

# Oriental Consciousness in André Masson's Automatic Paintings

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**Abstract:** André Masson has long been regarded as a representative figure of surrealist and automatism painting, but a closer look at his works makes it easy to find a dialogic nature with ancient Chinese calligraphy and painting. Influenced by Breton's concept of automatic writing, his works also draw on Chinese ink paintings of the Song Dynasty, abandoning perspective and playing the important role of white space. This paper tries to sort out the lineage of the emergence of Oriental consciousness in Masson's automatic paintings and explains the specific expression of Chinese painting in his art.

## 1 The Social Background of the Formation of Automatism

At the beginning of the 20th century, World War I broke out on the European continent. After four years of war, the Allied Powers won a hard-fought victory. After World War I, the strong shocks suffered politically, economically, and nationally spiritually, and psychologically brought about profound changes in French culture. The collective trauma of World War I plunged Europeans into a profound spiritual crisis, and Sigmund Freud diagnosed the "atrophy" of civilization after analyzing the trauma of war.

At the same time, with the decline of naturalistic philosophy and Comte's positivism at the end of the 19th century, the European intellectual world even began to doubt the rationalist ideas advocated by the Enlightenment, and philosophy and other humanities disciplines no longer approached science as they did in the mid-19th century, but rather headed in the opposite direction, beginning to believe in intuition, the power of life itself, and the mystical experience of life.

The surrealist ideology that emerged after World War I was a cultural product of the post-war period, and it spread to almost all areas of culture. As an explosive node of the cultural phenomenon, World War I accelerated the onset of the culture shock. André Breton, the main initiator of the Surrealist movement, was a great believer in Freud, and after familiarizing himself with his diagnostic and therapeutic methods, he decided to experiment with himself.

In 1924, André Breton published the Surrealist Manifesto. In this manifesto, Breton stated that Surrealism advocated a purely psychic unconscious activity - "through which one expresses the true functioning of the mind, either verbally or in writing, or in some other way. Excluding all aesthetic or moral prejudices, one is governed by thought when one is not

controlled by reason".<sup>1</sup> Breton claimed that beyond the real world, there was a more real "unconscious" or "subconscious" world and that the goal of surrealism was to allow people to discover the power of the subconscious and to liberate themselves from rational thought and traditional expression. It is "the transcription of ideas without any rational constraints" - encouraging artists to eliminate the control of the autonomous consciousness in their creations.

As a poet and critic, in terms of writing, Breton specifically proposed the theory of "automatic writing" (Automatic writing), "to develop a monologue as fast as possible ..... thoughts may not necessarily be faster than words, and may even be faster than words. It may not be faster than language, and it may not even be as fast as a quill pen that is waved and scribbled. He defined "automatic writing" as the core concept of this art movement, specifically, writers should put down their talents, gifts, and other external factors as much as possible so that they are in a passive, easy to accept the state of new things, and in this state they write without constraints, and the speed of writing should be quite fast to maintain the consistency of thought.

Influenced by Breton's concept of automatic writing, André Masson developed a creative method called "automatism", in which he let "the brush fly on the paper" to create poetry that transcends consciousness.

## 2 André Masson's Automaticism

### 2.1 The Turning Point of World War I

Most of the central figures of the Surrealist movement had the experience of being involved in World War I, encountering situations that were the most horrific for them. Young artists and poets suffered traumatic war experiences that shaped their lives and changed history. For them, the carnage was the overwhelming test of their lives, shattering their faith in morality and rational assumptions.

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Masson's fatal experience on the battlefield in April 1917, when he was struck in the chest by a bullet, gave him the experience of "ecstasy". Otto Hahn explains this ecstasy in his biography of Masson, the day a bullet penetrated the young artist's chest. Unable to get him to safety on a stretcher, he was left on his back. He was left on his back for the night. "The world around him became marvelous, and for the first time he experienced a complete release of the body. The release of the body, and in the sky a torso of light appeared before him" <sup>2</sup>.

For Masson, death became a fatal hallucination. The war left him with nervous nightmares; he suffered from insomnia and spent long, agonizing hours dreaming of new paintings.

