

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal

ISSN 0975-2935

www.rupkatha.com

Volume VI, Number 3, 2014

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Indexing and abstracting

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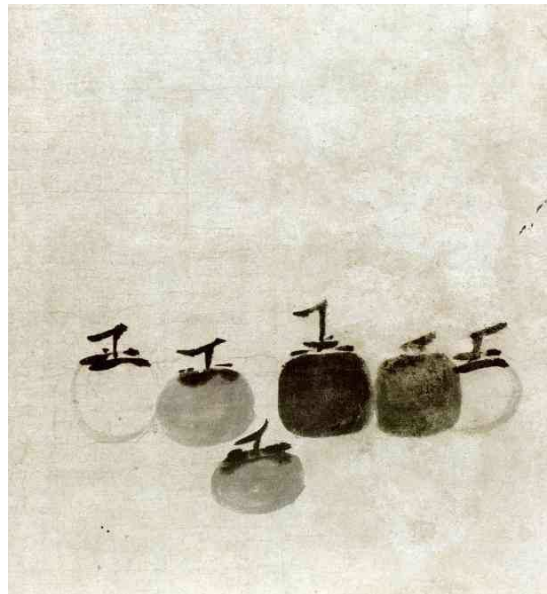
Aesthetic Experience as Temporary Relief from Suffering: Schopenhauer, Buddhism, and Mu Qui's *Six Persimmons*

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Abstract

Assesses the relationship between Arthur Schopenhauer's theory of art and aesthetic principles derived from Buddhism. Begins with an overview of Schopenhauer's philosophy and its relationship to his aesthetic theory. Develops closer analysis of Schopenhauer's theory of art, placing emphasis on the relationship between aesthetic experience and relief from suffering. Continues with analysis of the convergence between Schopenhauerian and Buddhist philosophy and aesthetics. Concludes with an interpretation of Mu Qi's *Six Persimmons*, ink on paper, 13th century China.



Mu Qui, *Six Permissions*, The Huntington Archive, Ohio State University

Introduction

This article assesses the relationship between Arthur Schopenhauer's theory of art, as adumbrated in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) and related aesthetic principles derived from Buddhism. It begins with an overview of Schopenhauer's philosophy and its relationship to his aesthetic theory. This is followed by a closer analysis of Schopenhauer's theory of art, with special emphasis on the relationship between art and redemption. The convergence of central aesthetic principles in

Schopenhauer's and Buddhist philosophy and aesthetics is then discussed before turning to an interpretation of Mu Qi's *Six Persimmons*, Ink on Paper, from 13th century China.

Schopenhauer's Aesthetic Theory

The World as Pure Idea: Schopenhauer's Philosophy and Aesthetics: The World as Will and Representation is divided into four sections. Each section has a distinctive focus. The best way to begin an overview of Schopenhauer's philosophy of art is to explain the content of these sections.

In section one, Schopenhauer develops an analysis of what his predecessor, Immanuel Kant, had called the world of phenomena. The phenomenal world is the world as we know it, constituted in terms of space, time, cause, substance, and so forth. This is the world of representation in Schopenhauer's idiom.

In the second section, Schopenhauer discusses Kant's *noumenal* world or the world of things-in-themselves. Kant had claimed that this world was unknowable, a question mark. Schopenhauer argued that the Kantian thing-in-itself was pure will. He suggested that we do have access to this world of will, the deeper reality. When I exercise my individual will, I catch a glimpse of the primordial will as it operates through me. When, for example, I raise my arm, I gain crude access to the primordial will through my bodily action. However, this access is not something to be celebrated, because, as we shall see, the will that manifests itself in our actions is desire, a relentless striving for satisfaction that can never be sated. For this reason, everyday access to the will is a type of suffering, experienced as endless dissatisfaction which can be alleviated by aesthetic experiences.

