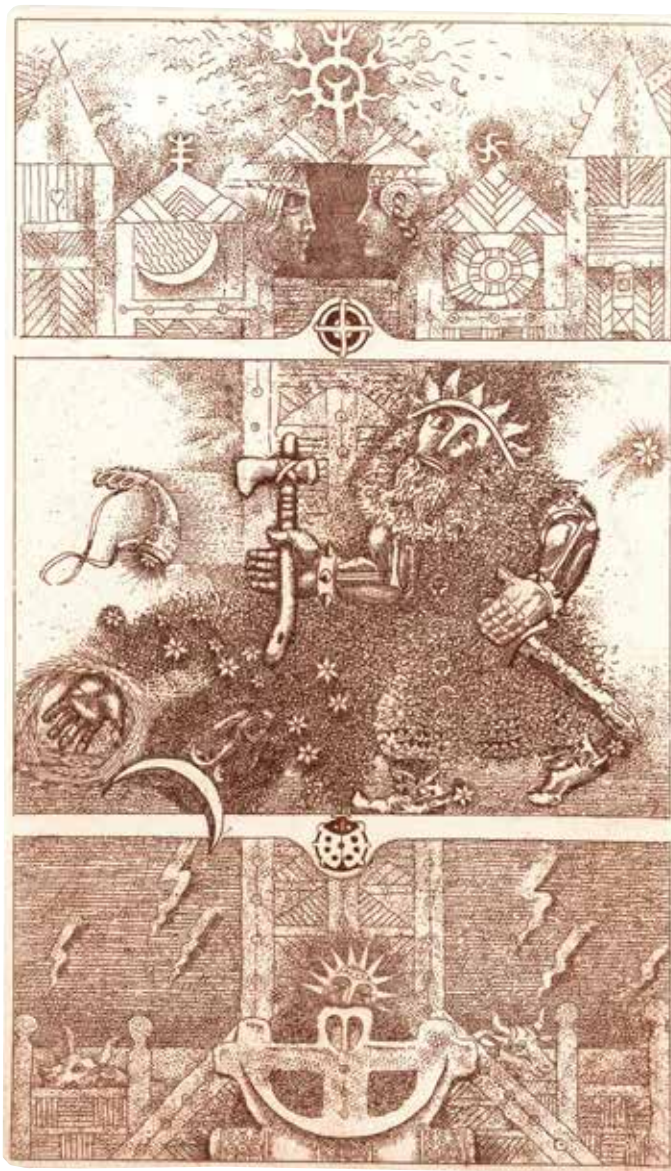


## RYTŲ ESTETIKA IR MENAS



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# Peculiarities of Chinese Treatises on the Fine Arts

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The article is dedicated to the treatises on the fine arts that became predominant in Chinese traditional aesthetics in comparison with other aesthetic traditions emphasizing their main peculiarities of their thematic fields. By comparing them with analogous Indian and Western aesthetic treatises of the fine arts, the author first brings attention to the fact that the Chinese ones are more concise and stand out by their metaphorical style of diction. Moreover, they primarily focus on histories of specific schools and most prominent artists. Finally, the article highlights predominance of the treatises on the landscape painting and calligraphic aesthetics within the whole stream of such works. The main attention there is given not for the analysis of particular pieces of art or their aesthetic features, but to the artist himself, his relationship with the natural world, those diverse emotional experiences that were formed between the subject and images depicted in such artistic works. Particular focus is provided for the analysis of expressive peculiarities of a particular idea, as well as the means of composition and artistic expression.

**Keywords:** Chinese traditional aesthetics, treatises on the fine arts, painting, calligraphy, comparative analysis.

Chinese treatises dealing with problems in aesthetics and the theory of art differ markedly from those of Classical Antiquity, the West, and India. They are more concise, and their style is predominantly metaphorical. Here, we almost never encounter what is typical of the West – abstract metaphysical discussions of beauty, grandeur, and the tragic – because these treatises are dominated not by speculative reflections, but by classificatory, ethical,

and didactic questions or ones connected with the creative process and the artist's emotional experiences. Hence follows the attention of these treatises to the histories of specific schools and to the twists and turns in artists' creative biographies – all of which leads to reflections about reality and representation, the seen and the unseen, beauty and ugliness, speaking forth and keeping silent, perfection and incompetence, refinement and simplicity, artificiality and

naturalness, purposefulness and spontaneity, volubility and leaving things unsaid, overburdening and aesthetic suggestion, outward and underlying nature, and other problems.

