

### 3. THE OBLIQUE PARALLEL PERSPECTIVE OF ASIAN ART

Daniel Sofron<sup>148</sup>

**Abstract:** *This paper examines the use of oblique parallel perspective as a method of structuring pictorial space in Far Eastern art. Unlike the conical perspective of the Renaissance, this type of perspective is not grounded on a scientific foundation; and yet, it follows a series of well-defined principles that offer a rational solution to the problem of representing space. Inspired by the philosophies of the Far East, Asian perspective is a completely different phenomenon, if we compare it to the types of perspective used by European artists. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Asian artists begin experimenting with convergence – an element that is typical of conical perspective. This phenomenon did not take hold, as the attempts to adapt conical perspective did not have an impact on the deeply traditional cultures of the Far East.*

**Key words:** *oblique parallel perspective, conical perspective, pictorial space, Asian art, axonometry*

#### 1. Introduction

The method used by Far Eastern artists to visually represent the real three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface is completely different from the types of perspective employed by Europeans. This method is a distinctive solution for spatial representation that promotes a unique law of image production, as it was influenced by the Far Eastern philosophy of contemplating nature and achieving communion with it. In visual artistic terms, this philosophy is expressed through a centreless continuum.

The world represented with the help of the Renaissance perspective is a world arranged around a centre, which corresponds to the hierarchical conceptions of human existence. The European artist (Soreanu, et al. 2021) sees himself as a physical factor in front of whom the appearance of reality is structured. He represents the world from within it. (Vereștiuc 2022) Unlike the European artist, the Far Eastern painter excludes himself as a physical individuality. He detaches himself from nature, representing it objectively from outside. As Massimo Scolari states, “The representation was not a transcription of direct observation of the real but of what the inner eye was capable of grasping.”<sup>149</sup>(Scolari 2012)

#### 2. Discussions

This detachment from the sensible reality gives the Asian artist the opportunity to control the placement and positioning of the motif depicted at will. This freedom of movement was perceived by the artist when he chose this type of spatial representation, which excludes vanishing points and does not imply a fixed position of the observer, as required by the principles of the Renaissance perspective.(Soreanu and German 2022),(D. I. Sofron 2022) Derived from the principle of cylindrical projection, oblique perspective suggests a parallel orientation in space, without any perspective reduction of the elements as they move

<sup>148</sup> Lecturer PhD., “George Enescu” National University of Arts from Iași, România, email: danielsofron@gmail.com

<sup>149</sup> Scolari, Massimo – Oblique drawing: a history of anti-perspective, MIT Press, 2012, p.341

away from the observer. The projection lines do not originate from a centre, as in the case of conical perspective, but “objectively” come from an inaccessible source, considered to be at infinity. The projection lines are thus parallel to a given projection direction. The parallelism of orthogonal lines is evident in Fig. 1, a fragment from one of the most famous handscroll in Chinese art.

The obliqueness of the parallel lines gives a much greater mobility to the pictorial image, but also to the viewer, who can see inside the houses, over the walls and around the corners. Due to its increased mobility, this method has been called “shifting perspective”<sup>150</sup> by some theorists. The Asian painter's concern is not to reproduce the image that the eye perceives from a fixed point of view, as the European artist does, but to express what someone might discover and experience as their gaze wanders along the pictorial image. “What the Chinese artist records is not a single visual confrontation, but an accumulation of experience touched off perhaps by one moment's exaltation before the beauty of nature.”<sup>151</sup>

