

Google “Chinese painting” and “how to” and you will meet dozens of online courses and books designed to teach you in a few simple steps how to paint Chinese paintings. Now, ignore these formulaic descriptions on how you too can create landscapes of places which probably hold no meaning for you, and instead look toward the art historical and philosophy books. American artists and art enthusiasts can and should look at Chinese art for inspiration and a comprehensive approach to visual expression, but make no mistake; any attempt for a Westerner to create a replica can at best be only that: a cheap, inauthentic imitation, certainly not within the category of art. The Chinese technique and aesthetic philosophy offers a left brained sense of structure while still allowing for a right brained intuitive play of visuals and can serve as a reference point and a source of inspiration. This essay will consist of some ideas on what Chinese painting is about and I hope it will inspire you to begin experimenting visually if you are so compelled yet are afraid to begin. I will discuss general art historical perspectives on Chinese painting and give you an overview of the subjects painted and the approaches you may take. This essay is also highly reflective on the philosophical influences that have permeated through to the Chinese way of painting-the basic points that will hopefully spark interest in the interested and will lead you to acquire more sustenance through further study. I will conclude with my own thoughts on how to

best learn from the Chinese example and let it seep into your own work.

Chinese painting is at least old as all other forms of global painting. That is, its origins can be traced back to the Neolithic period. Cave paintings from this era were similar in subject matter and style to those found in Europe at the time. Similarly, painting was used to decorate ritual vessels, and it is from these tiny pictures that calligraphy sprung. Painting, ritual, calligraphy...all were originally linked and this still remains for the serious painter. Pictures were symbolic, didactic, atmospheric and had one overarching purpose: to bring heaven down to earth. The artist/shaman was the conduit between these two energies. The Shamanic influence remains and the philosophical additions did not obscure past revelations and traditions. This is how Chinese painting became such an incredibly rich discipline. The desire to create the most effective and qi infused painting became was then the goal as it still is today, Subject matter held symbolic meaning and the range of subjects grew, but always most important: qi. The qi of the painter, the qi of the painting,..so painting itself is a ritual act of creation. Jing Hao of the Five Dynasties wrote the six keys to skill in his work, *Records of the Method of the Brush*. As he wrote it, The first is qi. The second is charm. The third is mind. The fourth is view. Fifth is line. And sixth is ink.

Again: The *first* is *qi*.

Qi is a word most are familiar with but cannot easily define. Qi is energy but it is not just energy, it is a life force, an undescrivable. It is potentially everything and potentially the space that is nothing. It is something the artist must develop in within their person, and then aim to transfer something of this essence into their work, thereby creating something more than just materials and composition. Painters were practitioners of qi gong: exercises termed such now, but referring to a broad series of sets of exercises-breathing, movement, meditation-prescribed to create and best utilize qi. There is no need to doubt that painters used these exercises since qi gong, whether termed such or not, was practiced in China for thousands of years by the vast majority. Today qi gong is still highly used and practiced. But for the artist, the focus of the qi was to enhance to work. And the practice of, well, practice, would make one a better artist, because art in China was not solely for production purposes, but it was a *performance* and part of a cultivated life.

The early symbolism that developed from vessel and cave painting led to standards and traditions that have become almost as rigid as Chinese calligraphy. Painting ritually was an act of communication; a prayer. And proper communication was understood to have been key. There is no writing without painting; no language without brushwork. It is rare to see a painting devoid of calligraphy. Often inscribed with poetry, which adds to the expression, the

least one might see is the artist's signature. In China, one would be premature to attempt painting without having first mastered calligraphy, or at the very least, one would try their hand at brushwork before delving into a visual expression. This preparation is much like the practice of drawing that exists as a preparation for painting and more complete forms of art in the West. The link between the *ability* to read and the skill of the painter were undeniable. The more literate the artists, the more intelligent the artists work, as the artist had much more time to practice and inspiration to practice from. The more cultivated the person, the more qi that can extend from heart to hand to brush to paper. The symbolism that expressed itself visually through ink and brush, writing and painting, was a code that developed but was not highly experimented with. The structure that the symbolism provided added meaning to the artist's work, while the subtleties of the artist's style made the painting what was hopefully a praised expression of a timeless idea. Choice of subject was a choice, but what makes one artist superior in talent to another is the *way* in which the idea is expressed,

