

PAINTING

Along with poetry and calligraphy, painting was one of the Three Perfections in Chinese culture. Paintings could communicate information, but above all, an acquaintance with painting indicated superior cultural refinement. Although painters were not always held in highest regard, their works were avidly collected.

Materials and Methods

Before discussing the chronology of Chinese painting, we must consider the materials and methods. Four basic formats were available to the painter. The vertical format, the *hanging scroll*, was ordinarily displayed on a wall, for the enjoyment of a large audience. The horizontal *handscroll*, by comparison, was designed for an intimate audience, usually of one. The oval or pleated *fan* was another format uniquely suited to the leisured life of aristocratic connoisseurs. *Album leaves* were mounted in picture books with fans and scraps of old handscrolls.

The supports for Chinese painting were silk and paper. Since the textures of fine silk and rough paper were integral aspects of the viewing experience, a painter never concealed the support in the way oil paint can cover a canvas. Classic Chinese painting lacks strong color. Because it is worked primarily in shades of gray, it is called *monochrome painting*, even when slight touches of color are included. Monochrome painting is ink painting. Soot and glue were compressed into a solid *inkstick*, which was abraded on an inkstone. The particles were mixed with water. Fresh inks and colors were created for each painting session. To create pigments for richly colored paintings, ground mineral crystals were mixed with water and glue.

Brushes were specially designed for different tasks. Wet and dry brushes, referring to the amount of ink the bristles could hold, were available. A typical brush had a core of stiff bristles encircled by an air pocket surrounded by soft animal hair. Unusual brushes were the size of brooms. What was most important was that the instrument was appropriate to the task. Line quality and tonal range were controlled by the pressure on the brush, the angle of the brush on the support, the density of the ink, and the absorbency of the support. Brushwork was the key element in evaluating the quality of an ink painting. It defined form, carried energy, and revealed the artist's personality. Brushwork interpreted the subject and provided an avenue for self-expression.

Early Painting, Through the Tang Dynasty

To begin our chronological study of Chinese painting we should acknowledge its origins in the neolithic Yangshao culture. The frayed bamboo reed used to create the fluid X-marks on the funerary vessel anticipates the brush in subsequent Chinese painting. Clay would always offer Chinese painters an attractive surface, but it was superseded by silk, the painting support of choice.

The oldest intact Chinese painting on silk is a T-shaped funerary item called a *fei-i* (Fig. 44), which translates "fly-away garment." In 1971 it was discovered on the coffin of a Han aristocrat, Lady Dai, who died around 168 B.C.E. The banner-shaped *fei-i* foreshadows the hanging scroll so popular in later Chinese art. It was painted with brush and opaque mineral colors in earth tones of red and tan. Flat paint fills firm black outlines, but several individual passages are rendered with amazing realism. Textural variety is a feature of early Chinese painting, evident in the grain pattern on the circular *bi* and the scaly dragons threaded through its center. Symmetry prevails in this surface-oriented work, but each motif in the numerous pairs is slightly different from its mate.

The purpose of the *fei-i* was to assist Lady Dai's soul in its flight to the immortal ancestors, therefore, it is replete with symbols that map the Daoist cosmos. In the vertical section, two horizontal lines anchor earthly scenes. Above the *bi*, a scene of filial piety includes old Lady Dai, bent over her cane, and several respectful attendants, most likely her children. Some distance below the *bi* is a funeral sacrifice with several bronze ritual vessels. Beyond this ordinary world, the space is filled with Daoist emblems. Most are famous in Chinese culture, and the following short list can help explain many enigmatic images in Chinese art. The important emblems are animals associated with the cardinal directions. Beginning at the top of the vertical section, two phoenixes indicate the south. Dragons of the east frame Lady Dai, and beneath the filial group is the tiger of the west. Two turtles and a snake near the funeral vessels are emblematic of the north.

Because painters in ancient China were considered to be common laborers, it is unlikely that we will ever know the name of the individual who painted Lady Dai's *fei-i*. An appreciation for artistic genius and individual personality dawned in the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. We would not find these connoisseurs among the Toba Wei buddha-makers in the north, but in the refined southern courts, where individuals devoted time to evaluating artistic quality. Analyzing art was an avocation among the southern nobility. In the closing years of the fifth century of the current era, six points, which have come to be called the *Principles of Chinese Painting*, were outlined.

