R. H. van Gulik, Mi Fu, and Connoisseurship of Chinese Art**

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Abstract

This essay presents a critical overview of van Gulik’s approach to the connoisseurship of Chinese painting and calligraphy by analyzing his three published books on the subject. Disenchanted with the primitive state of the study of Chinese art in the English-speaking world in the 1930s, van Gulik sought to establish a new method and new terminology for analyzing Chinese pictorial art that conformed to the modern scientific spirit. He disparaged most traditional Chinese scholars, finding inspiration only in the Song artist and critic Mi Fu 米芾 whose precise language and empiricist approach to connoisseurship impressed the young Sinologist as the embodiment of the scientific spirit. When compared to the strictly rationalistic criteria adopted by the practitioners of scientific connoisseurship in Europe and America, however, van Gulik’s own performance appears wanting. Although van Gulik’s achievements do not measure up to his own ambitious standards, in valuing mounting and other aspects of the material

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** I thank Jonathan Hay for introducing me to the seminal writings on connoisseurship in European art in his seminar on “Connoisseurship in the Era of Social Interpretation” at the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University in Fall 2004.
craft of painting, he anticipated the recent turn to material culture among historians of science, technology, and art in East Asia at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Robert van Gulik, Mi Fu 米芾, connoisseurship, scientific method, artisanal knowledge

1. Introduction

On Dec. 1, 1936, Robert van Gulik (1910-1967) finished the Preface to the first of many monographs on Chinese art he was to publish in his prolific life. Having received his doctorate from the University of Utrecht the year before, the young linguist proudly signed off as “Dr. R. H. van Gulik.” He was twenty-six years old and had just begun his foreign service career at the Dutch legation in Tokyo.¹ The short monograph, *Mi Fu on Ink-stones*, was printed in Shanghai and issued

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Idema described van Gulik’s post at the Tokyo embassy as “assistant interpreter” (p. 934) whereas Wessells described it as “second secretary.”

in 1938 [fig. 1]. At its core is an annotated translation of a treatise by a seminal artist-connoisseur then virtually unknown in the English-speaking world, Mi Fu’s 米芾 (1052-1107/8) *Yanshi* (硯石 An Account of Ink-stones). In this essay I discuss what I have learned about van Gulik as a scholar and connoisseur by reading this book against two of his later works on the connoisseurship of Chinese art, both published in 1958. The first is an annotated translation of the Qing collector Lu Shihua’s 陸時化 (1724-1779) *Shuhua shuolìng* 書畫説銘, rendered as *Scrapbook for Chinese Collectors*, the second is van Gulik’s magnum opus on connoisseurship, *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur* 書畫鑑賞彙編. My analysis focuses on the similarities and differences between the theory and practice of van Gulik’s connoisseurship and those of modern European connoisseurs on the one hand and literati collectors in imperial China on the other. In so doing, I seek to illuminate the multiple meanings of the “scientific method” and the nature of van Gulik’s vested interest in it.

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5. A comparison of van Gulik’s approach to connoisseurship with that of his rough contemporaries such as Max Loehr (1903-1988), Professor of Chinese Art at Harvard University, and Laurence Sickman (1907-1988), Director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, would be a worthwhile topic for further research. I thank one of the two anonymous reviewers for this suggestion. The early trajectories of Loehr, who received his Ph.D. training in Europe (at the University of Munich) in 1931-1936 and sojourned in Beijing in 1940-1949, are particularly comparable to van Gulik’s.
2. Mi Fu on Ink-stones

*Mi Fu on Ink-stones* was based on van Gulik’s Master’s thesis in oriental studies submitted to the University of Utrecht in 1934. Although only seventy-one pages long, the published monograph establishes several characteristics of van Gulik’s later works: high-quality printing, lavish illustrations (including his own drawings), Chinese characters embedded in the text, familiarity with Japanese sources, and meticulous referencing. He was a scrupulous scholar who adhered to the format and style required of empirical scholarship. Besides the overall accurate and elegant translation of Mi Fu’s *Yanshi*, van Gulik included a textual history of the different editions of the work, an analysis of Mi’s treatise in the context of other

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Song treatises on ink-stones, and general introductions to the use and shapes of the ink-stone for the lay reader. Much of this contextual material remains relevant and useful to both the specialist and general reader in the English-speaking world today.

The young van Gulik sounds tentative if not defensive in his Preface. Twice he apologizes for the incomplete nature of his analysis and once for the “dryness” of his tone (MF vii, viii). Later he expresses doubt about his ability to perform correctly the “risky task” of punctuating Mi’s prose (MF 18). Seeking to alleviate the dryness of his translation, he endeavored to add illustrations. Since he did not trust his “own judgment in the difficult question of appreciating and selecting ink-stones” (MF x), van Gulik proceeded to insert rubbings of ink-stones from Qing scholar Ji Yun’s 紀昀 (1724-1805) Yuewei caotang yanpu (関微草堂硯譜 Catalogue of Ink-stones from the Yuewei Caotang Collection), which was published in 1916.

These rubbings, accompanied by van Gulik’s meticulous translations of the encomiums carved onto the stones, did enliven the pages but they also exposed van Gulik’s relative lack of knowledge about the history of ink-stones. Many of the shapes featured, such as that of a lute (MF33), were Ming-Qing inventions and could not have been found in Mi Fu’s times. The same is true for several of the shapes in the typology of nine common shapes of inkslabs drawn in van Gulik’s own hand (MF 16-17). Elsewhere in the text, van Gulik mistook the parallel (wen 紋) and crisscrossing (luowen 羅紋) markings of a particular kind of ink-stone, carved from She 數 stones, for a generic description of all ink-stones (MF 23)[fig. 2].