In the third section of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer discusses art. For Schopenhauer, art has a redemptive quality. Art can provide an escape from the suffering caused by the relentless drive of the will. The contemplation of art provides us with a pure experience, devoid of desire and hence devoid of the dissatisfaction created by the will.

Schopenhauer concludes on a pessimistic note. Although it may be true that art can rescue us from the clutches of will, this is only a temporary fix. Aesthetic contemplation must eventually end, and when it does, the restless will reasserts itself with a vengeance. The only solution to human suffering is asceticism, the mastery of desire. With this brief summary in mind, I will trace out the argument in *The World as Will and Representation* more carefully.

When Schopenhauer claims, "The world is my idea",¹ he means to suggest that the world that we know, the Kantian world of phenomena, is no more and no less than representation. The world that I come to know is a world that I have created. I have created it through the constitutive action of my mind. I can only know the world as it appears to my mind, and therefore as it appears under the mental conditions of time,

¹ Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. J. Payne, Colorado: Indian Hill, 1958, p. 1.

space, number, cause, substance, and so forth. I do not have immediate access to the world as it really is; I only know my mental representations. The world that I have created operates according to several principles. First, Schopenhauer claims that the world of representations is a world defined according to the *principium individuationis*, the division of the will into particulars of time and space that create the illusion of discrete individual entities and persons.² The world as representation is also a world that operates according to the principle of sufficient reason.

“The will as a thing in itself is quite different from its phenomenal appearance, and entirely free from all the forms of the phenomenal, into which it first passes when it manifests itself, and which therefore only concern its objectivity, and are foreign to the will itself. Even the most universal form of all idea, that of being object for a subject, does not concern it; still less the forms which are subordinate to this and which collectively have their common expression in the principle of sufficient reason, to which we know that time and space belong, and consequently multiplicity also, which exists and is possible only through these . . . According to what has been said, the will as a thing-in-itself lies outside the province of the principle of sufficient reason in all its forms, and is consequently completely groundless, although all its manifestations are entirely subordinated to the principle of sufficient reason. Further, it is free from all multiplicity, although its manifestations in time and space are innumerable. It is itself one, though not in the sense in which an object is one, for the unity of an object can only be known in opposition to a possible multiplicity; nor yet in the sense in which a concept is one, for the unity of a concept originates only in abstraction from a multiplicity; but it is one as that which lies outside time and space, the principium individuationis, i.e., the possibility of multiplicity.”³

As the individual comes into being and passes away it exists only as a series of phenomena, existing only for knowledge generated by the principle of sufficient reason, in the *principium individuationis*. In terms of this knowledge and the experiential awareness generated by it, the individual receives his life as a gift, rises out of nothing, suffers the loss of the gift through death, and returns to nothing.

From a different frame of reference, that of science, there is a reason behind every individual thing that exists in the world of representations. There is no freedom in nature. There is no freedom in human behavior either. Our behavior is caused by our biology, our past, our social situation, and our character. We have the illusion of freedom, but pure freedom does not exist in the world of representation. The world of representation is a law-like world, a mechanistic world. It is Kant's world of phenomena and natural laws.

On the other hand, the world of will is similar to an all-encompassing fountain from which all of reality flows. This is Schopenhauer's way of modifying Kant's noumenal realm via a retrieval of the ancient idea of emanation. The will is a life-giving, form-

² Ibid: 23

³ Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. J. Payne, Colorado: Indian Hill, 1958, p. 146.

producing, eternal source, conceived of in somewhat sexual terms. The phenomenal world is then seen as the formal manifestation of this life-giving force.

"We have therefore called the phenomenal world the mirror, the objectivity, of the will; and as what the will wills is always life, just because this is nothing but the presentation of that willing for the representation, it is immaterial and a mere pleonasm if, instead of simply saying "the will," we say "the will-to-live."⁴

The will is an indivisible whole, best understood as a process, not a collection of things. As will endlessly actualizes itself; it pours itself into the differentiated forms that we, on the other side of the veil created by the limitations of our mind, grasp as reality. What we grasp and perceive is all illusion. We see our desires as individual, indeed we see ourselves as individuated, but we are nothing more than manifestations of one outpouring of will, a continual, restless, life-giving, process that shapes the reality that we know.

