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The Evolution and Impact of the Compositional Forms in Sesshu's Paintings

Gao Shuang

Abstract

In the history of cultural exchange between China and Japan, China has played a significant role in disseminating culture to Japan. An outstanding representative among the artists involved in these exchanges is the Japanese ink painter Sesshu. He studied in China during the Ming Dynasty, learning Chinese painting techniques and concepts, and was deeply influenced by Chinese landscape painting. This paper uses Sesshu's painting composition as a starting point to sort out his references to Chinese painting. First, it introduces Sesshu's life and artistic background, then analyzes his paintings to explore his compositional techniques and references to Song and Yuan dynasty paintings. Finally, the far-reaching impact of Sesshu's paintings on later generations is discussed. He spread the spirit of Chinese painting and its techniques in Japan, making an important contribution to the development of Japanese painting and promoting the development of painting exchanges between China and Japan. Through the analysis and discussion of Sesshu's paintings, a deeper understanding of his influence and status in Japanese painting and the exchange and development of painting traditions between China and Japan can be achieved.

Key Words

Sesshu, Japanese ink Painting, composition, impact

Throughout the long history of cultural exchange between China and Japan, Japan has always been an important disseminator of Chinese culture and art. Ambitious Japanese individuals have frequently traveled between China and Japan, introducing China's excellent traditional culture and art to Japan and integrating them with their local culture. The fields of Chinese and Japanese painting are closely connected and share many commonalities. As an outstanding representative of Japanese ink painting, Sesshu studied in China during the Ming Dynasty, "traveled almost everywhere",¹ and became the first key figure from Japan to study in China. Although his study time was short, he profoundly understood the essence of Chinese painting. During his time in China, Sesshu delved into the techniques and cultural concepts of ink painting, especially landscape paintings. He combined the composition and expressive techniques of Chinese landscape painting with Japanese

culture, forming a unique style. Through in-depth study, Sesshu mastered the skills and methods of Chinese painting, comprehended the philosophy and artistic spirit contained within, and had an important impact on cultural exchange between China and Japan.

1. Life and Works of Sesshu

Sesshu (figure 1) was an ink painter from Japan during the Ming Dynasty and is revered in Japan as the "sage of painting through the ages". He was a revolutionary painter who had been a monk at the Shokoku-ji Temple in Japan and studied painting under Tensho Shubun, a famous landscape painter from the same temple. Shubun's painting philosophy greatly influenced Sesshu's painting aesthetic. Shubun admired the ink painting style of the Song and Yuan Dynasties in China, especially the works of the Southern Song period. At that time,

Shokoku-ji Temple was a well-known painting center in Japan, where Sesshu often imitated Chinese landscape paintings, showing great interest in the painting techniques and compositional forms of painters from the Northern and Southern Song periods. He adopted the style of the Southern Song Dynasty and studied in China during the Ming Dynasty, applying the style and skills of Song and Yuan dynasty ink paintings to his works to depict and express natural landscapes. He integrated real landscapes with his emotions and imagination, becoming a successor of the Song and Yuan painting style, making an important and indelible contribution to the spread of Chinese culture and art overseas, and playing a special role in the history of Sino-Japanese painting exchange.

Sesshu's earliest paintings mainly involved religious figures. These works usually have a serious and devout atmosphere, showing his interest in Buddhism and Zen. Later, Sesshu began to draw widely on the painting styles of the Tang, Song, and Yuan periods in China. His works integrated the techniques of Chinese landscape painting, showing natural landscapes and cultural customs. In 1464, Sesshu left Shokoku-ji Temple and began to create independently. His painting style gradually matured, becoming freer and bolder.

In 1467, Sesshu had the opportunity to visit China during the period of the Ming Dynasty. During this time, he completed many works, such as *Autumn Landscape*, *Winter Landscape*, and *Scenery of the Tang Land*. After returning to his country, Sesshu actively explored the creation of ink painting. He went into the mountains and waters to experience them and sketch, and created a group of outstanding representative works with a distinctive personal style that truly reflects the local landscape of Japan such as *Broken Ink Landscape*. In 1502, Sesshu created the *View of Ama-no-Hashidate*, considered the pinnacle of his artistic achievements, showing magnificent natural landscapes and exquisite compositional skills. In summary, Sesshu's works have pioneering contributions in infusing ink painting with national sentiments and have profoundly impacted subsequent painters. In addition, other representative works include *Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons*.

2. Two Different Artistic Periods of Sesshu's Painting

Sesshu's artistic development can be divided into two periods: studying in China and creating after returning to Japan.

