THE INTEGRATION OF ORIENTAL CONCEPTS
OF SPACE WITH MODERN ART FORMS

by
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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

There has long been in the eyes of the West a barrier in the understanding of Chinese painting. Approaching their paintings with spiritual aims different from that of the artist of the West, Chinese painters pursued completely different technical means in achieving their artistic aims. To apply Western aims and attitudes to an art which is primarily an extension of a philosophical idea, only serves to distort the true nature of Chinese painting.

The achievement of an intuitive apprehension of the universal order through the full attainment of insight was the goal of the Oriental painter-poet-philosopher. The vehicle for the expression of the metaphysical ideals of Taoism and Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism was landscape painting. Space is the most unifying and harmonizing factor in integrating philosophical thought to visual form. The greatest contribution by Chinese landscape painters is their unique handling of complex space; i.e., disorientation of gravitational arrangements in accord to earth masses.

With regard to Chinese space handling, I will attempt to present the determining characteristics of their concept and to apply these to my own contemporary art form. The intended purpose of this investigation is to arrive at a new
CHAPTER II

CHINESE CONCEPTS OF SPACE

Landscape painting is highly honored in Chinese culture. Its function is to embody ideas in its concepts generally reserved for Western religion and philosophy.

As the phenomena of nature is considered the visible manifestation of the universe, Chinese art inevitably has a tendency to be represented by abstract, generalized forms. The very basis of Chinese landscape composition is the symbolic abstractions of natural forms. Tsung Ping (375-443), an accomplished musician, landscape painter and scholar, wrote in a treatise on painting:

The truth comprises the impression received through the eyes and recognized by the mind. If in painting, therefore, the likeness of an object is skillfully portrayed, both the eye and mind will approve. When the eyes respond and the mind agrees with the objects, the divine spirit may be felt and truth may be attained in the painting. When this is grasped, what need is there then to search for the dark and mysterious cliffs? Now the divine spirit has no trace; yet it dwells in each and every form and impresses it with this likeness. The true meaning of an object is manifested in its shadow, and if it is depicted skillfully and well, then he is said to have caught the true purpose of painting.¹

The ultimate reality, the true and essential nature of things is characterized as the all-containing Void, the limitless space. In expressing this idea symbolically, forms

are often reduced to a minimum in proportion to the surrounding space. This surrounding space reveals an echo or reflection of the One Reality. The central idea in Chinese philosophy, that of the spirit of the Universe (Tao) as being made of Heaven (spirit) and Earth (form), is also the central idea of their painting. Wang Wei (415-443), wrote that "the spirit has no form; yet that which moves and transforms the form is the spirit." In the manipulation of form in space, there is set in motion the phenomena--Tao. The artist transcends the limitations of the human eye by representing a part of nature to embody the spirit of the whole, employing the philosophy that to know the part is to know the whole.

In the handling of vast space, the Chinese painter releases the spectator from a physical gravity to a spiritual one. This is accomplished by his use of multiple views and directions. Humans are seen from eye level, mountains from below, rivers and brooks from above. All these elements within landscape painting, (i.e., people, mountains, water), are enveloped in mist representing the continuous and interrelated nature of the universe. Space in Chinese painting is not cubic in volume as witnessed by European painting, but extends beyond the material indications and suggests more acutely the infinite. As the Buddhist painter-priests arrived at the experiences of the inner meaning of things,

2Osvald Siren, Chinese Art of Painting, (Peiping: Henri Vetch, 1936), p. 18.
they conceived space as the symbol of Ultimate Reality. The enveloping space became a reflection of the essence of the painter's intuitive mind. Zen Buddhist painters feel that if the spirit of their products are perceived and appreciated, their paintings as compositions and theory have achieved their intended goals.

