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# **Aesthetics and Ethics. Image and Idolatry**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the philosophical relationship between image and idolatry across diverse cultural traditions, such as Greek philosophy, Christianity, and East-Asian thought. Drawing on Greek concepts of *eikon* and *eidolon*, we can distinguish between idolatrous and iconic modes of gazing, arguing that authentic images transform the viewer ethically and spiritually. Comparative analysis spans Christian iconography, Buddhist aniconic traditions, and Sino-Japanese ink painting, revealing how each tradition navigates the tension between visible form and invisible reality. The Daoist concept of “the great image has no form” (*da xiang wu xing*) challenges Western representational aesthetics, emphasizing dynamic process over static mimesis. Ultimately, the essay proposes that genuine images – whether Byzantine icons, Zen *ensō*, or Cézanne’s paintings – resist idolatry by pointing beyond themselves, inviting inner transformation rather than mere possession or imitation.

*Keywords:* icon, idol, image, ethics, aesthetics

1. As I attempt to navigate diverse cultures, artistic works distant in time and space, I emphasize the importance of a cautious and respectful attitude toward an otherness – personal, cultural, aesthetic – that is always too easy to betray by confining it within one's own hermeneutic categories. From a philosophical perspective, therefore, the work I have attempted has been a continuous deconstruction of these categories, which does not mean dismantling them or considering them incorrect, but relativizing them and then fertilizing them through contact with other categories. These categories are always intelligible (if the other is not immediately translatable into my concepts, this does not mean they are unfathomable and remain closed in their own world), but which require a patient work of approach and interpretation. This problem also arises when we try to engage with the theme of the image, the theme of the icon, the theme of the idol: the relationship between thought and image, between visible and invisible, between corporeal materiality – aesthetic in the etymological sense: *aisthesis* is sensation, sensible perception – and the spiritual dimension, manifested across all human cultures with very different accents.

*Eikon* and *eidolon* are two Greek terms indicating two types of image; I would add that they express two modes or regimes of the gaze. It is our gaze that generates idols, and it is always our gaze that enters into a relationship with icons. According to Plato, *eidolon* is the fallacious, mendacious image, which maintains its value as a phenomenon, but does not allow us to enter into an authentic relationship with that of which it is the image. It is an illusory phenomenal reality to the extent that it makes us believe that the visible is reduced to that superficial, immediate visibility. The icon, instead, implies a sort of transformation; thus we encounter the relationship that links aesthetics and ethics. I transform my gaze, and by transforming my gaze I transform myself, my behavior. Even the image, in a certain sense, begins to be transfigured. This transformation has to do with ethics, with my way of acting, and also with my way of being in the world. It's no coincidence that *ethos* is written two ways in Greek: with the letter *epsilon*, it indicates "behavior", a way of doing things (the Latin *mos*); with the letter *eta*, *ethos* means "abode", "dwelling", the place where I reside, where I consist – it is the overall sense of my dwelling, the way I live my life, the way my existence is imbued with meaning. This meaning is also conveyed through images, which, when I look at them, concern me, in the double meaning of the verb: I feel watched by them, and they relate to me, that is, they touch me deeply, they intertwine with my life. In a beautiful passage from Nicholas Cusanus, in his *De visione Dei*, a painted image of Christ's face seems to shift the position of its eyes and the direction of its gaze depending on my movements (something that also seems to happen with Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and other great portraits). One feels observed by that painted face. For Cusano this is an excellent tool for questioning the fact that we, sighted people, are always seen by something that precedes us, by something that welcomes us.

2. A non-idolatrous thought is one that, in recognizing the irreducibility of world events – the spirit is not susceptible to representation – cannot be blocked, fixed; that is, it does not erase the time of its very occurrence. As Gregory of Nyssa warned in the fourth century, the icon is the same as the prototype and at the same time differs from it: there is a gap, yet also a very close affinity, a sort of identification. Russian icons allow us to "glimpse" the prototype, without thinking of replacing it. Another effective image, used by Pavel Florenskij in his essay on the orthodox "iconostasis", is that of the *window*: an icon lets light pass through; the more beautiful and perfect

it is, just as when a window is clean and transparent, the less I realize there is a diaphragm, a colored panel, a glass. The window then becomes pure light. The authentic image always reveals itself either beneath itself – it is a simple pigmented wooden panel – or beyond, beyond itself – that is, it allows something to pass through of which it is precisely an “icon”. There is a fundamental relationship between identity and otherness in the iconic experience, a distance, a difference that is never eluded, but which at the same time allows an encounter, like the *dia*-present in the word dialogue, *dialogos*: a *logos*, a way to “hold together” (*legein*) across a distance, a difference (*dia*-).

