

# Research on the traditional context and content of ink wash graphic forms

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**Abstract:** Ink wash is a visual language that embodies the humanistic spirit of China. This paper employs modern scientific approaches to investigate the evolutionary patterns of ink wash across different periods and its diverse forms, aiming to enhance people's perception and aesthetic appreciation of ink wash morphology.

**Keywords:** Ink wash graphic forms, morphological content, traditional context

## 1. Introduction

This paper adopts the perspective of modern scientific methodology to systematically trace the origins, evolution, and systematic construction of ink wash graphic forms. It reveals the entire process, from the germination seen in primitive pottery painting, through the maturation of line-drawing techniques, the self-awareness of ink wash as an independent medium, and the expression of literati sensibilities, culminating in the formation of theoretical systems such as "the five shades of ink" and the "five brushstrokes and seven ink techniques." The study not only analyzes the diverse manifestations of ink wash in depicting natural, man-made, and even spontaneous forms but also aims, through a deep understanding of this traditional lineage, to enhance people's perceptual and aesthetic capabilities regarding ink wash forms. It provides a theoretical foundation for drawing nourishment from national spirit in modern design and creating a unique visual language.

## 2. The development process and characteristics of ink wash graphic forms

### 2.1. Origins: primitive pottery to Qin-Han brushwork

Ink wash holds a significant position in the history of Chinese painting, and its development follows a distinct trajectory. As early as the Neolithic Age, people used brushes to paint decorative patterns on various types of pottery. In the Banpo culture, primitive brushes made by binding animal hair to sticks appeared, and traces of these brushstrokes are clearly visible in the motifs on painted pottery. The brushwork of this period cannot yet be termed true "ink and brush" techniques, but it already exhibits the embryonic form. Patterns drawn with materials like manganese earth and ochre feature rough, yet bold and heavy lines. The graphics of this era also share visual forms with modern design, such as an emphasis on expressive abstraction, employing repetition, isomorphic transformation, and simplified distortion, and utilizing compositional principles and rules like contrast and unity, order and balance, rhythm and cadence, repetition and diversity.

From the flowing and vigorous lines of silk paintings from the Warring States period, we can infer the appearance of pre-Qin wall paintings that have not survived, imagining that those murals were also executed with brushes. The coloring in these silk paintings primarily involved flat application, with some use of washes. In the abundance of tomb murals and silk paintings from the Han Dynasty, the lines are executed with concise, decisive, and dynamic brushwork, and the overall descriptive style is more unrestrained. In comparison, the silk paintings from the Mawangdui tombs of the Western Han Dynasty exhibit a somewhat more delicate style, but a rough quality still remains, consistent with the overall stylistic system of the Han period.

## 2.2. Techniques: Wei-Jin Lines to Tang Ink-Wash

During the Wei and Jin periods, the "silken thread" line technique pioneered by Gu Kaizhi introduced a refined, uniform linear style. The ensuing diversification led by artists like Zhang Seng you marked the maturation of painting techniques. Southern styles remained graceful, while northern works maintained the robust character of Han tradition. Tomb murals from the Hexi Corridor captured lively scenes of daily life, executed in fluid outlines and bright, rhythmic coloring, paving the way for Sui and Tang artistic development.

The Sui Dynasty continued this progression, and the Tang era witnessed the full maturation of Chinese painting. From Yan Liben to Wu Daozi, and onward to Zhang Xuan and Zhou Fang, brushwork evolved in expressiveness—varying in thickness, solidity, and softness, emphasizing the independent aesthetic of the line itself. The Tang period also saw the rise of deliberate ink study, as theorist Zhang Yan yuan articulated the concept of "five tones of ink," laying a cornerstone for later ink-wash theory. This era thus marked a pivotal turn: from a colorful, material depiction of the world toward the subtle, expressive language of ink, establishing its status as an independent aesthetic medium.



Figure 1



Figure 2

### 2.3. System: Song Ink-Brush forms

From the Five Dynasties to the Song period, ink-brush forms continued to develop. Jing Hao's Notes on Brushwork provided a concrete theoretical framework, emphasizing the role of ink and brush integration over color. This theory became foundational. Through extensive experimentation, painting and calligraphy merged, resulting in rich brushstroke types and texture strokes (*cun*). Examples include Liang Kai's expressive "reduced brush" strokes, Li Gonglin's refined outline drawing, and Emperor Huizong's "golden knife" style. Ink techniques like layered ink (by Dong Yuan and the Mi family) and splashed ink (by Liang Kai) matured, while brushwork styles diversified—from centered-tip strokes for hemp-fiber and cloud-curl textures to side-brush strokes for axe-cut textures. These innovations created a lasting legacy.

### 2.4. Literati expression: Yuan raw paper and Ming-Qing individuality

During the Yuan Dynasty, literati, socially marginalized yet artistically driven, developed scholar painting. Raw paper became widespread, facilitating nuanced ink variations—from dry brush effects to tonal gradations. Artists like Zhao Mengfu and the Four Great Masters (Huang Gongwang, Wu Zhen, Ni Zan, Wang Meng) explored its expressive potential, as seen in works like *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*. Ni Zan's folding-ribbon texture strokes and Wang Meng's hemp-fiber-derived variations demonstrated both natural inspiration and technical individuality. This period laid the groundwork for Ming-Qing ink aesthetics.

