

NATURE EAST AND WEST:  
PAUL KLEE'S COSMOS AND THE JAPANESE GARDEN

by

KATHERINE EVELYN JOY KLIMT

(Under the Direction of Ronald Bogue)

ABSTRACT

The garden has in the history of Western culture been taken as the exemplar of the proper human interaction with the natural world. It has also exerted a profound pull throughout the history of Buddhist Japan, which has seen the development of the garden from a simulacrum of a heavenly paradise to an increasingly abstract art form that aims to provoke distinct spiritual reactions in viewers. Using the art of modernist painter Paul Klee, I will examine how the garden is used by both medieval Zen practitioners and a paradigmatic high modernist artist to interrogate the spiritual significance of the cultivated landscape. It is my contention that both the modernist painter and the Zen garden designers use the garden in order to demonstrate the inseparability of humankind from the natural order. They use abstraction within the garden to point to the ultimate evanescence of the contingent and specific, and draw attention to the metastable reality that both allows specific contingencies to emerge and causes their dissolution.

INDEX WORDS: Paul Klee, modernism, Japan, gardens, Buddhism

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DEDICATION

To Mathilda and Cad

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a vast distance between the varieties of artistic expression I am engaging with in this essay. One, the body of European modernist painting, in particular the works of Paul Klee (1879-1940); the other, the artistic products of the medieval Buddhist cultures of Japan, in particular the garden. These art works differ in myriad ways (their histories, contexts, spiritual and aesthetic dimensions), but between the two exist certain parallels that perhaps reveal a common ontological stance towards nature. Klee was not a Buddhist; nor will this paper assert any facile claims about the Japanese being modern or postmodern before either terms existed. But their specific religious or philosophical orientations need not be identical in order for their approach to nature to be similar. How humanity negotiates with and locates itself in relation to nature is one of the fundamental issues art seeks to illuminate: as well as potentially revealing truths about our inner lives, art is formative in our relationships to the outside world. Through it we situate ourselves in our environment and examine the ontological significance of this positioning. More than mere play or entertainment, art is an attempt to order the world in which we reside and derive meaning from this ordering. The modernists and the medieval Japanese certainly order the world and evaluate its significance in different ways, but their respective art forms reveal a greater accord than would seem immediately apparent. Klee's paintings and Japanese gardens both reveal through their use of abstract forms a similar division of the world into two distinct ontological realms: the process of flux that constitutes the virtual world (presented through geometrical abstraction), and the contingent, concrete realities that emerge from this world (presented through distinct representational figures). Both present a universe in

which being and becoming are intimately connected, though not identical, and both suggest that the diverse forms of nature are only manifestations of a purified metastable reality generally inaccessible to human perception. It is my contention that though European modernists and medieval Buddhists emerge from religious and aesthetic traditions that are widely separated in time and place, and however differently they may reveal their perceptions of the worlds they inhabit, those worlds are not as incompatible as they may appear.

I will examine first how the landscape, in its “wild” and cultivated forms, has been utilized in the Western tradition throughout history. In particular, I will examine how the garden assumed its status as an aesthetic exemplar: a piece of the natural world explicitly molded to suit not only humanity’s needs but also our desires. The garden has a long history in the art, thought, and literature of the Western world; tracing its historical development allows us to better understand its significance for modernists such as Paul Klee. Central to this investigation are the theories of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century art historian Wilhelm Worringer, who posited that the relationship between human beings and our environments is the most salient factor in how we choose to represent our world. The aesthetic poles of abstraction and mimesis have less to do with painterly skill than with our emotional response to our surroundings, with the former based in anxiety and the latter in confidence if not the perception of dominance. The modernist retreat into abstraction or, indeed, Primitivism, can be seen as a paradoxical response to the increasing facility with which human beings collectively and individually interact with the world: the scientific pursuit of knowledge engendered in modernists a sense of alienation, rather than identification, with the environment. Abstraction is central to Klee’s art in that it provides him with the means to penetrate beyond the nature’s myriad phenomena to the universal processes beneath, and in his

focus on the garden he makes explicit that human beings are not only agents of change and becoming within our world but subject to it as well.

Medieval Japanese culture, shaped by Buddhism as well as other religious traditions, locates the human being within the landscape in a manner surprisingly similar to Klee's. As I will show using contemporaneous literary and philosophical works, the individual in the Buddhist cosmos is always entwined within a complex and ever-changing system in which stable identity is a fiction. Japanese gardens of the medieval period, exemplified by but not limited to the *karesansui* (gardens constructed without water), aim to make visible these philosophical assertions and aid the individual in his efforts towards enlightenment. In doing so, they use both a very refined type of representation (drawing the observer's attention to the natural world) in tandem with abstraction (in order to draw the viewer's attention to that which cannot be directly expressed or represented) to convey the illusory and fragile nature of phenomenal world. Japanese aesthetics shares with Klee the conviction that the contingencies we see must be purified or pared down to their essence in order to be aesthetically or spiritually meaningful, however different their methods of conveying this principle may be. Examining the commonalities as well as the differences between artworks so disparate in time and space provides insight into the garden's function as a means of understanding the natural world and humanity's place within it. For both Klee and the medieval Japanese, the garden is uniquely situated to interrogate these issues: as a space that can be described as neither wholly natural nor entirely subject to human design, it allows artists from different philosophical and aesthetic backgrounds to interrogate the human being's place within the cosmos.

CHAPTER 1  
GARDENS AND THE CULTIVATED LANDSCAPE IN THE WESTERN  
TRADITION

I. The Modernist Landscape

The relationship between human beings and the environment has never been a static one. Consequently, how we conceive of this relationship—through art, philosophy, religion, and science—has, predictably, been variable throughout history. The position we place ourselves within the cosmos, whether it be as the beneficiaries of a deity who created this world with us in mind, an evolutionary accident in a “blind and pitiless” universe<sup>1</sup>, or a temporary confluence of myriad contingencies, influences how we approach the environment itself and what kind of knowledge we seek to derive from it; in other words, to a certain degree epistemology is at least partially dependent on ontology. Art provides one of the ways in which our species continues to negotiate its existence in surroundings that are often difficult to understand, and as those surroundings undergo alterations, be they of the “natural” or the anthropogenic variety, art in turn changes as well. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, by which time the natural environment in Europe, the Americas and elsewhere had endured tremendous changes as a result of rapid technological developments that drastically restructured humanity’s interactions with

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<sup>1</sup> Such are the words of biologist and writer Richard Dawkins, whose words nicely encapsulate a purely materialist view of humanity’s place in the world: ‘In a universe of blind physical forces . . . you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.’ Quoted in Michio Kaku, *Parallel Worlds: A Journey through Creation, Higher Dimensions, and the Future of the Cosmos*, NY: Doubleday, 2005: 355.

our environments and with each other, the artistic and literary movement now known as modernism arose. The processes of nature were integral to modernism; one of its foundational documents begins famously with words that signal dissatisfaction with, or even despair over, both the natural world and English poetry's traditional relationship to it: "April is the cruellest month." The familiarity of T.S. Eliot's clarion call should not diminish its import; in five words modernism's most emblematic poet repudiates nature herself, with her endless cycles and her ultimately pointless fecundity, and Western poetry's reliance on the products of such oscillations. For modernists, nature was futile and technology alien, and the individual hapless and confused in relation to both. The speaker of Thomas Hardy's "Hap,"<sup>2</sup> exasperated by existential angst, explores the quintessentially modernist dilemma of remaining sentient in a universe that appears not to be; like Job, he demands an explanation for his suffering and receives only nonsense, denied even Job's comfort in the knowledge that his suffering occurs at the behest of "some vengeful god," he is, conversely, beholden to "Crass Casualty" and "purblind Doomsters"; a lone consciousness in a world stripped of meaning and spirit.

In art, modernism's turn away from representation and towards abstraction reflects an attempt to cope with a world in which traditional ways of understanding no longer have the capacity to imbue human life with significance; nature and its interrogator science no longer point to truth, and religion no longer provides us with reliable moral structure. In this context, abstraction represents nothing so much as a retreat not only from the confusions of modern life, but also from an entire universe that has become incomprehensible. The modern world requires new ways

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Longman Anthology of British Literature, Volume 2C: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Kevin J. Dettmar and Jennifer Wicke (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006): 2297.

of looking at nature, because nature is not an inert backdrop against which humans conduct their affairs, but an active substance; it is part of humanity rather than apart from it. German art critic Wilhelm Worringer, in his early-20<sup>th</sup> Century essays on art history, *Abstraction and Empathy*<sup>3</sup> and *Form in Gothic*<sup>4</sup>, examines the historical developments of Western art via a framework that posits humanity's relationship to nature—both through the specific capacities of our physical bodies and the expansion of those capacities through technology—as fundamental to how Western art styles have developed, and proposes different “types” of men (paradigmatic representative figures of distinct human cultures) whose unique psychological relationships to their environments are revealed through, and are mediated by, their styles of artistic expression.

Wilhelm Worringer's theory of art differs from many others in the Western tradition in that it does not aim to define what art is in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions; it rather traces stylistic conventions according to how humans at a certain stage of development (in this schema, Primitive, Classical or Romantic, and Oriental) perceive their surroundings. In Worringer's view, aesthetics is intimately tied to how much or little anxiety a culture feels about the natural world; more primitive cultures, unable to dominate the natural world through technology, adopt abstraction; representation, and naturalism in particular, are possible because in more modern eras, the human-nature relationship is more tender and less fraught than it was for our ancestors. Significantly, Worringer's theory does not assert that mimesis preceded abstraction, or that, for example, the abstractions we observe in primitive art are due to insufficient skill—abstraction is rather the primary stage of artistic expression. Worringer's work

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<sup>3</sup> Translated by Michael Bullock (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Translated Sir Herbert Read (London: Alec Tiranti Ltd., 1957).

became quite popular in at least one segment of the modernist art community, that of Munich, where it influenced modernists such as Paul Klee, the focus of this essay. Worringer's identification of abstraction as more fundamental—or at least older—than the representational art it was rejecting, as well as his schematizing of these stages along psychological lines, endeared him to German modernists, whose spiritual approach to the artistic endeavor we will explore in further depth below. Additionally, Worringer's work presented a synthesis of many different strands of post-Kantian aesthetic theory and presented the man-environment relationship as inextricable from our artistic endeavors, an emphasis that became pervasive in the modernist period, even among those who may not have counted Worringer among their influences.

In order to understand where aesthetics stood at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is necessary to examine the developments of this branch of philosophy in the preceding two centuries, beginning with the formidable figure of Immanuel Kant. Worringer, like most, or perhaps even all, of the philosophers working since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was writing in response to Kant's ideas, and so he remains a towering figure in intellectual history. Kant inaugurated the modern philosophy of art by separating form from meaning and by identifying the beautiful as something that could be objectively evaluated.<sup>5</sup> In extending the inquiry into art beyond the analytic and psychological perspectives that preceded him, Kant established “the aesthetic as a domain of human experience equal in dignity to the theoretical and the practical (i.e., the

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<sup>5</sup> Ernest K. Mundt, “Three Aspects of German Aesthetic Theory,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 17, no. 3 (1959): 287-88.

cognitive and the moral).”<sup>6</sup> The two main strains of aesthetic theory of his time, empiricism and rationalism, evaluated art according to distinct criteria: for the empiricists, beauty is emotive and lacks a cognitive dimension; for rationalists, the experience of beauty is an intellectual recognition of an object’s possession of a certain property.<sup>7</sup> Kant was not content with this bifurcation, and formulated a theory of aesthetic experience that affirmed both its emotional basis and the universality of its judgments. His assumption that judgments of beauty must be universally valid for all people leads him to conclude that the foundation of such judgments must be equally universal, and thus grounded not in the representation of sensations, which are not communicable, but in form, which is. Form, for Kant, can be understood as the Aristotelian *eidos*, without which “there could exist only the utter chaos of undifferentiated matter.”<sup>8</sup> As such, though form and meaning may be distinguished, form and content cannot; undifferentiated matter derives its content from the form it takes.

The influence of these ideas, which Kant presented in 1790’s *Critique of Judgment*, is difficult to overstate; by the time Worringer was formulating his own theories, he was preceded by several generations of thinkers distinguished mainly by their differing interpretations of Kant’s aesthetics. These philosophers can be divided into three schools, the idealist, formalist, and sensualist, the last being the most important for my purposes. This interpretation of Kant focuses primarily on emotive dimension of art, and produced the influential concept known as *Einfühlung*, or empathy. Developed in 1872 by Robert Vischer, empathy (an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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<sup>6</sup> “Kant,” in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richards Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 196): 277-80.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Ginsborg, “Kant’s Aesthetics and Teleology,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified July 2, 2005, accessed December 15, 2011, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-aesthetics/>.

<sup>8</sup> Mundt, 288.

English coinage modeled on “sympathy”<sup>9</sup>) involves endowing to soulless forms “a soulful content thanks to an involuntary act of transferring our own feelings.”<sup>10</sup> The concept in part arose as a revolt against the formalist interpretation of Kant’s work, which, grounded in a scientific view of the mind, which interpreted cognition as “law-governed interaction” that favors certain regularities, conceptualized aesthetic response as based in “formal features of the object that trigger the mind’s lawfully determined affective responses.”<sup>11</sup> This seemed to neglect the subjective side of Kant’s aesthetics, and the sensualists argued that the mind is an essential participant in the generation of meaning; the subject endows objects with cognitive content and uses them to extract his own interior realm,<sup>12</sup> rather than merely responding to certain features of the object that harmonize with our predilections. For Vischer, empathy was an irrational concept, something that the human mind engaged in without knowing quite why, a kind of mystical union grounded in the “pantheist desire toward a union with the world.”<sup>13</sup> The fundamental mysteriousness and spontaneity of empathy as a response to works of art is illustrated by a

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<sup>9</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* still lists the now commonplace word ‘empathy’ as a psychological and aesthetic term, with the lone definition of “the power of projecting one’s personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation.” The older word ‘sympathy,’ also derived ultimately from Greek (συμπαθής, ‘fellow feeling’) originally had a meaning colloquial usage now ascribes to empathy: “a real or supposed affinity between certain things, by virtue of which they are similarly or correspondingly affected by the same influence, affect or influence one another (esp. in some occult way), or attract or tend towards each other.” Its meanings generally reflect the accord between two things, such that a change in one produces a change in another, rather than a projection of a subject’s feelings onto an object, which is the meaning of *Einfühlung* as presented in the theories of Vischer and Worringer.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Mundt, 291.

<sup>11</sup> Günther Zöllner, “History of Kantian Aesthetics,” *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, Oxford Art Online*, accessed December 15, 2011, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e03111#e03111-s0005>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Mundt, 292.

passage in Thomas Mann's 1911 novella *Death in Venice*, in which Aschenbach, ruminating on the relationship between artwork and subject, opines:

For an intellectual product of any value to exert an immediate influence which shall also be deep and lasting, it must rest on an inner harmony, yes, an affinity, between the personal destiny of its author and that of his contemporaries in general. Men do not know why they award fame to one work of art rather than another. Without being in the faintest connoisseurs, they think to justify the warmth of the commendations by discovering it in a hundred virtues, whereas the real ground of their applause is inexplicable—it is sympathy.<sup>14</sup>

The use of the word “sympathy” here reflects the close relationship of the two words, as the response Mann details is clearly one that Vischer and Worringer would identify as empathic. The response Aschenbach seeks is both instantaneous and indelible, and precedes intellectual evaluation of the object's admirable qualities.

Empathy was further developed in Theodor Lipps' massive *Asthetik*, largely devoted to an explication of the concept. He locates aesthetic pleasure and value in the way the soul responds to aesthetic stimuli; we call those things beautiful that awaken a sense of beauty.<sup>15</sup> He elaborated on four types of empathy: general (by which forms and outlines are animated), empirical or natural (in which we impute animate attributes to natural objects), mood (the expressive power of music and color), and a sort of physiognomic empathy, in which the physical appearance of a person is taken to be expressive of his inner life.<sup>16</sup> He exerted particularly pronounced influence

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<sup>14</sup> Translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter, *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories* (New York: Vintage International, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> Mundt, 294.

<sup>16</sup> “Theodor Lipps,” *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, accessed December 15, 2011, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy->

on Worringer in his formulation of the relationship between the individual and the artwork, in which he asserted that aesthetic pleasure was a kind of self-enjoyment, in which the subject projects himself into an artwork through empathy and thus dissolves the distinction between the two; this process leads the self to discover itself. The obverse, what we experience as ugly, is the occurrence of negative empathy, which is due to an opposition between subject and object such that the self finds its desires for activation frustrated, and no aesthetic pleasure results. Such objects are, in Lipps' view, unconnected to art; as such, art must be understood as something that engages the subject in a very specific, pleasure-inducing way. Empathy is active; "mere happening" is without meaning, but activity—action which is purposefully motivated—is the basis of aesthetic response.<sup>17</sup> Objects that fail to provoke an empathic response, and those that are aesthetically repulsive, are thus excluded from what can properly be called art.

Tangential to these struggles with the implications of Kant's work, but also figuring prominently in aesthetic thinking of the time and exercising a tremendous influence on Worringer, was Alois Riegl's notion of *Kunstwollen*. As Benjamin Binstock points out, an exact translation of this term has proven elusive and it has been variously rendered in English as "will to art," "will to form," "art-drive," "aesthetic urge," and "artistic volition," among others; often it is left in German and functions as a "transcendental signifier without a signified," which is something of a problem as it is the fulcrum of Riegl's thought about art.<sup>18</sup> Binstock prefers the

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remote.galib.uga.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T051304?source=oao\_gao&source=oao\_t118&source=oao\_t234&source=oao\_t4&q=Theodor+Lipps&article\_section=all&search=article&pos=1&\_start=1#firsthit.

<sup>17</sup> Mundt, 295.

<sup>18</sup> "Foreward," in Alois Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, translated by Jacqueline E. Jung (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 13-14.

translation “will of art,” as this correctly locates the will not within historical or social forces, or in the mind of an individual artist, but in “art’s evolving formal or visual elements or language.” Riegl’s concept was a response to the theory of art promulgated by architect Gottfried Semper in his work *Der Stil*, which grounded artistic productions in their function, material and technique. Semper’s approach in the first two volumes was firmly materialistic; he based his theory on observations of the practical, rather than the decorative, arts of pre-industrial people, focusing on pottery, weaving and masonry, productions which are explicitly bound by the materials that constitute them and the technical skill required to construct them.<sup>19</sup> Semper aimed to expand his theories in a third volume of *Der Stil* to include issues such as society, history, and the creative will, but the work was never completed or published and thus Semper was judged by Riegl and others as having advocated a purely materialist theory. Riegl acknowledged the importance of material factors in artistic creation, but stated that *Kunstwollen* was prior and more crucial to art’s material dimension; his view is a teleological one in which “*Kunstwollen* prevails in battle against function, raw material, and technique.”<sup>20</sup> It is the will to art that is art’s *raison d’être*, not its practical realization; the two may even contradict each other. *Kunstwollen* is an urge which is not rational or intentional, and is intimately tied up not with our practical needs but with our creative desires. Embedded within it are also a host of revolutionary notions that became extremely influential in the following years, such as the idea that art is an irreplaceable part of

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<sup>19</sup> Wolfgang Hermann, “Gottfried Semper,” *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, accessed December 15, 2011, [http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T077537?q=Gottfried+Semper&search=quick&pos=1&\\_start=1#firsthit](http://www.oxfordartonline.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T077537?q=Gottfried+Semper&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit).

