

Introduction to appreciating Chinese Painting

Chinese paintings evolved over a long period of time, and were founded on some very different concepts and philosophies when compared with Western paintings. The mainstream ink painting started approximately in the Tang dynasty (7th century).

The core concept in traditional Chinese aesthetics is to capture the spirit rather than the form. In other words, artists might overlook some aspects of realism and pay more attention to the spirit or mood of the subject matter. In fact, some Chinese painters exaggerate the forms of their subject to achieve their goals. As such, Chinese paintings are always in some ways abstract. In comparison, traditional Western art is essentially realist in its roots.

Without the risk of over-generalisation, Chinese paintings can be classified by the two main genres in Chinese painting: the *Xie Yi* (写意), and the *Gong Bi* (工笔). The style of *Xie Yi* is free and expressive, and is usually semi abstract by omitting the details; whereas *Gong Bi* paintings are more meticulous and executed with a fine brush and lends itself towards realism. In this book, the Chinese paintings are all of the *Xie Yi* tradition.



Fig 3 : *Gong Bi* (left) style vs. *Xie Yi* (right) style

For the most part in history, the *Xie Yi* style was associated with the scholars or the literati class in the Chinese society. This class was the dominant class in the Chinese arts tradition, at the same time they are the de facto ruling class. Thus, the *Xie Yi* style was the mainstream style practiced by Chinese artists, esp. after the Sung dynasty. On the other hand, the *Gong Bi* style was associated with the court painters who worked in imperial painting agencies and was often referred to as court-style paintings.

Chinese philosophies are often manifested through Chinese paintings. There were heavy influences from the three major schools of philosophies: The

Daoist, Buddhist and Confucius. We find that very often Chinese arts reflect the philosophies of the Chinese. One example is the pursuit of sublime and transcend spirituality rather than secular realism.

The 5 pillars of art from Chinese painting's perspectives

Subject Matter and Iconography 内容

Very often, Chinese paintings are filled with iconographical traditions and scholars employ these iconographic meanings as a tool for the expression of their state of mind, or for translating their aspirations into the visual form. In fact, until very recent times, paintings were often used as a tool to help with one's sublime mental cultivation, rather than an independent profession. This is particularly true for the literati style paintings.

For instance, the bamboo is associated with righteousness and humility. A combination of plum blossoms, bamboos and pine trees becomes the iconic theme 'three friends in winter', symbolic for the ability to withstand adverse conditions. Fishes, similar sounding to 'left over' in Chinese, are often associated with the auspicious meaning of abundance.

Landscape paintings are often used to represent an idealized state of mind or an ideal way of living, a way of life that the literati class which most of these painters belonged longed for. The purpose is not to reproduce the appearance of nature, but rather to grasp an emotion or the atmosphere of the painter's inner spiritual world.

Images in a painting are usually accompanied by inscriptions or writings in the form of a short paragraph or poem, used to enhance the meanings carried by the images in the paintings.

Line/Brush Stroke 线条

On the average more than 80% of the compositional elements in a typical Chinese painting consist of lines, created by brushstrokes. Brushstrokes by itself can be expressive. They possess different qualities and can invoke different meanings.



Fig 4 Expressive properties of lines

Compare 1 and 4. Which is steadier?

Compare 3 and 4, which is more vibrant?

Compare 2 and 4, which is heavier?

Compare 5 and 4, which is more smooth flowing?

One of the easiest ways to determine the skill level of a Chinese painting artist is to look at the quality of the lines this artist executes. Almost without exceptions, good Chinese painters produced good lines. In fact many painting traders use this method to authenticate the originality of a master's works. A fake painting can easily capture the forms, composition, etc, but seldom reproduce the quality of brush strokes that only the masters can execute.

Colour/ Ink tone 墨韵

Daoist philosophy for simplicity (vibrant colours make the eye blind五色令人眼盲) influenced the limited use of colours in traditional Chinese paintings. Chinese painters used different tonalities of the black ink and simple colors in their expressions.

The term *Mo Yun* (墨韵 or Ink tonalities) is used to describe the interplaying effects between the Chinese ink and rice paper. A variety of techniques had been invented by past masters to create gradual and subtle differences in the tone of the ink to overcome the limitations of a restricted colour palette. The Chinese has a saying, that Chinese ink has five colours, although in reality it

is monochrome. The 'five colours' is a metaphor to describe the wide spectrum of tonality possibilities offered by the Ink and paper.



Fig 5
Qi Bai Shi, Prawns
20th century

The Chinese ink and paper medium creates ink tonalities that express the transparent and watery qualities of the prawn.

Form 造型

Despite the inherent abstraction in Chinese painting, the subjects in paintings are often based on real life experiences. Unlike modern Western art, Chinese art had not evolved into pure abstraction yet. Qi Bai Shi, one of the most important Chinese painter in the 20th Century, explained this concept and advocated that the best art lies between likeness and unlikeness. That is, there must be a certain level of realism, but the subject being painted can be manipulated and exaggerated in certain ways to bring out its spirit. In Chinese painting capturing the spirit is always more important.



Fig 6
Liang Kai, the fairy
13th century

Take note of the abstraction and exaggeration. The facial features are not clearly seen. The clothes are also highly simplified in its expression. But we do have a feel of the character of this 'fairy'. The ability to be able to express the character is more important than being able to express the pictorial details.

Composition

The Chinese have their own system of organizing their pictorial presentations and is particularly fond of leaving large areas of unpainted surface, a characteristic that has come to be associated with Chinese paintings. The blank spaces could refer to a variety of things, denoting clouds, water and sky in landscape paintings or simply to reduce 'noise' and allow the viewer to focus on the subject matter. For e.g. in fig 3b, the background is purposely omitted so that the viewer can focus on the cat.

Another aspect of Chinese painting composition is that the elements inside the picture are usually in harmony or balance. Aside from the subject matter itself, seals, signatures and inscriptions can be used as pictorial elements to balance the composition.

Last but not least, the perspective Chinese use in their pictorial system is one which is different from our sensory experience. In a Chinese painting, there is usually no fixed vanishing point, making the painting flat. Things that are far need not be blurred when compared with near objects. For Chinese who are accustomed to this pictorial system, they will not find it unusual, but audiences from other cultures may find the picture funny the first time they looked at Chinese painting. This is one example of culture having an impact on interpretation of visual images.



Fig 7 Typical perspective in Chinese landscape painting
Huang Bin Hong, landscape
20th century

The far mountains (except for the last layer) carry almost the same amount of weight and intensity of colours as the front scenes. There is also no vanishing point. It is as if the viewer sits in an elevator and move up and down the mountain, rather than viewing the scene from a fixed vintage point.