironobu, "Chin Koju Shiron."
[43] Wang Huangsheng, *Chen Hongshou*; Weng, *Chen Honghshou de yishu*.

insights from English-language studies of Chen Hongshou. Notably, James Cahill's studies greatly complicated our understanding of Chen and his works, especially as they touched upon aspects beyond stylistic issues, and could be considered as a starting point of several major lines of inquiries in later scholarship.[44] These include: the multiplicity of Chen Hongshou's self or social identities,[45] his interactions with print culture,[46] and his affinity to religious thought and practices.[47] While Chen's depictions of objects have attracted some scholarly attention, most studies examine these motifs within specific pictorial contexts. Therefore, I will engage with these works in relevant case studies rather than attempting a comprehensive overview here. For

[44] Cahill, *The Distant Mountains*, 244-66; James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-century Chinese painting* (Harvard University Press, 1982), 141-5. I should also mention here the important earlier studies of Chen Hongshou in the English language. This includes an article published in 1962 by Wai-kam Ho, then curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art, on the museum's newly obtained handscroll by Chen Hongshou. In this writing, Ho identified the painting's archaic style with individualist and ornamental tendencies, and interpreted it in conjunction with the life experience of the artist during the dynastic transition as seen from the textual records. Such exploration of the stylistic characteristics is echoed and refined in an essay by Wen Fong, who related Chen's formal innovations to decorative arts and crafts. Fong's writing also contextualized Chen's style within the art historical developments since the middle period. See Wai-Kam Ho, "Nan-Ch'en Pei-Ts'ui: Ch'en of the South and Ts'ui of the North," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 49, no. 1 (1962): 2–11; and Wen Fong, "Archaism as a 'Primitive' Style," in *Artists and Traditions: Uses of the Past in Chinese Culture,* ed. Christian F. Murck (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1976), 102-9. The only two book-length publications on Chen Hongshou in English are also worth noting, although they are still very much following the path that Cahill paved. One is the edited volume, *Repentant Monk*, that accompanied the solo exhibition of the artist in 2017 at the Berkeley Art Museum. The essays in the book explore the impact of Chen's traumatic experience of the dynastic shift from various perspectives. The other one is Tamara H. Bentley's monograph that positions the figurative works of Chen Hongshou at the intersection between the scholarly and commercial spheres through foregrounding the Ming discourse of authenticity. See Julia M. White ed, *Repentant Monk*; and Bentley, *The Figurative Works of Chen Hongshou (1599-1652).*

[45] Some discussions of this topic include: Anne Burkus-Chasson, "Elegant or Common? Chen Hongshou's Birthday Presentation Pictures and His Professional Status," *The Art Bulletin* 76, no. 2 (1994): 279–300; Liu Shi-yee, "An Actor in Real Life: Chen Hongshou's 'Scenes from the Life of Tao Yuanming'" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2003); Richard Vinograd, "Composite Identities: Portraits" in *Repentant Monk*, 57-68.

[46] Some important studies on this topic can be found in: Qiu Sha 裘沙, *Chen Hongshou yanjiu: shidai, sixiang he chatu chuangzuo* 陳洪綬研究: 時代、思想和插圖創作 (Beijing: Ren min mei shu chu ban she, 2004); Shi-Yee Liu, "The World's a Stage: The Theatricality of Chen Hongshou's Figure Painting," *Ars Orientalis* 35 (2008): 155–91.

[47] See Anne Burkus-Chasson, "Between Representations: The Historical and the Visionary in Chen Hongshou's 'Yaji'," *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 2 (2002): 315–33; Patricia Berger "Living in a World of Regret: Buddhist Paintings," in *Repentant Monk*, 47-56; Shi-yee Liu, "Visions of the Occult in Early Figure Painting," in *Repentant Monk*, 33-45.

now, I will note that most of these studies interpret Chen's object depictions either in relation to Chen's "archaistic" personal taste and painting style, or as "props" for the figures.[48] Responding to previous scholarship, my dissertation not only expands and complicates existing understandings of the artist through an in-depth and focused study of his renderings of objects, but also establishes these images as critical sites of inquiry that reveal Chen's embodied interactions and intellectual engagement with objects, as well as his artistic responses to key issues surrounding materiality and material culture in the Ming-Qing era.

While material objects, their materiality, and affective affordances stand at the center of my thinking, in this study, I approach them mainly through the lens of Chen Hongshou's paintings. In this way, I partake in what could be broadly framed within the study of Ming-Qing material culture, a field largely built up by literary scholars through textual studies,[49] but more recently enriched by contributions from art historians and historians through the study of actual objects—oftentimes in relation to their contemporaneous textual manifestations, and mostly focusing on the material practices of scholarly elites.[50] This dissertation, therefore, contributes to

[48] The former is mostly seen in scholarship published in Chinese, some of which are included in footnote 17. The function of Chen's objects is similar to stage props that are manipulated by the actors to externalize their thoughts or to further the narrative has been pointed out in Zhang Xinwei 張欣蔚, "Chen Hongshou renwu huihua zhong 'daoju' de hanyi" 陳洪綬人物繪畫中'道具'的含義 (The Meanings of the "Props" in Chen Hongshou's Figure Paintings), in *Renwen tianxia* 人文天下, 89 (2017): 64-68. For a more in depth discussion of the issue of theatricality in Chen Hongshou's paintings, see Shi-Yee Liu, "The World's a Stage."

[49] Literary studies of this period have witnessed a material turn in the last two decades, inspired in part by broader trends in the humanities, but more specifically by Clunas's 1991 *Superfluous Things*, which brought attention to late-Ming textual discourse on object connoisseurship. Other important literary scholars whose work engages with objects and material culture include Wai-yee Li, Mao Wenfang, Judith Zeitlin, Sophie Volpp, and Bruce Rusk. While these studies often include visual materials and indeed take physical objects into consideration, their main concern is with the literary strategies through which discourses on objects were constructed.

[50] Xie Mingliang, for example, examined both ceramic wares with crackled glaze and the texts about them; but instead of using the texts as evidence for certain interpretations of the material remains, he reconstructed a culture of *suiqi* in the Ming Dynasty by treating the objects and texts equally as reflections on the Ming perception of crackles. In *Sensuous Surfaces*, Hay argues for the ability of decorative objects to not only provoke bodily experience, but also inspire states of mind related to certain cultural practices through their visual designs and tactile qualities. See Xie Mingliang 謝明良, *Maoyi taoci yu wenhua shi* 貿易陶瓷與文化史 (Trade Porcelains and Cultural History) (Taiwan: Yunchen wenhua shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2005); Xie

our understanding of Ming-Qing objects and material culture in two ways. First, by focusing on Chen Hongshou as someone who navigated and connected multiple social spheres—the scholarly, the painterly, the popular, and the religious—my study examines an intricate case where different social identities and cultural understandings of the material world intersect and negotiate with one another. Relatedly, in previous studies, perceptions and conceptions of objects have often been discussed as shared trends within certain social groups—or, in Wai-yee Li's words, "a cultural practice in the public realm."[51] While publicness is inevitable in dealing with printed texts and circulated objects, many of Chen Hongshou's paintings that I discuss were created in private settings and primarily reflect thoughts intended only for himself or an intimate circle of friends. Many of these works are also relatively small in size, indicating a private mode of viewing. These works thus provide us rare glimpses into how objects were intimately experienced and contemplated, thereby leading to a more nuanced narrative of material culture as multifaceted lived experience at this particular historical moment.

Second, my study explores the interrelations among objects, images, texts, and ideas. Scholars before me have emphasized the affective power of things in evoking and shaping ideas around them, thus setting up the possibility of identifying "visual discourses" of objects through their images. Yet although images of objects have frequently appeared in previous scholarship, the primary focus has often been on the relationship between texts and physical objects; pictorial

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Mingliang, *Taoci xiubu shu de wenhua shi* 陶瓷修補術的文化史 (The Cultural History of the Craft of Porcelain Mending) (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2018); Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*. A few studies that focus on the material experience of people beyond the elite circle are worth noting: Dorothy Ko, *The Social Life of Inkstones: Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021); S.E. Kile and Kristina Kleutghen, "Seeing Through Pictures and Poetry: *A History of Lenses* (1681)," *Late Imperial China* 38.1 (2017), 47–112; Bruce Rusk, "Artifacts of Authentication: People Making Texts Making Things in Late Imperial China," in *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life in Europe and China, 1500–1800*, ed. François Louis and Peter Miller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 180-206.

[51] Wai-yee Li, "The Collector, The Connoisseur and Late-Ming Sensibility," *T'oung Pao*, Second Series, vol. 81, Fasc. 4/5 (1995):25-30, 286.

depictions of objects, on the contrary, serve merely as supplementary evidence, with little consideration of their own significance and complexity. Especially within Ming-Qing studies, it might not be an exaggeration to say that the formal intricacies, interpretive richness, and intellectual depth in visual depictions of objects—a focus of this dissertation—had been a blind spot receiving far less scrutiny than objects in texts. One possible reason for this is the absence in Chinese painting history of a genre devoted to object depiction—such as the Western still-life—making it challenging to treat images of objects as a cohesive category for focused study. Another reason lies in the disciplinary divide between painting studies and object studies, both within Chinese art history and in the broader field of art history. While this disciplinary separation is largely a result of our academic training and conventions, historically, paintings and objects were often intertwined in both production and appreciation, and thus their histories are undoubtedly interrelated. By foregrounding the pictorial depictions of objects as a site of critical interpretation, this dissertation unpacks the complexity of these visual forms while exploring their unique discursive capability—how the visual, material, cultural, and social aspects of objects were mediated differently through pictures and the image-making process, and *vice versa*.

At the heart of this dissertation is the symbiotic, mutually transformative relationship between human subjects and material objects, mediated and animated through their pictures. It is perhaps evident by now that my thinking—and indeed my own experience with the material world around me—is deeply influenced by scholarship in the realm of thing theory, through which we have learned that objects are never passive entities whose functions and meanings rely solely on activation by human agency; rather, they embody agency from the moment of their creation—if not earlier, when they were imagined and designed—and they constantly form and

transform human subjectivity through their disruptive power over human beings.[52] Chen Hongshou was acutely aware of such dynamic relationships between object and subject, relationships he tirelessly narrated, interrogated, and problematized through his pictorial intervention. In Chen's visual renderings of objects, objects become subjects of sorts, as they exert power over the enthralled human subjects by captivating our attention and guiding us through myriad experiences, associations, and contradictions across media, time, and space. But these images also do more: it is through them that various subjectivities and subjective experiences with material things converse and converge—those of the artist, the painted figures, and the viewers then and now. In the artist's self-portrait examined at the beginning of this introduction, Chen visualizes his physical disorientation and mental distress in response to recent political events by dissolving the boundaries between self and object. The insensate figure surrenders to the intoxicating substance within the wine pot through the wine cup, while the manmade vessels assume an uncanny liveliness. The swaying wine pot and cup, like many other objects found in Chen's works, captivate the viewer through their many paradoxes—they participate in a somber scene yet retain an inherent playfulness; they remain inanimate yet appear undeniably vibrant; they exist as fictional pictures yet are remarkably realistic in their evocation of the embodied experience of such objects. These objects therefore sway us, the viewers, into the hidden narratives of the paintings, and draw us into Chen's pictorial-material world—one subtly estranged from ordinary reality, yet tangible, provocative, and charged with emotion.

[52] Some key texts include: Arjun Appadurai ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Bruno Latour, "A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans: Following Daedalus's Labyrinth," in *Pandora's Hope: Essays On the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 177-190; Bill Brown, "Thing Theory" in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1-22; Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter," *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2004): 347-72; Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," in *Materiality*, ed. Miller (Durham: Duke University Press: 2005), 1-50; Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013); Graham Harman, *Object Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican Books, 2017).

Chapter 1 Double Materiality

A narrative about objects in Chen Hongshou's visual universe ought to start with the album leaves that the artist painted in his early twenties. Roughly dated to 1619,[1] the small album in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art includes twelve drawings of various subject matters, including landscapes from various perspectives, figurative works, as well as four exquisite depictions of everyday objects: a container garden in a crackle-glazed planter pot (Fig. 1.1); an eight-lobbed mirror accompanied by women's accessories and a cut flower (Fig. 1.2); a basin on a stand wrapped in patterned textile, with the water contained reflecting the moon in clouds (Fig. 1.3); and a round fan decorated with images of chrysanthemums that appear to attract a living butterfly (Fig. 1.4). Carefully portrayed yet deprived of any pictorial background, figurative element or textual inscription, these seemingly familiar objects quietly yet forcefully assume the center stage, arresting the attention and inviting speculation.

This album has been commonly referred to by scholars as *Mogu tu* (*Miscellaneous Studies*, 摹古圖), which will also be used in the chapter for the reader's convenience. However, the title *Mogu tu* likely derived from the frontispiece inscription written by Weng Tonghe 翁同龢 (1830–1904), who originally named the painting series the *Mogu* album 橅古冊. According to this inscription, the character *gu* 古 describes the sense of antiquity in the paintings (*canggu*

[1] Another leaf from the same album bears the date of 1619 in its inscription. The difference in the types of paper and the subject matter among the album leaves, as well as the repeating signatures on every page, suggest that the painter might not originally have conceived the leaves as a single set. But based on the consistent form of monochrome ink on paper, the similar dimensions, and the shared artistic style, it has been accepted by scholars that they were all painted by Chen Hongshou within a relatively short period, around the year of 1619. For discussions of the dating of this album, see James Cahill, *The Distant Mountains: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Dynasty*, 1570-1644 (New York: Weatherhill, 1982), 246; Weng Wan-go 翁萬戈, *Chen Hongshou* 陳洪綬 (Chen Hongshou: His Life and Art) (Chen Hongshou: His Life and Art) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chuban she, 1997), 55.

zhi bi 蒼古之筆). It can be interpreted as referring to the maturity of the painter's technique, the brushstrokes reminiscent of those by ancient masters, or the reference to old visual and material traditions.[2] The character *mo* 橅 is a variant of *mo* 模 or *mo* 摹 in classical Chinese. Therefore, in the context of painting, *mo* carries the meanings of "copying after" or "painting from life".[3] This explains the often adopted title of *Mogu tu* 摹古圖 and its English translation—*Miscellaneous Studies*—that imply the painter may have studied both old paintings and ancient things from life when making the album leaves. But notedly, *mo* 摹 could function as a synonym of *fu* 撫, and thus be translated as "gently touching or stroking", indicating a tactility evoked by material surfaces.[4] Indeed, with the extremely delicate yet vibrant use of ink that renders the diverse surface appearances and textures in monochrome, these album leaves testify to the artist's particular interest in objects, their materials and materiality from the beginning of his artistic career. The album's modest size and the miniaturized drawings also call attention to the materiality—especially the corporeal aspect—of the album leaves, as they demand careful

[2] The curators at the Metropolitan Museum of Art have emphasized the first interpretation, and translated *canggu zhibi* in Weng Tonghe's inscription into "mature brushwork" on their online catalogue. This is fitting, especially since Weng's writing primarily deals with the dating of the album through evaluating the brushwork (In fact, Weng was surprised how mature Chen Hongshou's technique was at an early age). But *canggu* 苍古 was also commonly used to describe the archaic style of paintings. For example, the 14th century *Gegu yaolun* 格古要論 (*Guide to the Study of Antiquities*) characterizes Xia Gui 夏圭 (1195-1124)'s painting as "while he resembles Ma Yuan in composition and in brush style, he sided with the masters of the past in concept of art, favoring the simple and unemphatic 夏圭山水，佈置、皴法與馬遠同，但其意尚蒼古而簡淡". Quoted and translated by William Watson in *The Arts of China 900-1620* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 57. When used to describe the appearances of people, plants, and artifacts, *canggu* emphasizes the weathered look as a result of old age, which can also be found in the *Mogu tu* leaves.

[3] See the entries of *mo* 橅, *mo* 模, and *mo* 摹 in Zhang Yushu 張玉書 et al., *Jiaozheng Kangxi zidian* 校正康熙字典 (Corrected Compendium of standard characters from the Kangxi period Corrected Kangxi character dictionary), ed. Watanabe Atsushi 渡部温 and Yan Yiping 嚴一萍 (Taipei: Yiwen yishu guan, 1965), 1251, 1248, 1031. This comprehensive dictionary, first compiled in the early Qing dynasty by scholar officials Zhang Yushu and others, includes quotes from various earlier dictionaries as well as contemporaneous usage.

[4] See the entry of *mo* 摹 in *Jiaozheng Kangxi zidian*, 1031.

handling, and prompt the viewer to move closer in to observe and experience the vivid material details of the objects depicted.

Well-read in contemporaneous literature and frequently mingling with collectors and connoisseurs, Chen Hongshou was undoubtedly fluent in "the language of things" that figured so prominently within Ming-Qing scholarly culture. This explains his tasteful selection of objects commonly used and valued by the Ming literati in the *Mogu tu* paintings. More importantly, as will be elaborated in this chapter, his rendering of these objects reveals an acute awareness and a uniquely playful manipulation of the existing understanding of certain materials and motifs as described in connoisseurship literature. Despite Chen's clear cultural competence, the recurring terms that have been unanimously used by traditional connoisseurs and modern scholars to describe Chen Hongshou's depictions of objects in the *Mogu tu* album are "strange" and "mysterious," referring to both the "still-life" compositions that are rarely seen in Chinese scholarly paintings, and the rather ambiguous iconographies whose meanings could not be immediately pinned down. In fact, in James Cahill's foundational study of these paintings, the author maintains that they "no doubt conveyed meanings to the artist's contemporaries that are difficult to retrieve now."[5] Cahill's statement—not unlike T. J. Clark's remark on Cézanne that the French painter "cannot be written about anymore"[6]—did not stop the inquiring minds of scholars, but instead provoked many attempts to decipher these curious images. In art historical studies to date, there are three main strands in interpreting these works. Mainly considering the unusual visual manners in which the objects were rendered, Cahill senses that these images might be considered in close affinities with high-level craft production—including the carved

[5] Cahill, *The Distant Mountains*, 246. Also see Maxwell Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Paintings* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 150.
[6] T. J. Clark, "Symptoms of Cézannoia," in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 32 No. 23, December 2, 2010, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v32/n23/t.j.-clark/at-the-courtauld

ceramic teapots, molded ink cake and printed stationery—in which artisanal traditions were combined with scholarly taste.[7] This speculation is echoed in many later discussions, although it is often only suggested in passing, and there is yet to be a thorough and interpretive treatment of this issue. The second strand revolves around the theme of reality versus illusion, and deals with how the painter address the potential and limitation of seeing by intentionally foregrounding artifacts that blur the artificial and the natural—in particular, the container garden that was made to mimic nature, and the inanimate painted fan with chrysanthemums that seemingly attract a living insect.[8] Tackling the absence of human figures in these paintings, the third group of scholarly works highlights the connection between the depicted objects and implied female subjects. In Wang Cheng-hua's study of Chen's later figure paintings, she focuses on the sensibility evoked through the depictions of the interactions between the literati figure, the women, and the objects surrounding him.[9] Subsequently, Wang reads the sense of illusion in the earlier *Mogu tu*'s objects as pointing to women's sexual desire, which, in Ming literature, was often described as illusionary while maintaining an ability to transform between dream and reality.[10] This line of thought is further developed by Wu Hung, who sees these objects as metaphors of female figures and as indications of a feminine space.[11] These writings lay the

[7] Cahill, *The Distant Mountains*, 246; Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Paintings*, 150.
[8] This has been mentioned in both Cahill and Hearn's discussions, but is further elaborated in De-Nin Deanna Lee, "Chinese Painting: Image-text-object" in *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture,* ed. Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 561-79. More recently, Xiao Jiwei also sees the painted fan as a metaphor for both the appeal of illusion and the moment of its revelation. See Xiao Jiwei, *Telling Details: Chinese Fiction, World Literature* (London: Routledge, 2022), 83-4.
[9] Wang Cheng-hua 王正華, "Nüren, wupin, yu ganguan yuwang: Chen Hongshou wanqi renwu hua zhong jaingnan wenhua de chengcian" 女人, 物品, 與感官慾望: 陳洪綬晚期人物畫中江南文化的呈現 (The Late-Ming Culture of Sensibility: Women and Objects in Ch'en Hung-shou's Late Figure Painting, 1645-1652), in *Jindai zhongguo funü shi yanjiu* 中國近代婦女史研究, 10 (2002): 1-57.
[10] Ibid., 23-4.
[11] Wu Hung 巫鴻, "Gu yu jin de xieshang: Chen Hongshou de nüxing shijie" 古與今的協商: 陳洪綬的女性世界 (Negotiating Past and Present: Chen Hongshou's World of Women) in *Zhongguo huihua zhong de nüxing kongjian* 中國繪畫中的"女性空間" (Feminine Space in Chinese Painting) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2019), 399-401.

groundwork for my reinterpretation of the images of objects in the *Mogu tu* album in this chapter. However, taking on a material perspective, I will explore how the painter addressed the materiality of artifacts through ink painting on paper—an art medium with its own distinctive material attributes that the painter had to navigate and wittily utilized.

Notably, previous interpretations on the "meaning" of *Mogu tu* imagery are largely based upon empirical assumptions on the types of objects and their material characteristics presented within the pictorial frames, and tend to take these images as consistent reflections of recognizable objects found in reality. Upon first look, these paintings indeed seem quite life-like—a quality that the painter's works were already known for in the Ming Dynasty. In an early biography of Chen Hongshou written by his friend Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊 (1629-1709), the writer recounts that at the mere age of four, Chen painted a mural of the ferocious military god Guan Yu 关羽 that was over ten feet tall. The portrait was so vivid that it made children cry and adults kneel before it.[12] Although the story is likely an exaggerated account by the biographer, its basic narrative and wide circulation nevertheless speak to Chen Hongshou's well-known artistic talent to bring pictures to life. The mural mentioned in the anecdote does not survive, but the *Mogu tu* album indeed testifies to the artist's early interest and sophisticated technique in portraying a wide range of material surfaces and textures: upon seeing these works, an experienced viewer familiar with the visual and material repertoire of the Ming Dynasty could immediately identify the crackle-glaze ceramics, embroidered textiles, carved metalworks and painted silk fan. Evidently, the artist himself was well-aware of the lifelikeness in his works. One of the *Mogu tu*

[12] Zhu Yizun, "Chen Hongshou zhuan 陳洪綬傳 (The Biography of Chen Hongshou)," in *Pushu ting ji* 曝书亭集 (*Writings in Pavilion of Drying Books in the Sun*). Quoted in Wang Huangsheng 王璜生, *Chen Hongshou* 陳洪綬 (Changchun: Jilin meishu chuban she, 1996), 5.

leaves entertains the idea that the ink chrysanthemums on a round fan are rendered so lifelike that they fool the eyes of the butterfly (Fig. 1.4).

However, one starts to notice the strange ambiguity of these images and their many puzzling inconsistencies with reality: if within the pictorial space, the butterfly is indeed "real" behind the semi-transparent fan painted with chrysanthemums, why are some of the flower petals "disappearing" into its left wing, making their spatial relationship rather ambivalent? What are the eight S-shaped motifs on the edge of the plant pot, and what is their relationship with the crackled lines? Why doesn't the mirror reflect everything in front of it? And why are the water basin and the textile wrapped around the stand delineated with ink-lines that are so convoluted and shockingly rough? Such details cannot be fully comprehended within the existing interpretative frameworks of these paintings, and are hard to be explained away simply through the limitations of the artist's ability and the medium of monochrome ink painting, or the irreducible gap between representation and the represented. Yet they bewilder the eyes and invite interpretation, thus undeniably contributing to the captivation of these images.

In this chapter, I would like to take a step back from the previous iconographical analysis of *what* is depicted in the picture, and instead consider the questions of *how* these images of objects were rendered by the painter and made sense for the viewer. The enigmatic details in these paintings did not come from nowhere, but often tease at and subtly subvert the visual and cultural expectations of the time towards the objects depicted and the depicting medium. Perhaps we could attribute such a rebellious originality to Chen Hongshou's unconventional personality, as he was famously described by his peers as an "odd scholar 畸士" who "would not simply

abide by the rules 不肯恰沽就繩墨".[13] But a close examination of the "oddities" in these paintings will also lead us to further realize the painter's ingenious visual expositions and reinterpretations of artifacts, their materials and materiality. I argue that through visual paradoxes that defamiliarize the familiar, these paintings contemplate on material objects—including paintings themselves—beyond their literary meanings, stylistic categorizations, or visual appearances, and address them as material, tangible entities that could engage with human bodies within space.

While the readings of the objects' more concrete meanings proposed in previous studies are nonetheless valid, it is the particular ways in which Chen Hongshou transforms material objects into visual images, as well as the process in which the viewer encounters, looks at, and engages with objects and their materiality in and through the painted depictions, that this chapter foregrounds. This approach will not only help us come to terms with the many pictorial puzzles presented in the *Mogu tu* images, but also recalibrate, reconcile and further develop the various readings of them proposed in previous studies. Since many of the objects in the early *Mogu tu* leaves reappear repeatedly in Chen Hongshou's later works, a thorough examination of the *Mogu tu* paintings of objects can set a stage for us to better understand the insistence on including carefully delineated material objects in the painter's entire corpus. More broadly, through the cases of Chen Hongshou's early paintings of objects, it is in the hope that this chapter can shed light on the persistence of "still-life" imagery in traditional Chinese paintings despite the absence of a readily established genre by exploring their affective mechanism that enchanted historical and modern viewers alike.

[13] Quan Zuwang 全祖望 (1705-1755), "*Zi liuzi cirang peixiang bei* 子劉子祠堂配享碑 (The attending stele in the memorial hall of Liu Zongzhou)," quoted in Wang, *Chen Hongshou*, 25.

Working towards these issues, my discussion will start by tracing the pictorial genres that are adjacent to Chen Hongshou's peculiar compositions of objects in *Mogu tu* that are rarely seen in traditional Chinese paintings. The close connection to textual meanings in the related visual fields is in stark contrast with the absence of inscriptions on the *Mogu tu* paintings; this absence, however, opens up a space for interpretation beyond the semantic. Thus, in the following three sections, I will look at the artist's treatments of materials, surfaces and spatial configurations of objects respectively through case studies, each centered around one or a selected set of paintings from *Mogu tu*. While these three sections set forth different approaches that the painter adopted to depicting objects to highlight different aspects of their materiality, they are connected by a shared underlying logic: all four images of objects in *Mogu tu* are deeply registered in certain material aspects of the depicted objects, while revealing the very materiality of paintings themselves as crafted objects. This leads to a concluding section, where I address what I have termed the "double materiality" of Chen Hongshou's depictions of objects, with a particular emphasis on its implications on the viewing and interpretive experiences that are ultimately material-oriented, self-reflective and open-ended.

Poetic Pictures

Chen Hongshou's portrayals of objects in *Mogu tu* could be considered within two cultural arenas, the *huaniao* painting and print culture. Both of them connect images of objects to poetry, and more broadly, to the production of meaning through text.

In the introduction, I have briefly discussed material artifacts as a recurring motif in *huamiao* paintings and contextualized this phenomenon within the literature on things. In fact, whereas in the European artistic tradition, paintings of stand-alone inanimate objects had been established as a distinct genre and professional specialization as the "still life" by the sixteenth

century,[14] in pre-modern China, from the outset, such images have been considered as within the *huaniao* tradition. It is worth noting that *huaniao* painting is most often associated with small-scale, representational images of commonplace details of nature that evoke symbolic meanings derived primarily from traditional poetry.[15] Through referencing the sophisticated vocabulary of symbol, allusion, and metaphor in literature, even simple motifs could carry subtle yet complex moral, political and cultural significations.[16] Later categorizations of paintings largely followed the framework established in the Song texts, and thus the few paintings featuring manmade objects—if at all mentioned—are often scattered under the broad category of *huaniao*. For example, in a 1607 catalog of practical references for painters, *Tuhui zongyi* 圖繪宗彝 (Principles of Painting), pictures of flower baskets, potted container gardens and stationary objects are all included in volume six among pictures of birds, insects and fishes.[17] The close connection between mundane objects and literature, visually articulated through the persistent inclusion of these material artifacts in *huaniao* paintings, could be related, once again, to the literature on things, which elevate quotidian objects into a site of poetic and literary engagement. This includes the earlier-emerged "ode on things" (*yongwu fu* and *yongwu shi*), riddle-tales centered on mundane objects, object-biography, and the more recent stories of the strange. As mentioned previously, these genres continued to flourish and generate interest in manmade things during Chen Hongshou's time.

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[14] For a survey of the still-life painting tradition in Europe, see Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, revised edition (New York: Harper, 1981; French original, 1952.) The book is still considered one of the most thorough treatments of the development of the genre.
[15] Robert E. Harrist, "Ch'ien Hsüan's 'Pear Blossoms': The Tradition of Flower Painting and Poetry from Sung to Yüan," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 22 (1987): 53–70.
[16] Li-ling Hsiao, *The Eternal Present of the Past: Illustration, Theatre, and Reading in the Wanli Period, 1573-1619* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 33. Hsiao also provides a discussion of how Ming printed illustrations made use of the symbolic visual language from traditional *huaniao* paintings.
[17] Yang Erceng 楊爾曾 (act. 1594), *Tuhui zongyi* 圖繪宗彝 (*Principles of Painting*), (Beijing: Wenwu chuban she, 2022).

The four leaves in Chen Hongshou's *Mogu tu* album with potted plants, mirror, water basin and hand fan as main subjects could be understood within the contexts of the *huaniao* paintings as well as the literature on things. Visually, the four leaves are akin to the literati flower-and-bird paintings in the Ming Dynasty. The treatment of objects as the major pictorial and compositional elements within the picture frame, with minimal foreground and background setting, recalls the ways in which flora and fauna are often staged in *huaniao* paintings.[18] The monochrome yet extremely diverse and vibrant brushwork is also one of the main characteristics of Ming literati-style *huaniao* painting.[19] In terms of the subject matters, all of the four objects that Chen Hongshou decided to focus on—the mirror with accessories, the water basin, the fan and the container garden— had already came to carry an array of sometimes contradictory cultural meanings for the contemporaneous audience by the time they entered Chen Hongshou's pictorial repertoire. I will discuss in detail how the painter visually evoked and utilized the existing cultural premises of these objects in later sections. For now, I would only emphasize the fact that these meanings were generated and passed down, primarily, through famous texts accumulated across history and from a variety of genres.[20]

The association between images of objects and text becomes even more poignant when we further examine it within print culture. While we could trace the underlying cultural root of

[18] For a review of the common compositions of huaniao paintings, see James Jay Robinson, "The Vitality of Style: Aspects of Flower and Bird Painting During the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368)," (PhD Diss., University of Michigan, 1984), 11-12.

[19] For an introduction of the flower-and-bird painting in literati style during the Ming dynasty, see Anne de Coursey Clapp, *The Painting of T'ang Yin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 199.

[20] Another genre that often features "still-life" imagery is the so-called *qinggong tu* 清供圖, a term that is barely mentioned in historical texts, but is often used in modern scholarship to refer to paintings, mostly from the Ming and Qing dynasties, that depict displays of antique vessels, flowers and fruits arrangement often made for festive occasions. These paintings are mostly polychrome hanging scrolls in large size, and contain clear auspicious and seasonal symbols. Chen Hongshou was familiar with such paintings, as he had painted multiple pieces that could be categorized as *qinggong tu* throughout his life. It should be noted, however, that the monochrome color, relatively small size, format of album leaves, and iconographies that do not carry clear auspicious meanings differentiate *Mogu tu* from the so-called *qinggong tu* paintings.

these paintings to the *huaniao* pictorial tradition, as noted by Hearn, such "symbolic still-life subjects" are unprecedented in scholarly painting.[21] Instead, ornamental designs with "still-life" images could often be found on craft objects and woodblock prints.[22] Following this lead, around the time when Chen Hongshou was working on his album leaves, we could identify two main groups of prints that include images of stand-alone objects or sets of objects detached from any background.[23] First are the carved designs on ink-cake that are documented in printed catalogues – namely *Fangshi mopu* 方氏墨譜 (Fang's Manual of Ink Cake Designs), first published in 1588, and *Chengshi moyuan* 程氏墨苑 (Cheng's Garden of Ink Cakes) in 1605. The two books are very similar in their content and format, and at times even share almost identical designs. In these books, each entry consists of two images reflecting the shape of the ink cake and the molded designs on the two sides of the object. Man-made objects, such as plant pots, jade ornaments, scrolls, and furniture are often featured in these designs (Fig. 1.5). Second are the catalogues of stationary letter paper designs, including the 1626 *Luoxuan biangu jianpu* 蘿軒變古箋譜 (Models of Letter Paper of the Wisteria Studio), and *Shizhu zhai jianpu* 十竹齋箋譜 (Album of letter papers of the Ten Bamboo Studio) published almost two decades later. In these multivolume catalogues, the exquisitely printed designs of actual letter papers are reproduced fairly exactly, in terms of the printing technique, appearance, size, and placement on the page.[24]

[21] Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Paintings*, 150.
[22] Ibid.; also see Cahill, *The Distant Mountains*, 246.
[23] I am leaving out the illustrations in printed novels and dramas in my discussion because, although they have been connected to the works of Chen Hongshou, especially his figurative works, and they often feature still-life images of manmade objects, all the instances are dated to post-1640s, which is past the time when the *Mogu tu* paintings was made. A list of these prints has been compiled by Kim Soo Hyun 金秀玹 in his dissertation "Book Illustration of Chinese Fictions during the Ming and Qing Dynasties: Visual Representations of Narrative and Commercialization of Literati Taste 明清小說插圖研究—敘事的視覺再現及文人化、商品化" (PhD Diss., Peking University, 2013), 78-9.
[24] Suzanne E. Wright,"'Luoxuan Biangu Jianpu' and 'Shizhuzhai Jianpu': Two Late-Ming Catalogues of Letter Paper Designs," *Artibus Asiae* 63, no. 1 (2003): 70.

Many of these designs portray objects and their assemblages. With the incorporation of the new techniques of polychrome printing and *gonghua* 拱花—a form of blind printing where designs are embossed onto blank papers to create images entirely through texture—these catalogues are able to portray the visual and material characteristic of objects in even greater detail and vividness (Fig. 1.6 and Fig. 1.7).[25]

It is highly likely that Chen Hongshou was familiar with these printed designs featuring images of objects, either through the printed catalogues or through the inkcakes and letter papers themselves. The two ink catalogues and *Shizhu zhai jianpu* were all made by publishers based or born in Huizhou, a town in present-day Anhui province known for ink making and wood carving. Chen Hongshou was entangled with Huizhou, its talents and their craft works throughout his career. To study paintings, the young Chen Hongshou frequented Hangzhou and Nanjing—the two cultural hubs near Chen's hometown. Located in these cities were famous publishing houses that often hired Huizhou carvers. During these visits, Chen Hongshou was able to see the latest styles of printed illustrations, and perhaps established a liking for Huizhou carvings.[26] He also became acquainted with carvers from Huizhou, especially those from the prominent Huang family, with whom he would later start artistic collaborations and establish strong personal relationships. This is evident in an anecdote told by Dong Yang 董瑒 (1615-1692), a scholar from Chen's hometown. After Chen Hongshou's death, his longtime woodblock collaborator and close friend Huang Jianzhong 黃健中 reportedly encountered Chen's ghost. Huang thus told his wife to prepare some burial goods for the ghost. The ghost also told Huang

[25] For a more thorough examination of the two catalogs of letter paper, see Wright,"'Luoxuan Biangu Jianpu' and 'Shizhuzhai Jianpu'," 69–122.
[26] Hiromitsu Koyayashi, "Printed Beauties" in *Repentant Monk: Illusion and Disillusion in the Art of Chen Hongshou*, ed. Julia M. White (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 25.

that he had drawn the scenes of hell, and would like him to carve them into a woodblock print.[27] Born to a scholarly family and actively engaged with the prominent literati at the time, Chen was also immersed within the newly developed literati taste and the material culture in vogue; therefore, finely carved inkcakes and elegantly designed letter paper should not have been a novelty for him.[28] This means that he could have encountered the "still-life" decorations on the objects unmediated by printed reproductions.

But the more direct evidence of Chen's familiarity with these designs on objects and in print lies within the set of *Mogu tu* paintings themselves, as they recall the printed designs through the subject matter of still life, the composition of stand-alone objects detached from any background setting, and the shapes delineated solely with fine and sometimes faint lines. More interestingly, the *Mogu tu* images and the carved designs share pictorial elements with striking visual similarity. The most salient instance is the rendering of the chrysanthemum on the fan (1.4). The flowers feature larger central disks drawn with darker ink, and dainty petals in ink of lighted shade. Such rendering stands out from the painter's common mode of drawing chrysanthemums that often feature larger petals with no view of the disk at the center, but is almost identical to the chrysanthemums featured in an ink-cake design in *Chengshi moyuan* (Fig. 1.8). Moreover, the painter seems to have intentionally put his signatures and seals right next to or even on the depicted objects, instead of the more common position near the picture frame. This closely resembles the positions of the signatures of the artisans/publishers in the designs seen in the ink-cake and letter paper catalogs that we have just seen.

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[27] This episode appears among the anecdotes of Chen Hongshou compiled by 19th century scholar Dong Jinjian 董金鑒. See Wu Gan 吳敢 ed., *Chen Hongshou ji* 陳洪綬集 (Complete Works of Chen Hongshou) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2012), 673.

[28] A discussion of the widespread use and connoisseurship of letter papers among Late Imperial Chinese scholars and artists can be found in Liang Ying 梁穎, *Shuo jian* 說箋 (On Letter Paper) (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu wenxian chunab she, 2012).

In the printed design catalogs, we also observe a close relationship between pictorial depictions of objects and the texts about them—or, borrowing Craig Clunas's words when he discusses the connoisseurial literature on objects, "a developing late Ming interest in a precise verbal fixing of the material world".[29] In the case of the ink-cake catalogs, while there can be designs featuring calligraphic inscriptions on both sides, in most scenarios, one side would feature a pictorial design, which is followed by textual inscriptions on the reversal side. These texts can be very succinct—a simple identification of the specific object in question, or a brief poetic quotation related to such an object; or there may be an entire poem or even a short essay that describes the object's characteristics and explains its cultural meaning. A similar structure between images of object and text could also be found in the catalogs of letter paper.[30] This pairing of objects and/or their images to texts suggests a mode of understanding objects and their images through text and meanings found in texts.[31]

Besides the meanings prescribed through existing texts that appear alongside the objects and their images, objects were also expected to be given meanings through literary engagement. The *yongwu* tradition could already be considered as a manifestation of such desire, which is further concretized in multiple layers of realities in the stationary letter paper with images of objects: the writings to be inscribed on the stationary letter paper will ascribe meanings, simultaneously, to the letter paper itself and the pictorial objects it bears. A similar situation can

[29] Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 52.
[30] Wright,"'Luoxuan Biangu Jianpu' and 'Shizhuzhai Jianpu'," 70.
[31] While the ink cake and letter paper designs also include a wide range of other images, such as human figures, landscapes and the more traditional depictions of flowers and birds, it should be noted that these other motifs also appear in countless paintings unaccompanied by text. On the contrary, besides the leaves from *Mogu tu*, we rarely see images of manmade objects as the central motifs in painting; in the cases of the *huaniao* paintings with detailed portrayal of flower containers, most of them feature written inscriptions that explain the auspicious meanings of the imagery. In other words, the most common way one could encounter images of manmade objects is through printed designs paired with texts.

be found in the *Mogu tu* leaf featuring the fan. As a painting medium, it is common for a fan to bear inscriptions, sometimes written by multiple authors in various stages of the fan's thing life. With only the painter's signature, the painted fan in *Mogu tu* provides ample empty surface space that awaits inscriptions that comment both on the ink chrysanthemum on the painted fan, as well as the album leaf itself. In addition to inscribing a flat surface with brush and ink, physical artifacts call for a specific kind of literary engagement: the act of engraving. Scholars in late imperial China, as discussed by Thomas Patrick Kelly, carved words onto the material surfaces of all kinds of objects from daily life—including mirrors, water basins, and ceramic containers that appear in Chen Hongshou's paintings.[32] Such inscriptions are often succinct, elegant, witty, and deeply personal.[33] In the album leaves, by transforming the three-dimensional objects into painted images, the material surface of the depicted object and the painting surface merge into each other. Viewers are therefore not only invited to search within their literary reservoir for the cultural meanings of the depicted objects, but also allowed to create new, individualized interpretations for the objects by conceptually "engraving" them through leaving inscriptions on the paintings—which seems to be especially called for by the plentiful blank spaces available within the frames of the *Mogu tu* compositions.

Yet in these uninscribed paintings, one's expectation and desire to textualize the pictorial and physical objects are left unsatisfied: even though these images recall pictorial genres and literary practices that closely associate images and objects with words, there is no text other than the painter's signature left on the actual painting surfaces. The absence of inscription in the *Mogu tu* album might be an intentional artistic decision made by the artist. Around the same time

[32] Thomas Patrick Kelly, "Clawed Skin: The Literary Inscription of Things in Sixteenth Century China" (PhD Diss., The University of Chicago, 2017).
[33] Ibid.

as *Mogu tu*, Chen Hongshou made another album of twelve paintings also in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The subject matters and painting techniques in this set resembles those in *Mogu tu*. However, each painting in this set is accompanied by inscriptions written after the completion of the album either by the artist himself or invited friends, including the prominent connoisseur and artist Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558-1639) (Fig. 1.9). These texts comment on the stylistic and iconographic choices that the artist made in the paintings, thus helping later viewers better understand the images, their meanings and artistic value. But in *Mogu tu*, without designated texts, even if the viewer was likely to be familiar with the various cultural connotations of the types of objects being depicted, the specific meanings of the images remain ambiguous and fluid, leaving room for more diverse personal interpretations of the paintings. In other words, these paintings invite the viewer to explore objects and their images in ways that are unbound by the existing textual context.

One can further argue that images of mundane things to be found in most households and used by many could never be fully reduced to mere symbols, as they will always retain the ability to evoke the viewer's real-life intellectual, bodily, and sentimental experiences with the objects being depicted.[34] Such is the case with the things that are put under the spotlight in the four *Mogu tu* leaves—things that are so culturally prevalent yet commonplace that they readily become vessels to be filled with one's own thoughts and memories. Portrayed with vivid

[34] My thinking on this issue is indebted to Elaine Freedgood's writing in *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*, where the author "takes the objects literally, followed by a lengthy metonymic search beyond the covers of the text." In this way, she avoids the kind of reading that "indentures the objects to a metaphorical relation in which they must give up most of their qualities in the service of a symbolic relation." (page #?) In this way, she argues for objects' social, national and cultural significance as stored "at the level of the word." Taking her method a step further, I am interested in the objects' qualities that are inherent in the material, form, and function of objects, and how they were echoed, magnified, and employed in other mediums to allow the objects to make meanings. See Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2-10.

material specificities yet suspended in indeterminate space with few contextual indicators and no human figure, Chen Hongshou's objects are waiting to be enacted by and *only* by the viewer. The paintings in *Mogu tu* thus possess a poetic potential to touch and inspire the viewer through emotion, sensibility, and imagination.[35] Moreover, the small size of the painted objects rendered with delicate brush strokes entices the viewer to lean in closer in order to take in all the exquisite pictorial details. It also means that the album was more likely designed to be viewed by one person at a time. Therefore, the encounter with the *Mogu tu* images is necessarily a private and intimate one that engenders a moment of contemplation towards an individual's everyday experiences. Only then will one come to notice the ambivalence of these images and the things in them, as they wittily blur the natural and the artificial, the real and the illusory, the inanimate and the animate. It is through these playful contradictions that the true nature of objects—including painting itself—is revealed to the viewer.

Enigmatic Materials

In previous studies, it has been pointed out that the *Mogu tu* album thematizes the mutual transformation between human hand and the force of nature.[36] This theme is most clearly manifested through the motif of *penjing* 盆景 (or *bonsai* in Japanese; potted plants) as the main subject matter of one of the leaves. As an art form where plants are carefully manipulated to replicate scenery in nature and its changes on a miniaturized scale, *penjing* occupies the ambiguous space between the artificial and the natural. The same can be said about some of the materials that Chen Hongshou chose to depict in his early works, and would continue to portray

[35] This is akin to the intersubjective capacity of poetic images on its readers ("resonance-reverberation") described by Gaston Bachelard. See Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Translated by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xv-xxiv.
[36] Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Paintings*, 150.

throughout his artistic career. Chen Hongshou seems to have been particularly fascinated by materials crafted by humans but transformed by the forces of nature. These materials undergo changes that humans cannot fully control, thus leading to their visual effects that are ultimately spontaneous and unpredictable. Such abstract aspects of materials and the elusive processes of material transformation are captured and visualized in Chen Hongshou's portrayals of objects.

On material of this kind is ceramic with kiln transformation, or *yaobian* (窯變). In particular, it was ceramics with crackled glaze that would capture the artist's interest for decades. In the *Mogu tu* leaf, the pine, plum and bamboo branches—an auspicious combination commonly referred as "The Three Friends of the Cold Season" (*suihan sanyou* 歲寒三友)—were planted in a crackle-glazed pot (Fig. 1.1).[37] The artist devoted much attention to emphasizing the pot and its specific visual and material characteristics. While the miniaturization of the trees in container gardens is rooted deeply in the religious thought and world view of ancient China, and was evidently a common feature in Ming container landscapes,[38] visually, the miniaturized plant makes the normal-sized container appear larger in scale, thus stressing the container's importance within the composition. More importantly, the pot's crackled surface is highlighted,

[37] The "Three friends" emerged as a symbol primarily for scholarly virtues in the 9th century, but came to be considered as a decorative design that simply conveyed a message of longevity and good wishes in the popular culture of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century. It is a common motif used on decorative objects as well as in scholarly flower-and-bird paintings. But in these contexts, the plants are often portrayed as free-standing branches devoid of any visual clue for its growing environment. See Maggie Bickford, "Three Rams and Three Friends—The Working Lives of Chinese Auspicious Motifs," in *Asia Major*, third series, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1999), 127-158; The auspicious meanings of these plants can be found in an handbook of auspicious signs in Chinese art: Terese Tse Bartholomew, Mulan Bartholomew, and Kazuhiro Tsuruta, *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art* (San Francisco, Calif.: Asian Art Museum, Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, 2006). For a discussion of Three Friends of the Cold Season as a decorative motif on porcelains, see Mary Gardner Neill, "The Flowering Plum in the Decorative Arts," in *Bones of Jade, Soul of Ice: The Flowering Plum in Chinese Art,* ed. Maggie Bickford (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1985), 207 -213. For a discussion of scholarly flower-and-bird paintings and their common compositions, see Clapp, *The Painting of T'ang Yin*, 199.

[38] This has been discussed in Stein Rolf Alfred, *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

first through the layering of the ink lines on the pot surface. It seems that the painter first drew the S-shaped motifs near the pot rim. These motifs likely refer to the metal staples used for repairing broken ceramic pieces.[39] When repairing with staples, small holes were drilled on the two sides of a crack to hold the bent metal staples across the crack's seam.[40] After drawing the staples, Chen Hongshou then filled the surface of the pot with delicate lines that resemble crackles. As these lines do not correspond to the metal staples in the same way as in mended porcelains, they, with little doubt, are referring to the crackled patterns on porcelain wares. The fine, restrained yet freely evolved crackle lines are further accentuated through their juxtaposition with the rather raw and simple strokes in the roughly sketched outline of the pot and the staples. It should be pointed out that to give these crackle lines such a convincing and natural look takes great effort and artistic virtuosity. On the actual porcelain object, these patterns would be developed somewhat "organically" either through the change in the glaze material during the firing process (i.e. crazing), or as result of unintentional crazing that happens over a relatively long period of time.[41] In a description of creating crackle patterns on the interior wall from Li Yu 李漁 (1611-1680)'s *Xianqing Ouji* 閒情偶寄 (Random Notes on Leisurely Enjoyments), the author noted that the crackle patterns should be "varied in sizes and irregular in

[39] This is a technique that appeared in China at least since the ninth century and was still in practice for daily mending during the Ming dynasty. See Xie Mingliang, *Taoci xiubu shu de wenhua shi* 陶瓷修補術的文化史 (The Cultural History of the Craft of Porcelain Mending) (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2018), 56-79.

[40] Xie, *Taoci xiubu shu de wenhua shi*, 56-79.

[41] On real ceramic vessels, the larger, thicker and darker cracks were likely to be produced during the cooling process after the firing in a fast and drastic fashion. When the fired and crackled wares were taken out of the kiln, they might be dipped instantly into or brushed with a dark pigment, making the otherwise subtle lines into a network of bold patterns. For the lightly-colored thin golden cracks, study of the shards shows that there is no sign of yellow color being applied, and the fine golden cracks were likely to be slowly developed afterwards as another later layer of unintentional crazes. The crazes would catch color from the environments where the vessels were displayed or used. See Qiu Xiaoxun 丘小軍 and Chang Bin 常斌, "Cong Geyao 'jinsi tiexian' tanqi" 從哥窯'金絲鐵線'談起 (The "Golden Tread and Iron Lines" from the Ge Kiln), in *Wenwu jianding yu jianshang* 文物鑒定與鑒賞 2016(11): 66-71.

directions (大小錯雜，斜正參差)", which could be achieved by sticking "spontaneously cracked" paper pieces on a dark background.[42] For a painter delineating such patterns solely with ink, it would have been even more difficult to achieve the visual effect of effortlessness and spontaneity in the crackled pattern, and would have required a careful design process and masterful control of the hand and brush.

Although crackled glaze could be found on porcelains quite early on, a systematic appreciation of crackles was not developed until the early Ming Dynasty, and was popularized in the late Ming and early Qing.[43] A pioneer text that addresses the importance of crackled glaze in ceramic connoisseurship is *Gegu Yaolun* 格古要論 (Guide to the Study of Antiquities), which considers the crackles and crazes not only a major criterion to evaluate the quality of porcelain wares, but also a key factor for authenticating pieces from famous kilns.[44] In the mid and late Ming, scholars and collectors such as Gao Lian 高濂 (ca. 1527–1603), Zhang Yingwen 張應文 (1524?-1582) and Wen Zhenheng 文震亨 (1585–1645) observed the crackled-glaze even more closely and carefully, with the development of the categorization and ranking of different types of crackle patterns.[45] Part of the reason that Ming scholars were so fascinated by crackled-glaze

[42] The passage can be found in Li Yu, *Xianqing ouji*, juan 4, in Li *Yu Quanji* 李漁全集 (*A Comprehensive Collection of the Works of Li Yu*), vol. 1 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2014), 161. Translation by the author. The Chinese text of the manipulation of paper in this case reads "隨手裂作零星小塊." While the paper doesn't "crack" *per se*, and thus this line means that the paper were spontaneously *torn* into small pieces, the character *lie* 裂 used here is certainly referencing the visual effect of cracked pattern in porcelain (*binglie* 冰裂). I therefore translate the verb *lie* 裂 as "crack."

[43] This has been discussed by Xie Mingliang in his book chapter on the popularity of "suiqi" – porcelain wares with crackled glaze, which mainly focuses on textual descriptions of the Ru, Guan, and Ge wares in the Ming Dynasty. See Xie Mingliang, "*Wanming shiqi de song guanyao jianshang yu suiqi de liuxing* 晚明時期的宋官窯鑒賞與碎器的流行" in *Maoyi taoci wenhua shi* 貿易陶瓷與文化史 (Trade Porcelain and Cultural History) (Taiwan: Yunchen wenhua shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 2005), 361-373.

[44] See Cao Zhao 曹昭 (14 century), *Gegu Yaolun* 格古要論 (*Guide to the Study of Antiquities*) (Shanghai: Shanghai shangwu yinshu guan, 1940), juan 2, "Gu yaoqi lun" 古窯器論 (Discussions of Wares from Ancient Kilns). For a more detailed discussion of this, see Xie, *Maoyi taoci wenhua shi*, 361-373.

[45] Xie, *Maoyi taoci yu wenhua shi*, 390-1.

porcelain was the difficulty for the Ming potters to fully recreate the more subtle crackle effect seen on Song- and Yuan-Dynasty porcelain wares from the mysterious and now-lost Ge kiln 哥窯 and the Guan kiln 官窯. More fundamentally, although the crackles on the glaze could be manipulated to some extent by the craftsmen through skillfully adjusting the composition of the clay and the glaze and changing the firing temperature, the exact patterning could never be fully controlled by human agents. In *Sensuous Surface*, Jonathan Hay distinguishes two kinds of patterns in the Ming-Qing period decorative art: material pattern and formal pattern. The former is defined by Hay as "the inherent patterning of organic materials … understood to embody the potential of changes as embodied, undirected flux."[46] The artificial alchemical patterning on the porcelain glaze, including those created by what Hay calls "random crackling," should thus be considered as a kind of material patterning that is partly artificial but ultimately generated from the material itself under the force of natural elements, and thus unpredictable to the point that they were viewed by late imperial craftsmen and connoisseurs as ineffable and magical.[47]

There is a kind of naturalness and a subsequent spontaneity inherent in the making of cracked glaze ceramic. In Gao Lian's 1591 *Zunsheng bajian* 遵生八箋 (Eight Treatises on the Nurturing of Life), the changes in the glaze that happen in the kiln are described as resulted from the metamorphosis of the fire:

> [The changes in the glaze] all come from the fire's cultivation and metamorphosis; or else it could not be explained by reason. This seems to make them even more precious.

[46] Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surface: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 129 and 143.
[47] For a discussion of the crackled glaze as alchemical patterning, see Hay, *Sensuous Surface*, 136-7. Looking at the slightly later period of the Qing Dynasty, Ellen Huang demonstrates the "centrality of the magical and ineffable in transformative action to object-making, craft processes, and the production of porcelain at Jingdezhen during High-Qing China." See Ellen Huang, "An Art of Transformation: Reproducing *Yaobian* Glazes in Qing-Dynasty Porcelain," *Archives of Asian Art* 68, no. 2: 133–56.

是皆火之文明幻化，否则理不可曉，似更難得.[48]

According to this account, the form of the crackles was seen as not controlled by the craftsmen, but determined by the natural element of fire. In the *Mogu tu* leaf, a sense of vitality within the cracks on the glaze is subtly implied through the visual continuity in the style of the brush strokes between the crackled patterns on the pot and the some of the plants it contains—especially the tiny shrubs and the pine needles that appear to be delineated with more saturated ink dipped on a brush tip that is smaller than that used elsewhere in the same painting. Noticeably, these lines are not entirely smooth, but slightly grainy and tremulous, which give a sense of vibration and animation. In connoisseurship literature, crackled lines on ceramic glaze have been referred to – depending on their particular shapes and sizes – as "willow-leaf pattern 柳葉紋", as well as "crab-claw pattern 蟹爪紋", or "fish-roe pattern 魚子紋", all of which compare the ceramic patterning to living things in nature.[49] And indeed, like the leaves growing from a trunk, the crackled patterns on the ceramic surface grow and change over time. Depending on the specific environment where the ceramic vessels were displayed or used, a ceramic collector might find crazes developing in the previously pure glaze, or the original cracked patterns becoming darker and more intricate.[50] Thus, the shared visual quality of the ink lines between the cracked patterns and the growing weeds and pine needles could be considered

[48] Gao Lian, *Zunsheng Bajian*, in Gao Liang ji 高濂集, vol. 1 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2015), vol. 1, 610. Translation by the author.

[49] Hay mentions the use of these terms as a Qing phenomenon (Hay, 136). But the early use of these terms could in fact be found in writings including *Gegu yaolun* and *Zunsheng bajian*, and became widespread in writings from the Qing dynasty. The most comprehensive listing of the names of different kinds of crackled patterns on ceramic vessels could be found in the early 19th century book *Talks on Porcelain from Yinliu Studio* 飲流齋說瓷 *(Yinliu Zhai Shuoci*) written by Xu Zhiheng 许之衡 (1877-1935). See Xu Zhiheng, *Yinliuzhai Shuoci* (Shanghai: Shanghai Chaoji Shuzhuang Publication, 1925).

[50] Jia Cui 賈翠 and Miao Jianmin 苗建民, "Songdai ru yuan yao youmian binglie wen de tezheng guancha ji jili tanxi" 宋代汝官窯釉面冰裂紋的特徵觀察及機理探析 (Observation and Mechanical Analysis of Ice Crackle Patterns on the Glaze Surface from Song-Dynasty Ru Official Kiln), in *Nanfang wenwu* 南方文物, 2016(2): 225-230; Qiu Xiaoxun and Chang Bin, "Cong Geyao 'jinsi tiexian' tanqi."

as implying a conceptual parallel between them. The visual specificity of such ink strokes is further set off by the thick but rather fainter contours of the inanimate objects of the planter pot and the rocks. This second kind of brushwork also appears as the outlines of the mending marks, which, perhaps, is the artist's way of nodding to the metal staples' artificiality, in contrast with the organically developed crackled patterns on the ceramic glaze.

The emphasis on the organic aspect of a fabricated material through visually linking it to living creatures is also seen in another "still-life" composition by Chen Hongshou that we have briefly looked at, where a bouquet of lotus and bamboo branches in an oxidized bronze vase take center stage (Fig. 1.9).[51] Like the crackled glaze on ceramics, the patina on bronze vessels was also appreciated by Ming connoisseurs, especially for its dynamic visual effect that responds to the natural environment. A key text on the aestheticization of bronze patina is found in Zhao Xigu 趙希鵠 (1170–1242)'s *Dongtian Qinglu* 洞天清祿 (Records of the Pure Registers of the Cavern Heaven):

> Bronze vessels that have been interred under the earth a thousand years appear pure green, as though covered over with kingfisher feathers; in the forenoon their color is somewhat insipid; in the afternoon, owing to the Yin vapors, the kingfisher green glistens as if it were about to trickle away……Bronze vessels that have been immersed in water for a thousand years are pure emerald. Those that have not been immersed for so long a period as a thousand years are emerald green but lack the luster……Those that have been transmitted down from antiquity and have not yet entered water or earth but have passed through the hands of men have the color of purplish brown and a red sand-like mottle; those that are excessively so have the mottle protruding and appearing like first glass cinnabar……
>
> 銅器入土千年，純青如鋪翠。其色子後稍淡，午後乘陰氣，翠潤欲滴……銅器墜水千年，則純綠色而瑩如玉。未及千年綠而不瑩。其蝕處如前……傳世古則不曾入水，惟流傳人間，色紫褐而有朱砂班，甚者其班凸起如上等辰砂……[52]

[51] It is worth noting that Chen Hongshou had a great interest in the bronzes with patina, which appears in many of his paintings. The album leaf at the Metropolitan Museum is the artist's earliest existing portrayal of such material, but already shares visual features with the artist's later renderings of the same motif.

[52] Translated based on Barnard's with minor adaptations from the author. See Noel Barnard, "The Incidence of Forgery Amongst Archaic Chinese Bronzes: Some Preliminary Notes," *Monumenta Serica* 27 (1968): 91–168, 101-2.

This passage has been reprinted many times with the book during the Ming Dynasty, and evidently widely circulated among Ming scholars;[53] It also appears, with small variations, in many other canonical connoisseurship texts that were quite popular in the Ming Dynasty.[54] The main purpose of this text was to teach its readers how to tell genuine antique bronzes from forgeries. But the extremely vivid and almost excessive descriptions of patina indicates that the patina on bronze vessels was more than the mark of truly ancient objects; rather, it itself provides aesthetic pleasure through its dynamic visual and tactile effects that showcase the traces of time and various natural elements, namely soil, water and the *yin* vapors. According to this account, the patina does not simply endure, but also reacts to the changes of its environment, making the artifact much like a living entity. On a practical level, ancient bronze vessels were considered as one of the best containers for flower arrangements, as the breath of soil that they have absorbed over time will encourage the plants to grow flowers that appear brighter in color.[55] This suggests that to some extent, bronze artifacts could be transformed into something that shares the same function and material properties as the soil.

