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# Faith and the Sublime

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## Preface

Sublime beauty quiets our turmoil and captivates our whole being. In nature, one of God's most beautiful masterpieces, I experience the sublime. Even when I experience pain, the beauty in nature draws my heart to God and gives me faith in His omnipotence and love. For this project, I have created several paintings that portray my experience in nature as a metaphor for my journey of faith in God. My intent is that by using sublime beauty to portray my own journey of faith, my paintings will lead viewers to contemplate their own journey, however different it may be from mine.

The style and content of my series of paintings shares characteristics with the "sublime" and the "beautiful," two opposite concepts developed by Edmund Burke. The sublime strikes the human soul with awe and dark terror, while the beautiful is full of light and gives pleasure to the soul (Burke). I combine these two opposing concepts to portray my experience of faith, creating my own unique style called the "beautiful sublime." I portray sublime beauty by using similar techniques as artists of the Romantic sublime and by using characteristics of traditional Chinese watercolor paintings. However, I abandon the Romantic artists' tendency to portray dark terror, and instead focus on portraying awesome beauty. Unlike the artwork of the Romantic sublime, and unlike Chinese art, I implement in my artwork a theme of faith in God by portraying sublime beauty in nature.

## Faith and the Sublime

The “sublime” is the quality of threatening and infinite power and size that instills in us awestruck terror. Edmund Burke describes the sublime by saying, “The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature . . . is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (Landow). In nature, we experience the sublime when we experience something terrifyingly dangerous such as a furious storm or something infinitely gigantic such as a view of steep gorges stretching miles into the distance.

Traditionally, Romantic sublime artists expressed the sublime in their art through portraying stunning and terrifying scenes in nature. My artwork differs from the sublime because I add a more prominent element of beauty. Edmund Burke describes the difference between the sublime and beauty by saying,

Beauty should be smooth and polished; the great [or sublime], rugged and negligent... beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy: beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure. (Burke)

The sublime and beauty are opposites; the sublime is dark and heavy, while beauty is calming and aesthetically pleasing.

I define beauty as something from which we delay to turn our eyes because of the peace and joy that it brings us. Beauty is true, pure, and lovely. To Burke, the sublime and the beautiful are polar opposites. However, I use aspects of the sublime to portray primarily peaceful and beautiful scenes because my faith in God gives me a sense of security and hope even in dangerous or obscure situations. Because of God’s power and love, the sublime and the

beautiful, though paradoxical, can be combined. God's powerful presence in the world points to purpose and hope in life. While the Romantic sublime primarily expresses terror and chaos, the beautiful sublime looks to the sublime beauty in nature—God's creation—as a sign of God's omnipotent existence.

Artists of the Romantic sublime painted sublime scenes in nature to search for meaning amidst the irrationality, meaninglessness, and godlessness they felt in their world. Romanticism (1800–1850) was born in an environment of political unrest, danger, and death during the French Revolution, which took place from 1789–1799. The French Revolution had many causes, one of which was lower class resentment against aristocracy because of the extreme difference of poverty and privilege. Tens of thousands of citizens were murdered in the overthrow of absolute monarchies that were replaced with democracies (Hunt 7-12). The Industrial Revolution (1760–1840) allowed tedious tasks that had been done by hand to be executed by efficient machines. Slow transportation, inefficient agricultural methods, and hand-done sewing were replaced by steam powered machines, efficient agricultural methods, and textile industry machines (Landes 40). Life took on a quicker pace and less caring and personal environment.

The Enlightenment (1685–1815) was an era during which philosophers and scientists stressed ideas such as rationality, reason and science as primary authorities of thought instead of faith and traditional doctrine. Ideas from the Enlightenment caused people to see rational explanations for the existence of the universe, prompting them to question their faith in God and their sense of meaning and purpose. As a reaction against the overbearing rationalism of the Enlightenment, Romanticism emphasized intuition and the supernatural. It is true that much Romantic sublime artwork is stunningly beautiful and peaceful. But because artists of the

Romantic sublime were desperately trying to find meaning in their terrifying, irrational, and seemingly godless world, terror and darkness are dominant aspects of their paintings.

