

Yang Xin

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Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting

Richard M. Barnhart
James Cahill
Wu Hung

Calligraphy for series title by

Qi Kong, president of the Chinese National

Calligraphers' Association.

Frontispiece: *Lady Guoguo's Spring Outing*, Emperor Huizong's copy of an 8th-century painting by Zhang Xuan, Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang (fig. 72).

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The Culture & Civilization of China

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Yang Xin
Nie Chongzheng
Lang Shaojun

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CHRONOLOGY

1,000,000–10,000 B.C.
10,000–ca. 2100 B.C.

ca. 1600–ca. 1100 B.C.
ca. 1100–256 B.C.

221–206 B.C.
206 B.C.–A.D. 220

220–265

265–420

317–589

386–581

581–618
618–907

907–960

907–979

907–1125
960–1279

1115–1234
1271–1368
1368–1644
1644–1911
1912–1949
1949–

PALEOLITHIC PERIOD

NEOLITHIC PERIOD

Xia Dynasty ca. 2100–ca. 1600 B.C.

SHANG DYNASTY

ZHOU DYNASTY

Western Zhou ca. 1100–771 B.C.

Eastern Zhou ca. 770–256 B.C.

Spring and Autumn Period 770–476 B.C.

Warring States Period 476–221 B.C.

QIN DYNASTY

HAN DYNASTY

Western (Former) Han Dynasty 206 B.C.–A.D. 9

Xin Dynasty (Wang Mang Interregnum) 9–23

Eastern (Later) Han Dynasty 25–220

THREE KINGDOMS

Wei 220–265

Shu 221–263

Wu 222–280

JIN DYNASTY*

Western Jin 265–317

Eastern Jin 317–420

SOUTHERN DYNASTIES*

Liu Song 421–479

Southern Qi 479–502

Liang 502–557

Chen 557–589

NORTHERN DYNASTIES

Northern Wei 386–535

Eastern Wei 534–550

Western Wei 535–556

Northern Qi 550–577

Northern Zhou 557–581

SUI DYNASTY

TANG DYNASTY

Great Zhou Dynasty (Wu Zetian Interregnum) 684–705

FIVE DYNASTIES (in the north)

Later Liang 907–923

Later Tang 923–936

Later Jin 936–946

Later Han 947–950

Later Zhou 951–960

TEN KINGDOMS (in the south)

Shu 907–925

Later Shu 934–965

Nanping or Jingnan 907–963

Chu 927–956

Wu 902–937

Southern Tang 937–975

Wu-Yue 907–978

Min 907–946

Southern Han 907–971

Northern Han 951–979

LIAO DYNASTY

SONG DYNASTY

Northern Song 960–1127

Southern Song 1127–1279

JIN DYNASTY

YUAN DYNASTY

MING DYNASTY

QING DYNASTY

REPUBLIC

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC

*The Western and Eastern Jin dynasties together with the Southern Dynasties are frequently referred to as the Six Dynasties.

