

Song Dynasty Landscape Painting

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Song Dynasty landscape paintings are known for basic traits such as shifting perspective. In this lesson, you will explore examples of Buddhist art and architecture from China. In doing so, you will learn about the influences on art from this time period. Specifically, this lesson covers:



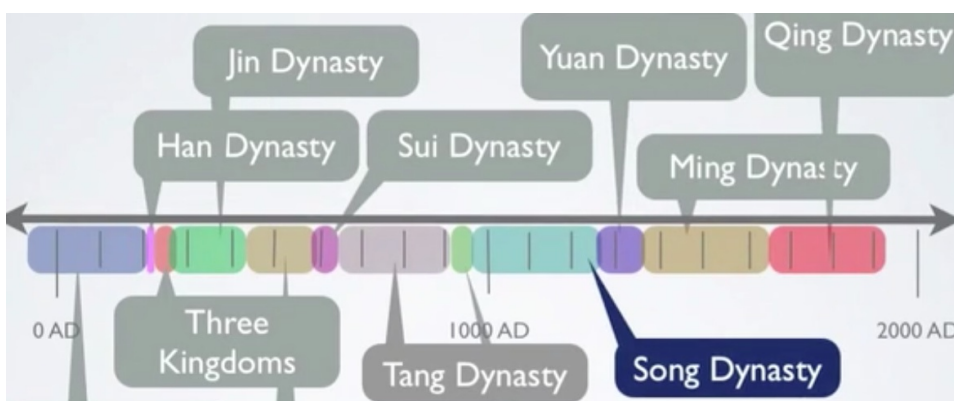
BIG IDEA

Neo-Confucianism was an important philosophical influence on northern Song landscape painting.

1. Time Period and Location: Song Dynasty Landscape Painting

China was ruled by a succession of dynasties throughout the Common Era. The Common Era was the period of time from 0 AD to the early 20th century. This lesson covers the Song dynasty, which was weak militarily, but extremely progressive technologically, politically, and philosophically. The artwork that we'll be looking at all comes from China.

The timeline below highlights many of the dynasties that ruled during the Common Era. Notice that the Song dynasty, covered in this lesson, is blue.



2. Neo-Confucianism

Confucianism dates back to the sixth and fifth centuries BC. **Neo-Confucianism**, or New-Confucianism, is a form of Confucianism that revived Confucianist thought and became ingrained in the sociopolitical context of

China.



至聖孔子

名丘字仲尼山東
兗州府曲阜縣人

Portrait of Confucius

The idea of li and ji are a fundamental part New-Confucianism. Li is viewed as an underlying reason and order to nature, or connection between nature and living beings, while ji is spirit, that is, life energy or life force. This belief was very influential on the way that landscape painters created their images and depicted nature in their artwork. Artists of this time sought to represent the idea of nature rather than specific places.



TERMS TO KNOW

Confucianism

A belief system based on the teachings of Confucius that emphasizes love and respect for human beings, the value of learning, and the value of family, including ancestors

Neo-Confucianism

A moral and ethical Chinese philosophy that revived Confucianism, but added influences from Daoism and Buddhism and emphasized the importance of nature and a sense of spiritual connection with nature

Li (idea)

The underlying reason and order of nature, as seen in its living forms

Ji (spirit)

Life energy or life force

3. Landscape Painting

The Chinese landscape painting of the Song dynasty is different than landscape paintings we see in, for example, 15th or 16th century Italy. Chinese landscape paintings do not depict specific places, but ideas of features within nature.

Below is an example of a painting that is not an image of a specific mountain scene, like a photograph; rather, this piece of work evokes the idea or sense of the concept of a mountain scene. It also makes use of shifting perspective.





Chinese Landscape Painting

Shifting perspective is a way of visually moving the viewer through the painting in a number of directions. This is done by having no fixed vanishing point like there is in linear perspective. Rather, objects appear closer and farther away, detailed or less detailed, depending on the way the artist is intending to pull the viewer through the landscape. It's a different way of viewing a painting than what is typical in Western landscape paintings and arguably a more organic way of looking at the landscape.

