

Jin Nong: The Eccentric Painter with a Wintry Heart

Marshall P.S. Wu

One of the most outstanding of the Yangzhou Eccentrics, Jin Nong (1687 - 1763) began painting late in his life. A precocious poet, he received approbation from elders such as Mao Qiling and Zhu Yizun. The publication of *Jingshen Ji* (1718), now lost, and *Dongxin Xiansheng Ji* (1733) made known poems of his early and mature phases. His poetic insights and imageries, cultivated for so many years, contribute not only to the writing of inscriptions¹ accompanying his paintings, but also the shaping of pictorial images.

Overlapping his poetic success, though later in time, was Jin Nong's emergence as a calligrapher, with a style unlike any other master's during or before his time. His accomplishment in that art is nothing short of stupendous. By studying calligraphic styles obtained from rubbings of bronze vessels and stelae, a practice which had profound impact on the nineteenth and twentieth century calligraphers and painters, he paved the way for a revolution in the clerical script. As Jin Nong had no prior pictorial training, his sure handling of brush and ink came from the art of calligraphy. Indeed, the heavy, powerful brushwork of his paintings was so derived, and contributed to the development of a personal style. Along the way, Jin Nong developed as a connoisseur. An early exposure to art perhaps was a key factor, for years later he still remembered *arhat* images with vividness.² Before he reached his thirties, he had accumulated hundreds of rubbings and old paintings. His horizon further widened when he came into contact with Yangzhou collectors and when he travelled to the North and became acquainted with collectors there.³ The opportunity of seeing rare works in these private collections must have stirred in him a hidden desire to paint.

Another source of Jin Nong's art comes from his association with Yangzhou eccentrics, especially Wang Shishen (1686 - 1759) and Gao Xiang (1688 - 1753). Both had been established artists even before Jin

Nong launched his painting career. Through the years Jin Nong must have watched them work and have become familiar with their styles as well as with the technical sides of painting and the actual process of creation. These are vital to a beginner.

Once Jin Nong took up the brush, his fame in painting began to overshadow that in poetry and in calligraphy. When did Jin Nong begin to paint? On the surface, it seems that this is a simple question that can be settled easily. Due however to a series of contradictory claims regarding this matter, the situation becomes far more complex. It may be that we need to determine, first, when he actually began to paint, and second, the onset of his painting career.

Most would place Jin Nong's first painting in his fifties, though others may favor his forties.⁴ There are indications that Jin Nong could have tried his hand in painting as early as 1723, when he was in his late thirties.⁵ Besides, we know of two attributions dated to 1736, testifying that he would have had sufficient experience prior to his fiftieth *sui*.⁶

Regardless of these incidental trials, the true onset of a painting career is another matter altogether, as it requires dedication and persistence. For that, we must rely on Jin Nong's own testimonial. As he himself put it, this took place in his sixtieth *sui* (1747), some ten to twenty years after the first experiments. He said:

Master Wintry Heart started to learn how to paint bamboo after the age of sixty...⁷

As innocuous as it sounds, Jin Nong's confession is important for at least two reasons. The first involves the beginning of a concentrated effort. Unlike those infrequent and intermittent trials of the past, this is the beginning of a steady involvement and exploration of painting subjects. The persistence and continuity so exhibited in the following decade signals a seriousness of purpose. The second reason is the growing confidence Jin Nong displayed from then on in his successful mastery of pictorial idiom and the praise he received from his peers. Replacing the earlier sense of insecurity, we now find Jin Nong glowing in his own achievements:

Mr Xu Bin, from Danyang, whose style name is Jiangmen, can paint narcissus with garden rocks... Hua Yan, style name Qiuyue, lived in my hometown [Hangzhou] for years. They are all old now with white hair... Whenever these two old men got together in the woods for tea, they took out their paintings and bragged about them. I hated myself for not being able

to follow in their footsteps. It was only during the sixth month of this year that I suddenly started to paint bamboo. As my works are not so bad after all, they were appreciated by these two old friends...⁸

That bamboo should be the first subject to launch his painting career seems only appropriate. Indeed, among the many painting subjects, bamboo is perhaps the easiest for a calligrapher to apply the skill already in his possession. After all, the brushwork in ink bamboo painting is inherently calligraphic. It also requires minimal expertise in verisimilitude and is simple in depiction. For Jin Nong, the subject served as a natural transition between the two disciplines. However, once the transition was made, he was able to go from subject to subject, switching from bamboo to vegetables and flowers, plum blossoms, figures, horses, self-portraits, and Buddhist images, as he himself acknowledged in a series of collectanea of inscriptions, which once had been attached to his paintings.⁹ The following presentation adheres essentially to this rough and sometimes overlapping chronology.

