

The Wheel of Fortune vs. the Mustard Seed: A Comparative Study of European and Chinese Painting

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In his famous book *Art and Illusion*, Ernest Gombrich mentions feeling puzzled by the following aspect of Chinese painting:

No artistic tradition insists with greater force on the need for inspired spontaneity than that of ancient China, but it is precisely there we find a complete reliance on acquired vocabularies. (Gombrich 1972: 128)

Gombrich notices that, on the one hand, the ancient Chinese placed great stress on the inspired spontaneity of painters, so that the traces of improvisation were deliberately kept in their works, yet, on the other hand, they relied so completely on acquired vocabularies or formulas that they could trace each of their brushstrokes back to certain famous masters in previous generations. It seems paradoxical, but in fact Chinese painters made new creations precisely on the basis of acquired vocabularies, and recognition of this fact can provide a starting point for a study of the unique characteristics of Chinese painting.

The way of understanding ‘acquired vocabularies’ in European painting

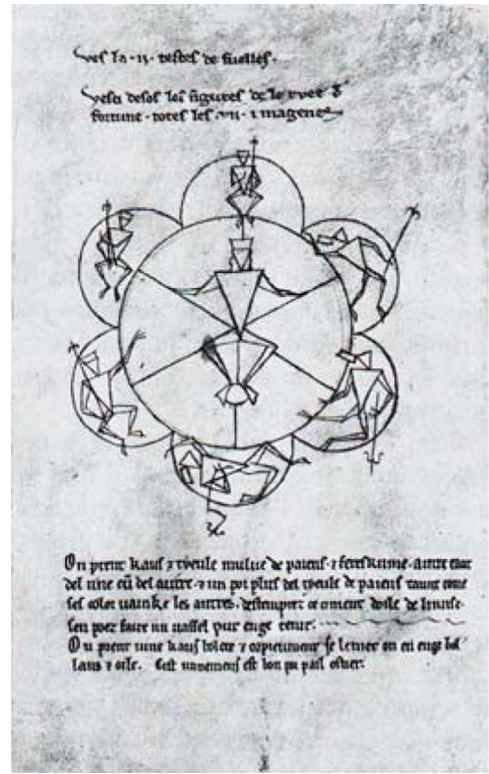
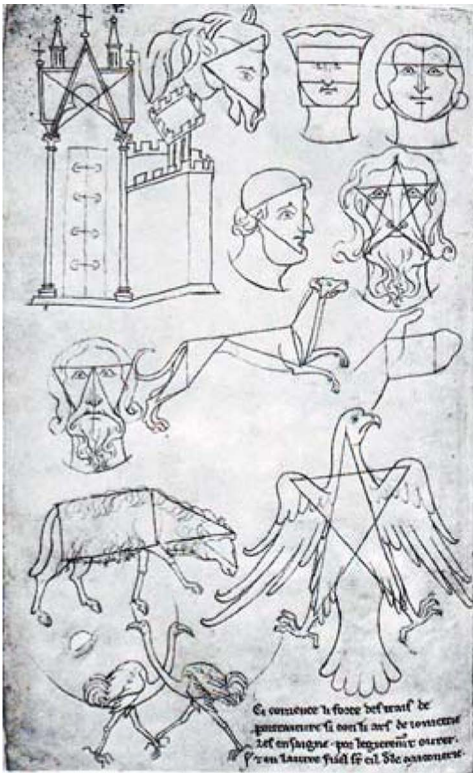
Gombrich continues with a discussion of the medieval writer and painter Villard de Honnecourt’s *The Wheel of Fortune* (c.1235), and reproduces the pages displayed overleaf (Figures 1 and 2).

To Gombrich, Villard’s pictures provide examples of how painters are always eager to give ‘universals’ – man, bird, lion, etc. – rather than this man, that man, this bird, that lion. From this, and also from the examples he gives from a Chinese book entitled *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (芥子園畫傳) to which we shall return, Gombrich concludes that painters are always taught to paint universals first, and it is only afterwards that they begin to deal with the particular. He takes the transition from the universal to the particular to signify a progress, paralleling his famous ‘making and matching’ formula.

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Figures 1 and 2. Villard de Honnecourt. *Constructions. The Wheel of Fortune.* Drawing on parchment, ca. 1235.

It is good that Gombrich puts European and Chinese paintings together, and attempts to look for some common theoretical explanation. These two examples are indeed similar in many points: both may be taken as books for beginners, and both provide basic formulas, or, in Gombrich's term, 'basic vocabularies' for apprentice painters to acquire. They are still, however, fundamentally different.

In Villard's picture we see geometrical forms in the images of men and animals: squares, triangles, and pentagrams. Zenner in her 'Villard de Honnecourt and Euclidean Geometry,' in which the relationship of Villard's portfolio to geometry is discussed at length, writes, 'In Antiquity, within the Mediterranean basin, and in the West during the Middle Ages, scholars considered mechanics as one of the more noble of human activities, placing it at the confluent of ideal mathematics and the three-dimensional physics of the terrestrial world' (Zenner 2002: 65).