Chinese painting developed over time to move from large scale cave paintings to fresco to paintings on rice paper or silk, although many other painted mediums and materials existed that simply are not as studied today because they were destroyed or not

collected, such as decorative household screen or the dainty oval fan. The Han dynasty at about 2000 B. C. is the traditional beginning of the tradition of Chinese brush painting, although other sources go back to 4000 B. C. and these of course are just our most informed estimates. The subject matter and approaches differed depending on the trends of the time, and the range was expounded upon as culture developed. The old reliable subject matters of landscape, figure, and flower and bird painting house all items of the traditional subjects and symbolisms. While the discipline grew, it still did not experiment heavily. There is an underlying idea of what painting is, what life is, what is best expressed through painting, and limits on how much one extended from tradition.

Figure painting has existed since at least the Neolithic era. Art historians recognize figure painting to have reached its height during the Tang dynasty. Figure painting was not limited to religious or historical portraiture, but also very common beginning to be popularized in this time were paintings of everyday court life and women. These slice of life paintings offer much to our understanding of life in China, and stories depicted through art also inform us on ideals of morality and physical beauty. Figure painting at its most experimental was perhaps during the eleventh century when Zen painters adopted a more free flowing style that valued loose expressive gestural line and prized was spontaneity. One

does not immediately think of portraiture when one thinks of Chinese painting, but its tradition and presence demand some word be aimed in its direction.

Landscape painting flourished in and after the Tang dynasty. The idealism of the landscape was undoubtedly under Taoist influence and represented the desire to retreat from dissatisfaction in society to solitude in nature. Philosophers in China attempted to define a culture and cement morality, yoking time and again an ever increasing population. Were they successful? Could any culture reach a perfect balance? Taoism sought another avenue-retreat, and it was often expressed in Chinese landscape paintings. Chinese landscape painting achieves its unique quality partially due to its use of multiple elevated viewpoints. The eye meanders through the changing landscape in visions that reflect change through negating time. The atmosphere that surrounds is of five atmospheric categories: clouds, mist, vapour, pervasive haze and rosy clouds. Atmosphere can be understood as a yang aspect of qi in its ethereal, less substantial qualities. In this way, yang energies were expressed with a yin flavored mystery. Likewise, the yang in landscape paintings was often expressed as open spaces that were not devoid but filled with qi, a yang substance. This yang energy was balanced by, if effective, an intuitive balance of yin materialism and solid objects. Balance in Chinese painting is not to be misunderstood as symmetry: that would be too easy.

Patterns exist in nature, but not often in perfection. Balance in painting was something the painter and viewer experienced and intuited reactionaty to the painting itself. Chinese painting served also to involve the viewer through its leading of the eye in and out of yin and yang. Too much said is a monologue, not a dialogue, and not of the traditional Chinese taste. A refined Chinese painter knew this and refrained from the tendency to overwhelm the senses that is so present in Western art. This too represents balance.

Like Chinese writings, a landscape painting is read from right to left and the idea of change is present in any successful landscape painting. This expression of change was undoubtedly rooted in ideas originating in the I Ching, The Book of Changes. One could also still find philosophical artistic inspitation from this book today. Knowledge acquired by meditation on nature was a prerequisite to painting a traditional landscape, while exactitude was a matter of preference.

In general there are two approaches one may take to Chinese painting, and these differences apply to any subject matter. The shui-mo technique is a freestyle approach to painting that encourages performance and spontaneity. By contrast is the meticulous gong-bi approach to painting that was found mostly in the royal courts. Shui-mo technique was more universally practiced and popular. The two styles really needed no categorical

delineation. We are typically part of one school of thought or the other. A right brained person tending toward movement would employ a loose fluid brushstroke whether they were informed of its nomination, and we all know those artists who work like architects organizing shapes and scenes in tedious meticulousness.

