

# The problem with art history

In this book Elkins reveals a train of thought about art history in general and provides us with a daring and provocative exercise in understanding the way in which we see Chinese or any other unfamiliar art form: mainly as a subject incorporated in our own western art history. Elkins builds his argument around his study of a large number of leading writings about Chinese art by western art historians during the major part of the twentieth century. While providing us with ample quotations from these books, he notices the presumptions and blind spots that form an intrinsic part of the western art historical method itself. His razor-sharp dissection of the problem shows an open-minded and agile search for a better way to deal with the art of other cultures in a serious and thoughtful manner.

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Elkins, James. 2010.

*Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History*  
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THERE ARE MANY ASPECTS to be considered in the book. Indeed, besides reading the book from one end to the other, Elkins suggests that it is feasible - depending on your knowledge of the matter at hand - to go back and forth through the various parts of the book. According to Elkins, young art history students can also take the book as a case study in which Chinese landscape painting plays the role of the unfamiliar (p. 10). It is up to each individual reader to pick and choose the parts that are relevant to them.

The first section of the book is a lengthy introduction by Elkins where he maps the long and winding road from the first steps of writing the book through the almost twenty years until it was finally published in the present form. This is followed by the main body of the text in which many of the Anglo-American and some European books that deal with the history of painting in China participate in the argument. Each work is allowed to speak for itself, and in the analysis they appear to represent 'the western view' of the arts of China. To give just one example: Elkins mentions Richard Barnhart who has advocated that art historians must value and study the different schools of Chinese painting equally. Traditionally, a division is made between two large groups: the Wu-school or literati painters, and the Zhe-school or professional painters and court painters. This division has deeply influenced the western approach to Chinese art. It seems to Elkins that in western art history only literati painting was taken seriously, and that professional painting never gained the same status. In most of the western sources, Elkins also finds a hiatus in the history of painting after a supposed decline of originality set in at the end of the Ming dynasty. It seems almost as if painting during the Qing dynasty and the subsequent periods was not good enough for existing western art history books.

I find the book intriguing in terms of the writer's sharp dissection and analysis of texts and the reconstruction of arguments as they were presented by two or three generations of art historians. However, sometimes a long, meandering description of the theory that is used in art historical discourse takes Elkins on a path that winds further and further away from Chinese landscape painting.

From an early age, I have been fascinated by the difference between familiar western painting and unfamiliar eastern painting. After training both as a painter and as a Sinologist, my knowledge of Chinese language became one of the tools for understanding more about this other way of painting. I have read most, if not all, of the western and Chinese books that are quoted and discussed in this book, and I have seen many of the paintings that are discussed, again both the Chinese and the western. This background makes it possible to concentrate on the deeper argument that I believe Elkins aims to make.

Elkins's argument revolves around the why and how of art history and in his reasoning he specifically criticises the way in which art history treats any unfamiliar or non-western art.

Elkins proposes six hypotheses to pin down the relationship of non-western art to western art history. I want to quote just three of them, with the intention of providing a glimpse of the full depth of the argument. The first hypothesis of the six sets the tone:

*The history of Western Art is deeply related to the enterprise of art history itself, so much so that the history of Chinese landscape painting tends to appear as an example, or as a set of possible examples, and not a co-equal in the production or understanding of art history itself.* (p. 24)

This gives the reader a first hint of the underlying problem at stake for art history: that it is neither art nor history, yet it cannot exist independently of either art or history. Art history is based on specific comparisons between art styles and periods. The art historian makes the rules and, typically, it is a western set of rules. These rules are by nature problematic when they are applied to compare works of art regardless of the place of origin or their position in a time period. The next section of the book covers this problem of comparisons, and at this point Elkins gives a warning:

*The question is how it is feasible, within a given disciplinary practice, to manage the comparisons that continue to give us our art and our history. There is a moral to be drawn, I think, about not running from comparison.* (p. 45)

