

gical universality. Indeed, even for Heidegger »the attitude of thinking which is able to listen is paramount« (Tercic 2006: 110).³⁷

Let me sum up: despite a long history of self-absorbed thinking, Anglo-European philosophy shows signs of receptivity towards other philosophies, thus allowing us to reconsider the »task of (critical-ethical) thinking« as a collective endeavour. If a new horizon discloses itself for Anglo-European philosophy, this must include openness towards other philosophies, in line with »monadological universality« and »linguistic (radical) hospitality«, so as to acknowledge the presence of WP and to share with these the gift of wisdom, through a sustained critical-ethical dialogue. Still further, a true radical hospitality is happening – as an event (*Ereignis*) – when Anglo-European philosophy remains attentive and welcoming to »the sending of the gift of wisdom« which comes to it from other close or distant philosophies. In practical terms, there is a need, in line with Husserl, to address »issues and problems« – the many questions raised in this essay at both theoretical and methodological levels – so as to further stimulate our investigation. For, WP is not a given, but a gift always in the sending.

–Cosimo Zene, SOAS, University of London, UK

³⁷ V. Tercic, *La dimensione dell' es gibt nell'ontologia di Martin Heidegger*, Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2006.

Approaching *Shan Shui* Art through Gadamer

Abstract

Shan shui art is a traditional style of Chinese landscape painting that has had a lasting impact on Chinese culture. This paper attempts to view a masterpiece of this genre of art – the artwork entitled ›Hermit Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains‹ by Wang Meng – from the perspective of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy of art in order to show how such an artwork can convey an ontological insight for those who experience it. Instead of viewing the artwork as simply an aesthetically pleasing landscape and thereby relegating the experience to the realm of feeling as is common in modern Western approaches to art, I argue that the artwork is best understood as imparting meaning into our lives by opening up a new perspective on reality. Specifically, I show the Daoist principles and concepts that underlie *shan shui* art at work in Wang Meng's (c. 1308–1385) masterpiece. The Gadamerian approach adopted provides an appropriate avenue to respect Wang Meng's artwork and other paintings in the *shan shui* genre on their own terms for those embracing a contemporary Western aesthetic sensibility.

Keywords

Philosophy of art, Chinese landscape painting, Comparative Philosophy, Wang Meng, the Four Yüan Masters, *Truth and Method*.

The Chinese painting style of *shan shui* (山水) gained prominence in the fifth century and has had a lasting impact on Chinese culture ever since (Zhen 2013: 8).¹ In his commentary on *shan shui* art from the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, Wen Fong argues that such painting was »infused with life not so much by the representation of reality as by evocation and reflection and the elicitation of associations

¹ L. Q. Zhen, *Chinese Landscape Painting*, New York: North Light Books, 2013.

that lie within the realm of feeling« (Fong 1992: 60).² While Fong is correct in pointing out that the primary function of *shan shui* was not the representation of reality, his way of relegating the function of this art style to the realm of feeling is misleading. I argue that the proper function of *shan shui* lies beyond representation and aesthetics and is rather to be found in realm of ontology. Using Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy of art, I will show that *shan shui* painting is better understood as an event of truth by looking at a masterpiece of the genre of *shan shui*, a 1366 artwork by Wang Meng (王蒙), a Chinese painter from the fourteenth century, entitled ›Hermit Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains‹ (青卞隱居圖).

Gadamer's philosophy of art as espoused in *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*) opens up new ways of thinking about works of art that resonate well with the role that *shan shui* art played in its original context. My goal in this paper is to use the ontological framework that Gadamer espouses in *Truth and Method* and apply it to Wang Meng's artwork. In doing so, I hope to open new ways of thinking about this style of Daoist art that are divorced from the modern emphasis on ›aesthetic consciousness‹ (*ästhetisches Bewußtsein*) that treats a work of art as an object that is merely ›there‹ for the appreciation of a subject. Gadamer's thesis that a work of art is an *event of truth* provides a much more appropriate way to think about *shan shui* art than the objectifying tendencies that one finds in the modern conception of art.

