CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY
The Inner World of the Brush

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Two characters by Chu Yün-ming, from a handscroll also illustrated in Figure 17
This essay is an introduction to the art of Chinese calligraphy—the subject of a major exhibition on view at the Museum through May 7—explaining how its stylistic and aesthetic qualities can be enjoyed by Western visitors who do not understand Chinese.

Chinese calligraphers often see brushwork by analogy with natural phenomena, not in any directly representational sense, but in terms of underlying principles of movement, growth, or structure. The stretching branches of a winter tree, the flowing water of a mountain stream, a rock plunging from a high cliff—such images vividly suggest principles of brush form and movement that interact profoundly with the past art of the brush. The sight of boatmen pulling the long oars of a ship on the Yangtze awakened Huang T'ing-chien to a new understanding of the brushwork of the T'ang monk-calligraphers, and became the basis of the long, trailing diagonal strokes of his mature style. Present experience and past thus merge at brushtip. One gradually comes to a realization that the past is alive in the tradition of Chinese artists. The calligraphy of Mi Fu or Huang T'ing-chien or Chu Yin-ming is as vital and fresh today, and as much a part of the visual experience of an artist now, as it ever was. The formal vocabulary, the material of style, is all that has ever been written, joined to the experience of life.


3. Wen Cheng-ming (1470-1559), Laudatory frontispiece (Yin-shou) for an album of paintings by T'ang Yin (1470-1523), now mounted as a handscroll. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Earl Morse. Photograph: The Art Museum, Princeton University


Confronted with an example of Chinese calligraphy, the Western viewer may assume that because he does not read Chinese he will be unable to appreciate the art of brush writing. Usually, however, the aesthetic and expressive qualities of the art are independent of verbal meaning. That is, the artistic effects of a work of calligraphy are fully apparent before one begins to read the characters or words. Insofar as calligraphy is an art, therefore (and to the Chinese it is not merely an art, but the highest graphic art form of their culture), it exists as such outside the realm of verbal content. Nonetheless, there is a large and sophisticated body of principle and theory upon which the art of calligraphy rests, and it is helpful to have some understanding of this framework in approaching it.

**THE FIVE SCRIPT-FORMS**

Instead of a unitary stylistic basis, such as ideal or naturalistic form, calligraphers rely upon five basic styles that might be thought of as script-forms. During roughly the first millennium B.C., these script-forms developed in a logical sequence in accordance with the growing use of the flexible hair brush and an increased awareness of the expressive potential of brush writing. Thereafter, they remained the common repertoire of all calligraphers, each used for specific effect or purpose. Two of the five are purely archaic. The hoary Seal script (Figure 2) is the most monumental, and was generally used for commemorative or dedicatory purposes. It is among the oldest forms of the written language, and alone of the common script-forms denies spontaneity, fluidity, and movement, otherwise common attributes of the calligraphic art. The brush is here used in imitation of a stylus, with which the first writing was done; it is held rigidly upright, the tip of the brush carefully maintained within the center of the stroke, and each stroke is written evenly and with powerful deliberation, as if inscribing lines in sand with a sharp stick. The tip of the brush, like the tip of the stick in sand, seems to penetrate deep into the paper, losing itself in the round, full impress of the line.

Two essential characteristics of calligraphy are illustrated most vividly by the Seal script. The hidden, or restrained, tip epitomizes an enduring cultural and artistic ideal: virtue, or strength—the sharp tip of the brush—is to be held within, guiding and shaping action, but exposed only rarely. The exterior, bland and mundane, smooth and round, is significant only to those who sense what is within.

Again, although it is historically among the most primitive forms of the language, the Seal script remains a living style, joined by all of the later script-forms and all of the innumerable personal styles within each script-form to create a rich tapestry of meaning and association. It is the beginning of culture, but the ancient beginnings live on in the present. Styles in Chinese art do not fade away; once formed, they remain forever viable alternatives. The majestic and powerful Seal script serves to commemorate and to dignify, but it speaks too of a stylus scratching an oracle bone.

