

Learning Japanese ink painting — an introduction

Overview

The study of Asian ink painting is a practice of being with the heart's rhythm. Exercising discipline and steadiness of heart and mind to develop a creative process over a substantial period of time. This is an active meditation process in encouraging new ways of observation and self listening as part of healing and inspiration.

Being an ancient practice form in China and Japan, its validity is true today as in its glorious past, especially useful for those who wish to encourage creative mode of life in themselves.

The appeal of Japanese ink painting is in the flow of the brush. The seemingly 'effortless' minimalistic stroke that suggest a bamboo in the wind or a flying sparrow is magical. It is the art of economy, using one brush and one colour to reflect upon nature's harmonies. Results can be achieved on first practice, but to achieve mastership flawless of the brush, practice is necessary.

Study emphasises solid brush strokes, and so practice of calligraphy offers a good platform in the variety of strokes possible to be made with a single brush. The play between ink and water on selection of absorbent paper, stimulate the visual impact between the subject matter and the space around it, to give feeling of depth, light and richness of composition and colour, even though 'only' black ink is mostly used.

Japanese ink painting was traditionally divided into two main schools of practice, the first was 'line work,' depicting subject with line drawing of the outside form. And the second, 'ink marks', that which depict subject as ink marks with no outside line. Upon this basic practice, combination and variety of techniques developed, including usage of Japanese watercolour, made from natural pigments.

‘The Four Treasures of Ink Painting’ - Tools and Materials

The four main tools and materials used in this practice are — brush, paper, ink stick and ink stone. Known as the 'four treasures' of ink, these carry a long tradition of craftsmanship in their own right, as their quality differ from simple student's kit, to highly prized hand made set. The paper, made of various percentage kozo fiber (from the bark of the mulberry bush), can vary in thickness, shade and size. The brush, made of natural animal hair, vary in hardness, size and shape. The ink stick, made out of soot or coal dust, traditionally mixed with essence oils and natural glue to form a solid stick. This black solid ink has a range of shades of black and a variety of translucency. The ink-stone, made usually out of slate, is there as a rough surface upon which the ink is ground.

‘The Four Princes of Ink Painting’ - Content

Beginners are best to start with four traditional themes, known as 'the four princes of ink' — they are — bamboo, plum-blossom, wild orchid and the yellow empress, known as the chrysanthemum. These four subjects hold within them the basic brush-strokes necessary to accomplish success. This study goes along with an early introduction to calligraphy characters (kanji).

More advance study, for those with some knowledge of the field, includes themes such as — song birds & flowers, sea-life, animals, landscape & figures. At this level, students should look for an in-depth study of composition and usage of space. A helpful way is to observe and study the great masters of the brush from the history of Japanese art. At this level it is well advised to accompany the study with calligraphy practice of kana script as well as more complex kanji

Methodology

Where possible, students should look for a teacher who can offer live demonstration, as well as working notes, one to one time and practical experience. Understanding the evolvement of ink painting in China and Japan will offer an overlay of depth and perception as to the schools and styles of painting that evolved within the art history of these countries.

Regardless if the student is a complete beginner or a professional artists, the study of ink painting can have an immediate effect and satisfaction, and yet, it is a step in a never ending journey of refinement. Personal pace and rhythm of progress is best to be encouraged.

