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ART 200.01: Art Beyond the West

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Visual Analysis on Wang Xizhi Watching Geese

In Qian Xuan's painting "Wang Xizhi watching geese", he portrays the story of Wang Xizhi, a calligraphy master and Daoist alchemist. The handscroll was created in China ca. 1295 during the Yuan Dynasty, and is now located in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When first looking at the image, I felt that the composition was whole and peaceful due to the colors, natural textures, and space. I also felt my eyes drawn to Wang Xizhi, since he is situated in the center of the painting and the color of his clothes contrast with the background.

Wang Xizhi and the smaller figure beside him remain calm and graceful while watching geese. The smaller figure may represent a child, as it is much shorter than Wang Xizhi and they seem to stand in the same space, not one further back. The two figures stand with some space in between them with no clear interaction, as they are facing in the same direction and not towards each other. They seem natural and proportionate to the rest of the scenery as they are smaller than the building and other objects in the foreground. The bamboo trees in the background are also smaller than the tree in the foreground, providing some sense of depth and distance.

There is mostly static movement in the composition, as the main subject is standing still and the terrain with boulders stays the same throughout. The viewer can sense a slight breeze in the way that each clump of grass is leaning towards the right, as well as the bamboo trees

swaying to the left and right. Qian also illustrates the movement of the geese by making subtle lines around them to emanate ripples in the water. Besides that, the water seems to be stagnant throughout. The lack of dynamic movement contributes to the peaceful and quiet mood of the composition because there is not an overwhelming amount of actions happening.

Although the lack of shadows make the work seem flat, there is a sense of depth and 3-dimensional space within the building that the figures are in due to the linear perspective used. The bold geometric lines of the building contrast against the natural lines of the land and trees surrounding it. The landscape contains subtle lines that curve in different ways. There are thinner lines within the land to better define ridges and different levels going up. Those thin lines are also seen in the boulders, giving them more depth and texture. Xuan uses different brush textures to make the leaves and grass look more natural. The brush strokes give the grass and the leaves on the bamboo trees a wispy texture, thicker at the base and thinning out until reaching the other end. The tree in the foreground has different textured leaves, with most as green dots and some orange downward facing leaves.

Qian Xuan implements a limited color palette of blues, greens, and some oranges in his painting. These three colors are seen everywhere in nature, adding emphasis to the natural scenery as well as contrasting against the black ink of the man-made building. I think it was an interesting choice to make the rocks in the foreground blue, with the orange at the bottom of them. Perhaps this was implemented to enhance the scenery so that the boulders are more noticeable against the background. The continuous use of blue, green, and orange draws more attention to the main figure, who wears white clothing, and the two white geese towards the right. This color choice, as well as the placement of Wang Xizhi right in the center, makes it clear that the focus is on him and his actions (watching geese) as it tells a story.

The composition is located to the right of the scroll and the calligraphy, which tells the story of Wang Xizhi, starts to the left of the image. Handscrolls are meant to be viewed from right to left, so putting the composition to the right allows the reader to visualize the story before they read the words. Without knowing the story told in the scroll, looking at the painting gives me a sense of tranquility because of how each element works together to give the composition unity. I thoroughly enjoyed looking at the variety of different brush strokes and how they can change how the image is perceived. It is one of the wonderful characteristics of Chinese painting that makes it such a renowned and recognizable art style worldwide.