Chapter 1

Categories of Painting

Chinese painting can be divided into different categories in terms of subject content, medium, professional group, purpose of painting, instrument used, genre, and in many other ways depending on the purpose in classifying. Indeed, the prevalence of a certain category of painting in a particular period is often a result of contemporary social values, views, and standards. For example, during the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, literati painting [01|10] was highly advocated by the scholar-painters (scholars who also took up painting), emphasizing the expression of sentiment rather than a likeness of form [03|10]. According to early literature, a comprehensive and systematic way to categorize Chinese painting is by subject content across the thirteen different genres covering figures of immortals and deities, portraits of notable figures, depiction of daily life, etc., as propounded by Tao Zongyi (陶宗儀 1329–1410), an art historian of the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties. Due to technological advancements, different materials such as rock [01|03], grotto [01|01], silk [01|25], and paper [01|26], were also used as a medium for painting in different periods. From a cultural perspective, paintings are used on various occasions such as New Year celebrations [01|06] and in home decoration [01|23 & 01|24], and can be divided in this way. In terms of instruments, there are brush paintings [01|28] and finger paintings [01|27]. Another way of categorizing is by social group or profession: works can be done by literati, artisans [01|11], and academy or court painters [01|12 & 01|13]; they can also be the work of an individual or of several artists in collaboration [01|29].

While the methods of classification can never be exhaustively conclusive since new ways of interpreting traditional Chinese paintings [01|09] are continually evolving and it is a subjective process, the most common way of categorizing Chinese paintings is by grouping them into three broad genres: landscape paintings [01|20], figure paintings [01|21], and bird-and-flower paintings [01|22].

Thirteen genres of painting (*huajia shisan ke*)
畫家十三科

As mentioned, the thirteen genres of Chinese painting were classified by the eminent early Ming scholar Tao Zongyi (1329–1410) as recorded in one of his most famous texts, *Anecdotes After a Life of Farming* (*Nancun chuogeng lu* 南村輟耕錄). These traditional subject categories are, in order of importance:

The thirteen genres of Chinese painting were classified by the eminent early Ming scholar Tao Zongyi

01 Buddha and bodhisattva figures
02 The Emperor of Heaven and other Taoist deities
03 Additional heavenly guardians such as vajras (divine thunderbolts), arhats (saints), lesser deities, and priests
04 Sagacious beasts such as dragons and tigers, traditionally wreathed in clouds and winds
05 Notable figures
06 Landscape
07 Bamboo, flowers, and birds
08 Mules and other work animals
09 Utensils and implements
10 Buildings and architectural drawings
11 Other creatures
12 Farming and weaving
13 Ornaments and inlays

Tao was the first to propose the concept of subject categorization. What the above classification of Chinese painting also reveals is that among intellectuals, the most important type is portrait painting, whether it depicts religious figures, including the pictorial representation of legendary deities and immortals in human form, or notables and grandees. The depiction of nature, covering landscape and wildlife, ranks next followed by a third type capturing scenes of human activity complemented with tools, implements, dwellings, and other buildings.

01 | 01
Mural painting (*bi hua*)
壁畫

Mural painting refers to paintings on the walls or ceilings of palaces, temples, halls, caves, and tombs. It is one of the major types of painting that prevailed in ancient China before the Tang dynasty. The earliest mural painting originated as cliff-face painting [01 | 03] and provides a record of people's lives in the prehistoric period. In later periods, mural painting was almost exclusively dedicated to serving a didactic role in both ethical and religious contexts. Such use of painting is exhibited extensively in the Zhou dynasty before the Common Era. At that time, palaces, temples, and imperial tombs were customarily adorned with narrative paintings portraying moral and religious themes, or expressing Confucian values. They depict stories of chaste widows and dutiful sons, the portraits displaying distinctive facial features. Also, painting as a kind of ritual for liturgical purposes was a theme found in the murals of imperial temples of the emperors and ancestral shrines of senior officials.

Mural paintings continued to prevail during the Qin and Western Han dynasties around the start of the first century CE. Sumptuous mural paintings, particularly in palaces, played a significant role in expressing and honouring meritorious statesmen. Even tombs in the early period were also adorned with murals of sages. For instance, in one tomb belonging to the period of the Northern dynasties, an engraved painting of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (*Zhulin qi xian* 竹林七賢), who were a group of reclusive scholars and artists, was unearthed. During the mid-Tang dynasty before the turn of the first millennium, paintings on the walls of Buddhist or Taoist (Daoist) temples were customary both for their aesthetic beauty and to create a more sacral atmosphere. The most renowned murals, however, are those in the Dunhuang Grottoes, which were frescoed in the period from the Northern Wei dynasty in the 4th century to the Yuan dynasty in the 14th century. Other important sites of mural painting include the tomb of Princess Yongtai (永泰公主 who died in 701 at the age of 17), the tomb of Prince Zhanghuai (章懷太子 654–684) from the Tang dynasty, and the frescoes of the Yongle Temple (永樂宮) from the Ming dynasty.