Bamboo

In 1747 or 1748, when Jin Nong was about sixty *sui*, he was ill and moved to his sister's home in the southern section of Hangzhou, near the city wall.¹⁰ There was no bamboo growing around his living quarters. He bought and planted bamboo roots from one of the temples near West Lake; soon there was a bamboo grove. In the summer, whiling away the long days during his illness, he started to practice painting bamboo.¹¹

It appears that *xiesheng* was his primary approach to bamboo painting. Instead of adhering to the style of earlier masters or even learning from a current expert, Jin Nong used the newly grown jade-green bamboo as his model and thereby created his own style. He said:

Master Wintry Heart started to paint bamboo after he was sixty years old. He did not pay any attention to the different types of bamboo paintings of the old masters. There are thousands of slender bamboo stalks around the house and he learned how to paint bamboo directly from them.¹²

On the other hand, there are plenty of clues in Jin Nong's writing to testify that he also sought inspiration from the works of at least ten early masters, ranging from Tang to the Yuan periods.¹³ A preference for earlier masters appeared to be the rule; rarely did he pay attention to painters of the Ming and Qing dynasties.¹⁴

The brushwork in Jin Nong's ink bamboo painting was wet, dark and forceful, derived directly from his calligraphy (Figure 1). He liked to compose these paintings with two or three long stalks tilting to the right, sometimes with overlapping shorter stalks at the lower left corner. The two major elements, the joints of the stalks and the shape of the leaves, are all rendered in his own unique manner. While the stalks are light in tone, his leaves are dark, almost triangular. These he described as 'the broken-off tips of bronze blades found in a forgotten ancient battle field.'¹⁵ The intention undoubtedly was to instill an archaic pathos to his bamboo paintings.

By examining his extant bamboo painting, we learn that 1750 was one of his most productive years. There was an immediate market for Jin Nong's paintings, once his latent talent blossomed. Nevertheless, in the following year, he suddenly gave up bamboo as his subject. It is reasonable to assume that competition, in the person of Zheng Xie, was the chief cause. At that time, Zheng Xie had returned to Yangzhou to become a professional painter. Since in personality Zheng was just as colorful as Jin Nong, and since Zheng's bamboo paintings, which often included rocks and orchids, could be even more substantive and captivating than Jin Nong's, the decision to retreat might have been as wise as it was timely.

In later years when Jin Nong occasionally painted ink bamboo, the vigorous, distinctive characteristics found in his early paintings were less evident. He arranged bamboo with small sparse leaves as the background for his flower, landscape or figure paintings, or he resorted to contour-outline ('double contour') as a method of rendition.¹⁶ The best example was done in 1762 for his student Xiang Jun (Figure 2).¹⁷ Painted on Ming dynasty paper, Jin Nong tinted the whole background with light brown washes except for white edges along the bamboo leaves, thus suggesting the presence of snow. The stalks and leaves were drawn with the so-called 'golden file' calligraphic strokes after Li Yu (937-78), the last monarch of the Southern Tang dynasty (937-75). These twisted strokes, powerful and expressive, have gnarled, uneven edges, demonstrating the vigor and strength of Jin Nong's brushwork in his old age.

Miscellaneous Subjects

Having put aside ink bamboo for a time, Jin Nong started to paint flowers, vegetables, figure and landscapes. Most of these were done in the format of album leaves. Whereas his ink bamboo was weighty and



Figure 1. Jin Nong, *Ink Bamboo*, dated 1750. Collection of Mr Goro Sakamoto, Kyoto.

substantial, these newer paintings were lively and light. The earliest example, dated 1754, is a set of album leaves entitled *Ink Play* now in the Wango Weng collection, New Hampshire.¹⁸ The first leaf shows a young boy standing at a pavilion by a pond. With a banana-leaf fan, he is trying to catch dragonflies drifting above the water. Jin Nong must have liked this composition because he used it more than once.¹⁹ The inscription in the upper right corner reads:

The lotus are blooming.
 The silvery pond so silent.
 In the cool early morning,
 Who knows how many green-winged dragonflies
 are flying?
 The breeze from my fan
 Drifts through the two six-paneled windows
 facing the water.
 I remember that we once sat [closely]
 together.
 With delicate fingers, you peeled the lotus
 seeds [for me].

