

# Ink and Brush: The way of transforming calligraphy and painting

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**Abstract:** Calligraphy and painting, created with a brush on rice paper, are unique art forms of the Chinese people. After thousands of years of development, Chinese calligraphy and painting have formed a complete system of ink and brush expression. Although calligraphy and painting appear in different forms, they share the same spirit of brush and ink. Today, due to the influence of Western trends, calligraphy and painting have strayed from tradition, often focusing only on the shaping and expression of form, without further capturing the spirit or embodying the essence of Chinese Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist cultures. The future development of calligraphy and painting must first return to the context of traditional Chinese culture and be reviewed from the perspective of Chinese cultural vision and the inheritance of calligraphy and painting.

**Keywords:** Chinese Calligraphy, Painting, Spirit of Brush and Ink

## 1. Introduction

Calligraphy and painting, created with a brush on rice paper, are unique art forms of the Chinese people. After thousands of years of development, Chinese calligraphy and painting have formed a complete system of ink and brush expression that can carry and express the profound spirit of Chinese culture and continue its lineage. Zhao Meng fu, for example, was a royal descendant of the Southern Song Dynasty. Despite the downfall of his nation, he chose to serve the Yuan Dynasty, a decision that was widely criticized. However, through his calligraphy and painting, he preserved the spirit of Han culture. As he said, "Though the nation may perish, its history shall not; our family's reputation remains untarnished for three hundred years." In fact, he further promoted the spirit of Han culture. It is evident that the spirit of brush and ink embedded in traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting is the crystallization of the wisdom and thoughts of countless sages. It has carried the civilization of the Chinese nation for thousands of years and has evolved in tandem with the history of Chinese civilization. In today's context of vigorously promoting traditional culture, the promotion of the spirit of brush and ink has become particularly important.

## 2. The common origin of calligraphy and painting and their modern separation

### 2.1. The common origin of calligraphy and painting

Although Chinese calligraphy and painting appear in different forms, they share the same spirit of brush and ink. Zhao Meng fu said, "Stones should be rendered with the 'flying white' technique, trees with the seal script style, and bamboo with the eight principles of calligraphy. If anyone can understand this, they must know that calligraphy and painting are fundamentally connected." Huang Bin Hong also stated, "The use of brush, ink, and composition in painting all originate from calligraphy. Abandoning calligraphy and merely focusing on the colors and pigments is the mark of a clumsy craftsman, not a true master of traditional Chinese painting." Calligraphy and painting share a common origin but diverge in their forms of expression. Since Wang Wei advocated literati painting and the integration of calligraphy and painting, the practice of "bringing calligraphy into painting" and "bringing painting into calligraphy" has become a trend. Throughout history, great calligraphers have often been masters of painting, and painters have also excelled in calligraphy. This is true for figures ranging from Su Dong po and Mi Fu to Zhao Meng fu, Tang Yin,

Shen Zhou, Wen Zheng Ming, Xu Wei, Chen Chun, Dong Qi Chang, and more recently Wu Chang Shuo, Qi Bai Shi, and Huang Bin Hong. Calligraphy has long been the foundation of traditional Chinese painting, and the unity of calligraphy and painting has a long-standing tradition.

## 2.2. The modern separation of calligraphy and painting

Nowadays, there is a significant separation between calligraphy and painting. Painters are often unfamiliar with calligraphy, and calligraphers are not skilled in painting. This situation can be attributed to the fact that since the 20th century, the academic education of calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting has severely deviated from the background of traditional Chinese culture. When learning painting, whether it is traditional Chinese painting or oil painting, students immediately adopt the Western art education model, starting with sketching and color theory, and using Western art theories to shape our aesthetics. The study of calligraphy has also focused on Western forms of expression, emphasizing the proficiency of external forms and techniques while neglecting the intrinsic spiritual essence of brush and ink. This inevitably leads to an emphasis on the formal expression of techniques in Chinese calligraphy and painting, while ignoring the attention to the intrinsic humanistic spirit.



