

China (Asia, Ch'ing Dynasty, Ch'ien Lung reign, 1736-95)

***Jade Mountain Illustrating the Gathering of Poets at the Lan T'ing Pavilion*, 1784**

Light green jade

H. 22½ x W. 38¾ x D. 19 inches

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## **Theme**

Nature has been the primary source of inspiration for Chinese artists for centuries. Equally important has been a reverence for the past. The artist who created the *Jade Mountain* followed both of these traditions. The particular event that inspired this artist was a gathering of poets that occurred nearly 1400 years earlier in 353 A.D.

## **Background**

This work symbolizes the long-standing Chinese cultural values associated with landscape and nature. The landscape theme is rooted in a philosophy of nature that can be traced to Confucian and Taoist precepts formulated as early as the 6th century B.C. The ideal of this philosophy was to be in harmony with the fundamental laws of the universe. Taoist philosophers taught that the way to spiritual understanding and peace was through contemplation of the beauties and mysteries of nature. The followers of Confucius drew their wisdom from the "natural order of things." From these philosophies the belief emerged that a harmonious existence pervades the universe, and that human beings, in recognizing the elemental powers, should seek to live in conformity with them.

Chinese poets and painters have sought to express this philosophy in their work. The Chinese were the first to make landscape a dominant theme in painting. A worthy picture had to evoke a poetic inner reality rather than just an outward likeness of form. Artists sought to convey the vastness of nature and the relative insignificance of humans within the cosmos. This philosophy was expressed in a respect for environment that valued landscape as a place to seek spiritual tranquility.

Jade mountains like this one were carved to represent the magnificent mountain landscapes that were so valued by Chinese philosophers, writers, and artists for over twenty centuries. They are the translation of the Chinese painting tradition into sculpture.

The Chinese consider jade to be the most sacred and treasured of all precious stones. Their word for jade is *yu*, meaning pure, precious, noble, and "right." Its physical characteristics were believed to express the greatest virtues of mankind: soft, smooth and glossy, like benevolence; fine, compact, and strong, like intelligence; angular—though not sharp or cutting—like righteousness; internally radiant like faith; pure of sound when struck, like wisdom; and able to be broken, but not bent, like courage.



Jade is not native to China. To obtain the precious stones, caravans often traveled as far as 2,000 miles across difficult terrain to mine deposits in Afghanistan, Siberia, Tibet, and Burma. By the time this was carved China had annexed the area of Turkestan where the jade for this piece was found. (It is located in today's Sinkiang province.) Once the jade was found, it was an arduous task to remove it from the mountains. The largest slabs, for objects like the *Jade Mountain*, were laboriously chiseled away from the surrounding rocks.

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts' *Jade Mountain* was created during the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1912), which was the last period of imperial rule in China. The Ch'ing Dynasty ruled through traditional Chinese institutions of government, philosophy, and religion. Its rulers also had great respect for Chinese cultural tradition and sought to preserve the great achievements of the past and to encourage the arts of the present. One of the foremost patrons of scholarship and art was the emperor Ch'ien Lung (chee-en long), who ruled from 1736 to 1795. His reign is regarded as the last truly creative period in the history of Chinese art. Ch'ien Lung, who commissioned this piece, was himself a prolific painter, calligrapher, and poet and his collection of Chinese paintings of all periods was one of the greatest ever assembled.

### ***Jade Mountain***

*Jade Mountain* was carved from one of four unusually large blocks split from a boulder found in Turkestan (a region in central Asia between Iran and Siberia, now considered today's Sinkiang province). Weighing 640 pounds, it is the smallest piece from that series but is considered to be the largest piece of carved jade in the western hemisphere.

*Jade Mountain* illustrates a poetry gathering held at Lan T'ing (the Orchid Pavilion) near K'uai Chi (gwi jee) Mountain in Chekiang province, where on March 3, 353 A.D., the gentleman-poet Wang Hsi-Chih (Wong She Jurr) invited 41 of his scholarly friends. Relaxing along the banks of a meandering stream where orchids grew in abundance, the group consumed wine from cups that floated downstream, contemplated nature, and composed poems for the occasion. These were later assembled by Wang, who immortalized the historic party for future generations in a long poem entitled *Prelude to the Orchid Pavilion*. Composed of 324 characters in 28 lines, the text is a rather sophisticated philosophical discourse on the meaning and enjoyment of life, death, the past and the present. Because the Chinese consider calligraphy to be the highest of all art forms, and because Wang was regarded as the greatest of all calligraphers, many copies of his poem were soon in circulation. It has received great attention and respect from artists, poets, and calligraphers in China and Japan ever since.

