

What's in a Painting? Yin and Yang

As a frequent lecturer, educator and intercultural consultant, I often discuss the Yin and Yang of Sumi-e using a Birds and Blossoms Sumi-e image, a very popular and well-known Chinese art motif. It helps illustrate the influence of Daoism and its emphasis on observable nature and an easier understanding of the concepts of harmony, energy and balance in Sumi-e paintings.

But first a little background. Historically, the Yin and Yang concept is believed to have originated more than 5,000 years ago. While Chinese culture and historians have emphasized its lengthy written history throughout millennia, literacy rates historically have been about 10% of the entire populace. (For more, I would recommend reading David Moser's *A Billion Voices*.)

Hence, oral and pictorial traditions have been much more universal and an effective medium for communication. The pictorial tradition often expresses itself through artistic and visual but wordless forms such as paintings, carvings, embroidery. In brief, visual arts and symbolism formed a familiar "language" of the greater Chinese population that can be seen in Sumi-e art.

If you look up Yin and Yang in any popular information source, the typical definition will provide something nebulous and abstract. This bland explanation doubtlessly involves the word harmony. However, what do those terms mean in the context of Sumi-e? How are they exemplified artistically in a typical birds and blossoms theme, for example, that has endured through millennia and throughout East Asia?

Consider Yin and Yang as two energies, namely the Sun (陽/阳 yang) and the Shadow (陰/阴 yin) represented frequently by the Moon. Everything that we experience in the external and the internal world is related to each other by some of the observable principles between the Sun and the Moon.

The principles include:

1. the Sun rises higher in the sky than the Moon
2. sunlight is hotter than moonlight
3. the Sun shines constantly, while the Moon phases in and out

4. more animals and insects are active during the sun-filled part of the day or diurnal while fewer creatures are active during the moon-filled part of the day or nocturnal.

Hence, Yang represents hotter energy, higher objects, activity, and constancy. Yin represents colder energy, lower objects, passivity, and ephemerality.

We can apply the principles to the popular Chinese Motif of Birds and Blossoms. Consider: a flowering plant is grounded, inanimate, short lived, and thrives in gentle warmth. If we had a checklist, the blossoms, especially in relation to high flying birds, would be classified decisively as a Yin symbol. On the other hand, birds are flighty, moving, constant in their routine nesting instinct, and would register as a Yang symbol. In artistic composition and brush strokes, the blossoms reach from the ground in an upward direction while birds fly downward to the blossoms. These two motions meet in the middle of a Sumi-e painting. On a greater philosophical interpretation, our mortal life meets here between the Heavens (天/sky above) and the Netherworld (地/earth below).

Birds and blossoms are not just colors and objects plunked down on the paper, but artistic forms installed from differing directions and which meet philosophically and elegantly together in a well composed union. Thereby, the Yin and the Yang creates a harmonious and beautiful painting.

To sum up, the Sumi-e artist or the Chinese brush painter communicates with the masses across social classes and across many dialects unlike the poet who speaks to a more exclusive and limited audience. Sumi-e artwork reflects the Yin and Yang concept that demonstrates a balance of contrasting and complementary energies through symbolic pairs.

Just to name a few in the birds and blossoms theme, they are: high and low positions of the birds vs. blossoms, male and female birds, open and closed beaks, bright and dark colors, small and large blossoms, and open blooms and closed buds. Thus, the application of the four principles to a Sumi-e image adds additional depth to its appreciation.

Sumi-e Painting by Joan Lok



Cockatoo. Painting by Liu Pei Qing, Yvonne's aunt's art

I hope to share more about Yin and Yang in a subsequent article that illustrates how its principles apply to greater and lesser degrees when looking at two paintings of similar subjects. And, in the spirit of the Sumi-e Society's educational purpose, I'm elated to bring novices devoted hobbyists and advanced masters together in this brief explanation. I wish all our fellow brothers and sisters who are far more talented painters than myself, to join me in bringing East and West philosophies and artistic endeavors together. – by Yvonne Liu Wolf, *Sumi-e Midwest Chapter*

Yvonne Wolf, is an intercultural consultant and founder of Chinese Intercultural, LLC. She speaks on a variety of topics that help to clarify elements of Chinese culture in an accessible and relatable context. Yvonne shares the knowledge and skills she has acquired having lived in four different countries where she became fluent in three languages (Chinese (Mandarin), English, and Danish). She has worked with organizations and business executives focusing on communication strategies working with Chinese and East Asian partners. Among her many skills is mediating across cultural misunderstandings.

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Deadline for Fall Quarterly Submissions: September 1

The Artist: Interview and Insights from Mr. Bertran Mao, Esteemed Shan Sui Artist

In a recent Zoom demonstration for the National Capital Area Chapter, Mr. Bertran Mao, a true master of the Shan-Shui method, recounted that it is so important in Sumi-e to thoroughly study the elements of the four gentlemen so that your foundation for Sumi-e brushstroke painting is solid. And Mr. Mao should know as he has sixty years of painting and teaching experience! He generously sat for an interview sharing some insights with Carole Yee and graciously gave permission for use of explanatory material from prepared handouts he uses in lectures and presentations.

Mr. Mao, thank you for agreeing to share your thoughts as you have such a rich history and experience with Chinese brushstroke painting. Thank you, Carole, for the interview. – Editor, Anne Klein

Interview with Mr. Mao

Mr. Mao, you have said that "Chinese Brush Painting is an art of lines, dots and brushwork. It is also more an art of drawing than of painting." Can you please elaborate?

Chinese brush painting is more of the art of drawing and not painting. In a brush painting the emphasis is on drawing of lines and dots. The line is used to create texture, shadow, and dimension. In other media such as oil, watercolor, acrylic there are no lines. The line must carry energy, the feeling of movement, like a dancer. Calligraphy is most important in brush painting.

What makes an artist a classical Chinese brush artist?

In Western painting the emphasis is on realism and the use of color to create light and shadow. With Chinese brush painting what is most important is not realism but to convey the life force, the energy, the breath (chi) of the subject as well as the feeling of the artist when it was painted.

However, one can see similarities with the Impressionist painters in that they too moved away from realism and moved towards a freer use of the brush, playing with the effects of light and color. In the late 19th century many of the Impressionist painters were influenced by the influx of Japanese prints and Chinese goods.

It is interesting to note that about 100 years ago, art schools in China, Japan, and Korea felt it was more important to have their students study Western art.