

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE JAPANESE GARDEN IN WESTERN LITERATURE AND ARTS

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The result of the Western transposition of the Japanese garden is able to create more of a material harmony than a spiritual one, losing part of its initial effect, that of an *axis mundi*, of the sacred communion between Heaven and Earth. In literature and arts the hyperbolized garden, endowed with fantastic features is able to create the state of reverie.

Western garden, decorated with grottos, Japanese bridges, pavilions and pagodas, with the direct scope of facilitating the coupe meeting and reverie, becomes a reflection of the states of mind, and taste of an entire period, dominated by megalomania.

The comparison between the Japanese and Western culture is based on the iconological analysis of the literary text and the visual elements. The transmitter and the receiver of the influences are not related directly, being mainly separated by the linguistic barrier, but the intermediaries assume the role of mediation and promotion of the specific Japanese cultural elements, unknown before in Europe. Thus we can assume that the experience of the Oriental travels and of the journals inspired by these approaches had the capacity to circulate the forms of expression specific to very different cultural environments.

Is there any connection between the way we interpret the common elements of the visual and literary text? More specifically, can we interpret a certain theme, such as Romantic exoticism, through the system of symbols, common to the two arts? Beginning with Aristotel, who considers both poetry and painting as imitation arts, continuing with the Horatian aphorism, *ut pictura poesis*, visual arts and literature have continuously been seen as *sister arts* (Vrânceanu: 2002, p.24)

In poetry and painting the characters, scenes and events are organized in a semantic unit, ensuring characteristics such as decency or veracity. Poetry allows reader to imagine the scenario, while in painting; the effort is merely that of decoding the information, in order to reach the meanings of the narrative. When reading the image, the effort is that of interpretation, of decoding the visual message, and interception of the details.

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Beginning with the Romantic period (1780-1840), garden arrangements become tributaries of the exotic garden. We can talk about plants belonging to distant realms, reaching Europe on the commercial routes between the East and the West, or we can present gardens where the vegetation is arranged in terraces, as in the case of Japanese gardens, which became extremely fashionable in Western Europe, during this period.

We should mention the fact that, before Charles Darwin's book, *The Origin of Species*, Romantic man felt the need of a clarification, regarding the different species of plants, so that later on, they should become a, important source of inspiration for literature. Literature was inspired by nature, and it was also nature as a source of inspiration for painting, so that at the end of the Romantic period, the artist could acquire a complex landscape, tributary to the notion of exoticism, but extremely original.

19th century is marked by the appearance of a new type of garden, where the element of novelty perfectly combines with tradition, exoticism with modernism, opulence with simplicity. Gardens, similar to those of the antiquity, become a pasteboard, reflecting the social status of its owner. Once the new social class of bankers, industrialists and manufacturers appeared, the so called *nouveau riche*, garden art becomes more and more specialized, under the impact of the touristic and exploratory trips to exotic destinations. Rare plants, new methods of cultivation and obviously the development of new technologies, all play now an important part in the appearance of a typical Japanese or Chinese garden, in a park in England or France.

As a result of the appearance of a number of specialized publications, such as *Garden magazine* (1826), *Gardens Chronicle* (1841), *Ladies Magazine of Gardening* (1841), the interest of the public opinion is shifted towards the art of gardening and that of garden and park decoration, according to the rules of the exotic garden.

Once the notion of exoticism is introduced in Western vocabulary, nature is more and more idealized; nature is understood as man, feelings, emotions, euphoria, ecstasy, nature becomes a landmark for the understanding of the surrounding world, making us aware of the limitations of our consciousness.

Gardens start being represented in literature and painting, but not earlier than the 16th century, when Joachim du Bellay speaks about natural beauty in one of his sonnets, published in 1549.

William Chambers, author of the study *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* visited twice East Asia before publishing his book in 1772, anticipating Romantic taste for the elements of exoticism, thus bringing some changes to the environment at Kew

Gardens, by introducing a pagoda and a pavilion with panels, decorated with scenes from Confucius' life. Yet, the French and the British lose very quickly their interest in East Asian garden, after the French Revolution and a rebirth of classicism.