The first principle says that paintings must have vital energy. The artist must capture the essence of the subject. The spirit animating the image is

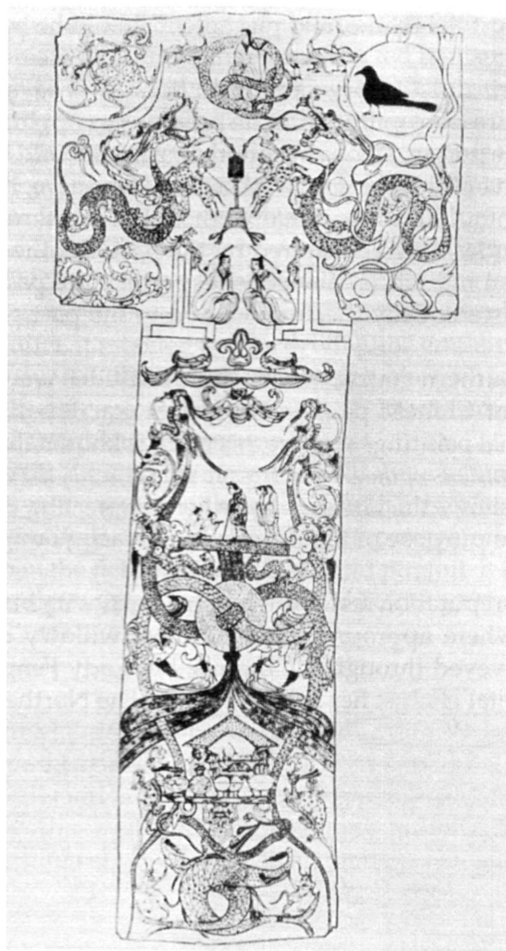


Figure 44 Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220). Fei-i from tomb of Lady Dai, ca. 168 B.C.E.; painted silk banner, 80 3/4" L. People's Republic of China

more important than its exterior appearance. The second principle states that vital energy is conveyed through the brushstroke. The strength of the brushwork, the visible record of energy, also reveals the painter's personality. According to the third principle, the painting must be faithful to the appearance of the subject. Capricious distortions would be discourteous to the subject, and, in the same vein, the fourth principle expects that the colors are true to the subject. The fifth principle addresses proper composition; arrange-

ments must support the theme, and placement should be both dynamic and meaningful.

The sixth principle is very Confucian because it says that the experiences of the past are transmitted into the present by copying the work of the masters. While the notion of copying another artist's work, line for line, may imply a lack of inventiveness from a Western perspective, it is an admirable artistic expression in Chinese and many other Non-Western cultures. Artists in other communities may be inspired by the past, but the Chinese artist is infused with it. An individual develops respect for the past by reliving the strokes of the masters. Only then can he add to the past with his personal inventions.

From the southern courts, where these attitudes were fostered, came the first important Chinese painter, Gu Kaizhi (ca. 344–406). Since no authenticated original paintings survive, his work is known through old copies such as the *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Ladies of the Court* handscroll. A detail (fig. 45) shows the virtuous Lady Feng protecting the emperor from a raging bear. The purpose of the scroll was to teach young women proper behavior.

Gu Kaizhi's reputation rests partly on his tight, wiry brushstrokes. They impart dignity, where appropriate, to the most willowy characters. Little movement is conveyed through the figures, but Lady Feng's fluttering ribbons reflect her vital energy, her spirit strength. The Northern Wei sculptors had cast the curling drapery on the bronze Standing Buddha in imitation of these ink swirls. Lady Feng's placement with the armed guards exemplifies the meaningful composition mandated in the fifth principle of Chinese painting. Absent in this painting, and in the Han fei-i, is a setting or a framing device. Each component is spatially isolated on a flat ground.



Figure 45 Southern dynasties (265–581). *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Ladies of the Court*, detail, Lady Feng and the Bear, copy after original, by Gu Kaizhi (ca. 344–406); handscroll; ink, slight color on silk, 9 3/4" H × 11' 6" L. British Museum, London

Under the patronage of the Tang emperors (618–906), painting expanded spatially and thematically. Prevailing taste favored realism. Portraits of people and animals, everyday activities among aristocrats and farmers, landscapes and buddhas were subjects we could find in a Tang painter's portfolio. Great events, both heroic and tragic, inspired Tang artists.

