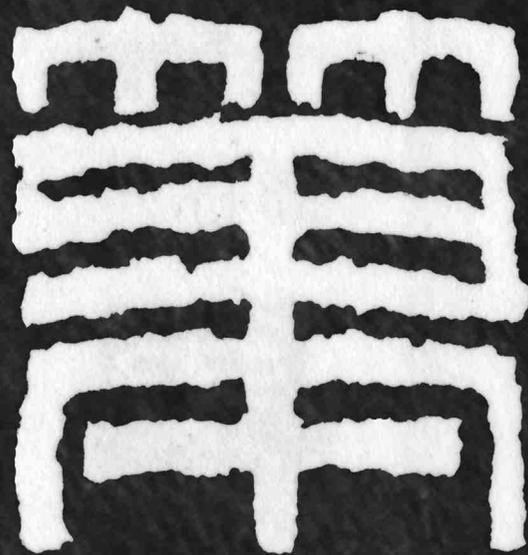


BRUSH
INK
MIND

the practice of chinese calligraphy & painting

FREDERIC WONG



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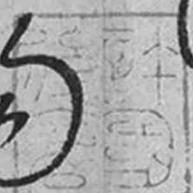


然如未結者也

吾人亦若也

見古詩也

友杖鉤西表上



FOREWORD

我見黃河水
凡經多少清
水流如激箭
人世如浮萍



The practice of calligraphy is a refining of the spirit.

■ Liu Xi-zai, 19th c.

Travel back in time with me, when I was eight or nine years old. I couldn't wait to come home after school to practice calligraphy or painting. Somehow it was fun to copy the same page of calligraphy hundreds of times. Or copy the same tree my teacher painted for me. Looking back, I can see a kind of inspiration. You know, a child's kind of inspiration - he knows in his heart if he wears that Superman cape and practices flying, he will learn to fly. And in his mind, he does fly like Superman. My superheroes have always been the Chinese calligraphers and painters from hundreds of years ago, who created works of supernatural beauty. I imagine that if I copy their work, I can write or paint like them. And I am still at it.

Have you ever been mesmerized watching an artist at “play”? Seeing their whole body and being connect with their art. Feeling their love for what they do. I remember my first pottery class, and that magic feeling, watching the teacher center a piece of clay on a wheel. Then it was our turn to try. We were pretty amused by the mess I made. The little lump of clay gyrated my body, took control of me, and then flew off the wheel. And before that magical day was over, we all learned how to center.

Like pottery, the way to learn brush and ink is by doing. I hope this book helps you “do”, and by doing, bring art into your being. Let's search for beauty. Let's bring the beauty of Chinese calligraphy and painting into our being. Let's create a space for play.

For over a thousand years, the Chinese have considered the two art forms of calligraphy and painting essentially the same. So in this book, I sometimes refer to calligraphy, sometimes to painting.

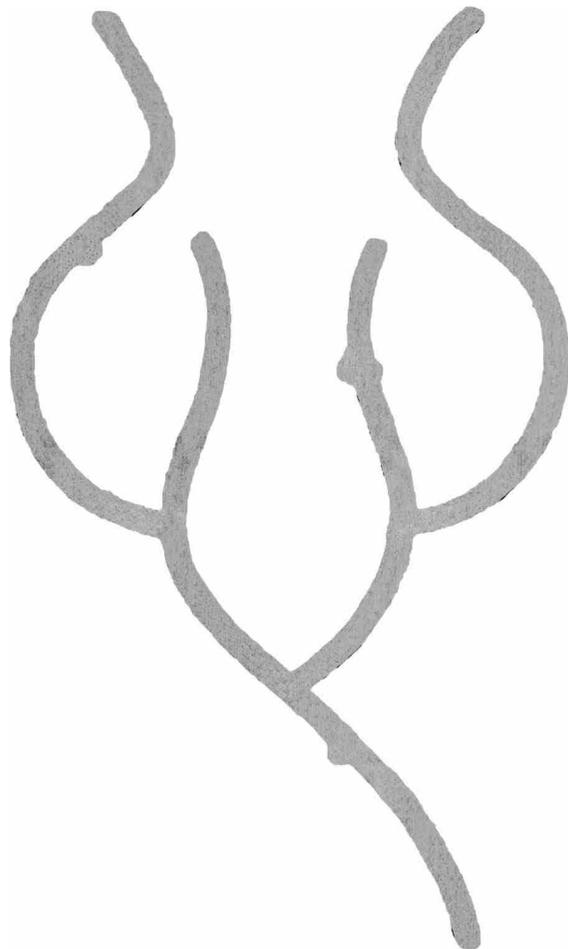
Painting (also calligraphy) comes from ink; ink flows from the brush, brush from the wrist, wrist from the heart ... just as all things come from earth, are born in heaven.

