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## The Spiritual Dimensions of Mountain Landscapes in Art

Shamsa Sheikh

Allan Harding MacKay's (b. 1944) *The Mohammed Mountain Question* (1987) (fig. 1) is a 1.5-metre-tall, 35-metre-wide panoramic painting/drawing of the Canadian Rockies and the Swiss Alps, inspired by Canadian artist Lawren Harris (1885–1970) and Swiss artist Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918), two renowned painters lauded for their landscapes.



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MacKay conducted research for this work at the Banff Centre's Leighton Artist Colony studios, and executed the work while living in the Swiss Alps.<sup>1</sup> Based on the artist's personal experiences of the Swiss Alps and the Canadian Rockies, *The Mohammed Mountain Question* investigates the concept and image of the idealized spiritual mountainscape in different cultures. Moreover,

this work explores how artistic interpretations of the landscape are shaped by an individual's connections to their physical environment and the meanings they attribute to it. *The Mohammed Mountain Question* broadens our understanding of the link between spirituality and the natural landscape within the Canadian national imaginary by also examining this relationship in European and Eastern cultures. MacKay merges images painted in the style of Harris not only with realist scenes inspired by the work of Hodler but also with pictorial and textual connections to Muhammad (ca. 570–632), who founded Islam, and the *I Ching* (*Classic of Changes*) (late 9<sup>th</sup> c. BCE), a classical Chinese text used for divination and based on the concept of opposing forces in nature, known as *yin* and *yang*.

The title of the work, *The Mohammed Mountain Question*, references a line by English author Francis Bacon (1561–1626) in his narrative of the life of Muhammad in *The Essays of Francis Bacon*: “If the mountain won’t come to Muhammad, then Muhammad must go to the mountain.”<sup>2</sup> The adage means “if one does not prevail, then one must submit to an alternative.”<sup>3</sup> This passage is part of Bacon’s fictional account of Muhammad attempting to make skeptics believe in his role as a prophet and his teachings by commanding Mount Safa to come to him.<sup>4</sup> When he realizes that the mountain will not move towards him, he instead travels to the top of the mountain to contemplate why he is unable to perform this miracle. The Prophet ultimately concludes that God is merciful, because if the mountain had moved many people would have been killed.<sup>5</sup>

Muhammad did in fact regularly retreat to the mountains, to isolate himself from what he saw as a world of corruption and temptation. He rejected polytheism (believing in more than one god)

and the worship of false idols, which were common among Arabs of the time. He showed sympathy for other people, especially orphans, widows, outcasts and the poor, and was horrified by certain cultural practices such as burying infant daughters alive, which occurred in certain areas in Hejaz, in western Saudi Arabia, for economic and social purposes.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons Muhammad withdrew to the cave Hira on Mount Jabal al-Nour, near Mecca, to seek spiritual comfort and peace, and to meditate and pray.

When Muhammad was forty years old, he received his first call to the “light” from the angel Gabriel, who came to him at Hira and announced, “Muhammad you are the last prophet and Messenger that God [had sent you a mission to fulfill].”<sup>7</sup> This caused Muhammad to become so distraught and frightened that he rejected the call of the light. Three years later, after he had become a highly disciplined spiritual seeker, he was called to become a prophet and propagate the teachings of Islam.<sup>8</sup> In the central scene of *The Mohammed Mountain Question* (based on the installation view shown in fig. 1), Muhammad is seated at the top of the mountain. Instead of gazing directly at the viewer, his eyes are focused on the mysterious forces of a dark shadow, which could perhaps be the presence of a divine revelation or an apparition of an angel. According to the Quran, “Muhammad, evidently encounters the apparition, [in which he gazes upon this shadow with curiosity on his mind] and begins to witness one of the greatest signs of his Lord” (53:17–18).<sup>9</sup> Soon after, he would begin his quest to spread the religion of Islam.

