

The Legacy of Master Li

by

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The greatest freedom lies in what I do not paint.

Li Cheng-chi

“Do you not think you were too hard on him?” First Assistant Meng accepted the scroll from Master Huang and tied it carefully.

He ties the strings of the foolish man’s fate, thought Huang.

“No,” he said.

Then, because Meng gave him that bland look like a stone wall, added, “I have spent a lifetime studying Ancient Master Li. I’m tired of fellows who stumble upon his writing and decide after a couple of years, or even less, that they know what it means.”

“Perhaps it is because we do not have any extant paintings by Master Li,” said Meng. He turned the scroll thoughtfully. “We feel the need to guess what they were like.”

Huang scowled at him. Meng had never learned the virtues of silence and due respect. But he was a First Assistant without parallel, and ran the studio so well that Huang did not have to waste his time dealing with the minutiae of student work.

“Look at this. It arrived yesterday.” Huang could not bring himself to point. He merely flicked his fingers at the monstrosity.

The painting hung in an alcove in his private section of the studio. Through the open door behind them came the sound of animated voices as the students on the lower level discussed painting over their morning tea.

Meng regarded the long rectangle of silk obediently. It was almost completely covered with sketches of horses, many of them made only with a few brush strokes and all in different poses.

“I thought it rather amusing,” he murmured. “And did you not suggest yourself that Master Li may have painted other subjects?”

Huang blanched. “Not horses. And the silk is grossly over-filled. So busy! The eye can find nowhere to rest.”

“The painter must strive to fill both the silk and the hearts of those who view it,” quoted Meng.

“That is a metaphor,” said Huang. “As I have said many times before. To fill the heart, one must concentrate on the image as a whole. Unity. Equilibrium.” He pointed to his own most recent work, still stretched on a wooden panel beside the alcove.

This was surely what Li had meant. A landscape, for only landscape was a fit vehicle for the expression of gentlemanly sentiment. A mountain, a path, a lonely retreat. The trees and rocks contained enough detail to suggest their type but no more. The composition balanced neatly between foreground, middle ground and far ground. He did not, of course, resort to the use of vulgar coloured inks. ‘Only black ink contains all colours.’

“The gentleman will be distraught. And he is a good customer of ours.” Meng still gazed at the ridiculous work in the alcove, but all his attention was on his master.

Huang snorted. “It exemplifies the kind of loose thinking I despise.”

Meng, improperly, raised an eyebrow. “A discretely worded letter from you...”

“I will not write it. He should not presume to tell me my interpretation is wrong,” snapped Huang. He slapped his cap upon his head and swept out. On the landing he almost ran into a raw-boned young man in the blue vest of a public runner.

“Out of my way,” growled Huang.

The runner saw Huang’s scholar’s robes, bowed, and took an express box out of the sling around his neck. “For the Master Huang. Personal and Urgent.”

As Huang’s fingers closed on the wood, still warm from the boy’s chest, he felt a shiver of misgiving. Then it passed. How foolish. Yet he felt reluctant to open the missive. Conscious of Meng’s openly curious eyes and of the more oblique interest from the apprentices in the main studio below, he turned back into his inner studio. Surely the moneylender would not dare send a letter to him by public runner...

To the Esteemed Master Huang Esquire, Head of the Silent Jade Studio and Scholar of
the Fourth Rank

From Li Liu, of the House of Sun

Honoured Master Huang, You are cordially invited to a viewing of my recently acquired
work, 'Trees in Landscape' by Master Painter Li Cheng Chi.

Huang felt his stomach uncurl in relief and didn’t bother reading further. Another fake. Every couple of years someone would, with great fanfare, ‘discover’ a painting by Master Li that inevitably

turned out to be a forgery. Some of them were quite ingenious—Huang particularly remembered a man who attempted to pass off one of Huang’s own paintings as a real Li. Flattering but, Huang made sure, ultimately unsuccessful. He was surprised that the rich widow Li Liu had fallen for one of these charlatans. She had, until now, shown great good taste in her collection, based, it was true, on his own advice.

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Li Liu was waiting for him in the tea room of the main house. She rose from her seat at the polished sandalwood table and bowed gracefully.

“A revered guest is worth more than warehouses full of jade.”