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Binstock, 14.

human life, that humanity's "nature" is subject to cultural and temporal variation, and that art should not be approached in terms of mimesis.<sup>21</sup>

The concepts of empathy and *Kunstwollen* were to figure prominently in Worringer's work. His "theory of empathy," outlined in *Abstraction and Empathy*, begins by examining not the aesthetic itself but the behavior of the "contemplating subject."<sup>22</sup> Acknowledging his debt to Lipps, he characterizes empathy as "objectified self-enjoyment," a movement by the subject into the object that creates a profound identification between the two, the dominant mode of aesthetic appreciation in the modern period. He recapitulates Lipps' ideas about empathy in order to point to the real aim of his work, which is to "demonstrate that the assumption that this process of empathy has at all times and all places been the presupposition of artistic creation cannot be upheld."<sup>23</sup> His theory of empathy is a restating of Lipps' view, but his dissertation points to another, equally prominent urge in the history of artistic creation: the urge to abstraction. After Riegl, Worringer explains that art cannot be reduced to a mimetic impulse, an essential attribute of mankind that nonetheless is utterly separate from our artistic endeavors:

The primitive imitation impulse has prevailed at all periods, and its history is a history of manual dexterity, devoid of aesthetic significance . . . at all times art proper has satisfied a deep psychic need, but not the pure imitation impulse, the playful delight in copying the natural model. The halo that envelops the concept art . . . can be psychologically motivated only by the idea of an art which, having arisen from psychic needs, gratifies psychic needs.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mundt, 304.

<sup>22</sup> 4.

<sup>23</sup> 7.

<sup>24</sup> 11-12.

It is this rejection of the mimetic basis of art that allows Worringer to advance his theories of the urges to empathy, abstraction, and tranquility and their accompanying types of man. As the primary beauty of a work of art lies not in how it affects us formally but in its “ability to bestow happiness,” different times and cultures, possessed of different philosophical and religious convictions, will have different views of happiness and thus different types of art. It is art’s culturally determined basis that results in the works from other cultures or other periods appearing distorted or unpleasant to our eyes; because these works are determined by cultural views different from our own, we respond with aesthetic pleasure to the artwork that most closely reflects our own culture’s ontological relationship with the external world.

The urge to abstraction reflects one of those relationships, and Worringer identifies it with the primitive or primeval man. As noted above, the urge to abstraction is in Worringer’s view originary and predates the tendencies towards imitation of the natural world that are, in fact, products of a modern, scientific yet spiritual, outlook: “Whereas the precondition for an urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the outside world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world . . . we might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space.”<sup>25</sup> This is a cognitive fragment of our earlier evolutionary history, in which our relationship to space was tactile rather than visual, and our inability to locate ourselves in our environment through touch resulted in feelings of intense insecurity. Our bipedal motion eventually resolves this as we become more dependent on our eyes, which are capable of assimilating vastly more space than our limbs, and as such this primeval urge to abstraction fades

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<sup>25</sup> 15.

and is replaced by the classical urge towards empathy. In *Form in Gothic*, Worringer explores the primeval man in more depth: he is not a representative of a generalized primitive culture per se but “man as he was before all experience, before all tradition and history, the first link in the chain of evolution, [and] can only be hypothetically reconstructed by us.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, all living cultures that exist on the planet are in some sense infected by classical thinking, for these evolutionary links have disappeared, leaving behind traces and tendencies rather than exemplars. At the same time, all classical cultures bear the mark of the primeval, as in spite of our progressively modern tendencies, the primeval feelings of estrangement “never absolutely disappears, for the dregs of these primal deep-seated experiences remain in man as a vague memory, in the form of *instinct*.”<sup>27</sup> Thus Worringer conceives of instinct not as something derived from animals, but from the uneasy state between the human and animal, when human beings possessed cognition but no totalizing worldview with which they could assuage their anxiety with the world they were enmeshed in. Worringer’s primeval man is the pre-religious man; man in a cognitive condition in which the development of some unified worldview became necessary:

Out of this relationship of fear which is man’s attitude towards the phenomenal world, there cannot but arise as the strongest mental and spiritual need the urge to absolute values, which deliver him from the chaotic confusion of mental and visual impressions . . . speech and art, and above all the religiosity of primitive man all spring from this need.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> 14.

<sup>27</sup> 16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Speech, art, and cognition are thus categorizing systems that humanity in its primitive state used to cope with the terrifying world of the senses; this is also in Worringer's view the font from which our tendency to seek transcendence sprung: "this timid soul, assailed by unknown forces, could as yet find no room for the idea of God immanent in the world."<sup>29</sup>

These two worldviews create distinctive forms of art to satisfy their cognitive needs. The chaotic world which confronts the primeval man results in artwork that emphasizes the abstract and transcendent. Rather than associating strict geometry and pure lines with highly developed cultures, Worringer asserts that "the style most perfect in its regularity, the style of the highest abstraction, most strict in its exclusion of life, is peculiar to peoples at their most primitive cultural level."<sup>30</sup> For the man confronted with a distressing and unknowable universe, "the simple line and its development in purely geometrical regularity was bound to offer the greatest possibility of happiness."<sup>31</sup> For the classical man, the beauty and joy of life is derived from the transformation of chaos into cosmos, undifferentiated matter in orderly form. This transformation results in an art cleansed of its transcendental overtones, which starts to idealize nature; the urge to empathy creates a situation in which man can devote himself joyfully to the external world, "in order to remodel it after his own image." The classical man can "animate all things with his own life," and thus imitating nature becomes his imperative because nature is now something he can integrate into an orderly whole, which he in turn can integrate into

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *Abstraction and Empathy*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 20.

himself.<sup>32</sup> The embrace of natural forms in art, the emergence of realist styles which aim to present natural objects in near-photographic likeness, arise from this shift in perspective.

The irony of the modernist condition is thus quite clear: situated in a world in which humans exert a power to manipulate, and perhaps even conquer, the natural world to an extent that previous generations could not have imagined, modernists conversely feel inept and alienated; their technological power does not engender spiritual power. In Luigi Pirandello's 1925 novel *Shoot!: The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*,<sup>33</sup> the titular protagonist vividly describes how his constant immersion in a world of machines (in his case, film cameras) is in turn slowly stripping him of his humanity until, at the novel's climax, he is indistinguishable from the camera his hands, in automaton fashion, operate:

And I began to turn the handle . . . my hand was impassively keeping the time that I had set for its movement, faster, slower, dead slow, as though my will had flowed down—firm, lucid, inflexible—into my wrist and from there had assumed entire control, leaving my brain free to think, my heart to feel, so that my hand continued to obey even when with a pang of terror I saw Nuti take his aim . . . I kept on hearing above that growl, above that gasp, the continuous ticking of the machine, the handle of which my hand, alone, of its own accord, still kept on turning.

As Gubbio watches a man meet his death at the hands of a doomed tiger, the total severance between his thinking brain, feeling heart, and machinic corpus enacts very literally one of Western culture's most influential myths, that of the separation between the mind and body. This rupture is shown to be profoundly traumatic for Gubbio, as well as destructive to his

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<sup>32</sup> *Form in Gothic*, 32.

<sup>33</sup>Tr. C.K. Scott Moncrieff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 211-12.

surroundings; the chasm between mind and body renders the cameraman incapable of effective action. In a wider sense, the presumed independence of mind and body so prominent in Western thinking since Descartes also renders the surrounding world inert matter in opposition to the dynamism of human substance. Such an assumption can only remain intact if one assumes humanity has some kind of special place within the cosmos, perhaps one bestowed upon us by God; if not, and human beings are also merely matter, the Cartesian dichotomy results in Gubbio's overwhelming sense of inertia and impotence—the man indistinguishable from the machines he has in fact created. That the climax of Pirandello's novel details a man being consumed alive by an emissary of the wilderness presumed to be safely contained, though exploited, by human beings is also indicative of the longstanding tension between man and 'wilderness' (that which is uncultivated and unpeopled) in the Western tradition, a relationship I will explore in more depth below.

## II. Wilderness and Civilization

If Worringer's schematic of the history of art is to be believed, naturalism represents not a fidelity to nature as a fidelity to man and his aesthetic convictions; we identify with nature because we have made it amenable to us. However faithfully we may believe we are imitating nature in all her vagaries, we are in fact subsuming nature within our own conceptual realm; the individual is no longer lost within an occult chaos but has become the master of his or her environment. Nature is a reflection and reification of human psychology, rather than an unknowable externality. As a consequence of this ordering of nature based on human desires, even the most naturalistic art is not truly mimetic; it does not imitate the myriad phenomena of

nature as they truly exist but instead presents an ideal nature that conforms to human aesthetic criteria. This awareness of nature's "shortcomings" and faith in the ultimately correcting hand of human beings is often unspoken, but it is both verbalized and taken to its extreme (the preference for the products of Art over those of "Nature") by the late-Victorian author Oscar Wilde, who explains his position regarding the relation between the two in one of his dialogues concerning aesthetics:

Enjoy Nature! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty. People tell us that Art makes us love Nature more than we loved her before; that it reveals her secrets to us . . . my own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition . . . when I look at a landscape I cannot help seeing all its defects. It is fortunate for us, however, that Nature is so imperfect, as otherwise we should have had no art at all. Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place. As for the infinite variety of Nature, that is pure myth. It is not to be found in Nature herself. It resides in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated violence of the man who looks at her.<sup>34</sup>

Nature and art most certainly have an important relationship, but it is not one in which nature in itself is either the inspiration for or final cause of art; it is a more nuanced interaction in which the environment becomes the raw material for the expression of the artists' creativity, which they then modify to suit certain aesthetic ideals. This modification, rather than the original, becomes the object of aesthetic admiration and its features are projected onto the environment which such art supposedly represents. Humanity inevitably does 'violence' to nature, either in reality or in

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<sup>34</sup> "The Decay of Lying," in *The Works of Oscar Wilde, Including the Poems, Novels, Plays, Essays, Fairy Tales and Dialogues*, Roslyn, NY: Black's Reader's Service Company, 1927: 597.

our imagination, as Wilde acknowledges, but such violence is in fact not the result of instinct run wild but rather is “cultivated:” we hone our imaginative capacities with regards to nature in the same way in which we have modified the actual natural world to our (seemingly) best advantage.

Wilde’s words point to the notion that “nature” as it is commonly conceived in the West is generally a fictive construct born of our own aesthetic preferences rather than something with objective reality. This is not to say that the environment does not exist, or even that its existence is predicated on the linguistically-based human constructs we use to conceptualize it. It is rather that “nature” is a culturally contingent formulation that varies across time and space, and no one definition can suffice for all regions and eras. In the West, “nature” can be defined as “the phenomena of the physical world collectively; esp. plants, animals, and other features and products of the earth itself, as opposed to humans and human creations,” although its current and obsolete definitions encompass concepts such as physical vitality, sexual potency, and individual character.<sup>35</sup> Etymologically, “nature” eventually traces back to the classical Latin *nātūra*, which describes not so much the physical world in itself as the creative processes that gave rise to that world; it has also referred historically to those dimensions of human life outside human control, such as menstruation and defecation. Thus nature has been defined both as something within human beings (our fundamental character and biological processes) and something outside us (the external environment of plants and animals as distinct from human society); its fundamental attribute may be that it to some degree exists irrespective of human life, however much we may depend upon it and exploit it for our purposes, and it also signals that it remains an ineluctable part of human life regardless of our attempts to distance ourselves from its constraints. The

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<sup>35</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, accessed 17 June, 2013.

long-standing pop-psychology preoccupation with “nature versus nurture” encapsulates much of what “nature” has come to mean in general parlance: it is that which exists outside culture, an untouched other that somehow remains in pristine isolation from human intervention.

This view of nature, however, does not take into account the complex history of the concept, which has not always strictly dichotomized the world according to a nature vs. human duality. As Roderick Frazier Nash points out, the idea of “wilderness” is in fact a product of civilization, which emerged during the development of sedentary agriculture and the distinct territorial boundaries it necessitates; it was during this time that distinctions between domesticated and non-domesticated plants and animals began to become significant, and as a result of our agricultural success we began to see ourselves as “distinct from . . . and better than the rest of nature. It was tempting to think of [ourselves] as masters and not as members of the life community . . . the intellectual consequence was the application of the concept of ‘wild’ to those parts of nature not subject to human control.”<sup>36</sup> Cultivated nature is the opposite of wilderness, and it comes in two basic varieties: agriculturalism and pastoralism. The former is the often arduous process of domesticating previously wild plants, sowing, harvesting, and storing crops, and the latter is the usually simpler and less labor-intensive process of rearing domesticated animals for food. As Paul Shepard explains in his explication of the importance of pastoralism as common theme in Western literature:

Except for hunting, pastoralism is the only life in nature without arduous labor. In contrast to agriculture, with its year-round drudgery, dependence on the weather, and danger from plant diseases and floods, tending livestock is comparatively

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<sup>36</sup> *Wilderness and the American Mind, Fourth Edition*, New Haven: Yale UP, 2001: xi-ii.

leisurely and the shepherd's life appears idyllic. Classical mythology unfolded in a pastoral landscape. Grazing animals remove brush . . . and mow the lawn beneath the trees, creating that penumbrous grove in which lovers dance . . . [and] the philosopher meditates . . . the pastoral ideal was a golden age of youth and of antique man.<sup>37</sup>

As such, pastoralism represented the ideal relationship between humanity and the surrounding world, in which life was mostly untroubled by want and hardship.<sup>38</sup> The tendency for European pasturelands and forest areas to form discrete regions, as well as the difficulty inherent in maintaining those areas as human, rather than wild, led to the latter being associated with darkness and chaos. The domesticated landscape and the unpeopled wilderness formed a dichotomy: one was desirable, plentiful, and welcoming to human beings, and the other was characterized by privation and the savagery of both man and beast. This aversion to 'wilderness' as opposed to the ideal, 'natural' world of pastoralism can be located in both the human desire for dominance of things unknown and untested, as well as in the brute physical qualities of an untouched landscape—the inner forest's darkness and myriad noises engendered longstanding superstitions about monsters, demons, and gods.<sup>39</sup> This division is made clear in John Milton's famous pastoral poem "L'Allegro," which opens with a portrait of hellish beasts and spirits, confined to a cave in a barren land:

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<sup>37</sup> *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002: 74.

<sup>38</sup> The common synonyms and near-synonyms of the word 'pastoral' suggest its long-standing connection in European thought to abundance and contentment: 'arcadian,' originally from Gk. *Ἀρκαδία*, a mountainous region in the Peloponnese associated with rural tranquility; 'bucolic,' from Gk. *βουκόλος*, 'herdsman'; 'idyllic', originally referring to a 'short poem, descriptive of some picturesque scene or incident, chiefly in rustic life.' *OED Online*, accessed 18 June 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Nash, 9-11.

Hence loathed Melancholy  
 Of Cerberus, and blackest midnight born,  
 In Stygian Cave forlorn  
 ‘Mongst horrid shapes, and shrieks, and sights unholy,  
 Find out som uncouth cell,  
 Wher brooding darknes spreads his jealous wings,  
 And the night-Raven sings;  
 There under *Ebon* shades, and low-brow’d Rocks,  
 As ragged as thy Locks,  
 In dark Cimmerian desert ever dwell (ll. 1-10).<sup>40</sup>

The poem signals its change of tone with an invocation to the muse Euphrosyne (Mirth), and goes on to describe a springtime landscape characterized by abundant flowers (ll.21-22) and affectionate nymphs (ll.36-40). Milton presents a fully realized pastoral environment, encompassing both agriculture (“While the Plowman neer at hand, / Whistles ore the Furrow’d Land” [ll. 63-4]) and the raising of livestock (“the Milkmaid singeth blithe” [l. 65]). This is land fully opposite from the desolate waste presented in the work’s introductory lines. Of course, pastoralism is not simply about the literal advantages of animal husbandry and the occult dangers of deserts, caves, and other inhuman spaces. Milton’s poem shows that these physical spaces are linked to psychological states as well: wilderness is either productive of, or produced by, melancholy and other varieties of unhappiness, whereas happiness, community, and fecundity are clearly dependent upon an environment worked over by human hands.

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<sup>40</sup> *Samson Agonistes and Shorter Poems*, ed. A.E. Barker, Arlington Heights, IL: AHM Publishing Corp., 1950.

At times Western poets dispensed with troublesome wilderness altogether: one of the most discussed depictions of the cosmos<sup>41</sup> in Western literature remains Homer's description of the shield of Achilles in Book XVIII of *The Iliad*.<sup>42</sup> The shield, fashioned by Hephaestus, depicts the world and its environs in a series of concentric circles, beginning with "the unwearied sun, and the moon near full, / and all the signs that garland the sky" at the center (ll. 522-3). The next circle depicts two cities, both "peopled and beautiful," one at peace and the other at war, and these cities are surrounded by a vision of pastoral wealth:

On it he put a soft field, rich farmland  
Wide and thrice-tilled, with many plowmen  
Driving their teams up and down rows.  
Whenever they came to the end of the field  
And turned, a man would run up and hand them  
A cup of sweet wine. Then they turned again  
Back up the furrow pushing on through deep soil  
To reach the other end (ll. 582-9)

The terrifying power of wilderness to disrupt this human-wrought order is illustrated by Homer in the form of two lions, who attack and kill one of a farmer's oxen (ll. 623-30), while the farmer's dogs "[shy] away from biting the lions / And [stand] there barking out of harm's way." In the sudden event of wilderness intruding upon the realm of human beings, neither humans nor their domesticated companions are capable of protecting the agricultural order; thus the maintenance of this order depends on a strict separation between realms, and wilderness is in fact

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<sup>41</sup> Defined in the *OED* as 'the world or universe as ordered and harmonious system.' 'Cosmos' is the opposite of chaos, and as such its equivalence in common vernacular with the universe as a whole suggests how important recognizable human order, such as that present in agriculture, is to the Western view of the natural world.

<sup>42</sup> Tr. Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997.

excluded from the cosmos Homer presents to us. The outer ring of the shield depicts domesticated animals (cattle and sheep), and “young men and girls in the prime of their beauty . . . dancing there, hands clasped around wrists,” and gives special attention to the materials they wear (“delicate linens” and “finespun tunics”), the tools they utilize (the men wear “golden knives hung from silver straps”) and the art they enjoy (acrobats among them “somersault . . . on cue to the music”) (ll. 637-50). Homer’s point here is clear: it is humans, and their various endeavors, such as agriculture, pastoralism, and art, that are of importance, and the natural world is good and desirable inasmuch as it can be utilized in the pursuit of human ends. Wilderness exists only as a temporary violent incursion into what is an otherwise perfectly ordered, and perfectly natural, system of interactions between humanity and its environment.

