

Song Paintings in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and Freer Gallery of Art  
Zhenyao Cai

Starting from the late 19th century, China endured a long period of internal rebellion and international aggression. As a result of European colonialism, the World Wars in the 20th century, and a series of Culture revolutions under Mao’s reign, hundreds of precious Song Painting were transferred to foreign countries. Countries that have a considerable quantity of Song paintings besides China include Japan and America. Japanese artists and curators had a special interest in Chinese Song paintings because the style, techniques, and symbolism of painting originated from Song Dynasty and were influential in the history of Japanese art since once introduced from China. Museums in the United States, on the other hand, started drawing a focus on Asian art collections in the early twentieth century, which allowed visitors worldwide to appreciate the artistic style of Chinese Song paintings.

The collections of Song paintings in American museums are documented in *Song Hua Quan Ji: Di liu juan* - Cleveland Museum of Art, Boston Museum of Fine Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Freer Gallery of Art, and Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art have most significant collections of Chinese Song paintings.

This research paper will discuss briefly the starting stage of the collection and preservation of Chinese Song Dynasty paintings in the United States beginning from the early 20th century, with a focus on the Song painting collection in the Boston Museum of Fine Art and Freer Gallery of Art. Though the two organizations are different apart: one is a public Museum that employs curators to curate works from various sources, and the other started with a private collection, the foundation of Song painting collections in both museums was under the influence of Ernest Fenollosa who was an American art historian of Japanese art and a pioneer in curating Chinese Art.

Song Painting Collection Statistics

Before 1907	Earnest Fenollosa	4
1907-1913	Okakura Kakuzo	12
1928-1937		4
1952-1957		3

Figure 1: Curation of MFA Song paintings in different timeframes

Gift by Denman Waldo Ross	12
Sold by Wanyan Jingxian to Okakura Kakuzo	8
Sold by Mr. Re to Koichi Hayasaki	4
Others (from auction house or personal collections)	5

Figure 2: Provenance of the MFA Song paintings

Landscape Paintings	24	Northern Song Paintings	5
Figure Paintings	22	Southern Song Paintings	24
Birds paintings	5		
Fruits and Flowers	1		

Figure 3: Category of Song Paintings in MFA

According to *Song Hua Quan Ji: Di liu juan*, the Boston Museum of Fine Art has a collection of fifty-three Song Paintings, among which twenty-nine are recorded on the official websites.<sup>1</sup> Most of the paintings are documented with precise provenance, including the previous ownership of the work and the time that the work came into the collection. The first set of Song Paintings exhibited in Boston was under the supervision of Ernest Fenollosa, who served as curator of Boston MFA from 1890 to 1896, and formally entered the permanent collection of MFA in 1895 (see figure 1). The period under the admission of Okakura Kakuzo witnessed the flourishing time of curation of Southern Song paintings as Kakuzo directly bought artworks from late Qing Dynasty curators such as Wanyan Jingxian, or sent out purchasing agents such as Koichi Hayasaki to purchase Chinese art objects. From 1928 till 1957, the main source acquired Song paintings from art business dealers such as Ton-Ying & Company and Yamanaka & Company (see figure 2).

Interestingly, the Boston Museum of Fine Art has a strong preference for Southern Song Dynasty paintings, especially small-scale fan paintings. Among twenty-nine paintings that have records online, only four are Northern Song paintings. Additionally, most of the Song paintings are Landscape paintings and Figure paintings (see figure 3).

#### Song Painting Collection in Boston Museum of Fine Art

It is important to discuss the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, not only because of its huge collection of both Northern and Southern Song paintings, but Boston the city also played a vital role in promoting the art of the Far East. The “loing for the East was a symptom of the moment, especially marked in New England,” writes the literary historian Van Wyck Brooks (Class of 1908). “Numbers of Boston and Harvard men were going to Japan and China in a spirit that was new and full of meaning,. Oriental art was the vogue among Bostonians, and they were filling their region with their great collections.”<sup>2</sup>

Ernest Fenollosa was the pioneer among the scholars who entered Japan to study Japanese Art and later extended to East Asian Art in general. In his belief, the artwork of the world of man may be looked upon as one. Oriental art has been excluded from most serious art history because of the supposition that its law and form were incommensurate with established European classes, but, as Ernest Fenollosa mentioned in his book *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, “if we come to see that classification is only a convenience, valuable chiefly for chronological grouping, and that the real variations are as infinite as the human spirit, though induced by social and spiritual changes, we come to grasp the real and larger unity of effort that underlies the vast number of technical varieties”<sup>3</sup>, he believes that the study of Oriental art should be not neglected or underestimated.

