

The Truth of a Landscape Painting

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When I first saw Xia Gui's (夏珪) landscape painting "Pure and Remote View of Streams and Mountains (溪山清遠)" on exhibition in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, it struck me that this extraordinary scroll is not only magnificent, but also true. This intuition might seem problematic, both philosophically and in terms of cultural differences. Is the use of the truth predicate metaphorical with regard to the painting? I argue that it is not. The truth of a landscape painting is dependent on how it creates a whole world of its own and, in doing so, nevertheless refers to our actual world, of which we would like to say that it is true. Recognizing the truth of this painting is also dependent on interpreting it, and this involves taking into account various factors of culture, tradition, and history, which have all entered the painting in multiple ways. I argue, on the grounds of a 'close reading' of Xia Gui's masterpiece, that we can indeed make good sense of the truth of this painting without neglecting cultural differences.