

China Series China Series Chinese Painting

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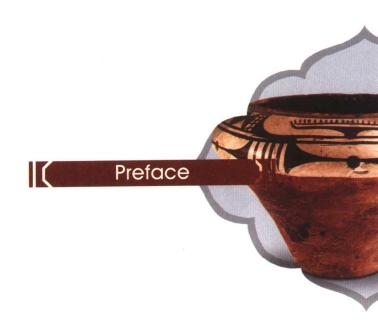
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Painting and the Culture Elite

/ellow River is the cradle of Chinese Civilizations. On the fertile lands along ▲ this mother River, tribes settled, clans formed, civilization developed and art emerged. Chinese painting can be dated back to prehistoric times and the earliest paintings of art were found on pottery pieces unearthed from several early civilizations in the Yellow River Valley. For example, Yangshao Civilization around 5000 BC to 3000 BC was a great and influencial society with its geographic area reaching today's Hubei Province to the south and Mongolia to the north and was a civilization in a transition period from matriarchal to patriarchal society. Cultivation and agriculture were already extensively used by this civilization. Fine pottery pieces unearthed demonstrated a unique characteristic of their own. The colorful pottery of Majiayao Civilization of early Neolithic time in the upper region of the River around 3000 BC to 2000 BC was considered to be the finest in that period and had achieved unprecedented level of sophistication. Another important civilization was Dawenkou Civilization, which was in the lower region of the River around 2300 BC to 500 BC and a typical society in late period of Neolithic time. Collectively they are called color pottery civilizations and many pottery pieces unearthed from the



A colored pottery pot of Majiayao Civilization, unearthed from Lintao in Gansu Province.



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sites associated them have remarkable and colorful paintings and patterns. Composition of the paintings includes human figures, fishes and insects, birds and animals, flowers and plants, and abstract patterns. The advancement of ceramic pottery laid the foundation for the development of bronze civilization and perhaps foretold the arrival of porcelain pottery. Ceramic, bronze and porcelain were all the important carriers of the new art form, paintings. However paintings were only used to decorate their carriers. Artists were anonymous and many of them were tribe women who just settled. Even in bronze and porcelain periods, artists were still craft painters and they were very low in their social rankings. It was very difficult to make a name in history books even for those with finest skills and who served in the imperial court.

During the Sui (581 to 618 AD) and the Tang (618 to 907 AD) Dynasties, a system of official examination was developed to select mandarins to serve the empires. Therefore a culture elite class was formed from the early stages of Chinese imperial history. Their ultimate aim was to do the examination well, to be selected and therefore to become a mandarin in order to achieve their political ambitions. In order to reach this ultimate goal they had to read and write thoroughly and extensively in order to become a cultured person and "gentleman" and also to be successful for the examination. Painting and poetry training was a very important part in this endeavour. The greatest Chinese philosopher and scholar, Confucius, said to his fellow students: "ambition must come from truth (the way); based on integrity; exercised through kindness; expressed through arts." This illustrated that integrity, kindness, and art were an integral part of a true greatness. He also said: "scholar can not be without truth." and "artistic skill is the nearest equivalent to the truth." This demonstrated a logical and underlining similarity between seeking the truth in a spiritual world and practicing a skill in an artistic field. The practice of art had been elevated to resemble the spiritual process of seeking the truth. For them art training was not a simple task just to command a skill but it was a mean to approach the way or the truth.

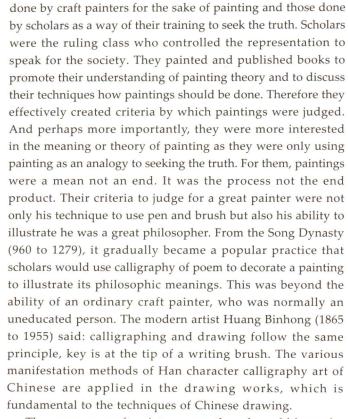
Consequently there were two types of paintings, those





Fuding You (part).

The Art of Chinese Painting



The career or craft painters even though could have the very finest painting technique, their ability and freedom to express their understanding of painting was limited and their way of painting was very much controlled by others. They normally painted scenes of real life and religion teaching by orders of their employers. They painted figures, landscapes (mountains and rivers, *shanshui*), flowers, fish or insects primarily for decorative purposes. In contrast, the painters who had higher social status would consider painting as an academic activity. It was a mean for them to enjoy the nature. For them, painting was not to imitate the nature but a way to express their philosophic feelings. Mind came before nature. Therefore landscape on their paintings would not be a mechanic copy of beautiful sceneries and it was rather the spiritual combination of their mind and the nature.

Most paintings of this type were done by those who were



Food Vessel with Snail Shape and Beast Skin Pattern, early Western Zhou Dynasty (11th Century B.C.), height 14.7cm, diameter 18.4cm, collected by Shanghai Museum.

well educated. In fact, almost all the culture elites had followed, treasured, and practiced this tradition. Confucius said in his *Analects*: "mountain fulfils the wise and water gratifies the learnt." This may not be a direct comment on paintings but it had directly linked the nature beauty to wisdom and knowledge. This had a very profound effect on painting aesthetics of the generations followed. And his followers even further developed this aesthetic philosophy: "who appreciate the natural beauty are the wise and the learnt." This provided a new philosophical meaning to a seclusion living admired by the culture elite.

