

QI BAISHI

THE SOUL OF CHINESE PAINTING

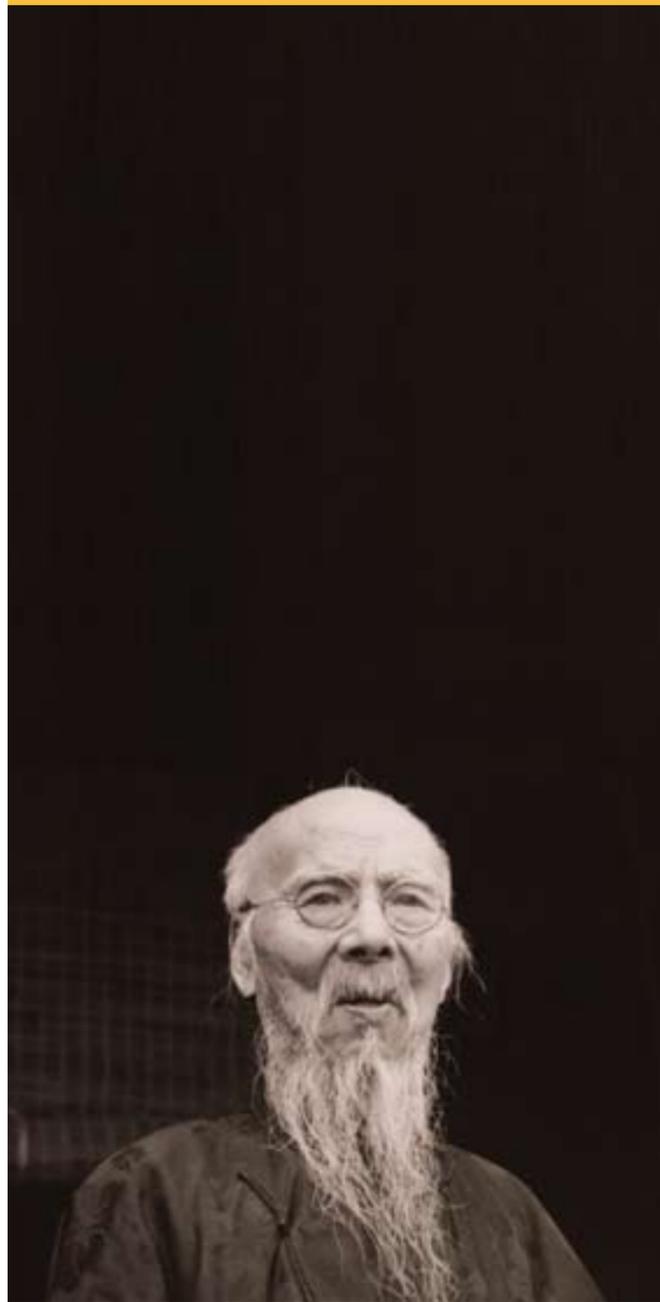
by ZHIYUAN CONG



齊白石

中國畫之魂





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Qi Baishi (1864-1957) is a widely known artist in China. Today, in the early 21st century after more than half a century since his death, his name still rings loud and clear, not only in China but all over the world. Why are people so unfailingly fond of his art? What is the charm of his art? It appears that he led a peaceful life and had not produced any strikingly outstanding works, but people still enjoy the charm, cultivate a taste for Chinese art, and draw inspiration from his balanced, full-bodied, easy-flowing, simple, and pure works of art.

QI BAISHI IN CHINESE ART HISTORY

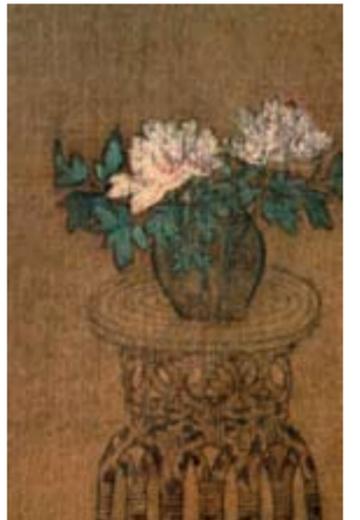
As a master of freehand flower and bird ink painting, what is his place in Chinese art history? First let us briefly examine the history of Chinese flower and bird painting.

