

4 *Landscape of the Soul*

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**Notice these expressions in the text.
Infer their meaning from the context.**

- ◆ anecdote
- ◆ delicate realism
- ◆ figurative painting
- ◆ illusionistic likeness
- ◆ conceptual space

A WONDERFUL old tale is told about the painter Wu Daozi, who lived in the eighth century. His last painting was a landscape commissioned by the Tang Emperor Xuanzong, to decorate a palace wall. The master had hidden his work behind a screen, so only the Emperor would see it. For a long while, the Emperor admired the wonderful scene, discovering forests, high mountains, waterfalls, clouds floating in an immense sky, men on hilly paths, birds in flight. “Look, Sire”, said the painter, “in this cave, at the foot of the mountain, dwells a spirit.” The painter clapped his hands, and the entrance to the cave opened. “The inside is splendid, beyond anything words can convey. Please let me show Your Majesty the way.” The painter entered the cave; but the entrance closed behind him, and before the astonished Emperor could move or utter a word, the painting had vanished from the wall. Not a trace of Wu Daozi’s brush was left — and the artist was never seen again in this world.

Such stories played an important part in China’s classical education. The books of Confucius and Zhuangzi are full of them; they helped the master to guide his disciple in the right direction. Beyond the **anecdote**, they are deeply revealing of the spirit in

which art was considered. Contrast this story — or another famous one about a painter who wouldn't draw the eye of a dragon he had painted, for fear it would fly out of the painting — with an old story from my native Flanders that I find most representative of Western painting.

In fifteenth century Antwerp, a master blacksmith called Quinten Metsys fell in love with a painter's daughter. The father would not accept a son-in-law in such a profession. So Quinten sneaked into the painter's studio and painted a fly on his latest panel, with such **delicate realism** that the master tried to swat it away before he realised what had happened. Quinten was immediately admitted as an apprentice into his studio. He married his beloved and went on to become one of the most famous painters of his age. These two stories illustrate what each form of art is trying to achieve: a perfect, **illusionistic likeness** in Europe, the essence of inner life and spirit in Asia.

In the Chinese story, the Emperor commissions a painting and appreciates its outer appearance. But the artist reveals to him the true meaning of his work. The Emperor may rule over the territory he has conquered, but only the artist knows the way within. "Let me show the Way", the 'Dao', a word that means both the path and the method, and the mysterious works of the Universe. The painting is gone, but the artist has reached his goal — beyond any material appearance.

A classical Chinese landscape is not meant to reproduce an actual view, as would a Western **figurative painting**. Whereas the European painter wants you to borrow his eyes and look at a particular landscape exactly as he saw it, from a specific angle, the Chinese painter does not choose a single viewpoint. His landscape is not a 'real' one, and you can enter it from any point, then travel in it; the artist creates a path for your eyes to travel up and down, then back again, in a leisurely movement. This is even more true in the case of the horizontal scroll, in which the action of slowly opening one section of the painting, then rolling it up to move on to the other, adds a dimension of time which is unknown in any other form of painting. It also requires the active participation of the viewer, who decides at what pace he will travel through the painting — a participation which is physical as well as mental. The Chinese painter does not want you to borrow his eyes; he wants you to enter his mind. The landscape is an inner one, a spiritual and **conceptual space**.

This concept is expressed as *shanshui*, literally ‘mountain-water’ which used together represent the word ‘landscape’. More than two elements of an image, these represent two complementary poles, reflecting the Daoist view of the universe. The mountain is *Yang* — reaching vertically towards Heaven, stable, warm, and dry in the sun, while the water is *Yin* — horizontal and resting on the earth, fluid, moist and cool. The interaction of *Yin*, the receptive, feminine aspect of universal energy, and its counterpart *Yang*, active and masculine, is of course a fundamental notion of Daoism. What is often overlooked is an essential third element, the Middle Void where their interaction takes place. This can be compared with the yogic practice of *pranayama*; breathe in, retain, breathe out — the suspension of breath is the Void where meditation occurs. The Middle Void is essential — nothing can happen without it; hence the importance of the white, unpainted space in Chinese landscape.

This is also where Man finds a fundamental role. In that space between Heaven and Earth, he becomes the conduit of communication between both poles of the Universe. His presence is essential, even if it’s only suggested; far from being lost or oppressed by the lofty peaks, he is, in Francois Cheng’s wonderful expression, “the eye of the landscape”.

[excerpt from ‘Landscape of the Soul:
Ethics and Spirituality in Chinese
Painting’, slightly edited]

Getting Inside ‘Outsider Art’

When French painter Jean Dubuffet mooted the concept of ‘art brut’ in the 1940s, the art of the untrained visionary was of minority interest. From its almost veiled beginnings, ‘outsider art’ has gradually become the fastest growing area of interest in contemporary art internationally.

