

HOW TO



Chinese Bird-and-Flower Painting for Beginners

Ma Zhifeng

Translated by Wen Jingen with Pauline Cherrett



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外文出版社电子信箱:

info@flp.com.cn

sales@flp.com.cn

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马志丰 著

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Chinese bird-and-flower painting is the greatest contribution Chinese artists have made to the world of art.

Apart from being an independent genre with its aesthetic values, Chinese bird-and-flower painting can be taken as a basic course for studying composition, brushwork and ink – a necessary preparation for the creation of all genres of Chinese painting. Specially prepared for Western readers, this manual with 250 colour illustrations is a step-by-step course of Chinese bird-and-flower painting. A brief history of this great art tradition is included in the manual.

Cover: Wisteria and Orioles (detail)
by Ren Yi (1840-1896)

Back cover: Peony
by Ma Zhifeng



Ma Zhifeng, also known as Fengchao ("beehive"), was born in 1944 in Cheng'an County, Hebei Province, China. He studied in Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts under the supervision of established artists Sun

Qifeng, Zhang Qiyi and Xiao Lang. After graduation he learnt from the bird-and-flower painting master Wang Xuetao (1903-1982). At present Ma Zhifeng is a director of the Wang Xuetao Research Association, vice president of Hebei Bird-and-Flower Research Association, and professor at the Handan Academy of Fine Arts. He is the author of *How to Paint the Myna*, *How to Paint the Peacock* and *How to Paint the Pheasant and Azalea*. His works have been published in art newspapers and periodicals and have been displayed in the Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Bird-and-flower Painting. He gave a series of lectures on the techniques of bird-and-flower painting on Hebei Television.



Wen Jingen is a senior editor with Foreign Languages Press, Beijing.

Pauline Cherrett has taught Chinese brush painting in England for over 20 years and is the author of several books on the subject.

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Translator's notes:

1. All illustrations in this book were executed and provided by the author unless otherwise stated. 书中未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.

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。着粪续貂，在所难免；所生舛误，咎在译者。敬希作者及读者见谅。

The greatest contribution the Chinese arts have made to the world is its bird-and-flower painting.

— Xu Beihong (*Benteng Chi Fu Jian*, [Galloping on a Foot-long Picture], Tianjin, *Baihua wenyi chubanshe* [Hundred-flower literary and art press], 2000, p. 252)

Introduction

Wen Jingen and Pauline Cherrett

Birds and flowers are universally loved motifs, in China as well as in the West. Western artists show flowers in their works too, but as far as we know, Western artists seldom treat the bird-and-flower as a special genre, while in China it is a long-standing tradition.

Parrot, tinted etching

Western artists depict birds and flowers too



If an artist has an interest in this genre, it is natural for him or her to learn skills to paint birds and flowers, but if he or she does not mean to become a bird-and-flower painter, is there any point in learning bird-and-flower painting skills? The answer is affirmative.



Pair of cockerels by
Pauline Cherrett (UK,
b. 1946)

