

Explaining The Inexplicable

Welcome. Thank you for joining me, and for your attention, which I hope to reward.

This is the first in a series of talks through which I will explore the nature of the creative process, in all its manifold, mysterious, and culturally vital aspects. It is intended for all, whether as artists or audience, who remain even a little confused by the art world - while, at the same time, being inexorably drawn to it.

My aim in this first talk is to explain the inexplicable. I hope to do that not just at a sufficient level to intrigue but to enlighten too.

Let me start with two key propositions. Firstly, art is a vital resource for sapient intelligence, of which humanity is currently the pinnacle. And secondly, humanity is hard-wired to pursue a quest for some level of transcendent meaning. We do so through various domains, most notably through religion, philosophy, science and art. If we expand our definition of art to 'any creative response to experience,' it soon becomes apparent that art is the only one of the four capable of subsuming the other three. That is why it is so important to us. That is why we are, and always have been, so powerfully drawn to it.

Creativity is our most powerful tool for not just expanding but evolving our consciousness. More than that, it is our broadest and most inviting path to Enlightenment, however we care to define that term as we proceed along it.

In a dangerous world, art offers solace and salvation. Just look around you. Where we once poured our treasure and skills into building towering monuments to the gods, we are replacing them today with towering monuments to art – our museums and other art spaces. Today, even office buildings are becoming works of art in their own right – or at least, aspiring to do so. Where we once bent the knee and listened intently to the priesthood, today we revere and respect artists and other key participants in the art world. In the next few minutes, I hope to explain why. More than that, I hope convince you that art's central role has long been misunderstood in the West, and that we need to start viewing art as a whole in a completely different light.

The focus of these talks is Chinese art, specifically the allied arts of painting and calligraphy. I hope to demonstrate the long-standing, precocious sophistication and maturity of Chinese art, but in order to do so sensibly we must first deal with the broader context in which it exists.

What I propose here is a broad, theoretical re-assessments of the nature, purpose and means of *all* art, in order to set about resolving the current crisis of confusion in the global art world.

For reasons that will become apparent, I have long believed that there is an urgent need to rethink our entire approach to art, starting

from its fundamental role in evolving consciousness. It is the nature of a complete theoretical shake-up of anything – and particularly of something as complex and important as art – that we need to make some radical adjustments, even completely overturn some well-established beliefs. We need to build a new framework of understanding. The conundrum in doing this, of course, is that we must construct each part of the framework sequentially, piece by piece, yet the overall meaning may not become entirely clear until all are in place. So please bear with me on what I hope will be an interesting and provocative journey.

Let's start with what, to many, may be the most radical adjustment in my proposed new framework. I am convinced that over the past century we have grossly overstated the global importance of the modern western revolution in the arts. I do not for a moment deny the dazzling discoveries and exciting outcomes as the many artistic -isms gave way to each other in a tsunami of creativity. Nor can I sensibly deny the global impact of this revolution – both are obvious.

More objectionable, though, is the equally undeniable fact that western art continued the cultural hegemony of the West just as its material and technological might began to fail. The power of a century of exciting innovation at the surface of art brushed aside any sensible context for understanding the art of the rest of the world, robbing us of a clear perspective on Chinese art. By the mid twentieth century, it seemed inevitable that the West would achieve effective global

dominance, enabling a hubristic sense that its revolution in the arts was as globally meaningful and advanced as its technological might.

It wasn't! From all but purely local perspectives, it was a revolution against a specifically western tyranny. And despite its global impact, it had far less relevance for other cultures, particularly that of China. Unfortunately but understandably, the rest of the world – and we have to include China here – was so dazzled by the resulting art that they bought into the grander illusion.

I cannot over-emphasize the importance of this point. It underlies the confusion that permeates the entire art world. So if you take nothing else from this talk, remember this idea. It changes everything, like the first domino that brings down the rest in collapsing sequence.

