

Chartres and Ryōan-ji

Aesthetic Connections between Gothic Cathedral and Zen Garden

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I

Chartres, French Gothic cathedral of soaring arches and flying buttresses, and Ryōan-ji, Zen Buddhist rock and stone garden of Kyoto, Japan—what common aesthetics do they share? And what do they not share?

There are reasons why these questions can and should be asked. First, if one is attuned to the “affecting presence” of the art forms of one’s own tradition, one may enter into the affecting presence of the form of another tradition. A paradigm, or a pattern of interpretation or of problem-solution, can allow one to make the unknown into an instance of the known. The paradigm becomes an approach. It is not that the paradigm of interpretation of one’s own tradition becomes a determinant, but rather a resource for interpreting the new and the different. If one has plunged deeply and imaginatively into the known, a way has already been offered into the other. Second, any doctrinal, restricted, aesthetic claim receives scant hearing today, for new understandings are possible in the cultural overlapping of our present world. A changed situation has put the old cry of Tertullian out of place: “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?” Today we can say that a Zen garden has much to do with a Gothic cathedral. Third, similarities and connections do not hide differences and opposites. As Thomas Kuhn has written about the history of science, “It is a truism

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that anything is similar to, and also different from, anything else.”¹ A recognition of tension and polarity in religious aesthetic forms should no longer produce a sense of conflict and irreconcilability, but rather call us to embrace difference, becoming “more than one thing” in our understanding of affecting presence.

II

Both Chartres and Ryōan-ji state that form and space do matter in religious feeling and perception. Clement of Alexandria, seldom concerned with the meaning and importance of aesthetics, said at the end of the second century that a temple is not a building but only a gathering of the faithful. Chartres and Ryōan-ji speak against Clement and assert that a place and its statement have much to do with the faith and ideas of a religious community.

What do we mean when we say, “*Utsukushii, ne,*” “Isn’t that beautiful?” Why do we yearn for beauty in our religious practices and in our sacred spaces? A Buddhist principle is manifested in both the cathedral and the garden. We long for the world of beauty because beauty is our home and we are born with a love for home.² More especially, aesthetics is connected with our longing for the home that defines us—where we see art form speaking to us about the condition of human life itself. The home we sense is not a place of romanticism and security, but a place where we are known for what we are, accepted in the midst of our ambiguities, and given a perspective. Certainly Chartres and Ryōan-ji would disagree on the nature of the self, but the art form of each speaks to the meaning of the true self known in each tradition. The immensity of Chartres’ inside space reminds viewers and believers of man’s smallness and finitude in the presence of God’s unlimitedness and eternity. The sparseness of Ryōan-ji reminds beholders of the importance of *mushin*, no-mind, and *sūnyatā*, emptiness. The longing, innocent face and form of the statue of John the Baptist in Chartres reminds us of the ever-present need to repent and begin again with hope. The combination of square and round windows

¹ Barry Barnes, *T. S. Kuhn and Social Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), frontispiece.

² Yanagi Soetsu, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, adapted by Bernard Leach (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972), p. 155.

CHARTRES AND RYŌAN-JI

found at Ryōan-ji and other Zen temples, perhaps most dramatically at Genkō-an in Kyoto, recalls for us basic human conditions. The round window, *satori no mado*, symbolizes the need for religious awakening; the square, *mayoi no mado*, symbolizes the reality of human afflictions—living, becoming old, being ill, dying. The forms of the beautiful re-present our human nature to ourselves; we are reunited with the essentials of our human conditions. We sense the familiar and the true. We feel at home deeply and realistically.

Both Chartres and Ryōan-ji urge those who enter to use the “gift of seeing.” There are many questions about the form and structure of the Gothic cathedral and the Zen garden, but one does not need instruction before one can appreciate.³ Concepts of each tradition are at once visible to the common eye. At Chartres, people—including Japanese Buddhists—often attest to the feeling of “providential space” or of sensing the Deuteronomic proclamation that “the eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms” (Deut. 33:27). Westerners sitting on the weather-beaten boards at Ryōan-ji catch, without explanation from experts, that they are in the presence of something standing for directness, serenity, simplicity, and reducedness. The blaring, jarring art forms and symbolization of a Sacre Coeur are not found at Chartres; the involuted symbolism of a mandalistic garden of Esoteric Buddhism is different from what one finds at Ryōan-ji. Chartres and Ryōan-ji offer their viewers something to look at immediately. Each speaks about receiving what is there. We are encouraged to “just look”—never to judge, not to categorize. To enter each with the state of *mushin*, ‘no-mind’—to be a clear mirror—is the best way. Study of the two art forms is to be done but never to replace the sense of the haiku “ahh”—an immediate recognition of something revealing, presented “just right,” *sono mama*, just as it is.