MacKay’s work also includes textual references to mountains from the ancient Chinese text *I Ching*, which is organized according to sixty-four hexagrams—symbols made up of six horizontal lines which may either be broken or unbroken.<sup>10</sup> Within a hexagram, the broken and

unbroken lines symbolize opposing forces in nature, or *yin* and *yang*, respectively. In *The Mohammed Mountain Question*, the spiritual nature of the central mountainous scene in which Muhammad is situated is evident in its embodiment of *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* is characterized by a negative, passive effect. It is dominated by the female principle in nature, which is associated with the earth, water, moon, cold and darkness. *Yang*, by contrast, is characterized by a positive, active effect. It is dominated by the male principle in nature and is associated with the sun, heaven, sky, fire, warmth and daytime.<sup>11</sup> *Yin* and *yang* cannot exist without each other, and there must be balance for these two forces to exist in harmony with each other. In *The Mohammed Mountain Question*, *yang* is seen in the blazing orange and yellow sunrise illuminating the sky and the figure of Muhammad seated on top of the mountain, which signifies his spirituality and wisdom as he accepts God's call to the light and becomes the last prophet. Embodying the new hope of humanity and faith, he will guide his people on the right path; as such, the figure of Muhammad is linked to the positive and active forces associated with *yang*. While the illuminated sky signifies the heavenly realm, or *yang*, the darker tones comprising the mountain and its alternating areas of light and shadow represent the earthly dimension, or *yin*. This image thus conveys the balance that exists in our world.

However, sometimes changes in the relationship between *yin* and *yang* can be dramatic. For instance, the images to the left and right of the central scene (figs. 2–3) may be interpreted as *yin* overshadowing *yang*.



Fig. 2. Detail from *The Mohammed Mountain Question* showing the scene to the left of the central mountainous landscape.



Fig. 3. Detail from *The Mohammed Mountain Question* showing the scene to the right of the central mountainous landscape.

Both of these mountainscapes, composed of valleys, hills, mountains, trees and forests, offer a dark and gloomy interpretation of nature that conveys a sense of isolation, loneliness and despair.

The dark, solid lines and black and dark green tones of the mountains create a cold atmosphere

characteristic of *yin*. The upper registers of the two scenes show sunsets rendered in lighter tones of white and orange or yellow, representing *yang*. In the left image, the dark clouds hover over the mountains as day (*yang*) progresses into night (*yin*). Similarly, in the right image, the yellow and orange sunlight is draining from the sky as darkness takes over. But at the same time, the sun is exploding into rings of light, anticipating the sun being “reborn” the next day. Together, the three mountainscapes shown in the installation view of *The Mohammed Mountain Question* convey change, the cycle of life and the dynamic nature of *yin* and *yang* within the natural world as day gradually falls into night and vice versa. The changes that we observe taking place in nature from one scene to another reflect the balancing forces of *yin* and *yang* in the story of Muhammad: his isolation, doubt and despair eventually lead him on a path of spiritual discovery. While the left and right scenes may represent Muhammad’s rejection of Gabriel calling him to the light at first and afterwards, the central image signifies his ultimate acceptance of this call.

In addition to Islamic and Chinese references to mountains, *The Mohammed Mountain Question* includes mountainscapes based on MacKay’s photographic documentation of the Canadian Rockies and the landscapes of Group of Seven member Lawren Harris. In MacKay's *Source/Derivations* series (1989–2004) Harris’s work becomes part of his conceptual investigation into issues of representation.<sup>12</sup> Harris’s modernist paintings of landscapes across Canada are cornerstones of Canadian culture and identity. He was a devoted follower of theosophy who wanted to seek direct knowledge of the “philosophical concerns or religious thoughts based on a mystical insight of life and nature of divinity.”<sup>13</sup> He integrated his beliefs about “spiritual transformation and liberation, [...] his views on the soul, the artistic process, and intuitive and mystical experiences” into his paintings.<sup>14</sup> These issues profoundly influenced the

direction of Harris's art: he moved away from depicting objective reality, and increasingly sought to articulate the spiritual truths residing in nature.<sup>15</sup> MacKay's *Source/Derivations II (Harris)* (1992) (figs. 4–5), presented at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery in Toronto in 1992, deconstructs Harris's *Isolation Peak* (1930) (fig. 6), situating it within the historical context of Canadian painting and examining the relationship between representations of nature and lived experience.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 4. Allan MacKay, *Source/Derivations II (Harris)* (installation view), 1992, wax, damar varnish, pastel, charcoal, paper, wood panels, University of Toronto.  
[http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/work\\_detail.html?languagePref=en&mkey=49659&title=Source%2FDerivations+II+%28Harris%29%2C+%5Binstallation+view%5D&artist=Allan+H.+MacKay&link\\_id=221](http://ccca.concordia.ca/artists/work_detail.html?languagePref=en&mkey=49659&title=Source%2FDerivations+II+%28Harris%29%2C+%5Binstallation+view%5D&artist=Allan+H.+MacKay&link_id=221).