As an independent genre, flower and bird painting began in the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD), at a time when “decorations on clothes and utensils were flamboyantly fashionable. It was popular to use flowers and birds as decoration. Towards the end of the period, style was exquisite and highly refined.” “The flower and bird paintings in the Tang Dynasty stand out for their color application and for the richness of vivid colors” (Wang, 1996, vol. 3, p. 68). The use of water and ink, while having appeared in the South and North Dynasties, was rare, and not until the Yuan Dynasty did it become widespread. It is obvious, therefore, that the use of color preceded the use of water and ink in flower and bird paintings in the history of Chinese painting.

The development of freehand flower and bird ink painting reached its peak in the Ming Dynasty with artists such as Qingteng, (aka Xu Wei) and Baiyang (aka Chen Chun). They used painting as a vehicle to “express their interests and feelings” and did so often with the help of inscribed poems in their paintings. In terms of figuration, they did “not focus on the likeness of form but on the manner” (Wang, 1996, vol. 5, p. 345). In terms of the use of ink and brush technique, they made subtle variations by using the water and brush technique skillfully. With a few forceful strokes and lines, sometimes using splashed ink, they could use ink and water in a superior manner. Succeeding the achievements of painters of the past, they pushed freehand-flower and bird-ink painting to the first monumental peak in Chinese art history.

In the Qing Dynasty, freehand-flower and bird-ink painting had a further development. “Not only were the traditional schools and genres of painting continuing and developing, but also some new schools came into being” (Wang, 1996, vol. 6, p. 194). During this period, artists as represented by Bada Shanren (aka Zhu Da), Shi Tao, and later the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou pushed freehand-flower and bird-ink painting to its second monumental peak in Chinese art history. Among them, Bada Shanren (aka Zhu Da) excelled above others. Nourished by previous painters including Chen Chun and Xu Wei, he emphasized displaying human expressions and attitudes through his subjects. “What characterized his works was aloof artistic conception, simple composition with brief brush strokes, heavy and varied brush movements, a somber, smooth and subdued atmosphere. His imagery was exaggerated and fanciful, closely recapturing reality not of the outside but of the spirit” (Wang, 1996, vol. 6, p. 194). His flower and bird painting pushed the standard to a new historical high in terms of its essence, conception and composition.

In the period from the end of the 19th century through the early 20th century, freehand-flower and bird-ink painting had another revival initiated by the painter Zhao Zhiqian. His style of flower and bird painting was neither in the Gongbi school of fine brushwork technique nor in the Xieyi school of the freehand style. “Working outside the tradition, he was fond of using bright colors with sharp contrast such as scarlet, green and black, to achieve harmony through contrast, resulting in art works with spiritual richness and striking vigor” (Wang, 1996, vol. 6, p. 232). Zhao’s style was further expanded by Wu Changshuo (1844-1927). “Wu developed a school of his own. What characterized his painting was his forceful and majestic style, highly unusual structure, bold forms, and unbridled and solid brush strokes, drawing heavily from calligraphy. Wu Changshuo was the outstanding master of freehand-flower and bird-ink painting in this period” (Wang, 1996, vol. 6, p. 233). Qi Baishi pushed this style to its highest level. Following the traditions of forerunners such as Xu Wei, Bada Shanren, Shi Tao and the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, he advocated emphasis on the artistic conception, the integration of poetry and painting, the ideas of poetry in painting, calligraphy in painting, and the use of seal carving in brush techniques in painting. Not only had he inherited the traditions and characteristics of the literati ink painting, he also enriched and expanded the themes of flower and bird painting with his own life experience and the traditions of folk art. He integrated his own creativity with the painting techniques of folk art and literati painting. He revived traditional art with new blood and nourishment, making the Chinese flower and bird ink painting exceptionally popular, and achieving the third monumental peak in Chinese art history.



