

M. K. Čiurlionis and the East: Part 2

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Many aspects of Čiurlionis's painting bear evidence of East Asian influences. Following his sojourn in Prague in 1906, during which he wrote of his interest in Japanese art, Čiurlionis enters a new creative phase, distinguished by his use of arabesque shapes, sinuous lines, calligraphy, and other formal elements associated with the art of East Asia. Characteristic features of Chinese and Japanese art traditions become even more prevalent later, in the third or Sonata period of Čiurlionis's painting, as he discovers novel approaches to composition and perspective, as he turns to a more muted palette. The bright colors of earlier periods give way to soft illumination and diffused light, as if seen through mists or fog. Themes are developed within a limited color range. He uses tempera and pastels on paper, alone or in combination, to achieve gently contoured modeling, pure tones and halftones, a subdued decorative quality, sensitive relationships between flowing forms and delicate linear structures. Bare surfaces, laden with great symbolic meaning, appear in his canvases. Scenes are often depicted from an aerial view. His cycles of paintings migrate through the dimensions of space and time in constant transformation.

In Čiurlionis's oeuvre, the most prominent genre is the landscape, but it is not the sort of naturalistic and neo-Romantic landscape of the Western tradition that mimics reality. Čiurlionis steadily moves toward depicting a landscape as it is perceived in the artist's mind, interpreting it metaphorically, as in the East Asian aesthetic. He summons up the metaphysical meanings of the natural world, which is no longer a physical, but rather an ideal reality, rooted in his subjective consciousness. He espouses the poetry of the primeval beauty and harmony of nature devoid of human presence. Čiurlionis sees the landscape as a natural all-encompassing system, closely connected with the orderly structure of the cosmos, as do the masters of East Asian painting.

In his canvases, precipitous towering jagged mountains, gracefully soaring wooden spans, mirror-like waters, tiny skiffs, nets, oversized storm-tossed trees, a proliferation of plants, flowers, fluttering butterflies, and other motifs typically found on Japanese sliding doors and folding screens appear with greater frequency. The growing influence of East Asian painting is evidenced by his detailed studies of Hiroshige's landscapes and of Hokusai's *The Great Wave of Kanagawa*. The latter work is reinterpreted in Čiurlionis's *Sonata of the Sea*. Finale, but here it is the restrained and refined form, muted tones, and internal artistry of the great Chinese and Japanese landscape tradition, as it was preserved in the work of Hokusai and Hiroshige, that takes precedence over the bold lines and intense color that typify the style of ukiyo-e etchings.

Further undeniable proof of the East Asian connection is provided by the *Summer Sonata. Allegro* (1908), a work grounded in the aesthetics of the East, but to date not yet afforded a closer look by art scholars. Clearly distinguishable in the distant background is a typical Far Eastern landscape of steep mountain silhouettes, expansive waters, islands, and sailing junks. The painting stands out with its subtle color scheme, so characteristic of East Asian landscapes, and its sensitive graphic lines. This, as well as the aforementioned painting inspired by Hokusai's well-known work, is signed with the artist's initials MKC. Even the signature is stylized like an ideogram, and its placement is precisely in the accustomed spot chosen by Chinese and Japanese painters. Is this mere coincidence?

These two mature paintings, the only ones that bear the signature of the painter, and in which one recognizes obvious references to East Asian art, speak eloquently of the new aesthetic coordinates of his Sonata period. Aside from the instances mentioned above, direct allusions to East Asian art can be found in other paintings of this period as well. For example, in *Sonata of the Sun. Scherzo*, there are depictions of mountains and of connecting bridges, together with areas of water and ornamental repetitive motifs of flowers and butterflies. In *Spring Sonata. Scherzo*, we see the motif of powerful torrents of rain, so prevalent in Japanese landscapes and etchings. In *Sonata of the Serpent. Scherzo*, images of smooth waters and of decorative butterflies are rendered in a transparent painting style and a subtle muted color palette. In *Sonata of the Serpent. Allegro*, bridges and aqueducts stretch across far-reaching waters.

