



## IN MEMORIAM

James Francis Cahill  
Professor of the History of Art, Emeritus  
UC Berkeley  
1926-2014

Professor Emeritus James Francis Cahill, one of the world's foremost scholars of Chinese painting and for thirty years a distinguished faculty member in the Department of History of Art at Berkeley, died in his Berkeley home on February 14, 2014. He was 87.

James Cahill received many of the highest academic accolades: the College Art Association's Distinguished Teaching of Art History award in 1995, its Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing on Art in 2007 and the Charles Lang Freer Medal in 2010. He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2001. He was one of only two art historians invited to deliver Berkeley's annual Faculty Research lecture, which he gave in 1982. He received one of Berkeley's highest honors, the Distinguished Teaching Award, in 1985. He is listed as one of the Builders of Berkeley on the Doe Library Terrace for his extraordinary contributions to the Berkeley Art Museum.

James Cahill was born on August 13, 1926, in Fort Bragg and spent his high school years in Berkeley, where he attended Berkeley High. He received his B.A. in Oriental Languages from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1950, after serving as a Japanese language specialist in the US Army in both Japan and Korea. He earned his Ph.D. (1956) in the History of Art from the University of Michigan, where he studied with the renowned early Chinese bronze specialist Max Loehr. After holding a museum training fellowship at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, he studied on a Fulbright Scholarship at Kyoto University with Shujiro Shimada in 1954-55. From 1956 to 1965, he served as Curator of Chinese Art at the Freer Gallery, Washington, D.C. Cahill returned to Berkeley in 1965, where he taught in the Department of History of Art until his retirement in 1994.

In 1956, while still writing his dissertation on the Yuan- dynasty painter Wu Zhen (1280-1354), James Cahill was offered a temporary position as assistant to the Swedish sinologist Osvald Sirén, who was compiling an annotated list of Chinese paintings in collections worldwide to accompany his multi- volume series, *Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles* (1956-58). Thus began Cahill's abiding interest in the problem of authenticity, a particularly knotty issue in Chinese culture where the construction of the original and copy is complicated by reverence for lineage and tradition and where old copies are highly valued. He brought this concern to all of his publications, beginning with his still- in- print classic, *Chinese Painting* (1960), which was commissioned by Skira as part of a revolutionary series that was designed to bring the best scholarly work on the history of art to a general readership in books printed to the highest standards of the day. The book was Cahill's first salvo in what would be a decades- long project to chart a coherent evolution of Chinese painting style from the earliest centuries through the end of the imperial period.

James Cahill brought to Berkeley a unique combination of skills: a curator's acute eye, based on years of working directly with paintings he avidly sought out in collections around the world; an historian's methodological range; and a poet's eloquence. In the 1970s, he began a project to write a five-volume history of Chinese painting from the Song through the Qing dynasties (10<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries). He completed three volumes, covering painting of the Yuan and Ming dynasties: *Hills beyond a River: Chinese Painting of the Yüan Dynasty, 1279– 1368* (1976), *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368– 1580* (1978), and *The Distant Mountains: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Dynasty, 1570– 1644* (1982). Translations of these books have been published in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and several European languages. Cahill's insights into Ming-dynasty painting were revolutionary at a time when most connoisseurs of Chinese art thought that painting had fallen into an irreversible decline by the thirteenth century. In these volumes, Cahill's approach combined biographical insights with rigorous formal analysis of brushwork and composition.

Authenticity remained a central concern in this project. To the very end, Cahill lamented that the history of Chinese art was under-developed in the West (if not in China) in comparison to the history of European art, where canons of important works had been established for centuries. In an effort to rectify this and to lay the groundwork for an introductory volume in his projected series on Song painting, he produced *An Index of Early Chinese Painters and Paintings* (1980, reprinted 2003), covering the period from the Six Dynasties (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries) through the Yuan (1280-1368). As its title suggests, this work picks up where Sirén's annotated lists left off, offering access to many more published images of paintings along with Cahill's own considered judgments of them.

