

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur

National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)

Course Title

Visual Perception and Art: A survey across the cultures.

Lecture – 14

China and Japan

by

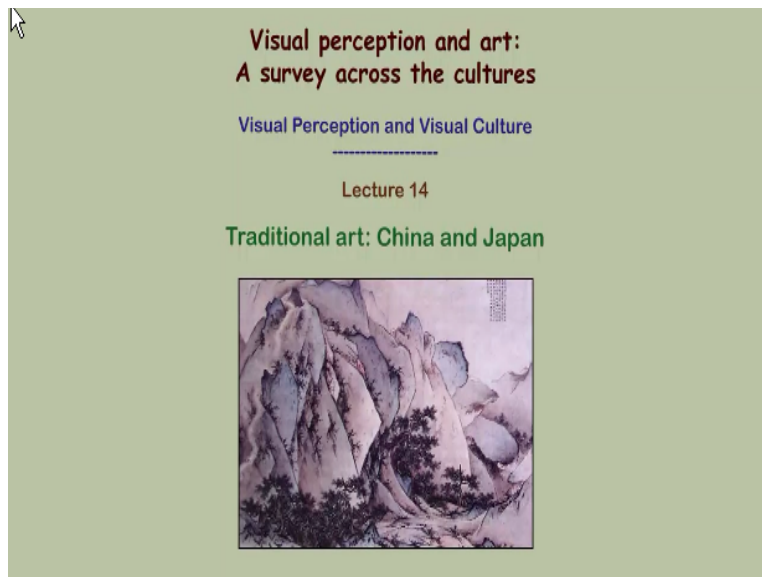
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Visva – Bharati

Hello viewers welcome to mook's online course on visual perception and art a survey across the culture.

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This is the 14th lecture in this course, and in this lecture we shall be looking at the forest and art mainly the Chinese and Japanese art in the context of visual perception.

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Figurative or landscape, decorative or narrative; Chinese and Japanese art, mainly painting, perceived 'space' and human figures in a completely different way.



Like India both Chinese and Japanese cultures are very ancient cultures. Hence there is a very long, very rich and a continuous heritage and tradition in both these countries. When you scan the art of both these countries that is the art of China and art of Japan you notice that figurative or landscape, decorative or narratives, Chinese and Japanese art mainly painting and also sometimes in sculptures perceived space and human figures in a completely different way.

Of course in a considerably non-mimetic way, but at the same time everything that they have painted or drawn or sculpted everything, every figure, every sculpture, every painting on cloth, every painting on wall, or on paper, has a very obviously and conspicuously identifiable and recognizable feature.

So in that sense Chinese and Japanese paintings are never abstract, there is a very strong presence of the actual reference to the real world. Then how does the visual perception involved in the art of these two cultures that is Chinese and Japanese cultures is different from the rest of the cultures. Now when you look at a Chinese painting for example, to begin with a figurative painting like this one thing that you notice something that you have not noticed in Indian art I am sure is this peculiar character of space what is the peculiarity in this painting for example.

If we say this is a fairly non-mimetic painting I mean in the sense that it is a very non realistic one where the painter does not make any attempt to make a realistic painting, then you can immediately argue well you have seen something like this or lot of examples like this in Indian painting as well true.

But then let me ask you back have you noticed a single painting in the entire tradition of Indian miniature art where the background space has been deliberately left completely blank or neutral like this one.

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Look at this painting okay, the figures have their own postures, the figures also have slightly muted though, but definitely certain kind of expression there are gestures you can also say a beautiful bird like a stork or a crane right walking ahead, this beautiful figure of a lady and perhaps she is a queen followed by an attendant figure who is slightly smaller in size which was also the norm of the ancient traditions of painting also in Egyptian, in Indian and many other places that the scale of the figures is never realistic because that the differences in scale between one figure and another figure more or less symbolically express the status or the relationships and the differences in their social and political status in a given culture.