“To be a guest is the closest we may come to heaven.” Huang bowed in return.

Li Liu wore a blue watered silk tunic seemingly too plain for her station as head of a merchant house, until one noticed the quality of the silk. She was young—no more than thirty—but attractive only in the vivacity of her manner that made her eyes shine and the corners of her mouth turn up.

“Master Huang, thank you so much for agreeing to view this painting. You won’t be disappointed.”

Huang covered his disapproval at her forthrightness with another bow and sat in the chair she indicated, across the limpid dark surface of the table.

“Madame Li, please forgive me if I seem a little skeptical. This is not the first time an original Li has seemingly been discovered.”

“You’ve seen many fakes, why should mine be different?” She smiled to remove any sting in the words.

A manservant entered silently and placed a tray of tea implements on the table.

“Please honour me with your participation at tea,” said Li Liu. At the corners of her mouth were tiny dimples.

“The honour is mine,” murmured Huang automatically.

The rose-flushed white of the porcelain tea set as well as the noiseless efficiency of the servant were of the highest quality, as he had come to expect from his fellow-connoisseur. Li Liu could afford to buy the best and, so far, always had. He was almost looking forward to seeing what manner of fake she had purchased. Of course, she would abide by his verdict. He was the greatest living expert on Li, after all.

Li Liu sipped her tea slowly. She had remembered protocol and, as decorum required, allowed Huang the same time to savour his own in silence. He bit into a pastry impatiently. The bitter, aromatic tea and sweet melting dough might as well have been water and paper, for all he appreciated them.

Her eyes twinkled at him over the rim of her cup. He gave up and set his cup down. “Perhaps you could tell me something of the provenance of your painting.”

“Very well.” She nestled her cup in its proper place between sweet dish and rim of tray.

“I have always been fascinated by the story of Master Li,” she began, using the formal storytelling pronoun and slipping into a regular rhythm. Huang felt himself settling as a ‘listener’ and had to shake himself to stay analytical, to weigh what she said against what he knew.

“When I was a child, my mother told my brothers and myself that we had an illustrious painter as an ancestor.”

“There are several families who claim Master Li as their primary ancestor,” protested Huang. “The line has never been satisfactorily traced.”

Li Liu shrugged slim blue shoulders. “That didn’t bother me then, nor does it now. The important thing is how he described his paintings.

The bushes are thick with chickens
Feathered fruit
I am forbidden to pick
How I wish they were pheasants—”

“—And I the fox,” finished Huang.

He regarded her with more respect. The poem was an obscure one that most historians avoided because of its difficulty. Huang had demonstrated that it was a political metaphor, and the balance of opinion was that Li had been drinking heavily when he wrote it.

“Is this related to the provenance of the painting you show me today?”

Li Liu’s dimpled mouth quirked. “You will see that it is. But to continue. When I grew old enough to understand that it was believed no actual paintings by Master Li remained in the world, I vowed to track down any that might have escaped notice by my predecessors. I concentrated on the few works that were given away to Li’s friends and patrons, for the paintings sold to the local businessman Yang Gu Run have all been accounted for.”

Huang dipped his head in acknowledgement of her implied praise; it was his research that had accounted for those paintings. “We do not know how many were given away over the years and how many perished in the fire,” he said.

“The diary of Li’s student, Wei Fan Long, who rescued Li’s papers from the fire, says that all twelve students possessed loose album leaves by their teacher and that he gave away ten larger paintings over a period of five years.”

All Li’s students died in the war that occurred six years after his death at 63. Wei’s diary only survived because he left it in his home town before returning to this province.

“Are you saying you have found one of the ten major works?” Huang asked with the scepticism the ridiculous claim deserved.

“I believe so.” Li Liu showed no embarrassment, but the tilt of her chin was a touch defiant. “I will show you further documentation, but not until you have seen the work itself.”

Her high-handed tone goaded him beyond politeness. “Show it to me, then. My time is limited.”

Her face clouded but she rose without comment. “Step this way, please.”

They passed out of the tea room, along a polished cedarwood corridor, into a long room where he had often viewed other works in the House of Sun collection, open on one side to the courtyard.

“After you.” Li Liu waited for him to enter the room. She then sat quietly in a chair near the rear wall.