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7 The shape of Tang-Song ink-stones continues to befuddle modern scholars and connoisseurs. See a clarifying study by Chi Jo-hsien 楊力��, “Tang-Song shiqi jixingyan, fengziyan yu chaoshouyan ji qi xiangguan wenti zhi yanjiu 唐宋時期瓷形謬、風字謬與抄手謬及其相關問題之研究” (Research Study on Clog-shaped, Feng, and Ch ao-show-type Inkstones from the T’ang to Sung Dynasties, and Related Questions), Gugong xueshu jikan 故宮學術季刊 18.4(Summer 2001): 17-61. See also her discussion of Mi Fu’s descriptions of the shapes of Jin ink-stones in “Cong kaogu chutu ziliao shilun Liuchao Sui-T’ang de yuanyan yu fangyan 從考古出土資料談論六朝隋唐的圍碁與方碁” (The Research on the Round-shaped and Square-shaped Inkstones in Six, Sui-T’ang Dynasties from the Archaeological Excavation), Furen lishi xuebao 興隆歷史學報 11 (June 2000): 78-79.
I cite these shortcomings not to fault van Gulik, but to celebrate his far-sighted vision and to affirm his ambition: to stimulate new research, the scholar has to venture from familiar territory to face the unknown; however treacherous, someone has to take the first step. Although his findings on Mi Fu and ink-stones are tentative, van Gulik offered in this pioneering monograph a strategic vision for advancing the field of Chinese art history. At the time of his writing, in the 1930s, studies of Chinese art in English consisted mainly of general surveys. To advance “critical historical research,” van Gulik proposed two interventions: to embark on studies of individual artists in their full historical contexts, and to extend the aesthetic criteria then prevalent in art historical analysis to embrace what we would term the practice of “scientific connoisseurship” (MF 2). These guiding principles of van Gulik’s
approach to Chinese art, which became the hallmark of his life’s work, were intuited when he was twenty-six years old and during his first tour of the Far East.\(^8\)

3. Mi Fu and Chinese Connoisseurship in van Gulik’s Eyes

Van Gulik was a life-long admirer of Mi Fu, calling him “the great Sung artist” (CP 80) and “one of the most important art-critics in Chinese history” (MF 62). Besides the more obscure treatise on ink-stones, van Gulik was also conversant with Mi Fu’s more famous works, Shushi 書史 and Huashi 畫史, as evinced by his lengthy citations of Mi’s methods of mounting scrolls and his activities as a connoisseur in Chinese Pictorial Art (CP 182ff). He learned about the true meaning of connoisseurship, or shangjian 賞鑒 in Chinese, from Mi Fu, who he thought was the first to coin the term. “He uses this term of the way a cultured, true lover of art will choose and pore over his treasures, in contradistinction from the ignorant amateur (haoshizhe 好事者) who buys at random what he likes at first sight in order to form a big collection, without being able to really enjoy the beauty of things” (MF 25-26).\(^9\) It is clear that van Gulik put himself in the former category and counted Mi Fu as his teacher, model, and true friend in this endeavor.

The fact that such Song artists as Mi Fu and Su Shi knew how to mount scrolls themselves instead of entrusting the task to a professional mounter so impressed van Gulik that he frequented mounting workshops in Japan and later in Beijing, taking meticulous notes on the entire process. Through decades of studying he came to the realization that “knowledge of the technique of mounting acquaints

\(^8\) During his initial posting in Tokyo in 1935-42, van Gulik made frequent trips to China (Chen Chih-mai, Helan Gao Luepei, p. 7 [Chinese]) but it is not clear when he first set foot in China.

\(^9\) Van Gulik looked up the term shangjian 賞鑒 in the modern dictionary Ci yuan 錢原, which glosses it as 賞鑒別 (MF 25). His translation for Mi Fu’s term shangjian zhi shi 賞鑒之士 is “discerning scholar” (MF 25). Van Gulik’s opposition between a cultured, true lover of art and the ignorant amateur points to the importance of social distinction on which connoisseurship rests, and which in turn is engendered by connoisseurship discourse. This is no less true for Mi Fu’s times as it is for van Gulik’s.
the student with a special vocabulary that constitutes the link between Western and Chinese art criticism... *the art of mounting is the gate to Chinese connoisseurship*” (CP xix, emphasis added). This original insight received a mild rebuttal by his long-time friend Chen Chih-mai, who found the book “a disappointment.” Chen attributed van Gulik’s odd choice of focusing on the trivia of mounting, eschewing such conventional approaches as stylistic analysis of brush strokes as the basis of attribution and authentication, to van Gulik’s “lifelong inclination to concentrate on obscure books often at the expense of standard works.” To my mind, however, the focus on paintings as a material process constitutes one of the most important contributions that van Gulik made to the study of Chinese art in the Anglophone world [fig. 3].

A brief survey of the Table of Contents of *Chinese Pictorial Art* reveals van Gulik’s unusual insights, which situate the point of departure of connoisseurship in the materiality of a painting and its objecthood. Chapter 1 (56 pp.) introduces the various ways whereby the mounted scroll was displayed in Chinese and Japanese interiors; chapter 2 (76 pp.) illustrates the techniques of mounting hand scrolls, hanging scrolls, and rubbings, as well as the difficult process of remounting and repairing antique scrolls; chapter 3 (156 pp.) gives a detailed history of mounting from the Tang through the Qing as well as its spread to Japan; chapter 4 (52 pp.) discusses Chinese literary sources on the art of mounting, including partial translations of two Chinese treatises of mounting. Together these chapters made up Part I, which makes up 73% of the total length of the main text of the book. Part II covers, as if as an afterthought, the more conventional topics of connoisseurship: chapter 1 (74 pp.) presents tips on judging forgeries of antique scrolls; chapter 2 (34 pp.) treats the identification of artist’s seals in particular and seal-carving in general; and chapter 3 (18 pp.) offers miscellaneous tips on collecting scrolls, from

11  These are Zhou Jiazhou’s 周嘉胄 (died c. 1660) *Zhuang huang zhi* 裝潢志 and Zhou Erxue’s 周二學 (fl. 1723-35) *Shang yan su xin lu* 資延素心錄.
the business practices and pricing of curio dealers to works of contemporary painters worthy of collecting (Gao Qifeng 高奇峰 (1889-1933) for example).

