

## LANDSCAPE PAINTING—EAST AND WEST

By DR. ELEANOR CONSTEN

*The attempt to understand the difference between the Eastern and the Western mind is the fascinating pursuit of anyone who has lived in both the Orient and the Occident. Many answers to this eternal question have been offered, and we intend to contribute a few more in some of the next issues of our magazine, holding to concrete points rather than to general commonplaces.*

*The following article is a charming yet penetrating analysis of the landscape painting of East and West.*

*The author is peculiarly fitted for her task, for she herself is the product of two cultures, being the daughter of an American mother and a German father. From early youth attracted by art and Chinese culture, she studied both subjects at the Universities of Vienna, Berlin, and Bonn. After obtaining her doctor's degree she went to America for post graduate work at Radcliffe, the women's branch of Harvard University. The first thing she was told there by a well-meaning friend was, "Don't tell a soul you got your doctor's degree at the age of 23, or you will never have a date." Dr. Consten thinks her friend was right.*

*For several years Dr. Consten worked at the Oriental Department of the Fogg Museum of Harvard University. Then she moved first to Japan, later to China, and here married the writer and student of Mongolian affairs, Mr. H. Consten. She is the author of two books on Chinese art and is now living in Peking.*

*Three excellent photographs of bizarre Chinese landscapes have been contributed by Miss Hedda Hammer of Peking, one of the finest photographers of Chinese subjects.—K.M.*

### PAINTERS

#### MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

Man has always looked at Nature around him and enjoyed what he saw. Earth, stones and rocks, trees, grass and flowers, in the changes of season and hour, ever repeated but never quite the same—of these a landscape is built, be it a flat expanse of barren ground or mountains with trees, brooks, and waterfalls. Landscape is fundamentally the same in the West and in the East, comprising all the variations possible in the temperate zone. It is the painter who makes the difference.

To the Western painter the countryside is a book with a different picture on each page; every aspect of Nature has its beauties. He has never given up the right to explore every corner of the land in search of new effects,

and endless are the possibilities of finding a new view in a new light for a new and different picture.

#### NOT ALL EXAGGERATION

But the Chinese have, in the earliest stages of their landscape art, put the seal of approval on one type only—the *shan shui* (山水) "mountain and water." They have specialized in a landscape that seems exaggerated to the Western eye. And exaggerated it often is, but not as much as we think. The photographer of today sees the cliffs and gorges, the pine trees and trailing mist of Hua Shan (華山), the sacred mountain in Shensi, as dramatic and awe-inspiring as they appeared to the painters of the T'ang and Sung dynasties, who reveled in striking contrasts of line and dimension. Rocks are slashed in long, parallel lines.

Mountains rise and break like angry waves, crested with pines. The valiant trees cling to the unyielding stone; and so does the pilgrim's path with steps cut into the deep decline. (Fig. I, photo by Hedda Hammer. Fig. II, painting by Ma Yuan, 馬遠, late 12th cent.) Mist rises out of the valley, the trees in the foreground stand out sharply against it. Mist emphasizes the distance between them and the hills in the background—distance unmeasured and unbridged. Towering cliffs appear out of the fog; their jagged lines are softened by the haze that swallows earth and sky alike. We do not know where solid ground may end and the infinite begin. (Fig. III, by Hsia Kuei, 夏珪, late 12th cent. Fig. IV, by Hedda Hammer.)

This spectacular, heroic landscape became *the* landscape for all Chinese painters, even those who lived on the Great Plain and never saw such fantastic scenery. For them it was only a short step from the unbelievable to the impossible, and the Chinese would hardly consider this difference very important, if the effect of grandeur, of Nature's majesty is achieved. The technique of landscape painting was standardized to such an extent that the fantastic and the ordinary did not seem so far apart, after they were stylized in black and white. The West first made the acquaintance of the most exaggerated and abbreviated bits of Chinese landscape on porcelains and lacquers, and it has never quite got over the shock of this first glimpse of China, consisting mainly of frail little temples perched precariously on most dangerously undermined cliffs.