Chinese and Japanese painters leave voids in their compositions in order that the spectator be allowed to move within varying space intervals. This guides him into the continuous, ever-changing conditions of the spirit. An essay by Ku K'ai Chih (344-406), on "How to Paint the Cloud Terrace Mountain" reads in the manner of a visual space symphony. The rhythmic movements of space create momentums which terminate with towering perpendicular cliffs. The stream moves over crags and clear areas, disappearing and reappearing—forging the composition into one of marvelous complexity. Ku K'ai Chih creates a variation of space by varying the intervals. Tensions and balances are formed through relationships of the far and the near, the seen and the unseen, of the calm and the activated to reveal the rhythms of life itself. In the depiction of this spirit of life, the void is the source of activity.

*Daisetsu Suzuki writes in Zen Buddhism concerning the art of the Haiku (Japanese poetry): "All things come out of an unknown abyss of mystery. When they (words or strokes of the brush) are too fully expressed, no room for suggestion is possible, and suggestibility is the secret of the Japanese arts."
Laurence Binyon, distinguished writer on Eastern art, expresses this idea in his lecture on landscape painting of China:

In the Umbrian school in Italy, the peculiar value given to space in composition is designed to lead the eye into depth. In their use of space with the framing of an arch, etc., the emphasis is repose...a serenity. The Chinese space is not a final peace but often a protagonist in the design. It is an activity flowing out from the picture which exhilarates more than tranquillizes.3

CHAPTER III

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ATTITUDES INFLUENCING CHINESE PAINTING

The greatest impact upon Chinese painting was the Taoist philosophy. During the Sung Dynasty, Ch' an Buddhism inspired painters to the peak of creative excellence.

I. TAOISM

Tao is the basic Chinese belief in order and harmony in nature. Ta (大) is in effect Wholeness or Oneness. It is the process of moving forward and outward and returning inward in completion of the circuit. In Tao, each thing functions according to its nature and thus in proper relationship to everything else under Heaven. It is an engaging into natural action.

Tao is also called the Great Void. This emptiness is described as the cessation of all action and the suspension of thought in order to allow freedom of the inner activity of the spirit. Space of any sort was regarded as filled with meaning since it was filled with Tao.

Much of Taoism resembles Ionian philosophy. Heraclitus of Ephesus said, "The way up and down is one and the same." "Everything is on the move." "It is not possible to step
twice in the same river." "Hidden harmony is better than the visible." ¹

Tao-yin (ca. 400), writes as a Taoist influenced with the meaning of the Universe:

High rises the Eastern Peak
Soaring up to the blue sky
Among the rocks— an empty hollow
Secret, still, mysterious!
Uncarved and unhewn,
Screened by nature with a roof of clouds.
Times and Seasons, what things are you
Bringing to my life's ceaseless change?
I will lodge forever in this hollow
Where Springs and Autumns unheeded pass.²

---Translated by A. Wally

Another important aspect of Tao is its state of perpetual motion; its unending mutation. It is described as being both unmoving and continually moving; as the way of "actionless activity." This sense of belonging to the stream of universal life permeating all things exhilarates the spirit.

Laurence Binyon writes concerning the importance of space in conveying the spirit of Tao:

So space becomes not a terrifying wall and stop to human questioning, but a home of the liberated spirit, where it flows with the flowing of the Eternal Spirit: The universe is one unbounded whole.³

II. CH'AN (ZEN) BUDDHISM

The Ch'an (Zen) sect of Buddhism also exerts a strong influence on Chinese painting. Appearances of the objective world are considered merely symbols of inner realities. Nothing is real; the world is just images of the mind which change and shift as the mind changes. The forms we perceive through our senses and through our intellect have no permanence or existence of their own.

Buddhists feel that it is necessary to rise beyond the intellect. Their doctrine is based on enlightenment through intuition and the Spirit. This state of existence signifies the highest form of reality: The universal aspect of life.

Zen Buddhists feel that life is a movement which never ceases; that the only way of converting into full value what life has in store is by living completely in the present. Time becomes an illusion. The spontaneity of expression in Buddhist painting illustrates this point.

With Sumiye painting any brush stroke painted a second time results in a smudge; life has left it. So is life. We can never retract what we have once committed to deeds, nay, what once has passed through consciousness can never be rubbed out. Zen, therefore, ought to be caught while the thing is going on, neither before nor after.4

The universal reality of life is revealed through the painter's consciousness of himself and in every phenomena of nature.

