

# Landscape and Space:

## Comparative Perspectives from Chinese, Mesoamerican, Ancient Greek, and Roman Art

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*Landscape and Space: Comparative Perspectives from Chinese, Mesoamerican, Ancient Greek, and Roman Art* (2021) challenges its audience to think outside the normal parameters of how modern, western society defines ‘landscape’. Whilst the field of landscape archaeology is one of continued significance, when it comes to ancient art history, landscape is often

used for context rather than as the crux of any such theory or argument and has been examined far less in non-western cultures. This volume, as outlined by the volume’s editor Jaś Elsner in the Introduction, aims to close the gap between an object and its inherent awareness of its own location within a landscape. The volume aims to do this without a Eurocentric viewpoint, which

is often neglected in contemporary academic consideration (Elsner 2021, p.4). Moreover, the book takes a highly multidisciplinary approach towards its subject matter, through the inclusion of paintings, objects and physical topography within its four main chapters, that each address some form of art within landscape, within a respective ancient society.

The first of these discussions, ‘Inventing Wilderness: The Birth of Landscape Representation in China’ by Wu Hung, elaborates on Elsner’s Introduction by taking a similar stance on views regarding orientalism. Hung is concerned with the way European scholars have generally disregarded Chinese landscape art before the 10th century CE (Elsner 2021, 16) and uses his chapter to argue against this by analysing the configuration of scenery within art from this period, specifically bronze objects from the Eastern Zhou period. He particularly focuses upon a ‘bipartite composition’, whereby artists juxtaposed an image of wilderness with that of human civilisation in order to define each one another (Elsner 2021, pp.28-29). However, Hung asserts effectively against a binary comparison

and states that the dynamic between these two spatial entities is far more complex (Elsner 2021, p.41), with specific topographical components representing ideological landscapes, such as mountains as untamed spaces (Elsner 2021, p.43). With Hung’s particularly compelling identification of a multitude of diverse artistic components, he makes a convincing argument for the developed presence of landscape in Chinese art before the tenth-century.

The second segment of analysis, ‘Statues, Stelai, and Turning Posts in Greece, c.565–c.465 BCE The Limits of Iconography’, sees Richard Neer decipher the numerous ways space can be determined in late Archaic and early Classical Greece. By exploring the two possible purposes of the monument mentioned in Book 23 of the *Iliad*, the race post and the commemorative mortuary pillar (Elsner 2021, p.60), Neer explains how both effectively connect to the construction of space and the conceptual meanings consequently conveyed. Neer provides the reader with special focus on the deliberately ambiguous and overlapping vocabulary such as the various Greek semantics

surrounding *sēma* (signs) and *terma* (posts) (Elsner 2021, p.61, p.63) and corresponding iconography, for example the various purposes of small Athenian pillars (Elsner 2021, pp.85-90). Neer's message in a simplistic sense is that vocabulary and the names of specific objects correlate to a spatial awareness and construction of space which is mirrored in the iconography and vice versa. Unlike Hung (and Brittenham's next chapter) this section of the book does not touch upon the messages concerning eurocentrism as mentioned in the previous chapter and Introduction, however it does follow the pattern of reconsideration of landscape components. Its inclusion instead serves to corroborate the notions of human interaction being a large part of what constitutes landscape – Neer's analysis argues effectively for the existence of multiple dimensions within the human experience of landscape. The overall discussions differ in that Hung's analysis centres upon the establishment of expression and visual representation of mythologies, within the two-dimensional cultural context of landscape depiction, whereas Neer's chapter explores the navigation of

physical space (as opposed to its representation). Both scholars put across critically evaluative work on very different subjects, hence it is difficult to compare the two in any sense other than that they both successfully persuade the reader to reconsider preconceived ideas about landscape.

Claudia Brittenham's chapter, 'Locating Landscape in Maya Painting', further analyses the western-centred view typically afforded to landscape discussion and convincingly maintains landscape was not a still vista but interactive. Brittenham explains that we are not meant to consider 'landscape' as a background or large scenic depiction in Mayan art, as topographical elements are portrayed in an animated form, which is often integral to the scenes they appear in (Elsner 2021, pp.103-105). She uses murals from the walls of a variety of Mayan sites including, the Bonampak Structure 1, a temple called Pinturas Sub- 1 from San Bartolo and scenes depicted on objects to explore this representation. Contrasting with Hung's chapter, Brittenham concludes the Maya captured landscape through a tripartite lens, comprising of the city, agricultural lands and the forest (Elsner

2021, p.112) yet similarly to the ancient Chinese art, these elements all interact with each other. Both Hung and Brittenham's essays serve to confirm how landscape is far from static in multiple cultures. Additionally, Brittenham's chapter is especially interesting, due to conceivably larger presence of historical context and ends on a cliff-hanger, 'instead, there is territory, ripe for conquest' (Elsner 2021, p.125), thus alluding to the colonial impact mentioned previously on Mayan art. Brittenham does well to both acknowledge, and yet not concentrate on this topic, which has been substantially covered elsewhere, and thereby successfully avoids taking away from her specific analysis on landscape representation.

