

maid is emerging from behind a screen to peep at the party in front (illus. 21), and that each of the three screens separating the four sections delicately overlaps with a figure belonging to the next section (illus. 19, 22). Even more telling, between the last two scenes a woman is speaking around a screen to a man; she points in the opposite direction and seems to be beckoning him into the back quarter (illus. 20). These details create dynamism, linking isolated scenes into a continuous pictorial plane, just as in a musical composition ties cross bar lines (illus. 34), connecting separated notes into a continuous melody:

34 Transcription of an aria from *The Story of the Black Pot*, composer and date unknown.



#### THE HANDSCROLL

This last analogy brings to our attention an essential but often neglected feature of the *Night Entertainment of Han Xizai*, which I have alluded to when describing the painting as a 'sequential composition', a 'visual journey', or a 'pictorial narrative.' All these concepts imply the sense of *time*. Indeed, my reading of the painting has demonstrated that it is a work of both spatial and temporal art. It can combine these two aspects harmoniously in a single picture because this picture is a *handscroll*.

The term *handscroll* is a literal translation of the Chinese word *shoujuan* (*shou*: 'hand'; *juan*: 'scroll'). Many scholars have commented on this type of picture; here is a standard description offered by Jerome Silbergeld:

Handscroll paintings range from less than three feet to more than thirty feet in length; the majority are between nine and fourteen inches high. Paintings are mounted on a stiff paper backing; those of greater length are often painted on several sections of silk or paper joined together. At the left is attached a round wooden roller, about which the scroll is wound when not in use and which is occasionally decorated with a knob of ivory or jade. At the right is a semi-circular wooden stave which keeps the scroll properly stretched



19 (top), 20 Scenes from Gu Hongzhong's *Night Entertainment of Han Xizai* (illus. 13). The sequence runs 21, 19, 22, 20.

21 (top), 22 Scenes from Gu Hongzhong's *Night Entertainment of Han Xizai* (illus. 13).



from top to bottom. The painting is viewed from right to left, as one reads in Chinese, unrolling a bit at a time from the roller and transferring the excess to a loose roll temporarily maintained around the stretcher on the right. About one arm's length is exposed at a time for viewing.<sup>61</sup>

35 How one views a typical Chinese handscroll painting.

We may add that after viewing such a painting the spectator rolls it back, again section by section, to the beginning of the scroll. This can be done quickly and mechanically; but some connoisseurs prefer to combine it with a 'reversed' reading of the picture from left to right, while halting now and then to review some details of specific interest.

This description suffices to illustrate the basic features of a handscroll, but it says little about it as an *art medium*. To qualify the handscroll as an art medium, we must establish its relationship with certain conventions in artistic creation and imagination, and demonstrate its potential for creating and comprehending a unique pictorial language. In other words, the physical attributes of a handscroll must be understood and explained in relation to the artist, the viewer and the images it bears.

Generally speaking, a handscroll must exhibit four inter-related features, which distinguish it from all other types of painting formats, including the hanging scroll, the album and the mural. The four features are a horizontal composition, a limited height and a far greater length, the 'scroll' form, and the 'unrolling' process in executing and viewing a painting. While this definition basically summarizes Silbergeld's description cited above, it also clarifies a confusion in his statement. Adopting a colloquial approach, Silbergeld considers any horizontal painting 'from less than three feet to more than thirty feet in length' a handscroll; but traditional Chinese artists and art critics had developed a more precise classification. Mi Fu (1051-1107), the famous Song artist and connoisseur, distinguished two kinds of horizontal paintings: hengjuan (a 'horizontal scroll') and henggua (a 'horizontal hanging [picture]').<sup>62</sup> The latter was shorter than three *chi* (about 94 cm) and could be hung on a wall. The former, longer than three *chi*, had to be rolled up when not in use; when viewing it the beholder needed to use his hands to gradually unroll the picture. Strictly speaking, therefore, only a *hengjuan* is a 'handscroll'. Although a *henggua* has the potential to 'grow' into a *hengjuan* when colophons are increasingly attached to it, it was originally created as a single-framed painting, not as a multi-framed handscroll.

