Water has always been a subject of works of art. From prehistoric times, humans depicted water as a wavy line, a stylized image that is easily recognizable and comprehensible. But also water fountains, whose beauty has been extolled by all world cultures, are undoubtedly works of art too. And come to think of it, art is also about… colours mixed in water, no?!?

In an area of the Sahara desert that incorporates the present day nations of Algeria, Niger and Mali, prehistoric peoples we know very little about painted and incised numerous marks on rocks that are believed by modern researchers to be symbols of water. This is perhaps an easy conclusion to reach, given that the same symbols are used to the present day. What we have are wavy lines, aligned horizontally or vertically, that are very similar to others found in many different parts of the world. Thousands of years ago, the regions of the Sahara that today are desert were once green and full of water, water that could fertilize the land and, therefore, “sacred”. Very probably, many of these stylized water images were also “sacred symbols” of this precious good, as well as being simply beautiful to look at. And humans invented others over time that we can all easily recognize, continually trying out new and original designs.

Illustration 1: © Centro Civiltà dell’Acqua
Stylised symbol of water.

Illustration 2: © Centro Civiltà dell’Acqua
Stylised symbol of water.

Illustration 3: © Unimondo
Stylised drop of water.

Illustration 4: © Kuthumadierks
Snow crystal seen through a microscope.

Where Water Becomes Art, Art is... Water!
How else can we render the idea of water apart from waves? For example by drawing symbols such as water-drops, straight lines to represent rain or a shower, tiny bubbles for fizzy water, or we can use colours. The colours used to depict water in art are all shades of blue, ranging from azure to green, as in nature. Since we associate them with water which is almost always cold in its natural state, so its colours are said to be “cold colours”. Do you know of any water symbols? A six pointed star is the symbol of cold and the winter par excellence because it so perfectly recalls the form of a snow crystal. All of these symbols are widely found in contemporary art. But how did humans in the past draw and depict water? With lines and streaks in the works of medieval artists, by following the colours and proportions of the natural world in the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, Durer, Vermeer and other Renaissance artists. With dramatic colour contrasts in the works of Caravaggio, or interplays of reflected light in the work of Canaletto and Turner or in the en plein air paintings of Monet and the Impressionists.

Water themes (including snow and ice) flow throughout literature, poetry, fine art, theater, music, and film. Water images may be enduring, aesthetically appealing, or threatening; indeed water is often used as a metaphor for spiritual journey, metamorphosis, birth and rebirth, renewal, inspiration or even violence and death.

Water is indispensible for all kinds of visual art forms, from tempera, oil and spray to fresco and etching, and lent its name to the special techniques of watercolour and aquatint. As a theme, water has left an indelible mark on the world of painting which in its turn has captured the strength, mutability and transparence of water forever. In the late 16th century painting “Narcissus”, Caravaggio wanted the water to reflect and filter reality, confirming its fundamental role in pictorial works. The frozen water mirror, depicted in a famous painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and identified as the Flemish village Sint-Anne-Pede, carries an important message. Indeed the painter compares the threat that awaits the unwitting birds in the trap visible on the bottom right to the danger that lies equally in store for the unwary young skaters on the left. Danger is represented in both the slippery and subtle ice and in other risks that constantly accompany life.

The antique Japanese art form of marbling, Suminagashi, means “ink floating”. It consists of drawing on water, creating abstract designs which are then printed onto paper. The images that form are directly linked to the process of placing small quantities of ink onto the surface of water or other semi-fluid solution. Once this has been done, the artist completes the work by transferring it with great care and delicacy onto another solid but absorbent surface, usually paper or canvas. Techniques dependent on the use of water in the artistic process like the foregoing strongly influenced the work of Art Nouveau artists at the start of the twentieth century.

Illustration 5: © Caravaggio.historiaweb “Narcissus” by Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio.


Illustration 7: © Pegaphoto Example of Japanese technique called Suminagashi.

Illustration 8: © Stylosophy Claude Monet “The Japanese bridge at Giverny”.
In 1892, the great impressionist painter Claude Monet, having bought some land near his house in Giverny, a village in Northern France, deviated the course of the river Ru in order to create a pond there. This place became the centre of his human and artistic experience for a good twenty-five years. His artistry, closely connected to the movement of light reflected in the water, changed the history of western art forever. The many flowers and trees planted there offered him an extraordinary wealth of colors and luminosity. In a series of large paintings of the water lilies on the pond, Monet succeeded in pictorially rendering a passing cloud, the lightest of breezes and the continual play of light reflected on the water.

**Water and garden artifices**

Water can be modeled and sculpted when it is frozen, or sprayed to create drawings and geometric shapes in the air. During the Renaissance, and in particular during the Baroque period, water jets and fountain games became popular. Thanks to artists like Bernini and Giambologna, many splendid monumental stone fountains, with depictions of the gods and protagonists of ancient mythology, were built.

