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THE SOURCES OF CHINESE
PAINTING

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The problem of this study is to trace the origins of Chinese painting and show the differences that exist between Western and Chinese painting and why these differences exist.

Analysis

First a study was made of Chinese characters to indicate how Chinese painting developed from them, and secondly an attempt was made to show how the differences between Western and Chinese painting depend on the cultural philosophy of each.

Orientation

The relationship between Chinese characters and drawing can still be seen today. It can be seen in Seal Script (chuna shu), Ancient Script (li shu), Orthodox Script (cheng shu), Running hand Script (hsing shu) and Cursive Script (tsao shu) of Chinese writing. The relationship is especially apparent in cursive script, which is itself a kind of surrealistic drawing. (See plate 1, p.2)

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 隸 | 隸 | 隸 | 隸 | 隸 |
| 楷 | 楷 | 楷 | 楷 | 楷 |
| 行 | 行 | 行 | 行 | 行 |
| 草 | 草 | 草 | 草 | 草 |
| 宋 | 宋 | 宋 | 宋 | 宋 |

Chinese Running hand Orthodox Ancient Seal

(1)

The Different Writing Characters in China

Delimitations

This study is delimited to a comparison of pictographic characters and the eight diagrams which people believe to be the beginning of Chinese writing, and to show how it developed into a philosophical system. A survey of pertinent literature and the opinions of people in this field are the basis of this study.

Basic Assumptions

The basic assumptions of this study are:

- 1) that there is a relationship between Chinese characters and drawing;
- 2) that a difference exists between Chinese and Western painting.

Sources of Data

The data for this study were gathered from the library books and from periodicals at the Bowling Green State University and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

CHAPTER I

CALLIGRAPHY AND PAINTING

In China, painting is the main part of art, and characters are a branch. Both of them have come from a very early period. Writing is separate from practical meaning, it is something of a design. Therefore a study about the source of Chinese painting should include the branch of Chinese art-writing. In addition, the material, brush, paper and ink used for both writing and painting are the same. Not only are materials identical, but the sense of "touch" in brush stroke is the foundation of both writing and painting. The writing is nothing but a special, strictly stylized, formula of painting. (See plate 2, p.5)

Not only has this relationship to calligraphy given painting a privileged position among the arts, in contrast to sculpture and architecture for instance, but the calligraphic qualities have tended to dominate the nature of the painting itself. Every literate Chinese has spent years in training his hand and eye in handling the paint brush and in acquiring a feeling for linear design, balance and composition. Every character is a more-or-less abstract



(2)

Brushwork in Chi Pai-Shih's Painting
(Contemporary)

design whose form is dictated by convention and which yet must be moulded individually by the writer to fit into the larger design of the page. Non-calligraphic elements in painting, such as modelling of form, light, shade, color and perspective, have been relegated to second place. Painting, like calligraphy, is the language of the brush.¹