With the subjects of figures and landscape came a more detailed expression and tradition of painting subjects listed under the heading of bird-and-flower painting. This is the most commonly “taught” style of painting in modern manuals for people looking to create rather than purchase christmas gifts for extended members of their family. I do not mean to disregard this type of painting at all since it is probably the closest style of Chinese painting that I aspire to. It is no easier than landscape or figure painting, it just lends itself to a more global population to create, although an American landscape created in the style of traditional Chinese landscape would be very interesting as well. In this category are the popular subjects of koi, horses, birds, the four gentlemen (chrysanthemum, bamboo, plum blossom, and the orchid), and pretty much any other subject singled out.

Painting is more than just the object it produces. I have hinted throughout the text that this is such. To be a painter is not only to make a picture...

“The best is to cultivate the shen.
Next is to cultivate the qi.

Last of all is to cultivate the form.”

-Lui Xi Zai, “Treatist on the Conception of Calligraphy” Qing Dynasty, 1644-1911 C. E.

The mind directs the qi which cultivates the form. This is ultimately all you need to know. But to be a little more descriptive, it starts with two things: 1) Cun/brushwork which leads to 2) calligraphy, which is essential the symbolism that directs all meaningful things.

“After the spirit and the thoughts are concentrated, the ideas may be developed in accordance with the style; and then it may be said, that what is grasped by the mind is expressed by the hand.”

-Anonymous Chinese Painter

Brushwork is the mental discipline that is a prerequisite for painting and an art in its own. Calligraphy, as stated before is the starting point that teaches line quality and form, of which there are many descriptions of. But more than just understanding the linear patterns that can arise from brushes of varying form, thickness, and hair quality, one learns the meaning of the symbolism inherent to calligraphy, which finds greater expression in painting. Most manuals for painting can go into further depth on brushwork and the descriptive terminology for each type of line. It was, and is, *that* important.

As a American painter, I do not expect to see myself learn Chinese characters for the purpose of incorporating Chinese aesthetic principles, but undeniably, practice using the tool that connects ones heart to ones canvas is the first step to learning to translate ones ideas to

the blank slate. However the understanding and appreciation of language and all it represents cannot be replaced by any degree of talent. Talent is merely an aptitude for something and cannot hold anything solid in its hand that is not of any real substance.

Talent without literacy is pure abstraction. Education and literacy to the highest degree one's circumstances can take itself is the modern equivlancy of this ideal. That is why this essay on painting is about the theory behind painting. The intellectual springboard.

After the shen is appropriately cultivated, the second thing to develop is the qi. I spoke of this earlier and referenced the practice of qi gong, but any physical practice that works toward generating and mainaining energy, wll the while focusing the energy will allow you as an artist to focus your attentions on that which you desire. Even appropriate diet cannot be understated. The proper greasing of the machinery is important as our bodies are our intruments. Which comes first, qi or shen? I do not know the answer to this, but the shen *directs* the qi, and they are both necessary if you want to develop to your highest capacity as an artist, and an unbalanced shen can make an interesting painting, but can lead to a painting that has undesireable qi.

Third: form. Form is the painting itself, and when the shen and the qi are enhanced and intention is set, then it is the artists' role to create the form that cannot but reflect the

shen and the qi of the artist. The form *is* the painting itself: the result of proper preparation. The greater the preparedness the better the results. Like all things, it cannot be faked and there are no shortcuts. The best one can do is work smart to avoid pitfalls and learn from experience.

The aspirant to Chinese painting will find at their disposal lists to reference when beginning to understand and apply techniques. The Chinese certainly loved to list. This probably stemmed from having the first classroom style educational setting and from having to remember things and not having access to information as readily as we are used to. But also, lists are informative and instructive. Here are a few.

A popular list referenced is the four heads of observation. The first is the idea of which was previously alluded to. This head refers to the meditation on the detailed points of nature so as to understand the essence of whatever is being studied. The Buddhist reference is obvious, even to the layperson. The second head refers to the variation of approach that different subjects should have. The symbolic meanings of things were a constant. It was unheard of and unscholarly to, say, reference Autumn with bamboo. The third head instructs the artist to show originality while the fourth head champions for a display of accurate draughtmanship.

Two popular styles of lists for the student of Chinese painting are things to do, and things to avoid. Much of the previous discussion was based on these principles.

