



## Artist & Composer Study

This session features six artists from ancient China. We've included six art selections for your kids and teens to use for picture study. They are:

- *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies*, by Gu Kaizhi
- *The Teaching Confucius*, by Wu Daozi
- *Luxuriant Forest Among Distant Peaks*, attributed to Li Cheng
- *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, by Fan Kuan
- *Early Spring*, by Guo Xi
- *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, by Zhang Zeduan

This session features music from several ancient Chinese dynasties. We have included six playlists for music study. They are:

- Music from the Zhou Dynasty
- Music from the Han Dynasty
- Music from the Tang Dynasty
- Music from the Song Dynasty
- Music from the Qing Dynasty
- Traditional & Neo-Traditional Music

*“The landscape has its own spirit and breath.”*

~ Guo Xi

Artist & Composer Study

# Traditional Chinese Art

Chinese art is one of the oldest continuous artistic traditions in the world, stretching back thousands of years. But unlike Western art, which often focuses on realism and individual fame, Chinese art is rooted in **philosophy, harmony, and inner expression**.

It is less concerned with copying the visible world than with understanding it. And it teaches us to slow down, observe, and see both the beauty of nature and the thoughts of the artist behind it.

## Principal Ideas to Understand:

**1. Art as Philosophy** - Chinese artists were deeply influenced by:

- Confucianism (order, duty, tradition)
- Daoism /Taoism (nature, balance, simplicity)
- Buddhism (spiritual reflection)

Art wasn't just decoration—it was a way of understanding life.

**2. Nature is the Main Subject** - Instead of portraits or dramatic scenes, many Chinese artists painted:

- Mountains (strength and permanence)
- Rivers (movement and life)
- Mist and empty space (mystery and the unseen)

This style is called shan shui ("mountain-water") painting.

**3. The Artist's Mind Matters More Than Accuracy** - Chinese painters didn't try to copy what they saw exactly. Instead, they painted what they felt about the subject.

**4. The Three Perfections** - Considered the highest form of art, Chinese art brought together what are often called the "Three Perfections" —

- Painting
- Poetry
- Calligraphy

A single work of art might include an image, a poem written by the artist, and beautifully brushed characters. These elements were not separate but worked together to express a unified idea. In this way, art became a complete form of communication—visual, literary, and expressive all at once.

Through these principles, Chinese art invites us not just to see the world, but to understand it more deeply.

# Gu Kaizhi

(c. 344–406 AD)



Gu Kaizhi is one of the earliest known Chinese painters and is often called the *father of Chinese figure painting*. He lived during the Eastern Jin Dynasty, a time when art was closely connected to literature and philosophy.

Gu Kaizhi believed that the most important part of a painting was capturing the spirit (or “shen”) of a person—not just their outward appearance. He paid special attention to the eyes, which he considered the key to revealing a person’s inner life.

His work often illustrated stories, moral lessons, and poetry, especially scenes involving court life and legendary figures. Rather than focusing on realistic proportions, he used delicate lines and flowing forms to suggest movement and emotion.

His paintings were typically done on silk handscrolls, meant to be viewed slowly and thoughtfully. Gu Kaizhi also wrote about art, helping to shape early Chinese theories of painting and laying the foundation for later artists.

## Featured Artwork:

### ***Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies***

*Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* is a series of scenes traditionally attributed to Gu Kaizhi (but could possibly be a copy from the Tang Dynasty, 500-800 AD), based on a poem that teaches proper behavior for women in the imperial court. Each image illustrates a moral lesson about virtues like humility, self-control, and integrity. The work emphasizes that true beauty comes not from appearance, but from character and wise conduct.

The portion of the scroll we are including is known as the “Rejection Scene,” and is housed at the British Museum in London.

歡不可以瀆寵不可以專實生慳愛則極  
 遷致盈必損理有固然美者自美翻以  
 取尤治容求好君子所沈結恩而絕寔  
 此之由



故曰翼矜福所以興靜恭自思榮顯所期

# Wu Daozi

(c. 680–759 AD)



Wu Daozi was a legendary painter of the Tang Dynasty, often called the “Sage of Painting.” He was especially known for his bold, energetic brushwork, sometimes described as “flying lines,” which gave his figures a sense of movement and life.

Unlike earlier artists who used color and careful detail, Wu Daozi often worked with ink alone, relying on the strength and rhythm of his brushstrokes.

He painted large-scale murals in temples, depicting Buddhist and Daoist figures with dramatic gestures and flowing robes.

Although it is likely that none of his original works survive today, his reputation was so great that later artists tried to imitate his style. Stories about him say that his paintings were so vivid they seemed almost alive, as if the figures might step out of the wall.

Wu Daozi helped elevate painting from a craft to a highly respected art form in Chinese culture.