2.1 Sesshu's Creation During the Study in China

During his study in China, Sesshu was deeply influenced by Chinese landscape painting. He studied Chinese

painting techniques, aesthetic concepts, and cultural traditions in China, especially in-depth research on the works of landscape painters during the Song and Yuan dynasties. During this period, he was mainly committed to learning and imitating the works of ancient Chinese landscape painters, trying to absorb and digest the essence of Chinese painting. After returning to his country, he combined the painting techniques he learned in China with traditional Japanese painting to create his unique painting style. He no longer imitated the works of Chinese painters but combined the expressive techniques of Chinese landscape painting with Japanese natural landscapes and cultural traditions to create a series of landscape paintings with Japanese characteristics. His works show a unique personal style in composition, ink color application, and artistic conceptual expression,



Figure 1. Sesshu. 76.1×35.1cm, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.



Figure 2. *Four Landscape Scrolls of the Seasons (Spring)*. 149.0×75.8cm, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

Figure 2-1. Detail of Figure 2.

which influenced the development of Japanese landscape painting. The works of these two periods show different artistic styles and expressions, representing two important stages of Sesshu's artistic development.

According to *A History of Painting in Japan*,² Sesshu was sent by his father to the Hofukuji Temple in Soja, Okayama Prefecture, when he was eleven or twelve years old, becoming an apprentice monk. Subsequently, he went to the Tofuku-ji Temple, one of the five mountains in Kyoto; the Shokoku-ji Temple where he studied under Shunrin Shuto, becoming his Dharma heir; and he learned ink painting from Tensho Shubun, the regular painter for the shogun's family at the temple. In 1467, at the age of 48, Sesshu experienced an important turning point in his life and went to Ming Dynasty China on a diplomatic ship organized by the Ouchi family. As a monk and painter, Sesshu learned much from the Chinese painting world.

Sesshu created a set of works called *Four Landscape Scrolls of the Seasons*, which includes four paintings depicting the four seasons with Japanese characteristics.³ These works use silk as the canvas, each is 149.0 centimeters long and 75.8 centimeters high, all without

signatures or seals, and the theme of the works revolves around human activities in each season. The composition of *Four Landscape Scrolls of the Seasons (Spring)* (figure 2) adopts the “half-summer” method, with the focus of the scroll being on the middle ground and the partially obscured mountain on the right. The picture shows a progression from near to far, depicting the slope and dike. The middle ground is a small stream that has just thawed, flowing out slowly; the water flow is thin and continuous. At the same time, the distant mountain is faintly visible in the morning fog, creating a distant, poetic, and vast space. In a detail of the scroll (figure 2-1), the scene depicts three willow trees with newly sprouting branches. In the composition, the huge rocks in the foreground are arranged in a “Z” shaped layout, and the gradually unfolding scroll depicts the branches swaying in the wind in the distance, growing to the left and right, with lush branches and leaves, echoing the foreground and background. The small stream flowing in the deep distance continues the folding branch composition popular in the Song Dynasty. The near, middle, and distant scenes are evenly distributed in the picture, using the unique perspective of Chinese painting, presenting a



Figure 3. *Four Landscape*
Scrolls of the Seasons (Summer).
149.0×75.8cm, Collection of the
Tokyo National Museum.



Figure 4. *Autumn Landscape*. 46.4×29.4cm, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

balanced and stable feeling.

Four Landscape Scrolls of the Seasons (Summer) (figure 3) adopts a panoramic, far-reaching composition, incorporating the far-reaching method of Song landscapes. The close-up view shows layered, receding boulders and slopes, an old tree stretching upwards, the clear spring rushing down and pouring into the pool, and the mountain paths twisting and turning from the left side of the middle ground into the picture, leading to the deep woods and pavilions. These elements are intertwined to form the rhythm of the painting. In the painting there are travelers walking, the master of the pavilion looking over the fence, and a child standing and holding a fan. The ink and wash are controlled, and the brushwork is skillful. The whole painting reveals a profound and clear mood, reflecting the refreshing and cool feeling of summer. As Guo Xi, a painter of the Northern Song Dynasty, said in *The Lofty Message of Forests and Streams*: “The landscape contains paths to traverse, sights to behold, places to explore, and spaces to inhabit. That can be wan-



Figure 5. *Winter Landscape*. 46.4×29.4cm, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

dered in, and paintings that are up to this point are all of wonderful quality.”⁴