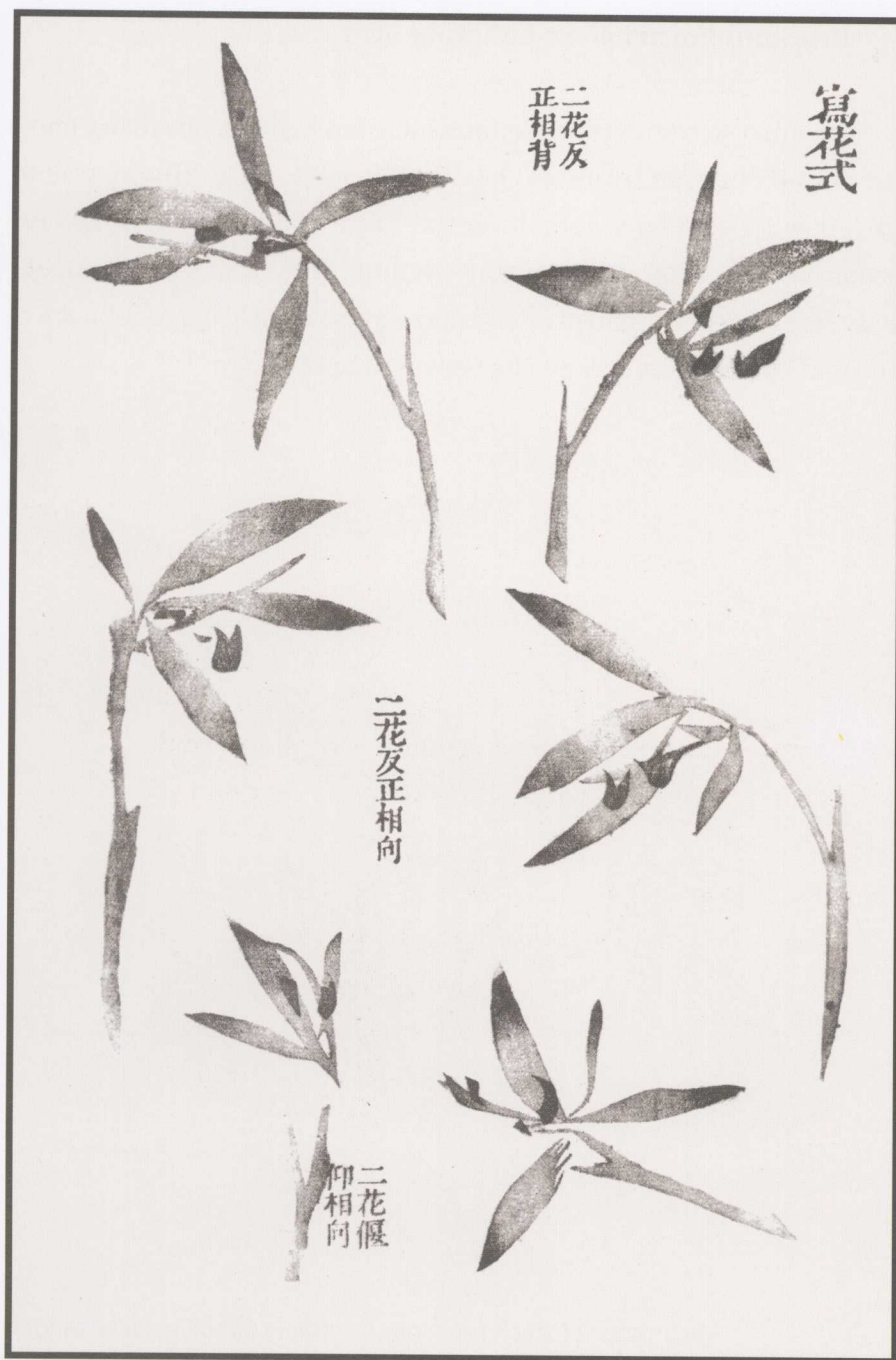
Beautiful Form before Faithful Form

An artist strives to produce forms that are both beautiful and faithful to life, but such forms are not always achievable. “Being true to life” is not a guarantee for a beautiful form. “Faithful” is not always beautiful, nor is “beautiful” always faithful. A faithful form looks exactly like a depicted human or object in nature while a beautiful form is one that conforms to certain aesthetic principles.



Multi-corolla Peach Blossom, sketch in pencil by Wen Jingen

This sketch from life is faithful but the branches forming the shape of a cross look awkward.



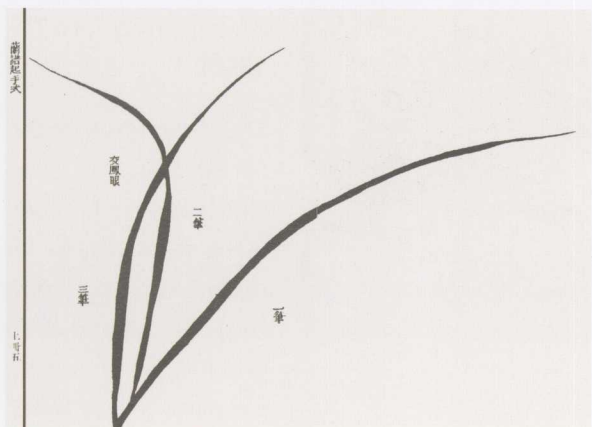
This page from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (1679-1701) displays ways to produce beautiful forms of an orchid flower.

During 1950s and 1960s in China, “formalism” in arts was denounced by artists who embraced a creed of Socialist Realism. Drawing and painting from life was emphasised and copying ancient works took a back seat. Some artists believed that for a successful portrayal accurate forms were enough. But aesthetic principles governing beautiful forms do exist. Formal beauty is always an objective of artistic activities. The Chinese art historian Zhang Yanyuan in his *Lidai Minghua Ji* (*Records of Paintings through Dynasties*, AD 847) characterises early immature landscape paintings thus: “The mountain peaks...are arranged in the shapes of extending arms or fingers.” (群峰……列植之状，则若伸臂布指。) The *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (1679-1701) includes a formula concerning painting an orchid flower: “...the five petals (of an orchid flower) should not look like a flat palm, but they should be like fingers — some extending and others bending.” These demonstrate that ancient Chinese artists came to realise a principle concerning beautiful forms: almost-parallel straight lines are undesirable. A truthful picture of an orchid flower may indeed have straight petals like the flat shape of a palm of the hand. Obviously, Chinese artists do not avoid such an image because it is unfaithful to life, they avoid it because it is not beautiful.