In the mid-Ming, Xu Wei fused calligraphy with painting, prioritizing expressive brushwork over form. Calligraphic lines became central to literati painting, redefining its visual language.

Late Ming and Early Qing. In the late Ming and early Qing periods, Dong Qichang's artistic theories were further developed by the "Four Wangs" (Wang Shimin, Wang Jian, Wang Yuanqi, and Wang Hui), who strongly advocated learning from the ancients, revered the Yuan Four Masters, and promoted the imitation of classical traditions. In contrast, the "Four Monks" (Bada Shanren, Shitao, Kuncan, and Hongren) pursued a freer artistic philosophy. They emphasized personal expression and attention to daily life, striving to break away from old conventions in their methods. Their ideas and practices advanced ink forms and techniques. Among them, Bada Shanren's works focused on strong contrasts, a strong sense of composition, and highly concise brushwork, which profoundly influenced later generations.

Ink-wash forms emphasize the "five shades of ink" — charred, dense, heavy, light, and pale — highlighting the need for rich layering in ink application. The modern master Huang Binhong summarized the forms and techniques of traditional Chinese painting through practice and research, developing the "Five Brushstrokes and Seven Ink Techniques." This system essentially encompasses most classical ink forms and corresponds to the ink concepts and styles represented by Ming and Qing literati painting.



Figure 4

### 3. Diversity of Ink Wash Forms

When we observe nature with a discerning eye, we discover its endless variety and richness. "Art originates from life," and ink wash graphic forms are also derived from natural forms. While depicting different natural scenes, painters have developed a complete set of ink wash styles for representing nature. These styles and methods serve as crucial theoretical foundations and practical experiences for our study of ink wash graphic forms. We can draw inspiration from traditional ink wash, but mere reproduction often falls short of innovative design requirements. Only through innovation can we reach higher artistic realms.

#### 3.1. Depiction of natural forms in ink wash

Nature encompasses both organic and inorganic entities, which provide us with immensely rich visual experiences. Ink wash depictions of these forms not only capture the characteristics of natural shapes but also manifest the inherent qualities of ink wash itself.

Organic forms possess vitality and a sense of growth, characterized by smooth curves and an expansive, living energy. The human body is a typical organic form, and both humans and animals are types of organic forms capable of movement. Plants, as another category, also exhibit vitality. The growth of plants—from small to large, from low to high—results in a sense of dynamism. The strength of branches, the lushness of foliage, and the abundance of flowers and leaves evoke a vibrant vitality. One of the simplest organic forms in nature is the oval, whose surface is highly tensioned. While not in motion, it internally embodies a sense of life. Most organic entities interact with their external environment, exhibiting relationships of mutual constraint and connection. The streamlined bodies of fish, the winged structures of birds, and the curved shells of mollusks are all adaptations to natural laws. Utensils and objects with organic forms are similarly cherished by people.



Figure 4

Inorganic forms are lifeless, such as landscapes, clouds, rocks, rain, mist, wind, and snow in nature. In traditional Chinese landscape painting, the depiction of forms like water, clouds, and rocks has resulted in many stylized works. These depictions capture the steepness and hardness of mountains and rocks, as well as the haziness of mist, among other characteristics.

#### 3.2. Depiction of artificial forms in ink wash

In our daily lives, people are constantly surrounded by various artificial forms. Every item used for clothing, food, shelter, and transportation is created by humans using materials, tools, or machinery. This includes buildings, office supplies, clothing, furniture, machinery, tableware, and even artworks created by artists. Based on their production methods, these can be categorized into handmade products and modern industrial products. All of these are artificial forms that can be expressed through ink wash.

While derived from life, these forms are often entirely different from those found in nature or daily life, sometimes even more concentrated and archetypal. They are the crystallization of objective reality and the artist's subjective emotions. Therefore, the depiction of artificial forms through artistic techniques like ink wash possesses a strong artistic appeal.

### **3.3. Spontaneous forms**

Spontaneous forms in ink wash refer to various shapes that occur incidentally during the artistic creation process. Examples include ink splashes on paper or the diverse effects achieved through techniques like spraying, tearing, stamping, smudging, dripping, or shaking ink, paper, or other materials. In the context of ink wash graphic forms, spontaneous forms frequently emerge. They are created by applying certain forces to ink, paper, or other materials, imbuing the work with a dynamic sense of energy and novel charm. When combined with deliberate design, they can manifest extraordinary beauty.

Research on the traditional lineage and content of ink wash graphic forms is a crucial component of studying ink wash graphic forms. By drawing on traditional aesthetics and modern art morphology as theoretical foundations and engaging in continuous practice, it becomes possible to create a unique design language that embodies the essence and spirit of the Chinese nation.

## **4. Conclusion**

The developmental history of ink wash graphic forms is a visual linguistic evolution that carries the humanistic spirit of China. It is not a rigid collection of techniques, but rather a dynamic process of continuously drawing inspiration from the myriad phenomena of nature and the insights of life, integrating innovation, and ultimately internalizing it into a unique aesthetic system and expressive methodology. The research in this paper is not merely a tracing of traditional lineage but also aims to inspire the present. In an era marked by globalization and digitalization, only by profoundly understanding and revitalizing the intrinsic principles and spiritual core of ink wash forms can we, through innovative practice, transform their timeless aesthetic value into a unique design language that manifests the national spirit and possesses modern vitality.