From Japan and China the Europeans have taken less the landscape architecture, but more of the exotic plants, which have been adapted to the climate conditions of the continent, thus leading to the appearance of green gardens with glass walls, for the protection of plants in winter time. The three types of garden that Chambers mentions are: *the pleasing, the terrible and the surprising*.

"Acclimation is the great discovery of the 19th century, even if it is not an invention of this century. Plants such as glycine, chrysanthemum, peony, anemone, gardenia, jasmine of camellia, honeysuckle, yellow bells or numerous varieties of decorative trees, such as cherry tree, *sakura*, prune tree, etc.

Literary critics consider that the poem *Kubla Khan*, by Samuel Coleridge was inspired by the descriptions of Japanese gardens, that he probably had the chance to read in British magazines of the time, where the pleasing aspect of the Japanese garden is key: with hedgerows, shrubs, blossoming trees, river channels, with arched bridges, pavilions, etc.

*So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.*

Nigel Leask considers that the first thirty-six rhymes of the poem *Kubla Khan*, make reference to a landscape garden, an artificial scenery, result of the poetic imagination, being inspired by the reality of the English parks. Unlike the palace gardens of Kubla Khan, as they appear in the travel stories of Marco Polo, in Coleridge's poem they are very close to the European Orientalist theoretical thinking of the 18th century (Leask: 2006, p.184).

With the help of alliteration and assonance, Coleridge is able to create a real incantation of a world of dreams, a terrestrial Paradise comparable to a fantasy garden, surrounded by high walls that make us think of the garden architecture of the East Asian region. Still the poem makes reference to Xanadu, the summer residence of Kubla Khan, placed in central Mongolia, a magical realm that Marco Polo had the chance to visit in 1275, and which the explorer characterizes as opulent and full of grandeur.

Nigel Leask reviews the most important literary texts where Japanese gardens appear. He mentions Sir William Temple, Joseph Addison, Horace Walpole and Oliver Goldsmith, important writers of the 18th century, who are considered a landmark in oriental studies in Europe.

In literature, and even in certain religious texts, the garden is hyperbolized, endowed with fantastic features, able to enhance the mystery, creating the state of Romantic reverie, dominated by exoticism. Laila leads Thalaba in such a garden, in Southey's poem:

*She took him by the hand,
And through the porch they pass'd.
Over the garden and the grove,
The fountain streams of fire
Pour'd a broad light like noon;
A broad unnatural light,
Which made the rose's blish of beauty pale,
And dimm'd the rich geranium's scarlet blaze
Pious verdure of the grove
Now wore one undistinguishable grey,
Checquered with blacker shade* (Southey: 1814, p.136 (XIV))

Although literature had the tendency of exaggerating the elements of the described garden, real gardens were endowed with unusual elements, belonging to the sphere of fantasy, in order to offer them a unit for their hyperbolization.

Nature is also endowed with a special power, that of opening the gates of total love; being the silent witness of secret meetings of the young lovers, and having the function of concealment and secrecy of the forbidden couple relationship, attending the beauty ritual and becoming synonymous with feminine sensuality.

Opulent, extravagantly decorated, based on a strictly geometrical structure, the garden arrangement at Stourhead is a source of inspiration for William Turner's painting *Rise of the River Stour at Stourhead* (c.1824). Stourhead was the perfect embodiment of 18th century desire to rediscover the Vergilian Arcadia. Stourhead Park was created in a rampant valley, which was turned by Flitcroft into a lake, surrounded by secret pathways, able to offer an original perspective, with temples, statues, grottos, which all integrate the strata of a visual, literary and even a personal allusion (Trachtenberg and Hyman: 1986, p.403-4).



Stourhead Park

Turner's landscapes, reproducing British parks and gardens, resemble those of Poussin and Claude Lorrain, through heroism. They transpose the reader of the visual text into an imaginary world, populated with titanic characters. There is such a force of rendering, which was never equaled by any Romantic artist, especially because most of these park and castle representations are accomplished in watercolor technique. In Turner's case we can speak about such a mastery of the technique, without any chance of returning on the surface, the transparency and subtlety of the color variations being able to create an atmosphere, pretty gloomy at the beginning, but monumental at the same time.