In *Autumn Landscape* (figure 4), Sesshu demonstrates his unique compositional style. This painting adopts a panoramic and far-reaching composition, skillfully integrating natural scenery into the picture. He uses bold brushstrokes to express the autumn scene, starting from the lower left corner of the painting with a curved path that leads the viewer deeper into the painting. In the distant view, the rolling hills, blue sky, white clouds and autumn leaves form a magnificent natural picture. At the same time, the activities of the characters in the picture add life and emotion, making the whole picture more vivid and flavorful. Sesshu uses delicate ink and brush and compositional techniques to show the mood of the autumn landscape to the fullest, giving people visual and spiritual pleasure and leaving a profound impression. The artist draws a path that bends and extends along the water towards the center of the picture from the lower left corner of the picture, places two figures in conversation



Figure 6. *Tang Tosa Landscapes Scroll*, Kyoto National Museum.

in the middle of the path as a focal point, and then draws the pavilion and the distant mountains, showing a solid and clear spatial depth. All the scenery is concentrated at the bottom of the picture, while the upper part is a vast space. This compositional technique corresponds to the *Winter Landscape* (figure 5), painted around 1467-1471.

The *Tang Tosa Landscapes Scroll* (figure 6) is a horizontal panoramic scroll painting by Sesshu depicting the landscape he encountered while traveling on the Xijin Ferry in Zhenjiang. This work adopts the compositional form of traditional Chinese long scrolls, illustrating the distinctive viewing experience of Chinese art characterized by its transcendence of temporal and spatial limitations. The extensive use of blank spaces enables a comprehensive view of the Zhenjiang landscape. Da Chongguang, in his *Huaquan*, remarked “Emptiness is difficult to depict; reality becomes clear while the void is perceived; the divine is unpaintable, yet true scenes compel divine ones to emerge. When spatial arrangements conflict, painted areas often become superfluous; the interplay of emptiness and reality creates wondrous realms where unpainted spaces transform into exquisite scenes.”⁵ In his painting, Sesshu seeks order and structure in areas filled with ink and brushwork while exploring divine principles within the void. The true marvel lies in the unpainted blank spaces. Sesshu’s skillful manipulation of negative space in this piece exemplifies his masterful depiction of the renowned landscapes he observed in China. This painting not only showcases Sesshu’s exceptional artistic talent but also reflects his profound comprehension and implementation of the traditional Chinese landscape painting tradition.

Tang Tosa Landscapes Scroll is a long scroll painting, which is very common in Chinese landscape painting. A characteristic of scroll painting is that the scroll unfolds to show continuous scenes and episodes, giving the viewer a sense of continuity in time and space. In this long scroll form, Sesshu has linked a number of sights and attractions that he saw during his travels in China.

The composition of a long scroll requires consideration of the transition and connection between scenes. In *Tang Tosa Landscapes Scroll*, Sesshu cleverly arranges the landscapes, architecture and characters so that each section of the scene stands alone while maintaining a natural connection with the preceding and following scenes. This layout gives the whole scroll a coherent narrative flow.

This work utilizes both near and far perspectives to convey a sense of spatial depth. In the foreground, Sesshu depicts detailed trees, boats and people; in the middle ground, buildings, hillsides and roads; in the background, distant mountains and sky are outlined in light ink. This layered layout and composition give the picture a more three-dimensional and spatial quality.

Dotted figures are a common technique in Chinese landscape paintings, increasing vividness and adding a sense of narrative to the scene through their activities. Sesshu skillfully arranges travelers, monks, fishermen and other figures in the landscape, making the image more lively and dynamic. These characters not only enrich the content of the painting, but also enhance the viewer’s sense of immersion.

Sesshu also enhances the rhythm and visual impact of the painting through the contrast between dynamic and



static elements. The contrast between the moving boat in the foreground and the steady rocks in the mountains creates a richer and more layered composition.

The *Tang Tosa Landscapes Scroll*, a masterpiece of Sesshū's during his study in China, showcases his deep understanding and application of the Chinese landscape painting tradition. By employing the long scroll format, creating a continuous layout of the scene, expressing distance and perspective through spatial levels, skillfully arranging figures, contrasting dynamic and static elements, varying thick and light inks, and integrating traditional landscape painting techniques, Sesshū creates a work of art that embodies the traditional features of Chinese landscape painting while also reflecting his innovative style.

