

Art and Design

The Art of the Chi: A Brief History of Chinese Painting

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“Brush outlined shape and in shape, spirit dwells.”

Since the dawn of the Renaissance, the West has defined the painted form using light and shadow. However, the Eastern tradition of painting holds a much different idea of form. Specifically in ancient China, form is described as a mere inked outline, but these outlines embrace a deeper meaning than what the Western mind is accustomed to. It is said that a master of painting in the Chinese tradition is “one” with nature. Although nature is the physical world in literal terms, it can also be defined as the chi, or a universal spirit that governs all things in the known (and unknown) universe. This idea of a universal spirit derives from Taoism, an ancient Chinese practice that is not religious in the Western sense. The Tao is a force that is the “living reality” of our world and of everything beyond. On a cosmic scale, everything in the universe is one and the same, with separate moving parts, a complete communion of the spiritual and the physical (Rowley 7). The Tao manifests itself as a never-ending fluidity of being and becoming. To the Chinese, a painting is only considered successful when the artist’s thoughts harmonize with this spirit. The concept of Yin and Yang comes directly from Taoism. This relationship of Yin and Yang does not necessarily represent good and evil, but rather the tension between opposing forces. Because the Tao resides in this tension, Chinese artists often depict landscapes in the form of “mountain-water” scenes, in which balance is created from the idea that opposites need each other for completion (8).

This balance must also exist in the artist himself. The Chinese master blends Confucian and Taoist ideas to create a fusion of opposing values. This was said to have given the artist a balance and strength that could not normally be achieved by Western artists. Confucianism also was not a religion in the Western sense, but rather focuses on the idea of social order and human relationships, of personal virtue and of character. The blending of these ideals gives the artist the ultimate freedom to create. The painter is supposed to possess humility, while also denying any form of fame, because the spirit of the uni-

verse is recognized only by those who are truly receptive to it. This excellence is achieved by becoming reclusive, not only physically, but mentally as well; this way one can develop his talents while also becoming in harmony with his own soul (13). The result is that the artist has a profound relationship with the natural world and has universality in his art. A master is a blend of the Confucian idea of intellectual cultivation, yet he also possesses the creative traits of meditation and spontaneity derived from Taoism.

Unlike the Western tradition, where originality is respected and sought after, the Chinese artists upheld the ways of their masters, however ancient, while also depending on natural talent. Years of practice and meditation are required to master the arts. Because Taoism sought the truth of things as they are in reality, the painter should be passive: open to resolving the paradoxes of life and to conquer worldly desires in order to contain his own spirit and be truly receptive to the Tao (22). The artist spends years in isolation to experience nature and the spirit, rather than the dominion over it, which is often a theme of Western artistic culture. The Chinese artist does not paint a scene as it is, but rather as he thinks it to be. This technique of painting comes from an actual relationship with nature, resulting in the ability to recall the spirit of the scene from memory. The artist is able to capture the likeness of a scene instead of the physical form of how it actually looks. He truly knows nature and possesses a unity with the chi.

In conveying the spontaneity of nature and in capturing the Tao, one must master the concept of "effortlessness." Preparation for this mastery includes meditation and extreme concentration in order to reach the highest state of creative readiness. The Tao (or chi) was everything to the Chinese artist: if one missed the chi, or was not able to embrace fully the spirit, no amount of talent or elaboration can save the work from being completely lifeless. The Chinese seek to capture the essence of an object, regardless of whether it meets the requirements of a "living thing" in the Western sense. Since the chi embodies everything, even a rock had to be a living thing. Once one achieves harmony with the spirit, the painting exhibits an ethereal quality, as though the entire piece were done in one breath.

The Chinese completely reject most Western styles. They believe that Western artists are obsessed with the "plasticity" of an object. To Europeans, form is expressed in the solidity and weight of an object, often through the depictions of light and shade, tending to give the subject a realistic quality. However, the Chinese achieved form through a concept known to us simply as "brush" (35). The brush is a physical object, but at the same time it represents the way in which a painting is created. There are many different types of brushstrokes in Chinese

painting: all of which have their own meanings. Knowing the techniques of brush is an important part of achieving proper structural integration, or the compositional design, of a painting. To the Chinese, the life of a painting belongs to the painting itself, and not to the lifelike representational descriptions that are so often the subject of Western pieces. The artist does not seek beauty in perfection or in complete proportions, as many Western artists seem to do, but seeks to capture a sort of “inner reality.” In other words, they want to show its reason for being, to truly represent the life, or spirit, of the subject (38).

For the Chinese, the content (or subject matter) of a painting normally consists of landscapes. Many of which are “mountain-water” scenes, representing the harmony of natural opposites. Since the Chinese reject the idea of “plastic” form, they make the landscape convincing by creating the correct “mood.” If one were able to accurately convey weather conditions, laws of seasonal change, and even perhaps the time of day, the painting would deliver a “real” experience (41).

The concept of “voids” is equally as important as solid forms. Artists leave intentional space in between objects to create a harmonious relationship between the two in order to produce an experience full of vitality (41). For example, during the Song periods (Northern and Southern), the voids in landscape painting probably represented the Taoist ideas regarding the non-existent (71). More specifically, Northern Song voids tend to show space and the sheer scale of vast mountainscapes. However, the opposite was implemented for the Southern Song landscapes, where the voids are more of a “vehicle” for the spirit of the chi. In Southern Song paintings, it is the quality of the void that matters. The point here is to create a relationship between the known and the unknown, as to “suggest through emptiness the reality of spirit beyond (physical) form” (77). Southern Song artists suggest with their paintings a state of flow between what can be seen and what can not.

For the Chinese, the Tao is an ever present force, governing what can be known, and also what cannot. The voids in their paintings represent this spirit, while the objects, such as trees and rocks, represent the identified, concrete world. This balance of opposites reinforces the concept of Yin and Yang, for these forces need each other to create a balanced universe. A true master can capture both and create a sense of mystery while also conveying the reality of what is solid. Ink paintings describe the relationship between visible reality and that which is beyond sight. This is the true nature of the chi.

Works Cited

Rowley, George. *Principles of Chinese Painting*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1947. Print.