

# The Artistic Life of Li Gonglin

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**Abstract:** In the Northern Song Dynasty, Li Gonglin (1049 - 1106), a scholar and official, returned to his hometown to create Longmian Mountain Villa. Against the backdrop of the Northern Song Dynasty's blessing of literature and suppression of the military, the prosperity of the commodity economy and the rise of literati painting, he practiced under the tutelage of renowned artists and was influenced by friends such as Su Shi, who fused courtyard painting, literati painting, and Zen ideology. He is known for his "white drawings", which transformed the norms of courtyard painting and turned painting into a vehicle for emotional expression. He is known for his exquisite characterization, his high achievement in painting Taoist and religious themes, and his achievements in the study of ancient artifacts, making him an important figure in the history of painting.

**Keywords:** Li Gonglin; Northern Song culture; Painting art

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## 1. Social and Cultural Characteristics

Historian Chen Yin Ke once said, "the culture of the Chinese nation, after thousands of years of evolution, the creation of the ultimate in the Zhao-Song era."<sup>[1]</sup> the Northern Song Dynasty was established at the end of the Tang Dynasty after the war of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, strengthened centralized power, the implementation of the policies of the Youwen suppression of martial arts, and improve the imperial examinations, the literati were able to enter the civil service.

The prosperity of the commodity economy drove the rise of cities and the establishment of the new compartment system. The population of Bianliang in Tokyo increased dramatically, and Meng Yuanlao's "Record of Dreams in Tokyo" and Zhang Zeduan's "Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival" showed the prosperity of Bianjing and its citizens' living style. Political stability and economic development laid the material foundation for cultural progress. Emperor Taizong of Song Dynasty set up the Hanlin Painting and Drawing Academy, and the favorable conditions and the emergence of "painting science" led to the unprecedented development of the Academy-style paintings, which were dominated by landscape paintings, flower and bird paintings, and among the figure paintings, there was a breakthrough in the paintings of Wu Zongyuan and Li Gonglin on the subject of spiritual activities. Inheriting the techniques of the Tang Dynasty and emphasizing the "law", courtyard painting also developed towards secularization as Song people focused on inner cultivation, forming an aesthetic style of "elegance and vulgarity" that combined the functions of government, education, record and decoration.

Song dynasty heavy literature atmosphere, papermaking, printing so that the popularity of reading, for literary creation to provide conditions. Northern Song Ru kiln porcelain industry to pursue simple and elegant, its shape and glaze reflects the aesthetic interest of subtlety and simplicity. The prosperity of Song painting is the result of history and society, literati painting, courtyard painting, missionary painting each has its own characteristics, the political and cultural changes in the Northern Song Dynasty to promote the transformation of painting styles, but also become the basis for understanding the art of Li Gonglin's paintings.

## 2. The aesthetic trend of literati painting

Gu Kaizhi of the Wei and Jin dynasties laid the theoretical foundation of painting with his "moving thoughts to write God in form" and Xie He of the Southern Dynasties with his "Six Methods". After entering the Song Dynasty, the idealized art of the Tang and Five Dynasties conformed to the literati's emphasis on the view of form and spirit, and turned to exploring the inner spirit of the image, forming a view of painting that pursued idealistic spiritual modeling.<sup>[3]</sup> The "Painting Jiji" emphasizes the connection between painting and literature, and Su Shi's point of view that "when discussing painting in terms of resemblance, one should see the children's neighbors" highlights the importance of the concept of form and spirit in the theory of literati painting.

Artistic performance, the Song Dynasty before the pursuit of painting more "magnificent rich and beautiful", favoring the missionary, heavy form light content; Song Dynasty focus on inner cultivation, the realization of the integration of form and content. Artistic style, the Northern Song Dynasty figure painting both the continuation of the Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties period of elegant aesthetic, but also affected

by the literati painting trend, the return of ink and wash lines, show the show of elegant interest, from the “magnificent” to “aesthetic”.

The rising status of literati and the construction of literature prompted a change in the style of Song painting. Chen Shizeng proposed that literati paintings should have the four elements of “character, learning, talent, and thought,”<sup>[4]</sup> and Li Gonglin met this criterion. “Poetry and painting as one” became the ideal of Song painting, and Guo Xi and Zhang Shunmin emphasized that poetry and painting were intertwined, and many painters were skilled in poetry, calligraphy, painting, and sealing. The exchange between literati also promoted the development of literati painting.

