

Perception of Nature: From A New Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

This study reexamines the art-historical question of how nature is perceived and represented, focusing on El Greco (1541–1614) and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). While El Greco deliberately distorted form to visualize spiritual reality, whereas Cézanne deconstructed form to reveal the very structure of perception. What unites them is a shared perceptual inquiry that transcends the classical conception of nature in terms of perspective and seeks a reintegration of spirit and nature. Furthermore, this paper examines the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Yamaga Sokō to explore the divergences and convergences between Western and Eastern cosmologies of nature. By articulating an alternative genealogy of the understanding of nature distinct from the classical tradition born in the Renaissance, the study aims to illuminate the perception of nature from a global theoretical perspective. It also emphasizes the influence of science, technology, and Eastern art—particularly the work of Hokusai—on the emergence of this “new lineage of perception.” Moreover, this study connects this to Yamaga Sokō's critique of the Zhu Xi-inspired vertical causal understanding of nature, discussing it in relation to his notion of a “horizontal relational world,” which conceives existence as a simultaneous, multi-layered network of interrelations. Finally, the study concludes that Cézanne's perceptual space resonates with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the world, which cannot be reduced to a single principle but rather constitutes an interweaving of multiple relationalities—a “weave of existence.”

Keywords: perception of nature, El Greco, Paul Cézanne, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Yamaga Sokō, East-West cosmology, phenomenology of art

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Introduction

The works of El Greco (1541–1614) are distinguished by the elongated proportions, the idiosyncratic use of light, and spiritual intensity. As art historians have long observed, his oeuvre is often associated with Mannerism for its deliberate transformation of Renaissance norms such as composition and perspectival depth of perspective. Yet beyond religious subject matter, El Greco's paintings often assign to nature a significance equal to or even greater than divine order. This emphasis on nature, within the deeply Catholic milieu of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy and Spain, crucially shaped the reception of his art.

The innovation in El Greco's works, however, remained largely misunderstood in his time, and El Greco was consigned to oblivion for nearly three centuries after his death. In the late nineteenth century, his "distorted vision of nature" was rediscovered by Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), whose reinterpretation of perception through form profoundly influenced the Impressionists, the Cubists, and ultimately the course of twentieth-century art. The structural thinking and pursuit of spirituality evident in Cézanne's and Picasso's works can be read as both the inheritance and transformation of El Greco's formative principles.

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the intellectual genealogy of natural perception extending from El Greco to Cézanne. By bridging the collapse of the perspectival conception of nature through perspective in Western art with the correlative cosmology of heaven and earth in Eastern thought, the study aims to reveal an alternative genealogy of natural cognition and propose a new theoretical framework for understanding the perception of nature.

El Greco and Cézanne: The Disintegration of Natural Representation

One of the central innovations of Renaissance art was the theorization of linear perspective. Developed in the early fifteenth century by Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti, this technique provided a rational means of reproducing three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface, establishing the foundation of modern pictorial representation.

Figure 1

The Mona Lisa / Leonardo da Vinci



Its quintessential example is Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, where the background landscape—mountains and rivers—forms a softly receding space through the integration of aerial and linear perspective, achieving a harmonious unity between figure and nature. Perspective thus functioned not merely as a geometric technique, but as an aesthetic principle mediating the relation between humanity and the natural world.

Nicolas Poussin, by contrast, employed perspective as the axis of rational order. In works such as *The Shepherds of Arcadia*, he combined geometric structure with symbolic equilibrium. Both the humanist naturalism of the Renaissance and the rational order of Classicism therefore developed under a common problem: how to grasp the world as a unified totality.

Figure 2

The Shepherds of Arcadia / Nicolas Poussin



By the late nineteenth century, however, this classical order was subjected to radical re-examination by Paul Cézanne. Rejecting the dominance of a single, fixed viewpoint, Cézanne sought to visualize on the canvas the generative process of perception itself through the superimposition of multiple viewpoints and temporal variations. In works such as *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, mountains and buildings are reduced to geometric forms, while layers of color modulation and brushstroke construct a dynamic, pulsating space. This was neither the harmonious balance of Leonardo nor the rational order of Poussin, but an attempt to reconstruct perception through the act of painting.

