

Dynamic Art: Chinese Calligraphy

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of modern society on the aesthetics of traditional Chinese Calligraphy, and techniques to preserve these aesthetics through designing a curatorial project. From the conducted research, it is evident that modern interpretations of calligraphy have driven away from traditional aesthetic standards. The paper will present an exhibition design that portrays ancient aesthetics through the manipulation of space. The organization of the exhibition relied heavily on Barry Judiths's article, "Dissenting Spaces", in the book: *Thinking about Exhibitions*. The significance of such a design is to introduce the Chinese Calligraphy without misinterpretations to the society.

Keywords: Chinese Calligraphy, Aesthetics, Modern Society, Exhibition

1. Introduction

The rise of culture appreciation calligraphy is accompanied by a sharp increase in misinterpretations of traditional aesthetics. The correlation has received significant attention from the calligraphy world: professional calligraphers, such as Hanbo Cui, discussed the difference between knowing how to write and writing for the sake of doing so [1]. These discussions between calligraphers have consistently shown their apprehension for ones that boast as "calligraphers" and spread misguided aesthetic viewpoints. Despite this, these studies have yet to be robustly promoted to the wider public. This paper sets out to address the problem through an investigation into why calligraphy is art and calligraphy in the modern society. Furthermore, in this work, a design of an exhibition will be presented as an example in displaying traditional aesthetics in a modern environment.

2. Calligraphy as Art

The word 'calligraphy' derived from two Greek words: *kallos* (beauty) and *graphein* (to write). In another sense, calligraphy can be understood as writing in an aesthetically pleasing way [2]. Traditional Chinese Calligraphy is a form of art for Chinese characters [3].

Chinese characters are created with diverse forms and meanings, all of which are based on the creation of pictorial characters and pictographic characters [4]. When looking at Figure 1, it is visible how the original image of an object slowly derives into the modern characters on the right.



Figure 1: Example of pictographic characters.

In ancient times, calligraphy was used as a tool rather than a source of artistic pleasure. That is, calligraphers had their own formal jobs, most of which were government officials. About the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, there were some calligraphers who made a living by selling written characters, or by taking commissions from wealthy families. Now, some write for artistic intentions, to portray emotion through writing [5].

2.1. Aesthetics of Traditional Calligraphy

The aesthetics of the calligraphy art form derives from two factors: the way of writing and the calligrapher's connotation with their culture and emotional interest.

The way one writes is based not only on ability, but also on the emotional cultivation of the writer in creating dynamic strokes. Dynamic beauty represents the comprehensive movement of hands, hearts, and pens. It focuses on the change of thickness, the amount of ink, and the speed of writing. Cui Hanbo once said: "Do not think one can write simply because they hold a brush," [1]. The way one writes depends on the rule of "a press, a stroke, and a lift" [1]. There is no complication in dragging the brush across the paper. Instead, it is about a natural press and lift of the brush.

Calligraphy is also about writing to create images that reflect the cultural accomplishment and emotional interest of the calligraphers. The calligrapher has a creative impulse due to certain thoughts and feelings. If one does not write in the language that reflects this kind of thoughts, but uses the combination of Chinese characters with no meaning, it is only an abstract painting, not calligraphy art. That is, the writers need to sustain a conscious pursuit of imagery [3]. Furthermore, the characters have to reflect a certain emotion or purpose [6].

2.2. Calligraphy in Modern China

As mentioned, beauty in calligraphy comes from Chinese characters, the way of writing, and emotion and purpose the calligrapher would like to portray. However, modern calligraphers only present Chinese characters in their work, and forget about the importance of one's way of writing and portrayal of emotion. These calligraphers are referred to as "Jianghu Calligraphers".

Jianghu-style calligraphy artists are used to describing ones that have not gone through a systematic study of calligraphy, but brag and show off their "skills" for money and fame. Moreover, their artwork does not represent the dynamic beauty of traditional calligraphy. Rather, they represent an unrestful and careless gesture. However, some people enjoy this form of calligraphy, because they believe it is a way to incorporate traditional calligraphy and bring forth innovation into modern society [7].

