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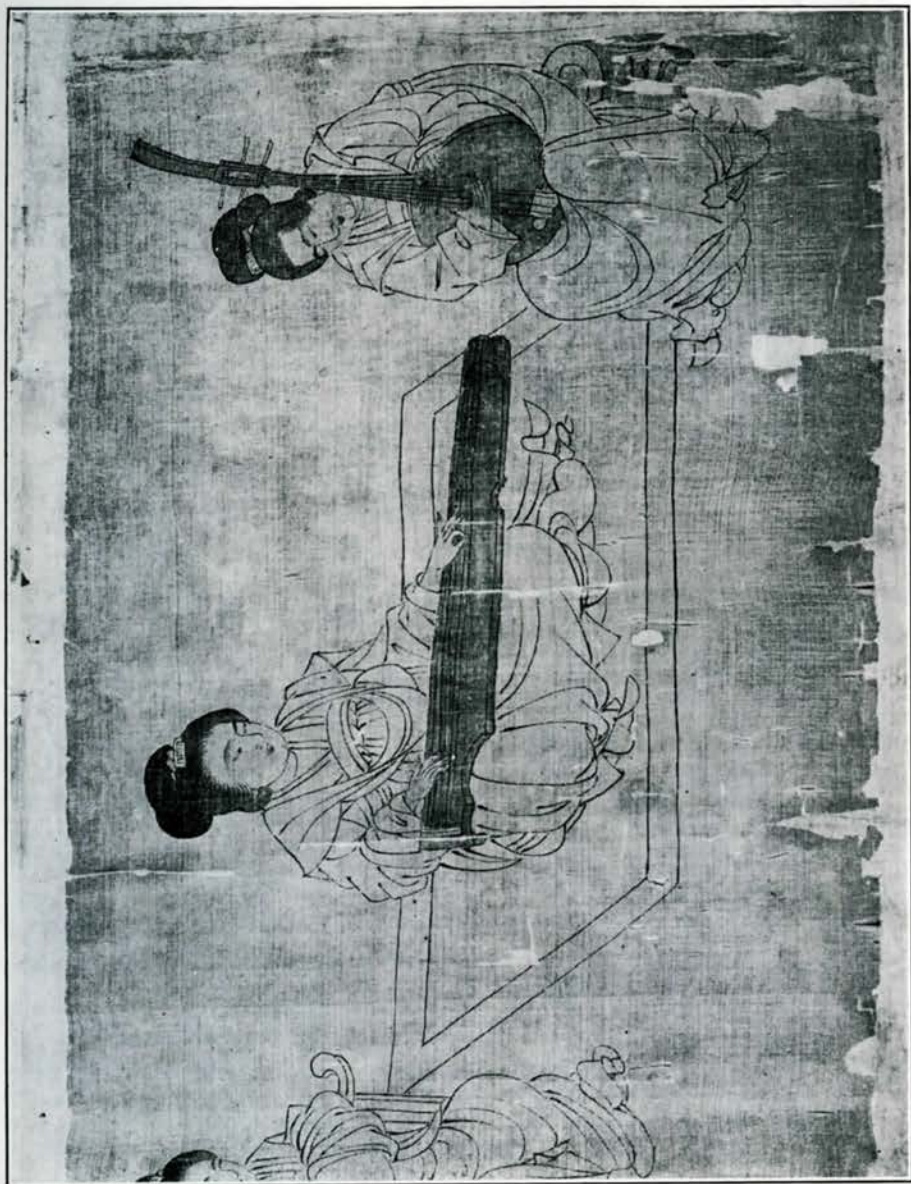
No. 4

LADIES OF THE COURT AN EARLY CHINESE SCROLL PAINTING

BY HELEN E. FERNALD

THE MUSEUM has possessed for some years a Chinese scroll painting which professes to be by the hand of the famous Chou Wên Chü, an artist of the last half of the tenth century A. D. This painting is five and a half feet long—it was originally much longer—and is followed by an inscription of two hundred and twenty-three characters which throws considerable light upon the origin and history of the work. The silk upon which it is painted is golden brown with age and is rather coarse and fibrous. Upon it are painted in delicate flowing outlines the figures of ladies and children, ladies playing musical instruments, sitting on chairs or stools, playing with children, waited upon by little maids, or carrying utensils of some kind. Coiffures are washed in with gray, as are also the musical instruments and occasionally a sash, which results in a pleasing spotting of darks down the length of the painting. Lips and hair ribbons are lightly touched with what is now a faded pink. But otherwise all is in line, line precise and dainty, line thin and crisp, gracefully sweeping but never nervous. The figures are arranged in loose groups without crowding, indeed each one seems to have plenty of air and space around it. There is no background indicated—only those few accessories which are in close connection with the figures. It is a work of great charm and delicacy. The plump but dignified ladies in their "Empire" gowns seem quaint and old fashioned. The painting goes by the name of "Ladies of the Court".

