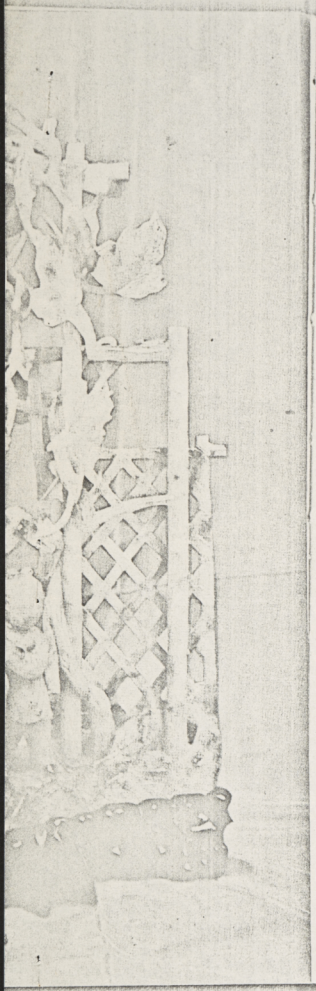


MARIO PRODAN

CHINESE ART

An Introduction

PANTHEON

are tormented by inordinate desires, but of a kind peculiar to the human race, with a tendency towards so high a degree of self-worship and adulation that, if not controlled, it may well culminate in the supernatural—a result both terrifying and absurd. The only thing the Chinese really believed in was their unworthiness in the presence of Nature and their only catechism was an attempt to find in Nature a niche from which they might contemplate the grandeur of all things created. When questioned as to his views regarding the supernatural, Confucius, that counsellor of princes and founder of an ethical system which retained its validity for nearly three thousand years, replied that the supernatural is beyond all our capacity of comprehension and that worrying about it was a loss of time when compared with the urgency of discovering the best way of living on this earth. The fact that in the course of time he became a kind of divinity, and a religion was founded in his name, is more than the mere revelation of the perversity of human ignorance; it is a product of the imagination of a people, in the habit of creating, from the idea of grandeur, an apotheosis full of gods, of genii and spirits, who are nothing else but the forces of Nature in a vulgarized form. And even if the doctrinary form of Confucianism subsequently became the official State religion, another revealing element in the Chinese character is that they still go on living in accordance with the doctrines of a completely different philosophy (which comes first? A philosophy or the people who follow it?), namely Taoism, which in its turn became a religion with even more gods, genii and spirits than Confucianism!

To obtain an idea of the difference between the

Oriental and the Occidental conceptions of a
be useful to make a thorough study of t
aspects of Taoism. But since we do not wis
the limits we imposed upon ourselves wh
this book, we will restrict ourselves to quo
the maxims of the master Chuan Tze:

*The life of man passes like a galloping horse
every turn, at every hour. What ought he to
ought he not to do, except allow his own dec
continue?*

It is in this deep humility that we must s
to the art of this people. The heroic aspect
not to their taste. The gigantic figures that f
of the Old Testament and of our epic po
exist, and soldiers are there only to lament
of war, cataclysmic events in human nature
and thunderbolts in Nature itself. Or else w
on the stage, behind the mask of the old ger
in plumes and flags and puffed up with h
portance. When he opens his mouth, it is to
howls, since he always has to keep his ch
inflated. He has a black mouth with fierce
corners. In him it is easy to recognize the
human stupidity.

We find no other trace of human hero
we can consider as such the heroism of a f
of a father or brother who accepted eve
with resignation. All the rest is the heroism
and of Nature alone, even when it assum
divine forms we have mentioned, of whi
so many in Chinese art: fairies and dre

material form to their work. When he looks at a Chinese painting, the neophyte must forget that, whereas the Western painter, before the advent of photography, used painting in order to reproduce and illustrate Nature as faithfully as possible, the Chinese painter always considered painting as a means of expressing an emotion—wonder, fear, the undefinable—that momentary inner vibration answering to the name of poetry. Which came first? The Chinese brush or the lyrical sentiment? Any attempt to reply to this question would involve us in useless discussions, but even if we refrain from drawing any conclusions from the examination of the paintings, the very way in which the Chinese artist set about his work shows that he used what he saw in Nature for purposes very different from those of mere reproduction.

Let us now try to follow mentally a scholar-painter as he gets ready to work and let us rid ourselves once and for all of the idea that we shall see him choosing a suitable place affording a view of the countryside and making measurements and creating a visual image of that part of the landscape which he intends to reproduce on his easel. If we do happen to find him in the open air, we shall see him wandering about the countryside, indulging in leisurely dreams, or, at the very most, making an occasional sketch to supplement his already exceptional powers of observation.

But it is in his simple, bare room that we shall see him at what for him is the most important moment. This is his refuge, far from all thoughts of the world. His first aim is to achieve peace of mind, because only in this way (as a famous twelfth-century painter once said) is it possible for him to feel in harmony with

Nature and to achieve perfect co-ordination of mind and hand. Forgetting his physical self, he seeks to absorb the rhythm of the continual renewal of Nature, to identify himself with eternity, to achieve that state of mind which is ideal for contemplation and reproduction, which will give serenity to his work—that serenity which comes from an absolute belief in the perfect ordering of things. It is this unshakable faith in the beauty of this order which allows him to make a free choice of his subject, from the ugly to the sublime. In Chinese painting we find an abundance of old men, horrible for us in their accentuated senility, of monsters and frightening creatures. The old men are there to remind us of the transitoriness of all human things, the others form counterparts to beauty, since in Nature everything is in equilibrium, and sometimes in an equilibrium of opposites reciprocally dependent on one another.

On a fine oblong table in front of our painter lie sheets of silk and of paper (since he will choose either one or the other according to the whim of the moment). Both of these materials are slightly absorbent, so that the signs he places upon them, like the cuts made by a chisel on stone, cannot be obliterated. Beside him, in a bowl resembling a severed bamboo trunk, are his brushes, with wooden handles and of various sizes: some of them very fine, others large and blunt with a sharp point above the swelling in the body. All these brushes, made of the hairs of hares, foxes or sables, are extremely delicate instruments, the point being so thin that it does not exceed the breadth of a single hair. Beside the artist, on the same side as the bowl, is the stone slab on which the solid ink is diluted with water

until it acquires the necessary density
to a delicate dove grey. Hanging
shelf for his seals and the implem
them, since every painter is also an
Often he devises a new seal for a jus
which gives him particular satisfacti
prises his name and sometimes a
dipped into a little receptacle contai
impressed at the end of calligraphi
original poems, the purpose of which
poetical significance of the painting.
scriptions and seals, however, are ap
words, they were added later to expres
of the owner or of an important p
quently it often happens that these a
perfect visual harmony existing in the
the painting and the original calligra
theless, the addition of texts and the ap
(some of them very beautiful) add t
and give the connoisseur yet anoth
harmony of all the elements forming t

On the other walls of the room ther
three mural paintings, or *Chüan*, wh
perhaps hung there that very mornin
his contemporaries, he was wont t
according to his state of mind, or a
season of the year or the festival falli
ticular day. This is, in fact, an intrinsic
Chinese mural paintings: they were ma
rhythm of change and renewal, in harm
owner's state of mind. When a picture
from the wall, it was carefully dusted
up and securely bound with a ribbon.