Lu Lengjia, Six Sages (detail); Tang Dynasty



Huang Sheng, Rare Birds (detail); Wu Dai



Xu Xi, Pea Flowers and Rare Birds; Wu Dai



海棠图

Crab Apple
133 cm x 33 cm
1934

题跋：借山吟馆主者。
印章：木人，白石翁

Inscription: The man who
owns the Jieshanyin Villa

Seals: the Wooden Man;
Baishi, the Old Man



荷花蜻蜓图

Dragonfly and Lotus
134 cm x 33.5 cm
1935

题跋：齐璜

印章：老木

Inscription: Qi Huang
Seal: the Ancient Wood



秋色秋香图

Fall Colors
68.5 cm x 34 cm
1950

题跋：秋色秋香。九十老人白石。

印章：白石，大匠之门。

Inscription: Fall colors.
Baishi, the Old Man at 90.

Seals: Baishi; the door of
the great craftsman



梅花图

Plum Blossoms
33.5 cm x 33.5 cm
1955

题跋：九十五岁白石。

印章：白石

Inscription: Baishi at 95.

Seal: Baishi



仙鹤图

Red-crowned Crane
88.5 cm x 40 cm
1934

题跋：甲戌秋八月再三更正。
白石山翁。

Inscription: Made several
changes in Fall, August.
Baishi, the Mountain
Old Man

八哥雁来红图

Mynahs and Amaranth
135 cm x 33 cm
1936

题跋：顽顽拳石布园林，日夕
归栖一对禽。我老欲归无著
处，不如鸚鵡最伤心。白石
山翁并提。

印章：阿芝，老白

Inscription: A few rocks in
the courtyard; a pair of
birds coming at sunset. I
am old but have nowhere
to go. My sad fate is no
better than the birds.

