The School of Life: Calm

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The route to calm can follow two paths: one we've been tracing up to this point – philosophy – and another we'll turn to now – art. Philosophy aims to calm us down by reaching us through our rational faculties. Art is concerned with how concepts can affect us through our senses. The arts know that we are physical, sensuous creatures and that there will be points when it is wiser to touch us viscerally than argue with us intellectually.

The Ryōan-ji Temple Zen garden is a major tourist attraction on the northern fringes of Kyoto in Japan. Visitors go there to sit on a wooden terrace and look for a long time at a patch of gravel that has been raked into lines and at some rocks surrounded by clumps of moss. To people accustomed to Western tourist destinations, it can feel like a very odd place. The gravel and the rocks don't seem to 'mean' anything. They don't commemorate a significant event or have any supernatural associations. Instead, the purpose of coming here is nothing more than to gain a profound sense of calm. The visitor stands to learn how to lead a more serene life from the visual experience of attending to a carefully tended garden of pebbles, rocks and moss.

The garden is guided by a single simple idea: that what is presented externally to our senses can have a powerful impact on what happens to us internally, in our

Top: Ryōan-ji Temple Zen rock garden in the spring, Kyoto, Japan

Bottom: Buddha stone figure, Bali

thoughts and emotions. The mind, in other words, can be guided by the senses. It's an idea that has traditionally offended clever people – because it bypasses the centres of cognitive intelligence and violates the idea that the mind is primarily influenced by information and arguments. The garden resolutely doesn't offer any facts or theories. It doesn't wrestle intellectually with us; it simply presents our eyes with a very precisely organised sensory experience.

The same idea – that sensory experience can shape our feelings – is at work in other parts of Buddhism. For centuries, devotees have been making statues of the Buddha himself. He's generally shown with his legs crossed; his eyes are closed in gentle concentration and he is ever so slightly smiling. He seems profoundly at peace with himself. The point of contemplating the Buddha is disarmingly simple: we should learn to be as he looks. We should model our inner world on his representation, searching for our own version of his comfortable, generous serenity.

The Western tradition asks us to concentrate on the Buddha's ideas. Buddhism more wisely remembers that we are sometimes as influenced by someone's smile. The faces of those we surround ourselves with start to shape our inner landscapes. Psychoanalysts speak of the way a mother's smile transmits contentment to a child – who absorbs the message and smiles back. Moods are contagious. By regularly looking carefully at the Buddha's tranquil, self-contained face, we boost a set of desirable

qualities in ourselves; we promote our own always-endangered reserves of calmness and tranquillity.

The ambition to create deliberately calming environments hasn't been confined to Buddhism. It was also a powerful force within medieval Christian architecture. The Abbey of Cîteaux, not far from Dijon, was built by Cistercian monks during the 12th century. When the monks first arrived, the surrounding area was marshland and wilderness, but they soon developed it into a significant centre of industrial enterprise. They were involved in land reclamation, construction, agriculture, metallurgy, viniculture, brewing and education. They also strongly believed that this intense activity should be undertaken in an atmosphere of order and calm. They wanted to approach their labours in the best state of mind. Calm was their guiding psychological, and therefore also architectural, principle.

The Cistercian monks constructed simple and harmonious buildings out of the local limestone, with plain colours and few ornaments. The plans involved regular repetitions: the doors, windows and roof vaults wouldn't vary much, so that the eye would easily find points of reference. Everything felt solid and enduring. Our natural human frailty was to contrast with the immemorial tone of the masonry. The monks were particularly keen on cloisters: covered walkways opening onto a quiet central square around which one could take de-stressing walks even on a rainy afternoon. The abbey at Cîteaux was just one of thousands built