If pastoralism and wilderness represent the two sides of a positive/negative duality in Western thought, the image of the cave in Milton’s poem—dark, dank, and inhabited by menacing creatures—also had its bucolic counterpoint in the image of the outdoor social space, the lawn or garden. Whereas the forest interiors so feared by the ancients were forbidding, enclosed spaces in which human beings were in constant peril, these man-made areas, separated from the town by meadows or hedges, were venues of public activity. The image of an “earthly paradise” is common to most ancient cultures, and was epitomized by one specific kind of cultivated landscape, the garden: “all paradises had in common a bountiful and beneficent natural setting in accord with original meaning of the word in Persian—luxurious garden.”<sup>43</sup> Gardens adorned Persian temples and Egyptian villas and were later adopted by Alexander after his wars

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<sup>43</sup> Nash, 8-9. The *OED* lists the etymology of “paradise” as deriving from Latin *paradisus*, “the Garden of Eden, the Judeo-Christian heaven,” from Greek *παράδεισος*, a *Persian enclosed park or pleasure ground*. It could also refer to the place where the blessed awaited resurrection after death.

in the region, signaling a shift in Greek religious architectural and landscape design, in which the pre-Alexandrine organic wholeness of temple design and ritual processes was replaced by the more ‘detached’ and ‘geometric’ arrangements of the East, a development that may have led to the emphasis Greek philosophy later placed on the human-nature divide.<sup>44</sup> If places of religious worship are no longer immersed within an environment that emphasized humanity’s place within the maternal body of the earth, protector and provider both, and instead divide nature into discrete areas and arrange it according to an abstracted order, the relationship between humanity and its environment is reconceived as one in which humans occupy a separate, if connected, sphere.

That gardens have symbolic significance that can be explicitly linked to their artificial features signals that they are not part of the “natural” world so much as an intentional product of human design and aesthetic preference that must be evaluated alongside other works of art. Gardens often seem closer to the “natural” than their most frequent companions, works of architecture, a judgment that can be attributed to their reliance on plants and stones as well as their general paucity of explicitly architectural features—such as straight lines, perfectly smooth surfaces, and geometric angles.<sup>45</sup> But all gardens bear the unmistakable marks (be they traces or broad brushstrokes) of human intervention; they are liminal artworks, both the product of human design and desire, but also spaces that utilize as their media substances not generally regarded as inert—paint, plaster, marble—but that which clearly lives—trees, flowers, grass. It is in this liminality that David E. Cooper finds gardens’ unique aesthetic significance:

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<sup>44</sup> Shepard, 66.

<sup>45</sup> Glenn Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008: 115.

The point is not simply the one that Proust made so forcefully, that the gardener is dealing with ‘living things’, with their own recalcitrant purposes. Nor is it simply that a successful garden relies on many local favours, from water to worms, from apiaries to acidity. In addition, the typical garden is evidently locked into a larger landscape on which it relies both for physical nurture and aesthetic impact . . . it is manifestly reliant on global processes—sunlight, weather, seasons—beyond the gardenist’s control. For such reasons one author writes of the garden . . . as palpably giving the lie to ‘myths of manageability’ by confronting us with an ‘active shaping’ that is not our own.<sup>46</sup>

Gardens act both to affirm humanity’s powers of creativity and manipulation of the natural world, and simultaneously to remind us of the limits of our abilities in the latter dimension: the garden can never be fully inert, and in its dependence on both human ingenuity and natural processes, it reveals to those who contemplate it our dependent co-origination with the world we inhabit. This dependent co-origination, a Buddhist concept I will explain in further depth later, can be illuminated even if the materials at hand are not specifically “alive”—as everything, even the most implacable stone—is the result of ongoing processes and is subject to varieties of change that may be occluded from us. As such, even seemingly inert or barren gardens, such as Kyoto’s Ryōanji, an expanse of gravel and rock, demonstrate the material world’s essential contingency.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> ‘In Praise of Gardens,’ *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, no. 2 (April 2003): 112.

<sup>47</sup> It should also be noted that some philosophers are now taking issue with the notion of matter as being inert at all. Paul Shepherd notes that “. . .there is a to and fro in this opinion on the sentience of the nonhuman world . . . Aldo Leopold discussed in ‘Thinking Like a Mountain’ the changes that a mountain might witness on its own slopes . . . his essay was a transmittal of ecological information about order and disorder on a mountainside. That order was a pattern of arrangement and behavior of the men, plants, and animals there . . . It is possible to speak of a mountain knowing, or . . . of the quiet sentience of rocks.” Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s “material vitalism” to argue for her own “vital materiality,” which posits

If the garden's general aesthetic significance is understood as revelatory of the profound intertwining of man and the natural world, it is not surprising that the image of the garden has assumed such tremendous stature in the history of Western thought. It is no accident that the most influential origin myth in the Western world, that of Adam and Eve in Genesis, concerns humanity's primal ancestors being cast out of a garden,<sup>48</sup> the perfect product of loving cultivation (in this case, that of Hebrew creator god YHWH) and into a hostile environment untouched by human hands, which Adam must toil over endlessly in order to render productive.<sup>49</sup> Images of the garden abound in both the Old and New Testaments,<sup>50</sup> and are central to the Islamic description of it as well. Sura 55 of the Qu'ran describes the difference

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a world of "animate things rather than passive objects." In Bennett's view, the subject-object divide so taken for granted in contemporary thinking is an anthropomorphic mistake which ignores the capacity of seemingly inert things to "impede or block the will and designs of humans [and] to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (vii-viii). Cooper also alludes to this when he speaks of the gardener being subject to what living things demand, and the admonition to this effect in the medieval Japanese gardening manual, the *Sakuteiki*, which I will examine below (110).

<sup>48</sup> Shepard concludes the Biblical Eden (which he defines as 'delight') was basically a "Mesopotamian hunting park," containing safely housed and fed predator animals and orchards. The tradition of hunting parks continued well into the Christian era, and their structure and aesthetics influences other forms of art and leisure, such as the game of polo and carpet design.

<sup>49</sup> *King James Bible*, Genesis 3:14-17. The expulsion from the garden can indeed be read as human society metaphorizing its own challenging transformation from hunting, gathering, and pastoralism into agriculture, which is labor-intensive and costly, though it enabled the growth of human civilization.

<sup>50</sup> A particularly vivid example from the Book of Joel describes the apocalypse as a period of relentless destruction of the cultivated environment: "The seed shrivels under the clods, storehouses are in shambles; barns are broken down, for the grain has withered. How the animals groan! The herds of cattle are restless, because they have no pasture; Even the flocks of sheep suffer punishment. Oh Lord, to You I cry out; for fire has devoured the open pastures, and a flame has burned all the trees of the field. The beasts of the field also cry out to You, for the water brooks are dried up, and fire has devoured the open pastures." *KJV* Joel 1:16-20. The second chapter reiterates this message in its description of the destroyers who are afflicting the land, who are both anticipated by fire and leave the land smouldering in their wake: "A fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns, the land is like the Garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness." Joel 2:3. The Garden of Eden is thus the model for all functional human environments, and post-lapsarian environments are likewise rendered infertile by human activity.

between Gehenna, the abode of sinners, and the “two gardens” reserved for those who are dutiful to the Lord. These gardens are rich with running water, abundant fruit, young women “untouched before them [that is, those inheriting this heavenly kingdom] by any man or jinn,” and green pastures.<sup>51</sup> It is a land in which nature has become perfect by divine intervention, but a divine intervention that is explicitly modeled after human cultivation practices.

Given its symbolic importance in Abrahamic as well as pagan traditions, the image of the garden has also been a multifaceted one, encompassing a wide variety of meanings, from the sexual to the spiritual. Among the most salient examples of the former sense is the twelfth century French allegory *The Romance of the Rose*.<sup>52</sup> In this medieval dream vision, a young man falls asleep and dreams that he awakens in the month of May, “the season of love and joy,” and discovers a “large and extensive garden” which is surrounded by allegorical figures (such as Hate, Cruelty, Baseness, and Covetousness) whom the hero must defeat in order to gain access to the rose housed within this particular *hortus conclusus*.<sup>53</sup> The hero’s penetration of this walled enclosure culminates in a scene of sexual conquest:

I had approached so close to the rose-bush that I could have stretched out my hands to the branches and plucked the rose-bud whenever I liked . . . I grasped the branches of the rose-tree . . . and I began, very gently and without pricking myself, to shake the bud . . . I had to move the branches and agitate them, but without destroying a single one, for I did not want to cause any injury. Even so, I was forced to break the bark a little, for I knew no other way to obtain the thing I so desired . . . at last, when I had shaken the bud, I scattered a little seed there . . .

<sup>51</sup> Cited in *The Book of Heaven: An Anthology of Writings from Ancient to Modern Times*, eds. Carol Zaleski and Philip Zaleski, Oxford: Oxford University press, 2000: 389-90.

<sup>52</sup> Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, tr. Frances Horgan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>53</sup> L. “enclosed garden,” that is, the virginal female womb.

I thus mingled the seeds in such a way that it would have been hard to disentangle them, with the result that all the rose-bud swelled and expanded.<sup>54</sup>

The garden here is clearly an object of carnal desire, and the hero's possession of the rose is a tactile, sensual experience. The distinction between the sensual and the spiritual was not as sharp in medieval thought as it is generally thought of today,<sup>55</sup> and the garden could thus function as a symbol of both courtly romance and spiritual inviolacy. The metaphor of the *hortus conclusus* is used here for a baldly carnal purpose, but often in medieval thinking it also referred to the perpetually unbreached uterus of the Virgin Mother. The phrase derives from the Vulgate translation of Solomon's Song of Songs (known in St. Jerome's translation as the Canticle of Canticles), 4:12: *Hortus conclusus soror mea sponsa hortus conclusus fons signatus*, "My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up." When the Song of Songs was reinterpreted in the Middle Ages, the sexual meaning of the text was sublimated into a metaphor concerning the divine union of Christ and the Church, rather than the less exalted union of husband and wife.<sup>56</sup>

Thus the garden has an extensive history in Western artistic and philosophical traditions, and it also encompasses a variety of meanings as a symbol of the connection between human beings and nature. It can be both virginal and fertile, celestial and earthly, Christian and pagan. One

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<sup>54</sup> De Lorris and de Meun, 333-335.

<sup>55</sup> In the fifteenth century autohagiography *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the titular Kempe quotes the words Christ says to her during a vision: ". . . I take no heed what you have been but what you would be. And oftentimes I have told you that I have clean forgiven you of all your sins. Therefore must I needs be homely with you and lie in your bed with you. Daughter, you desire greatly to see me, and you may boldly, when you are in your bed, take me to you as your wedded husband, as your most worthy darling." As translator Lynn Stanley points out, "the language of intimate physical love was used often by both males and female mystics to express spiritual desire and ecstasy." (NY: W.W. Norton and Co., 2001: 66).

<sup>56</sup> *LatinVulgate.com*, <http://www.latinvulgate.com/lv/verse.aspx?t=0&b=24&c=4>, accessed 17 June 2013.

strain of common meaning that emerges from this skein is that a garden is always a place set apart for leisure; unlike other cultivated spaces, such as agricultural developments or grazing fields, gardens are valuable primarily for their aesthetic properties. Gardens allow for a relation to nature that is neither one of apprehension, as with uncultivated wilderness, nor subsistence, as with agriculture—gardens make nature pleasurable. Because they represent an attempt by humans to project our desires upon a landscape—to modify and prune a natural space until it best accords with what we find pleasant—gardens are an empathic response to the surrounding world, one that allows the human mind to project itself onto an object and fuse it to ourselves, to imbue that which is presumably empty with our own vitality.<sup>57</sup> Gardens represent this urge to empathy in a very literal way, using the landscape itself to satisfy human aesthetic urges; however, as a confluence of natural and artificial agency, they are not empty objects awaiting the influx of human potency. As quasi-natural objects, they are both subject to human intervention and apart from it. The liminality of garden structure, which must both respect the demands of natural landscapes and materials and appease human aesthetic desires, would make it an appealing subject for the painter Paul Klee, who, consistent with the modernist ethos of making things new, would approach the painting of nature while aiming to avoid the trappings of traditional naturalism; to present a Romantic environment in the abstract.

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<sup>57</sup> Fiona Gray, “The Synthesis of Empathy, Abstraction, and Nature in the Work of Kandinsky, Steiner, and Mendelsohn,” *Proceedings of the XXVth International Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* (July 2008): 2.

### III. The Artist-Gardener

In his influential essay “Concerning the Spiritual in Art,”<sup>58</sup> Wassily Kandinsky takes issue with the dominance of naturalism in Western art history, and outlines the parameters of what he sees as not only a new kind of art, but a novel approach to human life based on the recognition of the spiritual as the central aim and substance of existence. The modernist period was one in which artists increasingly wrote about their own work, not in the manner of post hoc explications but rather in order to outline their own formal goals.<sup>59</sup> For Kandinsky and other modernists, the ravages of modernity—such as rampant materialism and facile replicability—have denatured both art and life, reducing the universe to an “evil, useless game.” This deadening influence results in an alienation from our fundamental impulses (which Kandinsky calls “Primitive”), and thus produces art that dwells only on amorphous and uncomplicated emotions. This narrowness and superficiality in turn engender in spectators a relation to art that is shallow and blasé: they seek in it “a mere imitation of nature which can serve some definite purpose . . . or a presentment of nature according to a certain convention . . . or some inner feeling expressed in terms of natural form.” The loss of our spiritual faculties has reduced our relationship to art (and thus, to some degree, our relationship to our own humanity) to one of practicality, conservatism, and simple-minded sympathy; at the very least such facile artworks “preserve the soul from coarseness,” but Kandinsky is clear that such art instantiates the squandering of art’s true potential. Any art that does not profoundly impress the viewer, and that aims only to be remarked

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<sup>58</sup> Tr. Michael T.H. Sadler. *Project Gutenberg*. Last modified 22 February 2011. Last accessed 2 December 2013. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5321/pg5321.html>

<sup>59</sup> Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968: 50.

upon as pleasant or intriguing, is not genuine art. In contrast to the views of many artists and writers who preceded him, Kandinsky is highly dismissive of art that aims for beauty alone and takes itself as its own end (art for art's sake); art must strive for a higher spiritual purpose.

Though Kandinsky is not specific about what that lofty goal may be, it appears that the artist must attain it by avoiding the trappings of representative art, which he identifies as being largely based in superficial imitations of past eras. Representative, or naturalistic, art is not necessarily “less noble” than symbolic art, as Kandinsky's first English translator, Michael T. H. Sadler, points out, but the difference between the two is meaningful, and condemnation of modernism tends to rest on wrong-headed aesthetic evaluations rooted in naturalistic thinking. This bifurcation is illustrated by Sadler via a comparison between the French painters Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin: for Cézanne, there was something in the phenomenal world that transcended the boundaries of representation, be it photography or impressionism, and his work does visualize the quintessence of its objects—“the treeness of the tree.” As a painter focused on the structural features of natural objects, however, “his art depends essentially on reality . . . the material of which his art was composed was drawn from the huge stores of actual nature.” Cézanne's work relied on abstraction, but an abstraction that was itself based on material reality; his goal was not to illuminate the inner meaning of a tree but rather to present trees as purified natural forms. In contrast, Gauguin's paintings progress away from the natural and into the domain of the spiritual, “towards that profounder emphasis which cannot be expressed in natural objects nor in words.” Gauguin's pictures are still populated with plants, animals, and human beings, but, unlike for Cézanne, they are not the true object of his study. Sadler posits Kandinsky as Gauguin's true successor and locates in his artwork the true fruition of Gauguin's original intent

to “achieve the final abandonment of all representative intention.” If natural forms, with all their inherent contingencies, are to be the focus of one’s work, the artist’s spiritual progress will certainly be limited; Kandinsky’s work bears witness to his increasing departure from representation: early pictures such as *The Blue Rider* (1903; fig. 1) and *Riding Couple* (1907; fig. 2), are still firmly rooted in representation and “in [their] thematic explicitness, narrative intent, and illusionist rendering . . . contain much of what the artist would later reject,”<sup>60</sup> in contrast to his later pictures, which tend increasingly away from naturalism and further into geometric abstraction. If, as Worringer asserts, abstraction is a predictable response to an environment that is hostile and chaotic, Kandinsky’s retreat into the cosmic tranquility of overlapping circles (*Several Circles*, 1926; fig. 3) and the severity of connected rectangles (*Thirteen Rectangles*, 1930; fig. 4) makes perfect sense; in a world mired in the environmental, moral, and spiritual morass of modernity, Kandinsky’s work seems to be saying that it is impossible to transcend the natural by reference to the natural.

Whereas Kandinsky pulls away from nature’s structure and forms by way of increasing abstraction, Klee by contrast looks to the forms of nature as essential to the truth he wants his art to reveal. Always focused on the spiritual dimensions of nature as well as the physical, Klee was not interested in “the mimetic translation of forms into art, nor with the imitation of nature . . . [he] was striving for a new act of creation,” as his own words from journals and his own manifesto, *On Modern Art* (1924),<sup>61</sup> make clear.<sup>62</sup> The goal of the artist vis-à-vis nature is not to

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas M. Messer, *Kandinsky*, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997: 54.

<sup>61</sup> Tr. Paul Findlay, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1966

<sup>62</sup> Anke Daemgen, ‘Nature,’ in *The Klee Universe*, eds. Dieter Scholz and Christina Thomson, Ostfildern: Hatje Kantz Verlag, 2008: 206.

“provide a scientific check on the truth of nature,” but rather a kind of “freedom, which merely demands its rights, the right to develop, as great Nature herself develops. From type to prototype.”<sup>63</sup> The true artist, in Klee’s mind, does not focus on the incidental—those concrete examples of natural phenomena—but instead “penetrate[s] to the region of that secret [place] where primeval power nurtures all evolution.” Klee’s goal is not to imitate nature in all its contingent specificity, but to uncover the fundamental operations of which natural objects are only the instantiations. He seeks the process, rather than the product. As John D. Dewsbury and Nigel Thrift point out in their discussion of Klee’s artwork in relation to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Klee’s emphasis on how things come to be as opposed to the specifics of what they are is because of his ontological conviction that the world is a becoming rather than a being; it is a place of constant creation and oscillation where stasis is anomalous.<sup>64</sup> However much Klee’s paintings may reference the forms of what Deleuze would call the actual world—trees, birds, pyramids, faces—his true focus is on illuminating the virtual world, constantly realizing itself through differentiating processes. And, just as the phenomenal world never attains a point of stable completion, the work of art is never a sealed, closed, or perfected object.<sup>65</sup>

Such an emphasis, however, does not mean that Klee’s work spirals into chaos or embraces randomness. Throughout his career, he focused on exemplars from the environment that evinced some degree of structure and order. A preoccupation with music was typical of modernists who worked in all artistic fields, including painting. As Michael T.H. Sadler explains in his

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<sup>63</sup> *OMA*,

<sup>64</sup> “Genesis Eternal: After Paul Klee,” in *Deleuze and Space*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2005: 92.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-9.

introduction to “Concerning the Spiritual . . .,” art realizes its true purpose when the boundaries that separate distinct areas are abrogated: “. . . [Kandinsky] has broken down the barrier between music and painting, and has isolated the pure emotion which . . . we call the artistic emotion.” For modernists, music was the emblematic and perfect art because it transcends the demands of mimetic representation and produces emotional effects “too subtle for words”; music not only allows us to escape the confines of imitation but also liberates us from our dependence upon language. Klee, a talented musician, viewed music as the true progenitor and pinnacle of the arts, and in his painting aimed to translate his understanding of the structures of music into visual form.<sup>66</sup> For my purposes, Klee’s preoccupation with an art form that is both largely nonrepresentational as well as governed by a high degree of structural regularity is instructive regarding what kinds of phenomenal objects he chose to focus on in his work. Just as the modernist goal of “painting music” involved a process of somehow imbuing a static canvas with a degree of music’s temporality, painting nature with the goal of illuminating its occult becoming requires translating the dynamic space of lived reality onto a flat surface. Among his most famous statements of artistic intent was the axiom that while nature is garrulous, the artist must be taciturn; that is, it is the artist’s duty to extract from multitudinous nature those phenomena that are truly significant and present them cleansed of contingencies. In this way, Klee’s drive to abstraction almost parallels the tendencies of another of Worringer’s paradigmatic individuals, the Oriental Man. As Worringer points out in *Form in Gothic*, any view of art must not occlude civilizations in the East, as they have produced art forms that presented a “wholly new standard of human development that corrects our European

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<sup>66</sup> Christina Thomson, “Music,” in *The Klee Universe*, 223.

prejudice.”<sup>67</sup> European consciousness, Worringer argues, is rooted in the “mental and sensuous,” and “bound . . . to the fiction of progress,” and such prejudices blinker our view of the surrounding world and silence our natural instincts. Such instincts are still alive in the Oriental Man, who is more Primitive than Classical, though he maintains a great separation from both. Unlike the Primitive Man, who regards his world with “vague terror,” the Oriental Man understands the “inexorable dualism of all being” and realizes that this knowledge is final, not preliminary. The Primitive Man seeks knowledge that will reconcile him to his environment, and the Classical Man believes that he has found such knowledge which *does* appear to reconcile him to this environment, but the Oriental Man “no longer feels confused and tormented by this dualism . . . [and] he submits to the great impenetrable mystery of being.” This sense of resignation rather than anxiety manifests itself in Oriental art as a lack of interest in vitality and a tendency towards abstraction and is bound to “the inflexible, expressionless line and its correlate, the surface,” but is distinguished from the Primitive Man’s art by its spirit as well as its forms; the richness and variety of its expression are a result of the sophistication of its religious vision.