EMPERORS OF THE SONG, YUAN, MING, AND QING DYNASTIES

<i>Emperor's Posthumous Temple Name</i>	<i>Reign Dates</i>	<i>Emperor's Posthumous Temple Name</i>	<i>Reign Title</i>	<i>Reign Dates</i>
SONG DYNASTY		MING DYNASTY		
Northern Song		Taizu (Zhu Yuanzhang)	Hongwu	1368–1398
Taizu (Zhao Kuangyin)	960–976	Huidi*	Jianwen	1399–1402
Taizong	976–997	Chengzu	Yongle	1403–1424
Zhenzong	998–1022	Renzong	Hongxi	1425
Renzong	1023–1063	Xuanzong	Xuande	1426–1435
Yingzong	1064–1067	(Zhu Zhanji)		
Shenzong	1068–1085	Yingzong	Zhengtong	1436–1449
Zhezong	1086–1100	Daizong	Jingtai	1450–1456
Huizong	1101–1125	Yingzong	Tianshun	1457–1464
Qinzong	1126–1127	Xianzong	Chenghua	1465–1487
		Xiaozong	Hongzhi	1488–1505
Southern Song		Wuzong	Zhengde	1506–1521
Gaozong	1127–1162	Shizong	Jiajing	1522–1566
Xiaozong	1163–1189	Muzong	Longqing	1567–1572
Guangzong	1190–1194	Shenzong	Wanli	1573–1620
Ningzong	1195–1224	Guangzong	Taichang	1620
Lizong	1225–1264	Xizong	Tianqi	1621–1627
Duzong	1265–1274	Sizong*	Chongzhen	1628–1644
Gongdi	1275–1276			
Duanzong	1276–1278	QING DYNASTY		
Di Bing*	1278–1279	Shizu	Shunzhi	1644–1661
		Shengzu	Kangxi	1662–1722
YUAN DYNASTY		Shizong	Yongzheng	1723–1735
Shizu	1260–1294	Gaozong	Qianlong	1736–1795
Chengzong	1295–1307	Renzong	Jiaqing	1796–1820
Wuzong	1308–1311	Xuanzong	Daoguang	1821–1850
Renzong	1312–1320	Wenzong	Xianfeng	1851–1861
Yingzong	1321–1323	Muzong	Tongzhi	1862–1874
Taiding huangdi*	1324–1328	Dezong	Guangxu	1875–1908
Tian Shundi	1328	Puyi*	Xuantong	1909–1911
Wenzong	1328–1329			
Mingzong	1329			
Wenzong	1330–1332			
Ningzong	1332			
Shundi*	1333–1368			

*No temple name; personal name or posthumous memorial title is listed instead.

MAP OF CHINA





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Approaches to Chinese Painting

PART I *Yang Xin*

Chinese painting can be traced back to decorations on pottery and on the floors of thatched huts in the Neolithic period. In the Eastern Zhou dynasty, 2,500 years ago, the use of brush and ink had already developed to such a point that the basic brush-made shapes have changed little since then. Chinese artists, philosophers, and critics have constantly discussed the role and qualities of painting throughout its long and complex history. To this day, the work of most Chinese art historians reflects the distinctive interaction between the painting tradition, on the one hand, and philosophy, poetry, calligraphy, and other cultural forms, on the other. What makes Chinese painting such an exquisite flower in the garden of Chinese civilization is the way the arts of the brush — painting, calligraphy, and poetry — together with the related art of seal engraving, interact, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, in producing so many of the masterpieces.

A complex yet important distinction for Chinese scholars as they have examined their painting tradition is between the detailed and technically proficient representation of a scene or object and the representation of its objective *and* subjective likeness. The former approach is associated largely with court painters, whose facility with the brush and whose naturalistic style culminated in many fine works, particularly during the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties; the latter approach is

associated largely with the literati-artists whose works started to appear in significant numbers by the early Song. The contrast is not a total one. Still, the depiction of partly imagined likenesses, not strictly realistic ones, is at the heart of what most Chinese scholars see as distinctive about the Chinese painting tradition. “One should learn from nature and paint the image in one’s mind,” as the painter Zhang Zao wrote in the eighth century.¹

In the early periods in the development of Chinese painting, a prominent artistic goal was the realistic representation of the subject matter. Han Fei (280?–233 B.C.), a thinker of the Warring States period, argued that the easiest subjects to paint were ghosts and devils; the most difficult, dogs, horses, and other real things. Why? Because people are familiar with dogs and horses, but nobody has ever seen a ghost or a devil, so they will not know whether an exact likeness has been achieved. From the painted pottery of Neolithic times to the silk paintings of the Warring States (476–221 B.C.) and Western Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 9) periods, there was a developing maturity in style, with successive painters trying to create realistic likenesses in diverse ways. Murals in early tombs and in the Dunhuang caves, painted during the Tang dynasty, attest to their great accomplishments.