Throughout Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Period, China has created a multitude of diverse treatises dealing with the problems of aesthetics and the theory of art. In catalogues of treatises on calligraphy, painting, and poetry we encounter thousands of titles. Apart from philosophical and art-historical treatises, much important information about Chinese aesthetics can also be drawn from a variety of other genres: problems in aesthetics and the theory of art are discussed in anthologies, digests, compendiums, the chronicles of dynasties and their commentaries, historiographical writings, religious, historical, and poetic texts, records about the “noteworthy” and the “strange” (to which the Chinese devoted special attention), diaries, travel notes, letters, various observations, and other texts.

Among the many art-historical treatises, the most important ones for the development of Chinese aesthetic thought are on the art forms most closely connected with written characters: calligraphy, painting, and poetry. Of the fine arts, calligraphy was the first to acquire high social status and a privileged place in the artistic hierarchy. For this reason, painting was greatly influenced by the aesthetic principles of calligraphy, which had developed earlier. “Writing,” Yolaine Escande indicates: fully achieves the status of an art at the beginning of our era, and the first theoretical treatises on this art appear in

the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, emphasizing the playful and hedonic aspect of writing as an art, which removes it from its functional role. As for pictorial art, theories about it appear only in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, in regard to the painting of portraits and of “mountains and waters” (*shanshui*), in other words, of pictorial landscapes. (Escande, 2003, p. 21)<sup>1</sup>

Treatises on painting deal with various genres (portraits, flowers, birds, bamboo, etc.), but the ones on landscapes undoubtedly stand out for their profound and multifaceted treatment of theoretical problems.

These treatises focus *not on an analysis of specific works of art or their aesthetic qualities, but primarily on various systems of classification and sometimes on the artist himself, his relationship with nature, and those diverse emotional relationships that are established between the apprehender and the images depicted in an artist's works, the depth of a specific idea, composition, style, and the means of artistic expression.* For this reason, in Chinese as in Indian and Japanese aesthetic treatises, unlike Western ones since Classical Antiquity, greater attention is devoted to the problems of the psychology of art. They describe in detail the inner experiences of the artist contemplating the beauty of nature.

When classified according to various criteria, the history of theoretical treatises on aesthetics and the fine arts can be

1 «L'écriture accède au statut d'art à part entière au début de notre ère, et les premiers traités théoriques sur cet art apparaissent au II<sup>e</sup> siècle, soulignant l'aspect ludique et hédonique de l'écriture en tant qu'art, qui l'éloigne de son rôle fonctionnel. L'art pictural n'est quant à lui théorisé qu'au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle, au sujet de la peinture de portraits et « de montagnes et d'eaux » (*shan-shui*), autrement dit, le paysage pictural.»

divided into different stages, each of which has its own characteristics. Because calligraphy long occupied the highest place in the Chinese artistic hierarchy, its aesthetic principles are what influenced treatises on other art forms (only during the Song Period did competition for influence arise from landscape painting, which in the Chinese aesthetic tradition became a symbol, directed toward knowledge of emptiness and infinite space, of the all-encompassing universe).

On the basis of chronology and specific typological features, in the history of Chinese treatises on the fine arts (calligraphy, painting) we can distinguish, with qualifications, four main stages since the rise of philosophical aesthetics in ancient times. During the early stage (2<sup>nd</sup>-early 7<sup>th</sup> century), the relationship between man and nature was at the center of theoretical interest, and the fundamental aesthetic principles of calligraphy and painting crystallized. The second stage (618-1368) covers the period of the Tang and the Five Dynasties up to the end of the Yuan Dynasty. In the Song and Yuan treatises of this period, the aesthetic principles of calligraphy and landscape painting, which had risen in the artistic hierarchy, acquired their classical form and symbolical meaning. At the beginning of this period, during the Song epoch, didactic and instructional treatises predominated, while they were later replaced by introverted interpretations of landscape aesthetics marked by Chan influence and closely connected with classificatory descriptions of subjective creative processes, spiritual states, and the most typical features of works of art. The third period

(1368-early 19<sup>th</sup> century) is connected with a decline in the creative powers of theoretical thought and with the growth of eclecticism and, finally, of modernization and interaction with Western aesthetic traditions. In the fourth stage (early 19<sup>th</sup> century-today), there is already an intensive spread of various eclectic tendencies along with the growing influence of Western aesthetic and artistic traditions.