Fig. 5. Installation view of *Source/Derivations II* (Harris).



Fig. 6. Lawren Harris, *Isolation Peak*, 1930, oil on canvas, 106.7 x 127 cm, Hart House, Toronto. <http://www.vanishing-ice.org/artists/lawren-harris/>.

Painted in green and yellows, blues, purple-black and brown, *Isolation Peak* captures the spiritual dimension of the mountainous landscape as well as Harris's emotional response to it.

*Source/Derivations II* (Harris) explores "the nature of 'landscape' and our perception of

‘place’,”<sup>17</sup> and includes the display of Harris’s painting *Isolation Peak* alongside seven painted panels by MacKay that reconstruct *Isolation Peak* in successive stages across seven large format paintings; “21 artist’s ‘sketches’ made with tracing paper, wax, and photocopies of the images in the original painting; seven heavily waxed book-works originating from museum catalogues; and a wax facsimile of the museum’s curatorial file on the original painting.”<sup>18</sup> The materials on display on tables, walls and shelves include writings, copies, photographs and diagrams related to *Isolation Peak*, such as archival references to the mountain portrayed by Harris. Lending a sculptural component to the work, *Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain* (fig. 7) is a flat, circular sheet of wood containing a hole in the shape of an isosceles triangle, placed on a stand and intended for the viewer to gaze through to observe Harris’s *Isolation Peak*.<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 7. Allan MacKay’s *Viewing Device for a Perfect Mountain* located in front of Lawren Harris’s *Isolation Peak* at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto. 1992. Photo: Robert Stacey. <http://www.allanhardingmackay.ca/pdfs/sourcederivations/Source-Derivations-2.pdf>.

*Source/Derivations II (Harris)* provides insight into the history of the mountains depicted in *Isolation Peak* and their spiritual meaning. By situating the idealized, famous landscape image within its historical context, MacKay demystifies the image while also expanding its meaning.

In *The Mohammed Mountain Question* MacKay continues to examine the spiritual landscape images of Harris. Aware that a viewer's perception of nature is necessarily influenced by cultural imagery, MacKay uses mostly primary colours in his mountainscapes to challenge our perception of the places he is depicting. Whereas *Isolation Peak* showcases Harris's formal interest in achieving an abstract landscape emphasizing simplicity and fluidity, MacKay's *Source/Derivations II (Harris)* and *The Mohammed Mountain Question* are more concerned with dissecting the cultural significance and emotional power of spiritualized representations of the natural landscape.

MacKay's investigation into these issues in *The Mohammed Mountain Question* also includes the landscapes of the eminent nineteenth-century Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler, who greatly contributed to the advancement of mountainscapes as "the very embodiment of national art" in Switzerland.<sup>20</sup> Hodler's interest in Symbolism and Art Nouveau led him to develop a style of painting called Parallelism, which aims to clarify the order of the natural and social worlds through symmetry and repetition. Certain motifs, such as reflections of mountains on water, more effectively articulate the objectives of this style.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Hodler was also inspired by "the Romantic belief in the spiritual replenishment and uplifting experience to be derived from oneness with the grandeur of nature."<sup>22</sup> In Hodler's *The Grammont in the Morning Sun* (1917) (fig. 8), the Grammont, located in Valais, Switzerland, is bathed in warm sunlight and painted in

invigorating shades of yellow, green, blue and orange. The sky above is a soft yellow; the calm, clear water below shows a blue reflection of the mountain which creates repetition and symmetry in the work. *The Grammont in the Morning Sun* represents a sense of isolation—a place where nature prevails.



Fig. 8. Ferdinand Hodler, *The Grammont in the Morning Sun*, 1917, oil on canvas, 64 x 90.5 cm, collection of Christoph Blocher.

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/ferdinand-hodler/the-grammont-in-the-morning-sun-1917>.