Art has a privileged place in Schopenhauer's philosophy. The contemplation of a work of art allows us to escape temporarily from the relentless process of willing that inevitably draws us back down. When we contemplate a work of art, we set aside our practical concerns and assume a disinterested posture. We get lost in contemplation. Beautiful objects or experiences in nature can jolt us out of our endless dissatisfaction.

What do we lose ourselves in when we contemplate? Schopenhauer claims that the will manifests itself in particular works of art as pure form, along the lines of Platonic Forms. When we contemplate a work of art, we are contemplating the will as an objectified form, a type of pure essence of the will itself. Thus art gives us temporary access the world of will through the contemplation of art as form. According to Schopenhauer, art is possible because the will manifests itself in nature in a hierarchical fashion. When the will objectifies itself phenomenally, it expresses itself in terms of a number of discrete individual entities that possess differing degrees of fullness or completion. Schopenhauer may have had Augustine's "Great Chain of Being" in mind when he argued that the will pours forth into the world and creates a series of different classes of entities, each with its own degree of reality. Schopenhauer called each of these classes a "grade of objectification".⁵ He equated the grades of objectification with the Platonic Forms. The grade of objectification is Platonic because it is outside of space and time, it hovers in the never-never land between the will and the phenomenal world. Each form is related to the particular representation as archetypes to their copies.⁶ Schopenhauer describes the varying levels or grades of objectification in Platonic and Augustinian fashion, with rock and mineral forms at the bottom of the hierarchy and forms for human values and virtues at the top. Again, the forms have a privileged place in Schopenhauer's system, they are not subject to the principle of sufficient reason, and they

⁴ Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. J. Payne, Colorado: Indian Hill, 1958, p. 45

⁵ Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. J. Payne, Colorado: Indian Hill, 1958, p. 175.

⁶ *Ibid*: p. 189-219

are not subject to causality, time, and space. They are purely objective manifestations of the will; in this context, purely objective means something like immediate emanation, not subject to the structuring activity of the mind and therefore, prior to and outside the world of representation.

These forms can be objects of knowledge only when we break away from desire. We must approach the forms in a disinterested fashion if we are to experience them. Schopenhauer suggests the method of approach in this passage.

"If, raised by the power of the mind, a man relinquishes the common way of looking at things, gives up tracing, under the guidance of the forms of the principle of sufficient reason, their relations to each other, the final goal of which is always a relation to his own will; if he thus ceases to consider the where, the when, the why, and the whither of things and looks simply and solely at the what; if, further, he does not allow abstract thought, the concepts of reason, to take possession of his consciousness, if, instead of all this, gives the whole power of his mind to perception, sinks himself entirely in this, and lets his whole consciousness be filled with the quiet contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether a landscape, a tree, a mountain, a building, or whatever it may be; inasmuch as he loses himself in this object (to use a pregnant German idiom), i.e., forgets even his individuality, his will and only continues to exist as the pure subject, the clear mirror of the object, so that it is as if the object alone were there, without any one to perceive it, and he can no longer separate the perceiver from the perception, but both have become one, because the whole consciousness is filled and occupied with the single sensuous picture; if thus the object has to such an extent passed out of all relation to something outside it, and the subject out of all relation to the will, then that which is so known is no longer the particular thing as such, but is the Idea, the eternal form, the immediate objectivity of the will at this grade; and therefore, he who is sunk in this perception is no longer individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself, he is pure, will-less, painless, timeless, subject of knowledge."⁷

When we contemplate aesthetically, we become fused with the object of contemplation. We are able to leave willing behind because we take leave of our desires when we fuse with the object. The fusion is not to be understood as a grasping or desiring; it is not a sexual union. Instead, it is a disinterested appreciation of the object. When the subject and object become one, both lose their individuality. The object is no longer an object; instead it is a universal essence, an Idea, a form. The essence or form, not the object, is now the focus of contemplation. The self has also become universal in its identification with the essence of the work of art. Thus, the moment of transcendence is also a moment of universality; the self touches the ground of being in its identification with the essence or form. In doing so, it reaches a point of stillness, where desiring and willing stop and suffering is deferred.

