

OBJECT IN FOCUS

**Journey to Shu (detail)**



Traditionally attributed to Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca. 1494–1552); Calligrapher: Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470–1559)

China

Ming dynasty, 16th–17th century

Ink and color on silk

21 5/8 x 72 1/8 in

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Freer Gallery of Art, F1993.4

**Describe**

The painting depicts a dramatic landscape of towering blue and green mountains topped with coiling clouds. Four groups of travelers are marching through the landscape. From the right, several women riders, each wearing a piece of red clothing, emerge from the mountains accompanied by several men in front and at the rear. Proceeding left from the bridge, traveling merchants rest among trees. One of their horses rolls happily in the grass. The third group of travelers appear exhausted from the journey. Feeling concerned, the man riding in front looks back at his companions. At left, the fourth group is making their way up the mountain path, which leads to hanging roadways off dangerous cliffs. In the background, a large body of water recedes into the distance. Trees and flowers are blooming, suggesting it is springtime.

**Analyze**

This painting is in handscroll format. A handscroll is a continuous roll of paper or silk bearing passages of calligraphy and painting. One would unroll it from right to left on a table and pause to appreciate it one section at a time. The composition of this painting is carefully designed so that whenever viewers open a section of the scroll, they encounter a group of travelers amongst high peaks of mountains. A poem by the leading Tang dynasty poet, Li Bai (701–762), appears at the end of the scroll (see below). It was transcribed by the great Ming dynasty artist Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) in masterful calligraphy. The poem describes the hardships of the road from the Tang capital Chang'an over high

mountain passes to the Sichuan basin. The painting also has a few collectors' and viewers' seals that convey pride of ownership. These common elements of a handscroll work together to make this painting, or any ancient Chinese painting, a documentary history that connects past and present.

## Interpret

Painted in lavish mineral-based colors of blue, green, and brownish yellow, this painting is a typical “blue-and-green” landscape. This style originated during the Tang dynasty (618–907). It was often employed in later periods, such as the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in this case, to evoke a past era of peace and prosperity. The current painting is modeled on a well-known landscape that was traditionally believed to represent the flight of Emperor Xuanzong (685–762) to Shu (Sichuan) in summer 756 CE during the An Lushan rebellion. However, its composition differs from its model in many ways, including the addition of an entire section of landscape and the conflict of season. It may be best if we simply appreciate the painting as a depiction of springtime travelers. The poetic colophon, located at the end of the scroll, translates as follows:

### *Hard is the Road to Shu*

Li Bai (701–762)

Oh, whew, my! How steep it is and high!

Hard is the road to Shu,

harder than ascending the clear blue sky!

When Can Cong and Yu Fu founded the realm, how long ago it was!

For forty-eight thousand years afterwards

human smoke did not reach the passes of Qin

West at Mount Taibai was a road for birds that led clear across to Emei's summit

But the earth collapsed and mountains crumbled and strong men died

And only since then have sky ladders and trestle roads been linked together

Above, at the lofty pinnacles where six dragons wheel the sun around

Below, by the whirling stream where churning waves collide and swirl

Even yellow cranes on the wing cannot make it over

And gibbons that wish to cross sadly clamber along:

Green Mud trail, how it twists and turns!

With nine loops each hundred paces winding up the sheer escarpment;

Brushing Three Stars, passing the Well, I look aloft gasping in fright

And clutching a hand to my breast I sit down there, panting hard

I ask you, sir, on your westward road, when shall you return?

The crags that jut above this fearful track cannot be scaled

I only see a mourning bird calling from an ancient tree

A male that flies behind his mate among the forest groves

And I only hear the cuckoo

crying at the nighttime moon,

grieving in the vacant hills:

Hard is the road to Shu,  
harder than ascending the clear blue sky!  
Which makes the ruddy faces pale of all who listen.  
Endless peaks stand not a foot from heaven  
Withered pines dangle and sag, drooping from vertical walls  
Gushing torrents and plunging streams wrangle in savage tumult  
Smashing cliffs, rolling stones, thundering down myriad ravines  
Beset with perils such as these,  
Alas, for the man on this far road, why, oh why, did he come here?  
At Sword Gate Pass among majestic jagged heights  
If a single soldier guards the gate ten-thousand others cannot breach it  
And if those who hold it are hostile they become like leopards and wolves  
At dawn one flees from angry tigers, at dusk one flees from giant snakes  
That slobber blood through whetted fangs and slaughter men like cutting hemp  
While it may be said that Brocade City is fun  
Wouldn't it be better to make it quickly home?  
Hard is the road to Shu,  
harder than ascending the clear blue sky!  
I tilt my body, gazing west, and heave a long-drawn sigh

(Translation by Stephen D. Allee)

## Inquire

- Imagine you have just stepped inside this painting. What can you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. Choose one section of this painting and write a description of what you see and what you imagine might be happening here. Use specific visual details to support your interpretation of the artwork.
- Choose one animal or human figure depicted in the painting and write a story from their perspective. What type of journey are they on? Where have they been and where are they going? What happened just before the moment depicted in the artwork, and what do you expect to happen next?
- Chinese handscrolls often incorporated text and image. Read the poetic colophon (included) and view this entire handscroll online [here](#). Then, write your own postscript to add to the end of the handscroll. In your postscript, include your response to the artwork, or what you think is most important to let viewers know about the story depicted.

## Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1993.4/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>







