CLP 32

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Something Borrowed, Something New: Cross-cultural Transmission and Innovation in ~~Far Eastern~~ East Asian Painting

(Japan House talk, May 15, 1999)

S,S. (Kung Hsien & Hokusai.) (Intro. remarks.) You may well wonder: Why do I begin with these two? what can they have in common? Both LS; both regarded now as highly original works, as "masterpieces" of artists. (Afternoon session.)

More importantly for my present argument, both made deep impact, deeply admired by western viewers, at early stage in our study of ~~FE~~ E.Asian art, when traditions they belong to were little understood. (In case of KH, not nec. this very picture, but something like it by the artist.)

Finally, and most to the point, western viewers who were so struck by them didn't realize, at that early stage, that part of reason they seemed so accessible to western eyes is that both artists had incorporated strong elements of western, or European, style into their pictures. In both cases, I believe, the response of western viewers, mostly unconscious, was tinged with a recognition of strangely familiar aspects of the images, which made them more visually acceptable, saved them from seeming entirely alien.

Hokusai's great Red Fuji (Fuji at Sunrise, "South Wind, Clear Weather"): What were familiar to western eyes, but original & striking to Japanese, were the blue sky w. white clouds, and the effect of morning sunlight & shadow on the upper & lower parts of mountain. Familiar to Japanese but strikingly new to western eyes were the flat, shaded areas of color, without dark shadows, and the boldly simplified, strongly patterned composition--for which, if there were time, I could show precedents in Jap. representations of particular places--shinkeizu, Melinda's subject--and espec. Mt. Fuji. Edmond de Goncourt wrote about this print in 1896: "Fujiyama colored brick red with a few snow lizards at its peak, against an intensely blue sky lined with layers of white clouds like a beach with the tide out. A print of considerable originality in which the artist

has tried to render the effect he has seen [that is, in nature] in all its barely credible reality."

S. Goncourt was aware of Hokusai's series of westernized landscape prints, done some twenty years earlier, around 1810; he writes that these landscapes "have a Dutch feeling about them." But to account for the striking coloring in the Red Fuji, coloring that was quite outside the Japanese landscape tradition, he makes the European assumption that Hokusai had simply imitated the coloring of nature, as any observant artist might do. About the whole Views of Fuji series he wrote, "The series . . . with somewhat garish colors that were chosen to match as closely as possible the colors seen under every light in nature is currently the source of inspiration for the landscapes of the Impressionists." So, Europe ~~is~~ was getting back what it gave, somewhat altered.

→ S. (another of the westernized series, for the shading.) I oversimplify the responses, of course, to make my point--which is that aspects of the image that fit w/in one's own tradition make the picture acceptable and readable, even comfortable, while those that are adopted from another trad. supply a special visual stimulation, a sense of newness, and so save it from banality, from being just another picture of Mt. Fuji.

S← KH, (Drenowatz. Rietberg) Arthur Waley ended his 1923 Introduction to Chinese Painting book with this extraordinary paragraph, perhaps the first perceptive thing that a western viewer had written about a post-Sung Chinese painting: "He [Kung Hsien] saw Nature as a vast battlefield strewn with sinister wreckage. His rivers have a glazed and vacant stare; his trees are gaunt and stricken; his skies lower with a sodden pall of grey. Many of his pictures contain no sign of man or human habitation . . . Such houses as he does put into his pictures have a blank, tomb-like appearance; his villages look like grave-yards. With this tragic master I conclude." Words that fit this picture, whether or not Waley knew it (he could have, from reprod.)

→ S. Waley had no way of knowing that behind Kung Hsien's most striking effects, and behind their relative accessibility to western eyes, lay Kung's familiarity with European prints--I have suggested

even that his "Myriad Peaks & Ravines" was a brilliantly original reworking of the print at right, the "View of Tempe" from Ortelius's atlas of 1679 (?). It was the western-derived elements that must have struck Kung Hsien's Chinese contemporaries most forcefully: the highly unusual composition, and the strong effect of light and shadow, achieved by a system of applying ink in a manner closer to western stippling than to Ch. texture-strokes (ts'un-fa). Yet Kung Hsien could claim that his ptgs were solidly in the lineage of such great early Chinese landscapists as Tung Yuan and Mi Fu, and Chinese viewers could know exactly what he meant, recognize traits of those styles in his ptgs and accept his works as acceptable departures from tradition.

