

The Masterpiece: A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines by Gong  
Xian 龔賢 (ca.1617–1689)



Qing dynasty, ca. 1670. Hanging scroll, ink on paper; H. 62 cm, W.  
102 cm

Museum Rietberg, Zürich (C.A. Drenowatz Collection).

"When a work of art impresses us as the highest embodiment of skill, profundity, or expressive power, we call it a masterpiece. In this way, we acknowledge its supreme place in our esteem, and at the same time, seek to set our judgement, insofar as this is possible, beyond challenge or equivocation. [...] In the confusing hubbub of conflicting opinion, the word has an authoritative ring and will not suffer depreciation. Masterpieces are masterpieces, or they are not. They cannot be what they are in some lesser proportion." With this irrefutable statement Walter Cahn opens his *Masterpieces: Chapters on the History of an Idea*. Calling something a

masterpiece may be considered by some a helpless and hopeless venture, and yet, it is to elevate a work to absolute superiority and to canonize it as the ultimate non plus ultra. Designating a work of art as a masterpiece raises it to the summit of a supreme ideal of art. Masterpieces of art have been and always shall be the cultural heritage of mankind; they are common cultural property of whole nations and as such are able to generate national pride and identity. In modern Japan masterpieces are venerated as "National Treasures," kokuhô 國寶, as "Important Cultural Property," jûyô bunkazai 重要文化, as "Important Art Objects," jûyô bijutsuhin 重要美術品, and in China they are registered in similar classifications as the nation's cultural heritage. Such a designation gives a work of art a sacrosanct aura protecting it as an absolute masterpiece in the realm of the world's cultural heritage. It even may become a classic masterpiece in the incontestable realm of absolute art. The distinction of a "classic masterpiece" and an "absolute masterpiece" (Cahn) indicates one of the various changes of meaning throughout the history of the idea of masterpieces. In recent years some sceptics have questioned the validity of the idea of a masterpiece and diagnosed a serious crisis of our most hallowed word in the vocabulary of praise. In their view it survives only in old-fashioned patterns and rituals of the memory. Other critics have identified "invisible masterpieces" that surface at certain times here and there as shadowy phenomena on their continual flight into utopia. Modern myths of the arts have constructed such invisible masterpieces as the unattainable ideal behind the celebrated visible works of art. "But also the visible masterpiece is in fact a paradox, because works demolish of necessity the ideal which has been invisibly inscribed on them." A persistent yearning, however, for a universally valid order of value will ultimately survive all periodically reoccurring attempts to deconstruct the idea of a masterpiece which epitomizes the loftiest human endeavors for ultimate excellence and highest mastery. "The quality of mastery is subject to an endless process of redefinition," writes Walter Cahn. "But symbols of

permanence have other, more mysterious, ways. They must be sustained by metaphysical certitudes, and these are in short supply." If our gaze is firmly grounded on the solid foundations of existing knowledge and on the wealth of visible existing masterpieces of incontestable quality we may be able to envisioning their true nature, to make them translucent and perceive their wondrous secrets as miracles of the human spirit. Therefore, we may continue our dream of the supreme masterpiece in which the true nature of art and the real face of the artist takes on visible contours. Without any doubt, the superlative masterpiece is entangled in an inflationary linguistic jumble and has fallen victim to modernist art theoretical debates. Thus we do not attempt here any further clarification; nor do we venture on testing the usefulness of the term's application on Chinese art or intend to trace equivalents of the term in ancient art theoretical writings of China. Nevertheless, from earliest times, Chinese art critics were concerned with standards of excellence, with classification and appreciation; connoisseurship had always been recognized as a discriminating art in itself with highly ambitious requirements. The expression mingpin 名品 or more specific –in terms of painting –minghua 名畫 may vaguely reflect some of the properties of our masterpiece. In the writings of the ancient critics these words indicate the changing conceptions of highest mastery. But superiority and inferiority of painters and paintings are usually dealt with in relative judgements. Writing around 840, the Hanlin 翰林 scholar Zhu Jingxuan 朱景· in the preface to his "Record of Famous Painters of the Tang Dynasty", Tangchao minghua lu 唐朝名畫錄, summarized the relative order of values of earlier art historians: "The number of those who have discussed the problem of classifying ancient and modern painters is considerable. I do not presume to speak of the periods of Sui, Liang, and earlier. In the present dynasty, there has only been Li Ssu-chen 李嗣真 [Li Sizhen, d. 696] who, in his Hua-p'in lu