¹Finlay Mackenize, Chinese Art (London: Spring Books, 1961), p.28

CHAPTER II

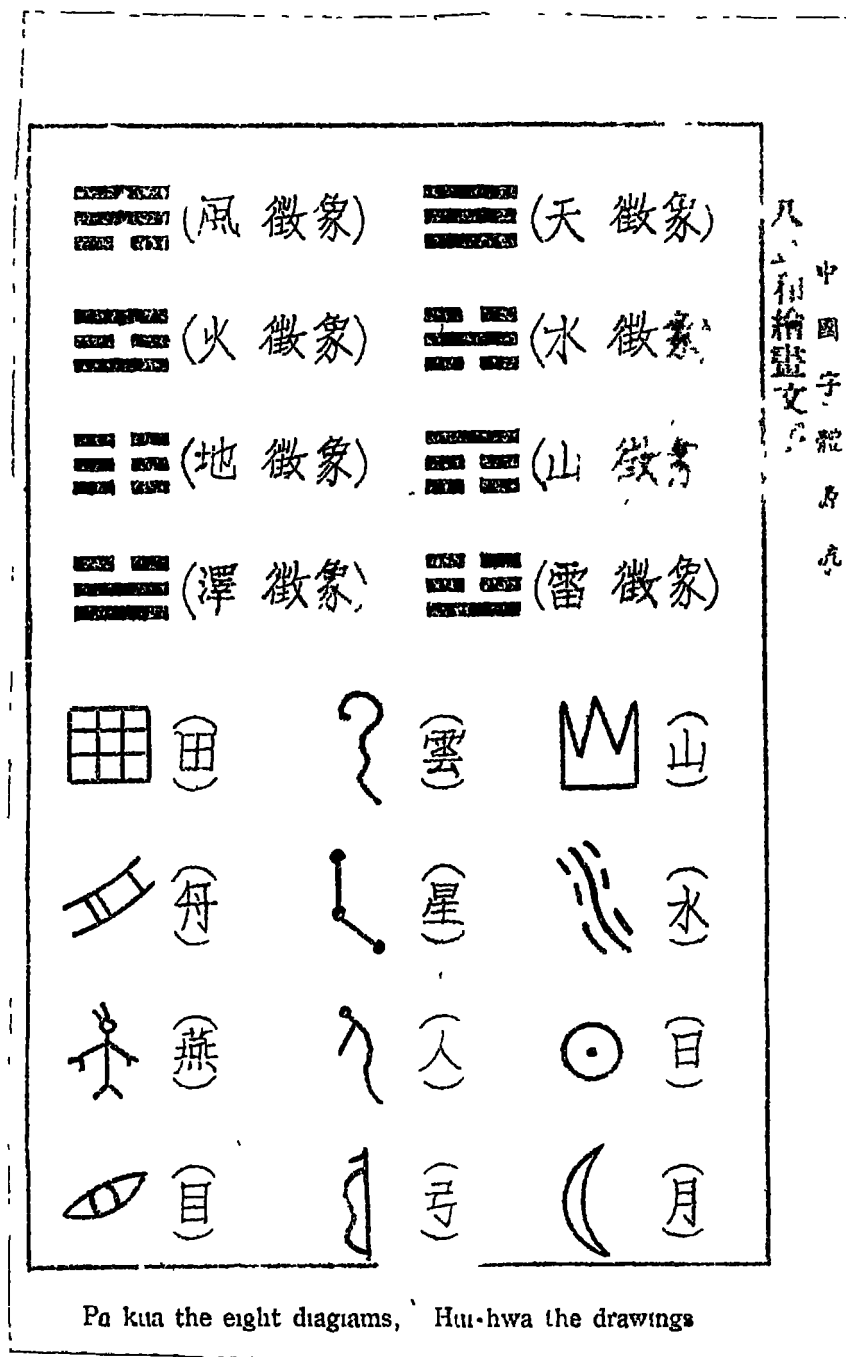
THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

According to reliable sources,² the oldest Chinese writings should be the "oracle" script of the Ying Dynasty that were excavated in 1899 A.D. by peasants at An-Yang, Honan. These oracle scripts were dated from the seventeenth to eleventh centuries B.C. Before this period the so-called "Chih-Sheng" (the knotted cords), Shu-Chi (the document), Pa-Kua (the eight diagrams) or Hui-Hwa (the drawing) etc. (see plate 3, p.8) were only simple pictures and were not constructed as symbolic or meaningful characters.

The Chinese believe that the universe consists of Yang (heaven) and Ying (earth). And human beings are the perfect part of the universe. In every soul there are two sorts of life. (Almost the same as the saying of Animus and Anima.) After his human death, man's Yang returns to the earth.

The Chinese use the symbol "--" Yang to stand for: man, light or heaven and the symbol "---" for Ying, woman, shade, or earth. The Chinese connected eight diagrams together (See plate 4, p.9) and made an octagonal form called "Tai-Chi." The chief characteristic of Tai-Chi is a circle divided into

²Chi-Chuan Chen, The Origin of Chinese Characters (Hongkong: Yan Wan Arts Society, 1953) p.12



(3)

Pa-Kua the Eight Diagrams; Hui-Hwa the drawings.



