
A Comparison of Thinking Modes in Chinese and Western Art

The Thinker by Auguste Rodin and the Chinese statue of a pensive bodhisattva in the Northern Wei Dynasty (386~534) look very different in the way they meditate, one sweating while the other relaxing. Under great mental strain, the former has all his muscles exerting themselves, especially in his lower legs, where the tendons bulge, assuming an air of crisis. We as Chinese or Easterners often cannot help but wonder whether it is so strenuous to contemplate. Can we catch the truth in such intense, painstaking pursuit? Perhaps this is precisely why we miss the truth.

The pensive bodhisattva in the Northern Wei Dynasty (386~534) is portrayed as much more “relaxed”, with his right leg crossed over his left knee while his right hand touching his cheek, in deep meditation with an easy grace. Instead of tense muscles, he wears a beam of delight as if he had become enlightened. I believe the ways the two contemplative statues are modeled, from a certain angle, reveal the different thinking modes in Chinese and Western art.

For example, most Westerners draw an angel with a pair of wings. They are very practical and do not think an angel can fly without wings. However, the Chinese or Easterners think in surprisingly different ways. They prefer a cloud to a pair of wings, because they believe immortal beings live above the clouds, which is apparently more ethereal.

Western paintings are realistic whether they are about people, still life or landscape and tend to depict a part or an aspect of nature. Western landscape paintings, for example, feature not only correct proportions but also vivid light and colors. A finished painting will definitely be framed under glass and hung on the wall as if a window had been opened, providing a view of fragrant flowers in a corner of the garden.

Chinese people have their own insights in this regard. They are not content to extract a part or an aspect from nature. Chinese landscape paintings try to reflect the whole of nature including mountains, rivers, clouds and trees, not just a part of it. This can be readily demonstrated by the landscape paintings on long scrolls in the Northern Song Dynasty (960~1127) and the small-format poetic landscape paintings in the Southern

Song Dynasty (1127~1279). Chinese art seeks “wholeness”, while Western art focuses on “parts” of a whole, as somehow revealed by the fact that a Western painting is simply framed under glass while a Chinese painting is mounted on a scroll that hangs in the middle of a wall in the main room, known as the central scroll.

Westerners are pragmatic and analytical. The Thinker by Rodin is thus represented from an anatomical point of view. Chinese people take a holistic perspective and incorporate everything including mountains, rivers, clouds and trees into a central scroll, like a well-ordered whole. Francis Bacon, a Western philosopher, advocated the conquest of nature, claiming that the aim of human knowledge is to dissect and discover the parts of nature and the principles according to which it operates. The Chinese, however, do not think so, and they have always wanted to live in harmony with nature. The Cosmic Trinity, also called the Power of Three, is made up of heaven, man and earth. All sentient beings share a close kinship. These views illustrate the harmony rather than opposition between man and nature. Thus there is a great distinction between Chinese and Western artistic expressions. Mr. Qian Mu, a Chinese historian and philosopher, made an interesting argument, “The difference between Western philosophy and Chinese philosophy is like the one between taking a step forward and taking a step back.”

A step forward brings us to a head-on confrontation with nature, so we conquer it, control it, and dissect it. A step back makes us at one with nature with a wide road ahead of us, so we are in harmony with nature as a part of it. This precisely explains why Chinese artists are expected to possess moral perfection in addition to the high skill expected of Western artists. Wen Zhengming, a Chinese painter and scholar, said, “Moral character affects the connotation of artistic expression.” This is a difficult point for Westerners to understand for they believe moral character and skill are two different things. A man of bad character can actually be expert in a special field of study. However, the Chinese make complete and rigorous requirements in this respect for they have their own insights.