Let's start to deal with this problem by looking at one of three weasel-words I shall be challenging: the term 'modern.' There are major distinctions to be drawn between modern as a chronological term; modernism as the description of a movement; and modernity as a description of its outcome. The distinction between modern and modernism may have been barely significant in the twentieth century, when it became current in the art-world, but now becomes increasingly paradoxical and, therefore, confusing. This is not just my own perspective; Jonathan Hay in his book on Shitao, the seventeenth century eccentric Chinese artist, sums up the problem by recognizing the underlying modernity of his paintings and, therefore, by extension, those of other artists going back several centuries in Chinese painting.ⁱ

And this is exactly why this matters. The ill-conceived use of the word ‘modernism’ to describe the revolution confusingly shifted the emphasis from *what* was happening to *when* it was happening. This then required the term ‘post-modernism’ to describe what it evolved into. And it led to an uncomfortable relationship with the broader field of cultural studies, where both ‘modern’ and ‘modernism’ were already current terms, albeit more broadly applied and, in some disciplines, stretching its meaning back several centuries. Conflating the cultural range of meaning of the terms and their aesthetic equivalent, greatly augmented the confusion.

However firmly entrenched, we would be better off in the art world by rejecting the term entirely in so far as it implies anything beyond chronology. If we really are stuck with it – and I suspect that we are – then it would be more efficient to confine ‘modern’ and ‘modernism’ to their chronological sense - which, in the West, roughly equates to the twentieth century.

This then leaves us with the separate idea of modernity. Since this refers to *what* happened, regardless of *when*, stripped of its chronological significance, it describes a stage in the evolution of art. But if we do continue to use ‘modernity’, then we need to take it one step further. We need to recognize it as something very specific – that stage in art when, freed from its historical bonds and autonomous as a vehicle for evolving consciousness, art becomes fully mature and works at its most efficient level.

This may sound like mere wordplay, but is of incalculable value in creating a new lens through which to view global art. In particular, it would allow the true modernity of centuries-old Chinese art, and provide much greater clarity on the true nature of global art. This perceptual shift is particularly necessary with Chinese art, which has in fact, been fully mature, highly efficient and fully emancipated in performing its highest role, for more than a thousand years in the visual arts and even longer in other art-forms.

With this in mind, let me offer you an *amuse-tête*, the philosophical equivalent of the gastronomic *amuse-bouche*. Silent music, of the kind so famously created by John Cage and others as part of the western artistic revolution, *was already being discussed in Chinese aesthetics at the time of Confucius*, in the late first millennium BCE. It was incorporated in theories of the arts by the Song dynasty in the twelfth century and, perhaps more to the point, was widely understood by then. It may well have seemed revolutionary to western critics, but the Chinese got there more than two thousand years earlier.

That's just one example of why we cannot afford to overlook China when it comes to discussions about global art. There are many others. Consider this fact, for example. In China, anything considered art has long been recognized as a conduit between the Dusty World, as the Chinese refer to everyday reality, and the transcendent realm of the Dao, or Buddha-nature. For a very long time, art has been seen not just as important objects but as a critical vehicle for modifying our consciousness.

That seems worth investigating further. And it's one of the reasons why I am proposing a rethink of the global importance of the modern western revolution in the arts. Without in any way denying its merits, global impact or local cultural significance, we can integrate it into a clearer and frankly long overdue perspective on the Holy Grail of art theory: an equivalent to a theory of everything, one that is equally applicable to any art from any culture at any point in time.

On that note, let's begin to get our aesthetic ducks in a row.

The first step is to overcome any lingering sense that art is somehow a separate, discrete entity capable of being dealt with efficiently by a separate theory of art – in effect, to be sealed away in a box labelled 'Art' and periodically examined as if it were a geological artefact. It is so intrinsically linked to our consciousness – both as creators and audiences – that it cannot be viewed as anything but a critical, deeply integrated component of our collective experience as humans. We need, in short, to replace outdated, separate theories of art with a single overarching Theory of Art and Consciousness.

As I noted earlier, humanity has four main vehicles for evolving and heightening consciousness - religion, philosophy, science and art. While we tend to see them as separate if often overlapping disciplines, their common ground in serving the evolution of consciousness unites them. And unity, of course, is one of the characteristics of the transcendent state of understanding to which we aspire. There are many

aspects of consciousness, and the science involved remains tentative compared to other scientific fields, but we are fortunate in that we can focus on the *results* of consciousness rather than on its biology or history.

