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Article: Making a Chinese Woodblock Print Easy on the Eye: Merging Chinese Aesthetics With Western Conservation Methods

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Making a Chinese Woodblock Print Easy on the Eye: Merging Chinese Aesthetics With Western Conservation Methods

INTRODUCTION

Inpainting is a widely practiced technique used to address areas of loss in pictorial art, aiming to balance respect for the original elements with the need for distinction between original and restored passages. Historically, traditional Chinese painting conservation was conducted by highly skilled “master mounters,” who fulfilled the role of modern conservators. The treatment process included wet cleaning, patching, infilling losses, inpainting, and remounting, with inpainting considered the most critical task. Chinese master mounters sought to conceal losses flawlessly, an approach that may raise ethical concerns by modern conservation standards due to the difficulty in distinguishing between original and inpainted areas. Moreover, unnecessary remounting to correct discoloration or unsatisfactory inpainting may also conflict with modern conservation principles.

This article presents a case study of remounting a rare 18th century Chinese woodblock print, *A Scenic View of Yueyang Tower* (岳陽樓勝景) depicting the Eight Immortals gathering in one of the most famous pavilions in China. The artwork exhibited significant losses and incorrect reattachments, necessitating careful image adjustments and inpainting. Given the artwork’s cultural significance and the importance of preserving its aesthetic integrity, it was crucial to devise a treatment plan that honored traditional Chinese practices while adhering to modern conservation ethics. Collaboration with colleagues to develop a balanced approach led to the use of detectable inpainting materials and reversible techniques. The project aimed to provide a solution that was not only theoretical but also practical, serving as a bridge between traditional aesthetics and Western conservation methods in Chinese painting conservation.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MOUNTING AND CONSERVATION

Traditionally, “master mounters” carried out the entire conservation process for Chinese paintings, fulfilling the role of what we now call a *conservator*. An important book, *The Mounting Manual* (裝潢志 Zhuang Huang Zhi), published around 1650 during the late Ming Dynasty by Zhou Jiazhou (周嘉胄), consolidates ancient mounting theories and remains an essential resource for traditional Chinese mounting practices (Xie 1998, 433). This manual is now available in modern editions, including the version translated and annotated by Tian Jun, published in 2003 as *Illustrated Treatise on Mounting*. In this article, citations from Jun’s edition are referenced throughout (Zhou 2003, 22, 78), with additional English translation provided by the author.

Zhou wrote, “The mounter is the director of life for calligraphy and painting” (裝潢者，書畫之司命也) (2003, 9). This statement underscores the mounter’s influence over the ‘fate’ of the artwork, highlighting their responsibility in both the technical and aesthetic aspects of conservation.

The manual includes an introduction and 42 sections detailing various steps such as washing, lining, mending, and other aspects of mounting materials and traditional restoration techniques in China. This comprehensive guide offers insights not only into the techniques but also into the aesthetics of Chinese mounting practices.

The tradition of Chinese mounting has remained consistent for centuries. A section of a handscroll depicts a mounter holding the same brushes and working by a red table, surrounded by several paintings on the drying walls of a mounting shop. This visual continuity emphasizes the lasting significance of traditional Chinese mounting techniques (fig. 1).

THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF INPAINTING IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MOUNTING

A chapter in *The Mounting Manual* (裝潢志 Zhuang Huang Zhi) discusses the concept of *quan* (全), literally meaning

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Fig. 1. A scene of a mounting shop in the 18th century. Wang Hui, *Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspections Tour, Scroll 7: Wuxi to Suzhou* (detail), 1691–98. Handscroll; ink and color on silk. China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911). University of Alberta Museum. Courtesy of University of Alberta Museum.

“inpainting.” The term *quan-se* (全色) refers to “completing the colors” and encompasses the skills of connecting strokes, known as *jiebi* (接筆), and adding colors. This process involves using ink and colors to fill in areas where the ancient painting is damaged or has lost color. In this chapter, Zhou illustrates the importance and intricacy of inpainting through an anecdote:

I have a friend named Zheng Qianli, who is a skilled professional in inpainting old paintings and calligraphy. He once restored Zhao Qianli's painting Fang Lin Chun Xiao Tu for me. The inpainting was so perfect that even Zhao Qianli himself couldn't identify the restored areas if he were to be resurrected. However, if the wrong person is chosen to inpaint the artwork, it can significantly damage the original piece. (Zhou 2003, 22, 78)

Zhou also wrote, “If an ancient painting or calligraphy is damaged or has missing parts, it's recommended to use aged ink and to ask a skilled mounting master for restoration. The mounting master should possess the extraordinary talent to restore the artwork to a divine level” (Zhou 2003, 22, 78).