A copy after an original Tang dynasty horizontal hanging scroll, *Ming Huang's Journey to Shu* (Fig. 46), presents an episode from the life of that famous but controversial Tang emperor. An avid patron of poetry, music, and painting, Ming Huang (reigned 712–756) also had a special yearning for robust horses and women. Because the army resented his obsession with the courtesan Yan Guifei, it rebelled in 755, driving the emperor, his sweetheart, and court loyalists out of the capital and south to the province of Shu. On the way, Yang Guifei was captured and strangled. The tale of passion and ruin inspired painters and poets for centuries.

The Tang artist divided the narrative into three sections. It begins with the arrival in the valley on the right, pauses with a respite in the center, and concludes with the departure on the left. The procession has the flair of a pageant rather than the desperation of flight and pursuit. It is presented in the colorful *decorative style* (also called the *blue-and-green style*) favored in the Tang

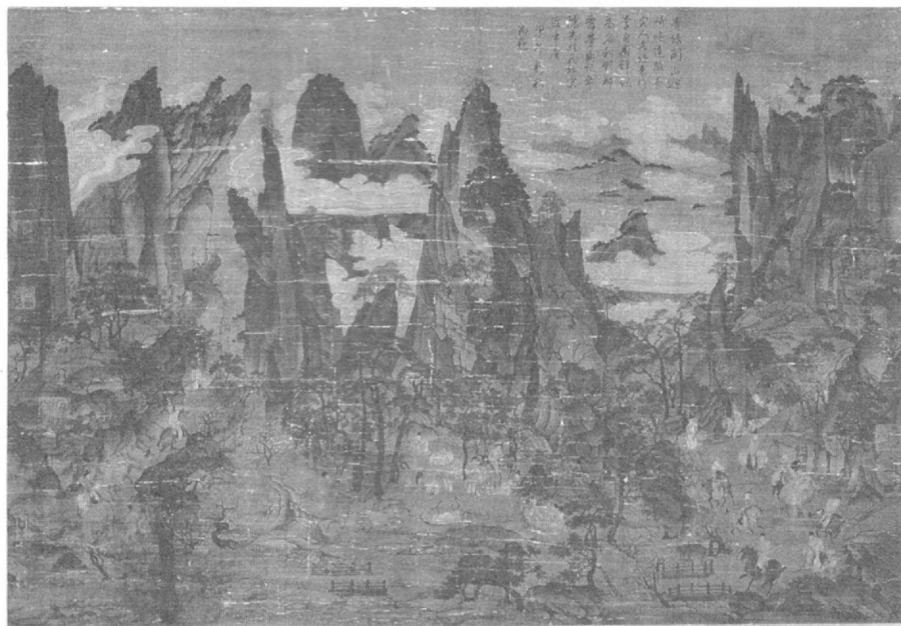


Figure 46 Tang dynasty (618–906). *Ming Huang's Journey to Shu*, Song copy after Tang original ca. 800; horizontal hanging scroll; ink, color on silk, 21 3/4" H. National Palace Museum, Taipei

court. In the decorative style, panoramic scenery overwhelms the figures while sharp details draw our eye to the surface. Overlap establishes an illusion of depth, but the landscape lacks atmosphere. Edges are defined by black ink lines and filled in with flat, opaque colors touched with gold. The jagged mountains and metallic clouds share qualities with the Han incense burner.

Monochrome Ink Painting, Song Through Qing

Chinese painting matured in the Song dynasty courts and in the Buddhist monasteries in the surrounding countryside. The Song army routed the invaders who had toppled their Tang predecessors, but they were forced to flee their capital city of Kaifeng when a new group of insurgents drove the Song court south of the Yangzi River to the new capital at Hangzhou. Therefore, an important distinction is made between the first phase, the Northern Song (960–1127) and the subsequent Southern Song (1127–1279). Although still lifes and genre scenes were painted during the Northern Song period, landscape painting was the supreme expression.

