

"First Impressions"

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An empty valley in the White Tank Mountains, near Phoenix, Arizona.

It was a crisp autumn day, and I had just crossed over a narrow divide into a broad empty canyon in the White Tank Mountains, just west of town. Until then, that morning, it had all been mostly uphill, and I could finally just "coast" now for a while, even though I was only about halfway through my hike. Still mildly sweating, and with slow, steady breath returning, I stood there in the glaring sun, just gazing into the desolate solitude ahead of me. It was empty, and silent. I just *had* to get out my camera, and take a photo of the lonely magnificence. There was something about that perspective, indeed the very presence within those barren rocks, that could not be denied.

Look at my picture here. You might ask yourself, "so what's there here to see?" "It's just some hills and lots of cactus. There's nothing there!"

Precisely. It was one of those "you had to be there" moments, and yet, it was intimately tied to that place, too (and still is). There is an appeal to such views, and it doesn't happen everywhere. It has to do with the lay of the land, the look of the rocks, in fact their very makeup.

I've talked about this kind of thing before in one of my writings (see "Touchstone", November

2003). I mentioned that in Western thought (and science) we give little or no importance to subtleties and feelings. Most other geologists I know would see in that hollow only metamorphic rocks, classified as Precambrian age (around 1.7 billion year old), and a much younger granite, judged to be about 70 million years old (both of these rock formations really are what is there). They would also see nothing of economic value, hence making the place "worthless".

But mix a little Zen into the Earth Sciences, and you have a different way of classifying things. According to Oriental wisdom, "every stone has a face." Every rock looks best when viewed in a certain way, from a specific angle. I would have to agree, and on a large scale it is what makes particular mountains look so appealing, and gives them character.

I think of that valley and the impression it created in me often. I look at its picture sometimes just to remind myself of how I felt then, how momentarily unburdened of all the clutter in my mind I had been. When I first saw the panorama, the instantaneous perception of that scene was like walking into a dark room, pushing the light switch to "On", only to have the light instantly "pop" with the flash of a bulb just

burning out. Think back -- you've had that experience. Remember how you can visualize the room for a few moments, before the image fades from your brain (and before you run to replace the light bulb)? In the instant the view unfolds, you have the briefest chance to experience the scene *without thinking about it*. And then you may *see* aspects you would otherwise never notice.

There is a Japanese art form known as *Suiseki* (literally "water stone"), in which natural rocks or stones, in this case small enough to be easily carried around, are valued for their aesthetic appeal. The characteristics that make them so desirable are a combination of suggestiveness, subdued color, balance, and four other aesthetic qualities for which we in the Western world have no precise words: *wabi*, *sabi*, *shibui*, and *yugen*. These words connote a mental state, felt by the observer.

"Wabi" translates roughly as a mood of melancholy, loneliness, desolation, stillness, and unpretentiousness. The object evokes a subjective feeling. "Sabi" means ancient, mellowed, seasoned, or mature. "Shibui" connotes quiet, elegant, understatedness, even refined. And "yugen" can imply obscurity, mystery, the profound, and the subtle, much in the way the moon shines out from behind a pattern of clouds, or a mountainside shows through a layer of thin fog.

It is not without merit to say that rock formations, hills and valleys, even mountains

can display equivalent indescribable characteristics. You may have noticed such feelings yourself somewhere in the great outdoors. You've just never thought about them later. You see such feelings expressed in the works of certain landscape painters, especially impressionist artists. Walk through some galleries in Scottsdale and take a close look at what various artists are trying to convey. I often wish that I was a painter, and fancy that if I could only master the strokes of brushes and thick oils on canvas, I would go back to the White Tanks, or seek out other such spots, and spend my time trying to capture the essence of landscape.

The nature of that landscape is in the rocks as much as in anything else out there -- maybe more so. Their age, their presence, is something that controls one's mind and sets one's mood. As with meeting someone new, it's all in the first impression.

For more on this subject, go to my website at www.gemland.com, click on "GeoArt", and visit the *Japanese Friendship Garden* in downtown Phoenix. The whole park is constructed with these concepts in mind. And then, even better, go visit it in person! Also visit the "Geology" section, and look at the sequence of views in the White Tank Mountains. If you want to shift back to Western sensibilities you can do that, too, and indulge yourself with geologic explanations galore.

--- *Richard Allen*

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