So usually as we find in Egyptian art or in Ajanta painting, in many mughal paintings, Rajput paintings here too in Chinese painting and many Japanese paintings also we find that the figure of the protagonist that is the main figure be it a king or a queen is usually shown larger in life usually shown in a scale much, much bigger than the scale of the rest of the figures who could be merely attendant and or gods and figures or gods like that.

So that is one thing, but I am coming back to the space again, this kind of space where you do not have any indication to even imagine the location of these figures, is something peculiar in many Chinese paintings. So it is a strange visual perception, because in Indian miniature paintings also okay, you do have background spaces which are not realistic which are sometimes decorative, sometimes highly conceptual, but at least you have some suggestions over there.

Some elements are purposefully drawn or placed to enable the viewers to imagine, but at least two guests or mentally locate the figures whether it is a garden, or the interior of the palace, or a forest even if the location is not painted realistically at least it is like a suggestion there are suggestions thrown on to the background of the painting in case of Indian miniature art.

But here in this case there is not a single element which might have helped you to make a sense of this background where exactly they are walking, if they are walking in the garden where is the grass, if it is supposed to be a garden then where is the sky, if they are walking on the floor inside the palace then where is the floor, and if the ground happens to be the floor then what is there behind the figures.

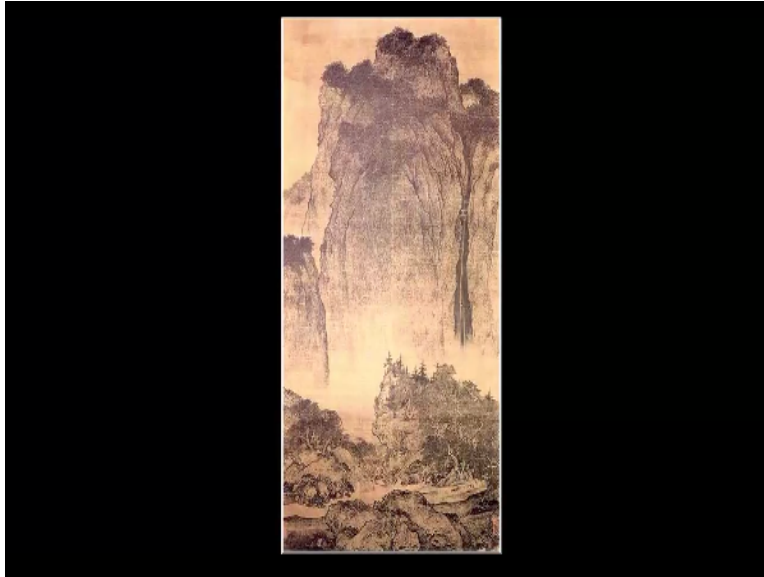
Now deliberately kept neutralized, ambiguous, nonspecific, completely vague, is not a matter of less skill, it is not a sign of inability rather this is a wonderful visual perception involved in this kind of paintings where this idea of dealing with the background in a nonspecific, and non conspicuous way allows the painters to evolve a different kind of visual language different from Indian miniature paintings.
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This is another example of a figurative art where just by looking at the figure you need not be told separately you can make out that the figure in the center with a very strong gorgeous black robe along with two attendant figures who are leaner in scale and also slightly shorter maybe art of course the attendants and the centre figure is the king, is the main, is the dominating figure.

So how do you make a figure look the dominant figure in the entire paper in the entire painting. And once again you see neither the floor the ground nor the background there nothing has been indicated there is no minimum indication to suggest where exactly the king is walking on, and what is there behind the king. I mean whether it is a wall or it is a garden, so this neutrality of the background space happens to be one of the most intriguing features, most curious features in many Chinese paintings and also in many Japanese paintings.

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Down living the figurative painting behind and moving on to the famous tradition of landscape paintings in China, you see not so similar, but again an intriguing concept of space.

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In the sense that when you look at these landscape paintings like this or this it is not difficult to make a sense of the space, but if you begin to measure the space with reference to a certain kind of real-life experience of moving inside a given space then you will be in soup, you will be baffled to see that how though apparently it looks pretty naturalistic, the space in this pictorial composition does not match at all with the real-life experience of the space.

