Tessin Lecture 2015: The Living Rock

Nicholas Penny
Director of the National Gallery, London, 2008 – 2015

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Fig. 1 Giovanni di Paolo (d. 1482), St John the Baptist Retiring to the Desert (predella panel), completed by 1454. Egg tempera on wood, 30.3 x 49 cm. National Gallery, London, NG5454.
The Living Rock

In Italian paintings of the early 15th century, the mountain range outside the city walls and beyond the patchwork of cultivated fields was depicted as a group of rocks. The shapes of these rocks owed more to the conventions of Byzantine art than to anything the artists had ever seen in nature (Fig. 1). In the second half of the century a few Italian artists such as Antonio Pollaiuolo and Antonello da Messina, inspired by the example of Jan van Eyck or Hans Memling, began to paint landscape backgrounds that were based on observation, but the wilderness was still often represented by rocks standing in for the mountains, although they were now sometimes studied from real specimens. The landscape painted by the young Filippino Lippi (Fig. 2) – a landscape occupied by penitent, visionary and itinerant saints past whom the kings have processed on their sinuous road to the ruin where they adore the newborn Christ – resembles no terrain that the artist can ever have seen, yet it is derived from careful studies of limestone.

The rocks in Filippino’s paintings differ little from those by Leonardo da Vinci. In the latter, however, mystery is added by crepuscular lighting and aerial perspective. These Florentine pictures are one source of an important current in European landscape painting of the 16th century which might be called “the marvellous mountain landscape”, of which the most notable exponent was perhaps the Netherlandish artist Joachim Patinir (Fig. 3). And even in the 17th century, when Claude, Poussin, Rubens and Hobbema were developing landscape paintings in different directions, examples of this genre may still be found, notably among the works by Jan Asselijn (Fig. 4) and David Teniers. It was favoured especially in paintings that represented the habitat of hermits and penitents, and these commonly featured a natural arch – often, indeed, a double arch.

Natural arches are unusual but they can be found in many parts of the world. During the 19th century they were frequently represented in paintings (Fig. 5), and they remain major att-
Fig. 3 Workshop of Joachim Patinir (d. 1524), *St Jerome in a Rocky Landscape*, c. 1515–20. Oil on oak, 36 x 33.7 cm. National Gallery, London, NG 4826.
Fig. 4 Jan Asselijn (1610–after 1652), *Landscape with a View from a Grotto*, c. 1635–44. Oil on wood, 34.8 x 23.8 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NM 7247.
Fig. 5 Thomas Fearnley (1802–1842), *The Arco Naturale, Capri*, 1833. Oil on paper mounted on wooden panel, 61.5 x 46.1 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NM 7281.
architecture. In the backgrounds of paintings by Francesco del Cossa we can find townscapes where steps, bridges and even dwellings are formed half by nature and half by man. In an early painting by Giovanni Bellini, St Jerome’s cell is furnished by not only a stone seat but stone shelves and a stone footstool which are apparently natural (Fig. 7), and in his painting of Christ praying on Gethsemane, Christ is on a platform before a prayer desk of natural rock, with his knees on a grass “hassock”. There are also examples of pictures in which King David and the Virgin Mary are seated on a natural rock throne. The artist in whose work it is most evident is certainly Bellini’s brother-in-law Andrea Mantegna, in whose paintings rocks are not only architectural but animate, and clouds can also assume figurative forms.

It would be interesting to discover a precedent or parallel for this sort of pictorial wit in sacred literature. Mantegna was certainly aware that natural architecture is associated in secular romances with scenes of enchantment and metamorphosis. No literary source known to me, however, quite prepares us for Lucas Cranach the Elder’s conception of the Golden Age (Fig. 8), in which amorous
couples frolic by the side of a pool that is fed by a source issuing from a rock cleft in a manner suggestive of a vagina. Figures will soon enter magical and erotic artificial caves. The grotto originated as a development of the fountain niche inspired equally by Roman ruins and by classical literature. It was one of the great inventions of 16th-century Italy. In many cases there was a skylight in the central chamber and such rooms are at once imitations of natural caves and reminiscent of the interior of the Pantheon. Two centuries later in England, the grotto with its natural central pantheon was frequently preceded by a natural arch. There must have been a constant interplay between such garden ornaments and the type of painting that we have already mentioned. Entrances, apertures and orifices were also animated: the cave had eyes as well as a mouth, and water issued from all manner of lips.

