

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Chinese Painters, by Raphael Petrucci

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CHINESE PAINTERS

RAPHAEL PETRUCCI

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A CRITICAL STUDY

BY

RAPHAEL PETRUCCI

TRANSLATED BY
FRANCES SEAYER

WITH A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE BY
LAURENCE BINYON

OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

AND WITH TWENTY-FIVE ILLUSTRATIONS IN DUOTONE

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PREFACE

A translator can have but one aim—to present the thought of the author faithfully. In this case an added responsibility is involved, since one who had so much to give to the world

has been taken in his prime. M. Petrucci has written at length of art in the Far East in his exhaustive work *La Philosophie de la Nature dans l'Art d'Extrême Orient* and elsewhere, and has demonstrated the wide scope of his thought and learning. The form and style in *Peintres Chinois* are the result of much condensation of material and have thus presented problems in translation, to which earnest thought has been given.

In deference to the author's wish the margin has not been overladen and only a short tribute, by one able to speak of him from personal knowledge, has been included, together with a few footnotes and a short bibliography of works of reference indispensable to the student who will pursue this absorbing study. The translator takes this opportunity to make grateful acknowledgement of her debt to the authors named, who have made such valuable information available, and to those friends who have read the manuscript and made many helpful suggestions.

FRANCES SEAVER

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

In Raphael Petrucci, who died early in 1917, the world has lost one of the ablest and most devoted students and interpreters of the art of the Far East. He was only forty-five years of age, in the prime of his powers, brimming with energy and full of enterprises that promised richly. Though he did not die in the field, he was none the less a victim of the war. He had exhausted himself by his labours with the Belgian ambulances at La Panne, for Belgium was his adopted country. He had a house in Brussels, filled with a collection of Chinese and Japanese art, and a little cottage near the coast just over the borders of Holland. He came of the great and ancient Sienese family of the Petrucci, but his mother was French and he spent much of his earlier life in Paris, before settling in Brussels and marrying one of the daughters of the painter Verwée. He had also spent some time in Russia. In Brussels he was attached to the Institut Solvay.

He was a man of science, a student of and writer on sociology and biology. He lectured on art and had a knowledge of the art of the world which few men in Europe rivalled. He wrote a philosophic novel, *La Porte de l'Amour et de la Mort*, which has run through several editions. He published a book on Michelangelo's poetry. At the same time he was a scientific engineer. When war broke out Petrucci was on his way home from Italy, where he had been engaged, I believe, on some large engineering project and he only got out of Switzerland into France by the last train which left Basle. He came to England for a time, looking after a number of Belgian refugees, including some very distinguished artists. At the end of 1914 he was engaged by the India office to do some valuable work in London on the collection of Chinese and Tibetan paintings brought back from Tun-huang by Sir Aurel Stein. He then worked at La Panne for the Belgian army hospital (he had had a medical training in his youth), went to Provence for a rest, fell ill and died in Paris after an operation.

Raphael Petrucci was a man who seemed to reincarnate the boundless curiosity and the

various ability of the men of the Italian Renaissance. But for some years before his death he had concentrated his powers chiefly on the study of Oriental art, of the Chinese language, and of Buddhist iconography. His most important work in this line is *La Philosophie de la Nature dans l'Art d'Extrême Orient*, a sumptuously printed folio published by Laurens in Paris, with illustrations by the *Kokka* Company, and written with as much charm as insight. Petrucci's knowledge of Chinese gave him an authority in interpreting Chinese art which writers on the subject have rarely combined with so much understanding of art in general, though as a connoisseur he was sometimes over-sanguine. His translation from a classic of Chinese art-criticism, originally published in a learned magazine, has lately appeared in book form. With his friend, Professor Chavannes, whose death, also in the prime of life, we have had to deplore still more recently, Petrucci edited the first volume of the splendid series *Ars Asiatica*. The present work, intended for the general reader and lover of art, illustrates his gift for luminous condensation and the happy treatment of a large theme.

A man of winning manners, a most generous and loyal friend, Petrucci wore his manifold learning lightly; with immense energy and force of character, he was simple and warm-hearted and interested in the small things as well as the great things of life.

