CLP 7

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THE STATUS OF WRITING IN ASIA (College Art Assn., Feb. 1983)

The invitation to be discussant at this session has been challenging and stimulating, sending my thinking into unaccustomed paths. This set of five extremely interesting papers, together with the formulation of the topic of the session by Yoshi Shimizu and Shreve Simpson, provide a basis for a grand integrative formulation that will serve as a unified theory for the status of writing in Asia, by supplying both case-studies of the kind that must underly any such general theory, and illuminating observations by the authors of the papers. Even with such supportive materials, however, I have no illusions about being able to accomplish anything like that, and I will only offer a series of thoughts in that direction. Much of what I say will be simple, even obvious, but seems nonetheless worth saying.

Two statements in Wayne Begley's paper can start us off.

First: the statement that "just as the calligraphy forms an integral part of the overall visual design, so too must the content of the inscriptions be construed as a purposeful statement of the cognitive significance of these monuments--a guide to the viewer as to how they are to be 'read.'" Oleg Grabar similarly states at the end of his paper that when the inscription is not simply an expression of vanity or graffiti, it "was to ensure that the point and aim of a building were clearly understood for all times."

These observations suggest that the meaning of the buildings is ~~ultimately~~ not entirely self-evident, and that the addition of writing to works of art can impose on them meanings not inherent in the object or structure, in the work of art proper, architectural or pictorial or whatever--impose these, that is, on our experience of these objects and structures. The same idea appears in others of the papers, and I ~~mean to take it as one of my texts~~ think it's a useful starting point tonight.

The other of Wayne Begley's statements is the one about "words functioning almost as if they were 'images'." This is more problematic, raising large questions more than answering

them. PErhaps his meaning is essentially the same as Grabar's when the latter says "Writing at this level is simply (or complexly) an idiosyncratic pool of forms used to develop a program, like representational sculpture or floor mosaics in Chris= tian or late antique art." Oleg's paper otherwise, especially in the second of his Two "paradoxes," argues against any kind of equivalence of words and images, stressing rather the disparity between writing and visual experience: "writing implies or recalls another order of knowledge, another mental process than the visual experience." I would certainly agree with this observation, and see it as another that is central to the question we are addressing tonight. Or rather, the two questions: although our topic is "the status of writing in Asia," we are in fact concerned with writing in its relationship to works of art on one hand (Begley, Grabar, Cahill papers) and writing as art, calligraphy, on the other (Bierman, Goldberg papers.) Although these are obviously interrelated, they can also be distinguished for purposes of discussion, and I will do so tonight.

Beginning with the first, in which the relationship between writing and a separate work of art is at stake--in which, that is, we are dealing with an inscription--and in which we could imagine the object standing (impoverished without) and in which the function of writing is more than decorative, we can ask Oleg's question about whether writing was used in an iconic function on architecture in China and Japan, as it was in Islam. The answer is negative, unless I am forgetting cases; plaques with writing on temples and palaces of the Far East only name them. But in other outdoor places we can find inscriptions that play more interesting roles: on a cliff, to ~~tell the viewer~~ inspire the viewer to a Buddhist reading of the scene, or that this is not just a piece of geology, or even of scenery, but a cliff where Su Tung-p'o once composed

an ode; or in a garden, where one is invited not simply to gaze at an attractive pile of rocks, but to imagine he is confronted by a strange assemblage of lions, or that he has arrived at last at Mt. P'eng-lai in the Isles of Immortals. Oleg's first "paradox," that the inscription is often "not necessary to the functions and uses of the building," supplies its own answer: the inscription is needed when the building or other object takes on meanings somewhat ~~separable~~ distinct from its simple function. It is just at the moment when the meaning of the object is compounded, no longer simple, that associated writing becomes appropriate, or even necessary to a full reading of it. If we say, with Wayne Begley, that it provides the viewer with a guide as to how the object is to be read, we imply that it somehow needs to be read and not simply named, or even more simply, used and understood by people who know its name already. Writing gives clues to compound readings intended by the maker, as when, in Begley's mosques, the "Paradise allusions make it clear that this monument is also to be interpreted as a symbolic replica of the ~~same~~ celestial prototype."