Neither Chartres nor Ryōan-ji offers a proselytizing form of beauty. One is aware of the parallels and differences, but one does not find that either the cathedral or the garden makes a claim of triumphalism or superiority. More than the specifics of the two traditions, each art form calls attention to the sense of something beyond, larger than, and surrounding the details. The viewer is in the midst of this larger,

³ See Robert P. Armstrong, *The Affecting Presence: An Essay in Humanistic Anthropology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), chapters 1 and 2.

nonspecific realm.

As we look at Chartres and Ryōan-ji—noting both the ideals and principles of each tradition and the details of lines and use of space—we are conscious of unsigned works. Chartres is the product of many designers and artisans who worked quickly from 1194 to 1220 to rebuild after a fire; Ryōan-ji, while attributed to Sōami or Tessen Sōki in the late fifteenth century, is certainly the work of others as well. Many tenders of the garden have engaged in the continuous work on the wall and also on the approaches. Neither Chartres nor Ryōan-ji glorifies their human creators.

Although presenting differing religious perspectives, Chartres and Ryōan-ji engage aesthetically in *hibiki-ai*, mutual echoing. Both sacred places present the art of stones: the subtle, differing shades of gray and earth-red with attendant reduced artistic effect. The obscure, dull patina and the cracks and the rough edges—whether found in the cut and placed stonework of Chartres or the isolated *hama sabi*, stream rocks, and *yama sabi*, mountain rocks, of Ryōan-ji—offer a similar statement and meaning. The sounds of walking through each are similar—reverberations coming from the eaves and boards in Ryōan-ji and from the walls in Chartres. In both art forms, there is *yāna*, a Sanskrit word meaning “a way of going”—an immediately perceived way of art’s ability to point to a perspective. There is a precariousness in the beauty of each. The gray-brown wall, an important part of the affecting presence of the Zen garden, forming an unabrupt background, is thin and weak, constantly being repaired or touched up. As for Chartres, Henry Adams has written about the “peril of the heavy tower, of the restless vault, of the vagrant buttress.”⁴ The delicacy and suspended effect of each place, the apparent instability, remind us of the uncertainties of this life, of the transiency of the world.

The differences can be genuinely grasped because of the complementarity. Both point to different ways of understanding the human condition and aspiration. But each can be entered trustingly and with anticipation. Clifford Geertz asks the question, “How is it that other people’s creations can be so utterly their own and so deeply a part of us?” He replies, “Anything imaginal grows in our minds, is

⁴ Henry Adams, *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), p. 377.

CHARTRES AND RYOAN-JI

transformed, socially transformed, from something we merely know to exist or have existed . . . to something which is properly ours, a working force in our common consciousness . . . not a matter . . . of the past recaptured, but of the strange construed . . . having come upon something [rather] than of having remembered it, of an acquisition than of an inheritance."⁵

The nonconversionist message, an unassuming declaration of a particular view of the world and of human destiny, a beauty readily assimilated make it possible for us as Westerners or Easterners to translate that which appears to be "other" into meaning for ourselves. James Merrill's poem *Lost in Translation* reads:

Lost, is it, buried? One more missing piece?
But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation
And every bit of us is lost in it.⁶

Chartres and Ryoan-ji make it easy for us to be lost in the task of translation. And this may be the ultimate point of true art—that in its presence we can respond to something different with working minds and trusting hearts.

III

Chartres has its own form of architectural style and images of the spirit. It offers things to the viewer not found in Ryoan-ji. Upon entering the nave, glancing around and up, one is immediately struck by the soaring space. It is not only the height of the nave, but the vaulting aspect of the structure, going from piers on one side of the nave to piers on the other, that gives the idea of ongoing height; the vault crisscrosses and seems to repeat itself, as if to offer the impression that the soaring qualities do not end. The walls are thin, not made of the heavy building blocks found in Romanesque architecture. The walls are built out, perpendicular to the outline of the nave, not parallel to the nave as in Romanesque, permitting glass in between the sections and a consequent feeling of airiness. Viewed from either the inside or the outside, the walls appear to be weightless and parchment-thin. The

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 54, 47-48.