■ Shi Tao, 17th - 18th c.

I encourage you to take time. Practice writing calligraphy daily for thirty to sixty minutes. Enjoy the time like you're eating an ice cream cone. Savor each bite. When it is all done, you are satisfied and you look forward to the next time. Writing is both effort and leisure. It is effort because you have to focus and be present. It is leisure because you have to slow down, do only one thing at a time, and forget your “chores”.

If you use this book with children, read the book and practice the exercises yourself, then help the children with the exercises. Let them copy the way you do. Encourage them to do the exercises slowly and step by step. Follow the steps diligently.

Let's play.



VI

IMAGES OF THE HEART

Calligraphy flows from emptiness, alternating with fullness. When the feet are planted firmly on the ground, this fullness of the lower body lets the upper body flow in emptiness. Thus from lower body to upper body, upper body to shoulder, shoulder to elbow, to wrist, to fingers, to brush. The brushstroke, in its fullness, penetrates right through the paper, and in its emptiness, breathes life onto the surface of the paper.

■ Cheng Yao-tian, 18th - 19th c.

The daily ritual. I hope writing the beautiful words in the upcoming pages improves your technique and nourishes your spirit. Read the word's literal and symbolic meanings. As you write each word, daydream on its meanings. The ink trails you leave are more than words or pictures; they are also traces of you. Become part of the word: write, restore, refine, beautify. Make yourself flow. Aim at the target and let the arrow go.

Over several thousand years, Chinese writing evolved from pictographs into many different script types, all of which are used for artistic expression today. For each word, the model you copy is a beautiful early example, that is either a pictograph (or very close descendent). Each word is pictured in four ways. The white writing on black background is your main guide to copy. The black writing on white background is how the word looks in ink. The third white writing includes the stroke order and direction. The fourth,

in the top right, is the “standard script”, the script that we use nowadays for everyday purposes.



谷

STROKE DIRECTION AND ORDER

Each stroke has a direction. Horizontal stroke goes from left to right. Vertical stroke goes from top to bottom. The bottom right diagram for each word shows you which stroke to do first (numbers) and what direction each stroke takes (arrows). Some of the common rules for stroke order in a word are: high stroke before low, left before right, horizontal before vertical, middle before left and right.

LOOKING AT CALLIGRAPHY

The examples of calligraphy masterpieces in this book have inspired me to practice, and I hope they inspire you. When you study them, remember each line goes from top to bottom, and the lines go from right to left.

THE WAY OF PRACTICE

Write the same words for at least several days, so that the stroke formation, the stroke order and direction and the accompanying energy are stored in your body. Until you are completely comfortable with the stroke order and direction, first write each word in the air without the brush, then write each word in the air with the brush. You may find having larger words (6 to 12 inches wide) helpful to guide your arm movements in the air. Use a photocopier to enlarge the square 300% to 600%. Once you write in the air enough times, write it on paper. Keep the brush straight. Always breathe when you write.

How do you copy the words? Tracing words is an old and beneficial practice. Photocopy each page; lay the paper on top to trace. You can also photocopy each page onto newsprint, and write directly into the white word. A new kind of fill in the blanks. When you have traced enough times to know the brush/arm movements and the stroke direction and order, you can copy with the model next to the paper.

First copy as exactly as possible, looking frequently at your work and at the model. Then look at the model with complete absorption, and put brush to paper without looking at the model again.

As calligrapher Kazuaki Tanahashi describes:

Copy the process, the posture, the way of holding the brush, the order of the strokes, the way of putting pressure on paper, the brush moving in the air, the breathing, feeling, and thinking.¹

■ Kazuaki Tanahashi, 20th c.



MAKING PROGRESS

When I see my old writing, I hate it and want to burn it. Delighted,
Mei Yaosou says to me, “My friend, you have made progress.”