Writing in China seems to follow fairly neatly the categories that Oleg outlines. It appears to begin with marks on neolithic pots that cannot be read now but are assumed to name the potter or the pot itself, and early inscriptions on ritual bronzes have essentially the same character, elaborated sometimes with multiple namings: x made this precious tripod vessel for his grandfather y. Writing here has the function that Oleg calls "indicative," and is, as he says, "formulaic and standardized." Chinese bronze inscriptions grow longer and more informative when the vessel begins to serve not only in its old function as a container for sacrificial food or wine but also to commemorate a gift or investiture, and doubles as sacral object and document. The function of writing here corresponds to Oleg's second, the commemorative, and to that noted by Wayne Begley for the eulogies written on his mosques: "to record who ordered the moseque to be built, and the date of its construction." At this moment, when the maker feels a need to inform some future viewer or user about the circumstances under which the object was made, or at least to make a lasting record of those circumstances, one great category within the inscriptional literature of China, the t'i-pa or colophon, is born.

INSERT (p.4)

(Oleg: "an official proclamation as true of the truth of a moment.")

(Insert in p. 3) The inscription removes the gift or investiture or profession of loyalty from the simple status of event to a permanent relationship or commitment. We know that the ritual bronzes became symbols of authority from the later Chou stories in which the possession of a tripod legitimized the rule of a state.

The cases of inscriptions on mirrors, developed so fascinatingly by Suzanne Cahill in a paper from which I learned a great deal, is still more complex. They can name or commemorate; but mostly they seem to fall into the third of Oleg's categories, what he calls the "semantic" (and avoids calling the iconographic, while noting that that's included in it.) They ~~identify~~ define and amplify the religious or other meanings that the object and its decor carry. But the mirror inscriptions can also, as Suzy notes at the end of her paper, take on a status that corresponds to Oleg's fourth category, the iconic, in which the inscription becomes itself a sacred object. Just as Begley's mosque served as a symbolic replica of its heavenly prototype, Cahill's inscriptions can be symbolic replicas of the original heavenly texts of Taoism as they were "cast in metal or carved in jade."

We could continue, if time permitted, by considering inscriptions on objects of other kinds--on ceramics (I think of a delightful quatrain about drunkenness in spring written on a T'ang wine pot) or, the material in which I am most at home, the great growth of inscriptions on paintings. This could be the subject of a book, and no doubt eventually will be; I will say only that we could define a series of types and purposes in these as well. Their common characteristic is that they ensure that the ptg is not experienced purely as a picture, or even purely as an aesthetic object. What Oleg writes about writing implying "another order of knowledge, another mental process than the visual experience" is true here: the inscription disrupts the simple and normal perception of the painting, stipulating that we are to see it as the product of the thought and feeling of a particular person, and that our separate knowledge of that person must affect our reading of the painting, that the painting must be understood as an embodiment of his Confucian self-cultivation or Ch'en enlightenment or whatever--as carrying, that is, cultural values outside the pictorial and aesthetic. That inscriptions occur typically on works by amateur artists, more than on those of the professionals, is consistent with this function, since the amateurs insist always on such multi-leveled readings of their paintings.

If we understand this function for inscriptions--that they superimpose on the object, or on our experience of it, meanings that are not inherent in the object itself, we understand also why inscriptions are so common in China. Cultured Chinese have always, it would seem, felt a certain mistrust of the simply functional, or the simply aesthetic, and felt that some overlay of cultural reference was needed to invest the object with sufficient value within their Confucian system of beliefs. (I speak, of course, of the value system current among the people who wrote the critical and theoretical texts, as well as the inscriptions themselves; simpler kinds of appreciation must have been characteristic of other levels of society.) Paintings were done in old styles, and inscriptions clued the viewer to these stylistic allusions. Such written appreciations

are very different in character from the older inscriptions on bronzes and mirrors, but similar in purpose in that they try to ensure that the object will not be perceived as purely aesthetic or functional--the mirror is not simply to see your face in, the painting is not simply a picture. Both are, instead, concrete embodiments of beliefs and complex cultural values. Here, perhaps, is where we can most properly see writing in China as having a privileging function: the word organizes our

In Japan, especially in the early periods, writing is associated with the visual arts usually in simpler ways, text and illustration etc., and more works of art are allowed to stand without accompanying writing, exactly because the Japanese were never so uneasy as the Chinese about accepting the object on its own terms; they enjoyed the decorative screen or the painting for what it was, or what it could evoke of nature and culture without the aid of writing. When (under the influence of China) more multilayered varieties of appreciation are introduced, writing assumes the new, somewhat ~~sinified~~ sinicized role with respect to the work of art: to inform the viewer of an ink-monchrome landscape that it is not so much a picture of scenery as a hint toward Zen enlightenment, or the user of a tea-bowl that it was used and admired before by some famous tea-master, or the patron of a Nanga artist that ~~his~~ the painter's works are to be appreciated in a sinophile mode, since they are accompanied by Chinese-style quatrains. This differing relationship between text and object helps to distinguish the indigenous movements in Japanese art from those that are more heavily Chinese-influenced: a yamato-e painting or a painting by Sotatsu may accompany a text, but it does not depend on an accompanying inscription to fulfill its meaning.

