

Non-Textual Portrayals of Landscape

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Landscape can be considered as the essence or quality of the land.

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The landscape in which we live or what we may find—the 'landscape domain'—has always played a significant role in how we express ourselves aesthetically; and then, it is a way in which we can come to understand essential aspects of another culture. I would like to present an overview, through a few selected examples, of how aesthetic expression may be characterized by those participating in Western and Japanese cultures.

Comparative cultural symbology (semiotics) and cultural aesthetics play the major role in how we relate to a landscape before us. Anthropologist Irene Portis-Winner, in her work *The Dynamics of Semiotics of Culture* (1999), writing of sign and symbol interpretation, suggests that there is no one way that members of a culture, let alone outsiders, will experience a landscape in a concrete, objective way, the way others will perceive it. Of course, artists, authors and other perceptive individuals have always known this. We bring to the experience our own unique set of perceptions, memories, and what we *want* of the landscape experience.

I look at a field in a way only I can see it and experience it.

Yet often we are not aware, or lose sight, of this uniqueness in others. Semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin wrote of the viewer's perception of time-space and worldview. He saw how these factors enter our interpretation of the environment and infuse the interchange between subject and ourselves as viewer, whether we are aware of it or not. Portis-Winner offers us this quote:

I see the world from a horizon, the world gives itself as immediately around me, as circumscribed by the unique angle of my vision, as a surrounding full of specific meanings by my own ends. The other, however, I see as existing in an environment: the world is the same for him as it is for others, for it is not conditioned by the uniqueness of his intentionality (as is my horizon) (Bakhtin quoted in Holquist 1981: 72).

By seeing the relationship in this light—the viewer, the landscape, and “the other”—we can explore further elements of human and cultural aesthetic manifestation informed by the inhabitants’ realm. It would be instructive to present some examples here of different disciplines that deal with landscape: painting, music and literature.

In American poet Gary Snyder’s epic collection *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1996), we see a vast array of poems that, themselves, portray the sheer vastness of human culture which includes Gaia history, Native American performance and storytelling, Zen Buddhism, and the landscapes of Japan, California, Alaska, Australia, China, and Taiwan. He particularly cites as a major influence the hand-painted scroll attributed to the 17-century Chinese painter and poet Wang Hui (or Lu Yuan), part of which is shown below in Fig. 1 (see Appendix for viewing sources).



Fig. 1 Section of scroll *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (17th Century) (Black and white image of original color-tone painting)

In a way, this is an example of a multiplex portrayal of ‘a landscape,’ where ‘a landscape’ is also ‘any and every landscape.’ The portrayer (the poet, the painter) gives us his necessarily subjective point of view; we the viewers and readers come to the landscape with an equal subjectivity based on a myriad of sources: memory, culture, and personal need.

<Painting>

John Constable’s landscapes are certainly indicative of the genre of English landscape painting. A fine example is his “Summer Evening” (Fig. 2), which evokes all the elements one expects to find in a peaceful setting.



Fig. 2 Constable, *Summer Evening* (1829/31) (Black and white image of original color painting)

The cows resting in their lush ‘fields of plenty,’ the shady trees on the gently rolling landscape, the calm sunset in the quiet sky. The time of day, reflected in the title, is just as important as the elements found in the painting. The viewer’s point of view—presumably we are standing on top of a small hillock gazing at the peaceful scene—invites us to perhaps stroll along past the cows, moving

easily from light into shade, and back into light, and smell the warm grass as day draws to a close.

Yet contrasted with this bucolic setting is the way Constable has given extreme tones of black to the shaded areas (*chiaroscuro*), which might be a little disconcerting a contrast when one considers the “generic” scene of the English countryside. Does that tree branch on the right seem like a sinister hand or claw stretching out? We are a little disturbed, especially with the way he has placed the sky, seemingly at an angle to the horizon, an angle more acute than we would expect. In the end, something darker falls upon the scene which at first seemed so idyllic, and such was the subtle power of Constable’s skill.

We move on to two works by J.W. Turner, whose consummate skill, in his younger days, in detailed architectural renderings eventually brought him to portray landscape scenes in a more abstracted way: he was able, through his eye-for-detail, to extract the deeper and subtler elements of a scene and portray his vision through careful attention to ground, wash of color and only the most essential details. In the end, one can feel the subject of his painting, in this first case, the waves of the sea and the winter storm, as it seems to overcome the apparently fragile craft as it struggles against the tempest (Fig. 3).