Figure 3*View of Toledo / El Greco*

Note. Deviation from perspective → prioritizing symbolism over realism
 Structured along a vertical axis (Earth → City → Heaven)
 Emphasis on the city's "floating presence" through color contrasts
 The city depicted as a spiritual/religious center

A comparable structure can be discerned in El Greco's work. His elongated figures and spatial distortions were not mere technical eccentricities, but means of rendering visible the inner world of spirit. In *View of Toledo*, for instance, the city and the landscape unfold under unstable light; the equilibrium of perspective collapses, and the viewer's gaze is drawn toward a transcendent dimension. The painting reveals not a reproduction of the external world, but a manifestation of the generative encounter between perception and spirit.

Art historian Estelle Alma Maré characterizes El Greco's paintings as mental constructs—visual compositions that mark a shift from the imitation of reality to the construction of reality itself. Three features define his pictorial practice: (1) anti-naturalism, (2) compositional abstraction, and (3) visualization of the spiritual dimension. In this sense, El Greco fused religious spirituality with formal order through a deliberate non-naturalistic syntax.

Figure 4*Mont Sainte-Victoire / Paul Cézanne*

Note. Relativization of perspective → balance between plane and volume
 Reduction of nature to spheres, cones, and cylinders
 Horizontal and structural stability
 Order achieved through the layering of observation and the modern scientific spirit

Despite the temporal and geographic distance separating them, El Greco and Cézanne share a profound conceptual continuity: both transcended naturalistic representation by distorting or dismantling form in order to reconstruct perception. Cézanne reduced nature to its geometric fundamentals—cylinders, spheres, and cones—and painted not appearances but the structure of perception itself. El Greco, in turn, employed form as an instrument of spiritual expression, rendering interior vision through non-naturalistic composition.

Thus, El Greco's "distortion" and Cézanne's "disintegration" both signify the transcendence of the classical conception of nature. Their practices generated a new perceptual turn—one that reintegrated reason and sensation, spirit and nature. Each, in his own era, brought about the dissolution of painting as mere mimesis and transformed perception itself into the creative subject. Through their respective deconstruction of form and integration of spirituality, they overcame the classical naturalism of the Renaissance and inaugurated an epistemological moment in which art no longer imitates reality, but creates it through perception. In their work, nature ceases to be an object of representation and emerges instead as the very field of perceptual becoming.

Collage: The Reconstruction of Science and Perception

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a wave of Grecomania¹ swept across Europe, rekindling interest in the formal principles and spirituality of El Greco. Critics such as Théodore de Wyzewa and Marcel Monté, contemporaries of Paul Cézanne, acclaimed El Greco's expressive distortions and spiritual intensity, positioning his art as a precursor to modern inquiries into perception. This revival marked a crucial shift in late nineteenth-century aesthetics—from the representation of nature to the generation of perceptual experience.

¹ Grecomania is an admiration and revival of ancient Greek art and culture.

Cézanne’s reconfiguration of nature as composed of “the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone” exemplified this transformation. By simplifying the visible world into geometric elements, he reconstructed visual experience itself. His *Mont Sainte-Victoire* series, resonating with El Greco’s elongation and abstraction of form, may be interpreted as almost a reincarnation of “the disintegration of form and the integration of spirit.” Cézanne’s canvases do not reproduce a unified object from a single vantage point; instead, they assemble visual fragments, performing what may be called a reconstruction of perception. This multi-perspective approach was deeply entwined with the broader “scientific age” of the nineteenth century—a period in which the very notion of nature was being redefined by technological progress.

