

THE SONG OF THE AGES: A FLAME OF HOPE

Sing the song of the ages

Giving voice on this beautiful night

Feed the flame in high places

From the earth to the giver of light.¹

Cristobál Gabarrón is an internationally established and widely appreciated artist, a humanist committed to meaningful existence in the larger world through his artwork and through the activities of the Gabarrón Foundation. The expressive works of Gabarrón in the extraordinary setting of Sculpture Park Bei Wu in Wesenberg can be experienced as the metaphorical flame of hope we all need.

A SPANISH KINSHIP: NOT LOCAL BUT GLOBAL

Gabarrón, born in Mula, Murcia, Southeastern Spain, shares with Miró an interest in Asian thought, and translates this interest into idiosyncratic paintings and sculptures. When Miró lived in Paris during the 1920s, he was in touch with several Asian artists, mostly Japanese. These encounters inspired Miró to experiment with linear expressions in spontaneous and playful ways that are associated with calligraphy, and also sparked his interest in ceramics. Gabarrón developed comparable interests.

Spain, especially the Mediterranean part, always has been a melting pot of cultures, maintaining a close relationship with the Arab world, while playing a prominent role in developing trade with the Americas, Africa and India. This hybrid character specific to Spanish culture has often sparked unique creativity.

Gabarrón shares with Miró and also with Kandinsky an intuitive interest in the essence of artistic expression as manifested in Stone Age cave painting or Pre-Columbian ceramics. These often exhibit calligraphic lines, free-hand geometrical ornamentation and shapes that seem to be symbols. It is therefore hardly surprising to find in both these artists and in Gabarrón similar organic shapes, linear playful quasi-symbols and abstracted references to figures. It is important, though, to appreciate how artists always learn from

¹ Quote from song *Dancing in Heaven* by Robert Plant, 2005.

and inspire each other. Gabarrón is as an artist very much his own. For one, Gabarrón applies geometrical forms and geometrical patterns in ways Miró never did. This likely is inspired by Arab culture and somewhat by Picasso. Gabarrón also shares this interest with Frank Stella. However, while even Stella's wildest works always hold a kind of industrial neutrality, being loyal to Minimalism, in Gabarrón's works we clearly experience the emotional touch and hints at landscapes. While Stella successfully expresses the universal side of being, Gabarrón emphasizes the individual and emotional side of being part of the universe. The traditional dichotomy in artistic expression mirrors the eternal challenge to understand being part of larger nature while simultaneously being an individual.

Where Cézanne searched for nature's universal structure in a Schopenhauerian sense by regularly sitting in front of nature, painting nature, Miró, for his part, wished to dive deeper into nature by searching for nature's essence as individual experience. Artists like Miró or Gabarrón do not depict nature or illustrate philosophical thought but are inspired by nature and seek personal knowledge about life and reality through the creation of their artworks.

UNDERSTANDING GABARRÓN

People from many different cultures around the world are drawn to Gabarrón's works. Why is this so? The shapes and colors he chooses for his sculptures seem familiar to everyone. Is this mere chance or can we find in earlier times the original roots for this natural, cultural, cross-over? History offers the answers.

In general, we consider European culture to be founded only on ancient Greek culture, on its philosophies and knowledge, including mathematics and geometry. But Greek culture early on was absorbed by Arab culture and for centuries was ignored in most of Europe until the later Middle Ages and Renaissance. European culture thus from its early days on was a hybrid culture. Even Europe's main religion Christianity originated in the Arab world, today called West-Asia, before it was picked up and transformed into a religion typical for Europe. Through the millennia, trade connections extended exposure to other-cultural influences which were willingly absorbed. In principle, already before the ancient Roman empire, the older cultures of India, China and Greece have shaped European culture. As he stems from multicultural Europe it is impossible to label Gabarrón's works as typical for Spain alone and explains why Gabarrón's works offer a comfortable familiarity to so

many people around the world. Viewers everywhere unconsciously recognize features from their own culture. This background of European culture makes it also logical for an artist like Gabarrón to develop a personal interest in thought from other cultures. The bridge to such other cultures already exists in his own genes.

In China, the confrontation of man with nature's forces led to the Taoist concept of *continuous change*, in India to the Buddhist concept that *everything is process*, in Greece to the concept epitomized by Heraclitus that *everything is in constant flux* (and everything is fire). Analogous concepts have evolved in our time in the natural sciences, as expressed, for instance, in the theorem of conservation of energy, in the Theory of Everything and in quantum physics. Reality concepts nowadays understood by science are not that different from philosophical concepts in the past. Human intuition is logically grounded on perception, and artistic intuition therefore is not merely grounded on emotions.