Although his own research had proved this painting must be a fake, Huang's heart beat a little faster than usual and his palms grew moist. He stepped back the required five paces and only then allowed himself to raise his eyes.

His first reaction was laughter at Li Liu's stupidity. After all the advice he had given her. Then anger—who did she think he was, some provincial dabbler in local history? How dare she waste the time of an imperially recognised expert on *this*.

A mess of lines covered the lower half of the long, narrow scroll, while the upper half remained blank except for several abbreviated scribbles, presumably birds in flight. ‘Trees in Landscape’? More like bushes, scraggly and long-branched with clusters of small, round leaves and some kind of globular fruit Huang had never seen before. A profusion of dahlias, chrysanthemums, bamboo grass, and heart-weed filled the space under the bushes. The only concession to ‘Landscape’ was the edge of a rickety tiled roof glimpsed behind the bushes. No depth, no unity of space, no sense of composition at all.

There was no sign of Master Li's characteristic seal, merely a hurried handwritten character surrounded by an uneven circle in the space above the bushes on the far right. Above that, three undistinguished ownership seals from subsequent centuries were lined up vertically.

The style could not have been less like Master Li's. All thin brushstrokes with no expressive width and only pale washes amongst the bush branches and on the ground in front of the vegetation. He peered at the foreground. Not even any of the signature curling-surface rocks. And the unbalanced blank space occupied three-quarters of the scroll without showing any of the famous Li atmospheric wash. Not only that, the wash on the bushes and flowers had a blue-green tinge. No, it was ridiculous.

He turned away, intending to end this charade, when a feeling that he had forgotten something prompted him to take another look at the painting.

He gasped.

The dense mat of brushstrokes under the bushes resolved themselves into small beaked faces. The vegetation was full of chickens. Yet when Huang peered closer, the shapes disintegrated into random lines. He stepped back again and unfocused his gaze slightly, and the chickens reappeared. There were even some roosting in lower branches of the bushes.

It was a kind of sleight-of-brush that he had always despised as being precocious and artisan, certainly not a technique that a gentleman such as Li would have used. And yet, there was that poem...

No wonder Li Liu quoted it at him. The poem was found scrawled on the back of a bill (unpaid) for plum wine from a local merchant when Huang discovered Li's papers in a hidden cellar in the Wei family warehouse. Wei Fan Long was the student whose diary provided much of the material about Li's life. The discovery of Li's papers had been the turning point in Huang's career, not least because nobody else had seen them for four hundred years.

So this fake must have been perpetrated by someone who had read the poem in the thirty years since Huang's discovery. Not an impossible task; the original papers lay in a vault in the imperial collection, but Huang and several other scholars possessed complete copies. Huang did not recall quoting the poem in an essay. He may have mentioned it during one of his annual scholarly retreats with his historian and artist peers. So much wine was drunk on these occasions that it was no surprise he didn't remember.

Easy to settle the matter. He kneeled in front of the scroll and examined it closely. Modern forgers might be able to fool an amateur like Li Liu, but their techniques for aging a scroll left signs obvious to the trained eye. He searched in vain. The silk appeared to be four hundred years old, the mount perhaps one hundred and fifty.

Huang rose, grunting as his knees protested, and sank back into the chair behind him. Not a modern fake, then. This was more interesting. It would be impossible to trace the people who might have seen Li's papers or heard the poem so long ago, although he could say with certainty that it must have been during the six years between Li's death and the beginning of the war, when the Wei family hid the papers.

Or...the thought struck him with its happy inevitability. The painting probably dated from Li's lifetime. Master Li must have recited his poem or sent it to a friend or student, who painted the picture and sent it back to Li as a gift. Li, who was notoriously unworldly, probably passed it on in turn. The poem would normally have been included on the scroll as well, but that was a mere technicality, explainable in any number of ways.

At any rate, the painting was not by Master Li, that much was clear.

"Shall I order some more tea?" Li Liu's voice startled him ridiculously. He had actually forgotten her presence.

She listened in silence as Huang explained why the painting could not be by Master Li but was likely by one of his contemporaries, then stood in front of it, her hands placed demurely on her azure silk thighs.

“The basis of your rejection is stylistic,” she said. “But you do not have any other Li painting to compare with this.”

