

ORIENTATIONS

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2022 | US\$22/HK\$130

100 Years of Arts of Asia at the Art Institute of Chicago

Notable Flower Paintings

Tang and Song Buddhist Sculptures

Monumental Buddha from Nagapattinam

Japanese Prints

Kshitigarbha Painting

Sino-Sogdian Elements in Persian Book Illustrations

Wesley Tongson's Paintings

Painted Enamel Wares in Sino-French Exchanges

During the 18th Century

Hybridization of Arts in the 18th Century

Qing Court

French-reproduced Copper-bodied Painted

Enamel Wares of the Qianlong Reign

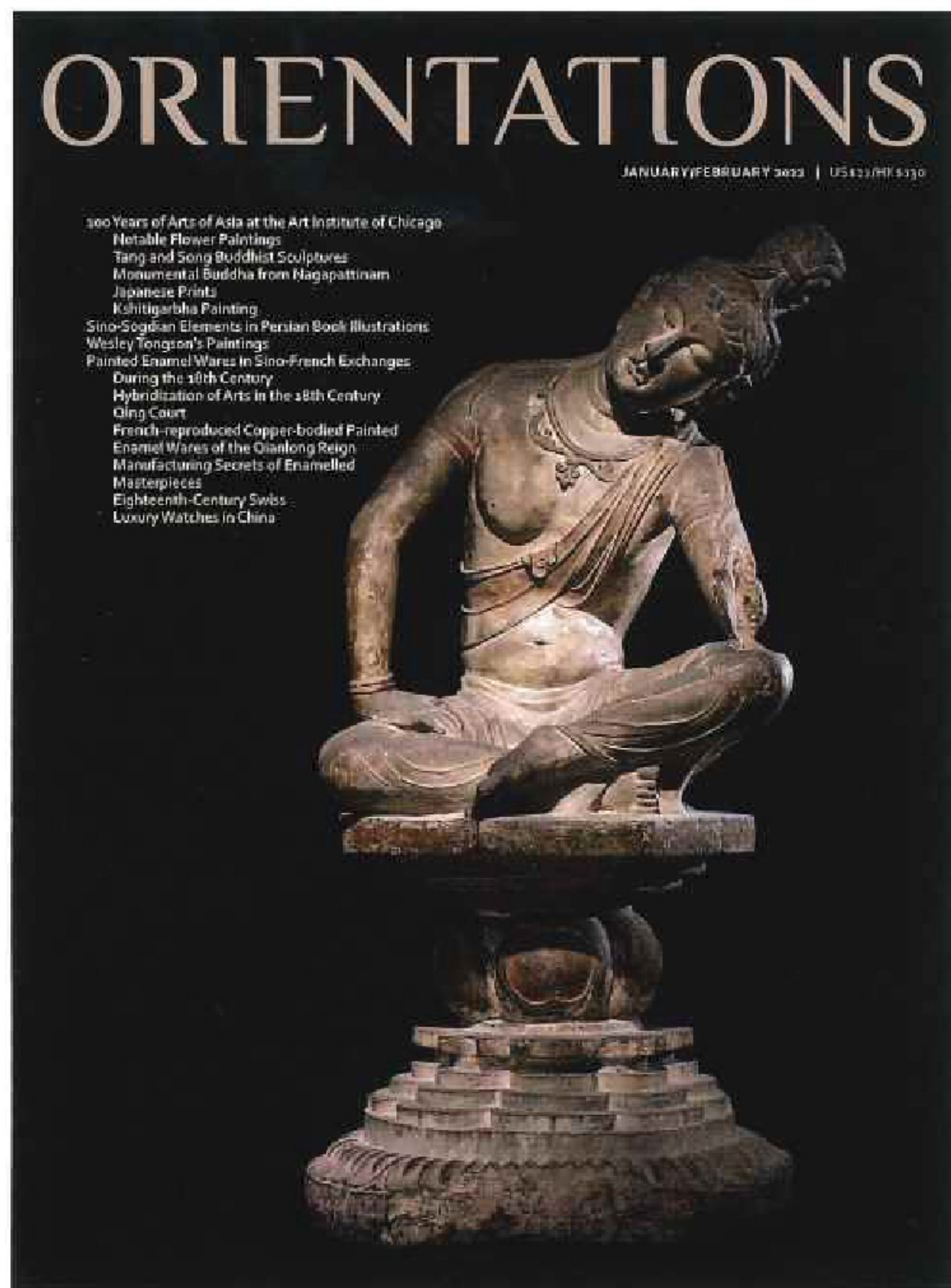
Manufacturing Secrets of Enamelled

Masterpieces

Eighteenth-Century Swiss

Luxury Watches in China





COVER: Meditating bodhisattva
China; Tang dynasty (618–907),
first half of the 8th century
Limestone with traces of polychromy;
Height (including pedestal) 157.5 cm
Art Institute of Chicago
Lucy Maud Buckingham Collection (1930.84)
Photograph by Rock Wang
(see p. 31)

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Spiritual Mountains:

Wesley Tongson's Transcendence in Ink Painting

Yi Yi Mon (Rosaline) Kyo

In a painting by Wesley Tongson (Tang Jiawei, 1957–2012), fantastical gorges and rock faces swirl and writhe, straining upwards to culminate in a monumental mountain formed by the artist's application of multiple layers of ink and colour on paper. Tongson's gestural patterns composed of monochromatic ink create a dynamic landscape. Layers of colour add aspects of depth to the ink, offering different textures—the dark teal appears like soft velvet while the milky white form cracks and veins—which are again layered by quickly finger-painted strokes of sinewy lines and dots. This painting, *Untitled No. 6* from the 'Spiritual Mountains' series, completed just before the artist's passing, epitomizes the culmination of his artistic evolution, which began when he decided to study traditional Chinese ink painting at the age of 17 in 1974 (Fig. 1). After being diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of 15, Tongson used ink painting, combined with his exploration of Zen Buddhism to, as he wrote, 'tackle my bad and unstable mood swings at night' (Wesley Tongson: *The Journey*, 2019, p. 121). Taking what he saw in his mind and transposing it onto paper—first using traditional ink and brush, then experimenting with splashed ink, and eventually abandoning the brush altogether to apply ink with only parts of his



Fig. 1 *Untitled No. 6* from the 'Spiritual Mountains' series
By Wesley Tongson (1957–2012); 2012
Ink and colour on paper, mounted on silk; 180 x 97 cm
Wesley Tongson Charitable Trust (ref. # 383)

hands—Tongson moved artistically through several experimental phases that reached an apotheosis in his final series.