Cahill sought out and photographed every painting he could access and he brought his growing group of graduate students into his projects, enlisting them to catalog photographs and slides, maintain and augment his enlarged annotated list of Ming paintings (now available as a database at Harvard University) and create exhibitions of Chinese painting at the then University Art Museum. The exhibitions, *The Restless Landscape* in 1971 and *Shadows of Mount Huang* in 1978, were both funded by the Kress Foundation, and they pushed Cahill's massive project of writing the history of painting in the late Ming and Qing dynasties forward. They also exemplified his approach to teaching, which was to introduce students to working directly with actual objects even as they honed their other methodological skills. Cahill and his first wife Dorothy Dunlap Cahill were avid collectors of Chinese and Japanese paintings and they made their collection freely available to students and scholars. During his tenure as director of the University Art Museum, Cahill carved out a storage space in the museum to house this collection and the growing number of Chinese and Japanese paintings he worked with donors to bring into the museum. Through a series of generous gifts from the Cahill family and other donors, much of the private collection is now permanently part of the museum's holdings. The Cahill Collections were exhibited at the museum in 2004-5 in a comprehensive exhibition, *Masterworks of Chinese Painting: In Pursuit of Mists and Clouds*.

James Cahill was instrumental in the cataloging and photography of the collections of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan, with which he maintained close ties. He was also among the first American scholars to open a dialogue with artists and art historians in the People's Republic of China, where he first traveled as a part of an official delegation sent by the United States State Department in 1972. He returned to China in 1975 as head of a second State Department delegation focused on Old Paintings, and made many trips back to lecture, do research and consult with Chinese painting scholars.

During the intellectual and political ferment that gripped the Berkeley campus in the 1970-80s, Cahill began to engage in heated debates with his colleagues at Berkeley and at other institutions. Without eschewing the problems of authenticity and stylistic evolution, his work increasingly took an adventurous turn. In 1982 during the year he was named a Faculty Research Lecturer, he published *The Compelling Image*, a volume based on lectures he gave at Harvard while serving as Charles Elliot Norton Professor of Poetry in 1978-79. With this revolutionary book, which received the College Art Association's Rufus Morey Book Award in 1984, his attention moved to new questions of cultural contact between China and the West, exchanges between popular and elite culture, and the largely ignored question of what purposes Chinese paintings were designed to serve. His continued devotion to teaching is evidenced by the receipt of the Distinguished Teaching Award in 1985. Cahill served the campus community by membership on Academic Senate committees: *Courses of Instruction* (1975-76), *Faculty Research Lectures* (1982-87), *Graduate Council* (1969-1972; 1989-1992), *Privilege and Tenure* (1985-88).

In *The Compelling Image* and in a series of related articles and lectures, he also explored the emergence of art historical painting in late Ming China and in Japan, painting done by artists consciously aware of their

precedents, no longer responding directly to the natural world but rather expressing themselves visually through the filter of historically significant styles, so that style itself became the subject of painting. The intellectual lives, studio practices and patronage of painters occupied him in his Franklin D. Murphy lectures for the University of Kansas, which were published in 1988 as *Three Alternative Histories of Chinese Painting*, and in the Bampton Lectures given at Columbia University, which appeared in 1994 as *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China*. The latter book broadened Cahill's range of interest to include popular and often anonymous painters and is now standard reading on a topic only cursorily discussed by earlier scholars. The Reischauer Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1993 were published in 1996 as *The Lyric Journey: Poetic Painting in China and Japan*. A fifth lecture series, the Getty Lectures, were presented at the University of Southern California in 1994 as *The Flower and the Mirror: Representations of Women in Late Chinese Painting*. They remain unpublished, but another book grew out of them, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China*, which appeared in 2011, the last of two dozen books and catalogs Cahill authored.

James Cahill was an internet visionary, early embracing the potential of the medium to broaden the audience for art. He is virtually immortalized in his pioneering website and blog, [jamescahill.info](http://jamescahill.info), where he uploaded all of his unpublished papers and where, after his health began to fail, he continued his project to produce a coherent history of the evolution of Chinese painting in two series of illustrated lectures, *A Pure and Remote View — Visualizing Early Chinese Landscape Painting*, and *Gazing into the Past — Scenes from Later Chinese and Japanese Painting*. These pioneering MOOCs are posted on his website and also on the website of Berkeley's Institute of East Asian Studies, which provided funding for both series. He was actively working on this long-range effort when he died.

James Cahill will not be forgotten. He was a brilliant, prolific scholar of Chinese painting, a generous, engaging colleague and teacher, charming raconteur, connoisseur of music, film buff of the highest order, and great wit. His musings on art, music, film, literature, and life in Berkeley in the second half of the twentieth century can be found online at his website.

James Cahill was married twice, to Dorothy Dunlap Cahill and to Hsingyuan Tsao. Both marriages ended in divorce. He is survived by four children, Nicholas and Sarah from his first marriage, Benedict and Julian from his second; six grandchildren; and by dozens of students dedicated to carrying forward his legacy of committed scholarship and teaching.

Patricia Berger  
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