Growing out of the Seal script historically was the Li (Clerical or Official script, after its use by scribes during the Han dynasty: 206 B.C.-A.D. 220) (Figures 3, 4), more angular than the Seal script, and emphasizing such potentials of the flexible brush as changing stroke width, long, extended horizontal and diagonal strokes, and occasional sharp rather than round stroke ends. When used very formally, as in the first example illustrated, it has much of the dignity and monumentality of the Seal script, and was used for the same purposes. When used less formally, it may be graceful and even delicate, with an old-fashioned charm and somewhat stilted flavor that limit its use in casual writing. It remained always a deliberately archaic style, at its most effective when written slowly with rich, sooty ink that appears to sink into the paper or silk.

The three remaining script-forms constitute the "modern" written language, although they developed during the third and fourth centuries. Unlike the Seal and Li forms, the

8. Mi Fu (or Mi Fei, 1051-1107), Sailing on the Wu River. Details of a handscroll. John M. Crawford, Jr., Collection, New York. No. 22 in the exhibition catalogue

definition of each is far from rigid, since one easily becomes the other depending largely upon how quickly an individual character is written. The Regular (K' ai, or Model) script (Figures 1, 5, 13) in its pure form is the standard writing, used nearly always in printed books, and learned by children when they begin to read. It is the first written form that fully utilized the formal capacity of the brush. Nearly every stroke and dot is flexed and modulated in thickness, there are few if any straight lines, and every element in each character is conceived as relating compositionally to another, thus creating a continuous flow of abstract movement that can only be properly read as one mentally follows the process of character formation.

Generally speaking, although Chinese is written from right to left, an individual character is written from left to right, and from top to bottom. The sequence of placement of dots and strokes in forming a given character is quite rigid, and therefore the actual movement of the brush is always apparent: i.e., the top leftmost element is written first, then each element directly below it, followed again from top to bottom by the rightmost portion of the character. If a character is not composed of left and right halves, then it is simply written in sequence from top to bottom. Only when a portion of the left half extends under the right half is the right written first. If there is a falling dot to the right, or a strong central vertical line, that element is usually written last, and it carries the flowing force of the brush into the character below. Because of the precision of line and structure required in writing the pure form of the Regular script, as in the example by Chao Meng-fu (Figure 5), such calligraphy is often admired for its perfect realization of an ideal.

In each of the script-forms, however, virtually limitless personal variety is possible. In contrast to the cool, classical perfection of Chao Meng-fu is the gaunt power of Huang T'ing-chien (Figure 6), whose calligraphy in the large Regular script stands among the towering achievements of Chinese art. He violates every precept of the classical tradition: his lines are often deliberately wavy, trembling slightly, as if driven by some enormous force; they vary arbitrarily from thick to thin; many strokes are seemingly lifeless, without any modulation—blunt, round, heavy, they are the stylus-written lines of the Seal script merged into the structure of the Regular form.

At another extreme, of elegance and fine-drawn beauty, is the Regular script of the Sung Emperor Hui-tsung (Figure 7). Huang T'ing-chien did not object to a laughing description of his writing as “snakes dangling from a tree”; Hui-tsung's writing, on the other hand, is called “slender gold,” after its resemblance to gold filament, exquisitely flexed and turned. If there is truth to the Chinese belief that a man's character is fully manifest in his calligraphy, perhaps it is seen here. Hui-tsung was a gifted artist and a weak ruler who watched over the loss of half of China to barbarian invaders, and it is art not strength that characterizes his writing. That fine gold filigree is easily bent and broken, however, only heightens appreciation of its delicate beauty.

When several strokes and dots in a character are written continuously, without lifting the brush, the Running (Hsing) script results. It is literally a running together of elements, usually emphasizing the vertical aspect of movement. Characters written in the standard Regular script generally occupy a rough square in composition; those written in the Running script are conceived as if in a standing rectangle. Essentially, the differences between the Regular and Running scripts are those between a printed and handwritten form.