In a new exhibition curated by Julia White, the Senior Curator of Asian Art at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), visitors are given the rare opportunity to not only closely examine Tongson's development as a master ink artist but also see his works within the context of Chinese traditional ink-painting techniques of eccentrics such as Xu Wei (1521–93) of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and Shitao (1642–1707) of the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911), as well as 20th century ink artists such as Wu Changshuo (1844–1927), Zhang Daqian (1899–1983), Harold Wong (Huang Zhongfang, b. 1943), and Arnold Chang (Zhang Hong, b. 1954). Pulling from BAMPFA's encyclopaedic collection of masterworks by Chinese painters, the exhibition welcomes Tongson as a new master into the canon of Chinese ink painting. While it is tempting to designate artists as distinctly premodern, modern, or contemporary, such designations do not apply in Chinese art-historical studies of ink painting. As Arnold Chang astutely points out, 'It does not occur to some people that traditional art can be contemporary or that contemporary art can be traditional. When it comes to ink painting, however, not only are the terms not mutually exclusive, but [they are] also interdependent' (Chang, 2007, p. 15). This is certainly the case with Tongson's development over several decades—during which he mastered traditional calligraphy, bamboo and flower painting, and landscape painting—only to engage in 'ink-play' in his later years, as he completely eschewed the brush to directly apply paint with his fingers yet still adhered to the compositional framework and subject matter of traditional Chinese ink painting.

Tongson first began studying calligraphy and bamboo painting in Hong Kong, before honing his skills under the tutelage of Madame Gu Qingyao (1896–1978) for several years before her passing. Gu came from a prominent Suzhou literati family whose large collection of traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy contributed to the study of Chinese ink painting in Hong Kong after her family migrated there in the post-1949 period (Li, 2000, p. 14). While Tongson studied Chinese painting with Gu, he also studied Western painting at the Ontario College of Art in Canada. He began experimenting with the splashed-ink method through an emulation of Zhang



Fig. 2 *Untitled, Toronto Painting No. 5*
By Wesley Tongson (1957–2012); 1980
Ink and colour on paper; 76 x 56 cm
Private collection

Daqian's works. At the same time, he was fascinated with Cubism and closely studied the works of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973).