The first group depicted upon the scroll—beginning at the right end—shows some court ladies listening to music played by two of



Musicians.
Beginning of the scroll painting in the University Museum, "Ladies of the Court".



Ladies listening to music.
Detail of the scroll painting, "Ladies of the Court".

their number. This is one of the best passages in the painting. First comes the p'i-p'a player, a lady seated upon a stool with a large guitar-like instrument held nearly vertical in her lap. The p'i-p'a became very popular in T'ang times and there were many varieties of it. This is one of the four stringed types apparently. The body is round, not pear-shaped, and one can make out only four pegs for the strings. The next figure on the painting is that of a plump woman seated upon a mat with a ch'in across her lap. The ch'in was a very ancient type of Chinese musical instrument and was always considered the classical instrument par excellence, a symbol of culture and refinement. It was, in effect, a long narrow board, hollow, with five strings stretched upon it from end to end. In the early Buddhist paradise scenes there is sure to be a ch'in player prominent among the musicians. It was a characteristic Court instrument, so we are not surprised to find it represented on this scroll. The audience listening to these two musicians consists of three ladies seated in a row, one who is evidently of higher rank than the others in an arm chair of elegant simplicity, the two next to her on stools.

There are six figures in the second group. Three are ladies walking beside a small sedan chair towards the first group. The chair is carried by two little maids and is occupied by a young child who has a rosette in his hair and holds a little bird upon his outstretched finger. The lady walking in front carries a pail in her left hand while on her arm perch two billing parrots. As she turns her head to look back at the child she seems to connect the two groups psychologically.

Beyond is a third group, made up merely of three ladies standing around a baby who seems to be just learning to walk. The lower part of his chubby body is hidden in a long skirt but his little fat arms and the tuft of hair over his forehead are entirely adorable. He is holding out his hands towards the slender lady who stands with her back partly turned towards us as she leans forward to catch him. To the left of this little scene are two fine standing figures, a lady with arms raised to adjust some detail of her coiffure and a tall maid who stands in front of her holding out a shallow bowl.

Finally, one sees a woman sitting on the floor with her hands upon a tiny fluffy dog in her lap. In front of her frisks another little dog pursued by two children. Two more children, at the end of the roll, have turned to look back and point at something but

what it was we do not know for the painting ends here abruptly, cut off, it would appear, through the very middle of a scene. At any rate the pointing children indicate that there was once more of the painting than is actually here now.

The silk is very old, badly cracked and split in places, and frayed along the edges. These ragged edges seem to have been carefully trimmed at some time, probably when the painting was last mounted. In fact it was trimmed so closely along the upper edge that the tops of two of the ladies' coiffures were sliced off, although not deeply. The mounting, evidently of far more recent date than the painting, has been most carefully done upon a wider piece of silk. The lost bits of coiffure have been filled out upon this mounting so as to improve the general appearance of the painting. The tone and colour of the mount are more nearly like those of the old silk than is apparent in the reproduction, where the contrast is too great.

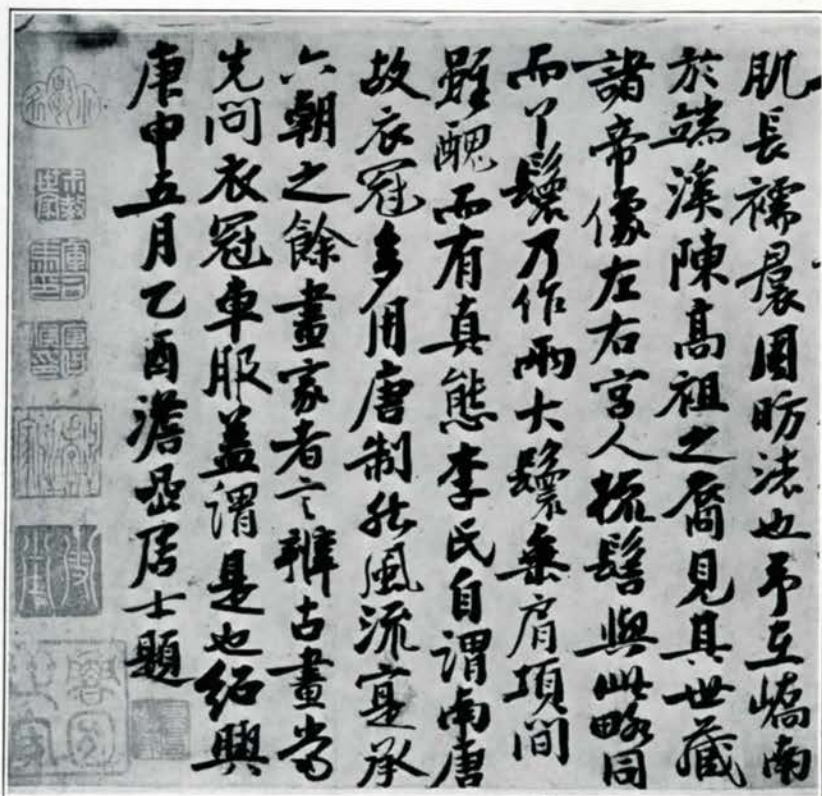
So much for the description of the painting. At the end is the inscription separated from the painting by a strip of brocade and itself written upon paper in a heavy black ink. That it is considerably older than the present mounting is indicated by the fact that it, too, has received a drastic trimming, suffering most at the lower edge, where some of the characters have been sorely clipped. At the beginning of this inscription several red owner's seals have been actually cut in two and at the end appear several more, the largest of which is exactly on the edge. The calligraphy is that of the Sung dynasty, and a delightful example, too, in its rich velvety blacks on the thick, warm-toned paper.