Such belief in innovation, originates from the eroded value of calligraphy in everyday life. In the modern era, calligraphy is now appreciated as a way to display of art. As the usage value decreases, the development of "new calligraphy" arises. The "new form" of calligraphy integrates the spatial distribution of western aesthetics. Traditional ways of writing had already been widely utilized by predecessors, making those in modern society seek for innovation. However, calligraphy needs inheritance, not innovation. From the perspective of social responsibility for cultural revival, advocacy for calligraphers to return to tradition and take responsibility will make great significance.



Figure 2: Example of Jianghu Calligraphy.



Figure 3: Example of Jianghu Calligraphy, from: Yingzhang Tian.

Figure 2 displays the words: The Sea Embraces All Rivers. As a viewer, one may think the piece portrays dynamic beauty in its shape and form, especially with curves and spaces between strokes. Conversely, the piece not only does not display dynamic beauty, but it also shows that the writer wrote for innovation and not inheritance. Within the piece, the breaks in strokes, and the curving lines and sizes of the characters were done purposefully. "Jianghu" categorizes those that do not care for how the brush works on paper. The writer performed "a press", but as they create the stroke and lift, it exposes their careless gesture towards writing [1].

In Figure 3, the lines may seem neat, beautiful, and crisp. However, on close inspection of the right falling stroke, they look almost exactly the same. The same goes for the tip of the writing brush, its dots and the hook. The artwork may seem neat and tidy, but it lacks the dynamic beauty a piece of

calligraphy should have. When calligraphers read characters, they don't see static works on paper. Only the printed words are static. Calligraphy, like playing the piano and dancing, is a dynamic art. It is a comprehensive movement of hands, hearts and pens. When people's eyes appreciate calligraphy works, their hearts dance on the paper with the brush. Humans are not printing machines. Not every word should use exactly the same brush movement to meet “perfection”.

3. Curatorial Note

The exhibition will explore artwork that presents traditional Chinese beauty to an excessive extent, and incorporates modern calligraphy artworks that offers the same beauty and aesthetic. It intends to offer various examples of traditional calligraphy and help the audience gain a grounded discourse on how the same aesthetic of ancient calligraphy can be portrayed in a modern environment. Furthermore, the exhibition strives to effectively manipulate space to express each aesthetic standard in the best form possible. That is, “the exhibition [needs to become] the set for a play with objects describing various possible subject positions and making the viewer spatially, as well as, visually aware,” [8].

The goal is to present the same traditional aesthetic of Chinese calligraphy in the modern society without manipulating the originality of its beauty. That is, as the human population moves into modern society, what was once known to be traditional has been broken by a new wave of calligraphers.

4. Exhibition Design

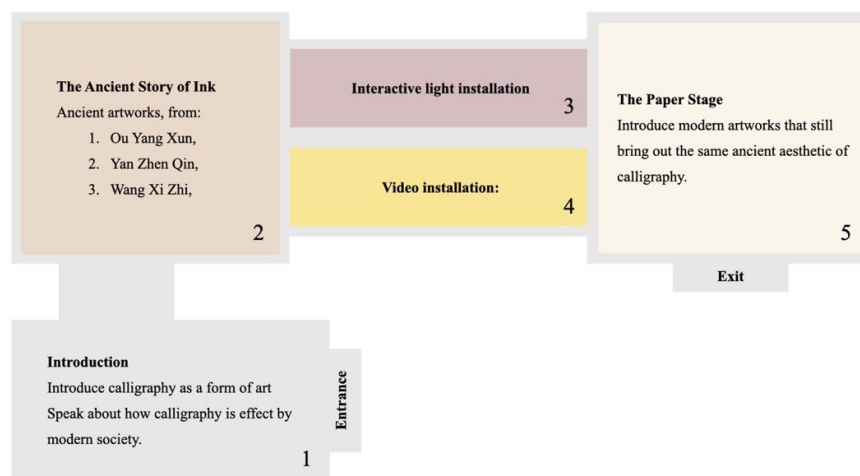


Figure 4: Floor plan of exhibition.