The early stage in the development of art-historical aesthetics covers the period from the end of the Han Dynasty to the beginning of the Tang. The first treatises on the aesthetics of calligraphy had already appeared before the end of Han rule during the early centuries of our era. In his treatise *A Discourse on Calligraphy (Shu Lun)*,<sup>2</sup> the foremost genius in this field, Wang Xizhi, subtly discusses the formal and spiritual aspects of calligraphic art by connecting it with the expression of the subtlest changes in the artist's spirit. Although there were painters who developed the aesthetic principles of their art before Gu Kaizhi (ca. 345-406), he enters the history of Chinese aesthetic thought as the founder of the art-historical aesthetics of painting. He left behind three known treatises on painting: *A Discourse on Painting (Hua Lun)*, *In Praise of the Excellent Paintings of the Wei and Jin Dynasties (Wei Jin Shengliu Huazan)*, and *Notes on a Painting of Mount Yuntai (Hua Yuntaishan Ji)*. The first of these deals with general aesthetic problems, while the other two discuss more technical aspects of painting. Gu Kaizhi's indisputable achievement is that he was the

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2 Shu Lun 书论

first to clearly define the main qualities of true painting: spiritualization, naturalness, unity of composition, the structural basis of a work of art, the following of tradition, and the masterful control of ink and brush.

In the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, works appeared by the two great originators of landscape painting: *Introduction to Landscape Painting (Hua Shanshui Xu)*,<sup>3</sup> by the Chan adept Zong Bing, and *A Discussion of Painting (Xu Hua)*,<sup>4</sup> by the Neo-Daoist adept Wang Wei (415-453). The first of these two men, the Chan Buddhist adept Zong Bing, was an outstanding painter and calligrapher and a passionate lover of music; he regarded the landscape as a work of the spirit – one that, when the images embodied in pictures are grasped, helps the apprehender wander in the boundless expanses of the world of the imagination. In his treatise, Wang Wei theoretically grounds the aesthetic value of the art of painting by relying on cosmogonic theories. He focuses on the relationship between man and nature, and he regards landscape painting as a way of helping a sensitive person feel the fullness of being and draw on the manifestations of spirituality hidden in nature. These two great masters of landscape painting exerted a tremendous influence on the further development of Chinese aesthetic thought; because of them, treatises on landscape painting multiplied rapidly during the Tang and Song dynasties, and the problems of landscape aesthetics became the main theme of theoretical reflection.

Another important treatise for the

3 Hua Shanshui Xu 畫山水序

4 Xu Hua 敘畫

development of early Chinese pictorial aesthetics is *The Record of the Classification of Old Painters (Gu Hua Pin Lu)*,<sup>5</sup> by Xie He (479-547; active ca. 500). On the basis of artistic excellences and defects, this author categorizes 27 of the leading painters who worked from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and he distinguishes six fundamental principles of painting, which became an important object of discussion in later Chinese aesthetic thought.

The Tang Period marked the beginning of an intoxicating surge in aesthetic thought. During this qualitatively new period, important treatises on calligraphy and painting appeared. They cover many problems, starting with the classification of artists, their styles, and their works, the symbolical associations of the parts of a landscape, the artist's relationship with the natural world, and his creative potential and ending with the complex psychological problems of the creative process. During the early part of this period, these treatises stand out in importance: *Eight Secrets (Ba Jue)*<sup>6</sup> and *Thirty-Six Techniques (Sanshiliu Fa)*,<sup>7</sup> by Ouyang Xun (557-641), *A Discourse on the Essence of the Brush (Bi Sui Lun)*,<sup>8</sup> by Yu Shinan (558-638), and *A Discourse on Calligraphy (Lun Shu)*,<sup>9</sup> by the powerful Tang emperor Taizong (597-649), who was known by the pseudonym Li Shimin.

A solid contribution to the development of aesthetics in the fine arts was made by Wang Wei (701-761), the author of the

5 Gu Hua Pin Lu 古畫品錄

6 Ba Jue 八訣

7 Sanshiliu Fa 三十六法

8 Bi Sui Lun 筆髓論

9 Lun Shu 論書

treatise *The Secrets of Landscapes* (*Shanshui Jue*, ca. 760)<sup>10</sup>, and by two of his comrades-in-arms – the geniuses of Chinese poetry Du Fu (712-770), who wrote the treatises *A Song Playfully Inscribed About Wang Zai's Landscape Painting* (*Xiti Wang Zai Hua Shanshuitu Ge*, ca. 755)<sup>11</sup> and *A Song About a Landscape Screen Recently Painted by Liu Shaofu of Fengxian* (*Fengxian Liu Shaofu Xin Hua Shanshui Zhang Ge*, 754?), and his admirer Bai Juyi (772-846), who wrote *Notes About Painting* (*Hua Ji*, 803)<sup>12</sup> and *Painting Bamboo: A Song* (*Hua Zhu Ge*).<sup>13</sup> In any discussion of the theoretical grounding of the new spontaneous tendencies in the development of calligraphy, it is worthwhile to mention the Chan monk Huai Su (737-799), who challenged the genius of Wang Xizhi and wrote the calligraphic work *Autobiography* (*Zi Xu Tie*).<sup>14</sup>

