

LEONARDO DA VINCI'S LANDSCAPE AND CHINESE INFLUENCES

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In *The Feast of the Gods* by Giovanni Bellini and *The Adoration of the Magi* by Mantegna, Chinese porcelain are painted as precious objects. The fifteenth century porcelain of the Ming period was brought to Europe through the Islamic Countries of the Silk Road. By this time Chinese porcelain was already common in the courts of Northern Italy, and so Chinese images were spread through the blue and white imported artifacts¹. The images depicted on the porcelain attracted the European painters. Some of the common representations are figures of animals, among which is featured a dragon with the body of a serpent, covered with scales, and with horns and four legs. Other animals look like giraffes with deer's heads, four hooved legs, horns, manes and scaled bodies. There are also images of hermits living in the mountains, and here we have pure landscape painting.

Some drawings of Leonardo show images of steep mountains². The illustration of his manuscript, the *Codex Atlanticus*, shows mountains drawn with pointed peaks and rivers around the base at the right of the image. This representation of mountains and water resembles the landscape images of China, and in my opinion the lines in Leonardo's drawings (fig. 1) correspond to those of Chinese ink drawings. It differs from the images of rocky mountains in Italian paintings of the period, such as those by Mantegna or Bellini. The soaring mountains and the rivers are enveloped in clouds and mist. They are also different from the naturalistic landscapes depicted in the painting of the Netherlands, as here the vertical lines of the mountains are accentuated. In this respect, Leonardo's landscape is typically Chinese in style. In particular the left portion looks very much like the landscape of *Shingo Yuan*. These features, which are apparent in this drawing, can be considered as evidence of Chinese influence on the work of Leonardo.

We now comment a written text of *Codex Atlanticus* which appears on the same page of this image. One part of the text overlaps the top of the mountain, and this shows that the text was written after the drawing was made. In this piece of text, Leonardo is envisaging a knowledge of Eastern culture. He speaks of the Tauro Mountains as if he had himself been invited to view them by a ruler of some Eastern country. Leonardo was very interested in the Log Books of journeys made by visitors of those countries, which were published and easily available at this time, and he showed admiration for the landscapes visited. This description of Leonardo's was

1. For further research, see H. Tanaka, "Influenza dell'Arte Cinese nelle opere di Leonardo da Vinci". In: *Art History*, 20, Sendai, Japan, Tohoku University, 1999, pl. 1-40.

2. Leonardo da Vinci, *Codex Atlanticus* 145v-a, 145v-b. In: A. E. Popham (ed.), *The Drawings of Leonardo da Vinci*, London, 1946, pp. 258-259.



most likely influenced by information found in Tolomeo's books, published in Ulm in 1482. The names of the places are not precise in the original logs, but from these books Leonardo derived his knowledge of Eastern countries.

The shadow of this ridge of Taurus is of such a height that when, in the middle of June, the sun is at its meridian, its shadow extends as far as the borders of Sarmatia, twelve days off; and in the middle of December it extends as far as the Hyperborean mountains which are at a month's journey to the North. And the side which faces the wind is always free from clouds and mists, because the wind which is parted in beating on the rock, closes again on the further side of that rock, and its motion carries with it the clouds from all quarters and leaves them where it strikes. And it is always full of thunder bolts from the great quantity of clouds which accumulate there, whence the rock is all riven and full of huge debris. This mountain, at its base, is inhabited by a very rich population, and is full of most beautiful springs and rivers, and is fertile and abounding in all good produce, particularly in those parts which face to the South.³

These landscapes of Eastern mountains were imagined by Leonardo, and then their representation was influenced by Chinese landscape paintings, showing imagined expeditions to Eastern countries.