Few great calligraphers achieved more in the Running hand than Mi Fu (or Mi Fei; Figure 8). His friend, the poet-calligrapher Su Shih (1036-1101), said that Mi used his brush like a sword, and it is a slashing virtuosity that characterizes his work, especially in the glistening vertical strokes torn down the page with dash and verve. One senses in his work exuberant pride in the freedom that comes only after absolute mastery of all convention, releasing the brush into a realm of sheer joyful creation.

A more delicate and restrained example of the Running script is the Southern Sung Emperor Li-tsung's couplet written on a silk fan (Figure 9), an exquisite, small performance by a distinctive minor master. With none of the brio of Mi Fei, Li-tsung nonetheless achieves a rewarding interplay of hair-like strokes joining elements and broad, strong horizontals and verticals, exhibiting throughout a perfect control of the brush. But whereas Mi Fei's driving force is his arm, Li-tsung's characters are guided by his fingers.

At the extreme of speed and abbreviation in writing is the Cursive script (Figures 10, 11, 14-17), the form of brush writing that most immediately and dramatically conveys the essence of the appeal of calligraphy as an art form. Perhaps no other traditional art of the world is so excitingly kinesthetic, abstract, and spontaneous. Functionally, the essential principle underlying the Cursive script is to write each character as quickly and simply as possible while still conveying the essence of its form; in other words, to reduce a standard form to an abstraction that can be imparted in continuously flowing movement. In order to allow achievement of the greatest possible creative freedom, masters of the Cursive script frequently chose to write a standard text such as the “Thousand-character Essay” or a passage from the classics or poetry of the kind memorized by schoolboys. The brush was thus freed of virtually all verbal association, often to become pure abstract form.

Some idea of the possible range of Cursive writing is suggested in the contrast between Hsi-en-yii Shu's classical, controlled Song of the Stone Drums (Figure 14), in which each character is still conceived as essentially a single, coherent unit, and each stroke and dot conforms to the rigorous canons of tradition; and, on the other hand, the abandoned writing of Ch'en Hsien-chang (Figure 10) or the mad genius, Hsü Wei (Figure 11). In the two latter examples, there is little sense of individual, separate characters left, but rather an open, sprawling movement over the entire surface, with one character often merging with another, and elements of individual characters split apart to drift out to a point of the most tenuous relationship with their original form. Individual brushstrokes observe no canons of correctness: Ch'en Hsien-chang uses a coarse, heavy brush that allows no orthodox nicety, and Hsü Wei prefers to let his brush run almost dry of ink, so that it drags and scrapes over the surface like a piece of worn-out charcoal over coarse paper.

Although the five common script-forms are coherent entities, they are regularly intermixed, and a single piece of writing may contain characters written in the Regular, Run-

ning, and Cursive scripts. For example, the three right-hand characters in the illustration from Mi Fu’s Sailing on the Wu River (Figure 8) are done in a running hand, while the single character to the left is a pure cursive form. Only about a third of the characters in Hsien-yü Shu’s Song of the Stone Drums (Figure 14) are written in the Cursive form; the majority are in a Running script. It is thus more strictly appropriate to describe both works as combinations of Running and Cursive forms (Hsing-ts’ao). Indeed, from the earliest theoretical writings on calligraphy we read of the importance of achieving individuality by deriving elements and principles from all of the script-forms. Thus Huang T’ing-chien (Figure 6), in creating his distinctive Regular style, adapted one of the basic concepts behind the archaic Seal form. His wavering strokes, moreover, are of a kind normally found earlier only in the Cursive script.

In Yen Chen-ch’ing’s striking Farewell to General P’ei (Figure 12) an unprecedented combination of script-forms and elements are employed to create a unique masterpiece. In the first three lines from the right, all characters but two are written in a powerful, archaic form of the Regular script using certain elements from the Seal and Li forms, while the second character in the first line and the third in the third line are written in a pure Cursive hand. In the next three lines, all but three characters are done in a fully Cursive script, punctuated by the occasional pictograph-like archaic structure. The effect, drawing upon the entire history of the written language, is thoroughly unconventional, almost bizarre, but rich in power and ancient substance.

