

Anne De Coursey Clapp, *Wen Cheng-ming: The Ming Artist and Antiquity*.
 Publisher: Artibus Asiae (Ascona,
 Switzerland, 1975)

The scholarly interest in Wen Cheng-ming has been on the upswing for some time. In the late 60s and early 70s, it was Chiang Chao-shen who opened the way with a thorough research of Wen's life.¹ Concurrently, the Harvard thesis of Anne Clapp was being written, which eventually saw publication under the aegis of *Artibus Asiae* in 1975. Still more recently, the exhibition of, and symposium on, the Wu Master, took place in Ann Arbor; organized by Richard Edwards, they rendered Wen an unprecedented homage. This reviewer, it may be added, was a participant in that symposium and presented a paper dealing with the methodological aspect of Wen Cheng-ming studies.²

It is not my purpose to review the exhibition or the catalogue that goes with it. My purpose is to review, with the advantage of having seen the exhibition, Anne Clapp's *Wen Cheng-ming: The Ming Artist and Antiquity*. Indeed, having seen the exhibition, the content of which overlaps the book, and having also savored areas of controversy brought to light by symposium participants, it does make the task of reviewing Professor Clapp's book so much easier. It is almost as if we are seeing it through hindsight.

Thematically, *Wen Cheng-ming: The Ming Artist and Antiquity* presents a well-articulated idea about Wen Cheng-ming's art and its sources. The nine chapters, which touch on

Wen's life, his artistic evolution, and his indebtedness to various masters, e.g., Shen Chou, Chao Meng-fu, Huang Kung-wang, Tung Yuan, Li Ch'eng, etc., follow a logical order. They piece together a train of evidence which leaves little doubt with respect to the "eclectic" tendency of sixteenth-century Ming painting in general and the Wu master in particular. Indeed, with a knowledge of more than 400 paintings and attributions by this master, one would feel a sense of confidence in trusting the author and her treatment of the problem.³

At the same time, it may be important to point out that, as Chinese painting scholarship goes, every book written is always less than definitive. "Provocation" perhaps is the only attainable aim. Anne Clapp's *Wen Cheng-ming* is no exception. While the "eclectic" tendency of Wen Cheng-ming is demonstrable, perhaps incontrovertible, the selection of works to demonstrate these borrowings could be extensively argued. *No two Wen Cheng-ming scholars would select the same group of works as his oeuvres*: this is simply an unavoidable condition, due to the fact that none of his paintings is documented with a degree of satisfaction that can insure and assure authenticity. As a result, scholar *A* may choose paintings *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, and *e*, while scholar *B* may reject *c*, but add to the corpus *f* and *g*. Scholar *C* may then come along and say that only *h* and *j* are reliable;

the others, including *a, b, c, d, e, f,* and *g,* are all questionable. Intolerable as it may seem, this situation is not without remedy. At present, however, this reviewer will only point to several key works reproduced in the book as highly dubious attributions. In doing so, this reviewer acknowledges that he too is participating in the same game as every other Chinese painting historian; he is however more interested in highlighting the areas of controversy, and does not intend this as a criticism of Professor Clapp.

Fig. 17: *Brewing Tea on a Spring Evening*. This painting is included in the exhibition catalogue, R. Edwards, ed., *The Art of Wen Cheng-ming*, No. XXVII.⁴ In both silk and painting style, it is much too recent for the Ming date. Ming silk can be found in abundance in the Palace Museum paintings, and none of them even comes close to the bright, raw lustre of the *Brewing* scroll. Its style is also contrary to the planar structure and patterned seriality of the sixteenth century and must therefore post-date Wen Cheng-ming by a considerable margin. A comparison with the *Old Trees and Cold Streams* can be easily made (Clapp, fig. 35), with telling consequences.

Fig. 20: *After Wang Meng's "Mountain Dwellings"*.⁵ The landscape presentation here recalls the Ch'ing concept of *lung-mo* ("dragon vein"), and therefore a seventeenth or post-seventeenth century date would be more appropriate. Its style also has little to do with Wen Cheng-ming, but stems, in all probability, from painters like Kuan Ssu (act. 1590-1630). One may indeed wish to attribute it to a Ch'ing follower of that artist.

Fig. 24: *Washing the Feet in the Green Waves*. Density and palpability of form, not to say a heavy handed handling of brush and ink, preclude it from being an acceptable Wen Cheng-ming. Again, a later, Ch'ing date would be more likely.

Fig. 25: *Landscape*. The Michigan scroll, which is also included in the Ann Arbor exhibition (*Catalogue*, No. XV) cannot have been a genuine Wen Cheng-ming at all, contrary to the opinions of Professors Max Loehr, Edwards, and Clapp.⁶ I would regard its uniformity of brushwork — and consequently the lack of strength and vitality thereof — as a telltale sign of its being a tracing copy. In contrast, the Ku-kung *Resting under Pine Trees* is a great masterpiece in the same genre, which Anne Clapp only cursorily mentioned in her text, but did not bother to reproduce.⁷

Fig. 26: *Landscape after Wang Meng*. So admired by many and accepted without question, this painting is in my opinion the work of a late Ming painter, done around or shortly after the time of Wu Pin (1573-1620). Its restless surface and its bizarre effect bears little relationship to Wen's own works, or even to his disciples', but was to invade their corpus later on due to such factors as faking and mis-attribution. In addition, the loosely straying brushwork is also atypical for the Ming master.

Fig. 28: *A Thousand Cliffs Vying in Splendor*. Magnificent composition but weak execution reduces this to a close copy at best.