⁷ Ibid: 231

To say that an object is beautiful, then, we must meet two criteria. First, we must be able to say that the object is capable of making us into pure, will-less subjects of knowledge, free from the burdens of desire and suffering. We must also be able to say that the object of contemplation has become purely objective, a pure Idea, a form. Both criteria aspire to a type of transcendence, a transcendence of the self on the one hand, and a transcendence of the representation on the other. The point where these two forms of transcendence meet is the aesthetic experience.

This transcendence of subject and object is also the essence of genius. Schopenhauer's assessment of the role of the genius is similar to Kant's, but adapted to his theory. The genius achieves access to pure form through disinterested contemplation and communion with nature and beauty. The genius experiences the essence or form, not mundane surface of the world. The genius then brings forth the essence and delivers it to the culture, providing an opportunity for contemplation and escape from desire.

Schopenhauer felt that music was the highest art form. Music is not a representation of an object or a subject and therefore seems to appear as an expression of the underlying will in-itself.

“The (Platonic) Ideas are the adequate objectification of will. To excite or suggest the knowledge of these by means of the representation of particular things (for works of art themselves are always representations of particular things) is the end of all the other arts, which can only be attained by a corresponding change in the knowing subject. Thus all these arts objectify the will indirectly only by means of the Ideas; and since our world is nothing but the manifestation of the Ideas in multiplicity, though their entrance into the principium individuationis (the form of the knowledge possible for the individual as such), music also, since it passes over the Ideas, is entirely independent of the phenomenal world, ignores it altogether, could to a certain extent exist if there was no world at all, which cannot be said of the other arts. Music is as direct an objectification and copy of the whole will as the world itself, nay, even as the Ideas, whose multiplied manifestation constitutes the world of individual things.”⁸

True, even music is not the will, but it is the most immediate relationship to the will that one can have. Music is primal and unbounded like the will; it is not restricted by concepts or categories. Music allows for a certain freedom from the principle of sufficient reason; its freedom lies in its capacity to express the unity of emotion and life, which is the essential quality of the will.

Art cannot ultimately redeem us, however. We can only lose ourselves in aesthetic appreciation for a limited period of time. This is not to say that aesthetic appreciation is useless. It provides relief from the omnipresence of desire, in a sense creating a safety valve for the culture. Aesthetic appreciation also helps us cultivate the ethical sensibilities. When we realize that we are connected to something bigger than ourselves,

⁸Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. J. Payne, Colorado: Indian Hill, 1958, p. 333.

we may come to gradually feel and suffer with the other, this is a prerequisite for ethical behavior.

In the end, Schopenhauer remains a pessimist. He recommends asceticism and sexual abstinence as the only reliable means of reducing the endless cravings of the will.

Points of Convergence: Schopenhauer and Buddhism

"If I were to take the results of my philosophy as the standard of truth, I would have to consider Buddhism the finest of all religion."

- Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*

According to Urs App, "Schopenhauer was the first Western philosopher to be influenced by Asian philosophy at an early stage when his system was not yet formed. He also was pre-modern Western philosophy's most voracious reader of translations of Asian texts, and he may well have been the earliest European to call himself a Buddhist."⁹ When Schopenhauer became aware of Buddhism and Indian philosophy, he embraced them as the finest of all religions. Although, as Peter Abelsen argues, there are many differences between Schopenhauer and Buddhism, there are many fruitful points of convergence as well.¹⁰ I will focus on three such points: the idea of self as transitory and impermanent; the idea of reality as a unity; and the idea of reality as an illusion.

