

# Viewing Chinese Painting from the Choice of Tool Materials

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**Published:** 26 October 2019

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## **Abstract:**

The choice of tool materials is not only the important foundation of Chinese painting technique system, but also the important origin of the aesthetic tradition of Chinese painting. The material characteristics of the Chinese brush, Chinese ink and Xuan paper have created the unique artistic features of Chinese painting and have achieved the artistic height of Chinese painting. Today, they still show strong plasticity and vitality. They are still the most popular tool materials for Chinese painting, and the exploration for their painting language is still the source of power for the development of Chinese painting. In this paper, the artistic charm and future possibilities of Chinese ink painting are discussed from three aspects: the representation of Chinese brush, the imagery of Chinese ink painting and the randomness of the Xuan paper.

**Key Words:** Chinese painting, Chinese brush, Chinese Ink, Xuan paper

## **Introduction**

As a kind of physical operation, painting is bound to be restricted by the tool material. The difference of tool materials is often the main reason that leads to the difference in the painting language techniques. Like the harvest of different products under different soil and climate conditions, the difference in the visual experience between East and West paintings and the different pursuit of art are also more or less rooted in the choice of tool materials.

The tool materials for the traditional Chinese painting mainly include the Chinese brush, Chinese ink and Xuan paper. Although there are many choices of tool materials in ancient China, these three constitute a classic combination of Chinese painting tools in the end. Today, they still show strong plasticity and vitality and the first choice of Chinese painters. Perhaps we can better grasp the artistic characteristics and development possibilities of Chinese painting by returning the three choices of Chinese brush, Chinese ink and Xuan Paper that has special significance to Chinese painting.

## **I. Chinese Brush and Representation**

Chinese brush is the main painting tool for Chinese ink painting, and most of its head is made into a cone. The storage of ink in the brush abdomen can guarantee long and continuous painting, and the vigorous and forceful tip is suitable for fine strokes. The traditional Chinese ink painting is mainly linear, which is greatly related to the construction features of the Chinese brush. However, the brush for Chinese painting is far more than the linear outline sketching, Chinese painters can use the Chinese brush to create endless traces and forms. They make full use of the hiding and showing, the positive and side, the out and return, the inverse and along, the pause and transition of the tip of the Chinese brush to show the subtle difference in the traces on the paper by the slight changes in the force. They create the ever-changing traces of the painting through finger pressing, palm lift, wrist turn and arm shift. From the expressive force of a single tool, the richness of the Chinese brush is indeed unmatched by other painting tools.

However, traditional Chinese painters also have their own laws and boundaries in the process of making traces, because the Chinese brush is more than a painting tool, and its greater mission is to serve as a writing tool. Chinese calligraphy art matures earlier than painting, and the rules and laws of calligraphic style of drawing are naturally applied to painting. Since the Song Dynasty, Chinese literati were more involved in painting creation. The literati painters who were familiar with the art of calligraphy further penetrated the aesthetic taste of calligraphic style of drawing into paintings, and gradually mastered the right to comment on painting, so that the calligraphic style of drawing eventually became the main aesthetic paradigm and rules of the Chinese painting style of drawing.

The aesthetic interest of calligraphic style of drawing is actually an abstract aesthetic pursuit. Its intervention in painting techniques has enabled Chinese painting to get ride of the imitation of the natural world earlier, and to switch to the representation of the interest of objects and the expression of author's emotions and inner mood. The law of the traces of strokes and the beauty of the depiction form constrain each other to reach a balance, and promote each other to achieve a wonderful realm. The calligraphy uses the pen to release emotion, and the image expression promotes the subjective processing. Therefore, the formal exploration occurs consciously, and individual style is naturally presented.



