

# The Eastern Treasure: Chinese Calligraphy

Chinese calligraphy has always been more than simply a tool for communication, incorporating as it does the element of artistry for which the practice is still valued in an age of ballpoint pens and computers. Indeed, calligraphy is no longer the basic tool of intellectuals and officials but has become the preserve of professional artisans and amateur enthusiasts.

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Whether they are recording information or simply creating beautiful forms, calligraphers' brushes are used to ink five different styles of script, known as 'seal', 'official', 'cursive', 'running' and 'regular'. The art may appear on any writing surface – even the rocky walls of cliffs – but it is especially common on letters, scrolls, works of literature and fan coverings.

Today, in addition to traditional master–apprentice instruction, calligraphy is also taught at school. Many ceremonies that mark national celebrations and religious rituals incorporate the practice and calligraphy has itself proved influential on modern art, architecture and design. In its distinctive Chinese form, calligraphy offers an important channel for the appreciation of traditional culture and for arts education. It is also a source of pride and pleasure for the Chinese people and embodies important aspects of the country's intellectual and artistic heritage.

Chinese calligraphy is an artistic practice that, while fulfilling the practical function of information exchange through writing Chinese characters with brushes, ink, and paper as the main tools and materials, conveys human contemplation of nature, society and life and thus reflects the unique character, spirit, temperament, interest, and philosophy of the Chinese people through special graphic symbols and writing rhythms. Along with the appearance and evolution of Chinese characters, Chinese calligraphy has developed for more than 3,000 years and become a symbol of Chinese culture.

Chinese calligraphy has developed along with the appearance and evolution of Chinese characters. The earliest Chinese characters discovered to date are the inscriptions on bones, tortoise shells, and bronze from the Shang Dynasty (14th to 11th century B.C.). It was during late Han Dynasty and the Wei and Jin Dynasties (approximately from late 2nd to 4th century A.D.) that the writing of Chinese characters as a means of recording information gradually evolved into an art with an aesthetic function. In correspondence with the evolution of the script forms, five styles, namely, the seal–script, official–script, cursive–script, running–script, and regular–script styles, and a number of carrier forms, including personal letter, hand scroll, vertically–hung scroll, central scroll, antithetical couplets, and fan covering, of Chinese calligraphy have been developed.



Before the printing technology was invented, calligraphy had performed the functions of recording information and conducting written communication and exchange. The space for calligraphic display has extended from homes, palaces, shops, and temples to the cliff and rocky wall. Calligraphy often appears in important events such as national celebration ceremonies and sacrificial rites as well as the daily activities of common people such as celebrations, burials, and religious activities, and performs different roles therein.

In ancient times, calligraphy was a necessary skill for intellectuals and officials, who were the main participants of the inheritance and development of calligraphy. A series of activities around calligraphy, together with the resulting cultural atmosphere, have constituted the important spiritual life space of the Chinese.

In its development, calligraphy has developed a complete set of theories and skills. The art has enjoyed orderly propagation and continuous development through personal instruction and documented records, and presented distinct features in correspondence with the change of time and alteration of tools and materials. Chinese history has produced a large number of prestigious calligraphers, such as Wang Xizhi (303–361 A.D.), Yan Zhenqing (709–785 A.D.), and Su Shi (1037–1101 A.D.).

In modern life, the popularization of pens and computer has put an end to the role of brush as the primary writing tool, and has accordingly transformed Chinese calligraphy from a working skill into a special art, and gradually transferred the responsibility for the propagation of the art from the traditional intellectuals and officials to professional calligraphers. Contemporarily, the propagation and development of Chinese calligraphy mainly depends on the calligrapher associations, arts colleges and schools, and research institutions at all levels. China Calligraphers Association, a nongovernmental professional organization with over 8,000 members, and Chinese Calligraphy Institute of Chinese National Academy of Arts, a national-level calligraphy research and creation center, are the major organizations for the propagation and safeguarding of Chinese calligraphy; Shen Peng, Ouyang Zhongshi, Zhang Hai, and Wang Yong are some representatives of the propagators of the art.

Aside from the traditional method of master–disciple instruction, school education has also become an important mode of Chinese calligraphy propagation. While carrying forward its glorious history, Chinese calligraphy has also absorbed nutrients from other forms of arts. Frequent calligraphy activities have been held at different levels. Chinese calligraphy is still the most popular and the most widely participated art form, and is also a main channel for the appreciation of the traditional culture of China

and for esthetic education.

Through more than 3,000 years of development, Chinese calligraphy has become a symbol of China's culture, according to Li Shenghong, vice president of the Calligraphy College. As time passes, calligraphy's utilitarian function is decreasing, and its existence as an art style is endangered. "On this basis, calligraphy must be considered as intangible cultural heritage which needs to be protected and passed on," says Li Shenghong.



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