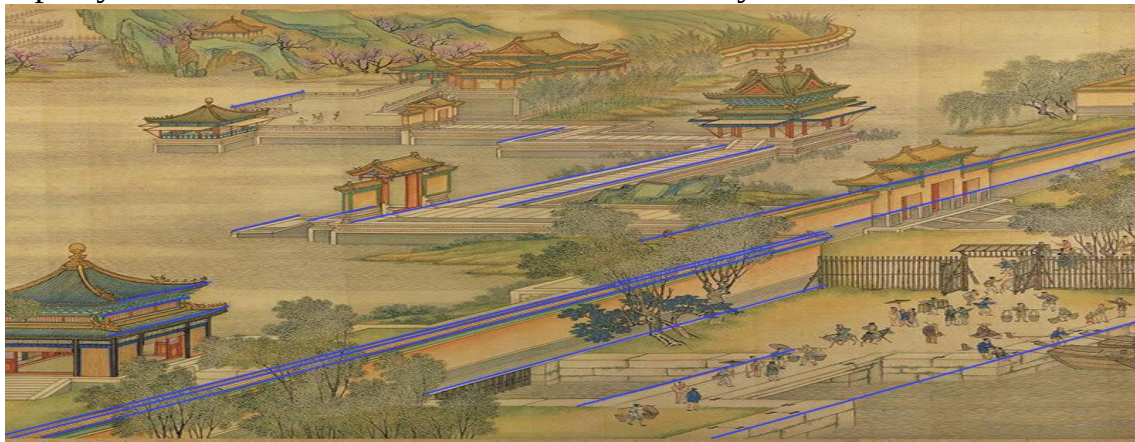


Fig. 1. Zhang Zeduan - *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, 12<sup>th</sup> century, ink and colour on silk, handscroll, 25.5 x 525 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing

The use of this solution of spatial representation, radically different from the European conical perspective, can be explained both by the themes Far Eastern painters approached and by the format (dimensions) of the pictorial support they employed. Far Eastern painters focused on traditional landscape scenes, an artistic genre called *sansui* painting (Sasaki 2013), which literally means “painting of mountains and waters”<sup>152</sup>. In these scenes, which very often approach a meditative theme, a small figure admires a mountainous landscape. The theme was rarely adopted in Western European painting, where religious scenes predominated and where the action, if not in an ecclesiastical architectural setting, was rarely placed in a natural landscape. European painters chose to create an environment that was very different from the irregular conglomeration of natural forms.

The themes addressed by Chinese or Japanese painting did not involve a construction in perspective drawing, since the elements depicted (rocks, trees, mountains) were not made of straight lines.(D. I. Sofron 2022) Moreover, these themes did not even favour scenes of an observational perspective. Another explanation for the use of oblique perspective in Far Eastern art is the support on which the images were created. In European art, the painting was framed and hung on the wall, or the wall itself was the support of the painting.(D. Sofron 2015) The

<sup>150</sup> Sullivan, Michael – *The Arts of China*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973, p. 157.

<sup>151</sup> Ibidem

<sup>152</sup> Sasaki, Ken-ichi – *Perspectives East and West in Contemporary Aesthetics*, (CA), vol. 11, 2013



format of the work was, in most cases, rectangular.

Instead, Asian painters used vertical scrolls (made of paper or silk) that hung on the wall or horizontal handscrolls as a support for their creations. The scroll was also used in Europe, but as a medium for writing. It was the Asian artists who turned it into a medium for painting. The earliest painted scrolls in Chinese art date back to the Han dynasty (202 BCE – 9 CE, 25 CE – 220 CE).<sup>153</sup> (Sullivan 1973) The dimensions of a typical handscroll were 25 to 40 centimetres wide and several metres long (Fig. 2), sometimes even up to 10 metres. Because of the great length of the support, the pictorial image could not be exposed completely, and therefore could not be contemplated in its entirety at a single glance. The margins of the handscroll were not fixed, so the viewer could manipulate them by moving their gaze back and forth (to the right and to the left). The experience of viewing these painted handscrolls was very personal as, due to the format, no more than two or three people could simultaneously examine the work of art, unfolding about 80-100 cm at a time.



Fig. 2. Zhang Zeduan - *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, 12<sup>th</sup> century, ink and colour on silk, handscroll, 25.5 x 525 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing



Fig. 3. Fragments from *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* by Zhang Zeduan, 12<sup>th</sup> century, 24.8 x 528.7 cm

This genre of painting was based on a narrative scenario rather than a specific subject, constituting a synthesis of space and time<sup>154</sup> (Krikke 1996). Such a work presented various scenes that were not delimited from each other, being viewed

<sup>153</sup> Sullivan, Michael – *The Arts of China*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973, p. 81

<sup>154</sup> Jan Krikke – *A Chinese Perspective for Cyberspace?*, International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter, 9, Summer, 1996, pp. 34-35

separately by scrolling from right to left, in the manner of reading a book. Fig. 3 depicts 4 fragments of one of the most famous images of Chinese painting, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. The scenes unfold over time, marking different stages of the activities on the river bank: characters embarking on a small boat, crossing a lake, sailing on a river, stopping at a port and arriving at their destination on the shore. In this sense, the painting is a kind of narrative art, very different from European painting, which presented a situation rather than a development.

