

# Chinese Calligraphy, Poetry And Painting\*

By FLORENCE AYSCOUGH

IF art be the fine flower of Man's spirit, it is important to recognize the root from which it springs: therefore I will divide my paper into two parts, and in Part I, the Introduction, I will discuss origins; while in Part II, the Thesis, I will describe the six different manners in which calligraphy, poetry and painting have—in China—woven themselves into a brocade of beauty.

To make clear that belief in the unity of all created things, which in Chinese eyes are bound in a close brotherhood, I would call attention first to the *T'ai Chi T'u*, or the Plan of the Ultimate Principle. From the ultimate principle which is brought forth by *ch'i* the breath of the Creator, spring the two essences, *Yang* and *Yen*. *Yang*, the Positive Essence, corresponds to all masculine elements: to strength, light and height. *Yin*, the Negative Essence, corresponds to all feminine elements: to weakness, darkness, and depth. By their interaction and perfect balance these two elements bring forth, as the Chinese would say, the *wan wu*, or ten thousand 'creatures'. The term, these 'creatures', includes men, animals, insects, plants—in fact all created things, are bound in a close brotherhood. Man although one of the Three Powers, which are heaven, earth, and man, is yet in Chinese eyes closely akin to the innumerable manifestations of Nature with which he is surrounded.

A realization of this philosophy is essential to a comprehension of the arts of China. Nor does a realization of this Philosophy suffice. One must also take into consideration the Chinese preoccupation with that fantastic region which they call the 'Western Paradise'. Here dwell forever under perfect conditions, those fortunate beings who by a life of abstraction have attained *hsien*-ship, if I may be allowed to coin a word. This world of fantasy, where dwell the *hsien*, seems often more real to an artist from the Middle Kingdom than does the world of actuality.

The Chinese, an essentially logical people, delight in seeking 'origins', but they have never been hampered by that passion for proof which so complicates the lives of Occidentals, nor have they considered it necessary to attribute all 'origins' to human agency. Believing, as I have said, that all things are bound in a close brotherhood, that Heaven, Earth, and Man, form an indissoluble trinity, and that mortals can by transmutation become immortal, it is quite easy for them to substitute a supernatural 'origin' when the human 'origin' is unknown. Hence many legends, as lovely as nscientific, have grown up.

In the first part of my paper which deals with Origins, these legends must perforce play an important part.

I must ask my readers to accompany me, in imagination, to the banks of the river Lo: there, in the dim mists which veil the dawn of history, stood Fu Hsi first of the

Primeval Emperors. The sunlight glistened from the scales which covered his body, dazzled the three eyes in his head, and was reflected from the surface of the waters. Suddenly the waters parted and there arose before him a dragon horse. Upon its back the creature bore a diagram, that which we know as the *pa kua*, or Eight Trigrams. Fu Hsi copied it and is supposed to have deduced therefrom a method which superseded that of keeping records by means of knotted cords. Leaving fantasy aside, it is a fact that the *pa kua* were introduced to Chinese thought at a very early date, and that they later formed the basis of the famous *I Ching*, or Classic of Changes. The recognition and application of this design—however it came about—may be called, as far as Chinese Art is concerned, the first great invention.

This first great invention was only the precursor of greater ones. It remained for Ts'ang Chieh, Minister of the Yellow Emperor to carry it further. The Chinese accounts state: 'he observed the shapes of things in Heaven; the forms of things on Earth; and the foot-prints of birds upon the sands.'—He must have observed with deep concentration. Did the four eyes which he is said to have possessed help matters? We do not know. At all events a great idea flashed across his mind—and the art of writing was born.

The histories say that when the five hundred and forty Primitive Characters were formed all Nature was moved; Heaven rained millet; Demons wailed in the night; and Dragons hid themselves in the depths.

These first characters which formed the second great invention—and now we come to the region of facts—represented largely natural objects. The sun, the moon, trees, streams, a mouth, a hand, an eye, and so on. Little pictures they were, drawn with life and vigor.