The structural logic of Cézanne’s pictorial thought thus anticipates what might be termed a collage-like perception. His surfaces are composed of overlapping temporal and spatial fragments; the viewer no longer perceives within the unity of a fixed vanishing point, but within an interwoven mesh of relations. This multi-perspective world vision found later expression in the Cubism of Picasso and Braque, and, more distantly, in the “multi-spatial representations” of cinema and digital imagery. A striking parallel can be found in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), released just one year before humanity’s first lunar landing. Employing advanced cinematographic techniques, Kubrick dismantled conventional spatial perspective to visualize perceptual experience under conditions of weightlessness. Religious scholar Tetsuo Yamaori observed that “what struck me as strange in *2001* was the attenuation of the sense of perspective,” suggesting that scientific technology itself could transform the structure of human perception.

Figure 5

Impression, Sunrise / Oscar-Claude Monet



Figure 6*Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash / Giacomo Balla*

Behind Cézanne's vision lies the rational spirit of Western modern science. Yet his inquiry was not confined to aesthetics; it was an attempt to integrate scientific insight into the reconstruction of artistic perception. While he observed nature with analytical precision, he transcended scientific rationality to depict perception as lived experience. In this sense, Cézanne's method enhanced the scientific attitude of the Impressionists—particularly Claude Monet's optical investigations—transforming perception itself into an artistic and philosophical practice.

In *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, mountains, houses, and trees are reduced to geometric structures—mountains as cones, houses as cubes. Yet these simplifications conceal a more profound intention. Through the layering of color and the subtle disjunction of brushstrokes, Cézanne integrated differing viewpoints and temporal flows into a single pictorial field, rendering the complexity of perceptual experience visible. The resulting structure resembles the assembly of machine components into a functional system: geometric elements combine to generate a new perceptual reality. This collage-like compositional principle was intimately related to the scientific and technological advances of the nineteenth century. With the advent of photography and optical instruments, the “objectivity of vision” came into question. Against the mechanical reproducibility of the image, Cézanne redefined vision as a bodily and spiritual experience. For him, nature was not an object to be observed, but a dynamic field of becoming constituted by the very act of observation. Painting was, in this sense, an apparatus for rendering the process of perceptual generation visible.

Figure 7*Still-Life With Apples and Oranges / Cézanne*

Cézanne’s perceptual experiments profoundly influenced the Futurists, who sought to sever the continuity of time and space, synthesizing motion and energy to affirm the mechanical civilization of the modern era. Yet Cézanne differed from them in his emphasis on harmony and order within nature. Conscious of the rise of technology, he nonetheless sought to capture in painting what photography could not: temporal fluidity, the density of sensation, the overlapping multiplicity of viewpoints. Through these strategies, he visualized the inherent complexity of human perception.

This multi-perspective vision forms the very core of Cézanne’s collage-like conception and bridges the way to Cubism. His painting must thus be understood not merely as a dissection of form, but as a reconstruction of cognition—an integration of scientific and spiritual perception. Cézanne’s work represents both the origin of the modernist “deconstruction of form” and a philosophical practice in which science and art, reason and sensibility, are united within a new visual episteme logy of perception.

Cézanne and Hokusai

Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), though often associated with Impressionism, reexamined the problems of form, structure, and space in painting. His assertion that “nature should be understood in terms of the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone” encapsulates his ambition to uncover the underlying order of the visible world. While reducing natural forms to geometric essentials, he sought to render the layered and unified structure of perception through color and light, reconstructing the world’s internal logic on the pictorial plane. Beneath this constructive vision lies a dialogue—implicit yet profound—with Japanese art, particularly the work of Katsushika Hokusai.

In late nineteenth-century France, the phenomenon known as Japonisme rapidly transformed the artistic imagination. Beyond mere exoticism, the influx of Japanese prints provided European artists with new models for rethinking visual structure and pictorial logic. Among these influences, Hokusai’s *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku Sanjūrokkei*) exerted a decisive impact. Hokusai did not treat nature as an object of realistic depiction; rather, he

formalized it as a spiritual and symbolic structure, presenting the universal order of nature in visual form. This principle of formalization profoundly resonated with Cézanne's lifelong engagement with Mont Sainte-Victoire.

