

The Reproduction of Chinese Painting in the Digital Age

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This paper investigates the reproduction of Chinese painting in the digital age. In particular, how does a website as an interface influence viewers' response to a Chinese handscroll? The paper begins with a critical description of a web interface of Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, followed by an analysis of the original painting, *Fishermen on an Autumn River*, that the interface digitizes and displays. The last section points out the influence of digitization on the relationship between viewers and digital heritage.

Keywords: Chinese painting, *Fishermen on an Autumn River*, web interface, digital age, digital heritage

In her article "Layers of Seeing and Seeing through Layers: The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Imagery," Louisa Wood Ruby, Head of Photoarchive Research at the Frick Collection and Art Reference Library in New York, points out the significance of the "differences between seeing an artwork 'in the flesh' and in reproduction" (Ruby, 2008, p. 51). She examines three kinds of layers of images, namely, the original work, a photograph of the painting, and its Web-based reproduction. Her critical analyses of the advantages, disadvantages, differences, and similarities between the different forms bring up the question about how to read a work of art in the digital age—a question that has attracted much attention in the context of modernism and the discourse of modernization. Whereas intensive discussions have been given to the digitization of European paintings, few of them cover Chinese paintings, many of which have also been digitized and are becoming increasingly important for research and teaching purposes.

This paper investigates the representation of Chinese painting in the digital age. In particular, how does a website as an interface influence viewers' response to a Chinese handscroll? The work of art I select is *Fishermen on an Autumn River* (Yanshuishengya 烟水生涯. 15th century, Ink and color on paper, 46 x 741.7 cm) created by a Ming painter Dai Jin 戴進 (1388-1462). The handscroll is currently collected in the Freer Gallery of Art, and its high-resolution reproduction is available on the website of Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (<https://asia.si.edu/>), two museums of Asian art of the Smithsonian Institution.

A Website as an Interface

The web interface of Dai Jing's handscroll (<https://asia.si.edu/object/F1930.80/>, accessed on March 15, 2021) consists of four vertical parts. The first part contains a Chinese landscape painting that portrays fishermen catching fish on the river. The painter divided the landscape into several sections by skillfully arranging vegetation and groups of figures. On both sides of the handscroll are handwritten inscriptions along with red seals.

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The first part also includes an integrated image of the handscroll, a central image of the panorama, and 21 equally separated pieces of the entire handscroll. Viewers can appreciate a total of 23 online high-resolution images in a full-screen mode, zooming in or zooming out, rotating and switching images by clicking the icons on the lower left of the part displaying the digital images.

Three aspects of the first part are worth noting. One is the order of the images. The panoramic image is set after, not before, the central part of the handscroll, followed by the other 21 pieces. Second, the images are viewed from left to right by default on the web interface, though moving back and forth is acceptable. However, a Chinese handscroll is supposed to be read from right to left. The last important point is that the layout of the first part is designed to fit the length-width ratio of general screens, so visitors will not see any text information about the painting unless scrolling down. That is, the interface allows viewers to fully immerse in the image and explore the work of art without the interference of any prejudice if the work is new to the viewers.

The second part of the interface consists of the handscroll's English title "Fishermen on an Autumn River" in bold type and a bar of thumbnails of the 23 images. Thus, the season that the painting depicts which is unclear in pictorial representations is confirmed by words of the titles. The third part lists detailed identifiers of the handscroll, such as the painter, the historical periods, the medium, the provenance, etc. Viewers will learn that the original work is created by Chinese painter Dai Jin of Zhe School in the Ming period with ink and color on a piece of 46 cm high and 741.7 cm wide paper. The painting is collected in the Freer Gallery of Art but currently not on view. Keywords related to the painting are provided to facilitate online searches. The Published References section fulfills the wish to know more about the work. Although informative, this part does not indicate the specific date when the digital images were created. The last part does not focus on the painting but offers quick links about the two museums and other internet-based media.

Collective Emotions in the Original Painting

James Cahill discusses the handscroll in his book *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368-1580*. He states that "all [fishermen] are highly animated, both by their postures (turned heads, bent knees) and by the drawing itself, done in short, jerky strokes." By appreciating the animated collective working scene, Cahill admired the painter's rigorous technical training which struck a nice balance between freedom and discipline. So even "trees and rocks seem animated as well, not so much by any dynamism in the forms themselves as by a nervous energy in the brushwork that brings them into being" (Cahill, 1978, p. 51).