## Featured Artwork:

### ***The Teaching Confucius***

*The Teaching Confucius*, attributed to Wu Daozi, portrays the great philosopher Confucius in the act of instructing his followers. The composition emphasizes his calm authority and wisdom, as he stands in flowing robes, engaged in teaching. Wu Daozi’s expressive lines bring a sense of life and movement to the figure, while still conveying dignity and restraint. The art piece reflects the importance of learning, moral character, and respectful guidance—core values of Confucian thought.



The Teaching Confucius

# Li Cheng

(c. 919–967 AD)



Li Cheng was an early Northern Song Dynasty painter known for his quiet, atmospheric landscapes.

He often depicted distant mountains, bare trees, and misty scenes that invite reflection and stillness.

Rather than bold lines or heavy detail, Li Cheng used light, diluted ink to create soft forms and a sense of depth.

This technique was sometimes described as “treating ink like gold,” meaning he used it sparingly and with great care.

By allowing space, mist, and subtle tones to shape the image, he helped define the refined and poetic style of Chinese landscape painting that influenced generations of artists.

His paintings were typically done on silk handscrolls, meant to be viewed slowly and thoughtfully. Gu Kaizhi also wrote about art, helping to shape early Chinese theories of painting and laying the foundation for later artists.

## Featured Artwork:

### ***Luxuriant Forest among Distant Peaks***

*Luxuriant Forest among Distant Peaks*, attributed to Li Cheng, presents a quiet and expansive landscape where dense trees rise in the foreground and fade into distant mountains. Using soft, diluted ink, the forms appear to emerge gently from mist, creating a sense of depth and atmosphere.

The painting invites the viewer to move through the scene slowly, from the detailed forest below to the distant peaks above. Its restrained brushwork and subtle tones reflect Li Cheng’s careful use of ink and emphasize harmony, stillness, and the quiet beauty of nature.



Luxuriant Forest among Distant Peaks

# Fan Kuan

(c. 950–1032 AD)



Fan Kuan was a Northern Song Dynasty painter known for his powerful and monumental landscapes. He spent much of his life studying nature directly, especially in the mountains, rather than relying on earlier artistic traditions.

His paintings emphasize the overwhelming scale and strength of the natural world, often showing towering cliffs, dense forests, and rushing streams.

In his most famous work, tiny human figures are placed within vast landscapes, reminding the viewer of humanity's smallness in comparison to nature. His compositions are carefully structured, with strong vertical elements that draw the eye upward.

Fan Kuan believed that the best teacher was nature itself, and his work reflects a deep

respect for its order and majesty. His style became a model for later landscape painters in China.

## Featured Artwork:

### ***Travelers Among Mountains and Streams***

*Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* by Fan Kuan is a monumental landscape painting that shows towering mountains rising above forests and waterfalls. Tiny travelers and animals appear near the bottom, almost hidden within the vast scene.

This contrast emphasizes the greatness of nature and the smallness of human life. Through careful detail and balanced composition, the painting reflects a deep respect for the natural world and invites the viewer to pause, observe, and feel a sense of awe.



*Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*

# Guo Xi

(c. 1020–1090 AD)



Guo Xi was a court painter during the Northern Song Dynasty and served the imperial court with great distinction. He is known not only for his paintings but also for his writings on art, which provide valuable insight into Chinese artistic theory.

In his book *The Lofty Message of Forests and Streams*, he explained how artists could capture the spirit of nature through careful observation and thoughtful composition.

Guo Xi developed the concept of the “three distances” to create depth in landscape painting: high distance (looking up at mountains), deep distance (looking into the scene), and level distance (looking across the land).

His paintings often show shifting seasons, changing weather, and atmospheric effects

