

# Techniques of Chinese Paintings

## ***Background***

Both painting and calligraphy developed at the same time, and both used the same tools and techniques. Chinese writing began as pictographs or tiny drawings. Around the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) the writing of Chinese characters—ideas, not words—became standardized. The writing was done with a brush and ink, and each character fit into an imaginary square. A character was composed of brushstrokes written from left to right and from top to bottom. This writing was read from top to bottom beginning with the right hand column. Gradually calligraphers made their characters freer, more fluid, and eventually ran the strokes together. As their skills developed it was only natural these calligraphers turned to painting, since they were already accomplished users of both brush and ink.

## ***The Four Treasures***

The Four Treasures are the tools used for both calligraphy and painting. Having beautiful tools showed respect for these skills.

**BRUSH** – The brush has been developing for 3000 years in China. It is constructed of a long inner core surrounded by a ring of shorter hairs. Around both of these a third layer runs the full length of the brush. The empty space between the short mid-layer and the outer layer is the reservoir which holds the ink or pigments. The brush must have a sharp point for fine lines, yet be fat enough for wider strokes.

**INK STICK** – The ink stick is primarily composed of soot mixed with animal glue which binds ink to the paper. This is compressed into an ink block and often decorated with writing and pictorial designs.

**INK STONE** – The ink stone has a smooth, flattened area in the center where ink is ground in a little water. The edges were often decorated, and the stone's grain was important.

**PAPER** – Paper was invented in China during the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) because the Chinese needed a way to keep their records. Most early paintings were done on silk, far more perishable than paper. By the Tang dynasty (618-906) paper was being used for paintings. The use of paper further linked painting to calligraphy. Paper was either sized with alum to seal the pores or unsized (think of a starched or unstarched shirt). Sized paper was used for careful detail work and for wet ink paintings and quicker brushstrokes.

## ***Other Materials***

**SILK** – Silk lies between sized and unsized paper in terms of texture. Silk must be sized and rubbed with chalk dust to remove grease prior to using it.

**PIGMENTS** – Pigments, either natural or mineral, were washed, ground, and allowed to settle in solution with liquid glue. The top layer was poured off and the bottom layer re-ground. The different grades of pigments were then dried and stored. Color paintings were never as numerous or popular as ink. They were associated with the professional artists who sold their works, a practice considered vulgar.

**SEALS** – An artist often impressed two seals on his work, one with red characters on white ground and the other with white characters on red. These were different versions of the artist's real and professional names. Cinnabar was used to make the red seal.

**COLOPHON** – The colophon consists of Chinese characters and gives us various information as to the occasion, style, or subject matter of the painting.

## ***The Tao of Painting***

The Tao of Painting expresses the basic concept behind Chinese painting. *Tao* means “the way” and comes from the Taoist philosophy. So the Tao of Painting refers to the basic Chinese belief in order and harmony in nature, in one’s conduct and thought. Everyone had a set place in society—one’s family, job, town, and relation to the Emperor. So, too, a calligrapher created his characters each in balance and harmony to the whole, some large and some small. Likewise, an artist placed his rocks harmoniously with other rocks and the trees in groupings resembling kinship. An artist not only depicts this feeling of harmony but also through his brushstrokes tries to convey that he too shares this concept. Now that you are aware of this concept, you can understand why there are no pictures of action or violence by traditional Chinese painters.

## ***Landscapes***

Landscape means a mountain-water painting. Artists explored the techniques of brush painting, making brushstrokes with brush and ink developed in calligraphy. They showed a reverence for nature and tried to make one feel they were actually in the landscape.

Composing a landscape involved a set of expectations:

**OUTLINES** – The artist first creates an outline of the mountains beginning with the predominant peak. These first brushstrokes set the mood for the entire work. Outlines are called the bones of the painting; they define and give a sense of structure.

**SHAPING LINES** – These lines provide texture. They reveal the style and personality of the artist who can use a wet or dry brush that is thick or thin. They do not depict reality but rather the spirit, the essential nature of things. This spirit is called *ch’i*. These texture strokes are the most important element of Chinese painting.