It is obvious that Villard was very interested in geometry; we can find evidence not only in the pictures he left, but also in the writings that accompany them. 'On folio 18v of the portfolio,' writes Zenner (2002: 67), 'Villard (or his scribe) wrote: *Ci comence li force de traiz de portraiture si com li ars de iometrie les ensaigne...*' ('[h]ere begins the force of lines for drafting, as the art of geometry teaches...'). Elsewhere, Magister II added a commentary (fol. 20r) on a leaf of 'technical drawings' he added to the portfolio: *Totes ces figures sont estraites de geometrie* ('[a]ll these figures are taken from geometry').

Zenner also discusses the source of Villard's knowledge of geometry. She tells us that there was a practical geometry passed between the craftsmen of the Middle Ages, and that 'the builder's

practical geometry was handed down by means of a strictly oral tradition, and that the oral aspect was propagated because they were all illiterate' (ibid.). Villard de Honnecourt probably also had access to original texts on Euclidean geometry at Corbie Abbey, where he stayed to study geometry. There are also direct traces of Euclidean geometry in the portfolio, as Zenner argues in detail (ibid.).

The practical methods of constructing pictures resulted from certain fundamental underlying aesthetic ideas; for example, that regular geometrical forms are beautiful. In Europe, there was a formalist tradition in aesthetics: The idea that, as Tatarkiewicz (1980: 125) summarizes it, beauty lies in 'the size, quality and number of the parts and their interrelations.' This is a tradition that was generally ascribed to Pythagoras, though some scholars argue that its origins are older. Pont (2004: 18), for example, holds that '[m]odern scholarship has established that most of the doctrines traditionally ascribed to Pythagoras were really the contributions of the older high civilizations, particularly of Mesopotamia and Egypt.' Pythagoras may not have created his theories from nothing, but rather learned a great deal from earlier civilizations, as many other Greek philosophers did. But it was in Greece that the tradition was crystallized by, among others, Pythagoras and Plato, and thus passed down as a dominant theme for later generations.

In Plato's *Philebus*, we read that 'something straight, or round, and the surfaces and solids which a lathe, or a carpenter's rule and square, produces from the straight and round' are 'absolutely and eternally beautiful' (Beardsley 1966: 43). Similar ideas are repeated by many writers from ancient Greece and Rome, through the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, and are called 'the Great Theory' by Tatarkiewicz (1980: 125–129). St Augustine first formulated beauty as measure, shape and order, and gave this idea the following well-known expression: 'Only beauty pleases; and in beauty, shapes; in shapes, proportions; and in proportions, numbers' (Tatarkiewicz 1980: 127). In the Renaissance, Alberti defined beauty as harmony and good proportion: 'the consonance and mutual integration of the parts' (ibid.: 128).

There are two sources for the Great Theory; one is music and the other is architecture. The Pythagoreans discovered the harmony in sound, and concluded that the 'elements of the material world either are, or are imitations of, numbers' (Beardsley 1966: 27). But in the minds of the Greeks, architecture, which was taken as 'frozen music,' shared the same origin, and was also determined by number. This idea profoundly shaped the Greek view of architecture, and its influence spread from architecture to sculpture and painting.

In discussion of the geometrical forms of architecture and painting, the Italian term *diseño* frequently appeared. This concept was developed from the mathematical understanding of architecture and other arts. *Diseño* was taken as a function of the deity. 'By *diseño*, which is the deity's beginning, she teaches the architect to make his edifices. She has invented the characters in which the different languages are written ... given ciphers to the mathematicians ... described the figures of geometry' (Richter 1970: 63). *Diseño* abbreviates *segno di dio*, meaning a sign of God. 'Art works are signs, their visible aspect indicating a metaphysical reality, an idea' (Carman 2007). In this way, *diseño* is linked with theology. That God manifests himself through certain geometrical forms was a belief current among European painters in the Middle Ages, from the third to thirteenth centuries.

A couple of years ago, as a result of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* and the film adaptation, a well-known picture became even better known: the *Vitruvian Man*.