Romantic gardens were decorated with ornamental structures, the so called *fabriques*, most of the time acquired from the Egyptian antiquity and having Masonic connotations. The obelisk, as a solar symbol, the pyramid, with mortuary connotations, the temple as a sacred place for meditation, the sphinx with protective role, Isis, as a symbol of the individual's regeneration, are all mythological symbols, but also components of an illuminating philosophy, centered on meditation and melancholy.

"All these *fabriques* – grottos, Japanese ponds, pagodas, kiosks, Roman or Gothic ruins, pyramids, obelisks, little temples – were used in accordance with their structure, as meeting points or meditation rooms, retreat houses or exotic greenhouses" (Humbert: 2006, p.191).

The garden becomes a reflection of the tastes of mind and of the tastes of an entire generation marked by grandeur and importance, totally indifferent to the social problems, political conflicts and spiritual disintegration.

Symbols such as the obelisk, the pyramid or the Sphinx, suggest an exoticism exclusively targeted at the initiated. The obelisk at Stourhead dates from 1746, being

erected by William Privet, ordered by Henry Hoare II, who wanted a garden as perfect as that of Arcadia.

Humbert observed the use of the expression *Et in Arcadia Ego* with regard to the British garden architecture, as a combination of symbols related to happiness, love and death, which had been "celebrated by the previous century architecture, with Gian Francesco Barbieri Guercino or Nicolas Poussin"(Humbert: 2006, p.195).



William Turner *View of the Bolton Abbey*

The entire Romantic period is dominated by artificiality in landscape painting. Although we can speak about a natural raw material, the plants are organized in an artificial way, mimicking the natural. The result of this garden is an unreal one, but the geometry of shapes, the separation into four or eight quadrants, suggests more of a material harmony, than a spiritual one. Very often the fountain, placed at the center of this quadrant, as the central point of the entire garden, represents an *axis mundi* and a symbol of the sacred communion between Heaven and Earth"(Hankiss: 2004, p.105).

We should also observe an interesting detail related to the different structure between the East and the West, with regard to garden arrangements, more specifically the climatic criterion. It is obvious that the Western man started to copy the Eastern model of exotic garden, but it was almost impossible to adapt it perfectly to the climate conditions of the northern regions of the continent. The gardens of Sintra Palace, Portugal, the most exquisite example of Portuguese Romantic architecture, is built on the exotic model, capturing solar light on a vertical line, with ponds built in the shadow of the perennial trees, brought from East Asia, Australia or America (*ginkgo biloba*, *sequoia sempervirens*, *thuja plicata*, *cupressus lusitanica*, *camelia sasanqua*).

English parks, during the Romantic period, are seen in a horizontal light, allowing the propagation of the sunlight on Earth level. Thus we can explain the beauty of the English lawn. "The wet atmosphere of England creates an exaggerated aerial perspective, allowing hills from apart to lose distance, as the water layers in a watercolor. (So it is not surprising that English tradition of watercolor painting and the landscape garden are in a strong connection: watercolor artists have painted idealized landscapes, which had previously been built by gardeners and finally being put on canvas by the artists)"(Moore, Itchell, Turnbull: 1993, p.9).

What delineates Japanese mentality from the Western one is our impossibility to perceive the emotional intensity of the environment, because we cannot detect deep feelings, romantic love or feminine beauty.

For us, Japanese world appears more like an encoded theatre, which we are unable to decipher with our feelings intoxicated with modernity.

Wolfram Eberhard's *Dictionary of Symbols* speaks about the *Manual of Beauty*, written by the Chinese aesthetician Li Yu, imposed in the Western world during the 17th century, where the feminine beauty is in consensus with nature. Thus: the eyebrows need to be curved as the willow leaves; the lips should resemble the cherries, while the teeth are like the fruit seeds, the body as slender and thin as the bamboo in the shadow of the wind.

The feminine portrait should be built according to the *ornamental principle*, in other words, the ornament is able to complete the feminine portrait. Very often, the external details assign hierarchies as follows: the headpiece is a sign of membership to a royal family, while the fan, worn in a specific position makes the difference between an imperial concubine and the future empress.