The idea of bronze as a material that is manmade yet also "organic" is further elucidated and visualized in Chen Hongshou's painting. First is the use of the mineral pigments in

[53] See I Lofen 衣若芬, "Zhao Xigu *Dongtian qinglu ji* tanxi" 趙希鵠《洞天清祿集》探析 (Analysis of Zhao Xigu's *Records of the Pure Registers of the Cavern Heaven*), in *Xin Song xue* 新宋學 2 (2002): 410-19.
[54] This includes: Cao Zhao 's *Gegu yaolun*, Gao Lian 's 1591 *Zunsheng bajian*, and Wen Zhenheng's *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志 (Treatise on Superfluous Things) written around year 1620 when Chen Hongshou was working on his early paintings.
[55] The original text reads: "Having stayed underground for many years, ancient bronze vessels absorbed the essence of the soil, and thus when they are used to grow flowers, the color of the flower will be extremely vivid and bright 古銅器入土年久，受土氣深，以之養花，花色鮮明." It was first mentioned in Zhao Xigu's *Dongtian qinglu*, and restated in much of the connoisseurship literature in the Ming and Qing periods. See Zhao Xigu 趙希鵠, *Dongtian qinglu* 洞天清錄 (Records of the Pure Registers of the Cavern Heaven), in *Quan Song biji* 全宋筆記 collection 7, ce 2 (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chuban she, 2019), 233.

exaggerated vivid colors. While obviously fitting for the portrayal of bronze patina in terms of their color scheme, as well as their thick consistency that creates an uneven surface on paper to resemble the texture of patina on bronze vessels,[56] the choice of pigments also reminds viewers of the mountains in archaic blue-and-green landscape paintings—a genre of painting that Chen Hongshou's teacher Lan Ying 藍瑛 (1585-1664) was particularly known for and which the artist must have been familiar with (Fig. 1.10). But the connection between bronze artifacts and scenes in nature extends beyond their resemblance in the color combination: reputedly, bronze patina had been used in making pigments for painting landscapes.[57] But what is most unique about this painting is the peculiar rendering of the bamboo branches and the lotus leaf. Here, we see an almost identical set of pasty, uneven mineral colors as used for the bronze patina. Moreover, upon closer look, the outlines of the lotus and bamboo leaves appear rather clumsy and fragmented, echoing the outline of the bronze vase. These should not be read as the immaturity of a young artist's technique: look no further than the lotus flower in the same painting, where the delicate, transparent pink wash was carefully applied on the flower petals outlined with fine,

[56] Although this could not be clearly observed in digital reproduction, in real life, the texture of the pigments is quite striking.

[57] This is implied in a story recorded in the Tang Buddhist canon *Tripitaka* 大藏經, where a devoted scholar tried to make a mural about the miraculous act of monk Fa'an who subjugated a ferocious tiger: "He did not have access to azurite; he wanted to use copper green (*tongqing* 銅青), but he could not find any copper to make it. In the night, he dreamed of a man in front of his bed, telling him that there were two bronze bells buried under his bed, and that he could make use of them. The next day, he dug out the bells and finished his mural. 不能得空青，欲用銅青而又無銅。夜夢人迂其床前云：'此中有兩銅鍾，便可取之。'安明即掘得，遂以成像." Although the text does not specify which part of the mural that the patina was used for, since the miraculous story took place in the woods, we might assume that the green pigment would be used to paint trees and perhaps mountainous landscape. See *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 (Precious grove of the dharma garden), juan 19 quoted in Quincy Ngan, "The Materiality of Azurite Blue and Malachite Green in the Age of the Chinese Colorist Qiu Ying (ca. 1498 – ca. 1552)" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2016), 60. The phenomenon of using metal patina as pigment is also mentioned in Luo Ying 羅穎, "Shanshui hua secai de chuancheng yu fazhan 山水畫色彩的傳承與發展 (The Continuity and Development of the Colors in Landscape Paintings)," in *Zhongguo huaxue yanjiu: Xingshen yu bimo* 中國畫學研究: 形神與筆墨 (Studies of Chinese Traditional Paintings: Form, Spirit, Brush, and Ink), ed. Zhongguo meishu xueyuan guohua xi 中國美術學院國畫系 (Hangzhou: Zhonggguo meishu xueyuan chuban she, 2008), 229.

effortlessly smooth brushwork, which contribute to the flower a realistic yet almost ethereal look. Nor should it be blamed on the quality of the pigments and the paper, since in other leaves of the same album, what appear to be the same green, blue and brown pigments were thinned out to create colored surfaces that are even and light (Fig. 1.11). In other words, the seemingly awkward ink and color applications were likely intentional. These unusual artistic choices lead to a rather interesting visual result, where the cut branches appear to be, quite literally, grown out of the bronze vase; one might also say that with the shared colors and texture, they are visually merging into each other, and the line between the manmade object and the living branches is blurred.[58] Moreover, the vase's shaky outline that is breached here and there by the bleeding ink colors contributes to a strong sense of animation, as if the vase is vibrating, or the oxidizing surface ever-changing.

Materials whose making necessarily involves the participation of nature and whose final form constantly evolves out of human control retain an inherent sense of spontaneity in their coming-of-being. This aspect of bronze patina has already been hinted at in Zhao Xigu's description, where the color and texture of the patina are described as being determined by the

[58] The connection between oxidized bronze and elements from nature might help us better understand the seemingly odd colophon that Chen Jiru wrote to accompany the painting, where the subject matter of a bronze vase with arranged flowers is completely left unmentioned; instead, the colophon compliments Chen Hongshou's skill in painting trees, flowers, clouds, rocks and cliffs in the styles of ancient masters. It should be pointed out that in this colophon, Chen Jiru also mentions Chen Hongshou's ability to paint religious figures in the styles of Hou Yu and Guan Tong. But the majority of the texts discuss pictorial motifs from nature. The entire colophon reads: "Chao Buzhi [1051–1110] said: "[In painting] follow Hou Yu [active 10th c.] for Buddhist figures, follow Wu Daoxuan [Wu Daozi, active ca. 710–60] for clouds and vapors, follow Guan Tong [active 907–23] for celestial guardians, pines, and rocks, follow Guo Zhongshu [d. 977] for grasses and trees, follow Li Cheng [919–967] for reclining boughs and dangling vines, follow Xu Daoning [ca. 970–ca. 1052] for tumbling cliffs and emaciated trees, and follow Yi Yuanji [d. ca. 1064] and Cui Bai [active ca. 1060–85] for flowers, birds, fish, and insects." Now Zhanghou is just twenty-five sui, but has acquired all those merits. In his previous incarnations, he must have been a painter as well a poet" (晁補之云: "菩薩倣侯昱，雲氣倣吳道玄, 天王松石倣關仝, 草樹倣郭忠恕, 臥槎垂藤倣李成, 崩崖瘦木倣許道寧, 花鳥魚虫倣易元吉、崔白." 今章侯年甫二十五歲, 具得其長, 前身畫師, 宿世詞客也.) Translations provided by the Met website: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44759?sortBy=Relevance&ft=Chen+Hongshou&offset=0&rpp=40&pos=5

environment. The spontaneity is even more clearly seen in the discussion of crackle-glaze ceramics by connoisseurs in late imperial China. In *Tiangong kaiwu* 天工開物 (The Exploitation of the Works of Nature), the author Song Yingxing 宋應星 (1587-1666) explains the technique of making such porcelain wares:

> In order to make porcelain wares with crackled glaze, after carving the [unfired] clay body with a sharp knife, one should put it under the sun until it becomes extremely hot, and then quickly dip it into clear water. The crackles will naturally appear by themselves after firing.
>
> 欲為碎器，利刀過後，日曬極熱，入清水一蘸而起，燒出自成裂紋.[59]

Here, despite the hand's initial intervention with the knife, the development of the crackles on the glaze during the firing process is described as "appear[ing] by themselves (自成)" after firing. And in the previously cited text from Gao Lian's *Zunsheng bajian*, the fire in the kiln is portrayed as an intangible force that is manifested through the natural, vibrant, and almost fantastic happenings on the glaze during the making process, which could not be fully comprehended by humans (是皆火之文明幻化，否則理不可曉).

Chen Hongshou never directly referred to the indication of spontaneity in his depictions of the bronze patina or the crackled glaze. Instead, at least in the case of crackle-glazed ceramic vessels, the painter's sensitivity to this aspect is revealed through the types of scenes in his later paintings where such objects could be found. In fact, throughout his artistic career, Chen Hongshou had produced numerous works featuring scholarly activities that are permeated with all kinds of objects of various materials; but the scenes where we see crackle-glazed porcelains are always limited to several predictable themes, among which the most common are those

[59] Song Yingxing, *Tiangong kaiwu* (The Exploitation of the Works of Nature), ed. and annot. Yang Weizeng 楊維增 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021). Translation by the author.

depicting figures involved in the activities of artistic creation, such as composing poems or making paintings.[60] In Chen's depictions of such scenes, we might often—if not always—find crackle-glazed porcelains taking up a small but nonetheless visually compelling space within the paintings' frames. This suggests that the crackle-glazed vessels were represented not only because they were fitting objects for the elegant living environment of literati in a general sense, but also because they were suitable to the specific scenes they were paired with. One example is a hanging scroll collected in Wuxi Museum (Fig. 1.12). The later attributed title of this scroll, *Baiyin sishi tu* 柏蔭思詩圖 (Thinking of Poems in the Shadow of a Pine Tree) summarizes the scene quite accurately: in the painting, two scholarly-dressed figures are sitting beside a stone table; the half-scrolled blank paper and the dampened inkstone suggest that they are in the middle of composing. Right in front of them seems to be the source of their artistic inspiration: a gigantic old pine tree with dramatically twisted trunks and bizarrely outstretched branches. While the figure on the left calmly points his feather fan to the tree, the figure on the right humbly lowers his upper body, looks upwards at the tree in awe, and lets himself be inspired by it. On the table taking up a significant amount of space is a huge crackle-patterned vase holding some flowers. This setup of a flower arrangement on a low platform echoes the setting of an offering table, indicating that the figure, who not only lowers his body but also devotedly folds his arms in to put his hands together, might be praying to this strange ancient pine, perhaps in the hope for poetic inspiration in return. In the scroll that I have discussed in the introduction, a scholar-looking figure is sitting by the table with a brush in his hand and a blank piece of paper laying in front of him (Fig. 1.13). The figure seems to be occupied by his own thoughts: he leans

[60] Other themes are: winter scenes; drinking activities; and life of the recluse, which will be discussed later in this dissertation. It should also be pointed out that sometimes, several of these themes are found in one painting.

forward over the table, with a furrowed brow and downcast eyes. The brush with an inked tip and the blank paper indicate that he is just about to write or draw something, but suddenly hesitates before starting; perhaps he is still searching for a better idea—although his half-opened mouth seems to indicate that he might have just been struck by a sudden burst of inspiration. On the stone table is a water container with crackle patterns placed between a *zun*-shaped flower vase and an inkstone. While the surface of the vase is left uncolored with no decoration and the inkstone only slightly shaded with ink wash, thus leaving the materials of these objects ambiguous, the crackle patterns on the water container undoubtedly point to the texture of crackle-glazed porcelain.

These scenes in Chen Hongshou's paintings capture the tranquil yet dramatic moments before artistic creation. Even though the figures appear to be actively seeking inspiration, they are nevertheless caught up in a moment of suspense, as if waiting for some more profound happenings, and as if the arrival of the final artistic revelation could not be fully controlled by them, but hidden in the intangible and un-depicted surroundings, or within nature's majestic creations—the pine tree, in the case of the Wuxi hanging scroll. The spontaneity of artistic inspiration has already been articulated by Lu ji 陸機 (261-303) in his canonical *Rhymeprose on Literature* (*Wenfu* 文賦) within the context of literature: "As for the moment of responding when moved, the regulation of flow and blockage; when it comes you cannot prevent it and when it goes you cannot restrain it. 若夫應感之會，通塞之紀。來不可遏，去不可止"[61] Within the late Ming context, such an attitude towards artistic creation, described in the ancient text, might have found a new hold. Chen Hongshou's own art practice, as has been suggested by Tamara

[61] Lu Ji, *Wenfu*, lines 111-112 and 115, translated by John Hay in "Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface," *Archives of Asian Art*, *38* (1984), 96.

Bentley, was deeply registered within a new cultural trend that linked subjectivity to spontaneity—an aesthetic that was enthusiastically discussed by late Ming intellectuals.[62] More specifically, as summarized by Maram Epstein, the prominent late Ming thinker Wang Ji (王畿, 1498-1583) and his disciples believed that "certain gifted minds could achieve sudden and spontaneous enlightenment without strenuous effort," and "saw instinctive responses to stimuli not as being flawed due to their subjective bias, but as a central basis for morality".[63] This is echoed in a comment by Zhou Lianggong 週亮工 (1612-1672), a close friend of the painter and famous scholar, who maintains that "the paintings of Zhanghou (Chen Hongshou) are the products of natural talent, and cannot be achieved through accumulated knowledge and skill 章侯畫得之於性，非積習所能致".[64]As objects whose form could not be fully controlled by human beings but determined at least in part by the invisible force of the fire, and thus embodying a sense of spontaneity and unpredictability, the crackle-glazed porcelain could be seen as a fitting footnote to the spontaneous and rather spiritual art making process portrayed in Chen's paintings.[65]

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[62] Tamara Heimarck Bentley, *The Figurative Works of Chen Hongshou (1599-1652): Authentic Voices/Expanding Markets* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 9.

[63] Maram Epstein, *Competing discourses: Orthodoxy, Authenticity, and Engendered Meanings in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 72-3. Also discussed in Bentley, *The Figurative Works of Chen Hongshou*, 10. It was very likely that Chen Hongshou was familiar with Wang ji's thoughts –Wang Ji was not only a cultural authority at the time, but also the teacher of Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521-1993), who was a close friend of Chen Hongshou's father. Amidst the social upheaval towards the end of the Ming Dynasty, Chen Hongshou and his family escaped from the capital to Shaoxing 紹興, and lived in Xu Wei's old home.

[64] Zhou Lianggong, "Chen Zhanghou 陳章侯" in *Duhua lu* 讀畫錄 (*Record of Reading Paintings*), ed. and annot. Wang Suliu 王素柳 and Zhou Feiqiang 周飛強 (Hangzhou: Xiling yinshe chuban she, 2008), juan 1, 74. Translation by the author. I have translated the character *xing* 性 into "natural talent", as the sentence emphasizes Chen Hongshou's artistic capability as naturally born with and could not be cultivated with intension. This is a sense of spontaneity and naturalness within the character *xing* 性: *Zhongyong* 中庸 explains *xing* as the quality determined by the cosmic order (天命之謂性), which is further explained in *Kangxi zidian* as "given by nature" (性是命賦自然).

[65] The sense of spontaneity and unpredictability can also be applied to the patina on bronze vessel, but I have yet to be able to identify a correlation between the painter's depiction of oxidized bronze vessels and their

(In)Tangible Surfaces

Chen Hongshou's skillful yet subtle visual expositions of the crackled glaze of porcelain and oxidized bronze speak to the artist's strong interest in things made with particular kinds of materials. "There exist what we call images of things, which as it were peeled off from the surfaces of objects, fly this way and that through the air," says Roman poet Titus Lucretius Carus in his *De rerum natura*—sometimes translated into "On the Nature of Things."[66] Indeed, for painted depictions of objects, the sense of material qualities is, after all, manifested in the arrangements of lines, shapes and colors rendered through the application of pigments on the pictorial surface—what Giuliana Bruno articulates as "materiality as a surface condition."[67] In the following discussion of another two album leaves from *Mogu tu*, we will discover how the artist cleverly manipulated and played with the interactions between the objects' fictional surfaces and the paper plane, drawing our attention to the materiality and artificiality of both the depicted objects and the paintings themselves.

In another album leaf from *Mogu tu*, a flower, yet to fully bloom, is left in front of a lobed bronze mirror (Fig. 1.2). The stem of the flower is entangled with a hair pin in the shape that echoes the shape of the mirror; and a ring finely decorated with a rabbit is placed to the left

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pictorial contexts to show a clear connection between bronze patina and the art-making process. There is a small hint, though: as I have mentioned, the understanding of bronze patina as resembling living entities and hence can grow natural and spontaneously out of human control is revealed by the ways in which the painter rendered the oxidized bronze surfaces in his works, among which is his particular application of mineral pigments – allegedly could be made from bronze patina – on both the bronze vessel and the plants it contains.

[66] Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of the Universe: A New Verse Translation by Sir Ronald Melville* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 102–3.

[67] Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 3. Bruno's discussion traces patterns of material relations manifested on the surface of different media, especially architecture, fashion, film, design, and new media. Painting is also mentioned in the discussion, but not of her primary concern. Notedly, Bruno maintains that her theorization of surface is an "intermedial operation" that exposes the thread that connect different media: "Such refashioning of the fabrics of the visual shows tension at the edge, in the space beyond the medium, in the interstices between art forms, and junctions where both transgressive and transitive moments between the arts become palpable on the surface." (Bruno, 6)

of the intertwined ensemble. In Wu Hung's discussion of this painting, he suggests that the scattered female accessories imply the presence of a woman outside the picture frame who has just taken off her make-up and jewelry, and that the flower could be read as a metonym of the lady who was meant to be in front of the mirror.[68] The shape of the mirror further strengthens this argument: often referred to as "mirror in the shape of a water chestnut flower" (菱花鏡 or 菱鏡 , *linghua jing* or *lingjing*), such mirrors had become a common motif in literary descriptions of lady's toiletry.[69] In fact, Chen Hongshou's metaphorical composition might have been inspired by the motif of a lady looking into a mirror commonly found in texts and images. As a pictorial theme, the depiction of "lady in front of mirror" could be traced back to one scene from the ancient *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* 女史箴圖 (*Nüshi zhen tu*) scroll, where two palace ladies are sitting at their toilette and looking at the mirrors in front of them (Fig. 1.14). While we only see the back of the round bronze mirror next to the woman on the left, the woman on the right faces away from the viewer and looks into the hand-held mirror, which reflects her visage. The scene is accompanied by a text that teaches women to attend to their virtue, rather than to physical beauty. This leads scholars to read the two mirrors in the scene that are not mentioned in the text as "more than just tools for helping with make-up, but mirrors into the souls of the ladies, reflecting their inner nature as much as their external appearance."[70] Thus, in this pictorial context, mirrors are significant for what they reflect. In the twelfth century, the motif of a lady in front of the mirror had become part of the repertoire for depicting "laments of the boudoir" (*guiyuan* 閨怨) focused on the transience of physical beauty, love and desire—a

[68] Wu, *Zhongguo huihua zhong de nüxing kongjian,* 400.
[69] Hua Fu 華夫 et al., *Zhongguo Gudai Mingwu Dadian* 中國古代名物大典 (*The Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Chinese Material Culture*) (Jinan: Jinan Chubanshe, 1993), vol. 2, 180.
[70] Shane McCausland, *First Masterpiece of Chinese Painting: The Admonitions Scroll* (London: British Museum Press, 2003), 64-5.

theme that also frequently appears in literature. The composition of such imagery is similar to that found in the *Admonitions* scroll, but the didactic tone was diluted, and female beauty became the main subject. This development is exemplified by Su Hanchen 蘇漢臣 (1094-1172) 's fan painting that portrays a well-dressed court lady adorning herself in a luxurious garden in late spring (Fig. 1.15). The mirror in front of her frames her powdered face and elegant hair adorned with intricate jewels; her amorous beauty is further enhanced by her surrounding environment, which features a variety of voluptuous textile surfaces and fragrant flowers that appeal to the senses. Yet her desolate expression seems to suggest that she is caught in a moment of sorrow—perhaps lamenting the passing of time and her own youth, just like the blooming flowers that will soon wither.[71]

The motif of a woman looking into a mirror continued to be portrayed by painters in the Late Imperial period, including Chen Hongshou himself. Dated roughly to 1636 by Weng Wan-go and now collected at the Tsinghua University Art Museum, a hanging scroll by Chen Hongshou depicts a lady standing under a tree and staring into a mirror (Fig. 1.16). Unlike the previous iterations of this motif, where the viewer could see the woman's face through the mirrored image, here, it is the front of the woman herself that the viewer is confronted with; but like its prototypes, in this painting, the emphasis is placed on the beauty being reflected by the mirror. The elaborately-dressed lady seems to be lamenting the promise and danger of her own beauty, as the inscription takes on the first-person voice of the lady: "I have planted three hundred peach trees, and my face blushes the same way as those fruits. Do not let the Han Palace know of my appearance, as a beauty struggles to make a life of her own (種桃三百樹，顏色亦

[71] My reading is based on the discussions of this painting by Lara Blanchard and Wu Hung. See Lara Blanchard, *Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 210-245; Wu Hung, *Zhongguo huihua zhong de nüxing kongjian,* 237.

如之。莫向漢宮說，美人爭自為).” Interestingly, the eight-lobed bronze mirror, the flower-shaped hairpin, and the fresh flowers that she wears on the back of her hair resemble the object combination in the painter’s album leaf that this discussion stemmed from.

However, although the connection between Chen Hongshou’s album leaf and the pictorial tradition of figural paintings with women looking into mirrors seems quite clear, apart from their obvious variation in genre and composition, another major difference is how the reflective surface of the mirror is dealt with. In the figural works, as I have suggested, it is always the women’s reflection in the mirror that is emphasized, either visually in the paintings or through the textual information provided in the inscriptions. Yet in the album leaf, no human reflection could be found in the mirror. One way to think about the absence of a mirrored face is to consider it as a way of leaving the viewer with room for imagination. Hence, reading the painting as suggestive of a feminine space, Wu Hung proposes that the reflection of the stamen and pistil of the flower adds to the subtly erotic tone of the image.[72] Along this line of thought, perhaps the viewer in front of the painting could even imagine the image of their own inquiring face being reflected in the mirror, which might evoke a voyeuristic pleasure of intruding into the private quarters of a lady. But no matter what the viewer imagines seeing in the mirror, their desire to see would nonetheless be denied by the material reality of Chen Hongshou’s mirror as a painted object whose set surface will always remain blank. This accentuates the discrepancy between the represented mirror surface and the representing paper surface, which, I will argue, invites the viewer to notice the materiality of the paper itself, and to realize the witty interaction between the mirror surface and the paper surface in visual, material, and conceptual terms.

[72] Wu Hung, *Zhongguo huihua zhong de nüxing kongjian,* 400.

The emergence of the picture plane as a thing itself through the mirror surface might not be a coincidence. The mirror surface and the paper surface had been appreciated for similar kinds of material qualities, and compared to each other in connoisseurial literature. While the trend of the design on the mirror's back side, the formula for the metal alloy, and overall quality had all experienced many changes since ancient times, the desire to make mirrors with a smooth, vividly-reflective front remained consistent. This could be observed in the numerous descriptions of the idealized bronze mirrors in the *yongwu* poems throughout the ages collected in *The Peiwen Studio's Collection of Poems on Things*. In particular, adjectives such as bright (*ming* 明, *guang* 光), clear (*cheng* 澄, *zhan* 湛 and *qing* 清), radiant (*hui* 輝) and lustrous (*ying* 瑩) are among the most frequently used terms across time in describing the front side of the mirror; sometimes, the mirror surface would be described as "like jade" or "like ice"—both referring to the almost transparent visual effect of an extremely polished and light-reflecting surface, as well as its tactile qualities of being smooth and cool to the touch.[73] This descriptive vocabulary for mirrors was also used for paper of the highest quality. The Ming Dynasty witnessed a growing interest and higher demand for the quality of the paper used for painting and calligraphy among artists and connoisseurs.[74] Varieties of paper made in different times and places of origin, and from different techniques and raw materials, were constantly compared and evaluated for their textures, colors, reactions to light, thickness and water absorbency. Those that are bright (*guang*

[73] Zhang Yushu 張玉書 et al., ed. *Peiwen zhai yongwu shi xuan* 佩文齋詠物詩選 (The Peiwen Studio's Collection of Poems on Things), 64 volumes. Kangxi 46 (1707) printing, held by Harvard-Yengchng Library, https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:12391452. A searchable online edition based on the copy at Zhejiang University, also from the Kangxi period, is provided by the Chinese Text Project, https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=310950.

[74] Jiang Xuanyi 蔣玄佁, *Zhongguo huihua cailiao shi* 中國繪畫材料史 (A History of Chinese Painting Materials) (Shanghai : Shanghai shuhua chubanshe , 1986), 64-70.

光), radiant (*hui* 輝), lustrous (*run* 潤) and as pure as jade were particularly appreciated.[75] Certain paper varieties were also directly compared to a mirror in order to highlight their shiny and smooth surface (光滑如鏡). For this reason, there was even a kind of paper called "mirror-surface paper" (*jingmian jian* 鏡面箋) that became popular among Ming painters and calligraphers.[76]

Chen Hongshou was likely to be aware of this rhetoric of mirror and paper, as it was current in both the geographical and cultural spaces that the artist occupied. The Ming interest in paper was fueled, in part, by the growing prominence of literati-style painting, which emphasis on the bold effect created by the interplay between water, ink and paper. Such artistic demand for paper was met by the expanded choices of high quality paper during that period.[77] Among the newly emergent artisanal paper, one of the most famous and sought-after was the paper made in Jingxian 涇縣—a county that neighbors the Huizhou, Hangzhou and Nanjing area where Chen Hongshou spent most of his youth. As mentioned in Shen Defu 沈德符's (1578-1642) notes, the Jingxian paper was known for its enduring strength and high degree of water absorbency that allows ink shading while maintaining enough definition for the ink lines.[78] But its ultimate charm lies in the lovely texture of the paper surface. Delighted by the Jingxian paper gifted from a

[75] One of the most extensive discussions of paper for painting and calligraphy could be found in Gao Lian 's *Zunsheng bajian*. The original adjectives he used are, among others, "beautifully and brilliantly bright and radiant 妍妙輝光" and "as pure and white as jade 如玉潔白". This text is quoted in Zhang Xiaozhuang 張小莊 and Chen Qifan 陳期凡 ed., *Mingdai biji riji huihua shiliao huibian* 明代筆記日記繪畫史料彙編 (A Compilation of the Essays on Painting in the Ming Dynasty) (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chuban she, 2018), 189.

[76] Such paper could be made domestically, but was often imported from Korea. For a discussion of the use of this paper in literati paintings and calligraphy, its sources, as well as references of primary sources, see Zhuang Shen 莊申, *Shanzi yu zhongguo wenhua* 扇子與中國文化 (The Fan in Chinese Culture) (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 1992), 134, 143 and 164-5.

[77] Zhao Quanli 趙權利, "Zhishi lueshu 紙史略述" in *Meishu yanjiu* 美術研究 2005(02), 57-8.

[78] Quoted in Zhao, "Zhishi lueshu", 58.

friend, Qing scholar Jiang Shiquan 蔣士銓 (1725-1785) wrote a poem that praises a paper surface "with a texture as smooth and lustrous as skin, while the fibers, like the bones and tendons, occasionally peek through (肌理膩滑藏骨筋)," and compares its color and sheen to "the snow extending on a frozen river on a clear day (平浦江瀰展晴雪)."[79] The kind(s) of paper that Chen Hongshou used in many of his early paintings does appear to be of good quality, and recalls many of the descriptions mentioned above: they are smooth with hints of the fibers, and remain relatively bright even after hundreds of years. Without further technical analysis, it is difficult to say whether the paper used for Chen Hongshou's early album leaves is indeed from Jingxian. But from Chen's own writing, we know that he considered Jingxian paper the best, and was willing to make paintings for an acquaintance in exchange for the hard-to-find Jingxian paper that he possessed.[80]

The attention to the painting surface was not new in Chinese visual art. In John Hay's discussion of the aesthetic of the empty space within the context of Song and Yuan landscape paintings, he noted that the exposed picture ground in these paintings could simultaneously be viewed as a representation of a misty void in the sky and the actual matter of the imperial silk.[81] But for him, these two perspectives are inherently contradictory, "challeng[ing] the very core of our perceptual stability that imparts such scintillating vitality to these images."[82] In Chen Hongshou's album leaf, however, the two aspects of the plain painting surface are reconciled, as the material reality of the paper is clearly and intentionally utilized by the artist as a representational tool to delineate the visual and tactile presence of the mirror. Most significantly,

[79] Ibid.
[80] Chen Hongshou, "Hua shuixian hua Changgong jingxian zhi 畫水仙換長工涇縣紙 (Painting narcissus in exchange for the Jingxian paper from Mr. Chang), " in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 44.
[81] John Hay, "Surface and the Chinese Painter," 116-7.
[82] Ibid., 117.

in the aforementioned texts on paper and mirror surfaces, in addition to their visual resemblance, their shared physical traits have also been emphasized. First, both of these surfaces share similar appeals to touch—an aspect that Chen Hongshou alludes to in the same album leaf through a visual emphasis on the physical contact among objects, as well as with the absent subject: the ring sits quietly by itself, waiting to be picked up and put on one's finger; the hairpin is awkwardly entangled under the flower, with one end firmly pressed against the leaf; the flower petals tilt towards and gently touch the surface of the mirror; and the ribbons on the back of the mirror seductively twist and flow in mid-air, wanting to be played with and grasped. Perhaps the painting is inviting the viewer to touch it—either literally or imaginatively, and to feel its silky surface that reminds one of a well-made bronze mirror.

Moreover, both mirror and painting were mediums defined by their abilities to "reflect" and "bear" images. As I've discussed, the reflectiveness of mirrors has often been addressed in previous pictorial works through the careful depictions of the reflections in the mirror. A good painting made by a capable painter was supposed to be able to copy the likeness and capture the "spirit" of its subject. One term that was often used to refer to such paintings, as well as to the act of making them, is *xiezhao* (寫照), a compound word that combines *xie* (寫), "to write or record" and by extension "to paint," with *zhao* (照), "to reflect/look at one's reflection" and by extension "to copy the verisimilitude".[83] The character *zhao* is also the word for both the action of looking into a mirror and the mirror's function of reflecting images. While the shared terminology may

[83] "To capture the spirit (of the subject) is called *xiezhen*, also referred to as *xiezhao*. (傳神謂之'寫真'，亦謂之'寫照') " See Liu Ji 劉績 (c. 15th century)'s *Feixue lu* 霏雪錄, in *Mingdai biji riji huihua shiliao huibian*, 1. Also see Yang Shen 楊慎, Huapin 畫品 (Categories of painting), "xiezhao" 寫照, *Mingren huaxue lunzhu* 明人畫學論著 (Ming Writers on Painting), I, no, 12, ed. Yang Jialuo, in *Yishu congbian* 藝術叢編 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1962-68), first series, vol. 3. While in both accounts *xiezhao* is used in the context of portraiture, it can also be used to describe direct portrayal of natural objects with an emphasis on likeness. See Wang Keping, "The Platonic Mimesis and the Chinese Moxie," in *Diversity and Universality in Aesthetics: International Yearbook of Aesthetics* (Beijing: Institute of Philosophy, CASS, 2010), Vol. 14, 220.

imply that the painted image imitates a mirrored reflection, and thus could be read as pointing to the painter's exceptional skill to capture likeness like a mirror, it also firmly emphasizes the mimetic quality of the painted image itself. Certainly, the mirror surface is itself reflective, while paper for painting cannot do the same without a painter's intervention. But once painted with life-like images, the paper conceptually operates in a similar way to a mirror. Such a comparable capability between mirror and painting of reflecting one's appearance and even capturing the inner spirit is particularly poignant in depictions of melancholic women making self-portraits based on her own mirrored reflections—a theme that was popular especially during the late Ming period. Some of these images could be found in various versions of woodblock illustrations for the "Xiezhen" 寫真 scene in Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550-1616) 's celebrated drama *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (The Peony Pavilion). In the illustration from the play's 1617 edition, for example, the female protagonist Du Liniang portrays herself with a brush while looking into her own reflection in the round mirror (Fig. 1.17). The close spatial proximity and the visual likeness between the yet-to-be-finished portrait and the mirror containing her visage suggests an interrelation between the two.

The cultural tendency to see the mirror and painting on paper as reflective, image-making mediums that echo each other provides us a way to think about the strange lack of figurative reflection within the mirror in Chen Hongshou's album leaf. Addressing the technical difficulty in rendering the reflective surface of the mirror, Cubist painter Juan Gris noted: " Surfaces can be re-created and volumes interpreted in a picture, but what is one to do about a mirror whose surface is always changing and which should reflect even the spectator?"[84] Gris considered

[84] Juan Gris, quoted in Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris: His Life and Work*, translated by Douglas Cooper (New York: Curt Valentin, 1947), 87-88.

sticking a real piece of mirror onto the painting the only solution. Chen Hongshou, on the other hand, dealt with this problem by exposing the painting's paper ground—a material that in his cultural context was understood to contain the potential to "reflect," and to bear images that capture one's internal and external qualities, just like the mirror.

It should also be noted that mirrors and paintings are oftentimes considered equally unreliable as sources of reflecting reality. Here, it is necessary to recall the textual details of the plot before Du Liniang picked up the brush to make her own portrait in *The Peony Pavilion*. At the moment, Liniang had already completed her makeup routine presumably in front of a mirror, and was consumed by her longing for the young man she met in her dream; she only realized that she had lost her looks when her maid pointed it out to her. This inspired her to make a self-portrait to document the image of her ephemeral beauty that she preferred to see in the mirror. The self-portrait, in Martin Huang's words, is "at best a representation of another representation".[85] The illusionistic nature of painted images is also suggested in Chen Hongshou's album leaves, most directly through the subject matter of "flower in the mirror" (*jinghua* 鏡花)—a familiar Buddhist aphorism commonly used to suggest the ephemerality and elusoriness of perceived reality by referring to the mirrored reflection as a form without substance.[86] But more importantly, the painter ingeniously uses the illusionistic nature of visual

[85] Martin W. Huang, *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 80. The biased nature of what one sees in the mirrored reflection and the illusive nature of the painted image that are implied in the text of *Mudan Ting* have also been aptly discussed by Anne Burkus-Chasson. See Burkus-Chasson, "Like Not Like: Writing Portraits in *The Peony Pavilion*," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2015): 134-172.

[86] Although by the Ming Dynasty, this meaning of *jinghua* 鏡花 had been commonly adopted both within and outside the Buddhist context, the origin of this term is not so clear. The metaphor of mirrored image (*jingxiang* 鏡像 or *jingzhong xiang* 鏡中像) as fleeting illusion has been figured in Buddhist texts since the Han Dynasty. But it was during the Tang Dynasty that mirrored flower (*jinghua* 鏡花) started to appear in Buddhist writings, likely related to the popularity of lobbed mirror in the shape of flower – also sometimes referred to as *jinghua* 鏡花 – during this time. It might also be related to a homophonic term, *jinghua* 鏡華, that can be translated to "mirrored splender". This term is often used in a similar context to *jinghua* 鏡花, although it put emphasis on

imagery to address the material reality of the painting as an artifice. As I've suggested, the cultural trope at the time that highlighted the similarity between paper and mirror enabled the representational function of paper in depicting the mirror surface; yet noticeably, in the painting, the "paperness" of paper is always conspicuously present. In other words, while the paper surface may recall the mirror surface visually, tactically and conceptually, we are always reminded that the mirror that we perceive is only a painted image on the paper ground.

This artificiality of the depicted mirror and its surface is further revealed by Chen Hongshou's particular rendering of the flower's reflection. While the flower is rendered from a tilted angle intertwined with the hairpin, thus implying a strong sense of three-dimensionality, the mirrored reflection only renders it into a flattened frontal view. Placed off-center leaving plenty of blank space and with no indication of the stem, leaves or hairpin, the reflection that Chen Hongshou painted is only a fragmented—or "incomplete"—view of the entire ensemble in front of the mirror. To some extent, the reflected image of the flower reminds us of illustrations from painting manuals that demonstrate how to paint various individual components of flowers from various perspectives (Fig. 1.18).[87] This is not to say that the painting is unfinished; the painter's signature and seal indicate that the painting is indeed complete, and therefore the sense of incompleteness in the depiction of the reflection must be intentional. Rather, it draws attention to the paintedness of the painting: here, the mirror can only "reflect" what the painter allows it to reflect with his ink and brush, which can begin and stop anywhere at the will of the painter.

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the Buddhist idea of emptiness, as more clearly suggested in the related term *konghua* 空華. See Carlos Rojas, The Naked Gaze: Reflections on Chinese Modernity (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 301-2. Also see Li Lin 李琳, "'Jinghua shuiyue' yuanliu bianzheng '鏡花水月' 源流辨證 (A Discussion of the Origin and Development of *Jinghua shuiyue*)," in *Mingzuo xinshang* 名作欣賞 2018 (24): 48.

[87] Wang Gai 王槩 (1645–1710) et al. *Jiezi yuan hua zhuan* 芥子園畫傳 (The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual), series 2, vol. 3. A Kangxi-era edition can be fully accessed at Chinese Waterprint and Woodcut Data base developed by the Central Academy of Fine Arts in China: https://i.cafa.edu.cn/waterprint/ch/chanciebwnl/?x=300002009.

The interrelated themes of the materiality of the painting and the illusoriness of the image as the painter's craft are also explored in another leaf from the *Mogu tu* album (Fig. 1.3). In this work, an ornate basin, raised on a stand and wrapped in elaborately decorated textiles, is placed in an outdoor garden; filled with water, the basin captures the reflection of the moon and clouds in the sky. The painting is clearly referring to the phrase *shuiyue* 水月 (the moon in the water), often used in Chan Buddhism to signify the illusory nature of all phenomena, as the moon's reflection is seemingly identical to the moon in the sky yet ultimately ephemeral.[88] Since *shuiyue* and *jinghua* are often used in tandem (as *shuiyue jinghua* 水月鏡花 or *jinghua shuiyue* 鏡花 水月), it is likely that the two paintings were envisioned by Chen Hongshou as a pair. However, this leaf takes a different approach to the themes of materiality, illusion and the artistry of painting. Compared to the *jinghua* leaf as well as the other leaves that we have looked at, where the materials of the objects being depicted could almost always immediately be deduced, the *shuiyue* image is rather ambiguous. While all the components of the water container are decorated with flamboyant patterns, the specificities of these objects—their real life equivalence and supposed materials—remain unclear. Echoing the movement of the water contained, the repeating water-wave patterns on the main body of the basin may often be found on both ceramic vessels and metalworks; and a few Ming basin stands have legs that bend inwards in the same way as the stand in the picture. The indeterminacy of these visual elements, in a way, disassociates the image from the things represented, but instead contributes to a sense of fictionality, and encourages the viewer to see them as the result of the painter's artistry. The use of unrefined, uneven, and almost "messy" ink strokes also highlights the painterliness of the

[88] This is summarized by Burkus-Chasson in "Like Not Like," 145. Also see Nakamura Hajime 中村元, *Bukkyōgo daijiten* 佛教語大辭典 (Great Dictionary of Buddhist Words) (Tokyo: Tōkyō shoseki, 1975), 2:804.

image, and the painting as a material entity created through the interaction between the human hand, ink and paper.

But again, it is the playful manipulation of existing subject matter and pictorial traditions that best reveals the artist's active thinking towards the nature of paintings and the images they bear. The Buddhist concept of *shuiyue* is also referred to in both the image and inscription of a hanging scroll by Wang Shishen 汪士慎 (1688-1759), who claimed that he has based his composition on an earlier painting by Shitao 石濤 (1642-1707) (Fig. 1.19).[89] However, unlike these other *shuiyue* paintings where the moon's reflection is set in natural contexts and is beheld by a human subject, Chen Hongshou's album leaf contains the reflection within a manmade object in an outdoor space, and leaves out the human beholder. Such a composition recalls another pictorial tradition: paintings of birds by basins. Likely an eighth-century innovation, the earliest images of centrally-positioned basins set in a garden environment surrounded by birds could be found in murals from Tang tombs (Fig. 1.20).[90] Liu Jie has noticed that with the floral decoration, wide opening with a petal-shaped rim, and a ring foot, the basins in the murals resemble the Sasanian or Sogdian gold-inlaid silver basins (*jinhua yinqi* 金花銀器), which were popular in the Tang dynasty.[91] She also suggests that the addition of birds surrounding the basin might have initially been inspired by the bird motifs often found on imported metalwares.[92] While few painting of this theme survived, textual records show that many medieval artists,

[89]An earlier iteration of this motif could be found in a painting by Wu Wei titled *Watching the Moon in Water*, which might be located in the Shanghai Museum. I have yet to be able to locate this painting, or a reproduction with high resolution. An image of the painting could be found here: https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/index-ming-dynasty-chinese-paintings/catalog/23-5f6d41cc8e8d446022e5c4aafcfdfdad

[90] Liu Jie, "Paintings of Birds by Basins," in *Visual and Material Cultures in Middle Period China*, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Susan Shih-shan Huang (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 257.

[91] Liu, "Paintings of Birds by Basins," 259.

[92] Ibid., 259-261; Also see Liu Jie 劉婕, *Tangdai huaniao hua yanjiu* 唐代花鳥畫研究 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chuban she, 2013).

including famous painters like Xu Xi 徐熙 (889-975), Zhou Fang 周昉 (ca. 730-800), Huang Jucai 黃居寀 (active 933 and after), and Huang Quan 黃荃 (903-965), made paintings of a basin surrounded by various kinds of birds, from humble pigeons to lavish peacocks.[93] Evidently, by the Song Dynasty, "basin and bird" pictures became such a common theme for paintings that they were considered "vulgar";[94] and paintings of this theme continued to be discussed among Ming critics and collected by Ming connoisseurs.[95] The only three surviving "basin and bird" paintings, all from the late Imperial period, share many compositional similarities to their Tang prototype, as well as to the album leaf by Chen Hongshou. While both the painting attributed to Huang Quan (but likely a Ming fabrication) (Fig. 1.21) and the painting signed by the Xuande Emperor (1399-1435) (Fig. 1.22) include metal basins set directly on the ground, the hanging scroll signed by Fu Zhongzheng 傅中正, a little known painter likely from the early Qing, features birds surrounding a raised ceramic water basin next to minimalistic elements of nature that hint at an outdoor environment (Fig. 1.23). Fu's painting particularly recalls Chen Hongshou's rendering of the water basin, as Chen's painting likewise does not directly point to the basin as a piece of metalwork, and also places it on a stand in a minimalist garden setting.

Yet unlike in Fu's painting—or all the previous "bird and basin" images for that matter—where actual birds are depicted gathering around the water basin, in Chen's album leaf, the "birds" become the design patterns on a textile that wraps around the container. We could not know whether Chen Hongshou was indeed aware of the origin of the "bird and basin" imagery in

[93] Liu, "Paintings of Birds by Basins," 261-4.
[94] Chen Yu 陳鬱 (1184-1275) wrote in *Cangyi huayu* 藏一話腴: "In ancient times, King Gong of Lu, named Yu, decorated walls with pictures of ancient exemplars to remind himself to behave well. In contrast, how disgusting are those people who decorate their living quarters from top to bottom with pictures of pigeons bathing in golden basins, peacocks, and peonies?" Quoted in Liu, "Paintings of Birds by Basins," 264.
[95] Liu, "Paintings of Birds by Basins," 264-6.

decorations encircling imported metal vessels of the Tang era; but at least effectively, he "returned" the birds back into decorative motifs that adorn the basin from all sides. For a Ming viewer who was probably accustomed to seeing the "bird and basin" paintings with depictions of "real" birds, Chen Hongshou's unconventional rendering might be especially confounding and thought-provoking. The expected birds are still there to accompany the basin in the garden, but only as images on a piece of cloth—yet aren't the "birds" that one used to see in the traditional "basin and bird" paintings mere painted motifs on silk that create only an illusion of birds as well? In the album leaf, the movement and volume of the textile wrapping the basin are vividly delineated with bold and varying ink strokes, thus drawing attention to the image-bearing surface where the bird motifs are set down. Once again, Chen Hongshou has led the viewer to see the illusory nature of painted images as the painter's work, while insisting on the materiality of the mediums that bear the images.

Moving Paintings

One of the most famous works from the *Mogu tu* set is the leaf depicting a branch of chrysanthemums that *appears* to be painted on the surface of a round fan. Seemingly, these flowers were painted so vividly that they attract a living butterfly (Fig. 1.4). The painting recalls the famous episode recounted in Pliny's *Natural History*, where the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis rendered a bunch of grapes with such lifelikeness that it tricked a bird to fly up to it—a classic example in Western art history that speaks to the lure and truth of painting.[96] Also playing with

[96] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, vol. 9, translated by H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), 308-11. The story of Zeuxis and Applles is so famous among art historians that it might have been one of the reasons that scholars often readily perceive the chrysanthemums the album leaf of Chen Hongshou as painted images that trick the butterfly, even though the status of these flowers as painted motifs on the fan is rather ambiguous, as I will argue in this section.

the theme of illusion versus reality, Chen Hongshou's painting, as pointed out by De-nin Deanna Lee, "force(s) the viewer to become more consciously aware of the activity and limitations of seeing."[97] A closer examination of this painting will further suggest that by featuring a hand fan, the work not only leads the viewer to contemplate engagement with the painting on a visual level, but also to consider how one interacts with a painting as a tangible, material object that occupies and moves within space.

Similar to other traditional Chinese painting mediums such as the painted screen, the painted fan serves practical functions, and requires the viewer's physical handling or interaction in space.[98] But what is unique about the fan is that it is highly portable and moves with the human hand when being held, which allows it to constantly engage spatially and corporeally with its holder and the environment.[99] The idea of the fan as a moving, tangible, sensuous material object is suggested in the *Mogu tu* leaf first through the presence of the butterfly, which flies so close to the fan that we see its left wing through the sheer gauze. This calls to mind the motif of "swatting butterflies with a fan" (*pudie* 撲蝶)—originally a festive activity among women on the Birthday of Flowers (*Huachao jie* 花朝節) to celebrated the blooming flowers in spring.[100] The female participants, the fragrant flowers, the season of romance and reproduction, and the hapless butterflies also make "swatting butterflies with a fan" a popular theme in

[97] De-Nin Deanna Lee, "Chinese Painting: Image-text-object" in *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture,* ed. Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 572.
[98] Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15-16.
[99] The fans' interaction with their environment has been discussed by Roberta Wue in the context of late Qing public space and popular culture in Shanghai. See Roberta Wue, "The Shanghai Painted Fan: Form, Format, and Function," in *Art Worlds: Artists, Images, and Audiences in Late Nineteenth-century Shanghai* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 25-70.
[100] For a discussion of the Huachao Festival and the its literary references in Late Imperial China, see Cheng Min 成敏, "Yinghua shijie chun fangban, denghuo loutai yue zhengyuan—wenxue li de huachao jie 鶯花世界春方半 燈火樓台月正圓—文學裡的花朝節," in *Zijincheng* 紫禁城, 2021(05): 32-67.

literature and paintings to express the melancholic sentiments of longing women.[101] In one such poem inscribed on a now-lost *pudie* themed painting, the early-Ming poet Gao Qi 高啟 (1336-1373) described in detail the scene of a lady swatting butterflies:

> The butterflies have just flew past the curtain blinds, yet [the lady] could not find them;
> It seems that they flew into the bushes to hide from the orioles and the swallows.
> The pair of butterflies are smacked onto the ground with the fallen flowers,
> leaving their lustrous powders and fragrant traces all over the gauze fan.
>
> 乍過簾前尋不見，卻入深叢避鶯燕.
> 一雙撲得和落花，金粉香痕滿羅扇.[102]

The poem, likely inspired by the painting it originally accompanied, describes how the fan, carried by a young lady, moves across the garden to reach the butterflies; it then climaxes at the intensely tactile moment when the butterflies and flowers are almost violently pressed against the fan, imprinting themselves onto the gauze surface.

The motif of "swatting butterflies with fan" was portrayed by Chen Hongshou many times in his later works. In these paintings, the movement and tactility of the round fan are often emphasized. In an extraordinary and extremely provocative painting titled *Inclining Woman with Incense Burner* (*Xieyi xunlong tu* 斜倚熏籠圖) made around the year 1639, the painter effectively appeals to an array of senses by featuring the bejeweled ladies and elegant objects that dazzle the eyes, the parrot to appeal to the auditory, and the incense burner hidden under the lady's elaborate dress to perfume her body and the entire space (Fig. 1.24). But this painting is

[101] One of the most famous instances is the episode of Baochai fluttering a pair of butterflies in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 红楼梦), ch.27. A discussion of this scene and the broader implication of the motif of women smacking butterflies is found in Yao Yijia 姚伊嘉, "'Baochai pudie' yiyun xintan" '寶釵撲蝶'意蘊新探 (Reinterpreting the "Baochai Swatting Butterfly" Scene), in *Honglou meng xuekan* 紅樓夢學刊 5(2019): 325-334.

[102] The poem is kept in various anthologies, including Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582-1664) comp., *Liechao shiji* 列朝詩集 (A Complaction of Poems from Various Dynasties) (Beijing Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 981.

most successful in evoking the sense of touch, which is first achieved through the depictions of luscious silk textiles layered upon one another around the female bodies, the incense burner that emanates a warming sensation, and the contrasting material textures on the group of artifacts to the right side of the main figure. Such visual tactility is even more intensely delivered through the lively detail on the bottom of the composition, which can be interpreted as a little boy trying to catch a butterfly with a round fan. As the determined boy uses both of his hands and the weight of his entire body to trap the gigantic butterfly with the fan, the viewer can almost *feel* the tension and vibration of the fan's gauze plane against the fluttering wings of the desperate insect. The boy's exaggerated body gesture and the folds on his clothes also point to his dramatic movement prior to this moment depicted, when he was running around with the round fan trying to catch the butterfly—a movement that Chen Hongshou playfully captured on another painting that was originally mounted on a folding fan (Fig. 1.25). In this painting, a slender lady carefully approaches the butterfly, with a round fan in her hand. As the painted fan folds, the lady moves, quite literally, closer and closer to the butterfly, until she physically "touches" and collapses onto the butterfly.[103]

In the *Mogu tu* leaf, no figure is present to hold the round fan. Instead, suspended in mid-air with its handle pointing towards the right hand of the viewer, the fan tempts the viewer to imagine picking it up, moving it around, and pressing it against the escaping butterfly. The painting evokes a sense of movement, not through the figure that carries the fan as in the other

[103] This scene reminds of a figure in the famous Tang-Dynasty handscroll *Ladies Adorning their Hair with Flower* (*zanhua shinü tu* 簪花仕女圖) at the Liaoning Provincial Museum. In this painting, a noble palace lady has caught a butterfly in her hand, perhaps with the help of one of the attendances holding a large round fan decorated with peony flowers. This handscroll also evokes a strong sense of tactility and sensuality, which has been discussed by Zhao Meng in a recent talk: Zhao, "Crafting Sensuality: Tactual Erotics in Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers," presentation, February 10, 2021, Visual and Material Perspectives of East Asia workshop, University of Chicago.

pudie themed paintings, but through the way in which the butterfly and the chrysanthemums are rendered—especially their ambiguous spatial relationship to the sheer fan surface.

Before elaborating on this point, it is necessary to provide some background on how the surface of the round fan was commonly understood materially and culturally at the time. Round fans (*tuanshan* 團扇, also referred to as *wanshan* 紈扇 and *gongshan* 宮扇) could be made out of all kinds of silk textiles—either painted or plain. But it was the various kinds of silk gauze (*luo* 羅 and *sha* 紗) that became the most popular materials in making round fans, primarily due to their light weight, ideal for such portable, practical accessories to be carried around in the summer heat.[104] But apart from being used for dispersing the hot air, round fans also functioned as mobile "screens" that simultaneously "obscure one's face" while "expos[ing] some aspect of the bearer's identity or aspirations".[105] The sheer gauze therefore became the perfect material for the round fan, as its semitransparency allows the fan to both frame one's features and veil them from plain sight. It is thus not surprising that in literature, round gauze fans became a common trope to highlight the arresting beauty of a bashful lady who hides herself behind a fan, making her even more appealing.[106] Perhaps for a similar reason, gauze fan could be found in many paintings of beautiful women (*meiren hua* 美人畫) especially during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This includes several paintings by the renowned Ming figure painter Tang Yin 唐寅

[104] Zhuang, *Shanzi yu zhongguo wenhua*, 63-8.
[105] Blanchard, *Song Dynasty Figures of Longing and Desire*, 218.
[106] A commonly used term to describe the relationship between the fan and the face within this context is *banzhe* 半遮—"to partially veil." A poem written by Gong Fulai 公浮來 (1569-1619) also describes this scenario perfectly: The swinging hair frames the face only half painted; the wind from the fan in the shape of the lotus leaf brings the fragrant from her lips. Through the sheer gauze fan, her eyes glimmer like the autumn waves; impressed by her beauty, the traveler tells her the stories of his broken heart. 倭墮遥遙半面粧，荷風低送口脂香。輕羅扇底秋波色，贏得遊人説斷腸" See *Fulai xiansheng shiji* 浮來先生詩集 (printed in 1625), juan 2, kept in Zhongguo jiben guji ku 中國基本古籍庫 (Database of Chinese Classic Manuscripts) produced by Beijing Airusheng shuzihuajishuyanjiu zhongxin 北京愛如生數字化技術研究中心 (Beijing Erudition Digital Technology Research Center), accessed December 28, 2022.

(1470-1524), as well as the cover illustration for in the 1640 edition of *Xixiangji* 西厢记 (Story of the Western Wing) published by Min Qiji 閔齊汲 (b. 1580) in Zhejiang (Fig. 1.25). In a painting dated to 1650, Chen Hongshou also depicts a woman carrying a transparent round fan (Fig. 1.26). As the young girl is completely drawn to the butterfly in front of her, the fan with the transparent surface and crooked handle amplifies her beauty by framing her silky hair and leering eyes, and almost comically echoing her curving body. The cultural interest in the sheer surface of the round fan also makes for a particular mode of viewing the fan, which is to see through its sheer surface and consider it together with the physical environment on the other side—whether it is the sight of a lady's beautiful face, or a fluttering butterfly in a garden. As the fan moves and engages with its changing surroundings, the picture it frames undergoes endless transformations.

Chen Hongshou's *Mogu tu* leaf clearly plays with the fan's surface and the animated potential of the image it frames. The semitransparency of the fan surface is introduced through the contrasting renderings of the two sides of the butterfly, with one wing behind the gauze surface only appearing as a softened silhouette, and the other wing extending outside the fan's frame, rendered with much sharper and more saturated outlines. But the spatial relationship between the chrysanthemums and the fan surface, as well as that between the chrysanthemums and the butterfly, is less apparent. Most previous discussions of this painting have assumed that the chrysanthemums are painted images on the round fan.[107] For art historians and historical viewers alike, such an assumption is only natural, as flowers—including chrysanthemums—are one of the most common motifs found on a silk round fan. But if we zoom in to the detail where the wing of the butterfly meets the chrysanthemum flower, within the painting's pictorial

[107] This includes: Cahill, *The Distant Mountains*, 246; Wang, "Nüren, wupin, yu ganguan yuwang", 23; Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Paintings*, 155; De-Nin Deanna Lee, "Chinese Painting: Image-text-object", 571-2; Wu, *Zhongguo huihua zhong de nüxing kongjian,* 399; Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 399.

narrative, the painted nature of the chrysanthemums seems less certain: although we see the faint outline of one flower petal overlapping with the wing, suggesting that the flower might indeed be part of the fan surface, some petals appear to be blocked out by the wing, indicating that the chrysanthemums could be farther behind the butterfly and thus not belonging to the fan surface (Fig. 1.27). In fact, with the petals and the left half of the butterfly in the same light-ink brushstrokes that blend into each other, this image teases the eyes of the viewer, presenting itself as a playful ambiguity that refuses to be fully resolved. Moreover, if we adopt the visual scheme set by the two contrasting halves of the butterfly, where what's behind the fan is rendered in delicate soft lines and what's directly in front of the viewer is painted in firm, dark lines, the spatial configuration of the chrysanthemums becomes even more perplexing, as they feature a combination of both kinds of ink lines. This *Mogu tu* leaf is not the only instance where Chen Hongshou played with the potential of the sheer fan surface in presenting visual paradoxes. In the later *Inclining Woman with Incense Burner*, while the boy's gesture suggests that he has been chasing the butterfly, thus implying that the butterfly that he has caught under the fan is indeed real and has been flying around, the symmetrical form of the butterfly may also inspire the viewer to see it as an image on the fan, which has fooled the boy (Fig. 1.24). Again, what is real and what is painted become ambiguous, thus imbuing the painting with a sense of instability that can engage with the viewer in more than one way.

Adding to the ambiguity between the chrysanthemums as real plants behind the fan and as painted images on the fan is their visual resemblance to those featured in the ink-cake design in *Chengshi moyuan*, as I have mentioned previously (Fig. 1.8). The mirrored composition, the similar darkened and enlarged disk center that is rarely seen elsewhere, and the shared monochrome color between the two images compel us to consider the possibility that Chen

Hongshou might have referenced the design included in *Chengshi moyuan* or a version of it when making the album leaf. This connection becomes even more plausible and interesting when we take into consideration the inscription that accompanies the ink-cake design: "An inscription on the Wulao Cave on Mount Zhongnan: The color of the ink chrysanthemums (*moju* 墨菊) is just like ink, its sap was used for writing in the ancient times 終南山五老洞碑記：墨菊其色如墨，古用其汁以書." The name of the cave, Wulao Dong 五老洞, is likely a miswriting of Wulao Dong 吾老洞, the name of the famous cave on Mount Zhongnan where Laozi 老子 spent his last years and ascended to immortality. The reference to the famous Daoist master Laozi and the Daoist landscape might provide an alternative reason for the addition of the butterfly to the chrysanthemum motif in the *Mogu tu* leaf, as the metaphor of the butterfly figured prominently in the Daoist attitude towards consciousness and the self, as well as towards the blurred line between the real and the illusory.[108] But more importantly, the inscription points out that the chrysanthemums depicted in the picture—as well as in Chen Hongshou's painting—may not be ordinary chrysanthemums, but the kind that can be used to make ink. This explains why the chrysanthemums in both the *Mogu tu* leaf and the inkcake design feature the uniquely dark and large flower disks. Although the Ming inkcakes were definitely not made from the ink chrysanthemums, the carved design of ink chrysanthemums that references the ancient practice of ink-making by the Daoist sages would add a scholarly flair to the inkcake, thus enhancing its aesthetic appeal. In the context of Chen Hongshou's album leaf, by referencing the ink

[108] The most famous reference to the butterfly in a Daoist text is Zhuangzi's butterfly dream. According to the story, Zhuangzi dreamt that he was a butterfly fluttering around happily amidst flowers. Upon waking, he would continue to feel the wings in his shoulders, unsure whether he was a man or a butterfly. For a discussion of this episode as well as an interpretation of the motif of the butterfly in Daoism, see Hans-Georg Möller, "Zhuangzi's 'Dream of the Butterfly': A Daoist Interpretation," in *Philosophy East and West* 49, no. 4 (1999): 439–50.

chrysanthemum or *moju*, the painter wittily evokes a double interpretation of the term *moju*—as the actual chrysanthemum plant *behind* the fan that could be the source of ink, and as the image of the chrysanthemum painted *on* the fan surface with ink pigment.