The following text accompanies Leonardo da Vinci's drawing:

Vitruvius, the architect, says in his work on architecture that the measurements of the human body are distributed by Nature as follows ... [...] The length of a man's outspread arms is equal to his height. From the roots of the hair to the bottom of the chin is the tenth of a man's height; from the bottom of the chin to

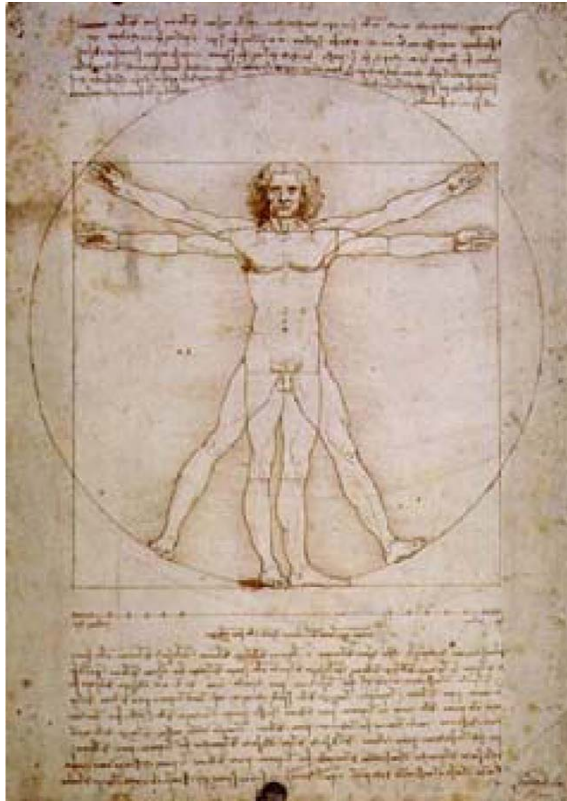


Figure 3. Leonardo da Vinci, Vitruvian Man.

the top of his head is one eighth of his height; from the top of the breast to the top of his head will be one sixth of a man. (Leonardo da Vinci 1945: I, 182–183)

This is exactly the code found and developed by Leonardo da Vinci, by which a mysterious connection between nature and human beings was established. Numbers, measures, and symmetry are all codes of God, who teaches European painters the essence of painting, the root of Art.

The separation of painting and architecture in China

Numbers and measures played important roles in other ancient civilizations, including China. In *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, a book edited by Lü Buwei (呂布韋, 293?–245 BC), a politician during the reign of the first Qin emperor (秦始皇帝), we find the following paragraph:

The ultimate source of music is very far away. It was generated by measurement, while rooted in the Great First.¹

In another chapter of the same book, ‘The Ancient Music,’ Lü records how, during the legendary Yellow Emperor period (黃帝, 2697?–2599? BC), a musician called Ling Lun (伶倫) made 12 pitch-pipes to distinguish the 12 notes of an octave.

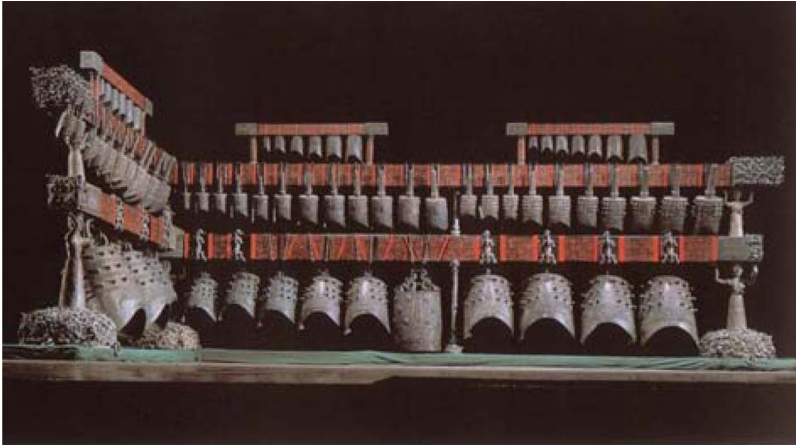


Figure 4.

These records may show that China was also among the earliest civilizations to discover the relationship between music and mathematics. These records of musical knowledge can be supported by many archeological finds, particularly the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng (曾侯乙墓), uncovered in 1977, where a set of bronze bells or *bianzhong* (編鐘) was found that has been dated to 433 BC.

Bianzhong or chime bells are traditional Chinese musical instruments, which can be dated back to long before the creation of the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng, who was only the vassal of a very small state. How large and luxurious chime bells and other musical instruments would have been for the emperor and the vassals of larger states we can only conjecture, but at least from this piece we can see that Chinese people at that time had already mastered the complex techniques necessary to make such an ingenious object possible. Pont (2004: 25) gives the following enthusiastic description:

The instruments included 65 bronze bells, forming a well-tuned carillon of five octaves, still in playing order. To everybody's astonishment, the bells produced a very accurate, mostly chromatic scale ... a musical Rosetta Stone, no less.

We do not know how the Chinese at that time were able to make such an excellent instrument, but we can be sure that its maker had a profound knowledge of music and its relationship with mathematics; otherwise it would have been impossible.

Very few ancient Chinese buildings have survived, since most of them were made of wood, but we can still see many pavilions, terraces, pagodas, and verandas. Euclid's work was not introduced into China until 1607, but the Chinese had developed an indigenous geometric knowledge, a mixture of practical geometry and numerology-geometry, dozens of centuries before that date.

