

# Spring pictures

## The asymmetric art of William Empson

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Very few people know that in addition to his better-remembered activities as a poet, literary critic and philosopher, William Empson was a painter of some talent. Only one of his canvases has survived – a rendering in oils of a Japanese springtime scene featuring a nude female figure walking beneath blossoming cherry trees. It has come to light just as another recently discovered work by Empson – his long-lost book on Asian art, *The Face of the Buddha* – is being prepared for its first publication. The two finds illuminate each other in a number of fascinating ways.

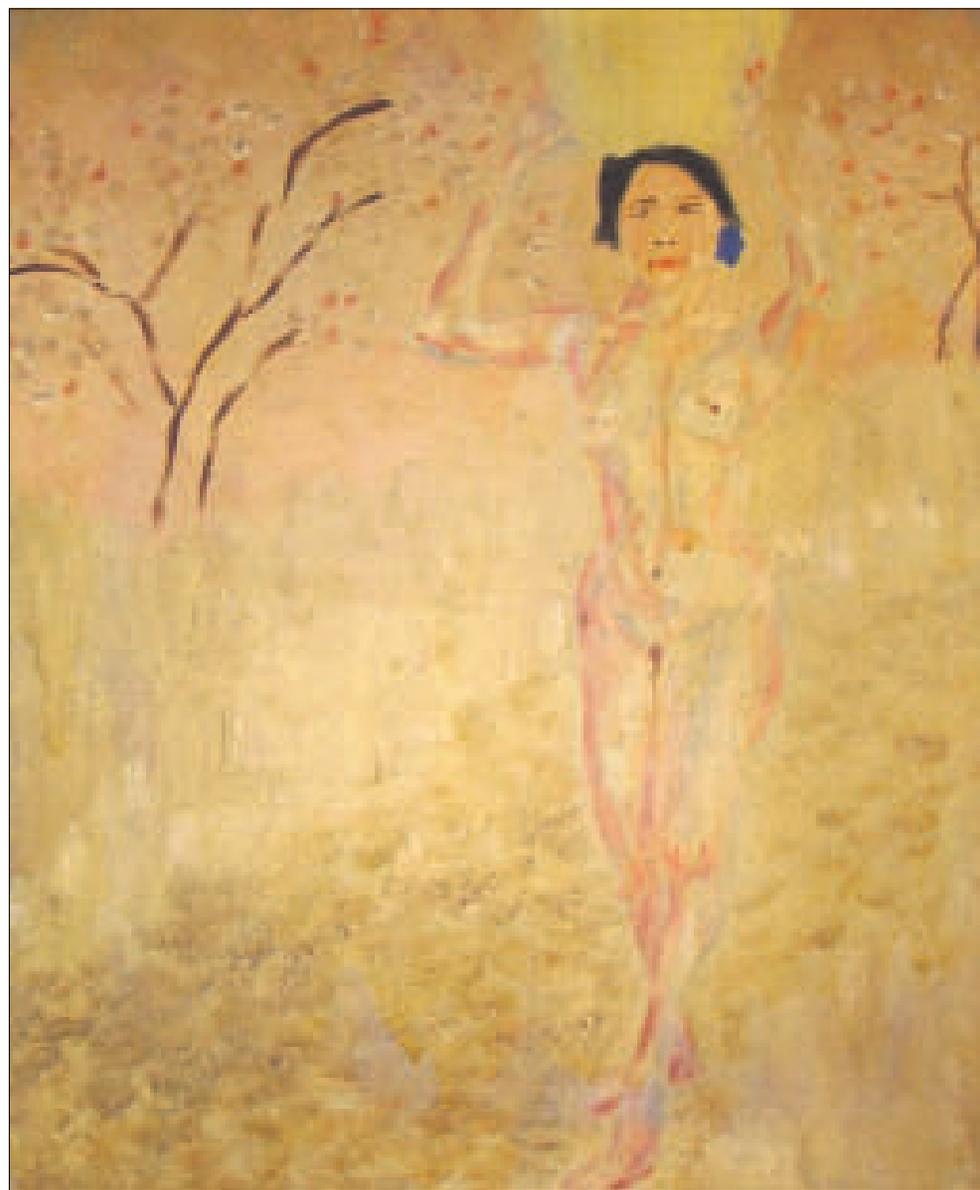
Empson must have painted the canvas, which is known to his family only as William's Painting, while he was lecturing in Tokyo during the early 1930s. It is the only time in his life when he is known to have taken art lessons, and a lot can be learned about the painting from a look at the interests of his teacher. Marjorie Nishiwaki, née Biddle, was a British artist who had married the Japanese Modernist poet Nishiwaki Junzaburo, who was also Editor of a seminal journal dedicated to Surrealism. Despite the very contemporary tastes of her husband with regard to art, Marjorie was an unrepentant disciple of Matisse in his post-1905 Fauvist phase, and liked to paint women on the beach near her Kamakura home in homage to the French painter's endless parade of frolicking bathers.

