

China through the Arts Supplementary Lesson

Chinese Brush Painting & Calligraphy - Part I

Brush painting in China reflects the Confucian and Taoist philosophies. Examining art works allows students to analyze ancient Chinese society and to observe how paintings and poetry demonstrate the Chinese quest for harmony.

This lesson is designed to provide students an opportunity to use the Internet. However, if appropriate technology is not available, a visit to a local library to retrieve several art books with pictures of paintings may suffice. Fortunately, because many of the earliest paintings on paper or silk were in black and white and artists relied mainly on shades of gray to suggest color gradations, many books provide high quality reproductions even in only black and white printings.

Artists in China were both painters and poets. A well-balanced painting often included a poem. Therefore, students should examine examples of paintings with poetic inscriptions.

Not only were excellent Chinese painters masters of traditional skills, they were experts at expressing emotion, rendering subjects in a way that was not strictly representational. A successful painting captures the spirit and vitality of the subject using a minimum of swift and sure strokes.

Students will read some background information, taking notes of key concepts common to Chinese paintings and how paintings reflect both Confucian and Taoist traditions. Then they will look to art works themselves to analyze in groups and share with the class their observations.

Materials: Chinese Brush Painting worksheets
one computer per group with Internet access **OR**
a selection of books on Chinese brush painting from the local library
OR photocopied examples of Chinese brush painting and calligraphy
“Common Motifs and Symbols” worksheet from China’s Renaissance in
Bronze organized by the Phoenix Asia Museum

Vocabulary: calligraphy, classical, yin and yang, essence, positive and negative space, rhythmic vitality, inspiration, technique, composition, spacing, perspective

(1) Background on Chinese Brush Painting

- In groups, students should read "Chinese Brush Painting" using highlighters and marginalia
 - Start the groups off by demonstrating how to identify and note the key ideas and make notes in the margins. Together as a class, work on at least one paragraph. Then break into groups to have them finish.
 - A group recorder should note the key ideas of Chinese Brush Painting
 - As a class discuss the questions encouraging students to rely on their reading notes. You may create overheads from some photocopied samples of art to illustrate some points during discussion.
 - Create a consensus list of key features they should look for when they analyze Chinese brush painting.

(2) Analyze Brush Painting works

- If a computer lab with Internet access is available, prep students for analyzing artwork on the 'Net:
<http://pasture.ecn.purdue.edu/~agenthtml/agenmc/china/china./cfcwm.html>
- If not, provide a few Chinese brush painting books for each group from the local library.
- Alternatively, provide photocopies of paintings to each group.
 - Whatever medium selected, walk students through the steps for analyzing artwork using the questions, demonstrating with a sample.
 - Provide copies of "Common Motifs and Symbols" for student reference
 - Allow time for students to analyze art and prepare to share their painting(s) and analysis.

(3) Sharing

- Groups Share paintings and analysis
- Discuss common findings in artwork

Chinese Brush Painting

AS YOU READ THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION, USE A HIGHLIGHTER AND MARGINALIA TO IDENTIFY THE KEY CONCEPTS OF CHINESE BRUSH PAINTING.

The room is clean and bare. A brush, a small stick of dried black ink, an ink slab for grinding the stick in water to make ink, and a small water container lay before a sheet of thin, absorbent paper spread out on a cloth on the floor. On the walls hang a few unfurled paintings in shades of black ink and examples of calligraphy. Although different from the hanging scrolls that you saw last week, they are equally as skillful and expressive, and well-preserved. In studios just like this one, Chinese artists have been painting for thousands of years.

Of all the civilizations in the world, China has the oldest continuous art history. Painters today use the same materials and techniques as their forefathers centuries ago. The Chinese consider calligraphy and painting the highest art forms.