Publication of Einstein's theory of the bending of light waves in curved space-time in early 20th century caused a general understanding of limitless and non-gravitational space. Einstein's concept matches certain concepts of Asian thought. Around the end of the 19th century, in Europe and in the USA, waves of interest evolved in non-western spiritual thought and other religions and cultures, especially from India, China and Japan. The first translations appeared of Zen-writings, of the writings of Rabindranath Tagore, of Swami Vivekananda, and of Lao Tzu.² Each of these thinkers advocated ancient, intuited knowledge about the non-hierarchical coherence of everything in the world and the cosmos, ideas long discarded in Christian hierarchical culture.

When one combines the ancient and timeless concepts of change in a non-changing whole, and understands man's natural urge to look upwards, focusing from the earth to the heavens, you will understand Gabarrón's works.³ One can appreciate Gabarrón's colorful sculptures as his artistic flame, fire, or bolt of lightning, reaching out to the heavens while firmly grounded on earth. Given all the physical and mental effort an artist like Gabarrón

² The original term is Dao, Daoism, Dao De Jing, but popularized and thus known pronounced as Tao, Taoism, Tao Te Ching or I Ching. Lao-Tse often is written as Lao-Tzu.

³ The Chinese, Indian and Greek concepts are remarkably alike and can be thus summarized: when confronted with life's limited duration, the threats from the immediate environment and humanity's powerlessness against nature's forces, a person discovers that he or she is grounded on earth and a mere speck in the immense universe. This vulnerability clashes with the need for an equilibrium of the inner self with the cosmos, and in all three cultures led to concepts of higher forces at play, to human subordination to such forces, to sacrifices for establishing some discourse with the above, to prefer fire as useful tool of communication allowing the rising smoke to visually connect to the higher forces. The naturalness of the urge to look upwards is obviously also grounded on the fact that we are daylight creatures and natural light comes from above.

invests in his creative process, his sculptures present a metaphorical sacrifice. This is emphasized by the specific concept of the so-called negative space of the Tao Sculpture group and by the verticality of the Siega Verde sculptures, both explicitly pointing upwards.

TAO

Some background information on Taoism might be useful for the exhibition visitor.

In Taoist philosophies of Lao-Tzu and Chaung-Tzu, *no-thingness*⁴ is called *Wu* – something that can only be perceived and imagined by the wise. In the 19th century natural scientists referred to the ether, the stuff engulfing everything. In modern Japanese Zen no-thingness is understood not to be empty but full of meaning, the equivalent to a quantum field. This might seem to be empty space but actually is full of tiny quantities of fluctuating energies.

No-thingness in Hindu and Buddhist teachings comes from the Sanskrit *sunyata*, literally meaning emptiness (in such space there is not a thing). It can best be described as the unshaped cloud of eternal energy of nature that is the foundation of the whole of micro- and macro-nature. Sunyata refers to the level of the formless smallest particles all the way up to the formless infinity of the universe. All that is - forms, objects and people - are composed of tiny elements, and are thus temporary clusters of particles and energies, that after death split up and flow back into formless no-thingness. Taoism describes such flowing energies as *Qi*.

In Lao-Tzu's concept, the Tao is the unchanging whole, it does not exist and only becomes comprehensible to man through his actions. *Wu* is the Chinese notion that to some degree is equivalent to the Indian *Dharma*. A wise person may be able to perceive *Wu* - the non-being or no-thingness – when he or she adjusts to the great transformation. This consists of following one's natural impulses while trying to get rid of all conscious willing and acting, being free of egocentric ambitions, being modest and adjusting to all circumstances. The aim was to become totally unified with the path itself, the Tao, thus become one with the elementary forces of nature.⁵ Rephrased this might be: go with the flow, but do not attempt to manipulate the flow of events. Obviously, such a way of being in the world represents a continuous challenge. Acknowledging the importance of the unity of

⁴ In the original Hindu and Buddhist meaning sunyata is unchanging and static. It just is. See Fré Ilgen, *Art? No Thing!, analogies between art, science and philosophy* (Engwierum: Pro Foundation, 2004, ISBN 90-9018543-7).