Zhou further emphasizes the use of aged ink and consistency have matured over time, allowing it to blend more seamlessly with the original artwork. Additionally, using old or worn-out brushes can provide more irregular bristle strokes that are less sharp and more blended, closely matching ancient artworks' texture and line quality. This manual reveals that the traditional Chinese mounting practice aims to conceal losses through perfect inpainting, reflecting their philosophy and ultimate goal. Even today,

Chinese master mounters regard inpainting as the most critical process in conserving paintings (Zhou 2003, 22, 78).

The Concept of “Si Mian Guang” in Chinese Painting Conservation

To achieve perfection inpainting, it is essential to understand the Chinese phrase *Si Mian Guang* (四面光), which translates to “four-sided light” in English. *Si Mian* (四面) refers to all four directions, whereas *Guang* (光) translates to “light.” In this context, it symbolizes uniformity and consistency. When used in traditional Chinese painting conservation, *Si Mian Guang* describes a standard where the restored or repaired section blends seamlessly with the surrounding areas. Essentially, it means that the colors, tones, and textures should match so well that it becomes difficult to distinguish the repaired part from the original work when viewed from any direction. This standard ensures that the conservation work maintains the integrity and aesthetics of the original artwork, reflecting the high level of skill and attention to detail required in traditional Chinese mounting practices.

Ethical Concerns in Imitative Inpainting

However, the pursuit of flawless, imitative inpainting raises significant ethical concerns:

1. *Risk of unnecessary remounting:* Over time, discoloration or inappropriate repairs may necessitate reversing the inpainting, often requiring full remounting. Remounting typically involves introducing water, presenting a risk to the original paint. Unnecessary remounting can conflict with modern



Fig. 2. Before treatment, *Scenic View of Yueyang Tower*, 1736–96. China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong reign (1736–95). Woodblock print with colors. Image: 99.5 × 54.5 cm (39 3/16 × 21 7/16 in.). Overall: 76 × 56.7 cm (69 5/16 × 22 5/16 in.). Private Collection. Courtesy of David Brichford.

conservation methods, prioritizing minimal intervention and potentially causing more harm than good to the artwork.

2. *Challenges in distinguishing inpainted passages:* In certain situations, even skilled conservators may find it difficult to distinguish between inpainted and original passages. This uncertainty can impact the artwork's authenticity from a Western perspective and pose challenges for future preservation if the inpainted passages cannot be easily reversed and distinguished.

CASE STUDY: TREATMENT OF AN 18TH CENTURY CHINESE PRINT

The case study involved the treatment of a rare 18th century Chinese print in a hanging scroll format titled *Scenic View of Yueyang Tower* (fig. 2). This unique print, part of a private collection, was on loan to the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) and displayed during the *China's Southern Paradise: Treasures from the Lower Yangzi Delta* exhibition from September 10, 2023, to January 7, 2024.

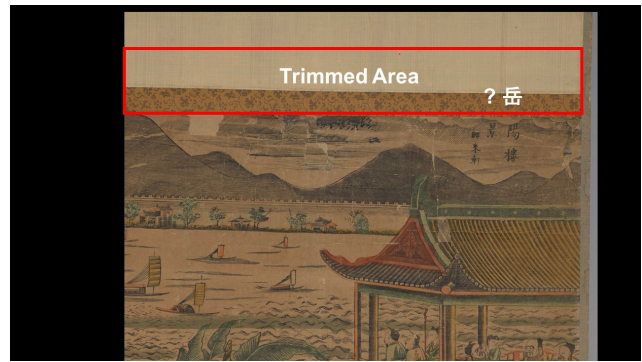


Fig. 3. The top edge of this print, potentially trimmed off during a previous remounting. Courtesy of David Brichford.

The print depicts the gathering of the Eight Immortals (八仙, *baxian* in Chinese). It has significant damage in the clouds and central figures, with two Chinese characters missing from the top edges. Specifically, the characters “yue” (岳) and another unidentified character are missing. Another missing character could possibly be “seng” (勝). This suggests that the top section may have been trimmed by the mounter due to damage (fig. 3).

In the upper section of the print, the lines in the sky and clouds were misaligned, with some pieces incorrectly placed (fig. 4). This area also suffered from notable losses. Additionally, the repair of the roof was not ideal, as it failed to integrate with the surrounding areas. Another issue was observed in the lower portion of the print, where two figures were depicted. The previous retouching efforts did not account for the stylistic requirements of a woodblock print, and the overall execution was rough, resulting in an unsatisfactory outcome (fig. 5). These issues highlighted the need for a meticulous and thoughtful approach to restoration, balancing traditional techniques with modern conservation ethics.



