



## Introduction to Chinese Brush Painting

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### The Chinese Brush

The single most astonishing fact about Chinese Brush Painting is that each brush stroke is a defining move that produces a portion of the painting that is neither improved upon nor corrected. No sketch is prepared and no model is used; the artist paints with rapid, mentally constructed strokes transporting a 'mind image' to mulberry paper.

From first to last stroke, the artist must 'get it right' while in Western watercolor corrections and overpainting are a part of the technique.

Chinese Brush Painting is meant to be more than a representation of an object; it is also a symbolic expression. This is why a full plant is never painted, but rather a few blossoms which will represent the plant in its entirety, and, in fact, all of life - a TAO principle. Rather than looking at the subject as you paint, you bringing it forth from your mind and heart and becoming part of nature.

And, in each painting there will almost always be a "Host" which is the larger and stronger flower, tree, etc. and a "Guest" which is indicated by being smaller.

Calligraphy is the highest art form to the Chinese! Indeed, it is considered the art form from which all other Chinese art forms evolved. Thus it is altogether fitting that we make a proper bow to this worthy ancestor that developed over the centuries in China and in many other Asian cultures, including the equally remarkable Japanese culture.

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### Introduction to the Beauty and Harmony of Chinese Brush Painting

The mastery of Chinese calligraphy requires many years of dedication, serious study and self-discipline. It is one of the world's most demanding art forms. Yet, the Chinese nobility, and especially the genteel literati, seemed intellectually compelled to devote an important part of their lives to mastering it. They vied with one another to achieve excellence -- and to attain at all costs the elusively "absolute" mastery and perfection which would win for them the coveted public recognition, sought by the scholarly elite.

The great privilege, wealth and high status accorded the great masters of calligraphy were not unlike the rewards lavishly bestowed upon the early immortal masters of Western (European) art during the medieval and pre-medieval periods of Western history.

From the high art of Chinese calligraphy evolved the beauty and harmony of Chinese Brush Painting. In retrospect, we can say it was a natural and inevitable development. Not illogically, the first two "subjects" emerging from the calligraphic art form into Chinese Brush Art were 'Bamboo and Orchid'!

We will deal later with the symbology and ultimate meaning of all the 'subjects' of Chinese Brush Painting, including the first two mentioned here.

For now, we will say that Bamboo and Orchid engaged the whole devotion and interest of the earliest Chinese "Brush Masters" for the subjects were, by intention, far more complex and demanding than they appear to the untutored eye. Indeed, with the progressive development of "Bamboo & Orchid", the first two subjects Chinese Brush Painting began its sure movement toward the high status of calligraphy itself.

For this reason, the Chinese aristocracy - the ruling class and its cultivated nobility, along with the spiritually-advanced intellectuals or sophisticated literati - discovered that devotion to the mastery of Chinese Brush Art was, indeed, an ennobling pursuit of mind and spirit, enriching human life and enhancing the highest principles and ideals of Chinese culture.

On the other hand -- the less privileged classes, the lower levels of the population, had neither the time nor the financial resources (nor the acceptable "spirit or intellect") to engage in esoteric philosophical or artistic pursuits. This was, of course, also true generally in Europe.

Author Diana Kan alludes to the elitism or exclusivity of the upper classes of China and provides a reasonable rationale for their high achievements in every art form. She says:

The Chinese aristocracy and its supportive literati class..."had the cultural background for mature, philosophical thought, and their artistic sensibilities had been heightened by long nurturing of an appreciation for beauty and harmony."

The techniques of Chinese Brush Painting have been codified; most notably formulated in the 5th Century A.D. by the venerated master *Hsieh Ho*.