The visual, spatial and conceptual ambiguities of the chrysanthemums could, on the one hand, be seen as contributing to the interpretation of this painting as Chen Hongshou's commentary on the illusionistic nature of the painted image. On the other hand, it is also important to bear in mind that in this particular case, the play of illusion versus reality is specifically made possible by the cultural expectation of viewing an image on and through the silk gauze surface of a portable fan, the image on which could never be fully decoupled from its physical surrounding—especially the things behind—and which are subject to change as the fan moves in space. Further highlighting the sense of instability and animation in the objects included in this painting, the ink strokes are deliberately rendered in a fuzzy and almost hasty manner. Moreover, the various possibilities of seeing the spatial relationship between the fan, the flower branches, and the butterfly could also be read as hinting at the fluidity of the images being framed on a sheer gauze fan surface. Put simply, the painting evokes not only the visual but also physical experiences with a semi-transparent painted fan. It recreates the engagement with a portable painting that frames a picture that moves and changes with the movement of the painting, therefore addressing the materiality of painting itself.

Double Materiality

In conclusion, riddled with intriguing visual paradoxes and contradictions, the "still life" compositions in *Mogu tu* invite the viewer to closely attend to the visual and tactile aspects of the material world, and to realize and reflect upon the objects' material nature both in the fictional

world constructed by the picture and as painted motifs created by the painter's inked brush on paper. The materiality that these paintings insist on is always two-fold, simultaneously operating on an illusionistic level within the pictorial space and on a factual level that is the very artifact of painting itself. The intense interest in the tangible and material aspects of manmade objects was a new phenomenon among Ming literati manifested through both connoisseurship literature and object design.[109] But Chen Hongshou's two-fold approach to objects and their materiality not only reflect the concerns of Ming material culture in general, but is also undoubtedly colored by his particular sensitivity as a painter: his craft depends upon the dialectical relationship between the visual and the material.

The need to capture the era's renewed scrutiny of the textural, material and three-dimensional qualities of physical objects through pictorial means on a plane surface posed new challenges for the painter, who could no longer resort solely to old visual formulas. As seen in the *Mogu tu* leaves, such a calling for a new visual language surrounding material objects seems to have inspired original reinterpretations and playful manipulations of the existing visual and cultural traditions through creative handling of the visual and material elements of the painted medium. This aspect of Chen Hongshou's art practice has been approached in this chapter from four angles: the image-text relationship that simultaneously evokes *and* detaches images from previous textual meanings; the two-way metaphor between the coming-into-being of manmade yet "natural" materials and the spontaneous process of artistic creation; the visual, material and conceptual collation of the fictional and the image-bearing surfaces; and the evocation of the tangibility and mobility of painted objects. Lingering in these images of objects is the tension between the image and medium, and between the materiality of the represented and the

[109] The former has been discussed in Clunas, *Superfluous Things*; the latter in Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*.

materiality of the representations in ink on paper. As seen in my previous discussions, paradoxically, Chen Hongshou's careful depictions of objects often point back to the illusionistic nature of painted images, and consequently elucidate the physical characteristics of painting as a crafted physical object that necessitates the physical manipulation and transformation of various physical materials and substances. However, the painter ingeniously saw the potential rather than the limitation of this inherent tension between the two layers of materiality; in fact, in the depictions of objects in *Mogu tu*, these two sides become mutually enabling and gratifying.

Built upon W. J. Mitchell's definitions of metapictures as "pictures about pictures—that is, pictures that refer to themselves or to other pictures" and pictures whose goal is to draw the viewer's attention "back to the process of image making," in the context of Chinese traditional painting, Wu Hung further points out that a metapicture "must explain a painting both as an image-bearing object and as an image," thus emphasizing the concrete, physical aspects of paintings.[110] Therefore, Chen Hongshou's early paintings of objects might indeed be considered metapictures, as they deftly attend to the illusionistic dimension of the pictorial image as well as the paintings' own artifice on multiple levels. But while Wu's metapictures readily comprise paintings—more specifically, the painted screens—as whole objects with their visual, material and spatial specificities, Chen Hongshou's depictions of objects in the *Mogu tu* leaves operate on a micro level: they zoom in and deconstruct Chinese paintings both into their material components of pigment, ink, and surface, and into individual steps of engagement from the painter to the viewer.

[110] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 35; Wu, "Coda: Metapicture" in *The Double Screen*, 241; also see Wu Hung, "The Painted Screen," *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 1 (1996): 73.

It is by and large the subject matter of culturally rich yet commonplace objects that lends complexity to these paintings. In Hanneke Grootenboer's discussion of still life paintings in the European tradition, she considers the small-scale paintings that depict inanimate objects as the examples *par excellence* for the kind of "pensive images" that contain "an interiority that differs from meaning, narrative or critique, and through which these images become not so much clever or intelligent as *thoughtful*."[111] She further points out that the simplicity, uneventfulness and lack of immediately discernible meaning in these pictures of common objects does not make it any easier for the viewer to take them in.[112] Indeed, Chen Hongshou's effortless yet strange images of objects demand from the viewer an effort. Each of the objects depicted is loaded with its own cultural history and diverse semantic contents, yet the paintings do not give us any explicit hint on which one of them to immediately turn to. And although we could read the paintings as expositions of the nature of painting as both pictorial images and material factum, with the exception of the hand fan, none of the objects that Chen Hongshou chose to include bears direct visual resemblance or textual reference to paintings *per se*. Instead, as mundane objects that could be experienced physically and discursively in daily life, their parallels to painting operate beyond the visual or even semantic level, but are fundamentally abstracted, material and experiential. Caught between different fields of reality that present interconnected yet distinct facets of materiality, these painted objects constantly drive the viewer to change perspective, and to resort to their own real-life interactions with the depicted objects in ways that are intimately intellectual and perceptual.

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[111] Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Pensive Image: Art As a Form of Thinking* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 9. She further explains that "a pensive image denotes not so much a self-referential commentary as a more indeterminate state of pondering in which the thought as such may largely remain unresolved." (Grootenboer, 9).
[112] Ibid., 113-4.

If these paintings could indeed "think," what might be on their minds? Nothing specific, one might say. Rather, they disrupt assumptions, and set up and prompt certain ways of thinking and engagement. As a recurring thread across multiple works of Chen Hongshou that I have discussed, the paintings and the objects in them are often rendered in ways that tantalize the beholding subjects to inscribe, to see, to touch, to move around and reflect upon their own surroundings and existence—and to pause, reflect upon, and question all of the above. Such an attitude towards objects recalls the epistemology put forth by Liu Zongzhou 劉宗周 (1578-1645), a famous scholar and political figure that Chen studied with during his early twenties and maintained a close relationship with years after.[113] In response to the earlier Neo-Confucian thought that emphasized the cultivation of the mind, Liu Zongshou maintained that knowledge was just as related to concrete things as it was to the innate moral or ethical considerations (道不離器；知為物化).[114] In particular, he advocated exploration of material things not only through one's mind, but also through the senses of the eyes, ears and hands (惟物感相乘而心為動).[115] While Liu Zongzhou adopted a rather broad and abstract conception of "things" (*wu* 物) to encompass all external material phenomena, his philosophy could certainly be applied to one's approach to material artifacts. As a loyal follower of Liu Zongzhou, Chen Hongshou's attitudes towards objects shown in the *Mogu tu* paintings might have been influenced by Liu's

[113] It is unclear exactly how long Chen Hongshou spent with Liu Zongzhou in his academy. But from Chen's correspondence and essays, it is certain that Liu Zongzhou's teaching and the peers that Chen became acquainted with in that time had a long-lasting influence on Chen's worldview. See Wang Huangsheng, *Chen Hongshou*, 13-15.

[114] Dagmar Schaffer, "Science in the Pre-Modern East" in Iwan Rhys Morus ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 113-5.

[115] Zhong Erju 衷爾鉅, " 'Jiwu qiuzhi' 'liwu wuzhi' – lun jishan xuepai de renshi lun" '即物求知'離物無知'——論蕺山學派的認識論 ("Knowing through things" and "oblivion without things"—the epistemology of the Jishan School), *Zhejiang xuekan* 浙江學刊 vol. 4 (1988): 64-70; Gao Haibo 高海波, "Shilun liu zhongzhou de 'gewu' sixiang" 試論劉宗周的'格物'思想 (A discussion of Liu Zongzhou's gewu thought), in *Zhongguo zhexue shi* 中國哲學史 3 (2003): 41-50.

epistemology. But that is not a matter of metaphysical dogma. In his portrayals of object, instead of directly "telling" the viewer what to think through texts and straight-forward imagery, the artist fills the paper with curious yet witty contradictions, inconsistencies, and unexpectedness, thus playfully inviting the beholder to notice, examine, contemplate and wonder about the objects—including the paintings themselves—ever more closely and intently, while leaving the final verdict to the viewers themselves.

Chapter 2 Objects of Interiority

Chen Hongshou is most celebrated for his figurative works, both in his own era and today. Yet with few exceptions, his figures are always accompanied by vividly portrayed objects. Chen, who extensively documented his artistic methods and life experiences through numerous poems and essays, kept the reasons behind his insistence on including material details in his figurative compositions to himself. Still, the meticulously rendered objects were already considered a trademark of his works in the early Qing dynasty. In the preface to the series of printed playing cards titled "Venerating Antiquity" (*Bogu yezi* 博古葉子) designed by Chen Hongshou, his friend Tang Jiujing 唐九經 (1611-?) praised the abundance, diversity and artistic excellence of objects—vessels and furniture—featured in the illustrations. Only after this did Tang proceed to comment on the human figures depicted at the center of each card.[1] This implies that, at least to Tang, the objects in the cards are just as interesting—if not more so—to look at as the human figures.

The objects in Chen Hongshou's figurative works have been the focus of many previous studies. Some scholars have emphasized the stylistic function of antique objects in Chen Hongshou's figurative paintings as part of the artist's archaic visual language. The same group of scholars further considers these objects as signaling the refined taste and the lofty literati spirit of the figures they accompany.[2] Also connecting the objects to the subjects nearby, some scholars

[1] This preface, written in 1653, is included in the edition that was likely printed in the same year. One set is preserved in the National Library of China in Beijing. An English translation of this passage can be found in Tamara Heimarck Bently, *The Figurative Works of Chen Hongshou (1599-1652): Authentic Voices/Expanding Markets* (London: Routledge, 2017), 209. While Tang starts the passage from introducing the "old trees and sparse branches," he does mention that these motifs are there to "set off the characters."

[2] Such discussions can mostly be seen in scholarship published in Chinese. Works in this group tend to survey all kinds of objects in one study and link them together to the literati aesthetics for archaic forms at the late Ming period. These include: Zhou Hao 周顥, "Kaogu tu ji leisi gu qiwu tupu yu chen hongshou de huihua zaoxing" 考古圖及類似古器物圖譜與陳洪綬的繪畫造型 (*Kaogu tu*, other catalogs ancient artifacts, and Chen Hongshou's artistic styles), in *Guohua jia* 國畫家, vol. 5(2006): 62-5; Wang Yumin 王玉民, "Chen

view these objects as akin to stage props that are manipulated by actors to externalize their thoughts or to advance the narrative.[3] Specifically dealing with objects and female figures in Chen Hongshou's works, Wang Cheng-hua explores the sensuous interactions between the subjects and the objects, and reads them as acts of nostalgia shared by scholars who lived through the Ming-Qing transitional period.[4] Wang's study is expanded on by Wu Hung, who addresses certain objects in Chen Hongshou's paintings as metaphors of female figures and as indications of feminine space.[5] A recently published paper by Qiu Yunyi further underscores the intimate connection between the portrayed objects and the mentality of Chen Hongshou himself.[6]

In these studies, objects are unmistakably linked to subjects—either the painted figures or the painter. They often serve as metaphors or symbols that introduce aspects of the related

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Hongshou renwu hua zhong guwu zhi neiyun yanjiu" 陳洪綬人物畫中古物之內蘊研究 (The Aesthetic of the Ancient Artifacts in Chen Hongshou's Figure Paintings), in *Guohua jia*, vol. 1(2011): 68-9; Wang Xiaoli 王曉麗, "Chen Hongshou Huazhong qiwu ji hanyi" 陳洪綬畫中器物及涵義 (The Meanings of Objects in Chen Hongshou's Paintings), in *Shuhua shijie* 書畫世界, vol. 177(2016): 85-6; Wang Xiaoli, "Chen Hongshou Huazhong qiwu zhi fenlei yanjiu" 陳洪綬畫中器物之分類研究陳洪綬畫中器物之分類研究 (A Categorization of the Objects in Chen Hongshou's Paintings), *Meishu jiaoyu yanjiu* 美術教育研究 vol. 19 (2016): 8-11.

[3]The parallel between objects in Chen Hongshou's paintings and props has been pointed out in Zhang Xinwei 張欣蔚, "Chen Hongshou renwu huihua zhong 'daoju' de hanyi" 陳洪綬人物繪畫中'道具'的涵義 (The Meanings of the "Props" in Chen Hongshou's Figure Paintings), in *Renwen tianxia* 人文天下 vol. 89 (2017): 64-68. For a more in depth discussion of the issue of theatricality in Chen Hongshou's paintings, see Shi-Yee Liu, "The World's a Stage: The Theatricality of Chen Hongshou's Figure Painting," in *Repentant Monk: Illusion and Disillusion in the Art of Chen Hongshou*, ed. Julia M. White (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 33-45.

[4] Wang Cheng-hua 王正華, "Nüren, wupin, yu ganguan yuwang: Chen Hongshou wanqi renwu hua zhong jaingnan wenhua de chengcian" 女人, 物品, 與感官慾望: 陳洪綬晚期人物畫中江南文化的呈現 (The Late-Ming Culture of Sensibility: Women and Objects in Ch'en Hung-shou's Late Figure Painting, 1645-1652), in *Jindai zhongguo funü shi yanjiu* 中國近代婦女史研究, 10 (2002): 1-57.

[5] Wu Hung 巫鴻, "Gu yu jin de xieshang: Chen Hongshou de nüxing shijie" 古與今的協商: 陳洪綬的女性世界 (Negotiating Past and Present: Chen Hongshou's World of Women) in *Zhongguo huihua zhong de nüxing kongjian* 中國繪畫中的"女性空間" (Feminine Space in Chinese Painting) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2019), 381-428.

[6] This topic, previously touched upon in earlier studies listed above, is elucidated more explicitly in Qiu Yunyi 邱芸怡's article. Qiu, "Chen Hongshou shinü tu de wu yu wuguan" 陳洪綬仕女圖的物與物觀: 以細務、戲遊為例 (The Object and its Observation in the Portrait of Court Ladies by Chen Hong-Shou: Taking Trivial Matters and Games as Examples), in *PUST Humanities and Social Sciences Research* 6, no. 3 (2022): 59-84

subjects that may otherwise not be easily discernible to the eyes of the viewer. These "inner qualities" include but are not limited to social status, taste, emotion, bodily experience, and memory. Yet the meanings of the depicted objects in relation to the subjects are seldom fixed. In fact, many objects that appear alongside Chen Hongshou's figures can carry a plethora of meanings that are not necessarily reconcile with one another. And as representations of three-dimensional objects, these motifs evoke multisensory and oftentimes individualized experiences. As a result, the same object could be understood differently by different viewers. In other words, rather than neatly and completely elucidating hidden aspects of the related subjects, these objects provide the viewer with a space of ambiguity and thus room for personalized interpretations. They allow individual viewers to engage with the paintings and their figures more intimately and experientially, therefore enlivening the scenarios and the figures within. One purpose of this chapter is to underscore such nuanced impacts that the depicted objects have on the viewer.

Central to my discussion in this chapter is the intertwinement among objects, interior space, and interiority. Commonly, the spaces of the interior can be perceived as containing various material things of practical, economic, and artistic value within. They are also occupied by subjects with inner and psychological lives—or interiority, which can be seen as in opposition to exteriority, which pertains to the world of material things. However, interiority is also inherently connected to the material and spatial environment of the interior. In Ewa Lajer-Burcharth and Beate Söntgen's introduction to *Interiors and Interiority*, the authors recognize seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings as a distinct cultural moment that has played into our modern understanding that connects interior space with human interiority: "Highly illusionistic and uncommonly precise in the rendition of details, these new interior views provided not only a vision of a richly described private life, but also an image of a distinct mode of spatialized self-

experience, one that was based not in self-reflection as much as visual observation of the material world."[7] Indeed, as our eyes wander across the framed mirror glistening against the plastered wall in the soft light filtered by the stained-glass window, the marble-tiled floor in two tones, the upholstered chair, and the shimmering rug draped from the dining table in Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675)'s *Music Lesson*, we are instantly transported into the cozy yet melancholic space of an affluent early modern Delft home (Fig. 2.1). None of these objects, however, distracts the viewer from the interior environment as a whole. Instead, they become part of the visual scheme that creates for the viewer an illusion of standing in the middle of the room through a continuous space full of convincing and meticulous details of surface texture, volume, color, pattern, light and shadow.

The paintings by Chen Hongshou, a contemporary of Vermeer on the other side of the world, similarly display an interrelationship among objects, interior spaces, and interiority.[8] But Chen offers a distinctive visual and conceptual approach: oftentimes, the interior spaces in

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[7] Ewa Lajer-Burcharth and Beate Söntgen, "Introduction," in Ewa Lajer-Burcharth and Beate Söntgen ed., *Interiors and Interiority* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 1-2. Also see: Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

[8] The shared interest across the continent in material artifacts and their relationship to human identities and subjectivities in the early modern world is a grand topic that extends beyond the current scope of this dissertation. Many scholars have connected this phenomenon to the "first global age," roughly spanning from the fifteenth-century to the mid-eighteenth century, which witnessed an overflow and intensified encounters of material goods across the globe—although this does not fully explain the particular fascination with things and materiality that emerged in scholarly and artistic circles during this period in various parts of the world. See, for example, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, "The Global Lives of Things: Material Culture in the First Global Age," in Gerritsen and Riello ed., *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 1-28. Timothy Brook characterizes the early modern era as "an age of second contacts," through which new connections were made with far more transformative consequences. In the same book, Brook also points out the striking parallel between Vermeer and Dong Qichang, as well as the socio-cultural conditions of the cities they dwelled in, Delft and Shanghai. In particular, Brook points out that in both corners of the world, wealthy families engaged in practices of patronage and conspicuous consumption within a social network of connections and exchanges seen as never before. The author implicitly suggests these factors were deeply related to the artistic ingenuity that these painters developed. Same could, perhaps, extends to Chen Hongshou and the social circle he was positioned in. See Brook, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 5-8.

Chen's compositions are implied entirely through the objects they contain. As I will illustrate further in this chapter, these objects mark the function of the spaces they belong to—mostly scholars' studios or gardens—while themselves captivating attention and demanding responses from the viewers. Notably, whereas the objects in Vermeer's paintings serve to enhance the architectural interior and blend into their spatial environments, in Chen Hongshou's paintings, the objects become visual attractions that *generate* and *define* spaces. As a result, while a viewer vicariously experiences the interiority of the figures in Vermeer's paintings primarily through the artist's perspective construction and use of oil paint, in Chen Hongshou's works, the experience of interior spaces and interiority is completely anchored by the depicted objects.

In this chapter, I will explore how some of Chen Hongshou's figurative paintings become affective particularly through the objects therein that construct various spaces around and within them—spaces that can be experienced by subjects both in and outside of the paintings. Three distinctive types of spaces will be examined: the space of emotion, the space of remembrance, and the space of thought. I will explore how Chen Hongshou activated each of these spaces particularly through his selection, placement, and rendering of objects, and contextualize his approaches within their respective cultural-historical contexts. As we shall see, these objects engender various dimensions of interiority—a term that I use for the simultaneous spatiality and subjectivity it entails. My discussion in this chapter will further suggest that the objects in Chen Hongshou's works are not merely externalizations or reflections of the hidden facets of the painted figures and scenarios, but can be seen as the very components that construct spaces of and for the mind of the figures and the viewers, operating both within and beyond the pictorial space.

Atmospheric Ensembles

In Chen Hongshou's paintings, objects often frame the pictorial spaces that the figures occupy. In *Drying Hair* (*Xifa tu* 晞發圖) (Fig. 2.2), for example, the scholar is framed within two groups of objects: a zither in the foreground, and a variety of other objects on the table in front of him. The title of this work and the loose hair of the figure clearly suggest that the scholar in the painting has just washed his hair and is waiting for it to dry. Seemingly oblivious to his elegant surroundings or the damp hair, the figure is immersed in a moment of contemplation. Another example is *Drinking and Reading* (*Yinjiu dushu tu* 飲酒讀書圖) (Fig. 2.3). Here, the objects on the low table diagonally frame the seated scholar, who looks away from the opened book and takes a sip from the wine cup.

Paintings like these are seemingly characterized by their everydayness, yet they are anything but mundane. In fact, these works have been described by scholars and connoisseurs as "unforgettable upon seeing," "unusually bold," "strange and whimsical," and "full of emotion".[9] Although there is no clear indication that these images are referring to specific historical events or people, they seem to have compelled their viewers to imbue the images with various narratives and emotions, either historical or personal. Among others, Weng Wan-go speculates that *Drying Hair* might be inspired by an episode of Song scholars Zhou Mi 周密 (1232-1298) and Zhao Mengjian 趙孟堅 (1199-1264), who got drunk together on a boat, let their hair down, and loudly recited ancient poems to mourn the fall of the dynasty—even though the painting

[9] See, for example, Weng Wan-go 翁萬戈, *Chen Hongshou de yishu* 陳洪綬的藝術 (The Art of Chen Hongshou) (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chuban she, 2021), 79, 86, 109-110, and 195-196; Zhu Liangzhi 朱良志, *Shengming qinggong: guohua beihou de shijie* 生命清供：國畫背後的世界 (Life's Pure Offerings: The World Behind Chinese Painting) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chuban she, 2019), 12-13. Although writers have rather strong opinion of the specific subject matter and the emotions in the painting, none of them gives satisfying reasons for their particular interpretations.

only includes a single figure in a garden setting.[10] And Zhu Liangzhi is convinced that the scholar in *Drinking and Reading* is filled with extreme anger, sorrow, and pain while reading the famous poem *Li Sao*—although the pages in the open book are blank and the figure's facial expression is indeterminate at best.[11] Most intriguingly, *Drinking and Reading* was famously collected and inscribed by playwright Kong Shangren 孔尚任 (1648-1718), who repeatedly saw himself in the painting at various points of his life.[12]

Indeed, the appeal of Chen's figure paintings resides not only in their exceptional artistic qualities, but also in their unique capacity to capture and evoke what is beyond the pictorial. For their viewers, these works appear to hold meanings that are not immediately visible, but are subtly suggested by the carefully rendered motifs and can be discerned upon closer inspection. This interior aspect of painting deepens the sense of subjectivity and liveliness of the figures, and makes these works self-generative and affective. Deeply inspired by the previous scholarly and literary accounts of these works, but seeking to explore and articulate the process in which such responses were elicited by the paintings themselves, my subsequent discussion will explore how objects surrounding the figures in the works of Chen Hongshou become integral to the creation of such an interiority within the paintings. Culturally encoded and interacting with subjects in and outside of the paintings, these objects generate a deeply emotional atmosphere that situates the figures, permeates the pictorial spaces, and resonates with viewers.

A closer examination of *Drying Hair* reveals how culturally meaningful objects were carefully selected and portrayed to discursively indicate the sitter's inner facets—his self-

[10] Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 196.
[11] Zhu, *Shengming qinggong*, 14.
[12] The full transcripts of the four inscriptions and a detailed trace of their timelines can be found in Liu Xiangchun 柳向春, "Kong Dongtang he Chen Laolian de yinjiu dushu tu ji qita" 孔東塘和陳老蓮的《飲酒讀書圖》及其他 (Kong Dongtang and Chen Laolian's *Drinking and Reading*, Among Others Thoughts), *Shanghai wenbo* 上海文博, vol. 1 (2009):14-20.

identity, intention, and mental state. To begin with, almost all the items showcase their owner's elevated taste as a late-Ming literatus from the Jiangnan area. In the foreground, a *qin* zither is covered by a plain red cloth and tied up with a simple white ribbon. Such a minimalistic style of zither accessories was advocated by Wen Zhenheng in *Superfluous Things*, a handbook of refined taste for late-Ming scholarly elites.[13] Objects on the large stone table in front of the figure, including the flower arrangement, the crackle-glazed wine jar, the wine cup, the citron display, and the hair accessories, were also popular items among Ming educated gentlemen. In the flower pot, chrysanthemums are paired with bamboo branches. These two plants are members of the Four Gentlemen (*si junzi*, 四君子: plum, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum), a popular theme that symbolizes the uprightness, purity and loftiness of a scholar.[14] With the crackled patterns on the wine jar and the patterns on the wine cup that are reminiscent of those on ancient bronze vessels, the drinking utensils reflect the late-Ming fashion of collecting and using objects that evoke the sense of antiquity.[15] The display of the two fingered citrons (or "Buddha's hands", *foshou* 佛手) on a red plate recreates the best way of displaying such items as described in Wen's *Superfluous Things*: a cinnabar-red plate is among the few dishes appropriate for holding fingered citrons, and two is the most elegant number of citrons for a desktop display.[16] Moreover, the figure in *Drying Hair* is sitting on an eye-catching knotted-root chair,

[13] "The zither case must be made with old brocade, and red and green tassels should not be used on the tuning pegs (琴囊須以舊錦為之，軫上不可用紅綠流蘇)." Wen Zhenheng 文震亨 (1585-1645), *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志 (Superfluous Things) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021), juan 7, 299.

[14] A discussion of the Four Gentlemen motif can be found in Mabel Irene Huggins, "The 'Four Gentlemen' of Chinese Art," *Antiques* , LXXXI (June 1962): 622-625.

[15] As noted by Craig Clunas, unlike Song antiquarians who only sought after authentic objects from antiquity, the Ming collectors appreciated all kinds of things of the past, ranging from "things believed to be of the past" to "things believed to invoke the past by their sheer physical configuration". See Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), chapter 4.

[16] Wen notes: "When this fruit is in season, a studio in the mountain should not be without them. However, placing three or four on one plate is both stiff and contrived, and using a large basin to hold twenty or thirty is

with its arms and legs wrapping around the figure's body. Notedly, furniture made of twisted roots was especially popular within the Jiangnan literati circle due to the emergence of elite wood carvers in this area as well as the late-Ming preference for the bizarre in art.[17]

The sitter's identity as a literatus with elegant taste is further revealed by the headgear left on the table. The small structured cap paired with a hairpin is likely a *shufa guan* 束髮冠, a type of small cap (*xiaoguan* 小冠) that just covers the topknot. *Shufa guan* were often made with precious materials such as gold, silver, jade, amber and agate. Most frequently worn by scholars in the Song Dynasty, in the Ming, *shufa guan* most commonly appeared in images of immortals. Nevertheless, although they were no longer seen as suitable for daily use, *shufa guan* were still sometimes worn inside a semi-transparent head cloth by the educated elites (Fig. 2.4).[18] As pointed out by Sun Ji, by veiling the shufa guan under a layer of textile, the wearer could avoid being seen as overly pretentious, yet still subtly showcase his wealth and cultivated aesthetic.[19]

While serving as identity markers, many objects in the painting also suggest that the sitter is immersing himself in a moment of solitude and contemplation. This is first indicated by the

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especially vulgar. It's better to seek out an old red carved tea container stand to display them elegantly, or perhaps find old-looking porcelain plates and place two citrons on a table, which is also acceptable (此種出時，山齋最不可少。然一盤三四頭，既板且套，或以大盆置二三十，尤俗；不如覓舊朱雕茶橐架一頭，以供清玩，或得舊瓷盤長樣者，置二頭於幾案間，亦可)." (Wen, *Zhangwu zhi*, juan 7, 282). It should be noted that in earlier connoisseurly texts, the writers encourage the display of over a dozen citrons in one dish. In the earlier *Kaopan yushi* 考槃馀事 (Radom Notes of a Scholar in Seclusion), the author writes: "[The container] is best to be big. Each basin should hold twenty-four citrons, or twelve to thirteen of them, only then will there be enough fragrance to fill the room with a pure aroma (以大为妙，每盆置橼廿四頭，或十二三者，方足香味，滿室清芬)." See Tu Long 屠隆 (1543-1605), *Kaopan yushi,* juan 3 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chuban she, 2017), 79. This text suggests that the display of only two citrons is only favored by a small group of scholars who paid even more attention to their tastes and aesthetics—the likes of Wen Zhenheng.

[17] Mette Siggstedt, "Chinese Root Furniture," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, 63(1991): 143-184, especially 152-155; James Cahill, *Fantastics and Eccentrics in Chinese Painting* (New York: Asia Society, 1967), 108.

[18] Sun Ji 孫機, "Mingdai de shufa guan, (di) ji yu toumian" 明代的束發冠, (鬄)髻与头面 (*Shufa guan*, (*di*)*ji*, and *toumian* in Ming Dynasty), in *Wenwu* 文物 2001(7): 62-83, 64

[19] Ibid.

hair attire that has now been taken off, signifying that the figure has chosen to disengage himself from his social duty. The covered zither was also widely used as a symbol of retreat and loftiness, as it was associated with the idea that the zither is better left untouched if no one could truly hear the music.[20] The relationship between the motif of wrapped zither and reclusion is clearly acknowledged in an album leaf by Chen Hongshou. Titled "Containing Tranquility" (*Nangyou* 囊幽) by the painter himself, the album leaf belongs to a series of sixteen images depicting the life of a hermit (Fig. 2.5).[21] We will discuss this work in greater detail in the next section. In the same album set, wine-drinking also linked literary talent to the lifestyle of a recluse: the title of the leaf "Irrigating Books" (*jiaoshu* 澆書) is drawn from an anecdote of Su Shi, who joked that drinking in the morning helped settle the knowledge that filled his belly (Fig. 2.6);[22] and the title of the leaf "Gargling Sentences" (*Shuju* 漱句) refers to a saying that describes the Western Jin scholar Sun Chu 孫楚 (220-293), who was said to have lived as a recluse on a rock by the water to sharpen his senses and hone his will (Fig. 2.7).[23] In these two pictures, we find wine jars in a shape similar to the one in *Xifa tu*, as well as a wine cup with a similar pattern.

Notably, the sitter's introspective state of mind and his longing for a reclusive life contain a Buddhist dimension. This is signaled by the knotted-root chair—a motif that was almost

[20] This idea has been expressed by famous poets including Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365-427), Meng Haoran 孟浩然 (689-740) and Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846) have all expressed in their writings the idea. A group of such poems has been discussed in Li Xi 李溪, *Qingwu shi zhi* 清物十志 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chuban she, 2022), Chapter 2

[21] "Nangyou 囊幽" could be translated in several ways. The term "囊" (*nang*) means bag, pouch, or to contain as an action, while "幽" (*you*) can mean secluded, quiet, deep, or hidden.

[22] Wang Jing 王婧, "Chen Hongshou yinju shiliu guan tuce zhi shiliu yin tanyuan" 陳洪綬《隱居十六觀》圖冊之十六隱探源 (Interpretations of the sixteen reclusions in Chen Hongshou's *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion* album) in *Meishu jie* 美術界, 2015 (5): 40-3.

[23] A discussion of the literary motifs of "gargling sentences" and "irrigating books" can be found in Wang, "Chen Hongshou yinju shiliu guan tuce zhi shiliu yin tanyuan," 40-3.

exclusively reserved for portraits of Buddhist arhats, patriarchs and monks prior to the Ming Dynasty. In the Ming period, the root chair came to be seen as perfect for cross-legged sitting during meditation for lay practitioners.[24] Although the figure in *Drying Hair* is not sitting in a cross-legged position, his hand gestures—particularly the right hand held upright with the palm facing outwards—is reminiscent of the *abhayamudrā* mudra (*shiwuwei yin* 施無畏印 "gesture of fearlessness"), a gesture that is associated with a sense of security, serenity, and compassion derived from enlightenment.[25]

The sitter's penchant for reclusion and enlightenment through meditation may be related to the *yimin* 遺民 ("leftover subject") sentiments widely shared among scholars who lived through the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. This is most clearly evident through the figure's unruly long hair, which is highlighted through its position at the visual center and being featured in the painting's title. The scroll has been dated to around 1649, only a few years after the issuing of the "queue order" in 1644 by the Qing Manchu rulers.[26] According to this mandate, all Han Chinese were forced to shave their forehead and braid the rest of their hair into a queue like the Manchus, with Buddhist monks and Taoist priests as the only exceptions.[27] For the Qing rulers,

[24] Li Rihua 李日華 (1565-1635) notes: "For sitting cross-legged in meditation, the frosty gnarled root of an ancient tree is just perfect". See Li, *Zitao xuan zazhui* 紫桃軒雜綴 juan 1, quoted and translated in Wai-kam Ho, "Late Ming Literati: Their Social and Cultural Ambiance," in Chu-tsing Li and James Watt ed., *The Chinese Scholar's Studio: Artistic Life in the Late Ming Period: An Exhibition from the Shanghai Museum* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 34.

[25] For a reference of the Buddhist mudras or hand gestures, see Robert Jr. Buswell ed., *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

[26] While there is no inscribed date on the painting, Weng Wan-go has dated the work to around 1649 based on the styles of the brushstroke and calligraphy. See Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 194. The location, Jingzhe xuan 靜者軒, where Chen Hongshou painted the work according to the inscription, might be the same place as Jingzhe ju 靜者居, which is mentioned in several inscriptions on paintings made by Chen Hongshou around 1650s.

[27] Alf Hiltebeitel and Barbara D. Miller, *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 125-129. Also see Edward J. M. Rhoads, *Manchus & Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928* (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 60.

the changing of hairstyle meant subordination to the new regime. Thus, any disobedience would be "equivalent to a rebel's defying the Mandate," and would lead to execution.[28] For the Ming loyalists, on the other hand, the hair-cutting order was extremely demeaning. It embodied the Manchu conquest of their homeland, and the subsequent downfall of traditional rites and cultural pride. Therefore, many Ming loyalists refused to wear the queue at the cost of their lives, or became monks or Daoist priests to avoid the humiliation.[29] Against this background, Chen Hongshou's unusual portrayal of a figure who maintains fully grown hair and lets it flow freely must have been a deliberate decision to highlight the figure's identity as a Ming loyalist who refused to obey the Manchu order, and who might have become a Buddhist amidst the chaos.

The figure's *yimin* identity is further implied by several details of the depicted objects. First is the cracked pattern featured prominently on the large wine jar. While developing such patterns on porcelain doesn't necessarily involve the actual breaking of the objects, the angular, irregular and fractured lines evoke a sense of breakage and fragmentation. In fact, since the 14th century, such objects were commonly referred to as *suiqi* 碎器—"broken or fragmented ceramic vessels." For Chen Hongshou, the visual qualities of the crackle patterns might have evoked the particular experience of Ming leftover subjects. The collapse of the dynasty in 1644 and the suicides of many loyalist friends had a deep effect on Chen Hongshou's state of mind. Allegedly, he was in a state of extreme frustration and agony to the point of madness.[30] Around this time,

[28] The slogan adopted by the Qing ruling class during this violent campaign was "cut off your hair and keep your head, (or) keep your hair and cut off your head" (劉發不留頭，留頭不留發). For more discussions, see Hiltebeitel and Miller, 125.
[29] Hiltebeitel and Miller, 126-7.
[30] This has been documented in a biography of Chen written around his own time: "When the disaster of the Jiashen year occurred, [he] took refuge in the Wu and Yue regions. Sometimes he would weep quietly, sometimes he would drink excessively and shout wildly, sometimes he would join young wandering knights to slaughter oxen and bury dogs. Those who saw him pointed him out as a mad scholar, and Shou considered himself a mad scholar as well. (甲申之难作，栖迟吴越。时而吞声哭泣，时而纵酒狂呼，时而与游侠少年，椎牛埋狗，见者指为狂士，绶亦自以为狂士焉)." See Meng Yuan 孟遠, "*Chen Hongshou Zhuan* 陳洪

his writings became increasingly permeated by political sentiments. The adjectives "*po* 破" and "*sui* 碎"— broken and fragmented—were frequently adopted to describe the disturbance of his homeland and his shattered life.[31] The dynastic turn also reshaped the visual expressions of Chen Hongshou. Admittedly, Chen had already shown interest in crackle-patterned porcelain in his early works, mostly for their inherent sense of spontaneity. But the depiction of crackles on porcelain wares reemerged and became more common in his later works after the fall of the Ming.[32] Often included in his paintings of recluses who refused to serve the reigning court, the crackles may be read as metaphor of the shattered country, the broken bodies of the loyalists, and the fragmented minds of Ming scholars.[33]

The sense of breakage and fragmentation can also be observed in the flower arrangement in *Drying Hair*: two of the bamboo leaves have turned yellow and withered with holes, showing that they have witnessed some hardship before they took refuge in the scholar's pot. Nonetheless, these bamboo and chrysanthemum branches have survived and are growing. Known to be plants that persevere through harsh conditions, the bamboo and chrysanthemums might be interpreted

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綬傳," in *Chen Hongshou ji* 陈洪绶集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1994), 587. Translation mine in consultation with Yi Lidu's tanslation in "'He Wore Flowers in His Hair': Understanding a Late Ming Through his Mid-Ming Subject," in *Ming Studies*, 2011(64), 33-45.

[31] This could be found in at least a dozen poems in the anthology of Chen Hongshou's writings, *Baolun tang ji*.

[32] Jonathan Hay has noted that Chen Hongshou's post-1644 paintings also got darkened and took on the voice of the *yimin*. See Johnathan Hay, "Posttraumatic Art: Painting by Remnant Subjects of the Ming," in *The Artful Recluse: Painting, Poetry, and Politics in Seventeenth Century China*, ed. Peter C. Sturman and Susan S. Tai (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2012), 84.

[33] While during the dynastic transition, the retreat to nature was a personal choice of many Ming *yimin*-scholars for surviving and finding consolation in the turbulent years of political upheaval and social unrest, the act itself—as well as the depictions of it—could also be considered as a strong political commentary: a critique of the current rulership by refusing to serve the court. For an extensive discussion on this issue, see Sturman and Tai ed., *The Artful Recluse: Painting, Poetry, and Politics in Seventeenth-Century China*. Chen Hongshou's depictions of rebellious, upright recluses accompanied with crackle-glazed vessels could be found in, for example, a scene from the handscroll *Scenes from the Life of Tao Yuanming* in Honolulu Museum of Art, and an illustration depicting the Han Dynasty scholar Fan Dan 范丹 (112-185) from the set of printed playing cards named *Venerating Antiquity* (*Bogu yezi* 博古葉子). Fan Dan refused to serve the corrupt court and instead lived in extreme poverty.

as mirroring the life experience of the seated scholar, who has survived the turmoil. Perhaps this is the reason that he is meditating with the mudra of fearlessness to pacify his mind and find inner peace in a turbulent era.

So far, I have engaged in an iconographic interpretation of the objects in *Drying Hair*. Through their pre-existing cultural meanings, these objects silently narrate—though not at all in a straightforward manner—a multilayered yet coherent story about the figure's identity, aspiration, state of mind and even life experience. These aspects of the human figure are otherwise not directly visible to the eye. But since these objects were commonly found in the lives of the painting's contemporaneous viewers and often mentioned in literary sources, their meanings I have drawn out would not have been overly cryptic for them. While this iconographic reading of the painting addresses *what* is included in the picture frame and *why* there might have been chosen, it does not account for *how* they are arranged spatially in relationship to the figure and the viewer. In the remainder of this section, I will argue that it is the latter that further activates the iconographic meanings of the depicted object, thus enabling the painting to capture and evoke what is beyond the pictorial, and making it particularly poignant for its viewers.

The objects in *Drying Hair* create an atmosphere that is simultaneously spatial and emotional.[34] As articulated by Gernot Böhme, atmosphere is located between object and subject; its production is dependent on the object, but is only manifested through being felt by the subject.[35] In the painting, the objects surround the figure from all sides, constructing a space for the figure to reside in. Encompassing various cultural connotations, these carefully chosen things constantly remind the figure of his social relationship, cultural identity, and lived experience.

[34] I am drawing upon Gernot Böhme's theorization of "atmosphere", where he points out that the atmosphere could be seen as a "tuned space"—that is, a space with a certain mood. It is therefore always spatial and emotional. See Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmosphere* (London: Routledge, 2016), 2.
[35] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmosphere*, 1-2.

Therefore, within the fictional space of the painting, rather than merely mirroring the inner feelings of the painted figure, the material objects may well be the very sources of his emotions—his sorrow, pain, and frustration as a Ming *yimin*. Such an atmosphere is fully immersive; it is not only taken in visually and experienced mentally, but also felt by the imagined body. This is engendered by the many multisensorial objects in the painting: both the chrysanthemum flowers and the fingered citrons exude fragrances for the figure to breath in; the covered zither implies music that has now stopped; the empty wine jar and wine cup indicate substance that has just been consumed through his half-opened mouth; and the gnarled arm of the root chair rubs and digs into his bare skin.

Framed by these atmospheric and bodily objects, the painting can be seen as a vignette of the corporeal and metaphysical existence of the painted figure. It is through the objects that the figure is animated and fulfilled. With these objects, the figure is given an identity, an elegant taste, and a lived life. He sees, drinks, smells, and touches. He thinks and he feels. The objects should therefore be considered as more than mere props that fixate the subject's identity for the viewer. Rather, they are part and parcel of the deep sense of subjecthood ascribed to the painted figure. In fact, the painting suggests blurred boundaries between the exterior and the interior, and between object and subject—ideas that were not entirely new among late-Ming scholars. Theorizing the idea of emotion in Chinese literature, Ling Hong Lam notes that "in its exteriority, emotion is the structure of space as an ontological condition."[36] This view eschews the conceptual opposition between the material world and the experiential subject, and sees them as converging in the atmosphere. Lam further illustrates this idea through the topos of winds, which he sees as "a prominent stratum that underlies the understanding of emotion in early

[36] Ling Hon Lam, *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early Modern China: From Dreamscapes to Theatricality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 5.

modern China": "…uneven yet diffuse, [the winds] permeate all boundaries and saturate every corner, making experiences present and immediate to the subject constituted therein."[37] While Lam's observations are almost entirely based on textual sources, they are echoed pictorially in *Drying Hair*, where the objects surrounding the figure operate similarly to the topos of winds. Not only do they contain the figure and permeate him via his senses, but they also, quite literally, "blend in" with his body. A subtle example of this occurs at the intersection between the stone table and the figure: whereas the figure's left foot seems to be in front of the table, the outline of the robe can be easily mistaken for the edge of the stone. In this way, the distinction between object and subject becomes visually ambivalent (Fig. 2.8).

The objects in the painting also have an effect on the viewer through the atmosphere that they create. According to Böhme, atmospheres, while being "quasi-objective," are nothing without a feeling subject. They are therefore subjective facts that exist intersubjectively, as an atmosphere tends to arouse particular moods that can be shared or disputed among various people.[38] Böhme's exposition of atmosphere may illuminate our understanding of the affective mechanism in the paintings of Chen Hongshou. Within the context of *Drying Hair*, the engaged viewer gets to experience the same atmosphere as the figure through closely attending to the objects in the picture. My close reading of the objects shows that every detail of the objects was carefully thought out to evoke dispersed yet interconnected moods of a *yimin* scholar, who took joy in aesthetically pleasing objects, while being consumed by sorrow for the fallen dynasty and thus found refuge in religion and solitude. These feelings were widely shared by the painting's most likely intended viewers—the artist himself, as well as people in his closest circle, given the particularly bold depiction of uncut hair at a sensitive historical moment. Upon looking at the

[37] Lam, *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early Modern China*, 23-25.
[38] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmosphere*, 2.

painting and encountering the objects in it, these viewers could easily share with the painted figure the atmosphere that these objects create. It is also important to note that a viewer might only read into some but not all of the aspects pertaining to the depicted objects. This means that different viewers might connect to the painting in various subjective ways. Such an intimate and personal relationship between the painting and its viewer is further made possible by the fact that all of the objects in the painting are everyday items for a late-Ming scholar to possess. For the historical viewers, the painted objects might summon their own intellectual, emotional and physical experiences with the images' real-life equivalents.[39] I will revisit this point later in this chapter.

While we do not have much record of how *Drying Hair* was perceived by its historical viewers, another work by Chen Hongshou—*Drinking and Reading*—provides valuable insights into how viewers from late imperial times may have interacted with paintings like these (Fig. 2.3). Like *Drying Hair*, *Drinking and Reading* depicts a scholarly figure sitting in front of a low table, deep in thought with a somewhat gloomy face. He is similarly framed by objects with layers of cultural connotations: bronze vessels that evoke antiquity and imply the sitter's erudition, taste and virtue; flower arrangements featuring bamboo and plum blossom branches – both among the Four Gentlemen motifs that symbolizes the character of a scholar; a clay pot that became especially trendy among Ming elites;[40] a wine cup with elegant crackle patterns that bear emotional complexities that may be related to the dynastic change; an incense burner with an intricate lid now removed on the table, showing the burning incense inside; and a knotted-root

[39] What these motifs of objects summon does not have to be concrete and narrative, but instead could be impressionistic in terms of a general mood or feeling. The sense of nostalgia evoked by depictions of material objects among yimin scholars has been discussed by Wang Chen-hua in "Nüren, wupin, yu ganguan yuwang."
[40] Lo Kuei-hsiang, *The Stonewares of Yixing: from the Ming Period to the Present Day* (Hong Kong: Sotheby's Publications, 1986).

staff often associated with hermits. What make this painting particularly significant are the four inscriptions by Kong Shangren that document his long-term engagement with the painting after he acquired it in 1690. None of the inscriptions directly addresses the content of the painting. Instead, each of them recounts a scenario in which Kong Shangren viewed the painting, with an emphasis on the various emotions that the playwright felt each time. Nevertheless, in several instances, the inscriptions subtly recall the scene in the painting particularly through the mention of objects similar to those depicted. The most telling example is the second inscription written in 1693:

> With silvered hair, I sit in front of a book;
> Each year, I long for my home in the countryside, where I could live among woodcutters and fishermen.
> Sorrows remain and hardship persists;
> Once more I spend New Year's Eve with this gentleman.
> The censer has been refilled with leaves to burn, casting flames akin to the crimson sky;
> Carefully arranged, the wild plums now bloom.
> Holding the tall goblet and getting drunk
> —it feels like New Year's Eve at Arong's abode.
>
> (Postscript) This old man is always by my bedside; we have been facing each other day and night for nearly three years. Tonight my servant boy wanted to replace him with a new painting while cleaning the room, but I did not have the heart for it. I still kept him around to see the new year together, and wrote a poem for him. Written by Dongtang Ren (Kong Shangren) on the night before the new year in the *guiyou* year of the Kangxi era (1693).
>
> 白髮蕭騷一卷書，年年歸興說樵漁。
> 驅愁無法窮難送，又與先生度歲除。
> 爐添商陸火如霞，供得江梅已著花。
> 手把申杯須爛醉，分明守歲阿戎家。
>
> 此老在余榻前晨昏相對且三年矣，今夕童子掃舍，欲以新畫易之，余不忍也，仍留守歲，並贈以詩。康熙癸酉除夜，東塘任題。

At first glance, the inscription could be read as a portrayal of Kong's own experience. With the burning censer, the plum blossoms and the wine, the writer's New Year's Eve mirrors the scene

in the painting. But without a clearly stated subject, the third line could also be read as a description of the scene within the painting. Going farther, this line might be considered as referring simultaneously to Kong Shangren and the painted figure, as they drink down their sorrow and homesickness together in their parallel and merging worlds. Such a reading is especially plausible, since the inscription repeatedly emphasizes how the figure in the painting and the writer kept each other company.

Kong Shangren clearly paid close attention to the objects in the painting, as the inscription vividly describes the incense burner, flower arrangement, and wine cup, but leaves out any other detail within the painting. Whether literally or figuratively, from the inscription, we can see that Kong imagined that he was able to share the perfumed, sophisticated yet sorrowful atmosphere created by these objects with the figure within the painting. For Kong Shangren, the painting was more than an image on silk; it created an emotional space he could enter, one inhabited by an empathizing old gentleman with whom he might share his joy and sorrow.

Kong Shangren was born after the Qing conquest and didn't witness the dynastic crisis first-handedly. Hence, to some degree, Kong repurposed the painting—which was filled with objects related to the *yimin* sentiments in Chen Hongshou's visual repertoire—to reflect a general state of loneliness that he was experiencing. It is also worth noting that Kong Shangren was fascinated by Ming loyalist culture. He developed close friendship with a few scholars from the conquest generation, and extensively drew upon the historical events, cultural symbols, and lived experiences—ranging from the traumatic to the romantic and the heroic—of that turbulent era in his own works.[41] Kong's second-hand experience of the Ming's fall, however, only added to his sense of urgency in commemorating and remembering the bygone era through his writings.

[41] Xiaoqiao Ling, *Feeling the Past in Seventeenth-Century China* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2019), 29.

As extensively discussed by Xiaoqiao Ling, Kong's most famous piece, *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan* 桃花扇), can be read as a dramatic rendition of the tumultuous recent past; moreover, its mission is not only to remember but also to "open up an affective space for us to relive the sorrow, pain, and hope."[42] Notably, in the play, it is the peach blossom fan that becomes the evocative embodiment of the blood and tears shed by those who lived and died during the Manchu invasion.[43] Such an emotive and vivid encounter with the past mediated by a material object, carefully crafted by Kong Shangren for his readers through a text, was experienced by Kong himself when confronted with Chen Hongshou's painting filled with intentionally chosen artifacts. The deep sorrow that haunted Kong Shangren in the 1693 inscription might indeed be related to the dynastic trauma that Kong so strongly felt in the form of postmemory, and now fleshed out by the objects in the painting.[44] This sentiment is hinted by the mentioning of "woodcutter and fishermen" in the inscription: both established tropes of the wise who witness worldly affairs from a distance, in the early-Qing yimin literature, they had become stock figures for those who bore the burden of the dynastic turmoil, mourned the fallen Ming, and passed down its legends.[45]

However, to ascribe the emotions that Kong Shangren underwent in front of the painting entirely to his feelings towards the past would be an oversimplification. Rather, layers of

[42] Ling, *Feeling the Past in Seventeenth-Century China*, 28-9 and 248-96.
[43] Or, in the words of Xiaoqiao Ling, the fan "epitomizes the power of aesthetics in its capacity to kindle empathy." Ling, *Feeling the Past in Seventeenth-Century China*, 295.
[44] Postmemory, according to Marianne Hirch, refers to an intimate connection to the past that is mediated "not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation." See Hirch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5. Xiaoqiao Ling effectively used this concept in her discussion of *The Peach Blossom Fan*. See Ling, *Feeling the Past in Seventeenth-Century China*, 250.
[45] Ling, *Feeling the Past in Seventeenth-Century China*. 268-9.

temporalities and memories were simultaneously evoked by and conflated through the painting. In another inscription on *Drinking and Reading*, Kong writes:

> Seven Chongyang Festivals have passed since I first inscribed this painting in the *xinwei* year (1691). The scenes have blurred and events are no longer remembered—who knows what has happened to my old companions. This *jimao* year (1699), I sent this painting for reframing. On the day it was done, I climbed the high tower again for the Chongyang occasion, and encountered many familiar faces. *Viewing thing(s) evokes nostalgia*—I find myself shedding tears without knowing where they come from. [Italics mine]
>
> 辛未跋此畫後，又七度重陽矣。景事模糊，不復記憶，其客況可知也。今歲己卯，重付裝潢。落成之日，又植重陽登高，賓客多舊遊者。覽物興懷，蓋不知涕泗何從耳。

What does the emotion-inducing *thing(s)* (wu 物) here refer to? The scenery from the tower, the painting itself, or the old objects in the newly framed hanging scroll? And which forgotten, remote or recent memory has it evoked? Kong intentionally left his words open to interpretation, thereby referring to the many ways that he experienced the painted work. Such an engagement with the painting might be traced to the atmospheric objects therein: while they unmistakably evoke particular kinds of mood, they invite the viewer to infuse the scene with their own interpretations, emotions, and even new narratives.

Melancholic Remnants

In previous examples, everyday objects become affective through their literary and cultural associations, spatial configuration, and interaction with the subjects. Working in groups to frame and define the space around them, these objects add to the internal depth of the painted figures, and evoke emotional and personal experiences of the painting for the viewer. The spatial and affective functions of objects remain the key theme for the two works to be discussed in this section. But different from the previous cases, where the objects suffuse the space with a moody

atmosphere, in each of the following works, one object stands out from the ensemble, and conjures specifically the embodied experience of melancholy—a complex state of mind closely related to one's conflicted feelings towards the past. Instead of engaging the viewer by leaving space for individualized experiences, these next objects delineate the nuances of melancholy towards the bygone times with such sensitivity and vividness that they visualize, materialize, and even animate the abstract internal processes of the painted figures for the viewer. These objects thus transform the paintings into spaces of remembrance, where the viewer is not only reminded of but also let to reflect upon and *feel* the past and its vestiges.

The paintings that this section focuses on belong to an album of sixteen leaves titled *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion* (*yinju shiliu guan* 隱居十六觀).[46] This title of the album, along with the individual titles of the sixteen paintings, were inscribed by Chen Hongshou himself on the prefatory pages of the album. Signed by the artist in 1651, the year before his demise, the set is one of Chen's last masterpieces, revisiting the painter's often-used themes, motifs and techniques in a restrained yet earnest manner. While paying great attention to the figures—which the artist was best known for, as well as the landscapes in the background—a genre of image that the painter was less known for but held dear throughout his career, it should not surprise us that Chen Honsghou also made sure to include carefully portrayed artifacts in each of the leaves, ranging from wine containers, tea vessels, writing instruments, and furniture, to scrolls and books.

In terms of the album's subject matter, as the title suggests, the sixteen leaves of the album portray figures who are engaged in activities that were often associated with the life of a

[46] The title of the album, as well as the titles of the sixteen pictures, were inscribed by Chen Hongshou at the front pages of the set. The album set will hereafter be referred to as *Sixteen Views*.

hermit. Some of these scenes, as Anne Burkus-Chasson describes, "are remarkably obscure; …others are trite, derived from familiar poems or historical anecdotes."[47] Burkus-Chasson then briefly but very aptly pulls out a throughline among the sixteen scenes: "The figural scenes are miscellaneous…[they] do not appear to illustrate successive events in a narrative. Instead, more importantly, each scene delineates a state of sensory absorption. Transported either by drinking, by reading, or by looking, these figures inhabit *private, inaccessible worlds*. Chen compelled the reader-viewer to emulate them—to be fully absorbed with these paintings."[48] In a way, my following discussions of two leaves from this album echo these insightful observations; however, in these two works, I will argue that it is precisely through the portrayal of objects that the "private, inaccessible worlds" the figures occupy become visible and accessible to us.

In the two leaves in question, objects assume particular visual and narrative significance. The first leaf of our focus is titled "Washing Inkstones" (*Huanyan* 浣硯), which depicts a scholar sitting by a river, attempting to clean his inkstones (Fig. 2.9). The scene likely refers to the well-known legend of Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), the famous poet who washed his inkstones in the river while living a reclusive life in a temple at a young age.[49] In this painting, the inkstones are highlighted not only by the blue pigment on the basin that contains them—the only pictorial element that bears color within the composition—but also by their central positions right in front

[47] Anne Burkus-Chasson, "Colouring by the Book: Chen Hongshou's Sixteen Views of Living in Seclusion and the Reproducibility of the Painted Image," in *Handbook of the Colour Print in China, 1600-1800*, ed. Anne Farrer and Kevin McLoughlin (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 62.
[48] Ibid, italics mine. The author does not elaborate on these observations, but instead moves on to her main point about the relationship between this album/book that Chen Hongshou created and the print culture with which the artist was actively interacting with.
[49] Wang, "Chen Hongshou yinju shiliu guan tuce zhi shiliu yin tanyuan"; and Lin Ju-Hsi 林如熙, "Laolian wuyi ke yiqing, yueshui wushan ran buqing—qianxi Chen Hongshou 'yinju shiliu guan tu'" 老蓮無一可移情, 越水吳山染不輕—淺析陳洪綬《隱居十六觀圖》(An Analysis of Chen Hongshou's *Sixteen Views of Living in Seclusion*), in *Shuhua yishu xuekan* 書畫藝術學刊 29 (2020): 89-116.

of the figure. A similar visual strategy also brings our attention to the zither in the previously mentioned "Containing Tranquility," where the zither is cradled in a textile with intricate patterns, tied with a red ribbon, and rests on the lap of the figure. As I have mentioned, the motif of the covered zither often evoked notions of seclusion and solitude, especially at a time when like-minded companions were hard to come across.

As the album's title suggests, these images should first be understood within the rhetoric of reclusion, which had always been a popular theme in Chinese art and literature, but gained renewed attention upon the fall of the Ming Dynasty. For scholars in the early Qing, reclusion became a "reality that many felt compelled to follow," rather than merely an idea to entertain with brush and ink.[50] As a result, many artists from this period portrayed the mindset and life of reclusion with deep empathy and sincerity. However, while certainly addressing the theme of reclusion, images from *Sixteen Views* have been described by Peter C. Sturman as seemingly "mock[ing] contemporary infatuations with this same ideal."[51] For Sturman, the sardonic tone of this album set is particularly poignant in the "Washing Inkstones" leaf, where "one typically awkward scholar is depicted playing with prized inkstones under a tree in the landscape, like a child with toy trucks in a sandbox."[52]

Sturman's vivid description captures some of the most intriguing aspects of the album set; but the meaning behind these peculiarities warrants further discussion. Indeed, the scholar in "Washing Inkstones" displays a childlike clumsiness. Holding an inkstone in each hand, and leaving behind the ladle that was supposed to fetch water from the river to the basin, he appears puzzled by the seemingly straightforward task of washing the inkstones. Likewise, the scholar in

[50] This renewed aspect in the rhetoric of reclusion and its manifestation in art have been discussed by Peter C. Sturman in "The Art of Reclusion," in *The Artful Recluse*, 35-6.
[51] Sturman, "The Art of Reclusion," 36.
[52] Ibid.

"Containing Tranquility" is caught in the middle of the simple act of tying the ribbons. To secure the knot, both the thumb and index finger of his right hand must be positioned on the same side of the loop in order to pull through the loose end of the ribbon from the opposite side. However, in the painting, the thumb incorrectly protrudes through the looped ribbon, making it impossible for him to proceed to the next step (Fig. 2.10). Considering the deliberate attention that the artist dedicated to portraying this small detail of knot tying rarely seen in any other paintings, the unusual placement of the fingers is likely intentional. On the one hand, the awkward hands further highlights the naive demeanor of the scholar. On the other hand, in contrast to a joyous little child playing with toys and ribbons in a sandbox, the scholars in these paintings appear far from joyful. Instead, gazing into the void, the figures are portrayed with facial expressions that are seemingly impassive and stoic.

Yet there is something deeply compelling about these faces, as they draw the viewer to contemplate what remains concealed. In fact, it appears that the figures are unbothered by their surroundings, but are entirely absorbed by something totally internal. Relatedly, several motifs in these paintings address the dichotomy between the external and the internal through an attention to the containers. While the scenes' titles clearly indicate that the inkstones and the zither are the main motif within each frame, it is what contains them—the basin and the textile bag—that are painstakingly portrayed with vivid colors and ornate patterns. To notice the inkstones and the zithers is, in a way, to uncover what lies inside the covers.[53] In "Containing Tranquility," the wrapped scrolls and the wine jar with a ladle indicating liquid inside similarly point to the idea of something concealed within containers. In the same way that we become intrigued by what are

[53] The artist's restrained yet precise use of color in these leaves may also be read along this line: the subtle colors appear on various "containers"—the figure's robe, zither bag, wrappings of the scrolls, wine container, and basin holding the inkstone.

inside those material covers, we may also start to wonder about the internal world behind the figures' inscrutable facades.