The dual fascination with splashed ink and Cubism, in combination with his growing knowledge of Chinese ink-painting history, comes through in his early paintings completed in Toronto. In *Untitled, Toronto Painting No. 6*, Tongson's early experimentation with this combination is evident: the fluid inky washes outlined by thin continuous lines break up the planes of a landscape, abstracting the classical form of a near shore separated from the distant shore with empty space alluding to water (Fig. 2). Between the two landmasses, elongated and abstracted pines bind the composition together. It is Tongson's early interpretation of the classic scholar-amateur artist's compositions of distant shores, which the Yuan dynasty (1272–1368) master Ni Zan rendered so bare and desolate in his famous *Rongxi Studio* (1372; National Palace Museum, Taipei). Tongson also incorporated the 'plain outline' (*baimiao* 白描), which gained popularity with the 11th century paintings of the scholar-official Li Gonglin (1049–1106). His stricter foray into *baimiao* painting can be seen in his *Untitled, Toronto Painting No. 1* (Fig. 3). Here, the emphasis lies in the plain line drawing with specific passages quoted directly from Huang Gongwang's *Clearing After Sudden Snow* (c. 1340; Palace Museum, Beijing): the pair of isolated



Fig. 3 *Untitled, Toronto Painting No. 1*
By Wesley Tongson (1957–2012); 1980
Ink and colour on paper; 46 x 61 cm
Private collection

dwelling nearly hidden behind large boulders in the middle ground and the precariously situated rocky overhang. In this early study, we can already see Tongson's attempt to combine different ways of visualizing the world: he offers multiple views of the rocky overhang so that the flat horizontal surfaces of the cliff are tilted up, creating a writhing form that seems to come to life, much like the middle landmass in Guo Xi's famous *Early Spring* (11th century; National Palace Museum, Taipei) yet also reminiscent of early Cubist works.

Upon his return to Hong Kong in 1981, Tongson studied with Harold Wong (Huang Zhongfang), who had also first studied painting with Gu Qingyao beginning in 1956. Tongson also took a two-month course on splashed-ink techniques taught by Liu Guosong (b. 1932), the Taiwanese artist and founder of the Fifth Moon Group. Tongson's continued experimentation and gradual mastery in manipulating ink resonates in his 1996 painting *Scudding Clouds, Misty Peaks* (Fig. 4). The careful washes of ink and colour flowing into each other, diffusing into veins that

allude to rock-face textures, clearly draw from Zhang Daqian's techniques, as can be seen in *Scholars with a Qin-Zither in a Misty Landscape* (1965) (Fig. 5). Yet, Tongson's ink-play coheres into solid forms that almost look like photographic negatives. In fact, his sister Cynthia recalled that creating photograph-like ink paintings was one of Tongson's stated goals and was something he did not abandon until the early 2000s: '[Wesley] had wanted to splash to the point that the painting would look like a photograph' (Chan, Chen, and Tongson, 2019, p. 56). Such tension of abstraction and representational fidelity imbues the work with an otherworldly, fantastical sense, to which Tongson's adoption of the classic blue-green colour scheme alludes.

With his growing expertise in manipulating the ink medium, he also continued to play with the representation of space. His unique ink-wash painting *Untitled* of 1997 (Fig. 6) further develops his earlier explorations seen in the Toronto works, with oppositional forces crashing and converging into each other. Much like *Wind and Snow in the Fir-pines* by Guo Min (c. 1234–1300), in which ridges and rock

Fig. 4 *Scudding Clouds, Misty Peaks*
By Wesley Tongson (1957–2012); 1996
Ink and colour on board; 72 x 97 cm
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gift of Lilia and Kenneth Tongson