I Gadamer's Project

Although one can point out many elements that characterize the modern era, one of the most salient is the dominance of science and the scientific method. The methodology of the ›hard sciences‹ has won out to such an extent that the human sciences have been forced to adopt their methodology of procedure. This is precisely why one finds statistical analysis and talk of science-based methodology in such disciplines as human psychology, sociology, and even communication. In fact, even philosophy, art, and history have fallen prey to certain molds set by the natural sciences. For example, one finds phi-

² W. C. Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy: 8th-14th Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

losophers performing experiments in the field of experimental philosophy as if they were scientists, art critics viewing works of art solely on the basis of their form and ignoring any content of the work in order to be ›objective‹ and historians thinking that they can get at ›the truth‹ about a certain historical event just as a scientist can get at the truth about the boiling point of water. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer tries to argue that certain elements of human phenomena (such as, what people do and what they create) need to be understood in a way that is wholly different than the methods of the natural or ›hard‹ sciences. He states:

The human sciences are connected to modes of experience that lie outside science: with the experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science. (Gadamer 2006: xxi)³

It is important to point out that Gadamer is *not* arguing against science. Scientific experimentation and observation are wholly appropriate when applied to certain aspects of the human world. For instance, if we want to understand our neurophysiological processes or the best way to maximize our nutritional intake, science undoubtedly provides the best means of going about attaining such information. In admitting this, however, we must realize that there are also elements of human life that go beyond the realm of science and need to be understood on their own terms. For Gadamer, ›the central question of the modern age [...] is the question of how our natural view of the world – the experience of the world that we have as we simply live out our lives – is related to the unassailable and anonymous authority that confronts us in the pronouncements of science‹ (Gadamer 1996: 111).⁴ In other words, the main question that comes along with the dominance of science in the modern era is how aspects of our lives like art, philosophy, and history can be understood authentically, that is, in a manner appropriate to their specific contexts. His thesis is that a genuine understanding of such phenomena requires us to go outside the methods of the sciences and view them in more fitting frame-

³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, J. Weinsheimer, and D. G. Marshall (trans.), second, revised edition, London and New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2006.

⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, ›The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,‹ in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, R. Kearney, and M. Rainwater (eds.), London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

works. The goal is not to undermine science, but simply to realize that certain aspects of our human world are not amenable to the scientific worldview. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on his treatment of art. In a certain sense, this is where the heart of Gadamer's interest lies since in a late essay entitled ›The Artwork in Word and Image,‹ Gadamer states that his real interest in *Truth and Method* was the experience of art (Gadamer 2007: 195).⁵

II Gadamer's Philosophy of Art

Gadamer argues that art is a special aspect of the human world that cannot be appropriately understood if we try to view it from the scientific perspective that dominates the modern worldview. He states that he is attempting »to defend the experience of truth that comes to us through the work of art against the aesthetic theory that lets itself be restricted to a scientific conception of truth« (Gadamer 2006: xxii). According to him, there is a sort of truth that inheres in great artworks that cannot be captured by the methodology and worldview of science. The problem is that the scientific worldview has infiltrated our modern period to such an extent that we no longer recognize any non-scientific types of truth as legitimate. Because of this, even the art world is forced to implement aspects of the scientific worldview in order to be taken seriously.

The basic structure of modern science is to objectify things and attempt to explain them through causal analyses. This is set up on the assumption that we, as human beings, are subjects that are attempting to explain the world around us, which is taken to be a totality of objects. In this framework, something is true if the propositions that a subject ascribes to an object are actual attributes of the object itself. For example, if I say ›The book is on the table,‹ this statement is true if there is, in fact, a book lying on the table. Although people will readily admit that art is distinct from science, Gadamer points out that the realm of art in the modern period has succumbed to some of the assumptions of the scientific worldview and has thereby lost the force it had at earlier points in world history. The modern worldview of art

⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, »The Artwork in Word and Image: ›So True, So Full of Being,‹« in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, R. E. Palmer (ed. and trans.), Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007, pp. 192–224.

that has been influenced by the methodologies and frameworks of science is what Gadamer calls the »aesthetic consciousness.«

As Charles Guignon notes, Gadamer's notion of aesthetic consciousness is »the orientation to works of art that regards them as objects for aesthetic appreciation« (Guignon 2003: 38).⁶ On this model, an artwork is an object opposed to a subject, and the function of the work of art is to bring about sensations or feelings on the part of the subject. Here, it is assumed that there is a single work of art that is the product of a creator and that spectators appreciate the artwork by getting into the mind of the creator in order to understand his or her intentions. Whether the creator's intention is to express a feeling that he or she experienced or criticize an aspect of culture, the point is that the spectator's job is to hone in on the creator's intentions and thereby have an experience for oneself. The experience that comes about from experiencing a work of art is one that a person would not normally come across in everyday life. The work of art transports the spectator to a place of sensation that is cut off from what happens in one's normal life. While Fong does not use Gadamer's language of »aesthetic consciousness,« his understanding of the spectator's experience of *shan shui* fits the mold of aesthetic consciousness since he considers the experience of an artwork from the lens of subjective aesthetic appreciation. Fong stresses that *shan shui* art goes beyond representation in that it does not merely aim to portray a beautiful landscape. Rather, such artworks »project the very essence of reality because of their intense psychological absorption« (Fong 1992: 61). From Fong's interpretation, the artists' »awe and [...] empathy with nature« are portrayed in the artworks, and a subject who experiences such artworks should come to have similar subjective feelings if he or she is to properly appreciate the work (*ibid.*). From this perspective, the major function of art is to elicit feelings on the part of the spectators that are similar to the ones felt by the artists themselves. Gadamer would consider such an interpretation to be caught up in what he calls aesthetic consciousness.

