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Dear Colleague:

Here are two more differences between Chinese and European artistic sensibility. First, consider the workplace. The Chinese artist is keenly sensitive to his working environment--to his studio. It has to be aesthetically just right to support his artistic effort. By contrast, Western artists do not seem to fuss over the quality of their workplace other than the adequacy of the lighting. Furthermore, painting in the West can be a physically heroic enterprise. It requires the stamina and agility of an athlete and the tolerance for disorder of a Bohemian. Here I think of Michelangelo on the scaffolds of the Sistine Chapel. I can't imagine a Chinese artist lying flat on his back for hours at a time, exposed to dripping paint.

The second difference lies in the importance of light and how it is treated. One can rarely tell the time of the day in a Chinese painting. By contrast, in Western art one can often tell time from the brightness of the light and the length of the shadow. Indeed, Chinese artists have consistently left out the shadow. Likewise, night scenes. Night and the stars, which are very much a part of the cosmos, have escaped the attention of Chinese artists. In Europe, interior scenes streaked with light coming through the window during the day, or from a candle at night, are a prominent motif in works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, impressionists have tried to capture the bright facade of a church or a sun-drenched picnic party at noon. The importance of light in Western sensibility may be traced back to the symbolism of light in the Gnostic-Manichaeic--and ultimately Persian--tradition. Light in the West carries both a mystical and a moral import. To Europeans in the Middle Ages, bright metals and jewels were precious not only because they constituted wealth but also because they stood for a certain moral quality. In the West, light is contrasted with shadow or darkness. This has not been true of Chinese art in which Yin and Yang are symbolized by other means. The Chinese aesthetics of light is different from that of the West, perhaps more subtle. Light suffuses a Chinese landscape. It is never represented as coming from one direction--from having one localized source. Chinese light is like infrared, if we can see infrared.

Best wishes,

*Jo - Lu*