This inscription, which proved to be rather a difficult one to read, has finally been translated by Mr. Quentin Huang. It reads as follows:

"This is the picture of the palace drawn by Chou Wên Chü. The number of women and children is eighty, among which is one man drawn to life. It is adorned with musical instruments, pots, fans, mats, and parrots, but without birds and animals. Wên Chü, a native of Chu Yang, was a Han-lin graduate of Kiang Nan waiting for the Imperial order. When he painted pictures of men and women his style was like that of Chou Fang but with more delicacy and beauty. Once he painted a picture of the Southern Farm for Hou Chu, which is said to be the best piece of painting of the time. Later on the picture was presented to the Court and was ordered

[by the Emperor] to be kept in the secret chamber. This picture of the palace is said to be the real piece [by Chou Wên Chü]. It was kept in the home of the Grand Tutor, Chu Tsai. Some person imitated it to be used as a present. The woman dressing up her hair into a high tuft had been so since the T'ang dynasty. This roll is full of plump persons in long petticoats and jackets in Chou Fang's style.

"When I was in Chiao Nan I saw in Tuan Ch'i the descendants of the Grand Emperor of the Chen dynasty and the emperors'



Conclusion of the text and collectors' seals.

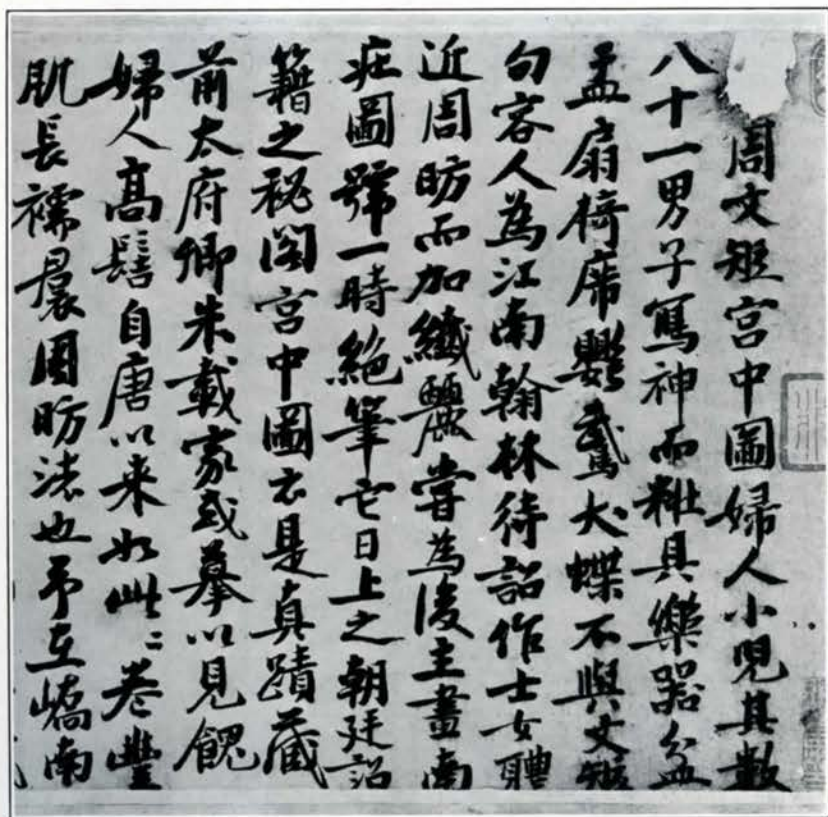
pictures of many generations which they kept. The palace concubine dressed her hair into a tuft similar to this. But the maids dressed their hair into two big tufts hanging down between the shoulders and the neck. Although these were ugly, they possessed the real manner.