The ancient Chinese believed that Chinese civilization began with two diagrams (Figures 5 and 6): 河圖 (*Hetu*: literally, the image from the Yellow River) and 洛書 (*Luoshu*: literally, the writings from the Luo River).

These two diagrams revealed numeric laws, presumably invented by certain anonymous designers but attributed to rivers and thus given a natural-cryptic origin (*Hetu* was carried on the back of a dragon-horse, and *Luoshu* on the back of a turtle). However, it was believed that Fu Xi (伏羲, the legendary first tribal chief) subsequently invented *Bagua* (八卦, the Eight Diagrams) (see Figure 7):

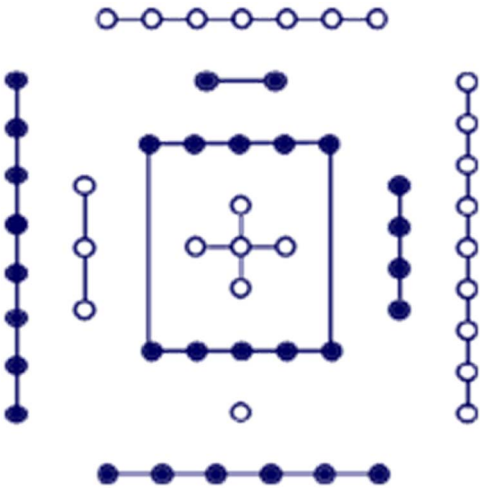


Figure 5. 河圖 (Hetu).

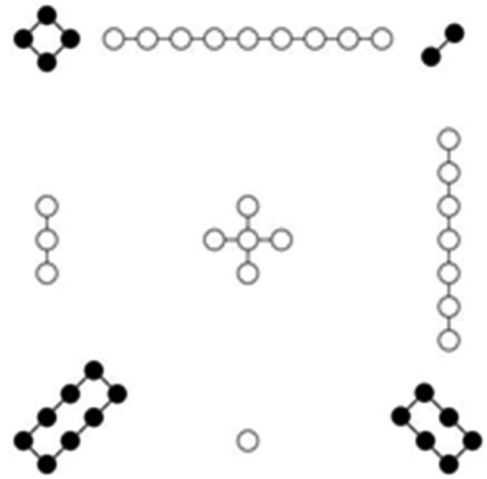


Figure 6. 洛書 (Luoshu).



Figure 7. 八卦 (Bagua).



Figure 8.

These were later revised (Figure 8) by King Wen of Zhou (周文王), reigning from c. 1105 BC to c.1056 BC.

All this implied a mathematical and geometrical tradition omnipresent in Chinese culture for many centuries. If we say the Pythagoreans believed that ‘all things are numbers’ and profoundly influenced European culture, we can also say that from *Hetu* and *Luoshu* to *Bagua*, Chinese culture also demonstrates a clear line of mathematical inclination.

This line of thought was even more obvious in architecture. There are many special characteristics in Chinese architecture, such as its emphasis on bilateral symmetry, horizontal breadth, and



Figure 9. Beijing: Temple of Heaven.

Fengshui practice was also based on a *gaitian* (蓋天) cosmography, dating from the Longshan culture (龍山文化, c.4000 BC) in which the heavens were round like a huge vault while the earth was like a square ground (Li Liu 2004: 85–88). The *gaitian* cosmography was one of the earliest cosmographies in ancient China, and exerted a strong influence on Chinese ideas of architecture, particularly imperial buildings such as the Temple of Heaven (Figure 9), the Temple of Earth, and the Imperial Palace (Figure 10).

These pictures again remind us of the Vitruvian man, which tries to place a human figure in a circle and a square.

There was a strong possibility, then, that Chinese painting would develop in the same direction as its European counterpart, and many Chinese painters did in fact pursue geometry, but another line of thought developed in China during the European Middle Ages: literati painting.

‘Literati painting’ is a translation of *wen ren hua* (文人畫), which literally means paintings made by men of letters, scholars, or writers. However, it does not refer only to the status of the painter; more importantly, it refers to a special style demonstrating a particular aesthetic taste.

Literati painting began with a change in the status of painters. From the end of the Han Dynasty (漢朝, c. 200 AD) onwards, some men of letters, such as Gu Kaizhi (顧愷之, 348–409), Lu Tanwei (陸探微, active 439–472) and Zhang Sengyou (張僧繇, active 500–519), started participating in picture-making activities. Although their work cannot be considered literati painting in its narrow sense, its appearance was of great importance for the eventual formation of literati painting.

Gombrich (1989: 105) observes this fact and comments that:

The Chinese were the first people who did not think of the making of pictures as a rather menial task, but who placed the painter on the same level as the inspired poet.

