

SYMMETRY WITH NATURE: THE CONCEPT OF RESEMBLANCE IN PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION IN THE EAST AND THE WEST

BEATRIX MECSI

Name: Beatrix Mecsi, Art Historian PhD. (University of London, SOAS) (b.Kaposvár, Hungary, 1972).

Address: Institute of Art History, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest; *Home address:* Budapest Nagybányai út 84/b, H-1025 Hungary. *E-mail:* mecsibeatrix@yahoo.co.uk

Fields of interest: Art theory in the West and East Asia; European and non-European art, their relationship; East Asian Buddhist Iconography.

Awards: Pro Scientia Golden medal 1999.

Publications: Chan Buddhism in ritual context, *Acta Orientalia*, 2004; Identification problems of Korean Bodhidharma-paintings, In: *21st AKSE Conference-papers*, Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Rome "La Sapienza", 2003; How did Bodhidharma come to Japan? In: *Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the University of Budapest Publications*, Budapest: MTA Orientalisztikai Bizottság and ELTE, 2000, pp. 120-126 and 245-257; *A japán kelfeljancsi: Avagy hogyan lett a szentből játékbaba?* [The Japanese tumbler: Or how did the founder of a religion become a toy?, in Hungarian], *Műhely*, Special edition, Győr, November, 1999, pp.116-118; *Japánok az Amerikai Egyesült Államokban*, [Japanese People in the United States of America, and their Impact in Contemporary Art, in Hungarian], In: *Terebess Ázsia E-tár* [Terebess Electronic Databas on Asian Studies], www.terebess.hu.

Abstract: This paper's aim is to show briefly the basic differences in visual representation in Western and East Asian (Chinese) art and to show why the concept of resemblance was so important in Western art-theory rooted in ancient Greek aesthetics and gives a more detailed description on that how the Chinese differed in their approach to nature and representing something imagined or legendary.

1 RESEMBLANCE OR REVIVAL?

According to an old Chinese chronicle, a painter called Lie Yi (around the 2nd century BC) always left out the pupils of the dragons and phoenixes he painted, because if he had completed them, they could come to life and fly away (Miklós, 1973). This legend

sounds very similar to the Western anecdote about the painter of Alexander the Great, who could paint such realistic bunch of grapes that he even deceived the birds themselves who wanted to eat them...

But the seemingly similar stories show two really different approaches to art. For the European painters and their audience the artistic perfection was delivered by the resemblance of the depicted models, while for their Chinese counterparts the revival of the art object was considered the – unachievable – aim of their art. In the story of the Greek painter we can find that concept which until the beginning of the 20th century was paramount in European art, which we can call *illusionist* concept.

The story about the Chinese painter shows the artistic principles of East Asian painting, which we can call the concept of perception of the artistic values ontologically. However, this concept is also present in modern Western art. We can summarize this perception of painting not as an *imitation*, but a *creation*.

2 THE MIRROR-COMPARISON

Imitation, or in other words - representation of the visible nature - had a great role in *judging artistic value* in Western art. If we look at the majority of *art theories*, which still have a great influence on our approach to art objects in the West, we can see that resemblance has a great role in elucidating pictorial representation in Western tradition. On the other hand, later on when we examine Chinese art, we will see that the concept of resemblance had also an important role, but it did not influence art theory as much as in the West. There was a clear distinction between depicting nature and representing non-visible objects. This distinction can be seen in the language as well, which we will examine later.

In the West there was no clear distinction in language between painting of the objects depicted from nature and painting non-visible, imaginary objects. The perception of art objects as reflecting reality, in other words, understanding an art object as a “mirror” is the basis for many art theories and quarrels in the West. One of the most common approaches to this question was the acknowledgement of the reflection of reality. As Leon Battista Alberti said that the painter tries to represent what is visible and achieve the nearest likeness to the object itself (Marosi, 1976, p. 23). Leonardo da Vinci also thought in a similar way. He aimed that “the spirit of the painter must be like a mirror, which always changes according to the object in front of it.” This idea for reflecting the reality mostly comes from the ancient Greek art theories, where we can find the origins of the later theory of the evolution of art. Resting on the theory of Aristotle on the evolution of the drama, Xenocrates (lived in the beginning of the 3rd century BC) states that the optical knowledge and the reflection of the visible reality is very important for depictive arts, and this is the basis for the further developments. However, there were

others in ancient Greece who did not share this concept whose main aim is the imitation of reality. Plato (429-347 BC) doubted the grounds of the imitation of nature, because in his view this only can reflect the ideas themselves from second-hand.

3 HSIANG OR CHEN?

What for Plato and his contemporaries and later their followers and heirs caused the dissension, was for the ancient Chinese a more clearly distinguishable task. (But even though full of controversies and difficulties.) We know from the sources about art that in ancient China there were different words - or pictorial characters - used for the different types of images (Foult and Sharf).

The Chinese used the term *hsiang* for “to resemble”, “portrait”, “figure”, “form”, “image”, “representation”, etc. For the Chinese, the act of representing or reflecting reality was closely associated with the ability to distinguish and iconically manipulate the structures or patterns underlying manifest phenomena (Wen Fong, 1984). In a discussion of the “great tradition” of Chinese painting, Wen Fong comments that “the painter’s goal was to participate in the dynamic energies and transformations of creation, rather than to fashion a mere counterfeit of nature. Painting must invoke and capture reality.”

There is another word in Chinese for portrait, it is called *chen*. The etymological associations of this word, similarly allude to the gnostic element involved in representation. The literal meaning of *chen* is “true”, “real”, or “genuine”. This term was used for portraiture as early as the Six dynasties period, because the task of the portraitist was to accurately capture the “living spirit” (*shen*) of the subject, rather than his mere outward appearance (Shi Lan, 1988). According to mediaeval theory-writers, once the artist succeeds in capturing “spirit resonance”, formal likeness will follow naturally. (Bush and Shih, 1985, p. 54; Acker 1954). It would appear that the use of the term *chen* for portraiture emerged in conjunction with this understanding of the artist’s task: traditional sources agree that the *chen* or “truth” of the portrait lay not in surface realism, but rather in the ability of the portrait to capture the sitter’s innermost being.

4 CONCLUSION

As we saw, in China, the approach for a depicted reality is mostly concerned with the invisible, the “inner” essence of the subject, and it moves from “inside” towards “outside”, while the classical Western view considers that to achieve the outer resemblance with the inorganic media is the first step to make the image to be reliable and appreciated.

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