Fig. 4. The sky section showing misplaced outlines, misaligned lines, and several areas of loss. Courtesy of David Brichford.



Fig. 5. A significant loss in the figures with improperly executed inpainting. Courtesy of David Brichford.

Imitative Inpainting Using Creative Infilling Techniques

After several discussions with the curator and the owner, a decision was made to use imitative inpainting to maintain the Chinese aesthetic and historical integrity. This approach required reconstructing the losses and ensuring continuity in the images and background by correctly placing the misplaced fragments and by finding a solution to perform inpainting that matched the original state as closely as possible.

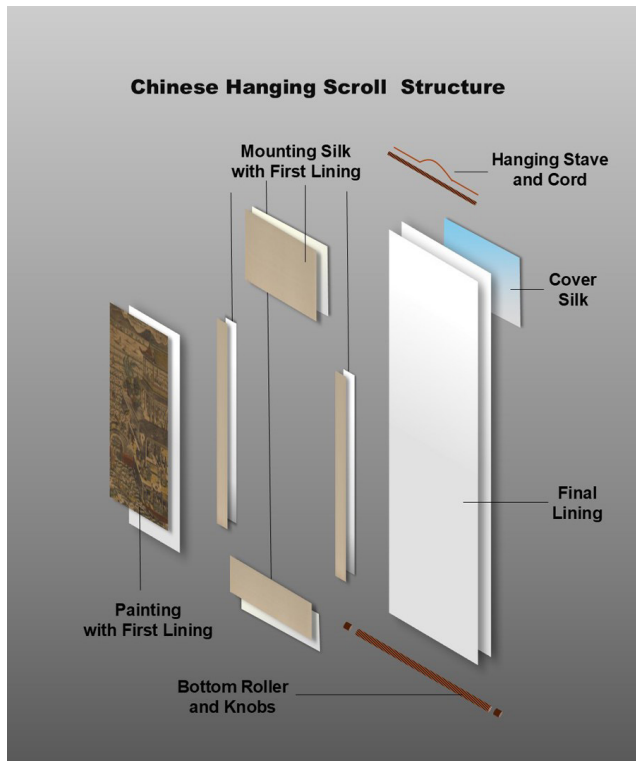


Fig. 6. Structure of a basic one-color Chinese hanging scroll.

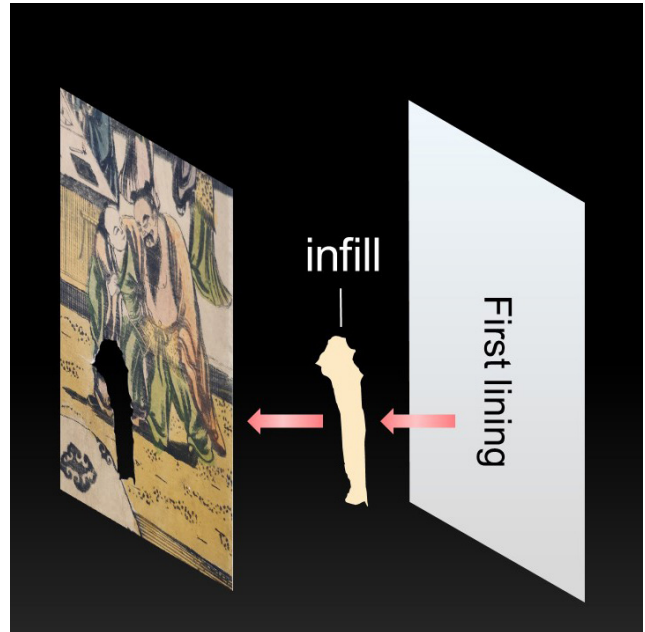


Fig. 7. The structure of direct infilling method.

This print is “rare” because it is the only known example that could be found. As a result, no comparable object could be used as a reference, especially for the inpainting process. The challenge was how to inpaint the losses to satisfy traditional mounting practices and Chinese aesthetics while meeting modern conservation standards.

When proceeding with treatments, the infilling and inpainting processes must be completed during remounting. Figure 6 shows the structure of a Chinese hanging scroll. After removing the old mounting silk and linings, the inpainting process is usually carried out after the artwork has been lined and dried on the drying wall before adding new mounting. Traditionally, there are two methods to infill the losses:

1. *Direct infilling on the verso*: This method involves infilling directly on the verso of the painting before applying the first lining (fig. 7).
2. *Infilling after lining*: This method involves doing the lining first, then infilling on the back of the first lining. The idea is to push lining paper into the losses, known as *yinbu* (隱補) in Chinese, which literally means “invisible infilling” (fig. 8).