This function of writing is more or less independent of its formal properties, the writing as calligraphy. Suzie Cahill, near the end of her paper, makes the good point that the bronze craftsman casting an inscription in a mirror makes it ritually perfect, aiming at an established standard instead of an individual creation, and at "making the word immortal." But moving only a few centuries forward within the same Taoist context, we can recall Lothar Ledderose's paper delivered at a Chinese calligraphy symposium some years ago which concerned a series of divinely -dictated writings that he saw as closely

bound up with the development of ts'ao-shu or the "draft script" in calligraphy. In these, the ~~manner of writing~~ script style assumed equal importance with the text--the quality of divine inspiration was expressed in the free, spontaneous manner of writing, which was supposed to have been a kind of automatic writing, done by someone in a trance while a divine maiden sat on the bed beside him and held his hand. Here was an uncommon fusion of two balanced levels of meaning in a single work, the meaning expressed in the written words and the meaning embodied in the ~~manner of writing~~ script-style, which gave it, in effect, the status of divine word or revelation. Enthusiasts for Chinese calligraphy sometimes ~~write as though~~ imply that this kind of unity of text and form was ~~that were~~ the norm for the art; but in fact, I believe, ~~this~~ it was ~~kind of unity of meaning in text and form is~~ quite unusual, and scarcely continued in later ~~times~~ centuries. Normally we can separate the denotative aspect of writing ~~aszxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ from its formal properties in somewhat the same way as we separate, for purposes of discussion, form and content in a representational art, while allowing for ideal fusions and interactions between them. The relationship of form and meaning is not, of course the same in the two cases, since a picture represents its subject in a more direct sense than writing, as a set of conventional signs, carries its meaning.

Having said that, we must immediately add a qualification on the basis of Irene Bierman's paper, which offers an extremely interesting case in which the graph represents, in a sense, the idea that comes to be attached to it. But this is, I assume, a highly special case, in which the form of the graph, her ~~lam-alif~~ letter-ligature--lent itself (fortuitously, I would imagine) to interpetation as a visual metaphor either for profane love or for the divine union of God and man--an interpretation underlined by its prominence in the sacred phrase meaning "No God except The God." Such a case, if not unique, must be rare--even the Chinese script, in some part ideographic, offers no real parallel that I can think of, although characters will sometimes be cited for their shapes, for instance in explaining how to make certain leaf patterns in painting bamboo ("like the character ko 个"). What one

both by its association with the word meaning "no," so that it could be taken as saying "no" to differences, and

that is, in popular contexts similar to those of Irene Bierman

might think of as a parallel, the use of auspicious characters such as the graph shou or "longevity" in endless variations on pots and fabrics and furniture are in fact cases in which the character carries its meaning, as usual, by convention, and not through some quasi-figural aspect of its form.

~~There are, of course, cases in China in which the written character, apart from whatever ideographic element it may incorporate in its structure, is made to serve a somewhat representational function, but these are the exceptions,~~ analagous perhaps to onomatopoeia in language, which normally doesn't "represent" what it is talking about, but may, in some simple sense, in these exceptional cases. One finds occasionally in calligraphy a passage in which the forms somehow represent a passage in the text--an example I've used in teaching is in a handscroll of calligraphy by Mi Fu (Traces of theBrush, p. 100, discussed p. 84) in which the point in the text at which the boatmen finally pull the boat out of the mud is marked with an enormous character made with movements expressive of something pulling loose, of sudden freedom from constraints. Here the writing represents the event in a relatively direct way; but this, too, is exceptional. Normally, the meaning or expression of calligraphy as an art form in China depends neither on the denotive meaning of the charac= ters written nor, as in Bierman's Arabic example or mine from Mi Fu, on any representational significance that their standard or specially-given configurations may have, but on the expressive forms given them in this particular act of writing by the calligrapher; and the expression of the calligraphy itself need have nothing to do with the meaning of the text. The text can be more or less arbitrarily chosen, the Thousand Character Classic or whatever; one may be reminded of the recent French composer Darius Milhaud who demonstrated the insignificance of text for his purpose by setting (as I recall) the Burpee Seed Catalog to music, as a cantata or set of songgs.