The Buddhist idea of the self is that there is no self. The self is said to be empty, an illusion. All of reality, including that which we call self, is perceived by the untamed mind as a process of restless change. What we take for substances are actually very unstable processes of energy coming-into-being and passing-away. Every instant is like the flickering of a flame; it is already dying as it comes into existence. Every development involves destruction. Every presencing of energy, which is driven by desire, is followed by an immediate decay and subsequent reemergence of desire. The gaps between creation and destruction are so infinitesimally small that we cannot recognize them, therefore, we take things to be substantial, or solid, when in fact they are ephemeral and fleeting. For the Buddhists, the self is made up of five *skandhas*: form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. Of these *skandhas*, the Buddha claimed,

"Form is like a mass of foam, it has no solidity, it is full of cracks and holes, and it has no substantial inner core. Feeling is like a bubble, which swiftly rises and swiftly disappears, and it has no durable subsistence. Perception is like a mirage. As in a mirage pool absolutely no water at all can be found. Impulses are like the trunk of a plantain tree: when you strip off one leaf-sheath after another nothing remains, and you cannot lay a hand on a core within. Consciousness is like a mock show, as when

⁹ App, Urs, 1998a. Schopenhauer's *Begegnung mit dem Buddhismus*, *Schopenhauer-Jahrbuch*, March, 1998, Volume 79:35-58.

¹⁰ Abelsen, Peter, "Schopenhauer and Buddhism," *Philosophy East and West*, Apr. 93, Vol. 43, Issue 2: 1.

magically created soldiers, conjured up by a magician, are seen marching through the streets."¹¹

These five skandhas exist as an interdependent process of grasping, driven to come into being and fall away by desire, or *tanha*. They arise each time in more or less the same configuration, creating the illusion of a permanent self, or 'I'.

For Schopenhauer, the self is also an illusion. A basic claim of German Idealism, the tradition that Schopenhauer is rooted in, is that for every object there must be a subject. There can be no objects without subjects to constitute them. However, if, as Schopenhauer claims, the world of objects is a mere world of representations, then the subject must also be a representation. Abelsen puts it this way,

"If the not-I is a mere representation, something to which no absolute reality can be attributed, this also goes for the I. Therefore, the world as representation embraces both the things that I behold and myself as their beholder. Or, in Schopenhauer's words: the opposition of subject and object is the "first general and essential form" of the Vorstellung."¹²

This means that both the object and the subject are representations. They are both ultimately unreal. What is real is the will, which is a driving life process that manifests itself as subject and object in the world of representation. The will creates objects; the will creates subjects and the will ties subject to object in an illusory manner through the desire to know, the subject's desire to "behold" the object. Although each system of thought has different origins, the upshot is the same. For Schopenhauer and the Buddhists, the self is an illusion, driven by desire.

For Buddhists, as for Schopenhauer, reality is a unity. Buddhists speak of two levels of reality, conventional reality and absolute reality. Conventional reality is the world of dualism, differentiation, and individuation. Conventional reality is the world that we take for granted as real as we navigate through our days. However, absolute reality is not divided into the same compartments as conventional reality. The key to the Buddhist understanding of unity is the doctrine of dependent origination. The key to the doctrine of dependent origination is the idea of causality. All things are caught up in an immense causal network. When we take the world for a collection of things, we are seeing it the wrong way. The world is actually a process of interdependent causation; each thing bound up with each other thing in a network of causal relations, all of it ultimately dependent upon the way that our perceptions are structured by our state of mind. What this means is that there really are no things, there is just this process that is constantly at work producing reality. This is the meaning behind the phrase, dependent origination. Nothing originates in an independent fashion; everything arises from the effects of everything else. All things are therefore dependent and the process is the reality, not the things created by the process. The mind's role in shaping this process is akin to the role of the will as described by Schopenhauer.