图1元，倪瓒，古木竹石，纸本水墨，纵64.3厘米，横37.3厘米

Figure 1, the Yuan Dynasty, Ni Zan, "Ancient Wood and Bamboo Stone", ink-water painting, 64.3cm lengthwise and 37.3cm widthwise



图2明，徐渭，驴背吟诗，纸本水墨，纵54厘米，横30厘米

Figure 2, the Ming Dynasty, XuWei, "Reciting Poems on the Donkey Back", ink-water painting, 54cm lengthwise and 30cm widthwise

Figure 1 is Ni Zan's picture "Ancient Wood and Bamboo Stone" in the Yuan Dynasty. The trees, bamboo and dry stone in the painting are similar in shape and the texture is appropriate. The style of drawing complies with the norms of calligraphy. Though the painting and inscriptions are not the same in the figure, the style of the drawing is consistent. Figure 2 is Xu Wei's "Reciting Poems on the Donkey Back" in the Ming Dynasty, the form of the old man riding on the donkey is portrayed vividly in a few strokes. It looks like illegible in the style of drawing, but it also conforms to the calligraphic style of the running script. Both works have given full play to the advantages of brush strokes, and they follow the aesthetic paradigm of calligraphic style of drawing while depicting the characteristics of objects. Both have concise features, but the style is different. This style is mainly constructed in the texture of the technique of writing and contours.

It can be said that Chinese painting choose Chinese brush as the most important tool, and it has played an indelible role in the maturity of Chinese painting from relying on the aesthetic paradigm of calligraphic style of drawing attached to it. However at the same time, the dependence of strokes on the aesthetic paradigm of calligraphic style of drawing is also invisible shackles for the further development of Chinese ink painting. The Chinese ink painter who is proficient in calligraphic style of drawing will form a powerful chain that expresses the contempt for drawing, and is easier to unconsciously slide into the established inertia, becoming a prisoner of pen and ink programs, hard to extricate himself and even nor knowing.

When we re-examine the Chinese brush, we will find that the Chinese brush can do much more than the circumference of the calligraphic style of drawing. In fact, with the mutual recognition of the art category and the widening of the human aesthetic dimension, the scope of the calligraphic style of drawing itself is constantly expanding. From appreciating the beauty to ugliness, it marks the advancement of human aesthetic dimensions. The exploration of the expressive power of the Chinese

brush and the exploration of the form of the handwriting is an important link that the painter is finding his own unique modeling language to form a unique style, and also the driving source of the continuous development and evolution of Chinese painting.

## II. Ink Painting and Imagery

Chinese ink painting is also the indispensable and most important painting materials in Chinese painting. The ink-makers collect the smoke stains and glues from the burning of plants to produce portable ink sticks. In general, the ink must be combined with water before painting, so painters use the ink sticks and water to grind ink in ink-stone for writing and painting. The more convenient and practical bottled ink is directly produced through the industrialization in contemporary.

The ink color of the Chinese painting in early stage were relatively simple, and was basically used as a relatively thick black. Since Wang Wei used the method of ink shading to separate more shade levels of dark colors in the picture in the Tang Dynasty, the ink painting gradually replaced the painting in red and green colors to become the synonym for Chinese painting. The ink produces a rich and delicate layers of ink colors through the dilution of water to realize the difference in the color of ink brightness, which makes the ink painting glow out of vitality. Zhang Yanyuan wrote in the book "Famous Paintings in the Past Dynasties" that "the ink has five colors".<sup>①</sup> The so-called "five-colors" generally refers to black, thick, wet, dry and light. However, in Tang Dai's "Things about Painting", it is proposed that "the ink is divided into six colors, then what are these six colors? Black, white, dry, wet, thick and light."<sup>②</sup> As a result, "the ink is divided into five colors" and the "ink is divided into six colors" is the general introduction to the rich color of ink in ink painting, which not only includes the tone of the ink color in terms of brightness, but also the proportion of water in the ink when starting to write or draw with a brush after the blend of water and ink.

Confucius once said that "Painting after Simplicity"<sup>③</sup> and Lao tzu said that "Five colors make people blind"<sup>④</sup>. The ancient Chinese literati always have the aesthetic pursuit of simplicity and elegance. The beautiful color of painting in red and green is difficult to achieve the beauty of simplicity, and pure ink can easily achieve the image of elegance. The literati worships nobility and elegance, and has a natural good impression on the image of ink. As they gradually grasp the right to speak in the comment on Chinese painting, the aesthetic thought of "Ink is the supreme" gradually penetrates into the hearts of people. Due to the simplicity and richness of the ink color and the control and change of the calligraphic style of drawing, the ink painting have always maintained a detached relationship with the real world. The image of the ink painting neither chooses realistic figuration nor pure abstraction, but chooses the image in a natural way. This is in fact very consistent with the Chinese doctrine that the Chinese have always upheld. The ink image maintains the distance that alienate the subjective and the objective. The distance needs creativity and the distance produces

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<sup>①</sup>(Tang Dynasty) Zhang Yanyuan: "Famous Paintings in the Past Dynasties", Shenyang: Liaoning Education Press, 2001, Page 19.