This ancient Chinese charm shows the Yang and the Yin surrounded by the Eight Diagrams, and in the outer circle the symbolic animals of the Twelve Terrestrial Branches

(4)

Theological Form of China.

light and dark sections often by an S-curve, which symbolises the Ying-Yang. These are friendly exchange.³

From antiquity Tai-Chi gradually developed into a philosophical system, and came into the service of religion to explain the disposition of providence. Tai-Chi is the symbolic spiritual play that has an important influence on Chinese culture and art. The octagonal form often appears in Chinese architecture and as a motif of decoration.

(See plate 5 p. 11)

Ancient pictographic writing appears on tortoise carapace and sternum bones and the bones of animals. These are generally known as the "Oracle Bones", and the inscriptions proved to be archaic Chinese. These pictographs are the earliest known form of Chinese writing. (See plate 6, p. 12)

The inscriptions on the "Oracle bones" of the Shang Dynasty (1776-1122 B.C.) shed much light upon the customs of the people of that period and give vivid and true pictures of the way they lived. The archaic pictographs on the oracle bones are in many instances very exact in describing methods used in the various pursuits in the daily life of the people. Sky, earth, mountains, rivers, light and shade, death and

³Werner Speiser, Art of the World - China, Spirit and Society (Germany: Hole & Co., 1960) p. 24

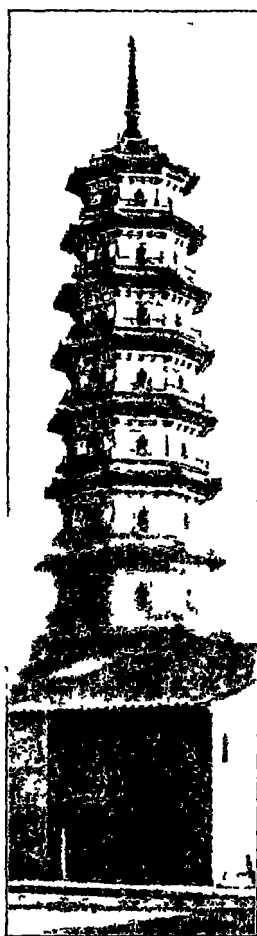


Abb 11 Achtzackiges Blumen-
Pagode, mit Privathaus im
Vordergrund Canton
(Aus Thomson, The Chinese)

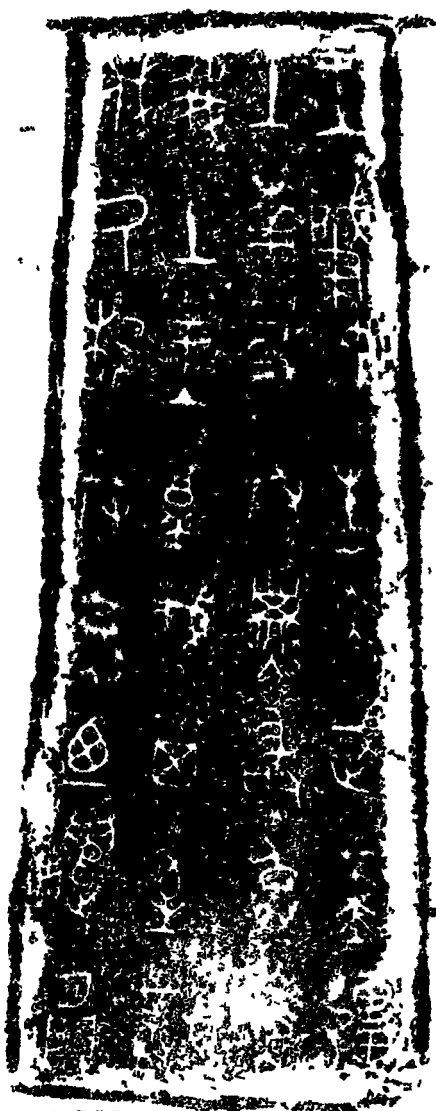
(5)

Octagonal Form of Architecture in Canton Province.

中國字體源流

宗周鐘

西周中期(昭王)(公元前1052)



王肇適省文武勤疆
土。南國及孳(子)敢陷虐
我土！王敦伐其至，戮

Chung (Bell of the middle West Chou Dynasty) (1052 B C)

(6)

Original Inscription of the Middle West Chou Dynasty.

rebirth, seem to have played a primitive role in their beliefs. In the imperial house and noble families, ancestor worship was an essential part of religious life. The souls of the dead had to be kept "alive" to protect their descendants, who held annual feasts at which the finest dishes were solemnly offered as a gift to the dead ancestors before being shared among the living.⁴ Even today, to worship one's ancestors is a most important duty.

