

An Artist's Perspective: How Art Works

Though brought up in a culture of Western art, I was trained from an early age to appreciate Chinese art. I have been involved in all aspects of the art-world – as dealer, collector, agent for living Chinese artists, and eventually as a practising artist, and have been struggling to refine a viable, all-encompassing theoretical approach to art for five decades. This theory will be presented online in its entirety at a later date, and its application to making more sense of many aspects of Chinese art is explored here through the medium of the handscroll.

Central to this premise is the notion of us possessing not one but two modes of consciousness, with art performing the function, among many lower-level functions, of being an efficient channel of communication between the two. The first is the intellectual mode, which is common enough that we all understand it. It is, by definition, a mode of differentiation. The perceived phenomena of self and environment are separated, identified and named, giving rise to the more specific languages of communication such as speech, the written word, mathematics, and so on. In that mode we respond to experience by reducing it to manageable fragments. That is its great strength: it functions successfully *because* of its limitations.

The second, alternative mode can only be grasped whole as a unified experience and is *trans-intellectual*. It has the unique capacity to make complete sense of the intellectual mode it contains, whereas the intellectual mode can never make complete sense of either itself or of the higher, trans-intellectual mode because it is only part of the full picture of consciousness. It is this transcendent mode that is at the heart of Daoism and Buddhism and has had such an impact on Chinese culture and, therefore, art.

If we are to accept the notion of alternative modes of consciousness, we must also expect alternative biases as to which is perceived as governing. This crucial choice has informed cultures throughout recorded history – and since there are two modes of consciousness, it comes as no surprise to find two major cultural biases in the world.

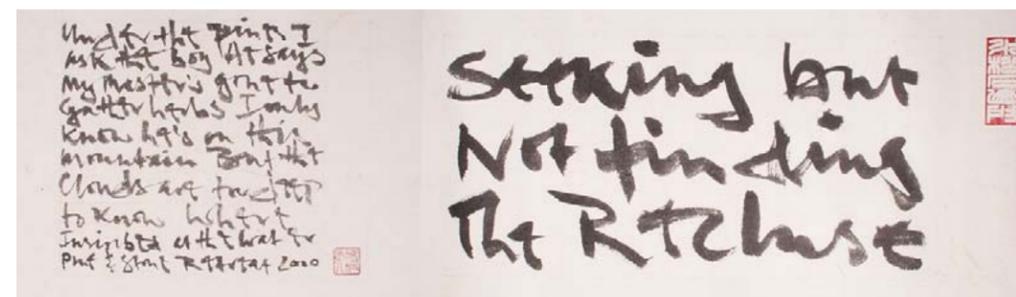
We can trace the seeds of the intellectual bias back to the Babylonians and see it flourish in the Greco-Roman culture. It has, ever since, tended to inform Western civilization,

Seeking but not Finding the Recluse
By Hugh Moss (b. 1943), 2010
Handscroll, ink and colour on paper
Width 23 cm, length 544.2 cm

granting the rational, reasoning faculties of mind ever greater prominence and authority. On the other hand, in eastern traditions, the unified, transcendent mode tended to be granted greater respect and considered the highest way of knowing – and for the purposes of this essay and to avoid unnecessary complication we may look upon the pre-modern Chinese culture as representing this bias (while acknowledging that it is not its only exponent). In the Chinese tradition, the intellect was greatly admired and valued for what it was but the influential minority reserved the highest respect for the transcendent mode.

This division of governing perspective between Western and Eastern civilizations no longer holds true in today's global world, of course, but was broadly viable until around 1900. Today there is a greater balance internationally between the rewards of the intellectual bias, where science has created significant advances in technology, and the rewards of sagacity that permeate the trans-intellectual bias and which favour precociousness and high efficiency in art by avoiding the tyranny of the intellect. I believe that the one bias encourages a focus on science and technology, while the other focuses on attaining the transcendent mode of consciousness, which in turn encourages profundity in the arts. The result is early maturity of the arts in China, and extraordinary sophistication and efficiency in using art media in order to transcend the intellect.

