

## CLP 5 "Some Prolix and Commensensical Remarks on Chinese Art Theory"<sup>-57-</sup>

APPENDIX D. Remarks by Cahill as discussant at the conference "Theories of the Arts in China," York, Maine, June 1980.

(References to papers given in the conference will, of course, not mean much while the papers remain unpublished; but here again, my remarks may be of interest for their broader theoretical observations.)

I will begin by noting that although we are here to discuss literary and art theory, most of us are in fact literary historians or art historians; we deal more with works of literature and art than with theories; and always in the back of our minds is the question of how any new understanding of the one will affect our understanding of the other.

I've been struck, during this conference, by harmonies between papers on the different arts, but also by differences. For one, where the papers on literature tend to treat their subjects in a broad framework of Chinese thought, those on painting and calligraphy seem inclined to draw in more specific outside referents—Buddhism, Taoism, medicine, etc.—and assert or imply that these are important to our understanding of our subject. We in Chinese painting studies seem to feel more worried, or more guilty, about treating our subject in itself, or in the more general Chinese context. Perhaps we feel guilty because we have been guilty—of too-narrow definitions of meaning in Chinese painting, that is; I myself would certainly plead so.

I've been struck also, at several points in the conference, by the similarities of our problems, and our formulations of them, to those of the Chinese. We seem often to be reenacting the same arguments over the same issues; the choices that confront us, and that we argue, are the same that confronted Chinese theorists. For instance: on what pattern should we construct a history of art, or of art theory? Maureen Robertson's paper defined some Chinese models; I myself have recently tried to do so for Ming writers on the history of painting. Models we can encounter include Maureen's cyclical, directional or linear, and irregular; also the influence model, parallel developments model, etc. If, as in Lothar Ledderose's paper, we see religious art as giving way to a secular, aesthetically grounded art, we follow one model, one of successive phases. I would tend to follow another, the parallel development model, for art and religion or other outside factors. My assumption would be that aesthetic impulses underlie the production of objects that are in some part objects of art from the earliest times; as objects of art, they take part in a development that, while not totally independent, has some internal coherence or logic; religious, philosophical, cosmological ideas, which similarly have their own development, impinge regularly on this development in art, adhering to the styles and images by convention, creating new possibilities for meaning in art, and for what art can be or can do. Eventually, the theorists arrive on the scene and begin arguing about what art *is*, or what art *should* do, offering restrictive theories. The inadequacy of the theories and the inconclusive nature of the arguments arise from the fact that art is, typically, being and doing more or less all the things that any of them say it is, more or less all at once.

It should be clear from the above that I want to adopt a highly pluralistic approach to both art and art theory; I prefer to accept aesthetic statements as statements of potential, about what art *can* be or do, and see art as the sum of all the right ones. (Question: who decides which are the right ones? Answer: shut up.) Of course, if we aim at a strict definition of *artistic qualities only*, some of these will be irrelevant; but for now, that is not our purpose.

Any formulation about the nature and purpose of art, then, is likely to be partial, inadequate to the phenomenon of art as it was practiced. Much of what we have been saying here will direct our attention, and that of our students and readers, to qualities and capacities in Chinese works of art that we and they might otherwise miss; it will sensitize us to elements that *may* be present in individual works. We are misleading if we try to argue that they *must* be present, and are in danger of reading into the works meanings that aren't there.

Example: Tu Wei-ming's defining of the highest ideal of Chinese artistic expressions as the embodiment of self-realization is one that we will all have in our minds from now on; but

we had best see it, I think, as a pervasive ideal, in relation to which we can try to understand the intent and achievement of many of the finest artistic creations of China. It would be a mistake to try to see *all* Chinese art in these terms; simpler, lower motivations, other kinds of art, can't be ignored. Tu's is not, that is, a universal theory of art in China, which should lead to statements of the type: "In China, art was . . ."

Much of what we have read and heard here helps to suggest resonances that were in the minds of artists and viewers, between art and other areas of Chinese thought and culture; I would prefer not to think of this always as a one-way flow, with art being given meaning from outside, or "receiving influence" from outside it, but rather to attempt a more organic understanding. Some of John Hay's formulations, in his paper for this conference and elsewhere, are suggestive in this regard: a painter of landscape, or a viewer of a landscape painting, might have as one element in his understanding of natural landscape the set of ideas and attitudes expressed in geomancy, *feng-shui*, and these could carry over into his creation or appreciation of landscape paintings. The question of how much stress to give to this element, among others, we decide on the basis of our reading of relevant Chinese writings, and, more importantly, our readings of the paintings.

