

WILL HENRY STEVENS: THE ORIENTAL INFLUENCE





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In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods we return to reason and faith.

This quotation from Emerson was on an exhibition brochure for *Paintings and Pastels by Will H. Stevens* held at the New Gallery, New York, February 17-March 14, 1908. It was the young artist's second one-man show; the quotation was no doubt chosen by him. It says much about the sensibilities of Will Henry Stevens (1881-1949). He had a love and respect for nature, a sense that there is an eternal order within change—the perennial festival—and an appreciation of a mystical spirituality which is beyond reason. These attitudes persisted throughout his life and were reinforced when he later became very interested in Chinese art.

The present exhibit is a selection of paintings by Stevens that reveal his ability to suggest varied moods; contemplative, playful, spiritual or ethereal. All represent a feeling or handling in harmony with Oriental artistic concepts; in some cases he deliberately adapted certain ways of seeing, characteristic of Chinese or Japanese art.

Western Europeans have shown fascination with the art of the Far East since the establishment of trade routes in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. With the full opening of Japan to Western trade during the early 1850s, artists in Europe, England and America responded in various ways. Japanese prints, ceramics and other artifacts were collected and imitated. The textbooks

used in schools of art at the time illustrated patterns and ornaments found in Japan, China, Persia and India.¹

It was probably in 1912 that Will Henry Stevens first saw paintings of the Chinese Sung dynasty (960-1279) at the Freer Gallery in Washington. He later recalled: "Here I found the thing that I had been aware of in nature. I could not look at Sung without realizing it had the same kind of philosophy that I had discovered in Walt Whitman. The experience sank deep but it did not influence me directly in my work for some time."²

Stevens exhibited with fair regularity throughout his life. The words and phrases that crop up in critical comments reveal, again and again, an appreciation of the artist's ability to convey a sense of the spiritual, or the imaginative, sometimes relating this to Oriental work.

In the period 1912-1922 an Indiana critic described a painting as conveying "...the vagueness of the twilight, in solitudes undisturbed. . ." and thought it suggested "...a Japanese garden scene at night."³ In 1920 a Cincinnati critic wrote, "The painter seems to seek nature in its



UNTITLED

NO. 1066

Mixed media

18 1/8 x 22 inches

Signed "Stevens '46"

the works of Klee and Kandinsky, with their emphasis on the spiritual in art, and on non-objective expressions of line and form.⁶ In 1935 a reviewer of an exhibit of Stevens' work in Cincinnati noted the artist's move towards abstraction and his philosophic turn of mind. "His interest tends more towards the abstract and while he makes his original sketches in the open, the actual planning and interpretation of his subjects are done in his studio. As a true philosopher he . . . fills his pictures with mood, atmosphere and emotion."⁷

Stevens probably read Lin Yutang's *My Country and My People*, first published in 1935.⁸ In a chapter on artistic life, the author wrote: "Chinese paintings are always painted from mountain tops. . . [the artist obtains] an elevation of the spirit as well as a physical elevation. . . It is this spirit of calm and harmony, this flavor of the mountain air (*shanlin ch'i*) . . . which characterizes all forms of Chinese art. Consequently, its characteristic is not supremacy over nature, but harmony with nature. . ." He further states, "All problems of art are problems of rhythm. . ." Passages such as this were justification and affirmation of Stevens' handling of forms, naturalistic or abstract, which so often echo the rhythms found in nature.



In 1940 Robert Durant Feild became the head of the Newcomb Art program, a part of Tulane University, where Stevens had taught since 1921. (He would continue to teach there until retirement in 1947). Born in England, Feild had served in World War I with the British Army on the northwestern frontier of India. There he was deeply affected by the ideas motivating the Ghandian non-violent independence movement.⁹ He immediately became an admirer of Stevens, and he was given a larger studio and was "exhilarated by the appreciation."¹⁰

In 1941 Bernard Lemann, a New Orleanian who had recently received his Ph.D. at Harvard, joined the art faculty.¹¹ He, too, had an interest in Eastern philosophies. Fourteen years younger than Stevens, he had known the latter as a friend since he was a teen-ager. Stevens received from Feild and Lemann an affirmation of his desire to express the spiritual in his art.