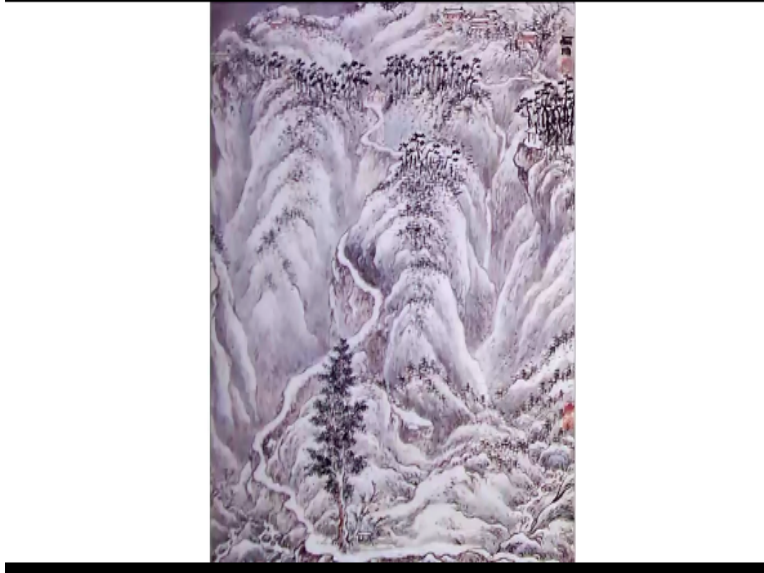
In fact the scale of the object that is the trees and a little bit of wooden architecture that you see almost in the middle ground, and the mountains part of they do not necessarily recede according to the laws of perspective.

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There are more examples like this here where laws of perspectives have not been applied, but the mountain scape has been recreated on the canvas.

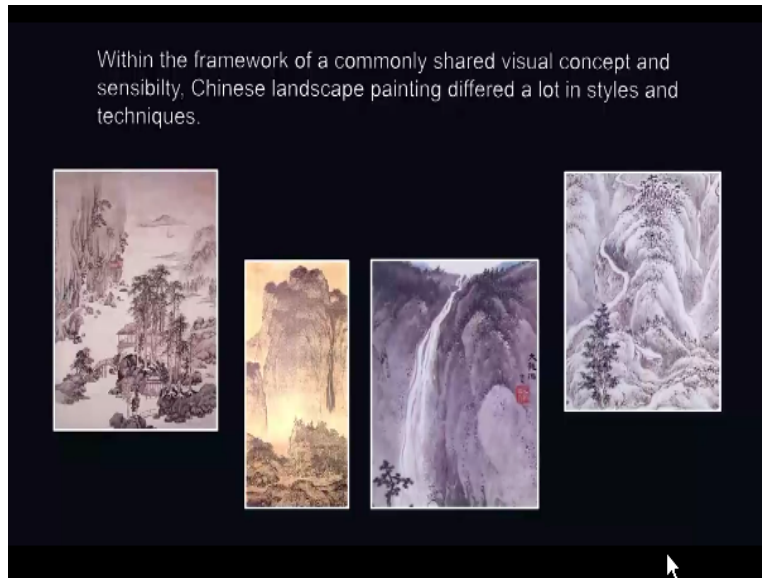
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For example this one the way the mountain scape has been painted up front on the paper it almost appears as if the waiver is not looking at the mountain from either the distance or far off, it appears as if the river is already there in the mountains, is already began to climb the mountain up. So this kind of experience of a space or a terrain or a mountain scope where the river is made to feel as if he or she has already become a part of that space happens or it does not happen rather when you apply the laws of perspective.

Laws of perspective of course it does suggest an extension of space, but at the same time it also makes the viewer feel as if you are standing outside that space.