These considerations come to mind especially in considering the papers by Susan Bush, Lothar Ledderose, and Kiyo Munakata. These, and some other recent writings on painting, seem to represent a "new wave" in Chinese painting studies, one that will probably continue strongly for the next few decades. Over the past thirty years or so, those of us writing on the subject have tended to be pulled toward secular, non-religious interpretations; I have been one of the principal malefactors, largely, in the beginning, in reaction to some silly overstressing of Buddhist and Zen elements in Chinese art, and to varieties of popular mystification. Now we seem to be swinging the other way for a while, and will for a time be pulled toward Buddhist and Taoist readings. This is healthy; new insights, new and closer approximations of the truth, will result. But we should stop at some point and think about the implications of these arguments, how we should formulate the relationships, what kind of relationship a doctrine or idea from religion or philosophy *can* have to a work of art (other than in cases where the one states the other in some simple, literal way), how one can "express" the other. These difficult questions underlie much of what we are doing here, and we seldom confront them directly.

In suggesting and discussing the question of Buddhist/Taoist content in painting (other than in simple and obvious cases of Buddhist/Taoist subject matter, I mean) we are raising an issue similar to the one the Chinese raised concerning didactic content and literature; we are not asking only, is it there? but also, usually, should it be there? In both cases, different answers are possible; the view of Chou Tun-i and others (as in Pauline Yu's paper) that literature embodies the tao, as against more aesthetic views that concentrate on form rather than the meanings attached to the image. We can, like Chou Tun-i, feel somehow that Chinese art *should* be religious, out of some general sense of the nature of Chinese culture, or we can take the opposite view, out of a different sense. In either case, we can take the position without making the mistake of believing that in doing so we are setting forth some objective truth about our subject. We can, within limits, determine the meaning of a Chinese text; we can't define in this sense, at least so clearly, the meaning of a painting, especially a landscape painting. And the problem is obviously even more difficult for calligraphy.

One subtle approach to the problem would be to extend to Buddhism, Taoism, etc. the view of art that Tu Wei-ming presents, in which art embodies or conveys the quality of Confucian self-realization. (Tu actually avoids, wisely, trying to distinguish different kinds of awareness or enlightenment.) The deepest definition of Ch'an or Zen painting, surely, after one has gone through those based on subject matter or context or function, is one that sees it as communicating through forms, through the way the subject is perceived and pictured, some quality of Ch'an enlightenment. Can landscape painting convey, in this way, some Buddhist or Taoist mode of understanding and experiencing the world?

Tsung Ping's essay suggests, however, a simpler relationship than this between image and religious content, the iconic: images of mountains and rivers, like images of sages in Confucian

didactic painting, aroused suitable ideas or mental states, and so could be used as foci of meditation. The Chinese belief in this capacity of landscape painting is beautifully established in Susan Bush's paper, in the texts translated and analyzed; if we juxtapose the passage from the "Introduction to Poetry on Wandering at Stone Gate" (p. 66) in which the climbers realize their emotional response to natural scenery and wonder, "Could it not be that emptiness and luminosity clarify perceptions, and quietness and distance deepen the emotions?" with suggestions in Tsung Ping's essay that the same kind of experience can be aroused by a painting, we arrive more or less inevitably at that concept; I am quite convinced by it.

So, landscape painting in China could be used as a focus of meditation. But we should, I think, hesitate before making the leap from that perception to the statement that early Chinese landscape pictures, or Chinese landscape pictures generally, should be understood in iconic terms, as means to enlightenment. And there will be a powerful pull, in the minds of students of Chinese art, toward just that kind of statement.

If we begin too quickly and loosely to apply the ideas expressed by some artists and theorists and critics to our understanding of paintings, a number of problems arise. First, there is no unanimity between them: several of the papers on literary criticism (Yu, Lynn, Chaves) recognize different views in different writers or in the statements of a single writer. We should similarly recognize distinctions in theories and attitudes among writers on painting, and relate this diversity to distinctions we can find and analyze in the practice of painting. Susan's recognition of a Taoist background to Wang Wei's essay and a Buddhist background for Tsung Ping's is an early example; and still other contexts or purposes for landscape painting can be traced in the early literature. These can best be seen as identifying different options; the artist can use landscape painting for this or that end, as a carrier for this or that kind of meaning; we can then look for clues, in existing landscape paintings, to a proper understanding of them within the framework of these options.