For Hokusai, Mount Fuji was not simply part of the natural landscape but the spiritual axis of Japanese culture. In *Thirty-Six Views*, Fuji dominates the pictorial field as an absolute and transcendent presence, depicted alongside human activity and meteorological phenomena. It is not a background motif but the structural principle of the composition—the spiritual axis that organizes the visible world. Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire occupies a parallel position. The mountain, which overlooked his native Aix-en-Provence, was both a familiar sight and a locus of transcendence. Over three decades, he painted more than thirty variations of this motif under differing conditions of time, light, and atmosphere. For Cézanne, the mountain was not a landscape subject but an idealized object of pictorial thought, mirroring Hokusai's treatment of Fuji as a symbol of the eternal.

In *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, Hokusai depicts the same motif under diverse conditions of season, weather, time, and orientation, thereby revealing the infinite mutability of a single subject. Fuji remains constant, yet its appearance shifts with the observer's perspective and the world's circumstances. This structure of repetition and variation corresponds to Cézanne's serial depictions of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Both artists shared a perceptual practice that sought the universal through change—not a fixed representation of form, but a meditation on transformation as the condition of permanence.

In Hokusai's compositions, spatial depth is not constructed through linear perspective but through the layering of color planes and the juxtaposition of forms. This planar and decorative spatiality profoundly influenced Cézanne's reorganization of Western pictorial space. Cézanne conceived mountains, trees, and houses as superimposed color planes, deriving depth not from perspective lines but from chromatic relations.

Figure 8

Hodogaya on the Tōkaidō (Tōkaidō Hodogaya), From the Series Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji

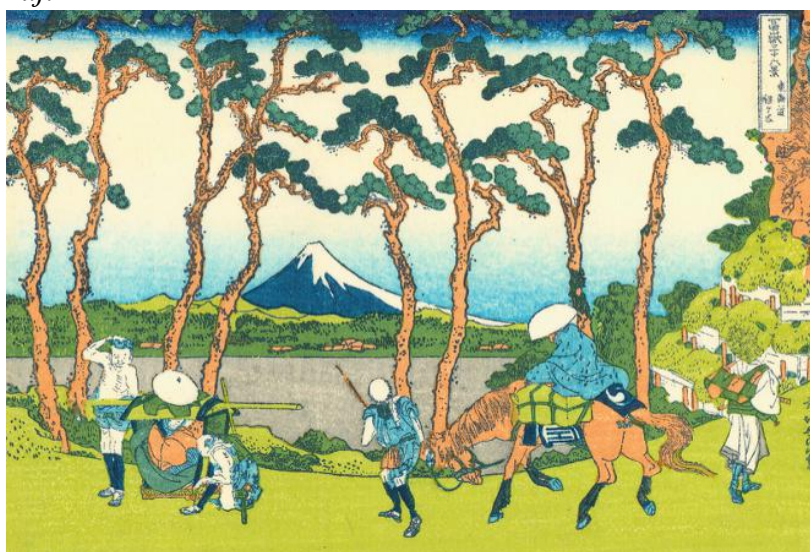


Figure 9

Sainte-Victoire is Part of the Series Montagne Sainte-Victoire, One of Over 80 Oil Paintings



In Mont Sainte-Victoire, natural elements such as the mountain, trees, and houses are simplified into geometric forms: the mountain as a cone, houses as cubes, and so forth. However, Cézanne does not merely reduce shapes; he employs color and superimposes multiple perspectives of the landscape to convey depth and complexity. This approach reflects Cézanne's intention that, much like the assembly of mechanical parts produces complex functions, the combination of geometric elements generates reality of perception.

Cézanne's spatial construction thus extends Hokusai's principle of planar composition, translating it into a new perceptual order that integrates form and process—the Western reconstruction of perception informed by an Eastern sense of structure. Hokusai simplified natural forms and elevated them to symbolic clarity through the use of sharply delineated contours. Mount Fuji, often rendered as a perfectly balanced triangle, functions as a symbol of eternity and stability. Cézanne, too, reduced nature to geometric fundamentals, claiming that all visible phenomena could be understood through the sphere, cone, and cylinder. Both artists sought, through simplification of form, to penetrate the essence of nature's internal order. 5 Hokusai's formal reduction and Cézanne's geometric reduction reveal a shared structural will: to approach the universal through the formal mediation of nature. The intersection of Hokusai's spiritual vision of nature and Cézanne's perceptual reconstruction thus represents a pivotal moment in the cross-cultural history of modern art. In this encounter, Eastern and Western conceptions of form and perception converged, each transforming the other. Through Hokusai, Cézanne glimpsed an alternative to Renaissance perspectivism—a vision of nature as a dynamic, relational field rather than a fixed visual order. Their dialogue across centuries and continents opened a new horizon for modern aesthetics: a perception that seeks not to reproduce appearances but to participate in the generative rhythm of nature itself.

