

APPENDIX C. Cahill, introductory remarks to seminar, January 1982.

What are we trying to find out? The same two questions as always: What is the artist up to? and What does it mean for him to do that, instead of something else?

A certain style or stylistic trait will carry implications about the artist's personality or character, as the Chinese claim, only at the stage of its inception. For the painter who originates it, it may well express (or reflect) his individual character—he may, for instance, use rough, fast-moving brushwork and oddly distorted forms etc. because he is by nature non-conformist. But when a whole series of artists use essentially the same kinds of brushwork and forms, it is obvious that conventions have come into being, and that the forms now carry meaning by *convention*. And that these conventions are attached to *types* of artists. Once Ni Tsan, for example, had established his landscape type and its implications, any artist who chose to project that image—through some intersection of actual personality, social role, economic constraints, whatever—could paint in that way. So paintings of this kind come to carry certain values in society. (Cf. the arguments in our Anhui catalog, or my late Ming book.) We can understand these associated values partly by reading the responses of critics and others, the terms in which the paintings are discussed.

So: we can see most paintings as carrying meaning not (or only partly) inherently, and more by conventional, established associations. This way of looking at them doesn't rule out the possibility of spontaneity of expression, artistic invention, etc., but it shows these to be less frequent occurrences in art than is sometimes supposed. Also, it doesn't argue that artists are more dishonest or imitative than other kinds of people, but only that the artist truly capable of creating new expressive forms is a rare bird. (Cf. Loehr's argument in "Phases and Modes"—which, e.g., sees Tung Ch'i-ch'ang as the only truly original artist in late Ming. This goes a bit too far.) The notion that all or most artists are individualistic, and that their works should be admired for their individualism and innovations, is a very recent Occidental one, and somewhat misleading. The Chinese prized originality, to be sure, but didn't make the mistake of finding it all over, or failing to appreciate paintings for other qualities.

How do we arrive at understanding these conventions? Through reading, of course, as always; but also by observing *correlations*. (If we see a number of paintings of cranes and pine trees that have "Happy Birthday" written on them, we assume . . .) Paintings of one *period* tend to have a certain set of observable and definable characteristics (which we should not try to define too rigidly and reductively); those produced in a particular place another set; those by a certain artist another set, etc. Identifying these is part of what we do as art historians. We can choose which set we pay attention to at any moment, according to our concerns of that moment. But we have to analyze, recognizing what pertains to what. (These features of the painting belong to the late 17th century, these to the Nanking school, these are particular to Shih-t'ao, etc.) It is the same with the semantic or thematic element: we can correlate this with period, with status (artist and patronage), and other factors, and understand it in these contexts.

Why correlation, instead of causality? Why, that is, shouldn't we (as I think we shouldn't) argue that some element of outside circumstance *causes* changes in the style or image? Because, if we try to see the world in purely causal terms, we have to suppose an infinitely complex web of causal factors for any event (or act, or object): something that happens on the other side of the world may trigger a series of effects which brings about a drop in the stock market which depresses the artist on that day and affects his picture—we obviously can't identify and attend to all of these. There are a limited number of significant and potentially analyzable ones, although in theory they are infinite. Recognizing and drawing correlations in an organic situation doesn't oblige us to trace causal links, or argue why factor X makes event Y happen. Our understanding needn't, in any case, be in such terms at all; a historian who tried to interrelate all his data causally would soon be brought to frustration and despair.

This is a more or less obsolete way of thinking anyway, at least about art and surrounding circumstance.

How do we analyze the work of art so as to understand these connections? A thorough familiarity with the material should allow us to understand period style, school style, individual style. (Style, in this usage, means a set of common characteristics—not style in the broad Loehrian sense.) And we can then see how these correlate with other factors. A period style may be affected by political, social, or other change. (Painting in Florence at the Time of the Black Death.) Individual style can correlate with the status of the artist, patronage, etc., as well as with individual character. And so forth. We proceed, always, by recognizing the correlations (whether or not consciously, and whether or not we call them that); certain characteristics in works of art are observed to correlate with certain situations; we note these, and then ask why and how. Noting the correlations isn't an end, but only puts us in the position of being able to ask the interesting questions and make the really interesting observations.

Our assumption is always that meanings attach to conventions; that paintings are not the one-time products of inspired encounters between the artist and nature or some other subject, as the popular view has it. In this popular view (as often argued by Chinese writers) the message or meaning is produced by the artist's spontaneous expression of his feeling/situation, and received by the viewer of the painting through some spiritual meeting (*shen-hui*). If we leave aside mysterious affinities, however, we are brought to another, sounder basis for expression in art: shared assumptions, established conventions, allow the communication of meaning.

Since works of art are our ultimate concern, all studies of peripheral matters—the artist's biography, theory, the circumstances surrounding the creation of the work, etc.—are done with the implicit assumption that these somehow affected the work. We don't say: Ma Yüan was a late 12th century court painter *and* he painted these pictures; but: Ma Yüan, being a late 12th century court artist, painted these pictures. (If we were to say "because," we would be back in the deterministic trap.) But we can then point out that Hsia Kuei was *also* a late 12th century court artist (younger?) who painted quite different pictures. Hsia was, more than Ma, the kind of artist who will strain against what is "natural" for him to do, in his time and situation—which is another way of saying that he was a more original master. (We can demonstrate this, ideally, by defining his early style—he begins from a base not unlike Ma's—and seeing how he develops from there. This is the value of studies of that kind, to which I am especially partial.)

Similarly, we have to understand Ma Lin in relation to his time, court service, etc.; but also in relation to Ma Yüan. His position in art history as son of an eminent father gives him a certain poignancy; one tries to grasp his dilemma, and find it somehow reflected in his paintings. A study of the sons of famous artists might be illuminating—cf. Wen Chia, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, Shunkin—such studies allow the humanizing of art history.

To ignore or deny all this is not only wrong, in being untrue to the reality of the material and what we know about it, but also dumb, in that it cuts off much of the most interesting and valuable kinds of understanding of art. The conception of pure quality as an eternal absolute is another popular delusion, which can be refuted, I think, on a variety of grounds. *Qualities* in art is a better concept to work with—but then we are back with characteristics, traits of style, etc.