In 1878, he was called to the University of Tokyo, where he became a professor of Political Economy and Philosophy, under the influence of Professor Morse in Harvard University. During his visit in Japan, he observed a decline of Japanese old traditions as the Japanese themselves started to indulge in an orgy of foreignism.<sup>4</sup> The emergence of European costumes and customs was welcomed by the

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<sup>1</sup> Museum of Fine Arts Boston, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://www.mfa.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *The China Collectors: America's Century-Long Hunt for Asian Art Treasures* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 43

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1921), xxiv

<sup>4</sup> Fenollosa, xiv

indigenous people. Fenollosa realized the threatened tragedy and put his effort to search for a way to promoting and protecting the Japanese art.<sup>5</sup>

During the years he spent in Japan, he studied Buddhism and visited temples in which large quantities of precious Japanese and Chinese artworks were stored. He also built networks with Japanese art curators and even administration officials. Such networking route converted him to an art historian, and on his return to America in 1890, he became the curator of Oriental art at the MFA.

In 1894, Fenollosa arranged an exhibition of forty-four Chinese paintings, which caused a public sensation. In the exhibition, Fenollosa met another important figure Denman Ross, who contributed tremendously to MFA's Song painting collection.<sup>6</sup> Known as a trustee and benefactor of both the MFA and Harvard's Fogg Museum, Ross was a trained artist and travelled to various countries to learn the content of their galleries. According to the account of his friend,

“He travelled in Europe, learning to know the contents of most of the great picture galleries. He went to Egypt and finally to China and Japan, and began his great collection of Oriental Art to be added to the collection of European pictures and textiles he had bought already. It was in Oriental and Hindu Art that he became most interested toward the end of his life.”<sup>7</sup>

Denman Ross viewed the collection before it was exhibited to the public, and he was amazed by the Buddhist paintings in the collection. At the end of the exhibit, he purchased five of the best paintings, depicting Lohans dating from the early Southern Song dynasty, formerly in the collection of the Daitoku-ji Zen temple complex in Kyoto. The paintings are attributed to Zhou Jichang and Lin Tinggui.

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<sup>5</sup> Fenollosa, xv

<sup>6</sup> Meyer, 50

<sup>7</sup> Charles Hopkinson, “Denman Waldo Ross (1853-1935)”, *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 71, no. 10 (March 1937): 544



Figure 4: *Lohans Crossing the River*, Zhou Jichang, Southern Song, Museum of Fine Arts Boston <sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Museum of Fine Arts Boston, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/lohans-crossing-the-river-24232>



Figure 5: *Sailboat in Rainstorm*, Xia Gui, Southern Song, Museum of Arts Boston<sup>9</sup>



Figure 6: *Orange, Grapes and Pomegranates*, Lu Zonggui, Southern Song, Museum of Fine Arts Boston<sup>10</sup>

One of the five paintings, *Lohans Crossing the River*, depicts five Lohans going across the river (see figure 4). It is a court-style Gong-bi painting with simple composition, but detailed rendering of the clothing, posture, and facial expression of the Lohans. In the painting, five Lohans are shown of different ages and tempers as the painter treated each Lohan very differently from others. The Lohan on the top of

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<sup>9</sup> Museum of Fine Arts Boston, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/sailboat-in-rainstorm-28132>

<sup>10</sup> Museum of Fine Arts Boston, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/orange-grapes-and-pomegranates-29766>

the painting closes his eyes to meditate, while the Lohan standing in front of him is more social as he converses with other Lohans. The different depiction of the human figures adds variety to the painting, and also suggests its storytelling quality.