As Tyler and Chen<sup>155</sup> show (Tyler and Chen 2011), Chinese painters faced a challenging problem when rendering perspective. Whereas the rectangular format of European perspective allowed for a vanishing point in the middle of the painting, corresponding to a main point of view, the handscroll implied a continuous representation of the scene, which would have placed a vanishing point at an absurdly large distance from most points of view, hidden from all but the central point. Tyler and Chen believe that Chinese painters had two ways of solving the problem. The first one consists in dividing the scene into coherent segments, each with a specific vanishing point. But there is no such solution in Chinese painting. The second one is the adoption of a form of perspective that avoids vanishing points by representing parallel lines as oblique orthogonal lines. The latter was the method chosen by Chinese painters, who thus succeeded in creating coherent ensembles. The same solution was used by Japanese and other Far Eastern painters.

The oblique perspective was present from quite an early stage in Asian art, being used in the first known paintings from China, which date back to the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE. Oblique perspective is mentioned in the writings of the painter Gu-Kaizhi (c. 344 - c. 406), who describes the method as a pictorial technique<sup>156</sup>. Also, texts preserved from the 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries refer to the use of a tool resembling a t-square for drawing parallel lines. The oblique perspective was used in all eras of Far Eastern art, which shows that it was the rational solution unanimously adopted by the painters of this geographical area.

The development of trade relations with the Western world and the contacts with Jesuit missionaries that began at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century determined the exposure of Asian painters to examples of European art that used conical perspective. Towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Jesuit missionaries exported conical perspective to Asia. Matteo Ricci, the founder of the Jesuit mission in China, introduced the first European oil paintings in 1583: "It was the first time that Western anthropocentric representations had appeared on the boundless horizon of Chinese art."<sup>157</sup> (Scolari 2012) In order to familiarize Chinese artists with the principles of conical perspective, in 1729, Giuseppe Castiglione arranged for the Chinese translation of *Perspectiva pictorum et architectorum*, the seminal work of his teacher, Andrea Pozzo.

The efforts of the Jesuit missionaries to popularize conical perspective in the Far Eastern artistic space had limited success. In one of his works (Briessen

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<sup>155</sup> Christopher W. Tyler, Chien - Chung Chen – Chinese Perspective as a Rational System: Relationship to Panofsky's Symbolic Form, Smith-Kettlewell Eye Research Institute, San Francisco, USA

<sup>156</sup> Ibidem

<sup>157</sup> Scolari, Massimo – Oblique drawing : a history of anti-perspective, MIT Press, 2012, p.341



1999)<sup>158</sup>, Otto van Briessen examines several paintings that he considers to be occasional attempts to introduce the principles of conical perspective into Chinese painting. Even if a more or less pronounced degree of convergence can be identified in some Chinese paintings created under the influence of European art, the orthogonal parallel lines converge towards a vanishing point that is located far outside the work. Because of this positioning of the vanishing point, the eye perceives a displacement of the scene to the right, as it can be seen in Fig. 4.

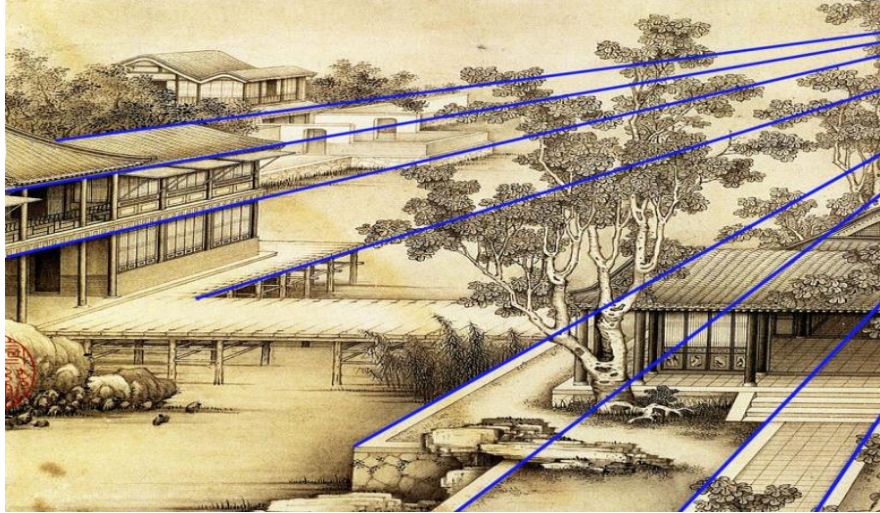


Fig. 4. Jiao Bingzhen – *Landscapes* – Leaf 2, 1689-1726, ink on paper, 26.4 x 26.2 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei

Perspective convergence is indeed used in some Asian paintings but, at the same time, the artist opts for preserving the plunging view of traditional oblique perspective, with the observer looking down on the scene depicted. The principles of conical perspective are applied partially, without the typical perspective reductions of the elements represented, as they move away from the viewer. In most of the paintings there are elements that do not obey the rigours of linear perspective, which leads us to believe that the convergence was probably intuitive rather than theoretical. Another interesting example of the use of Western conical perspective is that of the Japanese woodblock prints and paintings called *uki-e*, an artistic genre that was developed in the 1730s and lasted until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term *uki-e* was used in order to differentiate this new type of woodblock prints, which relied on the European perspective, from the traditional Japanese woodblock prints, called *ukiyo-e*.

### 3. Results

With the introduction of European written material to Japan, painters were probably attracted to the new experience of space they found in Western painting. Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the main method of spatial representation used in traditional Japanese paintings, called *yamatoe*, was the oblique perspective (Mende 1997). The first artists to introduce perspective convergence into Japanese art were Okumura Masanobu (1686-1764) and Utagawa Toyoharu (c. 1735-1814).

The *uki-e* woodblock prints influenced by the Western tradition rendered a scene in a way similar to the natural perspective. By means of the linear perspective, these woodblock prints were able to reveal the depth of the picture plane and give

<sup>158</sup> Briessen, Fritz van – *The Way of the Brush : Painting Techniques of China and Japan*, Tuttle Publishing, 1999, pp. 135-137

the impression of distance. In the *uki-e* woodblock prints of Okumura Masanobu (1686-1764), the Japanese artist who first introduced the principle of perspective convergence, the efforts to represent solid objects and the space that contains them by reconciling the traditional pictorial style with the new techniques of Western painting are evident.

Analyzing the construction of space in *Kabuki Theatre* (Fig. 5), an early (1743) example of Okumura Masanobu's woodblock prints, K. Mende identifies two distinct modes of representation<sup>159</sup>. The space of the audience is constructed in linear perspective, with all parallel lines converging in a single vanishing point, while the stage is rendered in oblique perspective. K. Mende believes that this representation is not the result of an incorrect technique, but rather must be related to what the artist wanted to express. By using the two systems of perspective in the same pictorial context, Masanobu succeeded both to create the feeling of being present inside the theatre (the central conical perspective) and to show the content of the play and emphasise the main actors (the oblique parallel perspective).

Mention must be made that while representing the characters in the audience, the principle of perspective reduction is not used. In other woodblock prints created at a later stage, linear perspective is applied more accurately, perspective reduction included, as can be seen in another *uki-e* woodblock print by Masanobu from 1745, *Taking the Evening Cool by Ryōgoku Bridge* (Fig. 6). In this case, the convergent perspective is used for the configuration of the interior space, while the exterior environment is represented by means of the traditional method of oblique perspective. The Japanese artists' choice of rendering interior scenes in *uki-e* woodblock prints is explained by the fact that central perspective was easier to apply in an architectural scene than in a landscape.

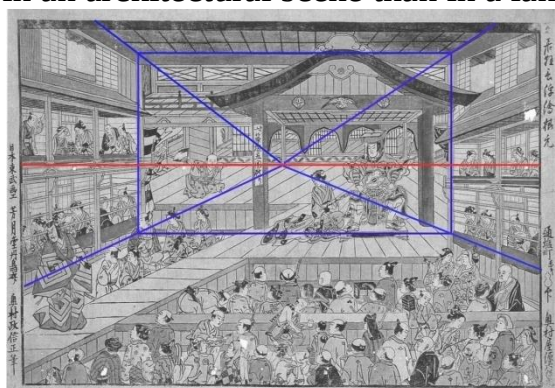


Fig. 5. Okumura Masanobu – *Kabuki Theatre*, 1743.