Lothar Ledderose begins by stating his conviction that there are links between religious and aesthetic values, and that the latter usually originate in the former, and grow as the former decline. He conceives his paper as tracing religious roots for values in landscape painting; the microcosmic structures of parks and gardens, and the symbolic order they represent, are seen as underlying the growth of landscape painting; he suggests at the end that landscape painting may be, more than we have realized, "the representation of an earthly paradise."

Sometimes, no doubt, it is; but much of the time, especially in later centuries, I am convinced, it was not. If we look through extant early landscape representations and accounts of early landscapes in China, we find that they vary greatly in character and function: a landscape background in a wall painting of a villa in a first century A.D. tomb; Chang Yen-yüan's account of the second century artist Liu Pao who painted a picture of a "Misty River" that made everyone who saw it feel warm, and another of "The North Wind" that made viewers shiver; the third century A.D. Lady Chao of Wu, mentioned in Susan's paper, who sketched a map of the empire and "embroidered the Five Peaks and the topography of all the states on a square piece of silk." The late Han tomb tiles found in Szechwan include a lake scene with someone picking lotus, a grove of (mulberry?) trees with someone picking leaves, scenes of shooting geese and harvesting grain, and landscapes with salt-wells—all, presumably, representing local scenes and occupations (related, of course, to the life of the tomb's occupant [occupations on his estate?]) in a straightforward way. The last, the salt-wells, use the same mode of landscape, hills as cells within which animals and trees are placed, as can be seen on hill-jars, *po-shan* censers, etc., where they have, we can assume, very different meanings. It is generally true in China that forms are given meanings as the occasion and the artist's purpose require, sometimes (but not always) with appropriate additions and alterations; and the forms endure and evolve while the meanings come and go. Kiyō Munakata (p. 48) notes perceptively that almost any landscape painting could have served Tsung Ping's purpose; Lothar (p. 12) notes that Chinese replicas of Mt. Sumeru must have looked very similar to replicas of P'eng-lai, conforming to a general image of the cosmic mountain.

All these—extant works, literary accounts, theories—provide us with a rich range of possibilities for landscape in China, and should warn us against reading too quickly Buddhist or Taoist or any other symbolism into any landscape representation we come upon, in the absence of clues or evidence. If we should, miraculously, find (in a tomb) Ku K'ai-chih's painting of the Cloud Terrace Mountain, which he describes in a short essay, it would contain identifiable elements—Chang Tao-ling and his disciples, etc.—to tell us how to read it. But what of a Six Dynasties landscape without such clues, supposing we find one? Are we to take it for a Taoist paradise, or a Buddhist object of meditation? We can only say that it might have been understood as either by the artist or his audience, but needn't be either.

The point of these remarks may seem too obvious to need statement, but isn't, in view of some tendencies to be marked in writings about Chinese painting. In a shift paralleling the Southern Sung shift in the nature of literary criticism (as defined at the beginning of Lin Shuen-fu's paper) we should probably move from a stage of trying to define what Chinese landscape painting as a whole means to one of trying to say how particular Chinese landscape paintings should be understood, using our grasp of theories to clarify the structure of options. What I speak of as applying ideas from writings too quickly and loosely to paintings would be comparable to our colleagues in literature studies deciding that they must find moralizing and didactic content in poetry because so many Chinese theorists have insisted it's there, or should be there. They don't do this (nor should we); instead, they try to read the poems for what they are, and recognize how far this insistence on didactic content results from the special Chinese need to justify (validate) literature and art on moral, or broadly cultural, grounds. And they recognize that this urge may not go in the same direction as the urge that motivates the actual production of art. The history of art provides numerous cases of non-correspondence between what theorists write and what artists do.

Much theorizing about art in China seems to reflect a recognition of a possible and actual tension between the practice of the art, as it was going on in the writer's time, and the humane, moral values that it *should* display; the practice, much of the time, fell short of what the theorists believed it should be. We, in turn, can recognize this and try to see the works of art in terms of their actual achievement, as closely as we can discern it, instead of adopting, ourselves, the Chinese theorists' view on what it *should* achieve. The Chinese could be dogmatic on these matters; we shouldn't. When Tim Wixted said that "our job here is to try to discuss in analytical language, not to make more poetic constructs about art," I felt myself vibrating in mystic harmony.