As a representative of literati painting, Li Gonglin painted a wide range of subjects. He was different from the literati painters who purely splashed ink and expressed their feelings, but on the basis of the superb painting style of courtyard painting, he incorporated literati interests, changed the courtyard norms, and enhanced the painting with poetic meanings. Historian Tang Lan pointed out that Li Gonglin demonstrated the unique charm of literati painting by combining the mastery of courtyard painters with his status as a literati.<sup>[5]</sup>

### 3. Influence of predecessors and friends

According to the historical records such as “Song History” and “Xuanhe Painting Records”, Li Gonglin studied the famous artists of the previous generations such as Gu Kaizhi, Lu Tanwei, Zhang Shengxiao, Wu Daozi, etc., and collected the strengths of all of them and “set up his own ideas”. In order to paint Taoist and interpretive subjects, he interacted with monks and incorporated the understanding of the literati into his creations, with both the creativity of Wu Daozi and the panache of Wang Wei in his brushwork and ink, “borrowing from the past and opening up to the present” in the cultural environment of the Northern Song Dynasty to create a new painting language.

In terms of painting creation, Li Gonglin started from saddle-horse painting, and followed the concept of Han Gan and Wei Yan's “Teaching Nature”. He was praised as “close to Wu Daozi in Taoism and interpretation, and better than Han Gan in saddle-horse painting”<sup>[6]</sup>, and Xia Wenyan even called him “the first in Song painting”<sup>[7]</sup>. Wu Daozi pioneered the large-scale painting wall of figures with spiritual activity themes, while Li Gonglin led the trend of small-scale scroll painting, transforming painting from a tool of indoctrination to a lyrical vehicle for the literati and scholars.<sup>[8]</sup>

Calligraphy, Li Gonglin's style of writing “in the rules of the special floating, nicknamed the Jin style”, he both “teacher of the ancients”, but also unique, this calligraphic qualities of its “white” line shaping This quality of calligraphy is of great benefit to the shaping of his “white drawing” line.

Li Gonglin was in the midst of the old and new parties in the Northern Song Dynasty, and befriended such literati as Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, and Mi Fu, as well as Wang Anshi. Tao Yuanming's thoughts made him yearn for the mountains and forests, and his friends made him uphold high morals and concern for reality and people's livelihood. The artistic attainments of these literati friends profoundly influenced his painting skills, artistic interests and life choices.

Li Gonglin's “Retro” is not simply an imitation of the skills of his predecessors, but is committed to restoring the aesthetic flavor of “simple and elegant”. His white drawings are presented in a simple and elegant style, incorporating literary connotations and calligraphic strokes, rendering with light ink to show the richness of “rhyme”, accurately portraying the mental temperament of the object, and giving new vitality to the ancient meaning.

### 4. The family schooling personal nature

Li Gonglin was gifted and erudite. His father, Li Xuyi, was the head of the Da Lisi, and was a keen collector of calligraphy and paintings. Li Gonglin was nurtured by this culture since his childhood, and when he was a teenager, he realized the essence of the ancient brushwork. After joining the capital, he had the opportunity to view the authentic works of the sages, and the combination of his family's education, his environment and his own talent resulted in his profound knowledge.

Li Gonglin was not only excellent in painting, but also accomplished a great deal in the study of ancient artifacts and ancient writing. The History of the Song Dynasty recorded that he was “a scholar of antiquity and erudition, long in poetry, and knowledgeable about strange characters”<sup>[9]</sup>, and could accurately determine the order of precedence of bells, tripods, and yi zuns since the Xia and Shang dynasties, as well as the identification of the characters. Shao Sheng five years, the court discusses the authenticity of the jade seal, he is a hammer with professional insights; his assessment of the Chu bell carvings, even more profound research skills, opening the next generation of ancient artifacts research precedent.

In painting, Li Gonglin was known for his delicate and precise expression. The Xuanhe Painting Record praised his characters, which could accurately show different identities, statuses, and character traits, ranging from the scholar of the temple to the man of the field, with his hands and feet, beauty, ugliness, nobility, and inferiority all leaping off the paper, far surpassing that of the world's ordinary painters.<sup>[10]</sup> He was good at both cursive and landscape painting, and in his later years he created the “Longmian Villa”, which is a treasured piece of art, and

his poems and writings were highly praised by the people of the time.

Li Gonglin was of a noble and liberal temperament, and was fascinated by calligraphy and painting all his life. In his early years, he was famous for his horse paintings, but later he focused on figure subjects, from copying to originality, and always studied diligently. Even in his later years, when he was ill and secluded in Longmian Mountain Villa, he still practiced his brushwork on his deathbed, emphasizing both impromptu waving of the brush and elaborate creation, leaving behind a large number of masterpieces.

In short, during the Northern Song Dynasty, cultural aesthetics tended to be “bland”, and multiple factors mingled and coexisted, providing Li Gonglin with a unique creative environment. With his outstanding artistic achievements and profound academic background, he occupies an important position in the history of painting, and his artistic value has been widely recognized by the academic community.

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