Fig. 3  Van Gulik’s Photographs of Japanese and Chinese Mounters at Work
Source: R. H. van Gulik, *Chinese Pictorial Art*, plate facing p. 76
If elevating the art and technique of mounting scrolls to the pinnacle of art connoisseurship may seem idiosyncratic, van Gulik had good reasons for doing so in light of the state of the field in Euro-America at the time (and in light of his denigration of the unscientific nature of traditional Chinese connoisseurship, as we will see below). One of the biggest difficulties he faced in his research was that the best Chinese collections of paintings (especially the imperial collection) were not accessible to him or other foreigners. The materials and techniques of mounting, in contrast, posed no such hindrance. Van Gulik’s admirable emphasis on the materiality of what some would denigrate as “craft” may have stemmed in part from this inability to examine a spectrum of key works in the literati painting tradition. Compounding the difficulty was the fact that none of the seminal Chinese texts were translated into European languages, hence they remained off limits to those scholars and collectors who, unlike him, could not read Chinese (CP 51-53).

Van Gulik thus lamented the primitive and insular state of Western studies of Chinese art when he came of age in the 1920s: “Thus it could hardly be avoided that Chinese pictorial art was presented measured by Western standards; there came into being a hybrid conception of that art, a curious mixture of Taoist speculations, esthetic theories of the Japanese tea-masters, and Western principles of art history” (CP xiv-xv, emphases added). Van Gulik’s life-long mission was to serve as the conduit of the Chinese connoisseurship tradition to his readers in Europe and America. The ultimate goal was anything but modest; his vision was “the establishing of a critical method that will allow us to judge antique Chinese pictures and autographs with a reasonable degree of certitude” (CP xx, emphases added). To state it differently: “[E]vidently the goal aimed at should be to establish for Chinese pictorial art a new method and a new terminology, that combines the results of Western and Chinese knowledge and experience in the field of art-historical research” (CP 414).

Such words as “critical method” and “certitude” betray a crucial difference between van Gulik’s sensibilities and those of his Chinese counterparts: his foundational belief that connoisseurship is a modern science. For all of his
genuine respect for the Chinese connoisseurship tradition, van Gulik consistently
grounded the theory and practice of his study of Chinese art in modern European
connoisseurship. Toward the end of this essay we will examine this rationalistic
tradition that emerged in the early eighteenth century and further developed in the
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here, a brief discussion of van Gulik’s
ambivalent relationship with the Chinese tradition of art criticism is in order, for it
casts van Gulik’s praise of Mi Fu in clearer relief.

4. The Superiority of (Western) Science

Although van Gulik employed the language of a Western-Chinese synthesis or
partnership in establishing a new method for art historical research, this partnership
was not an equal one. Van Gulik considered Chinese connoisseurship of paintings
inherently deficient; only thus can we grasp his curious back-handed compliment:
“Chinese connoisseurship of pictorial art has the experience of nearly two thousand
years behind it. Although as a matter of course lacking the aids evolved by modern
science it has developed an advanced technique of its own, eminently suited to the
appraisal of antique paintings and specimens of calligraphy” (CP xvi, emphasis
added). His premise, stated a priori and hence leaving no grounds for questioning,
was the superiority of Western “modern science” over the traditional Chinese ways
of knowing and organizing knowledge.

Van Gulik then enlisted the authority of his native informants—modern Chinese
connoisseurs—who according to him “concede that for instance the old aesthetic
classification of pictures in the three groups shén-miao-néng is futile, and that with
regard to decisions on authenticity there has always existed in China a tendency to
attach more importance to the social and scholarly standing of the man who made
the decision than to the actual merits of the case” (CP xvi). The rejection of the
classic tripartite formulation of “shen-miao-neng” (inspired-excellent-competent)\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} The categories of shen 神, miao 妙 and neng 能 were part of the “six categories” (liupin 六
as “futile” is made on the basis of its elusiveness and reliance on the subjective judgment of the connoisseur that cannot be generalized into “theory.” This criticism of partiality toward authorities with superior social standing smacks of the criticism of the lack of “democracy” in “traditional China” often heard in the twentieth century.

In a similar vein, van Gulik denigrated the embodied knowledge of traditional Chinese connoisseurs in favor of the abstract generalizable knowledge of modern science: “It will be only when there has been brought together a standard collection of authentic antique autographs and paintings that have passed all tests known to traditional Chinese connoisseurship and modern Western science, that we can begin to obtain a real insight in old Chinese pictorial art, and that we can decide authenticity problems with confidence. For only then shall we have obtained a standard of comparison, without which all work in this field must needs bear a provisional character.” (CP 415)

Yet van Gulik did not reject the traditional Chinese approach altogether. Despite such epistemological and social deficiencies, “traditional connoisseurship provides many sound data and we cannot afford to ignore it” (CP xvi, emphasis added). This statement of endorsement is not as affirmative as it may seem at first glance. The bifurcation of a knowledge field into “theory” (of a higher order due to its abstract quality) and “data” (concrete and piecemeal, hence lowly) as well as the identification of the former with “the West” has served to perpetuate the claims of superiority of Western knowledge systems and researchers over indigenous ones even today.13 Van Gulik’s unwitting adherence to this bifurcated standard betrays an

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品: liufa 六法) of critic Xie He 謝赫 of the Southern Qi outlined in Guhua pinlu 古畫品錄. See Theories of the Arts in China, ed. Susan Bush and Christian Murck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). These are in fact not subjective categories according to Jonathan Hay; they had critical functions that enabled critical judgments about a certain painting to be made (personal communications).