Seal: Azhi; the old Bai





八哥白梅图

White Plum Blossom and Mynah
105 cm x 35 cm
1950

题跋：铁衡吾弟玩味。庚寅九十岁白石老人。

印章：白石相赠，寄萍堂

Inscription: For the pleasure of my brother Tieheng, Baishi, the Old Man, at 90

Seals: Presented by Baishi; Jipingtang

和平图

Peace Dove
68 cm x 49.5 cm
1952

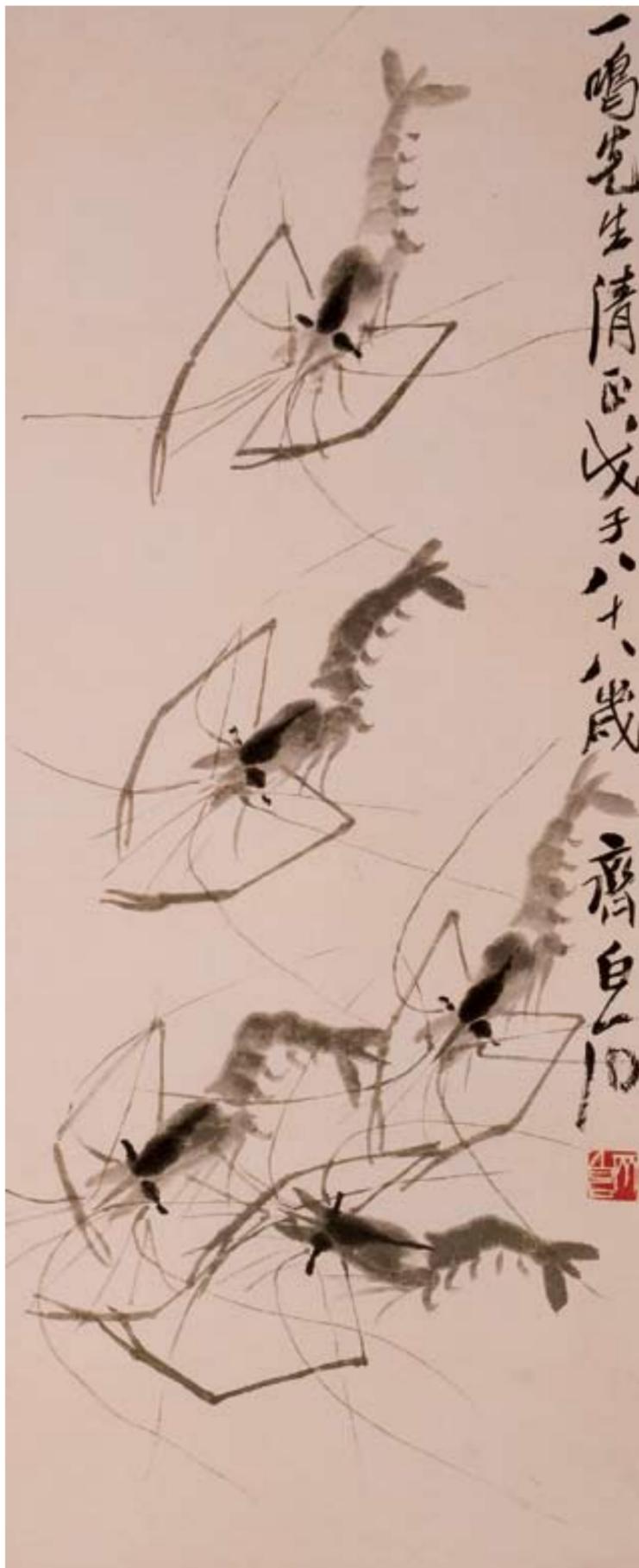
题跋：和平，九十二岁白石老人。

印章：齐白石

Inscription: Peace, Baishi, the Old Man at 92

Seal: Qi Baishi





虾图

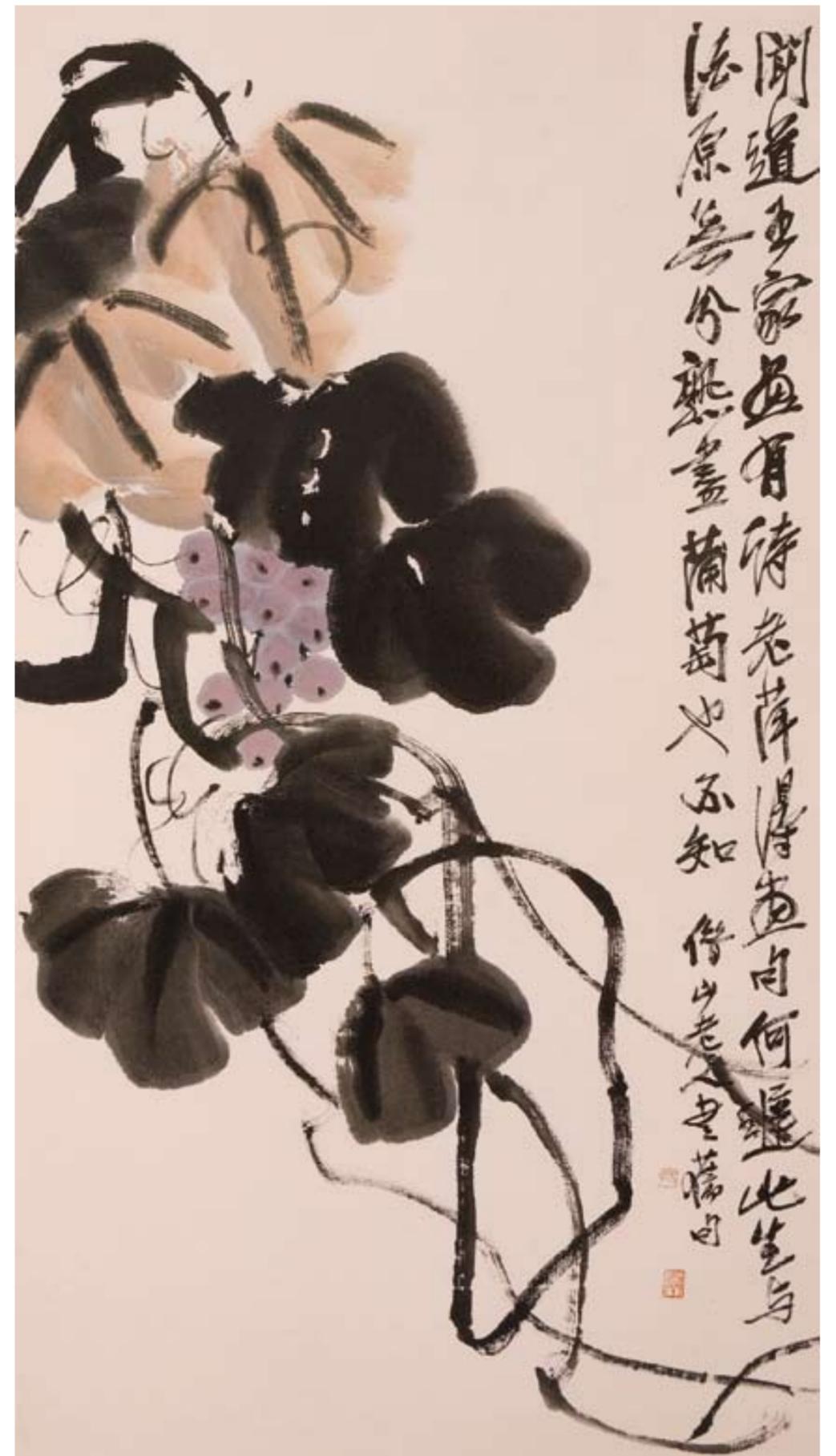
Shrimps
82 cm x 34 cm
1948

题跋：一鸣先生清正。戊子八十八岁齐白石。

印章：齐白石

Inscription: To Mr Yi Ming for correction. Qi Baishi, at 88.

Seal: Qi Baishi



葡萄图

Grapes
87.5 cm x 47 cm
1927

题跋：闻道王家画有诗，老萍得画句何迟。此生与酒原无分，熟尽葡萄也不知。借山老人书旧句。

印章：老萍，老齐

Inscription: I hear Mr Wang can paint and write poems easily. How come I am always slow? I have no luck with wine my whole life. Ripe grapes wouldn't help much either. A few old lines from Jieshan, the Old Man.

Seals: Old Ping; Old Qi



丝瓜大蜂图

Towel Gourds and Bee
133 cm x 34 cm
1938

题跋: 白石。

印章: 齐大

Inscription: Baishi

Seal: the Big Qi



葫芦图

Bottle Gourds
89 cm x 42 cm
1930

题跋: 人笑我, 我也小人。寄
萍堂上老人璜。

印章: 白石翁

Inscription: People laugh
at me and I laugh back.
Huang, the Old Man
of Jipingtang

Seal: Baishi, the Old Man

CHINESE BRUSH AND INK TECHNIQUES

THE KEY TO THE ENJOYMENT OF CHINESE PAINTING



Qi Baishi is painting. Photo taken by Zhang Daozu

Chinese painting originates in China and has a history of about 5,000 years.¹ China has long been isolated, unfamiliar to people of Western cultures. Not many people outside China have the opportunity to view the artistic works produced by Chinese artists and when they do have the opportunity, they do not really understand them because the techniques used in Chinese painting are very different from those in Western paintings. In the following text, I would like to introduce some basic concepts in Chinese painting so more people can appreciate exhibited Chinese art. I will first explain the structure and the use of the brush, the basic tool in Chinese painting, and then I will explain the nature of the ink.