With pictures alone one does not, however, come very far. It remained for some unknown genius to combine these pictures so that ideas could be represented. This may be counted as the third great invention. This genius wrote sun and moon together to suggest 'brilliance'; floods and flames meaning 'disaster'; two trees to signify 'a forest', three trees for 'deep shade'. This and further developments of the second great invention have made the Chinese language the marvellous vehicle for expressing thought, and especially poetic thought. The character *chai* which means a retired room or a scholar's study expresses, according to the *Shou Wen*, the place where 'the heart is regulated to receive the instructions of Heaven'. Is it not a little poem? A poem full of depth and sensibility?

It is most interesting to note how the Chinese use manifestations from what we would call the 'natural world' to express human emotion. The character *ch'ou*, meaning 'sorrow' is made up of 'heart' and 'autumn'; and the character 'autumn' shows grain combined with fire. Can sorrow be more vividly expressed?

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As similes, too, the Chinese use these same manifestations of nature in a manner foreign to us. I am convinced that no other people in the world would describe a lovely lady in the terms used by a poet who writes about the beautiful Chuang Chiang wife of the Marquis of Wei. The Marquis ruled 811—757 B. C. and the poem I refer to from the *Shih Ching* Pt I, Bk V. Ode III. Stanza 2 reads:

Fingers like tender shoots of the white grass;  
Fore-arm like the viscid sap of fir-trees;  
Neck like the long white larvae of the tree-grub;  
Teeth like a row of melon seeds;  
A square-headed-cicada forehead, and moth antennae  
eye-brows.

The earliest examples of Chinese writing extant are the characters on the so-called 'oracle bones', one important find was made in the village of Anyang, Chang Tê prefecture, Honan province, at what was possibly the site of the Capital of Wu I, a monarch of the dynasty known as Yin, who ruled at the end of the second Millennium B. C.

Early writing appears on bronze vessels of the Chou dynasty, both bronze and stone being especially valued by the Chinese because the characters inscribed upon them transform them into historical documents.

The so-called books of early times were strips of bamboo or wood between one and two centimetres wide, perforated at one end and strung together with a leathern thong. These strips bore single columns of characters, inscribed with a bamboo pen dipped in lacquer made from the sap of trees. Scholars moving about took with them veritable cartloads of books.

No legends deal with the origin of poetry in China. We find the art well developed in the earliest days of which we have any knowledge; and indeed the earliest non-suspect Chinese documents which we possess are the *Odes of Shang* in the *Shih Ching*. They were written between 1766—1122 B. C.

Apart from the folk-songs, which these Odes of course are, poetry proper may be said to have had its rise in Southwestern China and in that part known as the Land of Ch'u or the Land of Thorns. It dates from about 300 B. C. There lived then the famous Ch'ü Yuan author of the *Li Sao* or *Falling into Trouble*—of him more later.

How painting was done in the earliest days—we do not know! What materials were used? How were they handled? To either question one can only reply 'we have no idea'.

As I have said the Chinese themselves are never at a loss when it comes to attributing an 'origin', therefore one need not be surprised to read in a Chinese record that the first paintings were produced by a younger sister of the semi-legendary Emperor Shun. Lei was her name and she is called 'Painter Lei'. An exasperated Chinese critic of later days exclaimed indignantly: 'to think that this divine art was invented by a woman!'

Tradition, too, refers to there being 'representations of people and things at the dawn of time.' We know that design was far developed in the days of Shang, and that it then bespoke a long ancestry; and this we know because in the village of An Yang, of which I have already spoken

were found the lovely bone hairpins now in the Far Eastern Collection in Stockholm. I wonder whether they resemble those described in the *Shih Ching*, Pt I Book IV Ode III, *Chün Tzû Chieh Lao*? The theme of the Ode is the contrast between the beauty and the viciousness of Hsün Chiang, unworthy wife of the Marquis of Yung which state existed in the seventh and eight centuries B. C. It reads in part:

Until old age a wife belongs to her husband!  
Her head-dress an ornament of braided hair, six pins  
with jewels attached.

Graceful as bending grain, graceful as bending gain,  
affable and courteous, affable and courteous;

Like a mountain, like a river!  
Her pictured robes perfectly correct.

The woman herself is not good....

Say, why should she use such?

