

<https://doi.org/10.29013/EJA-20-1-138-143>

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THE IMAGE OF LOTUS AND LILY IN THE ART OF CHINA AND EUROPE

Abstract. It is shown that the images of lotus and lily are among the main ones in the fine art of China and Europe, as they express the idea of nature revival and symbolize purity. In the motif of the flower, as a visualization of spiritual reality, one can see the interconnection of the fine arts of China and Europe. On the basis of comparative method, particular features of lily and lotus depictions are shown both in the Xieyi technique and in oil painting.

Keywords: image, motif, art, lilly, lotos, China, Europe.

The purpose of an image of a flowering plant is an expression of the divine and the perfect. The image of a lily, lotus (variant – *Nymphéas*, water lilies) is among the principal ones in visual arts. “Just as the future lotus leaves are hidden in the seed of this plant, the archetypal forms of an infinite number of things rested in the bosom of the Eternal One,” writes E. P. Blavatsky [4, 77]. Being a universal symbol, the lotus is fundamental in Buddhism. In Taoism, the immortal maiden He Xiangmu is portrayed with a lotus of “open heartedness” [16, 263–266]. In Christian iconography, an analogue of a lotus is a lily – a symbol of the purity of the Virgin Mary. Its depiction is inextricably present in the plot of the Annunciation (Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci). To the theme of the flower is also devoted Yuan Zhonglan’s treatise, “The Book of Flowers” (late 16th century) [9, 88–93], as well as books by modern Chinese scholars [2; 3].

When studying the topic that we selected, it was especially important to use the comparative method, which allows us to compare and contrast the works of art of Europe and China from different time peri-

ods on related topics, and to identify the general and the particular. The artistic/stylistic and iconological methods are also used.

In the European model of the Renaissance culture, the primacy of man in nature was affirmed (for example, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola “Speech on the dignity of man”), which found expression in the system of types and genres of fine art. In times of environmental and social crisis, a person seeks salvation in nature, which affects the relationship between genres. In the painting of the second half of the 19th – early 20th centuries, the landscape, and the flower motif associated with it, are becoming increasingly important. It is significant that Claude Monet’s series of paintings “*Nymphéas*” (Water Lilies) (Musée de l’Orangerie) was donated to France the day after the signing of the Armistice in World War I, on November 11, 1918.

The contemplation of nature, with the aim of merging with it, is traditional for Chinese art, which is based on Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism. Man connects with eternal nature, feeling themselves to

be its constituent particle. Thus, he finds harmony, strength, beauty. From these positions, we consider the motif of lotus and lily. The system of the universe is recorded in the ancient Chinese canon “I Ching” (“Book of Changes”). In the introduction to the book “The Anthology of Taoist Philosophy” [9], translators V. V. Malyavin and B. B. Vinogradsky call Taoism the center of Chinese culture, in which the harmony of the Great Void is realized. Sinologists claim that the word “Tao” belongs not only to Taoism, but to the whole of Chinese philosophy. According to scientists, the world and man in Taoism are indissoluble as a microcosm and a macrocosm; the world is the “transformed One,” the fruit of the Tao metamorphosis. The main theme of the metamorphoses of being finds embodiment in the image of a flower, in particular, a lotus.

Understanding the flower symbolism in European culture is aided by Johann Goethe’s philosophical poem “Metamorphosis of Plants” (1798). One can observe the parallels between of the poetic insights of the German poet and the symbolism of the flower in China, where the plant goes through the stages of growth and is associated with the universe. For example, a flower when viewed from above has a rounded shape and symbolizes the sky. In comprehending the aesthetic issues of painting in old China, the works of E. V. Zavadskaya are important, in which approaches to typological comparisons of the painting of China and Europe are outlined. The scientist notes the connection between the work of the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists and Fauvists with the theory and practice of Chan art. In Chinese culture, the Tao (path) is the natural movement of man along with nature. The peculiarity of painting is the transfer of ideas through the form, technique and energy of “qi”. The artist and the first art theorist of China, Se He (5th century), in the treatise “Notes on the classification of old painting” outlined the “Six Principles of Painting” (绘画六法), without which it is impossible to create works of high art. First: “The sound of the spirit, the movement of life” (translated

by S. Kochetova) [10, 64–65]. The second half of the thesis is an explanation of the first part. E. V. Zavadskaya gives a more accurate translation of the text “Guhua Pinlu”: “The inspired rhythm of the living movement. Qiyun Shandong.” The scientist calls the concept of qi the most important component of the first law – spirit, base, substance [6, 304].

