The Written Word in Chinese Culture

Spring, 2001

Humanities 596 A, HSTAS 490 A, SISEA 490B, Art History 511
Thursday, 1:30-3:20, ART 312

Instructors: Jerome Silbergeld, Art History
302 Art jesi@u.washington.edu
office hours M 11:30-1:00
Patricia Ebrey, History and JSIS
203-C Thomson ebrey@u.washington.edu
office hours W 10-12

This course will examine Chinese calligraphy in its artistic and historical context. It is offered this term to take advantage of the exhibition at the Seattle Asian Art Museum on "The Embodied Image: Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliott Collection," on display from March 1 to May 27 at Seattle Asian Art Museum in Volunteer Park. This exhibition includes 55 pieces of calligraphy, many of them long handscrolls, ranging in date from about 200 to 1900 CE. Students thus will have the opportunity to examine closely original pieces of calligraphy while discussing in class the central role of writing in Chinese culture. The seminar will tack back and forth between all the ways in which writing functions in Chinese culture and specific examples of writing preserved as aesthetic objects.

Books to Purchase:
The Embodied Image: Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliott Collection
Character and Context in Chinese Calligraphy
* Assigned reading items below marked by an asterisk will be available in a reading packet, which should be purchased at Ram's Copy Center, on University Way near 42nd Avenue.

Most of the required and recommended reading items, together with an additional variety of valuable publications, will be found on reserve in the Art Library or the East Asia Library. Where reproductions of art objects are concerned, you will find it useful to refer to original publications, rather than to reading packet reproductions, for clarity and greater aesthetic accuracy.

Assignments:
Students are expected to attend regularly and to have done the required reading before coming to class. Each of you will write one short and one long paper. The short paper (4-6 pages, due May 3) will be either: a) a review of some of the literature on calligraphy, either a book review or a review of two or more related articles, preferably ones listed below under “Recommended further reading”; or b) an analysis of a work in the exhibition, with attention to the elements of style, stylistic reference, context and content, as appropriate. A brief (5 minute) report will be made, during the relevant class session in the case of the former option or as scheduled in the case of the latter option.
Students will be given considerable leeway on the longer paper (target length 12-20 pages), due May 31 for those presenting in class on May 24 (all Ebrey students and some Silbergeld students) and June 4 for those presenting in class on May 31. This paper can range from a study of one object or one artist represented in the exhibition to a research paper on a social or cultural history topic related to writing or calligraphy. Some of the topics that would make good papers include calligraphy and the art of the book; calligraphy as an element in painting and painting style; calligraphy as a signifier of social expectations and moral values; the publishing of calligraphy and letter-writing as a social and artistic act; comparisons between calligraphy and painting as commodities; comparisons between the social functions of calligraphy in China and the Islamic world or China and Japan; and calligraphy in the modern world and as a medium of political and/or artistic dissent. These are just examples. Students are encouraged to be creative and come up with distinctly different topics for papers.

Grading:

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short paper</td>
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<td>Long paper</td>
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<td>Class participation</td>
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Course Schedule

Week One: March 29 **Introduction.**
An introduction to the different script types and their history. Discussion of the central role of writing in Chinese culture.

Week Two: April 5 **The Magic Power of Words.**

**Assignments:**
Visit museum for an overview of the exhibition
Read: Michael Nylan, "Calligraphy, the Sacred Text, and the Test of Culture," in Cary Liu, Dora Ching, and Judith Smith, eds., *Character and Context in Chinese Calligraphy*, pp. 16-77.

**Recommended further reading:**
David Keightley, *Sources of Shang History*

Week Three: April 12 **Calligraphy, Amateur Art, and Individual Expression**
Chinese theory of calligraphy as an art. Issues of individualism and personal style. The case of the Six Dynasties and Tang periods. Comparison with other cultures.

**Assignments:**
*Liu Xie, The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, pp. 154-74 (chapters on spiritual thought, style and nature, wind and bone, flexible adaptability, choice of style)

**Recommended further reading:**

Week Four: April 19 **Whose Writing is Worth Treasuring?**
The social and political processes shaping artistic preference. Taste as a disputed matter: court versus literati taste. The case of the Song and Yuan periods.

**Guest Speaker:** Amy McNair, Associate Professor of Art History, University of Kansas

**Assignments:**
Revisit exhibition, with special attention to the calligraphy by Wang Xizhi, Yan Zhenqing, Huang Tingjian, Mi Fu, and Zhao Mengfu.
Attend Saturday April 21 symposium at Seattle Asian Art Museum.
*Amy McNair, The Upright Brush: Yan Zhenqing’s Calligraphy and Song Literati Politics, chapters 1, 2, 4, 7.
*Richard Barnhart, review of Amy McNair, The Upright Brush, CAA Reviews [online].

**Recommended further reading:**
Peter Sturman, *Mi Fu: Style and the Art of Calligraphy in Northern Song China.*
Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy.*
Amy McNair, The Upright Brush (remaining chapters).

Week Five: April 24 **Calligraphy and the Literati Arts (Session on TUESDAY)**
Literati as calligraphers, connoisseurs, and collectors. Access issues: Who gets to see what forms of calligraphy? The market for calligraphy. Calligraphy compared to painting as a literati art form. Book arts and the impact of printing on calligraphy. The case of the Ming period.

**Guest Speaker:** Qianshen Bai, Assistant Professor of Art History, Boston University. Talk on **Late Ming Cultural Life and Calligraphy: Handscroll/Album in Assorted Scripts**
Assignments:
Revisit exhibit, paying particular attention to the Ming dynasty calligraphy
*Dorothy Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chamber*, pp. 31-41.
*Jerome Silbergeld, Chinese Painting Style*, pp. 11-15.

Recommended further reading:

Week Six: May 3  **Review and synthesis**
Short papers due.
Proposals for long papers due.

Week Seven: May 10  **The Visual Culture of Inscription**
The history of making words a part of the landscape by erecting inscribed stelea at historic spots, temples, and other sites. The political uses of imperial calligraphy. Inscribing paintings, ceramics, books, and other valued objects.

**Guest Speaker:** Robert Harrist, Associate Professor of Art History, Columbia University.

Assignments:

Recommended further reading:
Week Eight: May 17  **Calligraphy Today**  
An examination of all the themes covered in the course in the context of contemporary Chinese culture in both the PRC and Taiwan. Calligraphy as an art form today. Calligraphy and political dissent.

**Assignments:**
Read:  *Richard Kraus, *Brushes with Power*, chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10.  

Recommended further reading:
Richard Kraus, *Brushes with Power* (remaining chapters).  

Week Nine: May 24  **Student presentations** (all Ebrey students; some Silbergeld students)

Week Ten: May 31  **Student presentations** (Silbergeld students)