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## BAMBOO PAINTINGS OF THE YUAN, MING AND QING DYNASTIES

**Abstract.** Discovering bamboo was a breakthrough for painting in Yuan, Ming and Qing periods and making it a separate subject marked the beginning of literati painting. Painting, like calligraphy and poetry, were cultivated by the educated wenren people, especially for the educated, and in some cases for the artist's entertainment. In ideal conditions, wenren did not sell their works. The painting of bamboo has received so much attention in China and so many artists of the highest competence have devoted their lives to the subject.

Different trends and tendencies of Yuan, Ming and Qing periods can be better evaluated in the light of goals and ideals of various groups, for and through which the works were created. Majority of the mentioned artists were amateurs who cultivated their natural talents and devoted themselves to painting. Another group of artists were officials, from central to local, who considered painting a task fitting an educated person. Painting handbooks and many guidelines were aimed at this group. During the Ming and Qing dynasties the majority of mentioned artists, especially the most influential artists, was not connected with the imperial court and painted because of great interest and natural talent. Artists rarely sold their works, more often they gifted them to their friends or exchanged them with their fellow artists. When we look closely on the lives of these artists, it is clear that they looked for inspiration in the past of Chinese art, and it would have been surprising if any of them had managed to shut off the influence of the accumulated tradition.

We must remember that as far as the applied material technique was concerned, not much changed from the times of Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之. In bamboo

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painting only some types of lines and applying ink were developed by the subsequent generations of the artists, and they were obviously continued by their followers. During the discussed periods most artists achieved sufficient fame to have their names remembered. Bamboo paintings were created in large numbers, therefore many of the works survived. It is not possible to comprehensively discuss the bamboo painters in this short text, although it is possible to provide an outline of the styles of the most prominent artists.

Humans in Chinese society are distant from nature, however the Chinese way of thinking tends toward removing this isolation, not allowing its presence and hiding it, in order to convert it into an opposite notion; all the old painting schools were striving to present humans as a part of nature. As Confucianism turned its attention towards establishing theoretical and practical laws governing the society, it considered both elements as parts of the law of nature, pertaining also to society. This aspect was even more visible in Taoism, existing as an opposition. Taoism, not focussed on managing a community, turned its attention solely to the nature and including in it humans. By drawing from ancient mythologies, Taoism saw nature as the all-permeating force that should be known or revered above all. Thus, Taoism displays a division into two trends: aristocratic and common, corresponding to a main division of society. The aristocratic trend is aimed at learning nature, while the common trend is aimed at worshipping the forces of nature.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, the archaic Chinese approach to nature is not perfect. It was the imperfection, the improvements made to this model—even unconscious and spontaneous—that led to momentary solutions and created movement—a pseudo-development simulating true history. Chinese creation process is not only the basis of a consistent reproduction, but is also the cause for nations and dynasties organised around such principles to undergo constant changes, and eventually to end. This is also visible in art, thus leading to the creation of more and more valuable phenomena.

The main stages of internal changes in Chinese society shape the history of Chinese art: from a uniform cult image produces mythological illustrations, through tableaus and historical images, to later nature paintings. In the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century landscape painting becomes an independent area, and later images of plants and animals are added. This multistage development ensures the artistic knowledge of nature, with results pertaining only to art, and not

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<sup>1</sup> WU HUNG 巫鴻, 美術史十議 [Ten Proposals for Art History] (Beijing: Sanlian, 2008), 21.

enriching the knowledge of natural sciences. However, there is a constant need to know the nature, which is present or resurfaces periodically, and can only be realised in art. In art there is no practical or active opposition to a passive and intuitive learning, as this type of learning never truly becomes a science. Perceiving nature is aimed at studying more specific and individual phenomena; nevertheless, is it never followed by a generalisation and abstraction. It remains on the level of detail—on the level of art. Various elements of nature used as topics for paintings can be distinguished gradually, in the order set by practical life: first come the animals, and then the plants.

