

山水

SHANSHUI

Opening speech: The Phenomenon of
Unpainted Water in East Asian
Painting

Thorsten Schirmer

The Phenomenon of Unpainted Water in East Asian Painting

By; Thorsten Schirmer

Chinese philosophy ascribes special virtues to water in relation to mountains, which serve as a model for mankind. A famous quote from Kongzi reflects his view on this:

"The wise man finds joy in the water; the man of virtue finds joy in the mountains." (Lun Yu, Book 6, Verse 23).

Laozi goes one step further by praising the weak water compared to the rigid rock:

"In the whole world, there is nothing softer and weaker than water. And yet, in the way it afflicts the hard, nothing equals it. Nothing can change it. That the weak conquers the strong and the soft the hard, everyone on earth knows, but no one act in this way." (Daodejing, verse 78)

Water flows and with this property it stands for the eternal transformation of the whole universe. It strives into the depths and, in contrast to the rigid rock, does not insist on a rigid position. This is expressed in the East Asian concept of landscape (chin. *Shanshui*, jap. *Sansui* 山水), which is built by the polar elements of mountain and water. While the mountain or rock symbolizes the cosmic force Yang, water from the finest mist to the wide ocean symbolizes the cosmic force Yin. Following this ancient principle, traditional landscape painting in East Asia usually does not depict real sceneries, but symbolic landscapes of mountains and water.

While the painters create mountains and rocks by using structure-forming brush techniques (chin. *Cun* 皴), they often use a technique of "non-technique" for the depiction of water in all its manifestations:

the water remains unpainted. By defining the bare paper by the painted forms, it is possible to create an illusion of water surfaces and the atmospheric phenomena of water such as mist, fog or rain.

As an example, a work by Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1306-1374), one of the four masters of the Yuan dynasty, is cited here: It shows a river landscape with trees in the foreground and mountains on the other shore. The water surface has no waves or areas of colour. The meaning of the bare paper within the composition is defined only by the edges of the riverbank.

The Japanese painter Nagasawa Rosetsu 長沢芦雪 (1754 -1799) applies the same principle to the depiction of a waterfall, which also remains unpainted.

The forms of water in the atmosphere are also represented by emptiness, as we can see in the example of an anonymous Chinese landscape from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). In a rocky landscape sits a scholar with a servant. The central pictorial space is filled by dense fog, from which three servants approach on an mist hidden path in the upper half of the painting. The illusion of fog is created by the unpainted parts of the silk.

The principle of the unpainted water surface is even more abstracted in a Japanese landscape painting from the 16th century, which is attributed to the monk painter Sesson Shukei 雪村周繼 (ca.1504-ca.1590).

Under the full moon a rock shrouded in mist forms the backdrop for a lonely figure in a small boat. This detail alone creates the illusion of a water surface. No ho-

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江渚暮潮初落風林霜葉渾稀倚
杖柴門間窈懷人山色依稀至正癸
卯九月望日戲為
勝伯徵君寫此并賦小詩倪瓚

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Landscape in Mist with Scholar and Servants, anonymous, Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), ink and light colors on silk, 23.7 x 26.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York





hizon or shoreline gives us a clear definition where the where water and sky meet. It is left to the viewer's imagination to fill the emptiness with content.

After all, the principle of unpainted water is even used in the depiction of fish, as the example of the Chinese painter Zhang Tongyu (born 1965) shows. On the otherwise unpainted paper it depicts a group of swimming carps. The movement of the fishes is so lively captured that no further execution is needed to create an illusion of water.

Countless other examples from all periods and styles of East Asian painting could be cited for this principle of representation. It is based on the East Asian philosophy of Daoism and Chan Buddhism which depict form and emptiness as an essential topic.

Water has the ability to take on any shape it encloses. Seen in this way, water seems formless. In being formless it takes on the counterpart to form. The actual counterpart to form, however, is emptiness, as Laozi explains:

"Thirty spokes hit the scar, the emptiness in between makes the wheel.

The potter shapes clay into pots and vases, the emptiness inside makes the vessel.

Windows and doors are broken into walls, the emptiness between makes the house.

The visible part of a work builds the form, but the non-visible makes up its essence."
(Daodejing, verse 11)

By appearing as a counterpart to form, water takes on the part of emptiness. The central mantra of the Heart Sutra, tell us:

"Form is nothing but emptiness, emptiness is nothing but form."

First of all, water is the manifestation of "form is nothing but emptiness". At the same time, however, the second part of the mantra is also realized in it: "Emptiness is nothing but form". Thus, the unpainted water is emptiness and form at the same time.



Waterfall, Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754 -1799), ink on paper, 137 x 53,7 cm, formerly Sakamoto Familiy Collection

Carp, Zhang Tongyu (born 1965), ink and light paint on paper, 131.5 x 65.8 cm, Neumann-Ogando Collection, Museum für Asiatische Kunst Berlin







Landscape in the Moonlight, Sesson Shukei (c.1504-ca.1590) attributed,
ink on paper, 22.9 x 33.0 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art