畫品錄[Huapin lu], has merely recorded artist's names without discussing their relative merits or grading quality. The result is that later students find him useless as a reference. I, in my humble way, love the art and search for its monuments. Things I have not seen I shall not record, but I shall write on everything I have seen. My investigations have been made whole-heartedly and without any fear of being seen as clumsy by others. For my classification, I have used three categories, 'inspired (shen神),' 'excellent (miao妙),' and 'capable (neng能),' established by Chang Huai-kuan 張懷瓘[Zhang Huaiguan, active early 8th century] in his Hua-p'in tuan 畫品斷 [Huapin duan, "Decisions on the Classification of Painters"]. A further triple division into top, middle, and bottom has been provided for each category. Outside of this system, for those not bound by any orthodox rules, there is an 'untrammelled (i, yi 逸)' category, to show their relative excellence." Although a masterpiece of art is not necessarily created for the exclusive purpose of man's appreciation and enjoyment, his aesthetic satisfaction, his intellectual or emotional stimulation, it is always created with an artistic intention and thus endowed with an aesthetic significance, intrinsic meaning, and a social function. As opposed to a beautiful object of nature, a work of art always lays claim to be experienced in multilateral dimensions, not only aesthetically. A masterpiece of art has not per se an aesthetic value, and not all outstanding works of art are in accordance with the canon of good taste and the fundamental assets of beauty and aesthetic quality. They can be extremely sinister, unpleasant, provocative, or even ugly, conveying individual moods of grief and mourning or general sentiments of frustration, stress, and isolation. Powerful images were employed to transmit messages of protest or critique during periods of political unrest and social fragmentation. They can serve as vehicles of silent resistance or as visual outcries in times of crisis, suppression, or in wartime. If we wish to fully understand a masterpiece of art, its origin, history, function, perhaps its social or political significance throughout the ages – ideally with

its genuine essentials – its creator, patron, donor, audience, affect, and resonance –, "we must inevitably start with the pattern of forces that sets its theme and states the reason for its existence." In trying to adequately grasp the artist's intention and read the meaning of a work of art either by explicit analysis or by intuitive contemplation we have to come to terms with its four basic constituents: idea, subject matter, content, and materialized form. "The re-creative experience of a work of art depends, therefore, not only on the natural sensitivity and the visual training of the spectator, but also on his cultural equipment." When talking about the expression of an idea or the reading of meanings of Chinese paintings it is highly important to pay special attention to the word "re-creation" and to lay particular emphasis on the prefix "re." More than most other works of Chinese art paintings and, of course, calligraphies are considered in an almost graphological sense manifestations of the creator's intentions and ideas, of his personal sentiments and features. They are thought to reveal the real nature of things as well as the true individual character of the artist. Let us now return to our initial idea of the masterpiece and remember: a masterpiece is a masterpiece. This self-referential definition is sanctioned by status, and thus a masterpiece – by its innate nature and virtue – needs no introduction. Gong Xian's 龔賢 grand landscape panorama in the Museum Rietberg, Zürich, is such an individual masterpiece. If a citation index makes any sense at all in distinguishing excellence, then "the Gong Xian" would probably be rightly listed in a top position. The painting has been discussed and reproduced time and again – in minor and major publications. The work not only occupies the most important position in the artist's entire career, it is moreover an unprecedented chef d'oeuvre in the history of later Chinese painting, one "that has no antecedent in Chinese tradition," as Laurence Sickman put it. Chu-tsing Li admired it as "one of the most powerful and dramatic expressions of Chinese art, a work that matches the tragic grandeur of such world masterpieces as Michelangelo's religious paintings and sculpture and Beethoven's symphonies." Indeed, uniqueness and supreme mastery seem to