In the fall of 1924, Masson participated in two Surrealist publications, the Surrealist Manifesto, published by Breton in October, and the Surrealist Revolution, published in December. Masson's attempts at automatism began before he met Breton in the spring of 1924. At that time, he had already known the works published in *Literature*, which were written in an automatist manner.<sup>3</sup>

From around 1926, he invented a new "automatist" painting technique, attempting to throw sand and glue onto the canvas and produce oil paintings based on the shapes formed. During Masson's involvement with the Surrealist movement in 1924-1929, he experimented with sand paintings and variations on animal and human forms, with subjects ranging from confrontation and carnage to violence and eroticism. Later, Masson decided that automatism was rather limited, and thus left the Surrealist movement for a more organized style, but was again associated with the Surrealists in the late 1930s.

## 2.2 Inspiration from traditional Chinese painting

In the mid-1930s, André Masson read the monograph *The Chinese Mystique and Modern Painting*. In it, the art historian Georges Dutoit compared European art with Chinese painting. It was this monograph that led Masson to become interested in Chinese culture and to embark on a new artistic quest that merged painting and calligraphy: "What makes Chinese ideograms so admirable is their pictorial richness."

In a monograph published in 1936, "*Mystique chinoise et peinture moderne*" writes: "It was the ancestors of the Chinese who first discovered and explored the uncharted frontiers of the imagination, and they must have done so not to draw fixed boundaries there, but to unfold its richness while extending its boundaries widely."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, artists of the time had very limited paths to understanding the East. Masson recalls, "If I remember correctly, around 1925, a young painter in Paris had little access to Far Eastern ink painting. Without being able to see the originals, he could only get a rough idea of them by consulting the monographs of German or Scandinavian scholars who had reprinted a large number of related works." It is worth noting that what the Surrealists called the "Orient" during this period was also a geographically ambiguous concept, encompassing both

Russia and its fractious borders, as well as China, Japan, and India in the Far East.

It was not until Masson was forced into exile in the United States as a result of World War II that his knowledge of Oriental art was further developed, and it was at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts that he came across a large number of Chinese paintings of the Song dynasty, which he could not help but admire for the true "halo of silence" that emanated from them<sup>5</sup>. "Thanks to this life of exile, I was able to open my eyes in Boston. The city's Museum of Fine Arts is proud enough of its most extensive collection of Chinese masterpieces-especially those of the Sung dynasty. One can take one's time to appreciate these works outside of those Chinese and Japanese temple collections." He began to "spray ink as freely as a Zen monk", he left white space, he wrote, he imitated the manner of Shitao and Xuezhou, he experimented with and became fascinated by "boneless" painting.

Upon his return to France in 1945, Masson began to draw inspiration from nature, creating landscapes, which were completely free of perspective, and paintings of animal subjects in ink. In these paintings, white space and writing play an important role, and they undoubtedly best reflect the strong attraction of Chinese painting for him.

Masson believes that the Western painting tradition has long viewed painting as a reproduction of what the human eye sees, but he believes that painting should be a search for ways to express oneself between poetry and painting. In this respect, Chinese painting provides a perfect example.

## 3 The Presentation of Ancient Chinese Painting in Masson's Art

This paper selects works from the special exhibition "Painting of Origin - Surrealism and the Orient" at the West Coast Museum of Art that can establish a dialogue between surrealism and oriental culture, and explores the close connection between the two.

### 3.1 Dong Qichang's Snowy Clearing in the Western Mountains and Masson's Sand Painting "Country People"

The sand painting was Masson's primary form of creation in the late 1920s when in the autumn of 1926 he created a group of works using different colors of glue and sand. With this new technique, he transferred the Surrealist principle of "automatism" to oil painting, which had previously only appeared in writing and drawing. Extremely free lines, rhythmically glued to the plane of the sand. (Figure 1) Critic Georges Rambouillet and art historian Georges Dutoit often compared these works to Chinese ink paintings of the Song dynasty.

In the 1920s, Masson had not yet been formally exposed to the artworks spawned by Eastern cultures and only had a general understanding of ink painting by flipping through some of his preoccupations, but it is not difficult to see the shadows of traditional Chinese

paintings in the series of sand paintings of the period: the large areas of white space and the sweeping, sweeping lines.