The intersection of Eastern and Western perceptual systems finds a resonant counterpart in the theory of *Missoku*² (“esoteric breathing”) developed by the Japanese musician Mikio Nakamura. His concept represents an attempt to extend the genealogy of perception into the dimension of bodily rhythm. Nakamura’s *Missoku* is not merely a performance technique; it embodies a holistic mode of perception in which sound, body, and environment respond to one another in inseparable unity. It reflects a fundamental principle of Japanese aesthetics—the equilibrium between inner stillness and outer movement, between the microscopic and the macroscopic.

This duality, mediating between the individual and the whole, between the inner and the external world, expresses a distinctly Japanese sensibility. It also underlies the compositional rhythm and spatial conception found in Ukiyo-e prints. In his analysis of Ukiyo-e, Nakamura employs the visual concepts of “zoom-in” and “zoom-out.” The zoom-in perspective focuses introspectively on the psychological subtleties and quotidian details of human life, while the zoom-out perspective expands outward to encompass urban landscapes and broader social contexts. This oscillatory structure, contracting and expanding like respiration, constitutes a specifically Japanese visual rhythm—a rhythmic mode of perception that unites inner consciousness with the external world. Such a structure profoundly resonates with the reconstruction of perception, integrating internal rhythm with external movement and transforming perception itself into an act of breathing.

Perceiving Nature and the Eastern Cosmology

This chapter reinterprets Paul Cézanne’s conception of nature and spatial composition through the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly his essay, “*Le doute de Cézanne*” (“Cézanne’s Doubt”). Cézanne’s painting is not a visual reproduction but an event of perception—a site where body and world co-generate each other. The generative principle of this relation points toward a universal mode of perceiving nature, one that transcends the boundaries of East and West.

Grounded in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, this study aligns Cézanne’s “respiration between world and body” with the heaven–earth cosmology of the Japanese Confucian thinker, Yamaga Sokō,³ who conceived of heaven and earth as mutually generative. Additionally, the relational theory of contemporary physicist Carlo Rovelli, outlines the interrelations among nature, body, and world as a cosmic network of generativity. At the intersection of Western phenomenology and Eastern cosmology, this framework redefines the “perception of nature” as a process of continuous relational becoming.

In “*Cézanne’s Doubt*,” Merleau-Ponty interprets Cézanne’s art as a “tissu du visible”—a “fabric of the visible.” For Cézanne, seeing is not a passive reception of sensory data but an active event in which body and world co-produce form. Painting, therefore, is not the subjective imitation of an external world but the process through which the world manifests itself through the medium of the body. Space is not a static container but a dynamic, woven field—an interlacing of time, movement, and visibility. The gaze is never fixed; it moves, integrates fragments, and continuously generates order. Perception, in this view, is the interweaving of

² *Missoku* (密息) The concept of “*Missoku*” (“esoteric breathing”) developed by Akikazu Nakamura is grounded in the understanding of the essence of breath and life acquired through the practice of the shakuhachi. He regards breath as the fundamental force that connects the mind and body, sound and the universe, and defines “*Missoku*” as “the art of breathing beyond sound.”

³ Yamaga Sokō (山鹿素行 1622–1685)

the visible and the invisible, the ongoing genesis in which world and body are mutually enfolded.