have been lofty goals of the artist. Several observations of the early nineteenth century connoisseur Luo Tianchi 羅—池 in his colophon mounted above the painting hint at this direction: "In painting landscapes, Kung Ch'ih-sien 龔—豈賢 [Gong Qixian] used the methods of ancient masters to express a new spirit. His lonely and self-reliant character made it difficult for him to associate with people. That is why his style differed entirely from that of the other painters, for he wanted to be a painter without equal before or after. His brushwork, however, is still derived from the Northern School. His ink appears moistened and enriched, suggesting Mei-hua-taojen's 梅花道人 [Meihua daoren's, Wu Chen's 吳—鎮, Wu Zhen's] technique. In the present painting, the thick mist, the surging clouds, and the precipitous waterfalls enliven every part of the mountains, throbbing with vitality. He has achieved a school of his own. This is Kung Hsien's masterpiece which hardly has its equal in the world. The Chiang-ning chih 江甯志 [Jiangning zhi, 'Gazeteer of Chiang-ning' (Nanking 南京, Nanjing)] notes that Kung Hsien excelled particularly in landscape and few people could penetrate his secrets." It follows a quotation (with a minor error) from the painter's theoretical treatise entitled Huajue 畫訣, "Secrets of Painting." Luo Tianchi's remark: Nai xiansheng shengping diyi jiezhi, er shi hanpi zhe ye 乃...革臚@傑製而.@罕匹者也, "This is Gong Xian's masterpiece which hardly has its equal in the world" (in Chu-tsing Li's translation) is of particular interest to our discussion. Jiezhi, "outstanding creation," or the modern Chinese equivalent jiezuo 傑作 refer to a "masterpiece." Gong Xian's masterpiece was acquired by the late Mr. Charles A. Drenowatz (1908–1979) in the 1960s from Walter Höchstädter (before 1967). In the coterie of collectors and experts he quickly became known as "the Swiss who owns 'The Gong Xian'," and "The Gong Xian," of course, was the masterpiece that lent

its title Qianyan wanhuo 千巖萬壑 to the catalogue of Chinese Paintings in the Charles A. Drenowatz Collection written in 1974 by Chu-ting Li: A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines. Five years later, in 1979, it entered the Museum Rietberg as the legacy of Mr. Drenowatz together with his entire collection of Ming and Qing paintings. For all we know, Gong Xian's masterpiece was not published until 1929 in Japan under the title Sengan heien (C: Qianyan pingyuan) 千巖·香, "A Thousand Peaks and Level Distance". At that time the scroll belonged to a certain Mr. Guan Mianjun 關冕鈞. Only around the middle of the last century, several Western scholars acknowledged the uniqueness of Gong Xian's masterpiece, among them Laurence Sickman who published it in 1956 in the Pelican History of Art and praised it with the following words: "Kung Hsien [Gong Xian] repeated his compositions many times; the same themes are to be found isolated in album leaves as are woven into long, horizontal scrolls. But in his grand panorama of shattered peaks, plunging cascades, and torn clouds, Kung Hsien created a vision of a blasted landscape that has no antecedent in Chinese tradition." It was perhaps Arthur Waley who – in 1923 – first recognized Gong Xian's landscape paintings as harsh evocations of a convinced Ming loyalist conveying with his oppressive gloomy compositions political sentiments, moods of mourning and desolation: "He saw Nature as a vast battlefield strewn with sinister wreckage. His rivers have a glazed and vacant stare; his trees are gaunt and stricken; his skies lower with a sodden pall of grey. Many of his pictures contain no sign of man or of human habitation; he once said that mankind had no existence for him. Such houses as he does put into his pictures have a blank, tomb-like appearance; his villages look like grave-yards." Landscape paintings might at first sight not seem particularly well suited to conveying political messages of discontent and resistance. But in an age of unrest, intrigues, and social turmoil following the barbarian Manchu conquest of dynastic China images of landscapes by an artist with strong sentiments for the fallen Ming imperial house are very likely to be invested with political significance. Although there

