

# The Language of the Brush: Calligraphy

Calligraphy in the Chinese tradition is the art of painting characters, the written symbols of the Chinese language, with a brush and ink. Historically, calligraphy was considered one of the highest arts and calligraphers trained with discipline and focus to achieve a high level of skill and receive the admiration and praise of the court and their peers. The Four Treasures of the Study include paper, the brush, an ink stick and an ink stone. These materials are all that are needed to achieve the yin and yang qualities of black and white. Different styles of script developed over the years for different purposes, and the styles of great masters were emulated for their aesthetic and spiritual qualities.

Calligraphy remains an admired form of art, in spite of the modern abbreviation and simplification of characters and the use of computers as tools of communication, with standardized characters. Artists from other traditions, including Jack Wise, saw the beauty and expressiveness in calligraphic brush work, and began to seek ways to incorporate calligraphy into their own work. Many failed, however, to understand the discipline required to achieve truly great calligraphy.

## Chops: Calligraphic Seals

The brush work of some calligraphers is marked with a seal or chop, called tuzhang or t'u-chang in China. These seals are small pieces of glass, bone, horn or ivory, jade, wood, metal, stone or porcelain, sometimes with a decorative top, with an inscription carved in intaglio or relief on the bottom. When this small oval, square or round end is dipped into a red past and pressed onto paper, the image is left behind. Seal scripts are calligraphy, but they have a distinctive form, and the characters must be carefully balanced within the design of the chop. Chops date to 1100 B.C.E., and were adopted by Chinese government officials for documents. They began to be used by artists in the late 1200s, as painters applied their personal or artistic name to the corner of a work with a seal. The name of a studio, a message or a poem can also be incorporated into an artist's seal. It also became popular for owners to mark paintings with their chop, and the seal of the Emperor would be placed right in the centre of calligraphy in his collection.

Jack Wise's friend Lin Chien-Shih was a calligrapher and a seal carver. He made a dozen different chops for Jack. These were placed on Jack's own works and on the special art works of his students. It was a great honour to have one of Jack's chops on your work, like a "seal of approval"! They indicated many things, such as "No use to use", meaning that the art was for an aesthetic purpose and "Teaching without words", referring to both visual communication and Jack's often wordless teaching style.

Look at the examples of chops on the web page. See how the calligraphic characters fit together within the shape of the chop.

\*What would your chop say?

\*Would you use a poem, a name, a sign of the Zodiac or some other inscription on your chop?

\*How is a chop different from a signature?

\*What would people studying calligraphy be able to learn from the seals placed on a piece of calligraphy?

\*Create your own chop. Create a design on paper and transfer it onto something easy to carve, like a carrot or a piece of potato, or create your chop out of clay or wood.

Remember that when it is stamped, the design will reverse, so carve it as an opposite.

## Calligraphy from Other Traditions

Calligraphy is sometimes translated as "beautiful writing". This is appropriate for the Chinese tradition, but there are examples of calligraphy from other cultures that are very different. Calligraphy is most often found in a religious setting, whether it is for Buddhist sutras or part of the Taoist discipline, as in China, or in Christian Bibles, Jewish Torah Scrolls and the Islamic Qu'ran in other parts of the world. Few people were able to read during many periods of history, especially before the printing press made books more accessible to the average person, so scribes were hired to copy important texts for kings, monasteries and other wealthy patrons. These examples of calligraphy are very elaborate and often highly decorated with drawings or paintings known as illumination.

There are similarities with Chinese calligraphy, in the disciplined use of the brush and ink and the training and focus required, but there are major differences, as well. Chinese calligraphy uses characters, symbols that represent words, while Arabic, Latin and Hebrew scripts use an alphabet of individual letters, which are put together to create words or sounds.

## Visit These Calligraphic Traditions

Enter these web sites, which contain appropriate information and images, or find your own links. Or, find books in the library.

Islamic Calligraphy in Arabic:

[www.islamicart.com/main/calligraphy/](http://www.islamicart.com/main/calligraphy/)

Various Medieval European Scripts:

[www.tiac.net/users/waynem/calligraphy/](http://www.tiac.net/users/waynem/calligraphy/)

Chinese Calligraphy:

[www.chinapage.com/callig1.html](http://www.chinapage.com/callig1.html)

Look at examples of calligraphy from China and other Asian countries such as Japan and Taiwan. Compare them with Arabic script, or Medieval European manuscripts.

\*Which do you find the most beautiful? The most moving?

\*Do you think calligraphy is art? Why or why not?

\*Why do you think Jack Wise was so interested in Chinese calligraphy?

\*Do you think he could have incorporated other types of calligraphy into his paintings?

\*Do you think your own hand writing is calligraphy?

Look at the fonts available on your word processing programme.

\*Which ones do you think were based on the calligraphic tradition?