■ Song Zijing, 11th c.

One learns, after all, by failing.²

■ Carla Needleman, 20th c.

When you compare your words to the model, you may find many faults with yours. It is like a voice saying “No” to you. “But it is a No grounded in a bigger Yes. The Yes of possibility...”³ For me, my painting teacher provided an enormous Yes. His writing was effortless. He was always enthusiastic like a child, reflective, clear, and deep like a calm lake. Since you may be your own teacher, treat yourself kindly.

Look through your practice sheets at the end of each week. These sheets can encourage as well as discourage. It can recall a bad day when you can't do any stroke right. In fact, that is reason enough to celebrate, because your eye makes progress first, then your hand. So if you find your writing unsatisfactory, that means your eye has learned. Be patient, and your hand and body will catch up.

Before you write, empty the desire for beauty, and beauty comes.

The secret to writing is studying more and writing more. Most people fret about not writing enough, yet they are lazy about studying. Each sheet they write, they expect it to be the best. How impossible! If you write diligently, learn to recognize your writing's faults and weakness, you need no one else to point them out.

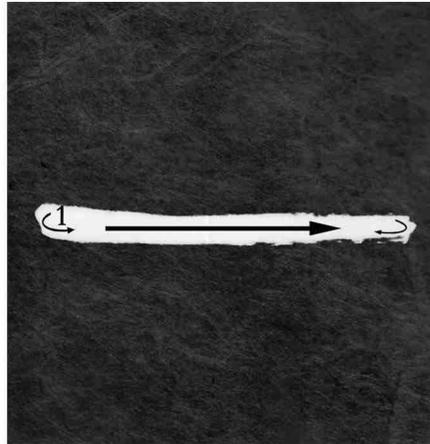
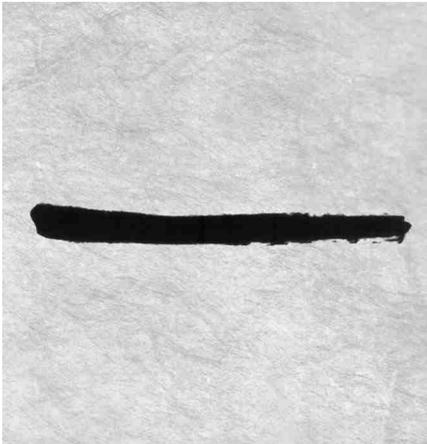
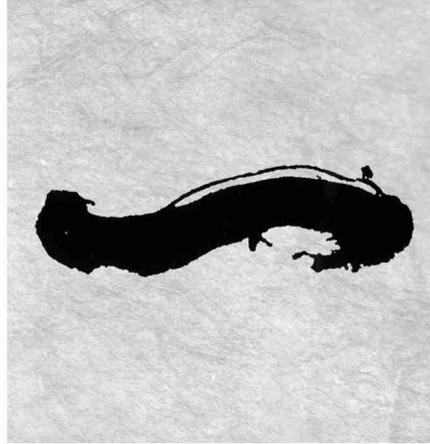
■ Su Shi, 11th c.

For inspiration, look at calligraphy masterpieces. Find them in some of the books and websites listed in the “books to read” section.

Other visual elements to ponder. How does the word fit in a square space? Look at the word and its negative space. Another element is brush energy, which the Chinese call “bone and flesh”. Bone is the structure and strength, flesh the life and vitality. In the beginning learning stages, focus more on the bone, that is, on the strength of the lines.

Do not fear mistakes – there are none.

■ Miles Davis, 20th c.