#### MASTER OR CREATURE?

The Chinese artist paints in the approved style and chooses the time-honored subjects of the old masters; the Western painter relies only on Nature herself and what he can see with his own eyes.

Yet the attitude of the Western painter is not one of humility; on the contrary, it is homocentric. Man is the crowning glory of Nature, her

master. Landscape is only what he can see; it stops at the horizon, that imaginary end of the world that is nothing but the limit of man's eyesight. Man and his doings are often the center of the Western landscape, heroic or intimate. Even if no human figure appears in the picture, the stress is still on a human personality, on the painter and his choice of subject.

The composition of a Chinese landscape painting makes it quite clear that human scope of vision has not been employed; only a bird on the wing would see the world thus. Only a spirit not bound by the laws of gravity could so convince himself that there is no horizon, where the world ends and we drop over the edge into nothing. The Chinese painter knows that out of the emptiness will rise more hills and new worlds.

The East gives a less exalted place to man in Nature; his importance is in proportion to his size. The travelers on the mountain path, the meditating scholars are as necessary to a complete representation of the universe as the rock and the tree—and not a bit more important than they. Man happens to be one of Nature's many creatures, not her master.

#### LANDSCAPE AS BACKGROUND

Landscape painting in the West began as an appropriate background for portraits and pictorial story-telling. The same was true of China; but it was a short and unimportant stage, whereas in Europe the landscape was slow to come into its own. It remained in a subordinate position throughout the Middle Ages. Beautiful landscapes have been painted as backgrounds to religious pictures by Dutch, German, French, and Italian painters; they were vast or intimate, fantastic or true to nature, they had everything an independent landscape should have, except the recognition as such. Today's art historians, with modern photography at their disposal, delight us with enlarged reproductions of background details. On the canvas they are small

and easily overlooked, yet the painter has lavished so much loving knowledge of Nature on them, that, when finally landscape was considered worthy of representation for its own sake, painters had little to learn—just leave out the foreground, and there was a full-fledged landscape.

The Chinese have always understood that the background for a portrait or some outdoor scene is different from and inferior to real landscape, just as man and his doings are inferior to the universe. When they paint a saint, or people in a garden, they also use rocks, hills, and trees, done in landscape technique; but they use them as "props," they do not give depth and rhythm to mere indications of scene. Background is limited, it serves a definite, explanatory purpose; landscape is boundless, it has no other purpose than unfolding itself. Its scope dwarfs man and his petty activities, until they take their proper, insignificant place.

### *SITTING DOWN*

#### *FOR A DAY'S WORK*

The Western artist packs his painting kit in the morning, takes his lunch, and goes out in search of a suitable subject. He examines critically this and that view, framing it in his mind and hanging it on a wall (preferably a museum wall). Size and shape of his canvas influence his decision. He finds an ideal motif and sits down with his easel and colors for a day's work on that particular spot. Now he must show his skill. He must confine a segment of Nature within a given space, so that her endlessness will not strain against the frame. He must find a point towards which all lines gravitate, away from the frame, so that the frame can be a protection and logical boundary, not a prison bar. The picture will then say to the beholder:

Here is a place of perfect beauty, of harmony in line and color. The moment at which I was painted was perfect; time stands still for you in me. Beyond me the world is of no

importance; settle down in my center, and you will desire no more.

The Western painter will go into the woods, he will see a pattern of tree trunks around him and dense foliage overhead, he will see deep shadows and flecks of light, colors and forms will close in on him and give him a feeling of intimacy with nature. He dwells on the accidental beauty of the moment, on the effect of light on color. His landscape is built of static forms, which he puts down in areas of color. He enjoys the infinite and subtle shadings of tints and hues. He paints only what he sees, and he sees shapes only through their difference in color. Because sky and clouds have color, they are to him as well defined as trees and stones, and he paints the sky as he sees it—a flat sheet of blue.