One must admire Jin Nong's ability, enhancing the painting with this evocative poem. The whole picture is exquisitely drawn, an outstanding example of originality and taste. The casually composed forms are resplendent with color. It not only reminds one of a childhood experience, but through the implied tranquility refreshes a sensibility dulled by age. On the tenth leaf, Jin Nong painted a young woman sewing in a hut. He inscribed the title on the left edge as *Lüchuang Pinnü Zhi Tu* or 'A Picture of a Poor Maiden by a Green Window.' Here he represents the sorrow and grief of all indigent women in China. Young girls from poor families rose before dawn and toiled the whole day. In the evening light, they worked at extra tasks such as sewing for wealthy customers. Their bitterness and drudgery touched Jin Nong's heart at a tender age. This picture relates to the night thirty-eight years before when Jin Nong was ill in his home town. Cold and lonely, unable to sleep, Jin Nong decided to adopt the style name of Wintry Heart, borrowed from the verse of a Tang dynasty poem about a poor young woman sewing clothes on a cold autumn night.²⁰ A vivid picture of that miserable woman must have imprinted itself on his mind, to be materialized much later in this album leaf.

Another well known album, dated the first day of autumn in 1759, is owned by the Shanghai Museum.²¹ Included are twelve landscape leaves in color. Nine of these feature figures, two feature boats, and one



Figure 2. Jin Nong, *Double-lined Bamboo after Wang Wei*, dated 1762. Sichuan Provincial Museum.

a flock of white egrets, all loosely composed and sparsely defined in thin lines against large areas of wash. At first glance, they seem somewhat weaker than Jin Nong's ink bamboo and calligraphy, in which the heavy linear strokes prevail. A change was taking place, perhaps due to his desire for elegance. From a painter's point of view, achieving the airy lightness as demonstrated in this album is a challenging task. Of this album, the best known and the most memorable image is the eighth leaf, *Gathering Water Chestnuts*, which is reminiscent of Shen Zhou's (1427 -1509) rendering of the same theme.²²

One month later Jin Nong painted a similar album of twelve leaves, now at the Palace Museum, Beijing.²³ It is likely that, upon completing the previous album, a patron saw it and liked it so much that he commissioned Jin Nong to produce a new set. In the first leaf a kneeling middle-aged man is worshipping a small Buddhist image on a table inside a pavilion. From the inscription on the right, one learns that the image is Bizhi Fo, or Pratyeka Buddha, who taught that by seeking the cause of common affairs in one's daily life, one could attain enlightenment. This religious touch reflects Jin Nong's espousal of Buddhism late in life to escape from the snares of the mundane world. One wonders whether this picture is actually a representation of Jin Nong himself. Tinged with melancholy, a leaf in the second album portrays a young woman in a blue dress sitting on a large rock under a tree. Holding her left knee, she gazes into the distant void. Her intensity suggests complicated feelings known only to herself, an example of Jin Nong's ability to evoke mood and inner dimensions.

In view of the technical, stylistic and thematic diversity found in his paintings, one senses Jin Nong's constant effort to revitalize his art. For example, Jin Nong chose a common clump of sweet flag plants as a subject for a hanging scroll.²⁴ Drawn in the linear *baimiao* manner, he used neither washes, shading nor color of any sort to detract from his long, thin ink line. The multitude of unique compositions and subtle variations provide considerable visual pleasure.

With an approach that was sometimes playful, Jin Nong was not adverse to use his superb skill to depict people in the temple where he lived in his old age. An example is the lively painting now at the Fuji Yurinkan, Kyoto (Figure 3).²⁵ It depicts a tonsured cleric, a young monk, with chin resting in hand, dozing off under the banana trees. The features are quite handsome, with eyebrows shaped like crescent moons. The protruding lips are full of seductive suggestion. A viewer not only senses the youthful vigor but is teased by the half closed eyes.



Figure 3. Jin Nong,
A Sleeping Young Monk.
Yurinkan Museum, Kyoto.

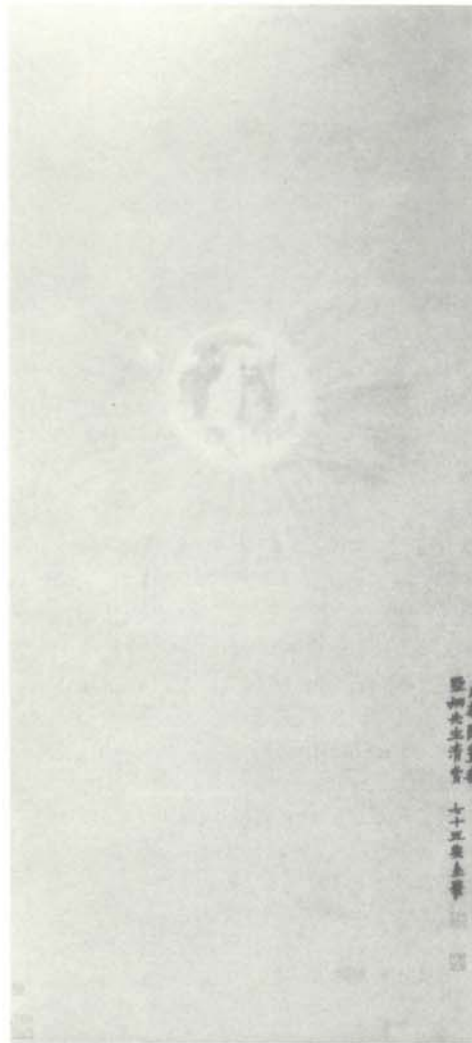


Figure 4. Jin Nong,
Radiant Moon,
dated 1761. Collection
of the Palace
Museum, Beijing.