The implication of Mi Fu's classification thus goes beyond terminology and the method of mounting. It defines the handscroll as a 'vista-vision plus' composition, meaning that the painter's (and the viewer's) visual field cannot cover its entire horizontal dimension (because the distance between one's eye and the painting's surface is fixed and determined by the length of one's arm, and because one's normal visual field extends about 180 degrees to the side and about 150 degrees vertically). A direct consequence of this seeming inconvenience, as Silbergeld has told us, is that the artist usually painted a handscroll section by section (illus. 36), and the spectator 'read' the handscroll from right to left, exposing one arm's-length at a time. The process of viewing a handscroll thus closely duplicates the process of painting the handscroll. In terms of both painting and viewing, a handscroll is literally a moving picture, with shifting moments and loci. (A hanging scroll or mural does not move; what moves is the viewer or his gaze.) A handscroll, when handled and



36 Li Shida, *The Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden*, 16th-17th century, section of a handscroll, ink and colour on paper. Suzhou City Museum, Jiangsu province.

37 *Emperor Yang Viewing a Painting with his Consorts*, Ming dynasty, woodblock print, from the *Sui Yang yanshi* (*Amorous History of Emperor Yang of Sui*).



viewed properly, is a series of consecutive sub-frames, not a monolith in a single frame. (A hanging scroll, on the other hand, has an overall frame enclosing all internal divisions.) A handscroll is the extreme form of what I call the 'private medium' of visual art, because only a single spectator can manipulate the painting's movement and control the pace of reading. (A hanging scroll, as shown in illus. 37, can be appreciated by a number of viewers simultaneously.)

It is not difficult to grasp these basic characteristics of a handscroll painting, which are obviously crucial to understanding the history of this type of work and any individual examples. But alarmingly, these characteristics are largely missing from a modern viewer's visual experience. A visitor to Beijing's Palace Museum finds the *Night Entertainment of Han Xizai*, 28.7 cm high and 335.5 cm long, stretched open to its full length in a custom-made glass case. The work has become so famous that it is not unusual to find more than twenty eager spectators crowded in front of the case, trying hard to look at the masterpiece from various angles. For those who are not so fortunate as to have access to the original work, there are plenty of reproductions available. In almost all reproductions, including those accompanying the present discussion, the long scroll painting is broken into pieces. Enframed by white page margins, these printed fragments appear one above another on a single page or one after another on different pages. The painting is also frequently discussed in the classroom. A lecturer often combines a pair of slides to show the painting's full composition (which would appear on the screen as a pitiful narrow strip), and may provide 'details' to demonstrate the painting's superb drawing or to support other arguments.

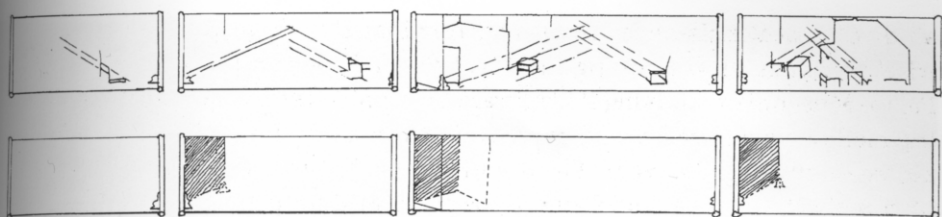
We must realize that these are not only the experiences of an amateur – a tourist or a student. These are also the current conditions in which most scholars study the painting. In all these situations, the handscroll *Night Entertainment of Han Xizai* has been transformed into other 'media' analogous to the framed painting. It no longer moves. It has gained an overall frame and presents its entirety in a single moment. It ceases to associate itself with an individual viewer, but subjects itself to the public's collective scrutiny. Consequently, it stops challenging the deep-rooted convention in art history to view a painting as a single whole – a convention developed from the

study of post-Renaissance Western art dominated by framed easel paintings. Encountering the *Night Entertainment* in the Palace Museum or studying it from various reproductions, all the methods we have learned in analyzing a framed painting automatically begin to work. We would approach it as a work of *spatial art*, and our initial questions would be concerned with its composition: What is the painting's spatial structure? What is its perspective system? Where can we find the centre or focus? What are the roles of individual images in relation to the painting's overall composition?

My earlier analysis of the painting largely responded to such questions and must be re-examined. I have proposed that the *Night Entertainment* consists of four sections: each section is itself a relatively independent spatial unit structured by the symmetrical placement of interior furnishings (illus. 32), and free-standing screens connect adjacent units into a larger composition (illus. 33). This statement is not wrong. But since it pays little attention to the painting's handscroll-format (as proved by the two diagrams of illus. 32–33, both showing the painting in its entirety), it can be dangerously misleading. For example, following my analysis we may discover an internal contradiction in the painting's composition: on the one hand, the screens, understood as inner partitions of a unified architectural space, divide yet link the four sections in a synchronic spatial continuum; on the other, how can Han Xizai appear regularly at either side of a screen – a situation that could never occur in real life?