is not much range and variety in Gong Xian's work his pictorial structure and style follows the meaning and obviously responds to an audience with similar sentiments. "In reading the meanings of the paintings in this way we adopt a method that could loosely be called semiotic: treating certain motifs and features of compositions as signs that carry meaning. Semiotics assumes a system of signification, a kind of code, which people of the artist's time understood without thinking about it or having to explain it to each other. The code will not be found written out, then, in texts of the time, but must be unlocked, recovered from the works themselves with the help of whatever clues are provided by inscriptions and other texts." In one of his own inscriptions on a handscroll dated to the autumn of 1688 Gong Xian clearly reveals the ambiguous intention of his mind landscapes: "In this scroll, I have followed the clouds and mists, hills and valleys, houses and boats, stone steps, streams and paths, that were first set forth within my mind. [...] You may say this is a visionary world, but it has its own Way, and is, while you look at it, just the same as the real world." Gong Xian's art cannot be understood apart from his age. The decline of the native regime and the upheavals of the barbarian Manchu conquest, which Gong Xian witnessed as a young man with strong political convictions, had a shattering impact on him. Political and social disorder, destruction and desolation are recurrent themes in his writings. Some of his poems appeared during his lifetime together with works of other Ming loyalists in a dissident, politically rather daring anthology. Gong Xian's grievance and antagonism towards the alien Manchu regime is often expressed in poetic inscriptions on his landscapes in the disguise of nature poetry. An example, which sounds almost like the artist's own description and interpretation of his masterpiece, is a poem entitled "In the Evening, Traveling East below the Yanzi Jetty:" "The river and sky have suddenly merged together, An isolated boat drifts between them. The distant peaks are already about to disappear; The evening sun, too, cannot be retrieved. With self-pity for being a 'constant traveler,' My changing feelings turn toward the sorrows of home; Just sobering up from the wine of parting –



A white gull beneath the azure mist." This is the translation of Jerome Silbergeld, who successfully uncovered the political, social, and autobiographical content of Gong Xian's art. Silbergeld writes: "This poem, on first reading, might be taken as an idyllic ode to an evening upon the river, but an analysis of the traditional landscape symbolism of the poem reveals something deeper and darker. The first line, 'The river and sky have suddenly merged together,' reveals a confusion in the fundamental order of nature. The element of Heaven, above, has become confused with the earth below, clearly symbolizing a nation in chaos. The 'evening sun which cannot be retrieved' may be the fallen Ming emperor, whose imperial radiance has vanished forever. So too may be the 'distant peaks about to disappear' stand for the Chinese scholar class, or perhaps for the entire Confucian cultural heritage, now threatened by foreign domination. And trapped in the midst of these overturned elements is the poet himself, personified by the line, 'An isolated boat drifts between them.' The third couplet makes the poem more personal, the term 'constant traveler' often being used by Kung Hsien in reference to his years of forced wandering, away from his home. In the final lines, Kung Hsien's 'Just sobering up from the wine of parting' might signify that he is still waking up to the painful realization that China has parted forever with its native Ming dynasty. The white gull is a standard reference to the scholar in exile or retirement; its white feathers recall the plain cloth robes worn in China by scholars without office, in contrast to the colored silks of the official. In this case, the white gull is Kung Hsien himself. Mist and smoke, fallen low upon the earth, obscuring forms and creating patterns of separation and isolation, have long been used in Chinese literature to symbolize political discord and factionalism. Finally, the 'azure mist' is possibly a pun on the 'blue cloud' of official status, and might give to this line the parting lament that its author may never fly to the (official) heights of which he is capable. Here, then, is a self-portrayal of the artist as a victim of what we might truly refer to as 'interesting times' in China, and yet much of the 'interest' here lies concealed far beneath the surface of this outwardly

bland landscape setting." In another poetic inscription on a landscape painting, which coincidentally bears the same title as his masterpiece, Gong Xian alludes to his "flight across the shattered political landscape of China and his frightening inability to escape the harsh political realities of his time." It reads: "A thousand peaks and myriad ravines, with an isolated dwelling; White stones are the grain which brew up purple evening clouds. It is as if you were fleeing [the emperor] Yao, but still could not get away, Or like one in flight from the [tyrannical] Ch'in [Qin emperor], facing a cloudy horizon." None of Gong Xian's other paintings parallel the artist's complex poetry more closely than *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines*. It is an intensely oppressive vision of fearful loneliness, reflecting the painter's state of mind with great directness. "The image of a conquered nation seems lodged in every hidden corner of this landscape, where the foreground trees hang withered, where no path offers a secure passageway, where explosive forms and unyielding structures seem to create a sinister menace to the outside viewer, and where man himself seems to have been driven from the face of the earth." No human being appears here. Deserted dwellings are hidden in the river valleys. Unearthly distortion and mysterious permeation of light and darkness radiate a compelling force and create visual excitement. And yet, in all its ambiguities the picture retains an amazing homogeneity. One would not be surprised to find an inscription on this painting, that he actually is said to have written for another work: "This painting of mine greatly resembles a place where no one has ever gone – or at least, where people do not ordinarily go." Painted around 1670, *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines* is Gong Xian's "most ambitious and original painting, and climaxes his search for a personal, haunting landscape imagery." Gong Xian was not a scholar-official, he was a "professionalised literatus" who earned his means by painting. He is known to have accepted commissions for certain pictures from particular patrons and even allowed his clients to dictate or at least plainly suggest subject-matter and compositional scheme. Among his varied clientèle were such renowned connoisseurs and collectors as the noted scholar, official, and dramatist Kong