**Figure 1.** André Masson, *The Countryman* 1927, 80.5 x 64.5 cm Oil on canvas with grains of sand Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne de France - Centre d'Industrie Design

Dong Qichang's "Snow Clearing in the Western Mountains" (Figure 2) shows a unique visual character among the surviving "boneless landscapes" of the Ming Dynasty. The transition between the blue-green dark parts of the mountain, the white light parts, and the yellow-green color that intentionally reveals the silken ground, forming a symphony of red, green, and white. The red tree on the mountain, painted almost purely in red, is at the center of the picture and is particularly striking, overpowering the images of the West Lake and the Buddhist temple, and even the image of the West Mountain, which is made up of a combination of strangely shaped stones. The overall composition of the picture and the white space between the rocks and trees are staggered, and the large green rocks are supplemented by the red trees, making the overall picture appear to be spacious and atmospheric.

Boneless landscapes are not sketched with ink lines, outlines, drafts, or topography. When painting, the artist is required to have a clear idea of what he or she is going to do. In one fell swoop, directly depicting the scene with large blocks of ink or colour. The automatism of Masson's painting technique is almost identical to the essence of the boneless landscape.

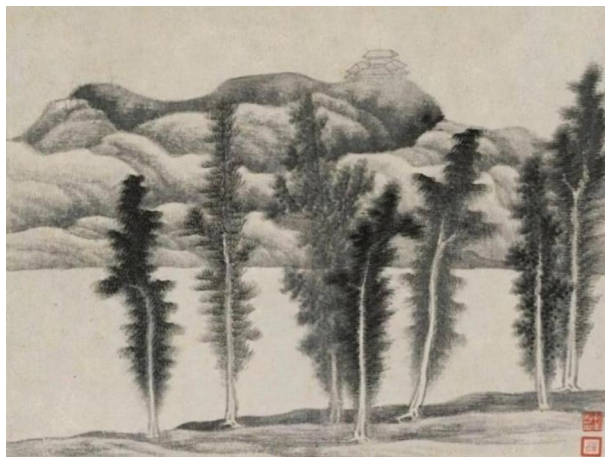


**Figure 2.** Dong Qichang, Ming Dynasty One of the Eight Scenes of Yan and Wu, Snow Clearing in the Western Mountains Colour on silk Collection of the Shanghai Museum

### 3.2 Kung Hsien's and Masson's *The Seine Flowing through the Roche Gironde*

Kung Hsien's "Twelve Sections of Landscape Albums from the Self-Collection" (Figure 3) has Kung Hsien's self-title: "This book since the early summer of Xu Shen brewing, to the end of the spring of jiyou, stay for the storage of the bag, do not seem to be like a stone out of the sleeve for others to seize also." This set of albums of the salient characteristics of the dense and delicate, the cumulative ink method is more skillful, for a variety of leaf shapes or point leaves or clip the leaves of the use of different methods of painting over the number of times more This set of album pages is characterized by its complexity and delicacy, and the use of the ink accumulation method is more skilled.

The main body of this work is a dense forest, with undulating rocks on the other side of the river under the cover of the forest, and a clear layer of light ink appears on the periphery of the forest, which is formed by multiple dots of cumulative ink, which "looks like the shadows of darker dots, forming a varied silhouette and giving it a moist and dense atmosphere"<sup>6</sup>. The lower part of the stone is darker, the upper part is brighter, and the contrast between light and dark is well-defined, making the stone fresh and transparent, and extremely light.



**Figure 3.** Kung Hsien, Qing Dynasty, One of the Twelve Albums of Landscapes in His Own Collection Collection of the Shanghai Museum

It seems that Masson's landscapes of the Seine flowing through Roche Guyon (Figure 4) could constitute some dialogue with Kung Hsien's landscapes. Firstly, unlike his earlier works, which were mostly devoted to themes of pornography, violence, and death, Masson chose to paint landscapes, which are seldom represented in Western paintings, as his subject matter. In the long tradition of Chinese aesthetics and philosophy, landscapes are regarded as internalized, evocative imagery, and a conveyance of spiritual realities; emptiness is central to this. Transcending the

stereotypical realistic considerations of the external world, the creation of Chinese landscape paintings became a medium for the artist's emotions, and similarly expressed the idea of spiritual harmony between man and nature.