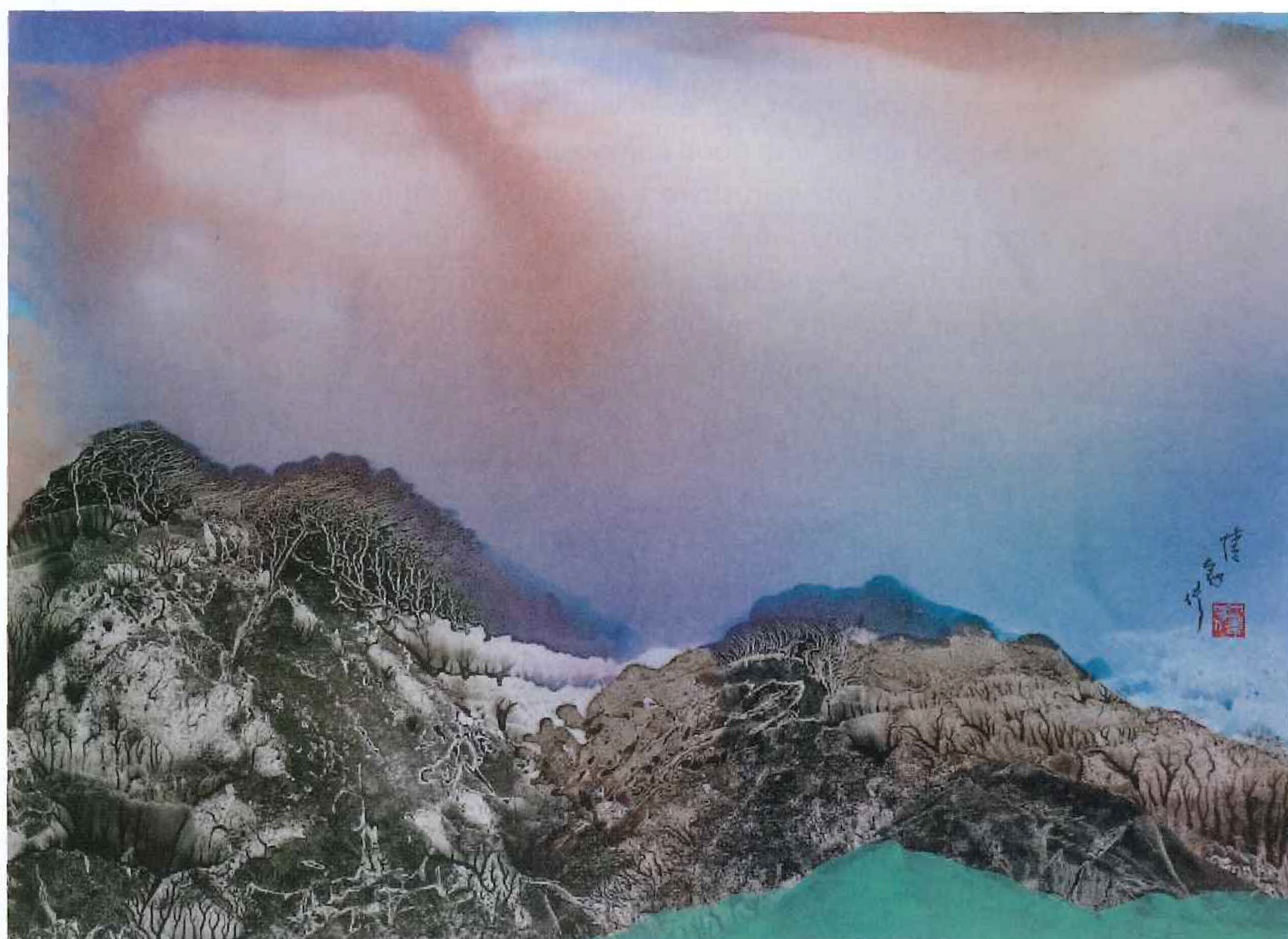




Fig. 5 *Scholars with a Qin-Zither in a Misty Landscape*
By Zhang Daqian (1889–1983); 1965
Ink and colour on gold paper; 57 x 82 cm
Rustic Studio Collection