The Chinese invented paper two millennia ago, and developed it to ideally suit the artist. They also invented a form of ink that was extraordinarily flexible: soluble in water, it offered an infinite range of 'colours' or ink-tones from jet black to transparent almost invisible grey, which when used very wet, or when mixed with water in combination with its sophisticated papers, would spread, and run into each other, but when applied with a drier brush could leave very precise, sharp markings. Once they had dried, they were permanent. On absorbent papers where each layer sank into the surface, this allowed for multiple, translucent layers of expressive markings. The brushes were developed to provide similarly sophisticated exchanges with the medium. In the West, the intellectual bias encouraged art forms in which the artist *imposed* a pre-planned painting on a relatively impermeable surface. The Western dance was mostly one-sided: the artist danced, the medium was the dance floor. In China, however, every aspect of the medium danced back: it was a full partner in the process, as the audience was expected to be a full partner in the ongoing exchange. Chinese pictorial formats were specifically designed



to facilitate this process, and the very epitome of this is the handscroll. Originally a convenient means of storing the written word, it became a format for painting from at latest the Han dynasty, and was well established by the Tang. The handscroll is a personal format that is designed specifically to involve the audience in the creative process: it was not intended to be displayed in its entirety as a single image; indeed, the display of entire handscrolls is a recent phenomenon, used mainly for public exhibition.

The exchange between viewer and handscroll is intensely personal, a private journey into the painting and into the process intended to encourage total immersion and a meditative state, a sense of timelessness, in the knowledge that this state was the ultimate goal of art. The painting is unrolled at the left while it is rolled up at the right (the image almost invariably proceeds from right to left, like Chinese calligraphy) as the revealed section is slid across the table surface to keep it in front of the viewer. It is the viewer who chooses direction (once into the handscroll, one can move in either direction), speed and extent viewed. The viewer is also involved to a considerable extent in composition as the selection and size of the revealed segment is constantly changing, creating a series of mini-paintings of the viewer's own composition. To hand during the experience will be scroll weights, allowing a particular segment to be fixed for a while, the rolled ends at bay, while the audience settles in meditatively.

The first impulse upon encountering a landscape handscroll – the commonest, but far from sole, subject-matter of the genre – may be to go through it sequentially to read the surface language of subject-matter in order to 'see where it goes'. But the exchange between artist, medium and audience is intentionally so intense that one is soon drawn into the subtler languages of visual art, the languages of form, line, colour and texture. We might reverse the direction of our journey moving back along the scroll follow the language of line, so highly developed in China through the art of calligraphy. Instead of seeing the detail depicted *with* line, one reads line itself

as a language and a wholly different experience delights the senses. We can then approach the language of form, following how the artist used the various shapes of boulders, cliffs, dwellings and trees in an abstract exercise, creating a careful and satisfying balance, which was, for the Chinese artist, of far greater concern than mere depiction. Only occasionally does a Chinese landscape painter depict a specific place; more often, the exercise of landscape painting is simply a way to facilitate the dance of the other languages. The same exercise can be followed with colour (even in a painting made up entirely of ink, since ink and water create an infinite range of tones, which are considered 'colours' in Chinese art). Texture is harder to isolate, since the paper or silk provides an initial texture, which is then added to with every brush-stroke. Underlying all of these are even more subtle languages of commitment, command of the various aspects of the medium, wisdom and confidence. By the time every aspect of the handscroll has been enjoyed, what might to the uninitiated have seemed yet another boringly similar landscape, with yet another scholar strolling clutching a walking staff, has been transformed into a stage of wonders where the intensely sophisticated languages of Chinese art 'sing' in harmony an immensely subtle song and the audience is drawn into the performance as full partner.