He must study his perspective carefully, because only by imitating the centralizing powers of the human eye, by duplicating its faculty to create a vanishing point wherever it fixes its gaze—only thus can the painter hope to gather a view into a small space, to cut it out of the universe without having the edges bleed.

### *AT THE BEND OF A RIVER*

Gottfried Keller, the writer and artist, painted the bend of a river: a big tree shades the angler at the right, it is balanced by a group of trees screening off the view at the left (Fig. VI). Colors range from warm browns over a rich variety of greens to the clear blue of the sky. There is no outline, only innumerable changes of color, comprehensively and aesthetically arranged. Any shifting of the viewpoint would destroy the delicate balance of mass and color. We have no way of going up the river, of finding out what the scenery beyond the bend and the trees would look like—and we are not supposed to. Our place is just on the edge of the frame, and we sit there as placidly as the angler who poses for his picture.

Hsia Kuei (夏珪), who lived about 1180—1230, also painted the bend of a



river, with a clump of trees at the right (Fig. V). A small figure crosses the bridge; unaware of painter or beholder it follows the path into the background. There is only emptiness to balance the trees and the earth. But wind and water are moving into it, trees and rushes point to it, the distant hills dissolve into it. We must follow the course of the river around the bend, because there we will find the real landscape, to which the painted one is only a guide and a promise.

The Chinese landscape is a representation of the universe and the spirit that creates and preserves it; both are timeless and boundless. Color is accidental, static, a joy to the eye; line is always on the move, while creating one form it already points to the next, it invites the spirit to follow far beyond the end of the picture (there is no frame) and beyond the man-made horizon.

#### GOING FOR A DAY'S WALK

The Chinese painter does not portray Nature, he does not paint a view from a certain point at a certain day and hour, as seen from a campstool. He wants a wider view, a more comprehensive representation of the countryside than just one eyeful can give him. He works as the musician does, who listens to the voice of many trees before he condenses them into the lucid form of a melody, which, though suggestive of Nature, obeys laws of purely artistic origin. Landscape photography may successfully replace painting in many Western homes; to the Oriental it can be a new and fascinating form of art, but not just another technique for the old landscape.

The Chinese painter roams over the countryside, he looks at the ever-changing scenery, remembering striking lines, forgetting accidental details (Fig. VII). He stretches his tired legs under the wooden table in the rustic inn, he drinks homemade wine with the monk of the mountain-temple. He climbs a hill and sits down to rest and gaze at the view, and the view will

unfold itself to him far beyond the power of his eyes, because he has come a long way and knows he can only hope to do justice to the vastness of the universe by understanding its essence, by sending his soul where his eyes cannot travel. He crosses the stream in the fisherman's boat and visits the retired official in his hut by the waterfall. They discuss philosophy and the affairs of the country, passing easily over unimportant details as the leaves of distant trees merge into dark shadow against the pale outline of the hills. They match their skill in poetry and they drink some more wine—Chinese biographers did not mince words about the bibulous inclinations of their artists—and by the time the painter continues on his way he is probably a little tipsy and will gladly accept the services of a donkey. Immeasurable dimensions will gain in proportion in his mind as he gazes at near and distant cliffs, and he will know that the difference in speed between the rushing water, his donkey's trot, the growing tree, and the mountain lifting its summit into the clouds, is really negligible in the light of eternity.

#### NO FIXED VIEWPOINT

So he returns to his study and dusts his table and spreads out his clean white sheet of silk. His mind runs over the impressions of the day, it lifts him higher than the hills he has climbed, and with swift strokes of the brush he writes down his landscape—only the "bones" of Nature, as the ancient canon puts it—for he will give the picture to his philosopher friend, whose imagination will need no more than a few hints to fill the empty spaces with more hills and trees than the silk could hold.