Lecturing Buddha (藥師三尊), mural painting in Dunhuang Cave 322, Tang dynasty.

01 | 02
Buddhist banner painting (*fofan hua*)
佛幡畫

Buddhist banner painting refers to the painting of Buddhist figures or scenes of the life of the Buddha exhibited on silk banners, dedicated by devout Buddhist believers at temples as decorative displays in honour of the Buddha or at shrines as votive objects to demonstrate piety. These painted banners were usually composed

Banner of Samantabhadra (持盤菩薩像幡), Tang Dynasty, unearthed in Dunhuang.

by professional painters and sold to Buddhists, who would present them to a temple where they were affixed to a pole outside or hung from the eaves inside a monastery for blessing. In Tibet, the practice of lamas carrying the painted banners in ceremonial processions continues even up to today.

Buddhist banner painting began in the Wei and Jin dynasties in the 3rd century, following the introduction of Buddhism to China. Banner paintings brought from India and other nearby countries had a profound influence on the artist named Zhang Sengyou (張僧繇 active 490–540) in the 5th century. Zhang was regarded as one of the four great fathers of painting (*huajia si zu* 畫家四祖), along with Gu Kaizhi (顧愷之 ca. 344–405) of the Eastern Jin dynasty, Lu Tanwei (陸探微 ?–ca. 485) of the Southern dynasties, and Wu Daozi (吳道子 ca. 680–759) of the Tang dynasty, and he was given the order by Emperor Wu of the Liang (reigned 502–549) of the Southern dynasties to execute Buddhist paintings on the walls of imperial temples.

Buddhist banner painting became most popular during the Tang dynasty. The Tang-era banners are particularly abundant with floral creations, the decorative style of which later led to the emergence and development of bird-and-flower painting [01 | 22]. At the turn of the 20th century, a great number of Tang Buddhist banners were found in the Dunhuang Grottoes. Most of the extant Buddhist banner paintings are now in a collection in the British Museum though some surviving pieces have remained in the hands of Chinese collectors. The contemporary master, Chang Da-chien (張大千 1899–1983) was the first modern-era artist to imitate this kind of painting, and remains one of the most famous to do so.

01 | 03

Cliff painting (*yan hua*)

岩畫

Cliff painting refers to paintings on the walls of caves, which were engraved and/or drawn in the prehistoric period. Cliff painting can be coloured drawings or just line carvings, depicting religious rituals and human activities such as hunting and fishing, which vary from place to place and time to time. The painting itself was a tool for recording the economic and social affairs of people at that time. It also conveyed messages and information about how they were threatened by the wild and cruel environment and how they survived.

Cliff paintings can be found all over China, especially in the northern and western areas. The most prominent ones are the rock paintings found on Mount Helan (賀蘭山) in Yinchuan, Ningxia, located in north-western China. Helan rock

A representation of Siberia cliff painting of deer through brushstroke by Jao Tsung-i.