### The Six Canons of Chinese Brush Painting

In the 5th Century A.D., *Hsieh Ho* wrote the "Six Canons of Painting" which form the basis of all Chinese Brush Painting to this very day. They are:

1. **"Circulation of the Ch'i"**: (Breath, Spirit, Vital Force of Heaven) - producing "movement of life". This is in the heart of the artist.
2. **"Brush Stroke Creates Structure"**: This is referred to as the bone structure of the painting. The stronger the brush work, the stronger the painting. Character is produced by a combination of strong and lighter strokes, thick and thin, wet and dry.
3. **"According to the Object, Draw its Form"**: Draw the object as you see it! In order to do this, it is very important first to understand the form of the object! This will produce a work that is not necessarily totally realistic but as you "see" it. Thus, the more you study the object to be painted, the better you will paint it.
4. **"According to the Nature of the Object Apply Color"**: Black is considered a color and the range of shadings it is capable of in the hands of a master painter creates an impression of colors. If color is used, it is always true to the subject matter.
5. **"Organize Compositions With the Elements in Their Proper Place."**: Space is used in Chinese Brush Painting the same way objects are used. Space becomes an integral part of the composition.
6. **"In copying, seek to pass on the essence of the master's brush & methods"**: To the Chinese, copying is considered most essential and only when the student fully learns the time honored techniques, can he branch out into areas of individual creativity.

### Painting With Joyous Freedom!

After the *Han* Dynasty (207-A.D. 220) collapsed, a civilized, poetic drunkenness was embraced. The group of poets named the 'Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove' were the epitome of a romanticized

image of the tipsy Chinese scholar who painted and created poetry by moonlight.

This literati was interested in transformation, expression and virtuosity. In their desire to escape the disastrous world they saw around them, they sought self cultivation. Their world view, based on a wish to live morally and truthfully, caused them to create an esthetic of tension between the unbalanced and the balanced. Everything then had a place but actually it was never quite fitting. The child-like qualities of intuitive knowledge and great capacity were most valued.

How do we get there? **Carpe diem!**

You already know the Six Canons of *Hsieh Ho*. Next the 'Eight Canons of Nan Rae'.

### The Eight Canons of Nan Rae - Rules of the Nan Rae Atelier

1. *Know Your Subject*: In order to paint with complete abandon, it's essential to know your subject first. Sketching is wonderful for this and what I would recommend is a stroll in your garden with wonderful thoughts of enjoyment and then taking cuttings and sketch, sketch, sketch! Know how the buds form, how the petals open up and then fall, how the stamen are placed. You'll be amazed.

2. *Be Surprising*: Look for and embrace the unexpected. On your intuitive journey, drink in the beauty that surrounds you, drown in a buttercup, then explode with inspiration. If certain parts of your subject 'speak' to you, then go with it. Enlarge or intensify them.

3. *Please Leave Serious at the Door of Your Studio*: Delight in your adventure. Remember there is no one like you and no one else can express the world about us in the same way as you. Enjoy this individualism. Flaunt it!

4. *Give Your Brush Life and Paint with Authority*: (This will be easy if you remember Rule #1.) Line is always alive, never static. While you will be painting deliberately, always remember to be spontaneous which brings us to Rule #5.

5. *Let Spontaneity Reign*: This will help you achieve Rule #4 and your masterpiece will be lively. It will dance!

6. *Don't Worry about Likeness*: Capture the essence of your subject. Speak to and thru your subject. Remember that if you merely 'copy' nature you are presenting the surface of your subject. When your painting is 'impressionistic' you will convey it's essence.

7. *Connect With Your Work*: Let your thoughts and feelings surge thru your work. Expression is all!

8. *Be Daring*: The *Ming* (1368-1644) and early *Ch'ing* (1644-1911) Dynasty artists were. Their compositions were unpredictable.

Let the work 'happen' in front of you.  
Just remember the three e's!  
have energy  
with eccentricity  
and be-free!

### "The Four Gentlemen" or "Four Seasons"

From the basic techniques of Calligraphy, there evolved the difficult forms and styles of all Chinese art. These developed first with the "Bamboo" and "Orchid" subjects. Later ... two other "Gentlemen" evolved. Together, the four subjects or "Gentlemen" (or "Four Seasons") became the important prototypes of the several Chinese Brush Painting Styles.

Thus, "The Four Gentlemen" form the basis of all the complex styles of Chinese brush.

The "Four Gentlemen" are:

(1) "Plum" - Symbol of the "Winter Season" - with its secret promise of "Renewal and Rejuvenation": the perpetual "Continuity & Hardiness of Life".

(2) "Orchid" - Symbol of the perennial "Hope of Spring" and the bright promise of Spring itself, in its "Unity and Modesty".