Painters of the Romantic sublime found ingenious approaches to portraying terror and darkness. In his article “The Abstract Sublime,” art critic and historian Robert Rosenblum identified four techniques that Romantic painters used to convey the sublime. The first technique is large dimensions, the second is mystery and complexity, the third is infinite boundlessness, and the fourth is dynamic and uncontainable energy. Rosenblum gave examples of how several artists of the Romantic sublime used these techniques. To explain these four techniques that Rosenblum wrote about, I will describe *Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (1834, Philadelphia Museum of Art), a painting created by JMW Turner, who was an artist of the Romantic sublime.



In *Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons*, viewers see the first technique in the large dimensions of the painting, which is 48.5 inches by 36.3 inches. Large paintings instill a sense of awe in viewers, as well as allow viewers to “experience” the action going on in the painting. In this particular painting, viewers feel as though they are part of the crowd watching the horrifying fire.

Turner used the second technique—mystery and complexity—in the ambiguity of the people’s faces, the buildings, and the sky. Viewers must struggle to make out the expressions on the people’s darkened faces, but can guess that the people are wearing looks of horror and fear. It is difficult to determine what the dark masses in the water could be, but they seem to be boats carrying people desperately rowing across the water to attempt to fight the fire. Viewers recognize only parts of the distant buildings partially lit up by the fire. The separation between fire and smoke, clouds and sky is indistinguishable. The mysterious ambiguity that Turner used in the painting forces viewers to search for details to recognize, which causes viewers to notice complexity in the details of the painting and to think about the catastrophe Turner portrayed. Mystery evokes in the viewer a sense of fear and the unknown.

Turner used the third technique, infinite boundless size, by portraying an overwhelmingly huge fire that consumes tiny, vulnerable buildings. By using perspective to portray a huge bridge that appears smaller as it recedes far into the distance, Turner makes the fire seem even larger. Viewers realize that the buildings, if seen from a far distance, must be large. The ominous fire sends an expansive reflection across the water. The sky is huge and full of clouds of smoke that extend indefinitely off the edges of the painting.

Turner used the fourth technique, uncontrollable energy, by painting the fire in beautiful yet horrifying colors of red, orange, and yellow that accentuate the intense power of the fire.

Turner's blurred and splattered brushstrokes portray the fast and powerful movement of the fire—an uncontrollable force of nature. At the top of the painting appear tiny orange and white specks of ash creeping forward, touching even life that is far away from the fire. Turner used these four techniques, which are found in many other Romantic sublime paintings, to evoke the terror of the fire.

Chinese watercolor artists portrayed the sublime by using similar techniques as the artists of the Romantic sublime. Traditional Chinese watercolor painters depict epic landscapes that strike the viewer with sublime awe. The dimensions of Chinese watercolor paintings are often very large, a characteristic we see in Romantic sublime art. The simple and concise brushstrokes in Chinese watercolor paintings contribute a sense of mystery, which is another important aspect of Romantic sublime art. We see mystery in the large, empty spaces of Chinese watercolor painting where no brushstrokes are applied. Other parts of a painting may contain complex detail. The balanced presence and absence of detail in varying parts of the composition gives the paintings a sense of mystery and complexity—characteristics shared by artwork of the Romantic sublime. *Wenrenhau*, also known as Chinese literati painting, is a style of Chinese watercolor painting that particularly expresses the sublime. Literati paintings emphasize personal expression rather than literal representation and surface beauty. Literati paintings often depict huge mountainous scenery, valleys or bodies of water.



Chinese master painter Huang Gongwang's well-known painting *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (1350, Zhejiang Provincial Museum), also known as *The Master Wuyong Scroll*, is a prime example of a Chinese literati painting that portrays the sublime using techniques of artists of the Romantic sublime. *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* is over a foot tall and almost twelve feet long. The stunning length of the painting seems to continue eternally. Gongwang used atmospheric perspective, making the landscape foggier and fainter as it continues infinitely into the distance. Large dimensions and eternal qualities are prominent features of Romantic sublime art.