The landscape in the background of *Mona Lisa* has sometimes been considered to be influenced by Chinese paintings. This has been suggested by such specialists in Chinese Art History as Munsterberg, Sullivan and Yukio Yashiro. But it has always been contested due to lack of clear evidence. However, in Giovanni Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*, Chinese porcelain is shown: as stated previously, much porcelain had been brought into Europe by this time. I have observed similarities in the landscape paintings of China, both porcelain and scroll painting, and in the *Mona Lisa* background⁴.

There are many Chinese scroll paintings which are very similar to this background. For example, Hsu Taining's *The Fisherman in the River of a Snowy Valley*. There are vertically depicted mountains to the left, and a river to the right. In the mountains, the mist flows down, and at the foot of the mountains there is a small bridge, similar to that on the landscape which forms the right side of the background of *Mona Lisa*. In another drawing by Leonardo, the mountains suddenly descend into the water, a feature similar to the painting by Wu Chen *Spring Dawn over the River* (fig. 2). The mountain's acute peak in the right of the image is also similar to the one on this work by Wu Chen⁵.

3. Cf. *Codex Atlanticus*, f.145v. In: J.-P. Richter, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, II, London, 1883, p. 390-391, n° 1336.

4. H. Tanaka, *Leonardo da Vinci*, Tokio, 1983; M. Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art*, London, 1973; O. Impey, *Chinoiserie, The Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration*, Oxford, 1977.

5. Wu Cheng, *Spring Dawn over the River*, Yuan Period (13th century), National Palace Museum, Taipei. See the catalogue of the *Exhibition of Landscape Paintings of the Scenes of Spring*, National Old Palace Museum, Taipei, 1988, 9, p. 16.



It has been observed that the horizon lines in the *Mona Lisa* background are not consistent in the right and left portions of the work. This indicates the absence of an idea of continuity on the part of Leonardo, as these two portions of the work are depicted independently. Also, this background occupies a horizontal space, which suggests that Leonardo is depicting two Chinese scroll paintings hung side by side. In the Western world, landscape painting is mostly horizontal, such as in the works of Van Eyck, where the mountains are spread out horizontally. However, in Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, the mountains and rivers are arranged vertically, which suggests the influence of landscapes in Chinese scroll paintings. Particularly in the right portion there is a small bridge depicted with the mountains and river, which is reminiscent of Chinese landscape paintings. In Chinese landscapes there are always hermits living in the mountains, and bridges are included as a symbol of this human presence. In the *Mona Lisa* there are no hermits, but the bridge indicates the presence of people in the landscape. This landscape with human elements is common to both Chinese painting and that of Leonardo. In this respect, the landscape of the *Mona Lisa* is exceptional, as the landscapes in *The Virgin of the Rocks and Saint Anne* show natural landscape with no evidence of human presence. The hermits featured in Chinese landscape paintings show the influence of Taoism. The hermit is a literate man, absorbing himself in nature, mountains and rivers, in the search for the Tao of nature. It is possible that Leonardo had access to this type of landscape, as these scroll paintings could easily have been brought into Europe at that time.

Leonardo described in this manuscript the importance of the Water⁶. The relationship between water and nature in this description is similar to that by the Chinese artist Kuo Chi, who said that:

Water is the vein of the mountains, trees and grasses are their hair. The mountains, trees and grasses are sustained by water, and the rocks are the bones of the land. These bones must be buried, not appearing on the surface of the land. The water is the blood of the land and it constantly flows. The mountains must give an impression of solidity, their shape is continually flowing up and down, and the river flows around the feet of the mountains, so both continually give the impression of being connected.⁷

So, Leonardo's theory of landscape and that of Chinese painters are very much alike. I would conclude that the landscape of the *Mona Lisa* can be considered to have been influenced by images of landscapes from China. These came from Chinese porcelain and scroll paintings, and from there Leonardo created his own synthesis of humanity and nature in his *Mona Lisa*.

6. *Codex Arundel*. p. 234r. J.-P. Richter, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

7. Kuo-shi, "Of Landscape Paintings". In: Saoki and I. Okumura (eds.), *The Theories of Paintings*, 1942. p. 92.