When aesthetic consciousness comes to take over, the word ›aesthetics‹ is introduced and art is merely relegated to the realm of feeling. Although we tend to simply identify aesthetics with theories of art, we should note that the word ›aesthetics‹ comes from the Greek

⁶ C. Guignon, ›Meaning in the Work of Art: A Hermeneutic Perspective,‹ *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 27, 2003, pp. 25–44.

word *αἰσθησις* (aesthesis), which means ›perception‹ or ›feeling.‹⁷ In making artworks simply a matter of feeling on the part of spectators, works of art no longer have any cognitive content. Works of art are merely there to provide us with sensations and not there to tell us anything meaningful about the way the world is or how we should live our lives. In other words, by relegating works of art to the realm of feeling, aesthetic consciousness cuts off the essential link that exists between a work of art and reality. Instead of viewing a work of art as something that has a claim of truth for the people who experience it, the artwork is seen as there for only aesthetic reasons.

Along with aesthetic consciousness comes ›aesthetic differentiation‹ (*ästhetische Unterscheidung*), which Gadamer defines as ›a process of abstraction [that disregards] everything in which a work is rooted (its original context of life, and the religious or secular function that gave it significance) [and thereby] becomes visible as the ›pure work of art‹‹ (Gadamer 2006: 74). When spectators engage in aesthetic differentiation, they abstract out everything ›unimportant‹ in the work of art to discover the heart of the meaning of the artwork. One can find this tendency in the art world today in the movement of formalism in which the artistic value of a work of art lies entirely in its formal characteristics such as the colors, lines, and shapes of the artwork. When examining an artwork from the formalist perspective, the aim is to focus solely on the formal features of the work and completely disregard any sort of content that may inhere in the work. Implicit in this process of abstraction is the idea that the ›true meaning‹ of the work of art is its form and that the content is merely peripheral. Gadamer would argue that such an art movement could only come about in the modern period where aesthetic consciousness reigns supreme over all other possible models.⁸ Instead of looking at art in terms of form or content, he wants to view art as an important aspect of our human existence that has an element of truth that cannot be captured in any ›scientific‹ or ›objective‹ terms. In other words, instead of assessing an artwork on how well it accurately represents reality in terms of its content or on how well the work's formal features of color, line, or shape balance together, Gadamer hopes to mea-

sure the importance of an artwork in accordance with how true it is, that is, in how much it resonates with the world as it is experienced and, most importantly, opens up new ways of being in the world for those who experience it. Gadamer argues that we call an artwork ›true‹ when ›we recognize [that] a work of art is ›right,‹ [and thereby say], ›So ist es!‹‹ (Gadamer 2007: 197). In other words, a work of art is true when we say ›That's it!‹ or ›That's the way things are!‹ as we come to a new realization about reality. Put simply, we can say that Gadamer hopes to cease viewing artworks merely from the realm of aesthetics and begin to incorporate them into the realm of ontology.

Gadamer argues that works of art used to play pivotal roles in the lives of people and his aim is to retrieve this idea that art has an important function in our lives that cannot be reduced to the role of merely supplying us with sensations or feelings. In order to do this, he has to get away from the idea that art is a static object that we, as independent subjects, merely look at and appreciate. In other words, he has to divorce the realm of art from the subject/object ontology that is implicit in modern science. He states, ›The work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it‹ (*ibid.*: 103). For Gadamer, works of art must be seen within their historical and cultural context as events that have a claim to truth on people. In earlier periods in human history, artworks were vital components of the life-worlds of people. For instance, an ancient Greek temple was a work of art that did not function as an architectural construct that was simply aesthetically pleasing. Rather, the temple united the Greek people and formed the people's identity.⁹ Gadamer asserts, ›No one can ignore the fact that in the work of art, in which a world arises, not only is something meaningful given to experience that was not known before, but also something new comes into existence with the work of art itself‹ (Gadamer 1976: 224).¹⁰ Gadamer attempts to retrieve this

⁷ There are still remnants of this original meaning in, for instance, the English word ›anesthetic,‹ which means to dull one's feelings.

⁸ As Gadamer notes, ›Aesthetic consciousness has unlimited sovereignty over everything‹ (2006: 77).