¹¹ Conze, Edward, *Selected Sayings From the Perfection of Wisdom*, Boulder: Prajna Press, 1978: 96.

¹² Abelsen, Peter, "Schopenhauer and Buddhism," *Philosophy East and West*, Apr. 93, Vol. 43, Issue 2: 3.

For example, in the *Shurangama Sutra*, the Buddha tells his interlocutor, Ananda, that the mind can become a mirror, reflecting the essential truths, if the mental habits in thrall to desire can be replaced by single-pointed consciousness.

*“Ananda, when the good person who is cultivating samadhi has put an end to the thinking skandha, he is ordinarily free of dreaming and idle thinking, so he stays the same whether in wakefulness or in sleep. His mind is aware, clear, empty, and still, like a cloudless sky, devoid of any coarse sense-impressions. He contemplates everything in the world - the mountains, the rivers, and the earth - as reflections in a mirror, appearing without attachment and vanishing without any trace; they are simply received and reflected. He does away with all his old habits, and only the essential truth remains.”*¹³

Schopenhauer arrives at a similar position by way of a different route. For Schopenhauer, the ultimate reality is will, which encompasses all that is. What we take as representation is also part of will. In that sense he is a monist, not a dualist, as Kant was. It is fruitful, however, to look at the Kantian underpinnings of Schopenhauer's metaphysics.

For anything to be empirically real; it must exist in time and space and it must be causally related to other things. However, time, space, and causality are not empirically real. They are the conditions of possibility for experiencing reality. As Kant argued, if time, space, and causality are thought of empirically, we run into certain antinomies or dead ends. If, for example, we take space to be finite, existing in the world, we must conceive of something like a meta-space that exists outside the world. However, what could a space like this be, or rather, where could it be? If, on the other hand, we take space to be infinite, there could be no boundaries, and with no boundaries, it seems, no differentiation. Everything would flow into everything else. Therefore, we must take space as a transcendental condition of knowledge, not a thing at all. If, to give another example, we understand time as finite, we would immediately be led to ask, what came before time began, and what comes after its end? If it is finite, surely there is some beginning and some ending, and if there is a beginning and an ending, surely there must be a before and an after. If we take time to be infinite, it would take an eternity to arrive at the present moment, which would never come about because time would be undifferentiated-- one vast flow.

What these antinomies suggested for Kant was that our experiences and perceptions of time, space, and causality are posited by the mind, not discovered in the world. Schopenhauer expanded on this to argue that our acts of positing time, space, and causation are representations of the subject that hide the ultimate oneness of reality. The unity of reality transcends time, space, and causality. This unity of reality is will. We just chop it up into manageable bits with our acts of mental positing.

¹³ Shurangama Sutra, Chapter 8, Verses 174-180.

The world, although conceived of as a unity, is ultimately an illusion for both Schopenhauer and the Buddhists. The Buddhist doctrine of *Sunyata* or emptiness, most prevalent in the *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* schools, is the key to the idea of reality as an illusion. If, as the doctrine of dependent origination suggests, all things are dependent on all other things, then all things are also empty. In this context, emptiness does not mean the same thing as completely devoid of matter or reality. Instead, emptiness has the connotation of openness or illusoriness. If nothing stands on its own, as a self-sufficient thing or entity, then nothing can be said to be complete or full. If everything is shifting and changing, then everything can be said to be empty, in the sense of open to revision, open to change. Even the process of dependent origination is empty. It is, after all, only a coming-in-to-being and a passing-away of desire and energy. It is no-thing in itself.

Nagarjuna takes the doctrine of *Sunyata* to its extreme conclusion by claiming that even emptiness is empty. He suggests that to think of emptiness is to reify it, to think of it as a thing. Nagarjuna claims that if we think of things as real, we will be able to think of things as empty, the opposite of real. However, because of the idea of emptiness, we cannot think of things as real, and so, paradoxically, we cannot think of things as empty either!