Adding to this provocation is that, beneath the priestly white robe, the tips of a pair of red shoes are showing, shoes hardly suitable for a cleric. In this presentation, Jin Nong's mischievous thought is disguised but evident.

The most extraordinary piece produced late in his life, in 1761, is the *Yuehua Tu* ('The Radiant Moon'), now at the Palace Museum in Beijing (Figure 4).²⁶ In the center of this hanging scroll hangs a bright full moon. Wet washes are used to form surface shadows, suggesting the legendary hare and cassia tree. The silvery gleam of soft radiant moonlight has been evenly applied, against a background of hazy sky, treated with light blue washes. The tranquility is impressively real and its uniqueness, in the history of Chinese painting, is beyond question.

Plum Blossoms

Jin Nong started to produce plum blossom paintings around 1756 when he was in his early seventies.²⁷ He seems to have adapted the styles and skills of earlier plum blossom masters, plus those of his two artist friends, Wang Shishen and Gao Xiang, whose artistic careers had come to an end.²⁸ As a result, his plum paintings lack the stylistic distinction found in works of other subjects, as his rendition of flowers, calyxes and stems are very traditional indeed. So is his tendency, like early poets and painters, to use the theme to symbolize the fragile beauty of an elegant young woman. In a playful mood, he inscribed on a painting of red plum blossoms:

By the window of my room at the lodging-house, I created this plum-blossom painting. To tint the flowers I borrowed the rouge of a beautiful lady who lives in a jade pavilion. I hope she will not be vexed at this old man who stole her cosmetics. When she tries to apply her morning makeup, she will be unable to mark a red dot on her lips. I could not stop from laughing.²⁹

His personal traits become apparent only when one analyzes the way in which the composition is organized. One first notices his thick, ink-washed tree trunks (Figure 5), which begin from the right corner and extend diagonally to the opposite edge. Also notable is his tendency to focus on the middle section of the tree. Both aspects recall his bamboo paintings and are extensions of the same approach.

A more pronounced departure from the accepted pattern lies in his willingness to deal with the plum blossoms as components of pictures which included other images. Thus he would, at times, add human figures to the scene or arrange the plum blossoms against a landscape setting for the purpose of instilling a lyrical mood.³⁰

In the context of plum blossom paintings, it may be useful to address the question of authorship and authentication. In 1755, Jin Nong accepted a student, Luo Ping (1733-99), who, as one of the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, was almost his equal in fame and accomplishment. The following year the master accepted a second student, Xiang Jun, probably also from Yangzhou.³¹ Many of Jin Nong's later plum blossom paintings may have been painted by his pupils and only inscribed by him. He himself admitted this.³² As a result, ascertaining authorship becomes a formidable task. Fortunately, works by these disciples are still available for comparative purpose, many more by Luo Ping than by Xiang Jun. The latter is represented by a handscroll, the only known work by Xiang Jun; in spite of bearing a poorly executed inscription and signature



Figure 5. Jin Nong, *Blossoming Plum*, dated 1760.
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri
(Nelson Fund).

purportedly by Jin Nong, it can be reattributed to the disciple since the end of the scroll is found to contain two small seals that read: 'Jun' and 'Gongfu.'³³ Both refer to Xiang Jun.

Comparing works of the teacher and students, one finds similarities but also fundamental differences. Jin Nong liked to paint his main tree trunks with heavy black ink. When the trunks are intersected by

thinner branches, white spaces are left to define edges. He also liked to bend his small branches in sharp angles. In contrast, Luo Ping's tree trunks are usually formed with drier brushwork. His blossoms tend to be more realistic and his compositions are fuller, with twigs and flowers crowding against one another. Of the three, the least talented was Xiang Jun. From the handscroll cited above, one sees that his branches are generally long and straight, lacking the twist and turn of the other two painters. The presence of thick ink lines and dots on top of the finished boughs may be Jin Nong's, attempts to rectify the perceived weakness or deficiencies in a student's work. In addition, while Jin Nong and Luo Ping preferred to paint with *zhongfeng*, with the tip of brush kept at the center of the brushstrokes, Xiang Jun used *pianfeng*, or 'the side of the brush.' The *taidian* ('ink dots') on Jin Nong and Luo Ping's tree trunks and branches are round; in contrast, Xiang Jun frequently resorted to flat dots. According to Jin Nong's own writings, Luo Ping was the bolder of the two disciples, favoring large trunks and thick branches in his plum blossom paintings. Xiang Jun was more careful, drawing only thin trunks and looser branches.³⁴ After having studied their works, we can vouchsafe the credibility of Jin Nong's analysis.