⁹ The example of the Greek temple informing the lives of the Greek people comes from Martin Heidegger. See his ›The Origin of the Work of Art,‹ in *Basic Writings*, D. F. Krell (ed.), revised and expanded edition, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1993, pp. 139–212. Gadamer was extremely influenced by Heidegger's philosophy of art.

¹⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, ›Heidegger's Later Philosophy,‹ in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, D. E. Linge (trans. and ed.), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

idea that artworks inform the lives of people and transform their worlds. He urges, »art is knowledge and experiencing an artwork means sharing in that knowledge« (Gadamer 2006: 84). By saying that experiencing an artwork allows a person to attain knowledge, Gadamer is recovering the idea that artworks have cognitive content and are not merely there for our viewing pleasure or to merely invoke subjective feelings.

In order to achieve this task, he replaces the subject/object ontology that one finds in aesthetic consciousness with an event ontology. Rather than merely seeing the artwork as aesthetically pleasing, the being of a work of art lies in its ability to transform a person and impart a new sort of knowledge that cannot be arrived at through scientific reasoning. He declares, »the experience of art contain[s] a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science but just as certainly [...] not inferior to it« (*ibid.*). The ability of a work of art to transform a person means that the work of art is an *event of truth*. Of course, this sort of truth is not of the correspondence variety that we find in science (e. g., the earlier example of the book on the table), but rather of the *existential* variety. The artwork opens up a new perspective on reality and changes the way in which the person views the world and – possibly – lives in the world. Gadamer argues, »what we experience in a work of art and what invites our attention is how true it is – i. e., to what extent one knows and recognizes something and oneself« (*ibid.*: 113). The work of art says something true about the world and one's place in it.

In fact, experiencing a great work of art can transform a person to such an extent that the person is no longer able to view reality the same way that he or she did before experiencing the artwork. This can occur in any genre of the art world. Gadamer uses Greek tragedy as an example of a sort of artwork that is able to transform one's world. He states that the person who experiences a great tragedy »recognizes himself in his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate« (*ibid.*: 128). He continues, »To see that ›this is how it is‹ is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with the new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives« (*ibid.*). In other words, a tragic play has the ability to impart knowledge onto the spectators in such a way that their worldviews are changed by the knowledge that they gain from the experience of the artwork. The truth of the work of art speaks to the spectators, and this results in a more expansive view of life and of the world at large.

Expanding our vision beyond Greek tragedy into art in general, we can say that Gadamer's way of situating art in ontology, as opposed to aesthetics, provides an alternative avenue for persons (especially contemporary Westerners) to understand art in the modern period. This is especially appropriate for the genre of *shan shui* art that has come to play such a significant role in Chinese culture. As Francois Jullian notes, »The Chinese painter, or at least the literati painter [...] is not inclined to depict« (Julian 2009: 189).¹¹ Rather, Chinese literati painters aimed to convey meanings in their artworks to open up new perspectives for spectators. Of the Chinese literati painters, perhaps the most famous historical group are the Four Yüan Masters and one of the most famous artworks in the *shan shui* tradition comes from Yüan Master Wang Meng. Viewing one of Wang Meng's masterpieces from the Gadamerian perspective provides those embracing a contemporary Western aesthetic sensibility with an appropriate sense of the role in which art can play in our contemporary lives by providing an ontological, rather than aesthetic, understanding of the artwork.

III The Artwork as an Event of Truth

The painting attached¹² is titled ›Hermit Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains‹ (青卞隱居圖) by Wang Meng (王蒙), a Chinese painter from the fourteenth century. If



¹¹ F. Jullian, *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject Through Painting*, J. M. Todd (trans.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

¹² This painting can be found in Fong (1992: 462).

one, especially as a contemporary Westerner, were to come across this painting today in the Shanghai Museum among other paintings and sculptures, one would probably simply regard it as an aesthetically pleasing landscape. However, this is not the way in which *shan shui* art functioned in the Chinese world for most of its history. In speaking of Daoist art (of which *shan shui* is representative), Wu Hung notes that what we group together as ›art‹ was actually seen as interconnected integral elements of the lives of the people in Ancient China. He states:

The term ›art‹ [...] means ›visual culture‹: the different kinds of visual forms produced by a group of people who were linked together by a shared language, shared ideas and behavior, and a common sense of identity. (Wu 2000: 77)¹³

In other words, works of art were seen as the various aspects of culture that united a community. When this particular painting was created hundreds of years ago, there was not a separate realm of existence that people referred to as ›art‹ like we have now. Rather, paintings like this along with other works of art were seen as human phenomena that informed people's worlds and played pivotal roles in uniting people into a common community. Just as Greek tragedy helped to form the patterns of human experience for the ancient Greek people, Chinese art functioned as an ontological linchpin for Chinese people in that it imparted meaning into peoples' lives.