Such a contradiction does not exist in the *Night Entertainment*, however: this problem would never occur to us if we had handled the painting properly as a handscroll. Since it would be gradually unrolled and would exhibit only one section at a time, we would never see the entire painting 'consisting of four sections'. Since the screen images would mark the boundary of each section in view, we would have little chance to find two Han Xizais at the same time. My earlier two diagrams of the painting's spatial structure should thus be revised to combine both spatial and temporal dimensions (illus. 38, 39). Comparing the new diagrams with the old ones, we realize that the hypothetical 'internal compositional contradiction' only indicates a serious methodological problem inherent in a purely spatial analysis of a handscroll painting.

Once we conceive the *Night Entertainment* as a handscroll,

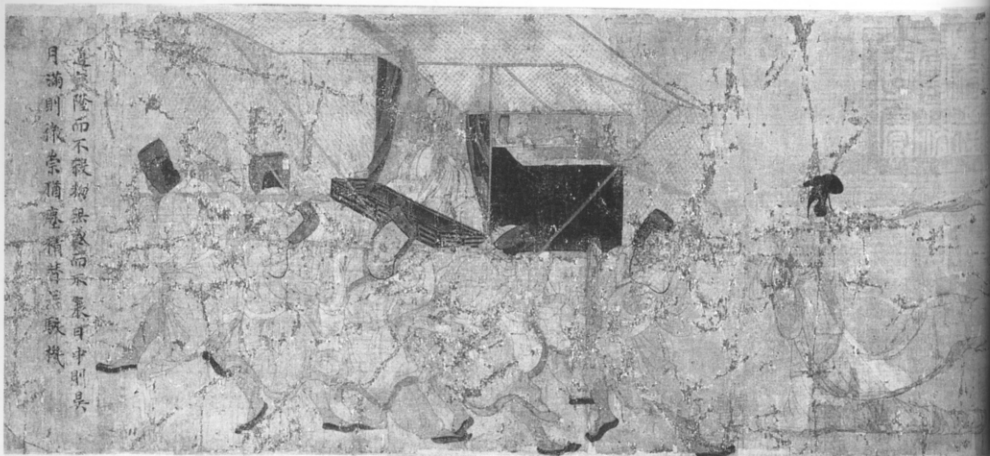


38, 39 Drawings by the author of the composition of Gu Hongzhong's *Night Entertainment of Han Xizai* (illus. 13) as conceived in the process of unrolling the handscroll; (above) receding furniture, (below) positions of screen images.