Northern Song. Northern Song landscape painting is called the *monumental style*. The justly famous hanging scroll entitled *Traveling Among Mountains and Streams* (Fig. 47) communicates the majesty of the monumental style. The painter, Fan Kuan (active 990–1030), created a vision so expressively convincing that the viewer was transported into the space. This was the goal of monumental style painting. By contemplating nature, the viewer became absorbed into the order of the universe. It was a spiritual journey, one of attitude. The illusion of being there was evocative. The painting was an object for sustained meditation leading to spiritual harmony with nature. Chinese landscape paintings never reproduced the appearance of actual locations, although they were often inspired by real places. They captured the spirit of the place that was both unique and universal.

Landscape paintings require two motifs, mountain and water, derived from the two characters forming the word "landscape." Water and mountain represent yin and yang, things low and high, things flexible and rigid. Human qualities were projected on natural elements also. Bold, scrappy pines were adventurous, young gentlemen, and bent, leafless trees were wise, old men.

People are always small in Northern Song landscape painting because size is the first law in creating space. Mountains are larger than trees and trees are larger than people. Beyond these simple rules, space was controlled by personal choices about placement. Appropriately, Fan Kuan concealed his name in the leaves near the man entering from the lower right.

A notable change from Tang to Northern Song painting is the inclusion of atmosphere. Nuanced ink tones replace the hard-edged clouds and crisp details of the Tang decorative style. Mist envelops the looming mountain, shrouding crevices, and glazing planes. Expressive brushstrokes impart character to the trees, rivers, mountains, and lone building.

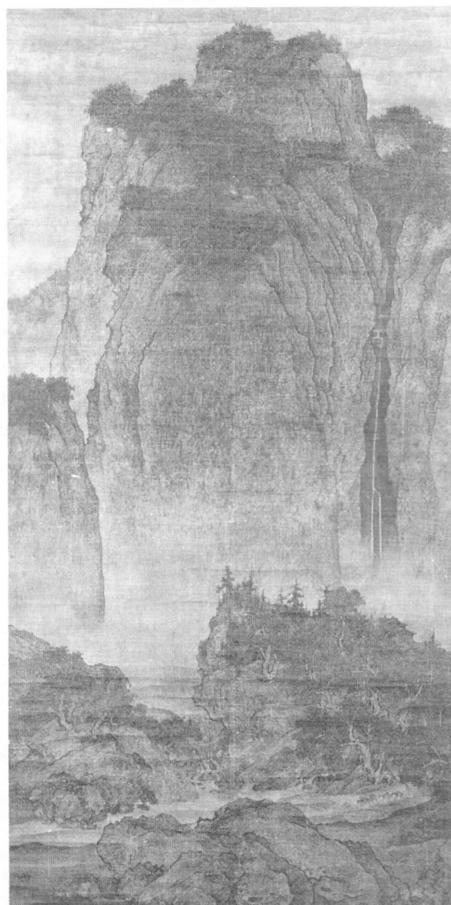


Figure 47 Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). *Traveling Among Mountains and Streams*, by Fan Kuan (active 990–1030), 1000; hanging scroll; ink, slight color on silk, 81 1/2" × 40 3/4". National Palace Museum, Taipei

Southern Song. The last emperor of the Northern Song dynasty, Hui Zong (reigned 1101–1125), was an accomplished painter but an inept administrator who lost northern China to invaders. He was captured, and his son fled south with remnants of the Song court. Although Chinese court life resumed its former splendor, the humiliating defeat hung in memories. Southern Song painting matured in a precarious political situation, and we can expect a current of uncertainty to run through the landscapes. Nature be-

came the gentleman's refuge in the unsettled age, but it was a world where the harmony of the monumental style had been disrupted.

Ma Yuan (active 1150–1225) was a premier exponent of the melancholic, *lyrical style* of Southern Song landscape painting. His oval fan mounted as an album leaf, entitled *Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight* (Fig. 48), is infused with lonely reflection. Gone are the stalwart young pines that had stood boldly on the cliff edge. Instead, barren plum trees, their thorns and flowers metaphors for life's fleeting pleasures, surround the man on all sides. While sitting immobile in the dangerous thicket, he gazes longingly into the night sky. Moonviewing was an ancient Chinese pastime. For centuries, buildings and gardens had been designed to facilitate advantageous views of the moon. Traditionally a group activity for the gentry, it is now a solitary activity. The gentleman is oblivious to the attendant standing respectfully behind his master. The young man, who always accompanies the scholar in a lyrical style