13 This bifurcation of theory and data (and the equation of theory with “the West” and “data” with “the rest”) was first criticized by critical anthropologists because their discipline was founded on exactly such a binary. See Johannes Fabian’s classic, Time and the Other: How Anthropology
indelible tension in his affiliations and outlook: for all his heart-felt sympathies with and love of Chinese culture, he remained a Westerner whose superiority was never in doubt. 14

Van Gulik’s devotion to connoisseurship as a scientific enterprise accounts for both his singular admiration of Mi Fu and his decision to translate Mi’s treatise on ink-stones, an obscure object to his Western readers. Unlike the more famous Huashi, which refers to antique paintings now lost, Mi Fu’s study of ink-stones in Yanshi “... may well furnish us with the most important material about Mi Fu’s critical methods. For the data given therein maybe verified... We can actually see and study the same material as lay before Mi Fu. By comparing his observations on the objects with the objects themselves, and by judging the methods he used in treating this material, we shall be able to form an opinion as to the value of his critical studies in other fields” (MF 10, emphases added). This is the most succinct statement of the method van Gulik employed in his connoisseurship of Chinese art in general.

Even more important than the availability of extant ink-stones as objects of our comparative study is the quality of Mi Fu’s mind and spirit: “[F]rom beginning to end his Yen-shih is a record of the results of independent investigation, without a single sentence copied from any of the other books. Mi Fu utilizes the material collected by them, but only to test and verify his own observations. In a true scientific spirit he does not let himself be led away by the opinions of others, but firmly sticks to the objects that lie before him.” Mi Fu’s disclosure that “all the stones I have classified here I have seen with my own eyes, and I have collected and used them myself. Those about which I have merely heard, even if it be a great deal, I have not put in my record 余所品謂（惟）目擊自收經用者，聞雖多不錄以存” (MF 47,
impressed van Gulik particularly, for it reads virtually like a manifesto of the values of objectivity and empiricism on which the modern scientific method rests. Another expression of Mi Fu’s empiricist and materialist method is his mistrust of the magical qualities attributed to stones, which to van Gulik bespeaks a skeptical mind that is “particularly keen on distinguishing fact from fiction” (CP 61, emphasis added).

Mi Fu’s direct and straight-forward literary style, largely devoid of literary allusions, also earned praise from van Gulik, as did his historicist method: “He does not indulge in historical quotations referring to high antiquity: his historical data refer mostly to T’ang dynasty... When he speaks of ink-stones from the Chin period, he relies on archaeological data such as paintings of that period, inkslabs found in tombs, and stones which had been transmitted in the families of literati from one generation to another” (MF 61). Van Gulik thus summarized his admiration for Mi Fu’s treatise on ink-stones: “Here Mi Fu presents himself as a critical spirit, gifted with a sharp sense of discrimination, and endowed with unusual logical capacity. And it is because this perspicacity is combined with artistic creative powers of the highest order that Mi Fu must... be considered as one of the most important art-critics in Chinese history” (MF 62, emphasis mine).

Compared to Mi Fu’s scientific spirit, other connoisseurs in the Tang and Song dynasties who discoursed on ink-stones appear slapdash and inadequate. Su Yijian 蘇易簡 (958-996), who first gave the ink-stone separate treatment as a stand-alone chapter in his connoisseurship treatise Wenfang sipu (文房四譜 Four Articles from the Scholar’s Studio), irritated van Gulik with his “motley collection of references” and the “incoherent mass” of “the piling up of isolated quotations.” Dripping with annoyance, van Gulik parodied Su’s excessive use of literary allusions as “carving a chicken with a butcher’s chopper” (MF 58-59).16

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15 For a critical history of this way of seeing/knowing and that which it excludes, see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, Objectivity (New York: Zone Books, 2007).
16 Su Yijian 蘇易簡, Wenfang sipu, wai shier zhong 文房四譜, 外十二種 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1991), pp. 843-1-62. The edition reproduced here is that of the Siku quanshu
Nor did van Gulik approve of the “old Chinese encyclopedic method of incorporating works of other authors in their entirety” (MF 59). Van Gulik’s standards of judging the validity of knowledge are originality, verifiability, generalizability, and objectivity. Under these yardsticks, the entire Chinese epistemological tradition of valuing specific, localized knowledge over the generalized—a tradition built on the citational practices of encyclopedias (leishu 类书) and notation books (biji 笔记)—appears trite and dated.17

Art historian Craig Clunas has called the Chinese episteme rejected by van Gulik an “aesthetic of multiplicity” whereby “more is more.” A Chinese encyclopedia, according to Clunas, is shaped by “an episteme in which it is the multiplication of categories, and not their reduction to what we now call order (through the elimination of what is perceived as redundancy and overlap), that is the powerful creator of pattern and meaning in the world.” The main mode of operation of this “aesthetic of multiplicity” in writing, art, (and material production, as Lothar Ledderose’s book Ten Thousand Things attests) is what he calls the “poetics of the list”—lists are not “raw data from which pattern can then be deduced (as they might be for Aristotle or Sherlock Holmes), rather they have the power to make and structure meaning in their own right.” In this world, “the power of

四庫全書. To my reading this work is more systematic and informative than van Gulik gave it credit for. The ink-stone section, which follows roughly a consistent pattern that structures the other sections on the writing brush, paper, and ink, is divided into four parts: narratives, making techniques, anecdotes, and encomiums in prose and verse. Su, for example, affirmed Mi Fu’s emphasis that the main demand on a writing implement is its “use” (yong 用, e.g. 843-9). The sections on making techniques, in turn, affirm van Gulik’s attention on the material aspects of connoisseurship. The division of literary sources into narrative, anecdote, and encomium establishes a scale of veracity and a new historiographical convention.