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The Chinese concept of space and the Chinese concept of visual perception vizavi space is such that it makes the viewer feel as if you have already become a part of that journey, a part of that space. So what apparently looks like a conceptual space which it is also empowered with a kind of possibility a communication possibility to make the viewer feel as if he or she has become a part of that tarin already into that journey.

So within the framework of a commonly shared visual concept and sensibility Chinese landscape painting differed a lot in the styles and techniques. So this is another interesting aspect that though Chinese painting tradition particularly the landscape painting tradition which continued for more than thousand years shared certain common visual principles, certain common characteristics of visual perception yet stylistically there is a whole range of variations.

So in case of Chinese painting and particularly landscape painting it is very obvious then that despite the fact that the tradition is following more or less given set of visual principles and a given set of visual perception this did not stop the Chinese painters to come up with individual styles and techniques. But the visual prescription is mainly about the space and certain notion of reconstructing the space it has got nothing to do with the style.

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So the style or stylistic invention is still possible by the artists though they are all sharing a similar kind of visual perception and a similar kind of aesthetic principles.

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Like this one as a style is same like this one because both of them are painted by the same painters.

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And then you have this one which obviously is not only by a different painter, but this painter is following a different notion of space leaving a huge amount on the right-hand side empty or blank and the weight age of forms is mainly on the left-hand side. Now this is supposed to according to the laws of very standard visual principles and aesthetics it is supposed to create a symmetry, more than that this kind of composition is supposed to create a kind of dis balance, because the weight in the composition that is the forms and figures have not been properly distributed all over the painting.

And when the forms and figures and shapes and objects are not properly distributed all over the painting, then it is bound to create certain kind of imbalance in the composition this is a general notion of any classical art beat in India or in the West in Chinese art in an example like this. Of course that notion has been completely neglected, denied, and rejected.

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Here you can see that the painters do not bother about that kind of balance and imbalance, symmetry or asymmetry.

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They are more interested in creating a certain relationship with the nature between nature and the artist, between nature and the artwork, between the nature and a certain philosophical approach towards the nature.

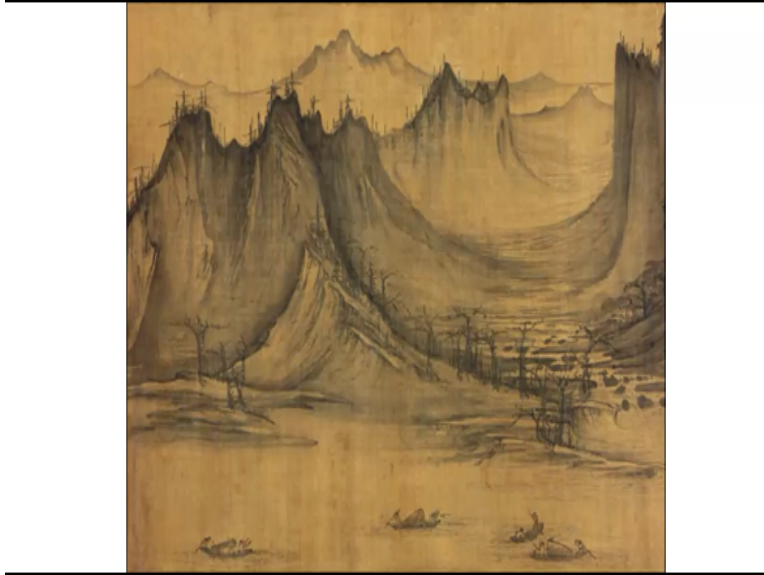
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Look at this landscape painting this is again, this would be considered very odd and almost unacceptable by any artist from a very hardcore strong mimetic tradition. If not for anything else, but at least for this reason that in this painting the artist leaves lot of space blank it is empty, there is a whole lot of void, void is something that was generally avoided by most of the Western artists in the mimetic tradition or even later.

But in Chinese art particularly in the landscape tradition you find void becomes a very important part of Chinese painting. And the problem with the void is problem not for us it is a problem for maybe people who do not understand this kind of visual perception, is this that too much presence of void might make the painting either in look incomplete.