Lacking reliable sources, it is difficult to say who, out of the entire range of Chinese and Japanese painters, exerted the greatest influence on Čiurlionis. Similar motifs can be found in the work of the Chinese painters Mu Qi (Mu Ch'i), Xia Gui (Hsia Kuei), Li Cheng, Ni Zan (Ni Tsan), Ma Yuan, and Ma Lin, as well as the Japanese painters Shūbun, Shukō, Sesshū, Hokusai, and Hiroshige. Added to this list, we have the many followers of the various influential schools of painting, including the Chinese wenrenhua, and the Japanese *haiga*, *bunjinga* (nanga), and *ukiyo-e* schools.

The fundamental principles of Čiurlionis's worldview and his creative thought constitute another link with East Asian traditions. Foremost is his universality, which manifested itself both in the broad range of his creative activity and in his pursuits to achieve a synthesis of the arts. His multifaceted and innovative being discovered the path to self-expression in painting, literature, as well as music, which he never abandoned, contrary to popular view. Typically, he also devoted his time to philosophical reflection.

Indeed, the great masters of East Asian painting, among them Wang Wei, Mi Fu, Su Shih, Ikkyū Sōjun, Shūbun, Sesshū, Shukō, Taiga, Buson, and Gyokudō, were, like Čiurlionis, protean individuals, who concurrently worked in more than one branch of the arts. Moreover, Čiurlionis's universality enabled him to overstep the boundaries of narrowly construed aesthetic principles, concepts, and artistic styles, as he successfully incorporated their positive elements into a universal system of aesthetics. He transitioned naturally from one art form to the expressive means of another.

Interests and traits seen as exemplifying artists of East Asia also describe Čiurlionis's personality and views. He was a man of conscience, had a passion for new ideas, sought perfection, and was never satisfied with the results he achieved. He was sensitive and easily wounded. He extolled spiritual values. He was filled with dignity, understood the worth of his creative work, and stood firm in his ethical and humanistic principles. His conviction that a creative individual, in essence, can never attain a state of completeness was the basis for his selfcriticism.

He shared the belief of East Asian painters that the human creative process is an iteration of the creative model of the universe, to which only a good and pure individual can aspire. Also, similarly, he subscribed to a poetic view of solitude. "Solitude," he asserts, "is a great teacher and a friend."¹

According to Čiurlionis's sister, their father spoke to them about his frequent walks in the woods, along streams and lakes, listening to bird calls, observing the habits of animals and fish. His love of nature in all its manifestations, as well as his penchant for wandering through the forests of Dzūkija, delighting in their rare beauty, was passed down to all of his children, especially to Konstantinas, the eldest. Nature to Čiurlionis was a real being, just as it was to painters of the East. To him, the color green is a symbol of living nature, and in his writings the concept of greenness arises from the depths of his subconscious. He feels a constant yearning for the embrace and harmony of greenness.

"An uncultivated person, as he observes the beauties of nature that surround him," writes Čiurlionis in his article "*Lietuvių dailės paroda*" (Exhibit of Lithuanian Art):

does not express his pleasure audibly, as do the so-called intelligentsia at every opportunity, but that does not mean that this person does not feel the beauty of the rising and setting sun, that he does not distinguish the bright rainbow from the heavy cloud, the roar of the stream from the chirping of the birds, the rumbling of distant thunder from the mysterious and profound tales of the forest that is dark with age. The rustic man listens and looks quietly and does not need to be told how beautiful it is. He understands that on his own. And he does take pleasure in nature, but he does it in his own way: he crafts songs, which contain all within, all the riches of nature's beauty – observed, described, and named in intimate terms...²

Characteristic of Čiurlionis, and of many East Asian masters of painting, is a painful awareness of the relentless passage of time, a particular emotional neediness, a clear differentiation between what is true existence and what is not, a continuing pursuit of the meaning of life that was already evident in the early years of his artistic development. In 1902, in Leipzig, he writes:

Everything perishes and passes. The future has turned into the past, and what do we find there—rot, foolishness. So much is said and contemplated about life. Life... Oh! Life... Where is it? Show me. Is this then life? What is it worth? The most beautiful ideas will resonate for a while in the air, people will listen and listen, praise them, even put them to memory, while swinish life drags along according to its own rules. We are constantly saying something, doing something. So many words! They are representations of various noble and beautiful things... Where are those things? Do we, in fact, live a double existence: one hideous— reality, and the other, the beautiful and noble one—

only in words, in the air? Why is it that one cannot live only in that other life? Why is it so elusive? What is it that I want? I want to be different, I want things to be different. I want a different life. I don't know the road to get there.³