"Li himself called the dynasty Southern T'ang and therefore he adopted mostly the clothing and head-dresses of the T'ang system. But the stylish really followed the fashion of the Six dynasties. The

painters have said that to discriminate the ancient pictures we ought to investigate the clothing, headdressing, and carriages which they used. This is what they meant.

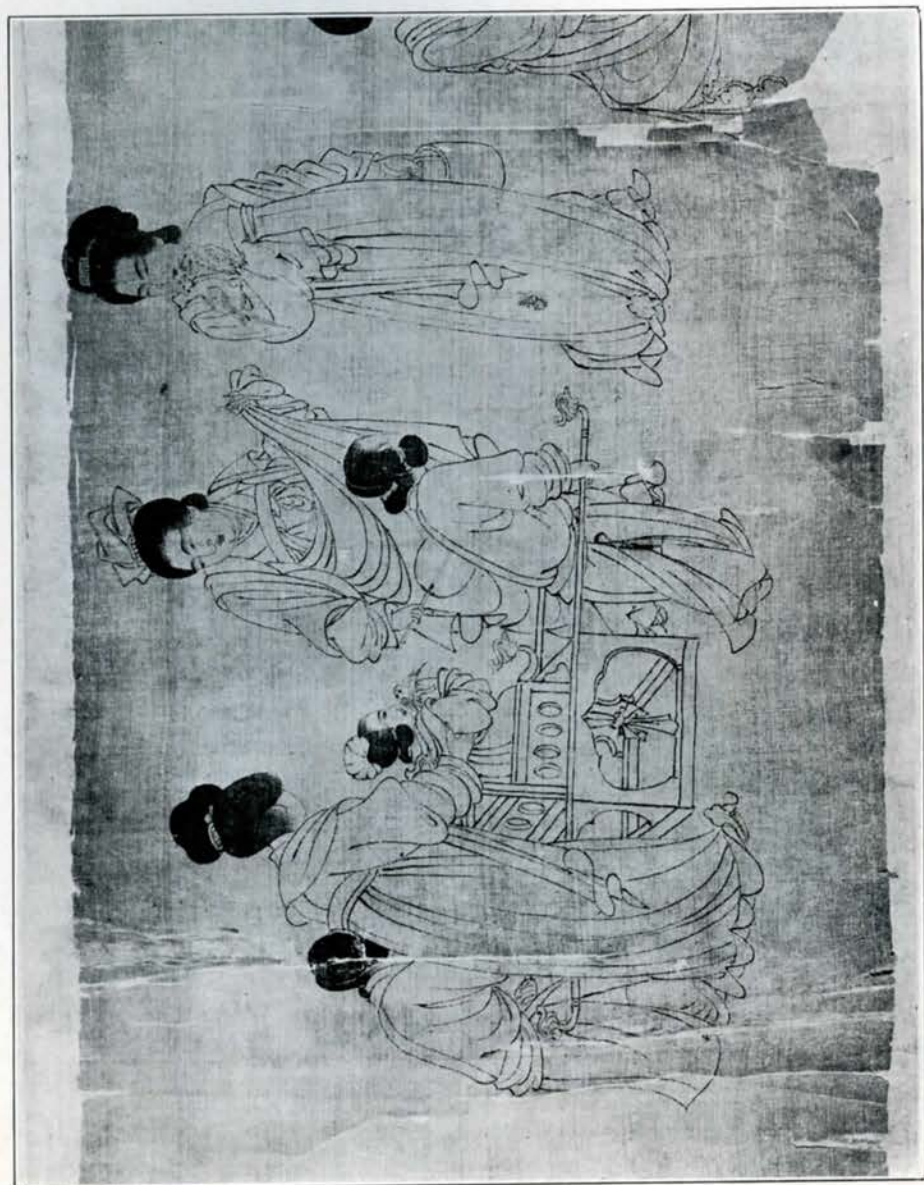
"This was written by Chang Nieh, a retired Buddhist scholar, in the fifth moon of the Kēng Shēn year of Emperor Shao Hsing."