LAURENCE BINYON

BRITISH MUSEUM
October, 1919

CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE BY THE TRANSLATOR	5
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE BY LAURENCE BINYON	7
INTRODUCTION	15

PART ONE. TECHNIQUE

I.	EQUIPMENT OF THE PAINTER	21
II.	REPRESENTATION OF FORMS	26
III.	DIVISION OF SUBJECTS	33
IV.	INSPIRATION	38

PART TWO. THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE PAINTING

I.	ORIGINS	45
II.	BEFORE THE INTERVENTION OF BUDDHISM	46
III.	THE INTERVENTION OF BUDDHISM	54
IV.	THE T'ANG PERIOD—7TH TO 10TH CENTURIES	58
V.	THE SUNG PERIOD—10TH TO 13TH CENTURIES	72
VI.	THE YÜAN PERIOD—13TH AND 14TH CENTURIES	92
VII.	THE MING PERIOD—14TH TO 17TH CENTURIES	114
VIII.	THE CH'ING PERIOD—17TH TO 20TH CENTURIES	131
	CONCLUSION	140
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	149

ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
I. Sculptured stones of the Han dynasty. Second to third centuries. Rubbings taken by the Chavannes expedition	23
II. Portion of a scroll by Ku K'ai-chih. British Museum, London	27
III. Kwanyin. Eighth to tenth centuries. Painting brought from Tun- huang by the Pelliot expedition. The Louvre, Paris	31
IV. Palace of Kiu Cheng-kung by Li Chao-tao. T'ang period. Collection of V. Goloubew	34
V. Portrait of Lü Tung-ping by T'êng Ch'ang-yu. T'ang period. Collection of August Jaccaci. Lent to the Metropolitan Museum, New York. [A]	39
VI. Painting by an unknown artist. T'ang period. Collection of R. Petrucci	47
VII. Geese. Sung period. British Museum, London	51
VIII. White Eagle. Sung period. Collection of R. Petrucci	59
IX. Horseman followed by two attendants. Sung period. Collection of A. Stoclet	63
X. Landscape in the style of Hsia Kuei. Sung period.	67

Collection of Martin White

XI.	Landscape by Ma Lin. Sung period. Collection of R. Petrucci	73
XII.	Mongol horseman returning from the Hunt, by Chao Mêng-fu. Yüan period. Doucet collection	77
XIII.	Pigeons by Ch'ien Hsüan. Yüan period. Collection of R. Petrucci	85
XIV.	Bamboos in monochrome by Wu Chên. Yüan period. Musée Guimet	93
XV.	Paintings of the Yüan or early Ming period. Style of the Northern School. Collection of R. Petrucci	97
XVI.	Portrait of a priest. Yüan or early Ming period. Collection of H. Rivière	101
XVII.	Horse. Painting by an unknown artist. Yüan or early Ming period. Doucet collection	105
XVIII.	Visit to the Emperor by the Immortals from on high. Ming period. British Museum, London	109
XIX.	Egrets by Lin Liang. Ming period. Collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Junior	115
XX.	Flowers and Insects. Ming period. Collection of R. Petrucci	119
XXI.	Landscape. Ming period. Bouasse-Lebel collection	125
XXII.	Beauty inhaling the fragrance of a peony. Ming period. Collection of V. Goloubew	133

XXIII.	Halt of the Imperial Hunt. Ming period. Sixteenth century. Collection of R. Petrucci	137
XXIV.	Painting by Chang Cheng. Eighteenth century. Collection of M. Worch	141
XXV.	Tiger in a Pine Forest. Eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. Collection of V. Goloubew	145

INTRODUCTION

Whatever its outward expression, human thought remains essentially unchanged and, throughout all of its manifestations, is fundamentally the same. Varying phases are but accidents and underneath the divers wrappings of historic periods or different civilizations, the heart as well as the mind of man has been moved by the same desires.

Art possesses a unity like that of nature. It is profound and stirring, precisely because it blends and perpetuates feeling and intelligence by means of outward expressions. Of all human achievements art is the most vital, the one that is dowered with eternal youth, for it awakens in the soul emotions which neither time nor civilization has ever radically altered. Therefore, in commencing the study of an art of strange appearance, what we must seek primarily is the exact nature of the complexity of ideas and feelings upon which it is based. Such is the task presented to us, and since the problem which we here approach is the general study of Chinese painting, we must prepare ourselves first to master the peculiarities of its appearance and technique, in order to understand later on the motives which inspired it.

While the first part of this study will carry us far from our habitual modes of thought, the second part will bring us back into a domain which our own philosophies, sciences and arts have already made familiar. Admittedly, Chinese painting is governed by distinctive ideas. Born of a civilization vastly different from our own, it may at times appear in a guise that seems incomprehensible. It would be astonishing, however, if Western intelligence were unable to grasp an aesthetic code of a magnitude which is too great to be ignored.