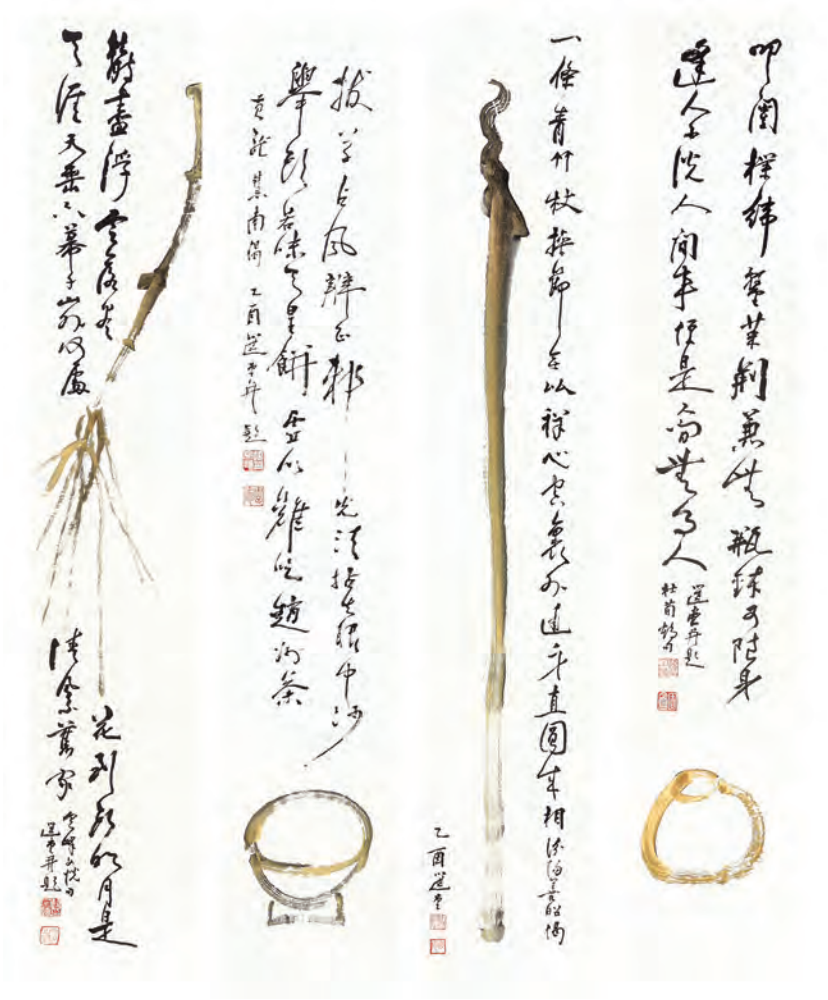
paintings were carved by ancient nomadic tribes. They depict topics such as animals, human figures, tools, weapons, buildings and celestial phenomena, and are of both great historical value and archaeological significance.

01 | 04
Cloth painting (*bo hua*)
帛畫

Cloth painting refers to paintings executed on various kinds of cloth. In ancient times, cloth paintings were mainly used as ritual decorations in a place of worship, to ward off evil, or to furnish tombs. Such paintings experienced prominence during the period from the ancient Zhou dynasty to the Han dynasty as evidenced from samples which have been unearthed. The most renowned examples are those which have been found in the tombs at Ma Wang Dui near Changsha, Hunan, in central China. A common motif, as evidenced by these rediscovered cloth paintings is the depiction of the legendary forebears Nü Wa (女媧) and Fu Xi (伏羲) whose offspring populated the earth.

Although different types of cloth were used as a medium, artists after the Han dynasty in the 2nd century BCE tended to favour silk. The only extant cloth painting from the later Song dynasty is currently kept in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan.

An imitation of cloth painting of *Lady with Dragon and Phoenix* (龍鳳仕女圖), Chu State of Warring States (475–221 BC) by Jao Tsung-i [01|04].



A tetraptych of *Zen Symbolic Accessories* (墨繪禪門四事四屏), Zen painting with simple brushstrokes by Jao Tsung-i [01|05].

01 | 05
Zen painting (*chán hua*)
禪畫

The term "Zen" is a romanized Japanese word equivalent to the Chinese character *Chán* 禪 (sometimes called "*Chán* painting"), and represents a meditative school of Buddhism which emphasizes experiential enlightenment. Zen paintings traditionally depict a Zen or peaceful atmosphere through a free sketching style. Common motifs include a pictorial representation of a Zen monk's quotation, portraits of Zen monks or other Buddhist figures. These paintings are composed of various layers of monochromatic ink and are characterized by their free, effortless, natural style and simplicity, intended to symbolize the sudden illumination inherent in Zen.

This style of painting was disseminated during the Song and Yuan dynasties in the early centuries of the second millennium, and quite a number of Zen monks were also well-known Zen painters. The most eminent example is a pair of paintings known as *The Sixth Patriarch Tearing the Buddhist Classic* (六祖撕經圖) and *The Sixth Patriarch Cutting the Bamboo* (六祖截竹圖) by Liang Kai (梁楷 ca. 1140–1210) of the Southern Song dynasty. Both paintings are now in the collection of the Osaka Municipal Museum of Art in Japan. Other exemplary Zen paintings include *Six Persimmons* (六柿圖) (see painting in 03 | 21) by Muxi (牧谿 ca. 1210–1269) of the Southern Song dynasty (now kept in the Zen temple Ryūkō-in of Daitoku-ji 大德寺, in Kyoto) and *Grapevines* (葡萄) by Wen Riguan (溫日觀 active in 13th century) of the Yuan dynasty.