The script written on oracle bones is fundamentally the same language as modern Chinese, even if more primitive and archaic in form, more pictographic than the language of the present day. But they had already become as a sign to represent language at that time. For the Shang people believed, that while they could not speak directly to their gods and their ancestors, they could communicate with them through writing. They would scratch a message to the gods on a piece of bone or the undershell of a tortoise, then place a red hot point of bronze against the bone until it cracked, and from the direction of the cracks they would read an answering message from the gods.⁵

⁴Daisy Lion Goldschmidt, Chinese Art (New York: Universe Books, 1960) p.12

⁵Finlay Mackenzie, Chinese Art (London: Spring Books, 1961) p.28

We can say that the inscriptions on the "oracle bones" are the transfer period of Chinese characters. These pictographic writings are of the greatest importance in a study of Chinese art, not only because they were the earliest forms of the individual characters in Chinese writing, but because they set the style.

During the Warring State Period (475-221 B.C.) these characters were further conventionalised and different scripts apparently developed in the different states. One way in which this primitive stage has come down to our own day is in the form of carved stone seals, which are still used to authenticate, not only painting and personal letters, but business and other forms as well. The Chinese value these seals very highly both for their archaic flavour and for their subtle qualities of abstract design.

In 221 B.C. the different forms of written script were standardised, and a form much as we know it today was authorised. Hsing Shu (the Running Hand) is the standard form of handwritten script, while Ts'ao Shu (Cursive Script) is a very free interpretation used in poems and on inscriptions where the form of the characters can be distorted almost out of all recognition so that the inscription is more like an expressionist painting than an intellectually decipherable message. The "expression" is of course present in all

Chinese calligraphy and creates that vital inner tension between the conventional form of the character as writing conveys an intellectually recognised message, and the aesthetic content of the character speaking the language of the emotions. It is thus, that calligraphy is, in a double sense, the language of the brush.⁶

⁶Finlay Mackenzie, Chinese Art (London: Spring Books, 1961) pp.29-30

CHAPTER III

SOURCES OF PHILOSOPHY OF ART

Since Chinese painting shows the structural method of using the brush, the brush strokes must be purposeful, and, once you start drawing, you can not overlap again or correct it. Therefore every composition should be thought over before starting it. Then stroke the lines exactly and definitely, expressing the concept very quickly. This thought is a sort of meditation--a kind of statement or the confines of intellectual comprehension. This is "Zen". As Kenzo Okada said, "Western art creates through objects but Eastern painting out of Zen."

The connection between Zen and art is important, not only because of the inspiration which Zen gives to the artist but also because through Zen he obtains a better understanding of the psychological conditions under which art is produced than has prevailed in any other civilization.

In Eastern painting, artists express the object which they see only in the mind. They have from the beginning grasped and developed a unique form of thinking, speaking and they do not think in terms of contrasts, "either-or" alternatives, or higher and lower categories. Therefore,

Chinese painting is only the medium to express the concept. Also it comes from the oldest way of recorded conception-- painting being the natural development from calligraphy. Their painting was a form of deep and serious spiritual communion with nature and reflects a spiritual essence of the world. Chinese artists take nature as major and life as minor, and express life in nature. And the aim of life is to achieve the absolutely peaceful in mind or to behold one's own fundamental nature.

According to philosophy professor Yu Chen-Chi of Taiwan University, Westerners have revealed a preoccupation with the most immediate aspects of life as exemplified by the humanism of the Renaissance, the artificially perfect form of Classicism, the affection for life of Romanticism, the representation of life of Realism, the feeling of color and light of Impressionism and the influence of mind of Post-Impressionism.⁷ They love nature, and take life as major and nature as minor, and their final purpose is to co-exist with nature. Their tendency in art was to explore limitelessly the reality of life. Therefore Western painting very frequently was bound by nature before the 2nd World War.