In mid-16th century Italy sculpture, which can be described as metamorphic in theme and even in structure, was devised both for the interiors of these grottoes and for the landscape around them. This sometimes consisted of figures which embodied the rocks and the waters that issued from them; more often the figures are represented as partially emerging from, or submerged in, the damp stone interior, as if they had been petrified Ovidian or Dantean victims. Those in the grotto of the Boboli Gardens are more like the alarming creations of modern science fiction (Fig. 9). The most famous sculpture of this kind was Giambologna’s colossal Mountain God, a personification of the Apennines, made for the gardens of the Medici at Castello, a terracotta sketch for which survives in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Some of Michelangelo’s unfinished sculpture was displayed in the Boboli grotto, and the spiritual struggle the sculptor intended to embody must then have looked like a reluctance to be absorbed into, or a determination to be free from, the natural rock – a painful process which other sculptors represented as one of softly swelling forms exuded or extruded or eroded (Fig. 10).

However, most grotto sculpture was not carved but was made of stucco or some related plastic material that has not survived. The interiors of grottoes were usually covered in shells. When the nacreous interiors were turned outwards they would reflect the light of a torch – an effect also achieved by quartz and fragments of mirror glass. But shells were also often combined with “petrifications” and curiously shaped pieces of tufa, relics or recollections of previous lives. It was in this context that new varieties of grotesque ornament were developed. The spouts of fountains had long consisted of heads which appeared to be half human and half vegetable; now faces were composed of – or concealed within – shells, reeds and crustaceae, a theme which was then transferred to picture frames and console tables, where monstrous heads are often to be detected or suspected among the scrolls.

The supply of petrifications and quartz was only one way in which artists were assisted by geologists and mineralogists. Slate, and perhaps porphyry, had been employed in place of wooden panels by Sebastiano del Piombo in the first half of the 16th century, and by the end of the century the black stone upon which some artists chose to paint would be left unmarked but polished to represent the night sky. The choice of precious supports as backgrounds for gilded relief sculpture was probably an important precedent for the next development: painting on patterned marbles and semi-precious stones, the colours and patterns of which resemble a blue sky, clouds or a portentous sunset. Relatively few of these paintings can be dated or attributed, but princely inventories reveal how prized they were.

Those included within the ebony frames of the Augsburg Art Cabinet in the Museum Gustavianum of Uppsala University can at least be dated. One large scene (Fig. 11) painted on calcite alabaster with a fleecy pattern, originally from the Nile but recycled from ancient Roman remains, may, at first sight, be taken to represent gods fighting among the clouds, but the procession across the top is led by Moses, and elsewhere Pharaoh’s army is being swallowed up by the turbulent waters of the Red Sea.
valents and are a natural development of the way jade had been fashioned to resemble objects with which it could be associated in shape and colour (whether sleeping waterfowl, seated buffaloes, or white blossom), and may also be related to the delight taken in controlled accidents in the firing of ceramics.

By the 18th century some knowledge of Chinese and Japanese art is well documented in Western Europe and is reflected in the pastorals involving figures in Chinese dress which proliferate in decorative painting such as we find in the Chinese Pavilion in the park of Drottningholm Palace, outside Stockholm (Fig. 12). Almost all of the landscape settings here include natural arches, for which there was, as we have seen, a long history in European art; but such fantastic rocks were indeed also characteristic of designs on the Chinese wallpapers, porcelain and lacquer that were

