East Meets West: A Comparative Study On the Origin of Landscape Depiction

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East Meets West: A Comparative Study on the Origin of Landscape Depiction

Senior Project Submitted to
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of Bard College

by
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Introduction

Why is it that a gentleman loves landscape? The reason is that he usually lives in a house and garden, enjoys whistling over rocks and streams, loves to see fishermen, woodcutters and recluse scholars, and enjoys the company of monkeys and cranes. It is human nature to resent the hustle and bustle of society, and to wish to see, but not always succeed in seeing, immortals hidden among the clouds.¹

The passage, quoted from the eleventh century landscape painter and theorist Guo Xi (c. 1020-1080), shows how important landscape was to the Chinese culture. Landscape painting in China has always been considered a high form of art. The artists explore the philosophy of nature or express their poetic feelings. Landscape was a spiritual sustenance to the Chinese intellectual minds. On the contrary, through the ages, landscape painting in the Western tradition was frequently considered a “lesser genre,” one that is inferior to the painting of figures and religious, mythological, or historical events. As a practitioner of Chinese landscape painting, I have always paid close attention to depictions of nature when I looked at paintings from both traditions. I was intrigued by the contrast, and was led to explore a series of questions, such as: is there a Western counterpart in landscape depiction that achieves the same level of spirituality as Chinese landscape paintings? If so, how is it similar to or different from the Chinese tradition? What are some cultural values that led to their development and difference? How did they originate in the first place?

In order to answer such questions, I started my research by tracing the origins of landscape depiction in both traditions. Along the way, I have decided not to be constrained by the term “landscape painting,” which treat landscape as the main subject; instead, I examine “landscape depictions” when dealing with cross-cultural comparisons, which also includes landscapes that serve as background to human activities. The primary reason is that landscape depiction existed

and developed over a long period of time in both cultures, usually as background to depictions of human figures, before the genre of landscape painting achieved independence. My analysis focuses in particular on two aspects of landscape depiction: the evolution of the vocabulary of landscape forms and the ability to express spirituality. To specify, vocabulary refers to the ways in which artists portrayed elements in the landscape, both in terms of the rendering of individual objects and their arrangement in space (perspective). Spirituality refers to the capability of the artist to convey spiritual meanings in the landscape, whether formal religious connotations or nature philosophy. A fully established convention in landscape vocabulary and the ability of the landscape to convey spirituality mark the maturity of landscape depiction. This project is specifically concerned with how and when landscape reached maturity in both traditions, that is having developed a fully established pictorial vocabulary and the ability to convey spirituality through landscape depiction.

In both China and Europe, landscape depiction reached maturity by the early Renaissance, i.e., Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) in China and the fifteenth century in Italy. For this study, we focus on two representative paintings, Travelers among Mountains and Streams by Northern Song painter Fan Kuan (c.950-1030) and St. Francis in Ecstasy by Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516), which represent maturity in landscape depictions from the two traditions. (Figs. 1 and 2) The

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2 Also, the definitions of “landscape painting” in the two cultures are quite different. The Oxford dictionary defines Western landscape painting as “a representation of a natural inland scenery, as distinguished from a portrait” or as “background scenery in a figure-painting.” Meanwhile, the Chinese word for landscape painting, shanshui (山水), literally means mountain and water. The word comes from the Analects by Confucius (551-479 BC) in which the mountain and water represent the aspiration of Chinese gentlemen. (The Japanese share the same word with Chinese.) The difference in concept is so dramatic that, when first exposed to Western landscape paintings in the nineteenth century, the Japanese adapted another word, Fūkei-Ga (风景画, meaning “painting of a scene”), to refer to Western landscape paintings. The Chinese adapted this word is well. See "landscape, n." Oxford English Dictionary Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/105515? (accessed April 11, 2017). See also, Ken-ichi Sasaki, "Perspectives East and West." Contemporary Aesthetics 11, (January 2013): 6.
landscapes in these two paintings demonstrate well-developed painting techniques as well as the ability to channel the spirituality of nature. Through the eyes of the depicted figures, the viewers can experience the spirituality that the paintings embody. The two chapters of this project separately examine how the visual vocabulary and attitude to nature developed in China and Europe in chronological order, leading to the two masterpieces mentioned above. The “Synthesis and Conclusion” section at the end offers some cross-cultural comparisons based on the observations achieved by detailed visual analysis and overviews of religious traditions in the two chapters.

The first chapter examines the development of landscape depiction in China from Bronze Age (referring to c. 1000-300 BC) to the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). We see how a series of conventions was established during the evolution of landscape forms from the primitive to mature stage. Depictions of landscape also gradually took on spiritual values. With the influences from Confucianism and Daoism, the depictions of landscape incorporated many spiritual connotations: the ancient sacred worship of nature; the Daoist admiration of mountains as mystical and divine; the concept of landscape as an ideal place for retreat; and the idea of mountain as symbol of monumentality and eternity. Both visually and spiritually, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* is a concrete representation of such cultural values.

Chapter II deals with landscape depiction in the West from Classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages, up to the early Renaissance. The interest in three-dimensional space and the vocabulary of naturalistic landscape forms were created in Roman antiquity, preserved through the Middle Ages, and revived in the Renaissance. Because Christian theology dominated Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, these classical landscape forms started to embody Christian ideas and symbolism, although they lost their original three-dimensional quality. With the
prominent theologian St. Francis of Assisi (c.1181-1226) whose teachings embraced nature and introduced a new interest to landscape, the classical interest in naturalistic landscape and Christian theology were allowed to combine, enabling the Renaissance painters to create landscapes that are both naturalistic and spiritual. Bellini’s *St. Francis in Ecstasy* exemplifies such landscape depictions.

The final “Synthesis and Conclusion” section compares and contrasts both traditions. This discussion offers observations on some similarities and contrasts in technique, style, and attitudes to nature, inherent in the two cultural values. The project reaches its conclusion that despite their differences, the landscape comes to convey spirituality to the viewers through the eyes of the depicted figures in both East and West.

However, this project does not cover possible cultural interactions between the two cultures, but treats them as independent aesthetic traditions in a parallel study. Michael Sullivan in his book *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* exhaustively examines the possible cultural interactions, but on which he focuses primarily from the sixteenth century forward.³ Facing the rarity of publications on this field of study, I had to separately consult scholarship from studies of Chinese or Western landscape depictions.⁴ As a practitioner of Chinese art living in a Western culture, it is my hope that more writings on this subject of cross-cultural comparisons can continually be produced in the future.

⁴ Art historian James Elkins reviews the publications on the subject of East-West art comparisons in a chapter from his book *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History*; he observes a positive direction that the field is going: “each account is apparently less naive than the last, apparently more in control of the problem it raises.” However, as Elkins points out, among the already-rare publications, it is hard to produce scholarly works of high quality on the subject that are not prejudiced, which is also a difficulty that this project faces. James Elkins, “A Brace of Comparisons”, from *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 16.
Chapter I
The Landscape Tradition of the East

Looking at Fan Kuan’s *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, a majestic Northern Song landscape painting measuring seven feet tall, one is awestruck by its monumentality, its imposing peaks, and the deep sense of space it creates.¹ (Fig. 1) As one of the most famous examples from the genre of Chinese landscape painting, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* marks the climax of the development of landscape painting. Using various techniques, the artist is able to convey a unique sense of spirituality. The mountain is sacred; it embodies religious feelings. In order to understand the complicated pictorial elements in the painting as well as the profound spirituality of the mountain, we need to go back to prehistoric China and trace the gradual origin of landscape representations. Examining landscape depictions from Pre-Han Dynasty China to its first climax in Northern Song (960-1127), this chapter traces the origin of the art form from its primitive stages to its developments and transformations, aiming to outline a clear chronology for the birth of the landscape genre with its distinctive traits.² Analysis focuses on the gradual process in which landscape depiction becomes a vehicle of expressing spirituality. At the same time, the study also observes the development of artists’ ability to represent nature realistically.

**Prehistoric Attitude and Representations of Nature**

Ancient Chinese culture was based on a spiritual view of the world in which each object in nature is possessed by *qi*, a universal cosmic force, unceasingly operating across time and space.³

¹ Measuring 206.3 x 103.3 cm, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* is currently located in the National Palace Museum, Taipei. It is done with ink on silk.
² I have deliberately chosen the word “landscape depiction” instead of “landscape paintings”, because early representations of landscape mainly survive on decorative objects, vases, bronzes, stone pillars, incense burners, etc. These early depictions of landscape on various mediums provide fundamental pictorial basis for the rise of landscape painting.
³ The concept of *qi* and cosmic force comes much earlier than the formation of Confucianism and Daoism.
For this particular reason, the Chinese held nature sacred, because they believed that nature, particularly the mountains, were the grandest manifestation of the cosmic spirit.\(^4\) Since the Shang Dynasty (c. 1400-1000 BCE), the sacred ceremony *Feng Shan* (封禅) was held by emperors in honor to heaven and the earth on Mount Tai, which was considered the highest and the most sacred.\(^5\) In the ceremony, the emperor makes sacrifice to *tian* (heaven) and *di* (earth) in celebration of an auspicious year or to consecrate the emperor’s power. However, such religious activities were always conducted in nature; the representations of nature, on the other hand, did not take on the role of a religious icon and replace the sanctity of nature yet. Nonetheless, such a reverent attitude to nature gave depictions of landscape patterns auspicious qualities; symbols such as clouds, waters, and schematic mountains were frequently themes of decoration that have propitious implications.\(^6\) The technique of depicting landscape, meanwhile, developed from such decorative motifs.

The major ancient religions of China share this attitude toward nature, such as Confucianism and its founder Confucius (551-479 BCE). Recorded in the book *Analects* which was compiled by disciples after his death, Confucius often emphasized the importance to keep the old *li* (rituals) that include sacrifices to heaven.\(^7\) He insisted that the execution of such ancient ceremonies was critically important for the peace and prosperity of the country. He also stressed the significance

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\(^5\) One of the most exhaustive explanation about the *Feng Shan* ceremony appears in *Shiji: Fengshanshu (Records of the Grand Historian: Book of Fengshan)* from c. 95 BC by the Han Dynasty Official Sima Qian, which records the reason why it is held on Mount Tai, the emperors who conducted the ceremony, and the actual procedure of it.


\(^7\) For example, look at *Analects*, Book of Bayi: “Zigong (a disciple of Confucius) wanted to spare the lamb in a *Gaoshuo* Sacrifice. Confucius said: ‘Zigong! You love the lamb, while I love the ritual.’” See also, Patricia Karetzky, *Chinese Religious Art* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 88.
of a hierarchical social order, in which the emperor tianzi (son of heaven) was the highest, while all other people must pay homage and perform their responsibilities in accordance with their positions. At the same time, he proposed the idea of a junzi, an ethical gentleman, which became an ideal state of human morality for later literati. Later artists would carry some of the virtues of a junzi into their artworks, particularly the virtues of seriousness and modesty.

Another important religion was founded by the legendary figure Laozi (c. 571-471); his Daoism was significantly influential in Chinese culture. The Daodejing by Laozi first proposes, in ambiguous terms, the notion of dao that roughly translates as an “ultimate way,” and its functions. The dao is a cosmic force that creates the universe and keeps it operating. The dao, at the same time, manifests in two forces that constantly balance each other dynamically, forming the polarity of yin and yang. Meanwhile, the text advocates an attitude that is quite opposite to Confucianism; it disdains li and proposes the notion of wuwei (inaction) as the best path for human life, which left a significant impact on later Daoist believers who would renounce their social responsibility and retreat into nature.

The two religions, although addressing different issues, respectively social responsibility and individual pursuit after dao, assimilated the same ancient cult of yin yang and their dynamic balance to achieve a universal harmony; the shared root gave the two religions compatibility when they were interpreted later in texts and in art. Although they underwent changes and reinterpretations from new schools of thought, the basic principles remained evidently consistent

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8 The actual establishment of Daoism as a religion actually happened around second century CE. Laozi, according to the legend, only left the book of Daodejing before he totally renounced the secular world and retreated into nature. The book is considered the first and most important classic of the religion. See also, Karetzky 2014, 155.
within each religion. These principles are very important because they provide philosophical background for the art of landscape painting in China.

No surviving textual or visual evidence demonstrates that an established tradition of landscape painting existed in Pre-Han Dynasty China. However, representations of landscape symbols from murals, bronzes, stone reliefs, and other media provide some insight on the development of a vocabulary of landscape forms. Before considering actual landscape patterns, a quick look at a *Wine Vessel* from the Zhou Dynasty (1046-771 BCE) period helps to create a fundamental understanding of the decorative tradition in China.10 (Fig. 3) On this bronze drinking vessel, schematic lines twist and coil into cloud-like forms; although decorations vary in position and size, a certain linear rhythm dominates the entire composition. Many bronzes surviving from Bronze Age China bear similar linear motifs. The abstract pattern, however, has no realistic or representational associations. Nonrepresentational as it appeared during the Bronze Age, this basic graphic pattern with its linear rhythm would serve as the foundation for all later decorative motifs.

**Han Dynasty and Mystical Landscape**

After years of instability and the short-lived Qin Dynasty (221-207 BCE), the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 221 AD) finally achieved unification and peace. Ruling over a vast territory, emperor Wu (reigned 141-87 BCE) adopted Confucianism as the official religion of the state and used it to establish a solid hierarchical system. From Han forward, the court treated Confucian texts as classics and the Confucian virtues as the value of the society. The art produced since the Han frequently shows the presence of Confucian social hierarchy and ethical virtues. Meanwhile, Daoism, although marginalized by the state, was gradually established as the second to largest religion; believers of Daoism continued to operate their practices, producing art works associated

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10 Measuring 22 x 15 inches, this bronze vessel is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
with the cult. Landscape depictions from the Han Dynasty that exist in decorative patterns from vases, stone carvings, and ritualistic objects frequently show influences from the mystical beliefs of Daoist practitioners.