2.2 Sesshū's Artistic Activities after His Return to China

After returning to Japan, Sesshū visited mountains and rivers throughout the country and attached great importance to sketching. He actively devoted himself to creating ink paintings, combining the techniques he learned in China with local Japanese aesthetics, pursuing a painting style compatible with Japanese customs, and using realistic techniques to depict the scenery, creating many classic works. *View of Ama-no-Hashidate* (figure 7) is his representative work created after returning to China at the age of 80. This painting depicts the famous Japanese scenic spot Amanohashidate. It shows the panoramic view of this scenic spot from a bird's-eye perspective, full of vivid details and magnificent momentum. Almost none of the Zen monk painters of the

Muromachi period had ever been to China. The images they painted in ink paintings came from Tang paintings, and the landscapes they painted were "imaginary landscapes" that "made paintings from paintings". Sesshū directly witnessed the magnificent scenery in China and learned painting ideas. He based his paintings on Japanese scenery to eliminate the traditional Chinese landscape painting model and create unique Japanese landscape paintings. In *View of Ama-no-Hashidate*, Sesshū cleverly incorporates the far-reaching method of painting landscapes used in the Song Dynasty. He uses flexible brushstrokes to depict Hashidate with moist, slightly green ink. In particular, to highlight the white sand of Amanohashidate, he applied the thickness of the sea ink and added the use of volumetric ink techniques in distant mountains to demonstrate Sesshū's unique realm based on Song paintings. This technique expresses the natural scenery of Japan. From this work, you can feel Sesshū's passion for Japanese nature and his efforts to understand it.

In China, Sesshū studied on the front lines of the painting world and gained a deeper understanding of traditional Chinese painting theories. However, as he mentions in his colophon to his *Broken Ink Landscape* (figure 8), he was only partially satisfied with what he had learned in China. At the time, the Ming Dynasty was dominated by the Zhejiang School, a style that broke with the patterns of Song ink painting and tended to be more dynamic in composition and brushwork. Although Sesshū came into contact with, and learned from, the Zhejiang School style, it needed to be fully harmonized with his Japanese aesthetic pursuits. His works, often painted

without contour lines and with broad splashy strokes, still maintain a clear structure despite the use of ink in a more expressive manner. This demonstrates Sesshu's inherent sense of stability and structure in his paintings.

Sesshu, a prominent figure in Muromachi period ink painting, pioneered a new direction. On the one hand, he renewed his appreciation for the greatness of Song Dynasty paintings; on the other hand, he returned to the foundational practice of sketching from life. As a Zen monk, Sesshu built upon the Song Dynasty's court painting style and integrated Zen Buddhist philosophy with a deep understanding of nature, thereby refining the technique of ink painting. He embedded his spiritual world within landscapes, establishing a uniquely Japanese aesthetic consciousness. *Birds and Flowers of Four Seasons* (figure 9) is one of his masterpieces created after his return to Japan, showcasing his mastery of Chinese painting techniques and profound understanding of Japanese natural scenery. This work represents his flower-and-bird paintings, demonstrating his exceptional skill in composition, brushwork, and conceptual depth.

In composition Sesshu pursued symmetry and balance, but in a flexible manner; he achieved visual equilibrium through a clever arrangement. One side features a tall tree on the screen, while the other side balances this visual weight with flying birds or clusters of flowers and grasses. This approach avoids rigidity while maintaining the stability of the composition.

Sesshu paid meticulous attention to rhythm and variation within the composition. He created a flowing aesthetic in the artwork by arranging different flowers and birds, directing the branches, and using spatial intervals. On the screen, the direction of the birds' flight and the tilt of the branches resonate with each other, forming a natural sense of rhythm that makes viewers feel as if they can sense the gentle breeze.⁷

Sesshu's approach to composition demonstrates a keen attention to variations in density and emptiness. He creates a sense of rhythm and depth in the artwork through the interplay between densely arranged flowers and birds and the spaciousness of blank areas.

Sesshu skillfully integrates elements of movement and stillness in his compositions to enhance the vitality and dynamism of the painting. He creates a contrast and harmony between movement and stillness by juxtaposing static flowers and plants with dynamic flying birds and flowing water. This dynamic interplay not only enriches the visual experience but also deepens the viewer's engagement with the artwork.

In *Birds and Flowers of Four Seasons*, Sesshu vividly captures the changes of the seasons through various flowers, birds, trees, and background elements. For

spring, he depicts vibrant scenes with blooming flowers and playful birds; for summer, he conveys tranquility and lushness with verdant trees and cool flowing water; for autumn, he illustrates the harvest and sentiment of departure with golden leaves and migratory birds; and for winter, he portrays cold and stillness with bare branches and stationary birds. This nuanced representation of seasonal characteristics imbues the artwork with emotional depth and vitality.