However closely Worringer’s description of “Oriental” art aligns with the reality of Asian artworks—and it is important to remember that his theory is a brief sketch with no illustrative examples—is perhaps less at issue than how much it aligns with the art of certain modernists, Klee included, who were aiming to return to some kind of primitive sensibility while expressing something of cosmic significance. Kandinsky’s view of modernity was one of frustration and acute dissatisfaction, befitting an abstract sensibility, but Klee appeared to view abstraction not as a response to how repellent the world is, but as a means of expressing its fundamental

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<sup>67</sup> 40.

characteristics. Klee does not perfectly parallel Worringer's Oriental paradigm, in that his paintings tend to be lively rather than resigned, but neither does he embrace Primitive anxiety and the drive for increasing knowledge of the material world; for Klee, abstraction is used as a vehicle to visualize what is immanent in the world rather than some quality that transcends it. Hence his most well-known maxim regarding the purpose of art: one cannot make the invisible visible if one assumes nature exists only to be escaped.

Among Klee's favorite motifs was that of the garden.<sup>68</sup> As shown earlier in this essay, gardens have had a long tenure in Western history as an analogue of paradise and the most stirring symbol of humanity's ideal relationship with nature and, at times, the divine. It is not surprising that Klee became focused on the garden as a subject of his work. In his paintings, however, gardens are no longer just symbols of human-nature symbiosis or divine agency; instead, they become representative of how nature operates at its deepest levels. The garden itself is no longer specifically symbolic as it was for the ancient Hebrews or medieval Christians; it does not literally represent paradise or a fecund body, but is taken as an abstraction of natural processes of rhythm and order and points towards the inseparable nature of humanity's relationship with its surroundings. For Klee, the garden is not a static Edenic utopia, but a place in which the constant oscillations of the natural world are brought fully into view and the enmeshing of humanity within such oscillations is undeniable. Given that gardens are an empathic response to the natural world, Klee utilizes them to abstract both nature and humanity; even as we aim to invest the landscape with our own impulses, human beings and our designs are

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<sup>68</sup> "Reducing the Contingent to its Essence," by Michael Baumgartner, in *In Paul Klee's Enchanted Garden*, ed. Zentrum Paul Klee (Bern/Ostfildern: Hatje Kantz Verlag, 2008): 30.

just one process among many that occur in the phenomenal world; gardens provide a way for Klee to abstract the human will to art itself.

Just as Kandinsky's paintings progressed from the representational to the purely abstract, Klee's earliest treatments of the environment are naturalistic drawings; in this early stage, he is concerned with the products, rather than the process, of natural formation. In his childhood, nature was a source of awe as well as discomfort in Klee's life, its enormous size provoking a sense of estrangement from his sense of self and identity.<sup>69</sup> This would motivate Klee, in the early years of his career, to place himself at a distance from the natural world's specificities and undertake an increasingly in-depth analysis of what produced such phenomena in his artistic works.<sup>70</sup> Gardens and landscapes were among the subjects Klee most frequently returned to, and in these works he visualized his perception of the natural world as a place of constant becoming, of formation rather than forms.<sup>71</sup> As a place historically both sacred and sexual, suggestive of a transcendent paradise while being firmly rooted in the material world, the garden was a symbol uniquely situated to allow Klee to fulfill his primary directive as an artist: to penetrate beyond the "finished forms" of the natural world and finally see "the act of world creation stretching from the past to the future. Genesis eternal!"<sup>72</sup>

Klee's early works were naturalistic, albeit in a highly suggestive rather than realistic sense. In one of his early drawings, *Abandoned Garden* (1909, fig. 5) Klee presents the abandoned space in outline, the fragmented lines providing an atmosphere both nervous and vague. For

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<sup>69</sup> Baumgartner, 23.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>71</sup> Ernst-Gerhard Guse, "Klee's Dialogue with Nature," in *Dialogue with Nature*, ed. Guse (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1991): 11.

<sup>72</sup> *On Modern Art*, 45.

Klee, line was the most limited of the dimensions of pictorial art (the others being tone value or chiaroscuro and color), being “solely a matter of simple Measure,”<sup>73</sup> and thus narrow in its expressive capacities. In *Abandoned Garden*, the tangled line fragments do not clearly delineate anything, but are suggestive of an atmosphere; title aside, there is nothing to indicate that this woodland space was ever a garden tended by human hands, aside from the slight clearing visible between the trees—a type of garden that harkens back to the earliest notions of a liminal space between the pasture and the wilderness. Klee’s approach here was one of implication or suggestion, rather than abstraction; his drawing points towards a concrete place that has undergone a process of change, rather than the underlying process itself. The sketch does, however, point to a concern not only with the passage of time but with the inevitable decay of human works; whatever may have existed in this garden previously, it is now reverting to a ‘natural’ space; our deeds as humans are not immune to universal processes. But Klee is not simply underlining that banal truism; presenting this bit of the landscape in this way, he is also suggesting that nature is never the unalloyed substance we would suppose it to be; human beings have always already been in the environment.

A watercolor from a few years later, *Hammamet mit der Moschee (Hammamet with Mosque)* (1914; fig. 6) presents the landscape in a very different way. While not a garden picture, it displays Klee’s general approach to a landscape, in this case one that has apparently been drastically shaped by human efforts (architecture and agriculture). As Will Grohmann points out, this Tunisia-inspired work is not a nature study; it was composed from memory and is a deliberate exploration of artistic lessons Klee was learning from the examples of Cézanne and

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<sup>73</sup> *OMA*, 21.

Delaunay, particularly with regards to his use of color.<sup>74</sup> The picture is animated by the contrast between the rhythmic forms that dominate the bottom two-thirds of the landscape and the two architectural forms set against the sky in the top third, a contrast that Grohmann believes evinces Klee's interest in "the problem of combining the absolute with the object."<sup>75</sup> The absolute, in this context, would be the virtual realm of constant becoming, which Klee symbolizes—or rather, "makes visible," as he would likely prefer—with the geometry which shapes the foreground (drawn here with both line and color, suggesting it has expressive significance). The object is represented by the various contingent phenomena such as trees, flowers, and the works of human hands, which arise out of these virtual processes. This abstracted realm is still fully in contact with the material. Klee's use of geometric patterns—triangles and a parallelogram in this case—visualize his dedication to the abstract (as there is little quite so abstract as Euclidean geometry, or indeed mathematics in general), but also how these virtual entities, interacting as they do with the material world, are never wholly pure; the triangles' edges bow outward or inward to a small degree, and the slightly ersatz parallelogram is overlaid with clusters of yellow plants. The emphasis on color itself could be viewed as an admission that the abstract can never be wholly so, and that human perception always remains at play; color is an extremely contingent phenomenon dependent upon the eye's receptiveness to light, but it is in color that Klee invests the most expressive potency and through it that he demarcates his geometric patterns.

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<sup>74</sup> 50.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

A watercolor dating five years later explores a similar subject (the Tunisian landscape), but in even more abstract form. *Southern (Tunisian) Gardens* (1919, fig. 7) echoes the earlier painting's attempt to express natural rhythms with pictorial ones, but contains far less floral dressing. The abstract has overwhelmed the contingent, or rendered it largely unnecessary. Whereas the earlier work could very well have been a literal representation of a mosque and its surrounding gardens, here Klee's title seems rather to underscore how little his blurry boxes actually resemble a garden of any kind. Imitation of the literal has almost wholly given way to symbolism; the abstraction is severe, but the vibrant colors as well as the undulations of the squares and rectangles which occupy the majority of the space on the canvas (which anticipate Klee's later 'magic square' paintings) are suggestive of movement. The reflected triangle dyads, reminiscent of volcanoes, hourglasses, or perhaps both, hover somewhere above or behind this segmented landscape, their presence a clear signal of the fact that however abstracted this garden may be, it is still subject to very real processes. Aside from the rhythmic squares, which bear some resemblance to agricultural plots, the human element in this landscape has dwindled almost to nothing; though more vibrant than the previous *Forsaken Garden*, this may be a garden in name only.

Not all of Klee's gardens occlude the human element, nor do they all present a landscape as an undulating surface of ambiguously defined shapes. *Seltsamer Garten* (1923; fig. 8) approaches the subject from a different perspective; rather than a canvas purified of life's myriad forms (its' "garrulity"), Klee presents us with numerous figures that overlap and entangle each other, defined by sharp, thin lines and surmounted by a radiant sun and a six-pointed star. Here nature in all her excessive fecundity is on display; the figures are so intertwined it is difficult to

ascertain their distinct perimeters. Peter-Klaus Schuster compares this work to the pioneering nature drawings of fellow naturalist Ernst Haeckel in his *Kunstformen der Natur*, published between 1899 and 1904.<sup>76</sup> Haeckel's influence on Klee was likely inspirational rather than literal (Haeckel's interest in nature was scientific, rather than spiritual, and he aimed to represent the natural, even with occasional artistic license, while as we have seen Klee sought to symbolize it), but a drawing of microscopia such as *Discoidea* (1904; fig. 9) bears some similarity with Klee's later garden picture: the natural forms are diverse and arranged facing the viewer on a flat surface. The differences, however, are more striking; whereas Haeckel's forms are typically just that—forms, deprived of environment and vitality—despite their beauty, Klee aims to present multitudinous nature and her attendant cycles. *Seltsamer Garten* also presents all the inhabitants of this “garden” as interpenetrating each other; their bodily boundaries are visible, but they are transparent; their myriad overlappings make it difficult to discern where each individual begins and ends. There is also a diversity of organisms present, from humanoids to plants to animals; interestingly, the human-like figures in this piece tend to have sleepy expressions, with their eyes half-closed, while the animals stare ahead alertly. As with many of Klee's symbolic decisions, this lends itself to two oppositional interpretations: on one hand, this could be suggestive of human blindness—or at least indifference—to our own intimate relationship with the other beings that populate the cosmos; on the other, it could imply that the humans populating Klee's exotic garden no longer have need of their eyes, for they have attained some kind of enlightenment. In an early self-portrait, *Nach der Zeichnung* (1919; fig. 10), Klee portrays himself in a similar fashion, with closed eyes and a ponderous expression. As he famously

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<sup>76</sup> In *The Klee Universe*, 21.

declared, “I am God,” his divine status a result of his role as the creator of a unique cosmos, his portrait’s closed eyes suggest that he sees not with a physical apparatus but with some kind of “inner eye.”<sup>77</sup> Such mystical pretenses were appealing to modernists, and Klee was very likely aware of depictions of the Buddha from the East, which often portray the Thus-Gone-One as seated and quiescent, with a calm expression and downturned eyes. It is possible, then, that his “strange” garden is some kind of paradise, not of any traditional sort but rather one in which the inhabitants understand the interrelatedness of all material phenomena, including themselves.

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<sup>77</sup> Schuster, 14-15.

## CHAPTER 2

## GARDENS AND NATURE IN THE JAPANESE AESTHETIC TRADITION

## IV. The Japanese Landscape

The Japanese approach to the natural world has long been one of the most discussed, and perhaps misunderstood, aspects of Japanese culture. Devoid of the Christian mythos, with its emphasis on dominion and its explicit spiritual hierarchy that places mankind below the angels but decidedly above non-human animals, Japanese culture is often thought of as one that gives to the natural world its due respect, and avoids the trap of exalting humans for their own sake. Whereas the dominant Christian traditions in the West have emphasized the fallenness and imperfection of the post-lapsarian world, and configured the human-nature relationship as oppositional, pre-Buddhist religious traditions (usually known as Shintō) in Japan are thought to have embraced what Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga call a “natural affirmation” which was characterized by “an innate sensitivity and harmony with the world.”<sup>78</sup> In these early traditions, suffering and evil were not a permanent outcome of a spiritual deficiency of mankind that was to be forever manifest in the external world,<sup>79</sup> but rather temporary conditions that could be

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<sup>78</sup> *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism: Volume 1*, Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1987: 3.

<sup>79</sup> In Book 11 *Paradise Lost*, John Milton has the angel Michael present Adam with a panorama of the horrors his actions have wrought upon every generation of humanity that will succeed him. He sees the beginnings of agriculture, the death of his sons, disease, death, and eventually war, and such developments are repeatedly imputed to the sins of Adam and, to a greater extent, Eve:

“Adam, now open thine eyes and first behold  
 The effects which thy original crime hath wrought  
 In some to spring from thee, who never touched  
 The excepted tree, nor with the snake conspired  
 Nor sinned thy sin, yet from that sin derive

overcome with the proper purification rituals; the environment humans found themselves in was not a necessarily hostile one. Shintō, as an animist belief system, imbues the natural world with numerous *kami*, sacred spirits, vaguely defined, usually benevolent, deific entities that embody abstract notions as well as inhabiting all manner of natural objects and phenomena. In anthropomorphizing the natural world, early Japanese worldviews did not recognize a distinction between human and non-human subjectivity, and these strains persist in the culture to this day:

The early Japanese viewed life as a unity between man and his environment and a strong desire existed to appreciate and comprehend the multiple aspects of nature that were so vividly expressed in the changing seasons. This extremely subjective emotional feeling for nature was a characteristic the Japanese people never lost and even today the spring cherry blossoms and fall moon invite excursions and viewing parties . . . the Japanese passively accepted nature as an integral oneness in which they participated.<sup>80</sup>

The lack of a dichotomizing perspective, as well as an emphasis on the processes and rhythms of the natural world, made indigenous Japanese beliefs especially receptive to the new religion, imported from the west, that would eventually become the dominant spiritual and philosophical system of the region—Buddhism.

Buddhism, unlike Japan's indigenous spiritual beliefs, was already a complex collection of philosophies with a longstanding literate tradition by the time it was introduced to the

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Corruption to bring forth more violent deeds.” (ll.423-29).

In Christian metaphysics, the corruption of the world is a direct result of humanity's misdeeds, and is thus a constant throughout human history, not amenable with sacrifices or other acts of supplication that are common in many spiritual systems throughout the world.

<sup>80</sup> Matsunaga, 4-5.

archipelago in the fifth century C.E.<sup>81</sup> As a result of Shintō's lack of institutional structure and exclusivity as well as Buddhism's tendency to spread through assimilation rather than coercion, the new beliefs made easy headway in Japan. In some instances, Buddhism was able to codify into sophisticated logical language what Shintō had intuited; for example, the Japanese sense of the unity of nature could be expressed as the Buddhist theorem of the interrelatedness of all things, an important concept I will return to shortly.<sup>82</sup> The emphasis in pre-Buddhist Japan on ritual and shamanism also made the region fertile ground for Tantrism, which would in the Nara period (710-784) flower into esoteric forms of Buddhism such as Shingon and Shugendō, a syncretic ascetic movement that combined elements of Taoism, Confucianism, shamanism as well as Tantrism. Such amalgamations clung to Shintō practices such as cleansing impurities and appeasing the spirits of the dead;<sup>83</sup> Buddhism's lack of doctrinal exclusivity has ensured that Shintō beliefs and practices have remained a presence in Japan, even if they are often not recognized as strictly religious in nature.<sup>84</sup> However, Buddhism also introduced into Japanese culture hitherto unknown ideas quite distinct from the native nature affirmation, such as the problems of impermanence, death, and the status of the self.<sup>85</sup> Buddhism would prove influential on many aspects of Japanese culture, particularly aesthetics and the arts. So profound were Buddhism's emphases on the ephemerality and interconnectedness of all things that it is difficult

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<sup>81</sup> Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture, Fourth Edition*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000: 19.

<sup>82</sup> Matsunaga, 6-7.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-11.

<sup>84</sup> Many such practices have been elevated to the status of nationalistic or purely 'cultural' practices. See Martinez, 187.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

to imagine what Japanese art—from gardens to painting to pottery—would look like without the undergirding of these ontological assumptions.

That all objects exist in relation to one another is one of Buddhism’s fundamental propositions, and it is deceptively simple. It is neither the “butterfly effect” of chaos theory nor the vaguely defined “sense of oneness” promulgated by the various permutations of New Ageism popular in the West. *Pratītya samutpāda*, or *engi* in Japanese, is a complex ontological notion that describes the inherent emptiness of all reality via an “analysis of how the sense fields and aggregates go about grouping, disbanding, and regrouping in various configurations as they influence one another in giving rise . . . to the fabricated world as a whole.”<sup>86</sup> That is, it is an attempt to penetrate the contingencies of our reality—experiences and phenomena—and arrive at the knowledge of the emptiness that is their only genuine feature. And because human beings, and all that within us which we commonly call “consciousness”, are also part of this phenomenal world, the autonomous self is also illusory and ultimately without substance. Our perception of the external world is dependent upon our continued embrace of this fundamental illusion, which in turn creates all of our attachments and their attendant problems. The early compendium of Buddhist axioms, *The Dhammapada*, expresses the agonies wrought upon human beings by our attachment to self:

Let go of the past, let go of the future,  
Let go of the present.  
Gone beyond becoming,  
With the mind released in every way,

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<sup>86</sup> Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikku, *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*, Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005: 16.