In line with this approach, Xie He, an art critic and painter of the Southern Qi (479–502), argued that there are “six principles of painting,” one of which is “fidelity

to the object in portraying forms.”² Zhang Yanyuan, an art historian of the Tang dynasty, agreed. “The subject matter,” he said, “must be painted to its exact likeness.”³ But other critics, even early on, believed that paintings need not—should not—be judged solely by a standard of objective realism. Good paintings, they said, achieve the unity of the objective and the subjective, showing both the image as it exists in reality and the image in the painter’s mind.

Here we see the emergence of *xieyi*, or “sketching the idea.” This, more than realistic depiction, is what many critics have considered to be truly important in painting. *Deyi*, “getting the idea” of the image in the artist’s mind, becomes the chief point to grasp when looking at a painting. The viewer has to see beyond the image to the implied meaning. Only by “comprehending the idea,” or *huiyi*, can one appreciate the best paintings in the Chinese art tradition.

Artists taking this approach may highlight certain areas and leave large areas blank, except for certain details related to the theme. The spaces of various sizes and shapes form a pattern in themselves, drawing attention to the main subject matter while providing the viewer with room to imagine and wander in. Reality is implied, not necessarily rendered with scrupulous accuracy. A moonlit scene outdoors and a lamplit scene indoors may be painted like the same scene in daylight, with only a moon in the sky or a bright lamp to signal nighttime. In *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*, a scroll painting by Gu Hongzhong of the Five Dynasties period (907–960), burning candles show that the scene is set at night (see fig. 103).

Another example of this widespread approach to reality relates to the depiction of buildings. Chinese painters tend to present buildings as seen straight on or from slightly above, seldom as seen from below. Li Cheng, another artist of the Five Dynasties period, once tried to paint pavilions, pagodas, and other structures atop hills exactly as they appeared to him from below; that is, he did not paint the tiles on the roofs, just the woodwork and frame below the eaves. His experiment was criticized by Shen Kuo, a famous Song-dynasty scholar, who said that Li did not understand how to “perceive smallness from largeness.”⁴ In succeeding dynasties no artist ever again took Li’s approach.

Neither Shen nor other Chinese critics have argued that such works distort reality, however. The opposite is the case. Realistic copying can never show the innate meaning or true nature of a subject, they would say. Only with imaginative representation can the depths of reality

be depicted. By the end of the Tang dynasty in the tenth century, this approach to painting began to find its great forms of expression.

Works executed by court painters into the tenth century before the establishment of the Song dynasty prominently featured human figures, the use of lines to define forms, rich and varied coloring, and realistic representation of the subject matter. This approach fit well with the social and cultural functions that the paintings were designed to fulfill. During the Qin (221–206 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) dynasties, for example, the government used portraits to publicize and eulogize loyal ministers and martyrs and to denounce traitors. Later Xie He even remarked, “All paintings stand for poetic justice; lessons about the rise and fall of ministers over the course of one thousand years can be drawn from paintings.”⁵

Scholars and officials of the Tang dynasty went a step further and attempted to bring painting into line with Confucian ideology. In *Lidai minghua ji* (Record of famous paintings of successive dynasties), Zhang Yanyuan argued that the “art of painting exists to enlighten ethics, improve human relationships, divine the changes of nature, and explore hidden truths. It functions like the Six [Confucian] Classics and works regardless of the changing seasons.” The cataloguer of the court collection of paintings entitled *Xuanbe huapu*, compiled at the end of the Northern Song (960–1127), attempted to define the social function of figure painting, even arguing that landscape painting, bird-and-flower painting, and animal painting should fulfill a similar ethical function.

In the *Xuanbe huapu*, paintings were divided into ten categories according to subject: religious themes, figures, palace buildings, foreign people, dragons and fish, landscapes, animals, birds and flowers, bamboo, and vegetables and fruit. These categories carefully reflected the official Confucian value system of the time. Landscape paintings, for example, were prized for their portrayal of the Five Sacred Mountains and the Four Great Rivers—places of imperial significance. The merit of birds and flowers initially lay in their “metaphorical and allegorical meaning,” while that of vegetables and fruit lay in their use “as sacrifices to deities.” In short, paintings were judged largely in terms of how well their subject matter served the gods, the Buddha, sages, and emperors.