The Li referred to was Li Pien (Hsü Chih-kao), founder of a dynasty in 936 A.D., which he called Southern T'ang. He patronized



Text of the inscription on the scroll painting, "Ladies of the Court".
Written by Chang Nieh in 1140 A.D.

literature and art and tried to reestablish the customs and laws of the T'ang dynasty. His grandson, Li Yü (961-975), third and last ruler of this unrecognized state, was a painter, musician, and scholar of repute. He is the Hou Chu for whom Chou Wēn Chū painted the Southern Farm picture mentioned here. Shao Hsing was the second reign title of Emperor Kao Tsung of the Southern Sung dynasty, a title adopted in 1131 A.D. The Kēng Shēn year occurred in 1140. The inscription bears a number of seals. These are:



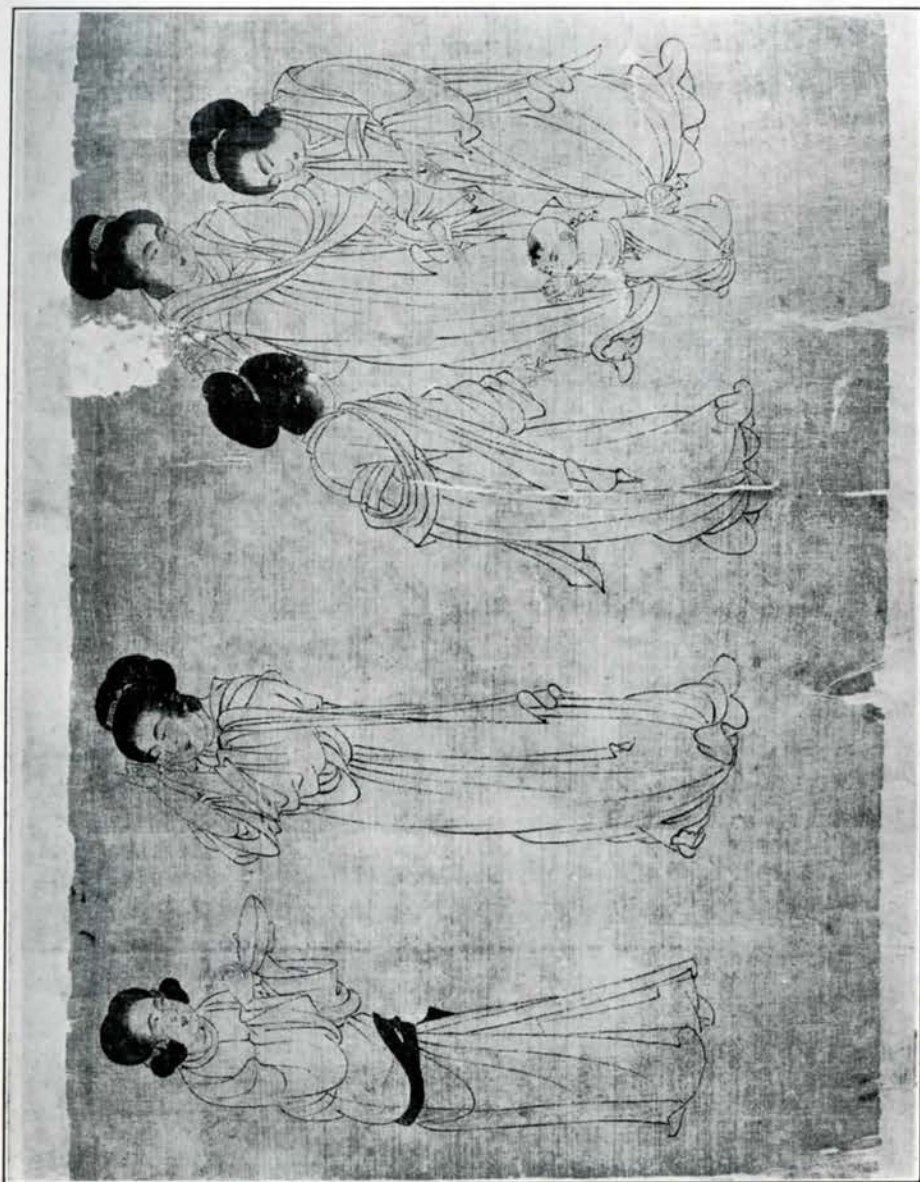
Ladies accompanying a child.
Detail of the scroll painting, "Ladies of the Court". Second group.

A three lobed seal reading "Hsiao Hsieh Chū"; a square one of "Shu Ao Shih Chia"; another square one reading "Chün Szü Ma Yin" or "The Seal of Chün Szü Ma"; the square seal of another member of the Chün family; one reading "Sou T'ang", meaning "Venerable Hall" (a studio mark); three others not yet deciphered and three which are undecipherable.

The title "Ladies of the Court" was not the original name of this picture, as the characters on the outside of the roll, older than the English name at least, read "T'ang Kung Ch'un Hsiao T'u" or "T'ang Painting of a Spring Morning in the Palace". In smaller characters following this we read "Shēn Ti", or "the spirits are present".