You do not again undergo birth and old age.<sup>87</sup>

The work of Shantideva, the 8<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist scholar at India's monastic university, Nālandā, also emphasizes the impermanence of the physical and the deceptive unity of the human self-image. In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, he draws attention to the body, “this form so frightening and foul,” which has an inexplicable power over human beings despite its obvious defects:

Alive or dead what difference does it make?  
 What use is this machine to me?  
 What difference will divide it from a clod of earth?  
 . . . Through lavishing attention on this body,  
 Such sorrow have I brought myself so senselessly.  
 What use is all my wanting, all my hating,  
 For what indeed is like a log of wood?<sup>88</sup>

The revelation of the emptiness of all things is thus for Buddhists not a means of assuaging human anxiety over life and death by positing such events as transitory stages that the individual self will survive, but rather a means of showing that it is because we have, and continue to embrace, a self that we are subject to life's torments. The physical and the spiritual are thus inextricable in Buddhist thought—the experiences of the body are dependent upon our

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<sup>87</sup> Tr. Gil Fronsdal, Boston: Shambhala, 2006: 90.

<sup>88</sup> *The Way of the Bodhisattva: A Translation of the Bodhicaryāvatāra, Revised Edition*, tr. Padmakara Translation Group, Boston: Shambhala, 2008: 226-7.

continuing belief in the substance of the self, which in turn is constantly reinforced by the evanescent pleasures our body allows us.<sup>89</sup>

A full discussion of the Buddhist concept of *anātman* (simply, “not-self,” the realization that the notion of a self is a fiction) is beyond the scope of this paper; for my purposes its importance lies in its assertion that the self is merely another contingent entity comparable to all others that (appear to) exist in our surroundings. Humanity’s understanding of itself is to a degree predicated on how it sees its environment—Western Christianity sees the disordered world as a consequence of our sins in the garden, but it may be that we inferred our sinfulness from the often unpredictable and unfriendly world around us; Buddhism’s conviction of the emptiness of the self arises from the recognition of the emptiness of all things, as the human being and the environment are inextricably linked. This conviction of interrelatedness, as well as the long-standing Japanese tendency to center aesthetics around processes such as seasonal change and emblematic natural objects,<sup>90</sup> has led many to infer that the Japanese have a “love” of nature, distinct from the dominant and objectifying view that prevails in the West. Roderick Nash

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<sup>89</sup> As Francisco J. Varela et al explain in their discussion of dependent co-arising, “Consciousness requires a body and mind together. Moments of consciousness in a given situation can gravitate toward one or the other end of the psychophysical complex; perhaps the consciousness is primarily sensory; perhaps it is primarily mental.” *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991: 113.

<sup>90</sup> This is most apparent to any reader of Japanese poetry, which in its traditional modes has been heavily reliant upon a certain set of images of natural objects that are used with striking regularity. Peter Ackermann argued in his essay on the importance of seasonality in Japanese culture that there may have been a canon of nature images commonly held to be suggestive of specific experiences or states of mind, but that such a canon is no longer extant. See “The Four Seasons: One of Japanese Culture’s Most Central Concepts,” in *Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Pamela J. Asquith and Arne Kalland, London: Curzon, 1997: 36-53.

summarizes this apparent dichotomy, attributing the Western attitude to the influence of Judeo-Christianity:

In the Far East, by way of contrast, the man-nature relationship was marked by respect, bordering on love, absent in the West. India's early religions, especially Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism, emphasized compassion for all living things. Man was understood to be a part of nature. And wilderness, in Eastern thought, did not have an unholy or evil connotation but was venerated as the symbol and even the very essence of the deity . . . [in Japan] Shintoism and Taoism fostered love of wilderness rather than hatred.<sup>91</sup>

Though it is true that the conceptual relationship between humanity and the landscape varies culturally, and the pastoral ideal thus far defined remains a primarily Western one, Nash's facile conflation of notions of wilderness extant in the West and East is problematic. To suggest that Western culture rejects or devalues wilderness while those of the East, including Japan, embrace it is not only to suggest that the religious traditions of East and South Asia are all in near-agreement concerning this issue but also to imply both cultures have concepts of the wilderness that roughly align—that the ambiguous word “wilderness” denotes the same set of basic properties in Japanese as it does in English, and furthermore, that the Japanese relationship with this “wilderness” can be assumed to be identical with their relationship to “nature.”

Scholars have noted that this famed Japanese “love of nature” is an important part of *Nihonjinron* discourse, which aims to define and explicate what is exceptional about Japanese culture both past and present. *Nihonjinron* emerged in the 1970s and 80s as Japan assumed an ever more prominent role in world economics and pop culture, and aimed to describe Japan's

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<sup>91</sup> *Wilderness*, 20-22.

unique cultural attributes—such as respect for hierarchy, avoidance of friction, and the love of nature—in terms of its topography and historical agricultural practices.<sup>92</sup> Though *Nihonjinron* discourse could be well-researched and insightful, it was also critiqued as promoting a simplified vision of Japanese culture contrasted to an equally unnuanced monolith known as ‘the West,’ a dichotomy that could be neatly encapsulated in a series of dyads of apparently oppositional cultural values.<sup>93</sup> Critics further pointed out the error in presenting Japan as a homogenous entity with cultural values so absolute they remove the opportunity for individual agency, and that the vision of Japan presented in *Nihonjinron* was essentialist and ahistorical, with set attributes that are unchanging over time. As Fabio Rambelli explains in his articulate assessment of the deficiencies of this kind of discourse vis-à-vis Japanese society’s relationship to nature:

[*Nihonjinron* arguments] imply that . . . Japanese culture is uniquely different from all others; that it is characterized by . . . a special, direct relationship with nature and reality in general . . . Interestingly, the alleged ‘love for nature’ of the Japanese seems to function only in Japan . . . the notion of a love for nature that is unique to the Japanese is often a conceptual reference point for nationalistic attitude and cultural chauvinism . . . Culture is essentialized, and Japan is treated as a sublime exception . . . the history of Japanese religion is also treated in a

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<sup>92</sup> Roger Goodman, “Making Majority Culture,” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*, ed. Jennifer Robertson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005): 60.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 65. Goodman identifies these ‘Western/Japanese’ value dichotomies as: 1. racial heterogeneity vs. homogeneity; 2. competitive conflict vs. harmony; 3. individualism vs. groupism; 4. egalitarianism vs. hierarchy; 5. universalistic ethics vs. particularistic ethics; 6. rights vs. duties; 7. logic vs. emotions; 8. independence vs. dependence; 9. contractualism vs. “kincontractualism.” It should be clear from these dualities that they paint in very broad strokes societies that have their own cultural and historical complexities, though it could be argued that they do point to generalized points of difference between the culture of Japan and those commonly found in the West.

hypersimplified manner to support the entire ideological edifice of cultural nationalism.<sup>94</sup>

This “confusion of nature and the state, territory and the people” is directly responsible for the discourse of Japanese uniqueness, as it assumes that both Japan as a nation and the Japanese as a people have always existed, and have always related to nature in the same way. This in turn allows for facile and reductive interpretations of Japanese culture’s perception and treatment of nature that fail to take into account regional, historical, or economic complexities.

That Japanese culture’s relationship with “nature” is variable throughout history and philosophically complex is clear when one examines the lexicographical landscape of the concept and its related terms. Modern Japanese refers to “wilderness” by the word *mikaichi*. Taken literally, this compound translates as “not yet opened ground,”<sup>95</sup> and is likely an imported coinage, similar to the word generally translated as “nature,” *shizen*. That Japanese dictionaries recognize separate terminology should suggest that “wilderness” and “nature” are not strictly synonymous. *Shizen* is a much-discussed term in studies of Japanese environmental aesthetics, and it is ambiguous in both etymology and implication, as D. P. Martinez explains:

. . . *Shizen* [is] an imported Chinese term made up of characters that are often translated as: oneself (*shi, ji*) and “to decree,” “if so, in that case,” “due, proper, reasonable, respectable, justifiable” (*zen, nen*). The Chinese word from which it originates, *ziran*, initially designated a state of being that was “opposed to the will and designs of the self (*wo*) and therefore associated with non-action (*wu wei*).”

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<sup>94</sup> *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007): 131-2.

<sup>95</sup> *Mi*, 未, also *mada*, ‘not yet, as yet,’ *kai*, 開, also *hira(keru)*, ‘to be opened, be developed’, and *chi*, 地, ‘earth, ground.’ *The Kanji Dictionary*, Mark Spahn, Wolfgang Hadamitzky, and Kumiko Fujie-Winter, Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1996.

This state represented an opposition to that which was culture, and eventually the term came to be extended to that which was “distinct from humanity and of . . . human nature.” The term was extended to include what might be called the environment, and it arrived in Japan with Buddhism in the sixth to eight centuries. *Shizen*’s long entry in the *Kodansha Encyclopaedia of the Japanese Language* gives meanings that include the “natural” world, the universe, all things of heaven and earth, the material world, that which is “fresh” and without artifice, and, in opposition to the experience of freedom and duty that is culture, it connotes a world of causal necessity.<sup>96</sup>

In the senses outlined here, the definition of *shizen* appears quite similar to those of the English term “nature” and its other Western cognates, though this is not enough to assert that they are synonyms. As Rambelli elaborates, in the pre-Meiji period various words were used for what could be called nature: *kikai*, material environment, *tenchi*, heaven and earth, and *banbutsu*, the various constituent phenomena and materials that make up reality. The *ziran* described above was often used in Daoist texts to refer to “the original modality of things, something that spontaneously becomes what it is . . . it is close to Latin *natura* as referring to the individual essence, but . . . was originally unrelated to what today we call the ‘natural world’.”<sup>97</sup> Confusion ensues for both terms when they are analyzed etymologically, since “nature” does not neatly align itself with the Cartesian and Platonic assumptions about Western nature’s inherent otherness just as *shizen* does not necessarily suggest a more intimate or loving relationship with the non-human world; in the West, “nature” is also connected with the self.<sup>98</sup> Such parallels

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<sup>96</sup> “On the ‘Nature’ of Japanese Culture, or, Is there a Japanese Sense of Nature,” in *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan*, ed. Jennifer Robertson, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005: 186.

<sup>97</sup> 133.

<sup>98</sup> Martinez, 187.

should not be taken as deterministic, however; since language must be analyzed with reference to the social systems in which it is embedded, and does not have a deterministic influence on the culture that produced it. Moreover, to assert a pan-Japanese experience of “nature” that remains homogenous across time, space, and the various strata of society fails to recognize the very pragmatic issues that constrain how certain individuals and groups within society interact with their environments.<sup>99</sup>

Returning to the notion of “wilderness,” we should note that however human beings approach the natural world, their experiences are always to some degree mediated by the cultural forces that they have been subject to. The attitudes towards nature that have often prevailed in the West, be they of a positive or negative register, are ultimately based on a Platonic view of the cosmos, which stresses that there is an existing truth “out there” that is independent from human perception. This notion remains influential in contemporary Western society, most notably in science, which is almost exclusively based on a naturalistic paradigm that asserts human cognition creates representations of its surroundings, and that these realms are separate. As Varela et al. explain, we assume that our own cognitive activities have no bearing on the world we are attempting to understand.<sup>100</sup> The Buddhist concept of *pratītya samutpāda* makes this kind of relationship impossible. A “pure” experience of nature would not be one in which society is forgotten and the human mind is granted an unmediated experience of its surroundings, but rather one in which that mind realizes the emptiness of its own presumed existence. If all being is illusory, seeking communion with nature is as misguided and ultimately futile as any other

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> *The Embodied Mind*, 135.

variety of desire-based experience, in that it further reaffirms our material and psychological attachments.<sup>101</sup>

It is also important to note that, as much as Shintō may be a “nature-worshipping” religion, it configures nature in a manner that is always dependent upon human action. *Kami* may be everywhere, but they are best expressed through objects made of human hands and their presence is usually demarcated by explicitly artificial objects, such as straw rope or streams of folded paper encircling a venerated rock or tree. At times a natural object of worship is no longer necessary, and the architectural surroundings themselves act as the *kami*’s embodiment.<sup>102</sup> That the *kami* not only exist in nature but are also capable of being bound to the products of human industry suggests that the relationship between humans, the environment, and the divine is a complex one in which there is more than one active participant.

Given the interconnectivity of humanity and the natural world in traditional Japanese thought, it is not surprising that aesthetics figure prominently in how Japanese culture approaches the phenomenal world, and this aesthetic is more complex than it may initially appear. Given that the human/nature dichotomy is not historically widespread in Asian cultures, this aesthetic relationship hinges upon the fact that we “find no clear-cut distinction between the concepts of nature and culture in Japan . . . the nature which is significant culturally is an artificial construct, whether that is vending machines, gardens, flower arrangements or human nature . . . there is no clear distinction between nature created by a god and artifice created by

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<sup>101</sup> Martinez, 187.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 188.

human beings.”<sup>103</sup> Not only does Japanese culture adopt the concept of a nature that is not meaningfully distinct from the works of human hands, but it also maintains that human intervention is necessary for natural objects to achieve their full fruition *as* natural objects, and this fruition is primarily aesthetic; that is, the most genuine presentation of the natural is one that has been adapted to the demands of human aesthetic preferences; “true” nature is an idealized nature, purged of contingencies, its wild aspects tamed.<sup>104</sup>

Japan lacks a discrete tradition of aesthetic philosophy comparable to the one developed in the West since Plato, but its aesthetic convictions as expressed through poetry, painting, architecture, and landscape design have tended to center on characteristics such as the power of suggestion, an affection for irregularity and simplicity, and an emphasis on the fragile or perishable nature of material objects.<sup>105</sup> These attributes clearly signal the Japanese ‘love’ of nature, which contains few straight lines and many evanescent objects, but they also signal the importance of human intervention—simplicity suggests that some present natural phenomena must be pared away, and suggestion implies that the perception of the viewer is of primary importance. However, the ambiguity of the divide between the products of nature and those of human hands entails that the former is consistently aestheticized in Japanese culture. If this aestheticization is successful, it produces a powerful effect on the viewer that is emotive rather than rational, intuitive rather than intellectual. As Kenneth Yasuda explains in his discussion of

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<sup>103</sup> Arne Kalland and Pamela J. Asquith, “Japanese Perceptions of Nature: Ideals and Illusions,” in *Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Asquith and Kalland (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997): 14-15.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>105</sup> Donald Keene, “Japanese Aesthetics,” in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Nancy G. Hume (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995): 29.

one of Bashō's haikus, "On a withered bough / A crow alone is perching; / Autumn evening now.":

We feel instinctively that the air is clear in Bashō's haiku . . . a loneliness is there, and a mystic power which holds us close with an acute feeling akin to melancholy sadness, tinged with acceptance. The three objects mentioned—the withered bough, a crow, autumn evening—have the same feeling and we are moved by and impressed with this common emotion existing among those three.<sup>106</sup>

Yasuda's choice of words stress the instinctive and emotional dimensions of haiku poetry, and place high value on its capacity to move the viewer; haiku is in some respects the emblematic Japanese art form, concerned with expressing the emotive power of one startling moment rather than exploring complex themes or presenting long, multifaceted plots.<sup>107</sup>

That the poetry of Bashō (and other composers of haiku) is grounded in emotion rather than intellect should not lead one to believe that it aims to be an exploration of an individual's psychology; as an artform intertwined with the "natural" world, haiku was supposed (in Bashō's view) to aspire towards an "impersonality," a distance from the material world and its vagaries, even as it must constantly rely on that world for its imagery and poetic vocabulary. Makoto Ueda explains how even an emotive state such as loneliness, generally thought of as subjective and internal, is in fact to Bashō an "impersonal atmosphere," and this aesthetic turn away from human psychology is rooted in Bashō's despairing attitude towards man's nature:

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<sup>106</sup> "Approach to Haiku' and 'Basic Principles'" in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture: A Reader*, 128.

<sup>107</sup> Of course, this is not to say that Japan lacks any tradition of epic or narrative poetry; medieval "novels" such as *Genji Monogatari* and *The Pillow Book*, as well as lengthy epics such as *The Tale of the Heike* clearly show that these genres also exist in Japan, but it seems to me that the brevity and imagistic content of haiku align more naturally with the dominant trends in the history of Japanese art and literature.

For Bashō, sorrow was the word to describe life and the world at large; in his view this life was a “demoniac world of the lusts” and mankind was “drowning in a filthy ditch.” Life is filled with sorrow because men, each pursuing his own desires, hurt one another. There is no escape for men from sorrow, since it is inherent in humanity. If there is an escape, it would be only through a denial of humanity, through men’s dehumanizing themselves. They can escape from sorrow only when they transform into an impersonal atmosphere, loneliness.<sup>108</sup>

We have already witnessed this desire to extract oneself from the pains of human existence in the work of Shantideva; presumably this distaste for the contingent world would extend to natural phenomena as well, but instead of aiming for transcendence, poets such as Bashō find the detachment they desire in the surrounding world, which suggests that the identification between the human and the non-human may not be as strong as some would argue. Haiku poets are dependent upon nature for their imagery and atmosphere, but ultimately nature is important *because* it is in some sense detached from humanity; the impersonality Ueda identifies would be impossible if the human being did not experience a sense of separation from his or her environment. Nature provides an avenue to escape the anguish inherent in human life. In this

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<sup>108</sup> “Bashō on the Art of the Haiku: Impersonality in Poetry,” in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*, 155. Bashō’s transformation of very personal grief or sadness into something more impersonal is somewhat similar to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words about his own despair after the death of his child in his 1844 essay “Experience,” in which he presents his own suffering as something that in fact cannot effect him: “Was it Boscovich who found out that bodies never come in contact? Well, souls never touch their objects . . . Grief too will make us idealists. In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more . . . it does not touch me: something I which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing tearing, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar . . . I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature . . . nothing is left us now but death.” (*Essays: First and Second Series*. New York: First Vintage Books, 1990: 243). Both Bashō and Emerson are insistent that the experience of grief, however profound, will not provide the human being with real knowledge and must be transcended—or at least transformed into something objective, such as a natural landscape—for it to be meaningful or useful to the human subject.

sense, we see the difficulty inherent in transposing the complex concepts of Buddhism, which negate the profundity of human experience by asserting that the self is an illusion, and the demands of art, which is ultimately about nothing if not humanity; Bashō aims to slough off the confines of the self, so his poetry flees to nature, but in doing so he affirms nature's separateness from human life and concerns, an apparent contradiction of the notion of the interrelatedness of all things.

As a consequence of his attempt to disentangle himself from the fallen world, Bashō's most highly regarded poems are often exclusively dependent upon natural imagery and bereft of traditional indications of human emotion. However, as the process of sloughing off of worldly attachments and achieving a true sense of self—which is paradoxically no self at all—is inevitably a gradual one,<sup>109</sup> the 1684 travel sketch composed after Bashō's first journey around Japan features a short vignette that inspires in the poet grief and despair, even as he attempts to retreat to natural images. Observing an abandoned child “crying pitifully” by the banks of the Fuji River, Bashō likens his fragility to that of the “flowers of bush-clover that scatter at the slightest stir of the autumn wind,” and composes a short poem in his honor:

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<sup>109</sup> “Introduction,” in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, tr. Nobukiyuki Yuasa (London: Penguin Books, 1966): 29-33. Though this portion of the essay is focusing on the difficulties involved in separating oneself from nature in the way Bashō desired, as Yuasa points out, his mature style is one that seems to testify to his success in breaking down the barrier between subject and object, revealed in his poetry through a symbolism that hardly seems symbolic at all: external actions and internal states are conflated. Bashō's words explain his poetic intent: “Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself upon the object and you do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one . . . However well phrased your poetry may be, if your feeling is not natural—if the object and yourself are separate—then your poetry is not true poetry but merely your subjective counterfeit.”