Ch'an teaching is best described in words ascribed to Bodhi Dharma:

A special transmission outside the scriptures;
No dependence upon words and letters;
Pointing directly to the heart (intuitive mind) of man;
Seeing into one's own nature and attainment of Buddhahood.5

The principle aim of Ch'an discipline was to awaken the spiritual consciousness of man's inner nature. This unconsciousness is the sudden enlightenment which grasps things without deliberation. Applied to art, the highest form of inspiration is that in which the artist becomes the thing he visualizes.

A thirteenth century poem by the Japanese painter, Soami, reveals lyrically the concept of Zen spirit:

Out across the wave
All is bare
Not a scarlet leaf
Not a flower there;
Only over thatched huts falling brief
Twilight, and the lonely autumn air.

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5Osvald Siren, Chinese Art of Painting, (Peiping: Henri Vetch, 1936), p. 93.
CHAPTER IV

SPACE AS STRUCTURAL DESIGN

WITHIN COMPOSITION

From its early days, Chinese painting has been a studio art. The visual world is copied indirectly. Examination of Chinese landscape paintings reveal abstracted forms symbolizing its philosophical nature. These forms relate to the equally abstract art of calligraphy.

Chinese calligraphy is an art form depicting word symbols. By its very nature the picture word and the meaning together reveal the thought. It is interesting to note how Chinese symbolic picture words paved the way for painting. The characters are written with respect for the white interval. The words are written in an imaginary square, the blank spaces given as much consideration as the strokes. The orderly relationship of the space which surrounds the single character gives it clarity and meaning. The more distinctive its background units, the clearer becomes the comprehension of the word as an expression (Plate I).

Chinese painting also reveals through the space surrounding the forms the relationships which strengthen its structural design. The paintings are knit together by strong invisible threads. The principle of Yin-Yang (the identity of opposites) forms a tough and complicated web strung across
the whole painting. These complex machinations of space
tensions and relationships involve several of their design
concepts.

The first is called Dragon Veins (or magnetic currents)*
which is the source of vitality and strength in Chinese
painting. It sets the style. The Dragon Veins are the
forward and lateral movement both exposed and hidden which
serve as the spiritual and material structure of painting.

The invisible links between visible forms are deliber-
ately emphasized in this concept. It describes invisible
threads which are woven in a complex system across a painting.
Connective strokes or empty spaces are used to relate two
parts of a picture (Plate 2).

Yu Ch'uang Man Pi in his Scattered Notes at a Rainy
Window writes:

Make the "dragon veins" slanting or straight,
complete or broken, hidden or visible, in fragments
or continuous, but all bristling with life, then you
will make a real picture.

Ch'i-fu, the rising and falling movement, constitutes
the space arrangement of the entire painting area from top
to bottom. Heaven and earth involve the relationship between
the upper and lower portions of the painting itself. It

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*Lung mo, (dragon veins), Giles, Dictionary, 8011 signifies the life-carrying lines or arteries of the composition.

*Osvald Siren, The Chinese on the Art of Painting,
(Peking: Henri Vetch, 1936), p. 204.
includes all that is anchored to earth and all that floats free of it: the distribution of space in a vertical plane and also its vertical cohesion. In Chinese thought, Ch'i-fu is the attempt to create harmony between heaven and earth. Ch'i-fu is concerned with the representation of the physical world and yet is involved in freeing it from the weight of this same physical world.

P'u Ch'uan writes of the principles of heaven and earth as a three-fold division of visual space: 1. Area of origin; 2. Area of growth; and 3. Area which may or may not be reached, of aspiration.²

Plate 3 shows an arrangement of this principle. The forms reaching toward Heaven (aspiration) while being anchored to Earth (origin) and the lateral balance (area of growth). This is typical of the Oriental desire to reach out towards the invisible.

The third area controlling space is the K'ai-ho (opening and closing) and Pin Chu (host and guest) principles.