To judge by the publication dates of books Stevens owned, during the 1940s he turned to a perusal of Oriental philosophy and to a renewed interest in Sung painting. His library included Arthur Waley, *Translations from the Chinese* (New York, 1940); Lin Yutang, *The*



more subtle and tender aspects, transposing and rebuilding its forms into dreams of glowing color. His chief appeal is to the imagination."⁴ In 1936 another Cincinnati reviewer wrote, "*Mountain Morning* makes a special appeal because it is fluent, simplified into a design that gives an Oriental feeling of movement."⁵

Influenced only mildly by cubism, Stevens responded warmly to the next waves of modernism, to surrealism, and to



UNTITLED NO. 1019

Pastel

18 x 22 inches

Signed "Stevens '46"

COVER ART:

UNTITLED NO. 1286

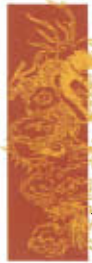
Tempera

24 x 16 inches

Signed "Stevens '45"



Wisdom of China and India (New York, 1942); L. Adams Beck (E. Barrington), *The Story of Oriental Philosophy* (New York, 1942); Lin Yutang, *The Gay Genius, The Life and Times of Su Tungpo* (New York, 1947); and George Rowley, *Principles of Chinese Painting* (Princeton, 1947).¹² Lin Yutang's writings especially enjoyed great popularity in the late 1930s and 40s. The enthusiasm for Eastern ideas was apparently shared and discussed with Feild and Lemann. When the latter wrote an affectionate and discerning memoir about Stevens in 1947-48, he quoted extensively from Chinese texts.¹³



Individual paintings by Stevens help to reveal how he was expressing and developing his philosophic ideas in color and form.

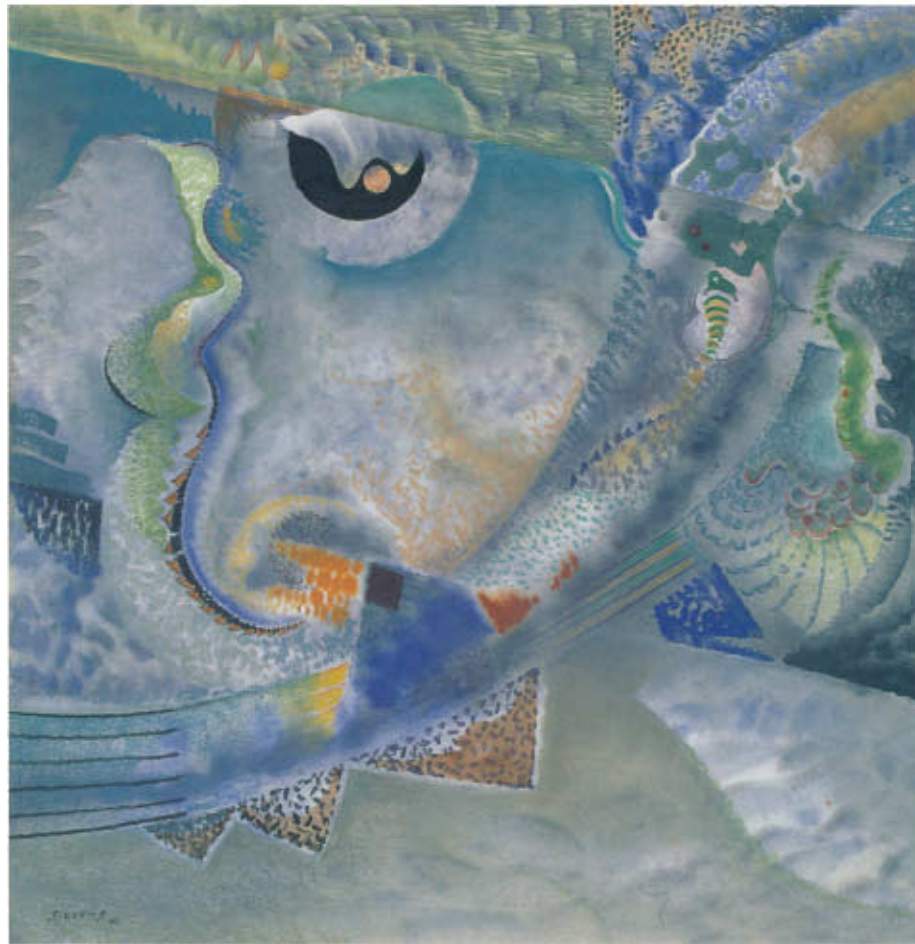
There is a subtle but deliberate Chinese touch in a semi-abstract composition signed and dated "Stevens '41", *Untitled No. 283*.