Finally, in Jaś Elsner's chapter, 'Space–Object–Landscape. Sacred and "Sacro-idyllic" from Dunhuang via Stonehenge to Roman Wall-painting', he discusses the textual and 'formless' pagodas from Dunhuang and then contrasts this with the 'absolutely material and instantiated set of objects in actual sites' within the British Isles (Elsner 2021, p.150). He begins with Chinese Pagodas and explores their

form and the way the viewer navigates it on the page (Elsner 2021, pp.134-149) before turning his attention to Stone Henge and the Castlerigg stone circle and the natural changes they are subjected to, due to their artificial placement within a landscape (Elsner 2021, pp.149-155). Next, he considers the Bewcastle Cross and the way we have no idea of its impact in its original, constructed environment as later man-made structures sprung up around it and how we thus lack the ability to comprehend its meaning within a landscape (Elsner 2021, pp.155-158). Then, Elsner concludes with Roman frescoes, including some from the Villa at Boscotrecase, near Pompeii and their ability to reflect a very specific place and time, even if they capture an image that is completely fictional (Elsner, 2021, pp.160-174).

This chapter is arguably the hardest to follow out of all those included in the volume, largely due to the greater need for prior background knowledge to make sense of the various art-historical elements, namely Buddhist art in conjunction with British stone circles and monuments and then Roman paintings. However, the chapter

helps to bring notions from the previous three authors together by effectively drawing on various ways landscape can be considered interactive. Elsner constructively unites the work of all the contributors together in their fundamental articulation of an abstract landscape and points to Brittenham's analysis on pictograms, Neer's discussion of epigraphic space and the conjuring of a running track, as well as the representative 'essential forms' explored by Hung (Elsner 2021, p.149) together. Likewise, by doing so under the second part of his chapter, Elsner skilfully presents his own thoughts as unique and full-standing in their own-right and does not automatically designate them as a way to summarise the other concepts expressed. Overall, he manages to explore the term 'landscape' (Elsner 2021, p.132), form and the meaning of 'emptiness' within a landscape captured on a page, specifically the arrangement of words (Elsner 2021, pp.140-142), the impact of changing topography on a particular landscape site (Elsner 2021, pp.153-155) and debates the concept of 'sacro-idyllic' and its interpretations as decided by prior art-historians in great detail

(Elsner 2021, pp.161-174). He covers these diverse topics with the upmost precision and although they appear very different at first, Elsner highlights the human interaction with landscape in these various forms, both in 2D art and regarding 3D monumental structures. Subsequently he finds that individual or societal perception is what generates the meaning, for example through the movement of the text (arrangement) and recitation (Elsner 2021, p.142).

As well as the variety of artefacts covered, within Elsner's chapter, he appears to take an almost philosophical approach towards the concept of landscape through his method of tackling the discussion from a variety of standpoints. On the contrary, Hung's focus is evidently from a strong art history perspective, a prominent feature of Neer's discussion is the linguistics and Brittenham includes larger portions of historical narrative. With topics covered in the volume being so vast in scope, close examination of specific subject matter works in the volume's favour as it would be impossible to include material on landscape and space from every ancient civilisation. However, opposing Eurocentrism

within the field of study appears to be fairly central within the Introduction and even first chapter, whilst the second chapter does not mention it. Likewise, in the Introduction, Elsner specifically establishes that some forms of Persian and Indian art are covered less than western or Chinese art (Elsner 2021, p.3), and, therefore, if the topic was revisited these areas should be given the upmost attention. It is fair to say that not every chapter needed to be dedicated to this discussion and the chapters that do cover this theme, cover it thoroughly, yet it would be nice to push for this in the future. Alternatively, the Greek and Roman coverage was original and may act as a contextual anchor for readers who are trying to branch out to areas of history less commonly taught. The familiarity of using an extract from the *Iliad* is particularly noteworthy, as many who are not directly involved in the topic of art history would likely be aware of the context.

Ultimately, all authors seem to agree to some extent that landscape should be interpreted as more of an experience, rather than a 2D method of artistic visualisation as the modern 'west' would typically define it. The

relationship between human settlements and the wilderness in ancient China and the animated portrayal of topographical features in Mayan art positively constitute a reevaluation of Eurocentric landscape conception and acknowledge the diverse ways societies may interpret their relationships with the landscape. While the multiple elucidations of a singular monument or marker in a Greek landscape, the interactive arrangement of Buddhist pictorial pagodas and the interplay between British standing stones and other iconographic structures with the landscape they were purposefully situated in, all work well to substantiate the notion of interplay between people and landscape. This interaction is the major implication illustrated by each chapter as much of the other information is very specific regarding the society that it came from. There are little similarities that can be identified in each and every section, for example certain features (such as mountains) within locales indicating an untamed space in Chinese (Elsner 2021, p.41) and Mayan art (Elsner 2021, p.132). However, these inconsistencies are to be largely expected as the civilisations covered vary completely in

time and location, whilst the case studies are very specific and ultimately do not take away from the conclusions reached. Overall, the contributors of this study effectively argue the case that even two-dimensional renderings of landscape signify an interactive relationship between people and the environment. The combination of different cultures serves to express the diversity of landscape articulation and indeed the variety of ways individuals and whole societies may experience it.