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Nature’s Grip on Humanity

The natural world has been at the center of human consciousness since our species’ appearance on earth. Providing the basic materials of survival and also the primary causes of death, nature has captivated humankind with its mysteries. Interest in nature is a cultural universal that has been expressed throughout the ages though many different fields: science, story, religion, math, and, of course, art. Two disparate examples, created about the same time during the 17th century in opposite hemispheres, show humanity’s once universal respect for and awe of nature: Italian Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s famous sculpture of Apollo and Daphne and Chinese artist Shitao’s painting Outing to Master Zhang’s Grotto. Although represented differently, both indicate the wonder of nature through the artist’s eyes.

Bernini’s unbelievable sculpture was created in response to an old Roman myth of the sun god Apollo. Apollo, as a result of an argument with Cupid, had been struck by Cupid’s arrow and had fallen in love with a nymph; unfortunately, she had sworn to remain a virgin. In order to save herself from Apollo’s passion, the nymph, Daphne, makes a plea to her father, a river god, who transforms Daphne into the laurel tree. (“Apollo and Daphne- Ovid’s Metamorphoses”) Bernini captures a rarely seen moment of the story: the moment when Daphne’s cry for help is answered. Because of his choice, Bernini is able to explore the idea of humans becoming nature, which he expresses with an unparalleled level of precision and lightness. Daphne’s face is rendered as shock, not joy or relief, as twigs shoot from her fingers, her hair broadens into leaves, and her toes grow roots. Daphne, struck by Cupid’s arrow against love, is about to escape her crisis, although in an unexpected way.

Shitao’s work also comes with a story of sorts: a written poem describing the artist’s reason for painting the image. “[F]rom inside Zhang Gong’s grotto a spring breeze comes… Its restless nature compels the world to take notice. …Although it [the cave] lies so still and hidden, yet its reds and purples are brilliant. It can be a landscape all by itself.” ("Shi Tao- Outing to Master Zhang's Grotto.") His words indicate his fascination with this landmark and its great beauty. Chinese culture historically held mountains as holy places where life energy (*qi)* was collected, and caves as passageways to magical alternate universes similar to heaven. (“Nature in Chinese Culture”) Therefore, such a journey by the artist to go see a beautiful cave has a spiritual connotation. The entire composition tells something of a story, as we can imagine the artist’s pilgrimage to the Grotto through the paths he paints for us. It has the feeling of a map through a wondrous landscape. As we can see, both artworks come from a storyline that revolves around nature and its role in our lives. The narrative quality and its resultant spiritual associations in both works emphasize the respect for nature that both artists share.

The loving and time intensive work that must have gone into Bernini’s sculpture is evident in the delicate tendrils present throughout the piece, which required great patience in order to preserve the structural strength of the stone and to achieve such fine detail. The textural pieces of the work such as the bark and leaves also show a deep study of nature. The respect for the human form, also a part of nature, is visible through Bernini’s careful depiction of the torque of muscles as Daphne turns, and Apollo’s graceful running stance with one foot in the air. This leads me to believe that Bernini sought to capture the true image of nature in a gesture of respect.

Shitao’s lengthy work also shows the precision and attention to detail of Bernini’s work, although in a two-dimensional scene. The scrolling landscape shows a variety of territory within its boundaries, from sea to lowlands to a mountain cavern filled with an inner light. The landscape is lightly rendered with washes of ink and very fine brush lines. Details such as trees are painstakingly drawn in, with a large variety in sizes and shapes. The piece also keeps to a calm earth tone palette of green-grey, black-blue, and a golden-beige. Little of Bernini’s drama is present, except perhaps in the rocks framed by the light of the cave in the foreground. Each small natural object is distinct and equally graced by the artist’s brush.

This miniature style of attention to detail differs from the large and dramatic Bernini sculpture. Baroque Italy greatly appreciated the intensity and movement of dynamic sculptures such as Bernini’s, and it would seem that Shitao’s contemporaries were impressed mainly by intensive detail. Where Apollo and Daphne ripple with movement frozen in stone, the Shitao image is very stable and balanced. I think this reflects on how people of the time felt about the natural world in a general sense. Perhaps 17th century Italians focused on the wildness and changeability of the seasons and weather, or the unpredictability of nature’s call on us to return to the earth, much as Daphne gasps in surprise at her quite literal return to nature. The dynamism of nature is captured in the way that the twigs burst out of her fingertips and the bark wraps in a spiraling motion up her body. Shitao’s contemporaries probably treated nature as all encompassing and unchangeable, hence its very stable form. However, both cultures display that intensive detail of nature’s creations that seems to show an in depth study of and respect for nature.

Another significant comparison between the two is the size of nature relative to humanity in each. While Bernini’s nature is a quick and powerful force, its representation focuses much more on the human element. Meanwhile, Shitao’s piece has only one man, hidden within the cave, who disappears in the vast landscape in which he has been placed. Other signs of human presence are small, such as a bridge and a few small buildings. The vast scale difference seems to indicate different focuses in the pieces: the Baroque period Italians clearly felt that the human was greater than nature, or at least that the human was a more important focus, whereas the Chinese felt that nature was immensely dominant over humankind. This kind of difference in culture reflects a short-term versus long-term view that I think is indicative of a general difference between East and West cultures. The Eastern world historically has seemed more long term focused, which can be seen in their religions and philosophies (Hinduism has reincarnation, Buddhism has the goal of nirvana that requires a long term commitment). While human life is transient, nature is unending. Many of the traditional landscape paintings seem to reflect this feeling towards nature, with expansive landscapes only dotted with signs of human civilization. Italian humanism instead focused on fulfilling the individual, acquiring knowledge and improving oneself, a comparatively short term mindset.

Another interesting style choice by both artists was to catch the scene at a time of place when a person seemed to become nature, either literally or through participating in mediation with nature. Daphne’s commune with nature is obviously quite literal, as we can see her human form changing. Shitao’s small figure is less obvious, but we can see that his upright form not only blends into the overall color scheme but also echoes the noble looking rocks at the entrance to the cave. These representations of people show an understanding that regardless of their philosophy on the matter, humans have to acknowledge that they are a part of nature and the life cycle.

Regardless of cultural and physical distance, both Bernini and Shitao’s art works appear to reflect an intrinsic awe of nature. Through detailed study, assignment of spiritual narratives, and choice of subject, we can see that the artist respects nature. However, cultural differences in perception of nature are seen in the scale of humanity to nature in each, an effect of contemporary mindsets and philosophy.

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