Later, after he finds his artistic calling, Čiurlionis apparently turns into the classic introvert, for whom true existence is inseparable from complete dedication to one's art. In this respect, he is similar to the neo-Daoists, the disciples of the Chan and Zen aesthetic, who formed the Chinese fengliu (wind and stream), wenrenhua (literati), and the Japanese haiga, zenga, and bunjinga schools. These artists, who advocated the ideology of the Way of art, i.e., the dedication of life to art, rejected titles and all material trappings of everyday existence in order to give their lives over to art, to the contemplation of nature's beauty and to the apprehension of its meaning.

In East Asian cultures, art is often elevated above other areas of spiritual pursuit and assumes a religious and philosophical function. As an expression of the deepest impulses, ideas, and emotions of the human spirit, art leads toward knowledge of the mysteries of nature and the universe. It is noteworthy that the Chinese and Japanese masters of landscape painting conceived the cosmos as "living reality." The primary purpose of painting is to genuinely convey the flight of the artist's spirit and the life pulse of every depicted object. Furthermore, the artist must enter into the rhythms of the universe and allow them to spread through his body as he creates. If the painter is able to enter into the spirit of the represented object and convey the creator's spiritual energy, then he is worthy of being called an artist.

Thus the painter should reveal not the external but, rather, the internal essence of the painted object or phenomenon. Čiurlionis rejects the premise prevalent in the West that an extreme and irreconcilable dichotomy exists between spirit and matter, the divine and the human, the ideal and the real, beauty and ugliness, and so on. Through his art, he seeks to emphasize the unity and harmony of opposites. He develops his own concept of the antithesis of the spirit and the material transitory world. By involving himself in the object of his artistic creation and by removing himself from the external world, he not only conveys the idea of a harmonious and ineffable universe, but he also captures inner reality – the consistent flow of actual pure states of consciousness.

The works of Čiurlionis are, similarly to those of the followers of the Daoist, Chan, and Zen art aesthetic, "paintings of the mind" that reveal the artist's intimate communion with nature and his receptiveness to its rhythms and constant transformations. Of foremost importance is an intuitive understanding of reality and the pursuit of poetically expressed simplicity. Alien to the art of Čiurlionis and of the East is the ancient world's idea of mimesis, i.e., the mimicking of the external world, the imitation and slavish copying of reality. The essential concept of his creative work involves the principles of Eastern contemplation and meditation, that is, inner sight, which explains the archetypal character of many of Čiurlionis's visions, the depth and metaphoric quality of his pictures.

"Paintings of the mind" demand from the viewer an active intellectual effort, emotional involvement, even a peculiar sort of meditation that encourages further reflection. It is as if the artist, through his paintings, urges the viewer to enter into a world of symbols and to actively experience a personal relationship with the depicted object, to approach the creator's spiritual state. The viewer must be worthy of the creative efforts that the painter has undertaken to transform primordial chaos into harmony. To the masters of East Asian landscape painting, the highest criterion for judging a genuine work of art is the work's ability to make the viewer think. Čiurlionis apparently shares this view, because his "mind paintings" typically tend toward conditionality, symbolic thought, and stylization of the depicted phenomena.

Even though Čiurlionis develops his visual structures consistently, in many of his paintings we find incomplete statements, aesthetic allusions, and an unfinished quality typical of East Asian painting. For Čiurlionis, it was more important to suggest an idea and to grasp its essence than to achieve its realization. This explains why many of his art, music, and literary works seem to have been left unfinished. However, on the other hand, one might regard this trait as a deliberate conceptual principle – in the incomplete statement and in the aesthetic allusion Čiurlionis sees the source of all things and the powerful potential of existence. Bare picture surfaces for Čiurlionis, and for East Asian painters, become a meaningful spiritualized meditational reality, an inner gravity, the incomplete state of the spirit, a pause, silence. Čiurlionis also actively used the emotional power of emptiness and of blank space to achieve harmony with other visual structures in the painting and thus ensure the integrity of his compositional solutions. This is thoughtful painting that requires emotional involvement, deeper reflection, the gradual apprehension of the assembled parts of a work, and later – the interpretation of the entire compositional unit.