After infilling, the artwork is flattened on the drying wall, and the restorer begins inpainting. Since inpainting is done directly on the infilled substrate or the lining paper, either method has limitations of reversibility, as any changes will require a full remount in the future.

For this project, a Japanese inpainting technique known as *hoshi hosai* (補紙補彩), which can be called *reversible infilling*

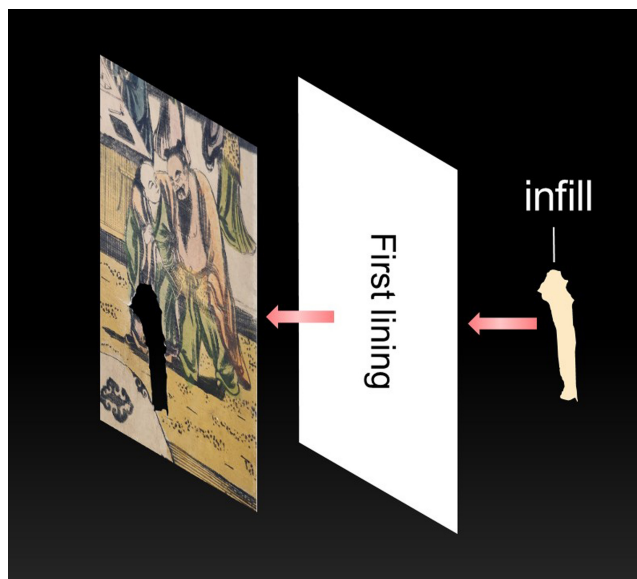


Fig. 8. The structure of the *yinbu* technique: infilling after the first lining.

and inpainting, was used (fig. 9). This fascinating technique was presented by Handakyuseido, a conservation studio accredited by the Association for Conservation of National Treasures in Japan, and was discussed by Mr. Handa Masaki during a 2006 talk in Taiwan (note 1).

Unlike traditional methods, *hoshi hosai* provides better reversibility. At the heart of this technique lies the use of thin infill paper, carefully cut to outline the lost areas, ensuring a precise fit to the damaged portions of the painting (fig. 10). In this project, a thin Chinese *Xuan* paper is chosen to match the texture of the original print substrate. Before the paper is affixed, a mixture of funori and wheat starch paste is applied to its back. Once the paper is securely inlaid, the losses are then inpainted. The infill acts as an isolated layer, which can be removed by simply applying water without requiring full remounting.

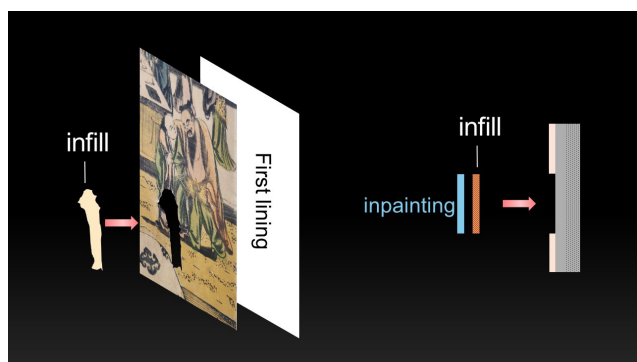


Fig. 9. The structure of the *hoshi hosai* technique: reversible infilling and inpainting.



Fig. 10. Prepared infills with precise fitting for the areas of loss.

This innovative technique offers a practical solution that respects both traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern conservation standards, providing a reversible method to restore the integrity and beauty of the artwork.

Inpainting Proposals

Given the absence of a reference object, the reconstruction of losses relied on thoroughly examining the surviving sections of the print to devise appropriate inpainting passages. The process began with composing mockups on spare sheets of paper to explore different inpainting approaches. Inpainting the sky fragments and addressing areas of loss were relatively straightforward, but the figures section was more challenging. The complexity of the figures' gestures and drapery required particular care in reconstructing the significant losses.

The author, alongside a dedicated team from the conservation department at the CMA, collaborated to devise and evaluate several proposals for the inpainting process. The team consisted of Dean Yoder, senior conservator of paintings; Julianna Ly, associate conservator of paintings; Sara Ribbens, conservator of Asian paintings; Mark Spisak, conservation technician; and David Piurek, paintings and frames technician. Together, we developed six initial proposals (fig. 11). After extensive discussion and careful reviewing with the curator, two of those proposals were selected for further refinement.