Cloudlike, swirling lines separate the composition diagonally into two halves. Within this celestial swirl, the curling form of a green dragon can be discerned. Lin Yutang wrote that "Chinese painter-scholars distinguished between *li*, . . .the inner law or spirit, and *yi*, . . .the artist's own conception, and emphasized the *li*; painting worthy of an art should aim at catching the spirit."¹⁴ He also wrote that the ". . .twining body of the dragon contains a perfect rhythm. . . ." and "The dragon represents otherworldliness, the 'fugitive' or *yi* principle. . . and it represents great Taoist wisdom, for it often hides itself among clouds and seldom reveals its whole self."¹⁵ This painting, then, can probably be understood as Stevens' homage to Chinese art, and to his increased interest in the meanings and forms of Chinese art.

Lin Yutang's injunction that "the artist must absorb impressions from the myriad forms of nature, its insects and trees and clouds and waterfalls. In order to paint them, he must love them, and his spirit must commune with them."¹⁶ also surely affirmed Stevens' own convictions.

In 1974 George Rowley summarized qualities of Chinese painting: "The Chinese fusion was a dynamic union of opposites which needed one another for completeness." The artist's ". . .painting must be neither naturalistic or idealistic, it must be both; his style must be neither traditional or original, it must be both; . . .the Chinese created a unique conception of the realism of the spirit which was one with the realism of matter."¹⁷ One can look at paintings done throughout Stevens' career and identify, for example, his individual types of broken lines, of textural patterns, of colors rich and subtle. Even in works seemingly totally non-objective, one can still sense what might have been a point of departure for a composition—flowing waters, falling leaves or swaying lines that recall winds and rains. He created, in his own way, a "realism of the spirit" and a realism of matter.

The Oriental practice of capturing a view from above is seen in a mid-1940s pastel of cabins nestled in a mountain setting, *Untitled No. 1066*. The mountains and the cabins are blended so



UNTITLED NO.283

Mixed media

14 3/4 x 15 inches

Signed "Stevens '41"



Continued overleaf



completely that the roofs of the buildings are echoed by the rising peaks of the mountains. "The best architecture is that which loses itself in the natural landscape and becomes one with it, belongs to it."¹⁸ Mountains were a favorite of Chinese painters, and surely Stevens' own love of the mountains contributed to his sense of rapport with things Chinese.

Rowley wrote about how, in Sung times, "Landscape painting began to imply a more comprehensive grasp of an all-embracing, limitless nature. And, by sheer multiplicity of parts, piling mountain upon mountain, the painters created an overwhelming sense of the majesty

and vastness of nature."¹⁹ In a vertical composition of 1945, *Untitled No.1286*, Stevens created an interpretation of North Carolina mountains in which there is just such a multiplicity of parts. The uppermost peaks are sharply craggy. Here, as in the painting with the elusive dragon, it is as if Stevens paid homage to the Chinese masters he had come to admire. In 1946 a New Orleans critic described ". . . his mountain landscapes in which the familiar southern mountain scenes have the quality of a Chinese perfectionist in painting."²⁰

In Chinese and Japanese art and ideas Stevens found concepts that harmonized with, and affirmed, his own beliefs and sensibilities. His compositions show parallels and affinities with these. He must have been pleased when, sometime in the 1940s, he read, in Lin Yutang's introductory comments to a section of *The Wisdom of China and India*, a book he owned, that, "in the mysticism and distrust of the mechanistic view of the universe, Walt Whitman is Chinese. And, generally the reader will find reading

Chinese philosophers like reading Emerson."²¹ It had come full circle, the poetic and intuitive writings that Stevens had drawn upon for inspiration in his youth were reinforced by and linked to the philosophic and artistic ideas he pondered in his maturity.