An interesting dialectic between image and model is also found in the Buddhist context. Buddhism was born, in a certain sense, “aniconic”. Until the first century AD, there are no depictions of the Buddha – he does not present himself as a god or a prophet: he is always depicted metonymically or metaphorically; symbols such as the Bodhi tree, the wheel of dharma (*dharmachakra*), footprints (*buddhapada*, the “footprints of the Buddha”), or stupas are used. Figurations begin to appear from the first century; it is interesting to note a sort of progressive freedom: some scholars attribute this to Mahayana, as a period following the tradition of the first centuries (the Theravada tradition). Greek influences are also present, as seen in the draperies of sculptures in the Gandhara or Mathura schools; there are decidedly intercultural elements when it comes to imagination, aesthetics, and the ways of relating the visible and the invisible. These Hellenistic elements are accompanied in the Indian and Tibetan worlds by other indigenous and highly original aspects, such as the mandala or the *sri yantra*, which translates as “venerable instrument”. I have used this word several times: the image is an “instrument” in the sense in which this term is used in Buddhism (*upaya*, in Sanskrit, or *hōben*, in Japanese, means precisely “useful means”). Such a “means” serves not to divert attention, reduce concentration, or, worse, idolize, but to channel awareness—like a sort of focal lens that gathers and focuses the rays of my concentration on that one truly fundamental thing: inner transformation, transformation itself. So, to use Christian language, it is the human subject who becomes an “icon of the living God”. In Zen Buddhism, some masters warn: “If you meet the Buddha on the street, kill him!”. But why? Because otherwise he immediately becomes an object of attachment, of idolatry. But it’s not about idolizing the Buddha, it’s about becoming him or, better, discovering that one already was, always and forever. Only by incorporating him into one’s gesture, into one’s life, does it not remain an idol.

3. Sino-Japanese ink landscape painting, the painting of the literati in China and of many Zen adepts in Japan, such as Sesshū Tōyō (c. 1420-1508), features almost no human figures or anthropological elements. There might be, at most, a pagoda, a small house, a path; sometimes a small human figure climbing a path. It is the landscape, nature, that is the “great icon”, the great image to be depicted – and not represented, because there is no *praesentia* to bring to the eye. In the traditional Sino-Japanese world, there is no notion of representation – here we might detect an affinity with the idea of Steven Schwarzschild, who, in the Jewish context, emphasized that the spiritual is not susceptible to representation. In the Sino-Japanese world of Taoist and Buddhist influence, the “spiritual” is immanent to the “natural”; there is no dualism. There is a polarity between yin and yang: since there is matter, then there is spirit and vice versa; but there is no representation, a way to re-present, to “bring back” (*re*-), “in front” or “before” (*prae*-), a “being” (in Latin, *ens*). Instead, there is a *continuous process*. The spiritual condenses, concentrates, becomes matter, becomes something tactile, but also becomes an image, and then rarefies and

becomes soul, becomes spirit. There are three great arts in the Chinese world: painting, poetry, and calligraphy; they are all monochrome, all made with the same tools: brush, ink, paper, stone to rub the solid ink stick (the “four treasures” of the calligrapher). Of course, the Chinese and Japanese in ancient and pre-modern times certainly knew how to paint with colors, they knew how to paint human figures, they created axonometric projections of buildings; but these were less important levels, philosophically less “dense” and articulated. The ink landscape is the most important level, figuratively (in Zen the extreme formal decantation is given by single stylised characters or by *ensō*, the images of circles drawn with energy and immediate dynamism).

The “middle void” (*zhong xu* in Chinese) is the dimension present in landscape paintings that emphasizes and conveys the openness to an undifferentiated background that is never susceptible to totalizing figuration or exhaustion. On the one hand, the aesthetic effect leaves the viewer free to imagine (“What is floating behind the clouds? What is about to emerge or what is about to sink back into the undifferentiated background?”), but it also reminds us that there is no *ens*, an entity, or a thing, *res*, to be “restored to presence”: there is a continuous movement, a dynamic process to be relaunched and revived.

