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Thoughts on the Aesthetics of Water

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Water. There is a lot of it around. It may not always be in the form that we want, nor in the location where we need it. But there is a lot of it, Three-quarters of the surface of Earth is covered with water. Ninety-eight percent of our body is composed of water.

Water also features largely in our appreciation of nature. Rivers and streams, seashores and lakes...water. The aesthetic use of water plays a role in many cultures in Asia and West Asia and less largely in Western cultures. Water occurs in spiritual and religious rituals from the Mikva of Judaism to the Baptism of Christianity and decorative water features are a frequent component of public and private sites. It may be that the oldest recorded water gardens, or perhaps 'water features,' were in what is called the Cradle of Civilization in Mesopotamia millennia ago. The idea either spread rapidly or occurred almost simultaneously involving Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, China, India, Japan, Rome, Persia and a number of other places among the evolving cultures of Earth.

Other than the obvious need that we have for water to sustain life, what is it that we look for in these waters of Earth. Aesthetically, what do we see or hear, or feel in quiet pools, tumbling streams, or crashing waves along a shore? I doubt that there is anything in the environment that attracts me more quickly or engages my attention and fixes me so raptly, than a pool of water. The context doesn't even seem to matter much. A pool alongside a path through the woods or bubbling from sandy desert soil in the natural environment or a decorative water feature in the built environment, are like magnets pulling me to them and through them and into them.

Is it only water as a liquid that claims our attention? Water in its many forms has a unique ability to redefine its self and its aesthetic aspects. In winter, water oozing from seeps and springs, that once dripped from rocky faces, becomes translucent steps of icy stalagmites. Perhaps the most fascinating redefinition occurs when the limbs and twigs of winter grey trees and shrubs become coated with shimmering and often translucent crystal coatings.

Water has a special tactile quality...an aesthetic of touch; the feel of water pouring through the fingers or caressing some muscles at the end of a long, hard day. The various sounds of water have a special quality. For example, the sounds of moving water evoke a spiritual and a psychological sense. Recorded sounds of water are used to induce relaxation, a deep sense of peace, and healing.

It is easy to take water for granted unless, like me, you were raised in a very dry place where you don't take water for granted...not even a tiny trickle or a stagnant pool. Even in a place literally overflowing with water some places are special. For example, there is a small stream only a few miles from our home. Not much more than a trickle, this stream wanders down a canyon beside a trail. There is one place along the trail where I always stop to take a closer look at the stream. At this spot the stream flows into a quiet, shallow pool. The pool is surrounded by lush grass and framed by a fallen log. I'm not sure what it is about this spot that grabs my attention. I suspect it might be something about the peace that I feel here and, possibly, the harmony with which Nature has arranged the elements of the place. I think most of us seek these special places in our lives, at least those of us who have some sense of the wild and the beauty in Nature.

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