Figure 4 shows the layout of the exhibition [9]. As the visitor enters the exhibition, they are introduced to the introduction of the exhibition. In the introduction area, the visitor will learn about calligraphy as an art form, aesthetic standards, and calligraphy in modern China, as discussed above. Next, the visitor will learn about three separate calligraphers from ancient China, and the ways they display the aesthetic standards through their scripts. After that, the visitor can choose between “Interactive light installation” and “video installation” to experience writing calligraphy themselves. Finally, the visitor will enter “The Paper Stage” where an example of innovative calligraphy still signifies inheritance of ancient aesthetics.

4.1. The Ancient Story of Ink

This section is dedicated to artwork by ancient Chinese Calligraphers. Each artwork will undergo a simple analysis on how it portrays the traditional beauty of calligraphy. This is done in order to provide the audience with a clear example of why calligraphy is art and how it separates from Jianghu Calligraphy.

4.1.1. Ou Yangxun

Figure 5 displays Ou Yangxun's *Jiu Cheng Palace Liuquan Ming*. Written in 632 A.D., the script "narrates the origin of the 'Jiucheng Palace' and its magnificent architecture," [10]. Ou Yangxun is a calligrapher recognized for his strong stippling words. Characterized by its square and condensed brush force, the words are not only steep on the side, but rigorous and neat; serious, yet cheerful and sparse. Figure 3 was an example attempting to recreate this style of writing.

Written in standard script, the words are neat and delicate, as if the characters were typed from a computer. One that is uneducated in calligraphy would, nonetheless, comment on its beauty. Though, the thickness of the lines varies from each other unnoticeably. It becomes evident that the strokes differ from each other. In the image to the right of Figure 5, the same characters have been written differently. Why would a master in calligraphy create such a variation? This is dynamic art, where there have to be certain changes to the brush strokes. When Ou Yangxun wrote the script, he did not purposefully write each character to meet perfection. Instead, by creating an unintentional variation shows that the brush had gone with the flow of the emotion of the artist.



Figure 5: Jiucheng Palace Liuquan Ming by Ou Yangxun.

When writing this script, Ou Yangxun was passionate about the architecture of Jiucheng Palace. Unlike Ou Yangxun, the artist from Figure 3 focused too much on writing rather than feeling, emotionally, what he wrote. That beauty in Ou Yangxun's work will be eradicated if the artist does not feel the passion. If one thinks too much about recreating a style, or deriving a new style, then one loses its purpose in writing [10].

4.1.2. Yan Zhenqing

Figure 6 presents a piece written by Yan Zhenqing in 774 A.D., called: *Bamboo Mountain Hall*. His regular script has a tight structure, round painting points, dignified and beautiful. His calligraphy was highly praised because he introduced seal script, as seen in Figure 7, into regular script and running script, and created his own unique style of fonts. When creating this script, Yan Zhenqing, had a gathering with his sub-coordinates in the Bamboo Mountain Hall. During dinner, each of them wrote two sentences in turn and compiled them into an article.



Figure 6: Bamboo Mountain Hall by Yan Zhenqing.



Figure 7: Example of seal script.



Figure 8: Example of rashness in ink.

Generally speaking, when writing it is common to create a “rashness in ink”, as seen in Figure 8, on the edge of natural writing. The shape of this trace should be uneven in thickness and free in sharp, usually formed when there is not enough ink in one’s brush. Conversely, in this piece, the stipple edge is smooth and round. It seems to be moving in a quiet way, like clouds that only move when a gentle breeze pushes it. To create such round edges, Yan Zhenqing placed extra attention on the amount of ink in his brush.

When writing, the artist’s posture would have been relaxed and calm. He was not rushing himself, rather he was enjoying his moments with his sub-coordinates as they came up with a poem. The emotion here is not strong, but each stroke underwent detailed consideration. Furthermore, the thickness of each stroke changes in a subtle way: horizontal lines tend to be thinner, and vertical lines are thicker [11]. Furthermore, in Figure 9, dynamic beauty is created when he changes the way one word is written. Though the way of writing has changed, it is still the same character.