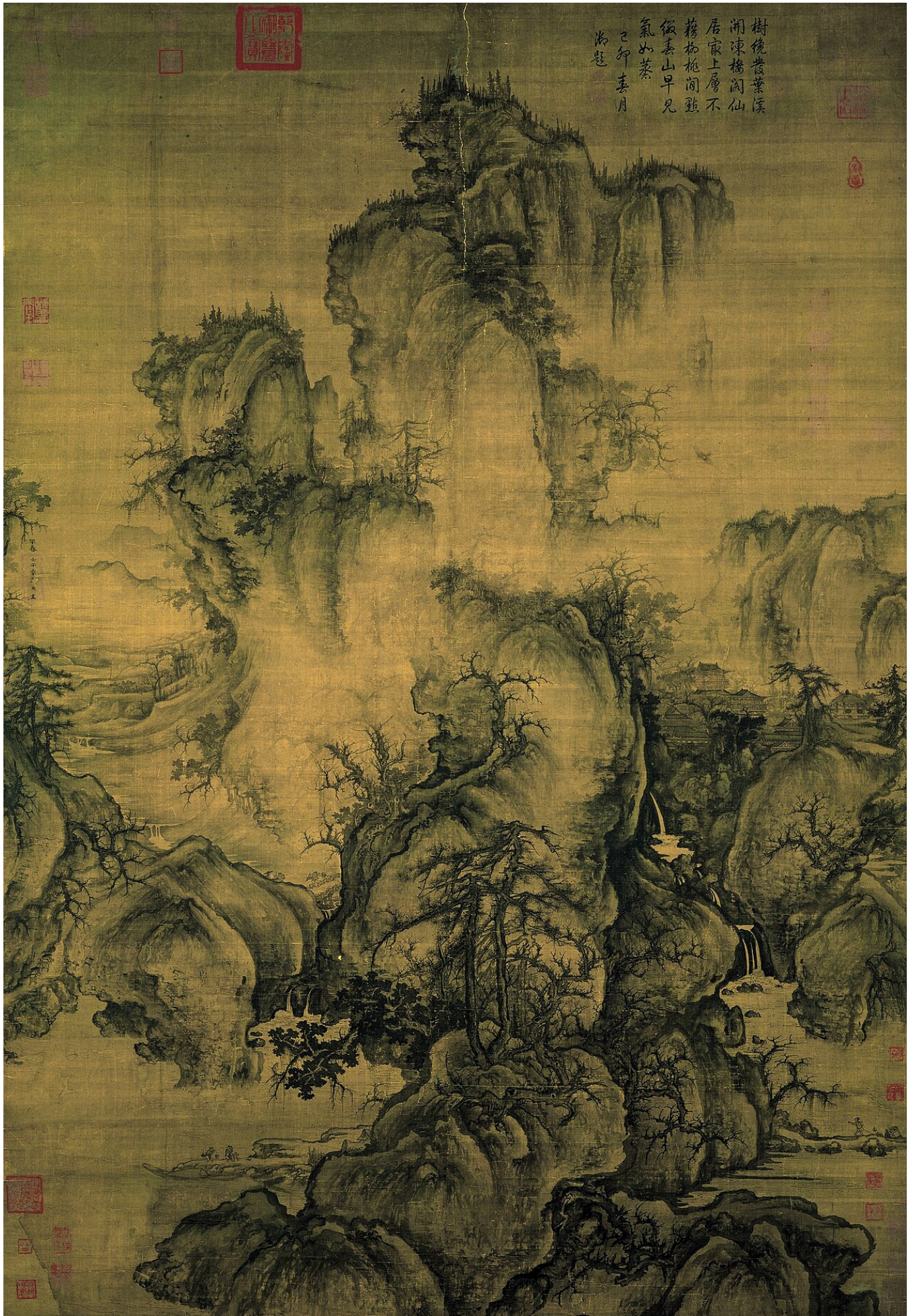
like mist and fog. He believed that landscapes should feel alive and constantly changing, much like nature itself. His work helped refine the techniques of landscape painting and influenced generations of artists.

## Featured Artwork:

### **Early Spring**

*Early Spring* by Guo Xi is a large landscape painting that captures the quiet transition from winter to spring. Mist drifts through towering mountains, bare trees begin to stir with life, and water flows gently through the scene. Rather than showing one fixed moment, the painting invites the viewer to move through it, experiencing different viewpoints and distances.

Guo Xi uses layers, shifting perspectives, and subtle details to create depth and atmosphere. The work reflects the idea that nature is alive and constantly changing, encouraging the viewer to observe closely and appreciate the quiet beauty of the natural world.



樹繞蒼葉溪  
閑凍橋閑仙  
居家上層不  
務松栢間豈  
飯委山早見  
氣如蒸  
己卯春月  
洪題

Early Spring

# Zhang Zeduan

(1085–1145 AD)



Zhang Zeduan was a Song Dynasty painter best known for his detailed and lively depictions of everyday life.

Unlike many artists who focused on nature or spiritual themes, Zhang Zeduan captured the activity of cities, markets, and ordinary people. His most famous work, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, is a long handscroll that shows a bustling city filled with merchants, travelers, boats, and bridges.

This painting is remarkable for its careful observation and storytelling. As the viewer unrolls the scroll, scene after scene unfolds, revealing different aspects of daily life during the Song Dynasty.

It provides historians with valuable information about the architecture, clothing, transportation, and social interactions of the

time. Zhang Zeduan's work stands out because it combines artistic skill with documentary detail, offering a vivid glimpse into the world of ancient China.

## Featured Artwork:

### ***Along the River During the Qingming Festival***

This portion of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* shows a busy city gate and the lively activity surrounding it. People enter and leave the city on foot and with animals, carrying goods for trade. A tall building and gate structure dominate the scene, while nearby merchants and workers go about their daily tasks. The careful detail reveals both the organization of the city and the constant movement of life, highlighting the connection between travel, commerce, and community in the Song Dynasty.

This is just one small portion of the scroll. For a better view, click [here](#), then use your cursor to enlarge the art piece, scrolling left and right, up and down. This scroll is housed at the Palace Museum in the Forbidden City, Beijing, China.



*Along the River During the Qingming Festival*

# Picture Study

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Created: \_\_\_\_\_

Art Mediums Used: \_\_\_\_\_

Further Study: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Use the box to draw a picture inspired by this artwork.**