During the Han dynasty, representations of nature, which began as linear patterns, became less abstract. While the decorative appearance and linear rhythm remained apparent, more realistic symbols emerged from the curling shapes. A Painted Vase with Dragon and Phoenix in Relief from early Han Dynasty exemplifies such an emergence. (Fig. 4) Embossed rings divide the decorations on this vase into three registers. While a clear rhythm of the lines, more vivid than the stiff patterns on the Zhou Dynasty vessel, dominate the whole composition, the curly motif metamorphoses into different representational symbols. On the top most register, the lines clearly evolve into shapes of fire-like clouds transcending to heaven; on the lowest register, however, they look more like branches of plants with flowers and leaves; clouds and plants join in the middle register as if heaven and earth meet, providing background for the lively dragon and phoenixes carved in low relief. This linear rhythm that is manifest in the entire design, as if controlled by a spiritual internal pulse, becomes one of the most distinctive traits of Chinese paintings in succeeding dynasties. Just like leaves and flowers that grow out from tree branches, representations of natural elements evolved from the linear pattern and gave birth to

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12 This pottery vase is one of the masterpieces collected by the Palace Museum in Beijing. It measures c. 25 x 15 inches.
13 While the more vivid rhythm of lines on the Han Dynasty vase compared with the Zhou Dynasty bronze might suggest emergence of new aesthetics, the function of the two objects is more likely the primary reason for this difference; the more formal and stiff lines fit the function of the bronze vessel as a ritualistic instrument.
representational landscape depictions; they will remain decorative, however, for a couple more centuries.\footnote{\textsuperscript{14} Michael Sullivan calls this development a “hill-whorl”, in which mountains and clouds developed from the decorative volute form. See \textit{The Birth of Landscape Painting in China}, 131.}

Aside from these decorative elements, the depiction of mountains during the Han Dynasty frequently falls in to the category of “mystical mountains.” Looking at the upper left corner of a \textit{Stone Pillar painted with Door Guard} from the entrance to a Han Dynasty tomb, a depiction of divine Queen Mother of the West sits on top of a mystical mountain, which is flanked by two lower hills.\footnote{\textsuperscript{15} Measuring c. 46 x 13 inches, this painted stone pillar was found at the entrance to a Han Dynasty tomb coupled with another one on the right side with symmetrical designs. They are currently in the Palace Museum in Beijing.} (Fig. 5) Trees and plants grow from the mountains where animals reside. This depiction of supernatural beings living in the mountain exemplify the “mystical mountains” proposed by scholar Wu Hung, which were fictional mountains that have exotic stones, trees, animals, and races of immortal beings. Wu Hung argues that people in the Han Dynasty believed that the depiction of such scenes on an object invoked \textit{xiangrui} (good omen or auspiciousness) upon the object itself.\footnote{\textsuperscript{16} Wu Hung, “A Sanpan Shan Chariot Ornament and the Xiangrui Design in Western Han Art” from \textit{Archives of Asian Art}, Vol. 37 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984), 45-47.} Works such as \textit{Shan Hai Jing}, a quasi-Shamanistic book collecting mythologies with exotic places and creatures in the world, gave inspiration to the designs such as the ones on this stone pillar.

The picture of mountain from this stone pillar also relates to another ancient component crucial to the rise of landscape depiction, its connection with Chinese hieroglyphic characters. Unlike Western cultures with alphabetical Latin languages, the pictographic tradition of China formed a strong connection between painting and writing. A profoundly complicated relation between calligraphy and painting developed over the centuries; artists thought of paintings as an
extension of writing and a calligraphic expression of the artist’s body and mind.\textsuperscript{17} However, at a more fundamental stage, Chinese characters are themselves logographs conveying meaning through pictorial images.\textsuperscript{18} The Chinese character for mountain in ancient seal script, “ibaba,” has its root in Neolithic times. Its shape of two lower hills flanking a tall peak in the middle expresses the fundamental conception for mountains. It manifests clearly in the depiction of mountain from this stone pillar.

The ancient Chinese attitude and admiration of the mountain during the Han finds its ultimate expression on the \textit{Boshan Xianglu (Fairy Mountain Incense Burner)}, a type of ritualistic incense burner that probably originated in pre-Han period and was very popular during the Han Dynasty. (Fig. 6) This particular illustration, excavated in 1968 in Hebei province, is the most lavish surviving example of the type.\textsuperscript{19} The artifact shows extreme mastery of the artist. Elaborately modeled, dragons crouch on the foot of the incense burner; their head turning upwards toward the wide open burning plate. Waves of the Eastern Sea in cloud-like shapes decorate the plate, on which rise the tall fairy mountains. Hunters chase after animals amid scattered trees, all carefully modeled in relief within the mysterious mountainscape. Visually, the \textit{Boshan Xianglu} provides a concrete example of the Han Dynasty concept of mountains. The hieroglyphic character “ibaba” is manifest in the design, albeit with more complexity and detail. The

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{18} The Tang Dynasty art theorist Zhang Yanyuan, at the beginning of the \textit{Li Dai Ming Hua Ji}, says that: “During this period (antiquity), writing was not different from pictures in substance...,” referring back to the shared origin of the two kinds of arts. See Lin Yutang, \textit{The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art} (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1967), 44 for a translation.
\bibitem{19} Michael Sullivan, \textit{The Arts of China} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 89.
\bibitem{17} See also Baidu Baike: “Cuo Jin Boshanlu.”
https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%94%99%E9%87%91%E5%8D%9A%E5%B1%B1%E7%82%89
The bronze incense burner, inlaid with gold, measures 26 x 9.7 cm.
\end{thebibliography}
Confucian notion of hierarchy is also apparent. It ensures that the mountains always appear in groups and that the central mountain is always the tallest, thus the most important. Although these principles are simple, they set up the conventions for the portrayal of mountain later in China.

Measuring about ten inches high, the incense burner later functioned as an important ritualistic object for Daoist practitioners. The Daoists believers thought that the mountains in the remote regions (some imaginary) are home to the divine where supernatural and immortal beings live, and the herbs that grant immortality grow. The inlaid golden lines and precious gems on the incense burner indicates the sacred spirituality of the mountains. When the burner functions, auspicious vapor (\textit{Yun Qi}) exhale from the holes; it symbolizes the breath of the mountains and of nature, also the breath of spirit and of life. The mountain and the vapor, one tangible while the other formless, form a dynamic contrast between \textit{yin} and \textit{yang} that ceaselessly change and balance each other, inspiring the beholder to meditate. The mountains emerging amid the misty vapor also allude to a supernatural fairyland that charms and delights the heart. The \textit{Boshan Xianglu} is a perfect example of the “mystical landscape” type representative of the period.

Rare examples of painted landscape also survive from the Han Dynasty; they demonstrate the development of techniques in painted representations of landscape during the Han. A \textit{Ritual Wine Vessel with Cover (Bian Hu)} from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts collection is covered with elaborate portrayals of hunters on horses with trees and hills. (Fig. 7) A clear linear rhythm dominates the broad contour lines, associating the picture with early decorative motif of the clouds. The bold lines that define mountains divide the picture into space-cells, in which

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\textsuperscript{20} They are frequently found in tombs, indicating that the object might have associations with the pursuit after immortality. See Karetzky, 161.

\textsuperscript{21} Dating to the second century BC, this painted bronze vessel measures c. 14.5 x 15 x 7.3 cm. For Michael Sullivan’s account on this vessel, see \textit{The Birth of Landscape Painting in China}, 41.
human activities take place. The painted mountains on this vase also utilize a new device in perspective. Looking closely at the front of this vessel, a horseman enters the composition from the left. A curly line that represents a hill in the foreground cuts off the lower part of the horse, creating a sense of three-dimensional space in which the horseman is emerging behind the hill. Early depictions either had objects scattered separately on a flat surface with random overlapping or had them vertically stacked together. (The *Stone Pillar painted with Door Guard* represents a successor of the second prototype.) The motif of overlapping on this vase moved one step further toward the creation of a naturalistic space. Similar samples exist on other artworks found in the same period. Although elementary, this is an important technique in the development of perspective and was practiced by all later artists to suggest a front-and-back relation, such as in one of the most highly-regarded landscape paintings, Guo Xi’s *Early Spring* from the Northern Song Period (960-1127 AD).\(^2\) (Fig. 8) This convention also made all later developments of perspective in Chinese landscape painting possible.

**Six Dynasties and Landscape of Retreat**

Significant changes in social circumstances happened along with the fall of the Han Dynasty in c. 200 AD, after almost four hundred years of peace and prosperity. People refer to the period between Han and Tang as “Six Dynasties”, a period of war and social instabilities. The changes in society led to the change of philosophy. The Confucian ideal of a stable and hierarchical society, dependent on the engagement and responsibility of each citizen, penetrated people’s thought during the Han Dynasty. But when the central government fell, the entire Confucian value that was taken as presumption for a society to function collapsed. Social engagement lost

\(^{22}\) As the Northern Song master Guo Xi’s most famous painting, *The Early Spring* is currently in the National Palace Museum of Taipei. Dating to the 1070s, the painting measures 158.3 cm x 103.1 cm. Note how the artist indicates space by showing the rock in the back emerging behind the rock in the foreground. The wide and expressive contour lines of Guo Xi also seem to reflect the type of lines painted on the wine vessel.
its meaning, and the philosophy of the period turned radically from the anthropocentric Confucian doctrines to Daoism, the philosophy of retreat and inaction.\(^{23}\)

Daoism sees the ultimate *dao* as a manifestation in *ziran*, a word roughly translates as “nature” or “naturalness”. *Ziran* in its original context refers to a cosmological sense of nature; the *dao* operates in the universe. The use of *ziran* in referring to an earthly landscape, on the other hand, occurred during the Six Dynasties when a new branch of Daoism named Neo-Daoism emerged.\(^{24}\) Represented by the famous Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (active in the third century AD), the Neo-Daoists advocated for the purification of mind in seclusion. It was under such a circumstance that the genre of landscape poetry occurred. Xie Lingyun (385-433), attributed as the founder of nature poetry, represents one of the literati scholars who, disappointed by the political situation, retreated into nature. His poems often describe the beauty and peace of landscape and display a preference of the rural, the peaceful, and the harmonious world outside of the unstable society.

I packed some provisions and grabbed a light staff; 裹粮杖轻策,
Following the winding path, I climbed to my hidden abode. 怀迟上幽室。
I proceeded upstream, the path winding further away. 行源径转远,
I reached the peak, my feelings not yet exhausted. 距陆情未毕。
Gentle ripples congealed in wintry beauty, 澹潋结寒姿,
Bamboos glistened in frosted strength. 团栾润霜质。

[...]
As tranquility and knowledge conjoin, 恬如既已交,
The cultivation of one’s nature begins here. 缮性自此出。\(^{25}\)
Such an idyllic view of nature becomes the precursor and prototype for many subsequent poets.

On the other hand, while *ziran* in this context definitely refers to landscape, it also expresses a

\(^{23}\) See also Shaw, 187-189.
\(^{24}\) See Shaw, 186 -190. She explicitly explains the rise of Neo-Daoism and the change of meaning of the word *ziran*.
meditative quality clearly shown in Xie’s poems; the two meanings of ziran conflate and give the act of retreating into landscape a contemplative association.

It was also during the Six Dynasties when Zong Bing (375-443), considered the founder of landscape painting in China, wrote his famous treatise. Physically incapable of retiring into the mountains, he painted landscape paintings on the walls of his cottage, in which “a vertical stroke of three inches can represent a thousand feet height; a horizontal stretch of several feet can stand for a distance of hundreds of miles.”26 In the case of Zong Bing, landscape painting started out as substitute for real nature, and one is supposed to retreat into the depicted landscape when looking at a painting.

“Therefore I live in leisure and put my thoughts in order. I wipe a wine cup or strum a qin (zither). In solitary peace I unroll a painting, sit and reach all the wilderness of nature. Without leaving the secular world in which fate situates me, I can enjoy the solitary nature alone. Tall mountain peaks rise high, and cloudy forest appear deep in the distance.”27 If the depictions of mountains from the Han Dynasty stand for auspicious and mystical landscape, the painting style after Zong Bing should be categorized as “landscape of retreat” or “landscape of nature”.

Unfortunately, none of Zong Bing’s paintings actually survive; neither is there any available landscape painting from the Six Dynasties that even suggest Zong’s aesthetic experience. Textual and visual evidence appear inconsistent in this period; the “landscape of nature and retreat” did not come until centuries later. Compared with the extremely well-developed poetry, philosophy, and aesthetics of the Six Dynasties, visual evidence that survives from the period remains archaic and primitive; the departure from Han Dynasty imagery was a slow and gradual process. However, it was during this period that many fundamental conventions in composition

26 Zong Bing, Hua Shan Shui Xu (Preface to Landscape Painting). Translated by author. 竖画三寸，当千仞之高；横墨数尺，体百里之迥。See also Lin, 32.
27 Zong Bing, Hua Shan Shui Xu (Preface to Landscape Painting). Translated by author. 于是闲居理气，拂觞鸣琴，披图幽对，坐究四荒，不违天励之藂，独应无人之野。峰岫峣嶷，云林森眇。See also Lin, 32.
and iconography were established. These developments happened mainly while landscape was still background to human activities. By the end of this period, the techniques of landscape depiction would mature enough for the genre to stand on its own.

The vocabulary representing mountainscapes that developed during the Six Dynasties includes two essential factors, namely, how to portray mountains and how to arrange them as occupying space. The most common way to depict a mountain during the period, referred to by Michael Sullivan as the “camel hump-hill”, simply has a triangular shaped hill with a rounded top. They may be connected to each other and form a mountain range. The significant progress that was made during the Six Dynasties, however, lies in the discovery and establishment of a pictorial convention, which Wen Fong calls “the overlapping triangles”, triangles that recede on a diagonal to suggest space. Both the way to portray mountains and the way to arrange them in space manifests clearly in the wall murals in Dunhuang dated to this period.

The Mogao Caves in Dunhuang in the far northwest of Gansu province, also known as the Thousand Buddha Grottoes, have hundreds of well-preserved wall murals that are important archaeological evidence for the history of art styles. Looking at the detail of the east wall from cave 428, dating to the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581 AD), colorful mountains divide the picture into separate space cells that contain figures in activity, a devise already invented in the Han Dynasty. (Fig. 9) This specific scene depicts a story from the Jataka, in which the main character Prince Sattva discovers hungry cub tigers on a journey and decides to throw himself

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30 The place is extremely remote from mainland China and remained hidden for almost a thousand years.