The compiler of the *Xuanbe huapu* certainly knew that birds and bamboo were not directly connected to human affairs, but they had to be made metaphorically relevant if they were to symbolize moral and ethical values. Thus, pine trees, bamboo, plum blossoms, chrysanthemums, gulls, egrets, geese, and ducks became symbols of hermits

or men of noble character; peonies and peacocks became symbols of wealth and rank; willow trees, symbols of amorous sentiments; and tall pine trees and ancient cypresses, symbols of constancy and uprightness. In this way, bird-and-flower paintings could serve an instructional purpose.

By the end of the Tang and during the Five Dynasties, before the *Xuanbe huapu* was written, landscape painting and bird-and-flower painting on silk achieved maturity, in the process changing the traditional, simplistic use of sketched lines to define forms. As landscapes came to convey tranquillity or poetic melancholy and refinement, the tendency to use less color or even just water and ink became prevalent. Painters also increasingly used scrolls as a medium.

In art circles in China it is believed that Wu Daozi (active ca. 710–760) marked the peak of court painting. Unfortunately, none of his works have survived, but some copies are said to be based on his original drawings (see fig. 68).

A couple of centuries later, in the Northern Song period, came the rise of the literatus-artist, whose influence on the development of Chinese painting was formidable. The literati-artists were well trained in poetry and calligraphy. Partly to distinguish themselves from professional painters, they often looked at painting in terms of those arts, adopting many of the aesthetic conceptions set forth in *Ershisi shipin* (The twenty-four aspects of poetry) by Sikong Tu of the Tang dynasty, a milestone in the history of poetry criticism. To elucidate such notions as vigor, thinness, primitive simplicity, elegance, naturalness, and implicitness, Sikong Tu described natural settings appropriate to each. Elegance, for instance, could be expressed by depicting scenes with “gentlemen listening to the falling rain in a thatched cottage while drinking from a jade pot; seated gentlemen flanked by tall bamboo groves; or floating white clouds and a few birds chasing each other in a sky clearing after rain.”⁶

Another theory of poetry that proved highly influential among literati-painters and art critics was set forth by Mei Yaochen, a Song poet who sought to achieve “depth and primitive simplicity” in his works. Once he remarked that poems “must be able to portray hard-to-catch scenes as if they leap up before the eyes, and imply meaning between the lines. A masterpiece is superior even to this.”⁷ By “meaning between the lines” he referred to something the author had in mind and the reader could perceive only by intuition, that is, a meaning that could be apprehended but not expressed. The literati-artists saw the applicability of this idea to painting.

Another aspect of the shift from court painting to literati painting was the growing emphasis on painting as an enjoyable activity, intended to please oneself and one’s friends. Su Shi, a poet, calligrapher, and painter of the Song dynasty, was one advocate of enjoyment. He once wrote a poem to a friend that read: “I asked why you painted a portrait of me; you said you are a portraitist to amuse yourself.” Ni Zan, one of the Four Great Masters of Yuan-dynasty painting, suggested that the pursuit of enjoyment gained in importance as the search for the “exact likeness” grew more desultory. This view was carried forward by Dong Qichang, the great painter and art historian of the late Ming dynasty, who explicitly advocated “painting for fun” and “the painting of fun.” Throughout the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, particularly toward the close of each, when government power waned and corruption grew rife, the idea of using paintings to “enlighten ethics and improve human relationships” was seldom mentioned by literati-artists.

The practice of annotating a painting with a poem evidently originated among the literati of the Song period. The Tang poet Du Fu composed many poems about paintings, some of which were comments on specific works. Whether any of his poems were written directly on wall paintings or scrolls is unknown. A number of Song poets composed poems about paintings, however, and some of these are found written on the mountings of handscrolls. The earliest known pieces extant today are attributed to Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1125), a celebrated painter in his own right (see, for instance, fig. 113); among these is the earliest existing example of a painting inscribed with a poem composed by the artist himself. Later painters followed suit; the practice became popular during the Yuan dynasty and common during the Ming and Qing dynasties, when paintings were likely to bear poetry or other inscriptions.