Some small changes in this sentence would make it perfectly correct:

The Chinese were the first people among whom the inspired poets did not think of the making of pictures as a rather menial task and engaged in this form of art.

gabled roofs. Liang Sicheng (1984) found that ‘[t]he Chinese have always employed an indigenous system of construction that has retained its principal characteristics from prehistoric times to the present day.’

This tradition was deeply rooted in the practice of *fengshui* (風水), a system of orienting buildings according to mysterious connections between Heaven, Earth, and human beings. *Fengshui* was a recondite geomancy by means of astronomy to discover the laws of Heaven, and a geography to know the laws of Earth. In this practice, the compass and other instruments were used to decide the north-south axis, and thus other directions. By choosing a good *fengshui* for a house or tomb, people believed they would be able to achieve good fortune in their life.



Figure 10. The Imperial Palace in the Forbidden City (Beijing).

A new upper-class painting emerged at the end of the Han Dynasty. This upper-class painting was no longer made merely *for* the upper classes, but also *by* the upper classes. Gradually a distinction between so-called elegant and vulgar painting was made, which imposed certain values on picture making.

Literati painting is generally considered to have germinated during the Tang Dynasty (唐朝, 618–907), with painters such as Wang Wei (王維, 701–761) and Zhang Zao (張璪, active around 780) as its forerunners.

In the Song Dynasty (宋朝), a group of scholar-officials initiated a new kind of painting. Among them the most prominent is Su Shi (蘇軾, 1037–1101), who put forth many important ideas for this new painting.

Susan Bush, a professor of Chinese art at Harvard University, describes its development thus (1971: 81):

Ideally, from its inception, scholars' painting was the art of an educated minority, practiced only in a circle of intimates and appreciated by a chosen few. Yet despite its elitist origin, it gradually gained ground until, by late Ming, the styles, practices, and views of the literati were the accepted modes of art and thought.

In the Qing Dynasty (清朝, 1644–1911), neither the orthodox painters around the court in Beijing nor the innovators in the southern commercial centers such as Yangzhou (揚州) became court or professional painters in the manner of the Song Dynasty (960–1279), when there was a threefold division of literati, court, and professional painting. Both orthodoxy and innovation should instead be regarded as continuations of literati painting. Although the relationships between the styles of each of these two kinds of painter and their social positions, as well as the different roles of painting in their lives, are highly deserving of study, the tradition of literati painting was already firmly established at that time, and any such study should first take this fact into consideration.

Literati art was created by men of letters, who were not trained in workshops and had little knowledge of the professional training of craftsmen. On the other hand, they received a humanistic education, and knew poetry and calligraphy. As is known, there are 'three perfections' – poetry, calligraphy, and painting – in Chinese art, and the Chinese painter is supposed to be educated in poetry and calligraphy. It would have been impossible for them to consider

mechanics as a noble activity as Europeans of that time did, and they were simply not interested in mathematics and geometry.

The rise of literati painting in China was also a process of separating painting from architecture, together with the knowledge of geometry and geomancy that architects might have. In the minds of these scholars, or men of letters, the work of painting was acceptable because it was a work of ink-play, that is, a natural extension of writing and calligraphy, but they would have nothing to do with house-building, which was only the work of menial craftsmen.

Chinese painters even considered that architectural painting was the lowest of the various genres of paintings.

Painting was divided into figure painting (such as portraits of monarchs and other royalty, as well as those of high-ranking officials and officers; pictures of legendary heroes, sages, and ancestors; images of Buddha or other Buddhist and Taoist figures), landscape painting (paintings of mountains, rivers, and other natural scenery), flower and bird painting (including paintings of the so-called ‘four gentlemen’: bamboo, plum blossom, orchid, and chrysanthemum, which symbolized the virtues of intellectuals), animal painting (such as paintings of horses, oxen, tigers, or dogs), and architectural painting (mainly paintings of palaces and temples). A great change in the status of various kinds of painting took place during the Song and the Yuan dynasties. Before the Song Dynasty, painters thought that the most important of these branches was figure painting, but from the Song Dynasty onwards landscape painting was placed first. No matter how the order subsequently changed, architectural painting was always in the lowest position. For instance, Gu Kaizhi (c. AD 344–405) wrote: ‘Towers or pavilions are only unchangeable objects, which are difficult to paint but easily made good’ (Gu 1963: 116). In the Tang Dynasty, Zhu Jingxuan (朱景玄) arranged the painters he recorded according to the following order: ‘The first are figure painters, then the painters of animals or birds, then those of landscape, and lastly those of towers, palaces, houses, and woods’ (Zhu Jingxuan 1986: 999). Tang Hou (湯屋, active c. 1330), a writer and critic in the Yuan Dynasty, cited a popular saying during his time: ‘When ordinary people discussed painting, they always said that there were thirteen categories. Landscape painting was at the top; architectural painting was at the bottom’ (Tang Hou 1982: 201). During the Ming Dynasty, Wen Zhenheng (文震亨, active c.1630) made this even clearer in simple words: ‘The first is landscape [painting], then [that of] bamboo, woods, orchids, rocks. As to [that of] men and women, birds, animals, towers, palaces, and houses, the small-sized is secondary, the large-sized is even less’ (Wen Zhenheng 1973: 137).