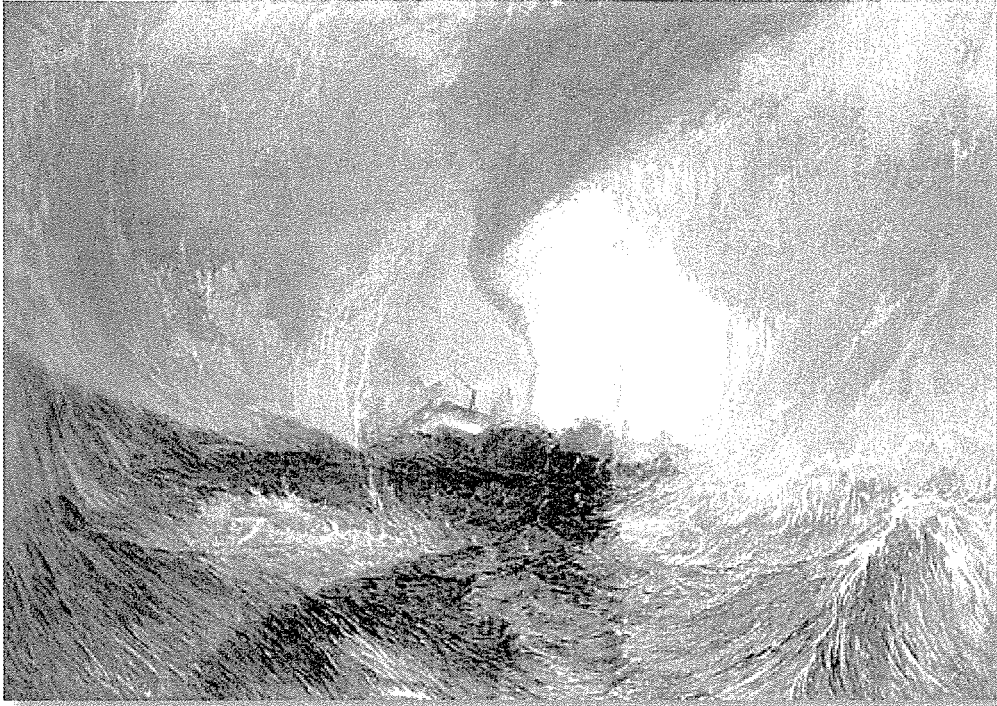


Fig. 3 Turner, *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (Black and white image of original color painting)

The viewer is overcome by the movement that Turner is able to portray in this landscape. Our attention is especially focused on the white center of his painting. What a powerful center he has given to the work, and yet compared to the elements of the rest of the painting, the areas surrounding it, this center is absent of color, form, and texture. But it is the viewer's emotion wrought by the scene that colors and forms this formidable seascape. We are drawn to this center, we are drawn into the storm—the viewer is that very storm-tossed ship.

His *Norham Castle, Sunrise* (Fig. 4) is quite a radical departure from what had been characterized as English country landscapes.



Fig. 4 Turner, *Norham Castle, Sunrise* c.1845 (Black and white image of original color painting)

Gone are the details, shadows and realistic depictions of what one finds in such a familiar setting. Now, in this painting, Turner has further abstracted the definitive lines and concrete shapes into a nearly Japanese *sumi-e* rendition, which had been common in the style of 余白の美 (“beauty of empty space) in landscape painting of the 17th century in Japan.

Below is an example of such a technique, by Hasegawa Tōhaku (長谷川 等伯, 1539–1610), simply entitled *Pine Trees* (Fig. 5).

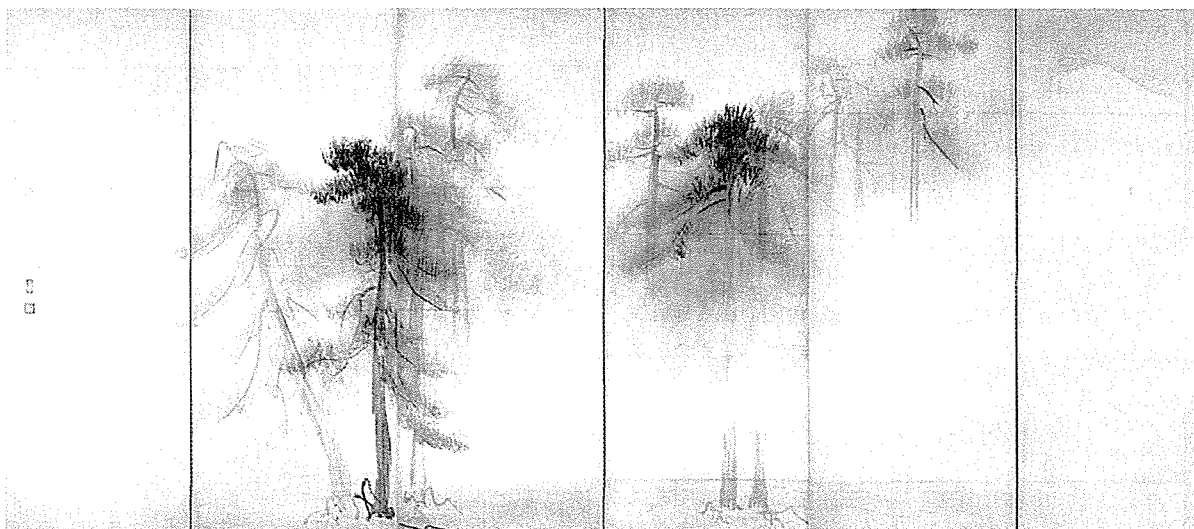


Fig. 5 Tohaku Hasegawa, *Pine Trees* (Black and white image of original color-tone painting)

