

Western Reactions To Chinese Landscape Painting

By ANNE K. SUN

MANY Chinese have expressed disappointment in the collection of Chinese art to be sent to the London International Exhibition. They say it fails to represent the finest work of the great dynasties. But one section of the collection, no matter how it may be rated here at home, cannot fail to impress western audiences favourably; and that is the group of Sung, Yuan, Ming and Chin landscapes. Here in Shanghai the scrolls are poorly lighted and carelessly hung but when effectively arranged in a proper gallery they will surely claim the enthusiastic interest and appreciation of all professionals and laymen in England.

There are many reasons why, in the past, foreigners have found it difficult to respond whole-heartedly to Chinese landscape. There are superficial peculiarities that formerly set the art apart as something strange and incomprehensible (and all may be noted in the present exhibit)—the highly stylistic technique used in rendering natural forms (rocks, trees, waves, waterfalls, etc.), the temper of the almost esoteric calligraphic brush stroke, the absence of what the uninitiated used to call "true perspective", the ignoring of direct sunlight and cast shadow and the unconcerned repetition of themes. And there are also deeper, more fundamental differences that lie rooted in the spiritual history of the two races.

These fundamental differences can be explained thus: The art impulse of the West, founded on the Greek ideal of beauty in the human form, and on the personal idea that has been emphasized in religion through the special salvation motive, has suffered a complete separation of man from nature. For centuries after the classic era men heeded nature only as it opposed him or ministered to his needs and desires. Despised and ignored, only gradually did it creep into his aesthetic life, a spare tree or gaunt rock just hinting at its existence. Later it offered humble background for majestic human forms, finally reaching fuller appreciation when the master recognized its power to complement his august, personal moods! This was the 19th century. The Barbizon painters loved nature but they loved her body and saw within her heart only a reflection of their own personal temperaments. None entered into complete union with her and felt thus a mutual relation to any "infinite rhythm of the universe". In the West, in the realm of God, and man, and art, nature had no part.

In the East, however, nature never became separated from man. The ancient Eastern religions peopled the vastness of nature with beneficent protectors and lovers of the race; not specially created angels living in a far off point of space. No barrier existed between the life of man and the rest of God's creatures. The continuity of the universe was accepted. The reflective mind of the Tang and Sung dynasties felt nature deeply;

and, not the human form, but a spiritual vision of his communion and oneness with the universal life, led the painter to express himself. The artist drew his inspiration from nature, for he discovered there hints of the infinite he realized within himself, and of which he recognized himself an immortal part. He was never an observer of nature; he was a part of what he saw and expressed.

With such diametrically opposed points of view, it is no wonder that except for the ardent lovers of oriental art, people of the West in the past have looked with helpless dismay at Chinese landscape. But I believe that now as never before in history, they will be able to realize the spirit vitalizing the work, and will be able to see the beauty.

For, things have been happening in the art world during the last twenty or thirty years. For three centuries the Western world had been fed on landscape painting that was materialistic, largely photographic, and constructed according to unalterable graphic laws. Pictures had rigidly definite horizons, indicated or suggested; the slants of all the horizontal planes disappeared in those horizon lines; the distant objects diminished according to those slants; and all the naive, illustrative conventions were organized from the point of view of a one-eyed, six-foot man, grounded on one leg on a fixed spot! Then at the end of the 19th century came the millenium. First the Impressionists attacked the ancient prestige of the outline, dissolving it in "plein air" and shattering it with the splinters of their broken color. Then the great master, Cezanne, seemingly profaned the holy basic symbols of graphic expression, the inviolable shapes and forms of nature, as he penetrated to eternal aspects and principles, and built up his dynamic bulks and mutations of forces. Very close to the Chinese he came in his disregard of what is ephemeral, and in his elaborate balancing of forces.

Had it not been for the world war, who knows what spiritual direction might have seized upon that liberated art! But following Cezanne came the Neo-impressionists, the Cubists, the Futurists, the Synchronists, with such a flood of distortion and abstraction, that the West found itself gasping resentfully as it watched every aesthetic orthodoxy of shape, color, form, texture, design, and perspective, utterly demolished and swept away. People were shocked but they were aroused and initiated. They have been appalled at the green suns and red trees; the good flat earth tipping to the stars, or heaving like the sea; the houses leaning against the sides of the canvas, and the roads running straight to the devil. But they have become, in the meantime, more intelligently aware of beauty in eternal relationships and less prejudiced about a certain photographic ideal. Airplane photography

with its masses of architecture converging unnaturally toward a center, and its layers of earth and hill and cloud and sky (just as in a Chinese landscape) has but reiterated the lesson. Because of this devastating training, and because of the long drawn mortification at not being able to comprehend or subscribe to much of the modern trend in art, I am sure any intelligent public will greet with affection and understanding and relief anything as profoundly orderly and sane as the Chinese landscapes in the present exhibit. As compared with a large proportion of the feverish, decadent, modern attempts, a Sung landscape is a most reasonable thing.