Architectural painting was called *jiehua* (界畫), which means to paint with a straight edge. To paint palaces, houses, temples, pagodas, or pavilions demands many straight lines, which are inevitably drawn with the aid of instruments. This kind of painting also requires careful calculation, measurement, composition, and a knowledge of foreshortening; it is, therefore, not an easy job. It would be wrong to think that the ancient Chinese did not know about the technical difficulties involved in making architectural pictures. What they wanted to do, however, was to deliberately separate painting from architecture, with its connections to mathematics and geometry.

The separation of painting from architecture in China also gave a strong impetus to painters to break away from the ideas of linking heaven and earth, the competition of Yin vs. Yang, the circle of Five Agents, and other traditional mysterious ideas.

What Chinese painters learnt from *The Mustard Seed Garden*

In his book *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich quotes a Chinese book entitled *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, that was completed in 1679 (Volume I), 1701 (Volumes II–III), and 1818

(Volume IV). ‘The Mustard Seed Garden’ was the name of a small villa in Nanjing owned by Li Yu (李漁, 1611–1680), an essayist and dramatist, who gave support to the compiling of the book and also wrote the preface to its first volume. The significance of the mustard seed came from a Buddhist parable – ‘Mount Sumeru is contained in a grain of mustard seed’ – and was intended to convey the idea that a small book might contain a huge amount of meaning. In this book, the basic theories of Chinese painting were summarized and many illustrations were provided for learners to copy and practice.

Gombrich advances the book as proof of his theory that Chinese painters, like their European counterparts, began to practice painting by learning how to paint trees, rocks, mountains, water, orchid, bamboo, plum, chrysanthemum, grasses, insects, flowers, birds, and various figures, such as adults and youths, women, and children; all of them universals, designating kinds of objects rather than individual objects. He maintained that this book, like some European books, did not bring people to the level of painting particular objects, that is, not this particular tree or that particular mountain. A universal is, in his terms, a schema of the object, which is at a relatively lower level, and should be corrected in accordance with perception if the painter wants to produce a realistic painting. Gombrich (1972: 129) writes:

The Chinese artist appears still as a ‘maker’ of mountains, trees, or flowers. He can conjure them up because he has learned the secret of their being, but he does so to record and evoke a mood which is deeply rooted in Chinese ideas about the nature of the universe.

In his famous formula of making and matching, the maker belongs to the lower level and does not reach the level of matching. He is right to say that Chinese painters are still makers, but we will find that they were not the same makers as the Europeans, and that they have other aesthetic ideas behind their work.

Now we come back to the *Mustard Seed Garden*. The first picture (Figure 11) in the first volume is accompanied by a paragraph of writing. Here is a translation of the first few sentences:

To paint landscapes, one should first know how to draw trees. To draw a tree, one should first draw the trunk and main branches, and then do the foliage, and thus eventually it becomes a luxuriant tree. Too many twigs will make it a withered one. (Wang Gai 1960: I, 41 & 1956: 53)

From this we can see that this is a book that teaches drawing. The author continues by showing how to carefully make the first few strokes to form a general composition, and stresses how important trees are in landscape painting.

What the *Mustard Seed Garden* teaches includes the following:

First, how to draw an element of a picture, such as how to draw a tree. Second, how to put elements together: for example, drawing two trees, three trees, five trees, etc.

Third, the ways in which elements like trees have been drawn by famous painters in the past, such as Fan Kuan’s style, Guo Xi’s style, Wang Wei’s style, Ma Yuan’s style, and many other styles.

The author concludes by saying that

The various styles of trees have been given above as established standards. After knowing the styles, we should consider their application. Although it is impossible to divide styles from their applications, we

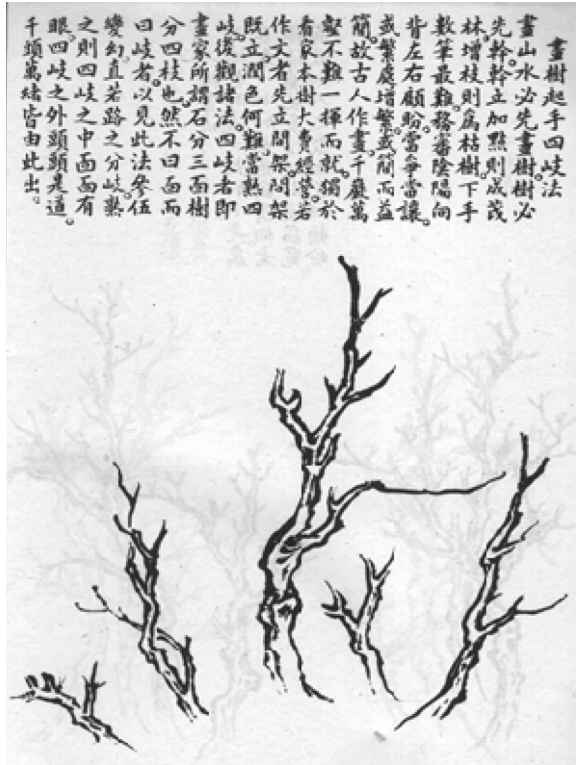


Figure 11.