31 Northern Zhou is one of the short-lived dynasties during the Six Dynasty Period. Cave 428 is one of the most famous caves, not only for its size but also for its well preserved and colorful decorations. A website contains detailed information about this specific cave. http://public.dha.ac.cn/content.aspx?id=689684729136
from the mountain, sacrificing his life to feed the starving tigers. The artist depicts figures and animals with schematic contour lines that are full of energy and animation. As always in Chinese pictorial tradition, the same energy of the lines carries over to the mountains and the trees. Represented unanimously in triangles, the so-called “hump hills” overlap each other and form long lines of mountain ranges. While the overlapping suggests clear front-to-back relationship within a single group of mountains, they do not create a sense of unified space overall. The spaces encircled by the mountains are irregular, some horizontal and others diagonal. The mountains serve as tools to set up space-cells for the depiction of the main story. The lack of proper scale in this mural also indicates its archaic stage, in accordance with the ninth century art historian Zhang Yanyuan: “sometime human figures are larger than hills.”

However, considering its primitive stage, the importance of this wall mural, as well as many other murals from the Mogao Caves, lies in its use of two fixed vocabularies, the triangular mountains and their recession. A complicated system of indicating space would originate from these simple principles.

One can have a glimpse at the height of landscape achievement during the Six Dynasties from the Stone Sarcophagi engraved with Stories of Filial Duty currently located in the Nelson-Atkins Museum. Surviving from the early sixth century, its composition possibly reflects landscape styles of Gu Kaizhi, the most renowned painter of the era, who does not have any authentic works that survive. It illustrates scenes of the six filial sons, a subject that is strictly Confucian. Looking at one of the panels, the long horizontal composition has a unified

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32 Zhang Yanyuan, *Li Dai Ming Hua Ji (Record of Famous Paintings)*. See Lin, 53 for a translation.
33 Wen Fong, *Images of the Mind*, 12 and 20-22. His analysis and diagrams for three stages of the development in Chinese landscape perspective is on page 20 and 21; they remain the most compelling analysis for the early stages in the development of this system.
34 Three of these side panels survive from a tomb in Luoyang, Henan province. Currently located in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, each of the panels measures 62.5 x 223.5 cm.
foreground. (Fig. 10) Tall trees of different kinds and protruding rocks separate the picture plane and divide it into different space cells, in which individual stories of the filial sons take place. The linear figures, slightly shorter than the rocks, appear in various postures with great animation. The proportionality between human beings and their environment appears more natural compared to the wall paintings in Dunhuang, suggesting a gradual improvement in naturalistic depiction. The tall vertical rocks overlap each other and recede diagonally into space. Behind the main register in which all stories are depicted, distant mountains and shoals appear in the background, significantly reduced in size; the contrast between the distant mountains and the tall protruding rocks in the foreground creates a sharp sense of recession into space. The engraving is so well done that scholars believe it is modeled after an original scroll or wall painting.\(^{35}\)

The *Stone Sarcophagus engraved with Stories of Filial Duty* illustrates many important conventions in landscape depictions of China. The overlapping motif has been examined previously. The forms, as they recede from the ground plane, diminish in size. The stories, on the other hand, align horizontally in separate space cells but within the same composition. One has to constantly move his eyes from one story to the other in order to read all of them. In fact, not only the stories, one has to move his eyes in order to look at each clump of the rocks and trees portrayed in the composition as well; each group of the elements has its own focal point. This technique of portrayal, referred to as the “multi-point perspective,” would have significant impact on later Chinese landscape paintings and become a characteristic of the genre. The hills in the background, on the other hand, indicate the settlement of another convention in the Six Dynasties, that the placement of an object higher up on the picture plane indicates a further

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distance to the viewer. This convention would allow later painters to stretch compositions vertically into infinite height but still make sense structurally.  

The natural forms are enlivened and unified by the spirit of qi; the wind blows through tree branches and tall grasses, and a number of small animals and birds scamper through the scenes. The hillocks, streams, trees, and animals constitute a harmonious space, showing traces of possible influence from the aesthetics of landscape poetry of the Six Dynasties. Meanwhile, the choice of including landscape as background speaks to a gradual rise of the artist’s and patron’s interest in landscape depiction. The designer of the engraving was capable of treating landscape “not as isolated entities, but as components of a coherent physical environment.” The artists’ technique of depicting landscape and conception of nature had, at this point, matured enough to incorporate separate natural elements into a consistent visual presentation of the physical environment. Although landscape still served as background at this stage, the totality of it became a crucial premise to the rise of landscape painting that followed closely and the achievement of spirituality within the genre.

**Tang Dynasty and Landscape of Solidity**

Zhan Ziqian (active 6th Century AD)’s *Stroll about in the Spring*, generally considered the first landscape painting of China, survives from the period between the end of Six Dynasties and the beginning of Tang (618-907). *(Fig. 11)* It is painted with ink and color on silk. An open river separates the landscape into two groups, one sits in the lower left corner while the other

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36 This convention, viewed from another angle, is a vertical expression of the “multi-point perspective” which often occurs horizontally. When tall vertical scrolls were introduced later in Tang and Song Dynasties, the vertical multi-point perspective would become clear.


38 Currently in Palace Museum, Beijing, the painting measures 43 x 80.5 cm.

39 The technique is referred to as *qinglǜ* (blue-and-green) style landscape, which became popular during the Tang.
gradually recedes into distance on the right. The perspective that the artist utilizes can be seen as a primitive type of *ping yuan* (level distance), which the eleventh century painter and art theorist Guo Xi defines as “viewing a distant mountain from close” among his three ways to show distance. The artist uses simple contour lines to outline the shape of the hills and the trees; the natural elements construct a complicated but convincing space. Instead of background to human activity, the landscape is the main theme of representation, while figures are interspersed among the scene. The people in the painting, on the other hand, do not act as characters in a story or serve as portrayals for any real or legendary figure; they are part of the landscape. Two men stand at the riverside on the left, enjoying the view of the river, while a couple of female figures sit in a boat that floats on the river; other people occur on the right where they cross a bridge to go to the temples visible amid the mountains. The scattered figures and the landscape construct a scenery with harmonious totality.

The setting of landscape and figures in this painting convincingly provides an example for the “landscape of retreat” category, developed during the Six Dynasties and finally visualized at the dawn of Tang. Nature and man are filled with interaction; the people portrayed in the scene are aware of their surrounding and actively participate in appreciating nature. The relation between the human figures and nature reflects the themes of landscape poetry from the Six Dynasties, such as the one by Xie Lingyun. Moreover, part of the function of the figures is to lead the eyes of the viewer through the landscape. They invite the viewer to join the enjoyment toward a landscape disengaged from the cares, the worries, and the responsibilities that are associated with human society. The painting embodies an ideal landscape utopia, in which one

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40 Guo Xi and Guo Si, *Lin Quan Gao Zhi Ji*. See a translation from Lin, 79.
41 See also Richard Barnhart, "Figures in Landscape," *Archives of Asian Art* 42 (1989): 62-70 for his account on the role of figures.
is permitted to leave aside social identities and gain joy from nature. Literati statesmen such as Wang Wei (699-759) during the Tang Dynasty would continue to explore the expressiveness of landscape painting in respect to the utopian mood that Zhan Ziqian’s *Stroll about in the Spring* creates.

*Stroll about in the Spring* is a rare well-preserved example; the actual numbers of landscape paintings that survived from the Tang Dynasty are not many. However, the aesthetic of the great Tang with its glory in political and economic success certainly left a huge influence on the development of landscape paintings. After more than three hundred years of warfare and chaos, China once again reached unification. Growing trade stimulated economic boom, allowing a luxurious taste of the arts to be born in the court. Meanwhile, the strong military force of Tang expanded the territory greatly, exposing China to exotic objects and art, greatly shifting the aesthetic of mainland China. A preference of the grand, the solid, and the extravagant replaced the modest and delicate art style of the Six Dynasties with the return of the stable central government.

The difference between the aesthetic preference of the high Tang and the previous dynasties appears clearly in a comparison between their calligraphic canons. A section from the stone stele *Da Tang Zhong Xing Song*, carved after the calligraphy of the celebrated calligrapher Yan

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42 Note that the distant mountains surrounded by white clouds allude to the *Boshan Xianglu* from Han. The mystical mountain type never disappeared in people’s conception toward landscape.
44 Scholars debate about the authenticity of the painting even within the Palace Museum; some think it is original from the early Tang while others hold that it is a Song copy. I agree with the former.
Zhenqing (709-784) in 771, provides a glimpse at the aesthetic of the great Tang Dynasty.\textsuperscript{46} (Fig. 12) Writing in the style of fully matured \textit{kaishu} (standard calligraphy), Yan uses firm and muscular strokes to constitute fully stretched forms within each character. The way to write each stroke is strictly regulated and executed. The lines curve out to reach a fuller and rounder shape of each character. Yan’s calligraphic style evolved from his precursor Wang Xizhi (303-361)’s canon. A section from Wang Xizhi’s \textit{Lantingji Xu} (Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion) is illustrated in comparison to the calligraphy by Yan Zhenqing.\textsuperscript{47} (Fig. 13) The different is apparent. Wang’s lines curve in to achieve a thinner and prettier quality. The forms are more elegant and delicate compared with the weighty and solid compositions of Yan.\textsuperscript{48} The aesthetic difference between Wang Xizhi, writing from the Six Dynasties, and Yan Zhenqing from the height of Tang is evident.

The aesthetic qualities that Yan Zhenqing’s calligraphy are manifest in Tang depictions of landscape as well. Art historians, facing a critical lack of visual evidence, turn to narrative scenes set in landscapes like the Silk Banner with Stories of the Buddha, which was found in Dunhuang in early twentieth century. (Fig. 14) Currently in the British Museum, London, the Painted Banner with Three Scenes of the Buddha dates to the eighth century, during the height of the Tang Dynasty.\textsuperscript{49} From top to bottom, the artist portrays three scenes from the life of the Buddha: the farewell, the shaving of his hair, and the life of austerity. On the other hand, the figures appear very small in the painting; landscape dominates the majority of the composition. A huge

\textsuperscript{46} The original of the stone carving survives in Wuxi Beilin, Human Province.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Lantingji Xu} only survives from copies; the illustrated copy is made by Feng Chengsu from Tang Dynasty, which is the most popular version and a faithful presentation of the original. Measuring 24.5 x 69.9 cm with ink on paper, this copy is currently in Palace Museum, Beijing. See Palace Museum, \textit{Online Category}. http://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/handwriting/228279.html
\textsuperscript{48} This comparison is not making any judgement about quality; it only aims to differentiate style. Both calligraphic works are spectacular.
\textsuperscript{49} The vertical long banner measures 58.5 x 18.5 cm.
and weighty rock sits on the bottom of the composition with its contour line running over the picture plane on both sides. It encloses a space for the meditating Buddha, who appears small compared to the gigantic rock. Behind the rock, space recedes to a platform, suggested by the overlapping technique, on which the shaving ceremony takes place. Two triangular hills with crowning trees rise above. Water runs behind the hills, and on its shore the departure happens. A cliff towers above in a diagonal shape, behind which distant shoal and hills recede to the cloudy sky.

The anonymous artist skillfully incorporated techniques in perspective developed previously and mastered space on a longitudinal plane, a shape difficult for landscape composition. The painting illustrates a multi-point perspective utilized in a vertical way; one has to look up and down in order to read the stories as well as the elements of landscape. Although the painting does not have a unified ground level, the artist is able to lead the viewer into a convincing space through overlapping forms and the zigzagging edges of the platforms. Besides, the painter employs another trick in composition, one referred to by Northern Song painter Guo Xi as shen yuan (deep distance). The diagonal cliff in the background towers on one side of the painting and allows a sharp recession in space between the cliff and the hills behind, creating a strong sense of presence for the cliff and a unique impression of depth to the landscape behind. The picture demonstrates a well-developed technique to arrange landscape motifs into space in the Tang Dynasty.

Beside devices in composition, the expressive contour lines that depict the hills and rocks draw attention. The painter executes the lines with strong determination; while they appear firm and solid, they are also enlivened with power and energy that penetrate through the entire composition. The lines are considerably wide in comparison to the shapes that they depict. They

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50 Guo Xi and Guo Si, Lin Quan Gao Zhi Ji. See a translation from Lin, 79.
start to become vehicles that carry out the expressiveness of the artist in landscape paintings in
the same way as they do in calligraphy. Meanwhile, the lines construct forms that are full,
weighty, and out-stretched. Both the lines and the forms embody a strong sense of presence and
solidity identical to the calligraphy of Yan Zhenqing; they are additional instruments for the
artist to channel his ideas beside composition. Meanwhile, the rich and firm quality is unique to
the high Tang Dynasty; Zhan Ziqian’s *Stroll about in the Spring* did not take on such
expressiveness yet. The aesthetics of the Tang opened a new gateway for the art of landscape
painting, “landscape of solidity.” Such a solidity lays out the foundation for the achievement of
monumental landscape in the Northern Song Dynasty.

**Northern Song and Landscape of Spirituality**

After its slow and gradual development for over a thousand years, landscape painting finally
reached its maturity and its climax in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127); the achievement of
the Northern Song masters is startling, yet not difficult to understand having looked at the
development of the genre before this point. The mystical landscape of Han Dynasty, the
landscape of retreat from the Six Dynasties, and the landscape of solidity that developed from
Tang would soon be assimilated by a group of landscape masters and bear fruit in their works.

Before looking at actual paintings, it is beneficial to briefly explain the tools and techniques
that a landscape painter employs during the Northern Song, during which an established tradition
formed. Painters painted landscape primarily with ink and brush on silk, sometimes with slight
color. The brushes vary in size to meet the need for the painting from fine to thick and rough.51
Ink is mixed with water to create different shades of black; the more water one adds to the ink,
the lighter it appears. The delicate material of silk is very responsive to the artist’s touch; it

51 Same with the brush used for calligraphy, the Chinese painting brush has animal fur on the tip and
usually bamboo as the shaft. The tip of the brush is pointed; the artist varies the width of the lines by
alternating the pressure he pushes the brush.
records every movement of the brush. Once an ink dot is painted on the silk, the artist cannot erase it. Although inspired by scenes in nature, traditional Chinese artists rarely painted works out of door; most compositions were done at home or in the artists’ studio with previous studies and revisions. When the painter has formed an idea of the composition, he first paints the contours of the mountains and trees with ink outlines. Within the outlines, he then applies expressive texture strokes, which are called “cun,” to indicate shadow or crevasses on the rock or wrinkles of an old tree branch, layering them if necessary in order to achieve a darker effect. Later painters would come up with a series of poetic names to describe the different texture strokes. When the composition is complete, the artist applies a thin layer of ink, called “ink wash,” to the surfaces to harmonize or unify. With a deft brush he then restores any detail lost in the ink wash. The artist intentionally leaves some areas as blank silk; they are meant to be read as mist that encircles the waist of the mountain or water that emerges from the crevices. Soft and delicate ink wash renders the distant ranges on the horizon or blurs the transition from mountain to mist. These techniques allowed Northern Song artists to physically achieve the effect in their works.