For our purposes, we need to deal with just two different modes of consciousness. Both are vital to understanding our other vehicles of comprehension, and are particularly illuminating in dealing with religion. These two fundamental modes – ways of knowing, if you will – are incompatible but complementary, and together allow us to envisage a fully evolved and integrated consciousness.

The first of these two is the intellectual mode – in short, the rational, reasoning faculties of mind. This was born the moment our ancient ancestors were first able to separate self from environment – to think of ourselves as individuals, different from our fellow humans but also from other animals and our environment – and deal with each independently. This was also when the intellect's sibling twin, ego, arrived on the scene. We are all familiar with this way of knowing, since it is our daily, default mode – we could not function without it. We take it for granted and, often, grant it more bandwidth than it warrants – even to the point of tyranny, as we shall see.

The other way of knowing lies beyond the intellect. As such it is ineffable, undifferentiated, unified. It is accessible to all, but only as direct, personal experience. This is harder to convey, of course, since any explanation or description of it can only exist within the intellectual mode – thus raising the conundrum of explaining the inexplicable. But it is worth pausing here to consider this phrase. Once the theoretical

structure for understanding art that I propose is in place, it will become eminently clear that explaining the inexplicable is as concise a definition of the highest role of all art as we could expect!

While this transcendent way of knowing is difficult to explain, glimpses of it have been common and universal across cultures for as long as we have been able to record our experiences, so we can at least gain entry to the concept through them. It comes to us in quiet moments – immersed in the grandeur of nature, for example, or in any meditative context. But it occurs in noisier, busier moments too. Consider music as perhaps the most widely experienced example. When listening to particularly effective music we become drawn in until, suddenly, we lose all sense of self and environment. We ‘become’ the music. We are carried away, quite literally in a psychological sense, into the undifferentiated, experiential mode.

This is our other way of knowing, even if it is no more than a brief glimpse of it. It is a therapeutic, delightful moment, but it is then usually marginalized by ensuing intellectual interpretation as nothing *more* than that. In extreme cases, our intellects may interpret it a different way – as divine revelation, for example, if the experience is deeper and set in the context of an established belief system. Either way, in these self-consciousness-transcending glimpses we experience a tiny taste of our other way of knowing, regardless of how they are subsequently squandered by the soon-regained intellect.

If, on the other hand, we recognize these glimpses for what they are, they can lead to a complete, paradigm-shifting perspective on

everything – widely recognized as the Enlightenment experience. In the East, this is equal to the attainment of Buddha-nature, Atman, or the Dao. The names we use for this state are incidental – since the state itself is unified, they all refer to the same transcendent state beyond the reach of intellectual definitions. Undifferentiated unity is as indivisible as it is inexplicable.

Countless writers, artists, scientists and philosophers have observed and commented on both these aspects of consciousness. Take Wordsworth as just one example. He described the first faculty as ‘the meddling intellect’. As dismissive and irritable as this may sound, without it he could not have become famous, nor could he have consciously differentiated his ‘host of golden daffodils’ from anything else. And for the immensely popular novelist Philip Pullman, his shift to the second way of knowing was not triggered by a Beethoven symphony or a Breugel painting but happened as he crossed a busy main road.

The incompatibility of these two modes arises out of the fact that either the intellect is engaged or it is not, so they cannot be simultaneously experienced. They are nonetheless complementary in that the intellect is essential in recognizing the existence of and aspiring to the transcendent mode. And once that mode is attained, the intellect is the only tool we have for subsequently considering and communicating it. Since this transcendent mode exists beyond explanation, the intellect must struggle as best it can to explain the inexplicable, often failing in the process.

But we can attempt analogies and metaphors in order to convey what it is like, and conceptualize its potential. The transcendent mode is, quite literally, meaningless without intellectual interpretation, so neither, despite the term ‘transcendent,’ is independently the higher way of knowing. It is the realization and integration of *both* that is the highest mode. And it is this that I propose as necessary ground for the fulfilment of our consciousness potential. Without both components, we cannot be fully realised individuals – and indeed, I would argue, as a species.

