

China's  
Calligraphy Art

Through the Ages

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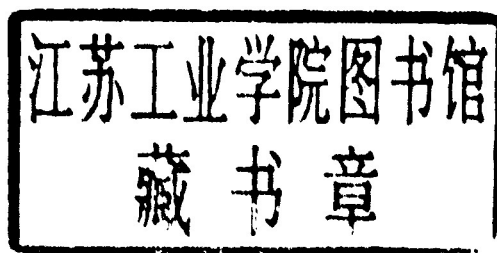
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朝廷乃是孝義之事也又何妨……今汝纔



# China's Calligraphy Art

Through the Ages



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

# Preface

China has been noted for its calligraphy that evolved from handwriting but has developed into an independent art genre that can be placed on a par with painting, music, dance, sculpture and literature.

In the beginning, the basically pictographic Chinese characters were created to copy all things on the earth in a simplified way. While being functional and overall realistic, these characters were written in a special form to express the artistic beauty, which was already on our ancestors' mind.

The various signs found in the ancient cultures as well as the pictographic *jia-gu-wen* (inscriptions on animal bones and tortoise shells) and *jin-wen* (inscriptions on bronze objects) popular during the Shang (c. 1600–1100 BC) and Zhou (c.

1100–256 BC) dynasties, -- their handwriting can all be regarded as a plastic art, which was rather more concrete than abstract. That's why some people hold the view that calligraphy and painting stemmed from the same root.

With the lapse of time, the pictographic Chinese characters became more and more symbolized. The appearance of *li-shu* (official script) during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) -- derived from *xiao-zhuan* (lesser seal characters) of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC) -- marked the completion of this evolution. Following *li-shu* came *kai-shu* (regular script), *xing-shu* (running script) and *cao-shu* (cursive script) in succession. The Chinese characters purely composed of dot and line strokes thus entered into a new, pragmatic

stage during which calligraphers were in continuous pursuit of a more convenient, simplified writing method and paid more attention to studying the law of the change of dot and line strokes. From designing the structure of a single character to organizing the whole scroll of calligraphy, they further devoted themselves heart and soul to the dot and line strokes to express their personal emotions. Finally, the three key elements of calligraphy took shape: the technique of calligraphy, the structure of a character and its stroke arrangement, and the organization and structure of a scroll of calligraphy.

The above three elements actually appeared in an embryonic form in the ancient scripts prior to *xiao-zhuan*. When writing in *li-shu*, calligraphers of the Han

Dynasty already had a conscious realization of them. Their finalization occurred no later than the Wei Kingdom (220–265) and Jin Dynasty (265–420) when all the five styles of calligraphy (*zhuan-shu*<sup>1</sup>, *li-shu*, *kai-shu*, *xing-shu* and *cao-shu*) had come into being.

Based on Confucianism originated by Confucius and Laozi's Taoism, an all-embracing aesthetic theory has formed in China over thousands of years, which affects people's appreciation of calligraphy. Thus free from any prejudice, from generation to generation calligraphers have paid much attention to the dialectical relationship between the law of calligraphy and the artistic conception expressed by the scripts, trying to make both fit happily with each other.

Legend has it that Madame Wei (Wei Shuo), a calligrapher of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420), wrote the *Map of Strokes Disposition*, in which she likened various strokes of Chinese characters to a long troop of soldiers ready for fighting, stones falling from the cliffs, arrows to be shot, trees living for over ten thousand years, lightning and thunder, or rolling waves. Many calligraphers of later ages had found inspiration in her rich imagination.

Calligrapher Wang Xizhi, who was contemporary with Madame Wei, wrote *12 Chapters Concerning the Brush Power* and drew an analogy between the arrangement of a scroll of calligraphy and the command of a million troops. Ouyang Xun of the Tang Dynasty (618–907)

classified Chinese characters according to their different structural patterns in his representative work *36 Rules in the Structure of Chinese Characters*, which remains to be a calligraphy reference book of great value even today.

Based on accumulated experiences, calligraphers of past ages had summarized a series of writing methods with a brush as well as a lot of taboos. These methods include: *cang-feng* (each stroke starts in the wrong order intentionally and ends with a pause in writing a character to produce an outwardly gentle but inwardly tough effect), *lou-feng* (each stroke starts in a natural way and ends with a possible outward stretch to make one's handwriting vigorous and uninhibited), *fang-bi* (turning the brush sharply to produce an angular,



forceful effect), and *yuan-bi* (turning the brush gently to write a smooth, reserved hand). In general, one should write in varied rhythms while striking a proper balance between thick and thin, straight and winding strokes.

In terms of the structure of a single character, one should make a distinction between the major and minor strokes and arrange them in a well-balanced way. For a beginner in calligraphy particularly, first and foremost he should be able to write a neat hand. Then he may try to develop a singular personal style. However, to recover one's original simplicity is always the highest level a calligrapher can reach.

