

Landscape as spiritual retreat

see DVD for additional material

髡殘
Kuncan

禪
Chan (Chinese pronunciation)
Zen (Japanese pronunciation)
meditation

琴
qin
musical instrument

Kuncan 髡殘 was a native of Wuling 武陵, in the Hunan 湖南 province. He became a *Chan* 禪 (Zen) Buddhist monk at an early age and spent most of his life as a recluse, living and roaming in the mountains.¹ It is said that there were times when he spent months and even years without seeing anyone. After years of wandering, he settled near Nanjing 南京 and became abbot of a *Chan* Buddhist temple. Occasionally, he painted landscapes for his own enjoyment, reliving his wild ramblings in the mountains.

This is an early landscape painted when Kuncan was in Nanjing. Nature is depicted in its untamed state of luxuriant growth. The entire mountain, with its pines and mist, throbs with a life force that culminates in the dynamic thrust of the mountaintop. Nature is portrayed as a living organism. A text by Guo Xi 郭熙, eleventh century, compares rocks to bones, water to blood, trees to hair and clouds, and mists to the complexion of a living person. The mountain in this painting shelters a cluster of thatched huts. The mist seems tactile, as if it could be touched. The sails of three boats appear in the distance, rising above the mist.

The viewer is invited to enter the painting and wander within the landscape, in imagination. A scholar's retreat is nestled in the valley, as only temples are situated at the high point of a mountain.

Kuncan has inscribed a poem on the right-hand corner, translated:

A recluse has built his home on the edge of a
blue cliff
Ten thousand green pines coil before it
Spring breeze, flowers are picked in handfuls
How is the Immortal of Wumen 吳門
(Suzhou 蘇州)
His body is already light
After the elixir of immortality, his spiritual
power intensifies
By day I sit alone under trees in the wild
The sea is calm, the dragon does not howl
Last night, I dreamt of visiting you in the shade
of pines
Bare-footed, I tread the clouds and the slippery,
mossy stones
The gusty wind blows in the sky, to awaken me
Returning home, I walk through the pines in
bright moonlight

The inscription mentions 'The immortal of Wumen', a reference to the popular belief that mountains were sacred and home to the immortals. The evergreen pine trees are symbols of longevity. Mountains also offered refuge from political upheavals.

The scholar, holding a cane, walks towards the thatched huts, his mountain retreat. An attendant follows him, holding a musical instrument (*qin* 琴) that looks like a lute, which is associated with the scholar class. The scholar could represent the artist returning home. The soft pink, silvery colour of the ink is evocative of moonlight. The pines are rustling quietly in the moonlit evening.

Kuncan 髡殘
Chinese 1612– (c.1674)
Walking through a pine forest in moonlight 訪幽圖 1660 China
ink and pigments on paper
207.2 x 97.6 cm (image and sheet)
Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Westpac Banking Corporation, Founder Benefactor, 1978 (AS7-1978)

¹ On *Chan* (Zen) Buddhism, see Kim Hoa Tram, *Awakening on Zen painting* sheet.