The next important step in constructing the proposed theory lies in different cultural approaches to our main vehicles of evolving consciousness. The approach to them differs radically depending upon the relative weight given within any particular culture to one or other of these two ways of knowing.

In the West, since the Greeks, we have increasingly relied upon the intellect. To the point when, in the aptly named Age of Reason, reaching its peak in the eighteenth century, intellectual rationality was considered to be the only sensible response to experience. That stance has softened considerably since, but remains dominant in the West and wherever else western hegemony has penetrated. While it is sensible to see the intellect as the means of considering and expressing experience, it does not follow that it should be granted autonomy or autocracy, since the direct, undifferentiated mode is beyond its control. And because of this, while intellect is the only means of *expressing* experience, it can only ever be a subset of the whole.

Compare and contrast that with the very different Eastern perspective. In China, India and elsewhere the transcendent mode has always been seen as an essential element in the fulfilment of consciousness. In the West, while recognized to some extent throughout history, it has tended to become increasingly marginalized and often derided or denied completely. Globalization has rendered such generalized distinctions between cultures less clear-cut than they were a century or more ago, but many – I would argue *most* – cultures still don't fully recognize the transcendent way of knowing. They are, in effect, trying to understand consciousness armed only with a handful of the tools they need to do so.

Does that matter? Well, yes! The relative weight given to these two ways of knowing has a major impact on how a culture responds religiously, philosophically, scientifically and aesthetically.

In religion, primitive cultures are united and tend toward animism – the belief in separate spirits for all phenomena that are not as yet understood intellectually. Animism then tends to evolve into polytheism, the belief in separate gods. And in the West, with its gathering, binary tendency towards fragmentation, it then shifts again towards monotheism, where an eternally separate God, a higher being, is seen as the pinnacle of consciousness and understanding.

So monotheistic cultures effectively outsource higher meaning. Instead of referring to an Indian call-centre to resolve real-world problems, we dump our highest aspirations and desires into the lap of God.

In cultures where the transcendent mode governed, it led to non-god, transcendent religions such as Daoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, where a higher *state* of being, rather than an actual higher being, is recognized as the pinnacle of meaning. The proliferation of minor deities, gurus, saints and sages that arise from such fundamentally philosophical systems, are then seen as no more than guides – lower-level religious structures required to help the mystified to deal with the mystery – and, of course, keep the priesthood busy, revered, and well-funded.

So for our purposes we can see the West and China as representing two poles of cultural bias. It's worth noting here that I do not intend the term 'bias' in any derogatory sense, recognizing that it is an inevitable result of intellect. An unbiased intellect is an oxymoron.

The Chinese saw the intellect as a useful tool, but were more focused on the importance of transcending its limitations, directly realizing the transcendent mode, and integrating the two. The intellect was seen as means rather than ultimate meaning. It was a tool, or rather an exponentially expanding kit of tools. As useful as it was, it was the stage-coach, not the driver. In China, an enormous range of technologies was invented and developed over the centuries, from paper to the mechanical clock, and gunpowder. But in China, science was seen as simply part of a broader search for meaning. It was often less practically applied than in the West, where it was aimed primarily at improving life in the here-and-now, which was the main approach to such nascent science as arose among the ancient Greeks of the first

millennium BCE. However useful science was considered to be, the Chinese tended to see philosophy and art as the purer forms of the creative response to experience and, therefore, as more useful domains.

In China, in a gathering process from the first millennium BCE, whatever was considered to be art, was recognized as being a powerful tool for self-cultivation. It was applied as such to educating the cultural elite, although ancient perception of what art meant was somewhat different than its modern interpretation. Indeed, the definition of what came to be recognized as art over the ensuing centuries was predicated upon recognition of this highest role. In the late Zhou dynasty, in the mid first millennium BCE, the six arts included archery, writing, horsemanship, rites, music and arithmetic, but not painting. We might be better off translating these as ‘talents’ rather than arts, but the precise definition is less important than their purpose, a focus on which led to their developed to maturity and to high levels of efficiency in their loftiest role long before we arrived at the same point in the West.