As we compare the internal facet of the human figures contained within their outer appearance to the material objects contained within the basin and the cloth cover, it is only natural to approach the former through the latter. The scholars' seeming childlike cluelessness in carrying out mundane tasks of cleaning inkstones and tying up the zither cover could be a somewhat realistic portrayal of elite men of letters who came to live in seclusion without the help of their attendants as a result of the dynastic transition. In fact, while the inkstone was an essential object on a scholar's desk, in paintings, the inkstone was seldomly handled by the scholar himself. For example, in a hanging scroll painted by Lan Ying and Xu Tai 徐泰 (dates unknown) in 1659, a woman is cleaning an inkstone in a basin. She is likely someone from a scholar's household, and is washing the inkstone after the scholar has completed his work at the desk (Fig. 2.11). This interpretation is supported by Lan Ying's inscription, which recounts an old acquaintance of his who maintained a fervor for collecting inkstones even after becoming a Buddhist monk. This scholar-monk is likely the owner of the inkstone being washed, as well as the other items on the desktop.[54] In another painting by Jin Tingbiao 金廷標 (? - 1767), a scholar sits atop a rock, observing as his servants wash his inkstone and prepare tea below (Fig. 2.12). As for zithers, while many paintings portray scholars playing the instrument, when not in use, zithers are often tended to by servants. Besides the numerous images of servants carrying the zither for their masters, a scene in Du Jin 杜堇 (act. 1465—1505)'s *Enjoying Antiques* (*Wangu*

[54] Notably, the first two characters of the book on the desk reads "*jin gang* 金剛," likely the start of *Jingang banruo boluo mi jing* 金剛般若波羅蜜經 or *Diamond Sutra*, one of the most influential Buddhist sutras in China since the Tang Dynasty. This indicates the Buddhist identity of the owner of these objects. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of the reproduction I have, it is challenging to decipher the remainder of the characters in the book title.

tu 玩古圖) shows a female attendant securing a knot that ties up the cover of a zither—in the right way (Fig. 2.13). By depicting scholars struggling to care for their prized possessions without the aid of the servants, Chen Hongshou might be subtly hinting at the displacement and disorientation caused by the political unrest, perhaps with a touch of mockery towards the elite class—himself included—who had always enjoyed a sheltered life.

But for late-Ming literati, the comfortable life they once enjoyed was certainly not the only casualty with the progression of history. So were the tightly-knit social networks now shattered by the displacements or even deaths of their members. In Chen Hongshou's later poems, he not only expressed the hardship that he and his family had to endure when they fled the family home, but also mourned the loss of many of his loyalist friends who perished in battle or chose suicide over serving the Qing court.[55] Admittedly, by the year 1651 when he made this album, Chen's life wasn't so bad—he made quite some money from selling his paintings, and had gathered a new group of friends. But in his writings around this time, he still, oftentimes, dwells on what can be broadly identified as the *yimin* sentiments—perhaps with a shred of performativity of a Ming loyalist identity, a stance that was still valued within his social circle. It is worth noting that these later writings express less anger, sadness, or self-denial compared to his earlier writings from the 1640s, but instead can more accurately be characterized by a general sense of loss and powerlessness about politics and history, as well as a melancholy towards memories of the past.

It may therefore not be coincidental that both the inkstone and zither, prominently featured in the two leaves, were social objects that constantly initiated and facilitated

[55] Wang Huangsheng has discussed this episode in Chen Hongshou's life and his writings during this period. See Wang Huangsheng 王璜生, *Chen Hongshou* 陳洪綬 (Changchun: Jilin meishu chuban she, 1996), 38-42.

relationships within scholarly circles. The "social life of inkstones" has been examined in depth by Dorothy Ko in her book of the same title. In its fifth chapter, Ko details a network of elite scholars involved in collecting, exchanging and appreciating inkstones in 17th-century Fuzhou.[56] More specifically, Ko points out that an inkstone recorded and mediated social interactions through inscriptions that it accumulated over its lifetime:

> [M]ost patrons would not have composed an inscription when the inkstone was still in the hands of the artisan. Typically, it was during the inkstone's subsequent social life that the patron had the chance to reflect upon its qualities, that friends were shown it at drinking or viewing parties, or that the stone was given away as a gift to a parting friend, eliciting further rounds of commemoration. The encomiums and notes, along with the names and seals of the writer(s), bear witness to the circulation and reception of an inkstone after it left the hands of the maker.[57]

Chen Hongshou's participation in social networks mediated through inkstones is evidenced by his inscriptions on these objects. One such inscription, signed by Chen Honsghou, can be found among inscriptions and seals by others on a Duan inkstone housed at the Shanghai Museum. It reads: "I value my integrity, which is as pure as jade, just like you. To dishonor it with gold and grains would be a call for disgrace (吾身與子惜如玉，愿之金穀則取辱)" (Fig. 2.14). The use of "you" in this text can be interpreted in two ways. First, it refers to the inkstone itself, with its smooth texture and saturated color reminiscent of jade. Such a precious object should be cherished as a valued collectible rather than sold for money. Second, the inscription alludes to the presumed social interactions by directly addressing those who encounter this inkstone to remind them of the importance of upholding integrity and resisting the temptation of material gain. As for the zither, it had been regarded as the testament of the bonds among friends since ancient times. True friends shared an appreciation for the same tune, giving rise to the term

[56] Dorothy Ko, "Fuzhou: The Collectors," in *The Social Life of Inkstones: Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China* (University of Washington Press, 2017), 153-187.
[57] Ko, *The Social Life of Inkstones*, 97.

"zhiyin" (知音), which directly translates to "appreciating the tune," and had come to metaphorically represents friends who deeply understand one another.[58]

In the two album leaves from *Sixteen Views*, the inkstones and the zither are depicted in the final stages of their cycles of use. The zither has been carefully wrapped up, and the inkstones are getting cleaned for storage. It remains unclear when or whether they will ever be used again by their owners amidst friends. Much like the lost friendships and the dismantled life of comfort, the inkstones and the zither have also reached the end of their use. With the social relationships once embodied by these objects now forgone, picking them up would only lead to feelings of loss and despair. Perhaps as a remnant subject of the fallen dynasty, the only way forward was to put away the objects that reminded of the good life in the Ming, and try to forget the horrors of the Qing conquest—although it was an impossible task. For Chen Hongshou, these were some of the very reasons for living a life of seclusion amidst mountains and rivers, directly expressed in his foreword to the *Sixteen Views* album: "I intended to forget about the world of ruptures and chaos 著意欲忘離亂世." But there is also a more immediate past that was evidently in the mind of Chen Hongshou when he made these paintings. The album was made for Shen Hao 沈顥 (1586-after 1661), a friend to the painter. In another inscription also written on the album's prefatory pages, Chen Hongshou recounts the good times that he and Shen spent together, laments their inevitable farewell, and wishes for their future reunion.[59] In this light, it becomes telling that the entire sequence begins and ends with the only two images in the album

[58] For a discussion of how music catalyzed friendship among Ming male scholars, see Joseph S. C. Lam, "Music and Male Bonding in Ming China," in *Male Friendship in Ming China*, ed. Martin Huang (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 79-83.

[59] The inscription reads:" The bond with the mountains and rivers has yet to sever; Every morning and evening, I stand by the fragrant bridge. When you left and yet to return, I saw only half of the lotus bloom. I gaze intently, waiting for you to be a companions with this old lotus. (山水緣猶未斷，朝暮定香橋畔。君去蚤來時，看得芙容一半。青盼青盼，乞與老蓮作伴。)"

that feature two human figures in the same composition: in the first scene, a scholar visits his hermit friend, who is reading by the stream, with a jar of wine (Fig. 2.15);[60] and in the last scene, two old monks are studying sutras, as one gazes tenderly at his companion (Fig. 2.16).

While the feelings evoked by a dear friend's departure certainly differ from the politically charged *yimin* sentiment, both share a similarly conflicted understanding and embodied feeling toward the past: it is something sweet and beautiful, something one would want to hold onto; yet it is ultimately fleeting and ephemeral, and will inevitably come to an end, leaving behind only memories. The two scenes of inkstones and zither may be read as the scholars' symbolic farewell to their objects with one last touch of care until they pick them up again, yet the mood in the interactions between the subjects and the objects is one characterized by a profound tenderness, rather than determination. With the hands tightly grasping the slipping inkstones and the fingers entangled in the ribbons, the two paintings capture a striking tactility that implies a sense of attachment between the figures and their beloved objects. Or, is the figure in "Containing Tranquility" reminiscing about moments when the zither was being played, and fully absorbed in those memories which lead to his hands unconsciously tracing the motions of playing the instrument?[61] Wang Cheng-hua has suggested that the figures' sensuous engagement with objects in works like these could be connected to the sense of nostalgia commonly shared by scholars who lived through the Ming-Qing transition. By possessing and engaging with the physical remains of the lively cultural lives under the Ming rule, the figures in Chen Hongshou's works hold on to their identities and memories from the dynastic past.[62] I would like to build upon Wang's arguments by further suggesting that these objects function more than as reminders

[60] Lin Ju-Hsi interprets the scene as depicting Hui Shi 惠施 visiting Zhuangzi 莊子 based on the title "Fang Zhuang 訪莊." See Lin, "Laolian wuyi ke yiqing, yueshui wushan ran buqing." 95-6.
[61] I appreciate Meng Zhao for pointing this out to me.
[62] Wang Cheng-hua, "Nüren, wupin yu ganguan yuwang," 56-7.

of a bygone dynasty, but also serve to evoke a space of melancholy—in a broader and more abstracted sense not necessarily tied to any historical or even personal events—and delineate its many complexities.

Historian Frank Ankersmit describes the experience of history as a "paradoxical union of the feelings of loss and love, that of the combination of pain and pleasure in how we relate to the past"—a sentiment that Michael Ann Holly identifies as melancholy.[63] A similarly conflicted sentiment towards the past, Stephen Owen argues, also exists in China since as early as the time of Confucius: "The past became an absence and an object of desire that had to be earnestly sought, its remains recovered, its losses lamented."[64] The paradoxical subtleties of melancholy can be observed in the *Sixteen Views* paintings. Both album leaves are characterized by a stark discord between the physical intimacy that the scholars fondly maintain with their objects with his hands and a mental distance implied by the figures' ambivalent expressions and disengaged gazes—or, a "cessation of interest in the outside world," which is a main condition shared between mourning and melancholia in the face of profound loss, according to Freud.[65]

Certainly, the disengagement of the figures withholds more than it gives, creating a psychological effect that directs the viewer's attention to the suppressed emotions and thoughts hidden beyond the figures' seemingly emotionless appearance.[66] The inkstones and the zither,

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[63] Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 9. Holly's discussion of melancholy related to Ankersmit's writings could be found in Michael Ann Holly, "The Melancholy of Art," in *The Persistence of Melancholia in Arts and Culture*, ed. Andrea Bubenik (London: Routledge, 2007), 132.

[64] Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1986), 14.

[65] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1951), 244.

[66] I am borrowing words from Sally Butler's essay that addresses the relationship between the disengaged gazes and melancholia in the representations of Aboriginal subjects in Australian art in the 1950s and 1960s when a moral dilemma regarding the status of Aboriginal Australians was beginning to emerge. The deep sense of loss and displacement conveyed in these works resonates with the pervasive sentiments among the

like the memories they embody, are close yet distant, insistent yet elusive. No matter how hard the scholars in Chen Hongshou's paintings try to grasp the past through its material remains, they can never be able to truly summon the joyful emotions and deep connections that once revolved around these objects. The painter's lament of a past life forever lost can be found in many poems that he wrote during the dynastic crisis, although he rarely directly addresses the historical event, instead conjuring a general mood of melancholy and nostalgia that evokes the profound sense of displacement and loss. In one of the poems, Chen Hongshou compares the memory of a peaceful past to the flash of a good dream (有時得佳夢, 復見昔太平).[67] Indeed, the fond memory of the past was no more than an elusive, unattainable dream, regardless of how vivid they may appear. Despite Chen's desire to linger in this dream, he inevitably woke up to a somber reality where he was left bereft and alone (恨不隨夢盡，嘐嘐群雞鳴).[68] A similar sense of loss triggered by the images of material things was described in another inscription by Kong Shangren on *Drinking and Reading*. As previously discussed, in 1693, the depiction of the figure and the surrounding environment in the painting brought great comfort to Kong Shangren during a time of hardship. But Kong's final inscription on the painting in 1708 highlights the poignant contrast between the idyllic scene in the painting and the harsh reality: while the scholar in the painting continues to leisurely sip wine in an elegant setting, the viewer Kong Shangren, now aged and impoverished, sits in a bare room devoid of anything to use for food and drink
(貧病且甚於昔年，黃花糕酒具費拮据，尚未卜登臨之地，冗坐空堂，鬱鬱書此).

Ming *yimin* scholars and their art in early-Qing China. See Butler, "Facing Melancholia: Racial Implications of the Disengaged Gaze," in *The Persistence of Melancholia in Arts and Culture*, 163-175.
[67] Chen Hongshou, "Ji ming no. 2 雞鳴其二," in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 76.
[68] Ibid.

In Amelia Barikin's essay on the relationship between time and melancholia, the author points out that "melancholia configures the past not as a closed book, but as a spectre that lingers with us in the present."[69] For Chen Hongshou, the past hovered around in the form of a bittersweet yet hollowing dream. Perhaps not coincidentally, the inkstones and the zither in the album leaves are also depicted as objects that linger even when they cease to be used. The darkest spot in the entire composition of "Washing Inkstones" lies at the center of the inkstone that the figure holds in his left hand. It vividly portrays the puddle of ink drying on the inkstone yet to be cleaned. As the scholar's left thumb dips into the ink and the loose, long sleeve slides down his arm, the remained ink, suggestive of the object's prior use, threatens to escape from its confinement and continue to leave its marks on the body of its owner. In a few moments, the ink will also blacken the river when the scholar starts washing it.[70] While the inkstone persists through the material substance of ink, the zither in "Containing Tranquility" lingers through sound. Even though the zither has been put away, the fingers in action will inevitably brush against the strings that are snugly wrapped beneath the thin fabric, prompting the zither to sound once more.

In other words, the motifs of an inkstone with drying ink and a covered yet resonant zither both point to the converging temporalities of past and present. In this way, these scenes

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[69] Amelia Barikin, "After the End: The Temporality of Melancholia," in *The Persistence of Melancholia in Arts and Culture*, 108. A similar idea is also reiterated by Allison Holland: "While the grieving process remains incomplete, the object of loss, place or person, lingers as a shadow." See Holland, "The Melancholic Horizon in Australian Landscape Art," *The Persistence of Melancholia in Arts and Culture*, 177.

[70] The effect of the ink dying the water is a common rhetoric when describing the elegant activity of washing the inkstones. In particular, it has been famously associated with the Song-dynasty poet Su Shi, who washed his inkstones by a river, where the fish had drunk the darkened water so much that they had turned black. The ink-tainted fish is mentioned by Su Shi's brother, Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039-1112) in his poem "Chu fa Jiazhou 初發嘉州": "Washing the residual ink in the inkstone of, the water turns into black fog; Even now, the fish in the river, still bear traces of ink on their heads (洗硯去殘墨，遍水如黑霧。至今江上魚，頂有遺墨處)." See Su Zhe, *Su Zhe ji* 蘇轍集 (Collected Works of Su Zhe), ed. Chen Hongtian 陳宏天 and Gao Xiufang 高秀芳 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 2.

perfectly capture the experience of the past as a persistent reminiscence that can be continuously felt, whether the dynastic past that rendered its victim into "a political subjectivity dislocated from time (一個與時間脫節的政治主體)," or an immediate, personal past—a friendship that lingers, to be savored on, and hopefully reignites when the separated friends meet again.[71] The carefully and intentionally portrayed objects therefore make the elusive experiences of the past visually available for the viewer by translating the intangible sentiments into the tangible interactions with material things. To this point, the album's title given by the artist himself is particularly apt. The Chinese title, *Yinju shiliu guan*, is commonly translated into "Sixteen Views from Living in Reclusion," as the sixteen album leaves portray sixteen activities associated with the life of a hermit. But "sixteen views," or *shiliu guan*, is clearly borrowed from the Buddhist *shiliu guan* 十六觀—sixteen kinds of *guan*, seeing visions in meditation, that could lead to enlightenment.[72] In addition to the most-adopted interpretation of *guan* as visualization, the term encompasses an array of meanings, including thinking, contemplation, and discernment—all of which refer to a psychological process that ultimately leads to perceptible and tangible transformation.[73] The images in Chen Hongshou's album may function in a similar way: not only

[71] David Der-Wai Wang, quoted and translated in Fu Mengxing, *The Perturbed Self: Gender and History in Late Nineteenth-Century Ghost Stories in China and Britain* (Taylor & Francis, 2021), 58. See Wang, "Hou yimin xiezuo 後遺民寫作," in Fo Guang University World Chinese Literature Research Centre, accessed April 19, 2025, http://www.fgu.edu.tw/~wclrc/drafts/America/wang-de-wei/wang-de-wei_03.htm.

[72] Detailed instructions for sixteen visualizations is provided in the *Sutra on the Visualization Of the Buddha of Limitless Life Spoken by the Buddha* (*Foshuo guan Wuliangshou fo jing* 佛說觀無量壽佛經, T.12.365), a widely circulated text originated in the 5th century. A summary of the Buddhist visualization practice and the scholarship on this topic can be found in Eric M. Greene, "Visions and Visualizations: in Fifth-Century Chinese Buddhism and Nineteenth Century Experimental Psychology," *History of Religions*, 55:3 (2016): 293-7.

[73] The various interpretations of *guan* are discussed in Robert H. Sharf, "Visualization and Mandala in Shingon Buddhism," in *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*, ed. Robert H. Sharf and Elizabeth Horton Sharf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001): 163-187.

do they offer glimpses into the life of hermitage, but they also visualize and thus conjure the subtle sense of melancholy for the viewer to experience psychologically and corporeally.

Pensive Vessels

In previous case studies, motifs of objects generate spaces of interiority of and for the subjects largely through their visual and iconographical specificity. The shape, design pattern, material, surface texture, and interaction with the depicted figures are painstakingly rendered, thus allowing in depth interpretations and embodied experience for the viewer. What is particularly interesting about the next set of objects from Chen Hongshou's paintings, however, is the mysterious "interior space"—or interiority—that they keep to themselves, which renders them not readily intelligible. Yet, for this very reason, these objects intrigue and inspire the figures in the paintings, while also initiating a pensive process for the viewers.

The first case study for this section is *Pondering the Plum Blossoms* (*Yin mei tu* 吟梅圖), now housed in the Nanjing Museum (Fig. 2.17). The title was inscribed by Chen Hongshou himself when he finished the painting in 1649. However, it only seems to describe the bottom half of the composition, where an elaborately-dressed lady is sitting in front of a blank sheet of paper, gathering inspiration from the plum branches in the vase held by the servant to the right. Yet the pictorial arrangement emphasizes the upper half of the painting, with its higher position and larger scale. Here, a male scholar appears to be composing a poem in front of a piece of paper or silk. The scholar is certainly pondering something as well. But despite the painting's title, he doesn't seem to be interested in the plum flowers: rather, he turns to the empty vessel at the corner of his stone table. As pointed out by Wang Cheng-hua, the two scenes of this painting

sharply contrast with each other in terms of how they portray "gazes" towards objects: [74] whereas the female figure looks at the flower arrangement in the vase in a spontaneous and natural manner, the male figure gazes at the vessel more seriously and intentionally.

Wang reads the second kind of gaze as a gendered act of male scholars who lived through the fall of the Ming Dynasty; she argues that for these scholars, the act of looking was a way of claiming ownership over the objects and the memories of the past that the objects entail.[75] More specifically, she suggests that the gaze of the figure directs our attention to the object's materiality and "objectness" (*wupin gan* 物品感), therefore reinforcing the gazing subject's dominance over the passive object being looked at.[76] Indeed, a strong relationship between the subject and the object is established in this painting through the figure's attention to the vessel. However, with his furrowed brows and clenched hands, the scholarly figure appears to be undergoing a moment of conflict and anxiety. In fact, rather than in total control of the object, he seems confused or even troubled by the vessel in front of him. The relationship between the subject and object is therefore not one of pure dominance and submission; instead, the seemingly passive object is quietly yet firmly exercising its affective power over the engaging subject.

What is so special about this object? With its circular, bowl-shaped profile, wide mouth, rounded rim foot, and the *taotie*-like motif above the handle, the object takes the shape of an ancient *yu* 盂 bronze vessel. The combination of blue and red pigments recalls the coloring technique often seen in the artist's depictions of bronze objects. But the clean silhouette of the

[74] Wang Cheng-hua, "Nüren, wupin, yu ganguan yuwang," 43-5. The Chinese terms that Wang uses in her writing range from *guankan* 觀看 (to look/to watch), *ningshi* 凝視 (to stare or gaze intently), to *shixian zouxiang* 視線走向 (the direction of sight). The power dynamic in these different modes of "looking" that Wang teases out leads me to translate them into the loaded term "gaze" in this context.
[75] Ibid., 57.
[76] Ibid., 42.

vessel and the lack of decorative patterns differentiate this object from a typical archaic ritual bronze. The simplicity of the vessel is perhaps suggesting that it was made recently rather than passed down from antiquity.[77] Or it might be an object that takes the form of ancient bronzes, but was made with materials such as porcelain, jade or glass.[78] The coloring of this vessel seems to support this latter speculation. Compared to Chen Hongshou's typical color application for depicting bronze vessels, in this painting, the hues are a lot less saturated, and they blend into each other in a much softer, gradual manner. Yet this subdued color does not specify the exact material of the object. It is rather surprising that Chen Hongshou, who was so fascinated by the vibrant colors of bronze patina and extremely skillful in its rendering, left the material of this particular object indeterminate. The vagueness of the material makes the object hard to pin down in terms of its cultural meanings and social connotations, and thus unspecified and less "special" *per se*. Adding to the humbleness of this object are the wavering outlines that make the vessel look clumsy and almost wobbly. A sign of correction was also left visible on the lower right of the vessel's bottom rim.

Despite its compositional importance within the painting, this object was delineated in an uncommonly hasty manner, one that forms a sharp contrast to the carefully portrayed objects often associated with Chen Hongshou. In fact, the execution of the object is a world apart from that of the figures in the same painting, with their energetic outlines and vivid facial expressions. Now, we must consider the possibility that as part of the setting, the object might have been painted by Chen Hongshou's assistants, rather than the master himself. In Shane McCausland's

[77] The clean silhouette with decorations of taotie motifs is particularly reminiscent of the Xuande-style bronze vessels (宣德爐) that started to be made in the mid-fifteenth century.
[78] Porcelain wares that take the shape of ancient bronzes started to be made in the Song Dynasty. See Adam T. Kessler, *Song Blue and White Porcelain on the Silk Road* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 288-300. Such objects became particularly popular during the Qing Dynasty. A few examples can be found in Wang Tao et al., *Mirroring China's Past: Emperors, Scholars, and Their Bronzes* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2018), 160-181.

important study of Chen Hongshou's workshop practice, the author identifies the 1630s as the time when Chen Hongshou adopted a *de facto* workshop practice.[79] Students of Chen Hongshou, including Yan Zhan 嚴湛 (dates unknown), Lu Xin 陸薪 (dates unknown) and Chen Hongshou's son Chen Zi, have all been credited with contributing to the works signed by Chen Hongshou. Several inscriptions and traces of underdrawings and corrections suggest that during this period, Chen Hongshou often preplanned and sketched the entire composition, and tasked his assistants with adding colors and filling up the scenery, including the landscape, rock, furniture, and sometimes even writing tools and cut flowers;[80] Chen Hongshou would then review the painting, and make alterations when needed.[81] Such workshop practice extended until the artist's later years. The inscriptions in *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu* (*Nan Shenglu si le tu* 南生魯四樂圖) dated to 1649—the same year as *Pondering the Plum Blossoms*—mentions that Chen Hongshou asked Yan Zhan and Chen Zi to fill the color for this scroll ("嘱门人严湛、儿子陈名儒设色"). In another scroll made around this time titled *He Tianzhang Amid Pleasures* (*He Tianzhang xingle tu* 何天章行樂圖), Chen Hongshou credited himself for adding the clothing and headwear to the faces painted by Li Wansheng 李畹生 (dates unknown), and Yan Zhan for adding the rest of the scenery (補圖).[82] Like in *Pondering the Plum Blossoms*, the brushstrokes of the rocks, trees and furnishings in *He Tianzhang* appear hesitant, stiff, and somewhat muddy—in stark contrast to the vitality and fluidity in the handling of the figures (Fig. 2.18).

[79] Shane McCausland, "Chen Hongshou and His Workshop," in *Bridges to Heaven: Essays on East Asian Art in Honor of Professor Wen C. Fong*, ed, Jerome Silbergeld, Dora C. Y. Ching, Judith G. Smith, and Alfreda Murck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 165-184.
[80] Ibid., 170.
[81] Ibid., 177.
[82] The painting is left undated. Based on the calligraphy style in Chen Hongshou's inscription, Weng Wan-go proposes a likely dating around 1649. See Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 202.

The possibility that the object might have been painted by Chen's students, however, does not fully explain its unusual clumsiness. While lacking the masterful touch of Chen Hongshou, these disciples of his still display tremendous skills as painters. In *He Tianzhang Amid Pleasures*, the objects on the stone table have been carefully delineated, displaying clearly defined shapes and easily recognizable materials. That is to say, it should not have been hard for these disciples to draw a vessel of decent quality. Moreover, bearing Chen Hongshou's signature and seal, the painting must have been checked and approved by Chen Hongshou himself.

The unusual rendering of the vessel in *Pondering the Plum Blossoms* was therefore likely a deliberate choice. In fact, it is not the only instance where we find a seemingly hastily depicted vessel taking up a visually important spot in the works of Chen Hongshou. Such is the case in *Tang Scholar Seeking a Line of Verse* (*Tangren suoju tu* 唐人索句圖) (Fig. 2.19)—a small-size monochrome painting that Chen Hongshou did at the request of an old friend, Zhou Lianggong 周亮工 (1612-1672). Based on the style of the brushstrokes, Weng Wan-go believes that the painting was likely made towards the later years of the artist's career, around 1650 and 1651.[83] It is possible that this work was among the forty-two paintings that Chen Hongshou made for Zhou in 1651, as recalled in a passage written by Zhou:

> In the year of *gengyin* (1650), I traveled up north and met this gentleman (Chen Hongshou) at the lake. He was still firm on not making any more paintings for me. The following year, I went to the south, and we met again at the Dingxiang Bridge. This time, he happily said to me: "Now is the time that I paint for you." He hurried [his servants] to bring some white silk…… He moved from my residence to Hugan, then to a Daoist temple, a boat, Zhaoqing, and later to Jinting. All that he brought were his brush and ink. In a total of eleven days, he painted forty-two works altogether, some big and some small, some horizontal and some vertical. The other guests and I were all confused as to why he painted these works for me with such a sense of urgency.

[83] Weng seems to have examined the painting closely in person. Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 221.

> 庚寅北上，與此君晤於湖上，其堅不落筆如昔。明年，予復入閩，再晤於定香橋，君欣然曰：「此予為子作畫時矣。」急命絹素……自定香橋移予寓，自予寓移湖幹，移道觀、移舫、移昭慶，迨祖予津亭，獨攜筆墨。凡十又一日，計為予作大小橫直幅四十有二。其急急為予落筆之意，客疑之，予亦疑之。[84]

Echoing Zhou Lianggong's descriptions, the monochrome style and the fervid brushwork suggest that the *Tang Scholar Seeking a Line of Verse* was indeed made in a speedy manner without an abundance of painting tools. And it appears to be single-handedly painted by Chen Honsghou. In contrast to the varied painting qualities within both *Pondering the Plum Blossoms* and *He Tianzhang Amid Pleasures*, this work displays extremely vibrant and dynamic brushstrokes that are filled with determination, excitement, and inspiration in every inch of the painted surface. In the garden background, the bold, gritty textures of the tree trunk and the small rocks are juxtaposed with the dainty outlines and elegant ink washes on the weeds and the flower. Every curve on the stone table, every vein on the knotted root chair and every fold of the figure's robe seems effortless, yet rhythmic and lively. The facial expression and bodily gesture of the seated scholar are subtle but nonetheless vivid and expressive—typical for figures by Chen Hongshou.

While the delicately painted flower stands out in the foreground and calls for attention, the scholar seems to be attracted, instead, by the tall empty *ping* 瓶 vase on the table, as he leans his body toward the object's direction, hands pressed against his chest. The vase has a simple silhouette. Its long straight neck is attached to a slightly crooked rounded half belly, with the

[84] Zhou Lianggong, "Ti Chen Zhanghao huaji lin tie ya 題陳章侯畫寄林鐵崖," in Zhou Liangong, *Laigu tang ji* 賴古堂集 (Collected writings from Hall That Relies on Antiquity) (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chuban she, 2014), juan 22, 414-415. A discussion about the interactions between Chen Hongshou and Zhou Lianggong around this period can be found in Shi-yee Liu 劉晞儀, "San Liang tongxin shuo—Chen Hongshou zeng Zhou Lianggong er hua shixi" 三亮同心說—陳洪綬贈周亮工二畫試析 (The Bond between the Three Liangs: A Thematic Analysis of Two Chen Hongshou Paintings for Zhou Lianggong), in *The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly* 故宮學術季刊 28. no.1(2010): 1-36.

connecting seam not at all smoothed out. Although the shape may appear familiar, it does not point to objects of a particular material, and is rather uncommon for a *ping* vessel around this time despite the material. The ambiguity of this object is further amplified by the rendering of its surface, which bears an ambivalent texture created by gently and freely pressing the lightly-dipped brush tip against the paper. The monochrome pattern evokes the visual effect of the unpredictable kiln transformation (*yaobian* 窯變) on porcelain; but it could also be interpreted as referring to the texture of patina on bronzes without the use of polychromic pigments.

Tang Scholar Seeking a Line of Verse shares the same pictorial formula with the upper half of *Pondering the Plum Blossoms*. In both works, we find a scholar sitting in front of a stone table. The blank paper or silk laid horizontally, along with the ensemble of writing instruments, as well as the titles, suggests that the scholars are about to write. Yet neither scholar rushes to pick up their brush, but instead turns towards the large vessels on their tables, deep in contemplation. Indeed, the two vessels—the *yu*-shaped container and the long-neck *ping* vase—both assume visual significance within the compositions through the larger size among other objects on the table, and their subtle connection and juxtaposition with the figures. Both objects, however, maintain a sense of ambiguity, with their materials left vague and meanings ambivalent—in stark contrast to the vividly delineated, often precious objects of specific shapes, materials, functions, and cultural connotations in most works by Chen Hongshou. Moreover, the muted hues and blurred textures render both vessels rather plain in their appearance, giving them a mundaneness that is further accentuated by their seemingly hastily sketched contours. Such unusual and likely intended ambiguity and humbleness makes these objects even more intriguing. We are compelled to wonder: What occupies the scholars' minds in front of these vessels? How should we—the viewers—understand these rather obscure objects?

One clue lies in the inscriptions on the two works. On *Pondering the Plum Blossoms*, Chen Hongshou mentioned that the painting was "made for sworn brother through the Daoist path, Xuanjian, after *Tangren*" (為玄鑒道盟兄仿唐人); and the other painting depicts the scene of "*Tangren suoju*" (唐人索句, which I have translate as "Tang Scholar Seeking a Line of Verse") as per the request of Zhou Lianggong. The two inscriptions share the same keyword *Tangren* 唐人, which can be directly translated as "a person from the Tang Dynasty." In Chen Hongshou's collected writings, the only mention of *tangren* appear in a discussion of his own painting methods, where the term is used to denote the painting styles in the Tang Dynasty: " I wish to create my works after *Songren* (the masters of the Song Dynasty, or, by extension, the painting styles of the Song), through which I hope to access *Tangren* (masters of the Tang Dynasty, or, the painting styles of the Tang) 願作家法宋人, 乞帶唐人."[85] However, nothing is particularly "Tang" about either of these works in terms of their visual and pictorial styles. Both paintings were executed in the typical style of Chen Hongshou, who admittedly absorbed but also transformed the fine lines and full-bodied figures reminiscent of the archaic style into his own uniquely recognizable visual language.[86] And the styles of the figures' costumes as well as their belongings are also commonly found in paintings from the late Ming and early Qing era. The reference to "Tang" in the inscriptions, then, must lie in the paintings' shared subject matter, where a scholarly figure is finding literary inspiration in a seemingly mundane object.

[85] See Chen Hongshou, "Hua lun 畫論 (On Painting)," in Wu Gan ed, *Chen Hongshou ji*, 21.

[86] Chen Hongshou closely studied paintings from the Tang Dynasty. The Tang-dynasty scroll *Shenjun tu* 神駿圖 now housed in the Liaoning Provincial Museum bears a collector's seal of Chen Hongshou. He had also seen and even copied after paintings by Tang masters Zhou Fang 周昉 (c. 730-800) and Zhang Xuan 張萱 (c. 8th century). See Chen Zhuan 陳撰 (1679-1758), *Yuji shanfang huawai lu* 玉幾山房畫外錄, in *Meishu congshu* 美術叢書 series 1 v.8, ed. Huang Binhong 黃賓虹 and Deng Shi 鄧實 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chuban she, 1986), 463; and Zhou Lianggong, *Shuying* 書影 (Shadows of Books) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chuban she, 1981), 106.

The history of making poems on everyday, utilitarian objects can be traced back to the "odes on things" (*yongwu* 詠物) in the Southern Dynasties.[87] But it was in the Tang Dynasty that the writings on mundane objects flourished and took on more diverse formats—most notably the riddle-tales and the object-biography.[88] Daily utensils such as mirrors, lamps, water basins and jars now became the animated protagonists in fully fledged narratives. The intensified literary interest in ordinary, humble, and even worn-out things in the Tang Dynasty, as Tian Xiaofei explains, was driven by a new culture of sentimentality about such objects among the literary elites. In particular, for the eminent scholar-official Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) and his associates, the sympathy and empathy towards inanimate, used objects were considered what differentiated them from those who lacked such finer sentiments.[89]

The Tang fascination with writing about mundane things retained its relevance and was still well recognized in the cultural sphere of later times. The most famous essay within the genre of object-biography from the Tang Dynasty is Han Yu's "Biography of Mao Ying" (*Mao ying zhuan* 毛穎傳), where the author humorously tells the life and ancestry of a personified worn-out writing brush.[90] "Biography of Mao Ying" served as a source of inspiration for numerous writers

[87] A study of the genre of *yongwu* can be found in Cynthia L. Chennalt, "Odes on Objects and Patronage in the Early Qi", in *Studies in Early Medieval Chinese Literature and Cultural History, in Honor of Donald Holzman and Richard B. Mather*, ed. Paul W. Kroll and David R. Knechtges (Provo, Utah: Tang Studies Society, 2003), 335.

[88] For a comprehensive study on Tang riddle-tales, see Li Pengfei 李鵬飛, *Tangdai feixieshi xiaoshuo zhi leixing yanjiu* 唐代非寫實小說之類型研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2004), 62–63. Discussions of the object-biography can be found in Franke Herbert, "Literary Parody in Traditional Chinese Literature: Descriptive Pseudo-Biographies," *Oriens Extremus* 21(1974): 24, and, more recently, Judith T. Zeitlin, "The Ghosts of Things" in *Fantômes dans l'Extrême-Orient d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* - Tome 1 (Paris: Presses de l'Inalco, 2017). Zeitlin also discusses the connection between the odes on things in the Southern Dynasties and the later Tang writings on things.

[89] Tian Xiaofei, "The Cultural Politics of Old Things in Mid-Tang China," *Journal of American Oriental Studies*, 140:2 (2020): 317-343.

[90] The name "Mao Ying" alludes to the materials for a writing brush: *mao* means "hair" or "fur" used to make the brush tips, and "ying" means "tip". Elling O. Eide masterfully translates this title into "Tip O'Hair." See Elling O. Eide, "Another Go at the *Mao Ying chuan*," in *Critical Readings on Tang China,* ed. Paul W. Kroll, Volume 3 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2018), 1230-1234. This essay has been discussed by many scholars,

to compose and publish essays in a similar format after Han Yu's time—a trend that persisted well into the nineteenth century. The Ming dynasty, however, witnessed a peak in the fascination with narratives centered around objects, as testified by the publishing of *Guangxie shi* 廣諧史 in 1615. Comprising ten volumes, this anthology aspired to be a comprehensive collection of stories featuring personified non-human objects, which include a significant amount of daily utensils. The oldest essay in this compilation is none other than "Biography of Mao Ying," while a noteworthy portion is dedicated to stories written in the Ming Dynasty.[91]

It comes as no surprise that Ming scholars—including Chen Hongshou—were drawn to this archaic literary practice of writing about mundane or even humble things. In the Late Ming, quotidian objects, ranging from various vessel containers and writing utensils to furniture pieces, had become a major source of aesthetic enjoyment and literary inspiration. These daily objects started to be listed alongside paintings and calligraphy in widely circulated connoisseurship literature, signaling their now elevated aesthetic and cultural values recognized by a broader audience. In widely read and cited texts including (but not limited to) *Zunsheng bajian* 遵生八箋, *Qingmi cang* 清秘藏, and *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志, the materials, designs and functions of commonplace objects were closely described and evaluated. But for Ming connoisseurs, what made an object truly extraordinary extended beyond the object's immediately discernible visual and material qualities; rather, it resided in what was *evoked* by the tangible qualities, but could only be *felt* by a sincere beholder. In fact, when engaged with in certain ways, even daily objects

some recent works include Zeitlin, "The Ghosts of Things" and Sarah M. Allen, *Shifting Stories: History, Gossip*, *and Lore in Narratives from Tang Dynasty* (China. Netherlands: Brill, 2020).

[91] For a reprint of *Guangxie shi*, see Chen Bangjun 陳邦俊, *Guangxie shi 10 juan* 廣諧史: 10 卷 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1995).

could inspire profound bodily and spiritual elevation.[92] The ability of objects to evoke something more than their material selves was embodied in the term *yun* 韻 that often appeared in writings about objects in the Ming and Qing era. As Jonathan Hay suggests, *yun* could be summarized as "the over-determination of connection in a decorative object—its capacity to bring thoughts, feelings, surfaces and things of different kinds into relation with each other through pleasure… through the medium of surface."[93]

The objects in the two paintings of Chen Hongshou hint at such an ability of an object to embody and evoke something more than its own material presence. While seemingly commonplace and unspecific, they are large and prominent within the compositions, commanding scholars' attention in the paintings. As the scholars immerse themselves in deep contemplation and let themselves be inspired by the objects before them, we, as viewers, begin to realize that despite their mundane appearance, these objects are meant to contain thought-provoking complexities that may not be immediately discernible to us. The exact content of the figures' thoughts regarding the objects, however, will always remain speculative.

The active involvement of objects in the process of artistic creation is subtly yet quite literally depicted in another work of Chen Hongshou, *Lofty Scholar* (Fig. 0.4 and Fig. 1.13), which we have already briefly looked at twice. In this work, a scholar holds a freshly-dipped inkbrush in front of a long sheet of silk or paper. The positioning of the sheet suggests that he is about to start painting from the bottom. Beside the painting necessities—a crackle-glazed ceramic water jar with a ladle and an inkstone—the only object on the low table is a tall *zun*-shaped vessel containing cut flowers. Like the *yu*-shaped vessel in *Pondering the Plum Blossoms*

[92] Mao Wenfang 毛文芳, *Wanming xianshang wenxue* 晚明閒賞文學 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 2000), 186-266.
[93] Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 382-3.

and the *ping* container in *Tang Scholar Seeking a Line of Verse*, the flower vase here is unusually simple and vague when compared to most objects painted by Chen Hongshou. It features a minimalistic outline that delineates a shape that resembles the *zun* bronze vessel, with no additional painting on the vessel surface to specify its texture or material. Nevertheless, the vase with flowers seems to have intrigued the scholar in the painting. As his folded leg is still pointing toward the vase with arranged flowers, it is clear that he was previously facing the object, but has now turned his attention to the sheet laid out before him—most likely to portray the vase and flowers that he has just studied.

One curious feature of *Lofty Scholar* is the underdrawings that have been left overtly noticeable on the surfaces of both the painting sheet in front of the scholar and the vase (Fig. 2.20 and 2.21). When I examined this work at the Shanghai Museum, it appeared to me that Chen Hongshou had first sketched out the entire form and topography of the rock table with faint lines. He then added the motifs on and around the table—the painting sheet, the vase, the inkstone, the water jar, and likely also the figure who is nestled in by the table—over these preparatory drawings, and completed the rock table with more assertive brush strokes and ink washes. Traces of underdrawings can hardly be seen on the robe of the figure and the stationary, showing that the artist was indeed able to hide the drafting lines. This also means that Chen Hongshou didn't mind or perhaps even intended for the underdrawings to show on both the scholar's painting surface and the flower vase, especially since the underdrawings on the vase could have easily been made less visible had the painter decided to add any patterns or texture on the surface of the vase. Such unusual treatment, one that is shared between the vessel's surface and the painting surface, leads to a visual resonance between the two, further reinforcing the reading that the scholar in the hanging scroll has taken his inspiration from the vase and now

about to transfer it onto the painting plane. But the connection between the two surfaces runs deeper than their visual resemblance. Set on the sheet of paper or silk before the painting scholar, Chen Hongshou's preparatory sketch, which manifests his own process of art making, doubles as the underdrawings of the painting-in-progress within the pictorial narrative. It quietly underscores the processes in which a plain sheet of paper or silk can be transformed into an artwork under an artist's brush tip. Echoing the underdrawings for paintings, the traces that peculiarly appear on the vase surface speak, perhaps, to the potential of even an ordinary-looking vessel as the subject of artistic creation: it can be extraordinary and meaningful in the eyes and painting of a true connoisseur.

The simple, ambiguous and sometimes almost clumsy objects that are clearly significant to the figures in the paintings of Chen Hongshou, however, remain intriguingly obscure for the viewers. In contrast to a typical object tale, which may start as a riddle, yet the true identity of the object is always revealed towards the end of the story, in these paintings, the identity and meaning of the objects stay hidden from—or at least not immediately revealed for the viewers. These objects, therefore, maintain a kind of interiority within themselves—an interiority that is implied but not fully intelligible.[94] It is the obscurity of these seemingly mundane yet curious objects that pulls the viewer into a much more intimate experience of the paintings. Left to ponder further upon these tantalizing objects, the viewer partakes in a thought process that mirrors that of the depicted scholars, who are also in contemplation before the objects.

[94] A relationship between the obscurity of objects and that of subjects has been raised in Sophie Volpp's discussion of Feng Menlong's famous vernacular story, "Du Shiniang Sinks the Jewel Box." She suggested that in the story, the jewel box is figured as a space of mystery and opacity, and functions as a metaphor of the internal depth of the protagonist. See Volpp, *The Substance of Fiction: Literary Object in China, 1550-1775* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 54-77. But unlike the jewel box, whose interiority is made possible by its immeasurable value and intricate layers, the vessels in Chen Hongshou's paintings are characterized by their simplicity and mundaneness.

Objects of Interiority

In this chapter, I have discussed three ways in which objects create visual, sensorial, emotional, and interpretive depth in the figurative paintings of Chen Hongshou. In the first group, the carefully arranged objects operate both iconographically as individual markers of the figures' inner qualities, and spatially and collectively to create a profoundly emotional atmosphere that situate the depicted figures and resonate with the viewers. In the second section, two album leaves illustrate how objects, by virtue of their cultural associations and subtle interactions with the figures, visualize, materialize, and animate the nuanced mental process of melancholy, thus turning the paintings into spaces of remembrance. In a third group of paintings, the ambivalent yet visually significant objects present themselves as thought-provoking enigmas that intrigue, perplex, inspire, and touch the painted figures and the viewers alike. In all of these cases, the images of objects are crucial in transforming the pictorial spaces into what may be called "spaces of interiority" that are spatial in nature and seemingly exist externally, yet inherently related to the subject and subjectivity.[95] The carefully placed and rendered objects not only create culturally rich environments to contain the painted figures, but also impart in the fictional subject a sense of psychological depth: they contribute to the multi-faceted identities of the figures, imbue them with emotions, animate their imagined lived experiences, and even allow them a private space of thought and contemplation. For the viewers, these objects set up aesthetic,

[95] While modern philosophy often assumes a dichotomy between the interior/interiority and the exterior/interiority, many scholars have emphasized a much more intertwined relationship and the porous boundaries between the two. A historiographical analysis of the philosophical discourses surrounding the concept of interiority and its relationships to the self and the external reality can be found in Elodie Boublil and Antonio Calcagno, "Introduction," in *Rethinking Interiority: Phenomenological Approaches*, ed, Boublil and Calcagno (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2023), 1-6. The ways in which the material and spatial environment structures the subjective experience are also explored in Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press. 1969) and Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

intellectual and deeply emotional spaces within the painting for them to enter, to wonder, to feel, to internalize—and to exercise and lodge their own various subjectivities, as they are invited by the paintings to engage with them not only visually, but also sympathetically and imaginatively. We may assert that in the works of Chen Hongshou, the painted artifacts embody interiority in its broadest sense by evoking and weaving together the architectural interior of a scholar's dwelling, the pictorial and interpretive space within the painting frame, the psyche of the depicted human figure, and the subjective space of the viewer's mind.[96]

In these paintings, the objects also assume their own "interiority" through their abilities to bring out hidden meanings, narratives, and emotions, while reserving in themselves a certain degree of opaqueness. Unlike the opulent decorations in Vermeer's work that we saw at the beginning of this chapter, which graciously welcome and comfort their guests on either side of the painting frame, the objects in these works of Chen Hongshou set up moments of curiosity, interpretation, contemplation, and suspense. The viewers are compelled to think about, decode, and reflect upon the objects; yet the answers never seem to be fully definitive. Even in the cases of the inkstones and zither in *Sixteen Views*, where the visual and cultural specificities of the objects appear integral to their meanings within the pictorial context, it is their uncanny temporal liminality that ultimately endows them with such affectiveness. The obscurity and elusiveness of these objects to the viewer is echoed in the ambivalent relationships between objects and subjects within the pictorial space. The interactions between subjects and objects presented in many of Chen Hongshou's works are simultaneously intimate yet detached. In *Drying Hair*, *Drinking and*

[96] When I say "the architectural interior of a scholar's dwelling," I am referring to the enclosed living space that encompasses both indoor chambers and enclosed gardens. In fact, the objects and furnishing in these figurative works do not make it clear whether the scenes are set indoors or in an open-air garden. This ambiguity, in itself and once again, points to an interplay between the interior and the exterior that these works set in motion.

Reading, and the leaves from *Sixteen Views*, while the figures are sensuously connected to the objects with their hands and bodies, their facial expressions give away their nonchalance towards the material environment around them. Conversely, the figures in *Pondering the Plum Blossoms*, *Tang Scholar Seeking a Line of Verse,* and *Lofty Scholar* actively contemplate the objects yet refrain from any physical contact with the objects of their interest.

Such an "interiority" of the objects provides within them an amorphous space to be shaped and fulfilled by the thinking, emotive, empathetic and imaginative minds of the looking subjects. Indeed, as James Elkins has pointed out, there exists no mere act of "just looking"; instead, our seeing is always shadowed by our thoughts—we are constantly searching for, being captivated, or dreaming about the things that come into view, whether consciously or not.[97] Elkins's observation summarizes the nature of all seeing irrespective of its particular object, and be also applied to the objects in the works of Chen Hongshou. But the objects in these paintings are particularly generative, in part through the spaces that they frame or anchor within the paintings. It is worth noting that all but one example discussed in this chapter depict spaces belonging to and exclusively occupied by a single scholar; in the case of *Pondering the Plum Blossoms*, the scholar is accompanied a female consort and a servant, yet his self-absorbed state and dominating scale in the picture reinforce his ownership of the space. That is to say, the spaces in these paintings are personal and intimate, offering refuge for the depicted scholars to freely indulge in their own feelings and thoughts. Enclosed not by walls, stairs and roofs, but by pensive objects intimately related to the figures' subjecthood, these spaces echo Gaston Bachelard's description of the house that sustains one's private desire, memory and experience, while evoking the abstracted and thus universal sense of home—to quote Bachelard: "The values

[97] James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 19-22.

of intimacy are so absorbing that the reader has ceased to read your room: he sees his own again."[98] Meticulously portrayed yet maintaining a sense of open-endedness, the objects in Chen Hongshou's paintings can be intimately experienced by subjects both in and out of the paintings.

There is also something unique about the specific types of the objects in these paintings. Mundane as they may seem, my chapter has shown that they are deeply entangled within layers of cultural, historical, temporal and spatial contexts both within and outside the painting frame. Here, Susan Steward's distinction between the souvenir and the collection may help us better understand the varied relationships between these painted objects and the many subjects they interact with:

> The souvenir involves the displacement of attention into the past. The souvenir is not simply an object appearing out of context, an object from the past incongruously surviving in the present; rather, its function is to envelop the present within the past…. The collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past is at the service of the collection, for whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection…. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection's world. The souvenir still bears a trace of use value in its instrumentality, but the collection represents the total aestheticization of use value. The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context.[99]

The painted objects, often bearing the trace of the past dynasty, could be viewed as souvenirs for the painted figures—the immediate users of these objects in the fictional world within the pictures. For the viewers across time, these objects are akin to the collection. For the historical connoisseurs who possessed the paintings, the objects become their collection quite literally as parts of the paintings; for viewers who are drawn to the paintings and intellectually engaged with the objects therein, these objects becomes "collections" through being recognized, differentiated,

[98] The quote can be found in Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 14. For a broader phenomenological discussion of the intimate space of the house and its poetic meditations, see Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 8-16.
[99] Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 151.

appreciated, interpreted, and eventually sorted into systems of knowledges.[100] Framed within the paintings and their original contexts of production, yet constantly reframed by the viewers' personal perspectives, circumstances, and historical moments, these objects bring the past to converse with the present in its multiplicity. They create spaces for various subjects and their own interiorities, enabling and inspiring communings among the painter, the various known and unknown historical spectators from different points in history, as well as the contemporary scholars driven by their distinct academic interests—including myself who is deeply invested in exploring the affective relationship between humans and the material world in this cultural moment of increased attention to material culture and materiality.[101]

The intertwinement among various dimensions of interiority, framed, anchored and inspired by the intentionally arranged objects from a scholar's desk, is whimsically illustrated and exaggerated in an album leaf attributed to Chen Hongshou. Titled *Flowers Springing from a Dreaming Brush* (*Mengbi shenghua* 夢筆生花) (Fig. 2.22), this painting bears the painter's seal, and can be seen, at the very least, as a close study and reinterpretation of Chen's artistic subject and style.[102] In the painting, a figure reclines on a daybed. From the top of the figure's head

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[100] I am largely drawing upon Susan Stewart's exposition of the collection. See Stewart, *On Longing*, 152-4. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal's "Introduction" to *The Cultures of Collecting* is another helpful point of reference for understanding collecting at large. See Elsner and Cardinal eds., *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 1-6.

[101] I appreciate Judith Zeitlin and Andrei Pop for leading me to think deeper on these issues. On this note, it is also interesting that Timothy Brook, a historian of the Ming Dynasty, sees the objects in Vermeer's paintings as "not just props behind windows but doors to open." See Brook, *Vermeer's Hat*. In this book, rather than examining the objects within the context of Vermeer's works, Brook uses them to introduce themes related to the global exchange—which is what he, as a historian of the pre-modern world, sees through these objects.

[102] This work bears a seal of Chen Hongshou, and has been listed as made by Chen Hongshou in the second supplement to *Shiqu baoji* 石渠寶笈 (Precious Bookcase of the Stone Channel [Studio]), a comprehensive catalogue of the paintings and calligraphy in the Qing imperial collection. See Hu Jing 胡敬 et al. comp, *Bidian zhulin/Shiqu baoji sanbian* 秘殿珠林石渠寶笈三編 (Beaded Grove of the Secret Hall/Precious Bookcase of the Stone Channel, Third Compilation), 1816 reprint, 10 vols (Taipei: guoli gugong bowu yuan, 1969), vol. 5, 2108. According to the inscription at the end of the album set, the painting was made when Chen Hongshou stayed in the Green Vine Studio (Qingteng shuwu 青藤書屋)—the house in Shaoxing that belonged to artist Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521-1593). This helps us date the painting to the year 1644. Weng Wan-go proposes a

emerges a meandering "dream balloon"—a common way to indicate the space of dream in Ming prints.[103] The balloon encloses the branches with pink flowers coming out from the tip of a brush. This motif is clearly drawing upon the popular saying used as the painting's title, which describes the talent of using a brush to write or paint. The outline of the dream balloon merges with the outline of the writing desk, thus connecting the space inside the balloon with that outside—a common visual strategy in Ming depictions of dreams in response to the contemporaneous view that "dreams are just as real, or even more real, than waking reality."[104] However, unlike other partially opened dream balloons, which hardly ever hinder the viewer from distinguishing the dream's impact from waking reality, the dream of the figure here is less clearly demarcated. While the fantastical flowering brush, as well as the screen in the shape of an uncurling scroll in exaggerated scale compared to the figure and other furniture, are most likely the products of the dreaming mind, it is unclear whether the desk and the other scholarly items on it—all to scale with the figure—are also objects of the dream. This ambiguity is further underscored by one corner of the desk being enclosed by the dream balloon, while the other end of the desk disappears into the unrolling screen. Alternatively, the dream bubble could also be seen as reaching behind the desk, thus completely merging into the blank surface of the screen and not directly enclosing any objects.

possibility that the painting might have been inked by Chen Hongshou's son Chen Zi, as the brush strokes and coloring appear rather soft and bland compared to other works by Chen Hongshou around this time, but instead resembles the hands of Chen Zi (Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 347). But Weng also notes that based on the textual records that all describe Chen Zi as a righteous, honest person, it was unlikely that he would purposely forge works by his father (Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 352). Therefore, we could say that even if it was Chen Zi who made these works, he must have done it under the instruction of Chen Hongshou.

[103] The use of the dream balloon has been discussed in Lynn A. Struve, *The Dreaming Mind and the End of the Ming World* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 138; and Yutong Li, "Visualizing an Emotional Realm: Dreamscapes in Chinese Romance Opera," *Ming Studies*, 12 (2022): 101-152.

[104] Struve, *The Dreaming Mind and the End of the Ming World*, 138.

Is the figure dreaming of making a painting that includes the scholarly instruments on the desk—the kind of objects that so often appear in the figurative paintings of Chen Hongshou? Or is the dream inspired by the objects that were already set before the figure—as well as the books he leans upon—before falling asleep? What, then, will be painted on the surface of the scroll-like screen? Or, can we perceive the entire scene encompassing the figure, the furniture, and the objects of the writing desk, rendered in scales that neatly fit into the curved painting surface behind, as the pictorial content on the screen that is animated and made three-dimensional through the eyes and imagination of the viewer? Together, these objects command, blur and set in motion the layered spaces of interiority evoked in the painting. Not only do they constitute an architectural interior that contains the figure, but they also visualize and materialize the dreaming and creative mind of the figure as an interior space—a space that is also playfully conflated with the space of the painting within the painting. As viewers, we find ourselves captivated and bewildered, once again, by the meticulously depicted and culturally complex objects presented in curiously contrasting scales and with strange details. As we try to make sense of these objects and the spaces they entangle, what we perceive becomes not just an interpretation of the artist's creation, but a reflection of our own subjective experience and imagination.

Chapter 3 The Painter's Rocks

Few objects in Chinese culture are more "overdetermined," to borrow Freud's term, than rocks.[1] *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (The Imperial Reader of the Taiping Era), the Song-dynasty imperial encyclopedia, completed in 983, already includes a total of 108 entries of notable rocks from historical records and anecdotes, spread across two volumes (*juan*).[2] Some found in nature and others residing alongside humans, these rocks were celebrated for their unusual appearance, associations with prominent figures and historical events, or the strange occurrences they brought about. They were considered objects of unsurpassed aesthetic value, agents of cosmic forces, markers of power and status, political omens, testaments of character, love tokens, and more. The fervor for rocks, especially as aesthetic and collectable objects, only grew in subsequent centuries. This sustained interest was largely fueled by the widely circulated printed catalogues of rocks with high-quality illustrations, such as the influential twelfth-century *Xuanhe shipu* 宣和石譜 (Xuanhe catalogue of rocks), *Yunlin shipu* 雲林石譜 (Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest), and the later *Suyuan shipu* 素園石譜 (Stone Compendium of the Plain Garden) published in 1613. In fact, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was rare to find a scholar who had never written about rocks, or an artist who has never depicted them. Some—with whom Chen Hongshou was associated and who will be introduced soon in this chapter—even became renowned primarily for their passion for rocks, both as tangible objects and as subjects of their artistic creations. Consequently, on the one hand, rock became a stock subject matter that all

[1] First appearing in Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the term "overdetermined" was used to refer to the dreams that were caused by multiple complex factors in the dreamer's life and psyche. The concept was then borrowed in many other disciplines to refer to, essentially, the multiplicity of meanings caused by various factors behind one symbol or situation. See Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1915), 266-86.