should distinguish them for beginners. It is like five flavours, which can be blended in different ways; an expert cook uses them in different ways to make delicious food. (Wang Gai 1960: I, 73 & 1956: 85)

From the *Mustard Seed Garden* and other books and ancient paintings, a student of painting only learns the ways and styles of painting; it is also very important for them to be able to make good use of these: to know how to apply them.

This is an imitation of the way calligraphy is learnt in China. Generally every Chinese student learnt calligraphy from childhood; it was an important part of education. To men of letters in ancient China, beautiful handwriting was taken as a sign of the quality of one's education and character.

The practice of learning calligraphy begins with the line. A line should have its beginning, middle, and end. The feeling and disposition of the writer can be seen in a line. We can describe lines as being 'powerful' or 'soft,' 'rigorous' or 'charming.'

From a single line, a calligrapher can proceed to connect lines to create a character. A character can have eight basic strokes, as 永 has various lines in different directions. A student should begin by learning to make lines in different directions, and then the ways of turning and combining, and eventually creating characters (Figure 19).

In Chinese philology, there are two kinds of characters: ones consisting of a single element (*wen*), and ones combining two or more elements (*zi*). A *wen* consists of strokes, while a *zi* consists



Figure 12.



Figure 13.

of *wen*. In this sense, a writer will progress from strokes, through *wen*, to *zi*, and then on to sentences, ending with a whole text.

The only way for a student to make progress is to copy: firstly, by imitating copybooks, and then famous calligraphic works. In order to become a calligrapher, a student has to practice for a long time. It is not a process of learning certain secrets of writing, like tricks of the trade or the geometry of composition, but more like a process of accumulating feeling. In our everyday life, after experiencing many different things, we can become an experienced person. It is precisely the same in learning calligraphy, in which, after many years of learning and practicing by copying and writing, we become experienced calligraphers, and can write spontaneously.

A calligraphic work may have different meanings to different audiences. To those who have never practiced calligraphy or cannot even write Chinese characters, a work as such may merely be an image composed of abstract lines. They may praise the Chinese for making nice pictures when they write. In contrast, to those who can write Chinese characters or have practiced calligraphy for some time, an image as such will mean the movement of their bodies, their gestures and postures, and thus the strength in the strokes: the dynamic force in the character will be felt.

If this theory is applied to painting, we can see that we also have two different ways of seeing a picture. One way is to take it as an image, and the other is to understand it in a dynamic way, by seeing in it the traces of the gestures and postures of its maker. We cannot avoid seeing Chinese painting as an image, since it has to be of some object and have, in Chinese terms, *xingshi* (形似) or likeness in form, but calligraphic and dynamic feelings will inevitably infiltrate into our perception of painting. In this sense, we can say that the Chinese did not write characters by drawing pictures, but rather they made pictures by writing characters: a sense of the dynamic act of writing permeated their understanding of painting.



Figure 14.



Figure 15. Fan Kuan.

In light of this it becomes clear why the Chinese have an anti-geometric inclination in painting. As I have argued elsewhere, they retain the idea that a beautiful line in a painting is a free-hand one (Gao 2003). Jin Hao (荊浩, 923–936) once gave a simple and interesting definition of drawing or painting: ‘Drawing is to draw’ (畫者畫也, *Hua ze hua ye*). It is indeed a kind of ‘acquired vocabulary,’ but it is a dynamic one. Those who take a Chinese character as a picture cannot have a real appreciation of Chinese calligraphy, while those who see a Chinese painting as merely an image cannot fully understand the painting.

Here I do not mean to say that everyone who looks at a Chinese painting must be a painter or a student of painting. We should not say that those who have not yet learned Chinese painting cannot feel the painting by means of their own experience. The dynamic or kinesthetic sense of the act of painting for the ancient Chinese came from the calligraphic practice that was an important part of the traditional education of Chinese intellectuals. For various reasons, including the imperial examination system for scholar-officials, calligraphic ability was emphasized and became one of the signs of one’s learning and cultivation. Good handwriting was important for educated people, since others would judge their quality and identify their temperaments from their handwriting. It was precisely the popularity of calligraphy that gave rise to the characteristic Chinese sense of line, which was transferred to the field of painting, and determined how painting was produced and appreciated.