Huang fanned himself gently in his chair. “If you read my commentaries on the Li papers, you will see that they must be interpreted in such a way that I cannot believe this work is true.”

“I have read your commentaries,” said Li Liu. “Which part of Master Li’s papers do you consider contradicts the evidence of this painting?”

Huang spread his hands wide to indicate the breadth of his choice. “Noble painting was never created from base subject.”

“Perhaps he did not consider fowl to be a base subject,” she returned. “Did he not also say, ‘A painter must be willing to seek inspiration high and low’?”

“Landscape is the true vehicle of an enlightened soul.”

“Do not fear to depict the rose within the forest, the thorn upon the rose, and the aphid upon the thorn.”

“Rocks are the weight of the soul and the weight of the work.”

Li Liu glanced over her shoulder at the painting. “I see no rocks.”

“That’s what I mean. Li always included rocks.”

“But the ground may be only sand.”

“Gentlemen do not paint what exists,” Huang said, horrified. He snapped his fan shut and stood up. “I have decided. This is not an original Li.”

“Because it does not agree with how you think an original Li should look?” Li Liu’s tone was polite as she mouthed this impudence, then she seemed to regret it. Her tone became conciliatory. “What do you think of the painting itself?”

Even in his anger, he could not help admiring her persistence. And the graceful angle of her slim neck.

“It is structurally unsound but the brushwork is by a sure hand,” he said grudgingly. “Perhaps produced by a professional painter trying to imitate scholarly brushwork.”

She stepped back and faced the painting. “Do you not see the delicate interplay of light and shadow in the branches? Does not the impeccable choice of telling detail on the flowers and fowl warm your heart? Do your eyes not follow the birds that swoop above this scene?”

“No.”

She sighed, and he felt a pang at disappointing her.

“I think this is a work from Master Li’s final years,” she said. “Possibly the last major work he attempted before his death.” She held up his hand at his protest. “Please listen. The poem on which this painting is based, or the poem that describes it, was written on the back of a bill dated the sixth month in the year Li died. Do you remember a letter to Wei dated the tenth month, only weeks before Li’s death?”

“Of course. It was his last letter.” Huang calmed his thoughts and reached for the contents of the letter, laid out in his memory in indelible characters. It took him a moment to realise what Li Liu meant. When he did, the room swung around him.

“How we change as the years parade by,” he quoted slowly. “And the work changes with us. My brushstrokes become short like my breath, and the lines lose flesh as my bones do.”

The small, assured lines of the painting filled his eyes.

“My company is my paintings, for I can no longer bear the noise of people. I have learned to play with my brush.”

Under the bushes the chickens pecked and preened.

“You see it?” Li Liu watched him intently.

He saw it, yet how could he admit that? What would his students and their parents say if he admitted his theories were completely wrong? For if this were a late work by Li, the early works must also be quite different to Huang’s theories. The man who painted these chickens could not have painted something as safe as Huang’s own careful, balanced landscapes.

He spread his fan again with trembling fingers and tried to cool his head. He had only to keep denying this work’s authenticity. He was the authority, after all. A painting this different must be endorsed by him or it would never be accepted.

Li Liu’s soft brown eyes narrowed. “You will not recognise this painting?”

“I...I need time to consider all the evidence,” he stammered.

She stepped closer. She smelled of lemon grass and vanilla.

“Can you not open your mind?” she smiled. “Perhaps your theories were a little off the mark. You will get the credit for discovering the one and only Master Li.”

Her last sentence jolted him. Did they think he was that easy to bribe? He would not receive credit, but ridicule followed by bankruptcy. A whole new branch of scholarship would spring up, based on finding the mistakes in his writings. No, it was impossible that all his theories were so wrong. He had spent his whole life on them. He *believed* in them.

He experienced a moment of curious clarity. On one hand he saw his life as a continuation of the present, a revered teacher and scholar with a permanent place in the history of art. On the other hand he saw a life of disgrace and the loss of his true place in history.

No choice.

As he left the House of Sun he did not look back. He was not the malleable fool she thought him to be. Well, perhaps part of him was foolish. For his vision of that other life had included a slim, blue-clad woman, and hanging in the alcove of their house was a painting of feathered fruit.

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