An objection to that argument, of course, is that some Chinese modes of understanding art, and some modes of understanding Chinese art, can only be grasped or arrived at through a kind of intuitive, holistic approach, a kind of lyric metacriticism (practiced in emulation of the Kao/Chang-defined mode of lyric criticism) that experiences the idea or object from inside instead of considering or analyzing it from outside. We try, of course, to use both approaches, but ultimately realize that we can't, really; it is the same dilemma that we encounter in trying to talk about Zen. Our choice is between joining the succession of Chinese theorists, and holding ourselves a bit distant from them and trying to be analytical. The latter, it will be charged, leads to an incomplete or inaccurate understanding; to that charge there is no good answer, except one like Don Munro's "flippant" answer to Su Tung-p'o in his remarks yesterday: if intuitive criticism and un-analytical approaches to Chinese art are turned loose, they will lead to disarray in their practice by the common people . . .

Returning to landscape painting: such meanings as Susan's and Lothar's papers suggest for it are most characteristic of the early periods; in later centuries, middle Sung and after, the tendency was rather to dissociate the content or meaning of a painting from its imagery, at least for some kinds of painting, and associate it rather with the nature and feelings of the artist, in ways that Susan and I have tried to trace in our studies of literati painting theory. This new way of reading a painting can still be reconciled with older views by the idea of art as embodying the self-cultivation of the artist; the painter's religious or philosophical grounding in this way affects the content of the painting, or becomes part of it. This process is implied in what

Chris Murck writes about Su Tung-p'o's ideas and his painting. We could thus argue that there is no real contradiction between the idea of painting as expression and the idea of painting as depicting the world—between its expressive and descriptive capacities, that is—and Chinese writers often blur or deny the distinction. Yüan Hung-tao, as quoted by Chaves, talks of his younger brother's poetry in these terms—"At times, his emotions and the scene would come together . . ." a fusion of emotion and scene, as Chaves calls it. But to say that they fuse is to acknowledge that they are separate or separable; viewed another way, they *needn't* fuse, and we commonly distinguish, and properly, between kinds of painting that are more expressive and others that are more descriptive. (Later thought: note the difference between Yüan Hung-tao's statement and that of Hsieh Chen, 1495-1575, as quoted by Frankel, *Flowering Plum*, p. 1: "Scenery is the go-between of poetry, emotion is the embryo of poetry. By combining them a poem is made." Is this a fundamentally different perception or a different way of formulating or expressing the same perception?)

The point here is that the fact that we, or the Chinese, can harmonize or reconcile divergent tendencies in theory doesn't mean that they can't or shouldn't be distinguished in the practice of painting. It is characteristic of Chinese thought that virtually anything can be reconciled with anything else on the theoretical level, if the writer chooses to do so; the resulting formulation can be a profound truth, but it can also, especially in later times, be rather facile, and nothing we should repeat or imitate. Chaves (p. 34) quotes Li Meng-yang: "The ancients used rules, which were not invented by them but really created by Nature. Now, when we imitate the ancients, we are not imitating them but really imitating the natural law of things." This kind of formulation was easy to make, sounded profound, and was accordingly attractive; similar ones are sometimes made by painting theorists. We can accept such an argument, or we can recognize (as I would do) that it is a theoretical construction that often goes against what we can observe happening in the paintings, where imitation of the ancients pulls the painting *away* from nature. (Tao-chi saw this most clearly.) Similarly, artists often state that nature is their ultimate teacher in painting, however conventionalized and unnatural the styles in which they paint. So tensions, contradictions, discrepancies, are not so apparent in theorizing as in painting; we should recognize them when they occur, being under no such compulsion as the Chinese to reduce everything to harmony. Our responsibility as scholars is in fact to be aware of distinctions and differences, both within art and between art and theorizing about it. Trying to imitate the holism and syncretism of Chinese thought in our treatments of Chinese art will too often lead, I think, to muddling; I am in sympathy with James Liu's plea, at the end of his article, for a recognition of diversity as well as homogeneity. Jonathan Chaves, at the end of his article, writing on Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, notes that Tung writes of taking nature as his teacher, and adds, "There is some irony in the fact that Tung's actual paintings are, if anything, among the most 'abstract' and intellectualized in all of Chinese art." He is absolutely right; I have myself recently made the same observation, at greater length. It is not merely a matter of irony, but a real disparity; it would be a profound mistake to maintain that because Tung claims to take nature as his teacher, his paintings must be seen that way. I would like, rather, to see Tung's critical and theoretical writings in the light of what Tu Wei-ming called, yesterday, the "rhetoric of the time"—in the light, that is, of contemporary theoretical positions which have a problematic relationship to painting.

