The World of Scholars' Rocks

by Mark Daniel Cohen

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On the future of aesthetics

The World of Scholars' Rocks

Gardens, Studios, and Paintings • The Metropolitan

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The following review covers the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition of Chinese Scholars' Rocks that Grace Bakst Wapner saw in 2000 and that, in part, inspired the work examined by Sara Lynn Henry in "Grace Bakst Wapner's Scholar's Garden: An East West Aesthetic Dialogue" in this issue of *Hyperion*. The review was first published in *Review* magazine, March 15, 2000.

In the Ming Scholar's Retreat

Museum of Art • New York • through August 20, 2000

in the Astor Court at The Metropolitan Museum, there is a small pool of delicately swimming water. The pool is set at the back left corner of the garden, is surrounded by rocks and quietly tempered foliage, and filled with intricately colored, slowly roaming fish. At regular moments, a stream plunges in a miniature waterfall, spilling from suspended stones to splash in the pool below. And the pool's water is like a fluid diamond, gleaming and precise, and transparent with a crystalline clarity.

One Sunday afternoon not long ago, I saw a fish in that pool raise itself to an astonishment. At a time when the waterfall fell, a marble white fish covered with alabaster orange spots swam directly under the churning plash. It hovered there for a moment, then drew itself up and lifted its head out of the water to bathe in the air under the glistening spell of the spilling shower. Like a transformative figment of legend, the fish entered the air to feel the cleansing of the falling of water.

The scholar's retreat is like a fairy tale kingdom. It is a place I have visited for years, a place of relief and enthusiasm and restorative charms. It is a magical place, in which lost chances seem to return and impossibilities appear to be likely. And it is also something else. It is a place most appropriate for study and thought, and for following the bread crumb trail of the mind. It is a place for the magical appearance of inklings and implications, for unsuspected notions arriving unbidden, where secret thoughts dart and levitate, as if another and a better mind had preceded you there. Another mind that is also your own is just out of view, just behind the foliage and around the edge of a stone, moving everywhere here as it did in the rose garden of T. S. Eliot, "moving without pressure" through the vibrant air, like "the unheard music hidden in the shrubbery."

Study is meet for the scholar's garden, for study is a descent into the mind, and the depths of the mind are where magic transpires. The rigorous chain of logic is as conjuring as a dance, as Lewis Carroll revealed when Alice stepped through the looking glass. It brings to mind the unpredictable; its predications raise the unpredicated. The reason dreams in the sparks of unexpected thoughts, in a cascading blaze that levitates like a suspicion, that tickles the skin like an inkling, that rises like a fish leaving water to bathe in water, in a plummeting of liquid jewels, in the shimmering facets of the pour.

The scholar's garden hovers thoughts like magic. It seems the natural home for such thoughts, the appropriate scenario, the stage set for translucence to imaginings, for the aura of such feelings made visible and tangible, physically real and open to the touch. The heart of the garden in the Astor Court is in the rocks that stud it—extraordinary stones beautifully gnarled with intricate attitude, contorted and driven with pockings and riven with holes that appear as natural as water-markings and yet as unnatural as the sculptor's impositions. They crop up from the floor and sit among the foliage

like legendary presences contemplating the intrusion in their realm of such ordinary mortals as we.

The stones mark the scholar's garden as the natural home for thought, for they seem somehow the intrinsic embodiment of thought itself. And so they have seemed to Chinese scholars for more than a millennium, as is revealed by "The World of Scholars' Rocks." Organized by Maxwell K. Hearn, curator in the Department of Asian Art at the museum, the exhibition fills all the Chinese art galleries surrounding the Astor Court and contains 36 scholars' rocks—many from the Met's holdings and 15 of which are promised gifts to the museum from the Richard Rosenblum family. The display of stones is accompanied by over 90 Chinese paintings, drawn largely from the museum's collection, which feature images of such rocks and landscape scenes inspired by their idiosyncratically lyrical forms.

None of the rocks and only a few paintings are dated—several more of the paintings can be located roughly in time by reference to the birth and death dates of the artists cited, in those cases in which the artist is known. Nevertheless, some sense of the range of history represented can be drawn from the information provided on the museum's web site, information that is unfortunately far more abundant than what is available in the galleries. The scholars' rocks themselves date, in one instance, from as far back as the Song dynasty (960-1279) to, in another instance, the reign of the emperor Qianlong (1736-95). According to the paintings that have dates, they range from at least 1460 to as late as 1940.