The brush, the ink, the rice paper and the ink slab are called the four treasures in a scholar's study. The first treasure, the tool used in Chinese painting, is translated into English as "brush," but to be exact, this is not a proper translation. The basic difference between the brush used in Western painting and the "brush" used in Chinese painting is that the western brush is flat while the Chinese "brush" is more like a pencil not with a hard point but with a soft cone-shaped point made of hair. Later, I will use the transliteration of the Chinese term Maobi, i.e., the hair brush, to talk about this tool in Chinese painting.

The use of the Maobi in Chinese painting and calligraphy began about 3,000 years ago. It is basically a cluster of hair from sheep, goat, rabbit, weasel, horse, etc. held together inside a bamboo or wooden tube. According to the different hairs of the Maobi, we can distinguish three kinds of hair: those made of hairs of the sheep,

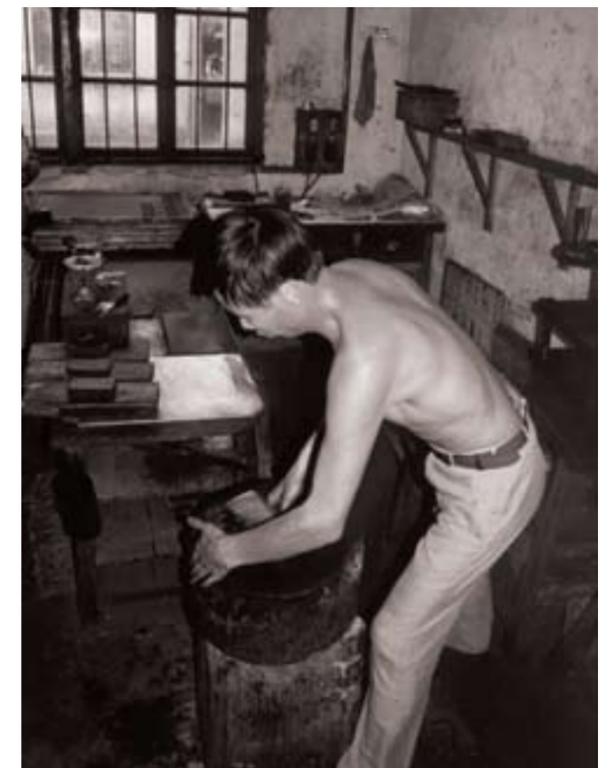
Corner of a Studio



goat, and rabbit which are soft; those made of weasel and horse, which are hard; and those made from mixed hairs of sheep which are harder than the first kind and softer than the second. According to the shape of the cone, the brush can be categorized into long tip and short tip. Brushes with long tips are best used for drawing lines, and short tips are for painting dots and for applying colors.

A masterful stroke of the Maobi can present five basic characteristics which can be viewed as an artistic standard to judge the value of a painting. First, the stroke should be heavy, like a big stone falling down a cliff. Its opposite is light, like a feather floating in the air. This lightness is judged to be an ill stroke. Second, the stroke should be round, not flat, as if having a three-dimensional perspective. Third, the stroke should be smooth, letting your force press on or rather through the paper evenly. If undulating or broken segments are produced, this will be considered a lack of skill. The fourth characteristic is like rain drops falling on and sinking into an earthen wall instead of the effect of rain hitting a glass window and slipping away. The last feature of the stroke is variety; that is, it should not be stiff. From this brief introduction above, we can see that it is essential to be able to discern the five characteristics of a stroke in order to appreciate Chinese painting.

The second treasure, the ink, was developed before the Han Dynasty, 202 BC to 220 AD (Fuller, 1979, p. 13). The inks used in Chinese painting were produced from pine resins or tung oil burned beneath a hood to produce a residue known as lampblack. This lampblack was collected, mixed into a solution with glue, pressed into molds, and dried. The result was an ink cake or ink stick which had to be ground back into a watery solution immediately before painting (Silbergeld, 1982m p. 6). Therefore, the ink is actually a piece of stone or stick before it is used. Because of the special method of production, the color will not fade away for thousands of years.