The inscription is, I believe, exactly what it pretends to be, a short description with comments by the retired Buddhist scholar Chang Nieh, who wrote it in the year 1140 A.D. It is possible that since the date of his writing the picture he was describing was lost and that this one was substituted for it. It is equally probable, however, that this is the actual painting, or part of it, to which he was referring, since it was the custom in those days to attach such inscriptions to the paintings they described and criticised and they became from that time on almost an integral part of the painting, at least in Chinese eyes. If this latter be the case, then the painting which we have here is as old if not older than the inscription, which dates from 1140 A.D. As a matter of fact, the painting appears to be considerably older than the inscription.

The inscription speaks of eighty, or eighty-one, figures. The roll, then, at the time that Chang Nieh saw it was much longer than at present, for the painting as we have it now contains only twenty-two figures. It has already been remarked that the MUSEUM scroll ends abruptly with the composition and action of the figures indicating that the painting was originally longer. It also begins very suddenly without the usual margin of space at the head of the roll. This might be due to the close trimming but, again, the composition of the music group itself is not what we should expect at the beginning of a long scroll painting. One would expect a mass of figures with line and psychological interest sweeping from it to the left. This music scene is no introduction. At any rate it is perfectly clear that somewhere, at some time, this interesting and lovely painting was divided into two or more parts—parts which have become separated, some perhaps lost.



Child learning to walk and lady arranging her hair.
Detail of the scroll painting, "Ladies of the Court". Third group.

Last summer it was discovered that one portion at least of the rest of the painting, and that a most delightful one, is still in existence. It is owned by Mr. Bernhard Berenson of Florence, Italy, who has kindly allowed us to reproduce parts of it here. At the beginning of his portion is a scene showing the "one man" spoken of in the inscription, occupied in painting a portrait of a court lady. It may well be that Chou Wên Chū has here represented himself at work. The next scene shows three ladies engaged in catching butterflies in a thin gauze cloth. It is a particularly charming group. There are several very beautiful standing figures, notably the two ladies carrying a basin of water between them. Finally, and perhaps best of all, is depicted a woman seated in a chair with her back partly turned to us while two other ladies stand behind her, one seemingly remonstrating with a refractory child. At the end a lady and a maid are bringing up another chair.

The scene of the man painting the portrait might very well have been originally at the beginning of the complete scroll. In view of the fact that we have in Mr. Berenson's picture only sixteen figures, making with those in the MUSEUM scroll a total of but thirty-eight, it is evident that practically one half of the whole is still missing. These two known portions may have been taken from the painting almost anywhere. Still, the composition of the portrait-painting group, like a glorious opening chord of music, its suitability in subject for the introductory scene, and the fact that the halves of two seals show on the right edge beside it, all lend support to the surmise that this may originally have been at the beginning of the painting. Whether the UNIVERSITY MUSEUM portion followed immediately upon the Berenson one it is impossible to tell; it almost certainly did not come at the very end but that is all that can be said at present.

We see the "one man drawn to life" mentioned by Chang Nieh (the characters read literally, "one man draw spirit"). The musical instruments, vessels, fans, chairs, etc., are all there. But what does he mean by saying that there are no birds or animals represented? For the phrase *ch'üan tieh pu yü* (literally "dogs butterflies not with") is an idiom meaning "without birds or animals". Certainly two dogs appear on the MUSEUM scroll as well as a bird, and there is a dog on the Berenson portion. There are butterflies, too, for that matter.

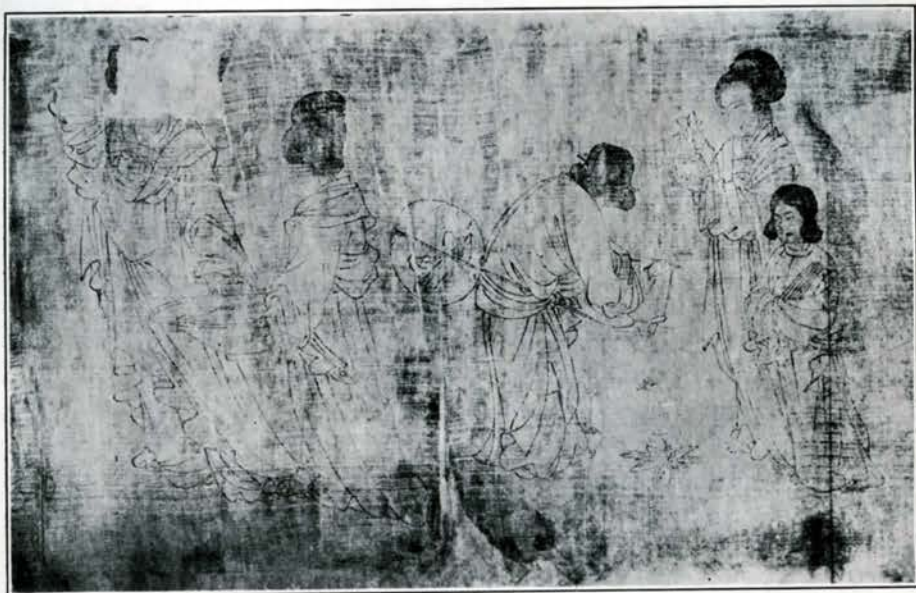
Chang Nieh's remarks about the authenticity of the painting are interesting. "This 'Picture of the Palace' is said to be the real