This warning presents a problem, as I would say that art is given to us by artists and not by art historians; just as historians do not make history but only record it. If you compare art or cultures there is always the problem of the known and the unknown. However, if you want to compare the works of an artist, what other way is there than to relate the works to commonly available reference works by other artists. In my view, it is purely a matter of respect and taking the artist seriously that allows one to compare any artist anywhere in the world to any other artist. Similarly, you can compare the works of any artist with the works of a direct colleague without implying that they are bound by the same culture;

it merely implies that they are all works of art. Elkins draws this conclusion in the second hypothesis:

*Because all understanding works by comparison, no account can be free of it. Comparisons to Western art continue to mold what is said about Chinese landscape painting. Being self-critical, provisional, sensitive, linguistically accomplished, circumspect, abstract, or informal about comparisons does not vitiate their power, and there is no evidence that we have escaped from even the largest mismatches.* (p. 45)

This seems like an open door, but the consequences are too often forgotten in art history. As Elkins puts it: you cannot subtract the comparison and come up with a pure vision of a Chinese painting.

At the end of this section, Elkins states that Chinese painting is schizophonic: there is a difference between the painting and its appearance in art history. Furthermore, he labels Chinese painting schismogenetic because it appears as partly western and partly Chinese. That statement I cannot accept, because this is a condition that only exists in the eyes of western viewers and in the eye of the art historian. Hence, I would rather call it a condition of the western viewer and of art history, than a condition of the painting itself. However, Elkins hits the nail on the head with his third hypothesis:

*The project of writing art history is Western, and so any history of Chinese landscape painting is partly fundamentally a Western endeavor, even if it is written by a Chinese historian, in Chinese, for Chinese readers.* (p. 57)

Based on my own experience from years of discussions with Chinese artists, museum staff and art students—all of whom shared a general interest in western art history—I fully agree with Elkins. Some of the people I have met express great admiration for art history; but, at the same time, they all make it very clear that, in their opinion, art history has nothing to do with China. It just has no bearing in China. The problem with art history is more general than its inability

to deal in a decent way with anything that falls outside of western culture. For the Chinese, art history is a curious discipline that has the status of being typically western. Chinese painting, on the other hand, has a long history that is known and appreciated without the weight of a separate field of study. In China, Chinese painting is mostly valued and criticised by painters and connoisseurs—people who know art from within—and not so much by people who study art history.

This is not a book about Chinese landscape painting. This is a book about western art history and, more specifically, about western art historians and the way in which they engage with Chinese landscapes. The title can be taken as a contradiction related to the misunderstanding between art and art history, as Chinese landscape painting is not art history and is certainly not western. The argument is invigorating and sharp, but in the end the only conclusion one can draw is that the issue still comes down to the inherent problem of western art history.

This is a courageous book, and it absolutely touches the core and the boundaries of western art history. It does not do the same for Chinese landscape painting. Here, Chinese landscape painting serves simply as an example to demonstrate the boundaries and flaws of western art history. In my view, Elkins treats Chinese landscape painting in a way that makes it more of a victim than a serious subject. One could say that he uses Chinese landscape painting to express his discomfort with the boundaries of western art history. On the positive side, Elkins has found a very inspiring way to put my own discomfort with western art history into words.

At the end of this review, I will counsel the reader not to start with the introduction by Jennifer Purtle, as it will certainly influence the way in which the book is perceived. Purtle's introduction is a critical review of the book, and she appreciates and recognises the larger influence of the argument. As she puts it: 'But rather than provide the final word on the subject, Elkins's work becomes a point of departure, a text from which an open debate to any number of art historians for whom Chinese landscape painting might serve as a hobbyhorse.' Calling Chinese painting a hobbyhorse is not very nice to say the least, and I would suggest that Purtle's use of this term amply proves the validity of Elkins' argument.

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Elkins builds on a large number of previous books on the history of painting in China. A few are shown above.