Did those old painters stand on a mountain side to establish a point of view for their towering masses of rock and streaming waterfalls; or did they build up their compositions mechanically according to complex laws of forces, masses, lines and distances, with infinite yet authoritative variation of technique for each form and aspect of a form? Or did each one, filled with the racial heritage of nature mysticism, retire to his studio and allow his soul to rise to spiritual altitudes where it apprehended the eternal aspects of his subject, and guide his hand in brushing in the great cosmic phenomena we see? Probably all three procedures, in varying proportions. All great art is an intricate, cultivated performance. But these landscapes surpass in true refinement anything the West has produced. The decorative arrangement is formal and classic, the technique is stylistic and conventional, the details are intensely realistic, but the bold, vital organization transcends nature's forms and gives the impression of super-reality, or universality.

The Chinese painters' preoccupation with bulk, the attempt at voluminous organization, is so modern that the foreigner ought to respond easily to it. The great volumes are organized in three dimensions and except for the color achieve a complete harmony between every part. Each rocky structure is also coordinated with all other masses, and balanced by spaces of mist or sky. So concerned was the early Chinese painter with the thrust and balance of these huge buttresses that he called all landscape "shan shui" (mountain-water). In looking at the present exhibition one passes scroll after scroll, each with the same central motif of crag or spur or cliff. They are marvelous rocks, not dead or rigid but mobile and living, and expressive. They appear over and over again, never savage or ruthless, always serene and poised, and their living rhythms always including man—man himself, or his dwelling, or his tiny boat.

Some delicate trace of man's place in the scheme is an integral part of every picture—finely etched palaces, intimate genre scenes, touches that are light, dainty, sometimes even humorous, yet detracting no more from the dignity of the theme than flute notes across a Beethoven motif. Indeed they are indispensable. They are carefully placed and used to break up a mass, or to catch the eye and carry it along, or to add grace and charm. Clusters of trees play a similar part in the design, arranged not as they actually grew, although

undoubtedly they might have grown that way, but as contrasts to complete a certain pattern, or to create some sinuous movement about the balanced masses of larger area. All are done with greater realism than the hills. Not mere trees but willows and elms bend near the bridge, cedars march on the heights; fruit trees spread along the stream. In the Ming painting, "Waiting to Cross a River in Autumn" by Cho'u Ying, five or six different kinds of trees, bright yellow, dull red, green and tan, stand in a grove, each leaf on each tree minutely executed, with a different technique for each type of leaf. The leaves are not truly naturalistic; they are abstractions so charged with the living force of the calligraphic stroke that their expression is the essence of realism.

The painting of waterfalls and rapids in that piece attributed to Kuo Hsi called "Eminent Recluse in a Mountain Abode", illustrates this point again. There is no attempt at naturalistic rendering but one feels that every abstract stroke is based on a mental condensation of long, keen observation, and a physical concentration of muscular control. No one can really understand Chinese painting until he knows how those early artists worked—how they seldom sketched their forms from nature but looked and looked, and studied and brooded, and filled their hearts with the spirit of the "mountain and water", and then went home and reduced the essential living qualities to a few potent strokes. Nor can one appreciate the dynamic force that vitalizes the painting unless one has seen the artist or calligrapher actually at work. The steady firmness of the grip on the brush, the flexibility of the stroke, the controlled power that becomes transfigured in a flash to the finest delicacy—there is nothing to compare with it in all the world unless it is a master's performance on the violin. In each case the artist's tool becomes an intimate extension of his hand.

The analogy has more than superficial significance. In Chinese landscape painting are found deep resemblances to music. Inherent in the rhythm of the brush stroke lies the subjectivity of the art, and the formalities of the stylistic technique free it still more from objectivity and throw the design into the field of vibration. The theme harmonizes with the tool. Creative at its conception, coming directly from nature but not reproducing it, it is not tied to materiality by literary content or local peculiarities or historical suggestion (as Western landscape painting always was in the past) and thus may vibrate with an almost pure sensuous, lyric quality, which in the great paintings becomes an interpretation of life forces. True, many of the landscapes in the exhibit show little trace of this power and do not embody the truths we know about old Chinese painting, but indications of the truths persist; and modern Westerners and Chinese alike, no doubt will return eventually to the old spiritual rhythmic coordination between hand and heart, to find the solution of the mystery of the illusive-ness of art.