I begin with these two examples, although they don't fit properly into our theme of crosscurrents in East Asian ptg, to make as forcefully as I can my principal point: that adoptions by artists of elements from a foreign pictorial art, far from reducing the originality of their works (as is sometimes charged), more often permit strikingly innovative effects exactly by incorporating unfamiliar materials or techniques into a native context; and that doing this broadens and deepens the appeal of such works to viewers of diverse backgrounds and tastes.

S,S. And typically, the process takes place in two stages: a relatively straightforward imitation of the foreign model (as here, a section of an early Kung Hsien handscroll and a European print of the kind he is imitating) is followed by a transformation of it into something that is both more original and more congenial to those within the artist's own culture. To say this is of course not to say anything new; we have been talking for a long time, for instance, about the Japanese artists' absorption and "Japanizing" of styles from the continent. But I hope to give this familiar, almost hackneyed formulation a somewhat new spin.

The view that borrowing heavily from a foreign art reduces the originality and value of an artist's work is often made in a nationalist

spirit, and is meant to be protective of the native tradition; it is sometimes accompanied by the equally nationalistic argument that admitting non-native elements of style into one's works sullies them, muddies the purity of a purely indigenous practice. While we outsiders need to be sensitive to such feelings, we needn't and shouldn't share them, or allow them to guide our thinking, since to do so would, among other things, hamper scholarly investigations of just the kind this symposium and exhibition are meant to encourage.

S,S. When cross-cultural transmission is joined with cross-medium, the effect of newness can be enhanced. I have sometimes shown van Gogh's oil copy of a Hiroshige print (the one with blossoming trees in Ueno Park), pointing out that this is mostly a curiosity, an exercise that was useful for Vincent but of minor artistic interest; but then I've gone on to show a van Gogh painting done shortly afterward that is obviously inspired by the Japanese work but no longer overtly Japanized--Vincent's lesson from the East has been absorbed into European painting, to its enrichment.

In talking about East-West exchanges in art,

For the present symposium, I can make the same point by juxtaposing a leaf from the Chinese Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting (pub. in Nanking, 1679) beside a "Red Cliff" ptg (Freer Gallery) by Ikeno Taiga, in which Taiga, while not copying the print, imitates closely in brush painting its techniques, idiomatic to color woodblock, of shaded color washes within heavy black outlines, and

→**S.** (detail) tree foliage rendered with shaded-color washes over an ink-printed pattern. This is interesting, but far less exciting than some of Taiga's other paintings,

S ← such as this one from 1748, in which these same techniques are reconciled with the native Rimpa tradition.

→ **S.** Detail. The fluid handling of ink and color, the decorative flattening of the stream, remind one of Kôrin. Some of Taiga's dullest moments come when he is being dry and didactically Chinese; his most entrancing, when he moves into a quasi-Rimpa manner, as here.

S,S. I would like to be able to show some similar transmission between Korea and either of its two neighbors, China or Japan; but while such episodes certainly occurred and are important and have been studied, I have neither the slides nor the knowledge to do it. Recently I've heard one paper and read another by Burglind Jungmann about how Japanese Nanga artists such as Gion Nankai and Ikeno Taiga drew on sources in Korean painting;[1] and others have suggested the same for Japanese Muromachi ink painting. As for Korean painting itself, its adoptions from China are heavy; but, as is the case with Japanese painting, its more independent moments are likely to be most interesting to outsiders. And as Amy Poster suggests in her catalog essay, pictures of the local scenery are especially valued in Korea, as they are in China and Japan. These observations can be illustrated by such a pairing as this: Chong Son "Diamond Mts. (anon. screen of same subject in show) and Sim Sa-jong, "Winter LS in Style of Shen Chou," which can represent the kind of Korean ptg that sometimes mediated bet. Chinese literati ptg and Japanese Nanga.