In comparison to the West and India, Chinese treatises on aesthetics and art were late in appearing. Their beginnings can already be seen in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, during the twilight of the Tang Dynasty, when the first significant treatises in this genre appeared summarizing achievements in the fine arts and earlier tendencies in calligraphy and painting. There were two such important historical-chronological treatises: *Record of Famous Painters of the Tang Dynasty* (*Tangchao Minghua Lu*),<sup>15</sup> by Zhu Jingxuan (9<sup>th</sup> century), and *Notes on Famous Painters*

*of Past Dynasties* (*Lidai Minghua Ji*, 847),<sup>16</sup> by Zhang Yanyuan (ca. 813-879), who later inspired a torrent of similar treatises. The first wave in the popularity of treatises in this genre arose during the twilight of the Song Period and the beginning of the Yuan, when Chinese intellectuals and artists, after living through complex social upheavals, returned to their national traditions and sought to preserve and systematize them in the face of cultural pressure from foreign nomads. However, the systematic study of the aesthetic thought and artistic theory of the past emerged only during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries with the appearance of the most important treatises in this genre.

During the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the master of monumental landscape painting and Confucian adept Jing Hao created one of the most conceptual of philosophical treatises – *Notes on Brush Methods* (*Bifa Ji*),<sup>17</sup> in which a true artist is vividly compared to a sage living in the refuge of nature. This treatise focuses on a discussion of the various rules of painting and the principles for classifying works of art. Jing Hao's ideas were further developed during the 10<sup>th</sup> century by the great master of landscape painting, poet, and musician Li Cheng (919-967?), who theoretically grounded his views of painting in the concise treatise *The Secrets of Landscapes* (*Shanshui Jue*).<sup>18</sup> Here, we can see obvious allusions to the thoughts expressed by Wang Wei in an earlier treatise with the same title. Li Cheng's treatise discusses the distinctive nature of the landscape genre, and it considers the component

10 Shanshui Jue 山水訣

11 Xiti Wang Zai Hua Shanshuitu Ge 戲題王宰畫山水圖歌

12 Hua Ji 畫記

13 Hua Zhu Ge 畫竹歌

14 Zi Xu Tie 自叙帖

15 Tangchao Minghua Lu 唐朝名畫錄

16 Lidai Minghua Ji 歷代名畫記

17 Bifa Ji 筆法記

18 Shanshui Jue 山水訣

parts of a composition and the problems of artistic expression. The ideas put forth in this treatise were adopted and further developed by many later representatives of the aesthetics of landscape painting.

In the history of Chinese aesthetic thought and art, the Song Period is an important stage of development during which new ideas of universalism and humanism vigorously unfolded in the landscape aesthetics that had finally become established. In the main, accumulated artistic experience was transmitted from a master to his disciples in treatises usually entitled *Secrets of Landscapes* or something similar and used in academies and art schools as auxiliary means of instruction. They focused on the composition of a picture and its component parts as well as the technical problems of artistic expression. However, there are also subtle treatises filled with many insights and profound reflections on aesthetics and artistic theory. Among them, the ones that stand out for their depth and comprehensiveness are by Guo Xi, Han Zhuo, and the two intellectuals Su Shi and Mi Fu, who embody the two main tendencies in aesthetic thought that determined the face of this period.

In the treatise *The Lofty Message of Forests and Springs (Linquan Gaozhi)*,<sup>19</sup> the main ideologue of the influential academic aesthetics of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Guo Xi, regards a picture as a kind of psychological portrait of the artist. He raises the problem of the artist's constant improvement and exalts the beauty of nature and the poetic character of the landscape painting that

reflects it. This treatise analyzes the structural principles of nature and the problems involved in dealing with the three different planes of high, horizontal, and deep perspective.