Dai Jin's handscroll is an exemplary work depicting fishermen as ordinary folk. The image of fishermen can be traced back to the pre-Qin in Chinese history. *Zhuangzi*, *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of Chu) and *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* 呂氏春秋 (Springs and Autumns of Master Lü, literally means Lü's comments of history) are three main literary origins of the images of fishermen in later ages. The fishermen in the former two texts are rendered as reclusive representatives that followed the idea of Daoism, and the fisherman in *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* was Jiang Shang 姜尚 (Jiangtaigong 姜太公) who fished with a straight hook and assisted the Zhou (1046-256 BCE) to overthrow the government of the Shang (c.1600 BC-c.1046 BCE). The image of fishermen was constantly recast and became a classical motif in various artistic compositions. What made the depiction of fishermen extraordinary in the Ming time (1368-1644) was that the image was no longer represented as a pure

gentlemen-recluse; rather, fishermen were also depicted as ordinary folk, actively catching fish to make their living. In other words, fishermen as working laborers and fishermen as virtuous recluses co-existed in Ming paintings.

Like many other handscrolls, the entire scene of the *Fishermen on an Autumn River* is naturally divided into several sections by trees and people gathering in groups. In different sections, we see some people sit on the bank to drink wine, surrounded by their children; some moor boats on the river, conversing with their companions; others are busy catching fish, actively raising nets, or poling boats. Even though the facial expressions of the figures are vague and thus it is hard to tell each figure's emotion, the entire scene is brimming with fishermen's enthusiasm for work and their enjoyment of collective labor. The pleasure of fishing is so apparent and contagious that on the left of the painting, Xu Xuan 徐旋 (active in the Qing dynasty, 1636-1912) appreciated the scene with lines such as "simple conversation was accompanied with miscellaneous songs (談笑無機歌嘔啞)" and "fishermen's pleasure was endless (漁家樂事何無窮)," and expressed his admiration of the fishermen's life in the poetic text he inscribed.



Figure 1. A group of fishermen in *Fishermen on an Autumn River*.

Now that the fishermen at work in the handscroll are ordinary people whose emotions are not shown by facial expressions, how did the painter represent their collective emotion? Viewing the fishermen in separated sections rather than taking them as a whole may give us a clue to answer the question. It is noteworthy that those who are catching fish in the same section are in similar posture or are fishing with the same gear. In different sections, nevertheless, the painter changed fishermen's postures and their fishing gears. Comparing Figures 1 and 2, it is unambiguous that on each boat are two fishermen. In Figure 1, both fishermen are standing, one of whom is responsible for poling the boat and the other for catching fish with a piece of net. In Figure 2, however, one man sits casually on the boat, leaving the other man standing alone and catching fish with two cross-shaped poles. Figure 3 provides another status of fishermen. Different from the fishermen in Figures 1 and 2 who focus on fishing, few of the fishermen in Figure 3 concern the fishing rods on the bow; instead, they are peacefully sitting or lying on the boat, conversing in gregarious groups or pondering alone.



Figure 2. Another group of fishermen in *Fishermen on an Autumn River*.

I argue that the similar posture and the shared fishing method and similar tools serve as visual signs of mimesis in a social group and that it is in the mimetic communication that the joy of labor is transmitted in a group. The term “mimetic communication” is coined by Anna Gibbs in her study on the effect of contagion. By proposing the term, Gibbs advocates to rethink mimesis for it is not “as simple mimicry or copying dependent on vision, but as a complex communicative process in which other sensory and affective modalities are centrally involved” (Gibbs, 2010, pp. 191-192). From this perspective, we may have a deeper understanding of the role of memetic communication in the social process—probably, people in a group occupying the same task will elicit the same emotion, in particular, the excitement and benign competition psychology of catching fish; fishermen in each section will conduct the similar action when the affects transmitted from body to body; moreover, the shared emotion may promote the formation of social bonds because of the affect contagion, which is “the heart of mimesis.” The collective emotion is not a combination of individual emotion, nor does it necessarily originate from an individual emotion. Instead, it can be generated by a community and becomes so contagious that people within the group are infected with the same emotion and thus enhance the strength of collective emotion.

Note that in pictorial representations, there was a distinction between the appearance of the aristocratic figure and that of the commoner in late Ming. As is pointed out by Anne Burkus-Chasson in her study on the expression of emotions in the late Ming figure painting, different from the depiction of the commoner, the gestures and facial expressions of the elite were supposed to be decorous because of the highly valued balance between *qing* 情 (emotion, sentiment) and the parameters of *wen* 文 (culture). Burkus’s interpretation of visual emotions derives from poetic text and historical anecdotes. She argues that “conscious manipulation and deception can play a role in the embodiment of an emotion and that the power of social institutions and social relations informed the discourse on emotion in late Ming times” (Burkus, 2019, p. 100). The depiction of the ordinary fishermen in the *Fishermen on an Autumn River* is not restrained by the highly valued balance between *qing* and the parameters of *wen*. The fishermen at work can act freely, which echoes the phenomenon of the emerging class differences and the division of meaning of fishermen in the Ming time.