17 Of course, Chinese connoisseurship writings are not confined to leishu and biji. For Tang and Song writings on the connoisseurship of paintings, Jonathan Hay (personal communications) has counted the following genres: (1) catalogues and lists; (2) biographies in which critical judgments about artworks were made; (3) accounts of empirical problems surrounding the activities of collecting; (4) random notes with documentation; (5) comments on paintings in such the works of such polymaths as Shen Gua (沈括 1031-1095).
the specific... is greater than that of the systematic.” Thus turning Aristotelian analytic logic, the foundation of modern science, on its head, Clunas has provided an alternative yardstick for judging the validity of the traditional Chinese approach to connoisseurship in particular and knowledge-making in general.

Whereas the “scientific method” privileges observation and reduction, the Chinese way of knowing emphasizes observation and multiplication. Although observation is the crucial first step to knowledge in both approaches, the contrast in the subsequent steps could not have been clearer: the modern European observer operates in a discursive field with finite parameters and stable categories; whatever data that does not fit an emergent pattern would have to be discarded as “noise.” The Chinese observer, in turn, operates in a field that has no pre-determined boundaries and uses a method of collecting information that is open-ended. Seemingly unconnected items of disparate sizes or importance can be placed alongside one another in an expanding list, and by sheer proximity to each other generate new meanings, patterns, and realities. These divergent approaches to knowledge-making will be further analyzed below under the rubrics of ‘scientia’ and ‘techne’.

5. The Importance of Craft and Material Culture

I do not intend to convey the impression that I disapprove of van Gulik’s (or Mi Fu’s method), nor do I wish to appear the enemy of “science.” My critique here is made in full admiration of van Gulik’s remarkable achievements as a connoisseur and scholar of Chinese art. Van Gulik’s devotion to the scientific method was a

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19 The list itself and the categories in it are shaped by conventions particular to the genre, but these conventions are remade with each new author’s interventions. For an example of how this works in the genre of materia medica (bencao 本草), see Carla Nappi, The Monkey and the Inkpot: Natural History and Its Transformations in Early Modern China (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).
progressive force in his lifetime (1910-1967); however singular his achievements, like all of us he was a product of the culture and historical times into which he was born. My critique (not criticism), made in the same critical spirit that was the cornerstone of van Gulik’s work, is meant to provoke discussion on the merits and limitations of the scientific method so that we can be more self-reflexive about the unexamined premises of our scholarship. Thus we may begin to rethink the kind of knowledge and approaches to knowledge-making that are appropriate to the twenty-first century.

Two aspects of van Gulik’s theory and practice of connoisseurship are particularly salutary; they are insights far ahead of his time. First is his reluctance to privilege ‘art’ over ‘craft’, or ‘high’ or ‘fine’ art over the mundane techniques of making things. Although he entitled his long chapter 2 in Chinese Pictorial Art “The Technique of Mounting,” elsewhere he used ‘the art of mounting’ (CP 54) to refer to this highly elaborate skill which he deemed the gateway of connoisseurship. His valuation of the materiality and texture of everyday objects as worthy of serious scholarly attention led him to probe the history of mounting hanging scrolls (including such minutiae as determining when the pair of ribbons — jingdai 经带 —

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20 It should be noted that van Gulik’s modern scientific cast of mind was so dominant that he sometimes missed the Chinese meanings altogether. One telling example is this passage from Lu Shihua’s Shuhua shuolü: “In order to judge the authenticity of a famous scroll which is reliably documented 凡名蹟即信而有徵, one must verify whether or not it evinces the artist’s personality 於真之中, 辨其著意不著意. Thus one may decide whether it is an old copy 是臨摹舊本, or an original work of art 抑自出心彥. If the personality is there, and the picture is also of high quality 有著意而精者, that means that the artist achieved full self-expression, though modeling his work after the methods of the ancients 心思到古法古也” (SH 40, Chinese 3). To construe 著意 as an artist’s “personality” and 心思到 as “full self-expression” amounts to mistranslation. These notions of the artist as a creative genius and art as his self-expression are part of the myths created during the Italian Renaissance.

21 Along the same vein Charlotte Furth has pointed out that van Gulik’s Victorian views of sexuality led him to misconstrue the meaning of procreation to Ming women in his Sexual Life in Ancient China. See her “Rethinking van Gulik,” in Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State, ed. Christina Gilmartin et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).
became attached to the surface of the mount), the history of book binding, the format of the racks on which rolled-up scrolls or books were stored and displayed, the history of wallpaper, interior decoration and a host of other subjects of vital interest to a historian of material cultures today. With boundless energy and keen eyes, van Gulik documented, complete with realistic drawings or photographs, the knowledge he acquired on these subjects from art dealers and artisans who did not commit their craft knowledge to writing.

In so doing, van Gulik anticipated a recent turn in the study of history of science, technology, and medicine that occurred several decades after his death in 1967. A group of pioneering historians of early modern Europe has shown that a focus on the epistemologies of artisanal knowledge—transmitted largely by embodied and material means instead of textually—could revise the conventional narratives about the scientific revolution. These scholars have pointed out that in the European tradition, the privileging of theory over practice (and by extension head over hand) can be traced to Aristotle’s taxonomy of knowledge, which is premised on an opposition between the knowledge of ‘episteme/scientia’ possessed by noble citizens and the ‘techne’ of lowly artisans. 22 ‘Scientia’ came to mean “inductive knowledge contained in logical propositions or geometrical demonstrations” whereas ‘techne’ refers to the kind of “how-to knowledge” that is not generalizable because it is not written down and too irregular or particular (p. 34).

In between ‘scientia’ and ‘techne’ lies the vast realm of practice or ‘experiential knowledge’ that “can be part of the unexceptional everyday lives of forgotten people” (p. 235). It is generalizable by collection of individual cases and induction.