ONE

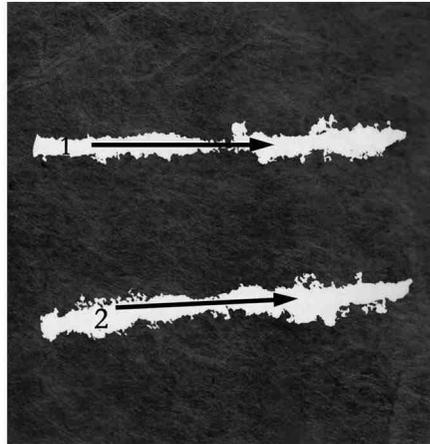
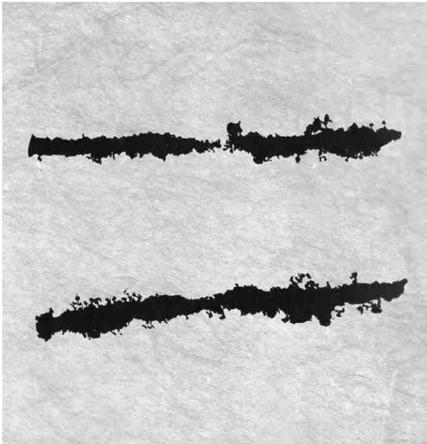
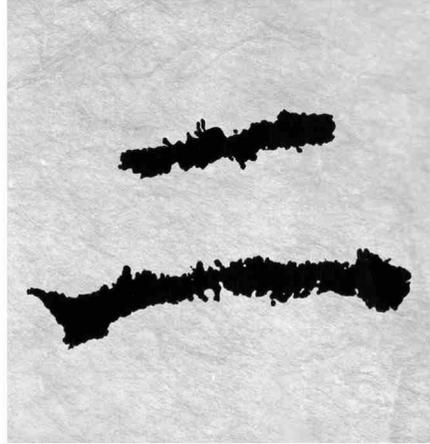
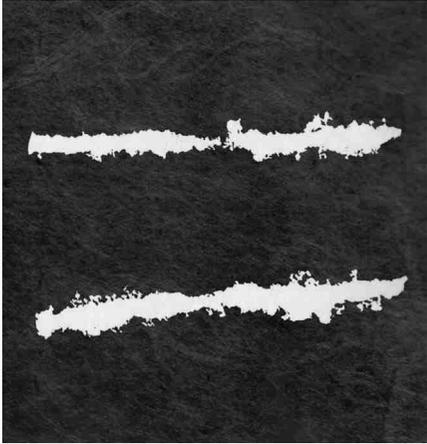
One is the one line, the line without beginning and end, the undifferentiated world. Completeness, unity.

Motion within stillness, stillness within motion.

▣ Daoist saying

First left, slowly thrust right, return left.

Practice in the air without brush. Practice in the air with brush. Practice on paper. Have “one” in your body/arm/hand/brush before you go on to “two”.

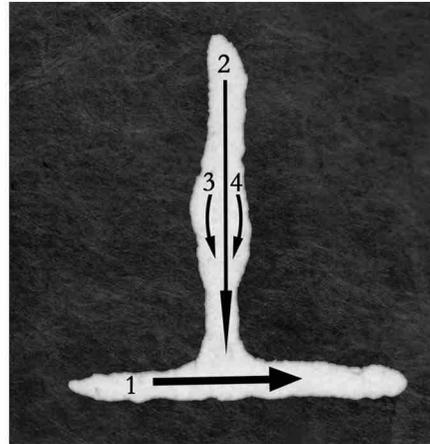
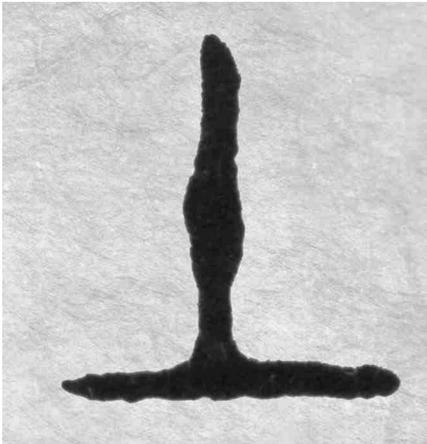
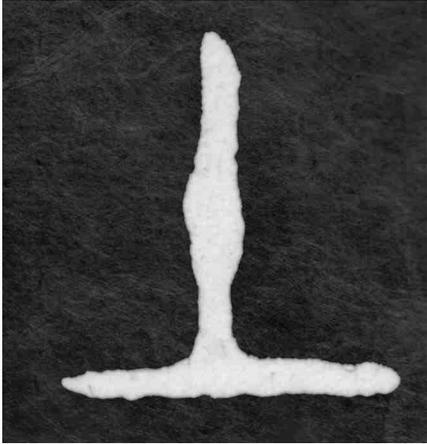


TWO

Two lines. It is the world of complements, pairs. From the two comes everything. Two is the male and female, light and dark, stillness and movement, heaven and earth, receiving and giving, yang and yin. Therefore the two lines are different, and connected. The one transforming, flowing into the other, the two becoming one.