01 | 06

New Year pictures

(*nian hua*)

年畫

A New Year picture or painting (*nian hua*, literally "picture of year"; also called *xi hua*, literally "picture of happiness" 喜畫), as its name implies, is a folk painting used to decorate the home during the celebrations of the Lunar or Chinese New Year ("Spring Festival" in Chinese). It usually depicts auspicious and propitious images such as Zhong Kui and other Taoist gods to connote luck, prosperity, and happiness, and is specially designed to herald the approach of spring with aspirations and good wishes.

Zhong Kui Leading a Bat–Symbol of Luck (引福鍾馗), red print New Year picture, by anonymous painter, contemporary. Zhong Kui, the legendary ghostbuster, is depicted inducing a bat which is a symbol of luck.

New Year paintings in the pre-Qin period before the Common Era typically bore images of deities and spirits to usher in good luck and fend off evil. A thousand years later in the Tang dynasty, images of "door gods" deployed as charms or "guardian angels" of houses became common. This custom developed the practice adopted by Emperor Tang Taizong (唐太宗 reigned 626–649) of the Tang dynasty who hung portraits of his two loyal generals, Qin Shubao (秦叔寶 571–638) and Yuchi Jingde (尉遲敬德 585–658), on the two panels of the front door, instead of guarding the door with real sentries, as an indication of no admittance to prevent disturbance by his officials.

New Year paintings further proliferated during the Song dynasty due to the advancement of woodblock printing technology. More patterns were produced with diverse subjects, including auspicious rebuses, chubby babies [08 | 50], sagacious beasts and seasonal flowers, the kitchen (stove) god (the guardian deity who returns to heaven on the 26th or 27th of the very last month of the lunar year to report to the Jade Emperor about the household and returns back on the 4th of the first month) and gods of wealth [08 | 41], Buddhist and Taoist subjects, pictures of folk tales, legends and narratives, and scenes from operas or daily life, all portraying festive joy and warm conviviality. Xylographic *nian hua* continued to flourish in the post-Song period and reached its peak in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The oldest extant New Year pictures were produced in the Ming and Qing periods.

01 | 07

Colour and ink painting (*caimo hua*)

彩墨畫

The three-character Chinese term *cai mo hua* carries dual meaning. First, colloquially, it simply refers to paintings executed with colour and ink. Second, it can also mean the traditional Chinese colour painting that is usually drafted and sometimes outlined with ink prior to the application of colour. However, a modern interpretation of *cai mo hua* is suggested by some contemporary artists such as Xu Beihong (徐悲鴻 1895–1953): they use the term to describe the modern Chinese painting that utilizes Western watercolours and Chinese ink on traditional rice paper or Xuan paper [10 | 0310]. The fusion of ink and colour combined with brushstrokes of various strengths produces a wide range of effects on the fast-absorbing painting medium when the mixed liquid of ink and watercolour flows or wicks along the paper fibres. Such unique diffusion of colour makes this type of painting visually very different from the traditionally composed Chinese painting mentioned above. Painters of this new stylistic school of colour and ink painting include Lin Fengmian (林風眠 1900–1991) and Wu Guanzhong (吳冠中 1919–2010).

01 | 08

Modern ink painting (*xiandai shuimo hua*)

現代水墨畫

Modern ink painting originated in the mid-20th century in Hong Kong and Taiwan and was espoused by contemporary artists such as Lü Shoukun (呂壽琨 1919–1975) and Liu Kuo-sung (劉國松 b. 1932). Both Lü and Liu are recognized as the earliest masters of modern Chinese ink painting and were famous proponents of the genre, introducing and lecturing on the concept and techniques in local universities during their sojourn in Hong Kong. This type of modern ink painting is regarded as representing continuity through reinterpretation of the style and essence of traditional Chinese brush painting, sometimes integrated with Western ideas, materials, tools, and techniques but never sundering its links with Chinese tradition. One of the major forms of this fusion category is landscape painting, emphasizing both the traditional practice of sketching natural scenery and various unconventional brush techniques and ink usage.

Landscape (山水), modern ink painting by Lü Shoukun (呂壽琨 1919–1975).

Birds in the Red Leaves (紅葉小雀), colour and ink painting by Lin Fengmian (林風眠 1900–1991).

01 | 09

Traditional painting (*chuantong huihua*)

傳統繪畫

Waterfall (山高水長), traditional landscape painting by He Tianjian (賀天健1890–1977).

Traditional painting refers to the mainstream painting of a specific period. The traditional painting of a particular period not only displays the prosperity and tastes of that period but also reflects the social, philosophical, or political convictions of the period and the artist. Therefore, traditional painting should not be simplistically interpreted as painting in a traditional style or in any way which makes it seem synonymous with "archaic" or "conservative". Different kinds of traditional paintings dominated in different eras. For example, in the Tang dynasty, frescoes were the traditional painting whereas in the early Qing dynasty the painting that followed the style of the Yuan masters were considered traditional.