The ancient poet  
 Who pitied monkeys for their cries,  
 What would he say, if he saw  
 This child crying in the autumn wind?

This deceptively simple poem stops short of the impersonality Bashō would later develop, but it does attempt to displace the profound emotions he experiences to a priest, who still has strong enough attachments to the external world to be moved to pity by the inarticulate noises of animals. Furthermore, the close connection of human pity with the blind and seemingly inevitable suffering of animals foreshadows Bashō's words below, in which he ruminates on the impossibility of finding meaning in the child's suffering:

. . . Is it because of his mother who ignored him, or because of his father who abandoned him? Alas, it seems to me that this child's undeserved suffering has been caused by something far greater and more massive—by what one might call the irresistible will of heaven. If it is so, child, you must raise your voice to heaven, and I must pass on, leaving you behind.<sup>110</sup>

Confronted with the brutality of this three-year-old's situation, which Bashō recognizes initially as a product of human actions, he can ultimately only respond with resignation and detachment—shifting the burden to an implacable force in a way that allows Bashō to see his suffering as merely another contingency in a world both unpredictable and inevitable, and in so doing aim for the detachment that the priest in his poem could not achieve. Recalling briefly Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov, who hinges his rejection of a world that operates according to a

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 52.

comprehensible moral order upon the suffering of children at the hands of adults,<sup>111</sup> Basho experiences the same ghastly despair but whereas Ivan rejects the created world and retreats into despair, even nihilism (“I don’t understand anything . . . and I no longer want to understand anything . . . I made up my mind long ago not to understand.”<sup>112</sup>), Bashō simply resigns himself to the inevitability of suffering in this world. Such suffering is neither the product of the incomprehensible caprice that causes Ivan such despair nor is it directed towards an ultimate benefit that will one day be illuminated. It is simply the state of affairs for all beings enmeshed within *samsara*. The natural world that surrounded Bashō may have allowed him to detach himself from his all-too-human emotions, but ultimately it provides no relief. Both Klee and the Buddhists are in agreement that the world exists in constant becoming, but whereas for Klee this knowledge invigorates his vitalism, for Buddhists it is an illusory cycle one seeks to escape.

Acknowledgment of the Japanese appreciation for nature must, therefore, be inflected with the awareness that such a love is not only complicated by the actual history of Japanese approaches to the physical environment, but that it is not about a sentimental attachment to the “natural” in itself. Just as Klee was not interested in imitating nature in all her specificity, but rather visualizing the oscillations of her virtual realm, nature in traditional Japanese aesthetics is a powerful material for the production of the beautiful. There are few examples of Japanese art that testify more strongly to this aestheticizing tendency than the garden.

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<sup>111</sup> See *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

## V. Japanese Gardens

To a more pronounced degree than has generally been observed in the West, gardening in Japan has long been a serious aesthetic pursuit. There is no evidence of gardens in the pre-Buddhist period of Japanese history, known as Yamato,<sup>113</sup> but the flowering of Japanese culture during the Nara (710-84) and Heian (794-1185) periods was rapid; among the numerous developments in literature and the visual arts, the *shinden* style of architecture and its attendant gardens also arose. Gardens in Japan, similar to those in the West, functioned as symbols or recreations of paradise, and some have speculated that their origins reside in spaces cleared and purified for the ritual summoning of deities, spaces both liminal and sacred.<sup>114</sup> That garden development began in earnest as Buddhism rose in stature and spread throughout the Japanese population is no coincidence; as we will see in our discussion of the Heian-era gardening manual (perhaps the world's first), the *Sakuteiki*, Buddhist concepts (as well as those derived from other religious traditions, including Daoism, Neo-Confucianism and geomancy) have long informed how the gardener is supposed to construct and arrange the space. It is also important to note that, just as gardens have ample representation in the art and literature of the West, they are also depicted with frequency in Japan's own religious and secular texts, as well as in contemporaneous artworks.

Depiction of gardens, or other luxurious natural spaces, is common in Buddhist sutras; the difficulty inherent in all save the enlightened grasping the abstract notion of *nirvana* (emptiness

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<sup>113</sup> Mitchell Bring and Josse Wayenbergh, *Japanese Gardens: Design and Meaning* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981): 5.

<sup>114</sup> Joy Hendry, "Nature Tamed: Gardens as a Microcosm of Japan's View of the World," in *Japanese Images of Nature*, 89.

and release from the *samsara* cycle) compels monks to adopt means of preaching the way that present the benefits of piety in more widely comprehensible terms: such methods, which appeal to our common desires, such the yearning for a happy afterlife or other material benefits, and indeed the sutras themselves, are called *upaya*, “expedient means.”<sup>115</sup> Thus the beautiful visions presented by sutras should not be taken literally; *nirvana* is not in truth a garden or any other kind of physical place, but such images are powerfully persuasive in the early stages of the growth of one’s Buddhist faith. A famous sutra entitled “The Wonderful Panoply of the Land of Bliss” presents a marvellous picture of what awaits the faithful: as the Blessed One (the Buddha) resides in an idyllic garden host to a gathering of a great number of monks, he addresses one of them (Sariputra) and describes a land called ‘Blissful,’ where “a *tathagata*, *arhat*, perfect and full buddha called Amitayus” (in Japanese, Amida) is forever preaching the *dharma*, and explains why this land is so called:

. . . the living beings in this world-system called Blissful suffer no bodily pain and no mental pain, rather they gain measureless causes for happiness . . . the world-system Blissful is adorned and enclosed on every side by seven railings, seven rows of palm trees, and nets of bells. It is colorful and charming. Sariputra, this buddha-field is made of the four precious substances: namely, gold, silver, chrysoberyl, and crystal . . . there are lotus ponds made of the seven precious substances. They are full of water that possess the eight good qualities of water . . . on the four sides of each of these ponds are four flights of steps, colorful, charming, each made of one of the four precious substances . . . and on the banks of these ponds grow majestic gem trees . . .<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Matsunaga, *Foundations of Japanese Buddhism, Vol. II*, 35-49.

<sup>116</sup> From “Rebirth in the Land of Bliss,” in *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004): 62-3.

The Blessed One's description continues with increasingly astonishing tales of luxury, culminating in showers of flower blossoms and complete with regular afternoon naps. This is a vision of paradise that is unabashedly sensual and aesthetic. This land of unalloyed joy appeals to the human sensory faculties (later the Blessed One describes choruses of wild geese, cranes, and peacocks, whose dulcet voices "proclaim the spiritual faculties," and the sounds of the trees disturbed by wind, comparable to sublime music), as well as our desires for material wealth and a symmetrical, orderly environment. It is this "pure land" (Jp. *Saiho Jōdō*) which serves as a symbol of the spiritual rewards awaiting those who are released from *samsara*; so pervasive was the influence of this analog of emptiness that the above sutra was commonly memorized and recited as a form of religious practice by those seeking rebirth in this paradise.<sup>117</sup> These splendid depictions of the Pure Land likely had more than a spiritual influence, as the depictions of Amida's residences in such sutras are mirrored in contemporaneous paintings of Heian-era aristocratic dwellings, to the extent that some palace gardens are thought to be recreations of this celestial realm.<sup>118</sup>

As Japanese literature developed along with Buddhism and the other arts in the Nara and Heian periods, it is not surprising that gardens appear in the contemporaneous prose. Much of the courtly Japanese language literature (as opposed to works written in Chinese) that was composed in the medieval period was concerned with the contours of courtly life, and much of it was

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid. It is also important to note that, perhaps surprisingly to some, Buddhism also has its hells; a Pure Land from the "Anthology of Essential Teaching for Deliverance to the Pure Land" describes eight types of hell, and they are quite predictably characterized by violence and unremitting torture, sometimes corresponding in a Dantean fashion to the nature of the sinner's misdeeds. Interestingly, while the description of the Pure Land in the sutra cited above is painstakingly detailed, there is seemingly no landscape in this hell. See Lopez, 69-77.

<sup>118</sup> *Sakuteiki*, 90.

written by court women, who were expected to be excellent writers of poems as part of general courtship rituals.<sup>119</sup> The first chapter of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century novel *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari*), written by Murasaki Shikibu, is titled *Kiritsubo*, “The Paulownia Pavilion,” with *tsubo* indicating a small garden situated between two buildings in a palace complex.<sup>120</sup> Many other chapter headings contain a mention of some feature of palace landscaping; the garden and other palace environs provide a rich atmosphere for the unfolding of *Genji*’s myriad human dramas and constantly remind the reader of the splendid wealth and isolation of Murasaki’s subjects, but it was unlikely a decision rooted in poetic license. Like all other ladies of the Heian court, Murasaki would have rarely, if ever, left her luxurious cocoon; and given that Japanese literature was almost wholly confined to women (and men) such as *Genji*’s author and her peers, the palace and its attendant luxuries served as the only proper backdrop for literary and poetic efforts. As Keane and Takei point out, the Heian capital was seen as the locus of all virtue, beauty, and taste in the world; its isolation produced a myopicism that would later be translated into their specific architectural and gardening projects, producing such unique features as *shakkei*, borrowed scenery, in which the hinterlands outside the capital served their only presumed purpose as adornment to an aristocrat’s garden.<sup>121</sup>

The other important work of Heian-era literary aesthetics, Sei Shōnagon’s *The Pillow Book*, also uses gardens and other natural scenery as a source of constant aesthetic enjoyment, and Shōnagon often ruminates on ponds (long an essential aspect of Japanese garden design), the

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<sup>119</sup> See Donald Keene, “Feminine Sensibility in the Heian Era,” in *Japanese Aesthetics and Culture*, 109-123.

<sup>120</sup> *The Tale of Genji, Abridged*. Tr. Royall Tyler (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

<sup>121</sup> *Sakuteiki*, 27-8.

qualities of different trees, and even the aesthetic virtues of certain insects.<sup>122</sup> Shōnagon's observations, and the precision and decisiveness of her opinions, suggest an aestheticizing tendency that is not merely the result of being moved by the landscape; already in formation are strict standards of what constitutes a properly formed landscape. However much gardens may hover in the background of these courtly narratives, these early literary works were not *about* gardens, nor do they propose rigorous or systemic theories of landscape design or even aesthetics generally. The former project was completed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century with the *Sakuteiki*, likely the world's first gardening manual. Commonly attributed to Tachibana no Toshitsuna, the *Sakuteiki* codified what courtiers like Shikibu and Shōnagon would have already intuited: it contains extensive rules about how exactly one constructs a garden, its essential features and their spiritual and aesthetic justifications. I will explore the *Sakuteiki* in more detail below, but before doing so I believe it is important to outline some of the probable influences on this gardening manual and its author.

It is important to remember that, just as Western cultures cannot be reduced to the influence of Christianity in its myriad forms, Japanese society is not solely indebted to the Buddhism that crossed its borders in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, nor to the Shinto that preceded it, or even to a syncretism of the two. The cultural landscape in which Japanese art and literature developed was also influenced by even older systems of thought imported from China, geomancy in particular. *Feng shui*, or *fūsui* in Japanese, is not so much a discrete philosophical program so much as a collection of “interrelated concepts that . . . were used to explain the existence and inner

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<sup>122</sup> Tr. Meredith McKinney (New York: Penguin Books, 2006): 47.

workings of all manner of phenomena.”<sup>123</sup> This system, perhaps most commonly known in the West as a method of arranging furniture, has roots that extend deep into Chinese history, perhaps even before the adoption of sedentary agriculture, in which a style of life adapted to nature’s cycles compelled individuals to view their lives as inseparable from the natural processes that surrounded them.<sup>124</sup> This emphasis on change rather than stasis, as well as the belief in *qi* (Jp. *ki*), a nebulous force that animates and binds all matter and energy,<sup>125</sup> led to the development of a cosmology that stresses process and transformation, encapsulated in the *Yijing* (or *I-Ching*), the *Book of Changes*, commonly attributed to the legendary visionary Fu Xi. The *Yijing* proposed that all phenomena were composed of elements that remained in a state of perpetual flux and mutation; this idea led to the later development of the ‘Five Phase’ cosmology, in which substances commonly perceived as being discrete and fixed (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water) are in fact mutable, temporary states:

The Five Phases are also sometimes referred to as Five Elements, but we prefer the translation ‘Phases,’ partly because it is closer to the original word, meaning

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<sup>123</sup> Jiro Takei and Marc P. Keane, translators. *Sakuteiki: Visions of the Japanese Garden, A Modern Translation of Japan’s Gardening Classic* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2008): 59.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-1.

<sup>125</sup> *Qi* is difficult to translate, and has a long philosophical tenure in Chinese thought. Chu Xi, the most prominent of the Neo-Confucians, affirmed it as, along with *li* (“principle”) essential to all existing objects; *qi* can be thought of as substance and *li* as form (see Herrlee G. Creel, *Chinese Thought From Confucius to Mao Tse-Tung*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953: 207). Wing-Tsit Chan, in his commentary on 11<sup>th</sup> Century Neo-Confucian philosopher Chou Tun-I’s *T’ung Shu (Penetrating the Book of Changes)* describes *qi* as “an originating power, an inward spring of activity, an emergence not yet visible, a critical point at which one’s direction towards good and evil is set.” See *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963): 467. A more complete definition is supplied by Ivanhoe and Van Norden: “*Qi* was thought of as a kind of vital energy found in both the atmosphere and the human body and existing in various densities . . . in later Chinese philosophy, *qi* was thought of as the fundamental ‘stuff’ out of which everything in the universe condenses and into which it eventually dissipates.” See *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, Second Edition* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, Inc., 2001): 391.

movement, but also because it better represents the process-oriented nature of the system. The Five Phases . . . are not perceived as fixed elements but rather as having the ability to ameliorate and create each other. Rather than being envisioned as fixed substances, they should be understood as points, or events, along a cyclic flow.<sup>126</sup>

The Five Phases are associated with a profoundly influential doctrine in Chinese philosophy, the “Yin Yang School.” According to Wing-Tsit Chan, this system can be thought of as a “dynamic monism” that only appears to be chaotic: “The outlook is dynamic and not static . . . in point of process, there is contradiction as well as harmony, and in point of reality, there is unity in multiplicity.”<sup>127</sup>

Thus it is clear that an emphasis on process, rather than product, was of particular importance not only in Buddhist China and Japan, but also in the philosophical systems that preceded it and influenced its development. The Neo-Confucianists of China’s medieval period would continue to further refine and wrestle with the specifics and implications of this process-oriented worldview; though the *Yijing*, with its focus on divination and mystical leanings, was originally circulated among Daoists—and Daoist-adjacent—circles, it began to become popular with Neo-Confucians anxious to find a theory that could combat the ever-increasing popularity of the southern import, Buddhism, and they often adapted Taoist ideas and texts to do so.<sup>128</sup> These ideas would exert influence during Japan’s medieval period as many aspects of Chinese culture were enthusiastically adopted by the aristocracy, and important religious leaders such as the founder of Shingon, Kūkai (also called Kōbō Daishi) actually embarked on journeys to the

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<sup>126</sup> Takei and Keane, 62-3.

<sup>127</sup> *Sourcebook*, 244-5.

<sup>128</sup> Creel, 205-6.

Chinese capital of Chang'an in order to return to Japan with the newest and most sophisticated products of Chinese thought and civilization. Early Heian Japan was so deeply indebted to Chinese culture in all aspects of intellectual, religious, and civic life that Japan had become a veritable “miniature model of China.”<sup>129</sup>

The geomancy-influenced ideas about the fundamental composition of the material world, and how such forces should be manipulated, proved to be of great importance in the *Sakuteiki*; the author often references directions by the names they assume in the *jūnishi*, the Twelve Branches, which impute to each spatial direction an animal (or two), such as Mouse (north) or Sheep Monkey (southwest), and so forth, names that derive from Chinese theories of phase change and are also likely indebted to agricultural and celestial cycles. He also makes references to the *shijin*, the Four Guardian Gods,<sup>130</sup> a concept closely tied to that of the aforementioned Five Phases. As with many other dimensions of geomantic practice, all of these deities must be in balance in order for one to properly use geomancy.<sup>131</sup> Hence a fairly lengthy passage from the *Sakuteiki* details the exact placement of how one should plant trees in a garden to balance the influences of the gods, or, more commonly, how the flow of water should be directed, as such design decisions can have important consequences for household residents:

The flow of water should come from the east, pass beneath the buildings, turn to the southwest, and thus wash away all manner of evil . . . this is using the waters of the Blue Dragon to wash out all evil to the Great Path of the White Tiger. It is

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<sup>129</sup> Varley, 56.

<sup>130</sup> They are the Blue Dragon (*seiryu*) in the east, the Scarlet Bird (*suzaku*) in the south, the White Tiger (*byakko*) to the west, and the Black Tortoise (*genbu*) to the north. *Sakuteiji*, 81.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

said that no one living in such a place will be afflicted by malediction or tumors.<sup>132</sup>

Thus geomancy assumes that human beings have tremendous power within the environment; through conscientious use of natural materials we can manipulate the forces that surround us to our own benefit. Garden design then is not solely aesthetic, and spaces are not arranged only according to how pleasing they will be. The underlying spiritual significance of the landscape entails that special attention must be taken to construct these spaces in a way that does not violate the cosmic order.

That being said, the lines that open the *Sakuteiki* are firmly rooted in an aesthetic outlook rather than a spiritual one. While decidedly a technical manual (despite some flowery language) concerned with the actual standards and implementation of garden design rather than its philosophical or religious underpinnings, it does contain brief explorations of what the proper inspiration of gardeners should be. The author outlines three basic guidelines that should guide the person “creating a garden” (literally, *ishi wo taten koto*, “setting stones”), all of which appeal to human desires and our interpretive powers vis-à-vis the natural landscape rather than geomantic principles. The first admonishes the designer to seek out places that will allow one to create a “subtle atmosphere” while “reflecting again and again on one’s memories of wild nature.” “Nature” here is an ambiguous concept; Keane and Takei’s annotation identifies the original Japanese term as *senzui*, “mountain-water,” or *shotoku no senzui*, “the natural constitution/innate disposition of mountains and water.” This term is also used by Tachibana no

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 191.

Toshitsuna to refer to gardens themselves, a usage that would become increasingly common as the middle ages progressed. Recalling that the nature/human divide is not as clearly drawn in traditional Japanese culture as it is in the West, this conflation makes sense; though Tachibana is likely encouraging his readers to remember their impressions of the “natural” world of mountains and rivers, it is impossible to wholly sever this sense of unmediated nature from the “tamed” nature available to us in gardens.

The author’s second guideline concerns the influence of past masters; however much one should keep “nature” in mind, gardening is an artistic pursuit with a history that should be respected. The third concept expands upon how and what the gardener should properly imitate—he identifies the “famous landscapes” (*meisho*), often used as paradigms for garden design, as the proper inspiration for the garden designer, but he is instructed not to merely passively parrot such scenes, but to recreate them in his garden “interpretatively.” The garden then does not aim for strict naturalism; the gardener/artist is encouraged to use his skills to improve upon the natural world which supplies his inspiration. These three guiding principles establish both the garden’s indebtedness to the natural environment and its dependence upon the skills and “taste” (*fuzei*) of the designer, and a balance must be struck between the two: the garden can be neither an example of unrefined wilderness nor should the artist be so dedicated to his own vision that he neglects the demands of the materials and violates their spiritual properties with poor planning.