Framed in the border are numerous smaller stones, some with dendritic inclusions (miniature branched patterns resembling trees), others with jagged patterns suggestive of dreaming spires or strange rock formations. The cleverest of the paintings of this type are those which manage to use the pattern of the stone for multiple purposes – for a shallow river, a city wall, a grey horse, and a streaky sky in one instance – or those in which the painted additions are minimal. Did the artists or patrons of these works know anything of the marble “paintings” that were so greatly valued by Chinese connoisseurs? The subjects of these are invariably mountains and clouds and water. They seem never to include figures, or indeed any additions in paint, other than marks of ownership or authorship and, not uncommonly, short poems. They were popular several centuries before their European equivalents and are a natural development of the way jade had been fashioned to resemble objects with which it could be associated in shape and colour (whether sleeping waterfowl, seated buffaloes, or white blossom), and may also be related to the delight taken in controlled accidents in the firing of ceramics.

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![Fig. 8 Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), The Golden Age, c. 1530. Oil on panel, 75 x 103.5 cm. National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, NG.M.0015.](image-url)
exported to Europe in large quantities. Chinese models inspired the aesthetic ideal of wriggling irregularity advocated by some writers on garden design (above all, the Swedish-born William Chambers) and, although the misunderstandings are obvious to modern authorities, the artificial caves and mounds of Ming dynasty gardens are startlingly similar to the British grottos created several centuries later – both, for example, employing stones eroded by water into bizarre shapes, often in precarious pendulous arrangements (Figs. 13–14).

Much of the art that we have surveyed so far has been in some sense metaphorical, and the subject matter has often been metamorphic. The rocks are, or aspire to be, a sort of architecture or to have an organic life, or may be seen in this way; the statues or figures are turning into, or only half escaping from, the stone, the material out of which some of them are made; the patterns in the stone are found, with some encouragement and editorial intervention, to represent the sky or the sea… Returning to Turner’s painting of Ulysses (Fig. 6), we should note that it is, at the same time as being a dramatic evocation of the Homeric epic, also a meditation on the origins of mythological ideas and in particular the idea of metamorphosis. The giant Polyphemus is not only half lost in the clouds and mountains but merged with them, as if an illusion conjured out of their shapes. The water nymphs arise from phosphoric plankton. And Turner has scratched galloping steeds faintly against the rays of the rising sun, to suggest the best available metaphor for energy.

The ability of the imagination to receive stimulation from accidental or “natural” effects was acknowledged in 16th-century writing on art: Leonardo, for example, was said to have found old soiled walls inspiring. Hamlet detects in the clouds, or affects to detect there, the shape of a camel, a weasel, and a whale. In the pictorial biography of Taddeo Zuccaro, projected in a remarkable series of drawings by his brother Federico, we see the young prodigy studying the antique, and the great modern art of Raphael, but we also meet him when, despairing and fatigued, he sleeps by the side of a river (Fig. 15). Here he dreams of great compositions for palace façades – compositions that he has found in the rocks at the water’s edge. His parents realize that he is in a very bad way when he arrives home with the rocks in a sack, but the inspiration that came to him in a fever is nevertheless regarded as evidence of his genius.

The artist may also wish to create natural – that is, accidental – patterns, for example by spattering paint to represent fine shingle beside a stream or to imitate the speckling of porphry and other stones. Rapid arabesques with a brush are employed to imitate broken patterns and misty mixtures in coloured marble (Fig. 16). Out of a deliberate confusion of roughly and rapidly worked paint, figures may emerge, as in some of Turner’s paintings of crashing surf (Fig. 17). August Strindberg went farther because his starting point was neither representational nor
Fig. 11 Panel of ebony inlaid with painted calcite alabaster and other stones from the "Augsburg Art Cabinet" assembled 1625–31 by Philipp Hainhofer (1578–1647) and presented in 1632 to Gustav II Adolf, King of Sweden. The painting by Anton Mozart (1573–1625), the ebony crafted in Ulrich Baumgarten’s workshop. The subject painted on the main slab of alabaster is Moses and Aaron Leading the Israelites to Safety as the Army of Pharaoh is Submerged by the Red Sea. Museum Gustavianum, Uppsala University.
mimetic – nor are we sure of what exactly he arrived at (Fig. 18). The small panels painted by Peder Balke, also in the late 19th century, executed in a limited palette with cloth, sponge, combs and fingers, conjure minimal, often rather Chinese, recollections of rocks and clouds and water, using tools and techniques that he had employed in his youth as a housepainter to imitate the grain of exotic woods and the patterns of marble. Much that we associate with modern art of the twentieth century – with forms of abstraction and surrealism – is foreshadowed here and, more generally, by the topics drawn together in this essay.

