ART HISTORY RESEARCH PAPER

ART AND THE ZEN OF CREATIVITY

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Creativity is a mysterious, magical entity of complex paradoxes that can be achieved by both scientist and artist. It can pertain to a person, process or product. Creativity has the capacity to bring something into being. It exhibits spontaneity through the creative impulse and contains a concept of value that differentiates it from the merely "new" and "different." Creativity is a human experience that seems to transcend human capabilities.[1]

Creativity can emphasize skill and technique, as it often does in Western cultures,[2] or it can express intuition and spontaneous, all-at-once images, as does the approach emphasize in Far Eastern cultures. Such a creative impulse has been manifested as the spirit of Tao by Chinese contemplative artists who, with purity and vitality, have created ideas that could have come only from an inner harmony and unity.

This Eastern concept of creativity is an integral part of Taoism and Ch'an Buddhism in China and Zen Buddhism in Japan. All three also share the conviction that opposites are relational and so are basically harmonious. This philosophical principle was described by C. G. Jung as, "the union of opposites through the middle path,"[3] a non-dualistic view of reality in which there is unity in diversity.

The principle of polarity and the concept of yin-yang are also expressions of this union of opposites. Without any Western inference of violent opposition or conflict, this way of thinking recognizes that there are two different aspects to each system, and without one the other could not exist. There is a balance of light and dark, feminine

and masculine. The existence of mutually opposing elements is found in dynamic harmony, spiritual reality, and the union of subjectivity and objectivity.[4] Each positive and negative principle is like the pole of a magnet, inseparable with neither able to "win" over the other.[5]

Many opposing viewpoints concerning creativity in Eastern and Western cultures provide fascinating contrasts that echo the poles of yin and yang. Where the Taoist or Buddhist would emphasize the naturalness and spontaneity of things, the Westerner values cultivation and deliberate effort.

A landmark attempt at Western definition of the creative process has been carried out by Catherine Patrick through direct observation during psychological experiments.[6]

Fifty white, American artists from the mid-west, east and south were shown a poem from Milton's "L'Allegro," chosen because of the variety of images it contains. Questionnaires and records of the artists' methods of drawing an image suggested by the poem exhibited these distinct stages of creative thought: preparation, incubation, illumination and verification.

During preparation the artist receives and assembles various new ideas for a drawing. During incubation an idea, mood or image vaguely begins to form. It may recur every few moments or off and on during a longer period of time, up to several years in some situations.

Illumination follows incubation, during which the idea is sketched for the first time. This may be an emotional state occurring with some degree of spontaneity or it may be an objective, detached state of recording the basic structure of the idea.

During the last stage of verification the idea obtained in illumination is elaborated and revised. Almost every artist did some revising, although the essential structure was seldom altered.

According to Patrick, all four stages may overlap in the course of the creative thought process. Preparation and incubation often occur simultaneously and revision may begin while sketching the first draft. An artist is also receiving new ideas while incubating recurring ones.[7]

In contrast to this controlled, studied situation is the following incident from the lives of two great Chinese artists.

"Yen Chen-ching of the eighth century, famous for his calligraphy, sent five poems of his creation to a friend named Chang Chih-ho, one of the three great Taoist masters of painting, who was generally known by his pen name, Fisherman of Mists and Ripples. The subtle beauty of these poems so moved Chang that he immediately painted the scenes described in them. Human figures, fishing boats, mists and ripples, wind and moon, were all imbued with the exquisite subtlety characteristic of the poems."[8]

For the Chinese, poetry and painting spring from a common inner source. It is the same spiritual rhythm that gives life to both. The artist's creative intuition goes beyond conscious limitations to reach the inner spiritual reality of things, making it visible with rhymes or shape and color. This spontaneous reflection of one's inner reality is achieved without artificial effort, and it is believed that the emergence of a poem or image should not be intentional, but natural and spontaneous.[9]

Patrick's stages of the creative process are echoed somewhat in the example of the Chinese painter who was moved to depict the images

described by a friend's poetry. A distinct difference shown by this and many Far Eastern creative activities, however, is the absence of the fourth stage of revision or verification. This may be partially accounted for in the arts of calligraphy and brush painting because of the nature of the materials. Chinese and Japanese paper resembles a blotter in that even a tiny drop of ink splattered on it cannot be removed. Yet there is more involved than simple material limitations. During the course of apprenticeship and training painters are taught to execute an image without corrections of any sort. A good painter believes that it is a shame to think of working over a stroke once it is made.[10]

Another distinction between Eastern and Western cultures has been a strong spiritual basis for the brush painter's art in the East. To be in touch with a spiritual reality is to be able to respond to the essence of life and nature.