When it is realized that a competent calligrapher may be at ease in any of the five script-forms (it is a common exercise to write the same text successively in two or more very different styles), it will be apparent how utterly different is the Chinese concept of form from our own. The range from the Seal to the Cursive script is precisely the range, formally, from primitive to abstract art. The implications of this orientation are particularly significant when it is remembered that all Chinese artists, whether painter or poet, are first calligraphers, and trained in the traditions of the art of brush writing before turning to other art forms. Thus, it appears likely that a painter, given a coherent individual form, might well conceive it simultaneously as both primitive and archaic, and cursive and naturalistic. In other words, the pictorial image of a pine tree is perhaps subject to the same range of formal interpretation as the written character for pine tree.

The range of script-forms moreover makes it quite difficult to interpret style in the ways suited to Western art. Confronted with two examples of writing by Hsien-yü (Figures 13, 14), one Regular, one Cursive, we would seem to have a perfect Wolfllinian dichotomy. In fact, of course, the difference between the “closed” form of the Regular script and the “open” form of the Cursive has nothing whatever to do with chronological development. However, it is likely that art-historical sense could be made of the personal stylistic development of Hsien-yü Shu if the several script-forms were isolated and analyzed separately. The differences between two works in the Cursive script by Chu Yün-ming done twelve years apart (Figures 15, 17), for example, are evident if we think in terms of boldness of execution and openness of form and of space.

In the broadest terms, the entire history of a given script-form may be subject to a similar interpretation, although the endurance of ancient models to some extent controls the range of formal variation. Although a stylistic history of calligraphy remains to be written, it is also possible that the changing character of the brushline itself is of more telling historical significance than formal structure per se.

AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS

The theoretical, critical, and technical literature on calligraphy is the largest and most sophisticated body of writing on any of the visual arts in China. The work of nearly every calligrapher, major to minor, has been dissected, analyzed, classified, and ranked repeatedly since the beginnings of critical literature nearly two thousand years ago, and the end is not yet in sight. Mao Tse-tung is among the most recent additions to the ranks of capable masters. It is nonetheless exceedingly difficult to generalize about standards of quality.

The art can be broken down into certain technical aspects, each subject to minute analysis and canonical dictum. The calligrapher is concerned with the quality of the brushline, with the formal structure of individual characters, and with the compositional organization of groups of characters. He is keenly conscious of the dynamic interaction between one line or dot and another, of the sense of movement within an individual character and through a line of several, of the tonality and character of his ink — wet, dry, dark, light — and of the overall appearance of a composition when he has finished. But even if one speaks of the “eighty-four laws of calligraphy,” as did the fifteenth-century Li Shun, a standard in any of these respects can no sooner be established than it is broken by a creative writer. Above all, therefore, to cut through the minutia of individual idiosyncrasy to a sense of enduring quality, one looks for evidence of total mastery of the brush, for conscious purpose — the venerable adage that “the idea precedes the brush” — and for a personal style, growing from tradition, but growing beyond it. In any case, knowledge of the historical range of styles is helpful.

