

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Playing the zither beneath a pine tree (detail)



Copy after Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca. 1494–1552)

China

Ming dynasty, late 16th–early 17th century

Ink and color on paper

8 3/4 x 41 7/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1953.84

Describe

At the center of the painting, a robed scholar kneels on the ground beneath a twisted pine. The pine claws in the air like a dragon. The scholar is quietly playing a *qin* ("chin"), or zither, while looking into the void of the far distance. The scholar with his *qin* is the focus of the painting. Preceding and following this scene is a great bare expanse. There is no audience. Facing the water with hills behind, the scholar plays by himself and for himself. Through the playing of the *qin*, he is quietly communicating with his surroundings. The dramatic rendering of the scene is probably meant to trigger a poetic mood of the original viewer, as described in a famous poem: "I walk to where the water ends; and sit down to watch as clouds arise."

Analyze

Qin is one of the most ancient Chinese musical instruments. It can be traced back to as early as the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1050 BCE). Different from most Western instruments, *qin* is played mainly for personal enjoyment or for a small group of friends, often in private gardens or natural settings. It has for centuries been valued as a symbol of high culture by the Chinese elite class. *Qin*, together with *qi* (chess), *shu* (calligraphy), and *hua* (painting), are considered the four art forms that every scholar should master.



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Interpret

A scholar playing *qin* while enjoying some beautiful scenery is a popular genre in Chinese landscape paintings. Meditating on mountains, rivers, and clouds was a major source of inspiration for *qin* masters. It is believed that through the playing of *qin*, a person not only touches the inner spirit, but the very heart of nature. That is a status that most Chinese elites have longed to achieve.

Inquire

- Let your eyes wander all over [this artwork](#). Look in silence for at least thirty seconds. What do you notice? What does this artwork make you think about? How does it make you feel? What questions do you have about this work of art?
- What does the scholar in this artwork notice? What might he be thinking about? What does he care about?
- How would you define a scholar today? What sort of knowledge should they have?

Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1953.84/>

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