<sup>②</sup>(Qing Dynasty) Tang Dai: "Things about Painting", noted by Zhou Yuanbin, Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House, 2012. Page 52.

<sup>③</sup>(Spring and Autumn) Confucius: "The Analects of Confucius: A Review in Both Chinese and English", translated by Gu Hongming,

and commented by Wang Jingtao, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2017, Page 49.

<sup>④</sup>(Spring and Autumn) Lao Tze: "Lao Tze", noted by Lu Yulin, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2011, Page 53.

beauty. At the same time, the ink image also retains the bridge connecting the subject and the objective. The connection can be felt and the connection produces affinity.

Once the height of the aesthetic is established, Chinese ink painters gradually less use colors. They use ink instead of colors wisely, or they make the ink color more colored. They introduce people into color vision in a way similar to synaesthesia through the imagery expression of the form and quality of objects. The darkness of ink has a natural hiding power, and it has the nature of transparency due to its affinity with water. The contradiction and complementarity between cover and transparency is just be used and played by Chinese ink painter to create and enrich the subtle ink scene, so that the rhythm of ink has become the main aesthetic content of ink painting. "Ink is the supreme" continues to lead many Chinese ink painters to indulge in the purity of the black and white world successively, doing the illusory thinking on the imagery of the form and color.

Figure 3 is Dong Qichang's landscape painting "Ink Roll to the Descendant". The mountains and tress in the painting are no the stylized and symbolized image. The layer of dry, wet, thick and light of the ink color in the scene is rich, creating a clear and elegant artistic conception. In the Qing Dynasty, Zhu Da learned Dong Qichang's calligraphic style of writing and painting. But Zhu Da's lonely and arrogant personality is quite different from Dong Qichang's flat and quiet style, which is also reflected in his ink paintings. Figure 4 is Zhu Da's painting "Lotus and Birds". The ink color of strange rocks, lotus leaf, water and birds are rich and natural, which reflects his connection with Dong Qichang in the same strain. However, his style is more individual, and the combination of pen and ink is more free and easy, thus obtaining a completely different feeling of temperament.



图3 明，董其昌，墨卷传衣，纸本水墨，纵101.5 横46.3  
Figure 3, the Ming Dynasty, Dong Qichang, "Ink Roll to the Descendant", ink-water painting, 101.5cm lengthwise, and 46.3cm widthwise.



图4 清，朱耷，荷花小鸟，纸本水墨，纵138，横53  
Figure 4, the Qing Dynasty, Zhu Da, "Lotus and Birds", ink-water painting, 138cm lengthwise and 53cm widthwise.

The ink painting techniques of the generations of ink painters have accumulated, and the image of layers of ink has been superimposed. After many years, the ink image is no longer a visual monochrome picture, but gradually has the spiritual attributes of Chinese culture. Nowadays, ink is still quite energetic. In addition to its own richness and plasticity, the vitality may also come from its image distance and cultural belonging.

### **III. Xuan Paper and Randomness**

The main supporting materials used in ink painting today is the Xuan paper (generally referred to as raw Xuan paper). although the history of the combination of Xuan Paper (produced in the Tang Dynasty, and widely used in painting in the Ming Dynasty) and ink is not particularly long, they are natural fit, and they are hard to leave and separate once they encounter. The beauty of ink on the Xuan paper is unmatched by any materials. The Xuan paper has the rare seeping properties and the ability to reflect the ink color delicately. Painting on the Xuan paper can clearly and even enlarge the subtle changes in the movement of the brush, and can give full play to the sensitive characteristics of the Chinese brush, thus showing the subtle style of painting and fineness of the ink color.