You cannot convey dao by speaking or not speaking.
Away with both, you'll penetrate the nature of dao.

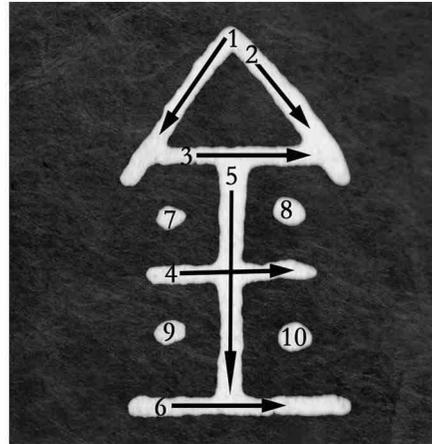
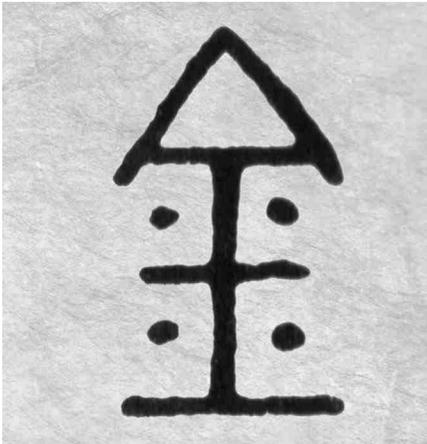
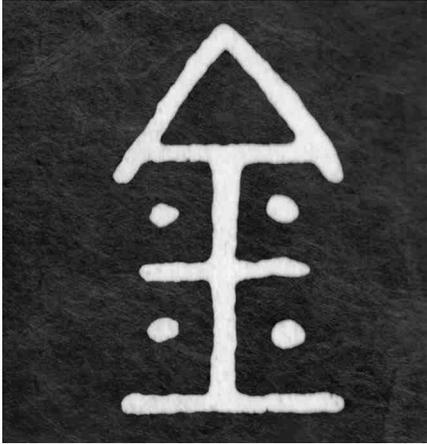
■ Zhuangzi, 4th - 3rd c. BCE



EARTH

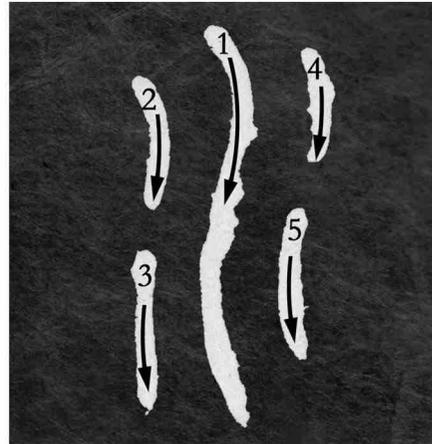
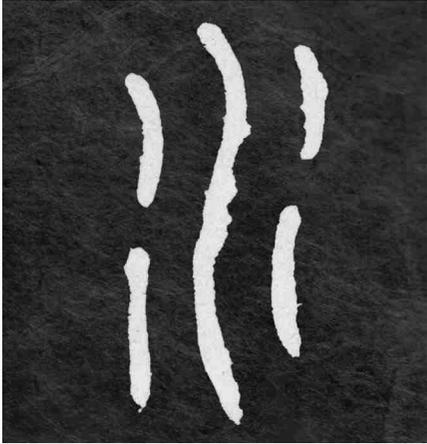
The tree of life that grows from the earth, bearing the fruit of potentials, possibilities. Visualize the dot holding the universe within. Think of it penetrating through the paper, the table. Connect the vertical and the horizontal. Penetrate vertical to horizontal.

One of the five elements: earth, metal, water, wood, fire.



METAL

Arrowhead made of metal, ready to penetrate the spirit.

