

Sumi-e

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In Japanese “Sumi” means black ink and “e” is picture or painting, so a sumi-e is a wash painting that uses black ink and a brush.

History

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the sumi-e style of painting was introduced from China to Japan as part of Zen Buddhism. It flourished as an art form during the Japanese Muromachi period (1333 - 1573). By the end of the 14th century, Sumi-e landscapes had found patronage by the ruling Ashikaga family and became the preferred genre among Zen painters, thus gradually evolving from its Chinese roots to a more Japanese style.



Autumn and Winter Landscapes by Sesshu, 15th century Japan

Typical subjects of paintings were portraits of important priests, landscapes, bamboo, flowers, birds and animals. Suiboku style developed in the beginning of the Muromachi period (1338-1573), it was known as black painting. The use of lines and different techniques like dry brush and slow and fast strokes were being used with the infinite shades of black to produce paintings. Zen priests were instrumental in the development of the Suiboku style and the rise of landscape paintings. By the middle of the 1400's a

Zen style known as shigajiku became popular, it was a picture on a hanging scroll with a poetic inscription. Other techniques evolved including splashed ink and broken ink during the 1500's.

Four Treasures

The four treasures refer to the tools of the artist. They are the following: Ink, Ink Stone, Brushes and Paper.

Traditionally, sumi or the ink-stick is made of pine, oil or charcoal soot combined with animal glue and sometimes for special inks; crushed pearls were added to the mixture when producing the sticks. The older the sumi is the better. Ink maker's held a valued place in society as craftsmen and often the ink sticks were highly decorated.

The suzuri or ink stone required a very smooth surface to allow the artist to grind their own ink-stick to obtain ink. Slate is the preferred stone, as it is very smooth and impermeable. An artist puts a few drops of water on an ink-stone and grinds the ink-stick in a circular motion until a smooth, black ink of the desired concentration is made. Ink stones often featured exquisite engraving and a lid to help keep the ink from drying out during use.

Fude or brush are similar to the brushes used for calligraphy and are traditionally made from bamboo with goat, cattle, horse, sheep, rabbit, marten, badger, deer, boar or wolf hair. The brush hairs are tapered to a fine point, a feature vital to the style of wash paintings. Different brushes have different qualities. A small wolf-hair brush that is tapered to a fine point can deliver an even thin line of ink. A large wool brush can hold a large volume of water and ink and can be used for shading.

Washi or paper was often the artist choice for the drawings. Paper in medieval Japan came in several different qualities determined by the fiber and glue composition. There were over 100 different types of paper produced in Japan that varied based on the chemicals and the fibers used. Japanese paper was made using fibers from the bark of the gampi tree, the mitsumata shrub, mulberry bush, bamboo, hemp, rice and wheat. Paper was normally made in the cold seasons to keep the glue used in the process from going bad, cold water also caused the fibers to contract and made a better quality of paper. Provinces that were known for quality paper production were Awa, Bizen, Etchu, Echizen, Ise, Iwami, Mino and Tosa. Farmers often made paper to supplement their income during the winter.

The four Gentleman

Four basic brush strokes comprise almost all the sumi-e paintings; once these four strokes are mastered any painting can be done. Mastering these strokes required practice and great effort as traditionally, once a stroke is painted, it cannot be changed or erased. This makes ink and washes painting a technically demanding art-form requiring great skill, concentration, and years of training. The four strokes consisted of Bamboo, Plum Blossom, Chrysanthemum and Orchid.

Bamboo is one of the most popular subjects painted. It is a symbol of summer, peace and strength. Bamboo is made up of canes, joints, branches and leaves and it is painted in that order.

The plum blossom is associated with the end of winter. The branches are painted then the flowers. The flowers use two different brush strokes, outline and solid strokes. You should never mix the different strokes in one painting.

Chrysanthemums are the symbol of fall, as they will bloom even when it gets cold. Two styles are used with the same rules that apply to plum blossoms. The flower is painted first with the leaves and stem completed to finish the painting.

The orchid, delicate and elegant is the symbol of spring. The strokes of the orchid are the most difficult to master. Orchids are painted single or in groups with the leaves being painted first.

Samurai and Sumi-e

Throughout its long and venerable history, Sumi-e has been held in high esteem and became a powerful way to show the values of the painter. Practiced by Zen monks as a form of meditation it was also adopted by the samurai class. For the swordsman, composure on the brink of battle had its artistic parallel in the calm and tranquility essential before the fearless release of a brush stroke. Embodying the honorable ancient warrior codes, Sumi-e was a metaphor for the ephemeral world of the Samurai.

Painting

I strive to use the materials as was found in the 1500 Japan. My material list follows:

- Traditional ink sticks.
- Ink stones.
- Paper
- Animal hair brushes

The steps involved in painting are:

1. Prepare the work area; I prepare to paint by gathering all my materials and organizing them on my work surface.
2. Make my paper choice. I have used rice paper, bamboo paper, palm fiber paper, water color paper and card stock. The paper affects the ink absorption and the final color after the ink dries.



Work area. Rice paper, brushes, brush holder, ink stone and ink stick and the water dish.

3. Grind my ink, in this step I try to make enough ink to do several drawings; I know that I will need to practice a little before starting a drawing and it normally takes several attempts to get the image that I am doing. If I have to stop and grind more ink, it causes the consistency to change and affects the color.



Grinding the ink, it takes about 10 minutes to grind enough ink for practice and one drawing.

4. Practice the strokes that I will be using on paper similar to what I am going to paint on, this allows me to judge my hand and to see how absorbent the paper is and the required wetness of the brush.
5. Take several deep breaths and picture what I want to paint.
6. In all honesty, it always seems that I make a mistake in the first couple of painting which destroys the attempt and I start over. As Sumi-e painting does not allow the artist to correct mistakes.
7. Let the painting dry over night and make a final judgment on its worth.
8. Stamp the drawing with my name stamp and my chop.

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