Chinese art has contained far too little of humorous observation and a surfeit of spiritual exaltation, for Chinese

⁷Chen-Chi Yu, Conception of Aesthetic, (Taipei: Chen Wha Press Company, 1963) p.243

artistic development has evolved along lines different from that of the people of the West.

As A. Moortgat has so clearly explained, for Westerner, life is the wonderful thing; and it is symbolized in plants, in domestic animals useful to and protected by man whose life depends on them; death is the enemy, the wild carnivorous animals, the perpetual opponent. In China they are both no more than changing appearances of the same thing and are subject to the tao of becoming and perishing. Su Tung-po answers the question what is life and what is death thus: "A thousand changes and ten thousand transformations underlie everything and nothing has been assimilated to anything else, but everything that stays in it's right place is in harmony with the creative activity of heaven....." There is something of death in life and of life in death.⁸ They have simply adopted a different scale of values which is, in some ways, more civilized and sophisticated and reveals a sympathetic sense of unity with life and its realities.⁹

⁸Werner Speiser, China,--Spirit and Society (Germany: Verlag, Baden-Baden, 1960) p.24

⁹Lion-Goldschmidt, Daisy, Chinese Art (New York: Universe Books, 1960) p.7

CHAPTER IV

TRADITIONAL AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES

The painting and art-criticism of the Chinese were always very closely bound up with their philosophy of life. They reflected the same ideals as those which inspired their philosophic and religious thought. A people can not be fully understood without some knowledge of the latter.

The foremost exposition of the Chinese attitude towards painting was, indeed, Hsieh Ho's famous treatise'. The "Ku Hua Pin Lu"---six component parts of painting---which he wrote at the end of the 5th century. He tried to clarify and express the concept and theory which, when gradually reinforced by experience, contained the essentials of the traditional attitude. Hsieh Ho's "components" can hardly be said to be his original idea. We must remember that these six component parts of painting were the foundations of landscape at a later time. As these components are, to some extent, the basis of subsequent art criticism, it is important to understand them. They are as follows:

- 1) Animation through spirit consonance.
- 2) Structural method in use of the brush.
- 3) Fidelity to the object in portraying forms.
- 4) Conformity to Nature in applying colors.

5) Proper planning in placing.

6) To transmit models by drawing.

Let us analyze each component from the first. "Script" is without doubt the most important thing in all of art. This "operation of the spirit" then, produces "life's motion" and it is this process which the painter must illustrate. The "spirit" is here something objective, something outside the artist. But with the spread of Zen Buddhism, it came to be regarded, ideally, as something to be sought by each man within his own nature.¹⁰

Component (2) means the use of the brush in outline drawing; since the structural brush work has always been accepted as an element of primary importance in Chinese painting, forming not only the backbone but the very life-nerve of the painter's art. The prominence of this can neither be exaggerated nor misunderstood.

The third and fourth point is to conform with the objects in order to give their likeness, and is evidently a demand for objective correspondence with nature. Thus it was important at that time to observe the phenomena of nature and daily life.

¹⁰Arthur Waley, An Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting (New York: Grove Press Inc. 1923) p.73

The fifth is still very important in art for both West and East. The sixth point, implies creative activity in conformity with the ideas and forms of the old masters, but later it led to the copying or reproduction of old paintings. This is the tragedy of Chinese artists. The desire to conserve and contemplate the past caused the Chinese people to always look back instead of forward.

CHAPTER V

COMPARISON OF REPRESENTATIVE PAINTING

Western influences began to be felt at the end of the Ching Dynasty (166-1912 A.D.). Time and progress have subsequently contributed to an increasing exchange of ideas concerning approaches to painting.

The era of modern painting discloses that artists of both East and West are closer in effect than ever before, though vastly different in traditional background.

Mont Sainte--Victoire (1900-1906 A.D.) by Paul Cezanne (See plate 7 p.23) and Landscape (See plate 8 p.24) by Chu Ta (1615-1705 A.D.) both employ a series of receding planes to create depth with an economy of forms. Cezanne uses restrained color and broad brush strokes to create his shapes, whereas Chu Ta displays great virtuosity and variety of brush work. As in most Eastern landscapes, Chu-Ta invokes a feeling of distance by employing vast negative areas.