In talking about the spirituality of Northern Song Landscape, a group of major artists are concerned. The landscape painters Li Cheng (919-967), Fan Kuan (c.950s-1032), and Guan Tong (c.907-960s) bear the name of “three masters” who have reached “divine inspiration” according to the Tu Hua Jian Wen Zhi (Experiences in Painting) by Northern Song art historian Guo Ruoxu. While all surviving works by Guan Tong evokes concerns about authenticity, Li

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52 The precursor to the technique of cun can be seen from the Silk Banner with Stories of the Buddha, in which the artist paints shaded broken lines within the forms of the rocks to achieve a sense of texture.

53 The exact years of Guo Ruoxu is unknown. The book Tu Hua Jian Wen Zhi is a landmark work in Northern Song art history. It is modeled on Li Dai Ming Hua Ji by Tang art historian Zhang Yanyuan. See Alexander C. Soper, Kuo jo-Hsii’s Experience in Painting (Tu-hua Chien-wen Chih) (Washington D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1951), 19 for Guo Ruoxu’s account on the three masters.
Cheng’s *A Solitary Temple amid Clearing Peaks* and Fan Kuan’s *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* exemplify the monumental landscape prototype of the Northern Song Dynasty.\(^{54}\) (Figs. 15 and 1) Typical of the landscape composition from this period, the two paintings both have imposing mountains in the center that dwarf other elements of the composition. The effect is more dramatic in the painting by Fan Kuan. The following section analyzes the spirituality in Fan Kuan’s mountains which is applicable to all similar compositions during this period.

The sheer size of *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* is astonishing. Measuring seven feet tall, the hanged scroll imposes onto the its viewer the majestic mountain it portrays, towering in the center and occupying nearly the full height. The innumerable texture strokes and the tiny dots that represent the vegetation further magnify the size of the mountains. While the bottom of the mountains disappears in mist, weighty rocks occupy the foreground, their shapes and solidity alluding back to the richness of forms from the Tang Dynasty. Streams run between the crags, and temples hide behind the thick woods. Only after being stunned by the great monumentality of the mountains does one find the tiny little figures behind the foreground rocks driving a group of mules across the valley.

Fan Kuan utilizes the third and final technique in perspective defined by Guo Xi, the *gaoyuan* (high perspective) technique in which one “looks up at the peak of the mountain from bellow,” when painting the central mountain in the composition.\(^ {55}\) Guo Xi theorizes that the central mountain “serves majestically as the lord of the crests, forests, and ravines grouped around it, the eminent point of everything big and small within the compass. Its demeanor is like that of a king receiving homage from his courtiers and subjects, none daring to assume easy-

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\(^{54}\) Currently in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, *A Solitary Temple amid Clearing Peaks* measures 111.76 x 55.88cm. It is done with ink and color on silk.

\(^{55}\) Guo Xi and Guo Si, *Lin Quan Gao Zhi Ji*. 自山下而仰山巅。See Lin, 79.
going or disrespectful postures.” Both the *gaoyuan* technique and the size of the mountain help to achieve the grand stature of the central mountain. The perspective not only functions within the picture, but also in interaction with the viewer. The size of the painting determines that the viewer has to physically look up at the mountains. The incorporation of the *gaoyuan* technique not only shows the painter’s reverence for the mountain, but also makes the viewer admire it from below. The dramatic contrast of sizes between the figures and the mountain is also significant. In order to emphasize the contrast, Fan Kuan shrewdly painted the foreground in a slightly elevated view. One actually looks down at the small figures in the foreground and then looks up at the monumental mountains. Such a trick in perspective maximizes the contrast between the tall and the dwarfed. At this stage, Fan is capable of using the multi-point perspective and manipulating it for the purpose of contrast and exaggeration.

While the serious and solemn mountain in the middle perfectly visualizes an ideal Confucian model of *junzi*, the surrounding of it is in a Daoist context. The artist loads the entire painting with signs of the polarity between *yin* and *yang*. The scene of mountains emerging from misty clouds alludes back to the *Boshan Xianglu*, the Daoist ritual incense burner, and its dynamic balance between the *yang* mountains and the *yin* vapor. The strong forms of the mountains are the ultimate manifestations of *yang*, the strong, the hard, the eternal, and the monumental; meanwhile, the mist, the most ephemeral and shapeless of all things, suggested by the artist by leaving the area blank, is the invisible force of *yin* that constantly changes. The polarity also functions between rock and water. As the *Daodejing* goes: “In the world nothing is softer or weaker than water; yet there also nothing that can outdo her ability in attacking the hard and

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56 Guo Xi and Guo Si, *Lin Quan Gao Zhi Ji*. 大山堂堂为众山之主，所以分布以次冈阜林壑为远近大小之宗主也。其象若大君赫然当阳，而百辟奔走朝会，无偃蹇背却之势也。See Lin, 74.
firm.” Fan Kuan includes water in two places in the painting: one emerges in between the crags from afar and forms a stream in the foreground; the other is revealed through a valley in between the monumental mountains on the right. The water, although shapeless and ephemeral, has the power to cut through rock, the strongest form in nature, and form valleys and crevasses. The juxtaposition between the mountains and the travelers can also be understood from a Daoist standpoint; the mountains are stable and everlasting, while the travelers are only transitorily walking across the nature and going through their temporal lives. The presence of these elements, meanwhile, enlivens the mountain with life spirit and energy. As Guo Xi explained in the eleventh century, “streams are the blood veins of a mountain, the vegetation its hair, the clouds and mists its expression. [...] Mountains lack delicacy without clouds, lack charm without streams, lack a feeling of life without roadways, and lack life without trees.”

On the other hand, the presence of the figures is crucial to the understanding of the spirituality of the landscape. Although subjected to the main theme of landscape, figures continue to exist in landscape paintings. As in Stroll about in the Spring, the artists present the relation between the human and nature through the portrayal of the figures in the painting. The human attitude toward nature, whether appreciative, admiring, or contemplative, is shown from the figures included in the landscape. The Daodejing explicitly puts that “Dao is great; heaven is great; earth is great; human is also great,” affirming the importance of man in between heaven and earth. In Travelers among Mountains and Streams, the spirituality of the high mountains associates it with heaven while the foreground rocks resemble earth. The placement of the

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58 For the ideal of yin and yang polarity, their sign system, and the idea of water cutting through stones, see McMahon, 68-70.
59 Guo Xi and Guo Si, Lin Quan Gao Zhi Ji. 山以水为血脉, 以草木为毛发, 以烟云为神彩。[...] 山无云则不秀, 无水则不媚, 无道路则不活, 无林木则不生。See Lin, 78-79.
60 Laozi, Daodejing, chapter 25.
figures in between heaven and earth is a contemplation toward the role of human in nature. Of course, the viewers are invited to meditate together with the figures depicted in the painting, facing the monumentality of nature and the transitory, puny stature of humanity.

The mountain in *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, emphasized through both size and perspective, is a spiritual symbol for the Chinese admiration of nature and landscape. Its spirituality consists of all qualities of landscape developed before this time, the “mystical landscape,” the “landscape of retreat,” and the “landscape of solidity.” The combination of the three makes the monumental mountain a collective presentation of Chinese attitude toward landscape, fully displayed with matured technique and supported by profound aesthetic and philosophical theories. As Guo Xi says, “It is human nature to resent the hustle and bustle of society that constrains like reins; it is human nature to wish to see, but not always succeed in seeing, the mist and clouds of the immortals and the divines.”61 Landscape paintings embody all virtues that a Chinese gentleman needs for spiritual sustenance.

Having gone through the chronological development of landscape depiction and its final expression in *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, this chapter has observed some of the traits that define the genre of Chinese landscape painting; these include both technical conventions in pictorial representation, such as the unique methods of perspective to arrange mountains in space, and attitudes that Chinese painters had toward nature, which are displayed fully by the spiritual mountains. The next chapter travels all the way back to antiquity again; with the same spirit and aim, it tries to outline some traits of Western landscape paintings that can stand up as counterparts to the Eastern tradition. The two chapter combined would eventually qualify for a cross-cultural comparison.

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61 Guo Xi and Guo Si, *Lin Quan Gao Zhi Ji*. 尘嚣缰锁，此人情所常厌也。烟霞仙圣，此人情所长愿而不得见也。Translated by author. Consult Lin, 71 for an alternative translation.
Chapter II
The Landscape Tradition of the West

Unlike Chinese landscape depiction that has a consistent chronological development which leads up to the achievement of Fan Kuan, the evolution of early Western landscape depiction appears more complicated. Since its origins in classical antiquity, the Romans, the later Medieval painters, and the Renaissance artists painted landscape; however, they had varied techniques and drastically different aims. Scholarship generally agrees that the rise of stature in Western landscape depiction happened by the early phase of Renaissance, during which painters were both capable of depicting landscape in a naturalistic manner as well as using landscape to evoke spiritual connotations.¹ Paintings such as Piero della Francesca’s (1415-1492) Battista Sforza and Federico da Montefeltro and Giovanni Bellini’s St. Francis in Ecstasy demonstrate an advanced level of development in landscape depiction in early Renaissance. (Fig. 27 and 2)

Beyond techniques in depicting nature, the landscape from Bellini’s St. Francis in Ecstasy conveys profound spiritual meanings. In order to understand some principles in the depiction of the landscape as well as the complex spiritual symbolism attached to early Renaissance paintings, this chapter traces the evolution of landscape depiction in the Western tradition from Classical Antiquity until Bellini, focusing primarily on the legacy that each period left to the art of landscape depiction, which eventually came to maturity during the early Renaissance.

¹ Scholar Ernst Gombrich dedicated an article concerning the establishment of landscape as a genre of art in the West. He argues that the breaking point happened in the middle of the sixteenth century with the earliest evidence in Venice. See Ernst Gombrich, “The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape” from Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance (London: Phaidon Press, 1966), 107-109. Kenneth Clark’s most renowned book Landscape into Art begins examination in between late Medieval and early Renaissance. See Kenneth Clark, Landscape into Art (London: John Murray Ltd., 1949), 4-15. My argument is that although landscape does not stand for a genre on its own yet in works such as Bellini’s St. Francis in Ecstasy, its vocabulary is mature and it carries spiritual meanings. I intentionally choose the word “landscape depiction” instead of “landscape painting” when referring to these works, being aware of the fact that the human figures are still the dominant theme in these paintings; but I believe that such landscape depiction in early Renaissance already carry meanings and values that are qualifiable for a East and West comparison.
analysis pays attention to how landscape imagery and pictorial convention, created in Classical Antiquity, are preserved during the Middle Ages and then revived in the Renaissance when it merged with Christian theology, creating a unique sense of spirituality in the works of early Renaissance painters.

**Classical Antiquity: Naturalistic Landscape and Creation of Vocabulary**

Roman cultural values, along with their pictorial traditions, were largely based on the Greeks. Classical Greek art, on the other hand, disdained the particular art form of landscape painting because of their heavily anthropocentric values. It is difficult to trace the role of landscape depiction in classical Greece. However, their attitude certainly left a profound influence on the Romans as well as later Europeans. Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) briefly discussed a newly evolved genre in his *Natural History* as “attractive fashion of wall paintings with villas, porticoes and landscape gardens, groves, woods, hills, fish-pools, canals, rivers, coasts - whatever one desires”; it seems that landscape to him was no more than a pleasing element in wall decorations. Thus, instead of classical Greece, it is more likely that the motifs of landscape portrayal described by Pliny originated in the Hellenistic period. The Romans adopted the personified deities from the Greeks, but the indigenous Roman religion was animistic. They believed that spirits inhabit everything in the environment, including landscape elements and places in nature. This can be seen from neighborhood shrines to sacred places, such as a spring or a grove, that scatter among Roman cities. Although landscape painting was not a major form of art in antiquity, such an attitude to nature allowed landscape depiction to flourish in Roman paintings.

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The *Nile Mosaic* in the city of Palestrina is a Hellenistic floor mosaic that dates approximately to second century B.C.\(^4\) (Fig. 16) It is one of the earliest surviving examples of landscape depiction in Italy. Originating from the top of the picture and flowing to the bottom, the Nile River runs through the composition of mountains, trees, cities while ships float on the water. Detailed portrayals of human figures and numerous kinds of animals dwell on the riverbanks. Interestingly, two types of basic landscape patterns later develop from this painting. The central peak on the top of the picture plane shows a hill with sharp angles, flat surfaces, and a sand-like color; it seems that the hill is made up of barren and exposed rocks. The green wetlands below the peak, on the other hand, have smooth contour lines and are covered by vegetation. The barren rocks and the glossy lands represent two fundamental patterns of landscape depiction that become part of the basic vocabulary for later painters.

The mosaic shows the Roman fascination toward the land of Egypt, and its representation of landscape more or less falls into the category of an detailed map rather than a painting. It allowed the artist to depict the landscape with exotic animals and human races of Egypt. This topographical approach to landscape does not have any emphasis on the meaning or spirituality of nature; it rather associates nature with territory. In this case, the Nile is the territory of exotic beings and a land of fascination, probably a potential place for conquer and expansion in the future. Later, more typically, artists used topographic landscape to depict the domain of a duke or the land of a state. The association between landscape and territory was manifest in Hellenistic Roman art.