Figure 1

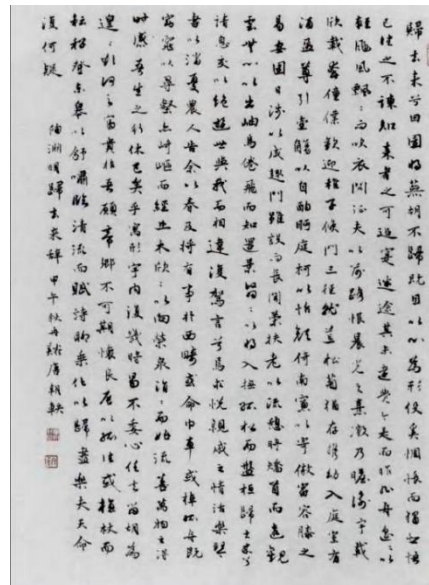


Figure2

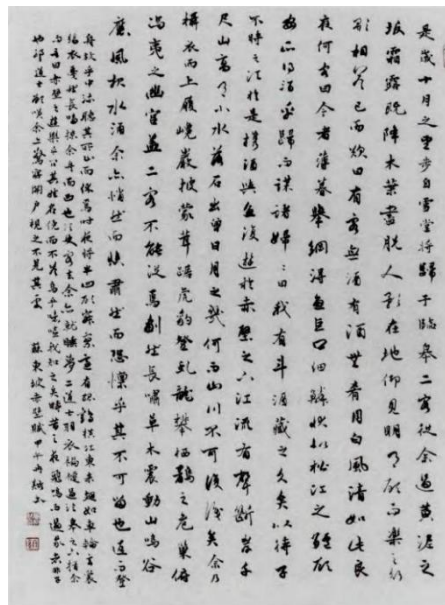


Figure3

### 3. The development and dilemma of literati painting

The most significant achievement in the evolution of traditional Chinese painting is the creation of literati painting. This is akin to the innovation in calligraphy by Wang Xizhi, who is revered as the Sage of Calligraphy. Just as Wang Xizhi revolutionized calligraphy, Wang Wei was the pioneer in advocating the integration of poetry and calligraphy into painting, giving rise to the concept of "literati painting." It was not until the Song Dynasty, with figures like Su Dong po, Wen Tong, Yang Wu jiao, and Ma He zhi, that the philosophy of literati painting was truly put into practice through their artworks. The pinnacle of literati painting was reached during the time of Zhao Meng fu and the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty.

Today, literati painting faces challenges similar to those encountered by the calligraphic style of the Two Wangs (Wang Xizhi and his son Wang Xianzhi) in the contemporary era. In calligraphy, after Wang Xizhi, his method of running script has been the dominant tradition. However, during the Qing Dynasty, the rise of the stele school of calligraphy led to a shift in focus from script to stele. Calligraphers like He Zi zhen and

Yu You ren advocated the combination of stele and script, introducing the robustness of stele into script, which revitalized the calligraphic tradition.

In painting, during the Dao Guang and Xian Feng periods, artists like Wu Xi zai and Zhao Zhi qian began to incorporate seal script and bronze inscriptions into their works. Huang Bin hong is often referred to as the reviver of painting during this period. He used the techniques of seal script and bronze inscriptions to depict landscapes, breaking away from the traditional methods of brushwork and creating a unique style characterized by its rich and moist texture. While many people today are aware of Huang Bin hong' s boldness in brushwork, ink usage, color application, and formal innovation, few understand that his fundamental principle was the intrinsic beauty of brushwork. Through his in-depth study of traditional Chinese culture and the history of painting, he proposed the concept of "inner beauty," which is a unique aesthetic notion in Chinese culture and the essence of traditional Chinese painting. Therefore, he insisted on "scholar-official painting" and the incorporation of seal script into painting, opening up new horizons.

In my view, the direction explored by Huang Bin hong is the rightful path for traditional Chinese painting. The unfulfilled intentions of Huang Bin hong require our careful contemplation and continuation.

#### **4. The development of Chinese calligraphy and painting in the 20th century**

The development of Chinese calligraphy and painting in the 20th century largely took place against the backdrop of what Huang Bin hong referred to as the "official culture." To this day, many accomplished painters have not been able to break free from the creative patterns formed by serving the establishment. The concepts of "serving the establishment," "thematic creation," and "form above all" have constrained their free creativity. Meanwhile, artists with independent ideas are often influenced by various Western trends, pursuing formal effects while straying away from tradition and the essence of brush and ink. They tend to focus merely on the shaping and expression of form, without delving further into the spiritual essence of Chinese culture, which encompasses Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This emphasis on form at the expense of brush and ink has become a common phenomenon in today's calligraphy and painting circles. It is precisely because painting has moved away from the brushwork of calligraphy that it has gradually drifted further from tradition, becoming increasingly disconnected from the mainstream of traditional painting. Yet, calligraphic brushwork is precisely the bond that connects us to the tradition.