Worker preparing the materials for ink

FOUR GENTLEMEN

THE PLUM ORCHID BAMBOO AND CHRYSANTHEMUM IN CHINESE PAINTING

The Chinese like to hang four kinds of flower paintings on their walls. They are the plum, the orchid, the bamboo, and the chrysanthemum. They give these four kinds of flowers an elegant name: the Four Gentlemen. The Four Gentlemen are known as traditional subjects and all the Chinese painters enjoy painting them. These subjects of painting first appeared as an independent branch of Chinese fine arts in the Song Dynasty, 1127-1279 (Wan, 1982, p. 322). Since then, they have never lost favor with Chinese artists and people. Why do the Chinese favor them and call them the Four Gentlemen? Why does each Chinese artist both like to and have to practice painting them?

The plum, the orchid, the bamboo and the chrysanthemum are called the Four Gentlemen not only because they are very beautiful, but most importantly because the Chinese have entrusted them with very deep meanings. The Chinese think that the four kinds of flowers embody the model Chinese person who possesses lofty ideals and pursuits. Thus, we can understand how much the Chinese love them and why they call the four kinds of flowers, the Four Gentlemen.

The plum blossom begins to bloom in winter and some people call it “winter-sweet.” When the flower is set off in sharp contrast by the color of a white-snow background and gray sky, the plum blossom, with its variety of colors such as red, pink, green, yellow and white, appears more beautiful than the other limited flowers in bloom during winter. Because the defiant plum blossom braves the snow and frost, the Chinese think the plum blossom represents the type of gentleman who never gives up his ideas during hard times, who never surrenders his pursuits in face of antagonism, and who possess lofty and unyielding character. When the flower blossoms, it is a signal that spring is coming. People believe the plum blossom heralds the season of spring and new life coming forth into the world.

The orchid is known to always grow up along the corner of a wall, under a big rock, or on the root of a tree.

People can smell the fragrance very often but cannot find the flower easily. People call the flower “hidden sweet-smelling” and think it is the kind of gentleman who always tries to give service and happiness to the world and never asks for compensation in return.

The Chinese recognize the bamboo as one of the Four Gentlemen because it has three characteristics. First, its leaves are green all year round, which embodies a man who keeps his friendship all his life. Second, its stick is hollow, which in China embodies a man who is always open-minded and modest. He will never stop studying till death. Finally, the bamboo joints grow up one higher and longer than the other. The word “joint” in Chinese is pronounced “Jie,” which is a homonym for another Chinese word meaning, “high moral principle” or “moral integrity.” Thus, the bamboo comes to symbolize a person of unyielding morals.

Chrysanthemum is given a meaning similar to the plum blossom. The flower blossoms during the fall frost season. It has a stronger vitality than other flowers. In addition, the shape of the mum is round and it opens during the mid-autumn festival, which in China means family reunion.

Chinese artists are interested in painting the Four Gentlemen not only because of the profound cultural and symbolic significance the Chinese have entrusted upon the four kinds of flowers, but also because they begin to learn through the practice of painting these subjects. The skill of painting the Four Gentlemen is the most basic skill in Chinese painting. If a Chinese artist can paint the Four Gentlemen very well, he or she learns how to paint the other flowers very easily. Here, I will prove this idea in three different ways.

First, Chinese ink painting is brushwork that is very closely connected with Chinese calligraphy. Zhao Menghu, a master in Yuan Dynasty, 1271-1368, pointed out that calligraphy and Chinese painting came from the same origin (Zhoa, 1982, p. 203). Thus, a good Chinese artist must be able to control the brush with excellence and sensitivity, and the artist also has to



Hong Ren, *Plums*; Qing Dynasty



Chu Sheng, *Orchids*; Qing Dynasty