This communication by means of sharing kinetic feeling enabled the Chinese to understand paintings in a special way, which was completely different from that of Europeans. While Europeans



Figure 16. Guo Xi.



Figure 17. Wang Wei.

could see in an object the geometrical forms that were taken as a more essential dimension, in China the communication between audience and work was realized by means of the common practice of character-writing, familiar since childhood.

Conclusion: The sources of creation in China

In conclusion I would like to put forth some ideas, based on the two manuals discussed, about the difference between traditional Chinese painting and European painting.

As we have seen, Chinese painters did not try to acquire a rational comprehension of the divine world by means of mathematics and geometry, and did not present nature in this way. This is not because there was no Pythagoras or Plato in ancient China, but rather because Chinese men of letters deliberately switched Chinese painting onto another track with the rise of literati painting.

Chinese painters even deliberately avoided the help of drafting instruments and resisted the temptation to render the shapes in their painting geometrically. To them, the world was not a place of secrets that could be discovered through mathematics, but rather the place in which they lived. Painters represented the world through certain vocabularies, as people describe the world with language. As a person with a good education could employ a bigger vocabulary and



Figure 18. Ma Yuan.

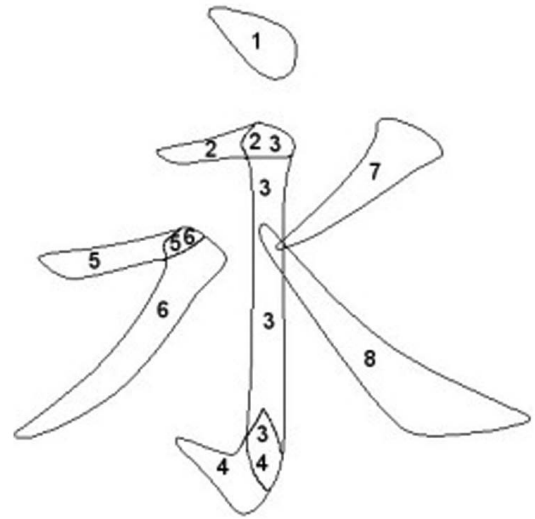


Figure 19.

so give a better description of the world, so a good painter also had a wide vocabulary with which to represent the world he saw. He developed this by means of copying from manuals and from celebrated painters, and renewed the vocabulary by seeing and imitating nature. During the process of painting, he never tried to construct his painting in the manner of a builder. The process of making a painting is an experience with its own beginning, middle, and end, rather than a project of combining different objects together. During the process of picture making, Chinese painters can freely express their emotions with the help of the vocabularies they have gradually acquired since an early age, but their present experiences and kinetic feelings are always central to the process.

As we know, there were stories of ‘one-stroke paintings’ (一筆畫) in ancient China. These were taken as quite unusual instances and recorded and passed down. These stories, as some Chinese painters have argued, refer to the way strokes are connected to create a complete whole:

Zhang Yanyuan said Wang Xianzhi could do one-stroke calligraphy and Lu Tanwei could do one-stroke painting. This does not mean that all the characters of an essay or all the lines in a picture of an object can be finished in a single stroke, but rather that, from start to end, the brushwork is consistent and linked together with an unbroken breathing thread. (Guo Si 1982: 84–85; Gao 1996: 71)

‘One-stroke painting’ might refer to a proficiency in picture making, showing a skillful application of the ‘acquired vocabularies,’ but the ancient Chinese went a step further by putting forth a rather special idea of ‘one-stroke’ (*yi-hua* 一畫). Shi Tao (1986: 13) wrote:

From ancient times to today, the obstacles to the law cannot be cleared away because the principles of one-stroke are not known. If one knows one-stroke, one will not be blocked by the eyes and thus the painting can follow the heart. If painting follows the heart, the obstacles are naturally removed.

The single stroke is an act that becomes a bridge between the feelings inside and their traces outside. A bridge as such signifies that the relation between feelings and traces is not the heterogeneous isomorphism posited by psychologists or Neo-Kantians, but rather a causal relation between action, with its kinetic feeling, and the traces that are the results of such action. From the order of the strokes, through one-stroke painting, to a metaphysical idea of ‘one-stroke,’ this is the whole process of the ideas of Chinese painters. We may consider that ‘one-stroke’ is not actually something that can create the world, as the author of this idea maintained, but we can at least accept that ‘one-stroke’ can be a process for cultivating painters. With this practice, the Chinese painter is convinced not that ‘I think, therefore I am’ but rather ‘I act, therefore I am.’ The world is my trace, and I am the source of creation.

Note

1. ‘The Great Music,’ in *The Spring and Autumn Annals* by Lü Buwei. My translation. See Lü Buwei (1998).

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