"If there were to be something non-empty, There would then be something called empty. However, there is nothing that is non-empty. How could there be something empty?"¹⁴

So there is no thing that is empty, just as there is no thing not-empty. This is the emptiness of emptiness, the ultimate illusoriness of the world. For Schopenhauer, the only thing that is ultimately real is the will. However, the will is concealed behind its representations. It is partly accessible, as in beatific visions, through glimpses at the Ideas or forms. However, Schopenhauer tells us that even when we follow the ascetic path and try to negate the will, we are left without access to ultimate reality. This is because we have severed ourselves from the very source of knowledge that gives us at least a rudimentary sense of will in the first place. If we deny the will, we deny knowledge. If we do not deny the will, however, we do not end up with knowledge of ultimate reality, we end up with representations. Schopenhauer tells us,

"In answer to some foolish objections I would like to state that the negation of the Will to Live does not mean the destruction of a substance, but simply the act of not-willing: what up to now was willing is no longer willing. Because we know this essence, the Will, the Thing in itself, only in and through the act of willing, we are unable to pronounce or grasp its being and doings after it has surrendered this act: that is why this negation to us, who are the phenomenon of the Will, appears as a transition into nothingness."¹⁵

¹⁴Kalupahana, David, *Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1986: 243.

¹⁵Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation*, translated by E. F. J. Payne, Colorado: Indian Hill, 1958: 52.

If we engage the will, we end up with illusory representations. If we deny the will, we deny the possibility of knowing anything and end up with nothing. We cannot win in our attempts to gain permanent access to ultimate reality; it will remain cloaked behind the veil of Maya for as long as we live.

What do the comparisons made above tell us about aesthetics? Art gives us a kind of access to ultimate reality that is temporary. We can never escape from the restless push of desire and its concomitant dissatisfactions. However, contemplation of works of art can give us respite. The transitory and ever-so-restless self can transcend its suffering and fuse with something higher and more permanent.

Through aesthetic experience, we can come to a realization that all is one, a unity, created by the endless striving of the will or by the process of dependent origination. The aesthetic experience can also be an experience of revitalization. When we connect with the essence of reality through identification with a work of art, we can return to ourselves with a renewed appreciation of the transitory nature of all existence. This appreciation can, in turn, lead to a heightened awareness of our place in the cosmos. We may be little more than a part of the process of endless striving that is known as will, or desire, but we are also capable of moments of transcendence, and this capability points toward the possibility of enlightenment.

Contemplating Mu Qi's *Six Persimmons*

Mu Qi's *Six Persimmons* is especially well suited for a Schopenhauerian analysis. I will begin with some general observations about the painting and proceed to consider it from Schopenhauer's point of view. I will conclude with some reflections on the way that *Persimmons* allows us to contemplate the transitoriness of the self, the unity of reality, and the illusoriness of reality.

Six Persimmons is a Zen (in Chinese: Ch'an) painting, completed in the 13th Century in China by Mu Qi. Zen paintings are often contemplated in order to allow the observer to reach a heightened state of awareness.¹⁶ The persimmons float in space on the canvas. They seem to stand out from the canvas. They simultaneously convey a sense of their individuality and their unity with something larger. If one considers them from a certain perspective, they appear to be individual objects, each with their own shading, color, and shape. On the other hand, they are united on the canvas, linked together through their essential sameness and through their physical proximity. Mu qui also captured the dynamic tension between the force and tension of life and the quiet eternity of form. In *Six Persimmons*, "passion has congealed into a stupendous calm".¹⁷

¹⁶ Fisher, Robert, *Buddhist Art and Architecture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1993: 26.

¹⁷Waley, Arthur, *An Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting*, London, Grove Press, 1923: 231.



Mu Qiu, Six Persimmon., It currently resides in the Juko'inthe subtemple of Daitoku-ji in Kyoto.

