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Unit

Approaching Chinese Painting

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Unit

Approaching Chinese Painting

WARM-UP: Be Proactive

The Cathay Landscape Action Group, acronym CLAG, has properly organized itself and got ready for the start of the course.

The first question popping up in everyone's mind is associated with two magic words: "What?" and "How?" CLAG is never passive, waiting to be told, but always proactive and exploratory. It seeks advice from its academic advisor, organizes brainstorming and group discussions, engages in hands-on practice, etc.

So as the first warm-up exercise, the crucial thing is that everyone must be mentally proactive, and curious. That is, everyone should get mentally warmed up!

There are 8 tasks in all. Enjoy and have fun!



Task 1 ▶ Listen to Academic Advice

Hello, there! You probably know me by now. I'm Jane's Dad. I'm a private art collector. The Cathay Landscape Action Group has invited me to be the Group's advisor. I'm more than happy to help them. But I have to warn everybody that I'm an amateur, not a professional, like Professor Tang. So my advice is after all an amateur's. You don't have to take it seriously. In English, people would say that you should take my advice with a pinch of salt!

Now, to come to my advice. I was requested to give advice on how to approach Chinese painting. I have to point out, from the very beginning, that there is no single correct answer. What I am going to say is based on my personal experience. You may find, from time to time, that I enjoy sharing my experience with everybody. I believe that experiential learning and experience-sharing are crucial in approaching Chinese painting.

I recommend three stages in approaching Chinese painting.

First, we take art as a creative process. That is, if we want to have a deep understanding, or good appreciation of a piece of art, or even a masterpiece, we must first try to do it ourselves. That is, get our hands dirty! This creative process can be experienced in three stages: (1) Observing nature through the eye (眼中画); (2) Internalizing nature in the heart-mind (心中画); (3) Painting through the hand (手中画). This is based on the insight of Zheng Banqiao (郑板桥) who draws the distinction between 眼中竹, 胸中竹, 手中竹.

Second, we take art as a product. That is, we study finished paintings and enjoy them in our leisure time, the way I do. But with the Cathay Landscape Action Group, it is, perhaps more appropriate, to study masterpieces, to draw inspiration from established masters. For I assume that you students are not as leisurely as I am. You have to finish your degrees within a fixed period of time! I have to admit that I am not a very enterprising person, with no ambition for higher degrees!

Third, we have to find time to reflect upon what we have done in the previous two stages. The importance of reflection for learning cannot be overemphasized! I strongly recommend that the Group should organize public lectures and forums, and invite professors of art to give their professional views.

That is all I can give you at the moment. I think it is adequate for you to make a start.

Send me an email or an instant message whenever you want to get in touch with me.

Task 2 ► Buy ourselves 文房四宝

Jane as the group leader is organizing a brainstorming session as a follow-up to her Dad's advice.



- Peter: Jane, your Dad is very modest! His advice, by whatever standards, is quite professional to me. I think we should follow his advice, not with a pinch of salt, but unconditionally! What do you think, Mary?
- Mary: Unconditionally, without doubt! But I think we need to do some preparation. The first stage Mr Wang recommended was... er er...
- Jane: To take art as a process.
- Mary: Right. Thanks for the reminder. To put this advice into practice means that we have to have some hands-on experience. Is that right, Jane?
- Jane: Absolutely right, Mary. Hands-on experience is crucial to our understanding of art as a process.
- Peter: Does that mean that we need 文房四宝?
- Jane: Yes.
- Peter: How do you say 文房四宝 in English?
- Mary: I don't know. But we can find out from a dictionary.
- Jane: It's easy to find the English translation of the term. It's not enough, though. We need the real thing, a real set of 文房四宝.
- Peter and Mary: Yes, we must have one! When are we going to buy it?
- Jane: We can do that later. But for the time being, I've got a set with

me. I “stole” it from my Dad’s studio.

Peter and Mary: Well done, Jane! Please steal some more for us!

Jane: No, you should try stealing from your own Dad, not mine!

(Peter and Mary laugh).

Jane: Okay, serious stuff now. We should familiarize ourselves with some handy vocabulary.

Peter: The best way is to do some reading. Let’s go online to see if there are some articles about Chinese 文房四宝.

(They all log on to surf the Internet. Mary has hit on one which is good.)

Mary: I think this one is quite good. Let’s read it. After that, we can extract some useful vocabulary from it.

Jane and Peter: Good idea!

Task 3 ▶ **Read about** 文房四宝

Read the excerpt below and extract the vocabulary as you find appropriate to your own learning.