#### **5. The importance of calligraphy in painting**

The future development of calligraphy and painting must first return to the context of traditional Chinese culture and be reviewed from the perspective of Chinese cultural vision and the inheritance of calligraphy and painting. Calligraphy and painting complement each other; calligraphers should have painting skills, and painters should have basic calligraphy skills.

In the last century, Lin Feng Mian and Xu Bei Hong proposed many methods to reform traditional Chinese painting, but in practice, these methods proved unfeasible. In contrast, artists like Huang Bin Hong, who adhered to the traditional spirit of brush and ink while seeking inspiration and innovation, gradually gained our respect.

Huang Bin Hong once said, "The essence of calligraphy and painting lies in brushwork, ink usage, and composition. Mastering brushwork alone makes one a master; without brush and ink, even with good composition, one is just an ordinary craftsman." This highlights the crucial role of brush and ink in traditional Chinese painting.

Huang Bin Hong emphasized that the brushwork in Chinese painting must be understood through calligraphy, especially the metallic and stone-like texture of seal script brush work, as well as the application of techniques like "ink dripping from a leaking house" and "broken gold bars." Calligraphy is the best carrier of Chinese culture and history. As Xiong Bing ming said, "Calligraphy is the core of Chinese culture." The subtlety of calligraphic brushwork best embodies the spirit of brush and ink.

Emphasizing the importance of calligraphy in traditional Chinese painting is, In fact, emphasizing the importance of brush and ink. Therefore, the foundation of traditional Chinese painting is calligraphy, not sketching. For students majoring in traditional Chinese painting, the study of calligraphy should be a top priority.

## 6. The significance of calligraphic brushwork in painting

The primary aspects of calligraphy that can be applied to painting are brushwork and character structure. First and foremost, how can the brushwork in calligraphy be applied to painting? The techniques of brushwork in Chinese calligraphy began with the initial use of the brush, which coincides with the origin of written characters. The earliest known characters, dating back seven to nine thousand years, were found on oracle bones unearthed in Jia hu, Wu yang, Henan. Since then, over thousands of years, as the forms of written characters evolved, so too did the techniques of calligraphic brushwork, becoming increasingly rich and sophisticated. Despite the myriad variations in brushwork, which different calligraphers have used to create diverse artistic forms, they can essentially be summarized as two types of brush techniques: central tip (zhong feng) and side tip (cefeng), as well as lifting and pressing, and twisting and turning. For painters, applying calligraphic brushwork to painting is not a simple matter of using these techniques. Instead, it involves training in the different brushwork styles of various calligraphic scripts to express the aesthetic of different scripts and lines through different writing techniques. This process enables painters to master the use of the brush and to experience the affinity of using a brush.



Figure4

### 6.1. The evolution of calligraphic brushwork and its application to painting

Calligraphic brushwork has undergone two significant transformations. The first was the shift from central tip (zhong feng) to side tip (cefeng) brushwork. During the pre-Qin and Qin dynasties, central tip brushwork with rounded strokes was used in seal script (Seal script). However, by the Han dynasty, side tip brushwork with square strokes began to be employed in clerical script (Clerical script). Since then, central and side tip brushwork have been used interchangeably, with central tip remaining predominant. The second transformation occurred when clerical script evolved into regular script (Regular script), running script (Semi-cursive script), and cursive script (Cursive script), introducing the use of dots and strokes. Side



tip brushwork was extensively utilized, marking a transition from the “ancient simplicity” to the “modern elegance.” At this point, the techniques of calligraphic brushwork were fully developed, with Wang Xizhi being the paragon of this evolution. Ancient calligraphers described brushwork with phrases like “drawing in the sand with a cone,” “sealing with ink,” and “traces of a leaking roof,” all emphasizing the strength and depth of the brushstrokes. These descriptions reflect the spirit of the Chinese nation, which values “virtue bearing all things” and “unceasing self-improvement.” Therefore, central tip brushwork is of utmost importance. It embodies the “sinew and bone” of the strokes, requiring a forceful and penetrating execution. This results in a full, round, and vigorous texture of the dots and strokes, a technique consistently upheld by masters from the revered stone carvings of the Qin and Han dynasties to the calligraphers following the Two Wangs (Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi). This is what painters need to carefully comprehend. The “style,” “majestic aura,” and “scholarly air” we often refer to are precisely the manifestations of this type of brushwork.