From the Song and Yuan period onward, beginning around the last century of the first millennium, despite the dynastic transfer of sovereignty and the impact of external influences, mainstream Chinese painting was still able to retain its traditional essence of learning from the past and emulating the great masters as a foundation for innovation. Therefore, the term "traditional Chinese painting", despite its appearance, implies something that is ever-changing and ever-developing in technique, form, and/or subject. The essence of traditional Chinese painting is the expression of the artists' perception of life and nature; their ideas add aesthetic beauty to the composition of their paintings.

Orchid (墨蘭), one of the Four Gentlemen, typical literati painting motif, by Jiang Yujian (蔣予檢 19th century), Qing dynasty.

01 | 10

Literati painting (*wenren hua*)

文人畫

Literati paintings refer to the paintings by intellectuals who were usually government officials, generally known as *shidafu* (士大夫) in the dynastic periods prior to the establishment of modern China in 1912. These upper-class intellectuals were not professional artists in the sense that they did not need to make their living by drawing and painting; instead, they created their artworks for pleasure, as a means of entertainment as well as self-expression. This attitude towards painting first appeared as early as in the Han dynasty among certain intellectuals. However, the earliest concept of literati painting as a category was not defined until the Northern Song dynasty. The great Song artist and noted statesman, Su Shi (蘇軾 1037–1101), and his circle, used the term *shiren hua* (士人畫), literally "painting by the scholar-officials", to describe in general the paintings by those amateur artists who were "non-professionals" but literati, in order to differentiate the works from those done by folk artists and other peers who were artisan painters engaged either in the Imperial Painting Academy [01 | 12] or Imperial Court [01 | 13].

These amateur but distinctive scholar-official paintings are mainly executed with monochrome ink or just with minimal colours, emphasizing expressive

spontaneity rather than meticulous details, and disregarding all strictures and concerns of realism and naturalism. This painting style was particularly popular in the Mongolian Yuan dynasty, a period of instability when many intellectuals opted to stay away from the ruling class. Paintings from this period are permeated with motifs reflecting a kind of scholarly nature, indicating the intrinsic virtues and values of an ethical man, commonly displaying these noble characteristics through the representation of the "four gentlemen" (plum, orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo) [06 | 0303] or of a recluse wandering through mountains or fishing in streams.

About 500 years after Su Shi, Dong Qichang (董其昌 1555–1636) of the Ming dynasty used a similar term, *wenren hua* ("literati painting" 文人畫), to formalize the categorization. Dong also broadly divided paintings into Northern and Southern Schools [05 | 0201–0202] but highly favoured the paintings of the Southern School. Dong further grouped those painters who were capable of painting landscape and imbuing it with a romantic atmosphere into the Southern School sect, whereas those who could not belonged to the Northern School. From this time, the Southern School painting was referred to, by and large, as "literati painting". Since then, and until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911, literati painting style became the orthodox style of Chinese painting.

01 | 11

Artisan painting (*gongjiang hua*)
工匠畫

Paintings done by professional artists, including folk painters or artisan painters who were commissioned to make New Year pictures [01 | 06] and temple mural paintings, are generally referred to as artisan paintings. Artisan paintings could also include all those "non-literati" paintings done by any artist except the literati. However, such categorization did carry some pejorative sense of discrimination.

Artisan painters, who underwent serious technical training from masters, were frequently criticized for placing too much concern and stress on form, colour, realism, and accuracy. For example, Qiu Ying (仇英 1509–1551), one of the four great masters of the Ming dynasty, was regarded by Dong Qichang (1555–1636) as a non-literati painter. Qiu's works were not even considered outstanding by Dong because Qiu started his painting profession as a lacquer worker. Nevertheless, such kind of biased thinking against artisanal painting began to change in the early twentieth century, and has now almost disappeared, especially from the perspective of connoisseurs.

Kui Xing (魁星踢斗 *Chief Star kicking the Dipper*), by anonymous painter, late Qing Dynasty, used as the original draft for woodblock printing. A painting of the god Chief Star portrayed with eight Chinese characters depicting the four virtues of Confucianism—*zheng xin* (rectify the mind 正心), *xiu shen* (cultivate the self 修身), *ke ji* (restrain desire 克己), *fu li* (resume the rites 復禮). This painting connotes the success in examinations as Kui Xing is regarded as the god of literature.