Horse Painting

Jin Nong began painting horses around 1757-58 after the age of seventy. According to *Dongxin Huama Tiji* ('Mister Dongxin's Inscriptions on Horse Paintings'), the choice of the subject stems from his conviction that he himself is like a fine horse without due recognition. Half of the twelve entries in that text deal in one way or another with failed hopes and dreams. It seems that Jin Nong's failure to pass the civil service examination was a source of pain and frustration, which intensified during his later years. In this sense, the horse paintings were a vehicle for expressing long pent-up resentments. In one of the inscriptions he wrote sarcastically:

I now paint horses in cold and deserted atmospheres. Gazing at my painting I seem to see myself, filled with pity for my toiling and rootless life. There is no Bo Le (the legendary horse expert) in the human world. Even if there is and I can meet him now, he probably would reject me due to my old age. Besides, amid the wind and dust in the wilderness, I no longer wish to be recognized.³⁵

His unique horse paintings were inspired by old paintings which Jin Nong had seen in his early days.³⁶ Thus these horse paintings display an archaic overtone beyond reflecting a melancholy and desolate mood.

Unlike his tradition-bound plum blossom paintings, Jin Nong's horses are different from any previous attempts. Intending to express the noble nature of the animal, most of his predecessors would favor verisimilitude as an essential goal. Accordingly, they utilized fine brush lines to define the form of stallions and to render the mane and tail by drawing each long hair one at a time. In contrast, Jin Nong, being the first one to rebel against this practice, used thick calligraphic strokes to draw his subjects. His modulated, expressive brush lines are energetic and powerful, swift and free, showing his consummate skill.

One of Jin Nong's favorite modes of rendering the horse shows it standing in the lower portion of the painting, facing left, with its hind-quarters touching the right edge. Bulky in bodily form, the horse's legs are made slender, with large joints, and the pointed hooves are drawn in the shape of clamshells. The arrangement of the four legs also follows a special pattern: the right hoof is raised slightly above the ground and the left legs are stretched forward. The tail is heavy and tousled, sweeping from right to left, resulting in a 's' shape. Furthermore, the left eye, which is the only one showing, is half hidden by a disorderly mane. Over all, in his predilection for drawing the head big and heavy, the animal looks more like a mule than a horse. The remaining space is left empty, providing plenty of room for his long inscriptions.

As a subject, the horse is more difficult to render than other genres such as bamboo and plum blossoms. In terms of anatomical detail and organic structure, the variety of poses and appearances, it takes effort and discipline before one can capture the form and spirit of the animal. Since Jin Nong lacked formal training, it was necessary for him to choose a standard portrayal. Once he managed to establish a satisfying pattern, he tended to use it continually with only slight modifications. This is why his extant horse paintings resemble one another.

The two best known horse paintings by Jin Nong are the *Dayuan Ma* ('A Ferghana Horse') and *Hualiu Tu* ('The Horse, Hualiu'), respectively in a private collection in Taiwan, and the Osaka Municipal Museum.¹⁷ The first work exhibits a great white stallion drawn with heavy ink lines. According to Jin Nong's inscription, the animal is fashioned in the way of a Ferghana horse, a rare and speedy breed in ancient times. The exalted stallion, head lifted high, displays a fearless and dignified bearing. With a long didactic inscription at the upper portion, it alludes to the bitter and cruel campaigns fought in the desolate wilderness in the past. One must admit that Jin Nong's painting is infused with heavy emotions.

When Jin Nong's *Dayuan Ma* is compared to the small pony in *Hualiu Tu* (Figure 6), the latter is perhaps even more expressive and laden with sentiment, the size notwithstanding. In this work, the artist drew a bony, under-sized black horse with a white saddle-cloth. *Hualiu* is figured among the eight legendary horses owned by King Mu (reigned ca 947-928 BC) of the Zhou dynasty, powerful animals with meritorious achievements in the battlefields.³⁸ However, this small horse could hardly be that. Instead, it is a shabby, docile and miserable beast, such as those used for daily chores on a farm in Northern China. Head down, it seems to have lost its will. Partially covered by an untrimmed mane, the eye that peeks through is large and sad, filled with indignation and bitterness.