A treatise written in 1121 by another academic aesthetician, Han Zhuo, who taught at the Calligraphy Academy at Emperor Huizong's palace – *Chunquan's Collected Works on Landscape (Shanshui Chunquan Ji)*<sup>20</sup> – focuses on the problems involved in creating a unified artistic style and composing a landscape. Here, much attention is devoted to a classification of the various components of a landscape and to a pedantic discussion of their interaction. Han Zhuo polemicizes with the recommendations made by his predecessor Guo Xi for conveying the characteristics of mists and atmospheric changes in pictures. On the basis of Confucian aesthetic principles, Han Zhuo calls on beginners to be more attentive in learning from nature, studying the styles of the great masters of the past, and acquainting themselves with the subtleties of their compositions and means of artistic expression.

In opposition to the members of the Academy, the intellectuals Su Shi and Mi Fu found their ideals in the work of artists from the Jin Dynasty (265-420). Under new ideological conditions, their treatises marked the rebirth and spread of the interaction of *Fengliu* calligraphy, painting, and poetry as well as the close association of artists with one another, the passionate collection of earlier works of art, and a striving for novelty and absolute values. These

19 Linquan Gaozhi 林泉高致

20 Shanshui Chunquan Ji 山水純全集

tendencies unfolded with full force in the works of the humanist painter, calligrapher, poet, and writer Su Shi, who inspired an intellectual movement and was widely known by the poetic pseudonym Su Dongpo.

Mi Fu, who was an eccentric with universal interests and Su Shi's comrade-in-arms, wrote several treatises that left a deep mark on the history of Chinese aesthetics and art: *History of Painting (Hua Shi)*,<sup>21</sup> *History of Calligraphy (Shu Shi)*,<sup>22</sup> and *Haiyue's Brief Comments (Haiyue Tiba)*,<sup>23</sup> which influenced later generations of intellectuals. He also wrote a work on an object made of precious materials and highly valued by collectors: *History of the Inkstone (Yan Shi)*.<sup>24</sup> Mi Fu was interested in studying the autographs of the great masters of calligraphy and painting, and he wrote texts that described ten different kinds of paper. It is Su Shi and Mi Fu's achievement that the aesthetic ideas of intellectuals permeated the entire later development of Chinese aesthetics in the fine arts until the 17<sup>th</sup> century and that the landscape painting that they emphasized and exalted became a synonym in aesthetic and artistic consciousness for painting in general.

During the Yuan Dynasty, in the milieu of the intellectuals who avoided the conquerors, many treatises on painting and calligraphy were written, but unlike earlier periods, the accents were shifted from a discussion of ideas to the technical subtleties of painting. Among these treatises, one by the eminent Huang Gongwang

(1269-1354) stands out for its distinctive character – *Secrets of Depicting Landscapes (Xie Shanshui Jue)*,<sup>25</sup> which deals with various aspects of this genre, explains the importance of authentically conveying the different motifs in a landscape, and discusses the stylistic features of specific schools and the technical subtleties of the creative process. The treatise *Twelve Things to Avoid in the Painting Tradition (Hui Zong Shi Er Ji)*,<sup>26</sup> by another well-known theoretician of that time, Rao Ziran (ca. 1340), stands out for its focus on classification, which is typical of many Chinese aesthetic treatises, and for its pedantic approach to the problems it undertakes to study. This treatise methodically analyzes, step by step, the traditional mistakes made by painters and explains how they may be avoided. This treatise attests to the tradition that had already developed of systematically and critically examining the specific practical problems involved in a painter's work and to the pursuit of viable innovative ideas – something that became obvious during the following Ming Period.

Although under the Ming Dynasty, at the Imperial Academy of Art and at the great cultural centers in the provinces, we can see a quickening of aesthetic thought and a huge number of treatises (reaching into the thousands), a closer look reveals that all this is the result of a tremendous quantitative, but not qualitative expansion of theoretical thought. Among the multitude of eclectic treatises that appeared during this time, these works by the painter

21 Hua Shi 畫史

22 Shu Shi 書史

23 Haiyue Tiba 海嶽題跋

24 Yan Shi 硯史

25 Xie Shanshui Jue 寫山水訣

26 Hui Zong Shi Er Ji 繪宗十二忌



and calligrapher Dong Qichang (1555-1636) stand out for their influence on the further development of aesthetic thought: *The Eye of Painting* (*Hua Yan*),<sup>27</sup> *The Purpose of Painting* (*Hua Zhi*),<sup>28</sup> and *Random Notes From the Room Where I Paint Chan* (*Huachanshi Suibi*).<sup>29</sup> These texts discuss many of the important problems involved in the interaction of the various arts and in the creative process.