Glorious hsi-i-i, Glorious hsi-i-i

Her pheasant-figured robe.

Wall paintings existed in the days of Chou, this we know because Ch'ü Yuan 332—295 B. C., of whom I have already spoken, described some he saw in the ancestral temples of the Kings of Ch'u in a long poem called *T'ien Wên* or the Heavenly Questionings.

In this case, the description alone remains to us. Of the pictures no reproductions exist. This is, however, not the case with the mural paintings in the Han Palace Ling Kuang built during the 2nd century B. C. In addition to the description written circa A. D. 129 by the poet Wang Yen-shou we have reproductions cut on stone of these paintings. We therefore know their outlines, and the eye of faith and imagination can supply 'the scarlet and the green' of which our poet speaks. The poem by Wang Yen-shou reads in part:

Spirits of Heaven-above, Immortals of the hills are  
perfectly represented in the space about the ridge-  
pole;

The Jade Maiden peeps through a window and gazes  
down.

Suddenly! seen aslant, indistinctly, as if they were the  
echo of resemblance,

Art pale ghosts, possibly vague pictures of the dead.

In the design are painted Heaven and Earth;

In their kind and species all multitudes produced.

A medley of creatures marvellous and weird,

Spirits of the hills, denizens of the sea.

Their forms are written and recorded

In scarlet and in green by him who was ordered to paint.

A thousand transformations, ten thousand evolutions

He shows,—each bound to its image.

According to its colour and the series of its form

His thought has caught their very semblance; — — —

[and reveals]

How first the threads of the World were sorted and  
arranged, how Nature opened and burst forth,

Thus bringing the beginning of ancient days. [He  
shows]

The Five Dragons, wings interlocked;  
 The Lord of Men, nine-headed.  
 Fu Hsi his person cased in scales,  
 Nü Kua her body like a snake.  
 Vast, formless, vague, undefined,  
 Their shapes are seen but dimly by wide-open eyes.  
 Resplendent, bright as fire, can be seen  
 The Yellow Emperor, T'ang, Successful-in-Repelling-  
 Injustice and the Great Yü;  
 The arched fronts of their chariots their pearl-hung  
 head-dresses are as they always were,  
 Their upper garments, lower garments, are varied  
 in form and shape.  
 Below appear the Three Emperors;  
 [Also,] lewd courtesans and rebellious chiefs;  
 Officers with loyal hearts, filial sons,  
 Scholars burning with the fire of devotion, wives pure  
 as the essence of divinity;  
 Wise men and those with but a monkey's wit; the  
 successful, the defeated;  
 None but are here recorded each in his proper place.

It is a thousand pities that no record of the murals described by Ch'ü Yüan remain. And this not only because of their intrinsic interest, but also because, did even a trace remain, a very important question might be solved, to wit: 'when was the writing brush evolved?' In other words 'When did the fourth great invention come about?'

Certain Japanese scholars and also Mr. Yetts, think that it must have existed during the days of Chou. They base their opinion upon the forms of specific writings.

Of this however we have no proof. Chinese tradition on the contrary attributes its development to a certain Mêng T'ien, a general of the First Great Emperor of Ch'in. Mêng T'ien was sent to the northern borders to supervise work on the 'ten thousand *li* wall' which the Emperor was erecting to keep out those hordes of barbarians who continually longed 'that their horses might drink in the streams of the South'. It is not difficult to imagine that the doughty general was home-sick in the northern wastes, and that he exerted himself to develop a medium which would hasten the passage of his thoughts. At all events the writing brush as we know it, with its dainty bamboo handle and its soft hair tip has been known to history since the short and agitated reign of Ch'in 255—209 B. C.

It was indeed an important epoch. Politically the form of government was revolutionized. Feudalism in China was given its death blow, and two events occurred which more nearly affected the Arts.

Firstly: Li Ssü, Minister of the First Great Emperor of the Ch'in dynasty suggested to his imperial master that the bonds of tradition so interfered with the dissemination of new theories as to make their diffusion impossible. He advised, therefore, that all books dealing with the past be burned! The order was carried out with thoroughness, and many treasures were then lost.

