

## Difference Between “Shanshui Painting” and “Landscape Painting” in the View of History of Fine Arts

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### Abstract

As a materialized way of mastering the world, painting accumulates the unique artistic potential and aesthetic emotion of mankind. In the history of art, shanshui painting and landscape painting with natural landscape as the object of the performance, show a significant difference in painters' eyes and under their pens because of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. This difference is based on the philosophical epistemological differences, but also the expression of the logic of science and empirical rational differences, as well as the practical level of philosophical differences. These are the theoretical keys to the analysis of shanshui painting and landscape painting, and the deepest cultural origin to understand the eastern and western painting imagery and realistic tradition.

**Key words:** History of fine art; Shanshui painting; Landscape painting; Cultural difference; Cultural origin; Differences between Chinese and Western cultures

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### INTRODUCTION

In the process of reforming nature, human beings not only create rich material culture, but also create incomparable artistic culture. As a materialized way of mastering the

world, painting accumulates human's unique artistic potential and aesthetic emotion, and reveals the spiritual power of human being. Although shanshui painting and landscape painting with natural landscape as the object of the performance not include the people as the main performance object, we can understand the relationship between man and nature through natural objects to achieve the aesthetic grasp of things. In art history, painters observe natural objects to describe shape and color as well as pass the temperature of life to nature. Here, colors not only describe natural scenery, but also reflect the glory of human nature.

Nature is colorful and life is beautiful. However different people in the world have different aesthetic. It varies from person to person, from place to place, from heart to heart, from environment to environment. While analyzing Chinese and foreign art histories, it is easy for us to realize that when artists are facing objective nature landscape, due to cultural difference, nature is different in artists' eyes. This difference is based on the philosophical epistemological differences, but also the expression of the logic of science and empirical rational differences, as well as the practical level of philosophical differences. In case of painting type, two types of painting have different result when facing the same nature. We can even ask according to this why there is shanshui painting only without landscape painting in Chinese art history before 20<sup>th</sup> century, however only landscape painting without shanshui painting in western art history?

### 1. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURAL SYSTEM

We need to start from epistemology of philosophical basis in order to answer this question.

For the relationship between man and nature, western philosophers believed that nature is a purely objective existence and people are conscious subjects. The relationship between man and matter is not an organic internal relation, but the rational construction of the various human external orders and networks. Cosmology in Western culture that separates man and nature makes western culture two-dimensional. Art needs to express beauty. However, it can mimic appearance of beauty without touching its core. This thought leads to enterprising material spirit of westerners naturally and further promotes it to cultural consciousness with eternal value. This perhaps is the deepest philosophical origin of our understanding of the scientific spirit and realistic tradition of the West for thousands of years.

However, for Chinese aesthetics which leads aesthetic emotion to inward world, it reflects different aesthetic preference from western culture. Chinese regard relationship between man and nature as the existence of an organic life. It is said that “the landscape visualizing the essence of Tao”. In Chinese mind, nature is me, I’m nature. Those two are born naturally and sharing each other. Matter and spirit are unified to provide infinite life energy to Chinese in limited life space. “The unity of heaven and man”, as a cosmology, makes people find a value reference from numerous internal differences, which are admire of Tao and Li, and praise to the inner life. The aesthetic character reflected by painting art, which leads to inward world of man, will certainly bring life character to its figure.

The difference between easterners and westerners’ cognition determines opposite value system and aesthetic preference. In shanshui painter’s mind, definition of shanshui is not a mountain or a river. Instead, it is imaginary expression of vivid life. The unity of heaven and man finally leads to neither mountain nor river, but merging of universe, nature and life. Shanshui painting regards mountain as morality and river as inner personality. The illusion of space is always the theme of shanshui painting deduction. The formation of shanshui painting is an organic expression format of this life. In contrast, western landscape painting focuses on the recognition of matter due to separate man and the universe as a result of their cosmology. Objectivity and sense make artists less emotional than Chinese shanshui painter when facing nature. They will not forget the matter and themselves. Instead they used to keep a distance between themselves and nature and observe nature systematically and frostily. If we assume that Chinese use “feeling” to understand the world, thus westerners use “observation” to know nature. Style that landscape painting expressing matches objective and rational recognition habit of westerners. Therefore landscape painting is reasonable to be an efficient way for a western artist to understand the world.