A fair degree of information is available on the web site, and to some extent in the museum, regarding the history of scholars' rocks and their influence on Chinese painting. According to the story the museum tells, rocks of fantastic shape were first collected for display in the studies of scholars during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Especially prized were stones that had been sculpted by natural erosion, or at least that gave the impression of having been shaped entirely by nature, even though they were often "artfully enhanced" by human intervention. The stones generally were displayed vertically and were filled with and shot through by cavities, furrows, striations, and dimples. They were valued for their resemblance to mountains, caves, and grottos, and their suggestions of magical peaks and subterranean paradises in which immortal beings reside. Largely, the rocks were made of limestone, and the most valuable were of a stone so dense as to ring when struck. (To this day, we judge the quality of marble for carving by the same standard.) By the 16th century, scholars' rocks were made of, or made in, jade, turquoise, soapstone, and malachite.

It was during the Tang dynasty, as well, that larger examples of scholars' rocks began to be featured in gardens. In the eighth century, paintings

of fantastic rocks started to appear, works in which the image of a single stone was combined with a tree or flower to imply a garden setting. Such paintings soon developed into a distinct pictorial genre and by the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) had become the principal mode of pictorial artistic expression. From the 14th century on, the extraordinary forms of scholars' rocks determined the stylistic treatment of landscapes in painting—landscape paintings often resembled scholars' rocks to a greater degree than actual landscapes. By the 17th century, the aesthetic standards of paintings and rocks had become indistinguishable, and the distribution of scholars' rocks in gardens often were inspired by the compositional designs of painted landscapes. As is obvious from the exhibition, the tradition of painting such rocks continued into the 20th century.

The multitude of paintings on display in the exhibition gives an ample sense of the range of such work, as described in the exhibition materials. They include beautiful examples of painted scrolls with single rocks and foliage, such as *Bamboo in Wind*, ca. 1460, by Xia Chang (1388-1470); landscapes of nearly ambient and animated scenery that bears the look of scholars' rocks, as in *Twin Pines, Level Distance* by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322); garden images dominated by a large and quietly imperious stone, as with *Garden of the Unsuccessful Politician*, 1551, by Wen Zhengming (1470-1559); and studies of individual rocks, such as the strikingly expressive and serpentine *Red Friend* by Lang Ying (1585-ca. 1664). Perhaps the painting most indicative of the values and insight harbored in the heart of these rocks and held forth for the people who treasured them is *Scholar on a Rock* by Ren Yi (also known as Ren Bonian, 1840-1896)—a painting on a folded fan mounted on an album leaf, which shows a scholar in a yellow robe sitting on a large scholars' rock and poring intently over a book. The plaque next to the work describes the rock and scholar as "kindred spirits," and the assertion seems right. The rock and the mind of the studious scholar, intensely focused in its inquiry and inevitable meanderings, seem somehow to be much the same thing. The scholars' rock is like a scholar set to reading.

This is an impression that comes all the more clearly from the examples of the rocks themselves, which are clearly the core of the exhibition. They possess an immediacy of fascination, a beckoning fluidity that seeks through their cavities and ingresses, their recessions and permeations that seem to hold within them suggestions and soft impressions that will flow forth only given the most delicate of pressures, only given the gentlest of touches that can brought by the inquiry of the eye and the hovering instigation of the most fleeting of thoughts—a touch as gentle as a whisper. The titles of the rocks—for which we are given no provenance; we have no way of knowing if the titles have accompanied the rocks through the centuries or are merely conveniences endowed by a collector or a museum—seem thoroughly misleading in the impressions they grant. The titles are either purely descriptive—such as *Rock*

With Large Perforations and *Vertical Rock With Numerous Perforations*—or evocative of metaphoric suggestions—such as *Three Mountains At Sea, Grotto*, and the fanciful and remarkably accurate *Rock In The Form Of A Seated Tiger*. Despite the traditional nature of the metaphoric suggestions, there seems something off about the visual allusions. The resemblance to a tiger or a mountain seems less the matter than some intrigue in the pure and literal nature of the rock, some mesmerizing power in the look of the stone for its own sake.

Obviously, there is something perilous in the drawing of inferences and the propounding of responses to art from a foreign tradition. No one but a resident of the culture from which an artistic genre originates—the cultural milieu in which it was created and by which it was nurtured and within which it took its meanings and granted its indigenous reactions—can possibly understand the intrinsic nature of such works. To respond for our own sakes is to ride roughshod over other people, over their ethos and their frameworks of significances, over their very minds, their very hearts. But within our confessions of ignorance, we may respond and in our response, search for a commonality of feeling and imagination, seek a spontaneous *lingua franca* of the imagination, a bridge language of the spirit. We may respond from our hearts if we are intent to look for the commonality of responses, if we are intent to research as much as we may after we come to recognize the way we respond—if we seek in a full sincerity to find what there may be of a common heart among us all.