(3) "Bamboo" - Symbol of "Summer Season," and its "Endurance, Flexibility and Perseverance".

(4) "Chrysanthemum"- Symbol of the "Autumn Season": "The "Triumphant in Life: Persistence, Patience and Fortitude."

Those "Four Gentlemen" are formidable subjects however simple they may seem to the untutored Western eye. Mastery of these demands strict discipline, meticulous adherence to traditional brush stroke techniques, and subtle expression of spirit, not slavish representation of the likeness of the subject. The artist's objective is to follow form by expressing the personality of the subject - in an understated revelation of its inner essence.

Whether you are of the East or West, "The Four Gentlemen" salute you in all the beauty and meaning unique to each of "The Four Seasons".

### Some of the Many Styles of Chinese Brush Painting

The earliest paintings were monochromatic Ink painting. In the East, black is considered a color. Black has profound meaning and importance and takes its place in the Asian 'rainbow', alongside the other colors.

The strokes employed in brush painting have developed since the 5th century in China and the 9th century in Japan. It was the Chinese who articulated, defined and codified the technique of brush painting strokes and the Japanese later made significant contributions of their own.

To achieve freedom, spontaneity and boldness, the emphasis in brush painting is on the idea. In fact, this type of painting is referred to as 'written idea'. Visualization of an idea is required before touching brush to paper. To visualize requires much thought and devoted practice. Visualization brings to bear mind and soul, artistic motivation and the bold expression of inner beauty that leads to art work that is unique to the artist alone.

In brush painting, brush "movement" is a cardinal element. The nature and various unique properties of the brushes lend readily to reflecting the movement of the brush, which becomes an esthetic element in achieving artistic integrity. Highlighting the all important 'movement of the brush', the artist does not correct the original brush stroke. It would betray crudity and clumsiness to do so and would diminish the straightforward honesty of the artistic effort. Strokes that are contrived or labored lose the light and airy elements of freedom and spontaneity.

Bone work is a linear movement of the brush tip and suffuses the brush painting with strength and muscle. In fact, without bone work the painting would seem weak and diffuse. The bone work used to paint branches, stems and twigs gives a complimentary strength to the more delicate flowers. Chinese Brush painting is contemplative and complex with ostensible simplicity. This appearance of simplicity is an extremely important element.

Chinese Brush painting is executed in many modes or styles dating from the Han Dynasty in the 3rd century A. D. Among other thing, the mode or style may depend on the subject. Chinese Brush

painting was born of ancient Chinese Calligraphy and evolved through the centuries. The most important is the Hsieh i or 'Written Idea' form originated Chao Meng-fu (1254-1322) and simply put it is the expression of emotion in painting. This innovation shaped all later artistic development in China.

Painting rapidly in the Po Mo or 'Throw Ink' style we use no drafting lines and make no corrections, leaving what we have painted as an expression of our inner self. Our goal is a spontaneous and free spirited effect.

The form of the subject painted is achieved entirely by free spirited and spontaneous execution of brush strokes without first sketching or outlining. This is called Mo Ku meaning 'Boneless' mode or style. One of the most important elements of this approach is that the artist does not go over or make any attempt to 'correct' a stroke. Correction would take away the element of spontaneity and would make it impossible to read the original brush strokes of the artist which is highly desired. Mo Ku may be combined with the outline/contour style called Ku Fa, the 'Bone' manner; the Narcissus is a good example.

### Honorable Ancestor of Oriental Brush Painting

Carrying the 'written idea' further, Gentlemen Scholars in China developed what is now known as the literati tradition. These men of culture and high position looked down on the palace painting style of perfect flowers, insects and animals which we considered vulgar since professional artist were paid for them. The scholar-gentry felt to be truly educated one should not only master calligraphy but also write poets and create expressive paintings as the mood struck them.

This tradition was firmly established in the Yuan Dynasty, 1280-1368, and highly respected in the Ming Period, 1368-1644. Gentlemen Scholars continued expressing joyous amateurism in their spontaneous painting. Their minds were open to new ideas since all true learning is play, and play has no judgment and is non-judgmental. So liberating was this method that it is still highly prized today.