S,S. I will use the rest of my time, then, for another China-Japan episode, this one another true back-and-forth, and rather extended. In 1995 I was invited to give a lecture on Japanese ptg at LACMA, and decided to take on once more the large problem of Sesshu and his relationship with Chinese ptg, Ming and Sung. As is well known, Sesshu spent two years in China from 1467, visiting Ningpo, Hangchou, Yangchou, and Peking. His contacts w. artists there seem to have been chiefly with the so-called academy and Che-school masters who were active in those places in the mid-15th century. He mentions Li Tsai as one of the two contemporary Chinese ptrs from whom he could learn something; and some of Sesshu's ptgs done soon after his return from China, such as the LS at left from a series of LS of 4 seasons, do present him as a kind of provincial Che-school master. (Ptg by Judô in exhib. appears to be based loosely on

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[1]Paper for session at AAS? 1998? and "Ike Taiga's Letter to Kim Yusong and his Approach to Korean Landscape Painting." Review of Korean Studies I, Sept. 1998, 180-195.

Sesshû's picture--configurations of mt & tree, in particular, quite close. Rest is different.)

S,S. I have been inclined over the years to see Sesshu that way, and have (or used to have) a kind of reputation in Japan for offering this view of Sesshu as essentially a Ming painter at symposia and other occasions. That went decidedly contrary to the version of the matter one gets from Sesshu's own writings, in which he plays down what he learned from his Ming contemporaries and claims to have gone back directly to the Sung masters; and this is the version accepted and argued by Japanese scholars. I would use comparisons such as this one, a section of Sesshû's "Long scroll" in the Môri collection with its distant model, Hsia Kuei's great "Pure & Remote View of Streams & Mts.," to point out that Sesshu was far closer in style to Ming recensions of Hsia Kuei's great composition than to the original. Hsia Kuei depicts the erosion by water at the base of the cliff subtly; Sesshu exaggerates it. Hsia Kuei gives a relatively natural scale of figures to landscape so that one must look carefully to find them (point out: two at base of cliff, two in cave),

S←. Sesshu, like a Ming painter, enlarges them, diminishing greatly the grandeur and naturalism of the landscape. The two figures in the cave attract the viewer's attention more than the surrounding rocks.

S,S. Here they are in details: prominently exposed in Sesshu's picture; tucked away in a tiny corner in Hsia Kuei's.

S,S. In Sung paintings of the Ma-Hsia school these paired figures stand for outdoor conversations or communions between two old friends, and can even be the central matter of the picture, as in Ma Yuan's picture at right (signed leaf, fan ptg., in Boston MFA). In imitations of Ma Yuan like the one at left they are conventionalized, and in typical works of Sesshu

→S. such as this sec'n of the scroll in the Asano col., they take on even more strongly the character of conventional signs. And that transformation--from meaningful images to conventional signs--has seemed to me the essence of Sesshu's relationship with Sung painting. Japanese scholars typically attribute Sesshu's greatness to his deep understanding of nature, writing for instance of the Môri

scroll as "the synthesis of the artist's life-long experience of penetrating into the secrets of natural beauty," and so forth; I have always seen Sesshu's achievement as somewhere else, but haven't known quite how to define it.

S,S. In the course of preparing the LACMA talk and going through Sesshu's works more carefully than before, I came upon several that seemed to give more substance to his claim to have bypassed the Ming and gone back to Sung originals. In particular, an album of 22 leaves, in So. Sung styles (+ Kao K'o-kung, sep. problem) which for me has been a major discovery. (2 leaves in style of Ma Yuan.) I know it only from a reproduction album pub. in 1910, in which the leaves are reproduced in colors on silk by some skilful process; ten of the leaves are reprod. in collotype in Tajima Seiichi's Masterpieces of Sesshu from the same year. The album was--is?--in the Hosokawa collection. Tajima writes about it, "There are many pictures done by Sesshu still existing; among which the long scroll belonging to Prince Môri comes first, and next to it the present album. When we look at the pictures in this album we readily understand that Sesshu was far superior even to the great artists of Sung China, such as Ma Yuan, Hsia Kuei, etc. . . no other work by Sesshu can be compared with them."

S,S (two more leaves, Li T'ang style.) And indeed, while we can dismiss as nationalism and hyperbole Tajima's claim that Sesshu here surpasses the Sung masters who created these styles, we are still left with a very impressive set of paintings, which handle the Southern Sung academy manner with more finesse and fidelity than Ming-period Chinese artists are ordinarily capable of. The discovery of this album even makes me think of attempting, at this late & highly incautious stage in my career, something that is properly unthinkable: a gaijin's Shin Sesshu-ron. (trans.: like Jap. scholarl & Leonardo...)