The use of shifting perspective was better suited to the long horizontal scrolls on which these Chinese landscapes are painted. The painting wasn't intended to be framed, but extended indefinitely in all directions.

You can also think about the Neo-Confucianist ideas, along with those relating to **feng shui**, and the idea that the land is alive and filled with energy.



TERMS TO KNOW

Shifting Perspective

A characteristic of traditional Chinese paintings as a way to break time and space

Feng Shui

A Chinese practice in which elements of space are arranged in a way that maximizes the flow of energy

3a. "Travelers Among Mountains and Streams"

The scene below is just a small detail from a much larger—almost seven feet long—scroll.





Travelers Among Mountains and Streams

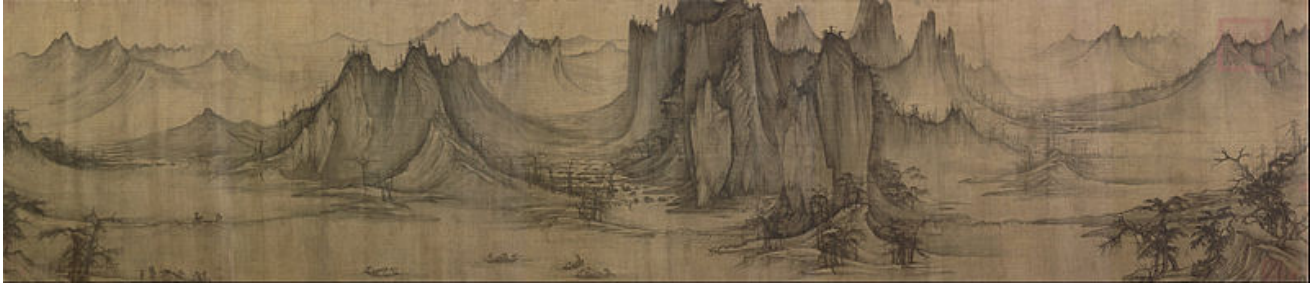
1000-1020 AD

Ink on silk

Even though the title references the travelers, nature is obviously the subject of this painting, dominating the scroll and relegating the travelers to tiny figures that are almost hidden within the painting. Again, there isn't a single vanishing point in this example, but rather a use of shifting perspective to visually move you across the width of the landscape.

3b. “Fishing on a Mountain Stream”

The image below gives you a better idea of the use of shifting perspective.



Fishing on a Mountain Stream

1049 AD

Ink on silk

While it is titled “Fishing on a Mountain Stream,” the idea in the title is not very evident from this image. Nature is clearly the focus, rather than a specific place. It could be any place. It’s an idea of nature. Linear perspective would be too limiting in this kind of landscape.

3c. “Streams and Mountains with a Clear Distant View”

This final example, titled “Streams and Mountains with a Clear Distant View,” is an example of the southern Song dynasty landscape style.



Streams and Mountains with a Clear Distant View

1190-1230 AD

Ink on silk

Xia Gui

Here the artist uses a sharper contrast between light and dark, as well as more simplified forms than what we've seen previously. It's essentially a different application of the same stylistic elements of Chinese landscape painting. It evokes a sense of a human connection in nature, but in a more reserved way than that of the northern Song style. In either case, Song dynasty landscape paintings embody our connection to nature, and they achieve more than just the depiction of nature to create a state of mind.



SUMMARY

Landscape paintings in the Song Dynasty were interesting in their depiction of nature. In this lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of Song Dynasty landscape paintings**. It is important to understand that **neo-Confucianism** played a role in artwork and architecture during this dynasty. Artists of this time sought to represent the idea of nature rather than specific places.

Chinese **landscape paintings** do not depict specific places, but ideas of features within nature. In this lesson, you explored these examples of Chinese landscape painting:

- “Travelers Among Mountains and Streams”
- “Fishing on a Mountain Stream”
- “Streams and Mountains with a Clear Distant View”

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Feng Shui

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Ji (spirit)

Life energy or life force.

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Shifting Perspective

A characteristic of traditional Chinese paintings as a way to break time and space.