This analysis of compositional techniques shows that Sesshu's work exhibits his profound artistic skill and unique artistic style.⁸ He not only inherited the essence of traditional Chinese painting but also integrated Japanese indigenous aesthetic sensibilities, creating flower-and-bird paintings with distinct personal characteristics.

3. The Influence of Sesshu's Painting on Later Generations

Although Sesshu spent a relatively short time in Ming Dynasty China, overcoming numerous difficulties unimaginable to modern people, including navigating cultural and linguistic barriers, enduring the perils of sea travel, and adapting to a foreign climate and environment, he also struggled to gain access to Chinese artistic circles. Despite these hardships, his experiences in China deeply influenced his work, his impact on Japanese painting after his return was profound. He advocated learning from nature by depicting landscapes, seasonal changes, and other themes to express reverence for nature and contemplation of life. His works are renowned for their profound meaning and unique brushwork, and his work is considered a significant milestone in the history of Japanese painting.

Upon his return to Japan, Sesshu approached nature from the perspective of a great popular painter, integrating traditional Chinese brushwork techniques into his works. By deeply engaging with nature through on-site sketching, he infused his artworks with genuine personal emotion, creating numerous realist masterpieces with distinct Japanese characteristics. His contributions to the development of Japanese ink painting are irreplaceable. Moreover, Sesshu mentored several artists who continued his legacy, such as Unkoku Togan, who inherited and developed Sesshu's style. Unkoku's work *Landscape Screen* reflects Sesshu's influence; he also excelled in ink landscapes and figure painting with representative works including *Ink Landscape with Figure* and *Pavilion Landscape Screen*. Hasegawa Thaku, known for his minimalist style, was also influenced by Sesshu, as seen in his *Pine Trees Screen*. Many other artists influenced by Sesshu have enriched the Japanese



Figure 8. Broken Ink Landscape. 148.6×32.7cm, Kyoto National Museum.

art scene, perpetuating and expanding his artistic legacy and infusing new vitality and creativity into Japanese painting.

As a fervent learner and promoter of Chinese culture, Sesshu played a significant role in advancing Chinese cultural and artistic dissemination in Japan, making a notable contribution to the history of Sino-Japanese cultural exchange. Japanese art critic Koguchi Seiichiro remarked, "What makes Sesshu Sesshu is his ability to fully assimilate the Song and Yuan painting styles, adhering to their principles in every line and stroke."⁹ Sesshu devoted his life to adapting ink painting to Japanese contexts, fostering the exchange between Chinese and Japanese art.

Sesshu also served as a bridge in Sino-Japanese cultural exchange, leaving a lasting impact on China. His landscapes, with their unique style and depth, attracted the attention of and study by many Chinese painters, becoming a source of inspiration for their work. The relationship between Chinese and Japanese painting can be described as mutual borrowing and influence. Chinese cultural dissemination to Japan led to its development and innovation there, while Japanese artists infused their unique characteristics into Japanese painting by learning from Chinese artistic principles. This tradition of cultural exchange continues to this day, invigorating the artistic creation and cultural development of both countries. Sesshu's painting style and approach profoundly impacted later generations, laying the foundation for Japanese landscape painting, influencing subsequent artists, and facilitating the integration of Chinese academic painting with Japanese art. His contributions played a crucial role in the development of Japanese painting traditions.

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Editor: Yao Xiao



Figure 7. *View of Ama-no-Hashidate, partial, ca. 1501*, Kyoto National Museum.



Figure 9. *Birds and Flowers of Four Seasons. Part 1, from the 1580s to the early 16th century*, Collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

ENDNOTES

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雪舟繪畫的構圖形式演變及其影響

高爽

摘 要：在中日文化交流史上，中國對日本的文化傳播起著重要作用。其中，日本水墨畫家雪舟是一位突出的代表，他在明代曾到中國留學，學習中國繪畫的技法和理念，深受中國山水畫的影響。本文以雪舟的繪畫構圖形式為切入點，對其對中國畫的借鑒進行了梳理。首先介紹了雪舟的生平和藝術背景，然後通過分析他的繪畫作品，探討了他的構圖手法和對宋元繪畫的借鑒。最後，文章闡述了雪舟的繪畫對後世的深遠影響，他將中國繪畫的技法和精神傳播到日本，為日本繪畫的發展做出了重要貢獻，同時也促進了中日兩國繪畫交流的發展。通過對雪舟繪畫的分析和探討，可以更深入地瞭解他對日本繪畫藝術的影響和地位，以及中日兩國繪畫傳統的交流與發展。

關鍵詞：雪舟；日本水墨畫；構圖；影響