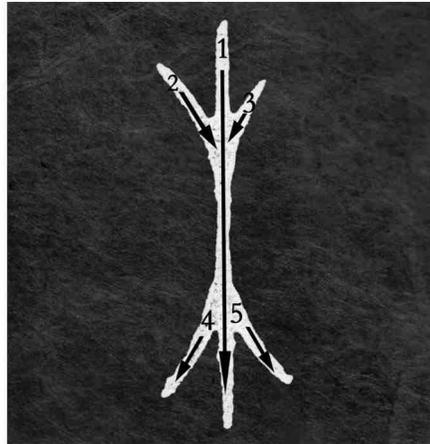
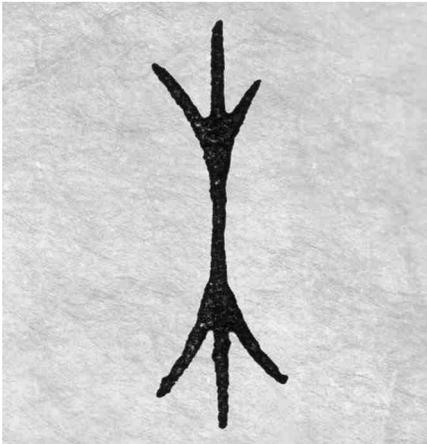
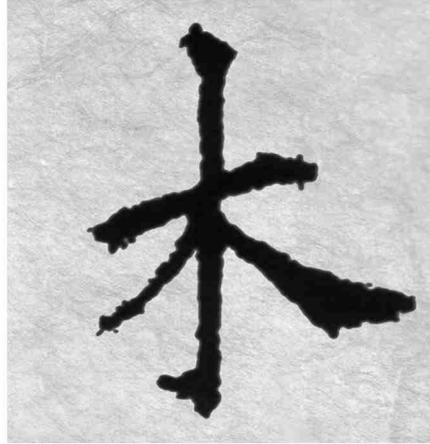
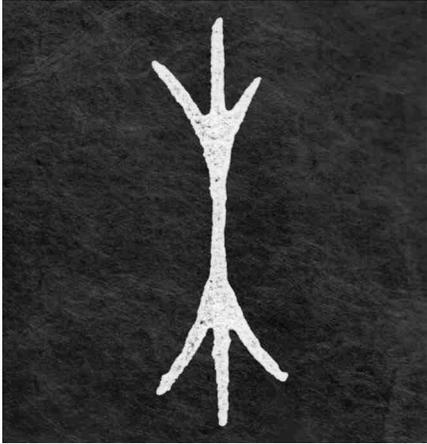


WATER

Water yields to its surrounding environment. It fills a container of any shape. It does not resist. It flows without resistance. It erodes rock, carves out valleys. The softest shaping the hardest. As you write the yielding curves, carve through rocks. Think of the line that dances freely between yin and yang.

In motion, be like water. In stillness, like a mirror. Respond, like an echo. Be subtle like non-existence. Be quiet like clear water.

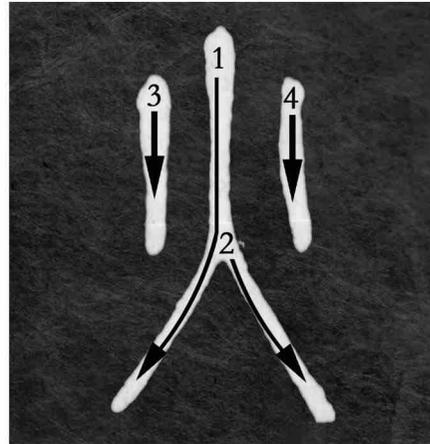
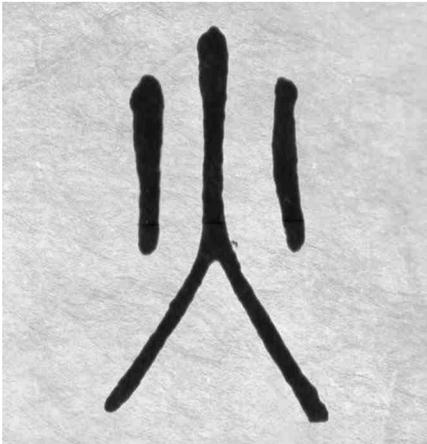
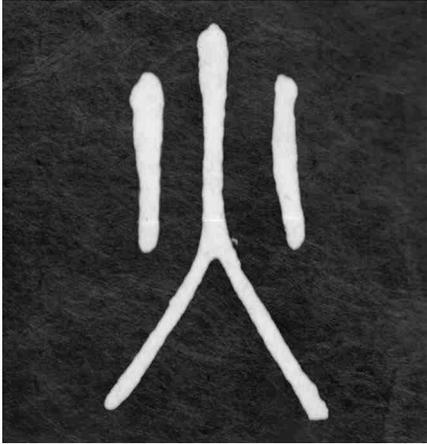
■ Zhuangzi, 4th - 3rd c. BCE