## 2. PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON CHINESE LANDSCAPE PAINTING AND WESTERN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Beside epistemological differences on philosophical level, there are scientific judgement and experimental sense reasons to expression that determine aesthetic character of a paint type. In fact, when two different cosmologies are established and performed, two cultures logically form recognition logic and scientific judgment that match them. Chinese people are given the formation of thinking habits and cognitive patterns beyond the objective reality of the mindset since late primitive society. Shanshui painters in the interpretation of the philosophy of man and nature do not have a parallel attitude to nature as westerners, but considering humanity as an organic part of the universe and nature. Landscapes under their pens do not rigidly adhere to the real mountains and rivers. There is no accurate focus on landscape composition of the border. They use the method of scattered point of perspective with bold and straightforward expression to communicate the inner relationship between man and the sky. For color expression, shanshui painters inherit the traditional five-color system on the basis of further internal convergence, using water and ink to develop classical Chinese color aesthetics to the extreme. As Zhiqi Tang, in the Min dynasty, said in *Tips for Painting*, “mountains in nature are the same to my feeling”. Obviously, the “reality” that shanshui painters understand is not the same as objective scale, perspective structure, bright and dark relationship, and temperature of color. It is completely different from western painters’ style that base on reality.

In the view of western painters, nature is an objective existence. And painters’ work is to reproduce it, which is “paint as nature” instead of “nature as paint”. Here paint is a carrier of nature. Its scale, structure, perspective, color and brightness have to match the object. For picture composition, painter’s vision is limited to focus. The border of composition is the border of the vision. Painters are not able to break vision unlimitedly as shanshui painters. In western societies, the formation of Aristotle’s mathematical logic and scientific rationality lays the Western concept of the universe, as well as having a profound impact on the western behavior. Landscape painting is developing in this atmosphere. For thousands of years, no matter how does western painting change, it is not able to violate reality-based tradition. Even for the landscape painting from impressionism, which is colorful and emotional, it does not dispense scientific logic. Newton’s discover of the prism is a scientific and rational contribution to western chromatics. The color from impressionism is an emotional expression of it. Therefore the color of it is both emotional and rational.

### 3. THE AESTHETIC VALUE ORIENTATION OF CHINESE LANDSCAPE PAINTING AND WESTERN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Chinese shanshui painting starts from Wei and Jin. By the end of Min and Qin dynasty, it has a history of more than thousand years. There are numerous of great shanshui artists. Despite of the metaphysical concept and consciousness, it has to mention the unique Chinese painting tradition in order to objectively analyze the reasons for the development of landscape painting. As valued items for Chinese literati, pen, ink and inkstone are studied since their childhood. This tradition derived from the soil of farming culture is not only a symbol of Chinese culture, but also a manifestation of the value of each literati. Shanshui painters use paper, pen, ink and inkstone to describe landscape in purpose of depicting nature, as well as exhibiting emotion to universe and life. It is not a purely objective description of man, but a spiritual spark of painter’s collision with natural life. Painters use his lifetime to improve skills of performing tools, mastering painting skills, and feeling nature of pen and ink. This mind is not able to be summarized by a word of “skill”. Material of paper, rate of painting, depth of ink color, and softness of inkstone are affecting people. They are highly united with knowledge, taste, interest, spirit and personality. When watching the paint, one is able to hear the painter’s sound and appearance. This is a unique character of Chinese paint and calligraphy that different from paints of other nations. Without paper, pen, ink and inkstone, nor series of skill and tradition derived from them, there is no shanshui paint or shanshui painter.

For western paint tradition, in counter, landscape paint, as a method of cognizing world for westerners, is marked clearly by western scientific rationality. Different from China, westerners use not only paper and water, but also pigment, cloth and oil to paint. Their skills and traditions

have realistic characters. When painters are determining the design, the priority is reality of object. Volume, shape, quality, space, and color relation all need certain skill to achieve. However, it more likes a methodology. Realistic skill of painter follows the need of reality. Skill difference of individual painter has meaning of aesthetic. However, aesthetic value of the skill itself is not as delicate as paper, pen, ink and inkstone. Painting skill in western art history, to be honest, is only a skill without aesthetic value.

### SUMMARY

Using the paper, pen, ink and inkstone to paint landscape, involving sky, ground and man, Chinese create Chinese painting with unique aesthetic value. Westerners use pigments and cloth to paint landscape, unifying object and subject, which establishes brilliant art of realism. Different art formats exhibit different value preferences, which are two epoch-making peaks. Ancients said that “the tasty orange, grown in southern China, would turn sour once it is grown in the north”. Shanshui paint, as a mark of Chinese culture, stands for Chinese behavior and Chinese style, which is impossible for westerners’ mind and method, vice versa. Thus no matter Chinese shanshui paint or western landscape paint, it must fit the national culture and physiological and psychological properties. Essentially it is a cultural choice.

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