This particular artwork was painted in 1366 by Wang Meng, the youngest of the Four Yüan Masters from fourteenth Century China. As Richard Vinograd notes, ›The year 1366, when the *Pien Mountains* scroll was painted, was dominated in southeastern China by the ongoing struggle for military and political ascendancy over the region and, ultimately, all of China‹ (Vinograd 1982: 4).¹⁴ The Yüan Dynasty was a time in which the Mongols ruled the Chinese people, and many Chinese persons struggled granting their allegiance to

Mongol rule. Wang Meng was part of the literati who famously refused to serve the Mongolian rulers, a group we now refer to as the Four Yüan Masters. These literati withdrew from political life to live their lives as hermits. Wang Meng would often sign his name as the hermit or the woodcutter of the *Qingbian* Mountains, the place he fled in order to escape Mongolian rule. In this particular painting, which is widely regarded as his masterpiece and a fitting representative of the *shan shui* genre, he recalls a past of living in harmony with nature that is no longer afforded to people living in his age due to the military unrest. Vinograd states, ›The *Pien Mountains* scroll would [...] have been a depiction of a retreat no longer secure against the confusion of the age‹ (*ibid.*: 6). Max Loehr notes that ›the overwhelmingly grand and complicated mountain landscapes [...] had their origins in actual impressions or studies of the woods and gorges where [he] loved to dwell‹ (Loehr 1959: 150).¹⁵ The Four Yüan Masters fastidiously studied the landscapes in which they dwelt in order to represent them in a realistic manner. Wang Meng's energetic brush strokes beautifully portray the landscape of his place of dwelling. However, it would be shortsighted to view this painting by Wang Meng as simply a representation of a beautiful landscape. Rather, this landscape painting is embedded in the time it was painted and expresses a truth about the world in which it was created.

Chinese landscape painting dates back to the Six Dynasties period (220–618), and *shan shui* painting first arises during the fifth century.¹⁶ As Ouyang Xiao notes, ›Chinese *Shanshui* painting, viewed as the highest form of visual art in its culture, has flourished for over 1500 years as an established genre. It has been influenced by human presence in nature ever since, and in return it has nurtured the Chinese understanding of nature‹ (Xiao 2014: 91).¹⁷ Since *shan shui* literally means ›mountain water,‹ the landscapes of mountains and

¹³ H. Wu, ›Mapping Early Taoist Art: The Visual Culture of Wodoumi Dao,‹ in *Taoism and the Arts of China*, S. Little, and S. Eichman (eds.), Chicago and Berkeley: The Art Institute of Chicago with the University of California Press, 2000, pp. 77–94.

¹⁴ R. Vinograd, ›Family Properties: Personal Context and Cultural Pattern in Wang Meng's *Pien Mountains* of 1366,‹ *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 13, 1982, pp. 1–29. Note that Vinograd calls the painting *Pien Mountains* and not *Qingbian mountains*. This is an older way in which to refer to the painting utilizing the Wade-Giles system, as opposed to the Pinyin system I am utilizing.

¹⁵ M. Loehr, ›A Landscape Attributed to Wen Cheng-ming,‹ *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 22, 1959, pp. 143–152.

¹⁶ For a history of the beginnings of *shan shui* art, see A. C. Soper, ›Early Chinese Landscape Painting,‹ *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 23, 1941, pp. 141–164.

¹⁷ O. Xiao, ›Detachment and Reunion: Travel and Human Presence in Landscape,‹ in *Landscape and Travelling East and West: A Philosophical Journey*, H-G. Moeller and A. Whitehead (eds.), London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. Those interested in the history of Chinese landscape painting should consult Michael Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979.

streams are essential features of this particular style of art. Historically speaking, we can account for the fact that mountains play such a large role in Chinese landscape art due to the Daoist influence of this genre. As Miranda Shaw notes, Chinese landscape artworks typically embody Daoist ideals and concepts. She states, »the theme of nature in [D]aoism [includes] a quest for naturalness, spontaneity, and primordial harmony with nature [as well as] physical isolation in the mountains« (Shaw 1988: 190).¹⁸ Mountains are prominent in Daoist art because they were said to have special qualities that other landscapes lacked. Stephen Little notes, »Mountains were venerated in China as numinous pivots connecting the human mind and celestial realms. Mountains were also seen as places in the terrestrial landscape where the primordial energy (*qi*) that created the world was particularly strong and refined« (Little 2000: 17).¹⁹