The Influence of the Web Interface

The web interface representing Dai jing’s landscape painting can be categorized as “digital heritage.” Digital heritage is a young term that was born in the 1990s when computers became more accessible and cheaper to be applied to heritage projects. Harold Thwaites proposes that “in order to build a complete and complex cultural representation via digital heritage technologies we must also understand how the users interact with the system or interface that is primarily ‘information’ based and thus through human interaction, elicits an ‘information impact’” (Thwaites, 2013, p. 332). A web-based heritage inevitably has limitations. The most prominent one is that the 21 pieces of the painting cut by the web interface designer are based on the principle of dividing the entire handscroll equally into several parts that fit the display screen. In other words, the many images of equal length displayed on the web interface are divided based on the length of the entire handscroll instead of the sections’ logic in the original painting. Thus, the fishermen that should have been viewed as a group are separated in the digital reproductions. The damage to the integrality of the original sections of the

handscroll will surely perplex viewers' perception of the collective emotion that is generated and shared in the original work.

After trying different browsers and devices, I notice that although one may zoom in to see the details of the work, the degree of how close and clear one may see the details is limited by the web interface settings rather than one's eyesight and the distance from the original work as it is in the museum. Moreover, the relationship between a website and viewers is dependent on the quality and capabilities of the browsers, as well as by the quality of the monitor on which the interface is viewed. Different browsers display slightly different layouts of the web interface and different monitors produce vastly different colors, which fails to show the actual quality and texture of the work.

The web interface makes the digitized physical component available to a wider range of viewers that have access to the internet. In terms of a positive perspective, thanks to digitalization, the past cultural heritage is shared with and will not be lost to future generations. Meanwhile, we must note that the digital image is not a "reproduction" of the handscroll but a transformation of an image, a translation from a continuum to a set of discrete units. The interface should thus be considered as a whole that consists of specific codes for each element of meaning within the landscape painting. The physical painting becomes merely part of the interface as a larger landscape that interacts with viewers. So, seeing an interface as a landscape that displays artwork and experiencing the artwork in a museum are quite different. Since the handscroll is divided into 21 pieces to fit the screen size, the display of the work becomes a fragmentary approach. Viewers have no volition to select a specific part, angle, or distance to see the work, which is different from how they approach a three-dimensional object when standing in front of a painting in a museum. Also, the panoramic image of the handscroll is by default displayed from left to right, making the viewers first view the poetry depicting the landscape, the river, and the fishing folk viewed. However, it is the four-character title, the land, and vegetation on the right side of the painting that should be shown first according to the correct order to see a Chinese handscroll. The designers of the website of Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery may use the same code to display a digital image while neglecting the particularity of diverse objects produced in different cultures.

The quick links at the bottom of the interface that inform viewers of the latest events and exhibitions in the museum are important for looking at works digitally and it can be regarded as a simulation of the museum that is visited on the site. In a museum, we often recognize posters and booklets with the introduction of the museum and the information of collections, exhibitions, and events. The quick links here play the same function and help viewers keep a "museum" status while browsing the interface. The quality of information on the interface, especially the Published References related to the artwork, provides viewers with scholarly supports that are useful for more thorough exploration. So the target viewers of the website could be more professional groups than the general public.

Conclusion

Works of art created in different nations bear distinctive cultural marks, while web interface flattens the distinguishes of various artistic forms and unifies the ways to read images. Yet, to be present at a site and experience a work of art can, of course, never be replaced by seeing it on a flat-screen, and the history and emotion within a three-dimensional object can never be replicated by digital codes. Reading Chinese paintings

requires one to read in a proper method and in the context of the work. On the other hand, my critical analysis of the web interface is by no means completely negative comments. Although it is difficult to overcome the drawbacks of digital heritage represented on web pages supported by diverse monitors, as Walter Benjamin's critique on reproductions in the modern time, the digital age has generated new layers of works of art. Moreover, advanced technologies and easy access to the internet allow people in different corners of the world, especially during the magical pandemic and post-pandemic eras, to appreciate paintings that are collected in a certain place and only open to a limited number of viewers.

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