[2] Li Fang 李昉 (925-996) et al., *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (The Imperial Reader of the Taiping Era) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998 [1960]), juan 16 and juan 17.

painters aspired to master and thus took up entire volumes in painting manuals such as *Shizhu zhai shuhua pu* 十竹齋書畫譜 (*Ten Bamboo Studio manual of calligraphy and painting*), first published around 1625. On the other hand, the profound connection between rock connoisseurs and their rocks led to many literary depictions of rocks as spiritual, emotional, or even living objects. In the most extreme cases, rocks even assumed human bodies and voices.[3]

Despite his unconventional and eclectic nature, Chen Hongshou, like many of his contemporaries, developed a deep affection for rocks. His admiration of Mi Fu 米芾 (1051-1107), the most acclaimed rock connoisseur in Chinese history, is revealed by his repeated depiction of Mi in the action of worshipping strange rocks. Although no record directly indicates that Chen collected rocks himself, in *Notes of the Borrowed Garden* (*Jieyuan Ji* 借園記), Chen detailed his plan to furnish his own garden with strange rocks:

> I could stack a few strange rocks, and build a few pavilions. On a day with clear wind and beautiful sun, one could do things and enjoy life within this space.
>
> 可壘怪石幾笏，構危樓數椽。風日清美，經營其間。[4]

Chen must have encountered and enjoyed such scenery numerous times in the private gardens of his friends and family. But Chen's interest in the dynamic formation of rocks might also have been inspired by the distinctive terrain of the Zhejiang region, especially around Zhuji and Shaoxing where the artist was most active. Mount Wuxie (Wuxie shan 五洩山), located just west of Zhuji, is renowned for both its waterfalls and its peculiar peaks and strange rocks sculpted by

[3] Narratives of this sort have been discussed in Judith T. Zeitlin, "The Petrified Heart: Obsession in Chinese Literature, Art, and Medicine," *Late Imperial China* 12, no. 1 (1991), 1-26.
[4] Chen Hongshou, *Chen Hongshou ji* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2012), 25. This plan to have rocks and architectural structures in the garden never materialized. In a later poem written after the garden was furnished, Chen Hongshou expressed that he was content with a much simpler arrangement, with only some bamboo and banana trees at the center, and some murals on the walls. See "A Quaint Arrangement of the Borrowed Garden" (*Xiaogou jie yuan* 小構借園), Chen Hongshou, *Chen Hongshou ji*, 131.

the water. From the many poems Chen wrote while visiting the Wuxie mountain, we know that he spent much time there and was deeply drawn to the peculiar sceneries from unexpected angles that the mountain offered.[5] Another rocky location that Chen clearly had knowledge of is Mount Cao (Cao shan, 曹山) near Shaoxing.[6] While Chen never described the scenery there, contemporaneous records refer to Mount Cao as a *shidang* 石宕, one of the many old rock-mining sites near Shaoxing. As rocks were mined and transported out as building and sculpting materials, the site itself became ruins. Over time, natural elements gradually rehabilitated the area, creating a rocky landscape that was visually striking and remarkably unique.[7]

Chen's fascination with rocks is most clearly demonstrated by his significant number of paintings where these objects take center stage. These works, however, have largely been overlooked in previous studies of Chen Hongshou's art and rarely examined as a group, perhaps due to the varied brushwork and compositions that present no obvious patterns. At first glance, these paintings might seem like just another artist's exploration of the dynamic forms of rocks, the technical challenges they pose, and the artistic traditions they embody. Yet, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that Chen Hongshou, as always, imbued his depictions of rocks with a distinctive personal flair that lies behind his adoption of diverse pictorial modes. Certainly, Chen's portrayals of rocks were shaped by the social interactions and cultural traditions in which he was immersed. But his renderings of rocks also betray his own observations and interpretations of rocks and their pictorial representations, as well as his active

[5] Chen Hongshou captured this aspect of Mount Wuxie in a hanging scroll titled *The Mountain of Five Cataract* now housed at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Chen Hongshou's writings about Mount Wuxie could be found in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, "Dao Wuxie 到五洩" (137), "Wuxie jihuai Wang Zixuan 五洩寄懷王子宣"(201), "Bie wuxia Maozhen 別五洩茂真" (312), "Youzeng Cui qing 有贈翠卿" (313).
[6] See in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 66.
[7] A detailed description of the rocks at Mount Cao is provided by none other than Chen's old friend Zhang Dai. See Zhang Dai, "Five Sites around Mount Yue: Mount Cao" (*Yueshan wuyi ji, Cao shan* 越山五佚記· 曹山) in *Langhuan wenji* 琅嬛文集, (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2013), 58

reflections upon his own engagements with these objects in relation to his personal experiences and mental states at various junctures of his life.

In this chapter, I will examine three groups of rock images that correspond to three key moments in which Chen Hongshou explored and problematized his evolving identity and artistic practice through his depictions of rocks. In fact, throughout Chen's painting career, rocks played a crucial role in shaping his artistic vision and sense of self, and served as a catalyst for his artistic metamorphosis. While an early series of rock paintings reflects Chen's initial attempts to establish his own style by reinterpreting approaches of previous masters, the paintings from his middle period and final years are characterized by bold and unique pictorial expressions that reveal a deeply conflicted and emotional artist who found solace and resonance in rocks. Moreover, Chen Hongshou's varied approaches to portraying rocks were deeply rooted in the rocks' inherent vitality and the artist's quests to evoke their liveliness and affect through ink and brush. Ultimately, therefore, this chapter explores a painter's lifelong dedication to and reinterpretation of a specific kind of object—the rocks—and the profound entanglement and mutual transformations between the artist and the objects he portrays. As Chen Hongshou captures and animates the rocks in his paintings, the rocks, in turn, cast their spell on the painter, revealing the fluidity between the creator and the created, the natural and the artificial, as well as the subject and object.

Reinventing Traditions

The fascination of rocks among Chinese scholars had emerged long before the time of Chen Hongshou.[8] Rocks were prized for being strange, bizarre, or even grotesque—qualities that

[8] For discussions of the early appreciation of rock, see Wang Jing, *The Story of Stone: Intertextuality, Ancient Chinese Stone Lore, and the Stone Symbolism in Dream of the Red Chamber, Water Margin, and The Journey*

started to be aestheticized in the mid-Tang and had come to be linked to the aloofness, pure-mindedness, individuality, and unique talents of humans since then.[9] These aspects of rocks continued to be appreciated in the Ming and Qing dynasties. By the late imperial times, rocks had become an object of obsession.[10] Not only were they appreciated as a cultural and social commodity, but they also inspired numerous literary and pictorial compositions.[11] There is no doubt that Chen Hongshou was familiar with this widely shared interest in rocks among late Ming and early Qing scholars. In fact, Chen's attitude toward rocks—and consequently, his artistic engagements with them—was deeply influenced by the cultural sphere around him. But from early on, Chen began experimenting with various ways to portray these frequently depicted motifs. In particular, the young artist developed his own methods to express the rocks' strangeness and metamorphosis—concepts central to the Ming understanding of these objects—by reinterpreting the styles and techniques of old masters and famous painters of his time.

From an early stage of his life and career, Chen Hongshou became acquainted with some of the era's best-known rock connoisseurs. These people not only shared an intense obsession with rocks and their visual and material forms, but also devoted themselves to capturing the

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to the West (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992) and Xiaoshan Yang, "Fetishism and Its Anxiety: A Poetic Biography of Fantastic Rocks," in *Metamorphosis of the Private Sphere: Gardens and Objects in Tang-Song Poetry*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 225 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 91-143.

[9] Yang, *Metamorphosis of the Private Sphere*, 98-107.

[10] As Judith Zeitlin has pointed out, in late imperial China, rocks began to command a high price in the market, and some people chased after them only for profit; on the contrary, it was the pure and unwavering obsession with rocks for what they were that marked the real connoisseurs. See Judith T. Zeitlin, "The Petrified Heart: Obsession in Chinese Literature, Art, and Medicine," 12.

[11] See John Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth: the Rock in Chinese Art*, *Exhibition Catalogue for China House Gallery, New York City, October 26, 1985-January 26, 1986* (New York: China Institute in America/Eastern Press, 1985), Zeitlin, "The Petrified Heart," and her *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), 74-88. Other publications on Chinese scholar's rocks include: Stephen Little*, Spirit Stones of China: The Ian and Susan Wilson Collection of Chinese Stones, Paintings, and Related Scholars' Objects* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1999); Richard Rosenblum, *Art of the Natural World: Resonances of Wild Nature in Chinese Sculptural Art* (Boston: Museum of Fine Art, 2001); and Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), Chapter 2.

appearance and essence of rocks through words and images. Lan Ying 藍瑛, with whom Chen Hongshou studied in his teenage years, made many paintings that feature rocks at their center. Some of these works were made after the style of previous masters to pay tribute and showcase their techniques; others reveal the painter's own passion for rocks. For example, Lan Yin titled a hanging scroll of his depicting a single faceted rock with red hues "Red Friend," which speaks to the painter's careful observation and intimate relationship with the rock in the picture (Fig. 3.1). Chen Hongshou's pictorial technique in depicting rocks, as we will see shortly, responded to his mentor's renderings of rocks. Chen's close friend Zhang Dai 張岱 also had a keen interest in rocks. This can be observed in his writings that include many detailed descriptions of unusual rocks he encountered, along with their individual histories and stories.[12] Another rock enthusiast that Chen Hongshou became quite close to, sometime before 1624, was Ni Yuanlu 倪元璐 (1594-1644). The two bonded through their shared experience of traveling from the south to Beijing for government appointments, similar political views, and interest in art.[13] Ni was not primarily known as a painter, but a significant portion of his remaining paintings are portraits of rocks. Some of the most striking rock images that Ni painted can be found in an album of ten leaves, each depicting a unique rock with a fantastical shape (Fig. 3.2). Ni titled this series *Friendship in Stone* (*Shijiao tu* 石交圖), alluding to the human characteristics that rocks embody, and alluding perhaps to a friendship as solid as stone.

[12] Zhang Dai almost became Chen's brother-in-law. The marriage between Chen Hongshou and Zhang Dai's sister was endorsed by the fathers of both sides when they were still little. However, the bride-to-be died in 1605, when Chen was seven, so and the marriage never cemented the families. For a study of Chen's interaction with Zhang Dai, see Fan Ye 樊燁, "Chen Hongshou shengping shiji kao 陳洪綬生平事跡考," (PhD Dissertation, Zhejiang University, 2017, 16. Zhang Dai's writings of rocks are exemplified by the essay "Huashi gang yi shi," as well as the descriptions of rocks from various gardens he visited. These essays can be found in Zhang Dai, *Taoan Mengyi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shiju, 2007).

[13] Their friendship can be observed through the poems they wrote for each other. For an analysis of these writings and the relationship between Chen Hongshou and Ni Yuanlu, see Fan Ye, "Chen Hongshou shengping shiji kao," 32-4.

Chen Hongshou was also associated with Mi Wanzhong 米萬鐘 (1570-1631), the most famed rock-lover, rock-collector and rock-painter of his time. While there is no record of any direct interaction between Chen and Mi, Chen's familiarity with and admiration of Mi is clearly shown in his portrayal of Mi in his later *Elegant Gathering* (*Yaji tu* 雅集圖), a handscroll depicting nine eminent scholars of the era, each with a name written next to the figure (Fig. 3.3). Although Mi had already passed away when Chen inked this painting, his image nevertheless takes up the center of the composition. Facing away from the viewer, Mi seems to be reading a sutra to a statue of the Buddha. As noted by Anne Burkus-Chasson, Mi was not widely known as a Buddhist, even though friends from his inner circle observed that he sometimes meditated and inclined towards Chan Buddhism.[14] And a study of Mi Wanzhong's private commission of porcelain wares suggests that the flower container half blocked by his image in *Elegant Gathering* seems to resemble those that he himself designed and possessed.[15] That is to say, even if Chen Hongshou did not know Mi Wanzhong in person, he must have had indirect access to Mi in order to portray him with such intimate details of his life. Textual evidence suggests that Chen Hongshou might have been acquainted with Wu Bin 吳彬 (1573-1620), a close friend of Mi Wanzhong and a fellow rock enthusiast.[16] Wu Bin painted many rocks, but he most famously portrayed Mi Wanzhong's highly prized rock in *Ten Views of a Lingbi Stone* (*Shimian lingbi tu* 十面靈壁圖).[17]

[14] Anne Burkus-Chasson, Anne. "Between Representations: The Historical and the Visionary in Chen Hongshou's 'Yaji,'" *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 2 (2002): 319.
[15] Huang Wei 黃薇, "Mi Wanzhong ji qi dingzao ciqi yanjiu" 米萬鐘及其訂造瓷器研究 (A Study of Mi Wanzhong and the Porcelain Wares He Commissioned), *Palace Museum Journal*, 4 (2014):141.
[16] Yang Yanhong 楊艷宏, "Wu Bin yu Chen Hongshou buanxing fengge renwu hua bijiao yanjiu 吳彬與陳洪綬變形風格人物畫比較研究," (MA thesis, Ningxia University, 2023), 11-5.
[17] The interaction between Mi Wangzhong and Wu Bin, both broadly and during the making of this painting, has been discussed in Chen Yunru 陳韻如, "Qizi yu zhipu – cong Wu Bin dao Fang Yizhi de wanming huashi

Inspired by rocks' metamorphic forms, these rock lovers around Chen Hongshou employed various and unique ways to represent the objects of their obsession. The diversity in rock depictions closely reflected contemporary appreciation of these rocks' strangeness, grotesqueness, and limitless variations—an aesthetic of rocks that Chen Hongshou also expressed in his writings. One mention of such rocks could be found in a poem that Chen wrote while visiting the Longqiu waterfalls in west Zhejiang. He noted that with the rocks that "display the finest craft of nature" and the waterscape that "makes sound that inspires visions from (the Buddhist) water contemplation" (石態極天工，溪聲生水觀), the view he saw "seemed to exhaust the limit of strangeness, yet the metamorphosis turns out to be endless" (皆謂奇當盡，誰知幻不窮).[18] Chen Hongshou's keen interest in rocks and their ever-changing forms manifests itself most clearly through his paintings where rock serves as a focal point of each composition. Unlike Chen's distinctive renderings of his figures and artifacts, it is difficult to identify one single style or a set of techniques that Chen used for portraying rocks. The painter likely intentionally adopted different ways to depict these objects in order to capture their strangeness and singularities.

Chen Hongshou's early attempts to create a wide range of rocks in a diversity of styles are clearly demonstrated by the rock images included in the album now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 3.4). Each bearing the painter's signature, seal and date, these small paintings might not initially have been meant as one album set. However, the similar sizes of the paper sheets, the relatively close dates ranging from 1618 to 1621, and the recurring

fengsheng" 奇姿與質樸—從吳彬到方以智的晚明畫石風尚 (From the Strange to the Simple. The Late Ming Stone Paintings of Wu Bin and Fang Yizhi), *Hanxue yanjiu* 漢學研究 41, no. 3 (2023): 41-44.

[18] Chen Hongshou, "Yu Meng Zisai you xilongqiu 與孟子塞游西龍湫," in Wu Gan 吳敢 ed., Chen Hongshou ji (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2012), 161.

images of rocks amidst a wooded landscape rendered with diverse yet interrelated composition, brushstroke, color, and ink-wash, suggest that these images likely document the painter's series of experiments in depicting these motifs within a short time period.

A close examination of these leaves reveals the diverse pictorial sources that Chen Hongshou referenced, as well as his reinventions of existing painting traditions. The earliest leaf in the set is made in the summer of the wuwu 戊午 year [1618], according to the date that Chen inscribed next to the image (Fig. 3.4-a). A later inscription by Chen, framed opposite to the painting in the album and likely written in the later 1620s,[19] describes the motifs as seen by the painter himself: "Weathered pines, old trees, broken banana leaves; sparse bamboo, bony rocks, wilting grass—what a sight! (催松老樹殘蕉, 疎竹瘦石衰草，何等光景!)"[20] Among these motifs, the "bony rocks" stand out with their imposing volume, spreading across the foreground, midground, and background. The boniness of the rocks is vividly captured through Chen's use of crisply variegated, dry, blurred, and paralleling brush strokes in staccato. This style of brushwork is reminiscent of that in Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1301-1374)'s works, famously characterized by Ni's friend Zheng Yuanyou 鄭元祐 (1292-1364) as "like chopping ice (若斫冰)."[21] Ni's rocks are particularly known for their bare and sparse surfaces—or, in Zheng's word, rocks that are "peeled" (*bo* 剥). Ni's approach to rocks is narrated in a painting manual he created for his

[19] Each painting is accompanied by an individual inscription framed opposite to the images. Six of the inscriptions were written by Chen Jiru and dated to 1622; the other six, bearing no dates, were all written by Chen Hongshou himself. Based on the calligraphy style, Weng Wan-go believes that Chen's texts were written around 1629. See Weng Wan-go 翁萬戈, Chen Hongshou de yishu 陳洪綬的藝術 (The Art of Chen Hongshou) (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chuban she, 2021), 81-2.
[20] Translation from the records of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44759, accessed March 5, 2025.
[21] Zheng Yuanyou 鄭元祐 (1292-1364), "Yuanzhen hua 元鎮畫," in *Qiaowu ji* 僑吳集 (Siku quanshu edition), 5: 19a. For an English translation, see Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth*, 90.

nephew—a 14th-century copy of which is preserved in the National Palace Museum. In this manual, Ni writes next to an illustration showing two rocks:

> When painting rocks, avoid using the outline method; outlining makes the rocks appear rigid. Instead, let your hand move freely, so the result resembles stone naturally. To achieve an ancient and simple look, use fewer texture strokes; to achieve a graceful and elegant look, use more shading……When adding texture to stones, include some moss dots, but avoid excessive texturing. …… The ancients used the ax-cut, the clove (or T-shaped), the horse-teeth, and other kinds of texture method. Some modern painters, unable to master all of them, claiming that some of them have a vulgar, craftsman-like quality, follow only the [ax-cute style of] Li Tang and the draping hemp-fiber method [of Dong Yuan]. To try to follow the ancients and fail is to be twice a loser. In these two rocks I have used a combination of ancient and contemporary methods.[22]
>
> 凡寫石不可用鉤法，鉤則板，隨手寫去，似石而已。要古樸，須少皴；要秀麗，須多染……石紋內用點苔，不可多皴…… 古人專用斧劈、丁香、馬齒等法，今人不能，乃云古法有俗工氣，故專師李唐披麻法。學而不能，是為兩失。餘二石雜用古今，爾自體認.

This set of methods is illustrated by the accompanying images, which are not painted by Ni's own hand but likely closely copied after Ni's original (Fig. 3.5). With no clearly defined contour, the two rocks emerge from the almost perpendicularly arranged ax-cut, the T-shaped, the horse-teeth, and the hemp-fiber texture strokes, applied in a restrained manner that leaves plenty of blank spaces to convey the simple bareness of the rock planes. But as Wen C. Fong has observed, the diverse stroke patterns are made uniform by their shared dryness and blurriness, thus "creating a visually fused pictorial surface."[23] Similarly, the rocks of Chen Hongshou in the 1618 leaf are also characterized by their lack of outline, their angularity created by the crisscrossing brushstrokes, restrained use of a nonetheless diverse range of texturing, and visual unity now achieved by the watery ink used across the various brushstrokes.

[22] Translated in consultation with Wen C. Fong's translation in *Beyond Representation*, 491.
[23] Wen C. Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy, 8th-14th Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 491.

Chen's exposure to Ni Zan was likely indirect and mediated through his teacher, Lan Ying. Lan's admiration of Ni was evident through his many attempts to recreate Ni's style in his own works. Lan's copies of Ni's works frequently depict scenes of rocks and withered trees—a subject matter that Ni himself favored. In one such work, Lan not only replicates Ni's most renowned monochrome composition of rocks, trees, and distant mountains, but also evokes the delicate austerity characteristic of Ni's paintings through the light, slightly blurry, and effortlessly arranged brushstrokes that capture the shapes of the rocks and trees without any pronounced outline (Fig. 3.6). Notably, the shaping and texturing techniques Lan employed to depict the rock closely resemble those demonstrated in Ni Zan's painting manual. However, Lan introduced a new element: wet blobs of diluted ink that are strategically dabbed across the rock surface. This addition imparts a sense of dimension while softening the brittleness often associated with Ni Zan's rocks. It also brings in a hint of the shiny and moist rock surfaces frequently found in Lan's other depictions of rocks (Fig. 3.1 and Fig. 3.7). We may connect this feature of Lan Ying's rock to the watery ink brushstrokes that Chen added to the otherwise sharp edges atop his rocks. And different from Lan Ying's customary approach to rocks, Chen completely colored these rocks with a semi-transparent, blueish-gray ink wash.

Although elements of Ni Zan, as well as Lan Ying's reinterpretations of Ni Zan, are certainly present in Chen Hongshou's 1618 album leaf, Chen also imbued the painting with his own twists. Perhaps to set himself apart from the Ni Zan tradition, Chen decided to apply colors to the paintings. But the true innovation lies within the brushwork. The rocks related to Ni Zan discussed above convey a sense of diagonal momentum, achieved through the tilted horizontal brushstrokes and the organically shaped rock layers that recede back into the left. In contrast, Chen Hongshou's rocks are characterized by their level tops and surface textures created by the

blurred yet distinctly vertical brushstrokes that make the rocks appear as if they are formed by layers of flat, rectangular slabs. The repetition of shapes and lack of spatial depth in the rocks give them an exaggerated angularity and sternness—surely the "bony rocks" that Chen himself described in the inscription. Yet different from the desolate scene that Chen saw when he revisited this work, likely with a mindset different from when he painted it, life emerges from these seemingly stark rocks: the diluted ink with a hint of green, delineating the damp mosses, is dotted across the rock surface, and concentrates on the tops. The same shading technique is also applied to the trees, giving them a lushness that deviates from the austerity in the Ni Zan tradition. This tension between life and decay makes the painting particularly intriguing.

Chen Hongshou evidently took pride in this distinctive method of portraying rocks, as he repeatedly used similar brushwork in his rock images around this time. In the *Mogu tu* album made around 1619, rocks in this style appear on three leaves.[24] One of them can almost be seen as a simpler version of the 1618 painting, with a cluster of rocks juxtaposed with a stark tree and a solitary bird (Fig. 3.8). In this piece, Chen preserved the blurry, vertical brushwork on the rock surfaces and maintained the interplay between dry and wet, light and dark strokes seen in his earlier work. However, in this iteration, Chen's rocks evolve into more abstracted and geometric forms, composed entirely of rectangular shapes with hardly any indication of volume or spatial depth. Even though the monochrome palette and the simplicity in the composition align this work more closely with Ni Zan's oeuvre, the treatment of the rocks is unmistakably that of Chen Hongshou himself.

However, the young artist was not content with mastering only one method to depict rocks. In the spring of the following year, Chen Hongshou reworked his 1618 composition into a

[24] See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the dating of this album.

new variation. The leaf painted in spring closely adheres to the overall triangular composition and basic motifs in the 1618 leaf, with a pair of tall, slender pine trees surrounded at the bottom by clusters of rocks and a few low bamboo shrubs (Fig. 3.4-b). Chen also kept the same linear brushstrokes on the tree trunks and the visual contrast between dense, dark ink and diluted, fluid ink found in the earlier work. But in the newer piece, Chen replaced the previous polychrome rendering with a muted palette, left out the leaves on the trees, and employed the "shuanggou" (双钩, or "white sketch") method in delineating the bamboo. These changes may be related to the spring season when Chen composed this new leaf, as they all contribute to a cooler and quieter atmosphere suitable for this time of year, as opposed to the lushness and vibrancy of summertime when Chen painted the 1618 leaf. But the most pronounced innovation in the new leaf appears on the rocks. While the linear, slightly broken, and dry textural strokes on the surfaces of the rocks are reminiscent of those in the 1618 work, now, the brushstrokes dramatically curve towards one side. The diluted ink blobs at the top edges of the rocks in the 1618 leaf also become noticeably darker and more spread out. These new methods give these rocks a strong sense of movement as if they are turning and reaching upwards, therefore setting them apart from the rather rigid-looking rocks in the previous work.

Chen's later inscription for this piece provides a glimpse into the painter's intentions behind these modifications, if only in hindsight:

> Recently I have been doing things like this in my prose writing as well. People know about the clear and resplendent character of my works, but not their deep distance (*shenyuan*). Hongshou.[25]
>
> 近來為文亦如此，人知我清貴，不知我深遠。洪綬

[25] My translation is based on the version provided by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's record. See https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44759, accessed March 5, 2025.

For Chen Hongshou, the 1619 leaf demonstrated the "deep distance"—or *shenyuan*—of his works, which he belived to have been taken for granted. The term *shenyuan* originates from *Linquan gaozhi* 臨泉高致 (*Lofty Record of Forests and Streams*), a painting treatise by Northern Song painter Guo Xi 郭熙 (after 1000-ca. 1090). In this enormously influential text, Guo Xi summarizes three expressions of space—or *sanyuan* 三遠 ("three distance")—in landscape paintings: "high distance"(*gaoyuan* 高遠), a view from the base of a towering mountain looking up towards its peak; "deep distance" (*shenyuan* 深遠), a view through a front mountain into the distance beyond; and "level distance" (*pingyuan* 平遠), a view from a nearby mountain at distant mountains across an expansive lowland.[26] Guo further adds that "the idea of deep distance is of repeated layering."[27] Neither the 1618 nor 1619 album leaves are strictly landscapes, thus Chen Hongshou's reference to Guo Xi's principles of spatial recession and atmosphere in landscape art must be underscoring the shift in perspective. Compared to the 1618 work, where all the pictorial elements are presented with visual clarity from a distant view, in the 1619 leaf, the same motifs are much more intertwined, presenting a closer and layered view where elements overlap and obscure one another, thus evoking the "deep distance" perspective that Guo describes. The changed appearance of the rocks between the two leaves might also relate to the shift in perspective that Chen was experimenting with in his second iteration. As the viewer now comes closer to the rocks, they will further make out the dynamic textures of the rock surfaces, and perhaps even see the rocks in completely different forms—or, in Chen's own words, "the metamorphosis turns out to be endless."

[26] Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 168-9. Also see Maxwell K. Hearn, *How to Read Chinese Paintings* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 29.
[27] Guo Xi, *Linquan Gaozhi*; translation in Bush and Shih, 169.

In the next leaf from the album, completed in the spring of 1621, Chen Hongshou embarked upon a radically different and highly experimental approach (Fig. 3.4-c). Here, he completely inverts his previous compositional strategy: rather than grouping the motifs at the center to form triangular mass, he arranges the trees, grass, and rocks along three edges of the painting frame. While the 1618 leaf features organic pigments in subdued shades, the 1621 leaf showcases saturated mineral pigments—azurite blue and malachite green—liberally applied to the tree leaves and rocks. The ornamental, peculiarly blue foliage on the left and the delicate transition from green to blue on the tall rock to the right all evoke a sense of archaism. In his 1622 inscription, Chen Jiru compares Chen Hongshou's juxtaposition of leafy and sparse trees to the work of Zhang Zao 張璪 (active late 8th century), and observes that the entire painting employs techniques reminiscent of Tang masters (章侯此幅類之，皆唐人畫法也). No work of Zhang Zao remains. And little is known about him either, except for that he was good at painting pine trees and rocks.[28] But we can at least say that Chen Hongshou was likely thinking about the archaic "blue and green landscape" (*qinglü shanshu*i 青綠山水) tradition associated with the Tang Dynasty, particularly as his teacher Lan Ying was also known for his reinterpretation of this style (Fig. 3.9). In fact, the flatness of the blues and greens on the rocks at the bottom may have been influenced by Lan Ying, who often deliberately minimized the gradation of colors and shades in his blue-and-green mountainscapes. Rather than using the blue and green pigments on mountains, Chen creatively transferred them to his rocks—after all, aren't rocks but fragments of mountains, or mountains simply larger rocks?[29]

[28] Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (9th century), *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 (Famous Paintings Through the Ages), vol. 10 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin meishu chuban she, 2019), 161.
[29] For discussion of the relationship between rock and mountain in ancient Chinese thought, see Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth*, 53-60.

The distinct strangeness of these rocks is further accentuated by the short, interweaving "hemp-fiber" brushstrokes that spread across their surfaces, recalling the wiry, tapestry-like lines characteristic of Wang Meng 王蒙 (ca. 1308-1385)'s mountain boulders (Fig. 3.10). Yet Chen's brushstrokes on the rocks are decisively bolder, darker, and more repetitive—perhaps an attempt to add a sense of ornateness and decorativeness to complement the painting's overall aesthetic inspired by the Tang blue-and-green landscapes. Regardless, the unlikely combination of an archaic, courtly color palette with brushwork derived from Wang Meng not only renders the rocks particularly odd but also imbues them with a unique vitality. The blue and green rocks, composed of rhythmic lines, look as if they are moving with the wind, just like the yellowing grass—if not appearing even more alive.

Chen Hongshou's interest in Wang Meng extends onto another leaf from the same set, likely painted in 1621 as well (Fig. 3.4-d).[30] Weng Wan-go, echoing Chen Jiru's inscriptions, observes that the rock's cloudlike shape, the combination of "hemp-fiber" brushstrokes and dots to depict the rock surfaces, as well as the curved tree branches delineated with short, wavy lines, are all borrowed from Wang Meng.[31] These elements can be found, for example, in Wang's *Shenlin Diezhang tu* 深林疊嶂圖 (*Deep Forest and Layered Peaks*) (Fig. 3.11).[32] But whereas most Ming painters tried to revive the essence of Wang Meng by exaggerating—elongating—his ropy "hemp fiber" brushwork on the mountain rocks, Chen Hongshou did the opposite. In the album leaf, Chen kept the wavy directionality of Wang Meng's brushstrokes, yet breaking up the

[30] As Weng Wan-go suggested, this leaf is framed between two leaves with dates of 1621 in an album where dated leaves all follow a chronological order, and thus likely also dated to 1621. See Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 86.
[31] Ibid. Chen Jiru's inscription suggests that "Zhanghou [Chen Hongshou] uses the ideas of Hongguzi [Jing Hao 荊浩, active ca. 870–ca. 930] as well, not merely those of Huanghe Shanqiao [Wang Meng]." I agree with Weng's evaluation of this inscription, which considers Chen Jiru's reference to Jing Hao merely an attempt to glorify Chen Hongshou's impressive technique.
[32] This comparison is also suggested by Weng Wan-go. Ibid.

long lines into short, tadpole-like dashes. This technique creates a misty effect that captures the moving clouds as they gather around the rocky mountains and veil the trees, thus imparting to the rocks a strong sense of animation.

From Chen Hongshou's own writings and the accounts of those who knew him, it is clear that while he was celebrated for the eccentric originality of his works, he held the traditions established before him in high regard, rooting each of his brushstrokes in the legacy of those who preceded him. Although it is difficult to determine exactly which works of the old masters Chen had access to in his early twenties, it is highly possible that he encountered a few through Lan Ying or, at the very least, studied their signature styles during his training under Lan.[33] In Chen's 1650 essay on viewing a handscroll by Wang Meng, he summarizes his attitude towards ancient masters:

> I consider myself fortunate to have avoided the wealth and status of the secular world, wishing instead to surround myself with artists, study the writings of the ancients, and express their character and essence through my brush and paper. While I learn from their intentions, I forge my own path.
>
> 老遲幸而不享世俗富貴之福，庶幾與畫家遊，見古人文，發古人品，示現於筆楮間者，師其意思，自闢乾坤.[34]

Indeed, as we have observed in Chen's early depictions of rocks, the painter's genius shines through in his unconventional reinterpretations of traditional techniques. Unsurprisingly, rocks—a motif steeped in rich cultural and artistic history—became the ideal medium for Chen's early artistic experiments with diverse approaches to perspective, brushwork, ink wash, and color. Perhaps it was the artist's fascination with capturing the strange, ever-changing, and dynamic forms of rocks that compelled him to explore techniques from all the paintings he had studied

[33] For a discussion of Chen's own art collection and his access to old paintings, see Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 239-40
[34] Chen Hongshou, "Wang Shuming hua ji 王叔明畫記," in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 25.

and training he had undergone, and exploit the potential of each of his brushstroke. Or perhaps both factors were at play: rocks are like styles, each unique and surprising. Regardless, one thing is clear: from the outset, rocks and Chen's artistic pursuit are intimately intertwined.

Unbound Matters

In the following decades, Chen Hongshou continued to make many paintings of rocks. In these works, he constantly revisited the composition he had already established in the early album leaves, where a cluster of rocks, accompanied by various plants, occupies the painting's center. Chen likely adhered to this familiar composition, at least in some of the works, out of convenience and to meet the high demand for his art. Chen's early Qing biographer Meng Yuan mentions that since the late 1620s, Chen Hongshou's paintings had already became well-known in the Shaoxing area and attracted many buyers. At this point, Chen Hongshou was still focused on obtaining a government position through examinations; yet he neither rejected all painting requests, nor wholeheartedly pursued a career as a professional painter to sell art for a living:

> The demand for his work from the public grew day by day, and Chen Hongshou did not always ignore it. His skill improved, and his reputation soared, yet his heart grew increasingly dissatisfied.
>
> 戶外之求者日滿，綬亦未嘗不應。藝日精而名日盛，而意滋不悅."[35]

Chen's attitude towards painting for money likely changed in 1630, when he received the devastating news that he had failed the exam once again. He now had to make a living through selling paintings, or even save up money to travel to Beijing and pay for a position at *Guozijian* 國子監—the Imperial Academy—so that he could skip the first rounds of examination and

[35] Meng Yuan, "Chen Hongshou zhuan 陳洪綬傳," in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 660.

qualify for official posts.[36] Chen barely mentions his commercial painting practice in his own writings—perhaps due to his own disapproval of himself becoming a *de facto* professional painter. Yet reading between the lines, it becomes clear that Chen Hongshou painted tirelessly to meet demands and generate income until he managed to leave for Beijing in 1640.[37] In his last years, Chen continued to struggle financially, at times even needing to borrow money from friends.[38] While he famously refused to create paintings for the wealthy and powerful, Chen still had to earn a living through selling his works.[39] He also allegedly produced paintings by the hundred for the poor, so that they could resell these pieces to sustain their livelihoods.[40]

Simultaneously auspicious and scholarly, images of rocks were well-liked by audiences across social spheres. For this reason, many of Chen's depictions of rocks in the 1630s and 1640s should be understood as commercial paintings to showcase his skills and satisfy the demand of various buyers. A hanging scroll at the National Palace Museum might be one example of the paintings that Chen Hongshou made for the market (Fig. 3.12). Bearing Chen's signature of "Laochi Hongshou" (老遲洪綬, literally "the old and belated Hongshou") that the artist used after 1645 and most frequently around 1649, the painting was likely made when Chen Hongshou retired to the Shaoxing area after years of sojourning and made a living primarily through selling

[36] Chen expressed his intention for taking this alternative route in a note written in 1631. See "Zeng Chen Geng qing ru guozixue xu 贈陳庚卿入國子學序," in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshoup ji,* 10-11.
[37] See Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 26-9; and Chen Chuanxi 陳傳席, *Mingmo guaijie: Chen Hongshou de shengya ji yishu* 明末怪傑: 陳洪綬的生涯與藝術 (A Late-Ming Eccentric: The Life and Art of Chen Hongshou) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chuban she, 1992), 13.
[38] This is evident through Chen's own writings, quoted and discussed in Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 50-1.
[39] Chen's later commercial painting activities, seen through his own writings, are summarized in Wang Huangsheng 王璜生, *Chen Hongshou* 陳洪綬 (Changchun: Jilin meishu chuban she, 1996), 35, 45, 51 and 181; Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 54-5.
[40] Wang, *Chen Hongshou*, 35-6.

paintings.[41] Now titled *Shouxuan tu* 壽萱圖, translating directly to "Daylilies of Longevity," the painting was commissioned for a birthday celebration. The rocks and the bamboos were both associated with longevity due to their durability, strength, and resilience even in severe weather conditions. But the daylilies further specify the painting's purpose: apart from symbolizing happiness and longevity, the motif of daylilies was often associated with childbirth and motherhood.[42] The painting was therefore likely commissioned as a birthday gift for a woman by her family.

To make this work, Chen budgeted his energy to deliver a wide range of techniques within a conventional composition, thus catering to the tastes of a broad audience within a reasonable timeframe. The daylilies in the foreground are rendered in a traditional *gongbi* (工筆) style, characterized by the meticulous details portrayed with precise and controlled brushwork, and the vibrant yet delicate polychrome colors layered upon one another to create a sense of lifelikeness. Chen switched to a larger brush to outline the tall, perforated rock behind the flowers. In contrast to the delicate, even lines of the daylilies, the contour of the rock features much more variation in darkness and thickness. The rock is fully covered with ink wash in various shades to portray its convoluted shape. Yet unlike the carefully applied pigments on the flowers, the ink wash on the rock appears to have been applied swiftly and freely, as it occasionally penetrates beyond the outline. The rock therefore is given a sense of painterliness often associated with literati paintings. In the background, the smaller brush is again used to delineate the bamboo branches, but now without any color or wash. This gives the bamboo an

[41] Weng Wan-go has dated this work to 1649 based on the style of the calligraphy, and pointed out that although Chen still held himself to a high standard in making this work, he likely made it for the market given the crowd-pleasing, auspicious subject matter and the date. See Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 198.
[42] "Daylily," in Terese Tse Bartholomew, Mulan Bartholomew, and Kazuhiro Tsuruta, *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art* (San Francisco, Calif.: Asian Art Museum, Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, 2006), 67.

airiness and lightness that differs from the other motifs in the painting, making the composition more visually dynamic. Similar compositions and stylistic variations can be found in many other paintings of rocks by Chen Hongshou. In another hanging scroll at the Nanjing Museum, Chen combined the same motifs—daylilies, rocks, and bamboo—in a composition almost identical to that in the Beijing scroll (Fig. 3.13). While Chen adopted the same methods in depicting the two plants, in the Nanjing scroll, he used stronger texture strokes (*cun*) to give the rock a more weathered appearance.

But there were also moments when Chen Hongshou engaged with rocks on a more profound level, and continued his artistic experimentation in their depiction. Among the artist's enormous corpus of rocks imagery from this middle period of his career, a few works stand out. In these works, rocks are not only situated within nature alongside flowers and trees, but also become part of nature's living organism, engaging with or even transforming into the animated bodies around them, thereby assuming a liveliness of their own. As in his early works, Chen imbued each of his brushstrokes with intentions and genius to capture the ever-changing, animated forms of the rocks. However, rather than looking to the painting masters who came before him, the artist now delved deeply into the life force inherent in the rocks themselves, and captured it with his seemingly naive yet strikingly original and radically imaginative ways of the brush.

One of Chen Hongshou's most unusual depictions of rocks can be found in a handscroll, now titled *Plum, Rocks, and Butterflies* (*Mei shi jiadie tu* 梅石蛺蝶圖), at the Palace Museum in Beijing (Fig. 3.14).[43] Weng Wan-go has dated this work to around 1639, based on the style of the

[43] Hereafter the Beijing handscroll.

painter's signature.[44] The handscroll opens with a large formation of rock that almost extends beyond the boundaries of the painting's frame. Yet this formidable rock is far from intimidating; on the contrary, it appears soft and weightless. To achieve this effect, the painter avoided any sharp turns of his brush—uncommon in the depictions of rocks—to create the meandering outlines that lend softness to the rock. The subtle gradation of ink washes on the rock surface also gives the rock a mellow, airy texture. Gesturing towards the left, the rock guides the viewer to the middle part of the composition, where a pair of butterflies gracefully fly over a smaller rock. The rounded outline and the ink dots of the small rock echo those on the first rock. But here, the painter omitted any ink wash, instead relying on the faint and dry *cun* texturing brushwork and bare paper to represent the rock surface. A few firm, more saturated strokes, however, delineate one side of the rock, creating a stark contrast with the light contours on the other sides of the same object. While seemingly assigned arbitrarily on the rock without any clear representational purpose, these dark lines visually associate this rock with the butterflies above. In particular, on the larger butterfly, we can also find contrasting outlines that follow no clear rule and the irregular, freely inked *cun* strokes used to depict the patterns of the wing. In fact, if we zoom in to examine the wing of this butterfly, it almost appears as if it is composed of multiple miniaturized versions of the rock below (Fig. 3.15). On the other butterfly, however, the brushwork suddenly becomes restrained and controlled—a very different mode of painting that reappears on the plum blossoms to the left end of the handscroll. In fact, the plum branch, as the concluding motif of the entire scroll, reconciles various visual elements and styles observed from the painting's earlier sections. The gnarled surface of the tree, sometimes portrayed with short and rapid brush strokes blending into the light ink washes, and at other times *cun* brushwork with

[44] Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 163-4.

dry ink arranged in parallel against the bare paper ground, recalls the distinctive visual features found on the rocks (Fig. 3.16). The plum blossoms, on the other hand, mirror the right butterfly in terms of both the delicate brushwork and the plump shape. The visual unity among the rocks, butterflies, and the plum tree is further established through the ink dots that spread across the surfaces of all of them. While assuming different representational roles, these dots serve to connect the different motifs within the composition, harmonizing and enhancing their interrelationship.

The painting exudes a strong sense of movement. With a small, rounded bottom and a heavier top reaching leftwards, the first rock appears rather unstable. Yet, instead of being on the verge of toppling over, the rock looks almost as if it is floating. Then, we encounter the second rock, which appears to be literally suspended in midair—how else can it be on the same horizontal level to the plum branch? The weightlessness of both rocks is further accentuated by the absence of any indication of the ground in the entire composition, as well as the spontaneously dotted ink mosses that occasionally seem to levitate from the rock surface. There is also the manipulation of scale and spatial configuration. The large, imposing rock at the beginning of the handscroll only opens up to a scene that zooms onto small details in nature. But it is not quite a *scene* yet: the four pictorial units—the two rocks, butterflies, and the plum branch—are laid out evenly across the painting, resisting a clear interpretation of their spatial relationship. The painting, in other words, presents itself as a scene that is *happening*—as if the various pictorial elements are still in the process of finding their final places and forms.

As the painting unrolls from right to left, and with the overall leftward movement suggested by the tilting rock, flying butterflies, and outreaching plum branch, we may also interpret the composition as presenting sequenced scenes in which the rocks are transforming

into flora and fauna. Perhaps Chen Hongshou was thinking about the inherent animism within rocks, a concept well understood and discussed among Ming intellectuals. More specifically, rocks were seen as suggestive of movements both around and within them. Rocks in gardens, as miniature mountainscapes, were expected to be accompanied by living waterscapes—waterfalls, streams, or ponds with weeds and fishes, as well as plants trimmed to look as if they were naturally grown.[45] In the influential *Suyuan shipu*, several texts following the illustrations of famous rocks describe how the rocks attracted birds and insects, who in turn added movements and sounds to the vignettes. But there is also an innate vitality to the rocks themselves. Stories of animated rocks have been told since the Han Dynasty, and attracted even more attention in the Ming-Qing era. In *Guaishi Gong* 怪石供 (*Strange Rocks Presented with Reverence*), an anthology of rock-related texts included as the second volume of *Xiangxue an* 香雪庵 (*Hut of Fragrant Snow*) compiled by a late-Ming scholar-official Xu Rulan 許如蘭 (dates unknown), we find a section titled "Shengdong 生動 (Movement)," which is devoted to anecdotes of rocks moving on their own. In another section titled "Bianhua 變化 (Transformation)," stories of rocks magically turning into food, trees, animals, or humans, and vice versa, are recorded.[46] While no evidence exists of direct interaction between Xu Rulan and Chen Hongshou, mentions of Xu in writings from those within Chen's close circle—including Zhang Dai, Ni Yuanlu, and Qi Biaojia 祁彪佳 (1603-1645)—indicate that Xu was connected to Chen's Shaoxing-based

[45] Wen Zhenheng 文震亨, *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志 (Superfluous Things) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021), juan 3.
[46] Xu Rulan, *Guaishi gong* (Altar of Strange Rocks), in *Xiangxue an* (Hut of Fragrant Snow), printed in Chongzhen era. National Archives of Japan Digital Archive, accessed February 14, 2024, https://www.digital.archives.go.jp/item/4756999.html

social network.[47] At the very least, Xu's anthology of writings on rocks certainly captures the scholarly sensibilities towards these objects in the cultural sphere that Chen was situated in.

In another painting made six years later in 1645, Chen Hongshou further illustrates the transformations between a rock and a plum tree (Fig. 3.18).[48] In this album leaf, a rock intertwines with the root of a plum tree, their boundaries virtually indistinguishable as if merging into one another. Such an ambiguity or even messiness, made possible by the dry and faint texturing brushstrokes shared by the rock and the tree trunk, is most certainly deliberate. The delicate plum blossoms, portrayed with extremely fine and controlled outlines and accentuated with light blue shadowing outside the contour, showcase the precision and refinement of the painter's technique, which he chose not to use in the other parts of the painting. It is possible that Chen Hongshou is trying to portray an ancient plum tree so old that it is taking on the appearance of a rock. This interpretation aligns with the later attributed title of this painting, "Ancient Plum" (*gumei* 古梅). But the image also recalls two stories from Xu Rulan's *Guaishi Gong* under the "Transformation" section, both of which narrate instances where rocks transformed into trees. The first story, said to originally appear in the ninth-century *Youyang zazu* 酉陽雜組 (*Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*), simply records a pine tree that had half of its trunk transformed into a rock, while the other half remained a tree.[49] The second story, quoted from *Xu*

[47] See Zhang Dai, "Fuzhaun 附傳," *Langhuan wenji* 瑯嬛文集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guoxue yanjiu she, 1935), v. 4, 78; Ni Yuanlu, *Ni Wenzhen ji* 倪文貞集 (siku quanshu edition), juan 17. Kept in Zhejiang University Library, digitized by Chinese Text Project 中國哲學書電子化計劃 (http://ctext.org/zh), accessed April 25, 2025; Qi Biaojia, "Qingming houyou jishi yangliu ci, no. 12 清明後遊紀事楊柳詞, 其十二," in Zhao Suwen 趙素文 ed., *Qi Biaojia shici biannian jian jiao* 祁彪佳詩詞編年箋校 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2016), 381. In Zhao Suwen's note to Qi Biaojia's poem, the editor points out that Xu Rulan's connection to the Shaoxing scholarly group likely stemmed from his appointment as prefect of Shaoxing in 1626, as noted in the local gazetteer.

[48] While this particular painting does not bear a date, we can approximate its time of creation based on dated works from the same album set. All the dated pieces in this set are from the spring of 1645. I will refer to this painting, in the rest of this chapter, as the Taipei album leaf.

[49] Xu Rulan, *Guaishi Gong*, in *Xiangxue an*, 4.56a. I am unable to find the same story in *Youyang zazu*.

xian Zhuan 續仙傳 (*A Continuation of Accounts of Immortals*), spans the same plot from the first story but adds a few more details:

> Ma Ziran (or Ma Xiang) was [serving as the priest] at the Dongtian Daoist Temple at Yongkang County during the Dazhong era. The temple had a large withering pine tree. Xiang pointed at the tree and said, "This pine tree is already more than three thousand years old and will soon turn into rock." Later, the pine cones indeed transformed into rock. Suddenly, the wind began to blow fiercely and thunder struck, causing the rock to shatter into several pieces.…… The surface of the rocks displays the scale-like texture of pine bark. They still stand today.
>
> 馬自然大中時永康縣東天寶觀。觀有大枯松，湘指之曰："此松已三千餘年，即化為石。"自後松果化為石。忽大風雷震，石倒側作數截。..... 其石松皮鱗皴，今猶存焉. [50]

Has the plum tree in Chen's painting transformed into a rock, while still retaining the texture of tree bark in one part, as described in the stories? Chen Hongshou, often leaving puzzles for his viewers, rendered the direction of the transformation ambiguous. Consequently, the plum and the rock are forever suspended in a moment of intertwinement and metamorphosis.

In both the handscroll and the album leaf, Chen Hongshou enlivens the rocks through their visual relationships with other living organisms within the compositions, established entirely through their shared style of brushwork. It is indeed tempting to draw a parallel between the visual homogeneity of rocks and trees in Chen Hongshou's paintings and *Old Tree, Rock, and Bamboo* painted by Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), another renowned rock lover. In Su's painting, tempestuous swirls of lines constitute both the rock and the tree (Fig. 3.19). Peter C. Sturman interprets the subject matter as "the image of Zhuangzi's crippled, 'worthless' tree," since Su Shi likely created this work during his banishment to Huizhou, a period of tremendous turbulence and isolation for the artist.[51] In this context, the rugged rock and weathered tree

[50] Quoted in Xu Rulan, *Guaishi Gong*, in *Xiangxue an*, 4.57a-b.
[51] Peter C. Sturman, "Inscriptional Practices of the Song Literati: Revisiting Su Shi's Old Tree, Rock, and Bamboo," *Archives of Asian Art* 72, no. 1 (2022): 89.

become emblematic of the overlooked scholar in peril. Su Shi's sinuous brushwork across the two motifs, therefore, are descriptive not only of the withered textures of the rock and the tree but of the artist's mental state that these objects symbolize. In Chen Hongshou's paintings, however, the rocks, plum trees, and butterflies are related to each other neither through clearly shared symbolic meaning nor through visual resemblance in a descriptive sense. Rather, the resemblance operates at the level of ink application, as these various motifs share the seemingly unrefined, erratic, and almost abstract manner of the brushwork. That is to say, the shared qualities of the most basic pictorial elements—lines and dots, are freed from their persistent duty of descriptiveness in Su Shi's work, thus allowing the rocks to convey a deeper sense of spontaneity and fluidity. We can easily envision the brushstrokes on the rocks rearranging and transforming into butterflies and tree branches. As the products of interactions among the elements of earth, water, and air, rocks and their expressive forms—as brilliantly summarized by John Hay—"celebrated the animation of matter as embodying the creative process of nature."[52] In Chen's paintings, the abstracted, lively "matter" that constitutes the rocks manifests as the brushstrokes that constitute all the animate organisms in the pictorial world that the artist created.

Further, in the *Plum Branch, Rock and Butterflies* handscroll, Chen creatively exploits the material qualities of the gold-flecked (or gold-sprinkled) paper to imbue each of his brushstrokes with a sense of animation. Paper historian Pan Jixing has explained the steps involved in making this type of paper. First, flecks of gold leaf would be blown onto a sheet of paper coated in glue. Next, a piece of oilpaper was placed over its surface until the gold flecks were integrated into the paper. Finally, the paper would be polished.[53] This process resulted in a

[52] John Hay, "Structure and Aesthetic Criteria in Chinese Rocks and Art," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 13 (1987):19. Also see Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth*, 22.
[53] See Pan Jixing 潘吉星, *Zhongguo zaozhi shihua* 中國造紙史話 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1994), 47-48.

paper with a very smooth surface, tight texture, and consequently reduced water absorbency.[54] For painters, the gold-flecked paper poses both challenge and opportunity. The paper makes it particularly difficult for the painter to achieve a refined final result. Its sleek surface can be slippery for the brush tip, impeding the artist's control over the brush movements. The paper's low water absorbency also renders it almost impossible to conceal the imperfections in each individual brushstroke, and makes it easier to smudge the ink that would take longer to dry on this material. Chen Hongshou clearly demonstrated his ability to meet this challenge in a fan painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 3.20). Here, he skillfully navigated the physical complexities of the speckled gold paper, producing an extremely delicate and polished image, where the brushstrokes are highly controlled and sharply defined, colors are evenly applied, and washes are seamlessly blended. In the handscroll, however, Chen Hongshou embraced the distinctive features of the gold-flecked paper to create the effect where each brushstroke is distinguishable from one another and each movement of the brush traceable (Fig. 3.17). Unable to penetrate into the paper, the traces of the brush appear to be "floating" on the paper surface. Left to dry atop the paper surface, the brushstrokes retain their shapes, forms, and the subtle effects of water when they were freshly inked. The brushstrokes, both individually and collectively as pictorial motifs, therefore *become* movements recorded on paper.

But this does not fully account for Chen Hongshou's unorthodox choice of brushstrokes that seem so naive, unpolished, and spontaneous in both of the paintings discussed. After all, Chen Hongshou rarely hides the meticulousness and thoughtfulness in his compositional arrangements or the sophistication of his techniques in the majority of his works, regardless of

[54] This has been pointed out in Yu Yusen, "Gold-Sprinkled: Chinese Paper and Persian Book Arts During the Fifteenth Century," in *The Allure of Matter: Materiality across Chinese Art*, ed. Cacchione and Wei-Cheng Lin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 95.

the subject matter. And in Chen's more generic paintings of rocks mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the artist intentionally and flawlessly executed a diverse range of brushwork within each work, which is suggestive of the painter's acute awareness that the appeal of his works, particularly to the art market, lays within their refinement and eclecticism. It is particularly intriguing that Chen Hongshou chose to fill a large sheet of the more expensive gold-flecked paper—which he typically reserved for small fan paintings and never elsewhere used for a handscroll—with brushstrokes that, at first glance, seem to lack finesse. This is not to say that the brushwork in the handscroll were actually done impetuously; on the contrary, the layered brushstrokes in various shades, crisply distinct from one another, required the painter to wait patiently between the application of each layer to ensure that the ink was dry enough to not lose shape when more ink was added. In other words, Chen Hongshou deliberately designed and even spent extra effort and time on the painting to make it appear amateurish and intuitive.

Such a peculiar approach might be seen as Chen's subtle rebellion against the more widely acceptable and market-pleasing mode of painting that he was compelled to do for his livelihood during this middle period of his career. Perhaps in both the Beijing handscroll and the Taipei album leaf, we are witnessing the rare moments when, amid the artist's increasingly demanding life as a professional painter, Chen could embrace his playful, experimental, and nonconformist artistic inclinations.

The tension between Chen's reality as a professional painter and his nature as an untamed artist is hinted at in the Taipei album leaf, which is accompanied by Chen's own inscription on a separate sheet of paper framed across the image. In this inscription, Chen mentions that he was gifted a plum grove, even though he did not have the money to even build a thatched cottage for himself. He then laments: "How can I have time to mind the elegant and the poetic? There are

hardly any old grains in the jar." (有人贈楳叢, 無錢蓋茅屋; 何暇事風騷, 盎中少舊穀.) The plain language of the inscription betrays a self-mocking and almost humorous tone, with which Chen Hongshou complains about his lack of money and free time—but what was he so busy doing? Biographies of Chen Hongshou often portray 1645 as a year when Chen underwent emotional despair due to the suicide of last emperor of the Ming Dynasty in 1644, and particularly following the deaths of several friends in the fifth and sixth months when the Ming forces lost the south. But life continued for Chen in his hometown Shaoxing with relative stability and comfort: he had moved into the famous Green Vine Studio (*Qingteng Shuwu* 青藤書屋), which previously belonged to Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521-1593), a family friend and accomplished scholar and painter; he attended drinking parties with Zhang Dai, and made the acquaintance of King Lu from the Ming royal family; he even found the time and mind to bring his dog to a friend's house for mating, though unfortunately, he lost the dog en route.[55] It is reasonable to deduce that in the inscription, Chen was actually complaining about the commercial painting activities that consumed much of his time and energy while alleviating financial burdens that were certainly real, yet likely exaggerated in this account. And because of this, he did not have enough time to explore his genuine artistic pursuit—"the elegant and the poetic." Perhaps this explains why the old plum and rock, though entirely absent from the text, are depicted so prominently and expressively in the painting, particularly in contrast to the comically diminutive and plainly outlined trees to the left. While the young plum groves reflect a fragment of the reality that Chen endured, the spontaneously rendered rock and plum branches, with their striking rawness and dynamism, embody the artistic freedom, complexity, and candor that Chen was longing for.

[55] Wang, *Chen Hongshou*, 177-8.

Few objects could be more fitting than rocks to channel the artist's conflicted identities and artistic needs. On the one hand, with their intricate forms, evocation of nature, and long-lasting endurance, rocks decorated scholar's studios and gardens, and served as auspicious motifs of longevity and immortality in popular paintings.[56] On the other hand, the irregular, bizarre, and fantastic aspects of rocks could only be appreciated by true connoisseurs, inducing the purest affection and fostering the most unwavering relationships among them.[57] The allure of rocks thus resonated particularly with individuals with eccentric and genuine spirits, a group to which Chen Hongshou undoubtedly belonged. The unorthodox, candid, and truly innovative brushwork of Chen Hongshou in the two paintings discussed in this chapter, therefore, captures the rocks' inherent dynamism and vitality, while externalizing Chen Hongshou's own creative metamorphosis and defiance.

The Artist and His Rocks

In previous cases, Chen Hongshou channeled his creative energies and technical virtuosity through visual expositions of rocks and their artistic and cultural complexities. While these works narrate Chen's artistic journey as intricately intertwined with his studies of rocks, they nevertheless place rocks at the center of attention. In the paintings to be discussed in the following section, all completed in Chen's final years, the painter portrayed rocks alongside figures, as the human and the rock being involved in a symbiotic, emotional, and mutually transforming relationship. In these works, Chen Hongshou introspectively explored and directly visualized his own relationship with rocks—subjects he had engaged with sensorially, emotionally, and artistically throughout his career.

[56] For the connection of rocks to the idea of immortality, see Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth*, 44.
[57] Zeitlin, "The Petrified Heart."

In the previous chapter, we have looked at a couple of leaves from Chen's 1651 album, *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*, where objects—a zither or inkstones—are made to intimately interact with the human figures. The same could be said with the "Awakening Rock" (*Xingshi* 醒石) leaf from the same set, as a scholarly figure sprawls on the ground, with his body leaning on a rock and his right arm holding on to the rock's one end (Fig. 3.21). What is unique about this work, however, is the strong visual affinity between the rock and the figure. Delineated with delicate curving contours, washes with ink of high water content that slightly seeps and disperses outside the outline, while deliberately avoiding any *cun* texturing, the rock appears almost soft to the eyes; it gently embraces the figure by slightly bending around him. The painter further creates a visual continuity between the rock and the figure through repeating similar brushstrokes on both entities. The smooth contours of the rock with parallel strokes reappear as the folds on the figure's robe (Fig. 3.22). The flowy, "dingtou shuwei" (釘頭鼠尾, brushstroke with a pressed start that resembles a nail and a lifted end like a rat's tail) strokes, often used in ink paintings to depict textiles, are not only applied on the the figure's headscarf, robe, and shoes, but also make up the rock's layered silhouette. While taking on the soft appearance of the textiles of the figure, the rock also blends in with the human body. Indeed, the artist subtly distinguishes between the textures of the rock and the figure's clothing by employing different ink wash techniques. The rock's surface is rendered with well-blended, watery ink that creates smooth gradations, while the scarf, belt, sleeve edges, and shoes are depicted with drier, uneven brushstrokes. Yet, while Chen Hongshou could easily distinguish between different materials through various techniques, such as altering the shade of ink—as demonstrated in another leaf from the *Sixteen Views* album (Fig. 3. 23)—he deliberately opted to use the exact same shade of ink for both the rock and the textiles in this case, rendering the

distinction between the two materials much less obvious. As the gray scarf emerges from the rock of the same shade behind the figure, wraps around his arm, and continues upward to cover his head, the image creates a visual illusion, as though the rock is transforming into a soft textile, reaching out to envelop the figure.

The "Awakening Rock" leaf is likely based on the story of the Eastern Jin recluse-poet Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365-427), who famously got drunk and fell asleep on a big rock to the east of his abode. This interpretation of the subject matter is confirmed by a woodblock print designed by Chen featuring a similar composition as that in the album leaf (Fig. 3.24). Here, the inscription accompanying the image tells the story of Tao Yuanming getting drunk on the rock. Similarly, a visual continuity between the rock and the figure is achieved in the print design through the rounded and layered contours of both the rock and the figure's clothes.

The visual relationship that the rock establishes with the figure in Chen Hongshou's images captures the tangible effect a rock can exert on the human subject it interacts with. The anecdote of Tao Yuanming and his rock is included in *Stone Catalogue of Pure Garden* as a pretext for the entry on "Sobering Rock" (醒酒石 *xingjiu shi*)—and paradoxically also referred to as "Drunken Rock" (醉石 *zui shi*)—collected by the Tang official and rock enthusiast Li Deyu 李德裕 (787-849). While Tao's rock seems to further bring out the effect of the alcohol by immersing the poet in a state of self-reflection and intensified emotion,[58] Li's rock was reputed to possess the efficacy of quickly sobering up its drunken owner whenever he lay upon it after

[58] This is most vividly described in Huan Wenhuan 黃文煥's annotation of Tao Qian's works: "Sitting on the Awakening Rock, he entered a thousand days of intoxicated haze, worries entering the heart as he reflected upon the affairs of the Jin Dynasty. 醒石在座，千日醉渺，晉事入胸中而憂至也." See Huang Wenhuan, "Duxi taoshuo" 讀析陶說, in Huang Wenhuan ed., *Tao Yuanliang shi zhu* 陶元亮詩注, late Ming edition. kept in Zhongguo jiben guji ku 中國基本古籍庫 (Database of Chinese Classic Manuscripts), Beijing Airusheng shuzihuajishuyanjiu zhongxin 北京愛如生數字化技術研究中心 (Beijing Erudition Digital Technology Research Center), accessed on June 27, 2024.

consuming alcohol (醉及臥踞其上, 一時間即清爽).[59] Perhaps it is the close association between Tao's drunken rock and Li's sobering rock that led Chen Hongshou to name his portrayal of Tao Yuanming and his rock in the album as "Awakening Rock." It is indeed unclear whether the figure is falling asleep after drinking or waking up from drunkenness; yet the rock, which supports, envelops, reaches out to, and even takes up the form of the figure, certainly seems to be responding to and exerting its influence over the human subject.