Another key element of the proposed theoretical re-jig rests in our approach to how we theorize about art, how we set about understanding it. Once high art with its transcendent role is recognized, its scope is infinitely expanded. We begin to shift our approach from a straightforward, product-based aesthetic, focused narrowly on the physical *products* of art, to one based on the overall *process* – and to the purpose of that process in evolving consciousness.

The first approach recognizes artistic vision, transformed by acquired artistic techniques into a physical work of art, regardless of the

art-form. In that object-based theoretical approach, the art-object (or performance) is seen as the end-product of the process of art. The audience is seen as *separate*, a happy beneficiary rather than a participant.

In the more sophisticated, process-based approach, the audience is fully involved. The first stage, culminating in the physical work of art, remains the same. But instead of expecting the audience to be a separate observer and claw its way back through the encoded languages of art in order to grasp, at second hand, a little of the artistic vision expressed, it is fully included. It continues the process by integrating the audience with its *own* creative techniques in responding to art, in order to fulfil the process of self-cultivation begun by the artist.

In the old object based approach, the goal of the process of art is obscured, allowing multiple, co-existing interpretations, which can be confusing. But in process-based art theory, linked to the evolution of consciousness, the goal is obvious. The *entire process* becomes the art and the end product is self-cultivation towards a more enlightened state of consciousness and, ultimately, to Enlightenment with a capital 'E' – the paradigm-shifting goal of consciousness itself.

With this shift, the ultimate criterion for judging art then shifts too. We become focused not just on objects or techniques but on sagely depth of meaning; wisdom that grows exponentially as we become more deeply involved to speed both self-cultivation and, thereby, evolving collective consciousness. It may be conveyed *through* the art object but that is merely one aspect of the overall process, albeit a pivotal one in specifically granting access. But keep in mind that specific definition is

not what art is ultimately all about. Once we shift to process-based aesthetics, merging art and consciousness, specific definition exists on the lower rungs of the ladder of comprehension.

Only when art is recognized as one of our most efficient means of evolving consciousness, focused on process rather than product, can it become fully mature and efficiently fulfil its highest role.

Let me be clear: this does not deny any of its lower-level roles. There are many of those – decoration, religious or philosophical propaganda, social propulsion, and much more. We can continue to match the drapes, provide social grease and acceptance, store excess wealth, intellectually intrigue ourselves and others, and enjoy its other manifold aspects - all very useful rungs on our ladder of art. But what it is ultimately doing is providing a unifying role, a path to transcendent wisdom. In that it joins our other, more specific languages, although more efficiently than in most.

There are only two watershed moments in art: the first when it is recognized as a separate endeavour from the rest of existence – that is to say, it is produced *as* art; the second when it is fully emancipated. Then and *only* then, does it become fully mature. Whether the second happens as evolution or revolution depends upon how entrenched is the intellectual bias in a culture. Once the intellect becomes besotted by its own way of knowing, it reaches for autonomy and intellectual tyranny flourishes. In China the second phase was never constrained by intellectual tyranny, so the arts evolved naturally and were well established both practically and theoretically by the first millennium

BCE. In the West it was a revolution that took place very much later, from the late nineteenth into the middle of the twentieth century, although some art-forms offered earlier hints of what was to come.

To be clear, what I am suggesting is that the intellectual bias of the West has millennially constrained artistic development to maturity. Art became subservient to our other three vehicles, robbing it of the efficiency of independence, and to some extent marginalizing it. Uninvited to the banquet of consciousness, art was consigned to decorate the room and provide entertainment. To recognize the inequity of this situation, we only have to try to imagine civilization without the arts, without music, literature, and the visual arts, without architecture. Without all our creative means of grasping, expressing and storing understanding from generation to generation, civilization is inconceivable. It wouldn't exist. In this sense, civilization *is* art.