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Or it might make also the painting lose the proper compositional balance. Now in that sense in a painting at least remember most of these landscape paintings are monochromatic that is the use of color is very less than in many paintings there is no color at all, it is all monochromatic like use of black ink on not exactly white, but half-white paper or silk.

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Even in these kind of paintings like this one or this one you find not only variations in style, you have also find variations in techniques, you also find variations in the way the idea of space or empty space has been approached and in this particular painting you can also see that how the painter has allowed the ink to drip all along the paper. This dripping technique became a very interesting technique for some painters.

In that sense this kind of techniques are very non-conventional, and hence very non-mimetic, because this is not the kind of experience that you have in the real world.

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In many landscape paintings like this one in Chinese art like this one which is has been identified as a free hand and a spontaneous kind of painting, the painting tends to almost lose all its references though it is a landscape painting and the painting tends to become an abstract painting though there is no intention on part of the painter to make it an abstract painting.

But it becomes it becomes because the painter makes an attempt to make the painting not abstract, but as brief as possible as spontaneous as possible as meditative as possible and there is whole philosophy behind this kind of paintings that you are not recreating nature you are not replicating nature forget about imitation forget about copying that is in no way possible in Chinese art but what exactly you are doing you are actually trying to express or recreate that particular moment when you are in unison with nature so it is meditative in that sense.

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In Japanese art too, the notion of a free space (unrestrained by the laws of optical perspective) is evident in the compositions and positioning of the figures and objects in relation to each other.



That you try to strike a relationship a deep relationship between yourself and nature, now let us look at a few examples from Japanese art injustice our to the notion of a free space free empty unrestrained by the laws of optical perspective almost neutral kind of space is evident in the compositions and positioning of the figures and objects in relation to each other like these two paintings it is clear that the painter does not bother to put any suggestions or give indications as far as this empty space is concerned.

But he places the figures he places the birds and animals so intelligently so cleverly that it is the placement and it is the spatial relationship between two objects that suggests some kind of space some kind of atmospheric kind of distance between that figure and this figure yet the background space the locational space remains nonspecific.

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Whereas in this particular Chinese landscape as far as that mountain is concerned this is very clear it is quite rooted and well planted on the earth but what is there immediately behind the hill is there is a deep emptiness of void or it is a pictorial emptiness whatever it is no matter what is the intention of the painter the composition according to the Chinese visual perception according to the Chinese visual sensibility does not look this balanced or symmetrical at all.

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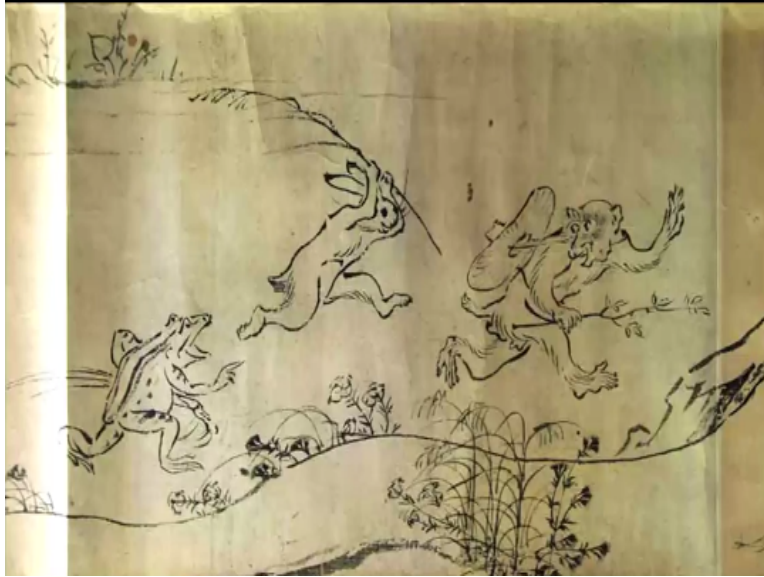


For that matter this so the entire mountain has been pushed on the right-hand side of the painting living a whole lot of left-hand-side pretty empty except subtitles hanging from the top now you look at the below just beneath the mountain again there is a whole lot of empty space and sometimes in order to justify this void and empty spaces Chinese painters have painted some mist or cloud.