**DOTS** – Dots may be vertical, horizontal, or diagonal. They may stress distant trees or moss, or they may follow the contours of the mountains. Though not realistic, they enliven a work and add variety to it. Both Van Gogh and Hokusai used a dotting technique successfully.

**WASHES** – Washes are heavily diluted ink or pigment mediums used in both small or large areas to give perspective and a touch of color.

**BRUSHSTROKES** – Brushstrokes are characteristic features of a Chinese painting and the basis for judging painting and calligraphy.

**PERSPECTIVE** – Perspective does not concentrate on a single viewpoint. Instead, the artist incorporates multiple viewpoints in a single work, so we can view a landscape from below looking up, from mid-point looking within, and from above looking down. This causes our eyes to keep moving and refocusing on every corner of the work.

## ***Studying Brush Techniques***

The *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* was produced after 1679 by three brothers named Wang. The title comes from the home of the publisher in Nanking. Since those making paintings were scholars-turned-artists, the manual instructed them in the suitable brush techniques for each subject. Divided into

thirteen books such as trees, rocks, and flowering plants, these books revealed an impressive observation of nature. The new artists were not slaves to this manual; rather, it showed them the right attitude in relation to the Tao of Painting.

## **Styles**

**GONGBI STYLE** – This is a meticulous, carefully detailed style applied to works of color. In general these are bird and flower pictures, as there was an even greater interest shown in nature around the Song dynasty (12<sup>th</sup> century). There is a heavy application of color. Between every two or three coats is a layer of alum or sizing, creating smooth, even shades, and preventing cracks and flaking when the scrolls, hanging or hand scrolls, were rolled up. No brushstrokes are visible in this style.

**BLUE AND GREEN STYLE** – This applies to landscapes painted with mineral blue azurite and green malachite color.

**XIEYI** – This is the expressive, spontaneous style opposite of gongbi. Often this is done on unsized paper with ink alone, or very little color. More abstract, xieyi has a more western feel to it. Where gongbi stresses the line and brush, xieyi stresses a freer use with absolute control of the ink. Zen Buddhism, developed during the Song dynasty (960-1279), and spontaneity are associated with the suddenness of enlightenment. Brushstrokes are very evident, and some of the techniques often seen are:

**Flying White** – pressure on the brush causing hairs to split, leaving white streaks.

**Splashed Ink** – very wet free application of ink causing ink blobs.

**Broken Ink** – breaking the wash by dipping the brush tip into darker or lighter ink tones while the work is still wet.

**BONELESS STYLE** – This occurs with colored flower pictures. No outline is used, and it is not used with ink painting or with landscapes.

## **Painting Types**

**FINGER PAINTING** – This was originated by artists wanting to get as close as possible to the painting's surface. Artists used their hair, fingers, or tongue. When using one's hand, an artist might have used a long finger nail, a nail and finger tip, or the palm.

**COPYING** – Copying from other artists was accepted in Chinese painting since it originated from learning calligraphy inscribed in stone. Many early paintings were preserved due to their copies. The methods of copying were tracing, reproducing a work faithfully, and one's interpretation of a famous work. All aided in learning the brushstrokes.

**DECORATIVE ARTS** – Painting techniques were used to decorate ceramics, jades, and lacquers.

## **Japanese Painting**

Chinese painting techniques along with Buddhism spread to Japan in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* came to Japan later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was a great influence for those Japanese scholars who wished to paint in the style of the Chinese. They were called Nanga painters.

## ***Comparison of Chinese and Japanese Painting***

Chinese paintings are more grounded. They show more varied brushstrokes and more details. They create mood pictures, often lyric or placid. They avoid displays of skill, showing simplification instead.

Japanese paintings often show a floating quality. More dramatic and done for effect, they exhibit sweeping brushstrokes, wider outlines, and use of the diagonal. These paintings are more manly and also more decorative.

## ***Differences between Eastern and Western Painting***

Western paintings stress originality. They are made by professional artists for profit. Some works show action, even violence. Color is mixed and very important.

Eastern paintings were made by amateurs or the scholar painters as a means of self-cultivation. Selling a painting was considered vulgar. Both inner preparation for pre-planning and spontaneity were encouraged. Painting skills were acquired by copying the old masters.

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