WOOD

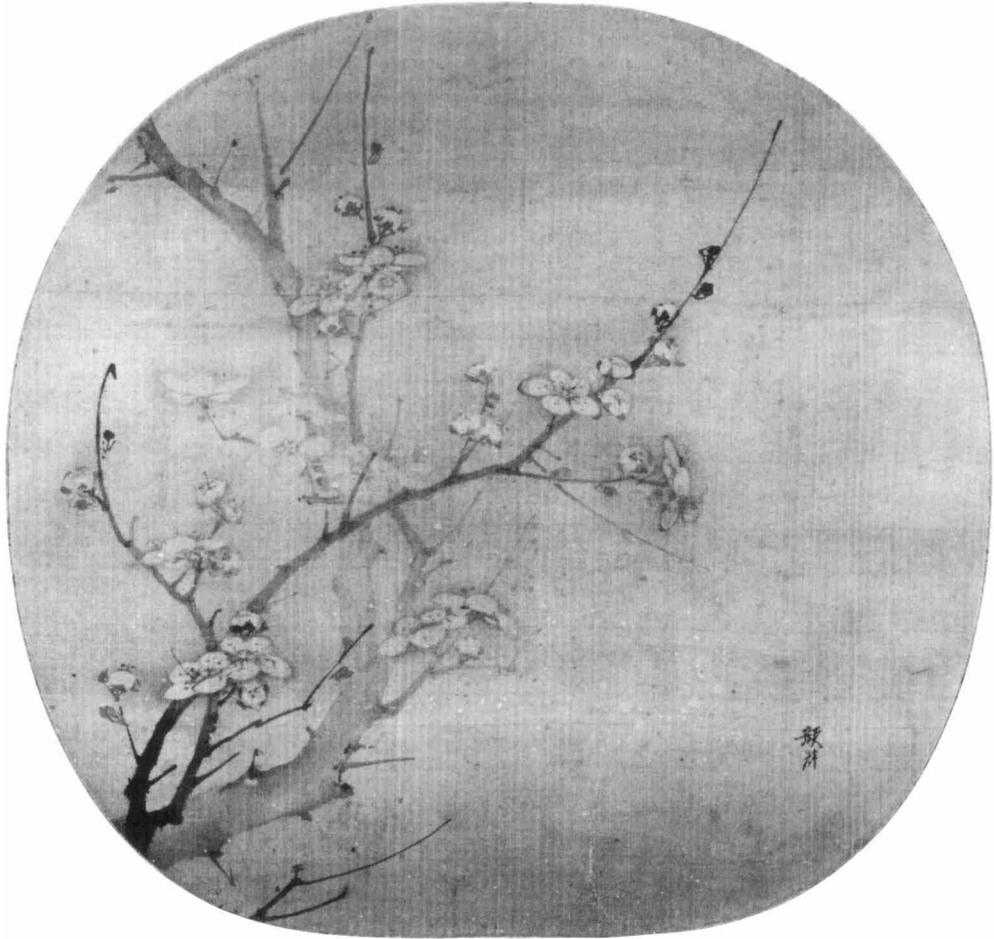
A tree. The trunk reaches to heaven and is rooted to the earth. It grows by receiving nourishment from the earth. I find many ancient words written with the spirit of what they represent. They are models that one can aspire to and practice from.





FIRE

Fire is energy that transforms and carries earth bound things into heaven. As the second long brush stroke comes down, it grabs what is below and reaches back up.