From the Schopenhauerian point of view, the painting is an excellent representation of the essence or form of nature. The persimmons are not fleshy, ripe, and fecund; they do not represent materiality and desire. Instead, they are ethereal, light, and spiritual. They represent an Idea of nature, an Idea of the will. They are universal, not particular, aspiring to the status of forms, not representations. They are pure objects, without any subjective aspect, without any investment of desire. There is a tendency to lose oneself in the persimmons, to lose one's subjectivity and escape from the ever-present drive of the will. It seems entirely possible to accomplish the complete fusion of the object and subject in the aesthetic appreciation of the painting. Pure object, as Idea or form, meets pure will-less subjectivity, as temporary suspension of desire.

How does this painting help make us aware of the transitory nature of the self, the unity of all reality, and the illusory nature of that reality? For starters, the idea that the self, or unified ego, is in charge of the world and in control of its projections, is undermined in the experience of viewing Persimmons. If we take it for granted that every form of subjectivity presupposes an object, we might conclude that the more we are able to possess and control the object, the more we are able to sustain the illusion of a centered, unified, and objective self. Nevertheless, the persimmons elude our grasp. They do not succumb to possession or control. They are clearly otherworldly forms in the Schopenhauerian sense. They are not mere representations. They are not to be gobbled up or possessed. Because they transcend materiality, they resist the controlling impulses of the self. The self is humbled in their presence. The self loses its grip on the external world, if only during the moment of contemplation. This momentary loss of control may be enough to create a glimmer of awareness that the self is an illusion, the self is dependent on representations; as such, it is itself a representation.

The viewer's encounter with *Six Persimmons* might help develop awareness that reality is a unity. As I mentioned above, they seem to occupy the paradoxical status of

individual things and a unified whole. Each persimmon is different, and we clearly see those differences when we look at the painting from a certain perspective. But when we look deeper, we see that these differences give way to a higher unity, a more essential form. If we begin to ponder the possibility that reality is comprised of forms, which also seem to be interdependent, (there is a transcendent quality to the persimmons that connects them to all of nature) then we will probably take the next step and ask what lies behind the Forms. What gives form to the forms? We may be led back to Schopenhauer's will. We may also be led back to the Buddhist idea of dependent origination; everything is related through a giant wheel of causality, a form-giving wheel of causality.

Finally, how do the persimmons teach us that reality, in its highest sense is *Sunya*, empty, and an illusion? One might begin by asking, "what do we see when we look deeply at the painting?" Do we see something material? This is clearly not the case. Do we see the presence of God? Again, this does not seem to be the case because the persimmons do not telegraph outward to a deity or creator. They simply impress themselves upon the viewer. We may see ethereal forms, and we may, as we argued above, be led to seek the unifying force behind those ethereal forms. But when all is said and done, we will come to the realization that the force we seek is impossible because all we see are these forms. We cannot get behind the forms to the source for any sustained period. With our subjectivity threatened, we are already tempted to dissolve into the objects we see before us. When we dissolve, the will that we use to see, know, and represent dissolves. It is in this danger of completely merging with the object that we find that the objects, and ourselves, are impossible, unreal in any ultimate sense. For to know something fully would be to fuse with it, but to fuse with it would be to use our will to get a grip. In the attempt to fuse, we lose ourselves, and the world that we try to grasp becomes one as it eludes us, because it eludes us.

I have attempted to trace the major contours of Schopenhauer's aesthetic theory. I have also tried to connect Schopenhauer to Buddhism. There is a danger involved in assimilating the thought of the East with the ideas of the West. However, the points of convergence are interesting enough to warrant exploration.

Any object that transports us out of the relentless grind of the will and lifts us out of desire is a worthy Schopenhauerian production. The Buddhist idea about art is roughly the same. Art should not stimulate the passions; it should still the sensibility and create opportunities for developing self-awareness. I cannot hold all art to these standards. There are numerous functions that art can perform. However, it seems to us that the current societal emphasis on hustle, acquisition, material success, competition, and endless striving could use a little Schopenhauerian counterbalance.

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