Another problem taken up in my LACMA lecture ...)

S,S (two more leaves, styles of ~~Li T'ang and~~ Kao K'o-kung) The album raises several big questions. One is why, after being considered the #2 surviving work of the master, it has been ignored so completely

over the nine decades since then--even the large corpus volume for Sesshu edited by Nakamura and Kanazawa, with a supplement reproducing works known only in old reproductions, doesn't include it.[2] From similar cases, one can guess that some dai-sensei long ago questioned its authenticity, and no one since has challenged that judgement. If so, it is certainly time for a reconsideration.

S,S. (Two leaves in the Yü-chien manner, with skilful uses of ink wash that make them much more atmospheric & evocative than the better-known works by Sesshu in this manner that we'll see in a moment.) But more importantly, the existence of this album seems to upset assumptions, at least my assumptions, about the formation of Sesshu's style, by testifying to Sesshu's ability to work outside the normal stylistic boundaries of his Ming Che-school and academic contemporaries and get back more closely to the Sung originals. And if he possesses this ability, then it follows that the high degree of conventionalization and formalization and flattening that characterizes his late style, as seen in the works always reproduced to represent him, was arrived at through a deliberate process, and isn't simply an end-point in a Ming-like hardening of style. And admitting that obliges us to try to define what lay behind this conscious choice.

S,S. An exploration of the implications of this discovery such as I attempted in my LACMA talk is impossible here for lack of time; let me simply outline it. At left, a late Sung fan painting attrib. to Yü-chien; at right, the well-known leaf after that artist in Sesshu's series of copies after Sung ptgs, which would appear to be based on this particular work. The success of the late Sung paintings of this kind as evocations of spacious, atmospheric scenes, with the parts readable, ~~recognizable~~, although seen through haze, as hilltops and groves of trees and so forth, depends on the areas of ink being blurred, amorphous, with the individual brushstrokes not distinct, well-shaped, neat; on the contrary, they are ragged, run together, and because of that powerfully suggestive. Sesshu, by contrast, emphasizes the formal elegance of the brushstrokes; and the sheer

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[2]Ref.

beauty of ink tonalities, which are not directed twd separating forms in space or rendering their volume, but twd pure visual beauty. **S, S.** And this is the direction that Sesshu will continue in his production of haboku or "splashed ink" landscapes, which became one of his favorite types. (Showed series in lecture; just two here.) On left, one in Seattle Art Mus., perhaps a bit over the edge in dir. of abstraction; at right, small masterwork of genre, haboku LS in Tokyo NM dtd 1495. What began as a highly evocative image of an evanescent passage of scenery has been transformed into a tightly organized, stable structure of broad, essentially non-descriptive brushstrokes. The identifying features of the scene, insofar as they are still readable at all, have been turned into conventional signs; the two seated men facing each other ~~are~~ now placed in the boat, where ~~they are~~ anomalous--who rows the boat? Wrong question. And even more than before, the shapes of the brushstrokes and their ink values take on a certain independence of descriptive purpose; they work as pure form, visually very satisfying.

The transformation, then, is completely knowing and deliberate. And if I were to sum up the direction of it in a phrase, it would be: the Japanization, or the accomodation to Japanese taste, of once-potent Chinese landscape imagery. What do I mean by Japanization? We used to use the term "decorative," but the word has too much of a pejorative sense, which I certainly don't intend. What Sesshu does is subject the imagery of Ch ptg to a radical formalization, a reduction of pictorial themes and motifs once loaded with meaning to more or less abstract conventions and brush configurations. This process drains the imagery of most of its original meaning, so that the scene can be read almost as pure form, very cool, disengaged, elegant. In later times the Rimpa masters, Sotatsu & Korin & others, would do the same for the old narrative imagery of Yamato-e; Nanga artists would do it again for certain imagery from Ming-Ch'ing ptg and printed pictures. What survive of the intellectual and emotional content of the earlier pictures are only faint echoes, or resonances, which evoke a kind of nostalgia, along with the pleasure of visual recognition without emotional engagement. This is a quintessentially