Fig. 6 *Untitled*
By Wesley Tongson (1957–2012); 1997
Ink and colour on board; 58 x 38 cm
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gift of Lilia and Kenneth Tongson

faces seem to fold in on themselves (Fig. 7), Tongson's painting departs from the primacy of brushstrokes to concentrate instead on the interaction of smooth forms and gradated washes. This work and a similar painting from the same year, *The Rugged Path*, are studies in tonal variations of ink monochrome, which his teacher, Harold Wong, emphasized greatly in his discussion of mastering ink. Wong states: 'The colours of ink are very important because basically without using colours, just using ink, there is so much tonality that comes out Composition is important, concept is important, but even with good concept, with good ideas, with good composition, the basis of the expression is brushwork and colours' (White, 2000, p. 28). Thus, while still monochrome, Tongson's careful study of gradations offers viewers a sense of colour. More importantly, by specifically trying to leave out the importance of brushstrokes—the dominant feature in most ink paintings—Tongson grasps the importance of compositional balance by focusing on forms. He offsets the large void in the upper right with the heavy, dark rivulets in the lower left. The transparent overlapping washes at



Fig. 7 *Wind and Snow in the Fir-pines*
By Guo Min (c. 1234–1300)
Ink and light colour on silk; 125 x 58 cm
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive;
Purchase made possible by gifts from Jane Lurie and Nancy Chew,
through the donations of Albert A. M. Bender, Mrs. Anson S. Blake,
William E. Colby, the Estate of Sallie Frances Devine, Arthur F. Landeson
and the proceeds of the 1998 Asian Art and Fumpon Sale

the bottom play against the solid interlocking forms just above the centre. Moreover, Tongson adds his allusion to photography—a unique and unexpected layer to the continuation of a centuries-long tradition—in the gradations of ink and the delineation of shapes and overlaying forms through a use of negative space. The composition imitates a photographic negative of an image of forms interweaving and folding into each other; here, Tongson achieves a subtlety to his ink-play that is absent from his work just a year earlier.

Such subtlety of textures and washes thrives in his 2001 ink-splash-



Fig. 8 *Untitled*

By Wesley Tongson (1957–2012); 2001
Ink and colour on board; 72 x 97 cm

University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive;
Gift of Lilia and Kenneth Tongson



Fig. 9 *Landscape with Houses on a Mountainside (Waterfall on Mt. Kuanglu)*

By Gong Xian
(c. 1635–89)

Ink on paper; 112 x 44 cm
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Purchase made possible through a gift from an anonymous donor

and-resist work, *Untitled* (Fig. 8). With a rock face dominating the composition, the unique work is a far departure from traditional ink paintings that allow viewers to rest their eyes on blank spaces or light ink washes. Ink and colour cover the entirety of the composition, but what would otherwise be a heavy and dense work remains light, as the artist conveys constant movement through the veined application of ink and colour. The painting could be read as either an aerial view of a scarred mountainside from a recent fire or a close-up view of a scholar's rock with its undulations and crevices. The textured study reminds one of Wu Bin's *Ten Views of a Lingbi Rock* (1610; private collection) yet at the same time draws from the ambiguous construction of landscape forms of Gong Xian (1618–89) that seem to shift continuously—at once rock formations and billowing, ominous smoke clouds—as seen in his *Waterfall on Mt. Kuang Lu* (Fig. 9). A more contemporaneous and immediate influence was probably from Harold Wong's works of the mid-1990s, as exemplified by the 1993 painting *Sound of the Waterfall*. Wong was an influential figure in the Hong Kong art world, as the founder of the Hanart Gallery in 1977 and as a noted collector active in major annual auctions, resulting in the dominance of the 'Hanart taste' in ink-painting connoisseurship and collecting

practices of 1980s Hong Kong (Chang, 2000, p. 33). As his student, Tongson would have studied Wong's paintings quite carefully at his teacher's 1993 solo exhibition, 'Means of Self-Expression', held at Hong Kong's China Club. Wong's mid-1990s surface studies, using short strokes and dots to build up textures, draw from the techniques of Huang Binhong, exemplified in the 1952 *Landscape* (Fig. 10).

Though Wesley Tongson's ink plays have often been likened to Liu Guosong's works, most likely because he took a two-month course in the early 1980s with the Taiwanese painter, Tongson's experimentation remains distinct from Liu's manipulation of both ink and paper. Liu's vertical scroll landscape from 2014 (Fig. 11)—in which he lifted fibres of the coarse paper to create the veined texture of the mountain's surface (Brown, 2007, p. 35)—presents ridges culminating in a monumental peak at the top. In contrast, Tongson's 2001 *Untitled* evidences

a manipulation of the viscosity of ink along with the use of resists to create a mottled and veined effect, softened with ink washes of varying intensities. Tongson's particular methods remain unknown, for he was secretive about his techniques. His continued commitment to creating ink-plays that appeared photographic can be seen in his choice of sepia and green tints. Moreover, his process of using resists allowed the splashes to manifest an image on the paper akin to the appearance of a photograph developing in the darkroom.



