
The National Capital Area Chapter Sumi-e Society of America

The National Capital Area Chapter is a multicultural community of artists, teachers, students and others with interests in supporting and preserving the art of sumi-e. Using the Four Treasures (brush, ink, rice paper and ink stone), artists create classical compositions as well as more contemporary works.

Membership benefits include opportunities to attend chapter-sponsored art demonstrations and workshops led by leading sumi-e artists. Members are also invited to showcase their art and calligraphy at chapter-sponsored exhibits and shows. Additionally, the chapter publishes a newsletter five times a year providing regular updates and articles of interest on sumi-e art.

To learn more about the NCAC please visit the chapter's website:

sumienationalcapitalarea.org

To become a member contact
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Silverpoem Studio



The Seal Signature and Ornament

The Chinese use of seals, or chops, began in about 1500 BCE as the official mark of authentication for contracts and goods. The characters were engraved in "seal script" which is still used on special occasions. Since the seal was an indication of office, it became a symbol of social status. Personal seals came into use as signatures by individuals, including art collectors and artists wishing to verify their work; scholars expanded the use of seals by engraving ideas and emotions rather than names. By the fifth century AD these private seals had become works of art in themselves, made of materials such as quartz and jade and intricately carved on the top and sides. The seal itself became a collector's item, and remains so today. The craft of seal carving and the use of seals continues among artists, scholars, and admirers of beauty.



Sumi-e

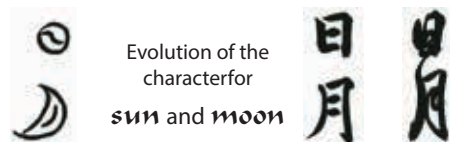
East Asian Brush Painting and Calligraphy

From Turtle Shells to Grass Calligraphy into Painting

The art of East Asian brushwork can be traced back to the beginning of China's known history. The use of the brush for writing has been verified as early as the 14th century BCE, when scholars wrote ideograms as guides to carving words on ceremonial "oracle" stones and turtle shells. These carved characters were much more pictographic than today's characters, and their style was dictated by the carving tools. By the second century BCE, however, this seal script was only used for special occasions, and was replaced by a more graceful style written with a brush and used by scribes for official documents, classical works and scriptures. This scribe style was simplified into the standard script that is still studied today as the basic calligraphic form.

The oldest known Chinese brush, made from bamboo and rabbit fur, dates from about 500 BCE.

A beautiful, flowing cursive style, which then developed to fill a need for faster and more fluent writing, soon became a vehicle for artistic expression. The cursive style is often seen in purely calligraphic works or as poetic accompaniment to many paintings, both ancient and modern. The more exuberant cursive styles are often called "running" or "grass" scripts for their organic, flowing nature.



It is easy to see how the elegant standard and vivacious running script lent their forms and discipline to painting. In fact, students of East Asian brush painting learn that each distinct stroke in the written word has its parallel in the painted image.

The Treasures and the Gentlemen: Traditions of Brush Painting

The classic materials used in East Asian brush painting and calligraphy are called the Four Treasures: the brush, the ink stick, the grinding stone, and the paper. The manufacture of each has become an art in itself.

Brushes are made from a variety of animal hair, from rabbit to wolf to horse, responding to the varying needs of the artist; some are made for fine line work, others to hold a large quantity of ink for large paintings or calligraphy, and still others for flexibility. Ink is traditionally made from the charcoal of pine or other wood, mixed with vegetable glue and compressed into sticks. The ink is liquified by corradating with water in the bowl of the grinding stone. Finally, the artist uses paper which, though generally called "rice paper," can actually be made from a number of plant fibers, and can be either extremely fine or quite coarse. some paper is very absorbent, allowing the ink to flow freely in bold strokes, while other paper is coated so that it can be used for more detailed work, such as landscapes.

The Four Gentlemen

These old friends are the orchid, the bamboo, the chrysanthemum, and the plum blossom, and are considered the most basic subjects of the brush painter's art. Each also has a symbolic value in East Asian culture. The orchid symbolizes spring's bright promise of beauty; the bamboo is a symbol of summer, and signifies endurance and flexibility; autumn's chrysanthemum, the last flower to keep its bloom, stands for life's strength and perseverance; and the plum blossom, the first to break winter's hold, is a symbol of the joy of renewal and the promise of life.



Each Word a Painting Each Painting a Poem

"Write the idea of a plum blossom,"

the age-old instruction of brush master to student, illustrates clearly the relationship that exists between painting and calligraphy in the realm of East Asian art. The graceful, vivid strokes that exemplify the best of calligraphy endow brush painting with a life and movement that its simplicity only emphasizes.



Outline Style



Spring

Calligraphers use their art to bring visual impact to the words of the poem or story, giving the characters a life and meaning that can be appreciated even if the language of the work is not known.



"Boneless" Style

In a way, a painter, using the same strokes and composition as the writer of a poem, is also writing a poem in images, in large complex characters of unique design, a poem that can be understood not as words, but as a message nonetheless, telling of the beauty and exuberance of life.

Many styles exist, from traditional to modern, from representational to abstract, within the universe of East Asian ink and brush. Artists might use color as well as black ink, brushes made of feathers, and paper flecked with gold, as they experiment and innovate with the materials and traditions of this millennia-old art form.