Fig. 32: *The Seven Junipers of Ch'ang-sha*. In the Wen Cheng-ming symposium, Marshall Wu argued convincingly that this was a work of dubious origin.⁸

Fig. 46: *Old Trees and Cold Streams*. The presence of two hands in this otherwise fine scroll (*Catalogue*, No. L) may place it as the handiwork of a disciple, with possibly the master himself adding the final touch — to wit, the dark dry twigs at the left end of the scroll — and, of course, the inscription. (This will not invalidate Professor Clapp's thesis, but merely add a qualification.) By comparison, fig. 47, *Two scholars under a Cypress* (*Catalogue*, No. LVII), is no better than a tracing copy, and an inferior one at that.

There are a number of other works which this reviewer would also consider as debatable, e.g., figs. 1, 4, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 30, 36, 40, 41, and 44. Once again, it is a matter of opinion, and conceivably, it is the reviewer's own subjectivity, not to mention his attitude of distrust, that has taken hold of him in reaching these conclusions.

With equal subjectivity, this reviewer will submit two critical comments vis-à-vis *Wen Cheng-ming: The Ming Artist and Antiquity*:

1). That while Professor Clapp attends to the problem of influences and sources, she has not shown equal sensitivity toward Wen Cheng-ming's own artistic personality. We come away with the feeling that Wen only did imitation or improvisation after this or that ancient master. Even though Professor Clapp does suggest repeatedly that Wen Cheng-ming appropriated the ancient sources to his own style and to his own syntax, exactly what his style and syntax are, is never clearly set forth to this reviewer's satisfaction. We sorely need a further definition of the core of Wen Cheng-ming's art, so that eclecticism — if it was indeed his avenue to creative height — could

proceed from this core, as well as enriching this core. Without knowing something about Wen Cheng-ming first, we cannot adequately explain how he operates vis-à-vis the ancient heritage.

2). That Professor Clapp seems to have shared with many of the interested scholars a feeling of uncertainty as to the validity of the Wu school paintings. This is not always apparent in her treatment of Wen Cheng-ming and his disciples, but the selection of works attributed to these masters are frequently telling in the sense that so many of them are inferior in quality. This is not surprising, in view of the astonishing assertions that were privately circulated among participants in the symposium, who regarded Wen Cheng-ming as no more than a "competent" artist. To this reviewer, however, Wen Cheng-ming is a great master, who, at his peak, was insurmountable and irrepressible,⁹ and even at his low ebb, would not have produced works that match the gift of a third rate forger.¹⁰ Even Wen Po-jen (1502-1575) and Wen Chia (1501-1583) are painters of skill and originality: to wit, the two handscrolls in the Palace Museum, *Spring Dawn at Tan-t'ai*, *The White-Deer Spring Retreat at She-shan*, and the hanging scroll, *The Immortals on the Islands of Immortality*.¹¹ They put to shame those paintings that are normally attributed to their name.¹²

It is a compliment to Professor Clapp that her translation of Chinese passages are generally excellent, with but two exceptions:

On page 3, Professor Clapp cites Wang Shih-chen's comment on Wen Cheng-ming's poetry: "莫如小閣 疎窗 位置 都佳 眼界 萬餘。" Her translation reads: "It is like a small pavilion with rustic windows; the building is placed to perfection so that the view may be fully enjoyed." Wang Shih-chen, however, was not being so favorable, for he intended to say: "It is like a small pavilion with rustic windows, elegantly put together in every way. However, the view from there is easily exhaustible."

On page 82, Professor Clapp erroneously translates the colophon by Wen as: "Because Li Tzu-ch'eng is related to me through my wife, he did me the honor to come several hundred *li* to condole with me at Wu-men. . . ." The original passage simply states that: "Because Li Tzu-ch'eng knew about my wife's death, he came several hundred *li* to condole with me at Wu-men. . . ." " 戚 " here does

not denote kinship, but sorrow over death in the family.

Ju-hsi Chou

NOTES

¹"The Life of Wen Cheng-ming and the School of Suchou Painting in the Middle and Late Ming," *Palace Museum Quarterly*, V, No. 4 (Summer, 1971), 27ff; VI, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971), 17ff; No. 2 (Winter, 1971), 23ff; No. 3 (Spring, 1972), 15ff; No. 4 (Summer, 1972), 23ff; VII, No. 1 (Autumn, 1972), 49ff. This has since appeared as a monograph, *Wen Cheng-ming yü Su-chou Hua-t'ai* (Taipei, 1976).

²"The Methodology of Reversal in the Study of Wen Cheng-ming," presented on January 31, 1976 at the University of Michigan Symposium on Wen Cheng-ming.

³See the *catalogue raisonné* in her thesis (Harvard, 1971).

⁴(Ann Arbor, 1976). For convenience sake, this will be designated as *Catalogue* below.

⁵This painting is available only in reproduction; neither Professor Clapp nor I have been able to examine the actual work itself.

⁶See Max Loehr, "A Landscape Attributed to Wen Cheng-ming," *Artibus Asiae*, XXII (1959), 143-152.

⁷See Clapp, p. 62, n. 13.

⁸This painting is included in the Ann Arbor exhibition (*Catalogue*, No. XXX). Marshall Wu's lecture is entitled "The Honolulu Academy of Arts **Seven Junipers of Ch'ang-shu Scroll**."

⁹For example, Clapp, figs. 22 and 35; see also *Catalogue*, No. XII, XXIX and LVI. Great masterpieces of the Wu master congregate in the Palace Museum, e.g., **Snow in the Mountain Passes, Resting under Pine Trees**, etc.

¹⁰Clapp, figs. 14, 24 and 47.

¹¹E. g., MH 32, MH 33 and MV 183 in the Palace Museum collection, Taipei.

¹²See Clapp, fig. 30 and p. 64.