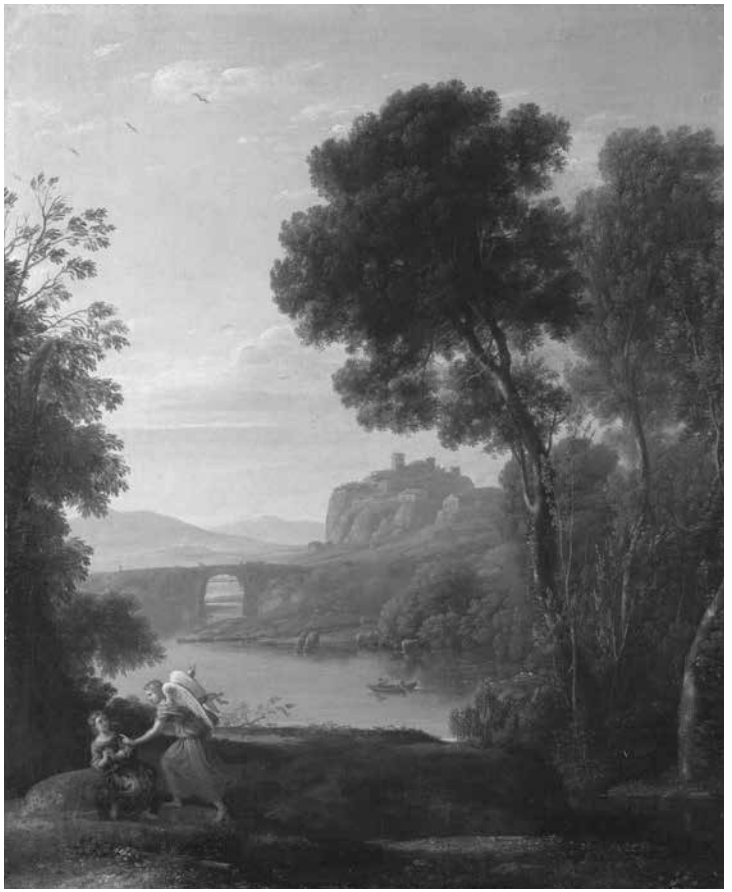
with similar intentions over a period of hundreds of years. It's not an accident that architecture that sets out to create a contemplative and serene atmosphere can easily get labelled 'monastic', though in truth there's nothing inherently religious or Christian about the pursuit of calm. The longing for serenity is a continuing, widespread human need, although the overtly religious background to abbeys and monasteries has an unfortunate association: making calm places erroneously seem as if they were inherently connected to a belief in Jesus.

Monks' dormitory in Santa Maria Monastery,
Ribatejo Province, Portugal

We need to rediscover the search for calm as a fundamental ambition of all architecture, not least for the buildings of our own harried times.

Artists have over the centuries also taken the development of calm to be at the centre of their mission to the world. In the 17th century, the French painter Claude Lorrain specialised in depicting soft skies, still water and stately, gentle trees. One of his famous techniques is to lead the eye gradually deeper and deeper into the silvery distance, towards the receding ridges of hills – drawing us into a much calmer world than the one we normally inhabit. Claude was trying to create a visual scene that would pacify our emotions, so that our minds could become (for a little while) as subdued and harmonious as his landscapes. He was working within the Classical assumption that painting – like all the arts – should help us to develop our souls, and since staying calm is a major concern in life, he accepted that calm would be one of the big goals that any really ambitious artist would set themselves.

This way of thinking about art has, however, been side-lined by a more recent, Romantic tendency to think of art as existing 'for art's sake' – which feels awkward around identifying any very clear or direct way in which works of art might be useful to us. The whole notion of art being in some way therapeutic came to seem unsophisticated. So, even when modern works of visual art actually are strategic instruments for calming us down, we might be slow to take up the offer.



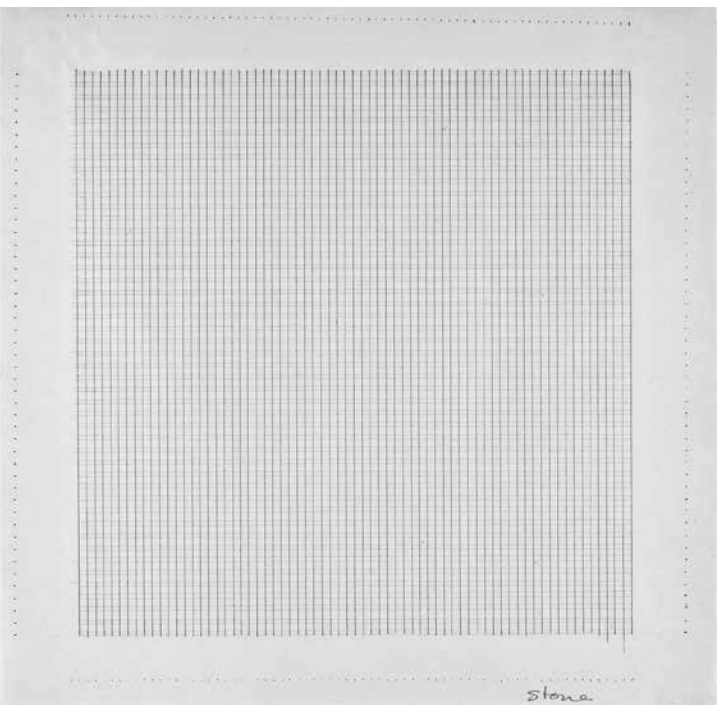
Claude Lorrain, *Landscape with Hagar and the Angel*, 1646