Fig. 10 *Landscape*
By Huang Binhong
(1895–1955); 1952
Ink and colour on paper;
104 x 35 cm
Lijin Collection



Fig. 11 *Landscape*
By Liu Guosong
(b. 1932); 2014
Ink and colour on
paper;
185 x 46 cm
Lijin Collection



Fig. 12 *Orchid 1*
By Wesley Tongson (1957–2012); 2010
Ink on paper; 248 x 124 cm
University of California, Berkeley Art
Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gift of
Lilia and Kenneth Tongson



Fig. 13 *Waterfall on Mt. Lu*
By Sheng Maoye (c. mid-17th century)
hanging scroll; Ink and colour on silk,
207 x 100 cm
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

In the early 2000s, Tongson returned to ink monochromes, and by 2008 he turned to painting with parts of his hands. He also continued his exploration of the ambiguity between the macro and micro in his 2010 painting, *Orchid 1* (Fig. 12). In addition, in this late phase of his career, Tongson veered away from a desire to create a photographic effect, seeming to succumb to the urgency to manifest on paper what he saw in his mind, opting for the immediacy of painting with his fingers. According to Cynthia Tongson: 'When an idea came to [Wesley's] mind, he just walked around the table. One time, my mother had a little glimpse of him. This was how he entered into a different state of mind, like he would be in a "zone". He would go around and around and around ... walking around the table; then he would start painting. But he really did not let anybody watch him while he was working' (Chan, Chen, and Tongson, 2019, p. 53). Though *Orchid 1* is a rock-and-flower painting, it presents the same vertical placement of forms as a scroll painting of a mountain and waterfall. Seen alongside *Waterfall on Mt. Lu* by Sheng Maoye (act. mid-17th century) (Fig. 13), Tongson's *Orchid 1* presents a monumentality that belies the subject matter. The division of the upper-left and the lower-right forms by a narrow space of white follows the same compositional technique found in many monumental paintings of waterfalls, down to the tuft of sprouting leaves and blooms at the bottom left that creates the same compositional balance as the foreground landmass in Sheng Maoye's painting. As Chang explains, in works of ink-play by master Chinese ink painters, 'Subject matter is secondary—the trees, rocks, pavilions, waterfalls, and figures are primarily non-specific compositional elements to be played off against one another' (Chang, 2000, p. 36). In addition, Tongson layers darker ink with his fingertips and nails atop lighter gradations applied with his palms. The result is a layered and dotted yet sparser application of ink than we see in works by other masters, such as those of Huang Binhong and Harold Wong.

In his 'Spiritual Mountains' series, Tongson brings several experimental phases together: examination and depiction of pictorial planes from different viewpoints, careful studies in the gradation of the ink, layering coloured washes upon monochromatic ink, and compositional balance of voids and masses. The series displays a spontaneity that testifies to his final mastery and unmediated connection with ink and paper. His monumental horizontal scroll, *Untitled*



Fig. 14 *Untitled* from the 'Spiritual Mountains' series

By Wesley Tongson (1957–2012); 2012

Ink on paper; 124 x 244 cm

University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gift of Lilia and Kenneth Tongson

(Fig. 14), presents an aerial view of a vast landscape of rocky gorges with negative space to indicate waterways. Quick, staccato gestures that indicate vegetation and landmasses in the foreground are a visual contrast to the long thin ink splatters that create the layers of the gorges' surfaces. Swirling, repeated lines in the waterways and the sky echo the sinewy drops of ink composing the landmasses, suggesting a certain velocity within the massive horizontal scroll, an object that demands to be seen in its totality rather than in sections. In No. 6 of the 'Spiritual Mountain' series, Tongson adds nearly opaque colours on the monochromatic ink (Fig. 1). Repeated overlays of ink and colour bring forth variations in each other, as if the painting went through different stages of processing in a darkroom. It seems Tongson did indeed achieve his goal of making a photographic ink-play, in his final works.

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