Here can be seen the characteristic *sumi-e* technique, and a lack of so-called three-point “Renaissance” perspective and the consideration of detail one finds in Western landscapes of that same period. In this and most other landscape paintings of Japan during this period, the style of 余白の美 (“beauty of empty space”) is foremost, and presents the subjective view of the painter regarding the scene. This peculiarly Asian approach can be seen most famously in the works of screen and scroll painters Maruyama Okyo (円山 応挙) and the Kanno School (狩野派), whose genre was a forerunner of the Shijo Style—the direct observation of nature. This manner of rendition can also be observed in the landscapes of painters and poets Sesshu (雪舟 等楊), Buson (与謝 蕪村), Goshun (松村 呉春), Ogata Korin (尾形光 琳), Basho Matsuo (松尾 芭蕉), et al. (Smith, Hallman)

<Music>

In music, lyrical composers such as Ralph Vaughan Williams (*The Lark Ascending*), can be said to have captured the English countryside landscape in their work.

As background, Vaughan Williams found inspiration for his *Lark Ascending* not only in English folk themes, but also in a poem by the English poet George Meredith (1828-1909):

He rises and begins to round,
He drops the silver chain of sound,
Of many links without a break,
In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.
For singing till his heaven fills,
'Tis love of earth that he instils,
And ever winging up and up,
Our valley is his golden cup
And he the wine which overflows
to lift us with him as he goes.
Till lost on his aerial rings
In light, and then the fancy sings.

The orchestral piece by Vaughan Williams provides the listener with an impressionistic image of a lark's song, as well as a musical “rendition” of the English landscape, as the bird rises and flies across it.

The listener can discern how the violin solo presents a “dynamic fluidity” and how it arises from and blends back into the orchestral texture, portraying the upward circling and precipitous ascent of the lark above the hills and meadows of the English countryside, “lost on aerial rings.”

SOLO VIOLIN

THE LARK ASCENDING

R. VAUGHAN WILLIAMS.

Andante sostenuto, Cadenza sur la feuille morte
Molto misera

slow [Kaf.] poco accel.

fuerza misera!

a tempo Prestabile

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Fig. 6 Extract of *The Lark Ascending* (Ralph Vaughan Williams)

This becomes quite evident when one looks at the score (Fig. 6) in a pictorial way, observing how the notes sweep up, around and downward—we can actually “hear” the music this way.

The well-known Japanese koto piece *Haru No Umi* (春の海), or *Spring Sea*, by Michio Miyagi, can also be perceived this way when one looks at the score rendered in Western notation (Fig. 7).

HARU NO UMI
(春の海)

宮城道雄 曲
Josef Molnar 編曲

Lento

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a piano accompaniment in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. The tempo is marked 'Lento'. The piano part has a steady accompaniment with some fingerings like '4 2 1' and '4 3 2 1'. The right-hand part has melodic lines with some fingerings like '4 3 2 1' and '2'. Dynamics include 'mf'. The second system continues the piece with similar accompaniment and melodic lines.

Fig. 7 Extract of "*Haru No Umi*" 春の海 琴
(Michio Miyagi, composer; Josef Molnar, arranger, 1929).

In Vaughan Williams' *Lark Ascending*, we note the flow of musical notation reflecting the very nature of the lark as it takes flight, and in Miyagi's *Haru no Umi*, we hear and see the swelling waves of the Tomonoura coast on Japan's Inland Sea that Miyagi depicted (Kamisango).

<Conclusion>

A landscape may be discerned in as many ways as there are those of us to experience it, and each of us may do so through an infinite number of interpretations. We see, we listen, we consider. We paint, we compose, we write. It is a tableau offered before us, and the only limitations to the way we may interact with a landscape are those boundaries we have not yet surpassed.

It has been my purpose here to briefly present and describe a few selected examples of these unique landscape realms, and to enable the reader to see the ways certain paintings and musical compositions, though stemming from differing cultures, portray similarities in their qualities in terms of Occidental and Oriental aesthetics.

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<Appendix>

The reader is encouraged to consult these media sources, to watch and listen to examples mentioned in the text:

- Gary Snyder: Mountains and Rivers without End
<http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/china/handscroll/>
 The scroll (attrib. Wang Hui or Lu Yuan) may be viewed at:
http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/china/handscroll/F1947_17.asp
- Listen to Janine Jansen performing *Lark Ascending*:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbcuteYm-EA>
- Listen to Akiko Suwanai’s discussion and performance of *Lark Ascending*:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbgmP0R_onc
- Listen to *Haru no umi* played by its composer Michio Miyagi (koto) and Seifu Yoshida (shakuhachi), from a 1930 recording, at Japan’s National Diet Library:
<http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1319027?itemId=info%3Andljp%2Fpid%2F1319027& lang=en>

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