Nicholas Penny would like to thank Magnus Olausson, for the invitation to give the Tessin Lecture and for his hospitality in Stockholm on this and other occasions; Merit Laine, for her help with the lecture and tour of the palace and gardens at Drottningholm; Jan von Bonsdorff, Martin Olin, Johan Eriksson, Greger Sundin, and Mikael Ahlund, for introducing him to so many of the marvels of Stockholm and Uppsala; and Janna Herder for help with this publication.

**Tessin Lecture**
Each year, the Nationalmuseum invites a distinguished art historian to deliver the Tessin Lecture in Stockholm. By this public occasion, the Museum wishes to pay tribute to exceptional scholarship in the field of art history and to emphasize the Museum’s commitment to research. *The Natural Arch and the Concealed Mask*, delivered by Sir Nicholas Penny on 13 October 2015, was the tenth annual *Tessin Lecture*. It is published here under a different title and both compressed in some respects and modified in others to increase its relevance for a Swedish public.
Fig. 15 Federico Zuccaro (1541–1609), The Young Taddeo Zuccaro Dreaming of the Façade Decorations by Polidoro in Rome and then Seeing Similar Designs in the Stones Beside a River which He then Gathers and Takes to His Parents (14 in a series of 20 drawings preparatory for frescoes illustrating the life of Taddeo Zuccaro), probably mid-1590s. Pen with brown ink with some brown wash applied with a brush, over preliminary drawing in black chalk.
J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, CA.
Sir Nicholas Penny

Sir Nicholas Penny’s career has been most successful both as an academic and as a curator, trained at Oxford and Cambridge. Among other acknowledgements and honours is his appointment as Slade Professor of Fine Arts at Oxford University at the age of 30. Nicholas Penny is well known as co-author, with Francis Haskell, of *Taste and the Antique*, a study of the reception and formation of the canon of classical sculpture, published in 1984. From that year he was Keeper of the Department of Western Art at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

Sir Nicholas began a long association with the National Gallery in London as a curator between 1990 and 2000 and then, after seven years at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, as Director. He retired in August 2015. His tenure as Director (2008–15) was distinguished by major exhibitions as well as acquisitions, and by a remarkable increase in public attendance. He hopes that he will be remembered as a curatorial director. Despite the steep growth in the responsibilities of all museum directors for both administration and fundraising, he continued to work on the third of his catalogues of the National Gallery’s 16th-century Italian paintings (devoted to works from Bologna and Ferrara and co-authored with Giorgia Mancini), which was published in June 2016.

**Tessin Lecturers, 2006—2015**

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2007 Martin Kemp
2008 Elizabeth Cropper
2009 Michael Ann Holly
2010 David Freedberg
2011 Horst Bredekamp
2012 Christopher Brown
2013 Christopher S. Wood
2014 Katie Scott
2015 Nicholas Penny

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Fig. 16 Nicolò dell’Abate (c. 1509–1571), oval panel of fictive marble, in one of the pilasters framing the illustrations to Ariosto, originally painted for Palazzo Torfanini, Bologna, c. 1550. Fresco transferred to canvas. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.

Fig. 17 J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), *The Parting of Hero and Leander*, completed by 1837, when first exhibited. Oil on canvas, 146 x 236 cm. National Gallery, London, NG521 (detail).
Fig. 18 August Strindberg (1849–1912), *Wonderland*, 1894. Oil on cardboard, 72.5 x 52 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NM 6877.