

**exhibition review**

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*Eccentric Visions: The Worlds of Luo Ping (1733-1799)*

Douglas Dillon Galleries for Chinese Painting, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, October 6, 2009 – January 10, 2010

*Eccentric Visions: The Worlds of Luo Ping (1733-1799)* is a tour de force not only for the massive international effort required to present this exhibition, but also for its masterful representation of a painter who traded in contradictions. Organized by Maxwell Hearn and Shi-ye Liu with a catalog by Kim Karlsson, Alfreda Murck and Michele Matteini, the show includes a number of treasures that have never been previously exhibited in the United States.

Luo Ping, included with his mentor Jin Nong (1687-1764) into the flexible grouping known as “Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou,” was a ghost-painter in every sense of the word. Serving his teacher for less than a decade as a dedicated apprentice and companion, Luo was talented enough to create paintings that Jin – an established painter more than fifty years his senior – passed off as his own. But Luo also claimed he could see ghosts with his unusual blue-green eyes, and is best known for his *Ghost Amusement Scrolls*. Depicting wraiths, dwarves, skeletons and all-too-human specters and demons, these small paintings were combined into long handscrolls carried by the artist like pictorial calling cards to collect inscriptions by some of the leading writers and thinkers of the day.

The simple fact that *Eccentric Visions* includes one version of the *Ghost Amusement Scroll* is enough to entice the viewer familiar with Luo Ping, and to fascinate those unfamiliar with the artist. But this painting is intelligently displayed to complement the other works in the show rather than outshine them with its fame and significance. Luo Ping’s ethereal technique of painting on wet paper to blur ink outlines that makes *Ghost Amusement Scroll* so powerful is consistently rediscovered throughout the exhibition, the same technical process preventing the ghosts from overwhelming the exhibition and lifting more traditional album leaves of landscapes and flowers out of the mundane.

The variety of paintings in *Eccentric Visions* clearly describes Luo Ping as a man fascinated with visualizing transcendence. A devoted Buddhist, Luo frequently depicted eccentric Buddhist figures with equally imaginative brushwork. The range of calligraphic strokes and tonal textures used in the ink monochrome hanging scroll *Hanshan and Shide* depicting the two eccentric Tang dynasty monks, also chosen for the cover of the exhibition catalog, displays Luo’s unquestionable traditional skill with brush and ink. However, when depicting his mentor Jin Nong intent on a sutra in *Portrait of Mr. Dongxin*, he instead paired European-inspired naturalistic portraiture with the tradition of painting *luohans*, supernatural Buddhist eccentrics. But this is what Luo Ping does: he blends opposites together and creates something otherworldly out of the utterly mundane.

Many of the eighteenth century's major cultural trends can be found in *Eccentric Visions*: the fusion of traditional Chinese painting styles with new Western pictorial methods, the pervasive period fascination with ghosts and strange phenomena, the new role of the professional eccentric painter, the impact of Buddhist devotion on the cultural fabric, and the tension between eighteenth-century China's two art capitals of Beijing and Yangzhou. All of these are present in the range of phenomenal paintings presented in the exhibition, making the show as much about the eighteenth century as it is about the worlds of Luo Ping. Perhaps this is the ultimate point: that Luo Ping, for all his eccentric visions, was a man fully enmeshed in the world around him and whose paintings reflect the full range of eighteenth-century China's diverse sensibilities.

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