

ART REVIEW Pictorial Delights Beyond Words



Brush and Ink The Chinese Art of Writing Metropolitan Museum of Art

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So, for example, if you were swept away by Jackson Pollock's flung-and-dripped paintings in the Museum of Modern Art retrospective a few years ago, you are already primed to be similarly thrilled by the wild-style calligraphy of the 11th-century artist Huang Tingjian, whose hand scroll "Biographies of Lian Po and Lin Xiangru" is at the Met.

And once you've seen it, you might even feel that Huang's cursive masterpiece out-Pollocks Pollock. Certainly its 60-foot-long flow of looping, swooping characters — they twist and shout; pump up, slim down; leave skid marks behind them — blurs distinctions between writing and painting, control and spontaneity, virtuosity and accident.

On top of this, it dramatizes, in compelling, nonrepresentational terms, a complicated story of political intrigue and endangered friendship.

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By HOLLAND COTTER

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It is also a sequence of moods, with impassioned voices calling out from the 80 scrolls and inscribed fans spanning several centuries, including the 21st, that line the galleries. Poor me, sighs an exiled scholar in a sad letter home. Lucky us, sings an exultant empress at the height of her power. Other voices, a whole chorus, chime in: Be joyous. Be calm. Beware.

Not all that long ago, a show like this one, made up mostly of handwritten texts in an unfamiliar language, would have been a daunting prospect for most museum visitors. It might even have given non-Chinese historians and curators trouble. But those days are gone.

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"Quatrain on Heavenly Mountain," a 12th-century Chinese fan, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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The closest equivalent in Western culture would probably not be abstract painting, but specific kinds of music: the scores for story-ballets, say, or programmatic symphonies. In the end, though, it was Huang who best described his writing. "A picture of the mind" is what he called it.

If you choose, you can let that picture remain abstract, unattached to any narrative, a kind of psychic encephalogram. For that matter, you can approach the whole Met show as optical joy ride. Why not? The sheer energy of the writing will carry you a long way, and the variety will make the trip diverting.

Alternatively, you can read the show's lucid labels, which translate the calligraphy and offer basic historical information. By no means everything is wild and crazy. An exquisite eighth-century manuscript called "Spiritual Flight Sutra" is a paradigm of centered probity. Its characters are uniform in weight, geometrically structured, meticulously aligned. Designed for legibility, they also convey the pacific ethos of the Taoist scripture they embody.

The history of calligraphy itself, however, was not peaceful. Trouble started once writing began to be valued as an aesthetic rather than utilitarian medium, and specific styles were tagged with social and political meanings.

This dynamic was already in play by the time Wang Xizhi (A.D. 303-61) was developing his famously expressive and endlessly influential styles. A century earlier, his writing would have been reviled as an assault on cultural orthodoxy. In the centuries after his death, it was revered as the paradigm of calligraphic correctness, closely identified with imperial orthodoxy. What was once radical became classical; what was classical was the model to rebel against.

Huang Tingjian was a rebel. He lived in an era of wrenching change. Like other members of an intellectual elite, he rejected the moral authority of a corrupt court, and he was shipped off to exile in remote Sichuan. There, as a sign of sustained dissent, he adopted the antiestablishment style seen in the Met scroll, in effect making the very act of writing a political act.

This story recurs, with changes in names and dates, so often throughout the centuries in China that the Met's calligraphy survey might accurately be subtitled "A History of Politically Activist Art in China." If so, however, two things would have to be clarified.

One, that such activism applied to a wide range of conflicting ideologies, conservative as well as progressive. And, two, that politics as expressed in calligraphy wasn't a matter of speechifying; it was deeply personal, a way of life. You wrote the way you lived.

Political expression could, it is true, be cartoonishly vivid. It comes as no surprise to learn that the lurching, sliding calligraphy on a set of scrolls by the 17th-century artist Fu Shan is the work of man who advocated intoxication as political protest. By contrast, only with close and lingering study can you discern debates and doubts being voiced in the sparse landscape paintings and poetic annotations of an artist like Ni Zan (1306-74).

A ruminative, possibly depressive man, he lived for many years in self-elected banishment from centers of power. And even after he settled down, he could never entirely dispel a sense of isolation and vulnerability. Only a surrender to the spirit of nature assuaged such feelings. And he worked his way into nature, you sense, through art.

Anyone who frequents the Met's Chinese galleries will have seen the two Ni Zan pieces that are in the show — little, scratchy landscapes with patchlike blocks of poetry — a thousand times before. But they never lose their peculiarly unassertive, almost self-effacing power. Without raising his voice above a murmur, this artist-thinker gives the condition of exile an existential, universalist weight. His profoundly meditated politics is the politics of experience.

For viewers with a predominantly romantic view of classical Chinese painting and calligraphy, all this talk of politics will be puzzling. For many Westerners, political art in China automatically means contemporary art, art that breaks with tradition. Precisely this assumption has defined the boom market for new Chinese art in the past decade and more.

But as our familiarity with the multifold phenomenon known as contemporary Chinese culture grows, we are discovering the many ways in which new art in China is addressing, reworking and refreshing existing traditions. The Met show, organized by Maxwell K. Hearn of the Asian art department, helps confirm this.

Although Mr. Hearn has drawn most of the material from the Met's collection, he has also borrowed a half-dozen works by contemporary Chinese artists, a significant addition. If the show that results is not the first to place contemporary calligraphy in the big historical picture, it is surely among the few to do so in so forthright a way.

The very first thing we see in the installation is a colossal ink scroll by Wang Dongling, who was born in China in 1945 and gained early fame there for creating big-character political posters for the Cultural Revolution. His work is still calligraphic in style, still done with brush and ink, but under the influence of Western modernism, has become entirely abstract, divorced from any language except the language of painting.

His colleagues in the show, Gu Wenda, Qin Feng, Wang Tiande and Xu Bing — all impressive, all Chinese-born, all with substantial careers in the West — come at calligraphy from still other angles, obscuring it, further abstracting it, applying it to non-Chinese languages, to fictional languages, making it emulate the language of music.

In doing so, are they honoring or undermining a tradition? Expanding it or emptying it? Their work raises such questions, provokes conflicting thoughts and has led to passionate debates between traditionalists and nontraditionalists. In all these ways, it remains true to calligraphy's contentious past and argues for a provocative future.