A connoisseur-scholar as intrepid as van Gulik can bring back to life the knowledge of the artisan and common people by being attentive to the process of making an object as well as the skills, tools, and materials needed, often by observing and studying with living artisans. Historian of science Pamela Smith

has thus called upon researchers to shift the focus of their analysis from textual knowledge to ‘practical’ or ‘craft knowledge’, a shift that requires new methods and new standards of admissible evidence: “Craft involved a way of knowing nature that was largely tacit and transmitted by social practices and institutions not generally recognized today as producing theoretical knowledge. This knowledge has an unfamiliar appearance to scholars because it is produced by bodily labor, rather than by words, and is often embodied in objects (and in artisan’s practices), rather than in texts” (p. 34).

This recent reorientation of knowledge in historical research leads to a second, and related, salutary aspect of van Gulik’s method: his refusal to take literary discourses at face value. Instead, he grounded his investigations in an interactive reading between words and things. For a philologically-minded researcher, he seems unusually skeptical about the power of words to convey truths from the past. His skepticism is rooted in an astute insight about a peculiar dynamic of Chinese written discourses: “The Chinese written language has a tendency to retain literary terms for objects of material culture long after the shape and function of those objects has changed so much as not to answer any more the old name” (CP 199). Van Gulik’s preference for the empirically accurate description of Mi Fu over the

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23 Roberts, Schaffer, and Dear, eds., The Mindful Hand: Inquiry and Invention from the Late Renaissance to Early Industrialization, p. 34. Pamela Smith has also devised an alternative taxonomy of knowledge to Aristotle’s: (i) knowledge of the senses, i.e. embodied; (ii) knowledge of various forms of embodiment, i.e. as expressed in symbols, words, texts, or objects (p. 35). See also Smith’s seminal monograph on artisanal epistemology: The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

24 Unfortunately, van Gulik dismissed the embodied knowledge of Chinese connoisseurs because it is not generalizable according to the demands of modern science: “The tradition still living among Chinese connoisseurs supplies little help on this point [i.e. detecting forged old silk.] Aged scholars have in the course of their long lives often developed a kind of sixth sense for old silk and paper. Some go by touch, others go by their olfactory sense. The former will determine the age of old silk by softly rubbing it with their finger tips, the latter smell it. Although their determinations often prove to be very much to the point, such criteria must always remain rather individual” (CP 391).
flowery language of Su Yijian, to his credit, is a response to this hard-learned lesson.

6. The Rationalization of Connoisseurship in Modern Europe

The ultimate goal of van Gulik, as stated above, is to establish a critical method and new vocabulary for the study of Chinese art based on scientific methods. His high hope for connoisseurship (in the narrow sense of judging the quality and authenticity of paintings and other art forms) is that it can develop into a scientific discipline and hence be taken seriously as art historical scholarship and art criticism. His vision and methods resonate with those of modern connoisseurship in Europe, though there are crucial differences. Earlier I discussed van Gulik’s valorization of the European scientific method over the Chinese “aesthetic of multiplicity”; he appeared more European than Chinese in outlook and tastes. Here I conclude this essay with a brief survey of the connoisseurship tradition in Europe in order to make a seemingly contradictory argument—of how van Gulik’s immersion in (Japanese and) Chinese cultures had imparted upon him a certain ‘Chinese-ness’ that must have made him seem alien to his European counterparts.25

The field of art connoisseurship as we know it was an entirely modern enterprise that emerged in England and Italy in the early eighteenth century (the term “connoisseurship” was first used only in the mid-eighteenth century). Jonathan Richardson (1665-1745), a seminal figure in this development, was an English painter and collector of drawings whose 1712 book *Two Discourses* (the first is an “Essay on the whole Art of Criticism as it relates to Painting”; the second “A Discourse on the Dignity, Certainty, Pleasure and Advantage, of the Science of a Connoisseur”) marked a point of departure for the appreciation of art. Previous

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25 In her analysis of van Gulik’s Judge Dee novels, especially their re-translation into Chinese by two modern translators using Ming-Qing vernacular forms, Zhang Ping 張芹, *Gao Luopei: Goutong Zhong-Xi wenhua de shizhe* 高羅佩：溝通中西文化的使者 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), pp. 11-15.
handbooks on art viewing that began to circulate in the early seventeenth century in continental Europe addressed themselves to the nobility and assumed that the artist, not the collector, was the authority whose judgment on matters of quality, authorship, and originality should be heeded. In contrast, Richardson wrote in simple English (we are reminded of van Gulik’s praise of Mi Fu’s plain language) and addressed himself to “the Publick”—middle-class Englishmen (and women) who were developing into a new class of consumers of paintings for their homes.

Fig. 4 Score Card for Evaluating Paintings Devised by Jonathan Richardson
Source: Carol Gibson-Wood, Jonathan Richardson, p. 189


At a time when museums were not yet open to the public and profusion of copies led to confusion, these new consumers needed advice from a new category of professional taste-makers—the connoisseur. The beginning of modern connoisseurship was thus intimately tied to the emergence of an open art market wrought of such new institutions as public auctions and art dealers which fed on middle-class tastes. It was also part-and-parcel of a nascent “nationalist” sentiment. A modern connoisseur, as exemplified by Richardson, played at once three roles: as arbiter of taste and taste-maker; scholar and art critic; educator of the public in the appreciation of art. Two hundred years after Richardson, van Gulik had probably thought of himself in exactly these terms in the field of Chinese pictorial art.

Richardson grounded his connoisseurship in the philosophical treatises of the English Enlightenment, especially John Locke’s *Essays concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Not only did Richardson reject the authority of continental masters, especially Italian painters, he also sought to locate “taste” in the natural ability of free-thinking and rationality of the (bourgeois male) subject. This rational ability was inborn, but it could also be fostered by education. Hence Richardson devised a scoring card for each painting to be studied; the viewer learned to grade the painting by assigning each of the seven areas (composition, coloring, handling, drawing, invention, expression, grace and greatness) a score from 1 to 18 [fig. 4]. The device of these seven areas as the basic elements of connoisseurship allows one to generalize and accumulate knowledge about the corpus of one painter or one genre of painting across time and space—the very issue of generalizable knowledge so crucial to van Gulik’s scientific method. Art historian Carol Gibson-Wood thus concluded, “Richardson sought to promote connoisseurship as a branch of human knowledge, a science in the eighteenth-century sense of the word... The unquestionable end of this branch of the ‘science’ of connoisseurship was the establishment of truth, the expansion of knowledge.” 28 The same could well be said of van Gulik.