This genre is described as the art of those who have ‘no right’ to be artists as they have received no formal training, yet show talent and artistic insight. Their works are a stimulating contrast to a lot of mainstream offerings.

Around the time Dubuffet was propounding his concept, in India “an untutored genius was creating paradise”. Years ago the little patch of jungle that he began clearing to make himself a garden sculpted with stone and



A Rock Garden sculpture made of broken bangles by Nek Chand

recycled material is known to the world today as the Rock Garden, at Chandigarh.

Its 80-year-old creator-director, Nek Chand, is now hailed as India's biggest contributor to outsider art. The fiftieth issue (Spring 2005) of *Raw Vision*, a UK-based magazine pioneer in outsider art publications, features Nek Chand, and his Rock Garden sculpture 'Women by the Waterfall' on its anniversary issue's cover.

The notion of 'art brut' or 'raw art', was of works that were in their raw state as regards cultural and artistic influences. Anything and everything from a tin to a sink to a broken down car could be material for a work of art, something Nek Chand has taken to dizzying heights. Recognising his art as "an outstanding testimony of the difference a single man can make when he lives his dream", the Swiss Commission for UNESCO will be honouring him by way of a European exposition of his works. The five-month interactive show, 'Realm of Nek Chand', beginning October will be held at leading museums in Switzerland, Belgium, France and Italy. "The biggest reward is walking through the garden and seeing people enjoy my creation," Nek Chand says.

BRINDA SURI

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Understanding the text

1. (i) Contrast the Chinese view of art with the European view with examples.
- (ii) Explain the concept of *shanshui*.
2. (i) What do you understand by the terms 'outsider art' and 'art brut' or 'raw art'?
- (ii) Who was the "untutored genius who created a paradise" and what is the nature of his contribution to art?

Talking about the text

Discuss the following statements in groups of four.

1. "The Emperor may rule over the territory he has conquered, but only the artist knows the way within."
2. "The landscape is an inner one, a spiritual and conceptual space."

Thinking about language

1. Find out the correlates of Yin and Yang in other cultures.
2. What is the language spoken in Flanders?

Working with words

- I. The following common words are used in more than one sense.

| | | |
|---------|----------|-------|
| panel | studio | brush |
| essence | material | |

Examine the following sets of sentences to find out what the words, 'panel' and 'essence' mean in different contexts.

1. (i) The masks from Bawa village in Mali look like long *panels* of decorated wood.
- (ii) Judge H. Hobart Grooms told the jury *panel* he had heard the reports.
- (iii) The *panel* is laying the groundwork for an international treaty.

- (iv) The glass *panels* of the window were broken.
 - (v) Through the many round tables, workshops and *panel* discussions, a consensus was reached.
 - (vi) The sink in the hinged *panel* above the bunk drains into the head.
2. (i) Their repetitive structure must have taught the people around the great composer the *essence* of music.
- (ii) Part of the answer is in the proposition; but the *essence* is in the meaning.
- (iii) The implications of these schools of thought are of practical *essence* for the teacher.
- (iv) They had added vanilla *essence* to the pudding.
- II. Now find five sentences each for the rest of the words to show the different senses in which each of them is used.

Noticing form

- A classical Chinese landscape is not meant to reproduce an actual view, *as* would a Western figurative painting.
- *Whereas* the European painter wants you to borrow his eyes and look at a particular landscape exactly as he saw it, from a specific angle, the Chinese painter does not choose a single viewpoint.

The above two examples are ways in which contrast may be expressed. Combine the following sets of ideas to show the contrast between them.

1. (i) European art tries to achieve a perfect, illusionistic likeness.
(ii) Asian art tries to capture the essence of inner life and spirit.
2. (i) The Emperor commissions a painting and appreciates its outer appearance.
(ii) The artist reveals to him the true meaning of his work.
3. (i) The Emperor may rule over the territory he has conquered.
(ii) The artist knows the way within.

Things to do

1. Find out about as many Indian schools of painting as you can. Write a short note on the distinctive features of each school.
2. Find out about experiments in recycling that help in environmental conservation.

Notes

Understanding the text ■

Factual and global understanding

Talking about the text ■

Discussing spiritual experiences

Thinking about language ■

- Inter-cultural philosophical viewpoints and related terms
- Knowing about the languages of the world

Working with words ■

Using words according to their function

Noticing form ■

Use of conjunctions to express contrast

Soaring Interest in Chinese Art

A painting by an 86-year old Chinese master has gone under the hammer for a record 30 million yuan, highlighting soaring world interest in Chinese art.

The work by Wu Guanzhong depicting a cluster of colourful parrots sitting on tree branches smashed the previous record price for a Chinese ink painting of 23 million yuan for a twelfth century masterpiece by the Song Dynasty emperor, Huizong. “Wu Guanzhong has successfully melded Chinese and Western artistic traditions,” said Ma Zhefei, marketing manager from China’s Poly Art and Culture Co.