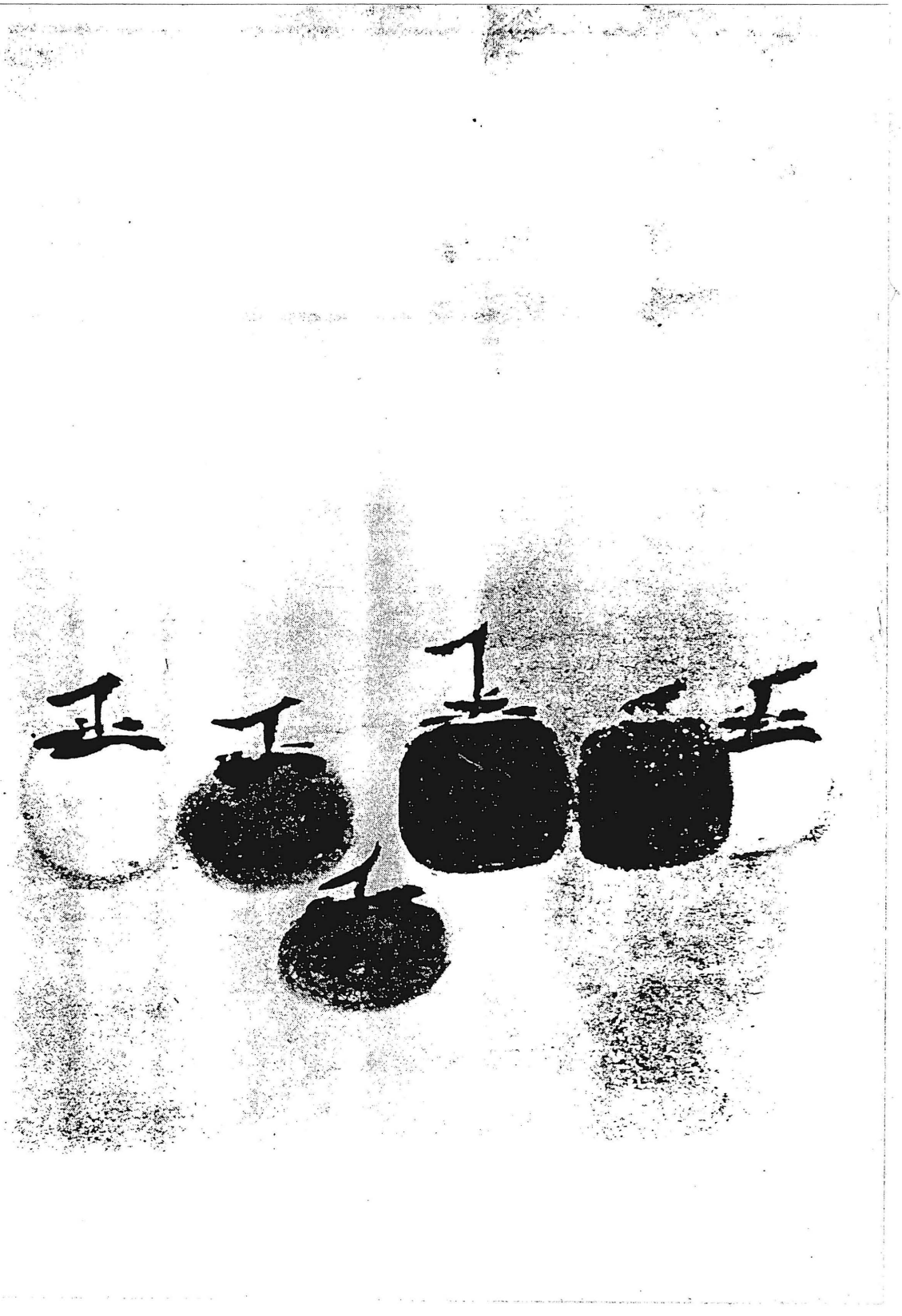
"Reality is that which vision reacts to and mind meets. When artists translate this reality into painting and grasp its subtlety, others' eyes respond to this and others' minds meet in this."[11]