The Arab architects who designed the baths and gardens of the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, demonstrated great technical awareness and artistic sensitivity too in making the water look so sumptuous and magical. The wonderfully cool environment, created as a protection from the torrid summers of Andalusia, is reminiscent of caves and other structures of the natural world, with arches and vaulted ceilings, and sunlight which filters through making the waters in the elegant baths crystalline clear. The Cambodian Khmer architects at Angkor similarly expressed great acuity in building their splendid stone temples decorated with imposing statues like silent guardians of the waters, as well as in their surprising works of hydraulic engineering. Not forgetting the numerous Italian gems, mainly built between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries: gardens and fountains such as the triumphal fountains of Rome, the Boboli Gardens in Florence, the Royal Palace of Caserta and the Palladian villas of Veneto. In the latter, full blown “special effects” were created which illuminated and made the water move through arches, columns, labyrinths, baths and sculpted fountains.

**What is “Eco Art”?**

There is a worldwide contemporary movement in environmental art, concerned with human relationship with the natural world. This may also be called Eco-Art, Art and Nature, or Restoration Art, and may extend to socially and politically oriented efforts known as “eco-activist art” and “environmental justice Eco Art.” Examples include Soul Salmon, an “art action” movement of Northwest American artists, businesses, institutions and tribes to protect native salmon, and artist Deborah Small’s painted porcelain brick art statement to preserve Mono Lake in California that led to a landmark public trust law case. Eco-Art was represented at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, with a call for artists around the world to devote their next artwork to an environmental issue.

**Contemporary works of... ice!**

It is possible to model and sculpt water in its frozen state. Naturally these are works of art that are not destined to last very long, but they are nonetheless of great emotional and visual impact, precisely because they are made of water. Sometimes modern artists deliberately melt their ice sculptures with warm air so as to produce startling effects of the work “in ruin” as it melts.

Today, however, water is mainly used for artistic installations: impermanent, short-lived works which in a certain sense represent the modern evolution of sculpture. Installations are made up of media (sound, lights, smells) objects and expressive forms of various types, all set up in a given environment. Some of these, produced by the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson in New York, are artificial waterfalls which were maintained in working order for almost all of 2008. The water fell from heights of 30 and 40 metres back into East River. Fish and other aquatic life forms were protected by water filtration through tanks suspended in the river. The installations worked with solar and hydraulic power and were designed to promote awareness of the environment which must be protected in the interests of everyone.

Illustration 9: © Leggievai

*Cinderella ice carriage at Roermond (Netherlands).*
Today, in Barcelona, Las Vegas and Dubai City, the most amazing and unique water shows can be seen, made by placing both rigid and flexible tubes that produce water jets and sprays onto horizontal and vertical surfaces. Inspired by Baroque examples, these fountains light up with sprays of water coloured by lights submerged in the basin. The water changes colour, direction and strength, and the swirls of water create the illusion of fireworks and laser beams. These water sculptures span various art forms, including music which beats perfect time with the movements of the water. This “entertainment” in some way recalls the methods and intentions of Baroque art, a sort of art for art’s sake. It is provocative, based on a visual experience, but also creates a fresh awareness of the infinite that we can become part of by breaking out of solid confines, finally open towards the heavens.
Until last century, frozen ice was used by the Inuit and other populations of the polar regions to make igloos. In the gardens of modern houses, the rain becomes a spectacle in itself as it falls: gliding down glass, running fast between drains and gutters, and finally falling in into the collection tanks. The water of the sea, if we listen attentively, can… speak, sing and play! Did you know that?

One permanent installation of enormous impact is the marine organ built just a few years ago in the harbor of Zara, a Dalmation city on the Adriatic coast. The intensity of the movement of the sea waves is continually made into music through the organ reeds made to accompany this really stunning work. As we listen, we can tell whether the sea is speaking, laughing, suffering, crying or dying, we can perceive its moods. Each movement of the sea water is amplified thanks to the movement through specially designed pipes. You can hear the sea groan, whistle, rumble, expand and crash, through the echoes of the water movements, of high tides and storms. It truly is a “water music”. In Scandinavia (and recently elsewhere too), inspired by the houses of Arctic hunters, there are hotels made entirely of ice during the winter period. Of course these are areas where the temperature is consistently near or below zero. Since it isn’t possible to switch on any heating, guests must wear very heavy clothing for insulation when sleeping because the beds too are made of frozen water. This, however, is a modern invention, with touristic and artistic ends, in which those commodities that have always inspired humans in building their homes are non-existent!

Frank Lloyd Wright’s House on the falls is an example of the perfect fusion of human construction in nature without altering the environmental and aesthetic balance. The great American architect displayed a profound awareness of hydraulic science, inventing as he did an architectural structure built only with local materials, like stone and wood, creating a unique union with water and its movements thanks to modern building techniques. Wright created an asymmetric building which represents what we might call the natural “disorder” of the place and fully embodies its main qualities.

Dossier compiled by:

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