You can see the influence of Matisse, working through Marjorie, in Empson's loose and expressionistic brushwork, in the use of unmixed colour applied direct from the tube, and in the areas of primed canvas that have deliberately been left exposed. Marjorie also knew that the "Japaneseness" of Matisse, most evident in compositions such as the Courtauld's "Femme au Kimono", had come courtesy of his celebrated collection of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. Her own work incorporates standard borrowings from Hokusai and Hiroshige such as perspective lines that obliquely intersect the plane of the picture – a feature that may be seen carried over into the steepness of Empson's path as it slices towards the viewer with purposeful abruptness.

In the main, though, Empson had little time for *ukiyo-e* prints, considering them to offer the rest of the world as jaded a view of Japan as Lafcadio Hearn's ubiquitous ghost stories. He even went as far as to advise the novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner to delay a proposed visit until the middle of winter, as "it's only then that the country isn't irritatingly like Japanese prints". When it came to visual art generally, in fact, classical Buddhist sculpture was the only genre that held any real attraction for Empson. "The Buddhas are the only accessible art that I find myself able to care about", he wrote from Japan to his friend John Hayward, and it was ostensibly to record his impressions of them that he was learning to paint and draw.

His interest in sculpture had begun in earnest during a visit to Nara, Japan's capital during the eighth century, in the spring of 1932. The city's vast temple complexes are home to the earliest examples of Buddhist art in the country. "He seems to have been bowled over by Nara", noted Dorothy Richards, the wife of Empson's erstwhile mentor I. A. Richards, the next time she saw him. For his part, Empson told Sylvia Townsend Warner that

"the Nara Buddhas are really worth coming here to see . . . the early ones feel as if everything was ready for an immense intellectual achievement which suddenly died". Ever suspicious of organized religion, he was talking about the point in Japanese history where Buddhism was transformed from a personal philosophy, of interest only to the country's cultural elite, into a full-blown state theology.



William's Painting, 1933-4

Most of the early "Buddhas" that Empson admired in Nara were actually images of Bodhisattvas – essentially enlightened "saints" whose mythological role is to assist others in attaining spiritual liberation. One of the most famous of these, a slender seventh-century piece in gilded camphor wood known as the Kudara Kannon, led him to an important realization. "It is clear that mouth, eye, and eyebrows are a bit steeper on the right", he wrote later. "The good humour and maternity of the face, rueful but amiable, belong to the left; on the right is the divinity, a birdlike unchanging wakefulness."

By the time he visited China the following year, tracking down new examples of Buddhist sculpture had become his main justification for travelling. "Peking very good in more ways than one, but no Buddhas of any merit", he noted disappointedly of the nation's capital. Fortunately, he was able to take the train from there up to the ancient caves of Yungang, where he found carved faces that seemed to prefigure the asymmetry he had detected in Nara. A great deal of the attractiveness of such artworks, he decided, "comes from their combining things that

seem incompatible, especially a complete repose or detachment with an active power to help the worshipper . . . the two qualities were largely separated onto the two sides of the face". The fact that Nara's Kudara Kannon was reputed to have come from Korea led Empson there too in search of further evidence for his theory. He found several pieces in Seoul that fitted it perfectly, but the famous granite Buddha at Seokguram, with its rigorously balanced visage, was an annoying exception. Empson thought it looked like a giant slug.

Taking his cue from recent publications on

the psychological implications of facial asymmetry, Empson began to make photographs that combined particular sides of sculptures' faces with their mirror images, producing what he called "left-left" and "right-right" combinations. "You need a film, not a plate negative", he noted, "because you have to print it backwards." Thinking of the Yungang sculptures in particular, he remembered seeing large numbers of heads, recently

hacked off (very wickedly) for private sale, and there are plenty of them on view, nearly always with their expression of ironical and forceful politeness. But if you make a picture with the left side twice over it has hardly any of this expression. The eye and the mouth are level and the face is calm and still. On the right the eye and mouth slant, and this gives the sardonic quality; in fact, if you take it twice over the thing approaches the standard European face of the Devil.

The manuscript that would develop into *The Face of the Buddha* was already well under way. "I have smacked out a lot of words on my typewriter about Far Eastern Buddhas", he told Richards the autumn after his return from China, mentioning also the art lessons he was continuing to take with Marjorie Nishiwaki, "mainly in the hope of getting to understand faces." Because of the photographic experiments, he had begun to imagine the faces of Buddhist sculptures as a kind of schematic diagram, treating the precise angles to be given to the features on different sides as an obsessive mathematical puzzle. Even three years later in the Rhône-Alpes, a place very distant from any examples of Buddhist sculpture, a skiing companion would recall that Empson "drew buddhas in the squared notebook he had just bought at Bourg St Maurice", instead of looking at the view like everybody else.

Judging from the small number of photographs available of her, the model for the figure in William's Painting was almost certainly Empson's Japanese girlfriend Haru, about whom little is known except for her given name. The meanings of Japanese names depend not on their pronunciation but on their spelling in kanji (classical Chinese characters), and Haru is usually written using the character that signifies "spring". The painting then, represents Haru in more ways than one.