As noted by Bernard Berenson, who visited the exhibition with Ross, “[The paintings] had composition of figures and groups as perfect and simple as the best we Europeans had ever done... No, decidedly I never had such an art experience. I do not wonder that Fenollosa has gone into esoteric Buddhism”.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that the American pioneers to collect Asian art were first entranced by the simple composition, unique texture strokes, and the mythological aspect behind the Chinese Buddhist paintings. Their purchase of the five paintings in 1895 indicated the beginning of the MFA’s collection of Song paintings, and also marked the beginning of the increasing interest in Chinese paintings in general.

The successor of Fenollosa as the MFA’s expert on Asian art was Okakura Kakuzo. His connection with the Museum, first as an advisor and later as the curator of the Department of Chinese and Japanese Art, began in 1906. During his career in MFA, he made parallel the study of art in Japan and Western research and did a great deal to arouse the community to realize how wonderful the Japanese and Chinese collections are.<sup>12</sup> In order to study fully the art, poetry, history, philosophy, and religion in Japan, China, and India, he had been around the world repeatedly. “He had been to China many times and visited pretty much every place noted in its religious, artistic, or political history”<sup>13</sup>.

Many of the paintings he curated are Southern Song fan paintings. One example is *Sailboat in rainstorm*, which Okakura purchased from Wanyan Jingxian, a Manchu curator in Qing Dynasty, in 1912 (see figure 5).

Like many other works of Xia Gui, *Sailboat in Rainstorm* shows his distinctive style and his expertise in painting techniques as a virtuous Song Dynasty court painter. The fan painting follows the simple scheme developed by Ma yuan and Xia gui: the composition is divided diagonally from upper left to bottom right. The lower segment is occupied by the depiction of landmass. Xia Gui used small axe-cut texture strokes, combined with light color ink wash, and irregular outlining strokes to define the rocks of various shapes in the foreground. Erecting on the rocks are three pine trees. The foliage is painted with rapid and random mi dot strokes and touches of green pigment, and the tree trunks and branches are rendered with thick and solid outlines and ochre pigment. The stormy weather is informed by the movement of the trees—the bent tree trunks and flying leaves suggest the direction of the prevailing winds and the undergoing rainstorm, even though there are no direct traces of depiction of raindrops in the painting. Behind the trees is a house, partly hidden by the foliage, suggesting the pursuit of life in nature for upper-class men in the Song Dynasty. On the upper quadrant, the empty space is marked by abbreviated brushwork to connote the mountains in distance. Beneath the mountains is a small sailboat with an old man sitting on the bow. The presence of the man in the painting invites viewers to join him to experience sailing in rainstorm.

The reasons why Okakura purchased these small-scale fan painting of poetic landscape is unknown. One possible guess is that the American audience has a special interest in this type of Chinese paintings, as it is manifest that almost all of the Museums which has great quantity of Song paintings possess a considerable amount of fan paintings.

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<sup>11</sup> Meyer, 50

<sup>12</sup> Museum of Fine Arts, “Okakura-Kakuzo, 1862-1913”, *Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin 11*, no. 67 (December 1913): 73

<sup>13</sup> Museum of Fine Arts, 74



Though most of the paintings are landscape paintings and human figure paintings, there are some interesting paintings of birds, flowers, and fruits as well. *Orange, Grapes and Pomegranates* is an interesting still life painting, that was a bequest of Charles Bain Hoyt, who traveled extensively in many parts of the world, particularly in the Orient, and devoted himself to collecting Chinese pottery and porcelain pieces, mostly of the Tang and Song dynasties.

*Orange, Grapes and Pomegranates* is a fine-detailed Gong-bi painting. In the painting, the pomegranate is at the focal point, rendered with touches of crimson pigment. Behind the pomegranate are grapes and an orange, the texture of which is visualized by using small brush strokes. The leaves with different shapes, stretching toward various directions, add variety and dynamics to the painting. These fruits are considered auspicious because they possess abundant seeds, which symbolize birth and prosperity (see figure 6).

Unfortunately, even though MFA had such a great collection of Song paintings, most of them are not on display for protection purposes. During over one hundred years of Song painting curation in MFA, the museum observed the transition between curating ideas of different curators, who put effort to maintain and promote the precious legacy of the Chinese Song dynasty.