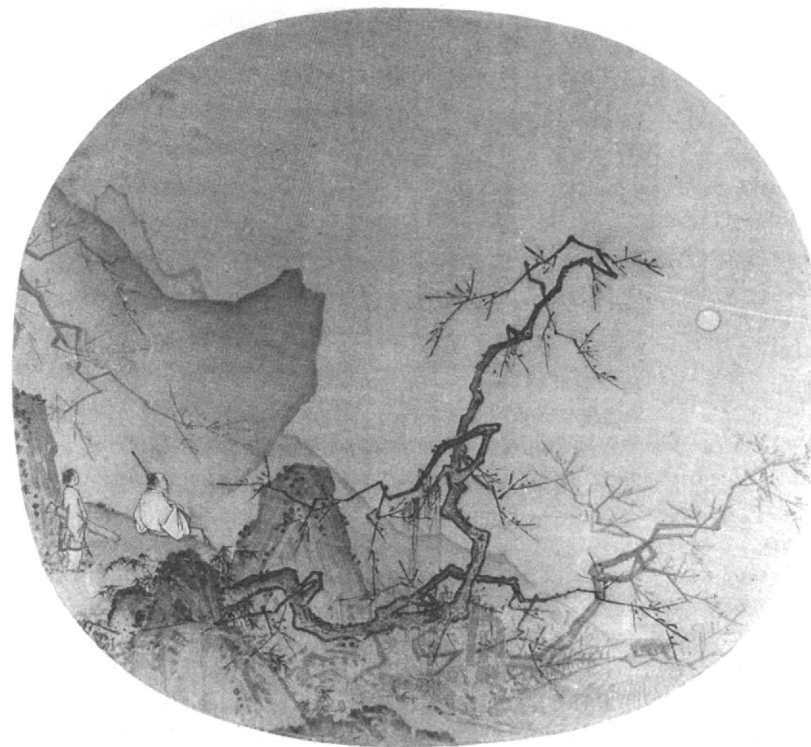


Figure 48 Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). *Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight*, by Ma Yuan (active 1190–1225); fan mounted as album leaf; ink, slight color on silk, 11 1/4" × 10 3/8" W. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

painting, holds a musical instrument for the scholar's melodic response to nature.

Southern Song lyrical style paintings are narrow-focus visions where individual brushstrokes are readily apparent. It is an art of placement and framing, with near and far linked by repeating elements. The lyrical style pushes the center of interest to one side, hence the name *one-corner Ma* often used for these compositions. While the mountain commanded the space in the Northern Song composition, over one half of Ma Yuan's painting is empty. On the surface, a diagonal line slices through the composition, dividing the lower left into a congested corner that opens abruptly to the vista. The gentleman's gaze, reinforced by two large plum branches, establishes a diagonal movement in depth. Dabs of white paint on the moon and the gentleman's garment connect the sky to the earth.

Correct spatial proportions are askew in Ma Yuan's world when compared to the monumental style. Trees are large, mountains are small, and the man dominates the space with his presence. Two protuberances, edged in rich black, nearly close the gentleman's channel to the moon. While undeniably refined and excruciatingly sensitive, the world of the Southern Song gentleman is not quite right.

Chan Painting. Suppose that we take a step over the edge of the gentleman's cliff. Imagine that all Confucian order is abandoned. That would be the perspective of the Southern Song Chan painter, Liang Kai. *Chan* (Zen in Japan), a variation of Buddhism, united Buddhism with Daoism. According to Chan Buddhists, the buddha-spirit exists in everything, like the Daoists' vital energy. The important aspect of Chan is that one understands intuitively, almost accidentally. Sudden revelations, unsought and unplanned, oust book-learning in the Chan worldview.

Chan nurtured an antihistory, anti-Confucian freedom that is revealed in Liang Kai's hanging scroll *The Sixth Patriarch Chopping Bamboo at the Moment of Enlightenment* (Fig. 49). A fallen gentleman-pine cuts a diagonal line across the lower left corner. The sliver of mountain, running down the left edge like a waterfall, bristles with nondescript twigs. Alone in the space, the Chan monk performs a remarkable act, slashing at the symbol of Confucian order, the segmented bamboo. By abandoning decorum and reason, he finds enlightenment. By abandoning correct proportion and controlled brushstrokes, Liang Kai surrenders to vital energy. Compared to the court painters' saturated brushstrokes, his dry-brush painting is undisciplined. To reinforce the expression, Liang Kai traded smooth silk for rough paper.