A good example of man's confrontation with nature in Japanese arts is in the case of the paper walls painting, made by Hasegawa Sotaku (c. 1650).

The composition is made up of parallel horizontal bands, which the artist accomplishes starting from top to bottom, using approximately the same dimensional scale.

Starting from the Confucian philosophy, and continuing with the Shinto's way of thinking, man is placed at the center of the cosmogony, and that is why he needs to be *measured*, so that the social status could be delimited. Measurement, based on numbers, referred to the philosophical system made up of the five primary elements in life.

That is why painting prefers groups made up of two or three elements, the delimitation of the composition being present in the painting, where the artist concentrates the signification, offering in fact a key for the decoding of the visual message.

The isolation of the figures, in groups placed on lateral panel, on the right side, has the purpose of creating a wide space for the unfolding of the activity of the main characters, which are unusually placed on the left panel: the Empress and her servant with the umbrella. But isolation here means the hierarchical situation of the characters.



Hasegawa Sotaku (c. 1650)

The horizontality of the silk, the surface of the painting, does not offer any depth, thus the action unfolds on lateral panels, offering the feeling of an aerated space. The only qualities of the canvas that offers a decorative effect is the double dimension, the relationship between surfaces, the artificial color and repetition of motifs, reaching a stylization, able to suggest plasticity.

The space is plain, because in Japan we are in a world of shadows, floating in the void. If the artist had introduced the third dimension, people and things would have distanced, reaching the so called *world exteriority*, which is total disagreement with man's confrontation with the world and nature. The vanishing point of the painting, where the imaginary perspective lines merge, and which create the feeling of space, is positioned in the top part of the painting, on the dividing line between the top characters and the bottom ones. We can observe here the stacking of the characters, because by drawing a larger number of lines, and setting of the vanishing point, Japanese art is able to create space in a bi-dimensional space.

By contrast, Thomas Gainsborough's feminine portraits are strong due to the women's look portrayed, becoming the focus point of the painting in most of the cases, while the head's position, the blue, orange or green dress, represent *pictorial impressions*, as Mayoux calls them, but not the rendering of nature. Everything in the painting suggests freedom of thought and of the paintbrush.



Hasegawa Tōhaku (1539-1610)

Gainsborough painted mainly portraits, searching for the ideal feminine perfection. They are a proof of the change of style of an entire generation, influenced by Van Dyck, reinforcing the sense of vibration of the colored fabric, be it silk, veil or sky. By studying these portraits we can observe the evolution of the models, starting from indifferent faces, up to the autonomous, strong characters, in the final part, who fit the environment, and whose characters are strengthened by the surrounding nature.

Mrs. Sheridan and *Mrs. Graham*, the two works that I have chosen for display, are among the most representative of Gainsborough's career. They belong to the 1770-1780 period, when the artist was painting in Bath, in a fashionable, frivolous environment, answering the requests of the most exigent, stylish and noble members of the British society.

Human body is able to offer a series of nodal points, full of poetry, and only because of the position of the head, body, chin, etc. in the case of *Mrs. Sheridan*, the composition is based on the counterpoint between the hands clasped in her lap with the palms in an outward position, and the straight head, with the chin, pushed up slightly. This opposition, between the exposure and reservation represent the antithetic key of the central character. What the limbs do for the body, does the face for the head. Tension is the general characteristic of the painting: legs folded over each other, hands clasped, the chin slightly pushed up, the long neck that fully reveals itself, all these make us believe that the model posing for the painting is in a state of abeyance, full of tension, the only missing element being the heartbeats.



Thomas Gainsborough, *Mrs. Sheridan* (1783),
Washington, National Gallery

If earlier before we mentioned the fact that Japanese painting lacked the three dimensions, here it is absolutely obvious that it exists. In the case of Mrs. Sheridan the depth of the painting surpasses the flat character of the canvas, and this is partly due to the character's look.

Mrs. Sheridan (1783) – a work of maturity; the painter carefully studies the states of mind of his character, who looks as if she was tormented by the feeling of love. The orange color of the dress is in tune with the decomposing autumnal nature, with the warm sunset in the back.