So it is not about direct visual perception of the real life but it has got something to do with the visual perception that develops along with the tradition so tradition helps in developing a language of painting and along with that a tradition helps in developing a certain kind of visual perception, so if we are to think that a certain kind of a character of a type of visual perception gives rise to this kind of visual language okay to some extent it could be true but looking at it from the river side it could also be true that a certain kind of visual language gives rise to a certain kind of visual perception.

So the visual perception and visual language cannot be understood as something that is ahead of the other it is as confusing and paradoxical as the head and as a hand and egg conundrum we do not know which one has come before which one I mean that is not the question at all.

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Both are developing at the same time now this is the Japanese drawing once again where you see an empty space and place and located on the empty space there are this animal figures, now these animal figures have a kind of accuracy with reference to the real world the real creatures the real rabbit the real monkey and real frog.

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Toba Sōjō

But once again the name of the artist is Toba Soja but once again when you look at the space behind it has been deliberately left as silent as possible.

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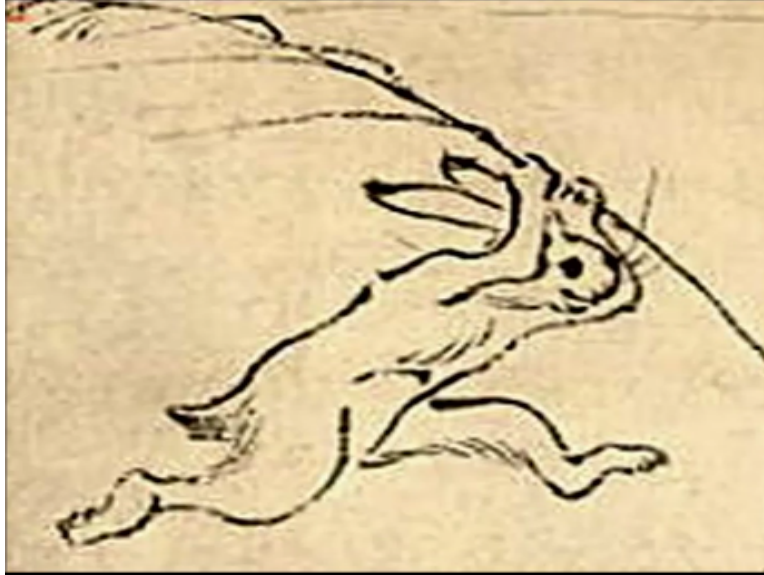
So here talking about the visual perception in Chinese and Japanese art it could be useful to connect the emptiness or void with this idea of stillness and silence too much work or an overcrowded space can lead us or can evoke a sense of sound and noise and a space which is almost empty or void can evoke a sense of silence of stillness not that this theory is true in all the Chinese and Japanese paintings.

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But it is true in some Chinese and Japanese paintings but when in a neutral space like this the figures themselves are overactive in full motion and movement and lot of dynamic qualities are visible the way in the way this figures are jumping and running and moving then the space behind cannot remain silent cannot remain peaceful anymore.

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Now this brings us to another theory that the character of the space that is the background space in Chinese and Japanese are partly depends on the character of the figures the positive figures.

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In certain examples Chinese painters brought their art to the point of abstraction though they never left the reference to the real world. In Japanese drawings too we observe this similar tendencies.



In certain examples Chinese painters brought their art to the point of abstraction as I have already mentioned though they never left the reference to the real world I am the reference to the real world or the natural world has always been there through all in Chinese and Japanese art but in some cases we find there is a tendency to minimize anything that they felt unnecessary and excess and thereby and also the fact that they were many of them are using the technique of calligraphy.

