

A National Art

FRANKLY this issue has been inspired by the Chinese Art Exhibition shortly to take place in London. Within a score of pages it is plainly impossible even to touch upon the fringe of the great realm of Chinese arts which have enriched Chinese civilization for some 4,000 years, but it is modestly hoped that this humble endeavor may perhaps serve to enhance the intelligent interest already aroused by the preliminary display now being held in Shanghai.

Of all types of Chinese art, calligraphy stands easily foremost. It is indeed fortunate that this subject in its relation to painting, has been dealt with by Mrs. Ayscough, the distinguished British scholar of Chinese literature, whose contribution to a better understanding of China by the English-speaking people cannot be too highly appreciated.

Calligraphy for the Chinese is more than penmanship; it is the very foundation of culture. A great author in the occident would not blush at the crudeness of his handwriting, but a Chinese shop keeper will not cease the effort to improve his. The respect in which renowned calligraphists are held by the Chinese is proverbial and is sought after by all.

The original handwriting of George Washington, if procurable, will doubtless command a high price, not because it represents consummate art but because it is a rare curio. Not so with Chinese handwriting which is invariably judged by its intrinsic worth as a specimen of art. Thus it has been possible for the humblest scholar a yore to bequeath to posterity his calligraphic accomplishments solely by virtue of their exquisiteness.

The Chinese love for calligraphy is almost innate. It is universal; it is classless. The pages of great scholars have some times been noted for their mastery of this singular art, for it is the least expensive medium through which one may give expression to one's higher and nobler aspirations.

In the West handwriting has now and then been exploited for the frivolous pastime of fortune-reading, but in China it is generally recognised as an index of character. While western penmanship may boast of beauty or form, but it is never associated with strength in the strokes which is the fundamental test of Chinese calligraphy.

In Chinese calligraphy is emodied the whole Chinese philosophy of life: the cultivation of strength through the softness of manners. A Chinese writes with a brush. The softness of the feather used increases with its quality. A novice is contented with a comparatively stiff brush which he can wield with great ease, but a master demands the softest brush which he is experienced enough to bend to his own will. A novice writes with his elbow

almost affixed to the desk, but a master proceeds with the elbow free to move at his pleasure. A novice tries to minimise his difficulties; a master overcomes them. A novice may imitate the form of a great master's calligraphy, the construction or arrangement of his strokes, but only a master can create the greatest strength out of the softest brush on the slipperiest paper. In softness is strength; in humbleness is nobility; such is the Chinese outlook on life.

With the modern demand for speed, Chinese calligraphy is likely to undergo a fresh step toward simplification. The movement to this end, initiated by *The Analects* and once commented upon in this journal, has already found support in several quarters though it may take considerable time before it will be accorded official recognition by the government. Simplification, which is characteristic of the evolution of Chinese calligraphy, may not detract from the beauty of this art or meet with serious opposition from its ardent proponents.

While calligraphy has been a national art with the Chinese in all walks of life and for centuries on end, the introduction of western mechanical facilities to China has threatened its banishment into relative oblivion. The manufacture of Chinese ink ready for use is an outrageous affront to calligraphy. Machine-made ink is coarse; it lacks the fineness, richness and mellowness which are combined only in ink ground with pure water on an approved ink stone of a definite type; it tends to corrugate the fine feathers of a brush; it is, in short, only black paint, an unworthy and unwelcome member of the traditional family of Chinese ink.

The wide use of the pencil and the fountain pen, in schools and in offices, is a direct cause of the decline of Chinese calligraphy. Nothing is more repugnant to the spirit of this Chinese art than a lead or steel point which either breaks at the writer's undue pressure or resists beyond reason his endeavor at an artistic expression. The strokes drawn by these innovations may excel in stiffness but are wanting in strength. For strength of the strokes, even as the strength of character, must be cultivated; it cannot come out of mechanical devices, and without strength there can be no Chinese calligraphy.

The invention of the Chinese typewriter is a third destructive factor which may have to be reckoned with in a growing measure. The number of varieties is increasing, and with it the prices are bound to decrease. The day may not be far distant when every author or office can afford a typewriter, when one no longer writes but typewrites, and when calligraphy will cease to be a national art but become a hobby for those who can afford the leisure to master its intricacies.