

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Fishermen, after Jing Hao (detail)



Wu Zhen 吳鎮 (1280–1354)

China

Yuan dynasty, ca. 1341

Ink on paper

12 13/16 x 222 11/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1937.12

Describe

This landscape handscroll is over eighteen feet long. It is painted in monochrome ink. As one opens and reads the painting from right to left, sixteen fishermen boating on a river appear one by one. Only four of them attempt to fish at all. The rest are busy sleeping, drifting, or simply enjoying the scenery on their boats. All but one of these fishermen wear robes and hats that identify them as recluse scholar-officials. The one at the end of the scroll even brings his attendant boy onto the boat. Each angler focuses on his own thoughts and affairs, paying no attention to his neighbors. The artist accompanies each figure with a short poem, describing his philosophical thinking or pleasure of being a fisherman.

Analyze

The artist Wu Zhen (1280–1354) is known as one of the Four Masters of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). Although well educated, he never attempted to become a government official. Scholar hermits as fishermen boating on a river is one of Wu's favorite painting themes. He used the fisherman's isolated life from society as a compatible metaphor for his own disdain for an official career. Wu Zhen's choice was not unique in his time. The Yuan dynasty was founded by the Mongols through the military occupation of China. Many Chinese scholar-officials refused to serve the conquerors. Instead, they retreated into private life, away from the mainstream of society. As retirement and reclusion were favored by the Chinese officials, paintings on the subject of fishermen became a popular trend at the time.

Interpret

Besides being a great painter, Wu was also a fine calligrapher. In this painting, Wu Zhen integrated the “three perfections”—poetry, calligraphy, and painting. He inscribed a poem next to each scholar fisherman. He also added a long remark at the end of the scroll ten years after completing the painting. Both writings were done in cursive script (a writing style that emerged due to the need of speed writing) in which Wu excelled. Cursive script allowed the artist to freely express himself through brush and ink. The combination of poem, calligraphy, and painting makes the scroll a very enjoyable piece of artwork.

Translation of selected poems

No. 15

This boatman in his little skiff has no name at all;
In bottle gourds he takes his wine, lives a life of joy.
Fragrant paddy rice,
Luscious water-mallow soup;
He rows the moonlight piercing clouds, going as he will.

No. 14

Wind and light at Five Peaks surpass all else around;
Ducks and geese out on the river are his closet kin.
Clouds beat the shore,
Billows stir and toss;
Mist so deep on Green Grass Lake, one cannot be seen.

No. 13

He's caught a red-scaled fish, drags it from the water;
Its brocade scales of mottled color follow in the hook.
It shakes its crimson tail,
And puffs its reddish gills;
He does not envy Yan Ling sitting on his fishing ledge.

No. 12

No cause to drop one's line in the center of the pool;
Fish are big, the boat light, his strength not enough.
Anxious he'll capsize,
Concerned to keep afloat,
He goes light in everything and stays away from depth.

No. 11

Mountains glow in the last, fading glimmer of sunset;
Clouds rise, clouds clear, and shadows turn to light.
As the wind moves its feet,
And waves spring to life,
He hears the sound of night rain on his empty awning.

No. 10

Little skiff for a boat, what strength does he need?
Out upon the river, clouds and rain are intermingled.
If he is diligent enough,
Takes the long waves down,
When tide rises at midnight, he will have no worries.

Translations by Stephen D. Allee

No. 1

The evening wind comes up Lake Dongting,
Stirring a leaf [boat] at the heart of the waters.
Steady the oar, light the reed mantle,
Fishing only for river perch and not for fame.

No. 2

Man in tiny skiff has no name,
Carrying wine in a gourd, fully enjoying life.
Fragrant is the rice, delicious the vegetable broth,
Steer into the moon, pierce clouds according to whims.

Translation from Joan Stanley-Baker, "Accrued Perceptions of Wu Zhen: The Fishermen Theme," *Bulletin of the Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong* 8 (1991): 36–46.

Inquire

- Explore the interactive for this image on the Teaching China with the Smithsonian website. Do you think the poems match the figures? How do the poems help you understand the subject of this painting?
- Why did scholar-artists choose to retreat from official society? Who are some famous examples? How did they spend their time? Research the figure of the reclusive literati scholar-artist in Chinese culture.
- Research the "three perfections": poetry, painting, and calligraphy. Each of these arts appeal to different senses. Why was it so important for these three arts to be integrated in traditional Chinese culture?

Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1937.12/>

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 動如心去江東水滸
 星不知何

殘雲暈照山明空碧
 雲收江漫時空靜
 動浪如生龍不語
 道出西亭