At the same time, the seeping characteristics of the Xuan paper means that the ink marks of the ink stains on the Xuan paper are not determined, and their morphology will percolate and expand like fermentation. The degree of percolation and expansion depends not only on the amount of ink in the brush, the concentration of the ink and the degree of treatment (the less treated, the stronger degree of seeping) of the Xuan paper, but also on the speed of the drawing, the angle and area of the contact between the ink brush and the Xuan paper. The uncertainty of ink painting on the Xuan paper undoubtedly increases the difficulty of painting, while increasing the fun of painting. The ink marks are balanced between control and accident. The Xuan paper provides surprise to the painter while making troubles, and it tests the painter's adjustment to the changing circumstances while interacting with the Xuan paper.



图5 齐白石，群虾，1945年，纸本水墨，纵68.5厘米，横34厘米

Figure 5, Qi Baishi, Shrimps, 1945, ink-wash painting, 68.5cm lengthwise and 34cm widthwise.



图6 周京新，《芙蓉》，2018年，纸本水墨，纵31.5厘米，横68厘米

Figure 6 Zhou Jingxin, "Lotus", 2018, ink-wash painting, 31.5cm lengthwise and 68 cm widthwise.

The modern painter Qi Baishi is a master who makes full use of the characteristics of the Xuan paper to exert the expressive force of pen and ink. He made full use of the clear ink marks after the seeping of the Xuan paper to create a transparent and clear pen and ink language. Figure 5 is his painting "Shrimps". The shrimps in the painting is concise, transparent and flexible in the shape, and it can be said that it's difficult for the pen and ink to have such a wonderful play when leaving the Xuan paper. The contemporary painter Zhou Jingxin has further exerted the physical advantages of ink on the Xuan paper, and the paint "Lotus" in Figure 6 is his new work in 2018. The pen and ink language with great expression is completely represented on the Xuan paper, and the water mark between the pens becomes an important means of modeling.

The excellent stage built by the Xuan paper makes the use of pen and ink have a considerable technical height, and the accidental interest of ink marks allows the painter to obtain the sublimation of art. The mark of strokes is defined by Chinese artists as pen and ink. It contains the knowledge, skill, cultivation, mood and emotion of the painter, and occupies a large part in the comment on traditional Chinese paintings. Therefore, when Wu Guanzhong proposed that "pen and ink is equal to zero"<sup>⑤</sup>, it likes making a big splash, and stirs up a thousand of supports of pen and ink to condemn him both in speech and in writing.

## Conclusion

The choice of tools for Chinese painting is not only accidental but also inevitable. It is the fit of cultural taste and aesthetic pursuit of Chinese people and physical interaction of tools. On the basis of

<sup>⑤</sup>Wu Guanzhong: "I Lived up of Drawing: Wu Guanzhong's Autobiography", Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2004., Page 299-300.

respecting and exerting the physical characteristics of tool materials, Chinese painting is in line with traditional Chinese culture, and self-disciplined to form a relatively complete set of technical systems and aesthetic traditions. Chinese painting has long been free from the constraints of objective objects, and has embarked on the road of image expression. It attaches importance to the language of painting, emphasizes the concept of humanity, and finally implements the above to the artist's personal cultivation. Therefore, Chinese paintings also fully conforms to all the characteristics of contemporary art, and thus has the vitality of eternal youth.

Although the traditional Chinese painting has developed to a considerable height, it has not gone all the way. The change of the time and the change of the present world have provided new themes and opportunities. Shi Tao in Qing Dynasty put forward that "Pen and ink shall follow the time"<sup>®</sup>, which is a great reminder of the significance of Chinese painting. The reason why we pay attention to pen and ink, appreciate pen and ink is precisely because it varies with each individual and advances with the times. Today, Chinese painters have successfully got rid of the shackles of objective image imitation, and they should also get rid of the simple imitation of traditional classical patterns and language techniques, so that they can live up to their creativity as contemporary artists.

The painters' painting is to express the concept, show the individual feelings and aesthetic taste, but must not give up the meaning and value of the painting. Since they choose the Chinese brush, Chinese ink and the Xuan paper, they should explore and grasp the physical characteristics and performance potential of tools and materials, which is the charm of the painting and also the artists' own job.

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<sup>®</sup> (Qing) Shi Tao: "Friar Bitter-Melon on Painting", noted by Zhou Yuanbin, Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Publishing House, 2007, Page 84.



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