Lady and children playing with dogs.
End of the scroll painting, "Ladies of the Court".

painting," he observes. "It was kept in the home of the Grand Tutor Chu Tsai." And then he adds as if in parenthesis, "Some person imitated it to be used as a present." We know, therefore, that even at this early date there existed a copy or imitation. Is the painting which we have here the original one by Chou Wên Chü's own hand, or is it the copy which was made soon after? Chang Nieh's statement that it is "said to be" the original conveys to our Western minds the impression that he had a doubt about it and his further remark to the effect that there existed a copy strengthens that impression. However, this may be merely a Westerner's deduction from the English translation of a text the meaning of which is somewhat obscure in places, even to a Chinese scholar. What does the painting itself tell? Is it by the hand of a master or not? Does it have any of the earmarks of a copy or no?

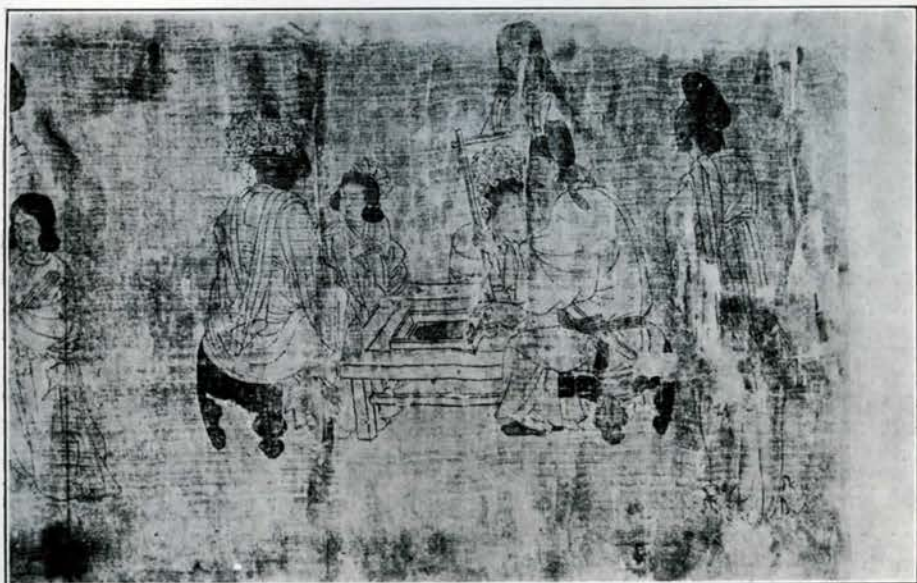
We should expect really great things of Chou Wên Chü. He was one of the most famous painters of his time. He flourished about 970 A.D. and therefore belonged to the period of the Five Dynasties and to Early Sung. Dr. Herbert Giles and others have gathered together references to him from various Chinese sources. He was a native of a district of Nanking, made *tai-chao* (one of the senior officials) in Han-lin College, which was the Imperial Academy of Learning, and his work was, apparently, appreciated by the Emperor of the Southern T'ang state, who bought one of his pictures and sent it to the Imperial gallery. Chou's specialty was the depicting of court ladies and children and in painting their faces he followed the style of Chou Fang of the T'ang dynasty. He had, however, we would conclude, his own characteristic method of representing drapery and edges of folds, a manner which is noticeable in all those paintings which are said to be by him. There are a number of paintings in European, American, and Chinese collections which are attributed to this painter. In the catalogue of P'ang Lai Ch'en's collection there is one entitled "The Noble Woman". The Lai Yuan Company published in 1916 a catalogue of paintings obtained by them from old Chinese collections and among these are two album pieces attributed to Chou Wên Chü, "Viewing Pine Trees" and "Musical Harmony". The latter is rather convincing, if one may judge from the reproduction. In the *Shên Chou* (a Chinese magazine of art published during 1908 and 1909) is the reproduction of a painting said to be by Chou called "The Morning Toilet", depicting two ladies standing in an interior. The Boston Museum of Fine



Catching butterflies and carrying water.
Middle scenes of Mr. Berenson's scroll painting.