Such an animated rock that assumes bodily characteristics also implies a profound emotional connection between the rock and figure. Certainly, the anthropomorphic potential of the rocks was first enabled by the idea that rocks were akin to living organisms structurally comparable to the human body, as both were seen as conformations of ecological energy.[60] Thus, the material and visual aspects of a rock were also understood in bodily terms. Most famously, the four aesthetic categories in picturing rocks—*shou* 瘦, "leanness"; *zhou* 縐, "wrinkling"; *tou* 透, "openness"; and *lou* 漏, "perforations,"—were also applicable to the depictions of figures.[61] Or, as summarized by Gao Yanping, "the very texture of 'shou tou lou zhou' possesses figurative depth."[62] John Hay also connects rocks to the human body through the *xing-shen* dichotomy that delineates not only the physical and psychological aspects of the human body, but also the

[59] Lin Youlin, *Suyuan shipu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1997), 2.33-4.
[60] Hay, "Structure and Aesthetic Criteria in Chinese Rocks and Art," 20.
[61] See Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth*, 99-109; and Ding Yi 丁一, "'Shou zhou lou tou' bushi xiangshi sifa, ershi gudai minjian de huashi jiqiao " "瘦皺漏透"不是相石四法，而是古代民間的畫石技巧, in *Zhonghua qishi* 中华奇石 3(2022): 9-12. While these four categories are often attributed to Mi Fu, several scholars have disputed this attribution, arguing that the earliest mention of these four categories appears in Yuan Dynasty, and were then attributed to Mi Fu in Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (1329-1412)'s *Shuo fu* 說郛 printed in late Yuan Dynasty. By the Ming Dynasty, the four categories for appreciating —or depicting —the rock had been widely accepted as Mi Fu's idea. A most thorough discussion of this matter can be found in Ding Yi, "'Shou zhou lou tou' bushi xiangshi sifa, ershi gudai minjian de huashi jiqiao," 6.
[62] Yanping Gao, "The Symbolic Force of Rocks in the Chinese Imagination" in *Imagination and Art: Explorations in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Ananta Ch. Sukla and Keith Moser (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 718.

formal and spiritual aspects of the body of the rock.[63] But the intrinsic bodily characteristics of rocks did not make them readily emotional or even anthropomorphic; rather, the animation of a rock required a deep devotion from its beholder. This mechanism has been explained by Judith Zeitlin through the interrelated concepts of *qing* 情 (sentiment, love, or passion) and *pi* 癖 (obsession), which became particularly poignant in the sixteenth-century and manifest through the collecting and appreciation of rocks. Her discussion is worth quoting in full: "Once the relationship between someone and the object of his obsession was conceptualized as *qing*, it was not such a difficult leap to declare that the object itself could be moved by its lover's devotion and reciprocate his feelings. Since, for the most part, the objects of obsessions were not human, this meant anthropomorphizing the object, adopting the view that animate and inanimate things alike are capable of sentiment. Such a position was facilitated both by the traditional Chinese animistic view of the universe and by the broader implications of *qing* during this period as a universal force, and even as life itself."[64]

Such is the case with the legendary rock of Tao Yuanming. In Cheng Shimeng 程師孟 (1009-1086)'s poem, the writer attributes the rock's effect on Tao to *qing*, emotions or sentiments: "Who knew a mere rock could be so sentimental (*duoqing*), as it once escorted Yuanming into the land of drunkenness (誰知片石多情甚，曾送淵明入醉鄉)."[65] A similar view is spelled out even more directly in a Ming-dynasty annotated encyclopedia: "Whether intoxicating or awakening, the rock just responds to human emotions (*shihu renqing*), why

[63] John Hay, "The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?" in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 67-8. Hay further notes that while the sculptural human body was completely absent in traditional Chinese art, "the typical Chinese rock, with its convoluted, foraminate, complexly structured form, might well stand as a culturally quintessential Chinese body."
[64] Zeitlin, "The Petrified Heart," 9.
[65] Cheng Shimeng, "Drunken Rock" (zuishi 醉石), collected in Mao Deqi 毛德琦 comp., *Lushan Zhi* 廬山志 (1933 reprint), juan 10., 71a. Accessed through Zhongguo jiben guji ku 中國基本古籍庫,

bother distinguishing them! (醉石醒石，則不過適乎人情，寧無區別哉)"[66] When Chen Hongshou's friend Wang Siren 王思任 (1575-1646) traveled to Mount Lu, he visited the rock where Tao Yuanming was said to have once rested on.[67] Wang documented the poem that had been inscribed on the rockface, the opening verses of which reads: "Yuanming made this rock a 'drunken rock,' and the rock made Yuanming a drunken [man] (淵明醉此石，石亦醉淵明)".[68] The character *zui*, which directly translates into "getting/being drunk," also refers to a state of fascination or even infatuation. The line can therefore also be interpreted as describing Tao's enthusiasm with the particular rock, whilst the rock, in turn, reciprocated the feeling. The rock's unique power was therefore not merely a reaction to Tao's momentary emotions when he was drunk, but also a result of his enduring devotion to the rock and their mutual fondness.

In Chen Hongshou's album leaf, the rock indeed assumes a sense of metamorphosis as a result of its intimate visual connection to the human figure, thus echoing the contemporaneous understanding of the relationship between Tao Yuanming and his rock. As the scholar in the painting presses his body against the rock and draws himself with his hand, the rock softens and embraces him in response, and gradually takes on his form. But the painting can also be seen as an image of the painter himself and his relationship with rocks. Although the sixteen leaves in the *Sixteen Views* album are unified by their depiction of activities for recluses, and while we can

[66] Deng Zhimo 鄭志模, *Qie pangzhu shilei jielu* 鍥旁注事類捷錄, printed in 1603 by Cuihua House of the Yu family (明萬曆三十一年序余氏萃慶堂刊本), juan 1. Zhongguo jiben guji ku 中國基本古籍庫, accessed on June 27, 2024.

[67] Wang Siren was Chen Hongshou's fellow townsman born one generation earlier than Chen Hongshou. The two clearly knew each other well. After the fall of the Ming Dynasty, Wang once invited Chen to live together as recluses in a poem, and Chen replied with another poem and a painting. See Lu Fusheng 盧輔聖, *Chen Hongshou yanjiu* 陳洪綬研究 (A Study of Chen Hongshou) (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chuban she, 2008), 247. Wang's account of Tao Yuanming's rock, which he saw during his visit to Mount Lu, can be found in Wang Siren, "You Lushan ji 游廬山記," in *Wang Jizhong ji* 王季重集, ed. Ren Yuan 任遠 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2012), 182.

[68] Wang Siren, *Wang Jizhong ji*, 182.

identify a few shared themes across different paintings—such as the theme of melancholy in the "Washing Inkstones" and "Containing Tranquility" leaves discussed in the previous chapter—the album overall explores a variety of subject matter, motifs, and styles that Chen Hongshou frequently employed in his earlier works. Chen was evidently in a contemplative state of mind towards his life's work and accomplishments as he created these paintings. In the album's forewords, Chen writes: "Plucking the *ruan* by the creek under the autumn moon, my life has naturally unfolded. It is hard to resolve the affairs of a lifetime, and settle them by the side of the water. (擘阮秋谿月, 吾生自可為。難將一生事, 料理水之湄)" Chen may be alluding to the waters of West Lake, beside which he drunkenly composed these paintings for a friend, as he recounted in another inscription. We can thus understand this album as the artist's endeavor to review and revisit some of his most distinctive and favored artistic expressions towards the end of his life. Given this context, it is not surprising that rocks of various shapes and textures are featured in several leaves, serving as tables, seats, or background elements and echoing their frequent appearance in many of Chen's figurative works. But the rock in "Awakening Rock" stands out through its compositional centrality, intimate interaction with the figure, and inclusion in the title. It is particularly noteworthy that while most other titles from the series, such as "Washing Inkstones," "Containing Tranquility," "Visiting the Villa (*Fangzhuang* 訪莊)," "Fermenting Peach (*Niangtao* 釀桃)," describe actions that the figures perform on objects or places, "Awakening Rock" seems to emphasize the rock's effect on the figure. We may thus interpret this painting as not only revisiting the motif of rocks that Chen so often portrayed and was clearly fond of in many of his works, but also as a reflection on the impact these rocks had had on the artist himself, as well as the mutually transformative, affective relationship that Chen and the rock had shared.

While in "Awakening Rock," Chen Hongshou captures the intimate relationship between a rock and a scholarly recluse—or himself as a scholarly recluse, in another album leaf now at the Cleveland Museum of Art, he specifically visualizes the profound and intense connection between an artist and the rock that becomes the subject of his artistic creation (Fig. 3.25).[69] In this painting, a man, holding an inked brush in one hand and a traveler's staff in the other, is confronted by an enormous rock. The rock dominates nearly half the composition, its mass stretching beyond the frame. The figure's face is a study in concentration: furrowed brows, slightly squinted eyes, pressed lips, and tightened jaws. His expression reveals a man entirely captivated by the rock before him, lost in deep thought.

Perhaps he is amazed or even perplexed by the strange formation of the rock—who wouldn't be? The rock has a striking structure. It rises from a narrow foundation, expanding layer upon layer as the eye ascends. Each stratum, while distinct, harmonizes with those adjacent, thus creating a cohesive whole. The edges of these layers feature a mesmerizing cascade of contours, yet the absence of *cun* texturing suggests smooth, flat surfaces across the rock face. The rock appears almost as if it defies gravity, as its sturdy and robust body is perched precariously atop a smaller base, which contrastingly contains a sense of lightness accentuated by a spray of red leaves emerging from the gap between the rock's two feet. The precariousness of the rock's asymmetrical, unstable structure is further heightened by a large pine tree, whose roots grip the rock tenaciously while its enormous branches reach towards the right and weigh downward, adding to the overall sense of imbalance in the composition.

[69] This painting will hereafter be referred to as the Cleveland leaf. A discussion of the dating of the album can be found in Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 233. Weng dates the album to this period largely based on Chen's documented interactions with its patron Lin Tingdong 林廷棟 between 1650 and 1651.

The figure seems so absorbed and affected by the rock that he is virtually transforming into a rock. It is noteworthy that the figure's attire, consisting of a layered robe and a wind cap (*fengmao* 风帽), is a common feature in Chen Hongshou's depictions of scholarly recluses. Nevertheless, the Cleveland leaf stands out for its unique rendering of this outfit. Here, Chen employs particularly uneven brushstrokes with abrupt turns, resulting in an unexpected stiffness and rigidity in the supposedly soft materials. This visual effect forms a stark contrast to that in another leaf from the same album, where Chen's trademark brushwork, characterized by effortlessly rhythmic curves and subtle variations in thickness, allows the textile of a similar outfit to flow freely (Fig. 3.26). Likewise, in yet another leaf from this album, the clothes are rendered with gently curved contours that embrace and accentuate a woman's graceful form (Fig. 3.27). Although departing from Chen's usual method of depicting clothing, the ragged and layered wrinkles on the cap and robe in the Cleveland leaf bear a striking resemblance to the layered contours of the rock within the same composition. Moreover, the painter employs the same brushwork technique, albeit with finer and more delicate lines, to outline the scholar's facial features and left hand. In fact, not only do the shapes of his hand, forehead, nose, and cheek mirror the contours of various parts of the rock, but the tension in the brushstrokes also captures the tensed muscles on his forehead and left hand, giving his body an almost rock-like hardness.

The rock, in turn, responds to the scholar. Its unusual shape—standing on two feet with clusters of rock layered upon one another and extending toward the scholar from both front and back—evokes the image of a robed figure greeting the scholar with outstretched arms. This pictorial echo extends to the coloring as well: the dark stripe on the lower part of the rock recalls

the darker edge of the scholar's robe, while the orange blushes on the rock's surface mirror the tone of the scholar's flesh.

But what is the nature of such a reciprocating and transformative interaction between the figure and the rock in the painting? At first glance, it appears that the man is about to inscribe on the rock face with his inked brush—a scene that recalls depictions of Mi Fu in paintings of the elegant gathering in the Western Garden (*Xiyuan yaji* 西園雅集). Allegedly taking place in 1088 at Wang Shen 王詵 (1037-c.1093)'s abode, this legendary gathering included some of the most prestigious scholars in Chinese history, and had inspired countless artistic interpretations—with Mi Fu's act of appreciating and inscribing upon rocks becoming one of its central motifs.[70] The initial image said to have been created by attendees Li Gonglin and Mi Fu has been lost; but a copy attributed to Li Gonglin, once in the Qing imperial collection, speaks to the characteristic rendering of this subject matter (Fig. 3.28). Here, Mi Fu is accompanied by statesman and book collector Wang Qinchen 王欽臣 (c. 1034-1101). Having just dipped his brush in the inkstone that the servant boy holds up in reverence, Mi raises his arm, about to inscribe on the rock's weathered surface. The popularity of this scene in the late-Ming period is attested by an illustration in *Saican tuhui* 三才圖會 (Illustrated encyclopedia of the three realms), an encyclopedia first published in 1609 (Fig. 3.29). This impressive 106-volume work compiled images of common motifs from paintings and printed publications, organizing them according to

[70] A discussion of "Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden," its imagery, and cultural significance can be found in Ellen Johnston Laing, "Real or Ideal: The Problem of the 'Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden' in Chinese Historical and Art Historical Records," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 3 (1968): 419–35. Chen Hongshou left an unfinished handscroll, which Qing painter Hua Yan 華嵒 (1682-1756) discovered in a collector's studio. Although Chen only painted the landscape section at the beginning of this long scroll, Hua Yan seems certain in his inscription that the painting was meant to be about the gathering in the Western Garden. The Qing painter thus completed the handscroll with motifs from *Xiyuan Yaji*. This painting is now housed in the Palace Museum in Beijing. For a discussion, see Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 233-4.

the three realms of "heaven, earth, and man" and effectively serving as a reference book for scholars and artists of the time.[71] The inscription accompanying the *Sancai tuhui* illustration describes the scene without identifying the figure as Mi Fu, therefore highlighting the activity of inscribing on walls (*tibi* 題壁; the wall is oftentimes a rock surface, as the depiction shows) as an important motif in its own right—and a popular activity among scholars.

Chen Hongshou followed the pictorial formula of the "inscribing on rock" rather faithfully in another painting from an album collected at the Shanghai Museum, but used it to portray a contemporary event (Fig. 3.30).[72] This painting is accompanied by a poem written by Tang Jiujing, a close friend of Chen's in his later years. In Tang's poem, after an evocative and vivid description of the imposing and weathered standing rocks, the author proceeds to narrate a scene where a scholar, deeply impressed by these rocks, enthusiastically inscribes his mark upon the rock surface with ink and brush: "He finishes his inscription with a dramatic flourish of his brush, leaving behind the traces of fresh ink that resemble tadpoles on sheepskin (題罷忽將鞭一喝，羊皮蝌蚪墨猶新)."[73] In a postscript to the album, Tang further recounts an occasion where Chen Hongshou wrote a couplet on a pillar among inscriptions by all the renowned virtuous scholars around the world (曾記章侯題柱聯，友天下士盡名賢). When considering Tang's text alongside the painting, the pillar he mentions likely alludes to the pillar-

[71] Wang Qi 王圻 (*jinshi* 1565) ed., *Sancai tuhui* 三才圖會 (Illustrated encyclopedia of the three realms) (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1970). A discussion of *tibi* can be found in Judith T. Zeitlin, "Disappearing Verses: Writing on Walls and Anxieties of Loss," in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, edited by Zeitlin, Lydia H. Liu, and Ellen Widmer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 73–132.

[72] Hereafter the Shanghai leaf.

[73] This is a reference to the "tadpole style" or *kedou wen* 蝌蚪文, which is a variety of seal script in antiquity. See Li Songru 李鬆儒, "Guodian jian zhong suojian 'niaochong shu' yu 'kedou wen' ziji yanjiu (郭店簡中所見"鳥蟲書"與 "蝌蚪文"字跡研究)," *Liaoning sheng bowu guan guankan* 遼寧省博物館館刊 2 (2006): 162–77.

shaped rocks that Chen Hongshou depicted. We can therefore infer that the Shanghai leaf is not only a depiction of a scholar inscribing on the rock, but also a documentation of the very scene that Tang mentions with a self-portrayal of the artist in action.

While the Cleveland leaf initially appears to depict an earlier moment of an event similar to that shown in the Shanghai leaf, a closer comparison between the two images leads to an alternative interpretation of the scene in the Cleveland painting. Like its pictorial predecessors, the Shanghai leaf portrays an inherently social activity. Rather than concentrating on the main figure with the brush or the unusual rock being inscribed, this painting emphasizes the interpersonal relationship involved in the event through detailed portrayals of other attendees. The social aspect of rock inscription is further articulated in Tang Jiujing's postscript, which describes the act as a means of connecting the inscriber to others who have written on the rock across time and space. Moreover, the creation of the Shanghai leaf—or indeed, the entire album—can be seen as a social endeavor. The close collaboration between Chen Hongshou and Tang Jiujing serves to strengthen their friendship and commemorate their shared memories. The Cleveland leaf, however, presents a distinctively private scene of contemplation and solitariness of one figure in the company of a rock. The servant holding the inkstone, which appear in all other depictions of similar scenes, is omitted in this leaf. Peering through two enormous pine branches that strategically frame the main scene while simultaneously keeping us at a distance, we, as viewers, are afforded a voyeuristic glimpse into the intimate and deeply emotional interaction between the figure and the rock.

The two paintings also differ in terms of their perspectives and tones. The Shanghai leaf presents a zoomed-out perspective that elucidates the entire scenario, including the detail of a servant carrying the inkstone from which the brush draws its ink. Such a composition lends the

picture a documentary-like clarity and a sense of realism. In contrast, the Cleveland leaf does not appear to be rooted in the look of a real event—for how could a scholar wander around in the mountains with a freshly inked brush in his hand, with nowhere to dip it? Instead, this work takes up a subjective tone, delving into the internal, psychological aspect of the encounter between the figure and the rock. The petrifying figure and the gravity-defying, anthropomorphic rock serve to illustrate the subjective and transformative experience of a scholar-artist being deeply moved by and finding spiritual resonance within the magnificent object. In other words, the painting can be seen as a visualization of what the figure is *feeling* as he allows himself to be inspired and captivated by the rock before setting down his brush.

It is tempting to take one step further and consider the painting as a self-referential image, where a painter—the figure holding the brush—has just painted the rock that he so deeply resonates with. The rock then, along with other surrounding motifs, further constitutes his "reality" that becomes the painting itself. This interpretation becomes particularly compelling if we view the painting not merely as a static final image, but a dynamic process of painting captured on paper. In fact, Chen Hongshou seems to intentionally draw our attention to the very process of painting, particularly through his rendering of the tip of the pine branch positioned near the figure (Fig. 3.31). Delineated with strikingly minimalistic lines, this branch forms a stark contrast with other branches fully covered by lush pine needles, as well as with the other bare branches portrayed with noticeable volume and surface texture. Did Chen Hongshou simply forget to finish this detail? Certainly not. The painting bears Chen's signature and seal, thus was considered to be complete by the painter himself; and the branch is conspicuously positioned near the center of the composition, next to the figure and against a blank background, making it impossible to overlook. That is to say, the branch's peculiar sense of unfinishedness must have

been deliberate. Looking as if freshly sketched and waiting to be developed more fully, these simple lines invite the viewer to contemplate the coming-into-being of the picture.

Upon close examination, the layering and spatial relationships among the brushstrokes demonstrate a rough order in which the various motifs were executed. In composing this album leaf, Chen Hongshou began by outlining the figure, as the ink lines of all other motifs—the red leaves around the windcap, the edges of the rock behind the staff, and the silhouettes of the mossy ground—are all executed around the figure. He then started painting the rock from the foremost, largest mass of the rockface, then progressively added layers to further develop the rock's complex structure, the thick and twisted tree trunk, the pine needles, and further completed the rock body around the pine tree. Lastly, he added the sprays of red leaves around the rock and the tree, a bit more rock behind the leaves, as well as the grass ground. Since the figure with the brush is painted first, in this process, the rock and its accompanying vegetation can be viewed as simultaneously emerging from the brush of Chen Hongshou and the brush of the figure in the painting. The brush-holding man therefore functions not only as a character within the painting, but also as a surrogate for the artist himself within the pictorial space, both *feeling* and *doing* what Chen Hongshou himself would feel and do when confronted by a rock that sparks artistic desires and stirs profound emotions.

The painting can thus be interpreted as a self-portrayal of the moment when Chen Hongshou was deeply moved and inspired by strange rocks—an experience Chen must have had been extremely familiar with, given his long-standing interest in and repeated depictions of the rock motifs. Such a self-reflective representation is particularly fitting as one of the twenty

leaves from the two-volume album set that Chen made for Lin Tingdong.[74] If in *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*, Chen seized the opportunity to look back at his past achievements but did it under the disguise of the theme of the life of the recluses, in the Cleveland album, the painter proudly flaunted his signature motifs, themes, styles, compositions, and heritage from ancient masters at the request of Lin. In the two leaves that I have briefly mentioned, Chen took his trademark motifs of a recluse scholar and a female beauty completely out of context, presenting them as if they were samples of his figurative work (Fig. 3.26 and Fig. 3.27). In another leaf, Chen writes, "Hongshou painted this after the style of Northern Song for Daoist friend, Cangfu." Little is known about Lin Tingdong, a close companion of Chen Hongshou in the final years of his life. But Chen clearly saw Lin as someone who could truly understand the art and history of painting, as well as the complexities behind his own creations. This is evidenced by a long inscription that Chen left on a now-lost handscroll painted for Lin in 1651, which is Chen's only extensive discussion of his artistic theories and approaches.[75] Perhaps for the same reason, Chen gladly fulfilled Lin's many requests for particular styles and subject matters, as recorded in the album's inscriptions. In doing so, he gifted Lin with a rather comprehensive collection that distills the painter's artistic virtuosity into twenty vignettes. More interestingly and most important for our discussion, Chen allowed Lin a glimpse into the "backstage" of his artistic process by showing, in the leaf of the figure and the rock, how it felt to deeply connect with the objects that inspired him, and to capture their essence with ink and brush.

[74] Chen Hongshou often refers to Lin Tingdong with his courtesy name, Zhongqing 仲青, or his style name, Cangfu Jushi 蒼夫居士.

[75] The full text is first transcribed in Qing scholar Chen Zhuo 陳焯's painting catalogue, *Xiangguang zhai yushang bian* 湘管齋寓賞編 as the inscription on a painting for Lin Tingdong titled *Xishan Qingxia tu* 溪山清夏圖. The essay is also included in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 21-2.

Artifice of Nature

Thus far, we have examined some of Chen Hongshou's most distinctive representations of rocks, and contextualized these works within the cultural understanding of rocks and their imagery at the time, as well as within Chen's own artistic oeuvre and life experiences. It is now clear that throughout the painter's career, rocks not only served as a signature motif that he frequently entertained in a variety of works, but also as a site of continuous artistic experimentation and innovation. Furthermore, Chen's evolving renderings of rocks responded to the painter's artistic quests and mental states at some of the key moments of his life—when he was a young artist finding his own path, a professional painter whose pursuit extended beyond his busy work for the art market, and an accomplished artist who could reflect on his own artistic practice from a distance.

Chen Hongshou found various ways to imbue his rocks with a visceral liveliness and affective dynamism. It was the urge to capture the rocks' metamorphic forms and inherent vitality that led the artist to adopt and renew the approaches of previous artists in his early works, and to eventually arrive at the deceptively naive and intuitive style that maximizes the potential of each brushstroke to capture the unbounded animism within rocks. The rocks' emotional affectiveness and transformative power so deeply moved the painter, and drove him to stage such an interaction between human and rocks—and more particularly, artists and rocks—in his last works.

In this narrative of Chen Hongshou and his rocks, the animation of the painted rocks both enables and is enabled by the liveliness within each brushstroke driven by the artist's restless creative impulse, to the point that these images of rocks become the epitomes of Chen Hongshou's artistic evolution and practice. It is hardly coincidental that among all the artifacts

Chen Hongshou studied and portrayed, it was rocks that assumed such a prominent role in his painting career. Certainly, like all the petrophiles around him, Chen Hongshou could not resist such an object that was so visually compelling and culturally complex. But specifically, as seen in a poem that I have discussed earlier, Chen was amazed by the rocks' mesmerizing, ever-changing forms, which he viewed as the result of "the finest craft of nature." This line invokes one of the most intriguing aspects of rocks: they have always been perceived as simultaneously natural and artificial in some ways. On the one hand, attributing the formation of natural rocks to the intentional design and labor—or *gong* 工—of some non-human force was a common trope in describing the fascinating appearances of rocks. On the other hand, although it was widely known that many rocks adorning gardens or desks were artificially enhanced through carving, coloring, and polishing, the objective of these manual interventions was always to amplify the rocks' perceived naturalness.[76] In other words, the case of rocks presents the natural and the artificial not as oppositions, but as complementary aspects that mutually reveal and enhance one another.

Similarly, good painting was viewed as an artistry that could only be achieved through the painter's technical finesse, yet, seemingly paradoxically, derived from a profound connection to nature as well. The conceptual fluidity between the artificial and the natural in painting is captured in a now famous verse by Ming scholar Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488-1559): "A real landscape that resonates with the heart is just like a painting, while a skillful hand creates

[76] In Judith Zeitin's words, "A rock was an art object, but one valued for its exquisite naturalness, not for the ingenuity and artifice of human skill." See "The Petrified Heart: Obsession in Chinese Literature," 12. Zeitlin also discusses the process of manufacture that could go into a rock that appeared natural in "The Secret Life of Rocks: Objects and Collectors in the Ming and Qing Imagination," *Orientation* 30.5 (1999): 40. The "artistry" or *qiao* 巧 in collectable rocks – referring to the human interventions on natural rocks with metal tools—is already emphasized in the twelfth-century *Yunlin shipu*. See Edward Schafer, *Tu Wan's Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest: Commentary and Synopsis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 30.

paintings that are just like the real nature (會心山水真如畫，巧手丹青畫似真)."[77] Late-Ming scholar Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛 (1567-1624) further articulated the ultimate connection between human craft and that of nature: "The skill of humans, when perfected in painting, can be said to replace the craftsmanship of nature and reveal the mysteries of the the formation and transformation of the universe (人之技巧，至於畫而極，可謂奪天地之工，洩造化之祕)"[78] It can thus be argued that, in terms of their shared fluid coexistence of artificiality and naturality, a rock can be analogous to a painting.

Consequently, the connection—or even oneness—between human and nature is often highlighted through the painting of rocks. In an album leaf painted in 1619, alongside Chen's early experimentation with rock depictions, a small figure blends into a rocky mountain landscape. The figure's robe subtly echoes the shapes of nearby rock formations, while his hat merges with the weeds growing atop the rocks (Fig. 3.30). In the accompanying inscription, Chen Hongshou expresses his satisfaction with his technique in rendering the rocky terrain in the painting: "In this painting, I have reached the utmost effects of brushwork, style, and thought. As for the wonder of ink, it lies in the place without ink. Those who understand painting will surely agree (此為用筆、用格、用思之至也。若用墨之妙，在無墨處，解者當首肯)."[79] What does he mean by the "wonder" that "lies in the place without ink"? Although "the place without ink" could be directly interpreted as the empty spaces at the top and bottom of the composition, it more likely refers to the lack of *cun* texturing on the rocks in this painting. This approach to

[77] Yang Shen, *Zhailu* 摘錄, in Zhang Xiaozhuang and Chen Qifan comp., *Mingdai biji riji huihua shiliao huibian* 明代筆記日記繪畫史料彙編 (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2019), 100
[78] Xie Zhaozhe, *Wu Zazu* 五雜俎, in *Mingdai biji riji huihua shiliao huibian*, 500.
[79] Translation based on the records on the Metropolitan Museum of Art website, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed July 17, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44759.

portraying rocks was advocated by Chen's contemporary Gui Changshi 歸昌世 (1573-1644), who believed that it could avoid the "style of painting artisans" (畫工氣) and thus better convey the literati spirit of the painter.[80] Or, in the words of Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) in his well-circulated book on painting history, technique and theory: "Do not put too much effort into the rocks, and they will naturally appear graceful and elegant (不在石上著力而石自秀潤矣)."[81] Dong further explains his idea on the best portrayal of rock formations through his commentary of Wang Wei's paintings: " In my opinion, Youcheng (Wang Wei)'s traces of cloudy mountains and rock forms converge with the workings of nature; with brushstrokes that are free and unrestrained, [his works] participate in the creative forces of the cosmic (余謂右丞云峰石跡，回合天機，筆思縱橫，參乎造化)." In Dong's understanding, the artist, through painting the mountains and rocks with his own hand and brush, not only mimics nature's spontaneous and dynamic creativity in his own process, but also becomes one with the work of nature itself.

However, Chen Hongshou was not satisfied with merely equaling what nature could do. Even in his early album leaves of rocks, the recreation and innovation of brushwork techniques from ancient masters seem equally if not more important to the painter than capturing the likeness of rocks in reality. And in the *Plum Branch, Rock and Butterflies* handscroll and the *Ancient Plum* album leaf, the artist unapologetically showcases the fabricated nature of the rocks in the paintings by emphasizing and exaggerating each trace of the brush. Yet one may argue that

[80] "The bones of the rock should not be overly textured with cun brushwork; too much will make it resemble the style of a craftsman. A few strong and succinct strokes will better convey the spirit of a literati (石骨不可多皴，多則近畫工氣，勁筆略鉤，方有士氣爾)." In Gui Changshi, *Jia'an zazhu* 假庵杂著, in *Mingdai biji riji huihua shiliao huibian*, 522.

[81] Dong Qichang, "Huajue 畫訣," in *Hua chanshi siubi* 畫禪室隨筆, reprinted in *Dong Qichang Quanji* 董其昌全集 (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chuban she, 2013), juan 3, 111.

in these works, the human force triumphs over that of nature—or at least provides another way from which life emerges: Chen Hongshou's painted rocks seem even more lively and animated than those in real life. In fact, these rocks are "alive" precisely because of their painter—and only through his ink and brush.

The signature that Chen Hongshou left on the Cleveland album leaf betrays the painter's awareness of the power of his own artistry to bring inanimate matter to animation. The signature reads "Hongshou *zhi* (洪綬製)," directly translatable to "made by Hongshou." Chen Hongshou's choice of the verb *zhi*, which hardly if ever appears elsewhere in his works, was highly unusual and thus likely deliberate. In fact, although Chen Hongshou's signatures do not always include a verb following the name, when they do, the selection is often purposeful. The two images of religious figures from the same album set, for example, are both inscribed with "Hongshou *respectfully pictured* 洪綬敬圖."[82] And in another three leaves depicting flowers, the verb "copied after" (*mo* 摹 or *fang* 仿) is included to emphasize the techniques of ancient masters from which Chen Honghou was inspired. More generic verbs such as "created" (*zuo* 作) and "painted"(*hua* 畫) are used in a few other leaves from the set. Besides its scarce appearance in Chen Hongshou's inscriptions, the term *zhi* is particularly curious for a painting depicting a scholarly figure holding a brush, as it was more closely associated with the fabrication of craft products. In *Kanxi zidian* 康熙字典 (*Kangxi Dictionary*) published a few decades later than the time of Chen Hongshou, the character *zhi* 製, when used as a verb, is explained as primarily synonymous to "*cai* 裁"—"to tailor." It then assumed the broader meaning of "*zao* 造" to refer to the often specialized manufacturing of three-dimensional artifacts, such as architecture,

[82] Italic my own.

carriages, and boats.[83] *Zhi* could also be used similarly to "*zhu* 著"— "to write," a meaning presumably derived from the term's close relation to *cai* and *zao*, both of which could be employed to describe the craft of writing, emphasizing its technical aspects.[84] When used in connection with visual images, as in the term "*zhitu* 製圖" (literally "making pictures"), it typically referred to the creation of maps, plans, schemes, or designs—images that are structured, practical, often technical in nature, and participating in the study or fabrication of physical objects.

Was Chen Hongshou aligning his painting with the work of a craftsman by using the term *zhi*? This seems unlikely, as he never identified himself as a professional painter, let alone a craftsman.[85] In a text where he humbly reflects on his own achievements, he describes that his painting "may not be exquisite, but nonetheless transcends those by craftsmen by a distance 畫即不精，頗遠工匠."[86] I would argue that Chen used *zhi* to specifically emphasize the craft of the rocks within the painting, with the brush acting as the tool that "chisels out" the striking forms of the rocks in the picture. For one, although there is ample empty space on the right side of the painting for Chen to inscribe his name, he counterintuitively chose to squeeze the characters between the contours of the rock.[87] The peculiar position of the signature makes it appear as if it were an inscription written or even carved on the rock surface; but it also evokes the signature

[83] See, Zhang Yushu 張玉書 et al., *Jiaozheng Kangxi zidian* 校正康熙字典 (Corrected Compendium of standard characters from the Kangxi period Corrected Kangxi character dictionary), ed. Watanabe Atsushi 渡部温 and Yan Yiping 嚴一萍 (Taipei: Yiwen yishu guan, 1965), 2535-2536.
[84] See quote above. The use of *cai* 裁 and *zao* 造 in describing writing is also suggested in *Kangxi Dictionary*. See *Jiaozheng Kangxi zidian*, 2530 and 2854.
[85] He was even hesitant to identify himself as a painter; rather, he always wished to be seen as a scholar. See Wang, *Chen Hongshou*, 9.
[86] Chen Hongshou, "Thoughts at Taizi Bay 太子灣識," in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 23.
[87] Indeed, it is most common for a painter to leave their signature to the left side of the composition; but Chen Hongshou also frequently wrote his name and inscriptions on the right side, including on one of the other leaves from the same album.

that an artisan might leave on a work they have crafted. For another, I can't help but think of the common technique of *fupi cun* 斧劈皴, a kind of texturing brushstroke often used to depict the weathered texture of rocks. While noticeably absent in this painting, this rather ubiquitous technique compares painting with a brush to chopping (*pi* 劈) with an axe (*fu* 斧), thus effectively equating the act of painting to the act of shaping and texturing a physical rock.

Chen Hongshou therefore asserts himself as the creator of the rock, despite its depiction within a natural environment. Yet the rock refuses to be possessed or tamed, even by its maker. As the painter captures and enlivens the rock, the rock is depicted as confronting and transforming the painter in the picture, making him so enthralled that he assumes the appearance of a rock himself. The painting therefore presents a much more convoluted relationship between the natural and the artificial, as well as between the painter and the object that he painted: the painter's brush transforms the natural into the artificial, and only then can the objects truly be animated—only to once again fall beyond the control of the man who brought them to life, and manifest their agency.

Chapter 4 Animating Statues

There is one special category of objects—if we may call them that—with which Chen Hongshou intimately engaged in his life and art. This category comprises Buddhist icons in various media and scales—specifically, paintings and statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. On the one hand, these objects continued to serve religious functions during the Ming-Qing era and were valued for qualities that transcended their material form within that context. On the other hand, they were increasingly integrated into secular discourses on material artifacts. As discussed in previous chapters, the emergence of a connoisseurship literature during this period attests to a newfound interest in categorizing, assessing, and appreciating objects based on their visual and material qualities. Buddhist ritual items, including niches, offering tables, incense burners, and rosary beads, were no exception. They were evaluated alongside other collectibles, with an emphasis on their artistic qualities and choice of materials that implied the objects' monetary value, sensuous characteristics, and the owners' taste.[1]

Chen Hongshou interacted with Buddhist images in both ways. In his writings, he records many instances where he venerated, appreciated, but also collected and created such objects. At home, he kept an image of the Buddha in the main hall and worshiped it with incense twice a day.[2] The image might be the embroidered Buddha he had mentioned in earlier texts—one he had waited a long time to have made, and before which he once arranged young plum branches

[1] For example, in Wen Zhenheng 文震亨's *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志 (Superfluous Things), incense burners, rosary beads, scriptures are listed in the same category as stationery and home décor, and only their aesthetic and material appeals are evaluated, rather than their efficacy in religious activities. See Wen, *Zhangwu zhi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2021), juan 7. Buddhist statues are mentioned in the entries on the Buddha Hall and the study, alongside discussions of interior decoration in other domestic spaces, such as the bedroom and the garden pagoda. In each case, emphasis is placed solely on the statue's material, craftsmanship, and how it should be paired with other decorative items. See Wen, *Zhangwu zhi*, juan 8.

[2] " The Buddha image is placed in the central hall, with incense offered at dawn and dusk. (佛像供中堂, 晨昏一炷香.)" See Chen Hongshou, "Qiandiao 前調," in Wu Gan 吳敢 ed., *Chen Hongshou ji* 陳洪綬集 (Complete Works of Chen Hongshou) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2012), 650.

in vases as offerings.[3] Like many literati and Buddhist devotees of his time, Chen often visited temples, where he encountered various statues of Buddhist deities. One noteworthy instance occurred in 1650, when Chen came across a stone statue of a Bodhisattva in the likeness of Su Shi during a visit to the Gaoli Temple 高麗寺 in Hangzhou. The hall housing the statue had fallen into ruin, and the protective niche had been lost. Chen and his friend therefore constructed a simple hutch to shield the statue from the elements.[4] As a painter, Chen created numerous paintings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas—many for the art market, some for temples, and others for families and friends in need of the deities' blessings. More often, though, Chen, being a pious Buddhist, viewed portraying Buddhas as a private act of meditation and merit-making, similar to copying and reciting scriptures.[5]

Chen Hongshou clearly believed that the Buddhist images he made could truly evoke—or themselves become—divine presence. In his inscription on a hanging scroll depicting Bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音 (Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara or Guanshiyin 觀世音), Chen describes the painting as delivering "the unobstructed teachings of the Western sages" (西方聖人無遮教)

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[3] See Chen Hongshou, "Qiezhi qi qi 且止 其七" and "Ji jizhi fuyao ruishi 寄繼之復邀銳師," in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 120 and 230.

[4] "The Gaoli Wangzi temple, with a statue of So Dongpo (Sushi) as its guardian Bodhisattva. The hall for the statute, along with the temple itself, was destroyed; and the statue also lost its niche……Zhang Mingmou and I hastily built a small shelter for it (高麗王子寺，東坡為伽藍。祠因其寺毀，像亦失其龕……余與張明謀，草率結一廬)." Chen Hongshou, "You gaoli si ji 游高麗寺記," in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 64. The incident, however, is appropriate to a pious scholar like Chen Hongshou, independent of his identity as an artist.

[5] Chen Hongshou repeatedly juxtaposed painting images of Buddhas, *huafo* 畫佛 or *xiefo* 寫佛, with copying scriptures, *shujing* 書經 or *xiejing* 寫經. It should be noted that *xiefo*, when mentioned alone, literally translates to "portraying the Buddha" and does not specify whether it is done through painting or writing. The character *xie* 写 can mean either "writing" or "painting from life"; when assuming the first translation, *xiefo* becomes synonymous with copying scriptures—the Buddha's speech. However, Chen Hongshou often mentions *xiefo* alongside *shujing* or *xiejing*, indicating that *xiefo* must have meant something different from writing scriptures, i.e., painting Buddha images. In one text, Chen mentions that a friend helped him prepare the inkstone and the gold and green pigments (為吾洗硯調金碧) when he was engaged in *xiefo*. The use of colorful pigments makes it almost certain that in this context, *xiefo* meant painting the Buddha. For Chen Hongshou's use of the two terms together, see Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 96, 177, 211.

(Fig. 4.1). While the term "wuzhe"(無遮) undoubtedly references the religious gathering *wuzhe fahui* 無遮法會 (dharma assembly without obstruction) to emphasize the Buddha's all-encompassing nature, one that does not discriminate based on gender, ethnicity, age, and social status,[6] the Chinese characters, literally translated as "unobstructed" or "unblocked," could also be interpreted as simply describing the direct teaching of Guanyin that the painting presents. We can reasonably infer that Chen Hongshou, who often enshrouded his images and words with cryptic metaphors and double meanings, might have also chosen this term to hint at the unmediated presence of the divine that his painting embodied. While Chen Hongshou identifies the figure in the painting as "the Great Bodhisattva Guanyin in white robe" (曩漠白衣觀世音菩薩訶薩) who is about to bestow a son to her believer (豁來送佳兒), he did not follow the conventional way of portraying the deity. Not only do the colorful accessories and patterned inner layers obscure her iconic white robe, but she is also depicted without the halo customarily used to signify the goddess's celestial status. Chen's pictorial interpretation humanizes the divine bodhisattva, presenting her with the approachability of a mortal woman in a practical stance for carrying a child: her bare feed spread apart for stability, torso leaning back to counterbalance the boy sitting on her hip, and left arm between the child's leg to secure him in place.[7] Both Guanyin and the boy gaze toward their lower right, and the boy reaches towards the painting's edge with a striking sense of animation and presence. When hung up on the wall, the celestial figures would appear to be gazing upon and interacting with the worshiper standing before the painting.

[6] This assembly was closely related to the Indian pañcavārṣika tradition. See Max Deeg, "Origins and Development of the Buddhist Pañcavārṣika, Part II: China," in *Nagoya Studies in Indian Culture and Buddhism: Sanbhāshā* 18 (1997): 63-96.
[7] I am indebted to Andrei Pop for this insightful observation.

This approach of evoking the presence of Buddhist deities by portraying them as corporeal, humanlike, and animate figures who directly interact with viewers outside the pictorial frame is commonly found, to various degrees, throughout Chen Hongshou's extensive production of Buddhist images. However, this chapter will focus instead on three instances from the final years of the artist's life, where he presents deities primarily as material artifacts on display—in contrast to his customary approach we have just examined. Most intriguingly, these manufactured icons retain a subtle liveliness through Chen's intentionally ambivalent renderings of their materiality and their interactions with human figures within the paintings. The first work to be discussed is *Elegant Gathering*, a handscroll painted between 1646 and 1647, which we have briefly looked at in the previous chapter (Fig. 3.3).[8] In this painting, a group of figures gather around an image of a Buddhist deity in a garden setting (Fig. 4.2). The deity's tied hair flowing upwards, the almost cartoonish face, and the stylized rendering of the robe are unusual elements that would likely confuse and intrigue even those well-versed in Buddhist iconography. While one might nevertheless immediately read this motif, placed on an altar in front of devotees, as a small statue, its twisting and twirling silhouette—among other visual elements that

[8] Based on Chen's signature, Repentant Monk (Senghui 僧悔), which appears on Chen's other works around 1647, Weng Wan-go follows Zheng Zhuolu's opinion and believes that the work was made after summer 1646 but likely in 1647. Seung Hee Oh, in her recent dissertation, dates this painting to the short period from summer 1646 to early 1647, when Chen Hongshou took refuge in the Yunmen Temple 雲門寺 as an ordained Buddhist monk, based on the painting's ritualistic implications. Other scholars, including Hsing-li Tsai, Ann Burkus-Chasson, and Liao Yuanyu, also date this work similarly to 1646 to 1647. See Zheng Zhuolu 鄭拙廬, "Tan Chen Hongshou yaji tu juan" 談陳洪綬《雅集圖卷》 (A Discussion of Chen Hongshou's Elegant Gathering), in *Yilin conglu* 藝林從錄, v. 5 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1964) 223-6; Weng Wan-go 翁萬戈, *Chen Hongshou de yishu* (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chuban she, 2021), 177; Seung Hee Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness: Self-Aware Fictionality in the Pictorial Art of Seventeenth-Century China," (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2023), 131-177; Hsing-li Tsai, "Ch'en Hung-Shou's Elegant Gathering: A Late-Ming Pictorial Manifesto of Pure Land Buddhism" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1997); Anne Burkus-Chasson, "Between Representations: The Historical and the Visionary in Chen Hongshou's Yaji," *Art Bulletin* 84, no. 2 (2002): 315-333; Liao Yuanyu 廖冤雨, "Chen Hongshou 'Yaji tu juan' kao" 陳洪綬《雅集圖卷》考, *Mei yuan* 美苑, no. 4 (2013): 80–87.

we will discuss—also give it a strong sense of animation, as if the image is coming to life. The second work in question, *Children Worshiping the Buddha* (*Tongzo lifo tu* 童子禮佛圖) dated to 1650, presents an equally strange object (Fig. 4.3).[9] In this humorous scene, three clumsy boys venerate a meticulously depicted Buddha statue, whose monochromatic brown shades—often interpreted as representing metal—confirm its "thingness," yet who seems to respond to the boys with an empathetic gaze.[10] Our third case study is a section from *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu* (*Nan Shenglu si le tu* 南生魯四樂圖), a long handscroll made in 1649 (Fig. 4.4).[11] In this scene, a miniature Buddha statue is portrayed with wood-like patterning and sheer ink in warm tones, thus revealing its materiality without committing to any specific material. It also features an unusual hand gesture that deviates from the standard mudras for Buddhist statues but mirrors that of the human figure in the same composition.

The coexistence, tension, and negotiation of the statues' materiality and animation—which often implies efficaciousness in the religious context—is the key to understanding these works and the artist's intent at work in these peculiar depictions. Indeed, the simultaneous thingness and liveliness found in these images reflects a larger and longstanding discourse surrounding Buddhist icons. Broadly speaking, one aspect that always makes sculptures as well as paintings of Buddhist deities an extraordinary category of objects is their unstable ontological status as material entities. On the one hand, made with metal, wood, stone, and lacquer, or ink,

[9] Although this work does not bear a date, Chen's inscription mentions that he painted it at Hulan Caotang 護蘭草堂—likely the same place as the Hulan Shutang 護蘭書堂 where he painted *Doucao shinu tu* 鬥草仕女圖 (*Ladies in Grass Fighting*) in the Gengyin 庚寅 year (1650) according to the inscription. See Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 211.

[10] The metal material of the statue is discussed in Wang Zhongxu 王中旭, "Xiying, minsu yu wanming fojiao xinyang: Chen Hongshou tongzi lifo tu yanjiu 戲嬰、民俗與晚明佛教信仰——陳洪綬《童子禮佛圖》研究," *Meishu yanji*u 美術研究 no. 3 (2020): 24-5. Scholars including Seung Hee Oh, Patritia Berger, and Wan-go Weng also mentioned the material as metal-based in passing.

[11] This handscroll bears the date of "Jichou zhongdong 己醜仲冬"—mid-winter of the year *jichou* (1649).

pigment, silk, and paper, these Buddhist icons are certainly material. Although strict Buddhist doctrine often downplayed the role of materiality in the production and veneration of Buddha images, in practice, the choice of materials and the making process mattered greatly to their religious significance and functionality, and were carefully attended to by commissioners, artisans, and worshippers from early on.[12] On the other hand, the material vehicle of a Buddha image only served to portray and thus mediate the "true presence" of the Buddha, which, in turn, endowed the image itself—whether painting or sculpture—with sacred or miraculous power.[13] Several scholars have examined the historical anecdotes and textual records concerning animated images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the context of early to medieval China.[14] While the efficacy of painted or sculpted icons largely derived from the power of their divine resonance, in

[12] Wei-Cheng Lin has argued for a system of Buddhist materiality on the practical level in early medieval China: see Lin, "Materiality of Buddhist Icons on Early Medieval China," in *The Allure of Matter: Materiality across Chinese Art*, ed. Orianna Cacchione and Wei-Cheng Lin (Chicago: The Smart Museum of Art, 2021), 32-63. Scholars have also discussed the significance of various materials in making sacred images in Buddhism, including: Wei-Cheng Lin, *Building a Sacred Mountain: The Buddhist Architecture of China's Mount Wutai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 64–80; Donna Strahan and Blythe McCarthy ed., *Research on Early Chinese Lacquer Buddhas: Proceedings of the Sixth Forbes Symposium at the Freer Gallery of Art* (London: Archetype Publications in association with the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2023); Cheng Lin Sheng, "Sandalwood and Buddhism: A Perspective of Material Culture," *Quarterly Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 2022 (Vol. LXX) No. 3: 7-31.

[13] See Lin, "Materiality of Buddhist Icons on Early Medieval China," 36-40. "True presence," or *zhenrong* 真容, was used in medieval times to refer to sacred icons that could evoke the Buddha's presence. See Sun-ah Choi, "*Zhenrong* to *Ruixiang*: The Medieval Chinese Reception of the Mahābodhi Buddha Statue," *Art Bulletin* 97, no. 4 (2015): 364–387.

[14] This includes Wu Hung, "Rethinking Liu Sahe: The Creation of a Buddhist Saint and the Invention of a 'Miraculous Image'," *Orientations* 27, no. 10 (1996), 32-43; Glen Dudbridge, "Buddhist Images in Action: Five Tales from the Tang," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 10 (1998): 377-91; Koichi Shinohara, "Changing Roles for Miraculous Images in Medieval Chinese Buddhism: A Study of the Miracle Image Section in Daoxuan's 'Collected Records,'" in *Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions*, ed. Richard H. Davis (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998),141-88; Michelle C. Wang, "Early Chinese Buddhist Sculptures as Animate Bodies and Living Presences," *Ars Orientalis* vol. 46 (2016): 13-38. The overwhelming emphasis on medieval sources in previous discussions of animated Buddhist images is largely due to the proliferation of writings on this matter and related ritual practices from this period, which Wei-Cheng Lin has identified as the "material turn" in East Asian Buddhism. Lin argues that between the tenth and twelfth centuries, an emerging consensus saw corporeality and materiality as the very medium for spirituality. This led to a reconceptualization of the icon that recognized its "thingness" without negating its potential as an embodiment of the divine. See Lin, "Broken Bodies: The Death of Buddhist Icons and Their Changing Ontology in Tenth-through Twelfth-Century China." In *Refiguring East Asian Religious Art*, ed. Paul Copp and Wu Hung (Chicago: The Center for the Art of East Asia, 2019), 97.

some instances, icons also seemed to assume their own autonomy or even personalities.[15] In any case, Buddhist icons were never regarded as merely dormant material artifacts, but active and agentic—or at least possessed of the potential for animation or even life.[16] As I will show, in the late-Imperial period, stories of animated Buddhist images continued to be retold and recorded, although in these later texts, a Buddhist image's craftsmanship and artistic value—qualities that may seem to emphasize the artificiality and thingness of these objects—did not seem to diminish their efficacy; at times, they even became the very source of their potency and animation. Both a maker and a worshiper of Buddhist images, Chen Hongshou was certainly aware of these new aspects of Buddhist icons, as evidenced by writings and paintings to be examined in this chapter.

All completed within the last five years of the painter's life when he began to actively engage in a mode of painting that is self-reflective toward his subject matters and methods—as I suggested in the previous chapter—these three paintings collectively demonstrate Chen's evolving understanding of Buddhist icons and their unstable ontology. In particular, Chen intentionally renders Buddhist statues in a liminal state that hinges between inanimate object and responsive manifestation, thereby perpetually reenacting the very moments of the statues' coming-to-life. Led to first discern and eventually resolve the tension between the artificial and the divine, the viewer becomes witness to the miraculous happening that the paintings set in force. At the center of this process is the intertwinement of materiality and efficacy, enacted

[15] John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 63-9 and 80.

[16] As Michelle C. Wang points out, even when statues were never seen moving, they were sometimes imagined to engage in locomotion when no one was looking. See Wang, "Early Chinese Buddhist Sculptures as Animate Bodies and Living Presences," 28. Wei-Cheng Lin, also suggests that the Buddha images were once considered living corporeal bodies before they were broken. See Lin, "Broken Bodies," 78-103. Jennifer Purtle has also discussed the issues of animated/animating Buddhist images in "The Great Buddhas' Roving Eyes: Imagining Animation and Animating Images between Han and Tang," in *Hang Tang zhijian de shijue wenhua yu wuzhi wenhua* 漢唐之間的視覺文化與物質文化 (Between Han and Tang: Visual and Material Culture in a Transformative Period), ed. Wu Hung (Beijing: Wenwu chuban she, 2003), 117-157.

through different visual mechanisms and serving distinctive purposes within each painting's pictorial and social context. In the following pages, I will start my discussion with a close analysis of the depiction of the Buddhist deity in *Elegant Gathering*, the earliest work in the group. The image's affinity to contemporaneous woodblock prints not only reveals Chen's familiarity with the existing doctrinal and visual conventions of image versus presence pertaining to Buddhist icons, but also provides an entry point for examining his departure from these conventions in the other two works. While both *Children Worshiping the Buddha* and the final scene of *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu* stand as Chen's visual expositions of how, in different ways, Buddhist statues become animated and efficacious fundamentally through the confrontation and problematization of their material nature, the former draws attention to the very act of painting in enlivening an image, whereas the latter addresses the devotee's part in bringing a statue to life.

Image/Presence

Elegant Gathering, a small handscroll now housed in the Shanghai Museum, was painted during Chen Hongshou's short priesthood at the Yunmen Temple, most likely between summer 1646 and early 1647.[17] Executed with faint, monochromatic line drawings (*baimiao* 白描) on paper, the painting depicts nine figures gathered in a garden of gnarled trees and withered rocks, surrounding an image of a Buddhist deity at the center. The image of the deity is best characterized by its ambiguity—both in its iconography and in its paradoxical presentation as a material statue whose unmistakable sense of movement and transformation challenges its static, manufactured nature.

[17] See footnote 7.

Previous studies have largely focused on decoding the painting's pictorial narrative and the context for which it was made, mostly through examining its painting style and deliberately complex iconography. Much ink has been spilled on understanding why these men were depicted, and what the nature of this gathering was within the historical context. Chen Hongshou himself annotated the human figures with their sobriquets in gold pigment.[18] These figures were either Chen's contemporaries or had lived in his immediate past, but all had passed away by the time of the painting's creation. Many have noted the painting's connection to the genre of *yaji* 雅集 (literally, elegant gathering) paintings made to commemorate gatherings of literati and friends, from which the painting assumed its posthumous name that has now been widely adopted.[19] While the figures included were indeed all like-minded scholars once involved in a tight-knit social network, most studies consider the depicted convocation to be fictional rather than historical. The inclusion of two of the three Yuan brothers—Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (marked with his sobriquet Yuan Zhonglang 袁中郎; 1568-1610) and Yuan Zongdao 袁宗道 (Yuan Boxiu 袁伯修; 1506-1600)—has led some scholars to speculate on the image's

[18] From right to left, they are: Tao Shiling 陶爽齡 (Tao Hunshuang 陶君爽; 1571-1640), Huang Hui 黃輝 (Huang Zhaosu 黃朝素; 1555-1612), Wang Zanhua 王讚化 (Wang Jingxu 王靜虛; act. late 16th century), Tao Yunjia 陶允嘉 (Tao Youmei 陶幼美; 1556-1622), the monk Yu'an 愚庵和尚 (1558–? or 1599–1665), Mi Wanzhong 米萬鐘 (Mi Zhongzhao 米仲詔; 1570-1628), Tao Wangling 陶望齡 (Tao Zhouwang 陶周望; 1562-1609), Yuan Zongdao 袁宗道 (Yuan Boxiu 袁伯修; 1506-1600), and Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (Yuan Zhonglang 袁中郎; 1568-1610). For information on biographies and networks of the participants, see Burkus-Chasson, "Between Representations"; Tsai, "Ch'en Hung-Shou's Elegant Gathering," 58–107; Patricia Ebrey, "Living in a World of Regret: Buddhist Paintings," in *Repentant Monk: Illusion and Disillusion in the Art of Chen Hongshou*, ed. Julia White (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 51-5; and Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness", 135-44. Oh notes two different years for monk Yu'an, as there were two monks with the same style name in two different time periods. See Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 140-2.

[19] Oh notes that the earliest reference of this painting as *Yaji tu* 雅集圖—*Elegant Gatherings*—is found in Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe 上海人民美術出版社, ed., *Lidai renwuhua xuanji* 歷代人物畫選集 (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1959), no page number. See Oh, 135. For an overview of the genre of "elegant gathering", see Lin Wanru 林宛儒, ed., *Yiwen huiyou: yaji tu tezhan* 以文會友: 雅集圖特展 (Taipei: Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 2019). Also see Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 135-7.

connection to the Grape Society (*Putao she* 葡萄社), a short-lived literature club established by the Three Yuans in Beijing and likely involving seven out of the eight figures.[20] In the meantime, the *baimiao* technique employed here, as first observed by James Cahill, recalls the style of Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049-1106), who was associated with later depictions of elegant gatherings, notably those portraying the renowned Buddhist group White Lotus Society (*bailian she* 白蓮社).[21] Indeed, all nine figures shared an enthusiasm for Buddhism, though some gravitated toward Chan Buddhism, while others were influenced by the teachings of the Pure Land master Zhuhong 袾宏 (1535-1615).[22]

The painting's religious significance is most evident in the central image of the Buddhist deity, which has become another focus of discussion in existing scholarship. The different interpretations of this motif have led to varied interpretations of the scene, although the answers to some key questions remain indirect: Does the figure represent Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (*Wenshu* 文殊) or the Guanyin Bodhisattva of the Lion's Roar (*Simhanada Avalokiteshvara*; *Shihou Guanyin* 獅吼觀音), both commonly depicted as mounted on a lion-like creature during this period? Is the figure meant to be understood as an actual sculpture on an altar, or as a divine manifestation appearing through the devotees' visions—an apparition, or even, an illusion? In her 1997 dissertation, Hsing-li Tsai contends that the deity is simultaneously Mañjuśrī and Guanyin, sculpture and incarnate appearance, therefore perfectly embodying the Pure Land idea

[20] With the exception of the monk Yu'an. See Ebrey, "Living in a World of Regret," 52-3.
[21] James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 129-31.
[22] This claim rests on the interactions between Zhuhong and Chen Hongshou, as well as seven out of the nine figures (Huang Hui and Tao Wangling were high-level precept disciples of Zhuhong; the Yuan brothers, Tao Shiling, Tao Yunjia, and Wang Zanhua were also associated to Zhuhong's Hangzhou circle). The correspondence between these figures and Zhuhong is closely examined in Tsai's 1997 dissertation. Also see Ebrey, "Living in a World of Regret," 53.

of non-duality.[23] Patricia Ebrey identifies the deity as Guanyin, while pointing out that the motif is deliberately conflated with that of Mañjuśrī in order to further associate the painting with the White Lotus Society that famously venerated Mañjuśrī, as well as with Li Gonglin, who pioneered the idea of Guanyin as an alternative to Mañjuśrī as spiritual guide.[24] Burkus-Chasson, also referring to the deity as Guanyin, reads the painting as a commentary on the nature of sight and seeing within Buddhism, as none of the figures in the painting is shown directly acknowledging the existence of the bodhisattva, thus rendering the authenticity and efficacy of the deity in the painting undetermined.[25] She further suggests that the painting conveys a skepticism toward the sincerity of Buddhist devotion in an era marked by war and political unrest, and characterized by increasingly commercialized pilgrimage activities surrounding the Guanyin cult.[26] Both Ebrey and Seung Hee Oh, however, maintain that the bodhisattva in the painting is undoubtedly efficacious. Ebrey fully embraces the idea that the bodhisattva is an evanescent, impalpable image seen through each figure's mind's eye. Oh argues that the painting was designed to function as an esoteric Buddhist ritual, possibly that of the *Great Compassion Dhāraṇī* (*Dabeixin tuoluoni jing* 大悲心陀羅尼經) closely associated with Guanyin, whose image is included to signify the specific dharati spell and complete the painting's "semi-mandalic structure."[27] In this scenario, whether the deity is a sculpture or intangible image becomes secondary to its central position in the composition. We will revisit the rest of Oh's arguments later in our discussion. For now, I would like to note that Oh's ritual reading of the

[23] Tsai, "Ch'en Hung-Shou's Elegant Gathering," 46-9.
[24] Ebrey, "Living in a World of Regret," 53-4.
[25] Burkus-Chasson, "Between Representations," 316-7.
[26] Ibid. Burkus-Chasson identifies the deity as Guanyin, thus connecting the image specifically to narratives of Guanyin visions and pilgrimages that were popular in the sixteenth century. See Burkus-Chasson, "Between Representations," 329-30.
[27] Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 145-53.

painting offers a refreshing perspective that steers the discussion away from iconographic disputes over individual motifs and towards examination of the visual and material mechanisms through which the painting acts out its religious function.