Another important system of thought in China is Taoist and Dao De Jing (the Book of the Way) is a philosophic work by its founder Laozi. The work is also considered an important concise book on painting. Laozi said in his Dao De Jing: "strong voice appears gentle," "grand shape looks vague," "great skill seams easy."

During the warring state period (475 BC to 221 BC) the King of Song Kingdom invited a group of painters to his palace. Almost all the invited painters were overwhelmed by this unexpected event, stood idle, shaking in the court. Only one of them was very relaxed and come later than required, painted without all the unnecessary hesitation and went home after a routine show of courtesy. The King was very impressed and sent a servant to visit him immediately and saw him sitting naked at home without any worry and expectation. The King said he was a true painter.

Another sage applauded as the spiritual leader of the group of Chinese artists is Zhuangzi (about 369 BC to 286 BC). Zhuangzi wrote in his Knowledge Wandering North: Zhuangzi: "the nature possesses the best beauty" and promoted the ideal to "go with the nature", "inner tranquillity", and "concentrate without distraction". He told the following story in his A Essay about Tianzi: Zhuangzi to illustrate his point of view. Zhuangzi considered that a true painter should not be bound by fine details. He should be acting according to his mind and to paint freely. Taoists promoted the philosophy that the simple was the best. Laozi said: "what you see is not what you learn. That is the way of the world." Zhuangzi had a very similar view. He said in Heaven and Earth: Zhuangzi: "five colors only make eyes dazzled." According to him (Constrained in Will: Zhuangzi), "simplicity is essence without disguise". He strongly believed in "nothing could compete with the beauty of simplicity (the Way of Heaven: Zhuangzi)." Both Laozi and Zhuangzi promoted the philosophy of simplicity without unnecessary "five colors". "Sitting naked" was an illustration of inner tranquility and free spirit. It inspired the ink-and-wash freehand to become the ultimate style of Chinese paintings.



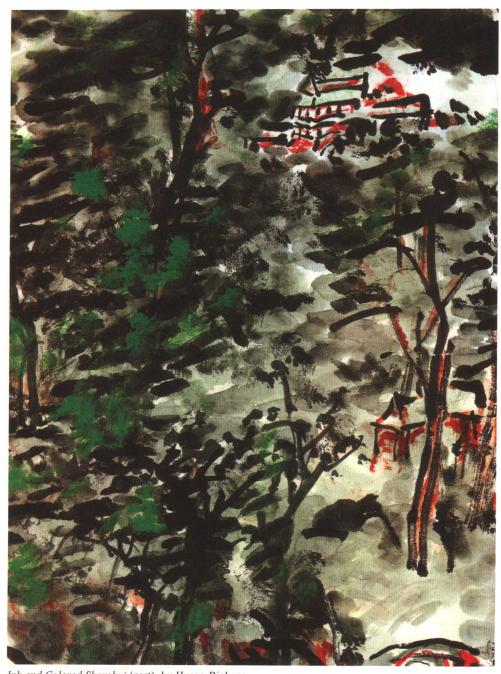
Perceiving the World with the Eyes of Chinese Painters

The discovery of photography in 1839 caused a panic among the painters in L Europe. The primary way of painting in the West was to imitate the nature rather than express it. When they saw an apparatus could do the job better than they could, they felt a sense of despair. Paul Klee (1879 to 1940) said art started to express the spirit rather the material world from the moment photography was invented. Therefore from 19th century, the western painting started to embark on a new trend of modernism. Ten years after its discovery, photography arrived in China but it never had a same impact on the Chinese painters than it did in the west although the culture elite and the ruling class in China admired the magic power of western painters for their ability to copy nature objects. The royal family of the time, including the grand mother of the Emperor, Cixi, had a tremendous curiosity on the newly arrived technology but they never viewed it as alternative to the art of painting. Traditional Chinese painting was fundamentally an abstract art form. Although there were no absolute abstract Chinese paintings in its original meaning, objects in a painting were not a direct copy of the nature world following the principle of perspective. It was rather a combination or harmony between the nature world and human emotion, a product of "heaven (nature) and human". The effect Chinese painters would like to illustrate in their paintings was not a visual effect of colors and patterns as their Western counterparts would like to achieve. The description of objects in their paintings was no means accurate and few concerned about such factors as colors, principle of perspective, anatomy, surface feel, and relative size. What they would like to achieve was a world in their mind of non materials. The nature world was not an object for them to make a true copy and it was rather elements for them to build their own world.

In contrast to the popular view of western painters, Chinese artists hardly considered the nature as an object but rather a subject which they worshiped. They had an uncontrollable impulse and energy to exemplify through the creation of certain image to prove the multiplicity of the nature in their mind. Remote mountains and running streams were the traces of their thinking process. The 17th century Germany philosopher Leibniz used the words *Naturliche Theologie* (nature theology) to describe this unique Chinese attitude towards the nature. In his *Dao De Jing*, Laozi considered the nature was the ultimate force.

"Human governed by earth; earth governed by heaven; heaven governed by Dao (the way), Dao ultimately governed by the nature".

This logic of Taoist from human through *Dao* (the way) to the nature clearly demonstrated when artists were painting landscape they were touching the *Dao* through which they ultimately immersed into the nature. This was how the Chinese



Ink and Colored Shanshui (part), by Huang Binhong