Art's subservience to religion is obvious and similar to its subservience to aspects of philosophy. Both dictate that art serve a purpose, with a range of subject matter deemed appropriate. Its primary meaning to religion and political philosophy rested in its efficiency as propaganda. Christianity, the dominant religion over the past millennium and a half in the West, demanded subjects that glorified its central figures and was a constant reminder of the presence of God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary - along with their saintly representatives. Philosophy, and particularly political philosophy, did the same for another range of cultural values. Both dictated suitable subject matter to reflect and encourage a preferred vision of humanity and its

environment, in order to establish what was to be glorified, what was proper, moral, desirable and acceptable - and, conversely, what was *not* - by way of admonition.

The popular still-life genre sums it up. In *Genesis*, the first book of the bible, God is claimed as making mankind in his own image and giving us dominion over all the bounties of the earth. That sets the scene for many of the artistic themes we still see and revere today. The still-life, with its picked fruit, plucked flowers, dead game, and hand-made artefacts, is a subtle representation of religious and philosophical propaganda. Art's subservience to science in the West is far less obvious, but far more pervasive. For centuries in mainstream, western visual art, anything depicted had to match the rationality of the scientific mind. A cathedral had to look like a cathedral; a haystack like a haystack; and a human figure sufficiently like the real thing to keep intact the focus on the all-important surface meaning. This reached its apogee with the Renaissance invention of scientific perspective, which then broadly governed pictorial art in the West for four centuries.

What happened recently in the modern western revolution in the arts was its final emancipation from this kind of constraining subservience, and its emancipation from the intellectual tyranny I described earlier. That was the underlying goal of the revolution. And it *was* a revolution, because the prevailing tyranny had become sufficiently entrenched and autocratic that it could be overturned by no other means.

Another aspect of current confusion is that the irony of *how* western artists revolted against tyranny has yet to be fully appreciated. In emancipating art, our western artists did so as the good scientists they had been raised to be! As they were banishing tyrannical rationality from the front door, they were inviting it in with open arms at the back door. They treated the revolution as a laboratory exercise, where the languages of art were separated in the old intellectual manner, and dealt with, initially, one by one. In the visual arts, these languages were subject matter, form, line, colour and texture. What the modern revolution did was to release all of these languages as independent equivalents to subject matter. And underlying these was another language that gained prominence: confidence. We need only consider a single language to understand the gist of what I am saying. In form, the process ended in a cul-de-sac for visual art - the blank white canvas. The idea of a school of blank white canvas painters quickly becomes satire. But while it was a cul-de-sac for visual art, it opened up a broad and inviting path to *conceptual* art - the art object vanishing completely – a vital key to grasping the nature of process-based aesthetic theory. In the revolution, -isms gave way to each other in dizzying waves of surface innovation. We then mistook these -isms for the revolution itself – whereas in fact, they were just skirmishes in the broader revolution against prevailing tyranny over the arts.

The lack of a sufficiently overarching theory of what was going on also led to other key misunderstandings amongst artists and audience alike. A revolution is against some form of tyranny in order to achieve a

perceived freedom. Perpetual revolution is an oxymoron, as Marx and Engels might have concluded had they lived long enough – down that road lies only the paradox of revolution against perpetual revolution.

So the West achieved its aims of emancipating art by the mid-twentieth century. But by then, and still clinging to the old product-based approach to art, everyone expected radical, modern, revolutionary art to be, henceforth, constantly innovative at the surface. That certainly led to valid and worthwhile art but, I'd argue, *despite* the prevailing wisdom rather than because of it.

I certainly do not lay claim to the belief that a Renaissance masterpiece is in any way inferior to a sixteenth-century Chinese painting, or that a shark in formaldehyde is trivial communication. Creative artists will always produce great art, under whatever constraints or misunderstandings they are culturally compelled to work – even transforming those constraints into useful inspiration. But the modern western confusion in the arts, by enshrining and then sanctifying surface innovation, has left its legacy. And that legacy is the invitation to banality. The comfortable, traditional, object-based approach to art – which worked well enough for centuries because we lacked loftier aspiration – is reflected in the modern focus on seeking constant novelty at the surface of the work of art.