Group of ladies.
Last part of Mr. Berenson's scroll painting.



The portrait painting scene.
First part of Mr. Berenson's scroll painting.

Arts has an album piece attributed to Chou showing a child tumbling on a terrace. The British Museum possesses a short scroll entitled "Women and Children on a Terrace". In this children are washing and helping women to cut melons and a woman with a child on her left arm holds out a small doll to a baby who is being bathed in a tub. The composition and style are delightful; the actual execution, however, is now considered to have been done later than Chou Wēn Chū and the painting is probably a copy after one by him. The Musée Guimet possesses a picture also ascribed to Chou called "Goddesses Playing", which depicts three graceful leaf-adorned figures sitting around a chess (or Gō) board under a pine tree.

The best of these works attributed to the master all betray a certain subtle quality of line in the figures which imparts life and movement to them. In the execution of architectural details and properties we see a clear delicate line, drawn in a rather precise manner without being at all mechanical. But in this simple, serene environment the figures appear nervous and highstrung. We have a right to expect this quality of rhythmic vitality in the work of a painter so much admired by the Chinese themselves, who considered it of the highest merit in painting. We may safely conclude that the figures drawn by the great master Chou Wēn Chū would be full of this vitality.

But as a matter of fact we do not find this particular quality to any extent in the MUSEUM or Berenson scrolls. The charm of the figures is undeniable, the flow of the lines, their delicacy and rhythm are captivating. There are passages of pure beauty of design, both in the line compositions and in the arrangement of the darks of the heads. But if one traces the figures one arrives at the conclusion that the artist was finding his delight in the line itself rather than in the delineation of living people. One is struck by the stolidity of the figures—the line flows but the figures barely move. There is none of the fluttering nervous tension of the ladies in the Shēn Chou picture for example, or in the painting of the two musicians. It is the line of a talented copyist drawing from another painting, not that of an artist whose hand feels the figure as his eye follows its curves. The faces are all alike, fat, with thick noses and stupid expressions. They are monotonous.

Lovely as the painting is as a whole it lacks that vitality and power which would mark it the work of a great artist. We cannot help concluding that it is a copy, probably a very early one made directly from the original itself by an artist who shows taste and distinction and much feeling for design, but who lacks the divine spark. Chou's easy composition, quaint figures, and charm of line are there but without his energy and suggestion of living movement. All the tricks of his brush are played upon, the bunched folds of sleeves over the forearm, with their repetition of lines, the way in which hems of skirts curl up in a little series of scallops, the smooth, coiling curve of the edge at the end of a long scarf; but the theme is line and not life. Whether Chou Wēn Chū worked in outline as in this picture, we do not know. All the other works which are by him or which are attributed to him are, so far as we know, in colour.

The question has occurred, of course, as to the relationship of the MUSEUM and Berenson paintings. Unfortunately the author has had no opportunity to examine the Berenson painting or study the two side by side. Judging from a comparison of the MUSEUM scroll with a very fine photograph of the Berenson one, however, there seems little reason to doubt that the two belong to each other. In style of painting they are identical, there are the same schemes of arrangement, tricks of pose, mannerisms in depicting folds and scarfs, there is the same character of the line itself. The first points may mean nothing because they are Chou's, whether in original or copy (a copy would seize upon his characteristics and emphasize them). But

what a copy might fail to catch is that very quality of line which made Chou a master and made his figures alive. The figures of both the MUSEUM and the Berenson scrolls fall short, as has been said, of showing this vitality. They are delightful examples of pure beauty in line design, in which respect they seem to have close artistic kinship with some of the early Japanese wood block prints. Such details as materials and measurements are rather convincing also. The silk appears to be exactly the same in both paintings and it has suffered precisely the same amount and kind of wear and tear. The heights of figures average the same and those which are similar in character and pose are of equal heights. Even the dimensions of faces are identical. The Berenson piece has not been trimmed quite so much at the bottom as the MUSEUM scroll and is therefore a fraction of an inch wider. It seems almost without question that they were once parts of the same painting.

In conclusion, therefore, we may say that although this delightful painting has passed for a T'ang work and was for centuries supposed to be by the artist Chou Wên Chū (who, after all, was a painter of the Five Dynasties and early Sung rather than of T'ang) there is good reason to believe that it is actually an early copy of a picture by Chou, a copy which was made before 1140, judging from the silk, its condition, the general character of the figures, and the evidence of the inscription which accompanies the painting and which appears to be genuine. If this supposition be true we have here a Sung painting of high order which, as a copy or imitation after a great master, reflects many of his best qualities and gives us a work of distinction, beauty, and charm.