

Poplar, Willow, and Distant Shoals

楊柳遠汀

Dated 1921

Hanging scroll

Ink on paper 53¾ × 14⅝ in.

(136.5 × 37.2 cm)

The Tsao Family Collection of
Modern Chinese Painting

INSCRIPTION:¹

楊柳依依拂遠汀，東風吹我過溪亭。

疏鐘日暮知何處，隔岸遙山一抹青。

辛酉暮春，吳昌碩老缶年七十有八

Poplars and willows flutter, sweep
the distant shoals,

The east wind blows me past a
streamside pavilion.

Distant bell at dusk—from where?

On a hill past the far shore:
one trace of green.

In late spring of the *xinyou* year [1921],

Wu Changshi, Laofou, at the age
of seventy-eight

ARTIST'S SEALS:

Changshi 昌碩 (square/intaglio);

Banri cun 半日邨 (square/relief,
lower left)

LITERATURE:

Wan and Zhao 2010, vol. 1, p. 150,

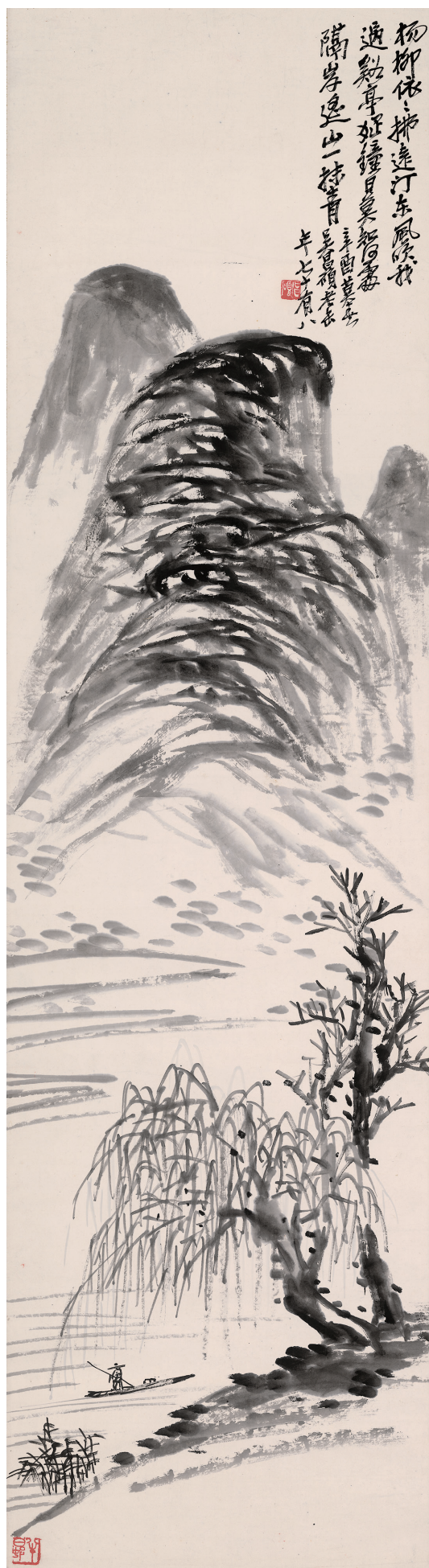
ill. p. 151; *Laofou Wu Changshi* 2011, n.p.

BY 1921, when he created this landscape, Wu Changshi had arrived at the height of his powers in calligraphy, painting, seal carving, and poetry. Other masters of his time were known for the first two or three of these art forms; Wu Changshi alone also excelled in poetry.

The short poem on this painting resonates with contrasting sensorial imagery. As a brisk breeze gives movement to the trees across the river and causes the poet's boat to pass by a place of quiet shelter, a faraway bell announces the approach of evening. Turning inward, he wonders about the source of the bell; then, as if in answer, he extends his focus to a single patch of green, the only spot of springtime color in the distance under the darkening sky. Now in the autumn of his own life, Wu Changshi sees the tender growth and hopefulness of springtime through the lens of the dying day. A place of rest is near but unattainable, yet the sound and the color of life call for attention across the great expanse. Poignant echoes of longing and nostalgia spring from this interplay of tensions as well as from the association of the willow tree with the age-old custom of plucking one of its branches for presentation to a beloved friend at parting. The traditional pairing of the willow with the poplar reinforces the idea of friendship, and the opening phrase, *Yangliu yiyi* 楊柳依依, could be alternatively translated, "Poplar and willow lean on one another." In four brief lines, Wu Changshi uses words to paint a picture that is at once a landscape and a portrait of his own state of mind.