Čiurlionis's worldview and oeuvre are steeped in pantheism and the idea that man is one with the world around him. The stimulus for many of his works was close attention to the mysterious ciphers of nature and close observation of nature's physical phenomena. It is here that the artist's affinity with the aesthetic of East Asian painting comes more clearly into view, especially where the relationship of man and nature is described in terms of unity and harmony. In traditional Western art, the primary focus is on man and his dominance over nature. In contrast, the human form in Čiurlionis's paintings, as in traditional East Asian art, is, for the most part, insignificant. Man is regarded as an organic part of nature, enmeshed in the elemental indivisible processes of the universe within the endless stream of life's transformations.

This cosmic universality, in which the self melds into nature's boundlessness, encompasses Eastern ideas of man's temporary existence and the principle of ineffability. Objects depicted in paintings obey the regular rhythms of nature; the illusory and transitory nature of human life is juxtaposed with the sublime eternity of the cosmos and nature. We find this viewpoint in *The Zodiac* cycle (1907), which followed a prolonged period of immersion in Eastern mythology. The marked

ornamentation, sophisticated color palette, and terse forms that predominate here are later further developed in *Sonata of the Stars* (1908) and the majestic *Rex* (1909).

The Poetry of Space and Eternity

To Čiurlionis, as to the masters of landscape painting, a heightened sense of space and immeasurable distance are among the most important elements of a landscape. The diptych *Sorrow* (1906-1907), quite reminiscent of the minimalist landscapes of the Chan painters, was the first noteworthy work from this standpoint and served as a sort of transition to his later *Sonata* period in terms of its treatment of space, as well as its color palette and gentle lines.

When, in 1908, the painter began to show obvious interest in East Asian landscape painting, he was drawn to its evocative use of space and to its attempt to convey the effect of the limitless reaches of the cosmos. Space is the cornerstone of his mature painting aesthetic. It is the basic element that fundamentally separates Čiurlionis from contemporary Western painters and closely associates him with the tradition of Far Eastern landscape painting. His early enchantment with nature's metamorphoses, which he rendered poetically, gradually progresses toward an intense study of nature. In these later works, we see how he emphasized details that convey space and depth and how he made masterful use of foreground and background to achieve the clarity of atmosphere typical of East Asian painting (*Summer II*, 1907-1908). *The Zodiac* cycle may be considered a peculiar hymn to space. The significance of space in Čiurlionis's works was first noted by V. Chudovsky. "Space," he wrote, "is the primordial element in Čiurlionis's art; it is the possibility of being. Space is the potential for life. For Čiurlionis, empty space, just like broad expanses, represented a real depicted phenomenon, similar to mass or materiality for other artists. He was the brilliant herald of untapped possibilities."⁴

The first painters to address the problems of space and distance were the great masters of Chinese landscape painting Tsung Ping (375–443) and Wang Wei (415–443) of the Yin dynasty. The leading figure of the Tang dynasty, also named Wang Wei (699–756), established new principles of spatial perspective and made further strides toward achieving the illusion of spatial depth.

The concept of landscape painting they created was further developed by the great masters of the Chinese Song and Yuan dynasties and the Japanese Muromachi and Momoyama periods of painting. Central to the concept that they introduced was the idea of the shifting perspective, characteristic of later East Asian landscape painting and especially the neo-Daoist, Chan, and Zen traditions. This idea of movement within the pictorial space, both within the physical boundaries of the picture plane, as well as the space beyond, is typical of Čiurlionis's painting cycles, where the viewer is allowed to wander freely within the expanse of the visible landscapes, to move across hills, woods, roads, and paths.

Furthermore, connected with the East Asian aesthetic of space that extends in all directions, is the rule that a painting, being an organic part of natural and universal harmony, may not have a delimiting physical frame, which would be counter to the concept of its integral existence within the uninterrupted stream of life's transformations. Westerners, on the other hand, observed the world as if looking through an open door or window. With its emphasis on optics and scientific knowledge since the days of Leonardo da Vinci, Western painting sought to have nature serve science and man, while East Asian painting, suffused with infinite respect for nature untouched by man, sought to preserve the primordial sacred beauty and nobility of nature. The Western concept of a single perspective seemingly circumscribed space and the physical fragment of the visible world within a rigid frame.

