R. H. van Gulik, Mi Fu, and Connoisseurship of Chinese Art**

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Abstract

This essay presents a critical overview of van Gulik’s approach to the connoisseurship of Chinese painting and calligraphy by analyzing his three published books on the subject. Disenchanted with the primitive state of the study of Chinese art in the English-speaking world in the 1930s, van Gulik sought to establish a new method and new terminology for analyzing Chinese pictorial art that conformed to the modern scientific spirit. He disparaged most traditional Chinese scholars, finding inspiration only in the Song artist and critic Mi Fu 米芾 whose precise language and empiricist approach to connoisseurship impressed the young Sinologist as the embodiment of the scientific spirit. When compared to the strictly rationalistic criteria adopted by the practitioners of scientific connoisseurship in Europe and America, however, van Gulik’s own performance appears wanting. Although van Gulik’s achievements do not measure up to his own ambitious standards, in valuing mounting and other aspects of the material

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craft of painting, he anticipated the recent turn to material culture among historians of science, technology, and art in East Asia at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Robert van Gulik, Mi Fu 米芾, connoisseurship, scientific method, artisanal knowledge

## 1. Introduction

On Dec. 1, 1936, Robert van Gulik (1910-1967) finished the Preface to the first of many monographs on Chinese art he was to publish in his prolific life. Having received his doctorate from the University of Utrecht the year before, the young linguist proudly signed off as “Dr. R. H. van Gulik.” He was twenty-six years old and had just begun his foreign service career at the Dutch legation in Tokyo.  

The short monograph, *Mi Fu on Ink-stones*, was printed in Shanghai and issued

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Idema described van Gulik’s post at the Tokyo embassy as “assistant interpreter” (p. 934) whereas Wessells described it as “second secretary.”  