VII

SOUNDLESS POEMS

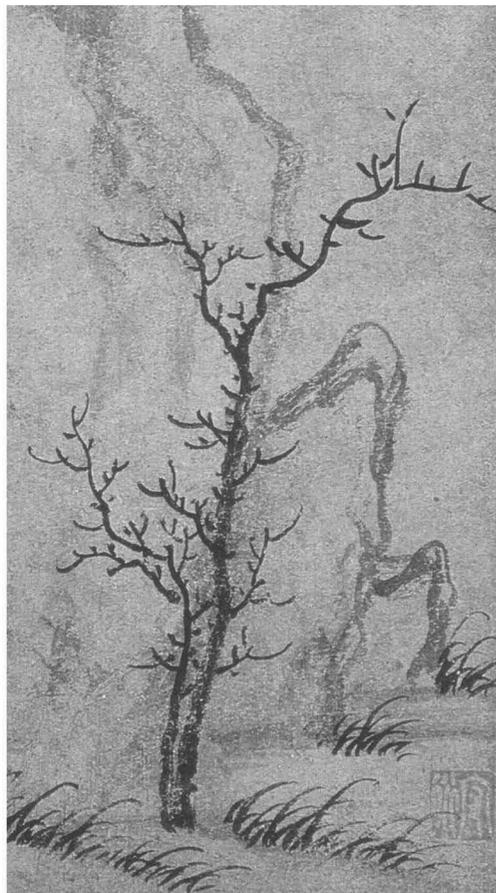
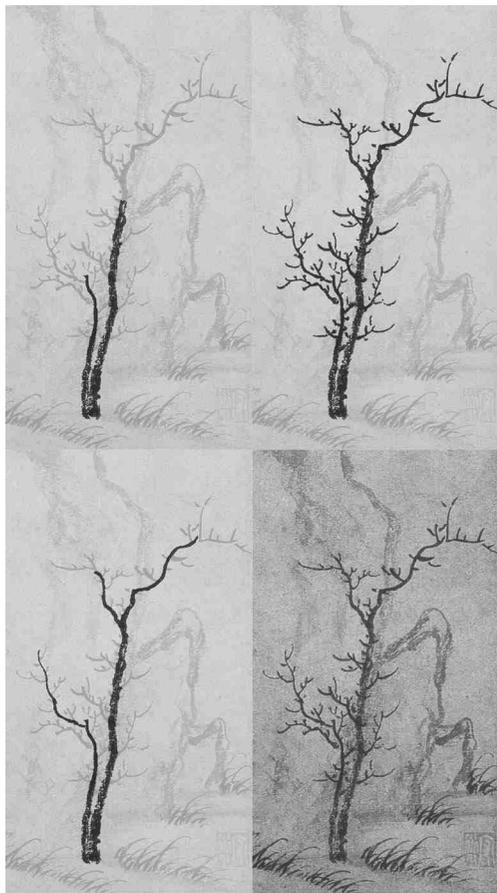


TREE

A monk asked Joshu, “What are we searching for?”
Joshu answered, “The cypress in the courtyard!”

■ Joshu, 9th c.

Trunk and branches. Draw the trunk and main branches from the bottom up. Next add smaller branches. The trunk emerges from the earth connecting life giver to life. The branches draw strength from the trunk, reaching towards the sky and expanding the tree. As you write each part of the trunk or branch, think of the one-brushstroke, the “line without beginning and end”. Each stroke that reaches up, first goes down. The trunk takes nourishment from the earth; each branch takes nourishment from the trunk. Visualize bone and flesh. Experiment with wet and dry branches; feel the different lines, the brush speed. Think of the tree growing within your breast. Strong and vigorous.



Study the relationships of trunk and branches, their yin and yang, forward and backward, left and right. Attend to how some branches dominate, and some yield. Where more branches grow, elaborate; where few, simplify. This is the way ancient masters painted a thousand cliffs and ten thousand valleys.

■ Wang Gai, 17th - 18th c.

Once you learn the basic tree, all trees are within your grasp. Look at different trees, plum, cherry, oak, pine, and willow. Observe their lives and transmit their individual spirit on paper.

Outside, I learn from creation. Inside, I follow the source of my heart.

■ Zhang Zao, 8th c.

Wu-i was good at painting insects. When he was young, he caught insects in a basket, and observed them for days and nights. Worried that the caught insects were not filled with spirit, he looked at them in the grass. When he painted, he was no longer aware whether he was insect or Wu-i. Is this different from creation itself?

■ Luo Da-jing, 13th c.



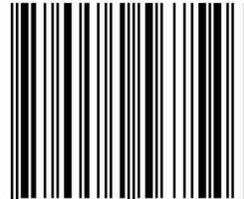
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