Reality can be achieved through a state of no-thought, which, according to the Taoist, means reaching the realm of creativity. Subjective and objective reality become one and the same. The natural, spontaneous merging of subjective and objective reality provides a unity of multiplicity, a wholeness of the artist who is one with nature. Such an interfusion of realities is believed to initiate the process of creativity. With no subjective-objective conflict the artist can reach a state of oneness, or non-being.[12]

A reflection of this state of non-being exists in the brush painting of Mu ch'i entitled, Six Persimmons, dated 1249 (see figure). Considered one of the best works ever produced by a Chinese artist, it is known not for its technical perfection, but for its visual manifestation of the artist's inner being. It expresses his state of mind and inner experience during a clearly creative, spiritual moment.

"The shades of ink wash from dark to gray and from gray to white correspond to the inner process going on in the painter. When he was still in the depth of the preconscious, the density of his creative night found expression in two dark contours. With the awakening of his consciousness, the inner darkness loses its density and manifests in two gray contours. As he awakens fully, his creative innocence is entirely unveiled. So the white contours are its expression. What is expressed in the picture corresponds to what happened in his mind."[13]

The work of art is the by-product of Mu ch'i's state of spiritual creativity. Through an ontological experience he produced a painting of the highest quality, exhibiting the spirit of Tao with its freedom and purity. The spiritual rhythm of the artist is depicted with immediacy and, often, simplicity. Such pure creativity is taught to Zen artists through years of disciplined exercises which teach them to experience the object with the whole self, so that the "object draws the picture" without conscious effort from the artist. The object, brush and artist are a single, unified, integrated process.[14] The essence of the reality of nature is captured with a creative intuition gained from concentrating on self-knowledge (and ultimately on enlightenment). Art is life and life is nature; all is one and one is all.



Zen artwork is considered not only as representing nature, but also as being in itself a work of nature.[15] It is the "art of artlessness" belonging to a world in which man belongs but does not dominate.

Unfortunately, we in the West have separated ourselves from nature and pursued intellectual, rather than intuitive, instinctive approaches to life. For the most part, throughout the history of Western art, artists have imposed an idealized view of reality on nature and art.

"The art forms of the Western world arise from spiritual and philosophical traditions in which spirit is divided from nature..."[16]

This view originated in Ancient Greece where an anthropomorphic philosophy developed which depicted the gods in human form and man as the culmination of the process of nature. Out of this Greek ideal of beauty and idealized humanity developed the Renaissance tradition which continued the encouragement of symbols of truth and reality by emphasizing formal intellectual considerations. Pre-defined ideals overcame any instinct for truth in forms or direct reflections on the reality of nature. According to Monroe C. Beardsley, known for his work in aesthetics, through the creation of a work of art man's hope was for control over nature, showing a mastery and worthiness to inhabit the earth.[17]

To the Chinese and Japanese, this view is grotesque. For humans are considered an integral part of nature. During the process of creating an artwork the materials determine the results as much as the artist's hand. While creating a painting, it is the brush, ink and paper, as well as the artist; all existing simultaneously with equal importance.[18]

When painting, the attainment of a work of art is never the goal, for there is no goal to be achieved. Emphasis is placed on growth, as a plant grows; not to become a tree, but with an attitude of purposeless growth. There is no beginning or end to this growth because each stage is both a beginning and an end.[19]