East Asian painters, even though they possessed an understanding of the Western concept of perspective as early as the eighteenth century, adhered to the predominant view of the East, which emphasized the preeminence of a perspective that allowed for panoramic space and multiple vanishing points. There is no doubt that Čiurlionis's mature work is rooted in the East Asian concept. This is easily confirmed by a close analysis of the paintings *Summer II* (1907-1908), *Summer Sonata Allegro* and *Andante* (1908), *Sonata of the Pyramids Allegro* and *Scherzo* (1909), and many others. Here, Čiurlionis has employed the panoramic perspective of a bird's-eye view that is so characteristic of East Asian landscape painting. Even though the flat and even Lithuanian countryside mitigates the effect of the shifting perspective and the depiction of the world from an aerial view, nonetheless Čiurlionis succeeds in eliminating the boundaries to space that are created by the picture frame, because the viewer's imagination is able to roam beyond the visible world or landscape. This is clearly seen in *Hymn* (1906-1907), *City Prelude* (1908-1909), *Angel Prelude* (1908-1909), *Sonata of the Pyramids Allegro* (1908), *Altar* (1909), and many other works.

In classical Western art, compositional unity is achieved by emphasizing the balance of the various components of the painting in reference to its compositional axis. The entrenchment of balance and symmetry determined the static character of classic Western art. East Asian painters and the mature Čiurlionis (with the exception of his *Rex*, 1909) are attracted to an asymmetrical composition, the natural disturbance of balance that liberates the artist's creativity and nourishes the imagination. This approach achieves greater dynamism, powerful emotional responses, and is effective as structures are developed within the dimension of artistic time.

Like the great masters of Chinese and Japanese landscape painting (Ma Yuan, Ma Lin, Xia Gui, Ni Zan, Wu Chien, Shūbun, and Sesshū), Čiurlionis applied the universality of his creative talents, which included music composition, to the pursuit of musicality in painting, focusing his attention on the natural rhythms of the world rather than on the represented object. As a result, the visual structures of Čiurlionis's *Sonata* paintings offer the experience of moving, not only through

space, but also through time, as in music and literature. In East Asian scrolls and cyclical paintings, which often depict the change of seasons, the images that are conceived within the dimension of time move from right to left. In Čiurlionis's cycles, the direction is from left to right, but in both instances, the process of comprehension is the same: the part or segment of the cycle that is comprehended by the mind is limited only in terms of what is capable of being grasped by the viewer's field of vision and by the mental process of contemplation.

This temporal principle of musical composition enables the painter to draw the viewer unawares into the process of comprehending the creative work and to pull him along. He reveals to the viewer the most mysterious flights of the spirit and urges him into dialogue with the ideas, moods, and emotional experiences being revealed. He speeds up and slows down the progression, as required by the visual suggestiveness of the painting in the cycle as well as by the significance of the main themes and leitmotifs being developed, concentrating or diluting their effect. This involvement in the world of the images and symbols found in many of the Sonata period cycles reminds one of the systematic exposition of themes and the development of motifs within the realm of music, all of which are experienced by the listener within the dimension of time. Indeed, many of Čiurlionis's Sonata period works, as well as many East Asian landscape painting cycles (e.g., Sesshū's *Landscape of the Four Seasons*), seem to follow the musical model of thematic exposition, development, and recapitulation, while some others, as if works of drama, have a clearly expressed climax.

A consistent exposition of the main themes and leitmotifs in the various paintings of a cycle is necessary in order to prepare the viewer psychologically. Through his involvement in this manner, the viewer is able to "read" the work as an integrated whole and evaluate it in terms of its aesthetic characteristics, symbolic meanings, unexpected twists in ideas, the introduction of new motifs, and masterful formal solutions. This "reading" occurs independently, regardless of the importance of the depicted images, of their meaningful content, of a work's complexity or simplicity. If the viewer wishes to experience a cycle's subtleties, he must do so sequentially, going from painting to painting, according to the painter's programmed span of time, which operates according to its own rules of subjective comprehension, without regard to the objective passage of time.