Concerning visual conventions in landscape depiction, the classical Roman tradition provided Europe with an illusionistic, three-dimensional approach to art. Depictions of natural objects are based largely on observation and aimed at creating visual resemblance. The

\(^4\) Currently in Palazzo Barberini in Palestrina, the floor mosaic measures 6.56 x 5.25 m.
geometric shapes of the rocks in the *Nile Mosaic* are even clearer on the wall painting from a *Cubiculum (bedroom) in the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale*.\(^5\) (Figs. 17 and 18) With a window on the left side, the rear wall depicts a rocky terrain and an arbor above which recedes in linear perspective; the terrace is broken, thus exposing a grotto with a fountain hidden among vines, birds, and mythical figures. The rocky land has sharp angles separating flat surfaces, forming a geometric depiction of rocks. The rendering of space is realistic. Bright colors of the terrain contrasts with dark shadow it casts. The plants further away appear lighter and blurrier, creating a sense of distance through atmospheric perspective. The whole scene is quiet, charming, and mysterious.

Viewing the landscape as part of the whole design provokes further insights. Painted pilasters and columns separate the symmetrical side walls into eight sections, four on each side. Each section offers a unique view: a garden with sanctuary and plants, a cityscape with towering buildings and platforms, or an enclosed courtyard with rounded temple. The artist employed a convincing use of perspective within the separate scenes and also the painted columns and platforms that surround them, making the wall paintings compellingly illusionistic. This bedroom represents the climax of the so-called “second style” in Roman wall paintings: a distinctive style that is characterized by its realistic depiction of architectural forms that creates three-dimensional illusion.\(^6\) The artist painted the room in such an illusory manner that the walls no longer exist; the beholders find themselves surrounded by entrances to sacred and imaginary

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\(^5\) Room M of the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale dates to ca. 50-40 BC. The eruption of Vesuvius covered the bedroom in 79 AD, thus allowing the wall murals to be preserved in amazing condition. See also Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Online Collection* and Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Boscoreale: Frescoes from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor.* [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cubi/hd_cubi.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cubi/hd_cubi.htm)

\(^6\) The German scholar August Mau originally delineated the “Pompeian Styles” through archaeological studies of the wall murals in Pompeii. His categorization was acclaimed by later scholars. See also Ling, 23 and 29-31.
The interest in creating an optically realistic and three-dimensional space developed hand in hand with depictions of townscape and nature in classical Rome.

Inserted among the scenes that look into architectural elements of shrines and cityscape, the mysterious landscape depiction on the rear wall of the bedroom creates a strong sense of space and an enchanting atmosphere. Different from the Nile Mosaic, this landscape scene suggests spirituality. The fountains, the vines, the birds, and the small figure of Hekate (Goddess of Magic) animate the grotto with the spirit of the place. Although no human figure is present in the depiction, the landscape is meant to be viewed by the owner of the bedroom, who instinctively locates himself within the scenes that surround him. The landscape, although not populated, has an arbor and other architectural elements that clearly show traces of civilization. Thus, the spirit of nature is rationally controlled within a civilized setting; the townscape scenes on both sides as well as the fact that it is in a bedroom further help to keep nature civil. Although the landscape scene encourages a contemplation on the role of nature, it is in close interaction with human society; the spirit of landscape is present but controlled by the rational forces of civilization. The tendency to control nature and keep it as part of the civilized world is characteristic of many Western landscape depictions.

This restraint of landscape, on the other hand, does not apply to landscape depiction from mythological scenes. One surviving cycle of frescoes, dating approximately to the same period as the Boscoreale bedroom, has the richest surviving landscape depiction in ancient Rome. The Cycle of Scenes from the Odyssey, or Odyssey Frieze, was discovered in 1848 during an excavation. The cycle has eight panels that depict stories from the Homeric epic Odyssey in a

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8 Musei Vaticani, Online Collection. Dating to c. 50 BC., the frieze measures 146 cm in height and 292 cm wide with frame.
unified style with a consistent expertise in the depiction of natural objects, the treatment of space, and the use of atmospheric perspective. In all the panels, landscape dwarfs the human figures. Similar to the Boscoreale bedroom, the *Odyssey Frieze* incorporates perspectival techniques of the second style, using painted pilasters to separate the scenes. Unlike the Boscoreale fresco, however, the subject of the paintings allowed the artist to paint an expansive landscape that represent an environment that is less controlled and more untamed.

Looking in detail at the second section of the cycle, *Odysseus in the Land of the Laestrygonians*, three of Odysseus’ comrades approach a woman figure from the right. She, noticeably taller than the three male figures, is the daughter of Antiphates, king of Laestrygones. (Fig. 19) The sea painted with bright blue surrounds a sandy shore, and two rocky crags rise above the horizon. The ships of Odysseus’ crew berth peacefully on the sea, while sheep and other animals enriches the view. The crew members are not yet aware of the disaster to come.\(^9\)

The landscape pattern shown from this detail utilizes a milder version of the rocky terrain motif found in the *Nile Mosaic*. The shape of the rocks appears more rounded with smoother surfaces. The light and shadow create a strong sense of mass in the portraying of each object. The trees have twisted branches and patterned leaves, inclining to the right to indicate a gust of wind. The treatment of space as well as the objects that populate it seems realistic. The light source comes from the upper left in a consistent manner among all the different panels, casting shadows on the right side of the mountains. The *Odyssey Frieze* evidences an advanced level of achievement in the realistic depiction of landscape in Roman antiquity.\(^10\)

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\(^9\) The Laestrygones are man-eating giants who, upon the arrival of Odysseus and his companions, ate many people and destroyed eleven of Odysseus’ ships. See *Odyssey*, Book X.

\(^10\) See Ling, 110 for his account on this painting. This chapter does discuss the possible Hellenistic or Greek root of this painting, although it is very likely that the composition of such wall paintings trace
With a compelling appearance of reality, the landscape depictions in the *Odyssey Frieze* act as a backdrop for mythological events to take place. They transform the observation of natural elements into a depiction of imaginary places to accommodate legendary figures and stories. The use of landscape depiction to provide a coherent environment for figural activity is only parallel to the engraving of *Stone Sarcophagi engraved with Stories of Filial Duty* from China, which dates 500 years later than the *Odyssey Frieze*. The mysterious landscape shown in the *Odyssey Frieze* becomes a separate trend of landscape depiction, in which nature appears untamed and capable to overpower human beings. The rational landscape of the Boscoreale bedroom and the irrational landscape of the *Odyssey Frieze* form an opposite approach in the Western conception of nature in the centuries to come.

To briefly review, landscape depictions in Roman antiquity first offered an unparalleled interest and excellence in realistic and illusional portrayal of nature. This includes both the way to render objects by modelling light and shadow and the interest to use linear and atmospheric perspective to arrange the elements in space. The classical world, although focusing more on personified deities and anthropocentric concerns, embraced nature as well as the depiction of it. In some cases, nature is controlled and considered part of the human world; in other themes, nature is represented in its wild state that is untamed and limitless. The importance of landscape in classical antiquity to the development of landscape in Europe lies in its creation of a fundamental vocabulary for landscape depiction as well as its interest in nature. The reappearance of landscape depiction during the Renaissance is partly a result of the revival of classical values.

**The Middle Ages: Spiritual Landscape and Preservation of Vocabulary**

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back to at least 200 BC. Ling and Schefold discusses the issue in detail.
Landscape in the Middle Ages has been a difficult subject for art historians because of the overall lack of landscape depiction produced during the period. There are two explanations: some believe that the otherworldly concerns of medieval theology and the dominance of Christianity resulted in a lack of interest in the depiction of the natural world. Kenneth Clark argues that when dealing with nature, the Medieval intellectuals thought all material objects as symbols, which contain spiritual truths. Thus, in the visual arts, such symbols need not to be naturalistic representations. The other response argues that the medieval representations of landscape preserves the vocabulary of Roman antiquity until it revives in the Renaissance. The two arguments do not necessarily conflict. Landscape during the Middle Ages, on the one hand, preserved the landscape vocabulary of Roman Antiquity, which served as the foundation for Renaissance landscape depictions. On the other hand, a profound association of landscape to theological symbolism and expressiveness of developed during the Middle Ages, allowing landscape to carry spiritual meanings. The following examples mainly consider these two functions of Medieval landscape depiction.

The Christian concerns of the spiritual world and growing rejection of sensory pleasure limited interest in realistic depiction of landscape during the Middle Ages. In the first place, the Christian Bible offers an ambiguous and controversial view of nature. The book of Genesis clearly states that man has dominion over all the earth and all its creatures; yet all these are also creations of God and thus embody the spirit of God. Thus, according to the Bible, nature can be

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11 Clark, 3.
12 The two responses are synthesized in Walter Cahn, “Medieval Landscape and the Encyclopedic Tradition,” Yale French Studies, 1991, 12-13. Having reviewed the two responses, scholar Walter Cahn went on to examine his own concerns of the period about the descriptive landscape representation during the Middle Ages from the encyclopedic tradition.
13 See, for example, Pearsall and Salter, 25.
15 For Example, See Job 12:7-10. “But ask the animals, and they will teach you; or the birds in the sky,
interpreted both as subject to man and revealing of God’s spirit according to the Bible. What led to the rejection to portrayals of nature during the Middle Ages was interpretations from Christian theologians from the period. For example, St. Anselm of Canterbury (c.1033-1109) proposed a proportional relation between satisfaction and guilt; he states that a faithful Christian ought to avoid ease and worldly pleasure. A realistic depiction of landscape indubitably offered worldly pleasure and delight, not to mention its associations with sinful classical pagan mythology.

For this reason, the landscape conventions of the Romans declined gradually during the Middle Ages. The artists usually intentionally made the landscape look otherworldly and remote from the earthly nature. By the fifth century AD, the interest and ability to render three-dimensionality started to lose its place. The already-rare depictions of nature were usually set on gold ground, gradually replacing the blue sky in classical art. When Europe reached c. 1000 AD, the Byzantine style completely rejected worldly space, and medieval theology almost totally took over control.

The Mosaics in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, dating to approximately 440 AD, shows the gradual moving-away from classical landscape imagery; it is in a transitional period. Began in 420s and completed under Pope Sixtus III (432-440), the church of Santa Maria Maggiore has some most well-preserved mosaics of early medieval Rome on its triumphal arch and side wall friezes of the nave. The Fall of Jericho in the nave of Santa Maria Maggiore belongs to one of the Mosaics that date to the fifth century. (Fig. 20) This specific scene depicts

and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.” This passage from the Old Testament emphasizes that nature is the creation of God thus carries the spirit of God.

St. Anselm, Cur Deus Homo, Book XX, “that satisfaction ought to be proportionate to guilt; and that man is of himself unable to accomplish this.” See Saint Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, S. N. Deane, and Gaunilo, Proslogium; Monologium; an appendix, In behalf of the fool, by Gaunilon; and Cur Deus homo (Chicago, The Opencourt publishing Co, 1903), 225-226.
the Old Testament story from Joshua 6:1-21: the Israelites march with the ark of the covenant around the walls of Canaan city in Jericho seven times, blowing their trumpets, and the walls fell. The artist of the mosaic arranges the figures in space more or less realistically with the correct front-and-back relation suggested by the overlapping and the slight diminution of size. While the figures in the foreground still have traces of three-dimensionality with their feet on the ground, the background mountains executed with curly lines and colorful fillings are treated as a two-dimensional flat screen. The top of the sky is blue while the spaces above and below the mountains are gold, marking a transition from blue ground to gold ground, from the natural world to the divine world. Christian themes and subjects intermingle with remnants of classical antiquity, creating the impressionistic and semi-realistic atmosphere for early Christian art.\(^\text{17}\)

While interests in the natural environment shrank, the vocabulary once created by the Roman Empire remained influential in medieval art. Artists copied ancient compositions with various levels of expertise. Their efforts helped significantly to preserve the pictorial tradition from Roman Antiquity. The persistence of classical style in the middle ages is best exemplified by illuminated manuscripts such as the famous *Paris Psalters*, produced in Constantinople in c. 900.\(^\text{18}\) An illustration page of *Moses on Mount Sinai* from the manuscript shows close imitation of classical figures and landscape.\(^\text{19}\) (Fig. 21) The scene depicts Moses receiving instruction from God in accordance with the Book of Deuteronomy, while apostles wait for him in the barren desert. The artist of this manuscript demonstrates sufficient ability to depict both naked body, as reflected from the back of the figure in the foreground, and bodies covered by clothing. The artist depicts mountains with the typical rocky-terrain motif that comes the Roman tradition. The

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\(^\text{18}\) The Psalter is currently in Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

\(^\text{19}\) This page of miniature measures 37 x 26.5 cm.
production of such a miniature in the tenth century is only possible because of the artist’s close study of the arts of antiquity. Such illustrations in a naturalistic manner, although rare during the Middle Ages, clearly demonstrate the preservation of Roman landscape vocabulary during the period, although they are incorporated into Christian theme.

Aside from the pictorial conventions of Roman Antiquity, Medieval landscape depictions started to become an instrument that channel the spirituality of God. An illustration of St. Matthew writing the Gospel survives from the ninth century in the Gospel Book of Archbishop Ebbo of Reims. While the composition of this picture closely resembles other representations of the same subject during the period, the artist’s execution is unique and dramatic. The artist paints the figure and the landscape with extremely expressive brushstrokes. Being aware that the brushstrokes certainly take away part of the realistic effect of the illustration, the artist chooses to evoke spirituality through the brushwork. St. Matthew is shown writing the Gospel with his stylus; he was just inspired by the spirit of God, which showers down to him through the quick and powerful lines that represent hills behind the apostle. The vivid lines that represent the gown of St. Matthew make him seem frenzied. Empowered by the spirit of God, he is highly energetic and concentrated on writing. The spirit of God, showering down and inspiriting the apostle, is conveyed by the act of writing to the Gospel book. The landscape in the background, although alluding back to the arbor and plant motif of classical antiquity, is enlivened by a different spirituality, the divine energy of God; it becomes an instrument to carry

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21 Measuring approximately 10 x 8 inches, this page and the gospel book is in Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. It dates to c. 816-835.
God’s spirit. This picture, together with the *Paris Psalters*, demonstrates a gradual merge of classical imagery with Christian theme and theology during the middle ages.

By the turn of the first millennium, the Byzantine style dominated Europe. The visual preference of the high Middle Ages was for the decorative, the otherworldly, and the rejection of rational pictorial depth. The vocabulary created by the Romans was preserved in the form of a relic, scattered here and there among miniature illustrations. Another set of illuminated manuscripts, the *Menologion of Basil II*, dated 979-84, contains saints with their feast days, illustrated in a typical Byzantine style.22 Painted by eight different artists, the manuscript has an overall uniform treatment to figures and environment. The background of *Martyrdom of Saint Theophilus* offers a glance at a Byzantine version of landscape depiction. (Fig. 23) The classical vocabulary of the rocky terrace remains. However, the forms no longer have a sense of mass, and the mountains seem to construct an inhabitable place for the figures. The absolute gold ground eradicates any sense of atmosphere. The landscape elements do not constitute a realistic and unified space as they did in classical antiquity.