The emotions of this piece are evident, because of the way Yan Zhenqing displayed his words in a smooth and slow manner [12]. This artwork was chosen because it is a piece that presents the same

aesthetic beauty of calligraphy as Ou Yangxun's work when they are two completely different styles. This suggests that the same beauty can be expressed by various people and style, as long as it attends to the three aesthetic standards of Chinese calligraphy.



Figure 9: Same character, different way of writing.

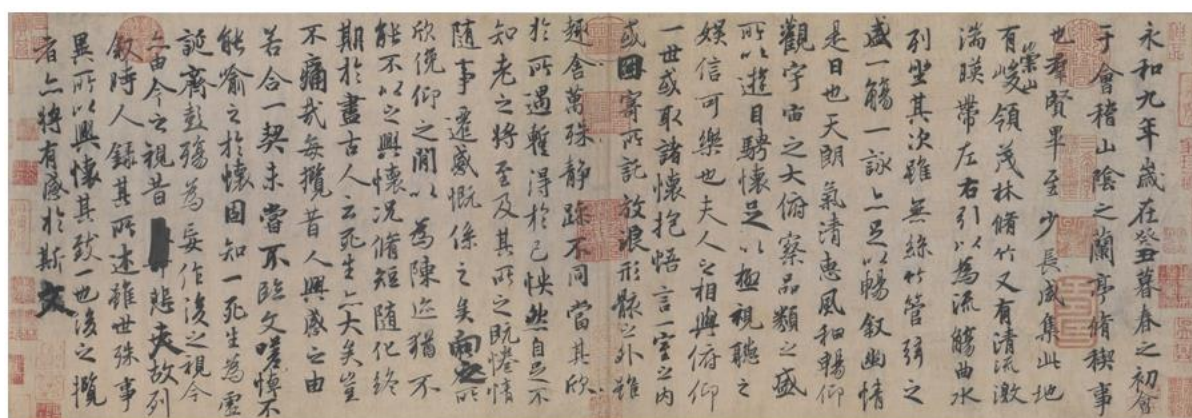


Figure 10: Orchid Pavilion Preface by Wang Xi Zhi.

4.1.3. Wang Xizhi

The third piece was written by Wang Xizhi in 353 A.D., called: *Orchid Pavilion Preface*, as seen in Figure 10. It is praised as the “best running script in the world”. The piece reflects Wang Xizhi's outlook on life and expresses the author's lamentation that great events are infrequent.

The frame is beautiful, the stippling is elegant, and the density is interspersed. Whether horizontal, vertical, point, skim, hook, fold, or press, every word in the Preface has a different posture and can turn freely [13]. The words vary in size and thickness. It presents Wang Xizhi's passion for this script. Similar to music: the thicker and larger words represent the chorus; where the thinner and smaller ones represent the verses.

However, the change in these elements is not exaggerated to a point where one character is incredibly thick and dark, and the character after that is small and thin. Instead, the change is minimal and well thought out. Unlike Yan Zhenqing's writing, this style of writing shows passion, and virtue. Rather than writing, it is as if the pen is gliding across the paper. Presenting a strong sense of integrity and coherence, highlighting Wang Xizhi's free and unfettered temperament [13].

4.1.4. Zhao Mengfu



Figure 11: Three Gates by Zhao Mengfu.

The final piece, see Figure 11, in this room is *Three Gates* written by Zhao Mengfu in 1302 A.D. The "three gates" refers to the gates of the temple, commonly known as the mountain gate. In this piece, the usage of ink is light without losing its composure and ancient thickness. With a tight and elegant structure, the script here has more momentum in its brush strokes. Zhao Mengfu's work is often described as: "writing as fast as the wind and rain." That is, through the characters look neat, through the connecting strokes and how the strokes end, it is evident that he writes at a fast pace.

This brings out, yet again, the dynamic beauty of Chinese Calligraphy. On the basis of inheriting the traditional calligraphy, the artist removed the complexity of the characters and simplified them. However, unlike modern calligraphers, when he modified the way, the characters were written, the change in brush strokes and his emotions when writing is still evident [14]. The way he writes is not ambiguous, the starts, operation and end of each stroke are crisp and clear. This artwork is chosen because it is a standard script that directly presents a different emotion than Yan Zhen Qing's and Ou Yang Xun's scripts. This places emphasis on how emotion can affect one's scriptwriting [15].

