

Why Is a Poem Included on a *Literati* Painting?

Core Competency: Global and Cultural Awareness

In Shen Zhou's painting (figure 18.39), the poet stares into four columns of Chinese calligraphy. Written by Shen Zhou when he created the painting, the calligraphy is a focal point on the page. Numerous actual lines on the peak and an implied line following the poet's gaze lead us to the dark, interesting shapes, set off against the blank background. It is almost as if the entire hillside points boldly to the calligraphy. Obviously, Shen Zhou wanted us to focus on the lines, which are a poem. A translation of the calligraphy is as follows:

White clouds encircle the mountain waist like a sash,
 Stone steps mount high into the void where the
 narrow path leads far.
 Alone, leaning on my rustic staff, I gaze idly into the
 distance.
 My longing for the notes of a flute is answered in the
 murmurings of the gorge.¹

Answer these questions considering the painting and the words of the poem and what you know about *literati* painting (figure 18.28) and calligraphy (figure 18.21):

- Why might an artist concerned with a conceptual understanding of nature that comes from his own mind have decided to include a poem on his painting? Why would he include calligraphy?
- Why do you think Shen Zhou located the poem in the spot on the painting where he did?
- What might the words of the poem tell you about Shen Zhou's character and who he was as an individual?
- Considering each line of the poem individually, how well does it illustrate what you see in the painting?
- Why do you think Shen Zhou chose to focus on clouds, a path, the distance, and a flute in his poem, when his painting also depicts other things such as trees and the temple?
- How individualized is the depiction of the poet? How descriptive are the brushstrokes that Shen Zhou used to create the poet? Can you see any of the poet's individualized features?
- Who do you think Shen Zhou represented in the painting as the poet? Why do you think the poet is this person?



FIGURE 18.39. Shen Zhou. *Poet on a Mountaintop* reconsidered.

¹ Tregear 158.