The Four Treasures of the Studio

The brush, the ink stick, the ink stone and the paper — the implements needed for Chinese traditional painting and writing — have been known as the “four treasures of the studio” since the end of the 10th century when there was a shop of that name selling the equipment in Anhui Province. These “treasures” are then basic necessities required to paint traditional Chinese subjects in “shades of black”.

Accessories

In addition to brush, paper, ink stone and ink stick, the painter needs a waterholder, a plate or porcelain dish for mixing the black ink with water to make the shades of black, and newspapers to serve as the absorbent backing for the Chinese paper. Weights are also needed to hold the paper in position. There

are also three special items included here: a wooden “mountain” brush rest, an antique water dropper in the shape of a bird on a tree trunk, and a lotus leaf brush-washer.

Chinese Painting Brushes

All derive from the writing brush, but early writing was done with a whittled, sharpened willow stick on strips of bamboo. General Meng Tian, who lived in the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) , is credited with the invention of the brush of hair. In the story relating to this, it is said that as he was supervising the construction of the Great Wall he saw a tuft of goat’s hair stuck to one of the stones, noticed its resemblance to the willow stick and tried to write with it.

The brush most used at present is a blend of the hairs of the weasel and the hare, but rabbit hair brushes, goat hair brushes, or even those made with panda hair or mouse whiskers are still available.

Much care is needed in the making of a brush. For instance, a brush of rabbit hair requires hair which is neither too soft nor too thick and has, therefore, to be obtained in the autumn when all the correct conditions are satisfied. The Chinese believe that every painter should possess his own brushes which, after training, take on his own personality and character.

The Ink Stone

To make the black ink, the ink stick is rubbed in water on an ink stone. The grinding action rubs ink from the stick, enabling it to mix with the water. The finer the grain of the ink stone, the smoother the ink becomes and the longer the time needed for grinding.

The stone should be extremely smooth and hard. The most famous ink slabs are said to be from Anhui Province of China, where most are made from black stone, but there are also varieties with red or green markings forming designs in the stone.



The Ink Stick

Old Chinese ink is made of pine soot mixed with glue and other ingredients to hold it together. It comes compressed into the form of a stick, sometimes round, sometimes square, decorated with characters and pictures in gold. Other ink sticks are made from lampblack mixed with varnish, pork fat, and musk or camphor; these have a light bluish, metallic tinge to them. (Tradition says that if this ink stick is rubbed on the lips or tongue, it is considered a good remedy for fits and convulsions).

A good ink stick is light in weight and very brittle. The best ink sticks produce a black which does not stick the brush hairs together, or fade with time.



Mixing the Ink

Before beginning to paint, the artist always prepares fresh ink. Although Chinese ink is available in bottles, it is not suitable for painting nor does it generate the variety of tones, from deepest black to delicate pearl grey, which can be produced by the Chinese ink stick. The action of rubbing the ink stick in the water on the ink stone has the psychologically meditative effect of preparing the mind for the painting ahead, and as such has always been regarded almost as a sacred rite.

To mix the ink, first put some clear water into the well of the ink stone. Hold the ink stick upright and dip one end into the water to dampen it, then begin to rub it on the flat surface of the ink stone. (The amount of water depends upon how much ink you expect to need. Begin with about half a teaspoonful, then experience will help you to increase or decrease this.)

(Adapted from Jean Long, *Chinese Ink Painting*, Blandford Press, 1984.)

Task 4 ▶ Let's do some translation work

- Peter: I enjoyed reading that excerpt very much. Thank you, Mary, for finding it.
- Mary: My pleasure.
- Jane: The excerpt includes many useful terms often used in Chinese ink painting. What about translating these terms back into Chinese?
- Peter: Very good idea. They will be very handy for our future exhibition.

Terms found in the reading	Chinese original
Four treasures of the studio	文房四宝
Ink stone	砚台
.....

Task 5 ▶ Observe nature through the eye

In this task, everyone should join the Cathay Landscape Action Group and go outdoors to throw themselves into the arms of nature.

- Jane: Peter, I think you should go to the water lily pond over there, and experience the water lily.
- Peter: Oh dear, I think Mary would be better than me at that.
- Jane: Why is Mary more suitable for the task?
- Peter: Well, she's a girl — she's more sensitive than I am.
- Mary: OK. What do you want to do?
- Peter: I'll experience bamboo — I think I can manage that. There's a bamboo grove over there, near the Science Building.
- Jane: OK, then.
- Peter: What are you going to do, Jane?
- Jane: I wish I could experience plum blossom (梅花).