excerpts from

AGain, there are exceptions; an excellent paper by Christian Murck at the calligraphy conference of 1977 pointed our the special importance for 16th century Soochow scholars of the Ch'ih-pi fu or "Red Cliff Ode" by Su Tung-p'o which they wrote over and over as calligraphy, and one can think of other examples, Wang Hsi-chih writing the famous preface to the Lan-t'ing Gathering poems, or Huai-su writing his autobiographical statement, in which the calligrapher's feelings are expressed both in his words and in the forms of his calligraphy.

But, to return to our earlier argument about writing overlaying the work of art with meanings not inherent in the work, and disrupting any simple functional or aesthetic reading: the situation changes when writing itself becomes the work of art, and in fact the relationship is interestingly reversed: the status of the piece of calligraphy as an aesthetic object now disrupts any reading that is limited to the denotive function of the text. The "double image" quality of the relationship is intensified, deriving doubly from a single set of forms; and the text is naturally reduced in importance as emphasis is shifted to the forms of the writing. This process is interestingly related to, although not identical with, Oleg's (statement that) the writing on his buildings "loses its substantive value when incorporated into the fabric of a visually perceived monument."

Steve Goldberg's paper, accordingly, while identifying the texts (written by his calligraphers), finds the capacity of calligraphy for "visual discourse" to derive from the configurations of individual characters and their spatial sequences in the whole work. He then attempts to associate the meanings of the calligraphy on this level with its status as social product, relating, as I understand his argument, the stable bilateral symmetry and general intelligibility of T'ang calligraphy with the T'ang rulers' desire to gain acceptance of their authority to rule. I am not entirely clear, when he speaks of T'ang calligraphy as having the "capacity to embody objectively verifiable truth," whether this is a capacity quite independent of the text, and if so, just how calligraphy can do this — what order of truth, that is — perhaps this can be made clear in the discussion. In any case, the calligraphy of the Sung literati, by contrast to that of the T'ang, in his words, "renounces a normative conception of structure" and thus opens the way to a "structurally arbitrary,

expressive use of brush strokes which vary widely from one calligrapher to another"; the calligraphic work of art "becomes the visual analogue of the calligrapher's personal predilections." It changes thereby from a public art to one that demands special interpretative competency in the viewer. Here, of course, we have exactly the same overlaying of additional meanings, associated with the artist's character or with his and the viewer's familiarity with old styles, that I noted earlier for scholar-amateur painters and their inscriptions; it is no coincidence that the writer of Steve's example, Su Tung-p'o, is also a founding father of literati painting. The difference in the case of calligraphy is that there the writing is not separate from the work but comprises the work; the piece of calligraphy transcribes the text in something like the way a painting represents a subject, but it embodies also in its forms the equivalent of non-representational values in painting. So text loses importance in such calligraphy in the same way that subject does in literati painting. The work of calligraphy can then be provided, in turn, with colophons recording the circumstances in which it was created, offering ways of appreciating it beyond the self=evident ones, and so forth. The colophon can be written in individual, expressive calligraphy, and elicit appreciation in itself; meanings pile on meanings until we have an art directed not only to the literate but to the connoisseur.

Calligraphy provides, then, an unusual fusion of kinds of meaning; but comparable examples of aesthetic unity in other inscribed arts, such as painting and its inscriptions or buildings and theirs, can certainly be achieved. Even though, that is, writing as a verbal medium belongs (as Oleg observes) to a different order from the visual, it need not be more difficult for a literate person to absorb a picture and an inscription together, if the artist and writer (whether or not the same person) have been successful in making them merge or fuse into a single, complex artistic experience, than to experience a song as a successful fusion of text and music (with the addition of a visual element if the song becomes part of an opera.) And we, as teachers of art history, have to believe and persuade our students that when

> we show a slide and talk at the same time we are amplifying and deepening our audience's experience of the object; it is only the occasional studio art student who, in his natural resistance to our approach, argues that we are spoiling the experience for him by trying to join knowledge to aesthetic response.

The same assumption underlies our writing; we had best be comfortable, that is, with the belief that associated writing can become an integral part of the aesthetic experience of a work of art without diluting it, since our careers ultimately depend on that.