4.2. Design of "The Ancient Story of Ink"

Three Gates will be displayed with a bright red background, and the other artworks will be displayed with white walls. With a white background, it indicates the pureness in aesthetic during that ancient period of time, whereas the red signifies a physical change in how people view calligraphy and how calligraphy is written. That is, Zhao Mengfu modified the complicated characters into a simpler form. This change in writing opens a new era; a new chance for the future generation. Since the paper is white, it will create a contrast with the red background. This contrast signifies the approach of the modern society, creating a connection to the usage of technology in the next room.

4.3. Interactive Light Installation

In this room, visitors will be encouraged to write on display screens to physically see how simple movement can create works of art, linking to the factor is dynamic beauty. They are also encouraged to write vigorously or gently to compare how emotion can change writing.

From *Thinking About Exhibition*, Barry stated on pg. 221: "the exhibition [needs to become] the set for a play with objects describing various possible subject positions and making the viewer spatially, as well as, visually aware,". By placing the projection and interactive screens randomly around in the room, allows the audience to physically walk around between touch screens.

Furthermore, it also allows the audience to view what others have written experiencing different styles effect by different emotions.

4.4. Video Installation

The room will be introduced with white, sound-proof walls. On one half of the room, there will be four hanging sheets of long rice paper. A video of someone writing calligraphy with soothing sounds of paper, ink and pen will be projected onto the long sheets of rice paper, as seen in Figure 12. This allows the audience to experience the dynamic beauty of calligraphy. On the other side of the room,

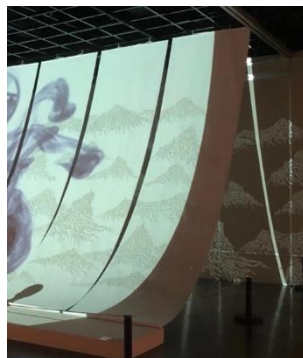


Figure 12: Example projection on rice paper.

This is another form of *interaction* because visitors would be walking between these hanging sheets of paper to go into the next room. The wall of rice paper signifies a new start, a portal into the modern China and how calligraphy is portrayed in modern society.

4.5. The Paper Stage

This exhibition room will display several interesting uses of paper by Sherwin, Xiongwen, a modern calligrapher, and how he presents traditional beauty in the modern Chinese society.

Dyeing of Rice Paper is an artwork created in 2021, as seen in Figure 13. As a calligrapher, Sherwin is trying to introduce calligraphy into people's lives. His inspiration originated from tea paper (rice paper submerged with tea). That is, most calligraphers enjoy creating artworks that have a connection with traditional artworks. To do so, most would choose to use paper that is made to look ancient. However, Sherwin wanted to make a change to this, and introduce calligraphy as an art form that can be young as well as being ancient and traditional. The introduction of the usage of color on rice paper, expresses the cheerful attitude of the artist. That is, such a technique introduces a new way to present traditional calligraphy. In these eleven artworks, the visitors can still see a range of writing styles. These styles are written according to traditional aesthetics. Yet again, presenting emotional and dynamic beauty [16].



Figure 13: Dyeing of Rice Paper by Sherwin.

What makes his work special is his appreciation for aesthetics of traditional calligraphy and how he is able to form a bridge between modern and ancient calligraphy. This series of artwork is an important factor in this exhibition because, when compared to Jianghu Calligraphy, Sherwin is “bringing forth new ideas” through his own creative innovation. However, all the while, he has kept still kept the traditional beauty of calligraphy. Hence, ending with this series of artwork leaves space for the audience to form a consensus on why calligraphy is an art and how ancient aesthetics can be brought into the modern society.

5. Conclusion

Calligraphy is an art form for its characteristics of Chinese characters, the flow of writing, and the connotation of the artist’s emotion. Though calligraphy is no longer a common tool for everyday writing, it can still be presented in modern society through various possibilities. The possibilities range from appreciating calligraphy, to creating innovative works of art through personal interpretation that inherit traditional aesthetics. The most important factor is to write with emotion and passion, creating a series of dynamic lines, and not writing for the sake of writing.

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