Visual expressions of the principles of garden design embraced in the Heian period and codified in the *Sakuteiki* are found in many contemporaneous artworks of the period. A 14<sup>th</sup>-century series of scrolls entitled *Kasuga Gongen Kenki Emaki* (fig. 11) depicts the famous Kasuga shrine, built in the Nara period and the longtime seat of the Fujiwara family, the most

powerful politicians of the Heian era. The work, available now only via a supposedly highly accurate 20<sup>th</sup>-century reproduction, contained twenty scrolls, and depicts many incidents from the founding of the shrine. A scene from the fifth scroll portrays Fujiwara Toshinori's devotion to the shrine and his ensuing good fortune. The scenery is serene and balanced: the humans reside in leisure, reclining, reading, and socializing; the trees are carefully placed and the vegetation tastefully sparse, and there is abundance of waterfowl, aesthetically pleasing and suggestive of a fortuitous and prosperous life.<sup>133</sup> Like Western depictions of garden spaces, this is an area that has been lovingly cultivated and maintained by human beings, set aside for enjoyment, the tensions and vagaries of both realms elided and their beauty emphasized. A livelier depiction of the medieval pleasure garden is found in the *Nenjū Gyoji Emaki (Scrolls of Annual Festivities)*, a collection originally painted around 1156 but available to us now only in an Edo-period copy, contains a scroll entitled "Festivities of the Southern Court" that does not focus on a garden per se but rather the leisure activities of Heian nobles in a palace courtyard, certain features of which nonetheless strictly follow the *Sakuteiki*'s guidelines.<sup>134</sup> The environment here is almost a wholly human one; unlike the previous scroll, here there are no genteel flocks of geese; the only birds present are gamecocks, clustered in cages or poised to fight, and the lone other animals are two large cows resting on the outside of the enclosure. The interactions with animals here are sharply contrasted with the previous painting; whereas the geese in the Kasuga garden were flying or resting in freedom, providing only aesthetic benefits to the palace's residents, the animals here have been domesticated to serve purely human

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<sup>133</sup> *Sakuteiki*, 136-9.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

purposes—the fighting roosters exist to entertain, and the cattle to serve as general beasts of burden. Moreover, the natural world asserts itself in a rather attenuated fashion—whereas in Kasuga we see grass, ponds, and numerous trees, here we see only two trees, and one winding creek that snakes through the courtyard. The sparsity of natural objects should not imply that this is any less of a garden than that depicted in the Kasuga scroll: the arrangement of stones around the stream is clearly deliberate, as are the plum and cherry trees. These few objects suggest the wider environment outside the palace, and, as is often the case in Japanese garden design, the suggestion is sufficient.

The *Sakuteiki* makes it clear that suggestion in gardens is both powerful and necessary. Later in the medieval period with the development of *karesansui* gardens, suggestion would refine itself into abstraction, and a new kind of garden would develop. Zen gardens were not places of leisure sports and socializing; they were instead designed to inspire contemplation and facilitate the observer towards Buddhist awakening. The concept of the *karesansui*, the “dry garden,” was briefly introduced in the *Sakuteiki*,<sup>135</sup> but the dry gardens there referred to would have been small pockets within a larger garden; fully-fledged *karesansui* would develop later. Such gardens were generally in an enclosed space such as a courtyard and were characterized by a total or near-total lack of water and a heightened concern with symbolism. Given the importance that the *Sakuteiki* and previous generations of gardeners had placed on water as a design element, and its intimate relationship with the forces and deities of geomancy, as well as its practical necessity to those things we commonly associate with gardens (trees, grass, flowers), a waterless garden would indicate a shift in the thinking concerning their purpose and function. Allen S. Weiss

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

remarks that the focus of Zen gardens is always stones in their various forms—be they freestanding, clustered together, or pulverized into gravel, they are omnipresent. Keeping in mind that the supposedly fixed elements are really just temporary states in a constant flux, it makes sense that in “Chinese and Japanese cosmology, stones are not mere inanimate objects but rather concentrations of cosmic and telluric energy (*ch'i*) flowing in different patterns throughout the universe. Rocks are thus valued for both form and force.”<sup>136</sup> Rocks also exude a kind of pathos, in spite of their seeming implacability—they crack and corrode over time, just as other natural objects do. This fragility is essential to their importance in Japanese aesthetics: since the Heian period, impermanence has been central to the beauty of objects both natural and artificial. In Zen this emphasis assumes primacy, becoming the lynchpin of an aesthetic system in which “the crack or imperfection . . . articul[ates] the contingency of chance effects and the intentionality behind the primal level of representation.”<sup>137</sup> That is, the Japanese approach to imperfections or evidence of wear over time, which is often to draw attention to such marks rather than cover them up, reveals to the observer both the ineluctable results of the passage of time and the human role in seizing upon these irregularities for our own aesthetic pleasure. Just as the Japanese love of nature is in fact a desire for an environment subject to human modification, the desire for unexpected contingencies in truth is a desire for such contingencies to be made part of a beautiful whole.

The emphasis on imperfection in Japanese aesthetics has often been evaluated in contrast to the perceived Western obsession with the orderly, symmetrical, and grandiose. Such a preference

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<sup>136</sup> “The Limits of Metaphor: Ideology and Representation in the Zen Garden,” in *Social Analysis* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 122.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

is thought to betray a more intimate, human, and even loving relationship with the art object: as Donald Keene puts it, “The Sistine Chapel is magnificent, but it asks our admiration rather than our participation; the stones of the Ryōan-ji, irregular in shape and position, allow us to participate in the creation of the garden, and thus may move us even more.”<sup>138</sup> A work of perfection is forever closed to our imaginations, but those works that present and embrace lacunae and irregularities invite or even demand our participation. Keene’s words recall that the garden remains a compelling form of art in both the East and West because it incessantly reminds us of our own immersion within a constantly oscillating universe, and imperfection in Japanese artworks serves to further show that not all natural phenomena will necessarily conform to our aesthetic criteria. This strand of thought, however, leads one to a kind of contradiction: to what extent can we say irregularity represents a tendency towards acknowledging the non-humanness of the surrounding world, when it is in fact aesthetically desirable and even cultivated, as in the above cited cases of cracked bowls? Do these contingencies truly serve to illustrate to us our own contingencies if we are capable of manipulating and aestheticizing them? Furthermore, it is exceedingly difficult to define “imperfection” without some stable basis of “perfection”; however much Japanese aesthetics privileges the former, its reliance upon the existence of the latter is undeniable.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> “Japanese Aesthetics,” 34.

<sup>139</sup> It should be noted that the “perfection/imperfection” binary is perhaps problematic in the context of Japanese aesthetics, as the opposition is a product of a Platonic tradition that posits the existence of perfect, abstract objects, reinforced throughout Western history by Christian ontology, which relies on multiple models of perfect beings (pre-lapsarian human beings, the Holy Trinity, and indeed Eden itself). Keene in the above cited essay uses the term “irregularity” and associates it with “asymmetry” and “incompleteness;” it seems to me, however, that all these terms, as negations of a presumably original state of regularity, symmetry, or completeness, entail a similar dynamic as does “imperfection.”

Robert Wicks, in an essay entitled “The Idealization of Contingency in Traditional Japanese Aesthetics,”<sup>140</sup> explores these concepts and presents a critique of the traditional view, which in his view tends to focus on the surface features of Japanese aesthetics while ignoring the more fundamental philosophical concept that enables them, that of contingency. This aesthetic cannot be divorced from Buddhist ideology which states that “the foundation of things is contingent, conditional, and nonabsolute.” This is a foundational principle of Buddhism in general, but expressing it through artistic means requires something against which contingency must be contrasted; that is, without an absolute basis, how do we visualize non-absoluteness? The fissure opened up by this allows for a deeper appreciation of the fundamental concept than would otherwise be possible: “By means of juxtaposing contingent, perishable individuals (which usually have an ‘imperfect’ appearance) against a perfected, polished, and idealized background, the contingency of the individuals is thereby aesthetically highlighted and made more readily appreciable.”<sup>141</sup> Neglecting the perfected backdrops against which the contingent asserts itself results in the mislabeling of Japanese aesthetics as one of “imperfection.” Wicks references a famous story about Sen-no-Rikyū, the original master of the tea ceremony, in which he admonishes his son for being unable to sweep a garden path satisfactorily, despite the boy’s best efforts. When the youth protests that he has not left not a twig nor a leaf on the ground, Rikyu proceeds to shake a tree and scatters the path with autumn leaves. While generally understood as a paradigmatic example of the Japanese preference for “imperfection” (the slight messiness of the scattered leaves preferable to the sterile cleanliness of before), Wicks points out how

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<sup>140</sup> *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 88-101.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

“perfection” is in fact very important here, as without it the spontaneous dissemination of the leaves would have been unremarkable; perfection is the “means to draw attention to the contingently existing things.”

The drive towards establishing some kind of background perfection to illuminate contingent objects and emphasize their beauty is widespread in Japanese arts. This also holds true in the dry rock gardens, in which perfectly raked gravel provides the tranquil grounding upon which the variable forms of rocks assert themselves. The status of these rocks, how exactly they function within the *karesansui*, is essential to understanding what such gardens do. Are they symbolic of certain places or objects, or abstractions of them? Are these gardens sketches of actual places, highly refined recreations, as Tachibana no Toshitsuna advised gardeners to make, or are they meant, through the device of abstraction, to draw one’s mind to cosmic truths normally inaccessible to us? Such questions may be the product of a false dichotomy that misrepresents the Japanese approach to such gardens. As Weiss points out, the standard Western reading of Ryōanji (fig. 12-13) asserts that the garden, a bare rectangle containing fifteen stones, resists any symbolic interpretation; rather than merely *resembling* a work of abstract art, it in fact *is* a work of abstract art that visualizes the impossible—that is, the truth about the universe that is incommunicable through any symbolic system.<sup>142</sup> Weiss resists this interpretation:

While there is indeed a Zen principle of mystery, obscurity, unknowability (*yugen*), this in no way obviates consideration of its mythical, representational, and iconographic foundations. The ‘vague’ significance should suggest a broad scope of metaphoricity rather than its lack. Abstraction and figuration are not, in

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<sup>142</sup> Weiss, 122-23.

Zen aesthetics, the terms of an antinomy; instead, they are the poles of a profound, complex, and often paradoxical intuition.

Thus there is abstraction or something like it occurring in gardens such as Ryōanji; however, in Weiss' view, this is not comparable to Western modernist abstraction which aims to forsake iconographic significance altogether. Zen gardens, like other forms of enlightenment-directed art (such as mandalas<sup>143</sup>) operate on two levels: one, the representational, in which the rocks direct one's mind to actual features of the Japanese landscape, and the other, the abstract, in which they point to something that cannot be directly symbolized and instead must emerge from contemplation. The oft-stated fact about Ryōan-ji that, of the fifteen stones there arranged, only fourteen are visible from any standing vantage point, and thus only a Buddha, as someone no longer tied to our spatial plane, can see them all, implies that the garden cannot be read on a solely symbolic level; a dimension of unrepresentability is figured into its design. Such a tiered methodology parallels that at work in many other areas of the Buddhist ministry: just as the above story of Amida's heaven presents a panoply of sensual delights that appeals to the novice while in fact referencing a place that cannot be represented through either language or image, visual arts such as the garden embrace the landscape while suggesting its ultimately illusory nature.

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<sup>143</sup> An artform common in India and among the esoteric Buddhist sects of Japan, such as Shingon, which can represent either a sanctified realm, or serve as a guide or diagram to enlightenment itself. In esoteric Buddhism, mandalas are one of three bodily means of attaining awakening, the others being mudra (hand movements) and mantra (the chanting of sutras).

## VI. Conclusion

It would be erroneous to pretend that Klee's artwork depicting gardens and the actual gardens of Japan are identical artworks in either purpose or method. As mentioned above, to do so would be to reduce what is a space with depth and breadth that has the (theoretical, at least) capacity to accommodate movement to a flat surface with none of those attributes. Furthermore, though a painting certainly does change over time due to age or mishandling, gardens, even of the relatively inert *karesansui* variety, are more sensitive to natural processes such as seasonal change and require frequent or even daily maintenance. One of Klee's paintings is assuredly the product of a singular artistic imagination, whereas even if a garden is a result of one individual's design, it is difficult or impossible to discern who that designer was. Japanese gardens of course emerge from a cultural and historical milieu wholly distinct from that which energized the modernists; abstraction for the Japanese was not a retreat from an untenable reality, nor was it completely at odds with representation. Modernism and Buddhism both contend with the status of the human being in the environment, and find that identity is neither concrete nor stable, but whereas this produces intense anxiety in the former, for the latter the response is resignation and the pursuit of emptiness. Paul Klee responds to the world with neither nihilism nor retreat, but rather takes joy in nature's garrulity; his attitude is more empathic than primitive but his artistic approach is one that aims for precision.<sup>144</sup> Likewise, Zen gardens on a representational level pare

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<sup>144</sup> It is important to note as well that Paul Klee, along with other modernists such as Paul Gauguin (mentioned in this essay as Klee's spiritual predecessor), can also be seen as participating in a kind of colonialism, especially with regards to their attachment to Primitivism. In her essay on the colonialist influence on Modernist architecture, Hilde Heynen points out, "It is very clear that the notion of the primitive does carry a colonialist overtone . . . the justification for that idea comes from a notion that was popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely that other (non-European) people are childlike . . . if one

natural phenomena down to a few iconographic signals, such as craggy rocks or swirls in raked gravel, but this purified landscape is not all that Zen gardens aim to convey; they also induce the observer to contemplate what exists beyond even the most aestheticized representation, and to understand that the natural world and the humans enmeshed within it are ultimately illusory.

Gardens are, if not a human universal, a widespread and longstanding part of how we arrange both public and private spaces. In both the European and Japanese traditions outlined above, they have had both practical and metaphoric functions: on the most prosaic level, they are pleasant outdoor areas where we can congregate and enjoy nature, however defined. Symbolically, they reveal to us how we as humans negotiate the landscape, how we modify it in order to fulfill our aesthetic and spiritual desires. In paradigms such as the Biblical Eden and the Buddhist heavens we see how perfect nature can be, as well as how human action can fracture such harmony and render it inaccessible without tremendous effort. Gardens have often been considered outside the purview of art; they are practical or merely pleasant, and they do not reveal anything compelling about the human condition, but instead express our very straightforward desires for beauty and luxury. But in using the garden as a symbol, as Paul Klee did, he demonstrated the garden's potential as a means of illuminating not only the inner workings of nature, but also the means whereby the human being is always and ever a part of this becoming. Japanese Zen gardens also

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compares [Adolf] Loos and Le Corbusier, it is clear that Loos the primitive was the pre-rational, the childlike, the one who loves tattoos. Thus the primitive for Loos is what has to be overcome . . . for Le Corbusier on the other hand the primitive is rather the primary, the original, the authentic, that which has to be regained. The latter approach . . . became the most important in Modern architecture . . . this interpretation makes up the attitude of what we can call primitivism in architecture." What Heynen identifies in Le Corbusier would also apply to artists such as Klee and Kandinsky; though rarely, if ever, choosing non-Europeans as subjects, their spiritual quest rests upon the identity between the primitive and the authentic and the desire to reclaim both. See "The Intertwinement of Modernism and Colonialism: A Theoretical Perspective," in *Docomomo Journal*, no. 48 (2013): 10-19.

function as symbols, but rather than merely impart to viewers a sense of their own enmeshment with the natural world, and the universality of natural processes, (which effect even the most implacable of materials), they are also living spaces in which human beings may progress further towards enlightenment. That is, Klee uses gardens in order to direct viewers of the work to an understanding of their unity with the natural world, whereas Japanese gardens are integrated into a system of Buddhist practice in which the inter-connectedness of all things is assumed: gardens, like other forms of Buddhist praxis that are centered in meditation (such as the mandalas used in esoteric Buddhism), are designed not merely to reveal to individuals their ontological standing within the world but also to aid them in cultivating enlightened minds.

Despite their differences, both Klee and the designers of medieval Japanese gardens see the garden as a symbol with genuine spiritual significance. If gardens are an empathic response to our environment, abstraction, which per its etymology is an act of pulling away from, could be seen as a retreat, the Primitive Man fleeing to the comforts of a stability and unity that do not exist in nature. For Klee and the Japanese, to abstract was not to pull away but rather to penetrate deeper; to recognize the limitations of humans imposing themselves upon the landscape and instead to visualize how that landscape came to be (for Klee), or contemplate its essential emptiness (the Zen practitioner). Abstraction was necessary as a means of presenting to the senses that which is not apparent: however thorough we perceive our domination of the natural world to be, nature herself incessantly develops.