Likewise, my discussion does not aim to resolve the already intricate debates surrounding the painting's cryptic meanings *per se*. Rather, it examines how Chen Hongshou's portrayal of the bodhisattva deliberately draws upon and conflates two types of motifs from woodblock prints: the depiction of Buddhist statues and the representation of divine manifestations—or presence. I will suggest that by referencing and reinventing visual strategies from contemporaneous prints that address the intimate relationship between image and presence in a Buddhist iconic imagery, Chen positions his bodhisattva in a liminal space between physical representation and divine presence, thereby rendering the deity as perpetually "happening"—a key attribute that underlies most existing interpretations of the painting but has not been treated explicitly.

Our attention is first directed to the print tradition by the artist's stylistic choice regarding the brushwork on the Bodhisattva. Here, the clean, fine line drawing, which contrasts sharply with the painterly brushwork of rocks and trees as well as the simpler outlines of the figures, not only recalls Li Gonglin's style but also evoke that of woodblock prints. The stack of folded sutras on one side of the altar also leads the viewer to associate the image with prints, as sutras were one of the most popular subjects for printed publications.[28] Chen Hongshou's affinity to print culture needs no further elaboration. But it is worth noting that during his time at Yunmen, Chen gained access to the extensive Qi family library—which was moved to the Yunmen area

[28] Huang Shih-shan, *The Dynamic Spread of Buddhist Print Culture: Mapping Buddhist Book Roads in China and Its Neighbors* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), chapter 12.

around 1645—through his friendship with the Qi brothers, Qi Zhijia 祁豸佳 (1594-1683) and Qi Biaojia. The Qi library likely broadened his exposure to printed images from Buddhist canons and vernacular publications, and served as a major source of study during his sojourning in Yunmen when *Elegant Gathering* was made.[29] The library was destroyed by a devastating fire in 1597, and Qi Chengye 祁承㸁 (c. 1563-1628), the patriarch of the Qi family, had to rebuild the collection from scratch since then. The subsequent relocation to Yunmen, however, marked the fragmentation of the library, as numerous rare and old editions were lost.[30] When scholar Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695) visited the library in 1666, he noted that "all books from the Song and Yuan dynasties had gone (宋元文集已無存者)."[31] It is therefore safe to assume that most if not all titles that Chen Hongshou browsed in the Qi family collection were printed from the Ming dynasty onwards. For this reason, although the discourse on material statues and their divine manifestations can be traced back to the Tang dynasty, it is the more immediate Ming and early Qing printed materials—through which we can begin to grasp this later discourse on Buddhist icons, their materiality, and efficacy—that are most informative for understanding Chen's artistic decisions.

Chen certainly took inspirations from printed illustrations when he depicted the bodhisattva motif in *Elegant Gathering*. The Bodhisattva's smaller scale than human figures,

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[29] Chen Hongshou and Qi Zhijia were two of the ten founding members of the Yunmen Society 雲門社, who were referred to as Ten Disciples of Yumen (*Yunmen shizi* 雲門十子). The father of the Qi brothers, Qi Chengye, was a government official and prominent scholar who constructed and assembled the much famed Zhansheng Tang library 澹生堂, which included over nine thousands books that are listed in *Dansheng tang cang shumu* 澹生堂藏書目, reprint in *Congshu jicheng xubian* 叢書集成續編 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1994). Chen's likely access to the Qi family is first pointed out in Oh's dissertation. See Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 157.

[30] For an overview of the Qi family library, see Peng Xinghua 彭杏花, "Dansheng tang cangshu kao 澹生堂藏書考," in *Tushuguan jie* 圖書館界, 2009 (1): 5-6, 20.

[31] Huang Zongyi, *Tianyi ge cangshu ji* 天一閣藏書記, quoted in Li Xibi 李希泌 comp., *Zhongguo gudai cangshu yu jindai tushu guan shiliao* 中國古代藏書與近代圖書館史料 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 37.

three-quarter view, and placement on a high altar in front of various ritual paraphernalia all speak to the statue's status as an artifact, as often illustrated in prints. For example, in a late-Ming compilation of *zaju* plays, two illustrations feature statues of a Buddha and a Daoist deity placed upon altars (Fig. 4.5).[32] Although elaborately delineated with varying details, neither statue plays a significant role in the narrative, which partially accounts for their smaller size compared to the human characters. Along with the ritual fittings, furnishing, and architectural interior—all depicted from a three-quarter angle—the statues serve as part of the material concomitants that mark the religious character of the settings. An attempt to emphasize the material quality of the bodhisattva image can also be found in *Elegant Gathering.* The fine, crisp, and densely packed lines, which can be observed on the bodhisattva, ritual vessels, seating mats, and the monk's robes—but nowhere else in the painting—visually align the deity with other material artifice in the picture, thus reinforcing its status as a statue.[33]

Yet one may nevertheless be struck by the subtle yet distinctive sense of animation and transformation that this bodhisattva image embodies. Such an effect is primarily achieved through the pictorial ambiguities created by the brushwork, where various motifs seem to merge into one another: the calligraphic wavy lines depicting the bodhisattva's hair strands are echoed

[32] Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸 points out that the Qi family library was among the few late-imperial book collections that included this book, *Xinjuan gujin mingju liuzhi ji* 新鐫古今名劇柳枝集, which includes *Qiannü lihun* and these illustrations appear. The book is one volume from the anthology *Gujin mingju hexuan* 古今名劇合選 carved in 1633 and printed during the Chongzhen 崇祯 period (1628-1644). See Zheng Zhenduo, *Zheng zhenduo quanji* 鄭振鐸全集 (Shijia zhuang: Huashan wenyi chunban she, 1998),vol. 6, 457-8.

[33] The echoing brushwork between the bodhisattvas and the vessels has also been pointed out by Ming Mei 明媚, who further suggests that such a representational method prompts the viewer to shift focus from the narrative of the image to an observation of the details of the objects. Ming then suggests that the bodhisattva figure is both material and illusory, which leads to her main argument about the fictionality and historical realism that painting presents, largely echoing what has already been brought up in previous studies. See Ming, "Chen Hongshou 'Yaji tu juan' de xushi kongjian yu shijue xiangxiang: yi guanyin xingxiang jiangou ji qi xiangzheng yuyi weili" (陳洪綬《雅集圖卷》的敘事空間與視覺想象：以觀音形象建構及其象征寓意為例), *Meishu daguan* 美術大觀, no. 6 (2020): 3.

in the neighboring patterns of the headlight; the striated belly of the sprouted ewer seamlessly blends into the robe's folds, while the partially outlined hand dissolves into the textile; likely seated cross-legged, the deity's bare toes peek through the bottom of the robe, which coils into spiral shapes that are almost indistinguishable from the spiraling fur of the lion; and the lion's protruding tongue turns into one stem of the lotus flowers wrapping around the beast (Fig. 4.6). The trembling, unevenly saturated brushstrokes further add to the visual instability of the image, as if it is involved in an ongoing process of transformation—a trick that the painter already used in an early "still-life" work to capture the ever-changing surface of an oxidizing bronze vase (Fig. 1.9). That is to say, the bodhisattva statue is portrayed as more than merely a static material object.

Printed representations of miraculous manifestations frequently charged with a sense of movement may have served as a source of inspiration for Chen Hongshou when he infused the bodhisattva with such a vitality. The "thingness" of the statue motifs in the previously mentioned illustrations is entirely absent in the next two cases, which can serve as examples of how divine manifestations are often illustrated in prints around this time. In an 1696 illustration of the popular "Universal Gateway of Guanshiyin" (*Guanshiyin pumen pin* 觀世音普門品) chapter in the *Lotus Sutra* (*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經; *Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma*), a large image of Guanyin hovers over the city wall (Fig. 4.7). The accompanying text describes how reciting the name of Guanyin can free a person from any physical restraints or bonds. We may interpret the illustration as depicting Guanyin's manifestation in response to the praying figures. While she is positioned in front of an altar, no one would mistake her for a static sculpture. Whether a vision or a presence, the Guanyin figure, much larger in scale than the human figures and dominating the composition, is also differentiated from the material objects in

the scene through its intentional pictorial flatness, with little indication of volume and depth. Yet the Guanyin image is also imbued with a strong sense of animation, as her head leans forward towards the worshippers, and her robe morphs into the swirling clouds—a detail that echoes Chen Hongshou's treatment of the bodhisattva image in *Elegant Gathering*.

Another instance of a bodhisattva's miraculous manifestation can be found in an illustration from the late Ming collection of short vernacular stories *Xihu erji* 西湖二集 (*West Lake Stories, Second Collection*) (Fig. 4.8). The scene is summarized by the text at upper right, quoted from the story that the picture illustrates: "Sincerely holding the dhāraṇī brings forth the sacred manifestation of the Buddhist spirit 持咒虔誠現佛靈."[34] The divine spirit in the sky—more precisely, Bodhisattva Mañjuśrīon a lion—is again characterized by a sense of liveliness through the trail of auspicious clouds that indicates the direction of his movement, and his body—as well as that of the lion's—turning towards the kneeling devotee. Likewise, the beast that carries the deity in *Elegant Gathering* turns towards and stares at the figure in action—chanting the dhāraṇī in a sutra, according to Oh—in front of the altar table.[35]

In woodblock prints, the clear distinction between the two primary statuses of Buddhist icons—whether as material artifacts or manifested presence—directly relates to the functional purposes of these pictures: they serve as either instructional or story-telling devices whose narrative clarity is the paramount concern. The duo status of Buddhist icons, while maintaining their respective distinctness, were constantly juxtaposed in depictions of active icons. In *Shishi yuanliu yinghua shiji*, 釋氏源流應化事跡 (The Origins, Transformations and Deeds of Buddha),

[34] Referencing Paul Copp's study, Oh points out that "'to hold dhāraṇī [持咒]'in Chinese indicates not only the act of holding the written scripture but also the actual undertaking of the ritual." See Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 150 and Paul Copp, *The Body Incantatory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 3.
[35] Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 150.

a compilation of illustrated stories on the life of the Buddha frequently reprinted during the late imperial period, a paired text and illustration describes a miraculous episode experienced by the prominent Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi 智顗 (538-597) early in his priesthood (Fig. 4.9). Truncated from his biography in the fourteenth-century *Xinxiu kefen liuxue seng zhuan* 新修科分六學僧傳 (*Newly Edited and Compiled Biographies of Monks of the Six Learnings*), the text describes Zhiyi's practice of the Lotus Samādhi (*Fahua sanmei* 法華三昧)—a Tiantai contemplation ritual that Zhiyi formulated and preached, and which emphasized the worship and intense recitation of the *Lotus Sutra*[36]—that led him to *see very clearly* the Buddha teaching in front of an ensemble at Vulture Peak (洞見靈山佛會儼然). In the illustration, Zhiyi's veneration of the *Lotus Sutra* is translated into his worship of a Buddha statue placed in a niche. While he prays before the Buddha's material image in the left half of the composition, to his right, two monks, presumably Zhiyi and his teacher Huisi 慧思 (515-577), stand in reverence before a heavenly ensemble appearing amidst auspicious clouds. The two scenes combine sequential events into one picture. The divine manifestation, as the text explains, is a result of Zhiyi's prayer in front of the statue. The two scenes effectively contrast a material sculpture of the Buddha with the immaterial manifestation of Buddhist deities. While the former is placed atop an altar, much smaller than the human figure, and in a symmetrical and essentially static posture, the latter are magically suspended in midair, large in size, and interacting with one another. Similar juxtaposition between a small and still material image of a deity and their enlarged and enlivened manifestation can also be found in many other frontispieces or illustrations to Buddhist scriptures (Fig. 4.10 and Fig. 4.11).

[36] Anna Sokolova, *The Awakening of the Hinterland: The Formation of Regional Vinaya Traditions in Tang China* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 169-70.

It should be noted, however, that for these illustrations, the goal of juxtaposing a clearly material, static image of a deity and an animate, manifested presence was not to differentiate between the two aspects of Buddhist icons. Rather, such a composition delineates the efficacy of material statues in their power to conjure divinity. Chen Hongshou achieves a similar effect in his bodhisattva image in *Elegant Gathering*. But instead of following the conventional method of juxtaposition seen in woodblock prints, Chen portrayed his bodhisattva to display characteristics as a material sculpture and as an animate presence simultaneously, thus effectively unifying two essential and interrelated aspects of Buddhist iconic statues in a single image. This approach gives the bodhisattva image a particular subtlety, as it now exists in the liminal space between artifice and manifestation, fully embodying neither yet suggesting both. This interpretation can be further strengthened by Chen's peculiar rendering of the lion's swirling mane, which derives from the beast's body yet appears to metamorphose into auspicious clouds to herald a miraculous-image-to-be. While not quite yet assuming the same degree of animation as the manifested heavenly presences seen in the prints, its latent sense of liveliness evokes the potentiality of further manifestation, and, arguably, makes the icon's power even more realistic and compelling. On this point, I echo Thomas Kelly's discussion of Lady Yang's weeping sandalwood statue in Hong Shen 洪昇 (1645-1704)'s sensational *chuanqi* 傳奇 drama, *Palace of Lasting Life* (*Changsheng dian* 長生殿), as the author argues that the affective power of the sorrowful statue ultimately lies within its "resistance to full animation"—the tension between its immobility, stillness, and silence as a prop and the audiences' expectation of its animation carefully set up in the text of the play.[37]

[37] See Thomas Kelly, "The Crying Statue in Early Qing China," *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* (2024) 11 (1): 115–147.

Chen Hongshou's creative rendering of the bodhisattva motif must first be understood in relation to the painting's narrative and function. My analysis suggests that the bodhisattva is first and foremost a material statue placed atop an altar, rather than an impalpable, illusory vision perceived by the figures in the painting. Yet it is a lively statue in the process of a mystical happening, which is clearly connected to the ritual being performed in the picture—though the question of who in the painting, if anyone, witnesses the statue's efficacious transformation remains unclear. Perhaps the statue is right at the threshold of animation and manifestation—thus the figures have yet to notice its subtle metamorphosis. To this point, Oh's argument is well-taken: the scroll may function as a perpetual ritual activated by the chanting devotee, facilitated by its implicit mandala-like composition, and enabled by the ink, gold pigment, and paper—all of which are efficacious in liturgical contexts.[38] Caught in an ongoing moment of transformation, the bodhisattva statue therefore not only confirms the effectiveness of this pictorial ritual, but also embodies the dynamic interplay between material form and divine presence—their coexistence and inherent tension.

This very tension, while magnified by the juxtapositional compositions in woodblock prints, is visually resolved in Chen Hongshou's imagery, which synthesizes the material and spiritual aspects of Buddhist icons. Chen's approach may have its roots in the new understanding of religious icons' efficacy observed in contemporaneous texts. The volumes on "the spiritual and the strange" (*Shenyi dian* 神異典) in *Qinding Guji tushu jicheng* 欽定古今圖書集成 (A compendium of books past and present), an ambitious encyclopedic work commissioned by the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662-1722) and completed in 1723, includes two and a half volumes listing

[38] Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 152-4, 158-63. Oh further contextualizes Chen's creation of this perpetual ritual in painting within Chen's experience in the postconquest Yunmen area, argues that it functioned to "[plead] on behalf of himself, his family, friends, and locals for remission from all possible sins committed in the present and the past." See Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 170.

several hundred anecdotes about miraculous images of Buddhist deities, many of which were animated in some way. Most of these records were copied from medieval or even earlier sources; only two dozen came from texts written in the Ming dynasty or later. In contrast to medieval tales where Buddhist statues assumed various degrees of animation and corporeality—growing hair, sweating, weeping, moving, and even traveling by themselves—late-Imperial records show miraculous Buddhist icons to be decidedly less "corporeal" or "lively." None of these later icons were witnessed to weep, sweat, or move around; instead, they most often revealed their potency through abrupt appearances—"suddenly manifesting on the white wall 粉墻突現," or the unspecified "appearing on its own 自來"—before turning "dormant" again in the temples.[39] The most "active" instance involves a wooden Bodhisattva statue spotted floating against the stream (見木逆流)—note the writer's wording that merely describes the unusual status of the statue's wooden material without any active verb.[40] The vitality and efficacy in medieval miraculous images, however, seem to have become increasingly related to the icon's materiality and craftsmanship. We will turn to the role of craftsmanship and the makers in an icon's enlivenment in the next case study. For now, I will note that Ming texts suggest that some sacred images promised their miraculous power precisely through their material qualities. In an essay in commemoration of the renovation of Qixia Temple 棲霞寺 in Mount She, Chen Wenzhu 陳文燭

[39] Chen Menglei 陳夢雷 (1650-1741) et al., *Qinding Gujin tushu jicheng* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1934), "Shenyi dian," juan 93, 93, and 94. The Ming records that I am referring to are all found in juan 94. Discussions of earlier records of animated statues can be found in Wang, "Early Chinese Buddhist Sculptures as Animate Bodies and Living Presences," 22-6.

[40] The story is quoted from *Yunnan tongzhi* 雲南通志 (*Gazetteer of Yunnan*): "In the past, there was a man from the Yi tribe fishing in the Lancang River. He saw a piece of wood flowing upstream. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be an image of Guanyin. He then enshrined it in Wanqing Temple (昔有彝人漁於蘭滄, 見木逆流, 視之, 乃觀音像, 遂奉於萬慶寺)." See *Qinding Gujin tushu jicheng*, "Shenyi dian," box 182, juan 94, "fuxiang bu 佛像部" zalu 2. Certainly, tales from the medieval period also used *fu*; the point here is that statues in Ming and later texts didn't seem to be portrayed any more animate that this.

(1525-1595) praises the generous donation from local officials Lu Guangzu 陸光祖 and Wang Shizhen, which allowed the temple to "entrust the marvelous attributes [of the Buddha] to the red and blue pigments, and lodge the divine image in polished metals (托妙相與丹青，寄靈像與銑鋟)."[41] Here, Chen Wenzhu draws a connection between the material components of painting and sculpture and the efficacy of the images. In another Ming record, the potency of a ceramic statue of Guanyin was directly related to its material qualities:

> During the Wanli period (1573-1620) of the Ming dynasty, a certain military commander saw a light in a well. Upon excavation, a ceramic image of Guanyin was found. It is lustrous like jade.
>
> 明萬曆間，都閫某見井有光，掘得磁觀音像，瑩然如玉.[42]

In this account, the statue's innate power, evidenced by the brightness it generated in the dark well, is intertwined with the inherent visual effect produced by its ceramic surface.

At once material and enlivened, the bodhisattva statue in *Elegant Gathering*, therefore, reveals Chen Hongshou's active thinking about the ontological nature of sacred icons, as well as his mastery of their pictorial and textual depictions in contemporaneous sources. In the following years, he would continue to contemplate such objects that he, as a lay Buddhist scholar, so often encountered and interacted with. In the two works discussed in the next sections, Chen further departs from established visual conventions, drawing upon his artistic abilities and personal experiences to animate the statues through their vibrant yet problematic materiality and profound connection with the worshipper.

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[41] Chen Wenzhu, "Chongxiu sheshan qixia si bei ming 重修攝山棲霞寺碑銘" in Ge Yinliang 葛寅亮 (1570-1646), *Jinling fancha zhi* 金陵梵刹志 (Gazetteer of Temples in Jinling), v. 4, CBETA 2024.R2, B29, no. 160, p. 129a 5-6. The full text is available at the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA) database.
[42] *Qinding Gujin tushu jicheng*, "Shenyi dian," box 182, juan 94, "fuxiang bu", jishi 3.13.

Elusive Materiality

Painted around 1650, *Children Worshipping the Buddha* evokes Buddhist teaching with tongue-in-cheek humor (Fig. 4.3). In a garden setting vaguely indicated by the scholar's rocks, three boys venerate a Buddha statue. While the monochromatic brown color of the Buddha highlights its "thingness" through its material that has often been interpreted as some kind of metal,[43] the three boys, each in a different posture and wearing colorful clothing with intricate detail, exude a vibrant sense of life. The children seem absorbed in their worship, yet one's over-enthusiastic prostration has led to dropped pants and an accidental mooning. The boy's shaved head, emerging from behind the vase-bearing boy's abdomen, wittily echoes the vase as well as his exposed end.[44] This unexpected yet undoubtedly comical incident has distracted the fourth boy from his task at hand. Pausing in his act of cleaning what appears to be a stupa top, he stares at the exposed buttocks with an amused smile.

Previous scholarship has suggested four pictorial and narrative sources that may have inspired this composition. The humorous picture could be located within the genre of "children at play," a theme that became popular in paintings and literature as early as the Tang dynasty, and spread to other media in both vernacular and Buddhist contexts.[45] Many of these works feature the motif of children bathing or venerating a small figurine of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, a scene often associated with the celebration of the Buddha's birthday, or the auspicious wish for

[43] The metal material of the statue is discussed by Wang Zhongxu in "Xiying, minsu yu wanming fojiao Xinyang," 24-5. Scholars including Seung Hee Oh, Patricia Berger, and Wan-go Weng also mentioned the material as metal-based in passing.
[44] This is pointed out to me by Andrei Pop.
[45] For discussions on the subject matter of children at play, see Yang Zhishui 揚之水, "Cong haier shi dao baizi tu 從孩兒詩到百子圖," in *Wenwu* 文物, vol. 12 (2003): 56-66, reprinted in Yang, *Cong haier shi dao baizi tu* 從孩兒詩到百子圖 (Beijing: Renmin meishu chuban she, 2014), 1-38. Also see Ann Elizabeth Barrott Wicks, ed., *Children in Chinese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), and several articles by Huang Xiaofeng 黃小峰.

many offspring.[46] The combination of children and a part of a stupa also relates the painting with the Ullambana or *Yulanpen* 盂蘭盆 ritual, during which children in Shaoxing and surrounding areas had been recorded to stack tiles into stupas to pray for the deceased.[47] The image of children along with a small pagoda and Buddha statue, however, can be more directly associated with Śākyamuni's preaching in the chapter "Expedient Means" from the *Lotus Sutra*: "Even if little boys at play collect sand to make a Buddha tower, then persons such as these have all attained the Buddha Way (乃至童子戲，聚沙為佛塔，如是諸人等，皆已成佛道)."[48] Several frontispieces include scenes of children praying to a real or sand-made "stupa" as illustrations to this particular passage (Fig. 4.12). Alternatively, the boy's bare buttocks and his bodily interaction with the boy at the front connect the painting to a print from *Shishi yuanliu yinghua*, which features a similar detail (Fig. 4.13). This print illustrates a story from the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* (*Xianyu jing* 賢愚經) in which young King Asoka joyfully and respectfully offered sand as make-believe rice to Śākyamuni and Ananda as they passed by.[49]

Chen Hongshou probably left the painting open to multiple interpretations to make it

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[46] See Chen Lu 陈璐, "Liangsong yingxi tuxiang yu zongjiao" 兩宋嬰戲圖像與宗教 (Religion and the Images of Children Playing in the Song Dynasty), in *Meishu Daguan* 美術大觀 no. 12 (2010): 22-3; and Wang Zhongxu, ""Xiying, minsu yu wanming fojiao Xinyang," 21.

[47] The connection between Chen Hongshou's painting and children's activities during Ullambana in Shaoxing and areas nearby in the 16th and 17th century is discussed in Wei Dong 畏冬, "Du Chen Hongshou tongzi lifo tu de qishi 讀陳洪綬童子禮佛圖的啟示," *Shoucang jia* 收藏家, no. 6 (1994): 60–61. Seung Hee Oh further contextualizes this connection within the social condition at the specific historical moment when the painting was made. See Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 175-6.

[48] *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T. 262.9:8c. Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra*, *Translations from the Asian Classics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 39. The painting's association with this text has been discussed by several scholars. See Wang Zhongxu, "Xiying, minsu yu wanming fojiao Xinyang," 21; and Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 172.

[49] See *Xianyu jing*, T. 202.4:368c. The story emphasizes the purity of one's heart when making an offering to the Buddha. The connection between this episode in *Xianyu jing* and the motif of children at play, particularly those venerating stupas or engaging with Buddhist-related activities, has first been pointed out by Yang Zhishui. See Yang, "Cong haier shi dao baizi tu," 57-8. But the relationship between Chen Hongshou's *Children Worshiping the Buddha* and this particular illustration of the *Xianyu jing* story is directly suggested and reinforced in Oh's dissertation. See Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 173-4.

suitable for various occasions and to appeal to a broader audience. The painting's relatively large size and jolly atmosphere, combined with the artist's inscription that follows his standard format of "By Hongshou, painted at [certain location]" commonly used in paintings intended for general buyers rather than a specific recipient, suggests that the work was likely made as a commercial piece.[50] Yet the work's likely commercial purpose did not stop the artist from exploring new artistic approaches and ideas about the main motifs in its creation. Rather, the combination of different narratives where children interact with either the Buddha himself or his material representations in one picture opens up space for Chen Hongshou to further explore, pictorially, the dual nature of Buddhist icons as both image and presence.

The painting cannot be fully explained by any of the above four interpretations. In particular, none of them can adequately account for Chen's peculiar rendering of the Buddha statue. Although both episodes in the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* feature Śākyamuni Buddha, the statue in Chen's painting, with its distinctive meditation mudra, could be identified as Amitabha Buddha. While this change of Buddha might reflect the period's intensified concern with salvation of the deceased,[51] the statue's specific form remains unexplained. While it is customary to depict Buddha statues in images of children at play, as well as in illustrations of the sutra stories, such images typically include small, roughly-sketched Buddha statues, often nested inside the pretend stupas built by the children. Such depictions likely reflect reality: children would have had access to small, inexpensive votive figures of Buddhist deities cast in brass or molded in clay, rather than large, finely crafted Buddha statues. A scene featuring such a small votive figurine used in children's play appears in an album leaf

[50] The connection between the painting's large size and its purpose as a commercial piece is also pointed out by Oh in her dissertation. See Oh, "The Theater of Consciousness," 171.
[51] Ibid., 174.

attributed to Su Hanchen 苏汉臣 (active ca. 1131-1170), though the work is likely a late Ming or early Qing production (Fig. 4.14). But given the religious significance of these Buddhist figures even when made with cheap materials, it is plausible that real children would also use toy figurines as stand-ins for the Buddha in their imaginative play of Buddhist rituals.[52] The statue in Chen Hongshou's hanging scroll, however, is much larger in proportion to the boys, and is portrayed with elaborate detail—certainly not a statue for children to play with in real life. Despite its placement near the edge of the composition, the odd statue becomes the focal point of the painting through its framing by the scholar's rocks and the orientations of the children toward it.

Patricia Berger notes that Chen Hongshou almost never depict the Buddha in a canonical form, with *Children Worshipping the Buddha* as the only "partial exception."[53] The sculpted figure in this painting is certainly immediately recognizable as an image of the buddha, with the auspicious marks of ushnisha, urna, and elongated earlobe, as well as his meditative posture. Chen's inventive rendering of its brownish monochrome color—which is in stark contrast to the vibrant colors he uses in portraying the boys—and lack of a halo reveal its material reality as a statue. Nonetheless, the statue is imbued with a strong sense of corporeality and animation. Whether metal or not, the brown tones point to the statue's material as something hard and concrete; yet the garment's fluid, curvilinear, and subtly varying lines, which curl around the figure's body and become particularly dramatic in the lower part where the robe pools on the rock surface, not only give the figure a sense of volume and gravity, but also create a sense of

[52] The origin of children's clay toy figurines was closely related to Buddhist statues, and were sometimes made in the form or posture of a Buddha. For a more comprehensive study of these objects, see Li Zenglong, "Song yuan shiqi ouxing qi yanjiu 宋元時期偶形器研究," PhD diss., (Chinese Academy of Art, 2023).
[53] Berger, 49. Berger does not elaborate on this observation, which was made after her discussion of Chen's "idiosyncratic versions" of well-known Buddhist figures, such as his 1620 *Bidhisattva Guanyin in the Form of the Buddha-Mother Zhunti* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Object number: 1992.197).

movement through their rhythmic and almost musical arrangement. Moreover, Chen Hongshou gives the statue a humane, empathetic expression, as if it is responding to the children's pious yet comical acts. The Buddha's subtle smile becomes apparent only when compared with the stupa-attending boy's clear amusement at his companion's bared bottom (Fig. 4.15). This visual strategy of highlighting the statue's simultaneous materiality and responsiveness echoes the painter's earlier approach to the bodhisattva image in *Elegant Gathering*, but is particularly fitting for a scene that draws upon passages from the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*, both of which teach that Buddhist images, stupas, and offerings—even those made from the humblest materials—can be efficacious in concert with the pure and sincere heart of the worshipper.

If in *Elegant Gathering*, Chen Hongshou articulates the dual nature of Buddhist statues as material objects and divine presence through his adaptation of printed imagery, in *Children Worshipping the Buddha*, he further probes how a Buddhist icon can become enlivened through its material instability. Such an effect is two-fold, simultaneously operating within the pictorial narrative and pertaining to the motif as a painted image resulting from and only from the painter's artistic intention and technique—a material process that engages the ink, brush, and silk surface. Once again, the "double materiality" that we repeatedly observe in Chen Hongshou's depictions of artifacts is at play, though this time employed within a religious context.

The material instability of the statue is primarily achieved through the dense visual contrasts between the statue and other motifs in the painting. But before proceeding with my discussion, I must acknowledge that the lack of firsthand examination of the painting limits my formal analysis, and color variations among available reproductions require careful evaluation of

what can be reliably discerned from existing materials (Fig. 4.16).[54] Nevertheless, meaningful comparisons among pictorial motifs can still be made, since although photographic reproductions inevitably lose certain details and subtleties of the original work, they are more likely to diminish existing contrasts rather than fabricate them. Therefore, when consistent differences between certain motifs in the painting appear across multiple reproductions, we can reasonably assume these distinctions reflect genuine artistic choices in the original painting.

The most salient comparison can be made between the Buddha statue and the stupa, not only because of their parallel stances and echoing color tones in the painting, but also because they were both understood as representing the very presence of the Buddha and channeling his miraculous power.[55] The standard way of depicting a Buddha statue within a stupa in pictures of children at play also makes a direct connection between the two motifs. However, in Chen's painting, the two objects take on entirely different visual languages. What we have been calling a "stupa," in fact, resembles more closely to a *sorin* or *chattra* (*tacha* 塔刹)—the vertical, often metal-based finial that tops a stupa or its Chinese derivative—pagoda.[56] Arguably, the *chattra* was the pagoda's most essential component, given its conceptual significance as the apex of the structure's central axis, its common function to contain relics, and its visual prominence as the

[54] I mostly rely on the reproduction from the website Zhonghua zhenbao guan 中華珍寶館 (https://g2.ltfc.net/). It has the highest resolution among the ones I can find, and is only slightly darker than but generally close to the reproductions found in Weng Wan-go's book and in *Chen Hongshou quanji* (these two are basically identical). The reproduction on Palace Museum's website is significantly lighter in color than all other reproductions.

[55] See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Origin of the Buddha Image," *Art Bulletin* 9, no. 4 (1927): 293.

[56] The relationship between the Indian-originated stupa and Chinese pagoda has been discussed by many scholars, including, for example, Lothar Ledderose, "Chinese Prototypes of the Pagoda," *The Stūpa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, ed. Anna Libera Dallapiccola (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980), 238–48; Nancy Steinhardt, "Early Chinese Buddhist Architecture and Its Indian Origins," *The Flowering of a Foreign Faith: New Studies in Chinese Buddhist Art*, ed. Janet Baker (New Delhi: Marg, 1998), 38–53; and Li Yuming 李玉珉, "Zhongguo zaoqi fota suyuan" 中國早期佛塔溯源, in *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 6, no. 3 (1989), 75–104.

most recognizable feature that distinguishes a pagoda from other high towers.[57] Like a *chattra*, the object in Chen's painting features tiered, parasol-like discs arranged along a central pole that rises to a pointed finial (Fig. 4.17). In the late imperial period, the *chattra*'s design followed strict conventions, especially regarding the odd number of its tiers.[58] The horizontal lines on the *chattra*-like object in the painting clearly reference the *chattra*'s tiered characteristic. Yet whether one counts the small tiers, the tiers within each umbrella-shaped section, or the total number of larger sections, Chen Hongshou's "*chattra*" does not quite make sense. Rather, the object looks like a simplified *impression* of a *chattra* as might be recalled by a casual observer. Well-versed in Buddhist visual tradition and symbolism and someone who often visited Buddhist sites, Chen must have understood what a *chattra* should look like. He was also more than capable of depicting it accurately and vividly. To explain Chen's unusual rendition of the *chattra*, Wei Dong cites an early-Qing tradition documented in gazetteers: during the Yulanpen Festival, children in the Zhejiang area would stack clay tiles into "pagodas."[59] Wei suggests that the painting may depict this local practice, which Chen Hongshou could have witnessed during his participation in the Yulanpen ritual in Hangzhou in 1650, the year that the painting is dated to.[60] The "*chattra*'s" brownish-gray tone may suggest fired clay, and its layered structure might evoke stacked tiles. However, its shape appears too regular and symmetrical to represent clay tiles piled up by children. The smooth outline suggests a unified mass rather than individual tiles assembled together. And while subtle shading beneath the horizontal dividers and darker ink on

[57] See Wei-cheng Lin, "Performing Center in a Vertical Rise : Multilevel Pagodas in China's Middle Period," *Ars Orientalis* 46 (2016): 100-34.
[58] Chattra could have five, seven, nine or as many as eleven or thirteen tiers; the number is almost always odd. See Xu Huangdang 徐華鐺, *Zhongguo guta zaoxing* 中國古塔造型 (Beijing: Zhongguo linye chuban she, 2007), 20.
[59] Wei, "Du Chen Hongshou tongzi lifo tu de qishi," 60-1.
[60] Ibid. Chen Hongshou documented the Yulanpen ritual that he saw in "You jingci si ji 遊淨慈寺記," in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 24.

the pointed finial gently convey rounded three-dimensionality, the overall uniform color and somewhat mechanical brushstrokes that nearly evenly divide the parasol-shaped discs flatten the motif almost to a diagram. That is to say, however we interpret the object, it clearly references a *chattra*, but only captures its essence in an abstracted, minimal visual language.

The Buddha statue, on the contrary, is highly detailed and ostentatiously three-dimensional. The painter not only spent much effort to depict each strand of the curling hair, each contour of the flesh, and each pleat of the robes, but also meticulously applied shading to each of the ink lines to reflect the sculptural volumes of body and cloth. Nevertheless, the material of the statue remains undetermined: is it brass, as many scholars suggest? Or could it be wood, clay, or even sand—all of which can take on a similar hue, and would not be too out of place for the depicted pictorial narrative? The darker shading on the statue does not entirely follow the contours, thus may be read as surface oxidation consistent with metal; but the echoing yet slightly varied colors on the statue and the *chattra* suggest that there may be other materials at play. In essence, we are denied definitive clues what the material may be. The question, then, is not what the material of the statue is, but why is it rendered in such a strikingly ambiguous manner. This question becomes even more pressing when we compare the statue's ambiguous material with the variety of materials and textures that Chen Hongshou portrays in the same composition. The two rocks that encircle the statue, for example, assume two contrasting textures. The tall-standing, perforated rock is portrayed with watery ink and dramatic yet fluid tonal gradations to capture its lustrous, smooth, and moist surface, while dry and linear *cun* strokes and sketchy outlines give the flat rock below a rough texture. Chen Hongshou's attention to material details and variations extends throughout the entire composition: the two-toned green leaves, the children's fluffy hair, the metallic fittings and earrings (either brass or gold, and

notably more saturated than the statue's color) adorning the boy holding the white porcelain vase, the jade *bi*-disc at the prostrating child's waist, and the varied patterns and colors of the garments.

The statue thus stands as a material object whose substance remains unspecified—a strategy of defamiliarization that we have seen in Chen Hongshou's works discussed in the second chapter. While the material and interpretive obscurity of the seemingly hastily sketched vessels in Chen's figurative works invites contemplation by drawing on viewers' personal experiences with objects, the material uncertainty of the statue in *Children Worshipping the Buddha*, somewhat at odds with its strong material presence within the painting, calls into question its ontological status as a concrete object. Evidently, the statue might exist, at least partially, in the realm of the children's imagination—a vision or manifestation in response to their piety, rather than entirely as a concrete, material entity. Indeed, the statue's ambivalent status as a material object is most clearly implied through its intangible relationship with the children, solely sustained by the children's gestures and the statue's gaze. In contrast, the abstracted *chattra*, paradoxically, interacts with the boy in a decidedly corporeal way—his left hand pressing against one side of the *chattra* with the thumb curving around the other side, while his right hand holds a brush that barely grazes the object's surface. We could thus understand the statue's elusive materiality as a further commentary on the ontological status of Buddhist icons—while existing concretely, their significance cannot be pinned down to their materials or materiality, and their engagements with devotees certainly transcend any physical or corporeal interactions. It is therefore not surprising that among Chen Hongshou's many references to flat or three-dimensional Buddhist icons in his writings, the icons' specific visual and material

aspects are often left out.[61]

Importantly, the unstable and intangible materiality in the statue he depicts in *Children Worshipping the Buddha* operates on another level: it is, after all, a painted representation of a material object, rendered in ink and pigment on silk. In other words, the painted nature of the Buddha statue, once confronted by the viewer, renders the so-called "materiality" of the motif illusory and further destabilizes the motif's ontological status as a material statue. Chen ensures his viewer does not forget that this seemingly vivid and present Buddhist statue is merely an image created by the painter's hand. He does so by foregrounding the technicality of the painter, made obvious through the juxtaposition of various modes of painting—the linear versus the painterly, the monochrome versus the polychrome, the abstracted versus the life-like—all within close proximity (Fig. 4.18). The most conspicuous revelation of the Buddha figure as a painted motif, however, lies in the sketched lines on his right arm (Fig. 4.19). This is not the first time we encounter a painting where Chen Hongshou uses exposed underdrawings to subtly make his point. Here, the artist draws attention to the correction by making the forearm disproportionately slim after the change. We must, of course, consider the possibility that this likely commercial work was the result of a workshop production. The changed detail was thus either made by Chen's disciple or by the master himself. Either way, the bold decision to make and keep visible such an unintuitive alteration must have belonged to Chen Hongshou, particularly since it would not have been difficult to blend out ink on silk to make the trace appear fainter. Moreover, the ink wash, rather than masking these sketches, ends up heightening their presence.

We may then ask: why would Chen Hongshou expect the buyer to simply accept such a

[61] He does sometimes mention the medium of the Buddhist image, but with few details otherwise. Besides the embroidered Buddha picture that I included in footnote 1 and 2, Chen Honsghou also mentioned an iron Buddha and a brass Buddha in his writing. See Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 146 and 301.

visible correction on the most central motif in the painting? What the alteration reveals, as I have suggested, is not only the unstable materiality of the Buddha statue, befitting within the discourse of Buddhist icons, but also the effort of the painter. Before expanding on this point, however, it is necessary to review another new trend in the textual narratives of animated Buddhist images during this era. Examining the Ming entries from compilations such as *Guji tushu jicheng* and the slightly earlier 1607 *Jingling fancha zhi* 金陵梵剎志 (Gazetteer of Temples in Nanjing), one would notice an overwhelming emphasis on the artistic achievement and craftsmanship of the paintings—and statues—of Buddhist deities in these works, to the point that they may give an impression that these religious images were primarily appreciated as aesthetic objects. What is most relevant to our case study of Chen's painted Buddha statue is the fact that these texts often affirm the importance of two-dimensional images by attributing them—or at least their styles—to famous historical painters such as Zhang Sengyou 張僧繇 (ca. 490–ca. 540), Wu Daozi 吳道子 (689–after 755), and Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (ca. 344–ca. 406), or more recent ones like Wu Bin 吳彬 (1550–1643). Some texts describe the painting process or the image's appearance in detail.[62] But in many cases, simply mentioning the familiar names seemed sufficient to imply the images' importance.[63] An anecdote of particular interest to our discussion—for reasons which I will soon explain—recounts an early Ming incident, where a strange monk stayed at a temple and vanished by morning, leaving behind four large paintings of arhats on the temple walls.[64]

[62] One example describes in detail the process in which Wu Bin painted the five hundred arhats. See *Jinling fansha zh*i, v.4, CBETA 2024.R2, B29, no. 160, 133a10-134a3.
[63] See *Jinling fansha zhi*, v. 3, CBETA 2024.R2, B29, no. 160, p. 78a18-19; v.3, CBETA 2024.R2, B29, no. 160, 93b3-8; v. 4 CBETA 2024.R2, B29, no. 160, 123a2; v. 21.
[64] The story goes: "The Baoji Temple is located east of the bridge at the Yellow Earth Pagoda. In the early Ming, a strange monk stayed overnight in the hall, but disappeared before dawn. People found four large murals of arhats on the east and west walls of the hall, and the brushwork was similar to that of Guan Xiu. (寶積教寺在黃土塔橋東。明初有異僧投宿殿廡，次早不知所往。見東西兩壁畫羅漢四大軀，筆法類貫休) See *Qinding Gujin tushu jicheng*, "Shenyi dian," box 182, juan 94, "fuxiang bu", jishi 3.11.

The brushwork was reminiscent of Guan Xiu 貫休 (832-912), a Tang monk renowned for his arhat paintings. The mural's efficacy manifested in an unusual way: "Following this incident, the temple never housed more than four monks at a time (從此寺中僧徒多不四人)."[65] In this narrative, the mysterious power of the arhat images derived from both the implied surprising identity of the painter—Guan Xiu—and the pictorial qualities of the murals themselves: the subject matter of four arhats in the style of an ancient master.

As for three-dimensional statues, much ink was spilled describing their origin, material, size, texture, and decorative style or patterns. At times, these visual and material qualities even became the main criteria for evaluating a statue's worth. For instance, upon seeing an image of Mañjuśrīin a naturally formed rock cave, Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-1590) complained: "The Mañjuśrī statue is exceedingly trivial and small (文殊像極猥小)."[66] And when encountering another statue of the Buddha surrounded by images of other deities on a pagoda at Baoen Temple 報恩寺, Wang was effusive: "All are made of white stone, crafted with exquisite detail and craftsmanship, as if they were the work of spirits. I caressed and admired them for a long while (俱用白石，精細巧致，若鬼宮.余摩挲久之)."[67] While the names of the carvers had long been lost, it was their fine craftsmanship that made the images compelling for the beholder.[68]

I would therefore tentatively argue that at a time when the very name of a famous artist or his artistry was considered sufficient to make a Buddhist image efficacious, the traces—even the

[65] Ibid.
[66] Wang Shizhen, "You niushou zhushan jilue 遊牛首竹山記略," included in *Jinling fansha zhi*, v. 33, in CBETA 2024.R2, B29, no. 160, 292b19-20. The medium of this statue is unspecified, but it likely is a carved rock statue based on the context
[67] Wang Shizhen, "You baoen si taji lue 遊報恩寺塔記略," included in *Jinling fansha zhi*, v. 31, CBETA 2024.R2, B29, no. 160, 270a12-13.
[68] I should add, though, that this particular entry also betrays the tendency of appreciating religious objects at the time through the visual and sensuous pleasures they provided, which I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

mistakes—of Chen Hongshou, who had already made a name for his painting, might not read as a defect but rather as a testament to the image's authenticity and efficacy. Chen famously proclaimed that his painting of Buddhist deities followed that of Guan Xiu (寫像貫休為師).[69] Indeed, Chen seems to be following in the footsteps of the famous Tang monk, master painter, and Chen's fellow townsman beyond mere stylistic reference. As early Ming records attributed the mural's miraculous power to Guan Xiu's presence and artistry, Chen Hongshou was, perhaps, hoping that his name and skilled hand might similarly imbue the image with efficacious properties in the minds of potential buyers. If this was indeed Chen's intention, history has proven him right: two surviving copies of Chen's original painting, both bearing forged signatures of Chen Hongshou but executed with lesser skill, attest to the popularity of such an unconventional composition and the allure of the artist's name.[70] Moreover, in painting the Buddha as an ambiguously material yet undeniably animated statue, the painter also metaphorically took on the role of a sculptor, whose masterful artistry activates a material icon and enables it to transcend its form and substance.

Synchronized Bodies

In the winter of 1649, Chen Hongshou created an elaborate series of portraits on a handscroll depicting his close friend and loyal patron, Nan Shenglu 南生魯. Although Nan had earned his Jinshi 進士 degree under Ming rule, he went on to serve the Qing court, and had risen to an official position in Hangzhou by the time Chen made this painting. Nan's post in Hangzhou partly inspired Chen to portray his friend performing the signature activities of the famous Tang

[69] Chen Hongshou, "Jueju sanshou 絕句三首," in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 179.
[70] For a description of the two works, see Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 344-5.

poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846), who had served as an official in the same city.[71] Chen claimed to have modeled the four scenes after Li Gonglin's handscroll depicting "Bai Juyi's Four Pleasures" (*Bailao sile* 白老四樂), which he might have seen either in the imperial catalogue during his time in the capital or as a more recent copy in circulation.[72] The portraits thus evoke what Richard Vinograd terms "composite identities," as each figure simultaneously captures Nan's physical likeness while evoking well-known episodes from Bai's life story, drawn from the poet's writings or biographical accounts.[73] The inscriptions next to the images written by Chen Hongshou explain the scenes' subject matters, which may not be directly legible from the pictures themselves. The first scene references Bai Juyi's practice of testing his poetry's accessibility by reciting it to an elderly commoner (Fig. 4.20); the second depicts the poet drunkenly reciting verse (Fig. 4.21); the third shows him conversing with a female musician (Fig. 4.22); and the fourth supposedly captures him in meditation (Fig. 4.3).[74] This final scene featuring an unusual Buddha statue will be the primary focus of our examination.

The handscroll exemplifies Chen Hongshou's workshop production in his last year. Chen's inscription suggests that while Chen himself drafted the outlines, his son Chen Zi and student Yan Zhan were responsible for the coloring. The portrait heads of Nan Shenglu, somewhat awkwardly placed atop the figures' bodies and rendered with more specificity and fullness than Chen Hongshou's typical depictions, may have been executed by yet another hand.

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[71] This is directly mentioned in Chen Hongshou's inscription on the painting. For a full transcription and translations of the inscriptions on the painting, by Chen Hongshou and others, see Li Chu-tsing, *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines: Chinese Paintings in the Charles A. Drenowatz Collection* (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae, 1974), 29-40. An in-depth discussion of the inscriptions can be found in Mao Wenfang 毛文芳, *Tucheng xingle: Mingqing wenren huaxiang tiyong xilun* 圖成行樂: 明清文人畫像題詠析論 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 2008), 225-233.

[72] Richard Vinograd, catalogue entry in *Repentant Monk*, 137.

[73] Vinograd, "Composite Identities: Portrait," in *Repentant Monk*, 63-4.

[74] For a detailed reading of these scenes alongside writings of Bai Juyi, see Li Chu-tsing, *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines*, 29-40.

The use of layered color washes on the faces to enhance realism, a technique derived from Western painting, suggests that the artist was likely trained in the style of Zeng Jing 曾鯨 (1564-1647), whose followers were commonly known as the Bochen School (*Bochen pai* 波臣派) after his courtesy name.[75] This was not unusual in Chen Hongshou's studio practice around this time. Not only did Chen become acquainted with Zeng Jing himself at Zhang Dai's gatherings, but he also collaborated with several other professional Bochen-style portraitists.[76] Along with a close inspection of the spatial relationships among brushstrokes, we can reconstruct the process by which Chen Hongshou and his associates completed these vignettes. In the meditation scene, Chen likely began by outlining the seated figure at the forefront—though probably leaving the face blank for the portraitist to fill out later. He then sketched the stone table's shape with faint lines and planned the object arrangement, so that when he finalized the table outline with darker ink, he could leave out certain parts to accommodate the objects. This process is most evident where the table's upper edge meets the tall vase on the left: while traces of a faint table outline remain visible on the vase's lower left side, the final outline stops naturally at the vase (Fig. 4.23). The composition was finally colored by Yan Zhan or Chen Zi.

However this complicated collaboration played out in detail, Chen Hongshou seems to have changed his mind regarding the objects on the stone table. While the edge of the table breaks off schematically for the vase, crackle-glazed incense burner, and white cup, it penetrates

[75] For an introduction of the style of Zeng Jing and the Bochen School, as well as their Western influence, see Nei Chongzheng's chapter on the paintings in the Qing Dynasty in Richard Barnhart et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 269-71.

[76] Chen Hongshou's collaborations with professional portraitists have been noted in the inscriptions on several works, most notably *Portrait of He Tianzhang* (*He Tianzhang xingle tu* 何天章行樂圖) painted around the same year as the Nan Shenglu scroll, as well as Portrait of Lou Yuede (Lou Yuede xiang 樓月德像). In these works, the style of the faces displays a close relation to the Bochen School. Chen's personal interaction with Zeng Jing at Zhang Dai's parties has been recorded in Zhang Dai's writing. See Zhang Dai, "Buxi yuan 不繫園," in *Taoan mengyi* 陶庵夢憶 (Dreamlike Memories of Taoan) (Beijing: Zhonghua shiju, 2007), juan 4, 45.

into the Buddha statue—though obscured by an attempt to blend out the ink traces. The statue's lower body beneath the initial table contour appears darker than its upper portion, suggesting that the statue was painted over the already-colored stone table. All of these details point to one likely scenario: the Buddha statue was not initially included, but was added later when the rest of the scene had been completed. Such a major alteration could only have been made by Chen Hongshou himself.

We may never know whether adding the Buddha statue was Chen's own idea or a request from the patron Nan Shenglu. But once there, it effectively became a focal point of the composition: without the Buddhist artifact, the lotus flowers in the vase, incense burner, and willow-filled cup—all common items with Buddhist significance—would simply suggest the sitter's religious inclination. With the Buddha at the center, however, these objects, typically found on offering tables, become ritual paraphernalia as the sitter worships and meditates on the Buddha image. The importance of the Buddha image is most clearly suggested by Chen Hongshou's inscription to this scene:

> Others have spoken of the lotus flower's scent;
> But I will mention the sandalwood's fragrance.
> When faced with an unsolvable moment,
> I find myself drawn to the teaching of impermanence.[77]
>
> 人謂蓮花氣，我曰旃檀香。
> 每逢無法時，乃理不住方。

The poem, best summarized by its title "Escape to Chan" (taochan 逃禪), likely refers to the last years of Bai Juyi, when he retired from politics and became interested in Buddhism. Living in Luoyang near the famous Longmen Caves, Bai Juyi frequented the Xiangshan Temple, befriended its monks, and donated a large sum of money for its restoration and expansion. He

[77] I have based my translation on Li Chu-tsing's translation in his catalogue, with some alterations.

even adopted the name "Xiangshan jushi 香山居士" (The Hermit of Xiangshan) during this time. The poem's first two lines reaffirm the Buddhist stakes of the scene and address the added Buddha statue. It should be noted that although lotus flowers were often considered a Buddhist symbol of enlightenment and rebirth, outside the Buddhist context, they also symbolized resilience, loftiness, and purity for Chinese scholars, and were appreciated for their beauty. Bai Juyi's fondness for lotus is evident in his numerous poems praising the flowers, but most dramatically in his effort to transport lotus roots from the south to the northern city of Luoyang to enjoy them locally.[78] Indeed, in the painting, the prominent lotus flower arrangement in the tall vase draws immediate attention. Perhaps to prevent viewers from associating the scene with Bai Juyi's love of lotus, Chen Hongshou's inscription deliberately emphasizes the painter's interest in the "sandalwood's fragrance"—a clear reference to Buddhist statues often made of sandalwood. This emphasis on the scene's Buddhist nature is reinforced in the picture by the addition of the Buddha image on the stone table.

Yet the small Buddha statue has a rather unusual appearance. While the layered curvilinear strokes from the Buddha's neck to its robes may evoke textures of carved wood, thus giving the statue a sense of material presence, the uniform gray coloring without shading makes the figure appear flat and lacking in volume. Even more remarkable is the absence of typical iconographic markers for the Buddha, including the halo, backlight, and ushnisha. The figure's curly strands of hair are reminiscent of Buddhist imagery from Central Asia; but without the ushnisha, the head also evokes Tang-dynasty figurines depicting people of foreign origins (Fig. 4.24). By incorporating this exotic swirling hair, the painter may then be referencing both the

[78] For this particular episode, see Ba Juyi, "On the White Lotus 題白蓮", in *Bai jiyi ji* 白居易集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 564.

cosmopolitan Tang era of Bai Juyi and the wavy-haired Buddha statues in the Longmen caves that Bai would have known well (Fig. 4.25).

Perhaps the most peculiar feature of this Buddha statue is its hand gesture. Whereas the statue's right hand is tucked into the robe, the left hand pinches the edge of the right sleeve, with the thumb peeking out from the cloth gathered around the wrist. It is certainly not a mudra, one of the most important symbols and identifiers of a Buddha statue. The unusual gesture, however, is repeated on the seated scholar, though the larger scale there allows Chen to elaborate on this detail with the elongated thumbnail, the tilted and tensed hand, and dynamic layers and folds of the flowing textile (Fig. 4.26).

Similar depictions, where hands are mostly concealed by the sleeves except for one protruding thumb, appear frequently in official portraits since the Song dynasty, most often—but not always—in paintings of political, religious, and cultural figures of the highest prestige (Fig. 4.27). In all such cases, we can only infer the hand gestures obscured by the clothing. A Yuan-dynasty stone carving, where one monk's partially concealed hand gesture is juxtaposed with another monk's clasped hands with a raised thumb on full display, provides a clue (Fig. 4.28). Known as *chashou li* 叉手禮, or crossed-hand greeting, this gesture originated in the medieval period and remained popular—though it evolved over time—as a formal greeting gesture signifying civility and respect.[79] Varieties of the cross-hand gesture became a major iconography in portraits of Confucius, who was said to use this gesture to greet people of all social classes equally. The *chashou* gesture in Confucian portraits thus came to symbolize the sage's humility

[79] Huang Jianbo 黃劍波, "Chashou li tuxiang kao ('叉手'禮圖像考)," *Nanjing yishu xueyuan xuebao* 南京藝術學院學報 2014 (4): 5-13.

and egalitarian teaching.[80] While most portraits of Confucius display the entire hand gesture clearly (Fig. 4.29), others merely suggest it through a single visible thumb. Following this pictorial tradition, Chen Hongshou adopted the concealed crossed-hand gesture in a family portrait that he made for a patron in 1649 (Fig. 4.30). In two other works, Chen uses similar hand positions on figures showing respect—one to a matron of the family, the other before a painting. (Fig. 4.31 and Fig. 4.32).

Admittedly, the crossed-hand gesture is not commonly associated with Buddhist contexts. But if we are convinced that the human figure was painted first, and that the Buddhist statue was added later, this distinctive gesture of the sitter is more easily explained: since it is rather typical for official portraits, it is only fitting that this very hand gesture appears in a scene where Nan Shenglu sits frontally in a style that resembles a formal portrait. With the added Buddhist statue, the gesture could then be understood as a layman paying respect to the Buddha with whom he is meditating. Compared to most other representations of this gesture, however, Nan Shenglu's exposed hand is imbued with a distinctive sense of movement, which is accentuated by the flowing textiles and, more subtly, by the positioning of the sleeves—one barely clinging to the left hand, while the other appears to be slipping down along the forearm. Instead of holding a static pose with hands already crossed, Nan Shenglu seems to be in the midst of gathering his posture.

It is more challenging to reconcile this gesture—and its animateness—when it reappears on the small Buddha statue, a material object resting on the stone table alongside other artifacts. That is, unless we consider the efficacy and animating potential of the statue. As Michelle Wang

[80] Qu Bo 屈博, "Kongzi jiaoshi xingxiang de tuxiang jiedu—yi 'xianshi kongzi xingjiao xiang' weili" (孔子教師形象的圖像解讀——以《先師孔子行教像》為例, in *Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Sciences Edition),* https://link.cnki.net/urlid/11.3188.C.20241225.1553.004

observes, the parallel between the construction of Buddhist statues and the structure of human bodies is most striking in a statue's hands, which were often crafted separately and attached to the main body using mortise and tenon joints or dowels, thus mirroring the natural joints of the human body and anticipating the potential animation of the statue.[81] But the eventual animation of the material icon required the effort of the devotee. Myoē (1173-1232), a master of the Kegon school in Japan, speaks to this matter in a line often quoted in the scholarship on miraculous icons: "When you think of an object carved of wood or drawn in a picture as a living being, then it *is* a living being."[82] In Chen's painting, the profound connection between Nan Shenglu and his sandalwood Buddha statue is conveyed not only through their identical hand gestures but also through the mirrored posture and shape of their robed bodies—and even the leafy mat beneath (Fig. 4.4). Is the statue responding to the meditator by returning his greeting and taking on his appearance? Or can the playful Buddha image be seen as an outcome of Nan's devotion—a manifestation of his visualization? The sequence in which the statue and the human figures were painted support both readings: the Buddha "appears" in a form that mirrors the meditating figure who has already been present. Either way, the Buddha statue effectively serves as a visual double of Nan Shenglu. Sitting alongside him, the Buddha statue appears less as an object of veneration and more as a compassionate companion.[83]

A close reading of the inscriptions may provide further insight, albeit an indirect one, into the reasoning behind Chen's artistic choices regarding the little Buddha statue and the human

[81] Wang, "Early Chinese Buddhist Sculptures as Animate Bodies and Living Presences," 30-1.
[82] See Helmut Brinker, *Secrets of the Sacred: Empowering Buddhist Images in Clear, in Code, and on Cache* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2011), 7.
[83] I am borrowing the words from Robert Campany, who first pointed out that "[Buddhist] images were not merely incidental accompaniments to devotional action: they were companions, they were the subject of dreams and visions, and they were regarded as being alive with the presence of the august beings they represented" in his discussion of early Buddhist tales. See Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 56-57.

figure. After finishing the handscroll, Chen Hongshou invited his friends Tang Jiujing—whom we encountered in the previous chapter—and Lin Zengzhi 林增志 (1593-1667), who had become a monk and adopted the name Miyin 密印, to inscribe poems on the scroll. In response to Chen's initial inscription accompanying the fourth scene, Tang offered a witty commentary on both the image and the Buddhist teaching of impermanence that Chen had invoked:

> Putting a flower in a vase,
> It will keep its color and fragrance.
> The doctrine of impermanence,
> Becomes the means to make the beauty last.[84]
>
> 取向軍持插，攀留色與香。
> 馮（憑）將無住法，權立駐顏方。

Following Tang's humorous critique, Miyin responded, with a didactic seriousness:

> Impermanence itself is not impermanent—
> Such is the meaning of the fragrance of Cao Brook.[85]
> The essence of Chan becomes static in meditation;
> Detachment is the true way.[86]
>
> 無住無無住，爰徵曹水香。
> 禪機寧滯坐，解脫是真方。

At first glance, the two writers' focus on the theme of impermanence, despite drawing from Chen's own reference, might appear to be at odds with Chen's emphasis on the sensory qualities of the lotus flowers and the sandalwood statue in his inscription. After all, the Chan Buddhist teaching of impermanence highlights the transient nature of material phenomena, and encourages its practitioners to detach themselves from the sensorial enjoyment of material things in order to

[84] Translations by the author in consultation with Li Chu-tsing's version.
[85] Li Chu-tsing explains that the mention of Cao Brook, an early site of Chan Buddhism in China, alludes to the origins of Chan's rise to popularity in the region. See Li, *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines*, 34.
[86] Translations by the author in consultation with Li's translation.

achieve true mindfulness.[87] Perhaps for this very reason, neither inscriber directly addresses the central and most distinctive motif in the painted scene—the Buddha statue, which Chen so explicitly praised for its woody scent in his inscription. But true to the Chan teaching, Chen's depiction of the Buddha statue does not insist on its materiality. Despite the wood-like patterns and light brown tones that subtly hint at its sandalwood composition, the sheer coloring, uniform line drawings, and subtle liveliness obscure the object's material specificity, rendering it almost transparent and verging on animation. The sitter's relationship with the Buddha statue is therefore not one of material obsession, but mutual transformation and bodily synchrony. In other words, Chen reaffirms in this scene that the wisdom and efficacy of the Buddha do not reside in the materiality of the image, but are ultimately drawn forth by its connection with the beholder.