Peter: You can't, it's long past the season!

Jane: I said that I wish I could! Mary, may I join you at the lily pond?

Mary: Of course you can. Let's go.

Peter: Just a minute! Can I take notes or do a sketch while experiencing the bamboo?

Jane: No! No one is allowed to take any notes or do any sketches. This is a rule of the exercise.

Peter: OK. See you then.

(The Group goes to gain the first-hand experience.)

Task 6 ▶ **Reflect upon “internalizing nature in the heart-mind”**

Jane: Hi, Peter, welcome back!

Peter: Hi Jane, Hi Mary.

Mary: Jane, I'm not sure about what we should do in this task. I have to admit that I don't quite understand what Jane's Dad meant by “internalizing nature in the heart-mind”.

Peter: I don't either. Jane, do you understand it?

Jane: I don't think I'm any wiser than any of you.

Peter: I've got an idea. What about calling Jane's Dad to see if he's available.

(Jane gives her father a ring. A moment later Mr. Wang arrives.)

Mr. Wang: Hi everybody! Nice to see you all!

Peter and Mary: Thank you very much for coming, Mr Wang. We appreciate it.

Mr. Wang: Jane told me that you're having some difficulty figuring out “internalizing nature in the heart-mind”.

Peter: That's right.

Mr. Wang: Well, Peter, would you please tell us how you experienced the bamboo.

Peter: Er...m, I first looked at the tallest one, then the smallest one,

then the mid-sized one.

Mr. Wang: Yes?

Peter: I also touched the leaves.

Mr. Wang: What else did you experience?

Peter: I sniffed at the leaves too.

Mary: Did you taste one?

Peter: No, I didn't. I am not a panda, Mary!

(All laugh)

Mr. Wang: Can you describe, in words, what you saw?

Peter: Er... that's a bit hard. But I took some photos with my mobile phone.

Jane: Peter, you shouldn't have done that! It's against the rule!

Peter: What's wrong with that?

Mr. Wang: Well, there's nothing wrong with taking photos, but you spoiled the exercise. The essence of this task is to see how much you can internalize what you see or experience with the bamboo. No photograph, no matter how good it is, can replace your experience of the bamboo.

Peter: I see.

Mr. Wang: Mature artists, when drawing bamboo, draw from their "heart and mind", that is, from their internalized version of bamboo. The internalized bamboo includes the artist's interpretations, and emotions about bamboo. That's why the painted bamboo is different from the photographed bamboo.

Mary: Right, the penny's dropped! The same is true of our lily, right, Jane?

Jane: Absolutely!

Mr. Wang: Great! But the "internalizing nature in the heart-mind" means even more than that. As your study unfolds, you'll achieve a better understanding. Good luck with your work! Bye for now.

Task 7 ► Practice “painting through the hand”

- Peter: According to Jane’s Dad, I should paint a bamboo from my “heart and mind”. But I’ve almost forgotten what a bamboo looks like. What about you, Jane? Do you still remember exactly what a lily looks like?
- Jane: Well, all I can recall is about the general shape, and the color.
- Mary: I’ve forgotten a lot of details too. So what should we do?
- Peter: Never mind. We’re not real artists after all. We’re only learning! Let’s just do the exercise. Where’re the four treasures of the studio?
- Jane: Here they are.
- Peter: I’ll draw a bamboo. You two draw two lilies.

(The Group tries their hand at drawing.)

Task 8 ► Attend Professor Tang’s public lecture

Lecture 1

What is Art?

Tang Yi, Professor of Arts

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It’s a great pleasure to be invited by the Cathay Landscape Action Group to deliver a series of lectures on Chinese painting. The host has instructed me not to be “too academic” or “too technical”, but just “informative and entertaining”. This, for me, is a real challenge, which I am happy to take up. But I must warn everybody, from the start, that you might get a little disappointed from time to time.

Since the present talk is the first lecture in the series, it is appropriate, I think, for me to start with a fundamental question: What is art? That is, what

makes a drawing become a piece of art? At auction, some pieces, regarded as masterpieces, can even cost millions of dollars to buy. What make them so expensive? Would any of you jump up and bid for them before the hammer goes down, with “Going, going, gone!”?

Well, let us put aside the issue of whether or not you are rich enough to attend an auction. Let us concentrate on the question of what makes a simple drawing a work of art. My talk comprises four sections. First, I invite everybody to reflect on the drawings found on the terra-cotta pots, and compare them with drawings by toddlers.