Jonathan Richardson inaugurated a *rationalistic* tradition of connoisseurship of European art, but strictly speaking his method is not as “scientific” as what later became known as the discipline of “scientific connoisseurship” which thrived in the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The founder of the latter is Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891), a German Swiss who was a naturalized Italian. Trained as a physician at the University of Munich, Morelli excelled in comparative anatomy and natural history, fields that were rooted in taxonomy, or the science of classification. When he studied with the glacial explorer, paleontologist, and geologist Louis Agassiz (1807-1873), the latter opined, “observation and comparison are indispensable to the naturalist,” Morelli added, “to the art-connoisseur too.”

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To Morelli, who became an authority in Italian art, art history has to be founded on “reliable and well-tested attributions” that are built on evidence derived from visual analysis of the works of art themselves. For that visual analysis, Morelli devised the unit of “signature form” (Grundformen)—the shape of the earlobe or fingernails that recurs from one painting to another, for example, that identifies a painter’s hand, much like the fingerprints that mark the singularity of each individual [fig. 5]. The hallmark of Morelli’s scientific connoisseurship is the catalogue raisonné, a complete list of works of an artist or a genre or school of painting which describes the characteristics of the works (date, medium, dimensions, provenance, scholarship and exhibition history) in such a generalizable way that they can be recognized by any reader. It remains a standard means of attributing a work of art today.  

Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), Morelli’s follower and a brilliant scholar of Italian paintings, also emphasized research in documents whereas Morelli stressed strictly visual analysis.  

Richard Offner (1889-1965), a Vienna-born and Harvard-educated scholar of Italian paintings, further developed Morelli’s scientific connoisseurship by refining his notion of “signature-form” into “typical shape” and grounding connoisseurship in Kantian aesthetic judgment that is pre-cognitive and pre-verbal. Offner argued that any ‘normal person’ is capable of having ‘direct’ or ‘ecstatic experience’ with


32 Coincidently, Berenson was a famed collector of Asian art, having been exposed to the fine collection at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston by Ernest Fenollosa. His collection of Chinese art includes Song and Ming paintings as well as gilt-bronze Buddhist statues from the Northern Wei and Sui-Tang periods. See The Bernard Berenson Collection of Oriental Art at Villa I Tatti (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1991).

a work of art in these terms: “[T]he normal person, who has experienced the object, who has consequently appropriated it, grants it its artistic prerogative, by forever correcting the sum of his reactions with it, carrying them back to their visible terms, checking them up with the shapes in which they arose. By this process criticism accomplishes an objective, if it fails—as it must do to the end of time—in reaching a scientific validity.” Scientific connoisseurship in this intellectualized vein developed into a serious (one may say joyless) and specialized endeavor that was a far cry from Richardson’s desire to instruct his middle-class readers the pleasures of viewing and collecting art (while enhancing their social status in the process.)

R. H. van Gulik the diplomat was comparable to Morelli in social station—an activist in the Italian revolution, Morelli attained political prominence and was elected Senator in 1873. Their exalted positions, social connections, and mobility afforded privileged access to collectors and prized art collections that facilitated their comprehensive studies. Yet even as van Gulik advocated bridging traditional Chinese connoisseurship and “modern Western science” (CP 415), the “science” he spoke of is of a different order from Morelli’s vigorous commitment to taxonomy. Van Gulik’s “science” remains at the level of practical method—using verifiable data and shunning subjective opinion or hearsay and so on. We may think of van Gulik’s “science” as comparable to Richardson’s whose efforts to “rationalize” connoisseurship were meant to make it accessible to an educated but non-specialist public.

In his self-perception as a taste-maker and educator of the public, too, van Gulik was kindred to Richardson, but unlike Richardson or Offner, the Dutch sinologist was uninterested in erecting a philosophical underpinning for his connoisseurship. When van Gulik proposed to systematize knowledge about pictorial art (although he did not perform such a task), his intention was to solve the problems of attribution,

dating, and detecting forgeries that any shopper or dealer at the Liulichang 琉璃厂 curio market routinely faced. When compared to his European counterparts, van Gulik appears more like a Chinese connoisseur in temperament, maybe even a Mi Fu. Like Mi Fu, van Gulik was opinionated, had unconventional views that cut against the grain of contemporary discourses, and he operated more as a belle-lettriste than an academic scholar or philosopher. Indeed, van Gulik would have been happy as a Northern Song wenren 文人.

Although largely couched in a disinterested objective tone, van Gulik’s treatises on connoisseurship of ink-stone and pictorial art occasionally reveal traces of his emotional investments and personality behind their scientific and rationalistic veneer. On making wet rubbings, he cautioned his readers to avoid windy days by recounting his own experience: “The writer of these lines vividly recalls an occasion when he found himself precariously perched on the edge of a monument while a half-completed rubbing well-soaked with ink was lifted off the stone by a playful breeze and nestled itself close to his best white summer suit—to the undisguised delight of the crowd of youthful native spectators below” (CP 91). The tone of self-mockery is a necessary (and thinly-veiled) disguise for the considerable pride he felt toward his diligence and bravery as well as sheer delight—like a naughty boy—in the outdoor adventure.