The first section of the scroll, called *The Remaining Mountain*, contains a sublimely epic composition. An unfathomably large mountain flanks a vast and peaceful sea, the horizon of which continues boundlessly off the edge of the painting—a feature shared with Romantic sublime paintings. Distinctive to Chinese art, the water and sky are implied by unpainted sections of the composition, which provide space for the viewer's eyes to rest. Some parts of the painting are simple, with single brushstrokes representing an entire mountain or tree. This concise simplicity contributes to the sublime mystery of the painting and lends viewers the opportunity to interpret what they will. Other parts of the painting are detailed, with infinitesimally small



houses nestled among trees that look like toothpicks compared to the enormous mountain on which they sit. Complex details in the rocks make the boulder-like mountain appear still more massive. The small details contrast with the proportionately gigantic landforms in a similar way to Romantic sublime landscape paintings. Steep, almost vertical mountains form islands rising unexpectedly out of the peaceful water. They appear to be dormant volcanoes that once erupted, spewing violent torrents of fiery lava. The striking contrast between the cataclysmic past event we imagine and the peaceful environment we see evokes a strong sense of the sublime. Both Chinese watercolor painters and painters of the Romantic sublime convey the sublime by portraying nature's boundless and terrifying power.

Chinese watercolor paintings instill in viewers a sense of awe *and* emphasize beauty, which is how my style of the beautiful sublime has been influenced by Chinese art. Chinese art differs from Western art in that Western artists, including artists of the Romantic sublime, use many brushstrokes to thoroughly define their subject, while Chinese artists use few and simple brushstrokes to loosely define their subject. Chinese artists portray beauty by using delicate, transparent washes of watercolor; generally faint, de-saturated colors that relax viewers' eyes; and gentle, flowing lines in the contours of the subject painted.

My style of the beautiful sublime combines the styles of both the Romantic sublime and Chinese watercolor paintings. Some parts of my paintings are complex and thoroughly defined, while other parts contain few and simple brushstrokes. As in Romantic sublime art and Chinese art, I portrayed the sublime by creating large paintings to instill a sense of awe; painting fog, de-saturated colors, and loosely define subjects to evoke mystery; using huge mountains and distance in perspective to depict infinite boundlessness; and portraying the ocean or large clouds

to give a sense of vast and uncontainable energy. To illustrate what I mean, I will use two of my paintings as examples.



(*Starlight Lane*, 30" x 22," watercolor)

*Starlight Lane* is a watercolor painting that aptly embodies my use of the techniques that artists of the Romantic sublime and Chinese watercolor artists used to convey the sublime.

*Starlight Lane* illustrates my attempt to use the beautiful sublime to portray my faith in God. I employed the first technique of the Romantic sublime by using relatively large dimensions. In *Starlight Lane*, I used large dimensions—30 inches by 22 inches—to evoke the sublime. I applied the second technique, mystery, by painting a concealed source of light that creates a sublime glow in the expanse of a purple and blue cloudy sky. Rolling in from the left side of the painting are clouds pregnant with the sublimely dynamic energy—the fourth technique—of an approaching storm. Stately evergreens stand in hushed anticipation of the storm. Forming a lacy

silhouette, the trees morph in beautiful hues ranging from magenta and periwinkle to indigo and teal. As in Chinese art, miniscule details in the foliage of the trees contrast with the colossal mountain on which they stand. Unexpectedly, the colossal mountain takes a terrifyingly steep drop into misty valleys below. A faint impression of trees in the valleys weaves through thick white fog, which rolls and rises between distant green and purple mountains and hovers like a blanket between mountains and sky. The blanket of fog creates a sense of mystery that we see in Romantic sublime art. The influence of Chinese art is seen in the loosely defined tree and mountains and in the foggy patches of watercolor paper left untouched by a paintbrush. The increasingly foggy mountains gradually disappear into the unknown and infinite distance—a prominent characteristic in artwork of the Romantic sublime.