Before the Qing dynasty, few Chinese painters made use of animals and birds to express human feelings. It was not until the seventeenth century that Zhu Da (or Bada Shanren), one of the *yimin* painters, depicted fish and birds with eyes which conveyed anger, isolation and hostility; that was reflective of the artist's resentments towards the ruling Manchu court.³⁹ One or two generations later, Jin Nong followed suit, though his purpose was quite different. There was no anti-Manchu feelings, but a cry against the indifference of a time when talented men were laid waste.

Jin Nong's Self-Portraits

If Jin Nong's horse paintings were used to vent his resentments, then his self-portraits were his unparalleled way of extending friendship and human bonds. They were farewell gifts to close friends and students. By sending them his portraits, he asked to be remembered when he passed away. Thus his self-portraits were painted with specific recipients in mind.

Unfortunately, even though nine were recorded in his *Dongxin Zixiezheng Tiji*, only one example remains, that is, the self-portrait done for his hometown friend, Ding Jing (Figure 7 and Figure 8a).⁴⁰ Painted as a hanging scroll, it portrays Jin Nong in profile, a bald-headed old man in a white robe with a tiny pigtail hanging on his right shoulder. He has a thick mustache and long beard. Holding a staff in his right hand, the man stares into space, his beady eye sharp and alert. The emphasis is on lightness and clarity; thus it manifests economy of line, simplicity and absence of any background. These further strengthen Jin Nong's own dignified and lofty bearings. The long inscription on the right side not only balances the figure but also summarizes the history of Chinese portrait painting based on Jin Nong's own knowledge.



Figure 6. Jin Nong, *Hualiu Tu*, dated 1760.
The Osaka Municipal Museum.

Although lacking in anatomical accuracy, this self-portrait confirms descriptions of his appearance found in his friends' writing.⁴¹ Further confirmation comes from Jin Nong's portraits painted by contemporary artists (Figure 8). The first known instance was by the Yangzhou painter, Gao Xiang and drawn when Jin Nong was at the age of forty-seven (Figure 8b). Reproduced as the frontispiece in his *Dongxin Xiansheng Ji*, it shows the frontal view of a middle-aged man with a bald head and long beard, not dissimilar from the figure in his self-portrait. Being a woodblock impression, the printed lines may lack the flexibility afforded by a brush; nonetheless, Jin Nong's features are clearly defined.



Figure 7. Jin Nong, *Self-Portrait*, dated 1759.
Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

Two portraits were done by his student, Luo Ping. One is dated 1760 (Figure 8c) and depicts the teacher who, naked to his waist, is seated in an armchair with a large fan in his right hand, dozing off under banana trees on a hot summer day.⁴² A small boy-servant sitting on the ground behind his master is also asleep. Luo Ping undoubtedly has witnessed such a scene – a moment of relaxation in the life of Jin Nong in

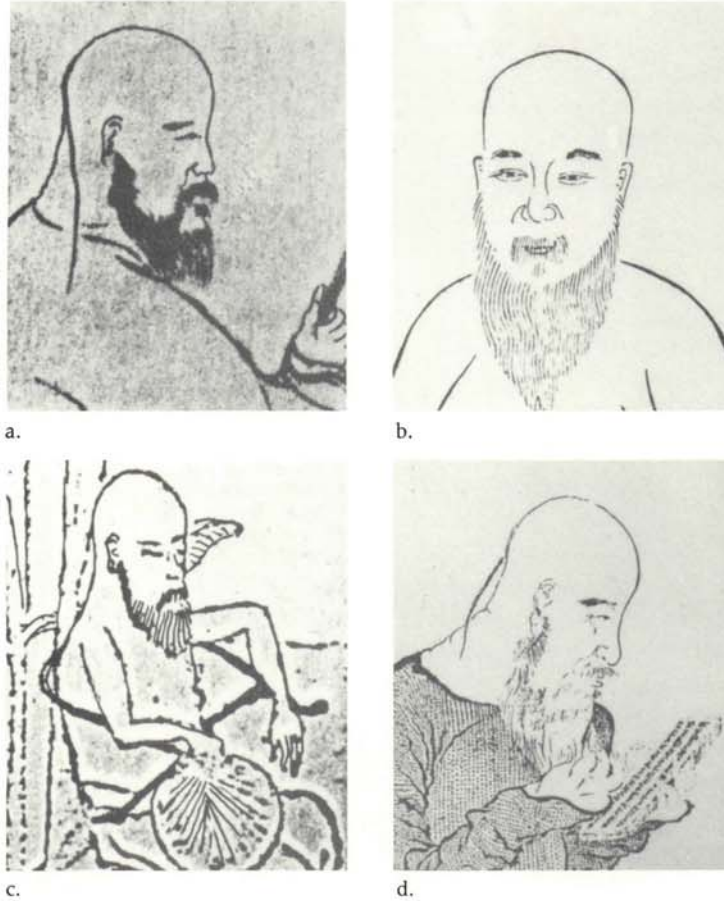


Figure 8. A Comparison of Jin Nong's Four Portraits.