Obviously, to appreciate calligraphy in the classical manner, one should know something of the classical models from which it springs. When one is familiar with the art of Wang Hsi-chih (Figure 1), one is aware that a work like Chao Meng-fu’s Record of the Miao-yen Temple (Figure 5) is such a precise and painstaking performance in the classical Regular script that scarcely a stroke in the entire long scroll deviates from accepted canon, even though it is done throughout at the topmost level of technical mastery and brilliance. Here we are reminded that it is not necessary to exalt the fine art of calligraphy. It has much in common with music in the sense that there are far more performers than composers, and more minor composers than great ones.
On the other hand, one would unhesitatingly rank Mi Fu, Huang T’ing-chien, or Chu Yün-ming among the greatest creative artists in Chinese history, solely on the basis of their calligraphy. The reasons, however, the standards by which their work can be judged, are utterly different. The calligraphy of Mi Fu (Figure 8), like that of Chao Meng-fu, is well within the classical tradition emanating from Wang Hsi-chih and his son, Wang Hsien-chih. The two Wangs are credited with creation of the ideal forms of the Regular, Running, and Cursive script-forms, and in the form of copies and engravings from which ink rubbings were made (Figure 1) their art endured as the classical ideal throughout the later history of the art. They must surely rank as the most influential artists in Chinese history. Mi Fu, then, paid homage to this tradition, which stressed elegant grace, strength of brushline, free-flowing rhythmical movement, and a cool air of balanced restraint. Remarkably, however, driven by an enormous ego and perhaps the finest artistic sensibility of his time, he refashioned the by-then genteel and institutional Wang style into a powerfully expressive personal vehicle, bold, daring, exciting, “as exhilarating as sailing in a wind or riding a horse into battle,” in the words of Su Shih, his older friend and rival. In Mi’s writing, certainly, such concepts as spontaneity, vitality, rhythm, and spirit are of the essence.

Not least of the admirable qualities of Mi’s calligraphy, as of many other great masters, is the impression of a three-dimensional space within which the brush seems to move. He claimed to write “with all four sides of the brush,” meaning not only that he utilized all of the physical properties of the brush tip, but evidently that he regarded the paper or silk upon which he wrote as extending into the space beyond or behind it. This dimension of the art of brush writing is most apparent when one stroke crosses another, as if moving in front of it, but even single strokes can be seen as turning in and out three-dimensionally. When used with such subtlety, the brush seems to bend and turn in a silent dance in space.
When one has come to a perception of such nuances, he has drawn very near to the creative satisfaction of writing. The master calligraphers have written time and again of the inner pleasure that the act of writing imparts. To sit at a clean table in a quiet room by a window, the mind free of all worldly concerns as the brush begins to move over the paper, is to enter a still and isolated world in which nothing exists but black ink in white space.

Scarcely a single criterion used in evaluating Mi Fu’s calligraphy is applicable to that of Huang T’ing-chien (Figure 6). Seemingly clumsy and halting – especially beside the brilliance of Mi Fu – his brush is more like a club than a sword. Huang was deeply influenced by Yen Chen-ch’ing (Figure 12), and like the great T’ang master eschewed surface beauty in quest of a deeper concept of indelible strength and inner integrity. It is thus difficult to find a single traditionally classical stroke in his work. Every character is written slowly and deliberately, the tip of the brush is rarely visible, and the characters are shaped with a striking originality sometimes verging on the grotesque.

Nominally a Confucian, Huang was deeply interested in Taoism and Ch’ an Buddhism, and this fascination with the mystical is always implied in his extremely inward and difficult calligraphy. The critical images used to describe the quality of Huang’s line are strikingly different from the poetic terms favored in the classical tradition. Not “a drop of dew hanging from a petal,” nor “a jade needle,” nor “a bank of clouds across the sky,” but “the worn cracks in an old wall,” and the rusty stain made over many years by rain dripping down a wall from a broken spout. Conveyed in these terms is the sense of a force inevitable and indelible, without discrete shape, without subtlety, but relentless and unshakable. Process is relatively unimportant, since his work throughout seems done with the same slow, halting deliberation.

There could be few contrasts greater, then, than with the kinesthetic excitement of Chu Yün-ming (Figures 15, 17), the gay genius of Suchow, “well known for his love of wine and flirtation and his enjoyment of excitement and laughter,” as Tseng Yu-ho Ecke describes him. Chu admired and was influenced by the art of Huang T’ing-chien, among others, but all that is introspective and difficult in Huang’s writing is turned to an exuberant celebration of the joys of life by the later man. Huang liked to wander off to a hidden Buddhist temple in the company of monks or retired scholars; Chu was lionized by the beautiful women and gay blades of the lovely resort city of Suchow, and probably wrote best when performing for the romantic spirits around him. But in his work, performance is lifted to the level of high art, for he was a profound student of ancient art who deliberately chose the wild Cursive form as the vehicle for natural and spontaneous creation.