And because calligraphy itself is something very eloquent it has a very strong visual power so many of these artists were trying to let the calligraphy speak on it is own no the form or the details of the form, at also this kind of ideas were very important for the Chinese and Japanese painter to develop their visual perception.

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Now then we have this whole tradition of screen painting in Japan where you find a lot of element coming up very strongly in the visual perception of Japanese art that is the element of pattern and decorative scheme in these screen paintings.

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Although each and every object seems to be recognizable identifiable having a real-life identity yet the way the objects and the figures and the spaces and various other elements have been composed.

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Japanese screen painting

It always at least in screen painting in Japanese screen painting it always gives a sensation of a pattern so it is interesting something that we have seen in Indian Rangoli and also 9 flow decoration that references from the references derived or the motives different derived from the real world being transformed into a pattern in Japanese art to.

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Particularly in screen painting we see these real life objects are placed and drawn in a way that they have a quality of a decoration quality of an abstract pattern though these paintings are never pure decoration or design.

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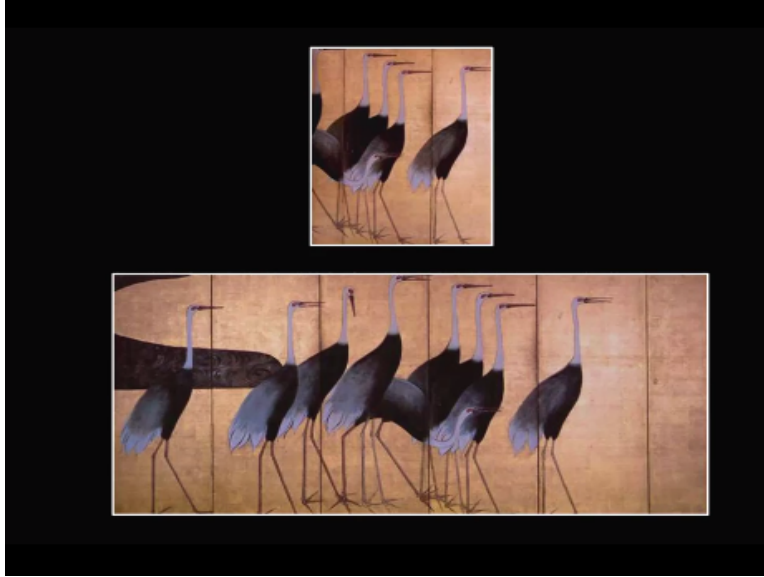
Even when it is a screen painting just full of crows flying in different directions crows on the ground so many of this but again without a single suggestion or indication with regard to the location it is a movement of the crows on the one hand and secondly it is also the placement of these birds throughout the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 folds of the screen that create a sense of space it does not create the tangible space but it definitely creates a sense of space to the extent that we do not miss the space at all.

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Now this is very important that the Japanese painters of the screen painting may not at all at the end of the day suggest any is in any identity of the space but it also ensures that while enjoying the painting looking at the birds looking at those cranes looking at the trees and whatever is there in the screen paintings we almost forget about the space we do not miss the space at all or rather space has been made almost irrelevant in the way we look for a space in Indian miniature painting.

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Or for that matter this one and none of these screen paintings that you have seen so far has any clear indication of the identity of the space but at the same time you do not miss out on the space there is a sense of space that satisfies you and your visual perception about the space.

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We heard about the use of *diagonals* as signifying movement and instability. Japanese narrative scroll paintings have used this principle quite frequently.