What comes clear in such a conference as this is not only the diversity of Chinese theories of the arts—Pauline Yu remarks that one can make almost any writer seem to espouse almost any position, since they don't adopt clear positions and stay within them consistently—but also the diversity possible in our interpretations of them. We have to realize, I think, that theorizing about art and producing art are separate activities; the relationship between them is always important, but also always problematic, dynamic, changing. We should investigate and understand the Chinese that seem most true to the material we're dealing with. The possibility of mismatches between writing and doing exist, of course, in a single person; Tung Ch'i-ch'ang is an example; Chaves quoted Verlaine saying that "poetry is music and nothing else" while noting that he put much else into his poetry. Numerous examples could be cited in studies of Western art—early non-objective painters (Kandinsky, etc.) who, writing at a time when it was

virtually impossible to argue a truly non-objective position, concocted theories about how their paintings expressed profounder and more universal truths about the world than did representational painting; or (a random choice) Salvator Rosa, who "is a good example of discrepancy between theory and practice in the Seicento. Who would suspect from his use of the brush (in a way so obviously suited to his temperament) that in theoretical matters he was an advocate of 'erudition' among painters, that he himself aspired to fame as a monumental painter, and that he considered decorum a matter of some importance?" (Denis Mahon, *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory*, p. 190).

Writings on art take their own course, have their own urgencies and inhibitions. Marilyn and Shen Fu say of writings on calligraphy that they are "organically related to the social, intellectual, and cultural climate and are true expressions of the era. How could we expect their writings to be what they cannot and do what they did not set out to do? It seems justified to propose that ways of thinking have their own evolution . . ." To say this defines the strengths of the writings, but also their limits. And the failure of Chinese writers, for these reasons, to raise and discuss some issues that interest us shouldn't convince us that we are wrong, or imposing our ways of thinking on the works of art, in turning our attention to those issues. The problematique of Chinese theorizing and criticism did not correspond neatly with that of painting. A question of the kind John Hay frequently raises, e.g. "Did the artists ever think of themselves as solving problems?" can only be answered: we don't know, because this wasn't within the terms in which the Chinese discussed art; which is not to say that the Chinese artists didn't think that way. (There are some indications that they may have, but that's another problem.) Similarly, I am not persuaded that we should refrain from discussing abstract tendencies in painting, or feel guilty and culture-bound in doing so, because Chinese discussions don't use this particular concept or word. (They seem often to be saying essentially the same thing in more roundabout ways.)

Finally, two examples from the conference papers of the kind of problems raised in not keeping painting (or calligraphy) separate from writings about it.

Hay (p. 3): "We might be tempted to use the figures of Ku K'ai-chih and Yen Li-pen as evidence that Chinese art had an innate and ancient tendency toward non-physicality—toward abstraction—and that the importance of calligraphy is the supreme expression of this. I think this would be quite wrong." (I think so too, but for a different reason.) Hay continues: "The complement to the *apparently* disembodied figures of Ku and Yen is the frequency of good and solid, flesh-and-blood terms appearing in texts on calligraphy." Hay's paper on these latter is (as always) stimulating and in itself convincing, but this argument is not. To rephrase it: we might be tempted to think that paintings have quality X, but they don't, because *writings about* calligraphy have an anti-X quality. This won't do.

Dick Barnhart, again in a paper I admire generally, studies Ming critical reactions to the "wild and heterodox" painters, but also offers a strongly negative assessment of those critical reactions, with the implication that the painters are in fact better than we have taken them to be. This is all right, I suppose, if the writer and his readers are clearly aware that he is operating on this double level; it is not all right if (as I suspect may be the case) he assumes that one follows from the other. It is quite possible—I offer myself as an example—to admire and agree with his study of the critics, but not sympathize with his effort to rescue the painters from the low critical evaluations they have received. It is quite possible, that is, for weak or bad paintings to be criticized on weak or bad grounds; proving the badness of the latter doesn't make the former better. *Our* evaluations of the paintings must be our own, based on the paintings; and there Dick and I would differ somewhat.

But we have all committed the same mistake, the same implicit equation of theorizing and painting; I certainly have, often enough; I feel nevertheless that it is useful to warn against it.