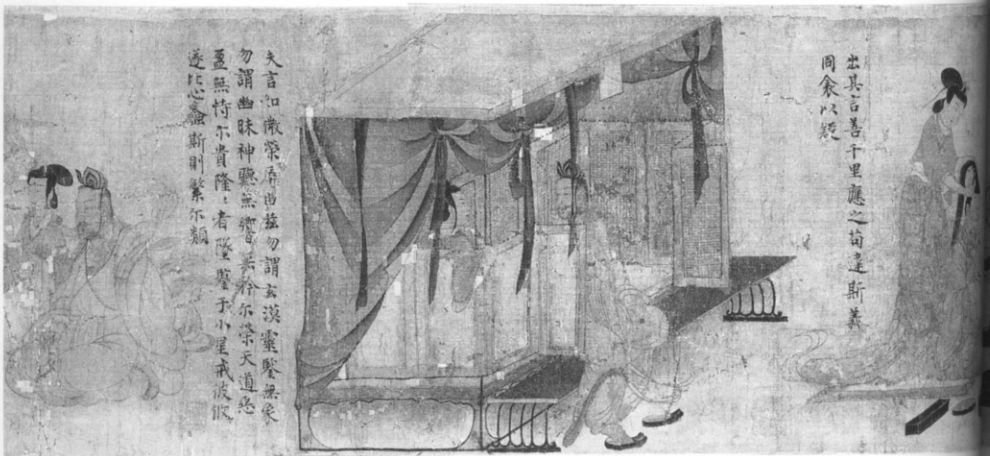
we are ready to investigate its position in the development of Chinese painting by examining its relationship with earlier and contemporary handscrolls. We find that this painting is the culmination of a particular handscroll composition, characterized by well-defined sub-frames on a moving picture plane. The origin of this composition may be found in lacquer decorations of pre-Han times and funerary carvings of the Han dynasty.<sup>63</sup> But the oldest surviving handscrolls are all post-Han works, among which the *Admonition of the Instructress to Palace Ladies*, traditionally attributed to Gu Kaizhi (c. 345–406) and probably a Tang copy of a fifth-century work, serves as an outstanding example (illus. 40). The painting's nine sections illustrate corresponding chapters in the essay by Zhang Hua (232–300) of the same title.<sup>64</sup> Following an ancient practice, the artist begins each section with an inscription in vertical columns. Texts thus separate individual scenes and punctuate the flow of pictorial images. With the help of this sub-framing device, the viewer can easily focus on each scene, and proceeds to view and read the scroll in a stop-and-go manner. The painting also signifies an intention of creating a larger narrative enclosure, which encompasses isolated picture-stories into a coherent composition related to the handscroll format. Most significant, the scroll ends with the portrait of the Instructress (illus. 23): holding a brush and a piece of paper in her hands, she seems to be recording the previous events. The mode of representation is derived from a convention in ancient Chinese historical writings, which are often concluded by a historian's 'self-statement'.<sup>65</sup> But the image of the Instructress in the handscroll plays an additional role: it transforms the idle act of closing the scroll into a meaningful viewing experience. Re-rolling the painting back to its beginning would start from the Instructress, and the following scenes would appear to illustrate the 'admonitions' she has written on the piece of paper in her hand.

40 (overleaf) Attributed to Gu Kaizhi, *Admonition of the Instructress to Palace Ladies*, Tang copy of a (?)4th- or 5th-century work, handscroll, ink and colour on silk. British Museum, London.





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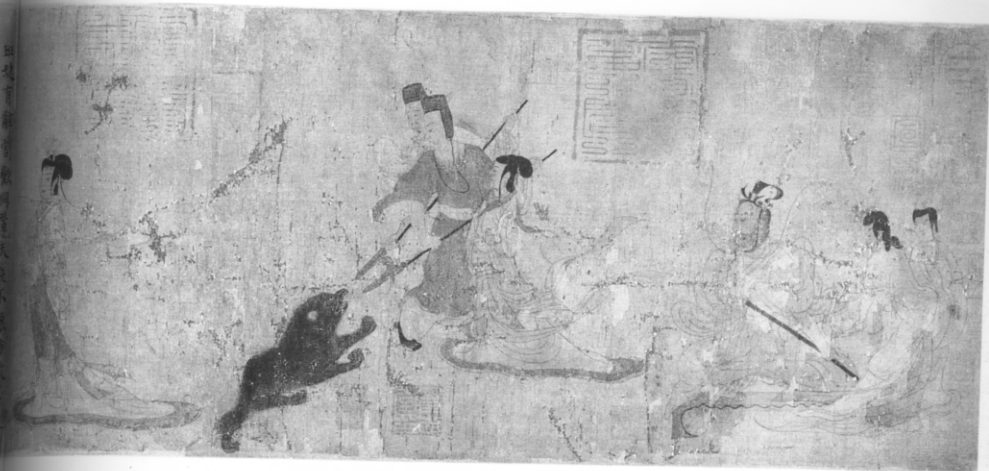
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 憂無恃不貴隆者隆墜于小星戒波散  
 遂比心益斯則繁爾類



女史司箴敢告庶姬

願世之重





41 *The Subjugation of Demons*, 8th-9th century, detail of a handscroll with inscriptions on back, ink and colour on paper, found at Dunhuang, Gansu province. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

42 Drawing by the author of a section of illus. 41.



A scroll painting found in the 'secret library' at Dunhuang exemplifies the next stage in the development of this handscroll composition (illus. 41). Dating from the eighth to ninth centuries, it illustrates the Buddhist tale known as 'The Subjugation of Demons' or 'The Contests between Sāriputra and Raudrāksa'.<sup>66</sup> Though damaged at the beginning and the end, the scroll is still 571.3 cm long; the six contests between the Buddhist holy monk and heretics appear one after another on the long scroll made of twelve pieces of paper. Like the *Admonition* scroll, it reflects the artist's concern with the internal division (and hence the stop-and-go reading sequence) of an overly long picture. But an essential difference separates these two works: the Dunhuang painting rejects texts (which are inscribed on the back of the scroll as the storyteller's script).<sup>67</sup> The structural function of texts in the *Admonition* scroll is assumed by images: a number of trees, rather schematically executed, divide the Dunhuang painting into six sections or sub-frames, in which the six contests take place (illus. 42).<sup>68</sup> Some details reveal a more advanced visual thinking: close to the end of each section there are always one or two figures turning their heads towards the next scene. We must realize that in displaying the picture, the 'next scene'