The final proposal was created based on its ability to reconstruct the loss in a way that appeared both logical and natural. Several key factors guided the final selection. The figures' body gestures had to be reconstructed in a way that would make sense within the original context of the artwork. For example, the figures' legs needed to be positioned in a way that maintained a natural alignment with the body's overall posture, ensuring that the reconstructed pose was both anatomically correct and visually coherent. Additionally,



Fig. 11. Six inpainting proposals created for the large loss in the figures.

the drapery of the figures' robe had to flow naturally, ensuring that the reconstructed folds and movement of the fabric blended seamlessly with the remaining portions of the print. By considering these elements, the final proposal achieved a reconstruction that integrated harmoniously with the original artwork (fig. 12). A challenging part of the entire inpainting process was using brushes to replicate the texture of the original print, ensuring a seamless blend between the newly inpainted areas and the existing sections of the artwork. This required meticulous precision to achieve a unified and coherent final result.

Adhering to Modern Conservation Principles

The modern conservation principle emphasizes keeping treatments and materials as simple as possible. Therefore, the focus was on using only three primary colors—yellow, blue, and red—to inpaint the losses. When considering the color wheel, these three colors can be mixed to create a wide range of hues (fig. 13). In rare cases, black was used if necessary.

The pigments used for this project were Holbein Artists' Pigment in Permanent Yellow Light (PG032), Oriental Blue (PG085), and Peony Red (PG008) (fig. 14). These are organic powdered pigments which are prepared for use in inpainting by using gelatin as a binder. These inpainting materials are



Fig. 12. Final version of selected inpainting proposals with outlines.

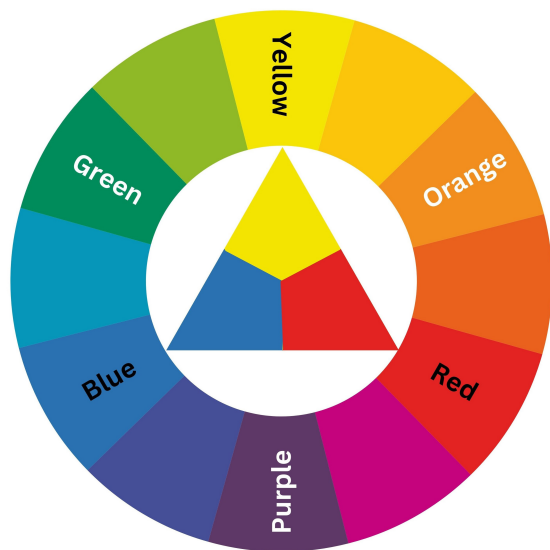


Fig. 13. Color wheel illustrating the primary colors and the hue system.

lightfast and stable, and they were introduced for inpainting in Asian painting conservation in Japan. Additionally, these pigments offer enhanced visibility under ultraviolet (UV) light, which helps to differentiate the original elements by making the treatment areas easier to identify. Because of this, it was possible to inpaint the losses as closely as possible to adhere to traditional Chinese practices while meeting modern conservation standards (fig. 15).



Fig. 14. Holbein Artists' Pigment used in this project: Permanent Yellow Light (PG032), Oriental Blue (PG085), and Peony Red (PG008).

CONCLUSIONS

This article offers a practical method for imitative inpainting, acknowledging its necessity within traditional Chinese aesthetics. The key to the approach was designing an inpainting method that satisfies both Chinese traditions and modern conservation standards. By affixing paper inserts within the losses and utilizing detectable pigments, the aim was to preserve the



Fig. 15. Comparison of inpainted areas: a. Sky and roof section: before treatment (left), after treatment (center), and after treatment under UV light (right); b. Figures section: before treatment (left), after treatment (center), and after treatment under UV light (right). Courtesy of David Brichford.



Fig. 16. Comparison of before and after treatment (overall image). Courtesy of David Brichford.

integrity of the original artwork while ensuring reversibility. The *hoshi hosai* technique, with its focus on reversibility and minimal intervention, allows for careful integration of inpainted sections without compromising the original work. Using primary colors and stable, lightfast pigments ensures that the inpainting endures over time and remains identifiable under UV light, aiding future conservation efforts.

This case study of the 18th century Chinese print *Scenic View of Yueyang Tower* demonstrates the challenges and solutions involved in reconciling traditional Chinese conservation practices with contemporary standards. The inpainting result is quite promising, especially when comparing the before and after treatment images (fig. 16). While the goal is not to achieve flawless inpainting, this work underscores the importance of thoughtful, reversible methods that respect both the artwork's original aesthetics and modern conservation ethics. This approach contributes valuable insights and techniques to the ongoing evolution of Chinese painting conservation.

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NOTE

1. The author attended Mr. Honda's presentation at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts in Taichung City in 2006.

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