Yangzhou, and his depiction has a ring of truth to it. Even though Jin Nong's image is rather small in ratio to the pictorial surface, one can discern those familiar features without fail. The second, undated portrait displays the master sitting on a rock, reading a palm-leaf sutra written in Sanskrit, with the bald head, small pigtail, heavy mustache and long beard intact (Figure 8d).⁴³ Signs of age are apparent, for example, small bumps of loose skin on the back of his neck and wrinkles around eyes, giving support to the theory that this must have been done during Jin Nong's last years.⁴⁴ The resemblance between the self-portrait and portraits is remarkable though they span more than a decade and are by different artists. They reflect Jin Nong's ability to achieve a measure of verisimilitude.

Religious Figures

Around the same time that he was painting horses, Jin Nong began to experiment with religious figures. A conversion to Buddhism had taken place, when he forsook his wanton ways for a life of purity. One inscription on his Buddhist paintings says:

...After my wife passed away, I lived alone and was celibate. I used to have a mute concubine but later I sent her away. Now I stay at a Buddhist temple in Yangzhou, and partake of food in its kitchen. Day after day, I eat only vegetables and actually have begun to enjoy this kind of meal. Aside from copying Buddhist scriptures, I dedicate myself to painting Buddhist images. A weak man of seventy years old like me dares not pray for any blessing. All I want is to have plenty of time to enjoy my peaceful life as well as to watch the beautiful scenery surrounding Buddhist temples in Jiangnan...⁴⁵

It appears that the old painter was experiencing an acute sense of the transience of life.

By the eighteenth century, Buddhist painting had lost much of its vitality. In their attempt to emphasize the divine nature of the Buddha and Buddhist deities, painters adhered strictly to the canonical prescriptions, for example, sacred attributes such as *ushnisha* or the topknot, the hair in snail-like form, the *urna* or the tuft of hair between the eyes, and the *mudra* or hand gestures. The unwillingness to deviate resulted in hardened patterns and further limited interpretation. On the other hand, Jin Nong sought a fresh approach, including an attempt to fuse the human and divine.⁴⁶ This approach is not entirely unique, since in the historic past the concept of the divine king often resulted in images which, in retaining the usual attributes of a deity, carried the visages of specific rulers. Nonetheless, it is far from being common when the case in point pertains to an individual less exalted than royalty.

In 1759, along with his experimentation with self-portraits, Jin Nong also painted a Buddhist painting for his friend, Zhang Geng (1685 - 1760).⁴⁷ It portrays a slender Buddhist figure holding a staff with both hands, standing under a *bo* tree - an arrangement that was to gain favor with Jin Nong in his Buddhist paintings.⁴⁸ The painting appears straightforward. However, as one reads Jin Nong's inscription on the upper left and Zhang Geng's at the lower left corner, one begins to grasp the significance of this work. Jin Nong's inscription reads:

On the 28th day, 11th month, the 24th year of Qianlong (1759), I drew fresh water from the Bodhisattva Spring and washed my fingers and nails. Then I burned excellent incense and painted a picture of the Buddha of Longevity

for the pure Master Mijia Jushi (Zhang Geng), so that he could worship and offer sacrifices to it forever and ever. Master Mijia's lean and graceful appearance looks rather like that of the Buddha of Longevity himself.⁴⁹

So this is an image of Amitayus, Buddha of Longevity, a subject with which Jin Nong was fairly familiar. From the comment, the resemblance between the image and Master Mijia seems to be incidental at best, except that there is a hidden angle about which the artist is reticent. Zhang Geng's poetic colophon, however, is more direct and forthcoming:

With all my exertions, I had taken care of
 my compassionate mother until she passed away.
 At the end of my own life, I recalled and recognized her face.
 I have tried to purify myself [for years],
 yet I still cannot attain this state.
 Ashamed and bewildered, I burn incenses in front of my mother's
 kind appearance.⁵⁰

It appears that, out of respect and in a touch of inspiration, Jin Nong had incorporated the facial features of his friend's mother into the Buddha image. If so, the resemblance between the latter and Zhang Geng himself should come as no surprise. Little wonder that the slender figure looks rather like a nun!