Secondly: The same Li Ssü chose the clearest among the ancient written forms of characters and established

them as the norm, forming what is known as the 'small seal script'—the foundation of present day writing.

The Ch'in dynasty was short-lived and was succeeded by that of the Han famous for its scholars and its learning. These scholars, among the greatest China has known, had great incentive to effort, it was their duty to replace the books which had been destroyed and the story of their prowess, although of amazing interest is far too long to be related here. They were equipped with a partly standardized script—the 'small seal' to which I have referred—with the writing-brush and lacquer to write with, and silk to write upon. The Han artists too performed wonders with these implements. The decorations on the lacquer pieces dated A. D. 69 found in the District of Lo-lang, show an amazing freedom of style. In fact the foundation upon which the Chinese painters erected their great art, was firmly laid during the Han dynasty.

The fourth great invention was, some three hundred years later, followed by a fifth—that of paper. This occurred A. D. 105. We read in the Dynastic History: 'During the period chien ch'u (A. D. 76—83) Ts'ai Lun formed part of the Imperial Guard. The Emperor Ho Ti, on coming to the throne knowing that Ts'ai Lun was a man full of talent and zeal, appointed him a privy counsellor. In this position he did not hesitate to bestow either praise or blame upon his majesty.

'In the ninth year of the period young yüan (A. D. 97) Ts'ai Lun became inspector of public works. By his plans and according to his arrangements, engineers and workmen made, always with the best materials, swords and arms of various sorts. Later generations could do no better than imitate his methods of work.

'In ancient times writing was generally on bamboo or on pieces of silk, which were then called *chih*. But silk being expensive and bamboo heavy, these two materials were not convenient. Then Ts'ai Lun thought of using tree bark, hemp, rags and fish nets. In the first year of yüan hsing period (A. D. 105) he made a report to the emperor on the process of paper making, and received high praise for his ability. From this time paper has been in use everywhere and is called the paper of Marquis Ts'ai.'

Although the equipment of Chinese scholars—one must of course understand the term as comprising artists as well—had grown, it was not yet complete. An essential element was still lacking. I refer to that material which, for some unknown reason is called in English 'India ink.' The French describe it more correctly as Encre de Chine and the Germans as Tusche.

The invention of true ink from lamp black, which we may describe as the sixth great invention, is ascribed by the Chinese to a certain Wei Tang who lived in the fourth century of our era. Many fancy inks have been made since but the fundamentals of the method followed by Wei Tang are unchanged. A number of lighted wicks are placed under a vessel filled with oil. When lamp black has coated this dome it is brushed off and collected on paper; it is then mixed in a mortar with gum until the consistency of paste has been attained, whereupon it is placed in moulds to dry for about twenty days.

May I now ask my readers to retrace with me the steps which we have taken? Accompanied by the spirit of a Chinese recorder we started our journey in search of origins among the mists which veil the dawn of history; we were present when the diagram of the *pa kua* was revealed, from which Fu Hsi, the scaly one, established means of communication. We stood by when Ts'ang Chieh, the four-eyed, was inspired to write pictograms; we realized that some Genius Unknown evolved from these pictograms the ideograms which have made the Chinese language the vital thing it is. We have seen the writing brush evolved and know how paper and ink came about.

Leaving the valley of myth, and climbing by the pathway of tradition, we have emerged upon the wide plateau of facts.

At long last, in the fourth century of our era, we find that the blackhaired people as the Chinese love to style themselves, were provided with the materials for writing a picture, or painting a poem. They use the same term, *hsieh*, for both processes and call both writings and paintings 'ink remains.'

The chief requirements demanded of the Chinese scholar to develop his art with the equipment I have described are: firmness, lissomness and decision. Pressure on the brush must be nicely graduated, and this graduation must be evenly maintained. The hand and arm which wield the implement must be strong and lissom as silk.

Absolute decision must be inherent in a great Chinese artist. Where the brush drops, thence it must depart. No erasure, no change is possible. The fluid ink makes an indelible mark upon the absorbent paper or carefully prepared silk and the author is committed to what he has commenced. A long mental preparation is therefore essential. The artist must know precisely what he intends to do. I once asked a Chinese connoisseur of pictures whether a Chinese painter worked quickly or slowly? His reply was: 'thinkee, long time; do — chop, chop'; this being the pidjin English term for 'great speed'.