In order to understand this, we have to take a brief look at what *qi* (氣) means in the Daoist context. Roger Ames and David Hall state that »*qi* is both the animating energy and that which is animated. There are no ›things‹ to be animated; there is only the vital energizing field and its focal manifestations« (Ames, and Hall 2003: 63).²⁰ The Daoists believe that all of nature is a complex array of flows of energy. Human beings, as fundamentally *natural* creatures, are seen as energy circuits that can increase their flows of energy by putting themselves in situations in which the *qi* levels are particularly high.²¹ The mountains were seen as places in which the energy levels are higher than other places, so people were urged to wander in the mountains. This is precisely why many mountains came to be seen as sacred when Daoism turned into a religion. The particular scroll that we are considering probably had religious connotations for its original audience. The solitary wanderer in the bottom, right-hand corner of the painting most likely acts as a model for people who want to get in touch with the vital energy fields of the mountains. This was not only an activity cherished by Wang Meng himself, but also a way of being

¹⁸ M. Shaw, »Buddhist and Taoist Influences On Chinese Landscape Painting,« *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 49, 1988, pp. 183–206.

¹⁹ S. Little, *Taoism and the Arts of China*, S. Little and S. Eichman (eds.), Chicago and Berkeley: The Art Institute of Chicago with the University of California Press, 2000.

²⁰ R. T. Ames, and D. L. Hall, *Daodejing: Making this Life Significant: A Philosophical Translation*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2003.

²¹ One can still find this belief in the modern practice of *feng shui*, which evolved out of Daoism.

for Chinese persons for centuries. Amidst political and military unrest, Wang Meng suggests that we embrace the mountains to get in touch with our vital energies and embrace spontaneity. The brush strokes themselves evoke the energy of the mountains. As Joan Stanley-Baker notes, »in [...] Qingbian the central feature is the mountain in its twisting, surging energy [...] The brushwork in *Qingbian* [...] reveals a bouncy, relaxed hand with energetic yet supple wrist movement« (Stanley-Baker 1990: 169, 172).²²

Water is even more revered in Daoism than the mountains since it is regarded as the source of all life and seen as an appropriate model for one to base one's life. As Hans-Georg Moeller states in speaking of Daoism, »The ›river‹ of the world is the source of its fertility – all life emerges from water« (Moeller 2006: 21).²³ This is based on the great Daoist sage Laozi's own words:

Under heaven nothing is more soft and yielding than water.
Yet for attacking the solid and the strong, nothing is better.
It has no equal.
The weak overcome the strong;
The supple can overcome the stiff.
Under heaven everyone knows this,
Yet no one puts it into practice. (Lao Tsu 1972, Chap. 78)²⁴

When water flows over a rock, the rock seems to dominate the water since the water forms to the rock and does not seem to affect it in any obvious way. However, through time, the water erodes the rock and thereby overcomes it. For Daoists, water teaches us to live our own lives in that we are supposed to embrace the natural flow of things, rather than fighting against them. By molding ourselves to our surroundings as the water molds itself to the rock, we adopt a fitting stance towards them. As is typical of the *shan shui* genre, the multiple streams that we find in Wang Meng's painting show an appreciation for the flow of water amidst the mountains and an ability to bring forth the flow of the water into the painting. Stanley-Baker, speaking specifically of the water in the painting, provides the follow-

²² J. Stanley-Baker, »Repainting Wang Meng: Problems in Accretion,« *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 50, 1990, pp. 161–231).

²³ H.-G. Moeller, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

²⁴ Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, G. F. Feng, and J. English (trans.), New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

ing analogy: »Like a dancer who has conquered gravity and for whom no twist or turn can cause imbalance, the brush of Wang Meng displays a particular bio-rhythm« (Stanley-Baker 1990: 221).

Just by this brief analysis of the significance of mountains and water, we can already see that the painting did not simply serve as a picturesque representation of a landscape in its original context. Instead, it clearly had a claim to truth for Chinese people that came across a painting such as this in a temple or other place of gathering. The painting told people how to live their lives. Viewing this scroll in some contemporary art gallery among other framed pictures and sculptures does not do justice to this integral function that the painting used to play. Instead, as Gadamer urges, a true appreciation of the artwork is one in which these ontological aspects come forth. It is important especially for those with a contemporary Western aesthetic sensibility viewing an artwork of the *shan shui* tradition to keep in mind this ontological significance. In speaking of the transportation of artworks from sacred places to museums, Gadamer avers, »By detaching all art from its connections with life and the particular conditions of our approach to it, we frame it like a picture and hang it up« (Gadamer 2006: 131).