In Japan, spring also provides a handy euphemism for matters connected with sex. Artworks featuring nudity and intercourse are traditionally nicknamed "spring pictures", and the liaison between this artist and his model was nothing if not passionate. Haru, who was employed as a nanny by the German ambassador, used to sneak out at night to sleep at Empson's house. On one occasion the two were woken by one of Tokyo's frequent earthquakes; fearing that the ambassador's offspring would also have been shaken awake, she had to get dressed and hurry back. "The thing was that being woken he would bawl / And finding her not in earshot he would know", recalls Empson's poem "Aubade", which evokes the incident.

On one level, both "Aubade" and William's Painting record the stresses and strains of conducting an intercultural love affair during what was a time of immense political uncertainty. Empson would later remember an "old hand" among the British expatriates



Empson's "left-left" image (left); Head of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva from Yungang, China, Northern Wei Dynasty, sandstone (centre); Empson's "right-right" image (right)

telling him, "don't you go and marry a Japanese because we're going to be at war with Japan within ten years; you'll have awful trouble if you marry a Japanese". A depressingly concrete illustration was very close at hand. Marjorie Nishiwaki's marriage to Junzaburo had already foundered amid the storm that was gathering between Japan and the West, and she would return to Europe a divorcee before the onset of the Second World War. "It seemed the best thing to be up and go", concedes Empson's poem about Haru, but the decision is sodden with reluctance, as in any situation where pragmatism takes the upper hand over feelings. "We have to put up with it", he later glossed the end of the poem; "we can't avoid this situation of history."

That sense of emotional ambiguity makes it almost impossible to resist applying Empson's theories on art to his own painting. Even though we are looking at a three-quarter view of the figure beneath the cherry trees, the left side of the face looms out, Picasso-like, to give a strict frontal view reminiscent of the photographs used to create Empson's right-right and left-left images. The face's sense of frontality is strongly underscored by the carefully dotted nostrils, as level and regular as an umlaut. Exactly as in Empson's appraisals of sculpture from Japan, Korea and China, the success of the artwork depends on its ability to combine "things that seem incompatible". In Buddhist sculpture, according to his theory of asymmetry, the left side of the face is supposed to represent calm detachment from the world, while the right side expresses a dynamic connection with the devotee.

If you use a business card or another straight-edged object to screen off the right side of the figure's face in William's Painting, the left side, with its soft, straight eyebrow and mouth, conveys a palpable sense of detachment – precisely the "we have to put up with it" attitude of Empson's "Aubade". The feeling is intensified by the fact that the gaze seems to be directed inwardly rather than towards you. If the left of the face is

covered up instead, the right, with its emphatically downturned mouth and contorted slash of eyebrow, confronts you with distress and even with recrimination, the eye seeming to

flash with the electricity of bared nerves.

The tension between these detached and engaged emotional states seems to have been as much an issue for Empson as it was for

Haru, at least for a few years. Back in London in 1935, he heard that she was passing through town with her new employers, a Canadian family, and called at their lodgings with such loud insistence on seeing her that they threatened to call the police. In the end the two contrived to meet several times, even managing a trip to Devon together, but that autumn she went with the family to Canada, and within two years Empson had taken up an appointment in China. The story, however, is fraught with ambiguous feelings as late as its final chapter, which does not appear until 1940. "I found a grindingly sad letter from [Haru] when I got back to England, and then lost the address", he told John Hayward then; "but maybe after all that was the best thing to do." The best thing, once again, seemed to be to up and go.

At this point the book on Buddhist sculpture that Empson had started to write in Tokyo all those years ago was beginning to take on its final form. He had travelled very extensively during his second stint in Asia, and was now able to expand the original discussion to include examples from Southern China, India, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Burma and Vietnam. In 1938, he even made a hazardous trek to view the remains of the Angkor civilization in Cambodia, imagining it to be "the only part of the world which made a success of colossal heads as a unit of architecture". Two years later, he left the finished manuscript of the book, along with the originals of the left-left and right-right images and all the other photographs he had collected in different parts of Asia, with the critic John Davenport, in the hope that he might be able to get it published. The traditional end of the story used to be that Davenport then promptly lost it in the back of a taxi, making it one of the great lost books – until it turned up, to everyone's surprise, in the archives of the British Library more than half a century later. It will be published by OUP, along with supplementary colour photographs, next year. William's Painting currently hangs in the Normandy home of Empson's eldest son, Mogador.

## [Untitled]

*i.m. P.R.*

'After the childish  
play-acting of recent years –  
the death mask cover,  
the is-he-isn't-he works  
of the "late" Peter Reading –

the actual death  
of the author comes as a  
refreshing return  
to form, the silence leaving  
no room for doubt, the loss of

consciousness stark and  
authoritative. Not for  
this Reading a fey  
parting elegy for [*Note  
to ed.: name of rare bird here*]

or yet another  
mawkish valedictory  
distich over an  
[*Ed. again: expensive French  
white wine*]. Entirely devoid

of content, dying  
suits our minimalist bard  
down to the ground. No  
shortlist of deaths of the year  
will be complete without it.

In the wise words of  
his dust jacket, this is a  
once in a lifetime  
event, the outstanding death  
of Peter Reading's career.'

DAVID WHEATLEY