1. Drawings by our ancestors and by toddlers: a comparative study

In 1989, I visited Banpo (半坡) in Xi'an. I was stunned, absolutely stunned, to find drawings made on the pottery, as shown here in Figure 1-1.



Figure 1-1: Pottery drawing from Banpo, Xi'an

At that time, I thought that it must be the oldest drawing ever unearthed. But as time went by, I found that there were many other discoveries about “rock paintings” (*yan hua*, 岩画). These pictorial drawings take us back to Paleolithic times (旧石器时代). The term *yanhua* includes both petroglyphs, which are engraved on stone, and pictographs which are drawn or painted on stone. Rock art is a term that covers both. In the Yin Mountains, Inner Mongolia (内蒙古阴山), there is a piece of rock art covering an entire mountain cliff 70 meters high and 120 meters wide. It was created obviously not at one stroke, but over a period of ten thousand years. The whole mountain is literally an art gallery! Here are some samples (see Figure 1-2)

The subjects of rock paintings are very rich. At Cangyuan (沧源), Yunnan Province, rock paintings found there show human activities, such as hunting, dancing, the performance of ritual sacrifices, and war (see Figure 1-3)



Figure 1-2: Rock painting from the Yin Mountains, Inner Mongolia



Figure 1-3: Rock painting from Cangyuan, Yunnan Province

Now let us compare these paintings and toddlers' drawings. Some are drawn by three year olds, others by four year olds, or five year olds. The subjects of these toddlers' drawings also vary (see Figure 1-4).



Figure 1-4: Toddlers' drawings

My purpose in comparing and evaluating the two types of drawing is to urge everybody to reflect upon two questions. First, *what do you think of the drawings found in pottery and rock paintings? Do you regard them as works of art?* Second, *what do you think of toddlers' drawings? Do you regard them as works of art too?*

I'll leave these two questions with you and move on to the second topic today.

2. True-to-life painting vs. photographing: realism in art

It is often the case that people evaluate paintings in terms of “像不像”, i.e., “true to life or not”. Those paintings being true to life are considered to be good, while those being less true to life, less good, or no good at all! Such kind of thinking is related to what is known in art theory as “realism”. In the history of western art, we see a lot of sculptures, and paintings that are extremely like real persons. But they are not normally classified as realistic works. The reason for that is that these sculptures and paintings are about religious subjects, e.g. angels, goddesses, etc., not about secular humans. Realism in western art history is generally considered to begin with Gustave Courbet. William

Fleming, an art theorist, has this to say about Courbet.

In the vanguard of the realists was Gustave Courbet. With a keen eye and a desire to record accurately what he saw about him, Courbet consciously set out to build an art on commonplace scenes. His painting was concerned with the present, not the past; with the momentary, not the permanent; with bodies, not souls; with the material, not the spiritual. His nudes were not nymphs or goddesses but models who posed in his studio. When asked why he never painted angels, he replied “Show me an angel and I’ll paint one.” (Fleming, 1980: 400)

In China, there was also a period of time during which realism was appreciated more than anything else. In this connection I would like to highlight Emperor Huizong’s (徽宗) contribution to Chinese art. As we all know, Huizong was a total failure as emperor, but a very influential figure as an artist. Among the artistic qualities he strongly promoted, the first was about realism. He seemed to be a true believer in the maxim that “the more faithful to life the painting is, the better it is”. This is unequivocally demonstrated in his own paintings of birds, flowers and rocks. Here are two samples (see Figure 1-5).



Figure 1-5:
Huizong's
paintings of
flower and birds

How do you find Huizong’s paintings, as shown in Figure 1-5? Are they true to life? I leave this question for your follow-up forum.

Everybody knows the Chinese idiom 画龙点睛. In history, there is a story associated with it. Zhang Sengyao (张僧瑶) was a painter during the North-South Period. He was ordered by Emperor Wu of Liang (梁武帝) to paint four dragons. He accomplished the royal task admirably, but with one thing unfinished: He didn’t draw eyes for any of the four dragons. When he was asked why, he replied: “Should eyes have been drawn, the dragons would have flown away!” People refused to take his words seriously. The artist thus was forced to prove what he claimed. He proceeded to draw a pair of eyes for two of the dragons, not for all four. As a result, so legend goes, the two dragons with eyes flew away, accompanied by a great thunder storm!