The progress of history and of criticism has given us the opportunity to reach a comprehension of the most peculiar formulas. Our culture is sufficiently broad to allow us to perceive the beauty of an Egyptian fresco or an Assyrian bas-relief as well as of a Byzantine mosaic or a painting of the Renaissance. We have therefore no excuse for remaining inaccessible to the art of the Far East and we have surely all the mental vigor that is requisite in order to accustom ourselves to the foreign nature of its presentation. It is in the realm of

painting that this foreign element is most noticeable. This is due partly to a special technique and partly to the nature of the doctrines which serve as its inspiration.

It behooves us then to acquaint ourselves with these new aspects of the human soul. That is the justification for this little book. It forms an introduction in which gaps are shown without attempt at concealment and is presented in all modesty.

PART ONE

TECHNIQUE

I. EQUIPMENT OF THE PAINTER

Where our painters have chosen wood or canvas as a ground, the Chinese have employed silk or paper. While our art recognizes that drawing itself, quite apart from painting, is a sufficient objective, drawing and painting have always been closely intermingled in the Far East. While the mediums used in Europe for painting in color, distemper, tempera and oil, led to an exact study of form, the colors employed by the Orientals—at times brilliant, at times subdued with an almost studied restraint—preserved a singular fluidity and lent themselves to undefined evanescences which gave them a surprising charm.

The early paintings were generally done on cotton, coarse silk or paper. In the eighth century, under the T'ang dynasty, the use of finer silk began. The dressing was removed with boiling water, the silk was then sized and smoothed with a paddle. The use of silken fabric of the finest weave, prepared with a thick sizing, became general during the Sung dynasty. Papers were made of vegetable fibres, principally of bamboo. Being prepared, as was the silk, with a sizing of alum, they became practically indestructible. Upon these silks and papers the painter worked with brush and Chinese ink, [1] color being introduced with more or less freedom or restraint.

The brushes are of different types. Each position of the brush conforms to a specific quality of the line, either sharp and precise or broad and quivering, the ink spreading in strong touches or thinning to delicate shades.

The colors are simple, of mineral or vegetable origin. Chinese painters have always avoided mixing colors so far as possible. From malachite they obtained several shades of green, from cinnabar or sulphide of mercury, a number of reds. They knew also how to combine mercury, sulphur and potash to produce vermilion. From peroxide of mercury they drew coloring powders which furnished shades ranging from brick red to orange yellow. During the T'ang dynasty coral was ground to secure a special red, while white was extracted from burnt oyster shells. White lead was later substituted for this lime white. Carmine lake they obtained from madder, yellows from the sap of the rattan, blues from indigo. To these must

be added the different shades of Chinese ink and lastly, gold in leaf and in powder.

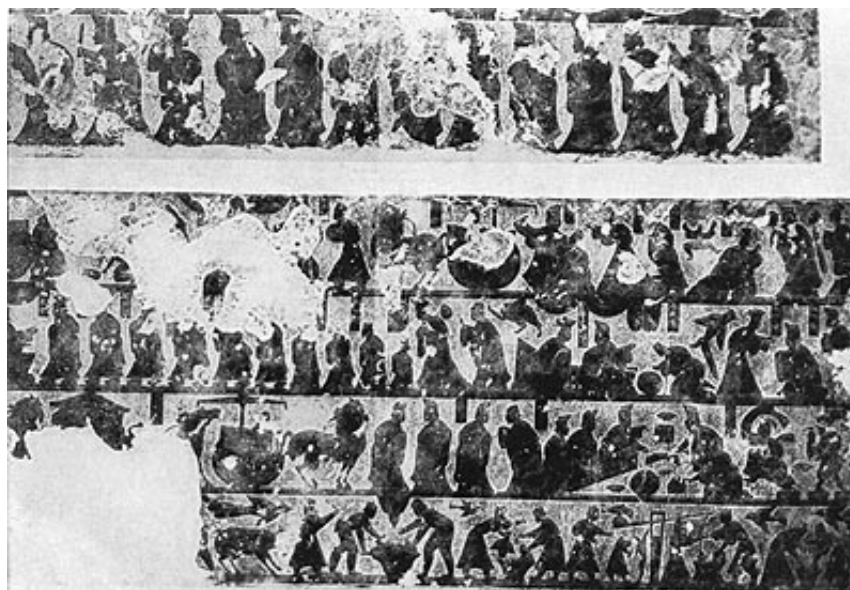


PLATE I. SCULPTURED STONES OF THE HAN DYNASTY
Second to Third Centuries. Rubbings taken by the Chavannes Expedition.