A framed painting hanging on the wall becomes functionally invisible with familiarity, and passing guests might not recall the following day what they saw in someone else's home. But get someone involved in a handscroll and they will not only remember it the next day, they'll remember it indefinitely. It is a highly efficient format. In China, this was recognized centuries ago, and while certain decorative or seasonally symbolic paintings were hung in the common areas of a home, high art was kept on scrolls or in albums, to be brought out and enjoyed for a while, then put away so they never lost their vitality to familiarity.

The handscroll allowed – indeed encouraged – the absence of fixed perspective in the mainstream of Chinese painting, as did the attenuated format of a long, thin hanging scroll.



Western pre-modern painting tended to be confined to a series of manageable, usually rectangular formats, because intellectual reality and, from the Renaissance onwards, scientific perspective, dictated them. To decide on a particular point from which to view a landscape, and then make the image mimic it so that when you stand in one spot to gaze at it, you see in two dimensions what the artist saw in three is a clever trick, but at the same time artistically limiting. To paraphrase Chinese 12th century aesthetic theory, 'to paint something the way it seems on the surface is a childish pursuit'. With Chinese painting the audience provides the perspective as a vital part of the process. The handscroll is specifically designed so that the viewer dictates the point from which the painting is viewed, again breaking down the distinction between the artist and audience.

Another telling point about the different aesthetic approach of the Eastern and Western traditions is found in the accretion of seals and added comments on ancient paintings. To the Chinese aesthete, the physical work of art was not the end product of the process, it was merely a part of an ongoing process that included the audience, so what more natural than to allow the audience to actually participate if they felt aesthetically confident in doing so? The *process* was sanctified, and taken very seriously, but the physical art object was de-emphasized and seen as open for continued creative response actually changing its nature. As a rule, these accretions were added by other artists and scholars, some of them emperors. They kept the process vital. They were, and continue to be, indefinite joint works potentially involving any future aesthete with access.

One can make many other observations about the precociousness of Chinese art, but the implication is that Chinese art was already 'modern' – by the standards of the modern Western revolution in the arts – many centuries ago. The theory I have developed and found useful in approaching any art form from any culture at any time both allows and explains this.

The theory also suggests that art serves many functions at many levels. Sagacity is relative; art is, and should be, multi-layered, capable of creating intrigue and appealing at every level of response. The theory is based upon the belief that art should enlighten. It should inspire those involved at all levels,

both on the artist's and the audience's side of the physical art object, to evolve his or her consciousness, to move ever onwards down that path from the obvious to the esoteric, from the banal to the lofty. It also shifts the focus of the art from the art object to the entire process, changing the questions we ask about art, and the answers we find.

From all this, it becomes clear that to expect agreement about various aspects of art, as preferred by the intellect, is to miss the point. We can agree on the overall nature of art, but to seek a 'correct' answer on its various aspects is not fruitful. If we were looking for a means of communication with greater precision, where we can expect agreement, and where 'right' and 'wrong' are appropriate terms, we have the more precise languages of communication at our disposal: the written word, or better still, mathematics, the ultimately precise language of science. A primary role of art is precisely that it plays an important communicational role beyond the specific (even if it simultaneously communicates specifically) so there is no need for agreement on any particular work of art, or even on the various aspects of the overall process.

It is the very complexity of this process that makes it so efficient – once we approach it with a clear understanding of what it is, its role, and how it works, which we can now do. The dendritic multiplication of the process, once we delve into it at any point, becomes impossible to follow analytically. The intellect is led into a realm where it can no longer cope; it reaches the limits of its capacity and becomes befuddled. That is ultimately the role of art, to befuddle the intellect having put it through its paces and honed it to the limit. Art eventually convinces the intellect of its own limitations, encouraging it to seek a higher perspective, and efficiently fulfil its proper role in the evolution of consciousness.

To me the handscroll seems to exemplify this role, which is why when I first began collecting modern paintings I made it my goal to encourage living artists to return to this largely abandoned format by commissioning them whenever possible. It is also why I paint them so frequently.

Hugh Moss, *The Master of the Water, Pine and Stone Retreat*. December 2012.