Your Suggested to do list might consist of The Six Qualities and/or the Six Essentials that have been handed down. *The Six Essentials*: One: Action of the qi and brushwork go together. Two: basic design should be according to tradition. Three: Originality should not disregard the li or essence of things. Four: Color should enrich. Five: Brushwork should be handled with spontaneity. And the Sixth Essential: learn from the masters but avoid their faults. *The Six Qualities*: First quality: to display power and control in brushwork. Second quality: to possess sturdy simplicity with refinement of talent. Third: to possess delicacy of skill with vigor of execution. Fourth: To exhibit originality, even to the point of eccentricity, without violating the li of things, Fifth: to convey tone through rendering of space. Sixth: to achieve depth and space on a flat surface.

Undeniably, these two lists are similar and linked. Teachers used what was good and expanded on what they desired. In reading the list of the six qualities, we can see how the author, without saying it directly, was teaching balance of yin and yang principles. There is no division in the yin and yang of painting, they simply fall into and generate the other. They tend to reside one in the other. Note also the importance of before mentioned prerequisites

of qi and brushwork. Cultivating the qi and mastering brushwork is a mental practice that leads to control, spontaneity, and originality. Simplicity is refined and indicative of single mindedness. It is therefore the goal. And finally, the student must reference the master, the ancestors. This teacher/student reverence was a Confucian ideal, highlighting the importance of study, reverence, all the while advocating for advancement and innovation.

In so few carefully selected words, one can learn so much, and begin.

Then upon beginning and during study, the student may also take note of the things *Not to do*. *The Twelve Avoidances* from the Yuan period states: The first thing to avoid is a crowded, ill-arranged composition. The second, far and near not clearly distinguished. The third, mountains without qi, the pulse of life. The fourth, water with no indication of its source. The fifth, scenes lacking any places inaccessible by nature. The sixth, paths with no indication of beginning or end. The seventh, stones and rocks with one face. The eighth, trees with less than four main branches. The ninth, figures unnaturally distorted. The tenth, buildings and pavillions inappropriately placed, The eleventh, atmospheric effects of mist or clearness neglected. And the twelfth, color applied without method. These twelve were written by Jao Tzu-jan. Again we can see overlap with the qualities and essentials. This list was obviously for landscape painters but is useful for understanding the types of things that

were important and debated in the development of landscape painting to its ideal form.

The following *Four Huangs/Avoidances* is both a smaller list and more universally applicable. The first to avoid: an anarchic personal style which disowns the example of past masters. The second: a sweet, easy going style. Third: vulgarity, an eye catching decorative style. And the fourth: a style completely submissive to predecessors. Again, with very few words, the critic has managed to ascertain what at times is problematic in the painter. Too much convention and the abuse of crowd pleasers makes for an unrefined painting. This list delineates practice/craft from persistence/art.

In modern texts on Chinese painting, sheer repetition is not an agreed upon method for learning how to paint. On the one hand, the seventeenth century Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting loosely attempts a more step by step learning method, as do many twenty first and twentieth century manuals. However Wang Chi-yuan in his book Oriental Brushwork, published 1966, expresses disdain when even attempting to be a Chinese painter, an underlying premise of this essay: “You, an individual, a person who wants to paint, seek direct help in working, but there appear no made to order diagrams to illustrate particular points of technique. To include these would give you a series of “practice” pictures, but only at the price of depriving you of the beauty and satisfaction that lies in

complete visual works.” (12) Indeed, where would the bravado of personal expression lie?

To take this approach would be to turn high art into mere craft, a common and evil error.

Errors are necessary. They are unavoidable. If you feel a little intimidated by the lofty approach and historical and philosophical depth that has led Chinese painting to be what it is today, wash that all away from your mind and just begin. This essay was not designed to intimidate. It is my personal reflection on Chinese art and art approach in general. It was designed to inspire and arrange correctly in ones mind what the highest forms of art aspire to. Hopefully it shows that you do not have to change who you are as an artist. There is room for whatever style of brushstroke you are inclined to use and whatever subject matter you are drawn to. The benefit to having such a rich tradition for so many thousands of years practiced by such a numerous population is that they have figured out the basics for you. The benefit to living in a time where all of this has been explored and where we have at our disposal the freedom to experiment is that we can possibly take the best of what has been done and combine it with what we want it to be. The artist is a shaman of sorts: a magic maker. But the artist is also the philosopher. And the good artist will always be a student.

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