What this demonstrates, beyond his ability to capture the appearance and personality of an individual and to incorporate them into his religious images, is Jin Nong's conceptual boldness and subtlety. Indeed, by carefully going through his Buddhist figures, one may find that each has its own distinctive set of personal features and traits, possibly modelled after Jin Nong's patrons or their relatives. In this manner, he not only pleased his patrons but also could maintain a sense of liveliness in his religious *oeuvres*. The majority of his Buddhist figures are standing or sitting under a *bo* tree with large leaves. They wear robes defined by heavy ink lines. Only the facial features of the figures are carefully depicted, allowing individualized portrayal. The rest of the body, including the hands and feet, is usually covered by the garment. Most have intense, solemn expressions.

One of his Buddhist paintings bearing the first inscription in the *Dongxin Huafo Tiji* was still in existence forty years ago.⁵¹ The date on this work, 1760, no doubt stands for the beginning of his Buddhist phase. Here the Buddha is portrayed as a standing corpulent figure, with short curly hair, heavy beard and mustache. Most of the traditional

attributes such as the *urna* and mandorla have been omitted. Only a bald spot on the top of the head suggests the *ushnisha*, the protuberance that conveys the Buddha's wisdom. The down-cast eyes as well as the clasped hands inside the sleeves make the figure look more like a gentle, good-natured Chinese sage than a sacred deity from India. The composition, comprising a figure surrounded on three sides by a long inscription in Jin Nong's inimitable calligraphy, is utterly unique in the history of Buddhist painting. Jin Nong arranged his writing evenly around the figure, filling the whole background. This reminds us of the large, boat-shaped nimbus or body-halo behind the deities in early Chinese Buddhist sculptures. The narrow white space between the script and the contour of the figure looks like the shining light of a mandorla. Jin Nong's composition best demonstrates the ingenuity of merging an inscription into the painting, a novel practice favored by Yangzhou artists during the eighteenth century.³² The text of this long inscription may be regarded as the finest survey of Chinese Buddhist painting ever written in the eighteenth century, as Jin Nong surveyed all the Buddhist painters and their recorded, representative works from the Han dynasty through the end of the Southern Song period. The inscription also indicates his awareness of the Buddhist caves at the Longmen site in Henan.³³

As a result of his knowledge, Jin Nong's religious painting has a peculiar, archaic quality. One of his works, depicting the vigorous Bodhidharma, found its way into the imperial collection, labeled as an anonymous Song painting (Figure 9).³⁴ The grave and earnest patriarch sits on a mat, legs crossed in a meditation pose. The black tree trunk and leaves form a strong contrast to the white robed figure in the foreground. Even though Jin Nong's signature and seals were cut off, perhaps by a cunning antique dealer, the thick linear work with uneven edges on the robe, the black tree trunk and four clusters of large leaves are typical of his style. There is little doubt that this picture is originally painted by Jin Nong. Emperor Qianlong inscribed it in 1769, six years after Jin Nong's death. As is well known, Jin Nong had been long obsessed by his failure to achieve recognition by the court. It was ironic that his work should posthumously reach the Emperor under a false attribution!

Summary

The productive period of Jin Nong's life as a painter spans roughly between 1747/8 and 1763. During these years he was able to garner the energy and produce his fine pieces. Toward the end, physical decay set in, as he was losing his eyesight as well as his hearing in the left ear. His



Figure 9. Anonymous Painter, *Damo under Tree*.
Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

life was to drag on for several months longer. In the ninth lunar month of 1763, at the age of seventy-seven *sui*, he passed away, lonely and destitute in a small Buddhist monastery in Yangzhou, the Sanqiu An ('Shrine of the Three Autumns'). Left behind is a noble pictorial heritage, the scope and range of which are all the more astounding in view of Jin Nong's basic handicaps, that is, a belated start and the absence of formal training. One can only attribute this miracle to his talismanic mind, his latent talents and his sensitive touch. Under his handling, themes which to his contemporaries might simply be dismissed as commonplace or even frivolous had charm and novelty.

Indeed, so flamboyant and wilful was Jin Nong in painting that he could change without cease. Once he succeeded in tackling one subject he would proceed to another, charting a new course and direction, always seeking fresh ways to explore the hidden potentials. His works are never monumental in size or elaborate in composition. Rather, his is an art that was bonded intimately with his life experience and conveys a sense of immediacy or transiency.³⁵ During the eighteenth century, few can match his furious pace, the quickness and breadth of his imagination, let alone his penetrating and fiercely original vision. This original vision sets Jin Nong apart from his contemporaries as a crane among the chickens. When he referred to the works of the past, the tendency was to use them largely as a point of departure, or to extract essence and to gain or regain that primitivity which is the core of his brand of archaism. Both old and new, both traditional and individualistic, Jin Nong's art struck a meaningful balance, the very reason for its ready and immediate acceptance.