

HOW TO



Chinese Figure Painting for Beginners

Jia Xiangguo

Translated by Wen Jingen with Pauline Cherrett



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To paint a live human figure is the most challenging task for an artist. Yet with a good grounding in drawing and constant practice, any artist, amateur or professional, can make a success of figure painting and thus prove his or her competence in this field.

Like people in other professions or hobbies, aspiring figure painters need two things – ambition and skill. Specially prepared for non-Chinese readers, this manual offers easy, step-by-step instructions, plus interesting information about the history and development of Chinese figure painting. Since each stage of study is carefully graded, the reader's ambition is unlocked and thus ultimate success is ensured.

Cover: Beating Silk

by Zhang Xuan (8th Century)

Back cover: Autumn Contemplation

by Jia Xiangguo



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Translator's notes:

1. All illustrations in this book were executed and provided by the author unless otherwise stated. 写注明作者的图片均为本书作者所作。

2. To make this book more accessible for non-Chinese readers, the translator has extensively edited the original text, and added some illustrations. The translator, and not the author, is responsible for all errors accruing from the rewriting and rearrangement of the arts.

为适应外国读者需要，本书编译过程中对原作的图文做了一定改动。着糞续貂，在所难免；所生舛误，咎在译者。敬希作者及读者见谅。

Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great. — Mark Twain

Introduction

Wen Jingen

This is a manual specially prepared for non-Chinese readers. To make this book more approachable for them, as a translator, I have extensively edited the original text and have taken the liberty to add some illustrations. For a beginner, the technical side of the genre is important and the theoretical issues seem of little relevance. But once you engage yourself in Chinese painting — a tradition quite different from your own — you will sooner or later encounter issues that may bewilder you if you are totally unprepared. That is why I have offered some suggestions in this introduction.

Take the Challenge: Paint Your Model with Accuracy

To paint a live human figure is the most challenging task for an artist. To my way of thinking, the difficulty does not lie in the com-

plexity of the human form, as the body of an animal, say a horse or tiger, is not much simpler. The task is challenging because your viewers may ask “Who is the person in your picture?” It is not likely they would ask the same question when viewing pictures of animals. In short, to paint a human figure is difficult because the audience expects more from figure painters. In fact, it is not very difficult to paint a human form — even school children without any special training can draw a figure in their own way, and primitive people painted many human figures in their caves. Yet it is difficult to paint the “whole” person of your model. In certain ancient cultures where people were not so critical of painters, or where an exact likeness was not expected, caricature-like figures executed in bold, dashing lines and colour patches were produced in abundance. But today, in the context of our time, most viewers expect to see a definite likeness of a certain person or persons in a figure painting.

The intimidating task makes many artists flinch. Not a few Chinese painters, especially those “literati” artists, shun this genre all their lives. Small wonder that trainee or amateur artists think they are not destined to be figure painters as they experience setbacks.

However it is a misconception to say that only “gifted” people can be figure painters. Experiences in contemporary art schools have proved that through step-by-step courses any student of average calibre can have a command of figure painting techniques. By honing one’s eye-hand-mind co-ordination through constant practice, all budding artists can become figure painters!

First Step

Like people in other professions or hobbies, new figure painters need two things — ambition and skill. To keep your ambition focused is of the foremost importance. On the technical side, the basic skills for Chinese figure painting are more or less the same as those for a Western figure painter. If you have learned to draw human figures, congratulations! You are at a good starting point; otherwise I recommend that you study drawing first.

I say this because Chinese figure painting is a much-innovated tradition — far more than landscape or bird-and-flower. In the 20th century, the great realist painter and art educator Xu Beihong (1895-1953) emphasised drawing from life. He had a famous maxim: “Artists are not worthy being teachers (for artists).” He revolutionised



Admonitions of the Court Instructress to Palace Ladies (detail) by Gu Kaizhi. In our eyes, these well-proportioned figures cannot be likenesses of particular people.

art education by adding drawing into the curriculum for all art students. This narrowed the gap between Western and Chinese figure painting. Xu's influence is ubiquitous in Chinese fine arts today. Another art educator Pan Tianshou (1897-1971) in his teaching stressed the copying of ancient works, but while asking students of bird-and-flower and landscape paintings to devote most of their time to copying, he too gave students of figure painting more time to draw from life at the early stage of study. It is clear that drawing from life is the foundation for successful figure painting, in China as well in the West.

In today's art nothing is sacrosanct. Different schools of art take a variety of approaches. As the goal of this book is to introduce realist figure painting skills, readers should ideally have some drawing experience. If, however, you intend to learn how to reproduce works of ancient masters, you should also study traditional brushwork and ink skills by copying from ancient works. In fact naturalistic drawing could hinder your command of ancient skills. Nowadays the pictures on fake handicrafts sold in roadside shops or stands are often betrayed by the use of correct anatomical presentation as taught in art schools today, but which was unknown to ancient Chinese painters.