The last significant period for the aesthetics of the fine arts emerged in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Shitao and Wang Gai (Wang Kai) wrote synthesizing treatises imbued with the spirit of the intellectual tradition. Shitao's *Quotations on Painting* (*Hua Yulu*),<sup>30</sup> which develops a conceptual philosophy of the "single brushstroke" (*yihua*), is one of the most significant works to summarize the Chinese tradition in the fine arts. Shitao's contemporary, the painter, calligrapher, and engraver Wang Gai, became famous in the history of Chinese aesthetic thought as the author of a fundamental text and one of the longest: the three-volume encyclopedia of pictorial aesthetics *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (*Jieziyuan Huazhuan*).<sup>31</sup> Here, the achievements of earlier aesthetic thought are, as it were, summarized. This was the last significant period of traditional aesthetic thought in the fine arts. Afterwards, together with the economic decline of the empire, there followed signs of a crisis in the field of theoretical thought.

27 Hua Yan 畫眼

28 Hua Zhi 畫旨

29 Huachanshi Suibi 畫禪室隨筆

30 Hua Yulu 畫語錄

31 Jieziyuan Huazhuan 芥子園畫傳

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the creative genius of the Chinese people waned, ever-greater influence fell to various instructional texts and reference books that did not achieve much in the development of new aesthetic principles and ideas. One typical example of this genre is a work of great scope by the calligrapher and landscape and portrait painter Shen Zongqian (1770-1817): *Jiezhou's Writings on Learning Painting* (*Jiezhou Xue Hua Bian*),<sup>32</sup> which deals methodically with the problems of landscape and portrait painting and devotes much attention to a pedantic discussion of the various objects in a landscape and of the problems of form, color, and a picture's unity of tone. In its theoretical level and emotional tension, this text is already entirely different from the great aesthetic treatises of the past. This gradual decline in the theoretical level of treatises can be seen all the way to the collapse of the empire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Conclusions

Having discussed the Chinese Treatises on the Fine Arts, and the main stages of development in aesthetic thought and art, we may state, first of all, that traditional Chinese aesthetics and art markedly differ in their theoretical positions, fundamental worldview, ideas, and artistic criteria from the corresponding traditions of the Indians, the Arab Muslims, Classical Antiquity, the West, and even the Japanese, who developed under the strong influence of Chinese culture. In comparison to the Japanese,

32 Jiezhou Xue Hua Bian 芥舟學畫編

Chinese art is less given to expressive decorativeness and an emphasis on the charm of diverse everyday phenomena, but when it flowered, in works created under the Song and Yuan dynasties, it undoubtedly exhibited greater meditational concentration and depth.

Second, traditional Chinese aesthetics and art were influenced by the ideographic system of characters in which the Chinese language is written. Hence follows the main archetype that systematically organizes the Chinese aesthetic and artistic tradition of fine art – the character. Its essence consists of visual symbols, enriched with energy (qi) meaning, that are an important factor influencing the Chinese tradition of fine art and the components of the system of arts.

Third, China has had two basic movements in the development of its aesthetic thought: one philosophical and the other art-historical. Proponents of the first explain fundamental aesthetic problems “from above” by relying on the abstract principles of Confucian, Daoist, and Chan philosophy, while supporters of the second movement work “from below,” i.e. by starting with artistic practice to conceptualize its patterns. It must be acknowledged that the Chinese aesthetic tradition, unlike the Classical one of the West, does not accord “beauty” the “special” or “supreme” role of

organizing basic aesthetic categories into a system. This central function is performed by “harmony,” which brings together under its roof the other important categories of Chinese aesthetics.

And finally, Chinese artistic culture stands out for the centuries-old continuity of its ideas, art forms, and creative principles. The hub of this artistic culture is the comprehensively educated artist-scholar with his relationship to tradition and the natural world around him. Because of various external and internal factors, Chinese culture has historically altered the hierarchy of its arts and markedly expanded their interaction and their technical means of expression. During their early stage of development, Chinese aesthetics and fine art were greatly influenced by the principles that had already crystallized in music, poetry, and especially calligraphy. However, the greatest achievements of the Chinese are primarily connected with their unique aesthetics of landscape painting and what was created under its influence with a wonderful harmony of composition, color, and form – the phenomenon that reached its pinnacle in the landscapes of the great masters of the Song and Yuan periods. In these works, this genre soared to spiritual heights not reached by any other painting tradition in the world.

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