In terms of the layout of a scroll of calligraphy, all characters should be well organized so that they can get integrated

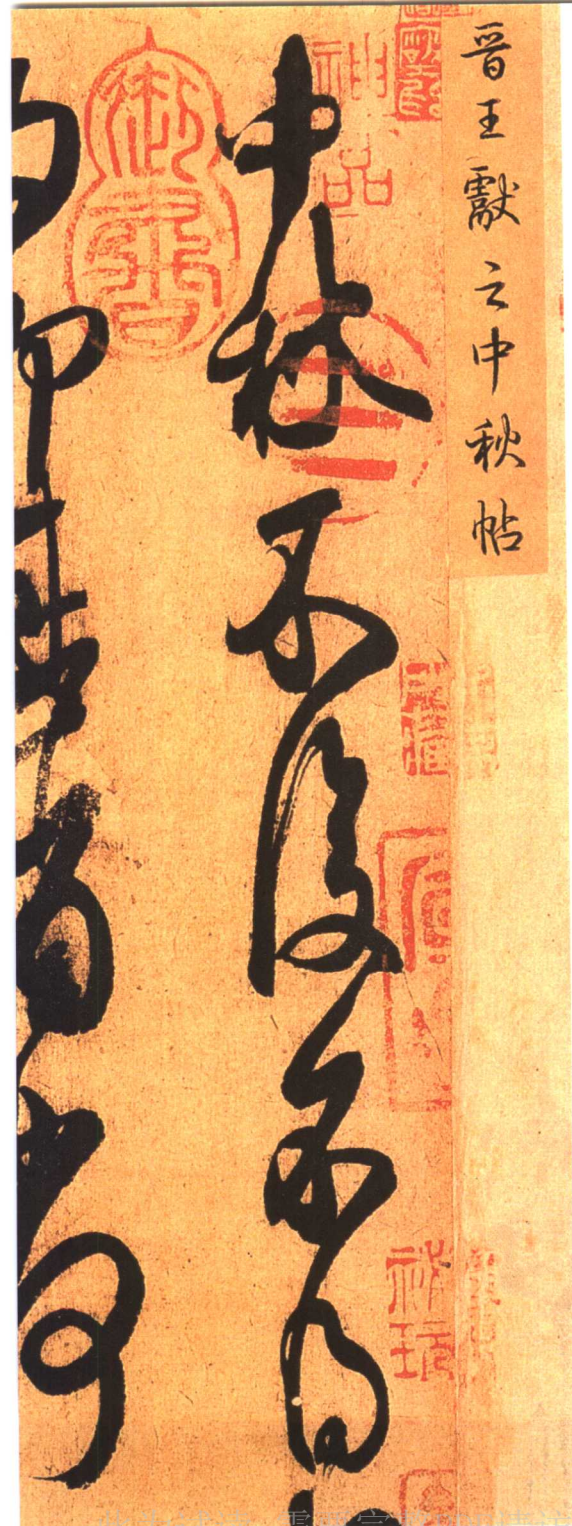
into an organic whole.

According to the above criteria basically centered round the calligraphic techniques, ancient calligraphy works generally acknowledged as the classics include: *jia-gu-wen*, *jin-wen* and *shi-gu-wen* (inscriptions on drum-shaped stone blocks believed to have been made during the Warring States Period (475–221 BC)) popular during the Shang and Zhou dynasties; *xiao-zhuan* in the Qin Dynasty; *li-shu* in the Han Dynasty, especially some inscriptions on tablets in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220); the *zhang-cao* (a type of *cao-shu* but bearing some characteristics of *li-shu*) inscriptions on bamboo slips in the Han Dynasty; the *xing-shu* works by Wang Xizhi of the Eastern Jin Dynasty as well as his

“Inscription of Seventeen” in *jin-cao* (a type of *cao-shu* evolved in the 3rd-6th centuries); the “Inscription of December” in *kuang-cao* (wild cursive hand) by Wang Xianzhi (seventh son of Wang Xizhi) of the Eastern Jin Dynasty; the *kai-shu* works of some master hands in the Northern Wei (386–534), Sui (581–618) and Tang dynasties; Sun Guoting (Tang Dynasty)’s *Calligraphy Score* written in *jin-cao*; the *kuang-cao* works of Zhang Xu and Huaisu in the Tang Dynasty, and so on and so forth.

Beyond all doubt, the technique of calligraphy is very important, but by no means the most important, as the ultimate aim of calligraphy is to use seemingly lifeless dots and lines to produce vivid pictures in the minds of viewers. And such imagery is only to be sensed, not





晋王献之中秋帖

explained. In other words, a calligraphic work can fully expose a calligrapher's temperament, experience and erudition, and perfectly convey his outlook on life. And the calligrapher's personal feelings are supposed to get a ready response among viewers. For this very reason, so far as the artistic strengths and weaknesses of a calligraphic work are concerned, different people have always held different views.

Marvelous calligraphy is voiceless music, motionless dance, and intangible sculpture. From it we can feel a sense of rhythm, a lapse of time and a constant change of scene. The more one reads, the more one is impressed by its profundity and unlimited charm.

1. A style of Chinese calligraphy, often used on seals.

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