#### Freer Gallery of Art



Figure 7: *The Rock Bridge at Mount Tiantai*, Zhou Jichang, Southern Song, Freer Gallery of Art.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Freer Gallery of Art, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://www.freersackler.si.edu/object/F1907.139/>

The Freer Gallery of Art is under Smithsonian Institution's national museums of Asian art in the United States, which, together with Sackler galleries, houses the largest Asian art in the country.

Charles Lang Freer, the founder of the gallery, was the first American that prioritized the collection of Chinese painting, and he specialized in works from Early Chinese paintings, namely Tang, Song, and early Yuan dynasties. "Do not send me any Ming or later pictures, I buy only Song and earlier paintings" indicated in his letter to a Shanghai art dealer.<sup>15</sup>

His strong preference for early Chinese paintings was influenced by Ernest Fenollosa, who left MFA in 1896 and joined to help Freer in 1901. From 1901 to 1908, Fenollosa became a kind of private curator to Freer, helping him to weed out, acquire, catalog, and maintain his collection of Chinese and Japanese paintings.<sup>16</sup> His view is from Fenollosa's writings about the painting tradition of China and Japan, and he believed that "the great schools of Chinese painting had reached full fruition during the Tang and Song dynasties, and they had already sunk far into degeneration by the Time of the Ming", given the reason that the excellence in Chinese painting resulted from the "free individualism" under Buddhism and Daoism.<sup>17</sup>

Some paintings he purchased around 1907 to 1912 are parallel to those of Boston MFA, partly influenced by Fenollosa's superior teachings. One example is *The Rock Bridge at Mount Tiantai* by Zhou Jichang, which Freer purchased in Tokyo in 1907. This painting was in the same collection as the five scrolls of Lohan paintings in MFA, originally being part of a set of one hundred scrolls brought to Daitoku-ji Zen temple in the thirteenth century.

In the painting, three Lohan stand in the foreground, looking up at the waterfall rushing over the mountain rocks. The Mountains depicted in the painting are Tiantai Mountains, which are located in Zhejiang Province. The pathway toward the Mountain peak is thought of as a pathway to paradise where the five-hundred Lohans worship and dwell among celestial temples<sup>18</sup>. In the background of the painting, two other Lohans walk in the clouds, venturing to climb to the Mountain peak to reach the heavenly space. Similar to the painting in MFA, the depiction of each Lohan varies with their body shape, gestures, ages, and tempers. The way they interact with each other and perform various activities also creates a world that intrigues the viewers.

After being acquainted with American pioneers of collecting Asian art, and the networks that Fenollosa had in Japan, Freer traveled to China and conversed directly with Chinese art dealers and collectors, including Duanfang, a Manchu politician, educator, and collector who lived in the late Qing dynasty, Pang Yuanji, who compiled the important catalogs of his ancient collection *Xuanzhai ming hua lu*, and Ching Tsai Loo, who maintained galleries in Paris and New York for collectors and American Museums.<sup>19</sup> All of these people influenced Freer's decision in buying Song paintings, and their effort as a whole made up the Freer Collection of Song paintings collection today.

To put it into a nutshell, starting from the late 19th century, when students at Harvard University started to go to Japan to get academic positions, the art of Asian came to the attention of art collectors in

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<sup>15</sup> Ingrid Larsen, "'DON'T SEND MING OR LATER PICTURES': Charles Lang Freer and the First Major Collection of Chinese Painting in an American Museum", *Ars Orientalis* 40, (2011): 7

<sup>16</sup> Larsen, 16

<sup>17</sup> Larsen, 17

<sup>18</sup> Freer Gallery of Art, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://www.freersackler.si.edu/object/F1907.139/>

<sup>19</sup> Larsen, 19-22



the United States. Ernest Fenollosa who was the first curator of Asian Art in Boston MFA, and also a friend of Charles Lang Freer, established the foundation of the Chinese Art collection of both institutes. The period of 1905-1920 witnessed the flourishing time of curation of Southern Song paintings in both Museums, as Freer and Okakura constantly purchased paintings directly from Chinese art curators such as Wanyan Jingxian and Loon Gu Sai. The preference toward Southern Song fan paintings and the influence of Fenollosa's ideas is shared by both Museums, however, the difference between private collection and public collection is also manifest, as shown by the personal preference of Charles Lang Freer in his collection of Song paintings.

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