John Marin's Marin Island, Maine (See plate 9, p.25) (1914) and Shih Tao's (1641-1717 A.D. Travel Scene (See plate 10, p.26) are similar in simplification of forms but Marin utilizes color instead of line to define shapes. Both exhibit profound sensitivity of brush stroke in these water colors.

A more restrained use of water color is apparent in "Mont Sainte-Victoire" (1900-1906) by Paul Cézanne. Form, color texture, and space are all depicted with the sparest of means (Courtesy of Mr Henry P McIlhenny)



(7)

Mont-Sainte-Victorie, by Paul Cézanne



93 | *Landscape*
by Chu Ia,
hinged scroll

(8)

Landscape, by Chu Ta

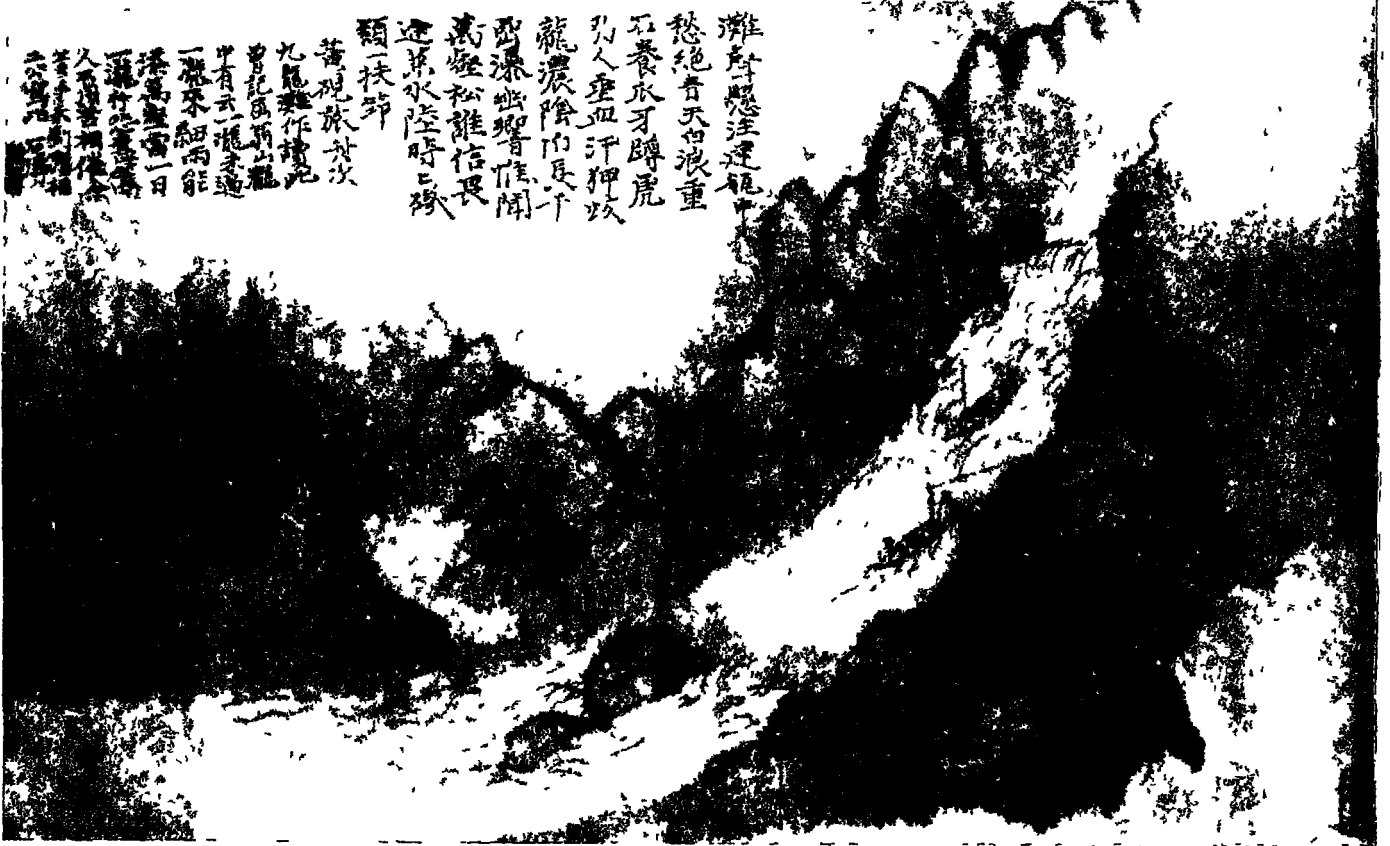


Marin Island,
Maine by John
Marin.