From the late Northern Song (and late Ming) connoisseurs van Gulik learned an attitude of resignation that ultimately transcended a worldly attachment to superfluous things. Van Gulik’s entire collection of paintings and antiques was destroyed during the war, after he was hastily evacuated from Tokyo in 1942. Looking back toward the end of his life, he concluded that it had been all worthwhile: “The present writer would not gladly have missed either the joys or sorrows that came his way during twenty years of collecting. Some of the happiest times of his stays in the Far East were spent in the hospitable houses of connoisseurs and collectors and in the shops of art dealers in China, Korea and Japan. Not to forget the hours passed in the study of favourite pictures and specimens of calligraphy. It was those that brought to mind the poet’s [Li Bai 李白] word that
'apart from this world there is another one that is not of man 桃花流川杳然去。別有天地非人間，’ a thought that swept away the weariness of the days that went and the anxiety of the days to come” (CP xxvi-xxvii). Mi Fu would have been at home with the sentiments behind these words.

7. Epilogue: Mi Fu after van Gulik

Four years before van Gulik’s premature death in 1967, French scholar Nicole Vandier-Nicolas published a study of a single Chinese artist—none other than Mi Fu.35 Van Gulik’s vision for the shift in scholarly research from general survey to individual artists was beginning to bear fruit. Twelve years after van Gulik’s death, Lothar Ledderose’s magisterial Habilitation thesis at the University of Cologne was published as Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy.36 Finally in 1997, the publication of Peter Sturman’s monograph Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China cemented Mi Fu’s canonical status as a calligrapher, critic, and connoisseur in the English-speaking world.37 Robert van Gulik would have been pleased.

These recent works on Mi Fu share certain characteristics of van Gulik’s scholarship, although it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the younger scholars were influenced by him. Among these characteristics are attentiveness to the material aspects of works of art, familiarity with Japanese connoisseurship literature, and situating of Mi Fu in his historical contexts. Most importantly, all have honed

37 Sturman, Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997). Also important is the work of Chinese scholar Cao Baolin 曹寶麟, who in a series of articles published between 1986-90 made headway with some vexing questions with the attribution, dating, and authentication of Mi’s calligraphic works.
and applied a connoisseur’s skills—close looking, attribution, and authentication—to advance art historical scholarship beyond subjective standards of aesthetic criteria. This is the agenda that the young van Gulik had prescribed in *Mi Fu on Ink-stones*, although he was not able to thoroughly actualize it himself.

But the differences between these works and van Gulik’s are notable. Van Gulik’s Mi Fu was first and foremost an artist-connoisseur and art-critic who established an empirical approach to connoisseurship and whose writings informed him of the intricate techniques in the mounting and display of scrolls. In contrast, recent research centers on Mi Fu’s contributions and significance as a calligrapher. Here, Mi’s seminal contributions lie in his creative transmission of the Jin 華 tradition from the fourth century, thereby defining its “aesthetic parameters” (p. 74), which in turn served as a baseline for later calligraphers to emulate. In Ledderose’s terms, Mi Fu’s writings and calligraphic copies served as a “filter” for earlier works that are no longer extant. “The only way to arrive at a proper evaluation of the picture [of any tradition], therefore, is to analyze how the filter works” (p. 4). In this view, ‘tradition’ is not a pre-given entity handed down from the past; instead it is a dynamic entity that is constantly being shaped and redefined in the process of its ‘transmission’ or ‘perpetuation’.

To a certain extent this dynamic view of tradition and artistic transmission is rooted in the very nature of Chinese calligraphy itself. Since the distinction between a copy and an original is often blurred in the practice of calligraphy (and early painting), the scholarly scrutiny of Mi Fu’s corpus of calligraphic works had the subtle effect of undermining altogether the enterprise of scientific connoisseurship envisioned by van Gulik. The burden of analysis shifts from a method of attribution and authentication that is premised on a work of art as an essentialized, closed system to one premised on a work of art as an open-ended event whose ‘truth’ resides in the process of its experience and reception. In ‘transmitting’ a classical artistic tradition, Mi Fu had to assess and define it. This may well describe the task of the scholar-critic today.

Ledderose summarized Mi Fu’s theory of calligraphy as a “dialectic contrast”
in his promotion of an “intellectualized approach” and such “unintellectual qualities as tranquility and naturalness” (p. 56). In a similar vein, Sturman painted a picture of Mi Fu that is full of contradictions, especially in his self-consciousness about ‘naturalness’ (pp. 12, 150). In the end, the enduring image of Mi Fu is marked by neither his eccentricity nor his aesthetic judgments, but the intensity of an “irrepressible energy” (p. 90) in his self-presentation, artistic creations, and theoretical or scholarly endeavor. This, perhaps, is what Robert van Gulik and Mi Fu had most in common, despite the gulf in time, culture, and received scholarly tradition that separates them.

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高羅佩、米芾與中國書畫鑑賞

高 彥 頤*

摘 要

漢學家高羅佩以研究中國古代房中術和創作狄公案小說名聞於世。本文藉由探討高氏較少為人注意的三部有關中國書畫鑑賞的論著或譯作，切入他的中國藝術鑑賞觀，指出高羅佩之所以特重「裝裱」一門，呪之為賞鑑之首要，實受米芾之影響。而高羅佩特別標舉米芾論藝時所顯示的「科學精神」，則是他認為賞鑑應服膺一種西方「科學方法」觀念下的產物。高羅佩自身作為一個學者和收藏家，雖然孜孜不倦，樂在其中，但就其系統性和嚴謹性看來，和現代歐洲的學院派科學鑑賞家的水準仍有一段距離。這與他在日本和中國滯留期間，出於客觀條件上的局限，未能系統地過目大量宋元名家真跡，不無關係。雖然如此，自高氏看似樸拙的作品中，可以發掘出諸如對「物質性」、「藝匠知識」等之強調，可與近年歐美人文學界物質文化研究等新取徑遙相呼應。

關鍵詞：高羅佩、米芾、賞鑑學、科學方法、藝匠知識

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