We could calculate the amount of time Liang Kai spent painting this picture in minutes, and that was the message of Chan. Creativity was swift and unpredictable. The choice to pursue the individualist's path was the artist's alone. Before taking the monk's vow, Liang Kai had earned the highest painting awards from the Southern Song court. He exchanged the cultured, non-active life of the gentleman for the spontaneous spirit of Chan.



Figure 49 Chan (Southern Song dynasty 1127–1279). *Sixth Patriarch, Chopping Bamboo at the Moment of Enlightenment*, by Liang Kai; hanging scroll; ink on paper, 29 1/4" H. Tokyo National Museum

Bamboo Painting. Bamboo was the quintessential emblem of the Chinese gentleman. It remained green through the winter, a symbol of endurance. It stood straight, but it survived because it was flexible. Its strength

was derived from its hollow center, the void through which vital energy flowed. Bamboo was segmented, like the ordered Confucian society.

Bamboo painting is considered the most difficult Chinese subject to master because the ability to dispose the repetitious shapes is a test of the artist's inventive spirit. Without the aid of detail or narrative, brushwork must carry the entire weight of the composition.

Because of these associations, bamboo painting became a popular subject during one of China's most difficult periods, the Yuan dynasty. In the thirteenth century Genghis Kahn had led hordes across the continent, cutting a path of destruction and misery from India to the shores of Japan. Kubilai Khan (reigned 1260–1294), one of Genghis Khan's sons, proclaimed himself emperor of China and adopted the dynastic name Yuan, which means "Great Beginning." Although the Chinese were spared the atrocities endured by the other conquered peoples, they were psychologically decimated by the takeover. The Great Beginning seemed to be the Great Conclusion. Bamboo painting became a battle cry among the dissenting nobility. Like the bamboo, they would endure.

An esteemed master of Yuan period bamboo painting is China's leading woman artist, Guan Daosheng (1262–1319). The deliberate, sword-stroke brushwork crossing the short handscroll (Fig. 50) makes it an excellent interpretation of a subject laden with masculine overtones. On another bamboo scroll she wrote, "Wouldn't someone say that I have transgressed?"

Eccentrics. In the fourteenth century, the alien Mongols were finally expelled and the Ming dynasty was established, to be followed by the last dynasty, the Qing, in the seventeenth century. Artistic tastes were conservative during the "Brilliant" dynasty and the "Pure" dynasty, as the names translate, respectively. The walled Forbidden City in Beijing, with its imposing halls, vast ceremonial plazas, and rectilinear alignment, encapsulates the rigid, petrified attitudes of the Chinese court.

Individualists fled the stifling atmosphere at court for the freedom of the countryside. In Chinese painting, they are referred to as the *Eccentrics*. Among the Eccentrics was the recluse Dao Ji (1641–1707). A descendent of the Ming family, he felt like an outsider in the new Chinese high society and entered a Buddhist monastery. Eventually Dao Ji abandoned his monastic vows and lived out his years as a professional painter and garden designer.

Dao Ji's novel painting *Wilderness Cottage* (Fig. 51), from a set of twelve album leaves, (Fig. 51) is a fitting conclusion to our study of Chinese art. In an inspired alliance of yin and yang, he made the mountain range swell in waves over the rickety dwelling. Lines are nervous scratches for trees, faintly touched with colored ink. As a painter and writer, Dao Ji was an articulate spokesman for artistic freedom. His most famous statement translates "I am as I am; I exist. I cannot stick the whiskers of the ancients on my face, nor put their entrails in my belly . . . I prefer to twitch my own whiskers."



Figure 50 Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). *Bamboo*, by Guan Daosheng (1262–1319), 1309; handscroll; ink on silk, 11" H. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Figure 51 Qing dynasty (1644–1912). *Wilderness Cottage*, by Dao Ji (Shih-y'ao; 1641–1707); leaf (g) in the album of twelve leaves, *Wilderness Colors*; ink, color on paper, 15 1/2" H x 11 1/2" W. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York