The brush-stroke in the painting of the Far East is of supreme importance. We know that this could not be otherwise if we recall that the characters in Chinese writing are ideographs, not actually *written*, but rather *drawn*. The stroke is not a mere formal, lifeless sign. It is an expression in which is reflected the beauty of the thought that inspired it as well as the quality of the soul of him who gives it form. In writing, as in painting, it reveals to us the character and the conception of its author. Placed at the service of certain philosophical ideas, which will be set forth later on, this technique was bound to lead to a special code of Aesthetics. The painter seeks to suggest with an unbroken line the fundamental character of a form. His endeavor, in this respect, is to simplify the objective images of the world to the extreme, replacing them with ideal images, which prolonged meditation shall have freed from every non-essential. It may therefore be readily understood how the brush-stroke becomes so personal a thing, that in itself it serves to reveal the hand of the master. There is no Chinese book treating of painting which does not discuss and lay stress upon the value of its aesthetic code.

II. REPRESENTATION OF FORMS

It has often been said that in Chinese painting, as in Japanese painting, perspective is ignored. Nothing is further from the truth. This error arises from the fact that we have confused one system of perspective with perspective as a whole. There are as many systems of perspective as there are conventional laws for the representation of space.

The practice of drawing and painting offers the student the following problem in descriptive geometry: *to represent the three dimensions of space by means of a plane surface of two dimensions*. The Egyptians and Assyrians solved this problem by throwing down vertical objects upon one plane, which demands a great effort of abstraction on the part of the observer. European perspective, built up in the fifteenth century upon the remains of the geometric knowledge of the Greeks, is based on the monocular theory used by the latter. In this system, it is assumed that the picture is viewed with the eye fixed on a single point. Therefore the conditions of foreshortening—or distorting the actual dimensions according to the angle from which they are seen—are governed by placing in harmony the distance of the eye from the scheme of the picture, the height of the eye in relation to the objects to be depicted, and the relative position of these objects with reference to the surface employed.



PLATE II. PORTION OF A SCROLL BY KU K'AI-CHIH
British Museum, London.

But, in assuming that the picture is viewed with the eye fixed on a single point, we put ourselves in conditions which are not those of nature. The European painter must therefore compromise with the exigencies of binocular vision, modify the too abrupt fading of forms and, in fine, evade over-exact principles. Thus he arrives at a *perspective de sentiment*, which is the one used by our masters.

Chinese perspective was formulated long before that of the Europeans and its origins are therefore different. It was evolved in an age when the method of superimposing different registers to indicate different planes was still being practiced in bas-reliefs. The succession of planes, one above the other, when codified, led to a system that was totally different from our monocular perspective. It resulted in a perspective as seen from a height. No account is taken of the habitual height of the eye in relation to the picture. The line of the horizon is placed very high, parallel lines, instead of joining at the horizon, remain parallel, and the different planes range one above the other in such a way that the glance embraces a vast space. Under these conditions, the picture becomes either high and narrow—a hanging

picture—to show the successive planes, or broad in the form of a scroll, unrolling to reveal an endless panorama. These are the two forms best known under their Japanese names of *kakemono* and *makimono*. [2]

But the Chinese painter must attenuate the forms where they are parallel, give a natural appearance to their position on different levels and consider the degree of their reduction demanded by the various planes. Even he must compromise with binocular vision and arrive at a *perspective de sentiment* which, like our own, while scientifically false, is artistically true. To this linear perspective is added moreover an atmospheric perspective.

Having elected from a very early time to paint in monochrome, Chinese painters were led by the nature of this medium to seek to express atmospheric perspective by means of tone values and harmony of shading instead of by color. Thus they were familiar with *chiaroscuro* before the European painters. Wang Wei established the principles of atmospheric perspective in the eighth century. He explains how tints are graded, how the increasing thickness of layers of air deprives distant objects of their true coloring, substituting a bluish tinge, and how forms become indistinct in proportion as their distance from the observer increases. His testimony in this respect is similar to that of Leonardo da Vinci in his "Treatise on Painting."



PLATE III. KWANYIN. EIGHTH TO TENTH CENTURIES
Painting brought from Tun-huang by the Pelliot Expedition. The Louvre, Paris.