Each stage of growth presents a record of the creative process. There is a spirit of searching, without the appearance of effort. The expression of a similar attitude can also be found in the West, particularly among modern and contemporary artists. The exploration and understanding of the nature of creativity has, traditionally, been the concern of artists. "And many modern artists consider the documentation of a creative process unfolding to be a central artistic goal."[20]

One of the earliest examples to be found in modern, Western art can be seen in the approach of Claude Monet. Beginning in 1888, he painted his first series of a single subject, fifteen different views of a group of haystacks. Through the repetition of his subject matter he recorded the images as a sequence in time, a visual representation of creativity. For Monet, his subject was not a view, but an act of seeing that view, "a process of mind, unfolding subjectively, never fixed, always becoming."[21]

This idea probably came from Japanese prints which were a great influence upon artists in Paris at that time.[22] Hokusai's Hundred Views of Mount Fugi, may have been the catalyst for an idea that carried Monet through haystacks, poplar trees, and the Rouen Cathedral to his garden and lily pond which occupied him for the last thirty-six years of his life. It was there that he created a wonderful succession of canvasses, themes and variations on the world of nature that existed around him. And his water garden was, "a work of art with nature as its medium."[23]

The flat surface of the pond, like the surface of a canvas, contained no actual foreground or background. There was only an illusion of depth playing on its surface, suggesting the atmospheric depth of sky and water; an infinity existing in a web of connected reflections. Monet's response was to paint continuous fields of color in which only reflections upon the water are visible. He moved toward simplification and abstraction in his latest series of Water Lilies, which, "depended more upon the exigencies of painting than on fact."[24] The play of colors and simplification of detail so that tonal harmonies and interrelationships became more important than illusionism were to have an influence on the development of abstract painting. "But even if they had had no echoes in future painting, some of the Water Lilies would still be among the supreme moments of vision in Western art."[25] Color has become a luminous matter and light appears to vibrate throughout the visual field as Monet nears total abstraction. Yet there remains an unmistakable organization of color that ties into his subject. An intense build-up of expressive, textural brush strokes creates an opulent surface which, "preserved only the essence of the object remembered."[26]

For Monet's moment of vision was a direct reflection of the essence of nature, an interfusion of subjective and objective reality. Such a moment appears very similar to Mu ch'i's transparent expression of his state of mind. Both must have experienced a moment of non-being, or what Robert Henri expressed as, "the attainment of a state of being, a state of high functioning, a more than ordinary moment of existence."[27]

A moment of timelessness, when multiplicities become one, illuminates the creative process in some mysterious way and all becomes one with the self. Through this experience, one's creative intuition can express its highest achievement in its search for the Zen of creativity.

ENDNOTES

[1]Carl R. Hausman and Albert Rothenberg, Editors, The Creativity Question, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1976), p. 3.

[2]Edward T. Hall, The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983), p. 128.

[3]Chang Chung-yuan, Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art and Poetry, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963), p. 6.

[4]Ibid., p. 8.

[5]Alan Watts, Tao: The Watercourse Way, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), pp. 19-23.

[6]Hausman and Rothenberg, p. 73.

[7]Ibid., pp. 73-79.

[8]Chang, p. 200.

[9]Ibid., pp. 199-204.

[10]Masaharo Aresake, Art, Life and Nature in Japan, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1933), pp. 22-23.

[11]Chang, p. 206.

[12]Ibid., p. 207.

[13]Ibid., plate 4.

[14]Hall, p. 93.

[15]Alan Watts, The Way of Zen, (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 174.

[16]Ibid., p. 174.

[17]Hausman and Rothenberg, p. 311.

[18]Watts, The Way of Zen, p. 175.

[19]Ibid., p. 176.

[20]Hausman and Rothenberg, p. 5.

[21]Robert Hughes, The Shock of the New, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 121.

[22]Ibid., p. 118.

[23]William C. Seitz, Claude Monet, Seasons and Moments (exhibition catalogue), (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1960), p. 39.

[24]Charles S. Moffett, Monet's Years at Giverny, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978), p. 13.

[25]Hughes, p. 124.

[26]Raymond Cogniat, Monet and His World, (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), p. 113.

[27]Chang, pp. 207-208.

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