Nor was the term 'modern' the only misleading term. 'Abstraction' is another. To the analytical western mind, with its preference for the binary, this was taken as the opposite of figuration, or mimetic, realistic depiction. It was, of course, but the term tended to keep the focus still

on the surface of visual art, not on its inner languages and underlying role. In China, once the visual arts had progressed through adolescence to full maturity – as an evolution from the end of the Han dynasty, in the third century CE – the syncretic mindset that arose from full recognition of the transcendent way of knowing simply shifted focus in the languages of visual art, rather than attempting to isolate them.

In China, pictorial focus shifted centuries ago from subject matter to the inner languages, but without entirely rejecting that subject matter. To the syncretic mind, to have done so would have seemed as foolish as choosing which leg to walk on. If we look a series of fourteenth century Chinese ink landscape paintings through the traditional western aesthetic prism, they can seem rather similar and even boring. Given surface subject matter, western eyes find it difficult to see past it to revel in the individual, powerful innovation in the abstract inner languages that are its true focus. Remove the prism, the distorting lens of prejudice, and we learn to see, and respond to the inner content of formal, excitingly abstract expressive, textural and colour concerns – it's worth remembering that shades of ink are considered colours in Chinese art. Chinese artists of the first millennium began to create wildly abstract expressive paintings of a deeply satisfying nature – indeed, also literally of 'deeply satisfying nature' given the focus on landscape. But without the capacity to reach beyond the surface language of subject matter to see the real art, it goes largely unrecognized through western eyes.

The third weasel word I want to discuss is 'tradition', so often used as a binary, polar opposite to 'modernity.' In the West, tradition is used

to define one side of the dividing line between the old art and the new, the adolescent and the mature. But such terms become utterly confusing when applied to Chinese art if we accept that at its core, it has been ‘modern’ by western standards for more than a thousand years of its ‘tradition.’

The tradition of Chinese painting stretches back millennia reaching full maturity more than a thousand years ago. The all-important art of calligraphy entertained maturity *two* thousand years ago. Such peaks and valleys as they has gone through since represent cycles of creativity and orthodoxy – and, more recently, the confusion of being confronted by the razzle-dazzle of modern western art and failing to grasp its underlying nature. If we view both traditions, and any other from around the globe, from a point of view of the maturity and role of art in the culture as the governing perspective; if we deal with relative maturity rather than using misleading terms like ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’; we can begin to resolve a great deal of the confusion in the global art world, past, present and future.

Once we have digested the theoretical overview I propose, we can move on to its application in more efficiently and clearly understanding not only the reality of the modern western revolution in the arts, but the arts of other cultures. Then, and only then, can we efficiently approach Chinese art.

Let me recap briefly the governing principles proposed here: Art is our most important means of self-cultivation and evolving consciousness. Its bandwidth of communication is not only vast, but

culturally essential with its highly efficient function as a conduit between the banal and the ineffably wise; from the details in life to the transcendent. In order to unlock this potential, we need to link art to the process of evolving consciousness. We need to recognize, respect and aspire to fully incorporating the capacity of both of our ways of knowing. We then need to shift from a product-based to a process-based theoretical approach, unifying all those involved in the arts whether as artists or audience. Applying this overarching perspective, and recognizing in various arts the most efficient way of achieving this unity of purpose, a clearer path to Enlightenment awaits.

Since these talks are, in effect, a modern way of presenting lectures, questions can be submitted in writing at any time and I can weave responses into future talks as they prompt clarifications. Any such questions should be sent to your platform of access, since they will appear in various places, including my own website, e-yaji.com. So feel free to start by addressing questions to this introductory talk, as they will help me to understand what to weave into subsequent talks.

Thank you for your patience, and for accepting the lack of illustrations in this introductory talk – hopefully, without the distraction of illustrations for wandering minds, it will allow us to make far more sense of those that illustrate future talks. I would also like to thank my friend and editor, who also happens to be a media-guru, Sean Gear, for his enthusiastic help in refining both what I have presented, and how I have done so.

Hugh Moss

At the Water, Pine and Stone Retreat,

August 2020.

ⁱ Jonathan Hay, *Shitao. Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*. Cambridge University Press, February 2001.