III. DIVISION OF SUBJECTS

The Chinese divide the subjects of painting into four principal classes, as follows:

- Landscape.
- Man and Objects.
- Flowers and Birds.
- Plants and Insects.

Nowhere do we see a predominant place assigned to the drawing or painting of the human figure. This alone is sufficient to mark the wide difference between Chinese and European painting.

The exact name for *Landscape* is translated by the words *mountain and water picture*. They recall the ancient conception of Creation on which the Oriental system of the world is founded. The mountain exemplifies the teeming life of the earth. It is threaded by veins wherein waters continuously flow. Cascades, brooks and torrents are the outward evidence of this inner travail. By its own superabundance of life, it brings forth clouds and arrays itself in mists, thus being a manifestation of the two principles which rule the life of the universe.

The second class, *Man and Objects*, must be understood principally as concerning man, his works, his belongings, and, in a general sense, all things created by the hand of man, in combination with landscape. This was the convention in early times when the first painters whose artistic purpose can be formulated with certainty, portrayed the history of the legendary beings of Taoism,—the genii and fairies dwelling amidst an imaginary Nature. The records tell us, to be sure, that the early masters painted portraits, but it was at a later period that *Man and Objects* composed a class distinct from *Landscape*, a period responsible for those ancestral portraits painted after death, which are almost always attributable to ordinary artisans. Earlier they endeavored to apply to figure painting the methods, technique and laws established for an ensemble in which the thought of nature predominated. Special rules bearing on this subject are sometimes found of a very early date but there is no indication that they were collected into a definite system until the end of the seventeenth century. Up to the present time our only knowledge of their content is through a small treatise published at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The third class, *Flowers and Birds*, deals with those paintings wherein the Chinese gave rein to their fancy for painting the bird in conjunction with the plant life associated with its home and habits. The bird is treated with a full understanding of its life, and flowers are studied with such a comprehension of their essential structure that a botanist can readily detect the characteristics typical of a species, despite the simplifications which an artist always imposes on the complexity of forms.



PLATE IV. PALACE OF KIU CHENG-KUNG BY LI CHAO-TAO
T'ang Period. Collection of V. Goloubew.

This general class is subdivided. The epidendrum, the iris, the orchis and the chrysanthemum became special studies each of which had its own masters, both from the standpoint of painting itself, and of the application of the aesthetic rules which govern this art. The bamboo and the plum tree are also allied to this class. Under the influence of philosophic and symbolic ideas they furnished a special category of subjects to the imagination of the painter and form a division apart which has its own laws and methods, regarding which the Chinese treatises on Aesthetics inform us fully.

Finally, the fourth class, *Plants and Insects*, is based upon the same conception as that of *Flowers and Birds*. The insect is represented with the plant which is his habitat when in the stage of caterpillar and larva, or flying above the flowers and plants upon which he subsists on reaching the stage of butterfly and insect. Certain books add to this fourth class a subdivision comprising fishes.

Lastly we must note that in the Far East, as in Europe, there is a special class to be taken into consideration, *Religious paintings*. In China, this refers almost exclusively to Buddhist paintings.

IV. INSPIRATION

The aesthetic conceptions of the Far East have been deeply influenced by a special philosophy of nature. The Chinese consider the relation of the two principles, male and female, the *yang* and the *yin*, as the source of the universe. Detached from the primordial unity, they give birth to the forms of this world by ever varying degrees of combination. Heaven corresponds to the male principle, earth to the female principle. Everything upon the earth, beings, plants, animals or man is formed by the mingling of *yang* and *yin*. While the mountain, enveloped in mists, recalls the union of these two principles, the legend of forces thus revealed by no means pauses here. Fabulous or real, the animals and plants habitually seen in Chinese paintings express a like conception.

The dragon is the ancestor of everything that bears feathers or scales. He represents the element of water, the waters of the earth, the mists of the air, the heavenly principle. He is seen breaking through the clouds like some monstrous apparition, unveiling for an instant the greatness of a mystery barely discerned. The tiger is the symbol of the earthly principle, a personification of quadrupeds as distinct from birds and reptiles. His ferocious form lurks in the tempest. Defying the hurricane which bends the bamboos and uproots trees, he challenges the furies of nature that are hostile to the expression of the universal soul. The bamboo is the symbol of wisdom, the pine is the emblem of will-power and life. The plum tree in flower is a harmonious combination of the two principles. It symbolizes virginal purity.



PLATE V. PORTRAIT OF LÜ TUNG-PING BY T'ÊNG CH'ANG-YU

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