⁵ The path, often written as the Path for emphasis, refers to the process towards accomplishing something. It is the search itself that counts.

mind/body, Asian concepts advocate physical exercises, such as yoga, or the physical process of making art, calligraphy and ceramics. Lao-Tzu emphasizes the harmonious unity of all phenomena despite the continuous change of human circumstances. To be in harmony does not describe a static situation, but in an ever-changing situation, the being is not at rest but in a process of continuous adjustment.

In short: we must meet the challenge to combine being immersed in a large unchanging whole, while at our daily level we change all the time by our physical involvement. It is revealing that neuroscientists have explained how visual alignment with another person works in our perception and in our understanding of interaction with the world: when we see another person acting, for instance, in sports or we see marks made by an artist in some material, our eyes and brain react to this. The perception causes similar neurons to fire in our own brain, providing the impression as if making the movement or mark ourselves.⁶

Experiencing art can make us aware of the natural process of change within non-change. Gabarrón's sculptures suggest change but do not actually change. The impression of change is the experience caused by the shapes in steel and the applied colored shapes, offering hope and optimism.

THE TAO SCULPTURE GROUP

*"What I am looking for, Miró also said, 'is a motionless movement, something equivalent to what is called an 'eloquent silence' or what St. John of the Cross referred to as muted music.'"*⁷

As a contrast to the late 1950s artists John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg, who each merely, and wrongly, illustrated nothingness in Zen, Gabarrón correctly understands emptiness as not being empty or silent, but as being full of meaning and, analogous to Miró, as eloquent silence. He does not attempt to illustrate emptiness but shows the way to individual understanding.

⁶ This description refers to what is popularized as *mirror-neurons*, and it explains how the same neurons fire in the active person as in the perceiving person. This has been proven in dogs but not as yet in humans, where the process likely may be more complex. Nevertheless, it is a useful notion for understanding the principle.

⁷ Quoted in Jacques Dupin, 'Joan Miró -Life and Work' (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), p. 379. Art historian Jacques Dupin, who knew Miró, described Miró's works from 1942-1944 and the *Constellations* paintings, as belonging to a period in which he searched for a special, artistic, visual language.

Gabarrón's steel sculptures at the Sculpture Park Bei Wu do not actually move, but their coloring and shapes suggest motion and change to our eyes and brain. The visual appeal of the not actually changing sculptures in the park contrasts and harmonizes with the continuously changing grass, trees, clouds and sunlight, which sparks awareness of ourselves situated in nature's forces at play. Like an act of meditation, the circular *Tao-Sculpture Group* and the tall spikes of the *Siega Verde Group* are symbols of this eloquent silence.

In the Tao Sculpture Group, the negative spaces created by the physical shapes of the sculptures are as important as the shapes of the sculptures themselves. Formally, the physical shapes of sculpture are defined as *positive*, while the spaces indicated by the non-tangible shapes are defined as *negative*. This definition is a poor choice, though, because negative usually means something to avoid. Especially when, as is the case in Gabarrón's dynamic Tao Sculpture Group, the presence includes both the physical sculptures and the empty space between and above the sculptures. The physical space is expressed by the material of the sculpture. The empty space above and in between is a space outlined by the steel shapes and is shaped in our mind.

Gabarrón's steel sculptures rise up from the earth's surface and are visually disrupted by colorful segments. These segments appear to hover between earth and sky. The main cut-out shapes in steel are inspired by Chinese characters and transformed into Gabarrón's idiosyncratic form-language. They are shapes associated with meaningful symbols, but their meanings are concealed. The viewer instantaneously recognizes the symbolic significance, as he or she does with Egyptian or Aztec hieroglyphs.

Gabarrón's geometrized organic shapes have some kinship to the form language of fellow Spanish sculptor Eduardo Chillida, or to Sergey Polyakov's idiosyncratic colored post-Cubist shapes. Gabarrón's smart positioning of monochrome shapes, quotes of geometrical patterns and manually added dots and lines, create interesting optical effects. In combination with the reflections of glossy and delightful colors these cause the surface to virtually dissolve: the viewer hardly perceives the surface of the steel shapes to be just flat surfaces. Such visual disruptions keep the eyes roaming over the work.