The long handscroll is singularly well suited to the Chinese conception of landscape. Painter and beholder travel along as the scroll is unrolled, one vista merges into another. Many landscapes combine into an account of Nature, not limited by a fixed viewpoint, not dependent on or composed

from the outside. Yet the greater number of Chinese landscapes are painted on hanging scrolls. Since landscape painting in China is not selection of a detail, but abbreviation of the whole, the variation in scope of the hand- or hanging scroll is of no account as compared with the expanse of the universe. Limitation lies in the choice of subject, only hills and running water being eligible. The fact that the first landscape painters in the T'ang dynasty chose such scenery must have played an important part in narrowing down the painter's choice; but no love of tradition could have kept even a Chinese from branching out into other types, if the strong, upward thrust of solid hills and the yielding, downward current of clear water had not expressed to perfection his conception of the forces that give life to the universe.

### THE CHINESE

#### NEED NO PERSPECTIVE

Perspective would only spoil the scope of a Chinese landscape; a centralized composition would stop the spirit in its voyage. The Chinese picture invites us to change our viewpoint as often as we like. We start from the top of the hill and look out towards other summits, we dive into the valley and see the stones in the river bed, we follow the pilgrim to the distant pagoda. Perspective balances every corner and detail of the Western picture into instant, formal connection with its main subject. The Chinese painter gives us rhythm instead of balance and thereby insures autonomy for every little unit of landscape. We can enter and travel through each part of the picture in turn, going from one to the other, and we shall be as little bothered by the lack of a uniform viewpoint as we would be by the changing pictures presented to our sight as we move around a familiar room.

The Chinese painter employs just enough laws to keep the picture from falling apart. The towering mountain is the keynote, the buildings in the background are slightly smaller than

those in the foreground, outlines and details of distant hills are dimmed by mist. But he does not assign to the beholder the exact place from where he must not stray.

### THE TINY COUNTRY DOCTOR

Kuo Hsi (郭熙) of the eleventh century (Fig. VII) combines many scenes in one picture, a complete world fills his strip of silk, enough to give us an idea of what the universe is like. Lauren Ford, a contemporary American (Fig. VIII), carried home many detailed sketches of the Connecticut countryside and combined them into a panorama, seemingly in the Chinese manner. She works in the Eastern way, combining views seen at different times; she also employs the bird's-eye view and high horizon. But the picture only seems decentralized; the Westerner cannot drop the approved standards; there must be an excuse for a picture like that. So the artist introduces the "Country Doctor": he enters the house in the center and gives the picture its name—and we are right back with the homocentric type. A dramatic moment of human interest is the excuse for and vital point of the whole picture, even though we can hardly make out the doctor's tiny figure in the wealth of surrounding detail. In spite of its scope, its variety of places and activities, this painting is an intimate one; it evokes very personal, nostalgic feelings. We are already supplied with the coloring of that particular day, from our memory we add the sound of birds and the smell of hay. To the New Englander this picture represents a very precious corner of the earth, not the world in general. The Chinese painter is always a *Weltbürger* (cosmopolite) even if he paints only bamboo groves and temples with curved roofs.

### THE POLICEMAN

#### WITH THE BRUSH

Western landscapes are seldom really bad, provided the painter has a fair amount of color-sense and technique.

and has been taught the laws of composition and perspective. Because the subject is beautiful, even less skillful renderings will still impart the charms of the place the painter chose to portray, and the picture will please those who love that particular spot. If a Chinese landscape is badly done there is nothing left to admire. The subject is too commonplace, has been too often repeated, is too stylized to excite any feeling in the beholder. If the rhythm is jumbled, if the sweep of line is without life, if the shading is crude, then no amount of "brush-stroke" technique can save the picture. It is a complete waste of paper, silk, ink, and time—and many Chinese landscapes are. It seems easy to learn the "trade" of the *shan shui*: take mountains, waterfalls, and pines, dot with tiny people, mix with some characteristic brush strokes and a few rules of composition, stir well, and throw on silk. Indulging in a genteel pastime does not guarantee stupendous results; if the person thus agreeably occupied is not a genius, no amount of studying the old masters will do him any good.