The key-note of writing and painting in China is this absolute mastery of the brush, so that every gradation of tone can be faultlessly rendered. Gradation of tone is all-important and therein lies the power of depicting distance.

All change must work gradually and the cursive style of brushwork was not fully developed until the third and fourth centuries of our era. We find traces of it in the fourth century work of Ku K'ai-chih, and it is supposed to have been finally introduced to painting by Lu T'an-wei who lived in the second half of the fifth century. No works of his remain to us, but the scroll in the British Museum attributed to Ku K'ai-chih must be in any case a very early work in the style of the master.

There grew up too a school of great calligraphists and the greatest of these—the master for all time was Wang Hsi-chih, who lived A. D. 321—379. He it was who invented the running brush-stroke, by which one character melts into the next. Of the two hundred and forty-three scripts from his hand which are reported to have been in the collection of the Emperor Hui Tsung of Sung, only seven were in square script.

By the sixth century the cursive style had become firmly established as is proved by the mural paintings found in a tomb at Gukenri, Korea. The tomb bears the date A. D. 550 and the glorious dragon shown upon its eastern wall, seems about to soar away upon a whirling wind.

Writing had also changed. The running hand and the grass characters, despair of European students and translators, had developed.

From the fourth century, then, when this cursive style was developed, the union of calligraphy, painting, and their sister art, poetry was complete.

There are six methods by which the union of calligraphy, painting and poetry are exemplified.

Method I. Calligraphy and design used as essential yet independent elements of the same composition.

Method II. Writings such as grave pieces, or dedicatory inscriptions, used on monuments together with representations of natural objects and of the human form.

Method III. Writing and paintings used as essential and closely allied elements of the same design.

Method IV. Writings and calligraphic paintings which reveal precisely the same brush stroke.

Writings and paintings are sometimes brought forth by the self-same flash of inspiration, the thought being expressed in part by words, in part by images executed consecutively, and providing equally important elements of the same design.

Method V. Writings used instead of paintings.

This method, so characteristic of Far Eastern thought, is developed in a hundred ways and under this division we may place the 'written pictures' peculiar to Oriental Art.

These *tzü huá* or 'hanging-on-the-wall poems' which the Chinese consider the most perfect manner in which a man can express himself are less known and understood than any other form of Oriental art. A beautiful thought, perpetuated in beautiful handwriting, and hung upon the wall to suggest a mental picture—that is what they amount to; and that the Chinese artist considers far more perfect a means of suggestion than any mere image can be!

Cold rain blurs the edges of the river;

Night enters Wu.

In the level brightness of dawn

I saw my friend start alone for Ch'u Mountain.

He gave me this message for his friends and relations at Lo Yang,

My heart is a piece of ice in a jade cup.

So runs the wording of a written picture in my possession. It makes visual to the mental eye the drama of a man who leaves the world and all he loves behind him. One sees the torrential sub-tropical rain which so often deluges 'Wu', as the Chinese call the region where the Great River debouches in the sea. This is succeeded by the brilliant dawn which follows such a downpour, and in the brightness of this dawn that man who will retire from the world, whose heart is become 'as a piece of ice in a jade cup', starts alone for the steep mountains of Szechuen; first treads of the stairway, leading to the 'Roof of the World'. Nor is he insensible of that which he must leave.

'Friends and relations' are, to a Chinese, the beginning and end of Life itself.

A highly popular form of these 'written pictures' are the *tui tzu* which form part of the decoration in even the humblest homes of China. The cultivated choose these 'antithetical phrases' with the greatest care that they may be appropriate to the place they are to adorn; the uncultivated must of course depend upon others for their choice but *tui tzu* they must have!

Method VI. Painting used instead of writing.

There are indeed three different ways in which paintings take the place of writings:

Firstly, they are used to express a wish or a proverb, or they are intended to suggest a well known tale. No pictures are more popular than are the groups of flowers, trees, and birds which are used as birthday greetings. The white-headed bul-bul appears then as a symbol of longevity, while the various trees and flowers each play a symbolical role.