The scene, therefore, becomes an ultimate euphemism for Nan Shenglu, who is portrayed not only as a contemporary embodiment of the talent and spirit of a celebrated Tang poet, but also as an achieved Buddhist who enlivens an artifact and, in doing so, becomes one with the Buddha. However, existing textual records of Nan Shenglu do not quite portray him as a typical Buddhist. Wu Weiye 吳偉業 (1609-1672), a contemporary of Nan Shenglu who likely knew him personally, describes a now-lost handscroll that Nan commissioned. In that painting, Nan is depicted as engaging in leisurely and scholarly activities—playing music, practicing *cuju*, and reading in bed—in the company of courtesans, young boys, and beautiful men. These

[87] This is most clearly articulated in the tenth chapter of the *Diamond Sutra* (*Jingang banruo boluo mi jing* 金剛般若波羅蜜經), in which it is said: "One should not give rise to a mind attached to forms; neither should one give rise to a mind attached to sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and mental phenomena. Instead, one should give rise to a mind that is not attached to anything. 不應住色生心，不應住聲香味觸法生心，應無所住而生其心." I have consulted the version annotated by Qing scholar Yu Yue 俞樾 (1821-1907). See Yu Yue, *Jingang banruo boluo mi jing zhu* 金剛般若波羅蜜經注 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chuban she, 2017), 6.

lighthearted and sensuous scenes, nevertheless, are followed by two final vignettes in which Nan is dressed as a Daoist priest and Buddhist monk in deep contemplation, thus adding a spiritual dimension to the painting.[88] Wu's vivid inscription on the painting further paints Nan Shenglu as an eccentric old man, who had enjoyed the worldly life to the fullest, found pleasure in every corner of life and art, and had no desire to "act like a Buddha who sits on a palm mat cross-legged and falls asleep" even at an old age (不信晚年圖做佛, 趺坐蒲團貪睡著). For Wu Weiye, Nan has truly found his purpose in life, as he reflects: "Even if he attains neither immortality nor Buddhahood, his time amid such fine streams and mountains has been well spent (縱然仙佛兩無成, 如此溪山良不惡)."[89] We cannot know whether Chen Hongshou ever saw this handscroll or encountered Wu Weiye's account of Nan Shenglu's jesting attitude towards Buddhist meditation. But rather intriguingly, Chen depicted Nan seated in meditation on a palm mat—precisely the posture Nan had dismissed according to Wu's account—before a Buddha statue that mirrors his position, also seated on a leafy mat. Yet Nan's restless posture in the painting does not hinder his connection to the Buddha; rather, their bond was so profound that the diminutive statue, quite literally, starts to transform into an extension of the sitter.

Chen Hongshou certainly found resonance in Nan's unconventional lifestyle as a Buddhist, as he too was known for his eccentric approach to Buddhism. Unlike his father Chen Yuchao, who diligently practiced the Buddhist lifestyle by refraining from eating meat and drinking alcohol, frequently releasing captive animals, and providing meals for monks,[90] Chen

[88] Wu Weiye, "Nan Shenglu liuzhen tu ge (bingyin) 南生魯六真圖歌 (並引)," in *Wu Meicun shiji jianzhu* 吳梅村詩集箋註, annotated by Cheng Muheng 程穆衡 (jinshi 1737), with supplementary notes by Yang Xuehang 楊學沆 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2020), 115.
[89] Wu Weiye, ibid.
[90] Lai Zongdao 来宗道 (1571-1638), "Chen Yuchao muzhi ming 陳於朝墓志銘," quoted in Wang Huangsheng 王璜生, *Chen Hongshou* 陳洪綬 (Changchun: Jilin meishu chuban she, 1996), 4.

Hongshou was never bound by Buddhist dogma. His deep understanding of and dedication to Buddhism, evident through his life's work, did not prevent him from heavy drinking, frequenting courtesans' quarters, or selling his paintings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the market. In his poems, Chen wrote with self-mockery that the money from his Buddhist paintings was spent on meat and wine, and that his home's Buddha hall doubled as a drinking chamber.[91] He also once lamented, with humor, that after fifteen years, he could still recall the face of a beautiful woman he had once encountered, yet couldn't recognize all the characters in the sutra that he had closely studied.[92] Even when he served as a monk in the Yunmen temple, he complained that "the long days feel like years, and there is nothing to pass the time in the mountains (晝長為年, 山中無可消遣)."[93] The painting's depiction of Nan Shenglu's intimate and analogous relationship with the Buddha statue might thus be read as Chen's affirmation, in the late years of his life, of his own spiritual bond with the Buddha, despite his lifetime of unconventional practices as a Buddhist.[94] Just like the Buddha statue sitting next to Nan Shenglu as a quiet yet compassionate companion, Buddhism remained a constant presence in Chen Hongshou's life and a theme he revisited in his writings, accompanying him from his youth and sustaining him through difficult times. In 1652,

[91] Chen wrote: "This year is already half over, yet I have not painted even ten images of the Buddha. My brush and ink are not idle, but most of it is exchanged for wine and meat (今年將半年, 寫佛無十幅。筆墨頗不閒, 大都換酒肉)"; "The jars of wine have been emptied, so I transform the room into a Buddha hall; a few paintings of the Buddha can be exchanged for some small money (歸去酒罈為佛屋，寫些佛像當繩頭)." See "Oucheng 偶成" and "Qiandiao 前調" in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 206 and 650.
[92] Chen Hongshou, "Li Huayan jing 理華嚴經," in *Chen Hongshou ji*, 59.
[93] Chen Hongshou, "Zhi Wang Yuan shu 致王予安書," in *Chen Hongshou ji*, 629-30.
[94] Tang Jujing has already noticed in his inscription the self-portrait tendencies in Chen Hongshou's depiction of the hybrid figure of Nan Shenglu and Bai Juyi in the first scene. A discussion of Tang's inscription to this scene can be found in Li, *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines*, 31.

aged fifty-four, Chen Hongshou died in his hometown surrounded by family and friends. True to his devotion, he recited the Buddha's name until his final moment (喃喃念佛號而卒).[95]

Unsettling Objects

Religious images are fabricated objects that promise a potential for animation through appropriate procedures in their engagement with religious doctrine, their makers, and devotees.[96] In the three paintings we have examined, Chen Hongshou draws the viewer's attention to each of these three aspects of a statue's enlivenment. In *Elegant Gatherings*, Chen engages with the enduring discourse on the ontology of Buddhist icons, and asserts their dual nature as both material artifacts and sacred presences by referencing and combining the visual conventions from religious and popular prints. In *Children Worshipping the Buddha*, Chen underscores the elusive materiality of a responsive icon pictorially and through drawing attention to the process of its creation—in this case, the act of painting—and its role in the statue's efficacy, echoing the fascination with the aestheticization and materiality of Buddhist images in the late-Imperial period. Finally, in *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*, Chen releases the Buddha statue from the bounds of its material form, addressing instead the devotee's role and their interaction with the statue in bringing it to life.

It may appear that in these works, Chen Hongshou only references the statue's material attributes as means to make these images transcend their materiality. However, I would argue that it is precisely the painter's visual insistence on the statues' materiality that not only enlivens

[95]While this is the most widely cited account of Chen's final moments first recorded in Meng Yuan's account, the illness that led to his death remains a matter of debate. See Meng Yuan, "Chen Hongshou zhuan 陳洪綬傳," in Wu Gan ed., *Chen Hongshou ji*, 662. A discussion of the potential causes of Chen's death can be found in Weng, *Chen Hongshou de yishu*, 69.

[96] Laurel Kendall, *Mediums and Magical Things: Statues, Paintings, and Masks in Asian Places* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 5-7.

them within their respective pictorial narratives and for the painted figures, but also makes them particularly immediate and compelling for the viewer outside the paintings. Like Chen's other depictions of material artifacts discussed in previous chapters, the Buddhist statues demand the viewer's effort to fully realize their power. These objects compel the viewer to confront their materiality, which only gradually comes into question as the viewer discerns the subtle visual cues Chen has embedded—hints that point to the statues' extraordinary capacity, one that transcends their physical form.

These statues therefore exist as material objects at the verge of animation, at once familiar and unsettling. What we encounter in these works are not merely Chen's artistic articulation of his "dream of the moving statue";[97] rather, the artist captures and enacts what David J. Getsy refers to as the "act of stillness"—the innate performativity of human-shaped sculptures that, through their very thingness in contrast to human motility and corporeality, induces affect and reaction in the viewer.[98] The religious nature of Chen's paintings, however, inverts the power dynamics between the statue and its viewer that Getsy observes: whereas Getsy's viewer responds to the statue's stillness most often through an assertion of control, Chen's Buddhist statues assert their power over the viewer through the tension and negotiation between their own stillness and motility.

Like Lady Yang's sandalwood effigy in *Palace of Lasting Life*, whose simultaneous promise of life and refusal of full animation on stage immerse viewers in the emotional space of mourning and amplify the sincerity of the emperor's as well as audiences' grief through its

[97] I am invoking Kenneth Gross's inspiring book *The Dream of the Moving Statue* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), among other scholarship on the literary trope of animated sculptures, which, as David J. Getsy insightfully points out, stem from the impulse to compensate for sculpture's stillness. See Getsy, "Acts of Stillness: Statues, Performativity, and Passive Resistance," *Criticism* 56, no. 1 (2014): 6-7.
[98] Getsy, "Acts of Stillness: Statues, Performativity, and Passive Resistance," 7.

weeping response,[99] the stubborn materiality of Chen's Buddhist statues and their latent animation perpetually reenact the very moments of the statues' coming-into-life, thus bringing the viewer into the sacred space of the miraculous happening. The subtle force of the religious statues becomes even more poignant when contrasted with Chen Hongshou's depictions of children's toy figurines. In one such work now housed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, a fully animated miniature figure charges forward on a dragon-like wheeled carrier, entirely devoid of any trace of its materiality as a fabricated, inanimate object, pulling the boy along in its motion (Fig. 4.33). Not unlike the mysterious Buddha statue worshiped by the children, the moving figurine could be interpreted as the result of the boy's imagination. But here, the fuller animation also imbues the image with a stronger sense of fictionality and, consequently, distances the pictorial narrative from the viewer's own reality—in stark contrast to the Buddhist statues that draw the viewer into experiencing their extraordinary transformations in progress.

Standing as the most dramatic examples of Chen Hongshou's agentic objects, these Buddhist statues are consistent with Chen's portrayals of mundane, material things as anything but dormant or passive. Encapsulating objects' very power over human subjects and the transformative potential between the two, these statues allowed Chen to explore furthest in his paintings the evocative interplay between material and immaterial. Through these works, he demonstrates, once again, how material things could serve as the ultimate embodiments and catalysts of ideas, experiences, and emotions, as well as keys to unlocking his encoded pictorial narratives and artistic aspiration—his curiosity, contemplation, and constant interrogation of and experiment with the complex relationships we may enter into with the material world through its pictorial representation.

[99] Kelly, "The Crying Statue in Early Qing China."

Coda

Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!
You really are beautiful! Pearls,
harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! all
the stuff they've always talked about

still makes a poem a surprise!
These things are with us every day
even on beachheads and biers. They
do have meaning. They're strong as rocks.

—Frank O'Hara (1926-1966), *Today*[1]

It may seem an unlikely pairing, but Frank O'Hara's poems always remind me of Chen Hongshou—not Chen's poems, to be clear; but his pictorial works that, in a broad sense, share the American poet's sheer excitement in ordinary things from everyday life. In O'Hara's famous poem *Today*, the poet revels in seemingly trivial things from daily conversations. These little things all appeal to the senses in one way or another, often without one's active realization, with their sweetness and tartness, refreshing coolness, acoustic resonance, tactile pleasures, or soothing relief. By simply listing and exclaiming over them in prose, O'Hara brings these mundane moments into consciousness and transforms ordinary objects into things lively and poetic. Yet the poem offers more than the delight and inspiration in noticing and experiencing mundane things. The beachheads and funeral bier reference the Normandy landings during WWII, thereby serving as poignant reminders that "the immediate elements of our daily lives, of *Today*, are with us even in the midst of historical catastrophe and personal tragedy."[2] Such is the case with the paintings of Chen Hongshou that we have examined in this dissertation. The physical and mental agonies that Chen so often addresses in his writings in response to political

[1] Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 15.
[2] Andrew Epstein, *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

turmoil and personal traumas sometimes surface in his painted works; yet even in his darkest moments, and even when images of objects serve to articulate loss, distress, and despair, Chen's lifelong dedication and attentiveness in portraying objects undoubtedly betray the enduring enchantment and, if I dare say, joy—the joy of looking, feeling, and thinking—that material artifacts and the very act of capturing them in painting retain for the artist.

As evidenced throughout the works that we have examined, Chen Hongshou indulged himself in observing the minute material details of everyday objects and being captivated or even entranced by them—an inclination that turned out to be both timely and timeless, culturally specific yet universally resonant. Indeed, Chen Hongshou was not the only artist of his time to display such fascination with material artifacts; but he was certainly among the most enthusiastic, thoughtful, and creative. As we have repeatedly observed, he was intellectually agile with the objects' cultural relevance and literary associations; but more importantly, he was deeply introspective and incredibly discerning about what made them so compelling for him, whether sensorially, emotionally, or spiritually, and however subtly. He then renders these thoughts about objects, their materiality, and affectiveness within ink and brush, allowing these objects to generate new meanings both for the painted narratives and of themselves.

While the objects that we have dissected from Chen Hongshou's works—from vessels, stationery, and musical instruments to rocks and religious statues—assume diverse meanings in their respective pictorial, social, and cultural contexts, all of them, in their own ways, captured the artist's attention through a shared liminal status caught between the concrete and the imaginary, the passive and the agentic, the inanimate and the animate, the ordinary and the extraordinary. For Chen Hongshou, to capture in his paintings these intangible nuances of daily objects—qualities that are ultimately experiential and could never really be fully articulated and

evoked through the semantics—meant going beyond textual descriptions and visual resemblances. Instead, Chen's modus operandi is to exploit and even deconstruct his artistic medium, and imbue his object images with curious details that seemingly diverge from the objects' immediate material reality. As a result, the viewer is led to notice, think about, and experience objects through the painted medium and in ways that are contemplative, suspended, embodied, and thereby—paradoxically—more realistic.

Chen's paintings therefore constantly juxtapose and interweave the familiar with the unfamiliar. In fact, one may argue that the sense of familiarity even in Chen's most peculiar renderings of objects or, as the other side of the coin, the numerous novel details in commonplace motifs, is one of the main reasons that Chen Hongshou's works were and still are so intriguing for viewers. Like the exclamation marks following the lists of mundane things in O'Hara's poem that bring mundane things into sharp focus and affirm that *they do have meaning* without specifying what that meaning is, Chen's distinctive artistic treatments of objects—both those in the paintings and the pictorial media themselves—transform everyday objects into something worthy of extended attention and reflection.

What, then, is the artist asking us to see in his objects? *What do they mean*? In my study, I stayed as close to our protagonist Chen Hongshou, his historical context, and his immediate audiences as I could to understand what these objects meant for the artist at various moments of his life and within his artistic and social oeuvre. But at many points in my research, I couldn't help but wonder: if the spirit of the artist had been watching over me, as I spent hours staring at the objects that he portrayed, trying to figure out why they looked kind of odd, and, with even longer hours, searching for meanings in them, would he have found it amusing and felt good

about himself?[3] While I have proposed my interpretations of these objects within their pictorial programs based on visual analysis and contextualization, I maintain that the *meanings* of these objects are never meant to be entirely fixed. Rather, these objects are there, in part, to create spaces for the viewer to enter, participate, and fulfill the paintings. After all, Chen Hongshou has already shown us in his earliest depictions of objects, discussed in the first chapter, that it was the very process of engaging with and being affected by material artifacts that he was most interested in and intended to animate for us. My writing, then, hopes to function, to a certain extent, as a form of ekphrasis that attempts to put into words and enliven, for my readers, what that sometimes elusive process of seeing, feeling, and thinking about material things through and with Chen Hongshou's visual representations could be.

There is hardly anything grandiose about the objects in Chen Hongshou's works. Rather, they wait, patiently and quietly, for the viewer to approach them with their gaze, and only then will these objects reveal their latent energy and transformative potential. Even in the cases of rocks and Buddhist statues, where the objects become the main characters and eventually come to hold power over the human subjects, they present themselves oftentimes in unassuming forms, and only start to grow their presence and depths as we gradually notice and become fascinated with their subtle peculiarities and carefully rendered details. That is to say, these are not things that assert their presence dramatically in that they stop working for us;[4] they are enigmatic because they are just there and always there, whether we or the figures in the pictures directly and actively engage with them or not. But they are also there agentically, even when they are not

[3] Although Chen Hongshou frequently presents himself as a tormented scholar burdened by historical circumstances and personal disappointments, an image that he was most often cast in in scholarship on him, his humor and pride in his artistic ability are unmistakably present in the witty details, playful distortions, and virtuoso brushwork that characterize many of his works.

[4] I am borrowing from Bill Brown's seminal essay. See Brown, "Thing Theory," in *Things*, edited by Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

in action *per se*.[5] With or without our awareness, and for us and those from late imperial China alike, material objects enclose our bodies, meet our senses, structure our thoughts, and stir our emotions; they emerge from the background when we call for them, and freely retreat when our attention shifts elsewhere. What I hope to have achieved in this dissertation is to bring into focus such subtle yet profound work that objects perform for us, within and through Chen Hongshou's paintings.

[5] My thinking is inspired by Jane Bennett's book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, particularly her discussion of the force of things as "vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics." Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4-6.

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Figures

Introduction

Figure 0.1 Chen Hongshou, self-portrait from *Figures, Flowers, and Landscapes*, c. 1633, ink and color on silk, 22.2 x 21.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 0.2 Pages from Lü Dalin, *Kaogu tu*, first printed in 1299, *Siku quanshu* edition, vol. 1, 1-4.

Figure 0.3 Attributed to Yao Yuehua, *Autumn Flowers in Vase*, Southern Song Dynasty (1120-1279), round fan painting mounted as album leaf, ink and colors on silk, 26.4 x 26.6 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 0.4 Chen Hongshou, *Lofty Scholar*, c. 1645, Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 118.6 x 51 cm. Shanghai Museum.

Chapter 1

Figure 1.1 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*, c.1619, album leaf, ink on paper, 17.8 x 17.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 1.2 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*.

Figure 1.3 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*.

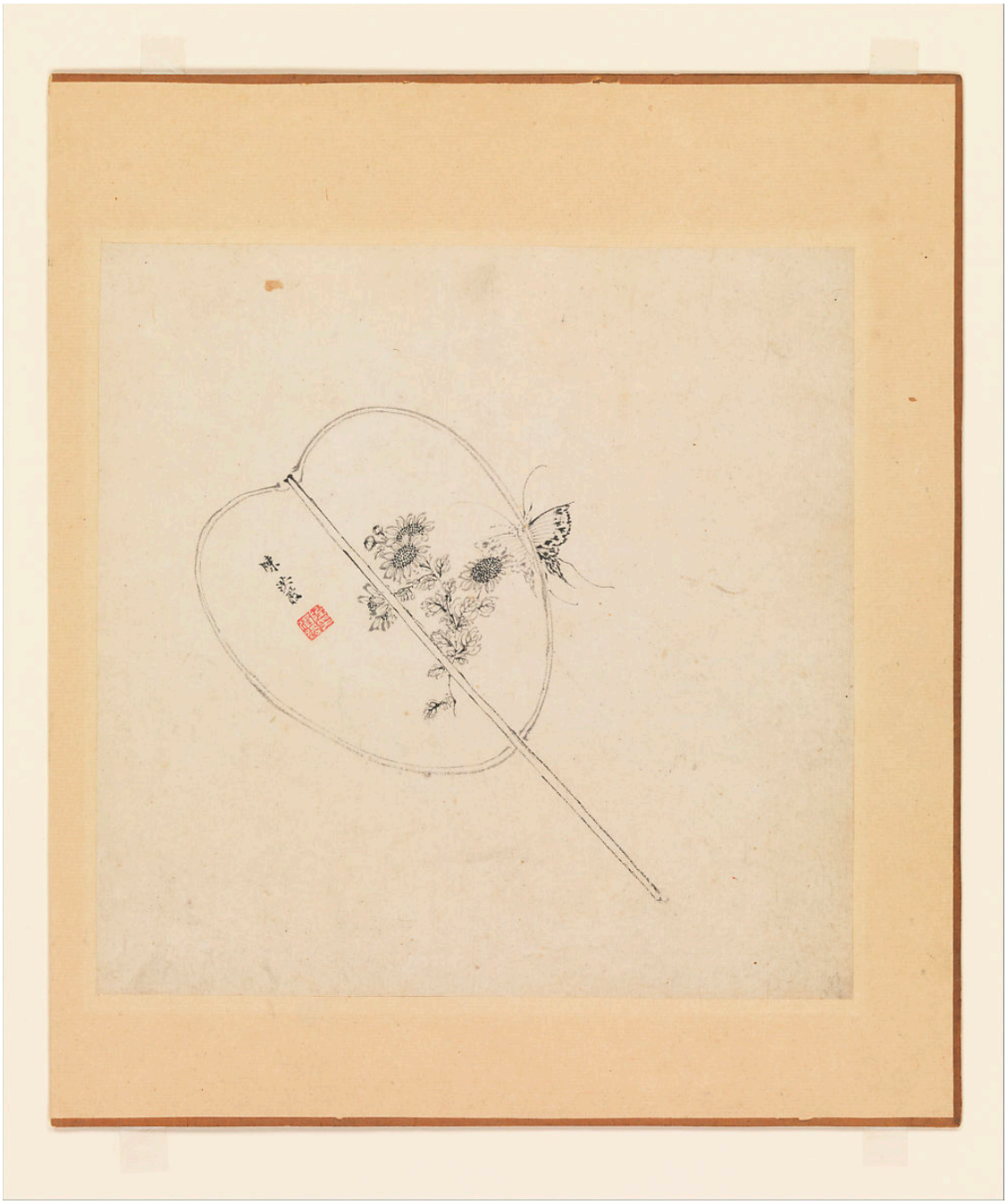

Figure 1.4 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*.

Figure 1.5 Illustrations in *Fang shi mopu*, 1589, woodblock print.

Figure 1.6 Page from *Luoxian biangu jianpu*, 1626, woodblock print.

Figure 1.7 Pages from *Shizhu zhai jianpu*, 1644, reprinted in 1952, woodblock print.

Figure 1.8 Illustrations in *Chengshi moyuan*, 1605, woodblock prints.

Figure 1.9 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Landscapes, Figures, and Flowers*, 1622, album leaf, ink on paper, image 22.2 x 9.2 cm, inscriptions 22.2 x 9.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 1.10 Lan Ying, *Landscape after Zhang Sengyou*, Ming Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 177 x 92 cm. Wuxi Museum.

Figure 1.11 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Landscapes, Figures, and Flowers*.

Figure 1.12 Chen Hongshou, *Thinking of Poems in the Shadow of a Pine Tree*, 1643, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk,102 x 50 cm. Wuxi Museum

Figure 1.13 Detail of *Lofty Scholar*.

Figure 1.14 Attributed to Gu Kaizhi, section of *The Admonitions of the Court Instructress*, probably fifth–sixth century copy, handscroll, ink and colors on silk. The British Museum.

Figure 1.15 Su Hanchen, *Lady at Her Dressing Table in a Garden*, Southern Song dynasty, mid-12th century, fan painting mounted as album leaf, ink, color, and gold on silk, 25.2 x 26.7 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 1.16 Chen Hongshou, *Lady Looking into a Mirror*, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 103.5 x 43.2 cm. Tsinghua University Art Museum, Beijing.

Figure 1.17 Illustration of the "Xiezhen" scene in *The Peony Pavilion*, 1617, woodblock print, *Qifeng caotang* edition.

Figure 1.18 Pages from *The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual*, 18th century, woodblock print.

Figure 1.19 Wang Shishen, The Mirrored Reflection of the Moon in Water, Qing Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 119.5 x 53.5 cm. Guangdong Municipal Museum.

Figure 1.20 Mural with images of birds and basin in a garden setting in the tomb of Princess Tang'an, Xi'an, Shaanxi. After Chen and Ma, "Xi'an wangjiafen tangdai tang'angongzhu mu," Fig. 12.

Figure 1.21 Signed by Huang Quan, *Golden Basin and Pigeon*, likely a Ming copy of a Five Dynasties painting, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 153.7 x 91 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

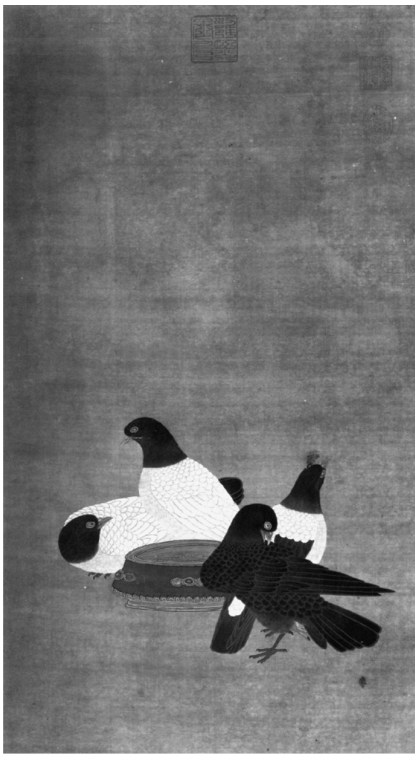

Figure 1.22 22 Zhu Zhanji, *Golden Basin and Pigeon*, Ming Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink and paper on silk, 86.2 x 47 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei

Figure 1.23 Fu Zhongzheng, *Pottery Basin and Pigeon*, Qing Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink and color in silk, 157 x 68.5 cm. Tianjin shi wenhua ju wenwu chu.

Figure 1.24 Chen Hongshou*, Inclining Woman with Incense Burner*, c. 1639, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 129 x 47.3 cm. Shanghai Museum.

Figure 1.25 Chen Hongshou, *Lady Swatting a Butterfly*, c. 1650, folding fan mounted as album leaf, ink and color on gold paper. Suzhou Museum.

Figure 1.26 Illustration for *Romance of the Western Chamber*, Min Qiji edition,1640, wood-block print. Cologne: Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst Collection.

Figure 1.27 Chen Hongshou, *Ladies Swatting a Butterfly*, 1650, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 93.7 x 45.7 cm. Shanghai Museum.

Figure 1.28 Detail of one leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies.*

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1 Johannes Vermeer, *Music Lesson*, c. 1662-1665, oil on canvas, 74.6 × 64.1 cm. London, Royal Collection.

Figure 2.2 Chen Hongshou, *Drying Hair*, Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 58.1 x 105 cm. Chongqing Museum.

Figure 2.3 Chen Hongshou, *Drinking and Reading*, hanging scroll, ink and paper on silk, 100.8 x 49.4 cm. Shanghai Museum.

Figure 2.4 A woodblock print from *Yushu renfeng* that illustrates how shufa guan was worn under a semi-transparent head cap. After Sun Ji, "Mingdai de shufa guan, (di) ji yu toumian," in Wenwu 2001(07):62-83, Fig. 4.3

Figure 2.5 Chen Hongshou, "Nangyou" leaf from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*, 1651, album leaf, ink and color on paper, 21.4 x 29.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 2.6 Chen Hongshou, “Jiaoshu” from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion.*

Figure 2.7 Chen Hongshou, “Shuju” from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*.

Figure 2.8 Detail of *Drying Hair*.

Figure 2.9 Chen Hongshou, “Huanyan” from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*.

Figure 2.10 Detail of “Nangyou” from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*

Figure 2.11 Lan Ying and Xu Tai, *Washing the Inkstone*, 1659, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper. Tianjin Museu.

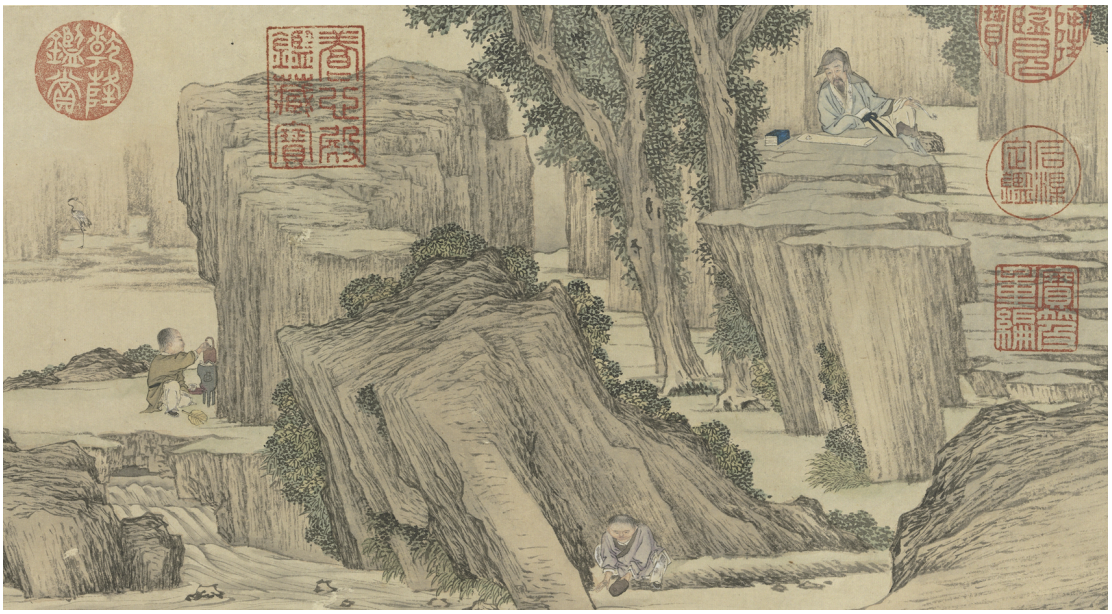

Figure 2.12 Detail of Jin Tingbiao, *Washing Inkstones and Making Tea*, handscroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 2.13 Detail of Du Jin, Enjoying Antiques, hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk, 126.1 x 187 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 2.14 Inkstone with inscriptions by Chen Hongshou and others (the image on the right shows Chen Hongshou's inscription with his signature). Shanghai Museum.

Figure 2.15 Chen Hongshou, "Fang Zhuang" from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion.*

Figure 2.16 Chen Hongshou, “Pinfan” from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*.

Figure 2.17 Chen Hongshou, *Pondering the Plum Blossoms*, 1649, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 125.2 x 58cm. Nanjing Museum.

Figure 2.18 Chen Hongshou, *He Tianzhang Amid Pleasures*, ink and color on silk, 25 x 163 cm. Suzhou Museum.

Figure 2.19 Chen Hongshou, *Tang Scholar Seeking a Line of Verse*, c. 1651, ink and color on paper, 24.5 x 32 cm. Heilongjiang Provincial Museum.

Figure 2.20 Detail of the painting surface in Chen Hongshou, *Lofty Scholar*.

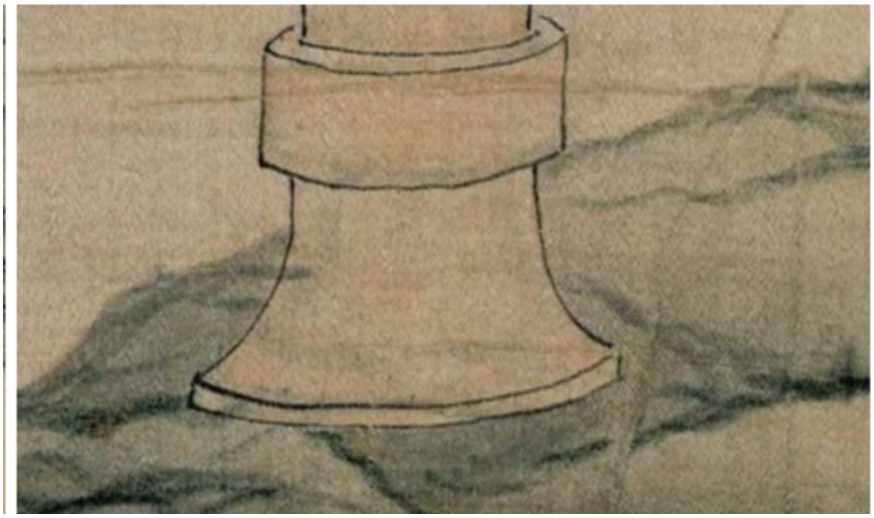

Figure 2.21 Detail of the flower vase in Chen Hongshou, *Lofty Scholar*.

Figure 2.22 Attributed to Chen Hongshou with the painter's seal, *Flowers Springing from a Dreaming Brush*, album leaf, ink and color on silk, 18.6 x16 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1 Lan Ying, *Red Friend*, 17th century, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 148.9 x 47.3 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

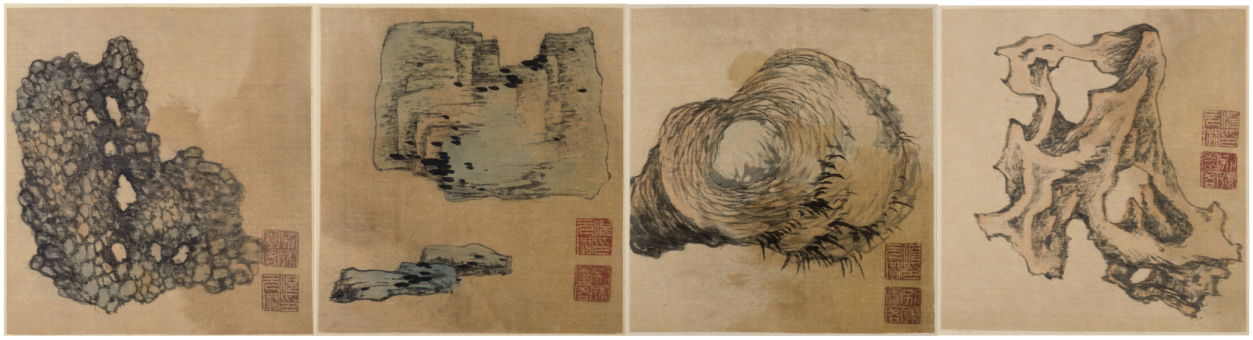

Figure 3.2 Ni Yuanlu, selected album leaves from *Friendship in Stone*, 1640, album leaf, ink and color on satin, each leaf 21.7 x 20.2 cm. Princeton University Art Museum.

Figure 3.3 Chen Hongshou, *Elegant Gathering*, c. 1646-47, handscroll, ink on paper, 29.8 x 98.4 cm. Shanghai Museum.

Figure 3.4 (left to right a-d) Chen Hongshou, album leaves from *Landscapes, Figures, and Flowers*.

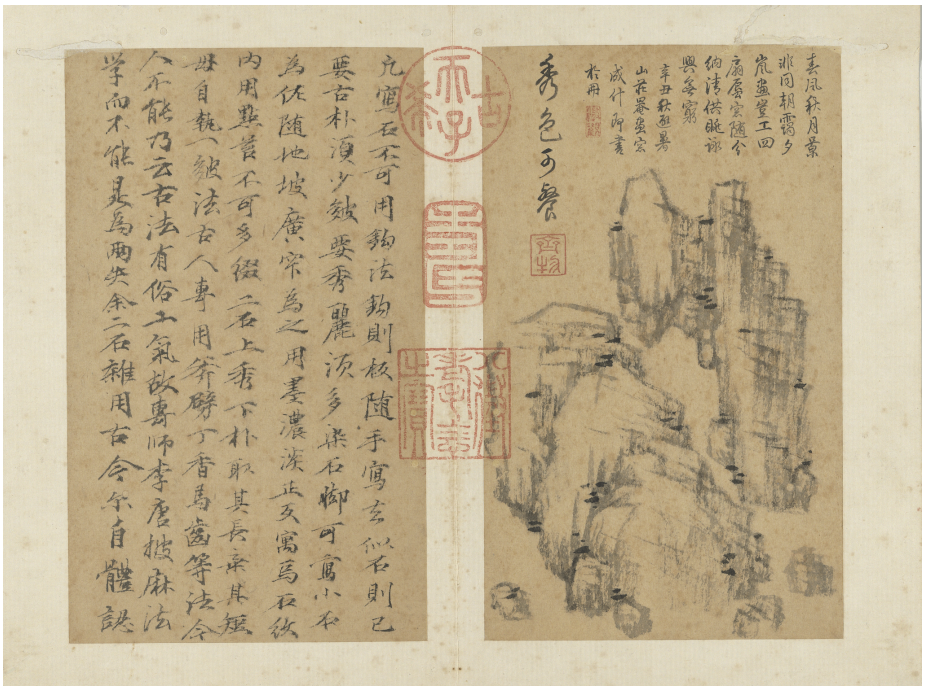

Figure 3.5 Unidentified artist, after Ni Zan's *Painting Manual*, dated 1350, leaf 7, "Angular Rocks," album, ink on paper, each leaf 23.6 x 14.2 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 3.6 Lan Ying, “Autumn Mountains Stretching Peacefully into the Distance,” in *Landscapes after Ancient Masters Album*, Ming Dynasty, album leaf, ink on paper, 31.4 x 33.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 3.7 Lan Ying, *Scroll of an Autumn Bird Resisting Frost*, Ming Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink on silk, 163.9 x 62.3 cm. Shanghai Museum.

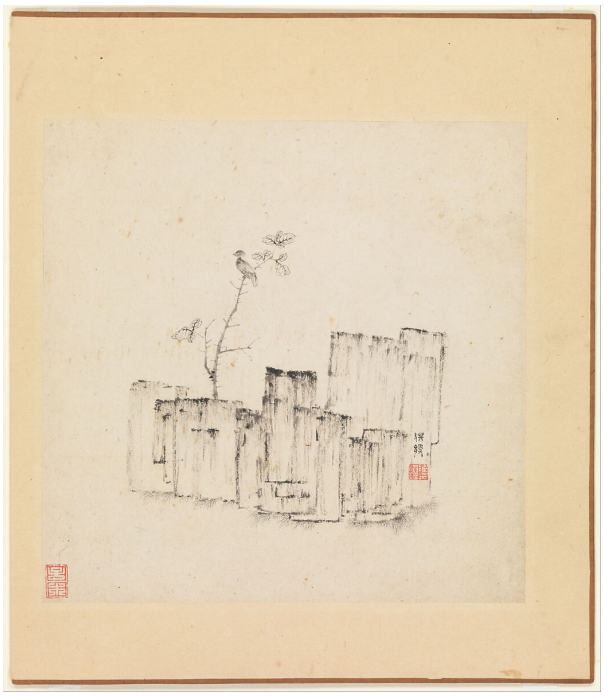

Figure 3.8 Chen Hongshou, album leaf from *Miscellaneous Studies*.

Figure 3.9 Detail of Lan Ying, *White Clouds and Red Trees*, 1658, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 189.4 x 48 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 3.10 Detail of Wang Meng, *Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains*, dated 1366, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 140 x 42.2 cm. Shanghai Museum.

Figure 3.11 Wang Meng, *Layered Ridges and Deep Forests*, 1344, hanging scroll, ink on silk, 64.5 x 38.6 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 3.12 (Left) Chen Hongshou, *Day-lilies, Bamboo and Rocks*, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 107.5 x 42.5 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. (Right) Detail of *Day-lilies, Bamboo and Rock*.

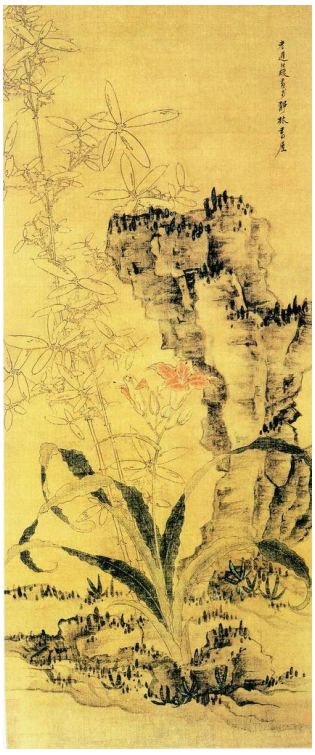

Figure 3.13 Chen Hongshou, *Bamboo, Rock, and Day-lilies,* hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 113.3 x 48 m. Nanjing Museum.

Figure 3.14 Chen Hongshou, *Plum Branch, Rock and Butterflies*, c. 1639, handscroll, ink on gold paper, 123 x 37.9cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

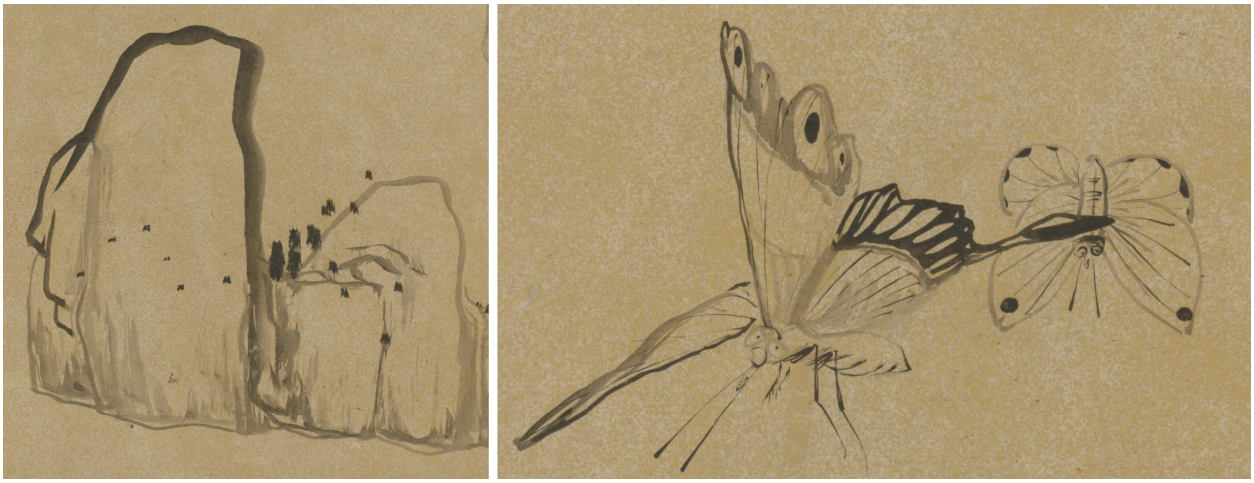

Figure 3.15 Comparison of details of the rock and the butterflies from *Plum Branch, Rock and Butterflies.*

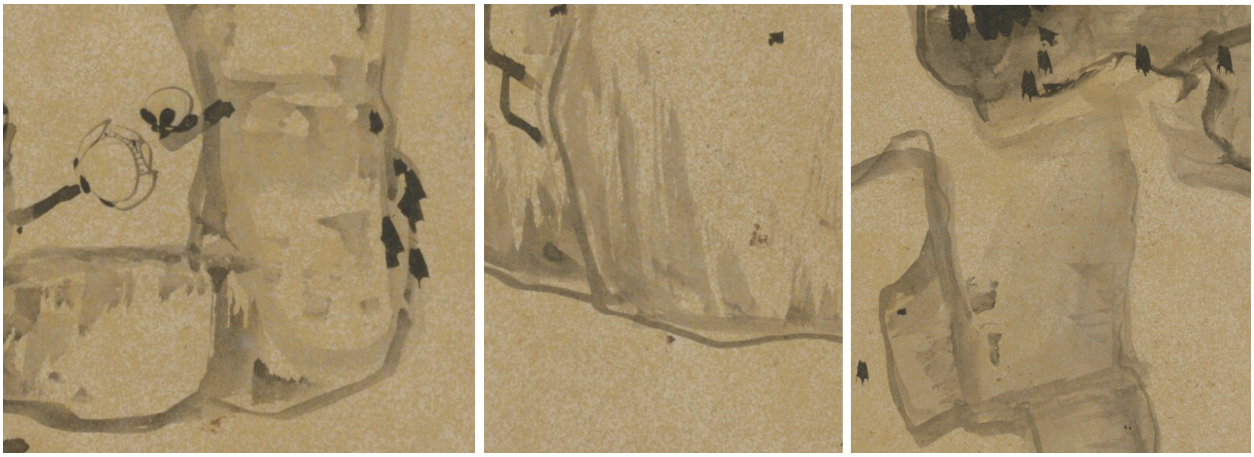

Figure 3.16 Comparison of details of the plum branch (left),the second rock (middle), and the first rock (right) from *Plum Branch, Rock and Butterflies*

Figure 3.17 Detail of *Plum Branch, Rock and Butterflies* showing the gold-flecked paper.

Figure 3.18 Chen Hongshou, "Ancient Plum," album leaf from *Miscellaneous Paintings of Chen Hongshou*, c. 1645, ink and color on paper, 24.3 x 31.1cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 3.19 Su Shi, *Old Tree, Rock, and Bamboo*, Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), undated, section of a handscroll, ink on paper, 26.3 x 50 cm (painting only). Private collection. Source: Christie's.

Figure 3.20 Chen Hongshou, leaf from *Landscapes and Flowers*, first half of the 17th century, one of twelve folding fans mounted as album leaves, ink and color on gold paper, 24.1 x 52.1 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 3.21 Chen Hongshou, “Xingshi” from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*.

Figure 3.22 Detail of “Xingshi” from *Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*.

Figure 3.23 Chen Hongshou, "*Piaoxiang*" *from Sixteen Views of Living in Reclusion*.

Figure 3.24 Chen Hongshou, "Tao Yuanming," leaf from *Venerating Antiquity*, 1653, woodblock print, ink on paper, National Library of China, Beijing

Figure 3.25 Chen Hongshou, “Scholar with Staff and Brush” in *Paintings after Ancient Masters*, album leaf, ink and color on silk, 30.2 x 26.7 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art.

Figure 3.26 Chen Hongshou, “Portrait of Tao Yuanming” in *Paintings after Ancient Masters*.

Figure 3.27 Chen Hongshou, “A Lady” in *Paintings after Ancient Masters*.

Figure 3.28 Attributed to Li Gonglin, *Elegant Gathering of the Western Garden*, handscroll, ink on paper, 47.2 x 1104.3 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 3.29 “Inscribing on a Wall,” in *Sancai tuhui*, 1609, woodblock print.

Figure 3.30 Chen Hongshou, “Complete Scene of Figures below Rocks,” leaf from an album, ink and color on paper. Shanghai Museum

Figure 3.31 Detail of “Scholar with Staff and Brush” in *Paintings after Ancient Masters*.

Chapter 4

Figure 4.1 Chen Hongshou, *Bodhisattva Guanyin*, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 4.2 Detail of *Elegant Gathering*.

Figure 4.3 Chen Hongshou, *Children Worshiping the Buddha*, c. 1650, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 150 x 67.3 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 4.4 Chen Hongshou, “Meditation” scene from *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*, 1649, handscroll, ink and color on silk, 31 x 289.5 cm. Drenowatz Collection, Rietberg Museum, Zurich.

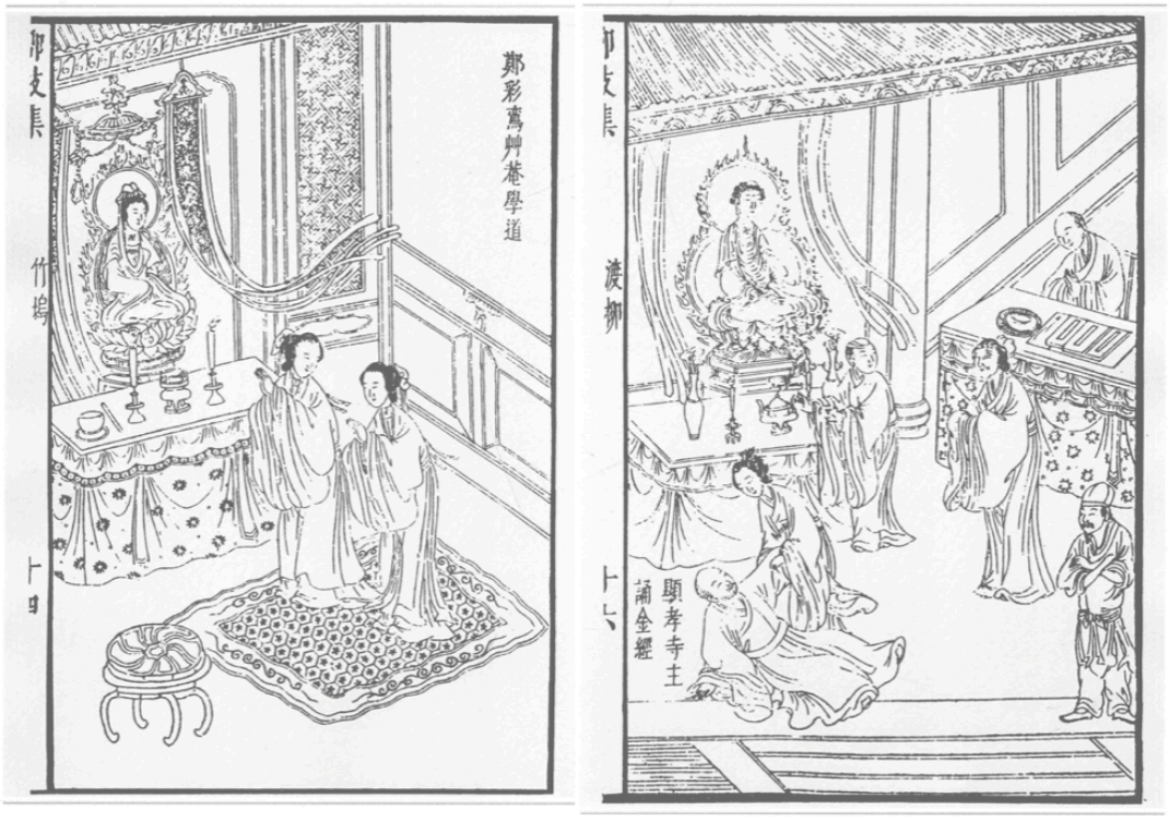

Figure 4.5 Illustrations to *Xinjuan gujin mingju liuzhiji: Qiannü lihun*, woodblock prints on paper, 17th century. From *Zhongguo fojiao banhuan quanji*, vol. 37, pp. 91 and 92.

Figure 4.6 Details of the Boddhisatva statue in *Elegant Gathering*.

Figure 4.7 Lotus Sutra, woodblock print on paper, 1696. From *Zhongguo banhua quanji*, vol. 1, fig. 290.

Figure 4.8 Illustration to *Xihu erji*, woodblock print on paper, Ming Dynasty, 17th century, From *Zhongguo banhua quanji*, vol. 4, fig. 203.

Figure 4.9 Illustration for *Shishi yuanliu yinghua shiji* , woodblock print on paper, Ming Dynasty. From *Zhongguo fojiao banhuan quanji*, vol. 33, p. 135.

Figure 4.10 Frontispiece to *Foshuo yueshang nüjing*, 1640, woodblock print on paper. From *Zhongguo fojiao banhuan quanji*, vol. 37, p. 128.

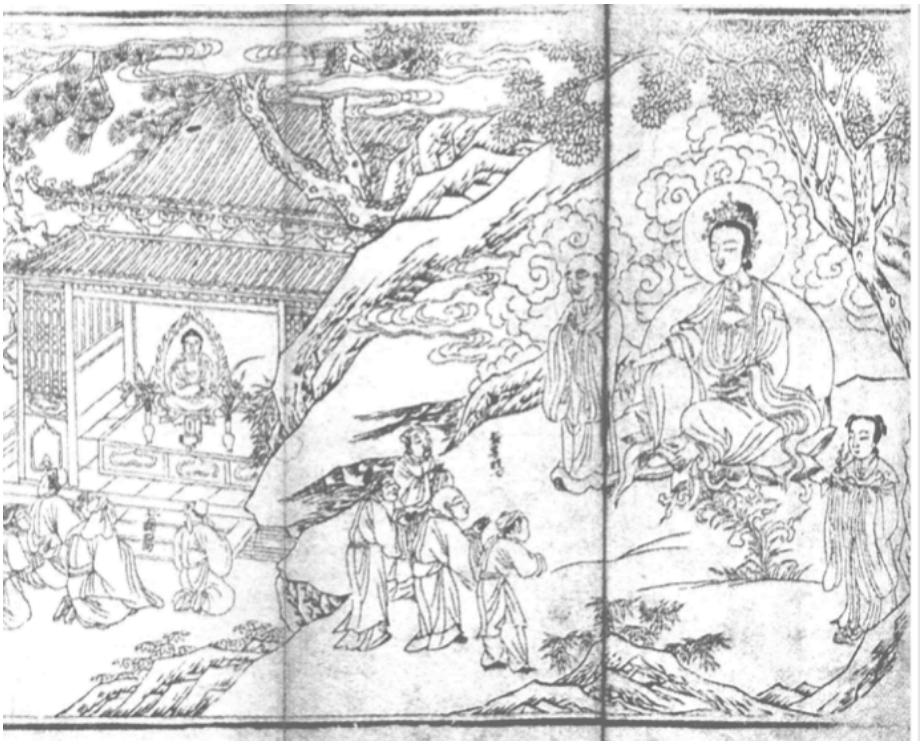
Figure 4.11 *Cibei daochang shifa bianxiang tu*, Ming Dynasty, woodblock print on paper. From *Zhongguo fojiao banhuan quanji*, vol. 37, p. 148.

Figure 4.12 Frontispiece to *Lotus Sutra* (detail), Song dynasty, woodblock print on paper. From *Zhongguo banhua shi tulu*, vol. 1, p. 6.

Figure 4.13 Illustration in *Shishi yuanliu yinghua shiji*, 1486, woodblock print and hand-colored on paper. Library of Congress Rare Book Collection, Washington D.C.

Figure 4.14 Attributed to Su Hanchen, *A Group of Children at Play*, 17-19th century, round fan mounted as an album leaf, ink and color on silk, 21.6 × 21.6 cm (unframed). Yale University Art Museum.

Figure 4.15 Faces of the Buddha and a boy in *Children Worshipping the Buddha*.

Figure 4.16 Left to right: reproductions of *Children Worshipping the Buddha* from the Zhonghua zhenbao guan website, *Chen Hongshou quanji*, and the Palace Museum website. Composite by the author.

Figure 4.17 The chattra of Baochu Pagoda in Hangzhou. Recast in 1997 according to the Ming original.

Figure 4.18 Detail of *Children Worshipping the Buddha*.

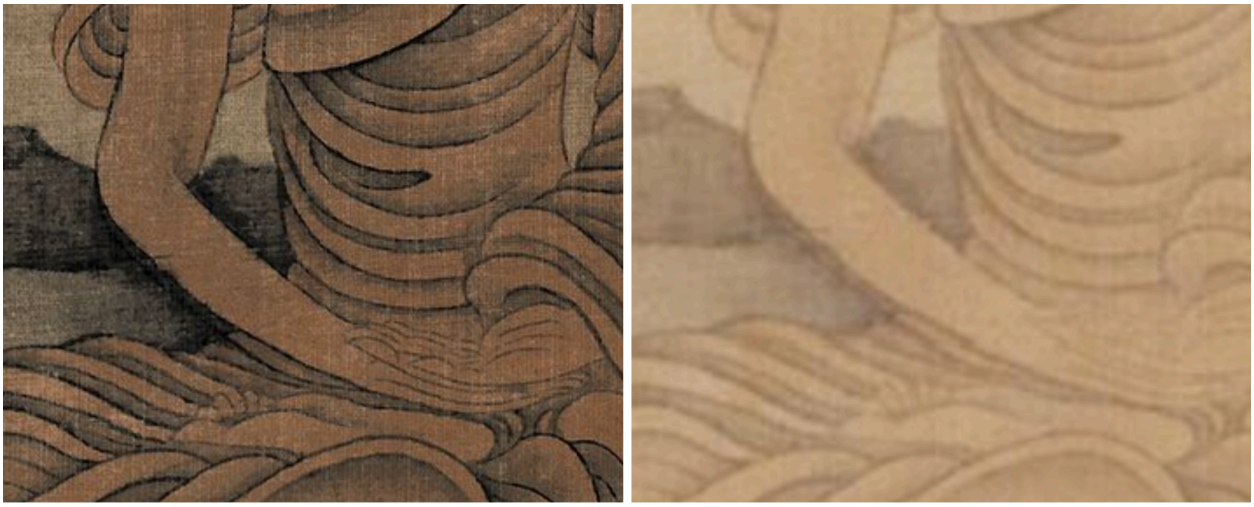

Figure 4.19 Detail of *Children Worshipping the Buddha* seen from two digital reproductions. Composite by the author.

Figure 4.20 “The Knowledgeable Old Lady” scene from *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*.

Figure 4.21 “Reciting Poetry while Drunk” scene from *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu.*

Figure 4.22 “Talking Music” scene from *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*.

Figure 4.23 Detail of the "Meditation" scene in *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu*.

Figure 4.24 Curly-Haired Youth, Tang dynasty, first half of 8th century, earthenware with green lead glaze. Art Institute of Chicago.

Figure 4.25 Close-up details of the colossal Vairocana statue in Fengxian Shrine, Longmen Cave, Luoyang.

Figure 4.26 The repeated hand gestures in the "Meditation" scene in *Four Pleasures of Nan Shenglu.*

Figure 4.27 (Left) Portrait of the Renzong of Song Dynasty, Song Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink and paper on silk, 188.5 x 128.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei; (Right) Portrait of Confucius, leaf from Zhisheng xianxian banshen xiang, album leaf, ink and color on paper, 33.3 x 24.3 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Figure 4.28 Carved images on Xingzhi Stele at Kaiyuan Temple in Xingtai, Yuan Dynasty, ink Rubbing. Central Academy of Fine Arts Library, Beijing.

Figure 4.29 Portrait of Confucius, first half of 12th century, ink rubbing. Confucius Temple in Quzhou.

Figure 4.30 Chen Hongshou, *Transmitting the Classics* (left) and its detail (right), c. 1649. hangings scroll, ink and color on silk. Wenzhou Museum.

Figure 4.31 Chen Hongshou, *Lady Xuanwen Giving Instruction on the Rites of Zhou*, 1638, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, 172.8 x 55.7 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Figure 4.32 Chen Hongshou, *Appreciating a Painting* (left) and its detail (right), c. 1647, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Figure 4.33 Chen Hongshou, *Child Playing*, c. 1650, one of two album leaves framed together into a hanging scroll, ink on paper, 11.5 x 21.3 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.