



Calligraphy and Writing Implements

Calligraphy is very simply beautiful writing. In China it is Chinese characters written using a brush and ink. Along with painting and poetry, calligraphy is considered one of the “Three Perfections” in Chinese art.

The basis for Chinese calligraphy lies in the various styles of script developed beginning with pictographs and oracle bone inscriptions (ca. 2700-1300 BCE). The first standardized written script in China was developed and implemented during the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE), under the reign of the emperor Qin Shi Huangdi (pronounced Qin shur-hwong-dee).

Today, the longest Chinese dictionary includes some 50,000 characters. Approximately 5,000-8,000 are commonly used. Chinese characters are complicated, subtle and require great skill and discipline to be well-written. It takes many years of training and practice to become a master calligrapher. Calligraphy is not only about writing words. Composition, balance, subtlety and energy are also important aesthetic qualities to consider. Good Chinese calligraphy possesses chi (qi), the life force or energy central to the Daoist beliefs.

The four characters on the China Art Cart represent some of the various script styles used by calligraphers. The artist who made them is Baofeng Wang (husband of former CIF guide Bin Yang).

mountain: ancient pictograph pre-dating standardized written language of the Qin dynasty; evolved into the modern character for “mountain”

山

bird: seal script/xiao zhuan; the style developed during the Qin dynasty under Qin Shi Huangdi; originally used for official documents; used later and still today for stone seals or chops (like those used by artists to sign their work)

(no image)

good fortune/happiness: regular style/kai shu; a very standardized, consistent style used in Chinese printed materials today

福

dragon: cursive/running/grass style/cao shu; a variation on regular style that allows for more creative freedom and expressiveness

龍

The Four Treasures of a Scholar's Study are paper, brush, ink, and inkstone.

Brushes

Calligraphy is typically created using a bamboo brush (traditionally, wolf, deer, goat, rabbit, or weasel hair is used for the 'head' of the brush, or bristles) and black ink (often referred to by its Japanese name *sumi*). Brushes come in many shapes and sizes from a single bristle to a brush as big as a person. Calligraphy requires a great deal of dexterity and control on the part of the artist. To achieve and maintain flexibility and muscle tone in the hands, calligraphers often use hand exercisers.

Most calligraphers use rice paper, although calligraphy can be done on other types of paper and fabrics such as silk. Paradoxically, "rice paper" used for Chinese calligraphy and painting is not made from rice. It is instead made from the fibers of the bark of the mulberry tree. It gets its name from the fact that this smooth, strong paper was used to make packaging for rice.

An artist might practice one character or a group of characters or strokes many times before creating the final product. Black ink and rice paper are not very forgiving, so there is no room for mistakes!

Ink Stick and Ink Stone

Ink traditionally comes in stick or cake form and is made from soot and a binding agent. Ink can also be purchased in liquid form. Ink sticks or cakes must be ground on an ink stone and mixed with water to create the desired hue (degree of gray or black). Grinding ink is a very slow and controlled process—one that many calligraphers feel is an important part of the preparatory period during which the artist must relax his/her body and opens and clears the mind for the intensity of the creative process.

Resources

China Art Cart materials

Power and Beauty Connection

Calligraphic intro area by Wang Dongling, the calligraphy is the title of the exhibit, Power and Beauty in China's Last Dynasty

For more on Wang Dongling, see bio information

Collection Connection

Calligraphic hanging scroll, one of a pair, 18th century, Shih Ko-fa, Ink on silk
2005.125.2 G218

Ink Stones and Ink Sticks - G217