That Chinese characters developed from pictographs led to a belief that painting and calligraphy had a common origin. Recent archaeological findings have established that in fact painting appeared before the invention of script. It remains true, however, that there is a close connection between calligraphy and painting: both involve brushwork, and inscribing a painting requires knowing how to write beautiful script.

Over time, literati, who were well versed in calligraphy, employed in their paintings brushwork techniques affected by their calligraphic style, and came to see the form and content of the inscription as an integral part of the painting. Drawn to the art of calligraphy, they began

to pay close attention in painting to the aesthetic appeal of lines and to the distinctive ways of doing brushwork, instead of just employing lines to compose forms. Xie He, in his Six Principles of painting, introduced terms to evaluate brushwork.⁸ In the Yuan dynasty, Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) inscribed a poem on a painting of rocks and bamboo that concluded with the statement that calligraphy and painting are identical (see fig. 173). Later artists did not take this view but instead cultivated a distinctive personal calligraphic style that was naturally reflected in their paintings. Shen Zhou (1427–1509), for example, who modeled his calligraphy on Huang Tingjian's, executed paintings with the bold and vigorous brushstrokes characteristic of Huang's script (see fig. 203). Others whose painting style shows similarities with their calligraphic style are Wen Zhengming (1470–1559), Zhao Zhiqian (1829–1884), and Wu Changshuo (1844–1927) (see figs. 204, 282, 284).

The inscription on a painting accentuates and complements the image. In the Song and Yuan periods, paintings were usually inscribed after completion to fill up any remaining space, but in the Ming and Qing periods, placement of the inscription was considered when an artist planned the initial composition. In some works the inscribed poem is essential to creating the perfect visual effect. In *Bamboo and Rock* by Zheng Xie (1693–1766), for example, the gray lines and gradations of the calligraphy look like the contour lines of the rock (see fig. 262). In *Fish Swimming* by Li Fangying (1695–1755), the poem hangs vertically like a riverbank.

Seals, which typically imprint characters engraved in an ancient calligraphic style, likewise enhance a painting. The practice of affixing seals possibly originated with collectors who stamped their seals on collections to designate ownership. According to the *Xuanbe huapu*, paintings executed before the Tang dynasty were not stamped. The Tang emperor Taizong inaugurated the practice by having his seals applied to paintings in the imperial household. During the Northern Song, painters began to stamp their own works, often to guard against forgery.

Using seals, however practical, added aesthetic appeal to the paintings, as literati-painters realized. The scarlet stamp could enliven a picture otherwise dull in color, and the choice of seal indicated certain interests and values of the painter, often with subtle cultural, personal, or political implications. Qian Xuan (ca. 1235–before 1307), for example, had a seal that read “brush and ink game,” implying that his paintings were for self-amusement. Most painters had their seals carved or cast by artisans, but some made their own.

The incorporation of seals into pictures made Chinese painting into a comprehensive art that combines several others. A painting is often the joint product of a painter, a poet, a calligrapher, and a seal maker. In exceptional cases, as with Wu Changshuo and Qi Baishi (1864–1957), the painters are well versed in all these arts themselves (see, for example, fig. 291). This bringing together of so many art forms ultimately became the most characteristic feature of Chinese painting and the reason why so many works resonate with the culture and civilization of China.

Just as Chinese paintings are enriched by the manifold skills and vision of several artists, this book, too, is the product of several minds, but in this case the contributors come from varying cultural backgrounds. Readers are thus introduced here to a greater diversity of viewpoints and methods than they would receive from any single author. Although scholars inside and outside China working in many fields have learned a great deal from each other's approaches, their differences can be of great value in stimulating discussion, raising new questions, and offering various ways to explore the same topic. In preparing the manuscript for this book, all of us authors contributed points of view. At the same time, through meetings and reviews of each other's work, we shaped our chapters to provide continuity and consistency in the book as a whole. The intensive collaboration was an estimable development in China-U.S. cultural and scholarly exchanges, but our goal was to provide an understanding of the historical evolution of Chinese painting, along with a bouquet of exquisite paintings to enjoy.