## 6.2. The art of integrating calligraphy into painting

During the Qing dynasty, calligraphers such as Deng Shi Ru, Zheng Fugu, He Shao ji, and Kang You Wei sought to enrich the middle part of the lines and to achieve a rugged and intense quality. They twisted the brush, constantly changing the direction of the strokes, creating lines with uneven bristles that exuded a metallic and stone-like charm. This approach gradually transformed the lines from refined to wild, conveying a “mountain forest air” and a “masculine spirit.” Therefore, when incorporating calligraphy into painting, it is essential to appreciate the diverse flavors and nuances of calligraphic brushwork. Many so-called calligraphers who claim to “incorporate calligraphy into painting” are, strictly speaking, not true calligraphers. They often follow the trend of the contemporary calligraphy circle, which emphasizes visual effects for exhibitions. They “paint characters” with a painter’s perspective, which is not in line with the millennia-old tradition of calligraphic brushwork. Wang Yuan qi said in his “Discourses on Painting,” “The method of painting is interconnected with poetry and literature; only with a scholarly air can one speak of painting.” This so-called scholarly air refers to the temperament of a literati that flows from tradition, a calm spirit that emanates from the brush and ink. This calmness in painting is sought through the bone method of traditional calligraphic brushwork, where each stroke is deliberate and not slippery, thus achieving stability and tranquility. Therefore, to incorporate calligraphy into painting, one must first learn the bone method of calligraphic brushwork, avoiding frivolity and extravagance, and understanding the profound and delightful essence of brush and ink.

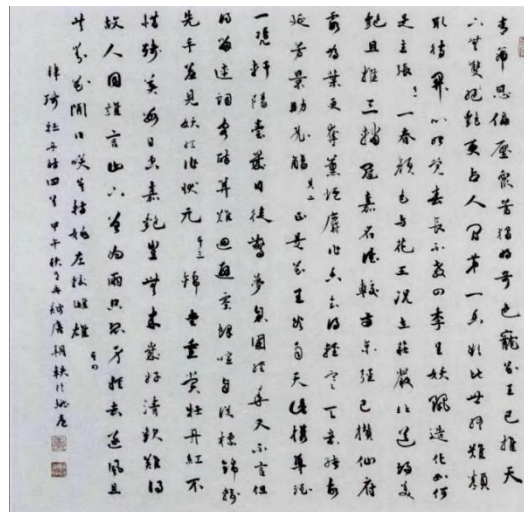


Figure5

## 7. Conclusion

### 7.1. The interconnected composition of calligraphy and painting

Calligraphy and painting share many similarities in composition and layout, which are influenced by Chinese culture and philosophical thinking. The layout of Chinese calligraphy and painting is deeply imbued with Chinese philosophical ideas, such as the Yin-Yang principles from the I Ching, the Doctrine of the Mean from Confucianism, the Taoist concept of non-action, and the Buddhist spirit of compassion. These philosophies permeate the composition and arrangement of calligraphy and painting. Chinese calligraphy, as the art of writing Chinese characters, reflects the Chinese aesthetic of "round heaven and square earth." No matter how the layout changes, it must ultimately conform to the principle of balance and symmetry to be considered beautiful, as exemplified by the character structure in Yan Zhen qing's calligraphy.

In both calligraphy and painting, the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang is always present, emphasizing the gathering and circulation of energy, or "qi." "The I Ching states," One Yin, one Yang, that is the Tao. "This interplay of Yin and Yang captures the essence of Chinese culture and reveals the secrets of Chinese art. In the art of calligraphy and painting, changes are endless but always revolve around the balance of Yin and Yang. If the brushwork is slow, it should be balanced with speed; if heavy, with lightness; if light, with weight. Similarly, ink should be balanced in terms of dryness and wetness, concentration and dilution. The art of brush and ink always seeks equilibrium in these opposing transformations, turning solidity into void and void into solidity, achieving the harmony of Yin and Yang. This harmony is the key to success; without it, the work falls short.