IV Meaning in the Artwork

The question I would now like to pose is whether or not this landscape painting has any claim to truth for Westerners living in a contemporary context. While Gadamer (1996: 112) claims that a work of art is always bound to the community that it is connected with, he also argues that artistic creations, understood as events of truth, can inform people from other cultures with different worldviews. He states:

The artistic creations of other ages or distant cultures many times cannot reach us very easily. But in the long run, art in all its innumerable forms gains our acceptance, even the most strange. This demonstrates, I think, the absolute presentness of art to all times and places. An artwork is able to build bridges that reach beyond the enclosure and space in which it originated. (Gadamer 2007: 199)

In *Truth and Method*, the idea of building bridges between works of art and their interpreters comes out most clearly when he speaks of the »fusion of horizons« (*Horizontverschmelzung*) that occurs be-

tween a person reading a text from another historical period or another cultural context. In speaking of textual interpretation, Gadamer states that a person trying to understand a text of another historical period or cultural context is able to fuse his or her worldview, which consists of all of the beliefs and values that a person holds, with that of the text. The reason that ancient Chinese texts like the *Daodejing*, which is not only a guiding work for those inspired by Daoism like Wang Meng but is also the single most translated work in the history of the world next to the Bible, can have such a powerful effect on humans living in the contemporary Western world is precisely because our worldviews are expanded by being open to the text. The horizon of the text, which includes all of the wisdom and knowledge that lies within it, is able to fuse with a person's horizon if the person is able to allow the text to speak to him or her. Just as a person can fuse one's horizon with that of a text, a person can fuse one's horizon with a work of art and thereby expand one's worldview to include a new perspective. Guignon explains this process as follows: »the meaning of a work of art is determined by the way the work brings to light and makes manifest a dimension of life that is already meaningful, a significance that first becomes formulated and fully illuminated through its presentation in the work of art« (Guignon 2003: 44). While a text does this from the concepts that are relayed in reading it, an artwork does this by the underlying themes that provide meaning to the spectator.

The particular artwork we are considering is infused with many values that are foundational in Daoism. First, we see that the human beings in the painting take up hardly any space at all. The hiker in the bottom-right hand corner and the man engaged in meditation in the hut are found only with careful searching. The towering landscape of the mountain makes the human beings in the painting seem extremely small and insignificant. This is a common feature of Daoist art of the *shan shui* variety. The idea that comes through in making humans only a small aspect of the picture is the fact that human beings are not at all special in relation to nature. In most Western cultures, the tendency has been to regard human beings as somehow superior to nature. In Christianity, for example, the belief is that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, which gives them priority over all other things. This has led to the tendency to treat human beings at the center of the universe and treat nature as something to be conquered. Animals, plants, and the land as a whole come to be

viewed as resources that exist as material on hand for human beings to appropriate for their own use. Gadamer's teacher, Martin Heidegger, has perhaps the best summary of this tendency in the modern Western world when he states that »nature becomes a gigantic gas-line station, an energy source for modern technology and industry« (Heidegger 1977: 50).²⁵ As humans have become more and more advanced in their ability to control their natural surroundings, their sense of self-importance has increased and their respect for nature has diminished.

The Daoist outlook is fundamentally opposed to such anthropocentric tendencies. From the Daoist standpoint, human beings are seen simply as another aspect of nature rather than a conqueror over it. One can find this tendency throughout the two classical books of Daoism, the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. For instance, the *Daodejing* advises us to »love the world as your own self« (Lao Tsu 1972, Chap. 13) since »the universe is sacred« (*ibid.*, Chap. 29). Instead of viewing human beings as special creatures that reign over nature, Daoism urges humans to love nature as oneself and take care of the world as one takes care of oneself. These anti-anthropocentric tendencies are even more prevalent in the book of *Zhuangzi*. The emphasis here is on unifying oneself with nature rather than viewing oneself as opposed to it. *Zhuangzi* states that the Daoist sage is the person who »mingles with the myriad things and becomes one with them [because] worldly strife leads to chaos« (Chuang Tzu 1994: 7).²⁶ The goal is to view oneself as a natural creature coexisting with other creatures in a state of harmony. Any attempts to pit human beings up against nature will only lead to disorder. In another passage, *Zhuangzi* states, »In a world of ultimate integrity, men would dwell together with the birds and the beasts. They would come together in tribes with the myriad things« (*ibid.*: 81). Instead of viewing animals as merely sources of meat or fur, the Daoist views them as coexisting inhabitants of the land with just as much of a right to existence as other humans. Since human beings and non-human animals are both simply natural creatures living out their existence in the world, there is no reason to believe that humans have any priority over animals.

²⁵ M. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, J. M. Anderson, and H. Freud (trans.), New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977.