Čiurlionis cleverly uses the horizontal line to link individual paintings in a cycle, a common device in East Asian painting. In *Raigardas*, it is a rivulet snaking its way through the three sections of the triptych. In *Sonata of the Stars*, it is the decorative ribbon of the starry path. Furthermore, the integrity of the component parts of the cycles is achieved, not through an obvious coordination of depicted motifs or color relationships, but rather through the use of a uniform color scheme, asymmetrical composition, ornamental details that repeat rhythmically, and the powerful emotional effect of blank space. Pauses and bare surfaces of the painting here acquire a special significance, because they emphasize the meditational character of the painting. The lithe musical line and the repetition of ornamental dynamic flowing shapes not only have a rhythmic purpose, but also help to develop the main themes and motifs within the sections that constitute the thematic exposition, climax, or resolution. At the same time, each section of the cycle has its own unique color range and spiritual mood that characterizes it alone. As in East Asian art, the cycle frequently ends with an ostentatious motif full of energy and vitality, much like a rousing musical chord that introduces the finale.

Conclusion

The connection of Čiurlionis's painting with East Asian traditions is undeniable. The refined aesthetic of East Asian art that replaced the Orientalism of his early literary, psychological symbolism led him to essentially new approaches in formal artistic technique and style. Indeed, Čiurlionis's familiarity with East Asian landscape painting had a huge, perhaps determinative, influence on the development of the musical painting style of his mature Sonata period.

East Asian philosophical thought informed his worldview and creative ideas. Painting to him, as to Chan and Zen painters, was prayer, contemplation, evocation, spontaneity, and the liberation of the spirit. The scale of objects and the point of reference for his art came from nature rather than from man. The constantly changing beauty of everyday nature is a theme in many of Čiurlionis's works. In his pantheism, nature is the primary object of the painter's contemplation and the source of his inspiration. Man's role is to engage in an intimate passive relationship with nature through observation and meditation.

Furthermore, East Asian concepts galvanized Čiurlionis's universality and his views on the synthesis of the arts, his exaltation of immeasurable space and aerial perspective, the non finito principle and bare picture surfaces, symbolic painting, and the poetry of simplicity. Chinese and Japanese art traditions are reflected in his solutions to problems of artistic composition, in his refined sense of color, his use of decorative arabesque shapes, graphic elements, calligraphy, and other formal stylistic features that characterize his oeuvre.

Most significantly, in many of Čiurlionis's works, as in East Asian landscape painting, the structures often unfold not only within the dimension of space but also in time. His Sonata paintings bear a close resemblance to musical counterpoint in terms of their compositional and plastic elements. They are based on a musical temporal principle that involves the development of main themes, leitmotifs, linear structures, and fluid shapes. Of great significance is the ornamental quality of sinuous lines and calligraphy, the dynamic repetition of stylized shapes, the rhythmic acceleration and diminution, all of which convey "musicality."

Having experienced the powerful effect of the East Asian landscape, Čiurlionis, as a painter, was not concerned with the interplay of form, space, and rhythmic structures in and of themselves. Rather, he consistently focused his creative will on resolving the complex problems of the synthesis of the arts. Čiurlionis was especially successful in realizing the goal of musical painting when he was able to integrate a suitable graphic-plastic approach with the specific requirements of representational art. Many of the late paintings of the Sonata period are distinguished by their masterful plastic language, their subtle gradation of tones and halftones. It is due to its grounding in the East Asian aesthetic that Čiurlionis's Sonata style of painting achieved its highly refined means of expression and remarkably sensitive relationships of color and form. Čiurlionis's Sonata of the Sea is, undoubtedly, one of the finest examples of the interaction of music and painting in the entire history of art.

Translated and edited by Birutė Vaičjurgis Šležas

Notes:

- 1 Čiurlionis, *Laiškai Sofijai*, V, 50.
- 2 Čiurlionis, *Apie muziką*, 279.
- 3 Ibid., 151–152.
- 4 Чюдовский, “Н.К.Чурлянис,” 53.

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