anticipation  
the composition:  
figures looking  
ahead

would be still rolled up, and that these figures lead the viewer to anticipate the forthcoming section.

These earlier works anticipated the appearance of the *Night Entertainment of Han Xizai* in the tenth century. Interestingly, its closing section (illus. 20) shows significant parallels with the end of the *Admonition of the Instructress*: the figures turn around to face or move towards the right, while Han Xizai's portrait, like the painted Instructress, guides the spectator to experience a flashback – to review the previous scenes once again in reverse order as he slowly re-rolls the painting back to the beginning. Similarities are also found between the *Night Entertainment* and the Dunhuang scroll. Gu Hongzhong likewise ignored texts and sub-framed his painting with pictorial images. But his images – the screens – are far more effective as internal partitions and are far better integrated into the painted scenes. In retrospect, we find a steady improvement of the framing device in this type of painting: the inscriptions in the *Admonition* scroll are semiotically extraneous to the pictures they divide. The isolated trees in the Dunhuang scroll separate events but have little to do with these events. The screens in the *Night Entertainment*, however, help structure both individual scenes and the whole handscroll (illus. 38, 39): while punctuating the motion of unrolling the painting, they also define places – the living-room, the bedroom, and the back chamber – because they are part of these places.

Su Shi, the leader of the Song literati art movement, once remarked on a handscroll of inferior quality: 'One gets tired after looking at a painting like this for just a few feet!'<sup>69</sup> The painting in question may have been a work of 'professional art' that failed to appeal Su's educated eye. But in a more general sense, his remark reveals an important impulse in refining the art of the handscroll: since a full presentation of a long handscroll depends on the spectator's enthusiasm and engagement (i.e., his patience to unroll the scroll to the end), the exposed images should always fulfil a dual function. On the one hand, these images should be expressive for what they are; on the other, they should stir up the viewer's interest in the following section that is still rolled up. The unspoken question – *What's next?* – is typical of a handscroll and can be manipulated into endless variations: What are these figures looking at? What are these chariots or boats moving towards? Where is this stream or path leading to? In a handscroll, the

sense of suspense is achieved by delaying answers to these questions.

Many images in the *Night Entertainment* can be reviewed in this light: the maid in the opening section who peeps at the party from behind a screen (illus. 21), the female musician and servant in the following section who are walking toward an inner chamber (illus. 19), and the man and woman who speak to each other across a screen between the painting's last two sections (illus. 20). These figures not only link isolated scenes into a continuous pictorial plane, as I proposed earlier, but also encourage the viewer to keep unrolling the painting, exploring the increasingly erotic images as he travels deeper and deeper inside Han Xizai's mansion. In fact, it would be difficult to find an image better than the screen for creating the sense of secrecy and suspense in a handscroll: a screen always defines two areas, one before it and the other behind it. It thus always exhibits and conceals at the same time, and always invites the viewer to explore what is hidden and unseen.

#### THE VOYEURISTIC GAZE

This last statement shifts our focus from the painting to the spectator, and defines his exploring vision as a voyeuristic gaze. The concept of voyeurism, derived from psychoanalytic theory, has been adopted in the study of cinema to characterize the position and look of the spectator.<sup>70</sup> For example, John Ellis writes in his *Visual Fictions*:

Voyeurism implies the power of the spectator over what is seen. Not the power of changing it, but the knowledge that the actions being undertaken are played out for the spectator. This is so too with cinema, where the cinema spectacle itself clearly has only one aim, that of performing itself for an audience. The spectacle is separate from the spectator, with an unbridgeable gulf between the seer and what is seen. This sense of separation permits the spectator to maintain a particular relation of power over what he or she sees, and constructs the need for a continuous change and development in what is seen. The characteristic voyeuristic attitude in cinema is that of wanting to see what happens, to see things unrolling. It demands that these things take place for the spectator, are offered or dedicated to the spectator,