The calligraphy of Chu Yün-ming exemplifies an approach to the art far different from that of either Mi Fu or Huang T’ing-chien: namely, the belief that after years of practice and study of techniques and styles one can abandon the hand and brush with full trust to go their unforced way. The element of the accidental or unexpected is here of importance, for one stroke may lead quite surprisingly to another, and the mind does not need to plan far ahead. Ideas subsist in the work because they have been formed over years of study, but not a specific idea here and another there. To look at such calligraphy is to immediately see the calligrapher at work, wielding a great, coarse brush, dripping and splattering ink (being ground as fast as half a dozen lovely young women can grind it) as all around him gasp in admiration and surprise at the tremendous creative force the intoxicated old man has become.

Doubtless the aspect of calligraphy most difficult – and at the same time most important – to grasp is the character of the brushline. Comparison of the two examples by Chu Yün-ming here illustrated may make an appreciation of this facet of the art easier to grasp, since they represent very different stages in his growth as an artist. In the earlier work (Figure 15) his brushwork is quite flat and rather too consistently dry and uninteresting. There is little sense of substance and scarcely any impression of space within which the strokes turn and thrust; they seem slippery and superficial. In the masterpiece of 1519 (Figure 17), however, the lines have an almost corporeal substance and tactile mass; they exist in a broad, deep space because, having substance, they must; they vary from rich, deep ink masses to feathery wisps of movement, and thus achieve the sense of movement in space; in short, the brushlines have character and interest in and of themselves.

It is typical of the individual development of a calligrapher as an artist that years and years are spent in mastering form and technique, but only late in life does the brush achieve character, substance, and individuality; perhaps, in a sense, like the formation of human character. Both Huang T’ing-chien and Chu Yün-ming were around fifty before they achieved great stature as artists. One looks then at the astonishingly fine, strong calligraphy of Hsien-yü Shu (Figures 13, 14), who died at forty-six, and wonders what a towering figure he might have become in ten more years; for his art had already moved to a position of greater eminence than any master since the death of Mi Fu two centuries earlier.

The enormous range in accepted standards of aesthetics and expressive quality does not, of course, make it impossible to recognize bad calligraphy, as the above sketch of Chu Yün-ming’s development may suggest. His work of 1507 is certainly not bad, but it is decidedly inferior to the later example. Outstandingly bad calligraphy on the other hand is not commonly encountered, since it was rarely preserved by collectors. Nonetheless, the work of any number of competent calligraphers past and present rests uneasily on the border between good and bad, subject of continuing controversy, and hence of enormous value in testing perception and judgment. Successive owners of a work by the Ming writer Chang Pi (Figure 16), for example, were constantly pressed into defense of its quality, since most viewers consider it rather vulgar. The flaccid, aimlessly meandering quality of his line is noteworthy, especially the grossly extended horizontal thrusts to the left. The brush appears throughout to slip over the paper, the curves lack interest and bire, and one glimpses nowhere a sense of purpose or distinction.

These considerations of quality aside, there is one respect in which the art of calligraphy is unique among the major art forms of the world, and that is the vividness with which
the creative process is permanently recorded. In good calligraphy and bad, one sees almost as surely as if watching the artist at work every movement of the brush in the precise sequence through which it moved. Nothing is hidden, mistakes remain along with daring successes, splattered ink where the hand slipped, worn scrawls where the brush ran dry of ink but moved on to finish a last flourish, even where the writer paused to reload his brush with ink. The changing tempo of the artist's work, too, is apparent. Often, for example, a writer begins a piece slowly and deliberately, as if cautiously feeling his way into it. The characters are relatively small and precise and slowly written, one follows the other in neat procession, and it is evident that careful thought is being given the job. Then gradually, as a rhythm or mood grows with confidence and sureness of purpose, the brush begins to move faster and more boldly, so that the end comes as an exciting, barely restrained climax. Calligraphy in this sense is a veritable record of the process of artistic creation.

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