On the other hand, the artists of this period frequently intend the landscape to be otherworldly; pictures like this evoke a spiritual world rather than an earthly environment. During the Middle Ages, landscape depiction gradually takes on symbolic and expressive values. Looking at *Martyrdom of Saint Theophilus* closely, the drama of the scene is in the decapitation of St. Theophilus in the center of the composition. Facing the soldier who is about to behead him with a sword highly raised, St. Theophilus dauntlessly moves to the right. His body forms a vigorous diagonal force, full of energy and determination. The soldier, although looking strong and ready to decapitate, leans back as if struck by the force coming from old Theophilus, who is

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22 Compiled by the Byzantine Emperor Basil II in c. 1000 AD, the manuscripts currently survive in the collection of the Vatican Library. It measures 36.5 x 28.5 cm. See Pearsall and Salter, 29 and Evans and Wixom, 100-101.
about to be martyred. The landscape, meanwhile, helps to dramatize the conflict. The two mountain peaks in the background, the two trees behind St. Theophilus, the rolling hills in the foreground, and even the architecture on the right all incline to the right, parallel to the saint; they help to maximize the diagonal force of the body of St. Theophilus and to express his determination and faith. After his worldly body dies, St. Theophilus’ spirit is going to ascend to the sky following the spiritual mountains in the background that symbolizes transcendence from earth to heaven. Meanwhile, the depictions of the trees carry symbolic values. Beside the most common association to the cross and Crucifixion, the trees also symbolize life and death. The tree on the right side of the picture plane, the only one that does not tilt toward the right in unison with the saint, is dead; its gesture aligns with the soldier who is wielding the sword, symbolizing the force of death. Meanwhile, the leftmost tree behind the martyr is alive; its posture mimics that of the saint almost exactly. Green leaves bloom from the tree with full of life energy. Through the martyrdom of the saint, life triumphs over death, the divine spirit over earth, and Christianity over the pagans. The expressive and symbolic landscape of the Middle Ages help to convey the theme.

The importance of Medieval landscape tradition, thus, lies in two primary factors. Pictorially, it preserves the Classical Roman landscape vocabulary and carries it to the Renaissance, although in stylized and simple forms. Meanwhile, a complex symbolic and expressive use of landscape developed during the Medieval-Byzantine period, which became instruments that an artist employs to conveys spirituality. Both landscape symbolism and Classical vocabulary of the Middle Ages left a profound influence to Renaissance art.

**Franciscan Theology and the Renaissance: Spirituality and Naturalism Combined**

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23 For the symbolism of mountain as transcendence to the celestial, see, for example, Helms, Mary. W. “Sacred Landscape and the Early Medieval European Cloister. Unity, Paradise, and the Cosmic Mountain.” *Anthropos* 97, no. 2 (2002), 445.
The beginning of Renaissance ideology traces back to an important figure, St. Francis of Assisi (Francesco Bernardone, c.1181-1226) and his teachings. Canonized two years after his death, St. Francis was one of the most popular saints during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. His theology moved away from the strict heavenly concerns of previous Christians to embrace earth and all its creatures because they are the creation of God. His most famous piece of surviving writing, *The Canticle of the Sun*, is cited below as a demonstration of his theology and view of nature:

Lord, most high, almighty, good, yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and every blessing. To you alone, most high, do they fittingly belong, and no man is worthy to mention you.

Be praised, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially master brother sun, who brings day, and you give us light through him. And he is fair and radiant with a great shining -- he draws his meaning, most high, from you.

Be praised, my Lord, for sister moon and the stars, in heaven you have made them clear and precious and lovely.

Be praised, my Lord, for sister water, who is very useful and humble and rare and chaste.

Be praised, my Lord, for brother fire, by whom you illuminate the night, and he is comely and joyful and vigorous and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, for sister our mother earth who maintains and governs us and puts forth different fruits with colored flowers and grass.

Be praised, my Lord, for those who forgive because of your love and bear infirmities and trials; blessed are those who will bear in peace, for by you, most high, they will be crowned.

Be praised, my Lord, for sister our bodily death, from which no living man can escape; woe to those who die in mortal sin; blessed are those whom it will find living by your most holy wishes, for the second death will do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord and give thanks to him and serve him with great humility.24

This canticle helps to illustrate some fundamental premises in Franciscan theology. Firstly, as seen from the beginning and the ending of the poem, God is the most high who gives meaning to the natural world. Secondly, St. Francis praised elements in nature such as the sun, the moon, fire, water, and earth. Instead of treating them as sources of sinful worldly pleasure, as many

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Medieval theologians did, St. Francis embraced these elements and attributed them with virtues of God. The theology of St. Francis allowed the divine spirit to manifest in nature. Such an attitude gave theological permission for artists to once again employ depictions of nature in their paintings, which gradually matured over time.

St. Francis was frequently a subject of depiction by artists of the late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance. Because many of St. Francis’ stories took place in nature, such depictions commonly included landscape as background. The earliest known representation of the saint, Bonaventura Berlinghieri’s *St. Francis with Scenes from his Life or St. Francis Altarpiece*, dates to 1235, within ten years after the death and canonization of St. Francis. The life-sized altarpiece has an impressive depiction of St. Francis in the middle over five feet tall, setting him up as the most important saint in the newly-founded Franciscan order. On both sides of the central depiction, stories in St. Francis’ life occur in small narrative scenes. The two scenes on the upper left corner, the *Stigmatization* and the *Preaching to the Birds* depict the two most popular stories concerning the life of St. Francis.

The *Stigmatization* of St. Francis, according to St. Bonaventure’s account of the life of St. Francis, occurred two years before St. Francis’ death when he was fasting in the wilderness. On a mountain called Mount Alverno, St. Francis perceived a seraph (angel of six wings) coming down from heaven who gave him stigmata on his hands, feet, and side, leaving him the same marks that the nails and the lance left on the body of crucified Christ. The schematic mountains

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25 Measuring 1.52 x 1.16 m, this life-sized altarpiece is currently in the church of S. Francesco in Pescia, Italy. The painting is done with tempura on wood. See Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education: 2007, 2011), 45.

26 St. Bonaventure, *Legenda Santi Francisci*, Chapter XIII, “Of the Sacred Stigmata.” See a translation from Bonaventure and Henry Edward, *The Life of St.Francis of Assisi* (London: R. Washbourne, 13, Paternoster Row, 1868), 161-162. The presumable date of St. Bonaventure’s *Legenda Santi Francisci* is later than the creation of the *St. Francis Altarpiece* in 1235; however, the stories would have been well
represented in the *Stigmatization* from this altarpiece reference Mount Alverno. Its yellowish color locates the scene in a desert-like environment where the saint was fasting in retreat. St. Francis is shown kneeling in the scene, praying and receiving his stigmata from the angel. The linear mountains do not provide a sense of space; they rather act like a screen that serves as background to the kneeling St. Francis.

The scene below the *Stigmatization, Preaching to the Birds*, represents another popular story of St. Francis’ life. Also recorded in St. Bonaventure’s book, St. Francis came to a place where a great multitude of birds gathered; he ran to the birds and talked to them as if they shared human understanding. He preached the birds to appreciate the Lord who created them; while he walked among them and touched them, the birds miraculously stayed where they were instead of flying away. In this particular illustration of the scene, St. Francis and his companions come from the left while different kinds of birds dwell among the trees on a schematic representation of mountain. The depiction of the story frequently implies the humble character of St. Francis who teaches the spirit of God not only to the poor people, but also to humble animals like the birds. It also manifests Franciscan theology, in which all beings in nature are created by God and thus contain the spirit of God. St. Francis, being humble and holy, perceived the Lord’s spirit among the creatures of earth and was in total harmony with nature. In both *Stigmatization* and *Preaching to the Birds*, the representation of nature follows the Medieval and Byzantine model. The linear outlining of the mountain forms do not create a naturalistic resemblance of actual mountains in nature; the gold ground as well as the incorrect proportional relation between the figures and their surroundings do not construct a three-dimensional space for the stories to take

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place either. However, the importance of these scenes lies in their incorporation of nature in depictions of St. Francis’ life, which opened a door to later artists who portrayed the same subjects with revived naturalism.

Renaissance scholars commonly ascribe the painter Giotto di Bondone (1270-1337) to the beginning of Renaissance. While in Giotto’s paintings, the figures appear with a sense of mass and naturalness that broke away from the Medieval tradition, the landscape motifs that Giotto incorporates still come largely from the Byzantine vocabulary. He was not a reformer in naturalistic landscape forms among the Renaissance painters. However, Giotto’s paintings do mark a gradual return to the observation of the natural world and interest in creating a three-dimensional space in pictorial art. Such an interest in rendering naturalistic space was crucial to the rise of landscape depiction during the Renaissance.

Giotto also painted scenes from St. Francis’ life. The famous altarpiece *St. Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata* from the Louvre Museum dates to the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century. (Fig. 25) Monumental in height, the imposing altarpiece has an unusual composition. Instead of a central iconic image of the saint that conventional altarpieces of the period usually had, Giotto painted the narrative scene of stigmatization as the center of the altarpiece. The composition is asymmetrical and dramatic. The winged angel, from whom the image of Christ appears, flies on the sky in the upper right corner, while St. Francis, shown kneeling on Mount Alverno with both hands raised, faithfully receives the stigmata. The

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28 See Hartt, 73. The Italian writer Boccaccio claimed that Giotto “brought back to light” the art of painting. (Decameron, VI, 5) The idea also comes from Giorgio Vasari’s attribution of Cimabue as “the last of the Greeks (Byzantine)” and Giotto as “the pupil of nature” from the sixteenth century. See Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists* Translated by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1991), 15-16.

rendering of St. Francis’ drapery suggests mass of the saint’s physical body behind the clothing, while the folds are modeled in light and shadow, revealing naturalistic observations. The depiction of the saint certainly differs from the Byzantine tradition, in which figures usually appear linear, heavenly, and unrealistic. Aside from Giotto’s innovations in the depictions of figures, the landscape in the background borrows vocabulary from the Byzantine tradition. Giotto portrayed mountain with the typical rocky-terrain motif, identical to the ones from the Paris Psalters. The broccoli-shaped trees also come from the Medieval vocabulary, slightly more realistically sized and rendered.30

According to Cennini who writes in the fourteenth century, artists only need to set up some rocks to stand for mountains and a few branches for a forest.31 Under such a convention, however, Giotto more thoughtfully used the background mountain to set the stage for the scene. First of all, the mountains, the trees, and the architectures provide a comprehensible environment for human activity to take place; St. Francis kneels firmly on the ground, being surrounded by earthly elements that the viewers recognize as part of the natural world. The outline of the landscape background encloses St. Francis, indicating his earthly nature, while the angel appears in the heavenly sky. Meanwhile, light comes from the upper right corner and shines on St. Francis and the landscape, casting shadow on the left side of the mountain and terrace, creating a naturalistic sense of space. The slight rendering of shadows on the mountain crevasses and the folds of drapery on St. Francis also adds to a sense of realness of the scene. Restrained by the

30 Limited by length and available resources, this chapter does not trace closely the development of the representations of plants. Scholar Otto Pächt argues that the classical symbols of trees never died in the Middle Ages. They were preserved, in specimen forms, as illustrations of herbal plants usually for medical uses. The Tacuinum, for example, has many such illustrations. The specimens are usually incorrect or exaggerated in proportions; however, early Renaissance artists reinterpreted them and incorporated them into paintings with gradually revised proportions. It is another interesting area worthy of further investigations. See Otto Pächt, “Early Italian Nature Studies and the Early Calendar Landscape” from Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, Vol. 13. 1/2 (1950), 25-37.
31 Hartt, 78.
convention of an altarpiece, the painting is set against gold ground. However, the earthly elements as well as the convincing sense of space that the painting embodies signify Giotto’s interest in the depiction of naturalistic world.

Giotto also inherited the expressive and symbolic use of landscape from the Medieval tradition. The light that comes from the angel on the upper right certainly suggests divine inspiration and grace that illuminates the saint and the earth. The mountain that encloses St. Francis, although physically referencing Mount Alverno where the stigmatization took place, also symbolizes transcendence to heaven through its triangular shape, a symbolism that occurred in the landscape from Menologion of Basil II. The trees bloom in an upward force of life and energy.

Below the central painting in this altarpiece are three predella paintings. The third one has a scene of St. Francis preaching to the birds. St. Francis, with his right arm reaching to the birds, bows down humbly to address the birds. All different kinds of birds align on the ground to listen to him preaching, while two more fly down from the tree to join the lesson. The tree on the right bows down in return to St. Francis, forming a charming and harmonious atmosphere. Although the background is only indicated by a strait horizon line, the figures, the birds, and the tree occupy the space in a naturalistic way. Both this predella picture and the main stigmatization scene demonstrate a significant step that Giotto made toward the creation of naturalistic space in the depiction of landscape backgrounds to Franciscan subjects.

Giotto’s landscape depiction still rely heavily on Medieval symbols. The sense of distance that his paintings embody is also finite and limited. His contribution lies more in the recreation of a coherent space to house separate landscape motifs as the environment for human activities

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32 In his other paintings, especially the ones that are not altarpieces such as the famous frescoes from the Arena Chapel in Padua, Giotto prefers blue sky to create a sense of naturalistic and earthly space instead of the heavenly gold ground from the Byzantine tradition.
and his interest in the role of landscape in paintings and in human life. Other Italian painters would soon follow his step. They would gradually abandon the irrational gold ground and prefer a naturalistic space; meanwhile, they would start to refashion the old motifs inherited from early traditions and incorporate more realistic ways of portrayal drawn directly from nature. The transformation from “landscape of symbols” to “landscape of facts” gradually came to happen in the fifteenth century after Giotto. The aesthetics started to return toward the classical and naturalistic way of portraying the world, while the expressive and symbolic value of landscape discovered during the Middle Ages gradually merged with naturalistic depiction, making the landscapes of Early Renaissance both realistic and spiritual.

Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) was the first Renaissance writer to exhaustively explain in words the technique of mathematically calculated one-point perspective, which had been practiced in Florence by prominent artists such as Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) prior to the composition of his book. The study of perspective opened the door for Renaissance artists to regain realism from observing nature, leading landscape depiction to a new generation. Alberti’s concept of a window, i.e. turning the picture plane into a continuation of the present space as if the viewer is looking out from a window, revolutionized the practice of perspective in painting and shaped the concept of Western taste of art since that time. According to Erwin Panofsky, Renaissance paintings surpassed classical antiquity by possessing two qualities that Greco-Roman paintings did not have, which are 1) continuity in measurability and 2) spatial infinity.

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33 The two categories, “landscape of symbols” and “landscape of facts”, come from scholar Kenneth Clark’s definition of the Medieval landscape and early Renaissance landscape. See Kenneth Clark, Landscape into Art (London: John Murray Ltd., 1949), chapters 1 and 2. Clark also argues that the motif of barren rocks frequently used in the Middle Ages refers to the desert of Sinai and other inhabitable places that symbolize torturing or solitude. See Clark, 10-11.
35 Erwin Panofsky, Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1965), 122.
The study of perspective accelerated the transition from “landscape of symbols” to “landscape of facts”. Within one century, landscape depiction in Italy totally broke away from the Medieval symbols. The taste of art returned to, or, in some ways, surpassed classical antiquity.

The landscapes from *Tribute Money* by Masaccio (1401-1428) demonstrates the transition.\(^{36}\) (Fig. 26) The foreground depicts a story of three scenes, in which Christ directs St. Peter to collect money from the mouth of a fish in Lake Galilee to pay a tax-collector. The architecture on the right recedes in one-point perspective, leading viewer’s attention to the background, in which the painter portrays a mountainscape in the distance with river, trees, blue sky, and clouds. The landscape, with its consistency of space, compelling scale relation, and realistic reflection of light, created a grandeur unknown before his time. The two qualities in which Renaissance paintings surpass antiquity proposed by Panofsky start to manifest in the landscape by Masaccio. First of all, the figures, the architecture, and the distant mountains are correct in scale; receding mathematically in space, they creating a strong naturalistic feeling. Secondly, the landscape is capable of demonstrating great distance with a sense of infinity of space. The distance of the mountains resolved the “background wall” of late Gothic and early Renaissance landscapes, which still existed in Giotto’s paintings. Masaccio’s landscape created a greater sense of space and atmosphere than any landscape depictions before his time.

Aside from perspective, Masaccio experiments with different ways to portray mountains and trees in this painting. He started to move away from the Medieval Byzantine symbols and looked for more naturalistic ways to depict landscape. His effort is clearly visible comparing the landscape in this painting with Giotto’s landscape. While Giotto directly utilizes the rocky-terrain motif borrowed from the Byzantine tradition, Masaccio’s landscape looks more like the mountains one can find in Italy. The naturally shaped mountains have both exposed rocks and

\(^{36}\) Measuring 2.47 x 5.97m, the fresco is in the Brancacci Chapel, Sta. Maria del Carmine, Florence.
valleys with plants; the distant mountain seems to be topped by snow. Landscape realism started grow in both the portrayal of individual objects and the arrangement of them in space. The pictorial aesthetics and achievements in perspective from fifteenth century Florence significantly impacted later artists.

The depiction of nature continued to grow in the direction that Alberti and Masaccio set forth. In the second half of the fifteenth century, the vocabulary and techniques of landscape reached perfection, as illustrated in two rather exceptionally small panel paintings by the most celebrated humanist painter of the time, Piero della Francesca (1415-1492). Battista Sforza and Federico da Montefeltro are two panel paintings pained on both sides.37 (Figures 27 and 28) On the front side of the panels, Piero portrays duke Federico da Montefeltro of Urbino and his pale wife Battista who passed away two years before the commission, facing each other. On the other side, horses and unicorns draw carriages, on which Federico and Battista sit among allegorical representations of the virtues. Behind the portraits are enormous depictions of landscapes, probably indicating the domain of the duke. The scenes are interconnected on each side, indicating that the couple shares the rule over their territory.

The background of the panels shows rich wetlands on the bank of rivers and lakes with fertile croplands. Hills rise above flat ground, offering a typical view of central Italy. Although the paintings are small, they are plentiful in details with trees, buildings, roads, cities, and ships. The artist chose a slightly elevated perspective in order to display the vast terrain of the duke. The skillful use of atmospheric perspective with blurred contour lines of the forms not only suggests distance, but also adds a moist and soft quality to the air. Probably under the influence of northern Flemish painters, Piero achieved a luminous yet vaporous tone, going beyond the

37 The two panels measure 47 x 33 cm each. They are currently in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence. The presumed date of these paintings lies in between 1465 and 1470.
Florentine perspectival landscape. This master of painting excelled in the depiction of landscape with its naturalistic forms, the convincing use of perspective, soft colors, as well as the tone quality that it achieves. Sophisticated in technique and breathtaking in the effect it creates, the landscape in these panels exemplify the highest level of landscape portrayal in early Renaissance.

However, Piero’s landscape in *Battista Sforza and Federico da Montefeltro* is by no means spiritual. It is rather landscape topology executed with perfect techniques. The Western interest in topological landscape was already hinted at by the *Nile Mosaic* in antiquity. Such portrayals of landscape frequently imply territory and a sense dominance of men over nature. Piero’s two panels are the best examples. Closely resembling the wetlands near Urbino, the landscape shows the vast territory that the duke and his wife rule over. Its beauty and fertility are used to demonstrate the wise and peaceful rule of Duke Federico. Such a topological and territorial portrayal of nature finds many other examples during the period as well.

The subject matter of *Battista Sforza and Federico da Montefeltro* dictates the function of its landscape. Created slightly after the two panels, Piero’s contemporary Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516) painted landscape in *St. Francis in Ecstasy*, which went beyond mere naturalistic representation of landscape and embodies profound spiritual meanings. (Fig. 2) It marks the landscape achievement in early Renaissance both in terms of technique and spirituality.

Currently in the Frick Collection, New York, the large painting was executed in between 1475 and 1480 for a private commission. The picture shows St. Francis, unusually small compared to his landscape surroundings, walking out from the cave on the right and opening his arms to embrace nature. The saint opens his mouth, as if inspired by the scene, and looks up at the upper left corner of the painting. Barefooted, he stands on the weighty rocks and hill that occupy the foreground, while the middle ground recedes into a green land on top of a cliff. On

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38 Painted with oil and tempera on panel, the painting measures 124.4 x 141.9 cm.
the left side of the panel, a laurel tree bends its head to the right, behind which a view to a distant
city in the background is visible across a river. Renderings of different kinds of plants and
animals enrich the scene. Behind St. Francis, a rabbit stretches out its head from a hole to look at
the saint. (Fig. 29) In between them stands a dead tree stump while a young olive tree sprouts
above. In the lower left corner, a bird, identified as a bittern, stands on a dry tree that bears
Bellini’s signature. (Fig. 30) In the middle ground, an ass settles on the grass field, while another
bird, identified as a Heron, stands on the cliff.39 (Fig. 31) In the background, a herdsman drives a
group of sheep, behind them water encircles a fortified wall of a city. A castle sits on top of the
distant mountain, set against a clear blue sky.

The painting, from first glance, achieves a convincing level of naturalistic depiction. The
human figures and the animals are realistically modeled. The rocky mountain, although alluding
to the rock-terrain motif of the past, is enlivened by rich plants. The scale relationship between
the objects in the foreground and the background creates a strong sense of recession. The
perspective does not seem mathematically calculated, but the lines consistently recede to the
upper left, where the light source is. The saint also gazes in that direction. The glossy surface of
the rocks as well as the drapery of the saint reflect the light, creating a unified, illuminated, and
charming atmosphere. Meanwhile, unlike Medieval landscapes depictions or the ones of Giotto
and Masaccio in which nature seems humanized, rationalized, and controlled, the landscape of
Bellini exposes the untamed aspects of nature. The irregularity of the rocks and the uncountable
twigs that grow unexpectedly in the painting show nature in a more realistic way. Yet, such
irregularities and randomness of nature are harmonized by the light, and construct a harmonious
effect.

39 The identification of the birds comes from Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, “The Joy of St. Francis: Bellini’s
The landscape in this painting is packed with rich symbolism. With the lack of the artist’s writings or any primary documents from the period that identifies these symbolic references, scholars do not agree on the symbolism of each object. Nevertheless, their interpretive associations unanimously point to the spiritual enhancement that such symbolism provides. The largely exposed rocks locate the scene in a desert-like environment, while the rudimentary cave on the right side is where the saint lives. Beside its certain reference to a faithful and ascetic life that the saint conducted in the desert and the cave, they possibly symbolize Mount Alverno of the stigmatization. Meanwhile, as scholar John Fleming points out, the desert and the cave with vines growing over the entrance can also allude to the sukkah, the shelter that God provides to the Israelites in the desert from the story of Moses, which, in this case, symbolizes a sacred hut that shelters St. Francis.\(^{40}\) The plants and animals also have symbolic connotations. The rabbit peeking out from the hole, a humble and mild creature, symbolizes a religious life that Moses prefigures.\(^{41}\) Fleming argues that both the cave and the rabbit demonstrate a tendency in Franciscan theology of the time to associate St. Francis with Moses. The dry tree stump probably references the Jewish religion as dead, while the young olive tree that springs above it symbolizes the blooming religion of Christianity.\(^{42}\) The two birds in the composition have Biblical references to penance in the desert, while the ass stands for poverty in hermetic life.\(^{43}\) These animals also reminds the viewer of stories in St. Francis’ life in which he preaches the humble animals and lives in peace with them. The city in the background that ascends high possibly refers to the Heavenly Jerusalem, while the mortifying life is the instrument through

\(^{40}\) John Fleming, *From Bonaventure to Bellini: An Essay in Franciscan Exegesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 78-79. Fleming’s book is acknowledged by most scholars as the most exhaustive study of the symbolism in Bellini’s *St. Francis in Ecstasy* in a Franciscan context.

\(^{41}\) Fleming, 60. He cites a passages from St. Jerome’s commentary on Matthew, in which Moses is described as the “little rabbit of the Lord.”

\(^{42}\) Lavin, 242.

\(^{43}\) Lavin, 244.
which one gains salvation. The symbolic values in this painting are so rich that examination can keep going forever. However, the importance of such symbolism is that it certainly embeds profound spiritual meanings into the landscape surrounding the life of St. Francis and the theology of Christianity.

Beside the rich symbolism, the viewers and scholars are not sure what exact moment in St. Francis’ life that the painting is depicting. There are two main interpretations. Millard Meiss proposes that the painting is an unusual representation of the stigmatization, in which the angelic light which pierced through St. Francis’ hands and feet is simply replaced by the natural light coming from the left side of the panel. Richard Turner, on the other hand, thinks that the painting depicts St. Francis singing *The Canticle of the Sun*, the poem quoted at the beginning of this section. Both arguments offer convincing evidence, but they have defects at the same time. My argument, instead, is that: exactly because of the ambiguity of its narrative, the painting captures an attitude, or a feeling, instead of depicting a specific story. The painting is an embodiment of St. Francis’ attitude to nature. The elements in *The Canticle of the Sun*, the light, the earth, the water, as well as death symbolized by the skull in front of the cave, all appear in the painting. Instead of depicting St. Francis singing the poem as Turner reads it, the painting is more likely to be inspired by the poem and its attitude to nature. The poem has a spirit in which the grace of God resides in all elements on earth. Bellini’s painting captures such a spirit exactly. The painting does not show St. Francis occupying the majority of the canvas, as most figurative paintings of the period do; instead, he is incorporated as part of the natural environment that the painting portrays. He is barefooted; his flesh touches nature. With all the animals and plants, he

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46 Tuner, 64-65.
is surrounded by nature. While nature appears untamed, St. Francis opens his arms to embrace it. The laurel tree on the left bows to the saint, a motif already seen in Giotto’s *Preaching to the Birds*. The light that comes from the upper left unifies the painting by adding warmth of tone to all the objects that reflect it. It is the divine grace of God that manifests in nature and landscape. St. Francis, as part of the natural world, looks up at the divine light in amazement, admiration, and inspiration. For the viewer of the painting, the effect is imposing. The spirit of God, channeled through the landscape, embraced by St. Francis, conveys to the viewer.

At this stage, landscape realism and landscape spirituality join perfectly. The interest in realistic depiction and illusionistic landscape vocabulary, invented in Roman-antiquity and preserved in the Middle Ages, flourished in the early Renaissance and achieved a level of realism characteristic of later Western landscape depictions. The most accomplished example of a realistic landscape from early Renaissance is Piero della Francesca’s *Battista Sforza and Federico da Montefeltro*. Moreover, the symbolic and expressive use of landscape during the Middle Ages influenced the Renaissance and provided painters such as Bellini the means to convey spirituality in landscape depictions. The twelfth century Italian Saint Francis was important to the revival in landscape depiction in the Renaissance. His ideas allowed the appreciation of nature, while his humble life as a recluse inspired painters to paint landscape as background to depictions of him. Bellini’s *St. Francis in Ecstasy* conveys profound spiritual meanings through its depiction of a detailed and realistic landscape. He shows nature as an instrument that channels the spirit of God. *St. Francis in Ecstasy* exemplifies the Western achievement in both landscape vocabulary and spirituality in early Renaissance.
Synthesis and Conclusion

Having examined the chronological development of landscape depiction in both East and West, we have seen that the art had matured in the early Renaissance (Northern Song in China and fifteenth century in Italy) in both traditions. With their distinct pictorial vocabularies and visual conventions, the paintings Travelers among Mountains and Streams and St. Francis in Ecstasy convey spiritual meanings. (Figs. 1 and 2) The following discussion briefly outlines some similarities and differences in pictorial vocabulary and attitude to nature between the two traditions. These observations deserve their individual projects of writing and should prompt further fields of research. Then, my project concludes with an important observation in similarity: the fact that in both traditions, the spirituality of nature is conveyed through the painted figures in the landscape.