The 20th-century American artist Agnes Martin, for instance, was deeply interested in calming manoeuvres. When asked by an interviewer to explain the purpose of her paintings, with their studied abstractness and repeated pale grids, she remarked that contemporary life agitates us like never before, so that time spent with her work should hopefully 'take our minds in another direction'. Though the commentary of museums and learned guides seldom puts matters as simply or as usefully, Martin was offering – via her grids and neat lines – the same form of help as Claude via his horizons and radiant clouds, as the monks of Ryōan-ji via their moss and rocks and as the sculptors of the Buddha via the quiet smile of their philosophical sage. In all cases, we are being offered a representation of an outer form that should incite and bolster an inner disposition.

At certain moments, it can feel obvious that externals matter for mood. One looks in a tidy cupboard and feels a glow of serene satisfaction. An early-evening walk in a park or by the beach can be deeply consoling. We're very alive in a few personal moments to the impact of what we see. But often this attitude isn't one we are strongly and securely committed to. The thought that mood is affected by the visual environment is a blow to our rational self-respect and our sense of being reasonably robust individuals. We're reluctant to say that we might suffer from visual chaos. It can easily come across as unduly fussy or a touch pretentious. That's why, at a political level, the pursuit of calm design, in cities or the

countryside, is never a priority. The idea that our mental health depends on serene environments has had very little traction: that's why we have a lot of bright neon signs and ugly towers all around us.

In the West, this very issue – how much visual externals really matter – was at the heart of one of the biggest disputes in the history of ideas, with the two great religious traditions – Catholicism and Protestantism – lined up on opposing sides.



Agnes Martin, *Stone*, 1964

The very first church building put up specifically for Protestant worship was the Castle Chapel in Torgau (two hours' drive south from Berlin), consecrated by Martin Luther in 1544. The design was deliberately severe and functional; it was simply a space to keep out the rain and the cold, where you could pray and think and hear sermons. You were supposed to be influenced only by ideas. Anything else – paintings, statues and beauty in general – were seen as snares that would seduce the congregation away from what really mattered. This was diametrically opposed to the Catholic view. The Catholic Frari church in Venice – for instance – contains a large number of hugely complex and expensive paintings and pieces of sculpture. It was intended to be a sensorily alluring place. It was somewhere people would like to spend time, even if they weren't feeling especially pious that day. The construction and decoration of this building were guided by a strong conviction that you could use the visual environment to get people into the right mood – so that they would be more receptive to ideas. The Catholic view grows from the notion that we are hybrid creatures, sensuous as much as we are spiritual. Inner life is hugely dependent on externals, so we should be very careful and ambitious about organising external space so as best to serve our inner needs. That's why the Catholic Church in its most impressive periods invested so deeply in creating the finest buildings and art in the world at the time. These were not created for their own sake but as concerted, systematic attempts to elevate the soul of humanity.

Top: Interior view of the Castle Chapel in Torgau, Saxony, Germany

Bottom: Nave of the Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari church, Venice, Italy

The same debate over the role of visuals rumbles on into modern times – though shorn of any references to religion. The neo-Protestant view repudiates any ties between the inner and the outer realms: it suggests that it doesn't matter what clothes a person wears, what houses look like, what the visual character of a city is. These are dismissed as unimportant subjects, which don't need or even deserve any collective concern. There's a suspicion of any stress on externals, which are viewed in an unflattering light, as an unpleasant kind of showing off and status-seeking. But opposed to this, we find a neo-Catholic approach that holds that there are indeed intimate and deep reasons to care about what things look like: that we need to have the right sort of streets, train stations, libraries, kitchens and clothes in order to be the right sort of people. Independent of any religious preoccupation, modern secular neo-Catholics continue to see visual art and design as important routes to inner contentment.

It is, in a sense, tempting to side with the neo-Protestant view. It makes us less vulnerable to what is around us, to the colour of the walls, the design of the city or the quality of the hotel room. Most of what we see around us is haphazard and jumbled, an enemy of calm and concentration. Yet it may be truer to accept that, however complicated and humbling it can be, the visual atmosphere we move in does play a critical role in forming our moods. It isn't foolish to seek calm through our books, our ideas and our conversations; but alongside

such moves, we should not be insulted also to be directed towards a more basic set of manoeuvres: ensuring that our cupboards are tidy, our beds made, our walls hung with quiet scenes and our gardens well raked. We need to lay our harassed eyes on calming art as much as we need to bathe our minds with calming logic.