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### Western and Eastern Art: A Comparison of Two Classics

The first artwork in question is *The Starry Night* by the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh was famous for creating over 2,000 works of art during his short decade-long career as an artist. Many people know him for his decision to cut off his ear in 1888. This was a sign of his depression that would eventually consume him. *The Starry Night* was painted one year after he lost his ear in 1889. It is an oil-on-canvas painting that features many dark blues, greens, and yellows. This painting would likely be classified as a Post-Impressionism piece because of the symbolic nature of the composition of the painting. Van Gogh was most likely inspired by natural scenery as well as memories of his homeland when painting this particular piece. He had moved to Paris in 1886 but the church in the background appears to be something that would be more commonly found in Holland instead of France.

The form of the artwork can be broken down into three separate parts. The first and most spacious part is the night sky. The sky makes up the majority of the canvas as it spans from the top of the painting to two-thirds of the way down. The second part is the large cypress tree that rises from the ground to almost the top of the canvas. This plant can be seen as a link between the heavens and earth. These two tend to be tied to life and death which was something van Gogh was known to philosophize about. He once stated that “Just as we take the train to go to Tarascon or Rouen, we take death to go to a star” (MoMA). The stars in the painting act as a reminder of our temporary existence on this planet. The final part of the painting is the town. The

town sits on the bottom-right and is surrounded by blue sloping hills that define the background of the town. The lights found in many of the houses in the town indicate that it is not so late that everyone has fallen asleep. It has not quite reached the 3 A.M. mark even though it is dark out.

The painting is operating on two different stylistic levels. The town appears to be very average looking and typical. The sky on the other hand is comprised of swirling colors, radiating stars, a depiction of the moon and Venus, and an overall scene that would leave someone gasping if they were to witness such a sight in real life. The sky was meant to be the main feature of the painting that would draw spectators in through the churning textures of different blues and whites. This makes sense symbolically. People look to the stars for imagination and wonder what kind of celestial events are taking place across the universe. Van Gogh recognized this and decided to paint the sky to match this sense of wonder people get from observing it. The town is more plain and normal because it is something we understand. There is no sense of wonder someone gets when they look at a town because they understand its inner workings. The night sky is completely different. This is why it looks the way it does in *The Starry Night*.

The second artwork being examined is *Life of the Buddha: The Birth of the Buddha*. This painting is older than *The Starry Night* by at least a few centuries. The true creator of this piece is unknown at this time. What is known is that it dates back to the Muromachi period of Japan from 1392-1573. The painting itself was estimated to be created in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is more faded compared to van Gogh's piece and was made from a wall panel that was mounted as a hanging scroll. This piece is also depicting a specific event where *The Starry Night* is not. *Life of the Buddha* shows exactly what the title says it does. Queen Maya can be seen walking in the Lumbini gardens and her divine son is getting the attention of dragons on the left side of the painting. The legend follows that the baby Buddha took seven steps immediately after his birth

and declared “Among all divine beings, only I am lord, most holy and victorious. The three realms are all sorrowful. I have come here through immeasurable births and deaths for the benefit of men and gods” (The Met). This concept of three realms or Trailokya is common throughout Hinduism and Buddhist texts. Buddhism features the Kamaloka, the Rupaloka, and the Arupaloka. Each is a separate destination that can be reached depending on the level of karma someone achieves in their life.

The form of this painting is similar to *The Starry Night* because it features a sky that the viewer is immediately drawn to because of the sky-dwelling dragons. The sky in *Life of the Buddha* is much smaller however and is limited by the large tan wall that divides the sky in half. The other elements include a green landscape decorated by three trees as well as a number of women in dress robes who appear to be fixated on the Buddha. The Buddha is holding his right hand up which matches with the legend that stated this is what he did when he claimed he was lord of the three realms. It is difficult to make out any kind of facial features on the Buddha. What can be seen is that he is wearing a white and red robe that a typical Buddhist monk would wear. He also looks to be standing on a small green box and something is linked with his head that is connected with the blue and red dragons that are floating directly above him. Perhaps this is an indication of his direct connection with divine and mystical beings that no one else in the painting can claim to have.

This painting uses more solid lines and less broad strokes than what is seen in van Gogh's painting. The sky in *Life of the Buddha* is much plainer. It is a navy blue color that stretches across the top quarter of the painting. It is unique because there are low hanging clouds and dragons in the background. It is much less detailed than the sky in *The Starry Night* though. There is more of an emphasis on thin and solid outlines in this painting as well. Perhaps the

biggest difference is the fact that there are actual people in *Life of the Buddha*. It is implied that there are people living in the town in *The Starry Night* because of the town and the lights that are on. Van Gogh chose not to include any people though. The viewer can only assume that various people would be seen if one could venture into one of the many homes found in the painting.

There are a number of similarities found between the two pieces. Their subject matter both points to the night sky as a source of divine inspiration. The difference is that the audience looking at *The Starry Night* has to use their imagination to picture the kinds of heavenly activities that are taking place above the stars. The audience does not have to do this with *Life of the Buddha* because they are presented with a divine being in the Buddha and godlike creatures in the two dragons. Even though these two paintings are hundreds of years apart, they still show how common it is for human beings to look to the sky for answers to their questions on life and death.

Comparing these two paintings shows how humanity does not change much throughout the ages. They were painted by two people who would likely have very little in common if they were to meet. One artist was a Dutch painter who retired in France until his death. The other was on the opposite side of the world living in a 15<sup>th</sup> century Japan. Both of these artists still shared the same love of nature and the night sky so they decided to represent their feelings through their paintings. Van Gogh's painting is more recognized because he is a more recent artist who the world knows much about. Perhaps if the man or woman responsible for painting *Life of the Buddha* was identified then their artwork would be just as influential among artists and critics alike.

Works Cited

MoMA. "The Starry Night." *MoMA Learning*. Web.

The Met. "Life of the Buddha: The Birth of the Buddha." *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Web.