Just as the poem invites the reader to enter the speaker's experience of nature and feeling, this monochrome ink painting uses the same narrative to appeal to the viewer's imagination for participation in its visual construct. The trunks of a willow and a poplar, consisting of mostly saturated, center-tipped brushstrokes, nearly touch at the base; their branches shade the riverbank and frame a man in a skiff near a clump of reeds. A few pale horizontal lines suggest the water's flow, while darker brushstrokes along the opposite shore represent sandy shoals. Further on, scattered dots of vegetation give way to the layered, curving lines of "heaped firewood brushwork" (*luanchai cun* 亂柴皴) that build up into an imposing peak rising in front of two others. In classical Chinese painting terminology, the artist first employs the *pingyuan* 平遠, or "level-distance," perspective in which we view landscape elements from the foreground into the distance along a low, flat sightline. Then *gaoyuan* 高遠, or "high-distance," perspective takes the eye from the base of the central mountain straight upward to soaring heights. The rich, dark ink values of the main hill in the thin, crisp atmosphere of higher elevations counter the fainter tones used to describe the mist-laden air below. As in the poem, the green, luxuriant trees seem to point and wave gently across the water toward the shoals and the looming peaks, which reciprocate by enclosing the narrow pictorial space with a feeling of shelter and retreat. This resonating space accommodates the poem's complementary themes of venturing outward and returning, closeness and distance, and human connection and interiority, and its suggestion of cycles in life and time.

In the 1919 landscape *The Autumn Air Breaks up the Vast Mists* (cat. no. 25), the artist's poetic inspiration similarly comes into play as he interprets the historic one river–two banks schema. While both paintings feature a strong breeze, the earlier scene brims with nature's dynamic energies, a commotion from which one would seek retreat. The 1921 work, on the other hand, creates a natural space that is replete with quiet reflection. The project of "reading" these paintings—studying the means by which Wu Changshi arrives at these distinctive settings with nothing more than brush, ink, and



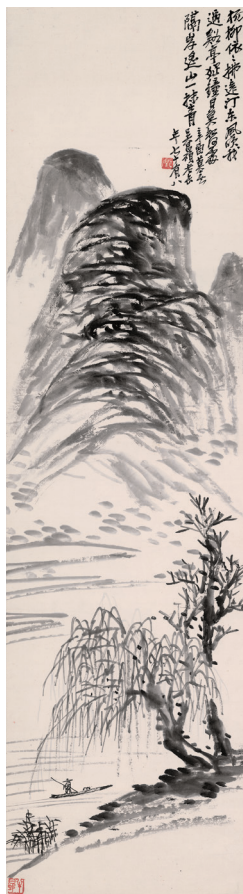
paper—poses a primary challenge to the viewer. The procedure parallels that of reading or hearing a poem: by exploring the words/brushstrokes, one may mentally reconstruct the step-by-step process of creation. Such imaginative observation can bring one into a personal experience of the poet/painter's vision, an experience with the power to transform the way we see the world.

The artist's relaxed manner in *Poplar, Willow, and Distant Shoals* comes through in both the painting, with its straightforward design and leisurely, self-assured brushwork, and in the poem's natural flow through a series of evocative images. With its buoyant calligraphy that appears to flutter in the scene's brisk wind and its two well-placed seals, this work unites the four arts in a single, spontaneous demonstration of artistic mastery and heartfelt expression.

CB & CLY

1. Poem translated by Carol Bardoff. See Appendix A-10 for character-by-character translation.





A-10 (cat. no. 29)

Poplar, Willow, and Distant Shoals

Poplars and willows flutter, sweep the distant shoals,
The east wind blows me past a streamside pavilion.
Distant bell at dusk—from where?
On a hill past the far shore: one trace of green.

楊柳依依拂遠汀，
東風吹我過溪亭。
疏鐘日暮知何處，
隔岸遙山一抹青。

楊柳遠汀

east	dōng	東	楊	yáng	poplar tree
wind	fēng	風	柳	liǔ	willow tree
to blow	chuī	吹	依	yī	gentle
I; me	wǒ	我	依	yī	gentle
pass; past	guò	過	拂	fú	to caress; to sweep
stream; river	xī	溪	遠	yuǎn	distant
pagoda; pavilion	tíng	亭	汀	tīng	sandbar; sandbank
across	gé	隔	疏	shū	sparse
shore	àn	岸	鐘	zhōng	bell(s)
distant	yáo	遙	日	rì	sun
mountain	shān	山	暮	mù	sunset; dusk; twilight
one	yì	一	知	zhī	to know
smudge; patch	mǒ	抹	何	hé	what
green	qīng	青	處	chù	place