

WANG Wei

Wáng Wéi 王维

701–761 Tang poet and painter

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Wang Wei earned himself an enduring reputation in both poetry and painting. His pen name, “Mojie,” was adopted from the Buddhist sutra (one of the discourses of the Buddha that constitute the basic text of Buddhist scripture) *Weimojie jing* (*Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*) and is emblematic of his belief in Buddhism. The synthetic Buddho-Confucian philosophy informed the style of his artwork.

Wang composed his first poem at the age of nine. When he was twenty-one he passed the national *jinshi* (advanced scholar) examination. Upon the political demise of his patron Zhang Jiuling (678–740), a result of corruption of the time, the disappointed poet began to express in verse his intention to retreat from political life. Thereafter he lived a half-reclusive life while enjoying high official positions. In 756 the rebels of An Lushan’s (d. 757) stormed the Tang capital Chang’an (modern Xi’an), from where Emperor Xuanzong (reigned 712–756) fled the bloodshed to Shu (modern Sichuan Province). Wang was captured and forced to serve the rebel government. He was convicted of treason and given the death penalty when the new Tang emperor, Suzong (reigned 756–762), recovered the capital. Evidence of his loyalty to the Tang dynasty was found in a poem

composed in captivity, and his life was pardoned, but he was demoted. This peril facilitated Wang’s conversion to Buddhism. Indeed, the vicissitudes in Wang’s life seemed to parallel those of the high Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) in the eighth century.

Wang Wei’s greatest works of painting and poetry involve themes of reclusion or subtly portrayed political and natural landscapes. In some of his early poetry he presents himself as a knight-errant or a brave soldier. His wife’s premature death and his political setbacks led Wang’s poetic style to a radical change, and he began to load his poetic imagery with philosophical messages. The natural scenes in his later works became more serene, and this serenity of imagery was often employed as a metaphorical presentation of meditation. In the interplay between the scene and the poet’s mind lay the quintessence of his poetry.

The setting for many of Wang’s most famous poems was a villa that Wang acquired in the early 740s that once belonged to the early Tang poet Song Zhiwen (d. 712). Located in the Zhongnan Mountain area in the countryside surrounding the capital, the villa provided a resort with wonderful scenery for his reclusive and artistically productive life. *Anthology of the Wang River*, a collection of poems by Wang and his friend Pei Di, was based on their excursions in the extensive villa gardens and vicinity.

Not much is known about Wang Wei’s paintings because only imitations have survived. Although *The Snowy Brooks* has been regarded as representative of Wang’s work, a false attribution to Wang makes no guarantee that it is at all indicative of Wang’s painting style.



Fu Sheng, as painted in this portrait by Tang dynasty artist and poet Wang Wei.

Su Shi's (1037–1101) famous evaluation of Wang Wei—"If one savours Mojie's [Wang Wei's] poetry, there is painting in it; if one gazes at Mojie's painting, there is poetry in it" (Yang 2007, 191)—guides us in appreciating Wang's work and provides at the highest level of Chinese poetry and painting.

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Further Reading

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WANG Xianzhi ►