Secondly, it can be seen that Masson's spatial expression is less inherited from the fixed composition of focal perspective since the Renaissance, and more belongs to the infinite and metaphysical scope of ancient Chinese landscape painting, which transcends the boundaries of the frame and a single focal point. The viewer immerses his or her eyes into it and wanders freely without referring to a specific focal point, thus exploring the realm of penetration and integration with the universe and the "unity of heaven and man". This realm is precisely the foundation of Chinese thought. According to Masson, this kind of space is "neither external nor internal" to Oriental painters, but rather "a purely functional relationship of the emergence of ability".<sup>7</sup>

In addition, Masson's representation of the trees and rocks in the mountains and forests is also very much in line with the brushwork of Chinese landscape painting, with the trees and rocks formed by dots and lines layered on top of each other to form a clear hierarchy of intensity and lightness, with the effect of chapping and haloing, which is very much in line with the meaning of Kung Hsien's "cumulative ink method".



**Figure 4.** André Masson, The Seine flowing through Roche Guyon 1952, oil on canvas Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre d'Industrie Design

### 3.3 Sun Long's Autumn Pond Frogs and Ma Song's Trout

Sun Long's brushwork is simple and sparse, free and easy to use, using very little ink, without outlining, and with excellent form and spirit. The brush does not connect with the meaning, and the line is not written but rhymed. He is especially good at using water and color and "blank" staining and other techniques, purely color dotted and made, called "boneless".

Sun Long boldly tried the "horizontal composition" in the composition, pioneered the painting method of boneless painting, and excelled in realistic brushwork, combining fine dyeing and ink writing in a unique style. He made full use of the coloring characteristics of silk to control the proportion of to, ink, and water. Especially when the brush is dipped in compound colors, it is necessary to make the different colors blend properly under the action of water flow. At the same time, he focuses on leaving blank spaces at key structural places. Looking closely at this painting, Frogs in Autumn Pond

(Figure 5), the white space is left at the back of the frog and at the place where the back connects with the thighs and other places with clear structural features. These small gaps are not only traces that reflect the brushwork but also the structural characteristics of the object.

Ma Song's "Trout" (Figure 6) is simple and spirited in its brushwork, but it is excellent in both form and spirit. He uses heavy ink to emphasize the physical structure of the trout, leaves a large area of white inside, and expresses the scales of the trout with the techniques of pointing and rubbing, while the pond in the background is summarized with a few strokes and sweeping lines, which is supposed to be a quick completion of the painting in his mind. The style of the work is similar to Sun Long's boneless bird and flower paintings.



**Figure 5.** Sun Long, Ming Dynasty Autumn Pond Frogs in the Flower Bird Grass and Insects Album 22.9 × 21.5 cm, color on silk Collection of the Shanghai Museum



**Figure 6.** André Masson, Trout, 1957, ink and watercolor on paper Center Pompidou, Paris Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne-Center for Industrial Design, France

automatism paintings created by Masson already reflected an underlying sense of the Orient; and after Masson moved to the United States and began to come into close contact with ancient Chinese painting and calligraphy, the brushwork and composition of Chinese ink painting became more maturely expressed in his works.

## Annotations

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5. André Masson, Divagations sur l'espace Le plaisir de peindre, édition La Diane française, 1950, 151.
6. Wu William, translated by Yang Yi, The Transformation of Kung Hsien's Painting Style in the Middle and Late Years, Kung Hsien Studies (Duoyun, No. 63), Shanghai Painting & Calligraphy Publishing House, June 2005, 81.
7. Tan Ping, Since Abstraction - Chinese Abstract Art Research Exhibition Tour, Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, September 2018, 171.

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1. André Breton, Manifeste du surréalisme, Chongqing University Press, Nov 2010.
2. Georges Dutoit, Mystique chinoise et peinture moderne, Revue des arts asiatiques, Mar 1936.
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5. Wu William, Kung Hsien. Ph.D.dissertation, Princeton University, 1979, 104-109.
6. Jing Guiqiu, A Study of Sun Long's Mo-Gu Ideal Flower-and-Bird Painting, postgraduate dissertation, China Academy of Art, 2003.
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## 4 Conclusion

Because of the strong cultural shock and mental trauma brought about by World War I, André Masson has always dreamed of new explorations in painting. Inspired by Breton's concept of automatism writing, the early