Artists of the Bunjinga movement (painting of literati, educated people), through depictions of nature and through colors, sought to express the spiritual essence of the world. The picturesque completeness of the gong-bi style was contrasted with the immediacy of the expressive se-i manner (expression of essence). The freedom of creative expression is maximally manifested in the masterpieces of Xu Wei (1521–1593) and Shi Tao (1642–1707). In the 20th century, this trend is most expressed in the art of Qi Baishi (1864–1957). J. Rowley writes that artists from the upper echelons of society worked in the technique of monochrome painting, they attributed the color to “low-lying data of experience”, believing that if there is ink in the picture, all five colors will be present in it” [14, 279]. In the “Tao Twilight” study, V. V. Malyavin specifically points out that “symbolism itself presupposes the economy of expressive means, it marks an act of self-concealment and therefore is in itself a secret and a power” [8, 25]. N. A. Prakhov recalled that, showing a series of shell drawings, in which the illusion of mother-of-pearl was transmitted by a combination of different shapes and planes, Vrubel claimed that only with black and white can color be conveyed: “I’m sure that future artists will completely abandon paints, will paint with Italian pencil and charcoal, and the public will eventually learn to see colors in these drawings, as I now can see” [5, 222].

The content of the works of the artist, poet and calligrapher Zhu Da (1626–1705) combines the perception of the world of Taoists and Chan Buddhists, where the goal was to experience the state of enlightenment. The famous scroll “Flowers along the river” (1697, Tianjin Museum, China) was created

by the artist at the age of 72 years. In a metaphorical form, the master tells about his life. Horizontal scrolls (47 × 1.292.5 cm) suggest a developed plot-based narrative. On the middle plane of the scroll is a river. Compositionally and symbolically, it connects the different seasons and the cycles of human life. Thus, Zhu Da conveys the idea of the unity of man and nature, which is traditional for Chinese culture. A view of the river is shown through the lotuses presented in the foreground. A broken lotus stalk symbolizes a broken spirit. Zhu Da likes to depict not beautiful open flowers, but unbroken buds on bent stems. It can be supposed that this is connected to the dramaturgy of the life of the prince, who had to hide in a Buddhist monastery from childhood. The dramatic life of the artist is reflected in the expressive nature of his art. The image of flowers made it possible to allegorically convey the oppressed state of the people of China, captured by the Manchu people.

At 54, Zhu Da experienced a mental crisis that forced him to leave the monastery. At the beginning the scroll depicts lotuses on stems, represented in the same style with hieroglyphs that precede a pictorial narrative of life. The soft outlines of large leaves create an expressive contrast to the linear certainty of the stems. The linear and tonal range conveys the spatial infinity of the monumental mountainous landscape, in which the lotuses represent a kind of semantic and compositional portals. The biography of the artist is revealed: from spring-youth to old age, expressed in a rotten willow on a snowy landscape. Zhu Da combined calligraphy, poetry and painting. Figurative and artistic analysis shows that in his composition lies a deep meaning. The eternal movement of life in the dramaturgy of the “great threshold” is presented: the encounter of the inevitable withering and the potentiality of a new birth. “There is beauty in everything, but not everyone is allowed to see it,” Confucius said.