I have watched a policeman on duty at a city police station spend unoccupied moments in painting hills and bamboo groves with scholars in huts on paper fans. The result was quite charming to the untrained eye, but the artistic merits hardly surpassed those of a pleasant picture postcard or calendar decoration. If the spirit of the universe has not inspired the painter, it cannot move the beholder to any feeling either. The picture is then like so many creations of modern art, which conceal the lack of inspiration and the lack of sound training under heaped clichés that are supposed to reflect the taste of the public. The fact that not only a change of mental attitude but the acquisition of a complete new philosophy would be necessary, may help to explain why—even among foreigners in China who are ardent admirers of Chinese landscapes—there are so few who attempt to paint in the Eastern style, whereas the results of opposite endeavors have been quite commendable.

### COLOR OF THE MOMENT

Colored landscapes are not unknown in China, but to the Western eye the colors seem limited, crude, and unnatural, as indeed they are. They are applied in the study according to a conventional system, a standard color chart summarily derived from Nature. Color has to be confined to one place, it is accidental, it may change with the slightest change in lighting. The Chinese prefers to strip his landscapes of this unstable element, he only uses the shades of ink from luminous black to pale gray, they accent the line and move along with it; they suggest color without defining it.

Color dates a picture, it makes it the child of one perfect moment which will never come back. Therefore the painter puts all his skill in the selection of the right moment and the color harmony which is the mainstay of his picture.

Moritz von Schwind, the German romantic painter, depicts a wanderer resting under a shady tree to look at the view (Fig. IX). We are given every detail of that view, as encircled by the tree, the foreground in radiant reds and greens, the hills in the back fading away into paler shades of blue, and above them the blue sky and white clouds. We find the same theme and composition in a painting attributed to the Sung emperor Hui Tsung (徽宗), the same protective tree, the same figure resting under it, looking out over the country at his feet (Fig. X). But to the Chinese painter the sky is not the limit, the clouds pass much too quickly to leave an imprint on the silk. The empty space is the most important part of the picture, we follow the man's gaze into it and we see more than any painter's brush could draw. Inspired by the painted scholar's rapt contemplation, our imagination takes wings and flies over hill and vale through mist and sun. So why try to paint the landscape? The scholar lost to the universe, one with rock and tree, is far more suggestive than any line or color could be.



*MOSS OR WINGS?*

The Chinese landscape gives wings to the beholder, but it does not rest him. He cannot linger on soft moss in a secluded grove, or in the shade of Corot's trees, he cannot find his home in a Ruisdael hamlet. He has to look at the woods from afar; he has to pass the hut by the wayside and journey to the pagoda on the hill, which will give him no shelter; he will take off from there into space filled with more mountains rising out of the mist of tomorrow. The Western landscape reminds us of some summer day of the past, when we ourselves have seen just that radiance of light and color in the country we love. To delight our eyes it blends the accidental beauties of color and planes, preserving a beautiful moment that otherwise would be lost.

The Chinese landscape promises to show us all the glories of creation, if we dare abandon our safe foothold on

that little part of the world over which we are master. It fulfills man's age-old longing for wings, the longing of Faust to follow the course of the sun:

Ah, that no wing can lift me from  
the soil,  
Upon its track to follow, follow soaring!

Then would I see eternal Evening  
gild,  
The silent world beneath me glowing,  
On fire each mountain peak, with  
peace each valley filled,  
The silver brook to golden rivers  
flowing.

The mountain chain, with all its  
gorges deep,  
Would then no more impede my  
god-like motion,  
And now before mine eyes expands  
the ocean  
With all its bays, in shining sleep.

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**MEDITATION**

*By Wei Li Bo*

The evening rain has quenched the swirling dust  
Raised in the heat of day by summer wind.

The yellow moon emerged from shadowy clouds  
And through the plane trees cast her peaceful beams.

Through silence of the night from leaf and tree  
Rings faint the reverent chime of silver drops.

### MODERN PHOTOGRAPHS OR ANCIENT PAINTINGS?

Fig. I This dramatic scene, photographed by Hedda Hammer in the Hua Shan of Shensi, might have been chosen as the subject for a painting in the T'ang or Sung dynasty