The more spontaneously you paint, the more expression will be conveyed in your work giving your painting style, your style, making your paintings uniquely yours. This style is the touch and flourish you bring to your work and it emanates from your full life experience. It brings your C'hi, life force, to empower your brush.

While it is important to follow rules and principals during the early learning period, it is important to not be overly concerned with this and forget to just let go and paint with abandon.

Some highlights of the many complex aspects of the work of Ink Painting are:

**Brush Strokes:** the variety of Brush Strokes has been developed and studied since approximately the 5th century in China and the 9th century in Japan. It was the Chinese who articulated, defined and codified the technique of Ink Painting Strokes but the Japanese later made significant contributions of their own. Both cultures have enjoyed a long exchange and suffusion of artistic and spiritual values. And now, of course, the West has the historic opportunity to synthesize and further benefit from and develop the Asian Way. The synthesis of cultures in the East has proceeded apace from earliest dynasties.

Mutual 'suffusion of cultures and ideas' is a profound and important process. It permeates Oriental Brush Painting!

**"Brush Movement!":** "Brush Movement" is a cardinal element in Ink Painting. The nature and various unique properties of Ink lend readily to reflecting the movement of Brush which becomes an esthetic element in achieving artistic integrity in Chinese Brush. To showcase the all-important 'Movement of the Brush', correction of the original Brush Stroke by the artist is neither attempted nor permitted. It

would betray crudity and clumsiness to do so; and would diminish the straightforward honesty of the artistic effort. It would seriously detract from the desired simplicity which is one of the hallmarks of Ink Painting.

**"Bone Work!":** Bone Work is a linear or vertical movement of the Brush tip! It suffuses your Ink Painting with strength and muscle! In fact, an Ink Painting without such Bone Work or "Line" would seem weak and diffuse, not strong at all! These Vertical Strokes - in combination with both Wipe and Dot Strokes - are executed in a free and spontaneous manner. If they are 'contrived or labored', they lose these light and airy elements of freedom and spontaneity. Crude or clumsy Ink Painting could not authentically be considered Chinese or Asian.

To achieve this freedom, this spontaneity and boldness, remember that the emphasis in Ink Painting is on the Idea: visualize, conceive a clear idea of each element of your painting before you touch Brush to Paper! To do this, you need to exercise much thought and devote yourself to much practice. This is the Way of the Chinese Brush Painter who brings to bear mind and soul, artistic motivation and the bold expression of inner beauty, to create an art work that is unique to the artist alone.

This approach, this freedom and boldness and thought, enables the artist to achieve nuance and poetic allusion -- while relying on artistic intuition to enhance Brush technique and increasing skills.

The monochromatic is subtle in its tonalities and gradations. As each dramatic line or wipe of the Brush is placed on Paper, mass and space suddenly appear! This is achieved through sublime subtlety and restraint -- an artistic economy of motion that artfully omits certain detail and specifics and adroitly leaves much to the viewer's imagination! In fact, the artist and the observer form a synergy, an esthetic and spiritual 'partnership' - for the observer brings as much to the painting as the artist!

**Uses of the Wet & Dry Brush:** For elegance of expression, both a wet and dry Brush are used in this subtle and delicate form of Ink Painting. Exciting dots and splashes and dabs of Ink transform the most ordinary Subjects (like the Four Gentlemen!) into cosmic artistic experience!

European art lovers would enjoy knowing that this same concept of dots and splashes or dabs was later copied and widely employed by the impressionists, and later by the Abstract Expressionists!

An opposite school of painting was seen from the 10th -19th centuries. Emphasis was on great control - by the strictly proper use of very small brush strokes! This style was called "*Gongbi*" -- developed to allow the artist to express (via detail) the innermost life of the objects.

Bamboo is primarily a Chinese subject. It did not gain popularity in Japan and other countries until centuries later! Ink Bamboo reigned supreme with the 11th century Chinese literati. Their compositions were not necessarily realistic. But the manner of painting each element of Bamboo was strictly prescribed: it is still followed today, without major exception. However, bizarre techniques have been seen, most notably during the *T'ang Dynasty* (618-906) - and these "unusual" methods are normally acceptable if the wielding of the Brush is strong and sure.

Although the Bamboo should be the easiest leaf to paint by virtue of its simple shape, it is the most difficult to execute correctly. Much practice is required to form the leaves properly and to maintain a spontaneous and pleasing composition.