The minimalism of expressive means in Qi Bai-shi's composition [1] “Lotus and Dragonfly” (1953) causes allusions to the paintings of the Qianfodong

(Dunhuang) cave temple (7th–8th centuries) and at the same time resembles willow branches in the “Nenuphars” gallery of Claude Monet's Orangeries. In common is the linear-rhythmic representation of water. Depicted by fine lines, the free graphic of horizontal and unsteady waves, which occupy the main space of the leaf, is balanced by the verticality of the lotus stem with a ripened seed box. The natural organics of the rich in tone stem is achieved through mastery in the use of the “dry” brush. The lively character of the swift brush of cursive writing penetrating the space of a column of hieroglyphs corresponds to the mood of a sensitive vibration of the movement of wind and water, to the state of a faded lotus, which only recently was full of juice and huge, ready to create new life. A dragonfly touched the lotus box underlined with cinnabar with thin legs for a moment. The life time of insects is even more mobile than a brief moment of flowering of flowers. By mass, the upper part is “heavier” than the lower one, which, coupled with the asymmetry of the composition, corresponds to the expression of the idea of dynamics. The red seal of the author balances the top and bottom of the leaf, in which dense elements and the vertical of the lotus are not indicated and which, like a weightless dragonfly, hovers in the space of an infinite world. Everything testifies to the dynamics, to the transformation of life in its cycle. In China, dragonfly symbolizes “immortality, plenty of leisure, joy and summer” [16, 400].

In the dominant of organic, natural principle, the quality of modernism is manifested. This stylistic trend was preceded by the work of the Pre-Raphaelites. In the picture of John William Waterhouse “Hylas and the Nymphs” (1896) from the Manchester Art Gallery, one can see a peculiar pictorial and poetic metaphor for girls-mermaids-lilies. Nymphs are deities of nature. According to the Greek myth, falling in love with Hercules, the nymph suffered from unrequited love and the gods turned her into a flower. The Latin name for the flowers *Nymphéas* comes from the Greek “nymph”.

Claude Monet's "Nenuphars" cycle was introduced at Orangerie in 1927. Mural paintings, which were called "large decorations", are exhibited in the concave space of two oval halls. The sky on the panel is replaced by a mirror of water reflecting it. Like Zhu Da, Monet suffered the fate of an outcast not understood by his contemporaries during the period of formation of his talent. The timeless loss of his beloved Camille (1879), the death of his second wife (1911), the First World War and the death of his son Jean (1914), the youngest son Michelle being drafted into the army – showed the tragedy of the reality of death and, at the same time, the desire to transfer the energy of vitalism. The creation of a flowering garden – Paradise in Giverny, with reservoirs of lilies of all possible varieties, gave possibility and creative forces to overcome the mental crisis. In the words of John Rewald, Monet "finally abandoned the form and in the shapeless fabric of the finest nuances tried to keep only a miracle of the light" [13, 310]. The refusal of the "inviolability of integral volumes" affirmed in academism [11, 103] has an analogy with Wǔ Xīng painting, where the image is shown within the natural movement of the flow of life.

In the letters of Levitan and Claude Monet a close emotional state is expressed, caused by the desire to create a picturesque canvas on the theme of pond plants. The motif is embodied in the image of the Nenuphars. In a letter to A. P. Chekhov, Levitan writes: "Could it be more tragic, than to feel the endless beauty of the environment, to notice the hidden secret, to see God in everything and not die, aware of own powerlessness, to express these great feelings" [12, 197]. A related mood when creating a picturesque image was experienced by Claude Monet. In a letter to G. Geffroy from Giverny on June 22, 1890, the creator of impressionism reports: "I again took up the impossible: water with grass that fluctuates in its depths. When you look, it's a wonderful sight, but you can go crazy when you try to paint it. But after all, I always tackle such things" [11, 98].