I portrayed the sublime in *Starlight Lane* by painting fog that shrouds the mountains in mystery, and by painting large clouds to portray an oncoming storm containing uncontrollable energy. I added to the sublime an element of beauty and faith by depicting light that beautifully colors the trees, and by depicting the hopeful glow of the sun, which represents God, behind the clouds. Combining the sublime, beauty, and faith, I created the Beautiful sublime. *Starlight Lane* was a rural property that our family was interested in buying and living on. *Starlight Lane* was inspired by my experience of faith connected to this sublimely beautiful property. The property had a high elevation and an epic view of mountains beyond mountains of thousands of manzanitas and spicy-smelling pines swaying in the wind that flowed through the valley. The majestic view could fill any human being with sublime awe. Our family did not know whether we would choose to buy and live on that property. Searching for something important to us, we stood in an unknown terrain and unknown future, yet still moved forward in our search and in our lives. Our experience at *Starlight Lane* was a beautiful, sublime experience of faith. In

*Starlight Lane*, the sublime glow comes from the sun that is concealed by clouds. In some terrifying moments God, like the sun, may seem concealed by clouds of mystery and doubt. But by faith I can see His beautiful, sublime glow and rest assured that He is present and omnipotent.



(*Good Bye*, 30" x 22," watercolor and gouache)

Another watercolor painting in which I used techniques of artists of the Romantic sublime and Chinese literati painting is *Good Bye*. Again, I used large dimensions for this painting. The foliage and stairs climbing up the left side of the painting are detailed, while the sky and sea are vast and open, giving space for the eye to rest and the mind to contemplate—a quality characteristic of Chinese painting. The small, ageless moon shines in and above a boundless sky and sea. As in Romantic sublime art, time and space seem to extend into infinity, striking the viewer with a sense of the sublime. Between the sky and sea appear distant

mountains that, as in Chinese art, are simple and loosely defined with few brushstrokes. The legs of a wooden pier wade out from the distant shore and lead to a couple of misshapen sunken ships that were once beaten by a sublimely powerful storm—a form of uncontrollable energy we see in Romantic sublime art. The pier and the ships send dark reflections dancing beautifully with the white reflections of the moon in the purple water. In the left side of the painting, an old wooden staircase climbs up a cliff by the sea. The moon illuminates some of the weeds on the cliff, making them glow white. Next to the stairs stand crooked, wooden railings that send shadows across the moonlit stairs. At the top of the stairs, the silhouettes of bushes and trees made with few brushstrokes reach dark hands into the night sky. Like paintings of the Romantic sublime, mysterious shapes and shadows in *Good Bye* portray the sublime.

In *Good Bye*, I combined the sublime and the beautiful and added an element of faith by juxtaposing mysterious darkness and shadows with the gentle light of the moon, which represents God. Through this combination I portrayed the beautiful sublime. I was inspired to paint *Goodbye* from my memory of a time I stood on a coastal cliff of California. The view of the moon and the vast sky and sea was sublimely magnificent. One of the people to whom I dedicated the painting is my grandmother, who passed away on the day I created the painting. These experiences are connected to the meaning in the painting. The eternal and beautiful qualities juxtaposed with the mysterious and ominous qualities of this painting convey the beautiful sublime because it represents the faith I can have even in darkness. Viewers see hints of a breeze continuously causing plants to bow and relentlessly giving birth to perpetual ocean waves. Continuous like the breeze, God gives life to humankind. Death, like the staircase, recedes into the dark and mysterious distance. Faith, like the moon, shines brightly in vast darkness. Though death is dark and mysterious, faith is “hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and

secure” (Hebrews 6:19 NIV), allowing me to trust that even when my loved ones approach death God will be present with both them and me.

