

Three Categories of Chinese Painting

Starting around 4000 B.C. traditional Chinese painting has developed continuously over a period of more than six thousand years. Its growth has inevitably reflected the changes of time and social conditions.

Figure painting: Following the introduction of Buddhism to China from India during the 1st century A.D. and the consequent carving of grottoes and building of temples, the art of painting religious murals gradually gained in prominence. The range of subject matters dealt with in **figure painting** was extended far beyond religious themes during the Song dynasty(960-1127). Paintings of historical character and stories of everyday life became extremely popular. Techniques were also further refined.

Landscape painting had already established itself as an independent form of expression by the 4th century. Then gradually developed into the two separate styles of “**blue-and-green landscapes**” and “**ink-and-wash landscape**”. The blue-and-green landscape used bright blue, green and red pigments derived from minerals to create a richly decorative style. The ink-and wash landscape relied on vivid brushwork and varying degrees of intensity of ink to express the artist's conception of nature, and his own emotions and individuality.

Flower-and-bird painting was separated from decorative art to form an independent genre around the 9th century. A great many artists painted in this genre during the Song dynasty and their subject matter included a rich variety of flowers, fruits, insects and fish. Many of the scholar painters working with ink and brush used a great economy of line. They produced paintings of such things as plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums, pines and cypresses, using their subject matter to reflect their own ideals and character.

Two Styles of Chinese Painting

While there are many schools and styles of traditional Chinese painting (*guo hua* 国画), many contemporary artists in this genre use either **fine brush technique** (*gong bi* 工筆) or **freehand style** (*xie yi* 寫意). These two broad poles in style can, and often do, shade into one another. Detailed observation and spontaneous expression are not mutually exclusive. The three examples below illustrate a common subject matter--lotus flowers--but each portrayal is rendered in a very different manner that ranges from realistic, meticulous brushwork and coloring to the highly abstract, where patches of shaded ink suggest the withered lotus flowers in the pond.