Japanese process--I remember reading a modern fashion commentator amazed at how the Jap. dress designers could present in their showrooms models in costumes of Hitler maidens, or the American drug culture, all drained of their original implications, presented as pure style. But this is no longer a specifically Japanese phenomenon, peculiar to the "Empire of Signs," if it ever was; the cool, disengaged manipulation of imagery is exactly what we live with, like it or not, in our post-modern ~~situation~~ condition, what we like to call

S,S. Another, later example: The almost magically evocative image of "A Mountain Village in Clearing Mist" by the 13th cent. Chinese master Yü-chien is turned into a composition for a two-fold screen by Ogata Kôrin (Seattle Art Mus.) which does not draw the viewer into attempting to read it as a spacious, atmospheric scene, but exists only as patches and brushstrokes of ink on a gold ground, which itself denies a spatial reading. The commonly-made argument about the special Japanese sensitivity to the aesthetic properties of materials might well be applied here: the inkiness of Japanese ink ptg of the later centuries has no real counterpart in later Ch. ptg, even when the Japanese works appear to draw on Chinese imagery.

S,S. It can be recognized and admired in Tôhaku's great pine-tree screens, or in Uragami Gyokudô's landscapes, such as his Tôun Shisetsu, "Snow Sifted Through Frozen Clouds." That there are no proper counterparts to these in later Chinese painting is partly because of the Chinese literati critics' insistence on what they considered "good brushwork," a requirement that this kind of painting almost necessarily violates--as the landscapes of Yü-chien and other Ch'an/Zen artists did in their time, earning them the scornful dismissal of critics.

S,S. And so on to Tomioka Tessai, who in his most brilliant works, from the late years before his death in 1924, uses ink and paper and color as though he had invented the medium. More than forty years have passed since the major Tessai exhib. that I organized as a Fulbright student in Japan (it opened here at the Met & was later shown in 12 other U.S. cities), and we are still far short of fully assessing the greatness and the impact of this extraordinary master.

S. I refer particularly to his impact on modern Chinese landscape painting, in which massed puddles of deep black ink are often combined with fine drawing, sometimes with color, in a Tessai-like manner. There is ample evidence that this manner was primarily inspired by Tessai; it was transmitted partly through Chinese artists who studied in Japan, such as Fu Pao-shih (don't have best slides to demonstrate this, tried to in article in Oriental Art several years ago) S,S. and partly through reproductions of Tessai's work to be seen in China, along with a few originals. Li K'o-jan, who didn't study in Japan, acknowledged the Chinese artists' admiration for Tessai, and the impact of his art on theirs, in an essay for the catalog of a Tessai exhibition that we organized for China in 1988? I think it was. (Ptgs by Fu Pao-shih, Li K'o-jan.)

S,S. Chang Ta-ch'ien, who studied in Kyoto in the 1920s and certainly knew Tessai's work first-hand, appropriates ideas from his paintings throughout his career, but especially in the ink-splash paintings of his late period. And so we have come full circle again, with a manner of painting imported originally from China, transformed fundamentally in Japan, and re-introduced to China in its new form, where it seems fresh and powerfully arresting, qualities that Chinese painting by that time had come to need.

The same points I have tried to make here could be made with numerous other examples of back-and-forth movements of styles and techniques and motifs between China, Korea, and Japan (not to speak of other places). These do not in any way diminish the importance of those internal developments that take place mostly within the cultural tradition, relatively free from borrowings from abroad, such as Chinese literati landscape painting from the Yuan masters through Tung Ch'i-ch'ang to the FourWangs and beyond, or Japanese Rimpa painting. But even these will usually prove to be not entirely self-contained: Dick Barnhart has recently made a strong case for something I myself suggested without elaborating: that some part of the formation of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang style was affected by his viewing of European prints in the crucial formative period; and Yamane Yûzô and others have shown how the Japanese Rimpa masters derived a

significant part of their imagery from Chinese pictorial printed books. What we must recognize, I think--in the face of protective attitudes toward national traditions--is that these cross-cultural transfers were not only very common but were entirely healthy, sometimes reinvigorating the internal developments at points when they had begun to falter, lose impetus, turn repetitive. Because it is just at those points that good artists, like Kung Hsien, Hokusai, Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, Sesshu, or Fu Pao-shih, are most receptive to new pictorial ideas, whatever their source, that prove to be useful to them and beneficial to their artistic tradition.

Thank you.