Besides the symbolism of color, an important role is played by the tree – a symbol denoting cosmic life – consistency, evolution, perceived as a process of regeneration, turns the tree into a symbol of inexhaustibility, of eternal life.

If we are to draw a comparison with the Japanese world, here the tree is a symbol of longevity and fertility, being always associated with the flower – especially the cherry flower. This is obvious in the Hasegawa School paintings, in the floral motifs of the feminine characters' clothing. In Japanese culture the following elements are very symbolic: the bamboo, the cherry tree, the pine, they are called the *three friends*, become most of the time they are associated in the artistic representations.

We can observe an abundance of *chiaroscuro*, uncertain tonalities, contrasts between light and darkness, all these inciting effects of the individual sensitivity, endowing the work of art with a restless element. The character of mobility

animating this painting, from the Bath period, is supported by the contrasts between light and darkness, an assembly of fluid, curved and *brisée* lines.

The gowns of the two feminine characters of Thomas Gainsborough are an indication of a specific social class that they belong to. Very often arts tended towards an agreement with fashion, which sometimes was bizarre, but other times very traditional.

Once time passed and an obvious maturation of the artistic style appeared, Gainsborough accomplishes more and more sophisticated feminine portraits, as in the case of Mrs. *Graham* and Mrs. *Sheridan*, where the two women become real goddesses. The eroticism caused by the sight of a beautiful, sensual woman, will be translated on the canvas into a detailed presentation of the ornate dress, of the delicate lines of the neck, or simply by drawing a smile.

The women portrayed by Gainsborough are the real nature goddesses, because they are always placed in the middle of the nature, surrounded by an aura of mystery, or hidden behind the darkness of a room, in the neighborhood of a Doric column, in a state of ecstasy or reverie.



Thomas Gainsborough, Mrs. *Graham*, 1775-1777

The pleasure of senses, offered by Gainsborough's paintings allows us to affirm that they belong to the category of the *Sublime beauty*, which is beyond the natural limits, through transcendent contemplation, towards the area of visual and tactile effects.

Although from a technical point of view there are huge differences between the two cultural environments, determined mainly by the artistic taste of each society, but also as a result of the cultural canon, the representations are almost the same: the woman and the world around her. Social hierarchies are those imposing restrictions and limitations, the result being the representation of the woman belonging to the higher strata of the society, where she is naturally represented, as a result of the social status that she inherited from her ancestors.

Colored ink technique, specific to the Japanese world, represents a fluid technique, where the color penetrates the paper and colors it, while oil painting simply covers the canvas, not being absorbed by the work support. Ink technique is more subtle and spontaneous, because once unveiled, the artist cannot make any more changes. It represents a final work, being a proof of the Asian perfectionism.

Asia, and Japan in our case, remains tributaries of this technique, and this is due to an exaggerated sense of traditionalism, and as a result of the fact that paste was the discovery of the Van Eyck brothers, during the 15th century in Europe.

Oil painting has the capacity to bring light, even in the darkest corners of the painting. This unique technique is *the oil*, which can be found between the chromatic pigment particles. The oil offers depth, while watercolors lack this profoundness, darkness being almost invisible in this technique.

Colors are in accordance with the states of mind, while the significance of colors is universal. Thus, the orange of Gainsborough's painting is a distinctive symbol, while the pink of *Mrs. Graham's* dress is a symbol of elegance, freshness, but also a symbol of feminine weakness.

Delacroix considers colors *music of the eyes*. Color is the cause and factor of all emotional reactions of the individual, but it can also determine shape. It is the unifying element, completing human vision of the surrounding world.

The Western diversity of themes has as a direct result representation of love, joy, sadness, fury or courage, and generally, these states of the mind have a maximum intensity. In Japan, no matter how strong emotions are, they are not represented, because decency is the guiding attitude in life. Thus, emotions of the Western world are replaced in the East with dispositions, feelings of a lower intensity. Western painters made appeal to poetic, allegorical and romantic associations, in order to offer an illusion of the evasive and elusive of the states of mind. Japanese art had the vocation of the superior harmonies, of the natural world reverberations, while the allusions abundantly inserted, are use to encode the visual or the literary text.

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