The host-guest principle dictates that two parts of a picture are set into relationship with each other. They represent the giving, the taking; the passive and the aggressive. If, in a landscape painting, the host tree is bent with spread branches, the guest tree will be slim and straight. A third tree avoids exact parallels and uninteresting curves.

This group is then brought into relation with another group of trees, a guest group, in yet another part of the painting.

The K'ai-ho, the opening and closing, is a higher development of the host-guest principle. Opposing pairs become identical on a higher level. According to K'ai-ho principle, some elements open up the painting and let it fly free into space, while opposing elements close it down again and hold it fast.

Examples of K'ai-ho:

1. Single K'ai opens up picture at lower left and ho closes it again. This is the simplest form of composition in Chinese painting. It is the creating of empty space by structuring and turning toward each other of the two elements (Plate 4).
2. Two pairs of K'ai-ho stand opposed to each other. Double face: downward eyes closed and upward eyes open, (Plate 5).

The spacing intervals follow from the top to the bottom, sometimes closing in and sometimes opening up into vast space. The turning peaks, the winding roads, the closing up of clouds, and the dividing water current originate in this concept.

3. Several pairs of K'ai-ho. The host-guest involve the rock, tree and mountain while the K'ai-ho involves the opening and closing by space cells and forms from foreground (K'ai) to background (ho) (Plate 6).
CHAPTER V

THE INTEGRATION OF ORIENTAL CONCEPTS OF SPACE TO COLLAGE PAINTING

In reassimilating Chinese concepts of space into a contemporary art statement, I have chosen a medium I feel appropriate to this particular project. The particular form of painting with strips of colored papers which I have used lends itself to spontaneity and to a variation of surfaces, so important in Chinese painting.

To reinterpret the technique of the brush and ink into another medium, I felt, would facilitate the attainment of imaginative new statements. The paper collage has proved to be an expressive medium in relating Taoist and Zen ideas of eloquent space to contemporary art forms.

In experimenting with the woodcut print, I found methods of creating interesting textural effects by pasting bits of heavy paper almost in pointillist manner to a board and printing from these surfaces. The surface itself had such potential beauty in color and texture that I decided to use this idea in the integration of Oriental space concepts to my own work. The tonal values so vital in revealing movements and nuances found in Oriental composition was found in the variety of tones and surfaces of wrapping papers.

I have abstracted forms to evoke feelings of space of various qualities. The viewer may translate these forms
into those of his own configurations. Through the use of the Tao and Zen precepts, I have attempted to reveal in these paintings the vitality and mystery of fluid space.

The tonal values of the colors in these paintings have been chosen to create the complex movements. Thus, the arrangement of these tones determine the quality of serenity, openness, violence or tightness in the composition (Plates 7, 9, 10, 11, 12).

In conclusion, I have probed into the area of shallow relief to determine how these concepts can be transformed into the three-dimension or the extension of relief. This area remains tenuous and unresolved, but may in time be applied more extensively within my own artistic expression, (Plates 13 and 14).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX

PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRODUCTIONS
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Chinese Calligraphy, Ike no Taiga, 18th Century
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(Forward and lateral movement)

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Landscape by Sesshu (1420-1506)
Ink on paper. Tokyo National Museum

PLATE 2B

Composition in Reds, by Amy Kasai
Paper collage (31"x48"). May, 1964.
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Mountain landscape, attributed to Wu Tao-Tsu (700-760) ink on silk.

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Paper collage (44" x 33"), April, 1964
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Landscape (detail), by Sesshu (1420-1506)

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Land of the Uto, by Amy Kasai
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(Two pairs stand opposed)

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Lake Shore in Mountainous Country
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Coll. Baron Iwasaki, Tokyo

PLATE 5B
Inward-Outward, by Amy Kasai
Paper collage (48"x72"), May, 1964
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(Several pairs of host-guest)

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Splashing Ink Landscape
By Sesshu (1420-1506), Tokyo National Museum

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Transformation, by Amy Kasai
Paper collage (36"x48"), May, 1964.
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