MacKay's mountainscapes are similar to Hodler's work in their emphasis on light and balance to convey the spiritual dimensions of nature. In integrating Hodler's work into *The Mohammed Mountain Question*, MacKay reveals the nationalistic significance of spiritualized mountain imagery within yet another cultural setting, and further illustrates how the inner ideas, perceptions, thoughts and emotions of artists relate to their structured study of a given location.

MacKay's work acknowledges that the Canadian experience of the wilderness is necessarily mediated by cultural imagery.<sup>23</sup> *The Mohammed Mountain Question* examines the connections

between our cultural history and contemporary material reality. We are able to reconfigure our distanced experiences of nature to our needs and desires, elevating nature to ideal, heroic and mythic dimensions in our imagination and in art.<sup>24</sup> *The Mohammed Mountain Question* offers insight not only into the narrative of Muhammad and the mountain but also into the nature of spirituality. The three mountainscapes in this work that I have analyzed in this essay explore the cultural, spiritual and emotional significance of these natural phenomena in Canada and Switzerland while drawing connections to Islam and Chinese culture, which regard mountains as embodying the cycle of life and the opposing forces of *yin* and *yang*, respectively.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Harding MacKay, "The Mohammed Mountain Question: An Extended Drawing," *CAIRN* 19, no. 3 (1995), accessed November 4, 2016,

<http://www.allanhardingmackay.ca/pdfs/reviews/cairn-1995.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Bacon, *Essays of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. Max Patrick (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1948), 24.

<sup>3</sup> "If the mountain will not come to Muhammad..." Phrase Finder, accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/if-the-mountain-will-not-come-to-muhammad.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Cyril Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2001), 132.

<sup>5</sup> Christine Ammer, *The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 221,

<https://books.google.ca/books?id=9QuEilMaBt0C&lpg=PA221&dq=If%20the%20mountain%20%20come%20to%20Muhammad&pg=PA221#v=onepage&q=If%20the%20mountain%20%20come%20to%20Muhammad&f=false>.

<sup>6</sup> Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, "Muhammad, the Messenger of God: A Brief Biographical Sketch," *Al-Islam*, accessed November 8, 2016, <https://www.al-islam.org/articles/muhammad-the-messenger-of-god-a-brief-biographical-sketch-muhammad-rizvi>.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Mathewson Denny, *An Introduction to Islam* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> MacKay.

<sup>11</sup> John Blofeld, I Ching: *The Book of Change: A Translation* (London: Mandala Books, 1984), 219.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Stacey, "Source/Derivations II (Lawren Harris)," Allan Harding MacKay, accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.allanhardingmackay.ca/pdfs/sourcederivations/Source-Derivations-2.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> *Dictionary.com*, “Theosophy,” accessed January 7, 2017, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/theosophy?s=t>.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Stoeber, “Theosophical Influences on the Painting and Writing of Lawren Harris: Re-Imagining Theosophy through Canadian Art,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 28, no. 1 (2012): 81.

<sup>15</sup> Kathleen F. Hall, “Theosophy and the Society in the Public Eye: Lawren Harris and Theosophy – Part One,” *Theosophy Forward*, December 9, 2016, accessed January 5, 2017, <https://www.theosophyforward.com/articles/theosophy-and-the-society-in-the-public-eye/1922-lawren-harris-and-theosophy-part-one-2>.

<sup>16</sup> Linda Genereux, “Reviews: Allan Harding MacKay,” *Artforum* (May 1992), accessed November 4, 2016, <http://www.allanhardingmackay.ca/pdfs/sourcederivations/Source-Derivations-2.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Stacey.

<sup>18</sup> Genereux.

<sup>19</sup> Terence Heath, “Allan Harding MacKay,” *C Magazine* 34 (1992),

<http://www.allanhardingmackay.ca/pdfs/sourcederivations/Source-Derivations-2.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Roald Nasgaard, *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America 1890–1940* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984), 134.

<sup>21</sup> “Ferdinand Hodler (1853–1918),” Musée d’Orsay, accessed January 7, 2017, [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-musee-dorsay/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more/page/6/article/ferdinand-hodler-7814.html?tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=649&cHash=2dde9dee75](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-musee-dorsay/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more/page/6/article/ferdinand-hodler-7814.html?tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=649&cHash=2dde9dee75).

<sup>22</sup> Nasgaard, 125.

<sup>23</sup> Genereux.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

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