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UNTITLED NO. 1318
Pastel
16 x 19 inches
Signed "Stevens"

¹There are a number of recent studies of Japonisme in Western art; see especially Gabriel P. Weisberg and Yvonne M. L. Weisberg, *Japonisme, An Annotated Bibliography* (New York, 1990) and Kenneth Trapp, "Rookwood and the Japanese Mania in Cincinnati," *Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin* 39 (Spring 1981), 51-75. Typical textbooks were Owen Jones, *A Grammar of Ornament* (London, 1856) Christopher Dresser, *Principles of Decorative Design* (London, 1873); and Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition* (Boston, 1899); all three were frequently reissued.

²The quotation is from Lemann, "Will Henry's Nature," 26. For the date, there are two postal cards, one of March 14, 1912, saying he was leaving Cincinnati for New York and then Washington, the second of March 29, 1912, indicating he had enjoyed his visit to Washington. Formerly in the McDowell Collection, now in the Archives of American Art; henceforth referred to as Stevens/McDowell Coll. Arch. Amer. Art.

³ Unidentified article from a Terre Haute newspaper re an exhibit at the Herron Institute in Indianapolis. Stevens/McDowell Coll. Arch. Amer. Art.

⁴*The Cincinnati Enquirer*, Sunday, May 2, 1920, Sec. 3, p. 4. Stevens/McDowell Coll. Arch. Amer. Art.

⁵ Article by Caroline Shine from a Cincinnati newspaper between Sept. 25 - Oct. 6, 1936. A shorter notice of this show was in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Sept. 20, 1936, p. 28, c. 2. Stevens/McDowell Coll. Arch. Amer. Art.

⁶ Jessie Poesch, *Will Henry Stevens*, (Greenville, S.C., 1987) 22.

⁷ *Cincinnati Times-Star*, Oct. 5, 1935.

⁸ Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People* (New York, 1935). The Howard-Tilton Library of Tulane University had two copies.

⁹ Obituary, Tulane University Archives.

¹⁰ Interview with Eugenie Chavanne Schwartz, June 7, 1986.

¹¹ Lemann was away from New Orleans, in Civilian Public Service, between 1943 and 1946, and rejoined the Newcomb faculty in 1946-1948. He subsequently taught in the Tulane School of Architecture. Tulane University Archives.

¹² In the McDowell Collection.

¹³ Bernard Lemann, "Will Henry's Nature," typescript, c. 1947-1948.

¹⁴ Lin, *My Country*, 302-303.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 318-319.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 288-289.

¹⁷ George Rowley, *Principles of Chinese Painting*, Princeton, 1947, 4.

¹⁸ Lin, *My Country*, 321.

¹⁹ Rowley, *Principles*, 6.

²⁰ New Orleans *Item*, April 25, 1946, Stevens/McDowell Coll. Arch. Amer. Art. It is interesting to note that in a quite different study, Rodger Cunningham, *Apples in the Flood, Minority Discourse and Appalachia* (Knoxville, TN, 1987), 97, the author notes that the way children who live in the Appalachian mountains perceive their setting, and their relation to this setting, is much as conveyed by Sung paintings, i.e., natural features dominate, "They are simply there, their quiddity noted and enjoyed." Stevens seems to have had this same sense of complete belonging to the environment.

²¹ Lin, *The Wisdom of China and India*, (New York, 1942), 568.



UNTITLED NO. 1369
Mixed media
18 1/4 x 16 inches
Unsigned