The spiritual influence of El Greco on Cézanne also relates deeply to this sense of generative space. El Greco's elongations and luminous vibrations suggest a world in perpetual transformation, where visible form opens onto the flux of being. Cézanne inherited this spirit, dissolving the boundaries between nature and self, between the seer and the seen. What Merleau-Ponty calls the "tissu de l'être"—the "fabric of being"—is precisely what Cézanne's brushstrokes render visible: a world woven through the movements of perception.

In early modern Japan, the philosopher Sokō critically reinterpreted Neo-Confucian cosmology. Against the dualistic hierarchy of Zhu Xi's thought, which positioned Heaven (ten) as transcendent principle (li) and Earth (chi) as its passive substrate, Yamaga proposed a dynamic model of mutual generation. For him, Heaven was not an abstract metaphysical order but an active force realized through human ethical action; Earth, conversely, was not a subordinate realm but an active medium through which the principle of Heaven manifests and deepens. Order and meaning thus emerge not as pre-given forms, but from the very process of mutual permeation between Heaven and Earth.

Yamaga's cosmology, therefore, conceives the universe as a woven field of relations in which part and whole, nature and humanity, transcendence and immanence interpenetrate. Heaven and Earth are not static opposites but continuously self-generating correspondences, forming a cyclical network in which ethical, natural, and social orders are co-constituted. Remarkably, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Yamaga's cosmology—though separated by culture and epoch—share a fundamental intuition: the world is not a fixed substance but a relational field of becoming.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of "the intertwining of body and world" corresponds to Yamaga's concept of "the interpenetration of Heaven and Earth." Both conceive existence not as dualistic hierarchy but as reciprocal generation. The world is not a pre-given order but a living fabric woven by bodily movement, natural cycles, and human action. This relational cosmology underlies contemporary thought as well. Cézanne's chain of brushstrokes, Merleau-Ponty's weaving of the visible, and Yamaga's theory of Heaven and Earth all converge in a cosmic network structure—an ontology of nature as the ongoing process of relational generation.

Conclusion — Nature as Relation, Perception as Becoming

Conclusion

El Greco discerned within religious symbolism the spiritual vitality of nature, manifesting the divine breath in the interplay between matter and light. In his work, nature is not a sign pointing toward transcendence but a spiritual resonance that vibrates to the very core of humanity. Paul Cézanne, inheriting this spirituality, reconstructed nature within the field where sensation and perception intersect. His brushstrokes do not imitate external phenomena; they reveal that seeing, itself is a generative act through which nature continually comes into being.

The "nature" Cézanne painted is thus not an external object to be represented on canvas but a living field where body and world breathe together. Likewise, in Yamaga Sokō's philosophy, Heaven and Earth constitute a relational domain in which order emerges through the mutual interpenetration of transcendence and immanence. Both perspectives share a fundamental

epistemic stance: the world is not something already completed but something continually in the making.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty elevated this pictorial practice to a philosophical level by theorizing perception as the intertwining of body and world. The world is not a passive object external to the subject but a phenomenological structure that appears through bodily movement. In this process, visibility and invisibility, subject and object, continually regenerate their boundaries.

In parallel, Sokō interpreted the relation between Heaven and Earth as a dynamic, generative order akin to this phenomenological structure. Heaven and Earth are not oppositional poles but reciprocal mediations in a cyclical network of becoming. From this perspective, both Western phenomenology and Eastern cosmology converge on a shared insight: that the perception of nature is not the recognition of a fixed object but the understanding of a relational process. The heaven–earth network structure articulates an ontological principle of mutual generation—an attempt to integrate visual, ethical, and existential dimensions within a single fabric of being.

Nature, therefore, should not be understood as an external, autonomous entity but as an event that unfolds together with human consciousness. To perceive is to participate in the world's own self-becoming. “Perceiving nature” is no longer a matter of mirroring the external world, but of breathing with it—of reweaving the texture of existence through acts of perception.

This perspective transcends the subject-centered framework of classical linear perspective and resonates with contemporary ecological thought and post humanist philosophy. Nature is not a fixed “background” but a continuously regenerated network of relations shaped through human perception and action. Perception, in this sense, is the act of weaving the world—of co-creating the living fabric of existence from within.

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