Now in connection with realism, I have two questions for everyone to play

with at your leisure. First, with our modern digital technology, we can produce pictures of flowers, birds, rocks, etc. with high resolution. These pictures are extremely true to life. The question is: *Are these pictures as good, as worthy, as realistic paintings? Why or why not?*

The second question is about the dragon painting. Let us make believe that the legendary story did indeed occur. Then the two dragons with eyes were absolutely “true to life”. The question is: *Is there any difference, with regard to the meaning of “true to life”, between Huizong’s realistic painting of flowers and birds, and Zhang Sengyao’s escaping dragons?*

I would urge the Cathay Landscape Action Group to organize an online forum to debate the two questions above. In my subsequent public lectures, I’ll come back to these issues as well.

3. Painting, artist and self

Nowadays it is a simple matter of pressing a button to take a photo of ourselves. It was not like this in human history. Before the camera was invented, we looked at ourselves in a mirror. But before the mirror was invented, we could only see ourselves through the reflections in, say, quiet water. In the Qing Dynasty, emperors employed artists to draw or paint pictures of themselves. The most famous, perhaps, was an Italian missionary artist, named Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), who is best known in China under the name of 郎世宁. We shall talk about this artist in more detail in other lectures. I mention him here for his realistic painting of emperors in connection with the tripartite relation between *painting, artist and self*.

Here are two paintings of Qianlong by Lang Shining (see Figure 1-6). Qianlong is the *subject* of the paintings, Lang Shining the artist. We can by all means say that the paintings are about Qianlong. But can we also say that the paintings are also about the artist *himself*?



Figure 1-6: Lang Shining’s paintings of Qianlong

In Chinese art history, as in world art history, the relation between the art and its creator is a permanent topic for debate. I assume that all of you have done the tasks recommended by Mr. Wang, namely (1) to experience an aspect of nature; (2) to internalize an art work in the heart-mind; and (3) to make a drawing by hand. If you go through the three stages, the final drawing is actually a materialization of yourself in the drawing. This is rooted in one of the theories of Chinese art: art as an experiential expression of self (写意理论). According to this theory, what makes a piece of art a masterpiece lies not in the fact that it is true to life, but in the fact that it reflects the experiential meaning of the artist. Take Zheng Banqiao's bamboo painting for example. What he tries to show through his painting, is not that it looks like real bamboo. Rather, it reflects his personal experience of bamboo, that is, the meaning he gives to the bamboo.

Before I move on to the final part of my lecture today, I would like to leave you a painting believed to be drawn by Zheng Banqiao. As you look at it, I want you to reflect upon the experiential meaning behind it (see Figure 1-7).



Figure 1-7: A bamboo painting attributed to Zheng Banqiao

4. What makes a piece of drawing a piece of art?

We come to the last part of my talk today. It deals with the issue of artistic worth. I have to remind everybody here that what we are concerned with is NOT the monetary worth of a given piece of art. The artistic worth we think of here has little to do with money. Though the two are related, they are not the same.

I have to disappoint you if you want to hear an answer from me right here and now. What makes a painting or a drawing a work of art is an extremely complicated issue. In fact my eight public lectures put together can be seen as an attempt to answer this complicated question. Having said this, I still want to tell you a real-life story in connection of artistic worth.

Anyone interested in Chinese painting knows Xu Beihong (徐悲鸿) and Qi Baishi (齐白石). Xu Beihong, in his capacity as President of the Central Institute of Chinese Visual Arts (中央美术学院院长), once organized an exhibition in Beijing. It was quite a large one displaying a good range of paintings by contemporary artists. When the exhibition was up and ready, Xu Beihong walked around for a final checkup. In a very obscure place he spotted a painting of shrimps. It was priced at 8 Yuan. The painter was named Qi Baishi.

What Xu Beihong next did to the painting was stunning! He moved the painting to the entrance of the exhibition, and placed it ahead of his own painting! What is more, he altered the price from 8 Yuan to 80 Yuan, 10 yuan higher than his own work!

Thank you for attending this lecture. See you in the next one.

Task 9 ► Join an online forum

As a follow-up to Professor Tang's public lecture, the Cathay Landscape Action Group has organized an online forum. Everyone is invited. The questions to be debated are the following.

1)	Are the drawings found in pottery and mountain rocks works of art?
2)	Are toddlers' drawings works of art?
3)	Was Zhang Sengyao's dragon drawing realistic?
4)	Are Huizong's paintings of birds realistic?
5)	What are the differences between a photo of a person and a realistic drawing of the same person?