
Chapter - 4

Landscape of the Soul

The writer contrasts Chinese art with European art by using two stories. The Tang Emperor Xuanzong commissioned the painter Wu Daozi to decorate a palace wall. When it was done the Emperor admired the scene.

The painter drew the Emperor's attention to a cave and when he clapped his hands the entrance of the cave opened. The painter entered but before Emperor could move the entrance closed and the painting vanished, along with the artist. In another story, a painter wouldn't draw the eye of a dragon he had painted for fear it would fly out of the painting.

The writer then cites a story representative of Western painting in which a master blacksmith Quinten Metsys fell in love with a painter's daughter. To be accepted as a son-in-law Quinten painted a fly on the painter's latest panel. When the painter tried to swat it away he realised the truth - Quinten was taken on as an apprentice and married his beloved.

These stories reveal what each form tries to achieve. The Europeans want a perfect illusionistic likeness while in Asia it is the essence of inner life and spirit. In the Chinese story only the artist knows the way within and he reaches his goal beyond material appearance.

Unlike a Western figurative painting a classical Chinese landscape does not reproduce an actual view and one can enter it from any point and travel in it. It requires the active participation of the viewer both physically and mentally. Man becomes a conduit of communication or 'the eye of the landscape.'