In that acknowledgment, personal reactions to these stones may have some meaning. They appear, and have always appeared to me in their display in the Astor Court, to be not merely the erosions of water but, by that erosion, of the very essence of water—the essence of water translated into the rock it has ground. The look of these permeated, lyrically craggy, and lunar-looking stones is like the sound of splashing water. They have about them a sense of an ease, like the natural ease of water that seeks its own level, that does not fight against the natural processes but succumbs to them and takes from them their strength. These stones are the opposites of machines, the opposites of human intrusions upon nature. They do not harness the natural power, they follow it. And they have imbued into them, and recorded upon them, not the movements of water, but the nature of the movement of water. They seem to flow, not with the look of water rushing in a stream, but with a lithic equivalent of such a movement. They have in them the passion of water, for water does have a passion. Water moves, it is not pushed, it is driven from within itself, and as such, it is something much like life.

That passion infuses the mind which beholds it. The tenor of the movement of the stone carries to the imagination, for the movement of water is keyed to a movement of the mind, a motion re-invoked by the vision of the scholars'

rocks. It is the movement of reverie, of the easy chasing of the mind after the phantoms of its own making, a pursuit like the pleasure of water following itself—a natural motion, for the mind is a natural thing. The mind fabricates and forces within the world of its own making, within the world of its own visions, but within the natural world itself, the mind is an object of nature, as natural as a cloud, as a waterfall, as a fish seeking air, as a moisture-invested rock. In its every gesture, its every investment, the mind dreams in a pleasure of reverie, discovering what is unexpected, finding magic around the edge of every stone.

The scholars' rocks are images of the mind, images of something that is not visual, images in the sense of likenesses of a different kind. They are images that are like what they concern, that reflect by calling to what they do not resemble. They call to the mind and draw it to an entry—an entry into them, and into itself. These rocks cause you to enter yourself, like the scholar in the painting who poured his soul into his book, the book over which he pored as he sat on the rock.

The power of these rocks to capture the imagination is something strange, and it is something not so strange, something deeply familiar. The clue is given in the observations made in the historical material the museum has provided. We are told that the stones were often products of erosion—they were "sculpted by natural processes"—or at least they gave the impression of having been fashioned by nature, though they were "artfully enhanced" by artisans and "oriented to maximize their expressive potential." Consider those phrases carefully. "Sculpted by natural processes"—"sculpted" in what sense, at least in what sense different from the way in which all natural objects are "sculpted" by such processes? "Artfully enhanced" how? How could they have been made more natural than nature made them? What is there to enhance? "Expressive potential"—expressive of what?

What they are expressive of, what a human artisan could judge the rocks by and enhance them to become even more evocative of, is their capability to pull the imagination—their aesthetic potential. That is the lesson these scholars' rocks have to teach—that the aesthetic quality is inherent in natural formations. That it exists in nature, exists as it were when we are not looking—exists whether we are looking or not. The aesthetic aspect is real, real in the sense that it is there to be discovered. It is not dependent on us to create it. It is as natural as a cloud, as a waterfall, as a fish seeking air, as a moisture-invested rock. We may enhance it if we may think how to do so, but we do so by making the natural formation come to seem all the more natural, or to seem so to us.

And one of the places in which the aesthetic experience is to be found most readily is precisely where those people who selected and fashioned the

scholars' rocks sought for it—in limestone, the original material of the scholars' rocks, and the base material of marble, the material that rings when it is packed dense enough and is flawless in its density. The art historian Adrian Stokes wrote about the intrinsic imaginative power of limestone in his book *The Stones Of Rimini*, and it has been said nowhere else so well:

> Limestone is the humanistic rock. The spectacular witness of limestone weathering or natural sculpture has inspired many of the comprehensive images on which civilizations have been based. . . . The interaction of limestone and water is always poetic, always appealing to the imagination. . . . The story of limestone and water has many further chapters that are palpable to the senses, many variations: and the men who obtained nourishment from this environment soon conceived those many aspects of life and death which, when forming some calm or "objective" whole, we name culture.

There is no accident to the finding by Chinese scholars of the aesthetic appeal in formations of limestone. Stokes found the same recognition in the architecture and sculpture of cultures throughout the Mediterranean, as he found that the artistic images of those cultures are rooted in the natural formations of limestone. What is most significant here is the testimony we receive from the Chinese scholars who displayed the stones, and the Chinese artisans who finished them, and the Chinese painters to portrayed them—testimony to the perennial nature of the aesthetic, to the objective fact of it. The aesthetic may be difficult to define, it may be ultimately impossible to specify and may elude forever our efforts to theorize it. But it is a fact that we pursue, a stable reality that we may harken toward or dismiss, and if artists turn away from what such scholars found in these rocks, then they turn away from art itself. And artists may do so, for art is hard. It is hard for art is everywhere about us, and what is all about us is what is hardest to find. But to falter in the face of the difficult is not to deny it, it is merely to avoid it.

The stones in "The World of Scholars' Rocks" offer one of the more intense and intensively focused aesthetic experiences to be obtained at this moment in New York, and there was not a single artist involved in their making. It tells us that whether we choose to pursue the aesthetic in the perennial sense of the word, it will not disappear. It will be there, for it always is there—as permanent, as fluid, as solid as a rock.

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