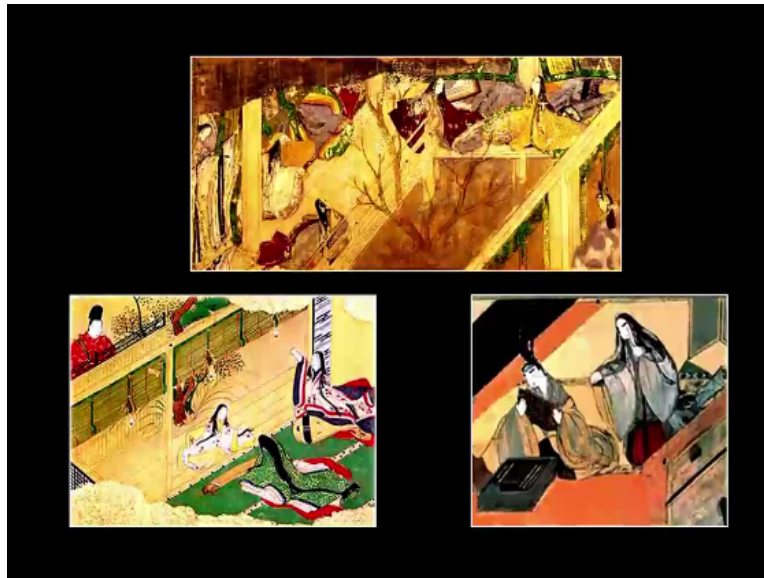
We were talking about diagonals in one of our early lectures and how diagonals in our visual perception evoke certain sense of movement it is interesting to see that in many of these Japanese narrative scroll paintings diagonals has been used as signifying move and instability so Japanese narrative school paintings have used this principle quite frequently look at this painting.

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Look at this one whether it is the fire or the architecture oceans even the movement of figures mostly there is an emphasis on the diagonal movement mostly there is an emphasis on the diagonal structure of the painting.

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Because these paintings are all about chaos now this bit of painting that we are looking at right now is not about chaos it is about very quiet and silent kind of interpersonal relationships between the members of a royal family it is about the different dialogue that is taking place between the different members of the family yet the diagonals of the architectural units and members have been placed so intelligently so properly that you always have this sense of an ongoing narrative.

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A story that is unfolding itself once again this is another painting or rather it is a print not exactly a painting but a woodcut print by Hiroshige it is called the farmers and the farmers are having on their way back home and the path is diagonal and you can see also the raindrops the rain falling diagonally so various kinds of diagonals create not only a sense of movement but also a sense of urgency. So there is an emotional content there which has been expressed very well.

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Through the use of these diagonals but when it is a painting like this where there is not a single diagonal except the slopes of the mountain but again the mountain the tip of the mountain and placement of the mountain makes the whole mountain that is Mount Fuji extremely stable and look at all the clouds each and every cloud is horizontal in shape, it is interesting even the mountain despite the diagonal slope of the mountains generally the shape of the mountain has a vertical thrust.

And you have this clouds horizontal clouds so again going back to those the basic principles of visual perception you may take these examples from Japanese art and explain how in real paintings and creative works of art like this the principles of visual perception like diagonal movement then horizontality stability etc has been actually used by these painters who did not have a real knowledge of visual perception actually at least no theoretical knowledge.

So thought theoreticians and psychologists later came up with these ideas they discovered these theories but it is interesting to see that how many 100 of years back painters were perhaps knowing these theories in their own terms.

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And lastly in this tradition of ukiyo-e painter would cut print when you see this beautifully drawn and printed figures of women with different kinds of dress and costume and movements once again the artists takes this wonderful I would say it is a very bold step it is a very bold decision to keep the background as non-interfering as possible and to make the bodies create that sense of space the body is the human figures by virtue of their movements and everything else.

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A similar clean or visual perception is also found in the way this particular Japanese mask that is no mask has been created it is to make it very evident that it is not an imitation of a face it is a mask that perhaps mocks the face even the eyebrows have not been made very typically naturalistic or the facial expression Japanese artists are excellent in the way they were able to extent exaggerate and play with the references from the real world and that is why the kind of visual perception they used in their art is neither magnetic nor purely nonmagnetic it is based on a certain character of their culture and it is needless to say as we have been reiterating whenever it was needed that ultimately visual perception has to be studied in the context of a given culture.

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Like this one as well or this one.

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I mean it is an expression of the faces which is the expression of their drapery it is an expression of their hands that fill up the entire canvas or the entire page.

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So the stillness of the neutrality of the space does not create any problem in the context of Japanese art thank you.

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