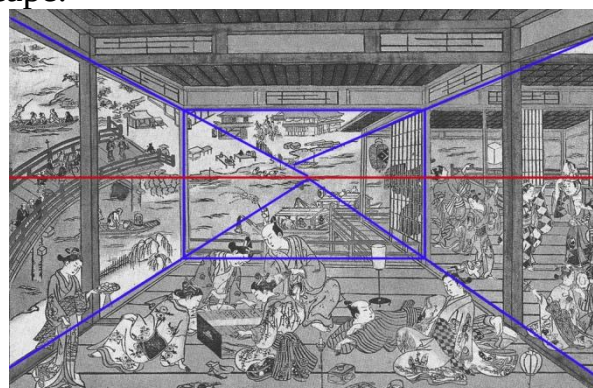


Fig. 6. Okumura Masanobu - *Taking the Evening Cool by Ryōgoku Bridge*, 1745.

The popularity of *uki-e* woodblock prints was short-lived, with artists considering them to be full of patterns and returning to oblique parallel perspective. As Z. Dumitrescu states, “attempts to export perspective to the Far East remain isolated and without a striking impact on such traditional cultures.”<sup>160</sup> (Dumitrescu 2002)

This further reinforces art historian Erwin Panofsky's assertion that perspective is not only a transcription of visual reality, but also a symbolic form of representation that derives from major cultural differences (Panofsky 1991), (Urmă

<sup>159</sup> Kazuko Mende – The Representation of Pictorial Space in UKIE, *Journal for Geometry and Graphics*, vol. I, (1997), No. 1. pp.31 – 40

<sup>160</sup> Zamfir Dumitrescu – *Ars Perspective*, Nemira, București, 2002, p. 33

2014). For Far Eastern cultures, parallel perspective is also a type of symbolic form, deeply rooted in a pictorial experience that has been uninterrupted for more than two millennia. Even today, the vast majority of artists who approach a traditional pictorial style remain faithful to the rules of perspective that have come down to them from the past. (Briessen 1999)

The principle of the Asian oblique parallel perspective, improved over time, has become a unanimously accepted and used system - the axonometric perspective system. In Europe, axonometry has been widely used since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Initially employed for technical or military purposes, it was generalised as a system once it was given a geometrical foundation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1822, the English scholar William Farish established the principles of axonometry in his work *On Isometrical Perspective*. Starting with the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was introduced as a subject of study in technical schools in Europe and America<sup>161</sup> (Krikke 1996), axonometry has become indispensable for engineers and architects.

#### 4. Conclusions

The system of oblique parallel perspective characterises only Far Eastern art. The solution adopted by the painters of this area for the representation of space has the ability to suggest the existence of the third dimension, without "breaking" the flatness of the picture, as is the case in European art. The Asian oblique parallel perspective is a truly plastic invention that has enough power to express space with an established geometric status, perfectly adapted to the flat surface of the pictorial support, perhaps for the first time in the history of art.

#### List of illustrations

Fig. 1. Zhang Zeduan - *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (detail), 12<sup>th</sup> century, ink and colour on silk, handscroll, 25.5 x 525 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing. Image edited by the author.

Fig. 2. Zhang Zeduan - *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, 12<sup>th</sup> century, ink and colour on silk, handscroll, 25.5 x 525 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

Source:[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Along\\_the\\_River\\_During\\_the\\_Qingming\\_Festival#/media/File:Alongtheriver\\_QingMing.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Along_the_River_During_the_Qingming_Festival#/media/File:Alongtheriver_QingMing.jpg)

Fig. 3. Zhang Zeduan - *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (details), 12<sup>th</sup> century, ink and colour on silk, handscroll, 25.5 x 525 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing. Source:[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Along\\_the\\_River\\_During\\_the\\_Qingming\\_Festival#/media/File:Alongtheriver\\_QingMing.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Along_the_River_During_the_Qingming_Festival#/media/File:Alongtheriver_QingMing.jpg)

Fig. 4. Leaf 2 from the painter's album entitled "Landscapes", 1689 – 1726, ink on paper, 26.4 x 26.2 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6652394>

Fig. 5. Okumura Masanobu - *Kabuki Theatre*, 1743, woodblock print, 32x46 cm. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MASANOBU-Theater.jpg>

Fig. 6. Okumura Masanobu - *Taking the Evening Cool by Ryōgoku Bridge*, 1745, woodblock print. Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uki->

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<sup>161</sup> Jan Krikke – A Chinese Perspective for Cyberspace?, International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter, 9, Summer, 1996

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