Chinese artists have summed up their experiences and boiled them down into formulae that best exhibit their aesthetic principles. It is Chinese bird-and-flower painting that contains the most of the depictive concepts.

A page from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (1679-1701)

This page shows the way to arrange leaves of an orchid. Once you learn this method, you will be able to make beautiful forms of other plants like lily and iris, too.



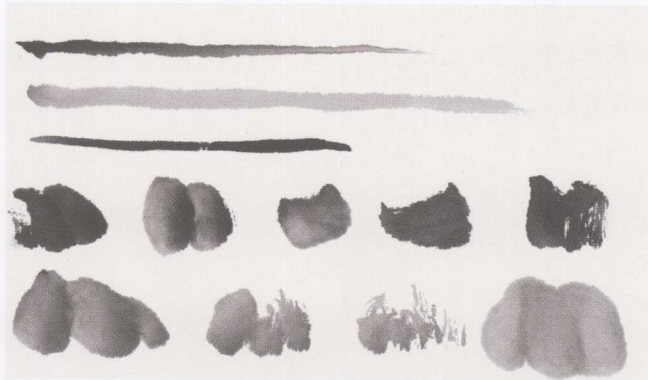
By copying methods of painting from textbooks, students will master some approaches to beautiful forms without delving into abstruse theories. Once an artist intuitively grasps these principles, he or she will be able to apply them to other genres of painting. That is the point of learning bird-and-flower — an artist learns to produce beautiful forms before he or she tries to portray the real world. In fact, a similar education system exists in the West too. In Victorian art schools, students were taught to draw objects that they could hardly have seen.



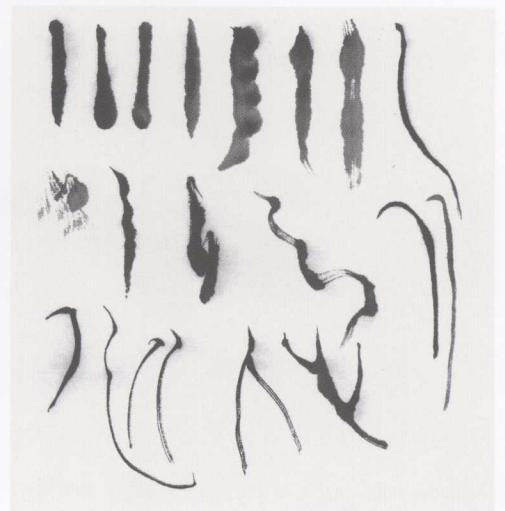
At the Source of the Peach Blossom Stream (detail) by Wen Zhengming (1470-1559)

The three trees on the foreground in this landscape are grouped in the same way as for orchid leaves — one long, the second short and the third crossing the other one or two.

Along with the arrangement of compositional elements, brushwork and ink application are very important factors in Chinese painting. To some extent they have their individual expressiveness. Chinese artists do not only produce lines and apply colours with the brush; they manipulate it in various ways. The position of the brush tip is carefully controlled to make different strokes. Ink shades play a far more important role than black or grey colours. You will read more about this as you learn the bird-and-flower painting skills step by step following this manual. Again, various strokes and ink applications are best epitomised in bird-and-flower painting.



Just a few of numerous strokes and ink shades which may be used. Illustration by Wen Jingen



Exactitude of form is more desirable in figure painting than in bird-and-flower painting. Comparatively speaking, the forms of birds and flowers are simpler than human forms or motifs in landscape. At an early stage of study, students of figure painting must pay close attention to the accuracy of forms and so they cannot have a free hand to exploit the brushwork and ink effects. By practising bird-and-flower painting, they can have a freer approach.

Two Traditions and Different Attitudes towards Artistic Creation

Roughly, Chinese paintings fall into two major categories, the meticulous (*gongbi* 工笔[筆], literally, “meticulous brushwork”) and the freestyle (*xieyi* 写[寫]意, literally, “writing ideas”). The former is



Peony, meticulous style, by Wen Jingen

noted for meticulous delineation and strong, brilliant colouring. The latter is noted for bold brushwork, ink application and reduced colour. To be fair, each style has its virtues, and, if executed by incompetent painters, each style may have its weakness. But in the past Chinese scholar-officials, who were virtually amateur artists and also authors of art historical and critical works played up the freestyle and made light of the meticulous style. This prejudice had a strong influence.



Peony, freestyle, by Wen Jingen