Jade is very difficult to carve. The skill of the artist in rendering this scene is evident in the details of the crisply defined ridges of the hills, the leaves on each tree, the delicate cups floating down the brook, and each tiny figure walking the mountain paths. Equally remarkable is the delicately inscribed calligraphy on two sides of the mountain. The long poem seen on the front is Wang Hsi-Chih's famous preface. Its inclusion here is a reminder of the importance of the past and tradition in Chinese art. In addition to the poem, written centuries earlier, all the subject details described in the poem are depicted on *Jade Mountain*: a mountain landscape with scholars, pavilions, and wine cups. On the back is a poem by the emperor Ch'ien Lung. (Translations of both are found on

page 8.)

The incorporation of these poems into the sculpture illustrates the Chinese belief that calligraphy and poetry are integral parts of an artwork. As early as the 11th century, scholar, painter, poet, and calligrapher were often the same person. Rulers considered themselves the scholarly elite, so it is not surprising that an enlightened connoisseur and patron like Ch'ien Lung, living in the 18th century, would commission such a work as the *Jade Mountain* and compose his own verse for the back. It was not just a reverent tribute commemorating the historic event of a poets' gathering, nor merely a decorative triumph of the jade-carver's art, nor yet another copy of the famous poem. Rather, it was a combination of all of these things, uniting in one work the best of the past and the present and embodying for the emperor and other viewers the important virtues of scholarly activity, love of the arts, and unity with nature.

## **Technique**

Ch'ien Lung established palace workshops in several cities to produce jade objects for imperial use. The process involved in making large jade mountains like this was time-consuming and expensive. It included eight or nine stages, required several workmen, and took years to complete. Jade, which is an extremely hard material, is worked slowly by drilling, using an abrasive harder than the rock itself, such as quartz dust. Until recently and despite jade's hardness, the power for drilling and carving came only from the artist's hands or from a foot treadle that turned a grinding element. The artist's tools were thought to have been wood or bamboo, while the surface was worn down by causing friction between the abrasive quartz and the damp stone. This type of sculpture that is produced by carving away or removal of stone from a larger piece is called subtractive sculpture.

## **Artist**

Although his name has not come down to us, the artist who conceived and carved the *Jade Mountain* must have been an honored and respected member of Chinese society. The creation of any jade object required great skill, patience, and discipline; in addition to this, the mountain would have called for great scholarship, aesthetic sensitivity, and feeling for life. It is these qualities that transform what could have been merely a demonstration of technical ability into an object intended for poetic contemplation, in keeping with the Chinese reverence for nature.

## •Calligraphic Transcription•

"Prelude to the Orchid Pavilion," Wang Hsi-Chih

In the late spring of the ninth year of the Yung Ho reign (A.D. 353) a gathering was held at Lan T'ing, the Orchid Pavilion, north of K'uai Chi Mountain. The meeting was held to clean and repair the honored graves and all the luminaries came. Young and old alike were gathered together. At this site were steep magnificent mountains of lush forests and elegant bamboo. Here, too, was a clear, rapid running stream, traversing the slope which could be used to float the wine cups. We sat about the banks of this stream. Although lacking the joy of flute and string, a single cup and single poem were sufficient to draw out the deepest emotions. On that day the sky was bright, the air pure and the gentle wind a thing of tranquility. Gazing upward the vastness of the universe could be comprehended; downward one saw the varied abundance of things. All that the mind and eye conceived was best appreciated through the senses. It was a delightful experience! In this generation one is influenced by experiences within his own tiny environment, but one's emotion comes from outside his material existence. Although there are ten thousand moods of fondness and dislike, and a difference between action and non-action, when a man feels joy he is content to know that that feeling may be confined to him alone.

