

COMMENTARY

Some Remarks on Chinese Painting and Its Influence on the West

In the thousand years from A.D. 700 to 1700, and in particular during the Chinese Renaissance under the Sung Dynasty (960-1279), the greatest contribution of China to universal culture in the domain of painting was the invention of several different types of non-linear perspective, such as one can admire as far back as the Eighth century A.D.

The six ground-rules of the Chinese school of painting were established by Xie He (500-535):

- “The first of the six rules of painting is: inner resonance gives life and movement (*qi yun sheng dong*);
- “the second: structural (“bone”) method in the use of the brush (*gu fa yong bi*);
- “the third: faithfulness to the object in depicting forms (*ying wu xiang xing*);
- “the fourth: conformity to mode in applying color (*sui lei fu cai*);
- “the fifth: proper arrangement in the composition (*jing ying wei ji*);
- “the sixth: transmission by copying (*chuan yi mo xie*) [i.e., copying famous models—DS].”

Contrary to the Nietzschean interpretation in which modern artists like Kandinsky (in his “Concerning the Spiritual in Art”) or the poet André Breton (with “*automatism*”), indulge,—isolating the first rule from the rest, to just plunge into “primordial chaos,”—the notion of “inner resonance” must be understood as “*divine inspiration*.” In the year 1074, the Sung painter Guo Ruoxu wrote in “Notes Concerning What I Saw and Heard Regarding Painting”:

“If a person’s spiritual courage (*renpin*) is great, it follows that his inner resonance is necessarily great. And if his inner resonance is great, then his paint-

ing will necessarily be full of life and movement (*shendong*). It could be said, that in the most elevated of spiritual heights, he contends with the quintessential.”

It is this concordance with the universal which permits a painter to portray the idea, or the principle of things (*li*), rather than the outward appearance of the form.

The best definition of “*li*” is found in Su Shih (1037-1101), who wrote in his “Notes on Jingyinyuan Paintings”:

“On the subject of painting, I judge that if human figures, animals,



National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China

buildings, or implements have a constant form, in contrast, mountains and rocks, trees and bamboos, running and rippled water, like mists and clouds, do not have a constant form, but preserve a constant inner principle (*li*). When a constant form is defectively portrayed, everyone perceives it; however, even a



© RMN, Louvre

FIGURE 1. Leonardo da Vinci, “Mona Lisa” (detail) (1503).

FIGURE 2. Dong Yuang (947-970), “Festival to Bring Rain.”

connoisseur might fail to see that a constant principle has not been honored. That is why so many mediocre painters, in order to trick the public and appear important, paint things lacking a constant form. Now, a fault in representing the form affects only a part of the painting, while an error in the constant principle ruins it entirely. Therefore, when representing things that do not have a constant form, one must honor their inner principle. Many craftsmen are capable of drawing forms in minute detail; on the other hand, only noble minds and distinguished talents achieve the principles of things.”

Long before this period, the great painter and scholar Wang Wei (701-761), who founded the school of landscape (called, in Chinese, “mountain-

water”), had already made this idea clear in his *Shan-shui-fu*:

“When painting a landscape, the Idea must precede the brush. For proportion: height of a mountain—ten feet; height of a tree—one foot; length of a horse—1/10 of a foot; height of a man—1/100 of a foot. Concerning perspective: a man at a distance—one doesn’t see his eyes; a distant tree—one can’t distinguish the branches; on a faroff mountain—soft contours like an eyebrow, not one rock is visible; similarly, not a ripple on distant water where it meets the horizon of clouds [a beautiful description of ‘perspective of disappearance,’ of the sort Leonardo was able to recreate—KV]. As for the relations that exist between the elements: The mountain is encircled by clouds, rocks conceal springs, pavilions and terraces are surrounded by trees [what I call ‘narrative perspective,’ which ‘relates’ the space—KV], the paths bear the traces of men [i.e., the space is inhabited by man—KV]. A rock must be shown with three faces,* a path can be traveled from both ends, a tree is recognizable by its crown, a body of water is known by the wind passing over it. Consider first atmospheric effects [i.e., the space is not empty or dead—KV]: differentiate light and shadow, distinct and hazy. Establish a hierarchy amongst the figures, determine their pose, their conduct, how they greet one another. Too many elements—the danger of cluttering; too few—dissipation. Grasp the exact dimensions and precise distance. That there is space between the far and the near applies

* i.e., in three dimension—DS.

FIGURE 3. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “Children’s Games” (1560).

FIGURE 4. Zhang Zeduan, “Going Up-River at the Qing Ming Festival” (detail) (late 11th-early 12th century).