Secondly, paintings are used as illustrations. Under this head one can place the Buddhist and Taoists pictures which tell—as do our religious pictures—some definite story. A very famous example is the picture of Li T'ieh Kuai by the thirteenth century artist Yen Hui.

The third manner in which Method VI is used is to suggest by a painting precisely the same mood as is suggested by a poem—of this manner there are innumerable examples. In fact one can find a poem to balance most of the master-pieces from the Chinese printer's brush.

And now I have spoken of the six methods of representation to which I at first referred. It remains, in closing, to say a few words about the scholars—the term embraces poets, painters, and calligraphists—who for the joy of expression indulged in these arts. One period during the T'ang dynasty is especially noted. I mean that quarter of a century which closed with the An Lu-shan rebellion A.D. 756.

Then there met in Ch'ang An, the Sian of today, a group of men whose names ring in the annals of Chinese art. Then lived Wang Wei who expressed himself in both

poems and paintings, whose rolling waterfall is a world Masterpiece; then lived Li T'ai-po who dubbed himself an Immortal of the Wine-cup, who chose the lyric as his chief means of interpretation. Another giant, perhaps the greatest of all, was Tu Fu in whose poems—so the Chinese say—the history of the times can be read. And Ch'eng Ch'ien, the eccentric Ch'eng Ch'ien for whom the Bright Emperor created the post of Kuang Wên, which entailed no duties because duties Ch'eng Ch'ien would not perform. He lived in the temple Tz'u En, the temple of Compassionate Grace, and collected leaves in the courtyard, which leaves, he decorated with pictures or poems. One of his famous offerings to the Emperor was a landscape with a poem in impeccable script, placed so that the balance of the composition was perfect.

The Bright Emperor with his quick aesthetic response appreciated it keenly and exclaimed: 'Ch'eng Ch'ien! The Three Perfections!' The term has been used ever since to describe such a composition.

In these days the poets and painters banqueted together listening to each others' poems or admiring each others' paintings, they made expeditions together and lived indeed a life full of aesthetic emotion. They visited the hills where they listened to what Tu Fu describes as 'the music of silence', where they watched the dragon float by in the clouds which he governs, or heard the tiger growl in the wind it controls. Then they were inspired to write—poetic frenzy seized them. And it is not to be doubted that in the brush the Chinese and Japanese possess a medium for the expression of emotion denied to us.

With the writing brush they improvise much as our musicians improvise. Intoxicated by the joy of execution they are veritable virtuosi of the brush.

The Chinese artist pours out his soul from the soft hair tip on the slender bamboo tube and whether that which drops from the tip be a writing or an image it is:

That which is undefinable;  
That which is untranslatable;  
That which is universal  
That which is: ——— Poetry!

## Chinese Painting

By WEN YUAN-NING (溫源寧)

WHAT is unique about Chinese painting is its intimate connection with calligraphy. It is difficult to draw the boundary line between the two. Indeed, so intimate is the connection between them, that it is impossible to say when one ends and the other begins. In such a picture as *An Old Tree with Bamboos and Rocks* by Ku An and Ni Ts'an of the Yuan Dynasty, for instance, the writing in it seems to be nothing but a mere extension of the drawing. And in *The Pomegranate* by Hsu Wei of the Ming Dynasty, what difference is there between the strokes that compose the picture and those that compose the writing?

A bamboo and an orchid are objects which any calligraphist can draw: the better the calligraphist, the

better the drawing of such objects. The movement of the brush in drawing them, and the strokes that compose them, are identical with those that form characters. This is obvious even to the uninitiated. For this reason, practically every Chinese scholar, ancient or modern, who has any urge to draw at all, almost invariably begins with the bamboo and the orchid. The result may not be pleasing: if so, this is not due to any defect in the technique, but in the composition and the design.

In more elaborate drawings, such as *Spring in Kiang Nan* (江南春圖), and *The Western Hill of Tung Ting Lake* (洞庭西山圖) by Wen Cheng-ming of the Ming Dynasty, for example, the connection between painting and calligraphy may not be very apparent. Nevertheless,