⁶ Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, p. 10.

forces of thrust and compression are dealt with by the elaborate system of flying buttresses on the outside. The buttresses appear to fly upwards, above the tribune roof, or lower roof, in order to support the massiveness of the upper structure of the cathedral.⁷

The viewer is struck by the inside light of Chartres—the “girdle of light,” as it is sometimes described. In the thirteenth-century glass-maker’s art, blues and reds were the dominant tones. Depending on the light, the colors are always shifting, offering ever changing patterns. “The sensuous power of the illuminous tones of Chartres glass, which waxes and wanes in strength as the day proceeds, grows at dusk, when the windows seem to glide loose from the framework of the cathedral architecture and appear like colour floating in space.”⁸ Chartres is said to be a Bible of glass as well as a Bible of stone.

In its space, light, and height Chartres is thought to be a sum of Christian doctrine. Its architecture, perhaps even more than its collection of specific religious objects, points to the attributes of God and the condition of mankind. Chartres and other cathedrals have often been identified with the description in the Revelation to John: “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for the husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’” In Chartres, the spiritual has become the material and the material the spiritual. The cathedral exists in the city of earth, but it reminds the faithful community of the city of heaven. In the cathedral, one is pulled down the aisle, through the central space, to the altar—one heeds a beckoning. But one is also pulled up, to the arches, to the glass and light—to God and the transcendent Christian world view.

There is a *tarikī*, other power, sense about Chartres. As Henry Adams has written, “Of all the elaborate symbolism which has been suggested for the Gothic cathedral, the most vital and most perfect may be that the slender nervure, the springing motion of the broken

⁷ See Whitney S. Stoddard, *Art and Architecture in Medieval France* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), and *Monastery and Cathedral in France* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1966).

⁸ Hans Jantzen, *High Gothic: The Classic Cathedrals of Chartres, Reims, Amiens*, trans. James Palmes (Letchworth, Hertfordshire: Garden City Press, 1962), p. 165.

CHARTRES AND RYŌAN-JI

arch, the leap downwards of the flying buttress—the visible effort to throw off a visible strain—never let us forget that Faith alone supports it, and that, if Faith fails, heaven is lost.”⁹

Likewise, Ryōan-ji has its aesthetic uniqueness and particularity. As one looks at the fifteen rocks on the raked sand of the garden, one is impressed by irregularity and unplannedness. There is *hachō* present in the garden—a breaking of harmony. The breaking is not jarring or difficult to assimilate; rather, it speaks to us of the imbalance and disharmoniousness of life itself. We seem to be in the presence of *na-jimi*, familiarity, or of a real-life kind of harmonious effect, *utsuri*.

The garden calls us to make our own patterns of interpretation. Our viewing urges us to put things together, not to separate the blank space of raked sand from the eruption and solidity of the rocks, to see the whole garden at a glance and yet to concentrate on its particulars, to speak about it and yet to be silent beside it. Whatever pattern we see in the garden, it must be connected with the prevailing emptiness which makes possible fresh connections. “There is no wordy explanation. There must be the ‘speech without words’ of Zen. Good patterns are simple; if they are cluttered, they are not patterns. The kind of pattern I am speaking of is not primarily decorative; it comes of Zen emptiness of *mu* (‘void’), of ‘thusness.’ The more the significance contained in the pattern, the more this vitality. In its placidity there must be movement; it lives in that no-man’s land where eloquence and silence are one. Without both it dies.”¹⁰ Movement and lifefulness are in the blank spaces.

Looking at Ryōan-ji, one is aware of structure—raked sand, rectangular shape, lines, carefully laid out border stones, a wall of uniform height and construction.¹¹ But there is spontaneity in the structure. The fifteen stones were placed by the maker of the garden in casual asymmetry. How has this unplannedness, this spontaneity-within-configuration occurred? One has the feeling that the original designer was caught up in the space allotted to him, controlled by it: He responded to given possibilities, not imposing his own designs and preconceived notions of order upon the space. Many Japanese potters

⁹ Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel*, p. 377.

¹⁰ Yanagi, *Unknown Craftsman*, p. 114.

¹¹ Matthieu Casalis, “The Semiotics of the Visible in Japanese Rock Gardens,” *Semiotica* 44 (March-April 1983), pp. 349-362.

prefer to use a large kiln rather than a small one. For if the kiln is small, the potter may be able to control it completely, to become a master of the kiln. But when a large kiln is used, the art objects are placed within and the outcome is not predictable. I have built three Japanese rock and stone gardens; the one with which I feel most connected is the one which, in whose building, I acted quickly in placing stones, responding in the moment to my perception of the controlling space. I also felt I was answering aesthetic statements made by particular rocks about to be placed. It is like *shodō*, the art of calligraphy, in which the brush strokes are made deftly in response to the controlling space of a scroll or a defined piece of rice paper.