²⁶ Chuang Tzu, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*, V. H. Mair (trans.), Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

Just as animals have a right to existence, the Daoists believe that landscapes deserve to remain intact. Humans are not supposed to change the world to fit their interests but are rather supposed to live in a way that respects the integrity of the environments that they inhabit. This lesson comes through in the painting under consideration when we notice the way in which the buildings are integrated into the mountain landscape. The group of buildings on the left-hand portion of the painting blends in with the environment and acts as a fitting complement to the overarching landscape. This idea of setting up architecture in such a way that it complements nature, rather than compromises its stability, is based on two Daoist principles.²⁷ The first has to do with the earlier point that Daoists view the earth as something that is sacred and that therefore needs to be treaded upon lightly. Daoists recognize that all creatures depend on the stability and integrity of ecosystems, which means that any activity that threatens their integrity and stability is harmful for both the landscape and all the various creatures that depend on it as well.

The second principle that grounds this aspect of the painting has to do with the way in which Daoists view human practices in relation to nature. In speaking of the Daoist outlook, Hans-Georg Moeller explains, »The world of culture or of civilization was an intimate part of the natural world, or rather, there was no border drawn between nature and culture. Instead of such a distinction, one common order was believed to unite social and celestial space« (Moeller 2004: 24).²⁸ Just as birds build their nests in the appropriate places in a tree, human beings are supposed to build their dwellings in places that fit in with their environment. This is why one finds temples built into the natural framework of the mountains in many Daoist paintings and why one can go to China today and still find sculptures and architecture that blend into their natural surroundings.²⁹

²⁷ Interestingly, the concept of integrating artistic creations with nature is currently a project that some contemporary artists like Leslie Fry are working on. Cf. J. Wadler, »Sowing Enchantment,« *New York Times*, June 15, 2011.

²⁸ H.-G. Moeller, *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory*, Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2004.

²⁹ A good example of this occurs at Mount Tai, which is considered to be the holiest mountain in China. As one climbs the mountain, one finds sculptures placed in the trees and temples atop the peaks of the mountain as if they were meant to be there. Such artworks are not so much »ornaments« of the sacred mountains, but essential aspects that contribute to its nature.

The idea that the human elements of the world are supposed to blend with their natural surroundings is anchored in Daoist literature. Zhuangzi says that the ultimate way in which the world would be set up would be a world in which »there would be no paths and tunnels through the mountains, no boats or bridges to cross the swamps« (Chuang Tzu 1994: 81). The idea here is that humans should live in such a way that does not change the landscapes of their surrounding environment. Laozi also warns against trying to shape the world toward human interests. He states, »The world is ruled by letting things take their course. It cannot be ruled by interfering« (Lao Tsu 1972: 48). Instead of interfering with the world and with nature, Daoists »act on behalf of things but do not lay any claim to them« (Ames and Hall 2003: 2) because »those who would control things lose them« (*ibid.*: 64). What this means is that instead of manipulating the world to force it to meet human interests, the Daoists view themselves as integrating their living practices into their natural surroundings. In doing so, they are able to live in harmony with nature. This is probably one of the reasons that Wang Meng resists political and military conflict with the Mongols and chooses instead to live in seclusion in the mountains where he can live in harmony with nature.

These lessons that come forth in the painting were experienced as *true* to its original audience, and if this application of Gadamer's philosophy of art is correct, this artwork can provide a similar experience to us Westerners living in the modern period and, hopefully, transform those who experience it in a positive manner. In such a way, the experience of the artwork can come to gain a similar force as it did in its original context: one of ontological, and not merely aesthetic, significance.

V Conclusion

Gadamer's philosophy of art provides Westerners with a fitting conceptual framework from which to approach *shan shui* art in a manner similar to the way in which it functioned in its original context. I have argued that his framing of art as ontologically significant is a more appropriate way to understand *shan shui* art than the modern aesthetic conceptions of art by looking at Wang Meng's masterpiece, ›Hermit Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains.‹ Modern aesthetic

conceptions of art, inspired by modern science's subject/object ontology, emphasize accuracy in representation and the ability for an artwork to incite certain feelings on the part of the spectator. Gadamer's philosophy of art, on the other hand, views artworks as events of truth that highlight aspects of the world for those who experience them. Wang Meng's art brings forth essential truths about human existence according to Daoism that provide us insight about the proper place of human beings in the natural world. An appropriate appreciation of works such as this includes an openness on the part of the spectator to the truths that inhere in the artwork. If one is able to be open to such truths, one can fuse one's horizon with the themes of the artwork and thereby gain ontological insight. This fusion of horizons provides a proper appreciation based on the truths that come forth from the painting, rather than the aesthetic feelings that the painting elicits.

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