### 7.2. The inspiration of calligraphic character structure for painting composition

To be more specific, in his later years, the modern artist Huang Bin Hong completely approached his painting composition as if he were "writing characters." Recently, I had a discussion with Mr. Wang Lu Xiang, who mentioned that Huang Bin Hong believed Chinese characters represent the pinnacle of art. In the construction of Chinese characters, there are the so-called "Six Principles of Chinese Characters," which Huang Bin Hong regarded as the ultimate "Six Principles of Form." Nothing can surpass these principles, and everything must be encompassed within them. Therefore, he believed that when a Chinese person familiar with characters observes nature, there is a cultural filter at play, which is the Chinese character itself. When looking at a mountain, it is not merely seen as a mountain, but as a character. The character that comes to mind distills the structure of that landscape—whether it is a vertical or horizontal structure, and whether its center of gravity is in the middle or at the bottom. This is related to the arrangement of space and composition in painting. Thus, Huang Bin Hong often used Ouyang Xun's "Thirty-Six Principles of Character Structure" to analyze the composition in painting. The concept of character structure in calligraphy, with its interplay of density and sparsity, is indeed analogous to painting and requires scholars to deeply comprehend it through careful study.

### 7.3. The application of calligraphic ink techniques in painting

How can the ink techniques of calligraphy be applied to painting? The art of brush and ink begins with the brush itself, as the ink is divided by the brush. Different brush techniques produce different shades of ink. For the same line, the ink color varies depending on the pressure, speed, lifting, pressing, turning, and twisting of the brush. Whether the brush is used in a square or round manner, dry or wet, central tip or side tip, each technique results in a unique ink color and aesthetic. As we practice the diverse brush techniques in calligraphy and appreciate their subtleties, we unconsciously enhance our ability to express ink shades in painting. The concept of "five colors of ink" is precisely due to the rich variations in calligraphic brushwork. Huang Bin Hong was a master of ink techniques. He said, "A good painter builds on the foundation of the brush and achieves greatness through ink, and the endless variations of brush and ink come from the use of water." Therefore, his paintings could have multiple shades of ink in a single stroke, and a single dot of ink could combine dry and wet effects. It is evident that Huang Bin Hong deeply understood the subtleties of calligraphic brushwork, and he was also skilled in using old ink, scorched ink, and stained ink, creating endless variations of ink shades in his paintings.



Figure 6

#### 7.4. The transition from calligraphy to painting and the future

Calligraphy and painting originally share the same source and have many interconnections, which are too numerous to mention. Recently, it has quietly become a trend in the calligraphy circle for calligraphers to turn to painting. The art of calligraphy is in decline, as writing beautiful characters is extremely difficult, while it seems much easier to create a few hasty brushstrokes in a painting. Moreover, the current market places more emphasis on paintings than on calligraphy, with the result that good calligraphy often sells less than mediocre paintings. This has led to a trend of calligraphers transitioning to learn painting. Originally, learning painting should be a necessary part of a calligrapher's training. However, due to this worldly prejudice, the situation is rather embarrassing. Although many outstanding calligraphers have begun to focus on painting, it is not necessarily true that an excellent calligrapher will automatically become a good painter. Although calligraphy and painting are interconnected in terms of brush and ink techniques, it is still necessary to find the bridge for the transformation of skills. Art requires not only exceptional talent and passion but also a profound accumulation of tradition. To become a master of traditional Chinese painting, a painter's painting skills must come first. This ability is fundamental and is the primary challenge that calligraphers need to overcome. The quality of lines and the artistic taste are of course important, but if one focuses solely on sentiment, it will only lead to the decline of literati painting and the coarseness of the art. Therefore, although calligraphers have a natural advantage in the writing of lines and the quality of brush and ink, to complete the transition from calligraphy to painting, they still need to carefully comprehend the subtleties and master the bridge for the transformation of skills in order to achieve success.



## 8. Conclusion

In today's diversified artistic environment, the integration and development of calligraphy and painting face numerous challenges and opportunities. This paper has thoroughly explored various aspects, including the common origin of calligraphy and painting, their modern separation, the evolution of literati painting, the development of Chinese calligraphy and painting in the 20th century, and the importance of calligraphy in painting. These explorations have revealed the close connections between calligraphy and painting in terms of spirit and technique. Calligraphy is not only the foundation of painting but also the bridge connecting tradition and modernity, form and spirit.

Moving forward, calligraphers and painters should place greater emphasis on drawing wisdom from traditional culture and returning to the roots of calligraphy and painting. Through in-depth research and practice, they should combine the spirit of calligraphic brushwork with the visual expression of painting to create more works that are imbued with the spirit of the times and cultural depth. Only in this way can the ancient and unique art forms of Chinese calligraphy and painting be revitalized in the new era, continuing to carry forward the profound and extensive nature of Chinese culture.