In painting the Bamboo Leaves, the new tender ones are seen growing upward. This tendency is modified by the direction of the wind or weight of the rain. Because the leaves are very long and thin, they all must appear to be blowing in the same direction to maintain the harmony of the painting.

"Good Practice Brings Perfection"

1. Regard the moisture in your Brush ... not too much, not too little. Neither too wet nor too dry! You'll know!
2. Make a preliminary stroke or two on the paper, either horizontally or vertically!
3. How fast does your stroke travel? That's strictly up to you! Along with moisture control and the degree of pressure you exert on your Brush as well as the 'speed' of your brush stroke, all this may vary a great deal! But, a middle ground is best - neither too fast nor too slow! If too fast you may lose control. Too slow, your stroke may bleed and show hesitation. Don't hesitate. Be bold, but not reckless, neither too fast nor too slow!
4. The width of the stroke may be determined in three ways, as follows:



A. Exert pressure on the tip of a vertical brush or "Center Brush". Note: "Center Brush" is the basis of Chinese art and Calligraphy. Remember.- only one-third of the brush is used, and this limits the width of the stroke.

B. Modified Wipe Stroke, using Slant Stroke



C. This is a full Wipe Stroke, using the entire length of your brush. This creates the widest stroke!

### The Four Treasures of Chinese Brush Painting

(1) **INK:** The Ink is in stick form, made from burnt Pine Wood Soot, mixed with glue. This procedure was invented in 205 B.C. So highly prized is the Ink-Maker's Art that a gift of Fine Ink Stick is a mark of high honor. Pine Wood Soot Ink (Sung Yen Mo) is carefully ground by the Artist - who uses the Ink Stick with small amounts of water to produce only enough Ground Pine Soot Ink for the immediate need.

The Ink is endowed with "infinite" possibilities, thus enabling the Artist to express an unusual "sense of dimension" & subtlety of spirit.

(2) **The Inkstone:** Made of Slate upon which the Ink is ceremoniously ground by the artist.

(3) **The Brush:** Almost as if to emphasize the severity of the Chinese Art discipline, the Brush is made from hardy materials, including the fur of the wild rabbit, wild goat, deer and wolf. Brush handles are made from sturdy Bamboo.

Thus, Chinese brushes demand great skill in proper use, for Chinese 'Brush' does not permit the Artist to "go back over the work to correct mistakes, as in some Western art. The brush is held in the same way the user holds chopsticks, and is very sensitive to the slightest movement or pressure. The heavier the pressure, the thicker the stroke; & the lighter the pressure, the thinner the stroke. With too much pressure, the brush loses its shape: The Artist is then unable to complete the stroke properly.

In fact, the technique requires that the Artist "re-form" the Tip of the Brush after nearly every stroke! In the hands of a master, the "Chinese Brush" calls for subtle & intricate variations.

(4) **The Paper:** The fourth treasure was invented in China during the Han Dynasty in 100 A.D. Artist Nan Rae uses true handmade paper or "Double Shuen" - very thin and absorbent. It is always handled with care and respect by the Artist.

Without the Four Treasures, those who hold tradition dear and valuable agree that there would be no Chinese Brush Painting as it is known and appreciated today. The Four Treasures have been called the "instruments" of design, discipline and style which advanced the wondrous "Art of Brush" and is recognized as one of Great China's signal contributions to world culture and the art of living - a cultural hallmark of a great tradition.

### 'Shigajiku'

*Shigajiku* are Japanese Poem Paintings in the grand tradition of the Chinese literati. Your *Shigajiku* may commemorate an event such as the first blossoms of spring. Relationships are excellent for *Shigajiku* and you might want to speak of a dear friendship.

*Ishikawa Jozan* (1583-1672) was a student of classical Chinese poetry and said, 'with rare books to read, no unending nights, this quiet spot is deep within the mountains. My world is apart from the world of men. I don't concern myself with their 'right' and 'wrong'.

Think you don't know what to say?

#### **Poem**

'My spirit remains still,

if I speak....

The silence is broken.'

or ...

'The stillness fills me with awe

and joy floods my heart.'

**Go for it! and Thank You**

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