Thus we should understand this way the phrase we find in the *Daodejing*, chapter 41: “The great image has no form” (*da xiang wu xing*), a sentence that comes right after “the great square has no corners, great music has no sounds, the path that proceeds is the path that retreats”... These sentences seem like the logical paradoxes by the Greek philosopher Zeno, challenging the power of reason (*logos*). In reality, they are also a reminder that, precisely, the great image – that is, the effective, authentic, truthful, excellent image – is not “beautiful” (the classical notion, used in European aesthetic treatises). “Beautiful” (*mei*) exists as an adjective in Chinese, with many similar variants, but it is reserved for other fields, not art. What we would call a “beautiful image” is a “large, superior” image, or even a “natural” one: this is the highest adjective to qualify a sublime work of art. But in what sense does “it has no form”? If it is to be an image, it must have some form. It must have it, yes, even as a “formless form”; however, it must not have a defined, definitive, or ultimate form. It must always remain somewhat nuanced, frayed, bordered by emptiness. The character *xiang*, which we translate here as “image”, curiously also means “phenomenon”. Here we are, so to speak, at the antipodes of the Platonic conception, according to which the image is a copy (never entirely precise or faithful) of a phenomenon, which in turn is a copy (never entirely faithful) of an idea.

*Xiang* is both “phenomenon” and “image”, because both the mountain, the landscape I enter and walk through, and the image I compose by painting, are equally inhabited by the spirit. Here, I would translate “spirit” as the “vital flow”, the atmosphere, the flux or dynamic energy that continually infuses life’s phenomena and images with vitality. Thus, the challenge is not so much to mimetically capture an object outside of me, “thrown against” (*ob-iectum*) a subject, but rather to restore the vital, spiritual dynamism that animates everything.

4. Moving toward the conclusion, we can also observe the same in images drawn from contemporary Chinese calligraphy and painting, even when the approach is toward a sort of

abstract expressionism and there is no longer a denotation, a reference to “mountains and waters”. The Sino-Japanese notion of landscape (*shanshui* in Chinese, *sansui* in Japanese) literally means “mountains-waters”, or a system of variations, of relationships. It is not a *panorama*, a visible (*orao*) “whole” (*pan*); it is not a “landscape” (or *landschaft*, *landschap*, *paysage*, *paesaggio*...) but “high-low”, “full-empty”, “stable-mobile”. Even when this explicit reference is missing, a dynamic dimension remains, right down to the most synthetic and celebrated image: *ensō* in Japanese, “circular image”, the circle of masters. Unlike the anecdote about Giotto painting a geometrically perfect circle to demonstrate his skill, this aspect is not at play here – circles may be far from geometrically perfect, but what matters is the dynamism, the life they communicate, the relationship between fullness and emptiness, between the sign that is engraved or absorbed by the paper and the background that receives it. Here too, what matters is the internal work I do, while training in the art of painting, that is, the inner transformation of those who prepare to practice drawing signs, leaving footprints, even those who have never picked up a paintbrush: we all draw signs, we are living signs, simply by walking down the street. Our life and our breathing are traces, imprints of something ineffable, something invisible. Of course, another challenge emerges in Christianity: there is a God who takes shape and there is a God who withdraws, a glorious God and a suffering God, who feels, endures, has sensations. Grunewald illustrates this well in his Crucifixion, which reveals the disturbing aspect of a truth that does not impose itself, yet is a sign of a truth that allows for its own happening. As in the paintings of the episode known as *Noli me tangere* (“Do not touch me”, or also “Do not hold me back”), we must know how to leave room for a void for the spirit to happen: it is the risen Christ who does not allow himself to be held back by Mary Magdalene. “Do not hold me back, do not touch me”: if you hold me back, the Spirit will not reach you. Love that image that disappears. This also happens at Emmaus: as soon as no one has noticed, as soon as the bread is broken, behold, Jesus is gone. What remains? The *ethos* remains, the place of a dwelling, the possibility in our lives of becoming living images of something, of something we can call by many names and with which we wrestle, like Jacob with the angel. The iconic image is not only a pacifying image, it is also a disturbing one. It can become Cézanne’s apple, it can become Barnett Newman’s *Onement*, which goes beyond dichotomies, dualisms, the rigid relationship with a “denotate” (*Bedeutung*, in German) with the “dictatorship” of the retina, that is, the mere imitation of something I see outside, right before me. It is the absolute image, which is painted not to possess something of the world and manipulate it, but to attest to its pure existence, to show how much that existence can be loved.

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