Visually, the Western tradition since Roman antiquity had a tendency to prefer mimetic art and the creation of illusion through realistically rendered objects and the use of perspective to construct three-dimensional space; on the contrary, the Chinese landscape tradition had a continuous interest in linear portrayal of objects emphasizing rhythm of lines, which is opposed to naturalistic depiction. This difference is obvious if we compare the Painted Vase with Dragon and Phoenix in Relief from the Han Dynasty with the frescoes of Cubiculum (bedroom) from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale (Figs. 4 and 17) The interest in creating illusion through linear and atmospheric perspective and the ability to render objects with modeling are clearly visible in the wall paintings from Roman antiquity. The interest revived in the Renaissance and became one of the traits of Western depictions of nature. Contrastingly, the
Han Dynasty vase demonstrates an interest in internal rhythms that are manifestation of qi or cosmic spirit, which influenced the Chinese tradition of landscape depiction through the ages.

The Chinese landscape tradition is also dependent on a series of pictorial conventions, such as Guo Xi’s *sanyuan* (three ways to show distance) system mentioned in chapter I, which make the paintings less easily comprehensible to the viewers who are unfamiliar with these conventions. The Western interest in naturalistic depiction, which is based on the logic of the gaze and the creation of illusion, is less dependent on such conventions. Wen Fong uses the Greek terms *mnemonics* and *mimesis* to characterize this difference. While *mimesis*, the art of resembling nature according to the way it looks, always coexisted with Western development of representational art, *Mnemonics* utilizes a certain set of representational symbols, recognized only within an enclosed society that is familiar with them, and articulates meaning directly through the symbols and the ways in which they are presented. The *Mnemonic* conventions of Chinese landscape depiction allow paintings such as *Silk Banner with Stories of the Buddha* to be easily comprehensible to a Chinese viewer. (Fig. 14) Its longitudinal composition and multi-point perspective do not create any problems to the Chinese viewers who are familiar with the pictorial conventions.

In terms of the meanings of the landscape, the Chinese always held nature sacred, because it was considered the ultimate manifestation of the cosmic spirit. The sacredness of nature remained unaltered throughout the history of Chinese landscape depictions. In the West, 

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however, the meaning of nature varies from time to time and from artist to artist. The Bellini painting is a good example of the Franciscan attitude to nature, which nature sacred as revealing the presence of God. There are other trends in landscape depictions, such as the ones that reference the idea of recreation and reproduction that is attached to the aristocratic villa culture, or the ones that express poetic and pastoral feelings. This project does not examine these types of Western landscape depiction.

Despite their differences, the two paintings have a striking similarity: the spirituality of the landscape is perceived through the eyes of the painted figures in both paintings. By inviting the viewers to look at nature through the eyes of the figures, both paintings provoke meditation on the relation between human and nature. They are almost didactic in a way that they instruct the viewers in the proper attitude to nature. As opposed to the concept of landscape being an entertainment, these paintings show how landscape can convey a profound level of contemplation of the role of human beings in nature. The following short discussion looks at how both paintings carry such meanings.

In Chapter I, we have examined how the difference in size between the figures and the mountains maximizes the awe-inspiring effect that the mountains create in Travelers among Mountains and Streams. It is crucial to note that landscape paintings from the Northern Song Dynasty all had figures in the landscape, and, although tiny, they are a very significant component. (The figures do not disappear until the Yuan Dynasty.) Paintings such as Li Cheng’s

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2 The villa culture started since Roman antiquity. Rich aristocracies purchase lands in the countryside and build their villas. In their leisure time, they leave the cities in which they are from and go to their villas for country life, relaxation, and interaction with nature. There is a whole category of landscape depiction that is associated with the villa culture, which is not included in this project.
A Solitary Temple amid Clearing Peaks and Xu Daoning’s Fishermen’s Evening Song are similar to Fan Kuan’s painting in the treatment of figures and show how the figures functioned in Northern Song landscapes. (Figs. 15 and 32)

The most important role of the figures is to invite the viewers to locate themselves within the painting and to experience the landscape from their angle. This role is more apparent in horizontal scroll paintings. Looking at Fishermen’s Evening Song, figures or traces of human activity are interspersed among the painting to lead the viewers’ eyes through the composition from right to left. The hut in the lower right is followed by a bridge that connect the mid-ground shoals, leading to the imposing mountains in the middle. Below the spectacular mountains, the fishermen are shown in tiny size fishing in their boats. A group of people gather in the lower left, greeting a boat that is pulling in to the shore. Above them, two travelers are crossing a bridge to the right, leading our gazes back to the composition. (Fig. 33) The viewers instinctively locate with the figures and walk along the bridges; they experience the landscape from the angles of the figures.

When the viewers follow the lead and look through the landscape, the figures evoke a contemplation of the relation between human and landscape and suggest a proper attitude to nature. The dramatic contrast between the monumental landscape and the tiny figures suggests the grand and everlasting stature of nature and the transitory life of human beings. Meanwhile, similar in Li Cheng’s A Solitary Temple amid Clearing Peaks and Fan Kuan’s Travelers among

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3 Xu Daoning’s Fishermen’s Evening Song, currently in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, dates to ca. 1049. Done with ink and slight color on silk, the handscroll measures 48 x 225 cm.
Mountains and Streams, the figures always appear low in the composition. Under the heavenly mountains that appear monumental in the vertical composition, the figures are humble and close to earth. If the viewers locate themselves with the figures, they have to look up at the mountains in admiration. The artists structure the paintings for the viewers to experience the spirituality of the landscape and morally instruct the viewers to revere the monumental and eternal nature. The landscapes would certainly lack this layer of meaning if the figures were to be excluded.

*St. Francis in Ecstasy* functions in a similar way. The viewers are invited to look at nature from the viewpoint of St. Francis, which is depicted with rich details and a harmonious tones. Different from other paintings of the time, St. Francis is shown as part of the landscape. As one identifies with St. Francis, one feels surrounded by nature and overwhelmed by the atmosphere that the landscape embodies. Furthermore, as St. Francis opens his arm to embrace nature, the viewers too share this attitude. Charmed by the peaceful and glorious appearance of nature, one joins St. Francis to pray to God, whose spirit is manifest in all parts of the landscape. It goes without saying that if St. Francis does not exist in the painting, it would have made no sense at all. The presence of St. Francis gives the landscape meaning: it was through his teachings that the attitude to nature was conveyed, and it was through his eyes that the viewers receive the spirit of God.

On the other hand, *St. Francis in Ecstasy* represents a tendency in landscape depictions of the early Renaissance. In Chapter II, I argued that it is exactly because of the absence of an

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4 The concept of conquering nature was quite unimaginable to the Chinese; this is why there is almost never a painting in which a figure is located on top of the mountain or even halfway up.
identifiable narrative moment that the painting embodies an attitude more than depicting a story. To further elucidate the issue, the oddity of the painting comprises two factors: 1) that the landscape takes up the majority of the picture plane; and 2) that there is not an identifiable narrative going on in the painting. The two factors combined, in my opinion, makes the painting closer to being a landscape painting.

There are plenty of paintings that have rich landscape depictions that dwarf the figures, but they usually host a narrative story. For example, an earlier work of Giovanni Bellini, *Agony in the Garden*, has an extremely rich landscape.⁵ (Fig. 34) Yet, the landscape is secondary to the narrative story (Christ sadly praying to the Lord after the last supper when an angel appeared to strengthen his mind), which is clearly the subject of the painting. This type of painting is simply characterized as a “narrative” painting that has landscape background.⁶ There are also plenty of paintings that do not have narrative stories. In fact, most portraits of St. Francis or the Madonna and Christ do not have a narrative moment. They are “iconic” paintings that treat the depicted figure as the subject. The subject is usually shown central in the composition and takes up the majority of the picture plane, while landscape is smaller and less significant in comparison. Piero della Francesca’s *Battista Sforza and Federico da Montefeltro* exemplifies this type.

*St. Francis in Ecstasy* is neither narrative nor iconic. Its lack of narrative and its treatment of St. Francis as part of the landscape almost marks a step from figurative painting to landscape

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⁵ Bellini’s *Agony in the Garden*, painted in c. 1465, is currently in the National Gallery, London. The large panel measures 81.3 x 127 cm, and marks an early phase of the painter’s artistic style.

⁶ Although, arguably, the landscape in *Agony in the Garden* does take on expressive and symbolic values.
painting, or, more properly, the depiction of figure in landscape. Bellini’s later work *St. Jerome Reading* has a similar treatment between landscape and figure, in which St. Jerome is shown in a landscape that dwarfs him in size. (Fig. 35) It is clear that the status of landscape depiction in Bellini’s paintings rises to a height that it is at least equally important as the figures. However, in both paintings, the spirituality of nature is anchored by the presence of the figure; their identity helps the viewer to interpret the landscape. Just as St. Francis’ attitude to nature enables the landscape to be seen as the manifestation of the divine spirit, the iconography of St. Jerome as a hermit gives meaning to the landscape as a place for solitary retreat. The figures and the landscape inseparably work together to carry spiritual meaning.

In this sense, the figures in *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* and the St. Francis in *St. Francis in Ecstasy* function similarly: they are the means through which the spiritual meanings of the landscape are conveyed to the viewer. They construct exemplary images of the ideal relation between human and nature, which in turn reveals the cultural value from both traditions. *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* reveals the ultimate reverence and admiration that the Chinese had for nature, while *St. Francis in Ecstasy* displays a harmonious relation with nature, which is a manifestation of God.

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7 I ceased from mentioning Giorgione, Bellini’s pupil, and his widely debated *Tempestuous Landscape with the Soldier and the Gypsy*, because the landscape in this painting has a totally different spiritual meaning. However, my argument is that Giorgione’s bold innovation in this painting, in which he paints an ambiguous landscape with nameless figures, is hardly original. His teacher’s *St. Francis in Ecstasy* had already made the step toward this direction. The ambiguity of the narrative makes the landscape closer to being the subject of the painting.

8 Currently in the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., this panel was painted by Bellini in 1505. It measures 47 x 37.5 cm.

To return to the beginning question of this project concerning the contrasting attitude to the genre of landscape painting between the East and the West, we see that landscape from both traditions deserve a lot of study. The Western treatment of landscape as a “lesser genre” is not a because of its incapability of conveying spirituality. As we have examined, landscape depictions in both traditions are capable of conveying profound spiritual meanings by the early Renaissance masters. Moreover, as the study in this last discussion shows, they reveal deep cultural values of people’s contemplation of their roles in nature, which constitutes a significant part of the history of mankind. One gains meditation, inspiration, philosophy, and moral lessons from nature, and these are the values that landscape depictions from both traditions convey.
Figure 1. Fan Kuan, *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*. Northern Song Dynasty, c.1000. Ink and slight color on Silk. 206.3 x 103.3 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fan_Kuan_-_Travelers_Among_Mountains_and_Streams_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)
Figure 2. Giovanni Bellini, St. Francis in Ecstasy. c.1476-1478. Oil and tempura on panel.

124.4 x 141.9 cm. The Frick Collection, New York.

(https://collections.frick.org/miradorviewer/Objects/39)
Figure 3. *Wine Vessel (Hu)*, Western Zhou Dynasty, late 9th to early 8th century BCE. Bronze.

55.2 x37.5 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

(https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/44515?sortBy=Relevance&amp;when=18000+B.C.-A.D.+1&amp;where=China&amp;ft=*&amp;offset=20&amp;rpp=20&amp;pos=23)
Figure 4. *Painted Vase with Dragon and Phoenix in Relief*, Western Han Dynasty, 64 cm tall and diameter of the lip 21 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

(http://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/ceramic/227442.html)
Figure 5. *Stone Pillar painted with Door Guard*, Eastern Han Dynasty. 117.5 x 35 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

(http://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/sculpture/233896.html)
Figure 6. *Boshan Xianglu (Fairy Mountain Incense Burner)*, Western Han Dynasty, dated 113 BC. Bronze inlaid with gold. 26 x 9.7 (foot) cm. Hebei Provincial Museum, Shijiazhuang. (https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%94%99%E9%87%91%E5%8D%9A%E5%B1%B1%E7%82%89/5025682)
Figure 7. *Ritual Wine Vessel with Cover (Bian Hu)*, Western Han Dynasty, 2nd Century BC. 14.8 x 15 x 7.3 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

(http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/ritual-wine-vessel-with-cover-bian-hu-19126)
Figure 8. Guo Xi, *Early Spring*. Detail. Northern Song Dynasty, 1072. Ink on Silk, 158.3 x 108.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taiwan.

(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guo_Xi_-_Early_Spring_(large).jpg)

Figure 9. *The Life of Prince Suttva*, Wall Murals, Mogao Cave 428, Dunhuang. Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581).

(http://public.dha.ac.cn/content.aspx?id=689684729136)
Figure 10. *Stone Sarcophagus engraved with Stories of Filial Duty*, from Luoyang, Henan province, early 6th century. Each panel is 62.5 x 223.5 cm. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.


Figure 11. Zhan Ziqian, *Stroll about in Spring*, c. 600AD. Paper and Color on Silk. 80.5 x 43 cm, The Palace Museum, Beijing.

(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stroll_About_InSpring.jpg)
Figure 12. Yan Zhenqing, *DaTangZhongXingSong (The Flourishing of the Great Tang)*. Stele carved in 771. This is an early Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) imprint of a section of the stele. 50.5 x 71 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

(http://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/impres/234173.html)

Figure 13. Wang Xizhi, *Lantingji Xu (Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion)*. Tang Dynasty copy by Feng Chengsu. Ink on paper, 24.5 x 69.9 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

(http://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/handwriting/228279.html)
Figure 14. *Silk Banner with Stories of the Buddha.* Tang Dynasty, 8th-9th century. Ink and color on silk. 58.5 x 18.5 cm. British Museum, London.

(http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=108001&objectId=6659&partId=1)
Figure 16. *Nile Mosaic*, Palestrina, Palazzo Barberini, Palestrina. 2nd Century BC. 6.56 x 5.25 m.

(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mosa%C3%AFque_nilotique,_Praeneste,_Italie.jpg)
Figure 17. *Cubiculum* (bedroom) from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale. ca. 40-50 BC. Fresco on Wall. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

(https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247017)

Figure 18. *Cubiculum* (bedroom) from the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale. ca. 40-50 BC. Detail of the rear wall. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
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(http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822001360864)

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(http://library.artstor.org/#/asset/AHSC_ORPHANS_1071313665)
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