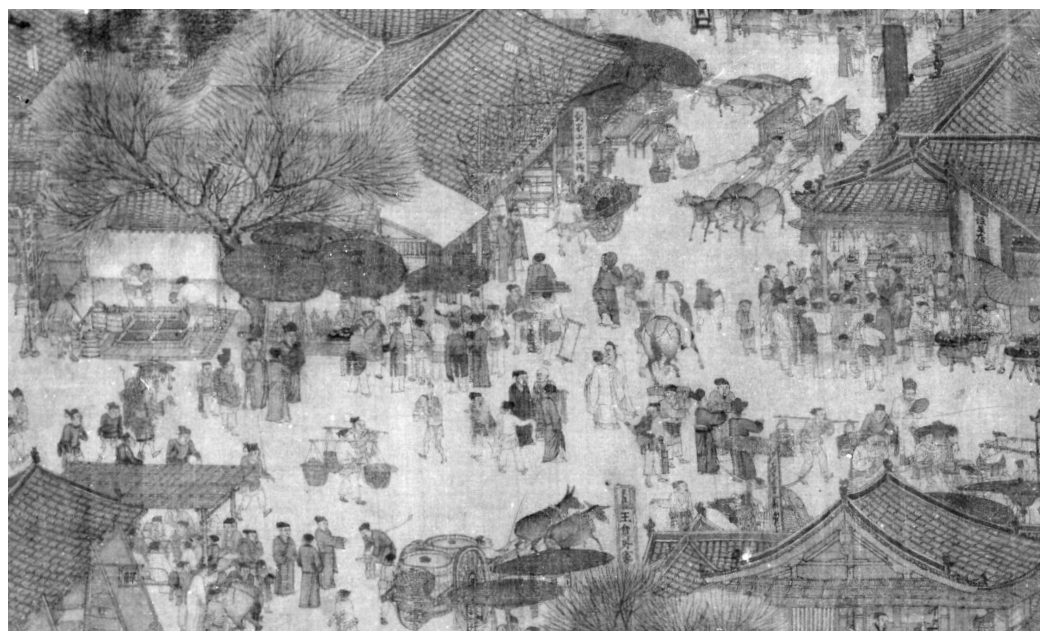
to mountains as well as to waterways.”

This strong conviction, which is adhered to by Confucians and Taoists (although with opposite conclusions), of not relying on outward appearances of the visible world, induced painters to use visual ruses to transport the viewer from one level of horizon to another. Interaction between water and mountains being a symbol of universal transformation, different levels of horizon can flow from one another by type: water, light mist, mountain, heavy mist,

cloud, water, light mist, mountain, and so on. When, in the course of a visit to the Louvre in Paris, you see busloads of Asians filing with great emotion before the “Mona Lisa” of Leonardo da Vinci, don’t be astonished. The “Mona Lisa” belongs to their culture also, or rather, to that domain of universal culture which we share with them. The particular method Leonardo uses to establish a “wandering” (“*balladeur*”) horizon [SEE Figure 1], is identical to that which we find in the Chinese school of landscape



Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



The Palace Museum, Beijing



FIGURE 5. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, "The Magpie and the Gallows" (detail) (1568).

Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt

FIGURE 6. Tcheou Tch'en (c.1500-1535), "Dreaming of Immortality in a Thatched Cottage."



Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

for over a thousand years! The landscape of Dong Yuan (active 947-970), "Festival to Bring Rain" [SEE Figure 2], or "Travelling Amid Streams and Mountains" of Fan K'uan (c. 980-1050) [SEE page 88], are good examples.

Of course, if you are a "good" Cartesian or Newtonian, you could sweep all this evidence of a great civilization aside with a shrug, and cry: "Mysticism!"

It should be pointed out that linear perspective was mastered in China, too. As early as 1074, Guo Ruoxu (cited above) wrote:

"When one paints buildings amongst trees, avoid false calculations, and draw the outlines with an equal force (*jun-zhuang*) [i.e., establish an equality of line weights within each of the different depths of plane—KV]; so that the relative distance (*shenyuan*) penetrates the space; and, so that the hundreds of diagonals converge at the same point, as in the works carried out under the Sui, T'ang, and the Five Dynasties. . . .

When one paints towns and pavilions, make evident the four edges [of the buildings—KV],* with the vertices arranged in order, front and back being clearly distinguished and without error in drawing the lines. The painters of today generally use a ruler to construct right angles; they set off the vertices with numerous complex brushstrokes lacking completely the sense (*yi*) of vigorous beauty (*zhuangli*) and of free elegance (*xiannya*)."

It is not to be excluded that the "military" ("bird's-eye") perspective used by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in his "Children's Games," was inspired by such Chinese feats as "Going Up-River at the Qing Ming Festival" of Zhang Zeduan (late Eleventh-early Twelfth century) [SEE Figures 3 and 4].

To conclude, let us examine the case

* See, e.g., Figure 13 in the author's "The Invention of Perspective," *Fidelio*, Winter 1996 (Vol. V, No. 4), p. 55—DS.

of aerial (atmospheric) or color perspective (i.e., evoking space through a progressive diminution of the intensity of color), whose conceptualization we attribute today to Leonardo. The comparison between "The Magpie and the Gallows" of Bruegel [SEE Figure 5], so appealing in its virtuosity, and the painting attributed to Tcheou Tch'en (active c.1500-1535), "Dreaming of Immortality in a Thatched Cottage" [SEE Figure 6], shows us the fruits of the Chinese approach, come to enrich the West—because these works are constructed entirely on the same principle, the principle which one finds already in germ in the Eighth century in the conceptions of Wang Wei.

—Karel Vereycken,
translated from the French
by Deborah Sonnenblick

This article was originally presented at a Paris conference on the Eurasian Land-Bridge, Sept. 15, 1996.