Chinese Manners

Those who study Chinese art often encounter a problem — how “Chinese” is his or her painting? Using Chinese instruments is no guarantee for producing a painting in real Chinese style. As early as in the late 17th century European artists began to use Chinese ink (once erroneously known as the “Indian ink”) and Chinese brushes, (James Ayres, *The Artist's Craft*, Phaidon, 1985) but their paintings

did not look “Chinese”. Over centuries Chinese painters have developed highly mature and sophisticated types of strokes. As in Chinese calligraphy, Chinese painters preferred neat and spontaneous strokes without retouching. The Chinese quality of a painting lies in, among other things, the special brushwork and ink application, and it takes time to master such skills.

In former times, Chinese artists used to learn brushwork skills by copying other, earlier artists’ works and when they created a new painting they tried to match their images to the patterns they had learned. Compare the nose of the ladies in three paintings created in different periods of time by three different artists and you will see that a pattern was repeatedly used. Neat and beautiful as the “one-stroke” method is, it is no guarantee for a truthful representation.

Obviously, if one sticks to this type of neat stroke that refuses retouching, one is likely to achieve good brushwork at the expense of formal accuracy. Of course some masters can achieve accurate depiction and highly spontaneous brushwork, as shown in Xu Beihong’s portrait. But it is impractical to expect a beginner to achieve this. To have a good grounding in figure painting, I strongly recommend the following principle — it is better to have loose brushwork than loose form.

I propose this because, as I have said before, Chinese figure painting is a revolutionised tradition. So, unlike Chinese landscape and bird-and-flower paintings whose basic brushwork is achievable through copying formulae, contemporary Chinese figure painting offers few ideas. To gain good brushwork, a figure painter also has to practise other genres of painting. This I will discuss later.



Jade Lady, from wall painting
of the Yongle Palace, Yuan
Dynasty (1271—1368)



Han Xizai's Nightly Feast (detail)
by Gu Hongzhong (10th century)



The Moon Goddess by Tang Yin (1470 — 1523)

Those paintings were created by different masters. Note that the nose in all of them was executed with the same single hooked stroke.

Portrait of Li Yinquan by Xu Beihong (1895 — 1953)

This masterpiece is admired for accurate depiction and spontaneous brushwork.



Likeness & Beyond

A hackneyed issue in Chinese art theory is which one of “formal resemblance” and “spiritual resemblance” is important. There are mountains of views on this topic. Many Chinese art theorists hold that spiritual resemblance can be achieved only through formal resemblance. Nevertheless some literati artists claim that they disdain the formal resemblance achieved by meticulous depiction. They insist that spiritual resemblance comes from their mysterious communication with nature. The dispute has been going on for centuries and there is no sign that a consensus will be reached. If you delve into these debates, it is likely that you will be more puzzled than enlightened. I am in no position to make any judgement on this controversy. I would just like to put forward a few points for readers to consider:

1. Ancient Chinese art history and criticism is heavily biased. Most written documents on art were written by officials / scholars. They were literarily well educated but most of them lacked strict training in painting. This was especially true during the latter phase of the Imperial China. As China's leading painter Xu Beihong pointed out, “Artists who mean to cover up their errors always put forward their own theories. The more sophisticated the theory, the weaker the art”. (*Benteng Chi Fu Jian*, [Gallop on a Foot-long Picture], Tianjin, Baihua Wenyi Chubanshe, 2000, p. 252) The literati painters played up their amateurism and played down professional painting techniques. If we do not believe the Emperor's new clothes, we can find that human figures in literati artists' works are poorly executed. Just as Wang Shixiang says in his epilogue to *Introduction to Painting* (Huishi Zhimeng 绘事指蒙), “Men of letters belittled artisans or craftsmen and paid little attention to their works and experiences. Those scholars claimed that they disdained to do as the artisans did, but in fact they

were ignorant and incapable in this field.” (*Chinese Folk Painting Formulae* [Zhongguo Minjian Huajue 中国民间画诀], Beijing Gongyi Meishu Chubanshe, 2003, p. 221)

2. Chinese literati painters knew more than their hands could perform. Ancient Chinese art theorists were aware that it was important to present the volume of depicted objects. Guo Ruoxu in his *Tuhua Jianwen Zhi* (Records of Seen and Heard-of Pictures 图画见闻志) criticised three errors in pictorial representation. One of the three was “...to present objects flat, unable to present them in the round” (……状物平扁，不能圆浑). If you look at the self-portrait by an established master with an innocent eye, you can see the human form is rather flat.

Yet this painting has been praised for “graphically portraying the pride, aloofness and refined air of Jin Nong the supercilious commoner”. (*Immortal Chinese*

Self-portrait by Jin Nong (1687 — 1763)

Note the flat human form