The cut-out technique and the location of the colorful and symbolic parts urge the viewer to ponder the empty space directly in-between and above the sculpture. These empty spaces are defined by the symbols and they direct the viewer's focus upwards. This recalls sacrifices in ancient times that used fire to link the earth and humanity with the

higher heavens by means of smoke. Or, as Gabarrón himself writes, “... create a metaphysical message of duality, yin and yang, creating the true sculpture in a vacuum that disperses in nothingness towards the sky.”

The circular composition quotes the Taoist principle of harmony or order, and refers to the circular I Ching.⁸ The interrelationships of the colorful segments add a sophisticated emphasis of dynamics and change at play at our level of existence. Unlike Gabarrón’s twelve main elements, the I Ching involves sixty-four hexagrams in a binary form language not unlike basic program language in modern computing.

The precise positioning of the individual sculptures of this group has been chosen by Gabarrón to follow a specific logic and offer a multi-layered meaning. However, each viewer should trust and follow his or her own perception to explore this logic. This obviously matches with Asian thought not exactly prescribing or explaining, but merely hinting at finding truth or understanding: you understand it, or you do not.

THE SIEGA VERDE GROUP

The Siega Verde (green Harvest) is a famous archeological site with prehistoric drawings on slate rock in Salamanca, in the west of Spain. These drawings beautifully depict animals and abstract symbols, and their age and artistic power deeply touched Gabarrón, inspiring him to create the thirteen sculptures of the new *Siega Verde Group*. The impetus to create new works after such impressions is important to the artist as a way to process experience and give it a place in his own life.

Throughout art history artists have explored the position of humanity as confronted with nature. Glorious examples include *The Monk By The Sea* by C.D. Friedrich, or the Dutch maritime paintings, the dynamic works by William Turner, of course Paul Cézanne, or the *Apocalypse* series by Vasily Kandinsky. These artists found their own idiosyncratic expression inspired by Asian art and thought, as Gabarrón did, in our time. The majestic *Siega Verde Group* are a good example.

⁸ Lao-Tzu’s thoughts are described in the Tao Te Ching, the book of the Path and Virtue, providing hope within the limited duration of life. The book, popularized as the I Ching, likely a work in progress written and adjusted through time by various authors, introduces the concept of Tao and serves as a guide for human behavior and experience. The Tao Te Ching promotes the value and cultivation of simplicity, detachment, virtue, and of living in harmony with nature. One of the first known analysis in Europe of the Tao Te Ching was attempted by German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), for some time living in Berlin, only two hours from Sculpture Park Bei Wu. Leibniz acquired a copy of the Tao Te Ching from Joachim Bouvet, a Jesuit padre stationed in China.

Scientists have shown how lightning does not only flash down from the clouds but also sparks from the earth up to the clouds. These sculptures take up this fact and provide grand symbols of the continuous discourse between life on earth and the heavens. They also reference Gabarrón's personal experience of Siege Verde. His pointed, free-hand, geometrical shapes connect him to the works by artists with similar interests in Asian thought and artistic expressions from prehistoric times or other cultures; like mentioned earlier: Kandinsky and Miró, but one can also think of Tanguy, Masson and Calder.

In contrast to the function of lightning in ancient time, when people interpreted bolts of lightning as blasts from the gods for punishment, the coloring in Gabarrón's sculptures makes his sculptures peaceful, elegant and silent symbols pointing at the skies and letting the viewer appreciate his or her smallness in the whole of reality.

A FLAME OF HOPE

The urge to look upwards to the heavens led to complex philosophical, religious and scientific explanations and assumptions. Great thinkers also understood that people need to avoid longing for some other place than being on earth. In ancient India, Greece and China this led to concepts of reincarnation or re-cycling of energies. The desire to find satisfying concepts and explanations for our individual confrontation with nature, life, and death is a timeless challenge, indeed a song of the ages.⁹ What can an artist do but offer through his or her artworks a personal experience that allows a flame of hope and optimism for coping with this challenge?

JUST LOOK

Although we live in a time and culture that insistently assumes we can understand art only by reading the statement of the artist or the art critic, it is important to remember that we primarily appreciate things by our senses, not by verbal rationalization. We appreciate a landscape, a bunch of flowers or food, not primarily because we talk about them. Our eyes and our brain function differently; they allow a sense of meaning in many non-verbal and indirect ways. This has already been advocated in ancient Greece, India and China, and remains a fundamental insight that continues to be relevant. This is the brilliant meaning of the artworks of Cristóbal Gabarrón.

⁹ See footnote 1.

Fré Ilgen, 2022