In my paintings, I portrayed faith and the beautiful sublime by using techniques that artists of the Romantic sublime and Chinese artists used to convey the sublime. While artists of the Romantic sublime used the sublime to express terror and doubt, I use the sublime and beauty to express meaning in life and a place for faith in God. Before creating my paintings, I had recently been struck by certain Romantic sublime paintings, one of which was Caspar David Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* (Alte Nationalgalerie, 1808-1810), which portrays a vast, clouded sky above an endless expanse of the ocean viewed by a comparatively miniscule monk standing on an enormous rock. I intuitively used the same tools as artists of the Romantic sublime as I sought to convey my experience of nature. Additionally, because I am partly Asian, I grew up looking at and creating Chinese watercolor paintings. I love the simple, flowing lines that Chinese art contains, as well as the loosely defined objects that give Chinese artwork a sense of mystery. As I sought to portray the sublime in a richer way, I intuitively drew from Asian styles of art, such as depicting distant mountains and trees in a concise way.

Who I am directly affects what I create. When I attempt to creatively portray a specific idea or feeling, I pull resources from my whole life experience. There is no one specific artwork or experience or memory that entirely inspires any one of my paintings. Artists’ quotes, ideas, artwork, and my own memories and experiences work together to inspire my work. As I plan a painting, I am intuitively influenced by all these resources.

Creating from the influence of other artists is a common phenomenon. In “*Subject: What, How, or Who?*” Elaine de Kooning wrote, “Contemporary artists and audiences alike tend to regard evidence of influence with contempt.” But de Kooning argues against this tendency. She

declared, “That something new in art cannot come into existence despite influence is a ridiculous idea, and it goes hand in hand with an even more ridiculous idea: namely that something totally new, not subject to any influence, *can* be created.... Any artist...who looks only into his own life for his ideas is still going to find the irresistible ideas of other artists there” (Chipp 571). Having absolutely no influence from other artists is impossible.

My intuitive approach to creating artwork is used by several other artists as well. In “*Epitaph for an Avant-Garde*,” John Ferren described how he and other artists found a new style. He said, “It was not a question of knocking over other gods. It was a question of finding your own reality, your own answers, your own experience.... We discovered a simple thing, yet far-reaching in its effects: ‘The search is the discovery.’ Picasso had said, ‘I don’t search. I find.’ ” Ferren continued, “Our new arrangement was, quite simply, no arrangement. We kept all the elements of painting—those that we knew or felt—suspended, as it were. We faced the canvas with the Self, whatever that was, and we painted. We faced it unarmed, so to speak. The only control was that of truth, intuitively felt” (Chipp 573). While finding a new style, these artists abandoned control and sold themselves to ambiguous intuition. I used this intuitive approach in that I was intuitively influenced by painters of the Romantic sublime and Chinese painters. In the creative process, I exposed myself to relevant artwork from which I drew inspiration to express my own experience.

My journey to discovering how to portray faith through art was an ambiguous one. In the process, I was forced to give up all my plans and preconceptions for how to portray faith, and instead simply follow my intuition and see what happened. When I let go of plans and painted from intuition, my inspiration blossomed. By intuitively using the influence of other artists, I expressed my experience of faith through the beautiful sublime.

It is no surprise that Christianity is the worldview in which I paradoxically combine the sublime and the beautiful. The very core of Christianity—the Gospel—is a paradox that makes horror and death the ground from which beauty and life blossom. Jesus' bloody death through crucifixion was not only physically, but also spiritually excruciating, because for the sake of humanity Jesus took the punishment for the sins of each person who ever lived or will live, separating Him from God's love, which Jesus had known for eternity. Yet, from this horrible death Jesus rose back to life through God's infinite power, and it is through Jesus' resurrection that millions of souls are freed from death to gain eternal life. To each person, the Gospel is given as a gem of grace, transforming the sublime terror of death into beautiful life.



*Caribou Lake*, 30" x 22," watercolor and oil pastel





*Mount Pilchuck, 13" x 9," watercolor and guache*



*Heedless of the Quinault Indians, 16.5" x 11," watercolor and guache*



*Weathered Cypress*, 18" x 11," watercolor



*Weathered Cypress*, 22" x 15," watercolor, guache, and oil pastels



*I Go Back to the Waves, 30" x 22," watercolor and soft pastels*



*Heaven Meets Earth, 30" x 22," watercolor*



*Golden Streams*, 14" x 10," watercolor and gouache

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