The painting by I. I. Levitan (1860–1900) "Nenuphars" (water lilies) (1895, 95 × 128 cm) from the

Astrakhan Picture Gallery, was painted in the estate of Gorka, Tver Province. In a letter to A. P. Chekhov on the 9th of August, 1895, the artist says: "I am representing a subject that can be missed. I painting blooming lilies that are already reaching the end" [7, 54]. The words "reaching the end" mean "die." In the canvas "Nenuphars", a bottomless gloom of a swampy water reservoir is transmitted, on the surface of which snow-white heads of floating lilies are shown in a free natural rhythm. Leaves and flowers are realistically accurately painted from nature. The technique of tonal oil painting allows Levitan to convey the materiality of each leaf in the natural cycle of the movement of life: from fresh bright greenery to its flaming red dampening and final annihilation. Decay is shown in the brown spots of a yellow leaf. A related motive can be seen on the small square of Ma Sintsu's album sheet "The Bird on the Lotus" (12th century), which also represents the scene of the eternal movement of life in the dramaturgy of the "great threshold": a meeting of the inevitable withering and potentiality of a new birth. The composition of the Chinese artist of the Middle Ages lacks the reflexion manifested in the picture of the European painter.

Chinese masters created their works from memory. Levitan, like Claude Monet, worked on an open-air sketch for a painting. The horizon line is absent because Levitan painted Nenuphars sitting in a boat and looking down at water lilies. The underwater world mysteriously shines through the frozen still surface. The radiance of small white lilies is conveyed by contrast with the dull dark tone of a swampy pond. In the upper part of the panel picture, cold reflections of the blue of the steely sky are visible. In painting technology, Levitan inherits the techniques of Italian Baroque. From the second half of the 16th century, artists painted over dark priming color. Lights were registered with white. The feeling of shadow was created due to layering of light colors. Dark shadows were painted with a special transparent glaze paint in various variations. According to the researchers of the painting technology of the

old masters: “The pasty, colorful mass of lead white was laid out under the shading in bright areas in a high-lightened tone, which in combination with the dark grounding created an exaggerated-volumetric impression, which was then softened by the finishing of glazes” [17, 107].

The painting “Nenuphars” manifests a change in the individual style of Levitan from the sketchy form of the chamber landscape to the decorativeness of a picture-panel. In a contrasting arrangement of white flowers against a dark background, in the linear pattern of algae, a combination of academic tradition and Modern is manifested. There is a contradiction between the academic manner of a detailed study, a thorough pictorial analysis of the motive in the preparatory sketch and the desire, as noted by D. V. Sarabyanov, for a study as an independent art form which makes it possible to “directly express the life of the subject in its momentary state.” According to the scientist, a “study” helped to get away from the literary plot [15, 172].

Conclusions. For impressionism, the method of working in the open air is fundamental. Like Chinese painters, European artists strive to show life in its natural movement. When comparing the image of lotuses in the works of Xu Wei (1521–1593) and Claude Monet’s *Nenuphars* in the Orangerie Museum, one can notice a lot in common. The space is spiritualized. The horizon disappears and clouds

float in the pond. Water merges with the sky in a magical union. Monet does not depict the objective world, but creates a picturesque fabric in which lilies are perceived as a part of an environment filled with the purity of flowers. His expressive means are color and light. Every moment the lighting changes and with it – the color harmony. The fragmentary form of the composition, manifested in the works of impressionism and modern, is akin to the interpretation of space in the fine arts of China.

Unlike Levitan, Monet, in the main motive of his work (water lilies), dissolves the object (flowers) in a light-air space, depriving them of material “tangible value” (Burnson’s term). Monet’s painting-decorations evoke memories not only of the huge windows of the mirror hall of the Versailles palace, from which a view into an ideal garden was opened. They have an indirect connection with the panoramas of Chinese landscapes, where the viewer-artist is in the center of the immense space of the world – the Tao.

In the “flowers and birds” genre of China, the world is presented holistically, in endless change. In the European painting of the mid-19th – early 20th centuries, the Renaissance humanistic self-affirmation of man is rejected. The aspiration of harmony with nature is manifested in the image of flowers. In the motif of the flower, as a visualization of spiritual reality, one can see the interconnection of the fine arts of China and Europe.

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