113

(9)

89 | Travel Scene by Shih-t'ao, album painting

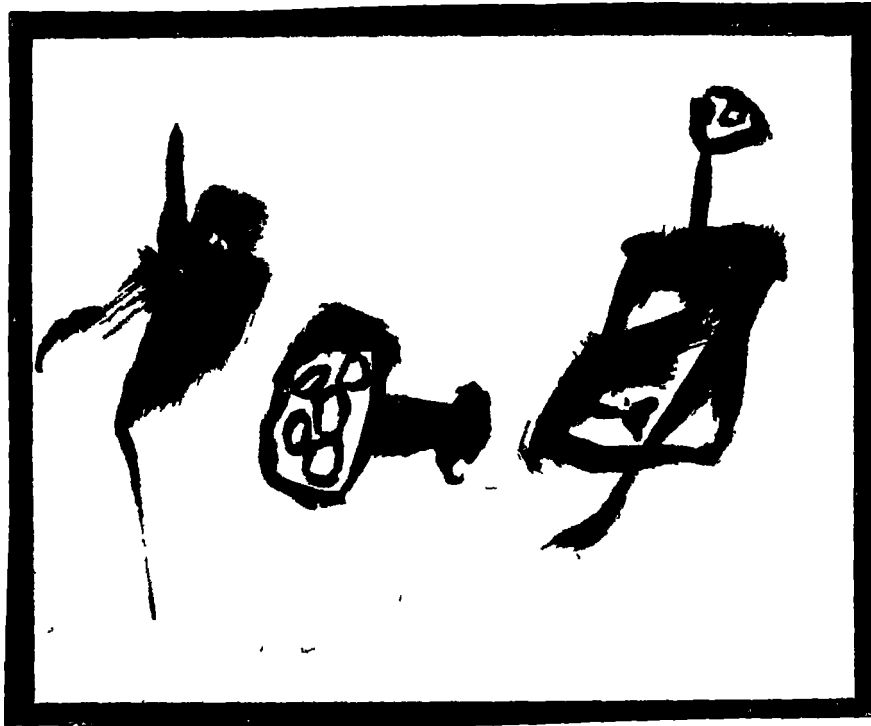


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Travel Scene, by Shih-t'ao.



(11)

Miniature, by Julius Bissier.



(12)

Kingfisher by Pa-ta.

In comparing ink drawings of Julius Bissier (Germany) miniature (1957) (See plate 11, p. 25) and Pa-Ta's (1615-;705 A.D.) Kingfisher (See plate 12, p. 25) the "touch" principle is dominant; Bissier's brush imparts bold masculine strength to his composition, while Pa-Ta exhibits contemplative grace of movement. Both exemplify the principle of deformation.*

*deformation--Eastern term of abstraction.

CONCLUSION

As Author De Carle Sowerby said: "Europe and the Far East bring into contrast the most vigorous traditions in history. Henceforward there is interest for both civilizations in studying and in coming to understand a foreign ideal. Thus arise the elements of a new culture."¹¹ This is the principle of modern art. It started during the 2nd World War and has continued to the present.

¹¹Author De Carle Sowerby, Nature in Chinese Art, (New York: The John Day Company, 1940) p. 7

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An Abstract of
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The problem of this study was to determine the sources of Chinese painting, and to show the differences that exist between Western and Chinese painting in relation to basic philosophies and aesthetic principles.

The procedure used was based upon experience in actual working knowledge of Chinese painting, and resources gathered from available library books in the Bowling Green State University and the University of Michigan, as well as from personal books.

The study indicated that calligraphy was the underlying fundamental of Chinese painting, and Eastern contemplative philosophy the source of its inspiration. Western painting was observed to be based on a subjective, humanistic attitude.