Shangren 孔尚·(1648–1718) and the Ming loyalist Liang Yizhang 梁·H樟

(1608–1685) who was living in seclusion at Baoying 寶應 in Yangzhou

Prefecture at the time, he approached Gong Xian for a painting. In his letter to the artist he apologized for sending a messenger to Yangzhou instead of coming himself; he was simply too busy. Liang requested a landscape composition that "must be as dense as if there were no sky, as broad as if no ground." Perhaps he had seen *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines* and now may have wanted another grand vista like Gong Xian's masterpiece. Its unusual size and shape, composition and style gave rise to the speculation, that this painting could have been inspired by images of the Western world brought to China by Jesuits in the form of European engravings. The erudite Italian missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who arrived in Macao and remained until his death in 1610 in China, was well accepted into intellectual circles in the cities where he stayed. In 1599 Ricci received imperial permission to establish a Jesuit missionary station in Nanjing, the city where Gong Xian was to grow up and reside decades later. Ricci and his associates had in their luggage many printed books, several of them illustrated with engraved maps and vistas of European sceneries and cities. Chinese intellectuals were obviously fascinated by them to an extent, that more volumes were requested at the Jesuit headquarters in Rome, and it is most likely that these "exotic" European engravings were still circulated among curious Nanjing artists during Gong Xian's time. Books such as Abraham Ortelius's great atlas *Teatrum Orbis Terrarum*, published in 1579, with landscape engravings by the Flemish artist Anton Wierix (ca. 1555/59–1604) are known to have been in China by the beginning of the seventeenth century. "Specifically, the View of Thessaly and the Vale of Tempe from *Teatrum Orbis Terrarum* corresponds in so many features as to seem to rule out coincidence, " writes James Cahill, and he continues: "These features include the division of the picture diagonally from lower right to upper left; the dramatic effects of strong light and shadow – which Kung Hsien, to be

sure, renders inconsistent and unnatural; the visual compounding or confounding of rivers, paths, slopes, and mists; the horizontal zigzag shapes of almost palpable cloud near the top; the formation of the mountains out of repeated turret-like shapes. [...] Kung Hsien, to whom the place was unknown and its association meant nothing, could see it only as a purported image of unimaginable lands far to the west, and as the creation of an artistic intelligence so alien to his own that it seemed more a work of fantasy than of even imaginative topography. As a model for the creation of an image of his own interior world, it would serve. [...] What Kung Hsien presents is a completely convincing alternate world, as real in its unearthly logic as the real world but separate from it. [...] The unity and coherence of Kung Hsien's picture derive not from natural order but from his mind." Although Gong Xian was the leading master of the so-called Nanjing school of landscape painting and his work and biography have been thoroughly investigated, he has remained a somewhat shadowy figure as a personality and a provocatively puzzling phenomenon as an artist. He was born in Kunshan 崑山, Jiangsu Province, and grew up in Nanjing where he apparently became acquainted at an early age with a number of active political figures, among them Yang Wencong 楊文驄 (1596–1646) and Fang Wen 方文 (1612–1669). With the exception of a decade of aimless wandering after the collapse of the Ming dynasty in 1644, Gong Xian seems to have lived in Nanjing the rest of his life, more or less in secluded retirement. In 1668 he acquired a plot of land to build a home of his own under Mount Qingliang 清亮山, the "Half-Acre Garden," Banmouyuan 半畝園. His friends described him as a stubborn idealist and an uncompromising conservative with eccentric habits. Gong Xian had several potent patrons; he was held in great esteem as a painter by many connoisseurs and collectors of his time and kept up a prolific output; and yet he is known to have lived on the edge of poverty through most of his life. Gong Xian shared the problems of his day with other artists, but more than

his contemporaries he seems to have realized his situation as a "fallen amateur" (Silbergeld), his painful separation from the literati tradition as well as his isolation in a disintegrating society by saying of himself with unyielding pride: "There has been nobody before me and there will be nobody after me."