With this acceptance one will never notice the approach of old age. When one is fatigued through thought the feeling is joy, and that emotion will suddenly become a thing of the past. Still, these are the things which excite one's emotions and all achievements and failures are thus transformed and finally come to an end. The ancients stated that birth and death are great events. Such pain! In tracing the course of the emotion involved in building a grave I always feel grieved although I know that birth and death are illusions and that the (legendary) birth of Chi and the demise of Pong are untrue. Our concept of posterity is presently formulated and can be likened to our present view of the past. A sad situation! Therefore, I record and collate all the writings of my contemporaries. Although the occasion may change from this one and although the next generation may be different from this one, what touches one's heart remains the same. Posterity will be inspired by these verses.

Early in the late spring month of the Chia Ch'en cycle (1784, copied by the emperor).  
(Placed above the copy of Wang Hsi-Chih's poem is the seal of Ch'ien Lung.)

### •On the reverse side of the mountain is another inscription, a poem written by the emperor himself:

The mountain of jade of Huo T'ien was large.  
It was carved to represent a literary gathering.

Elders and youth alike comprised the meeting.  
The calligraphy was originally fashioned late in the Yung Ho reign;  
And the writing has been authenticated on numerous occasions since then.  
It pleases me that this colophon is genuine.  
One should ask in this picture,  
Who should be considered to be the man of jade?

By imperial decree, the Chia Ch'en cycle of the Ch'ien Lung reign.

## Suggested Questions

1. How big do you think this sculpture is? **Discuss and then show them with your hands.** How heavy do you think it is? (*640 pounds.*)
2. Can anyone guess what it is made out of? Jade is a very, very hard mineral. Would it be hard to carve? How long do you think it might have taken to carve this? **Briefly describe process.**
3. Is this sculpture all one color? Do you think the brownish color is painted on or is it a part of the stone itself? Have you ever seen a stone with different colors in it?
4. Pretend you are taking a walk in this landscape. Start here. (**Point to either the far right or left sides.**) Tell me everything you see. Do you see any water? (**You will probably have to point out because it is hard to distinguish in the reproduction.**) Is it an easy walk? Do you have to do any climbing?
5. How many figures can you see? How many trees? Are all the trees the same? What do you think the various groups of people are doing?
6. Is there any writing on this sculpture? Where? Does it look like our writing? **Discuss how many Chinese characters there are versus our 26 letters, and that the Chinese read up and down, not from left to right.**
7. This sculpture was commissioned by the Emperor Ch'ien Lung. What does it mean to commission a work of art? Why would the Emperor commission it? His signature seal is somewhere on the sculpture. Can you find it?
8. What might have inspired this artist to carve this particular scene? **Explain the historical significance of the scene.** Do you think the artist had visited this particular place or is he inventing an imaginary place he has never seen?
9. Do you think this artist is more interested in showing us the activities of the people or in picturing nature? Do these people seem to be part of nature or do they seem to intrude on it?
10. The Chinese had to travel far to get this jade. It is also very hard to extract (get out) of the rock. Since it is also difficult to carve, why do you suppose the Chinese loved it so much? What is the most precious thing you have?
11. **Talk about scale.** How does the artist make this landscape appear vast? (*Small people, proportionate scale of people, trees, mountain.*)
12. By looking at the picture, can you imagine how this jade feels? Is it smooth, rough, prickly, silky, etc.? Do you think it would be warm or cool to touch? Would it feel good?

13. Have you seen a marble sculpture in this series? How are these two alike? (*Both subtractive, both have people in them, both are hard materials, both get inspiration from the past.*) How are they different? (*Figures are different in scale, no landscape in Thorvaldsen, carving technique is different, they are from different cultures, etc.*) **If you have discussed these terms ask:** Is this sculpture additive or subtractive? Jade is even harder than marble and the artist has to use some different tools. **Discuss process.** Which would be more difficult to carve—marble or jade? Which would take longer?
14. What might have inspired the artist to create this scene? (*See answers above and add—to commemorate an historic event, to remind people to venerate their ancestors, to instill pride in their Chinese heritage, to evoke a quiet mood, to instill a love of nature, etc.*) Can you think of an historical event that inspired a piece of American sculpture? Do you think the jade mountain was meant for public or private viewing? **Discuss its size.**
15. What important event in your life, in your family or in the country might inspire you to make a sculpture? What material would you use? Why?
16. Calligraphy was highly regarded in China. What is calligraphy? Can you find some on this sculpture? Do the Chinese characters look like our writing? Do we still use calligraphy today? Would you use calligraphy to write: a) a paper for school? b) to write a letter to a friend? c) to make something special like a short poem or name tags? Why?

## **Bibliography**

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