## FIGURES

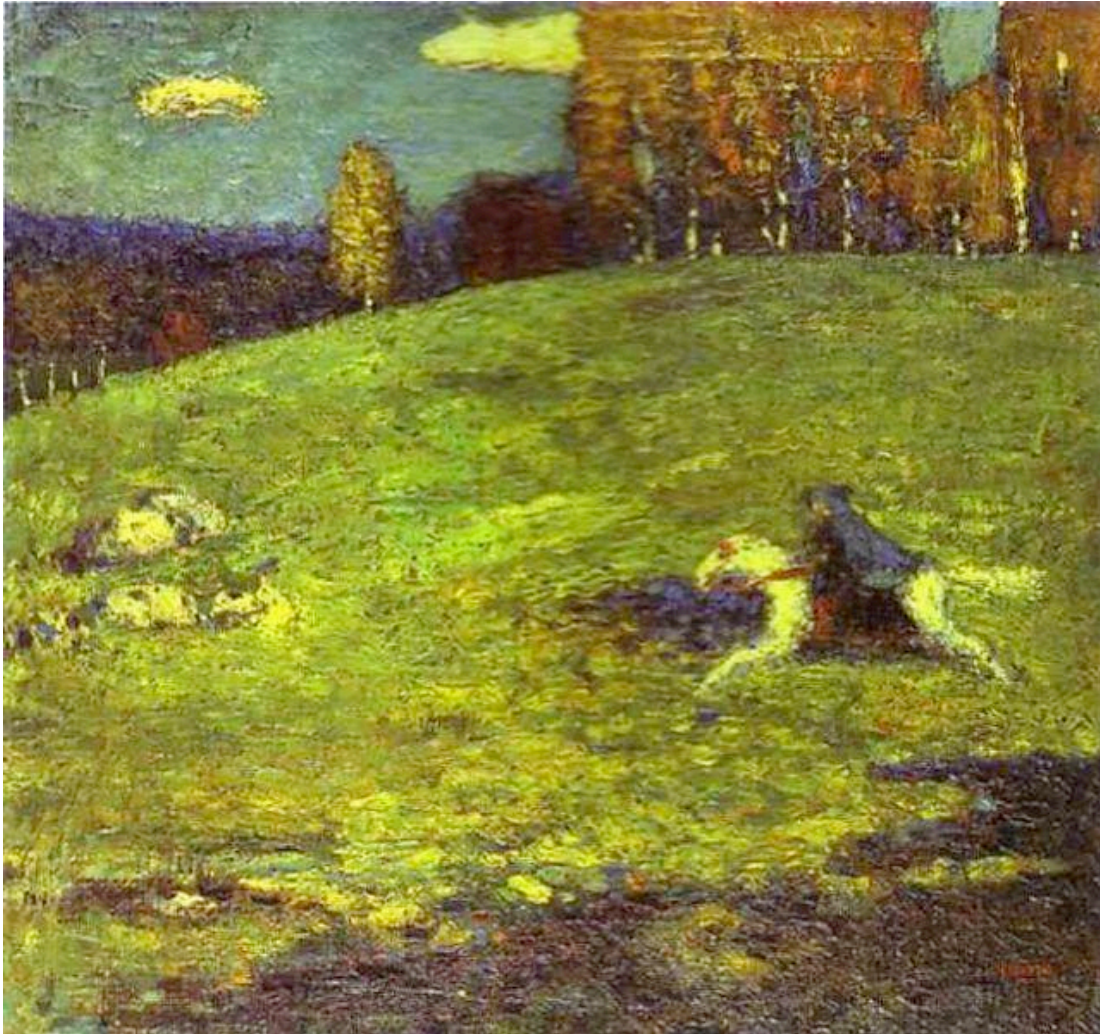


Figure 1: The Blue Rider



Figure 2: The Riding Couple



Figure 3: Several Circles

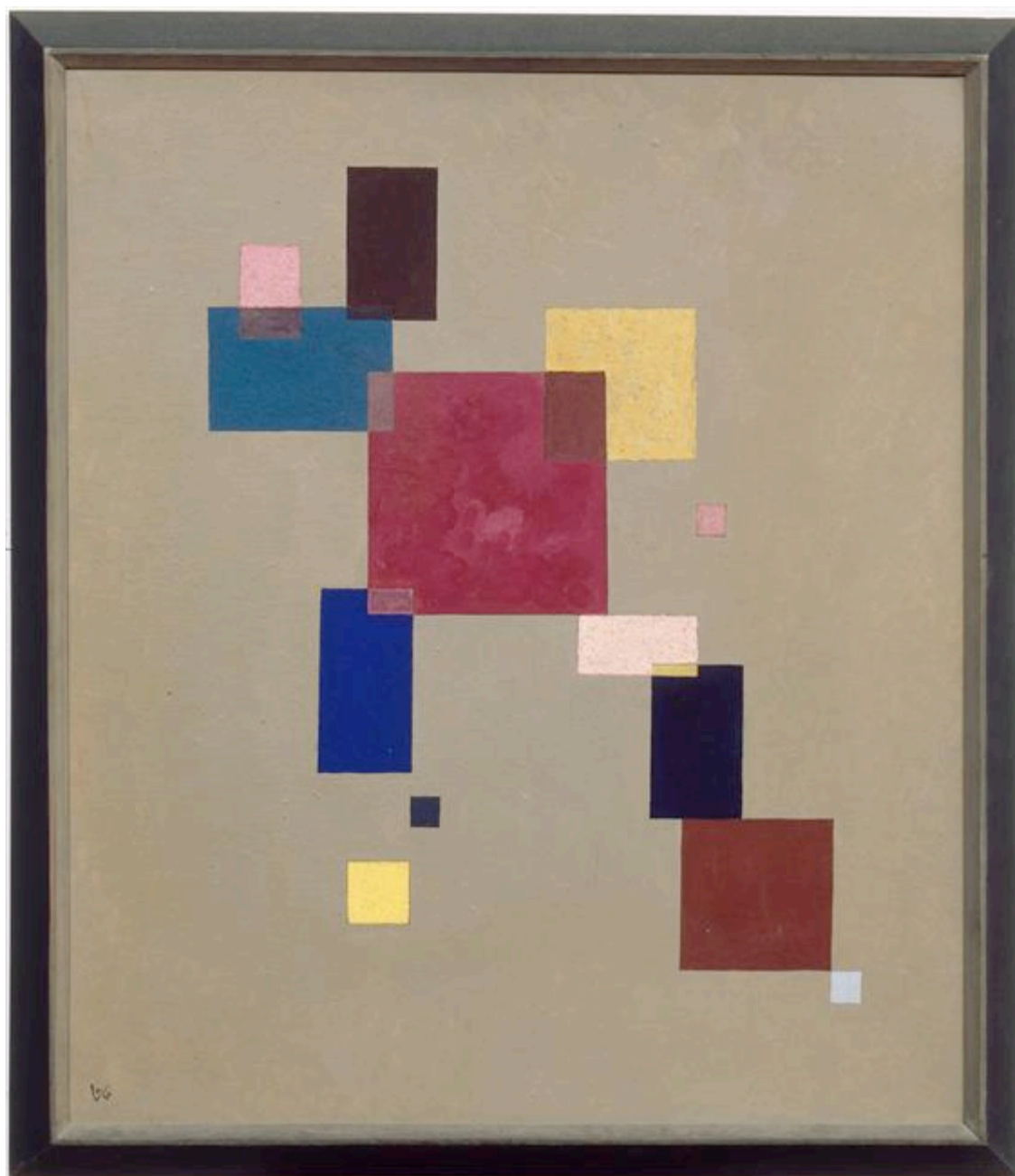


Figure 4: Thirteen Rectangles



Figure 5: Abandoned Garden

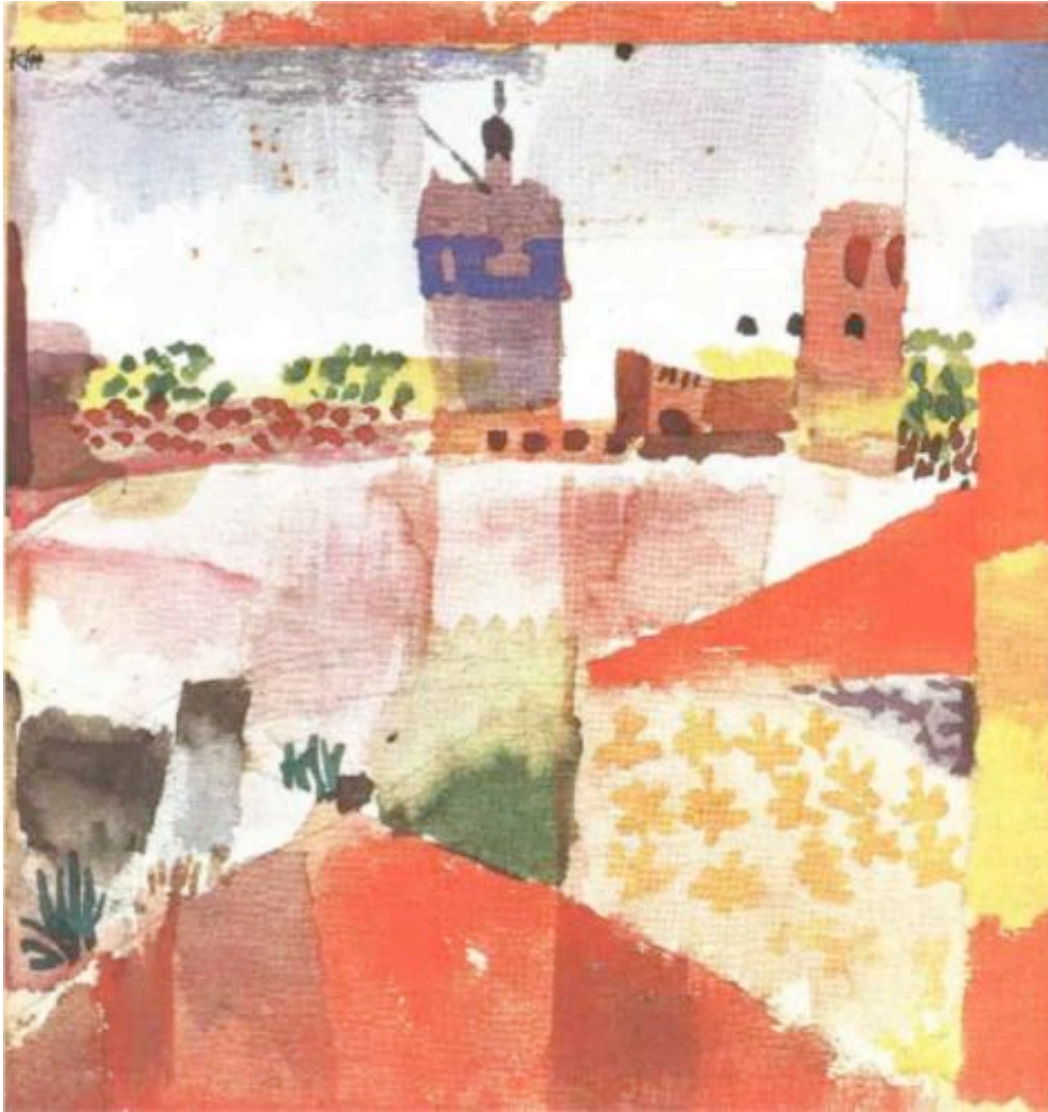


Figure 6: Hammamet with Mosque

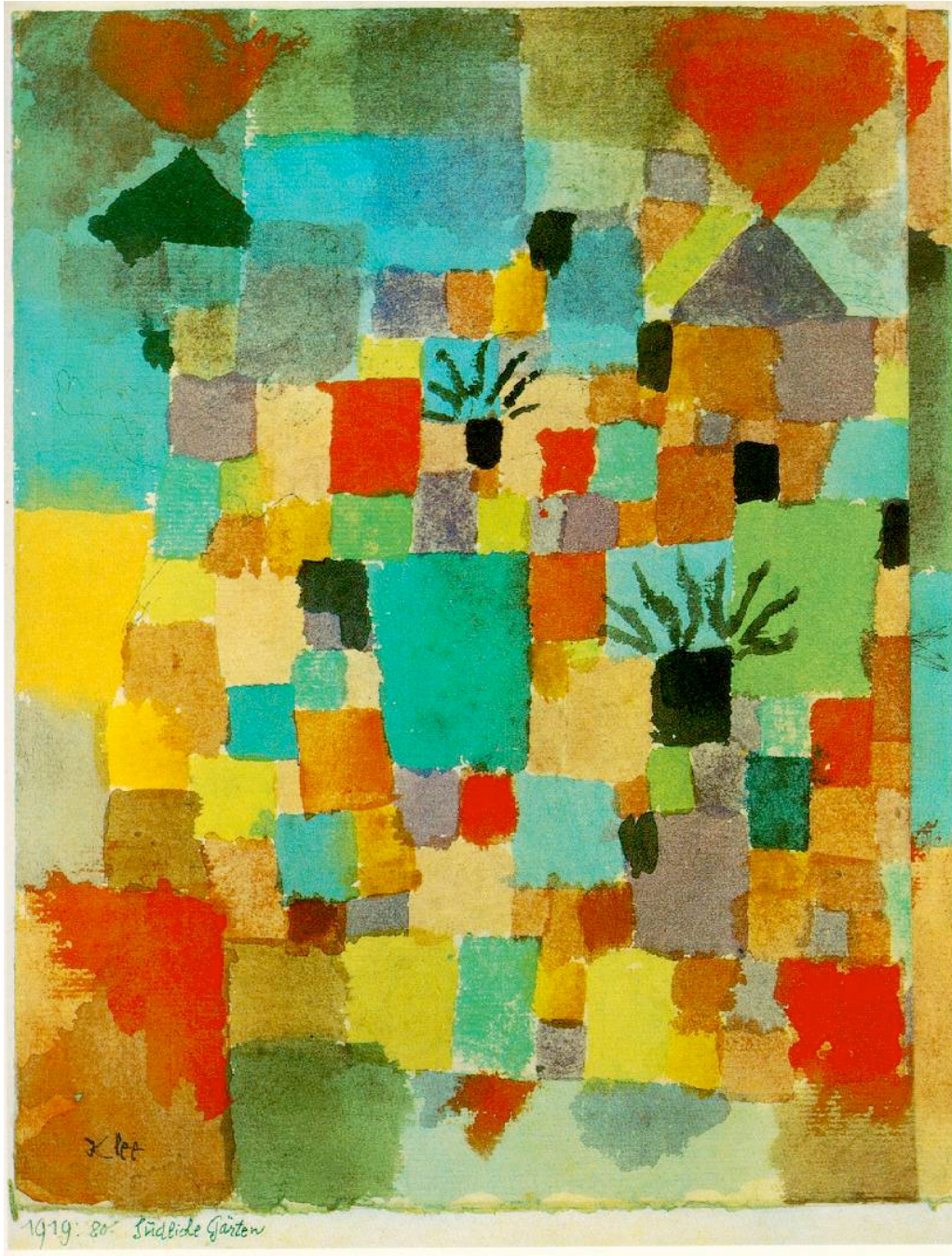


Figure 7: Southern (Tunisian) Gardens

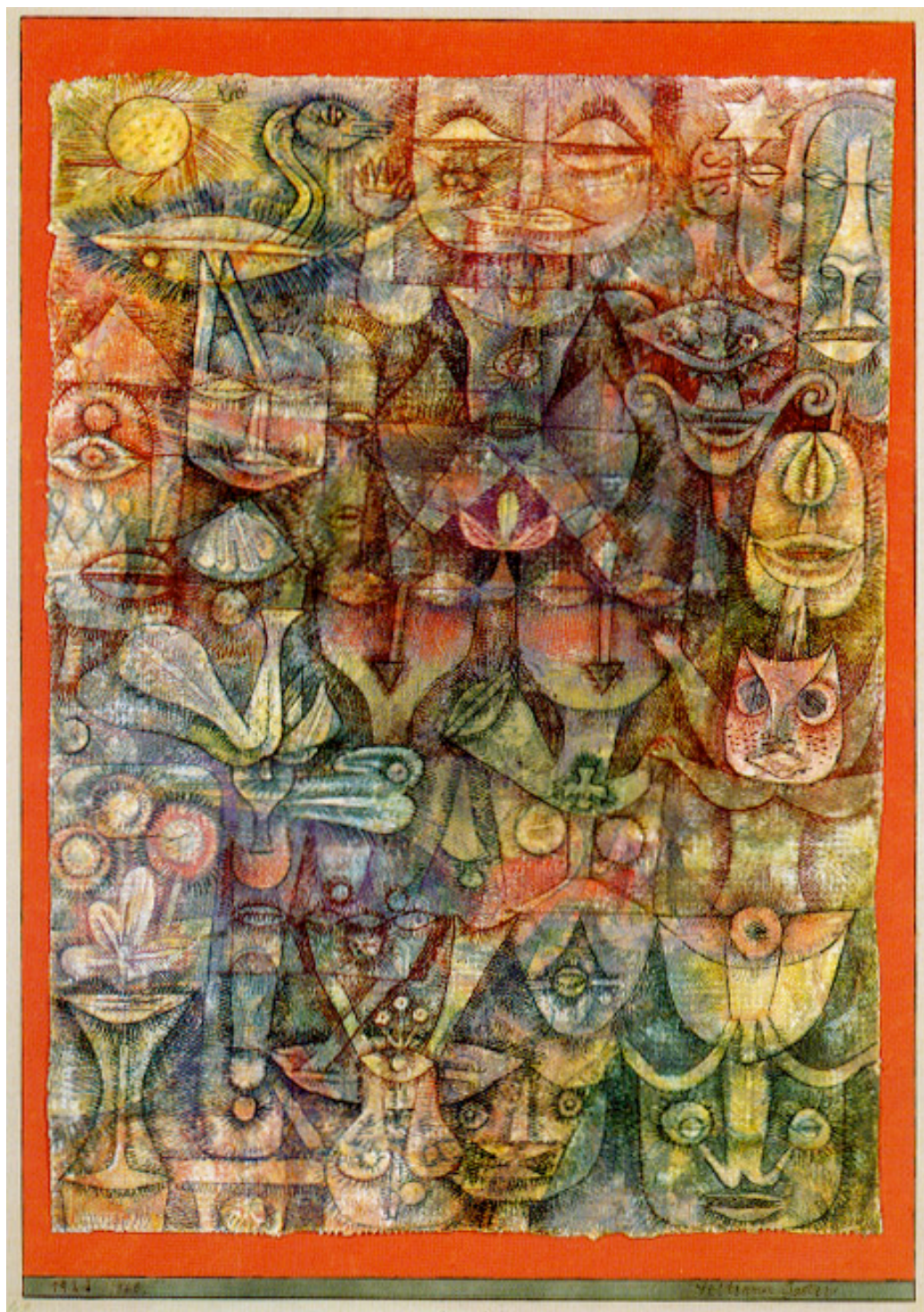


Figure 8: Strange Garden

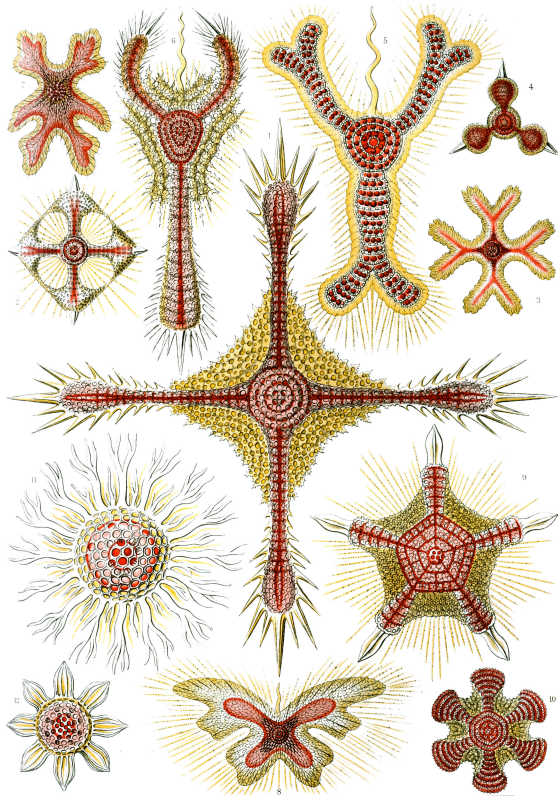


Figure 9: Discoidea

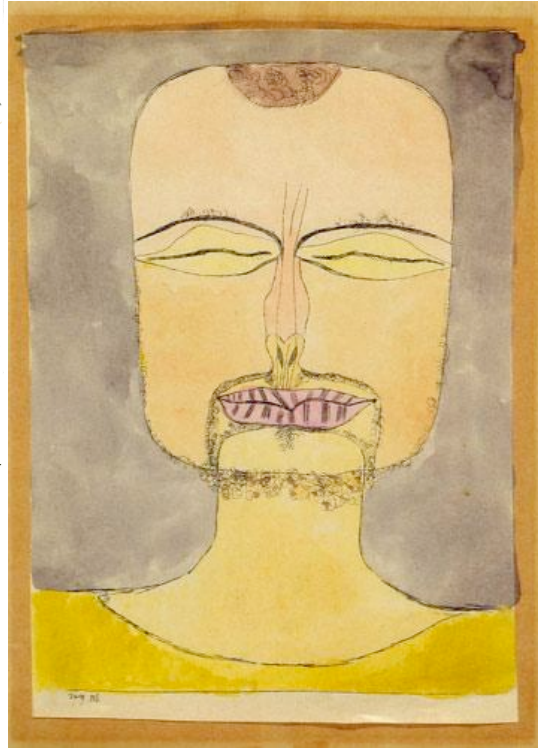


Figure 10: Nach der Zeichnung



Figure 11: Excerpt from the Kasuga Gongen Genki Emaki



Figure 12: Solitary Stone, Ryōanji



Figure 13: The Garden of Ryōanji

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