

Introduction to appreciating Chinese Calligraphy

What is calligraphy?

Chinese characters in their most primitive forms are logograms - words were derived from pictures. This allows an opportunity for aesthetic appreciation of Chinese characters - in an extreme interpretation, we can say that a group of Chinese words are made up of small units of pictures.

Because of human nature's pursuit for aesthetics, there began a demand for written words to be beautiful. Writing started out in Chinese history as a functional activity. Chinese soon learned how to make their written words look good, and slowly writing beautifully became an independent art from its functional origins.

The 5 pillars of art from calligraphy's perspective

At a secular level, the aim of Chinese calligraphy is to write words beautifully. However, a higher level of requirement is for the calligrapher to enter into a state of absolute indulgence and concentration, when the spirit of the individual is totally immersed into the act of writing. This is a time when the brush and the calligrapher are united as one. In this way the calligraphy will exhibit traces of this spiritual state. In such works the energy, or *qi*, will be smooth flowing.

Meaning of words 内容

Unlike painting, which is a pictorial system, calligraphy can carry with it literary meanings. For example, a calligraphy work of a poem would encompass poetic beauty on top of its visual aesthetic value.

Composition 章法

The ways in which words are laid out in a calligraphy work are not arbitrary. Just like paintings, the words are laid out in a beautiful manner. Over the span of history, the Chinese developed some templates of laying out the words, and today most calligraphers follow these templates. (e.g. 对联, 中堂, 琴条)

One important characteristic unique to calligraphy is *hang qi* (行气), which refers to the relationship between individual characters in a row or column. Usually the requirement is for the *qi* or energy to flow through the column smoothly, and the flow either strictly vertical or horizontal.

Brushstrokes 线条

Chinese calligraphy is an art that is largely made up of brushstrokes. Its aesthetic beauty comes mainly from the beauty of the brushstrokes.

Good quality lines are often powerful, vibrant, steady, vigorous and possess

character. Feeble lines that are weak and unsteady are unattractive.

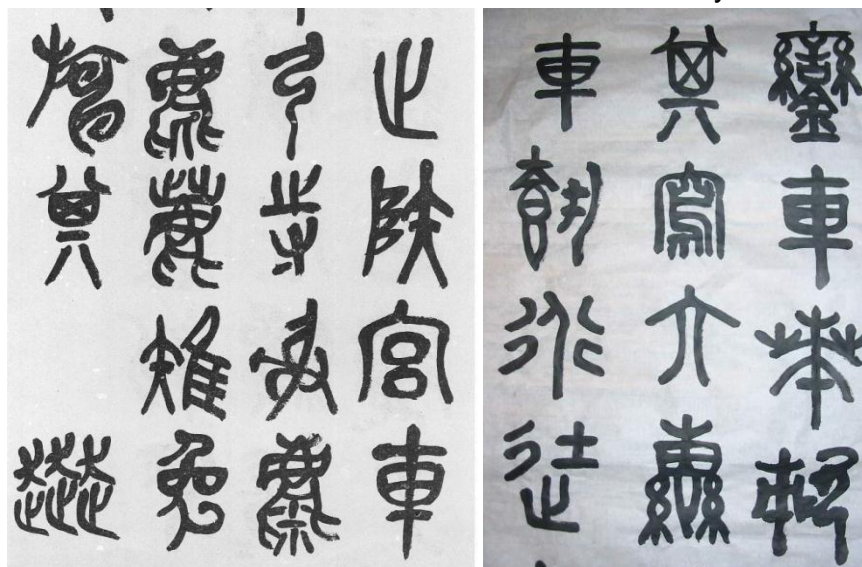


Fig 8

Compare the left and right calligraphy. Try to find similar words, then compare individual brushstrokes. For the same words, feel the power of the strokes. Which one do you think it better?

Ink tone 墨韵

Traditionally, Chinese calligraphy uses concentrated, black ink. Generally the requirements were that the ink must be glossy and black to make the characters stand out.

Modern developments allowed calligraphers to use ink tones more freely, similar to the effects used in paintings. In this way, ink tone is an added dimension that contributes to variations in the written work. Variations are encouraged, because human nature dislikes monotonous repetition.

Form of words 间架结构

Within the boundaries of a character, the relative position and size of each component create different aesthetic effects.



Fig 9 Different combinations of relative position and size for the same word. Some styles of writing seek perfect balance and harmony, while others may seek unstable equilibrium.

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