In building a rock and stone garden, one studies the objects, perhaps meditates, and then, caught up in what is before him, acts. One then steps back to see what has happened. Again, an analogy—it is like the practice of Korean woodworkers who, on purpose, use green wood which will inevitably crack and partially deform when dry. The end result will be in a sense controlled by the materials with which the craftsman works, not by his preconceived and calculated notions of space and form.

As one looks at Ryōan-ji, one sees lines, space, rocks—all on the surface. At the temple garden, in distinction to Chartres, the eye goes around and out—around, taking in the fifteen rocks, the wall, the emptiness and out, over the wall seeing connection with what is beyond, seeing the outside starting from the inside. Nothing is soaring upwards, nothing is consciously stated; nothing is deeply intended. It is the surface and the “face” that counts. One looks at the empty spaces and senses that something is in the process of being drained away; it is the lack that is crucial. Ryōan-ji offers what is inscribed there. Do not look for more; there is no foundation of meaning. It is a situation and an art form without a floor. In a sense it confounds all paradigms of interpretation and all commentary. Like a haiku, it overrides and cancels all commentary, because it is the commentary. To appreciate Ryōan-ji one accepts the surface and the inscription.¹² In looking at the garden, one is to become, as Zen people say, limitless within limits.

¹² See Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), especially pp. 73 ff.

IV

Drawn to the shared and the particular beauty of cathedral and garden, our task is to discover and proclaim the affecting presence found in each. Certainly we are not to proclaim the superiority of the one over the other. As Dōgen pointed out, once we quarrel over which of several perspectives is right, we have separated ourselves from the spirit and the possibility of religion; we have removed ourselves from the imaginative and inspirational forms of traditions. Dōgen warns us not to carry around our perspective or our practice, using it as a club to put others down.¹³

When East visits West, or West visits East, the visitor, with her own practice and tradition, should expect to be deeply moved when in the presence of something else. Jan Van Bragt reported on a visit of Japanese religious *sensei*, teachers, to European Roman Catholic centers, concentrating on Rome. A Japanese archery master was told by others that his bows at the beginning and end of *makiwara sharei*, archery ceremony—performed and demonstrated in a church—had become considerably deeper than the regular forty-five degrees. “He could only answer that he had not been aware of it but that, before the crucifix, he felt an excess of reverence which ‘pulled his breast toward the floor.’ ”¹⁴ And so it is in journeying from Ryōan-ji to Chartres—or the reverse. The two-way journey is mutual transformation.

Contemplation of the beauty of Chartres and Ryōan-ji is easily assumed. But the awesome space of the cathedral and the jutting stones of the garden remind us that the grasping and living of the religious life are not easy. The call to faith issued by the cathedral and the call to emptiness issued by the garden are not readily accepted and appropriated. Indeed, they are accompanied by doubt, turmoil, frustration, anxiety. Beckoning promise and formidable reality are presented by each. Celia Thaxter, nineteenth-century New England Isle of Shoals poet, once wrote of the sea:

The slow, cool emerald breaker curving near

¹³ Dōgen, *Tenzo Kyōkun*, trans. Tom Wright, p. 2.

¹⁴ Jan Van Bragt, *Newsletter*, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Nagoya, 1982.

EUSDEN

Along the sparkling edge of level sand,
Shatters its crystal arch, and far and near
In broken splendor spills upon the land.
With rush and whisper siren—sweet and soft
Gently salutes the children of the earth
And catching every sunbeam from aloft
Flashes it back in summer mood of mirth . . .
And yet, when passed is this sweet summer dream
What roar of thunder on the coast will break
When winter's tempests rage in sullen wrath . . .
And hurl against the sandy margin gray
Devouring fury, tumult, and dismay.¹⁵

Ryōan-ji and Chartres stand for the “fierce rhetoric” between sensing and realization, between attraction and fulfillment, between being at home and yet not at home, between summer's bliss and winter's storms. But the shared and different affecting presence encourages our religious journey. No matter how difficult the practice, or dim the vision, or shattered the expectations, the beauty of cathedral and garden sustains and nurtures. In crossing boundaries, in appropriating what we see, in using all our senses, in being ready for the new, the possibility of Buddha mind and faithful heart are presented to us.

If your ears see
And your eyes hear
You'll cherish no doubts.
How naturally the rain drips from the eaves!

—DAITŌ KOKUSHI¹⁶

¹⁵ James E. Vallier, *Poet on Demand: The Life, Letters, and Works of Celia Thaxter, 1835-94* (Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1982), p. 120.

¹⁶ Jon Covell and Yamada Sobin, *Zen at Daitoku-ji* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1974), p. 19.