Each painting is designed to communicate a message. That is why poems are often written in calligraphy on the same page. As the painter Su Shih (1036 - 1101 A.D.) explained, "Poetry and painting are one and the same thing." The picture should bring words to your mind, just as reading the poetry creates a picture in your mind. But the poems and pictures should not tell a story. Even paintings that show scenes from a story, serve only to suggest the story to the reader's mind. They should only represent an idea, the individual thought of the artist. Calligraphy should show flowing movement, just as a painting is supposed to do. It should not be too perfect, but instead demonstrate life in motion.

In order to create excellent art, the painter needs to be at harmony with himself and with nature so that he can clearly express his mood or emotions. In landscape painting, the Chinese paint subjects that people of all time periods can relate to - mountains and streams, the changing seasons, trees and flowers, birds, beasts, insects. If buildings appear in landscape paintings, they are typically small huts or retreats like those of peasants. Humans are dressed in traditional clothing so that the paintings never go out of style. A Chinese artist wants to create works that will have timeless meaning.

The Chinese seek to depict all of life, rather than to focus on an individual. By showing humans in landscape paintings as tiny as ants, how important should the viewer think each human's place is in the world?

A Chinese painting includes and balances the two opposing forces in nature, yin and yang. Tiny humans shrink before towering mountains. Petite women entertain large, powerful men. Blank space is left to maintain a sense of balance between dark

or "positive" space, and light or "negative" space. As Lao Tzu, father of Daoism explained thousands of years ago,

Clay is molded into a vessel;
the utility of the vessel depends upon its hollow interior.
Doors and windows are cut out in order to make a house;
the utility of the house depends on the empty spaces.

A vase is only useful because it is empty inside to leave room for water and flowers. Shelter is only good if it has openings, empty spaces for the dweller, light and air to enter and exit. Often, for example, you will see a painting of a bird on a branch, but the rest of the page will be left empty. If the entire page was filled, how would the bird have room to fly?

The goal in painting is not to copy the appearance of a subject in every detail, but to capture its essence or spirit. Painters study their subject, then paint from memory what they consider to be the essential elements, using the fewest possible strokes. There is no such thing as good or bad, ugly or beautiful. Instead, all art must show movement and growth. This is why you see so many paintings of gnarled, old trees or aged men. Paintings are beautiful because they are simple and moving. Artists strive to make sure each stroke is essential to the artwork, adding nothing extra. By avoiding unnecessary strokes, the artist demonstrates "the skill to do more, with the will to refrain." As an old saying advises, the painter should not "paint feet on a snake." Instead, the painter should avoid unnecessary strokes and focus on the essence of the subject.

By comparing two different artists' brush strokes, you will notice that each artist has his own personal handwriting. The brush strokes show the artist's skill and personality but also reveal the painter's meaning and mood. For example, a long line with only smooth curves expresses joy or peace of mind. What do you think short strokes might indicate about a painter's frame of mind?

Xie He, a famous artist and critic in the fifth century, established six principles for judging the quality of Chinese paintings. According to the Six Canons, quality paintings include:

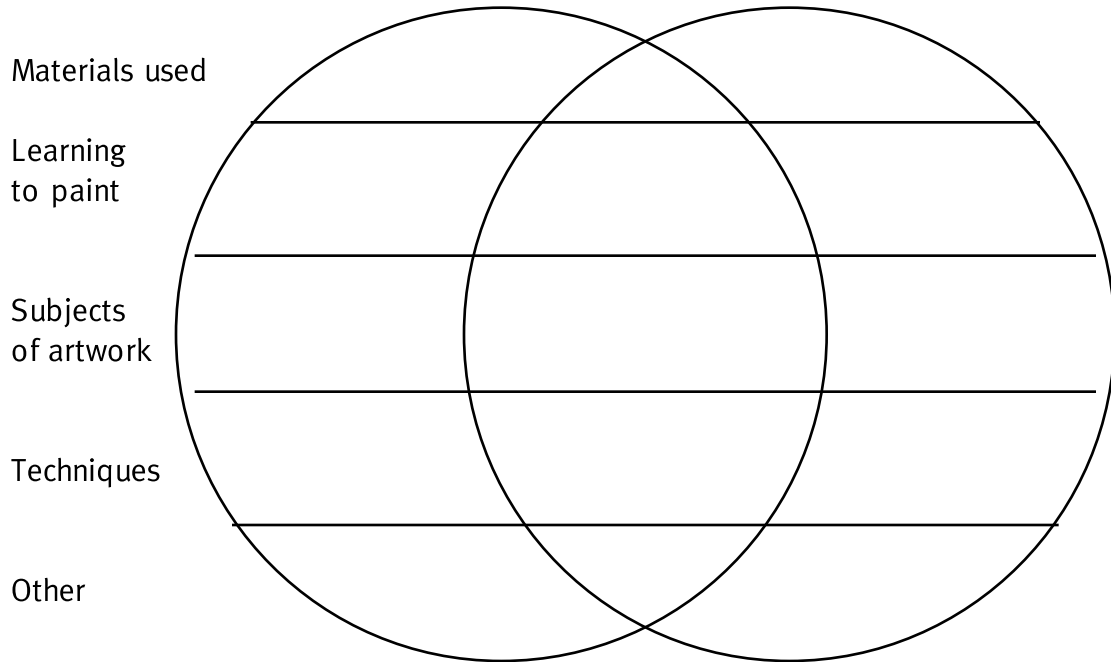
- 1) Rhythmic Vitality. A painting should demonstrate the inspiration and mood of the painter which gives it meaning and harmony.
- 2) Swift and sure brush stroke technique. Once a stroke is made, it cannot be erased.
- 3) The inner nature of the subject must be depicted using as few strokes as possible.

- 4) Appropriate coloring - shades of gray should suggest colors even if only using black ink.
- 5) Composition, spacing, perspective - the artist should leave blank space, the most important object should draw the eye first, and the painting should depict balance and harmony, life and movement.
- 6) Study and copying of old masters. Those who seek to become great painters should become skillful in copying the master's techniques. After mastering the techniques, the new masters can create their own unique style.

Artists and critics today still judge artwork by these Six Canons.

NOW THAT YOU HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION, ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS.

1. How might painting in China compare to painting in America?



2. In what ways do Chinese Paintings reflect ancient philosophical principles?

Confucian -

Taoist -

3. Together in your group you are going to select one or two Chinese brush paintings to analyze. Before you evaluate them, first decide what criteria or principals you will use to try to decipher the painters meaning, mood and skill. You may use the Common Motifs and Symbols page if it helps. Be prepared to share and explain your chosen artwork to the class.

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COMMON MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS



bamboo a symbol of long-life and resilience, referring to the fact that the bamboo bends, yet does not break



leiwen a "thunder" pattern of spirals representing storms, rain, and fertility



bat an emblem of happiness



lotus a symbol for the Buddha and for purity; the lotus rises from the mud pure and beautiful just as the Buddha lived in a world of corruption yet remained pure and holy



butterfly an emblem of joy, of summer, and a reference to marital happiness



peony the peony represents spring, and is also an emblem of love and affection



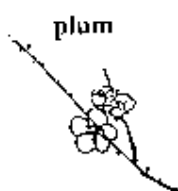
crane an auspicious symbol of long-life



pine a symbol of longevity and endurance, as the pine tree endures the long winter



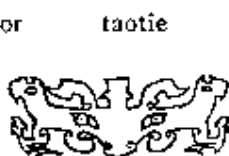
dragon symbol of heaven and the emperor; connected with clouds and rain



plum the plum symbolizes winter; it is considered an auspicious symbol, as the plum blossom is the first flower to bloom in the spring



Immortal one of the Eight Immortals, or protectors of Daoism



taotie animal mask motif made up of two dragons confronting each other, seen in profile; the eyes and ears are emphasized to create a full-face mask

From China's Renaissance in Bronze organized by the Phoenix Asia Museum