Simultaneously, landscape painting became a separate topic. In the beginning it was a background for religious or genre art, then it was a companion to architecture, and finally it was restricted to mountains and waters; then it was further divided according to specific plants constituting separate topics. The 12<sup>th</sup> century saw a full range of topics: from a bamboo and a solitary bird, to insects and cherry branches, large river landscapes and various natural phenomena. Chinese painters' searches were limited to solving singular artistic issues. Plants have become the main topic in Chinese art: either whole trees or marked with a branch with blossoms, bamboos and numerous flowers.

Discovering bamboo was a breakthrough for painting, and making it a separate subject marked the beginning of literati painting (文人畫). Painting, like calligraphy and poetry, were cultivated by the educated *wenren* (文人) people, especially for the educated, and in some cases for the artist's entertainment. In ideal conditions, *wenren* did not sell their works. As an educated man and a representative of the class, the *wenren* began civil service, thus becoming a member of the highest social class a Chinese can aspire to. After passing the imperial exams he would become a member of the nobility. In China the artistic and literary activities were always reserved for the officials, and the time an official devoted to creating art was considered a way of ensuring the development of the national culture. Therefore when speaking of Chinese painting, we must speak of the literati elite, leading a gradual evolution of the nation.

The *wenren* created art first and foremost because of their love of art they often hid behind the facades of various art schools, separating themselves from professional artists. It was the literati who painted bamboo, wrote treatises, criticized and formed rules for bamboo painting.

After several individual attempts, the greatest Song poet and the most talented painter of the dynasty, Su Dongpo 蘇東坡, made bamboo his favorite

topic, and at the same time made it a touchstone for of a literati painting techniques . Nodes and various shaped leaves are an interesting calligraphic motif for ink painting. Bamboo has always been painted monochromatically in ink. Sometimes only single leaves are presented, sometimes branches, and sometimes a small grove (oftentimes with a rock or the aforementioned “two friends”). Bamboo played also a main role in another group — the Four Nobles 四君子; three others often presented flowers were winter plum blossom, orchid and chrysanthemum (梅花, 蘭花, 菊花). This very interest in the brushwork and ink — one of the main factors contributing to the greatness of 14<sup>th</sup> century Chinese painting — has also found its way to painting other blossoming plants and trees. The most often painted plants were orchids and plum blossoms, and to a lesser extent narcissus. These blossoms were not only admired for their natural beauty. Orchids and plum blossoms also had philosophical and symbolic connotations in China, as orchids possess delicacy and aroma, and plums display the freshness of youth and returning life in bright flowers blossoming on the gnarly and coarse branches with the first breath of spring. The popularity of these particular flowers with Yuan painters must have been increased by their appearance. Long, pliable and elegantly bending orchid leaves were perfect for long, fluid brush strokes, while in plum trees their gnarly trunks, branches, and even young shoots were combined with almost ethereal flowers, and gave the artists an opportunity to display their brushstroke mastery and texture creation. For the best painters of the period, the flowers they painted were more than just a way of showing off their skills. The great Yuan flower painters approached their topic with all botanical insight and expressed a character of every flower with a sensitivity of a talented portrait painter.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century saw the peak of a particular branch of painting devoted to depicting the bamboo in ink only. The graceful and elegant plant has come to symbolise in China a perfect and noble gentleman, a man who is pliable as bamboo, and bends to the requirements of society, but also a man who retains untouched moral character. Smooth, pointed leaves, either remaining motionless during a quiet day, or bent and trembling with every breeze like banners, are a fascinating and dazzling challenge to a Chinese artist. The very challenge of depicting the bamboo in a technical manner must have immensely involved the Chinese, with their innate passion and drive for perfection.

Bamboo was in botanical sense a perfect means of expression of a wide range of human emotions, but has given the artists an opportunity to show

off their brushwork. The pliable Chinese brush is ideal for painting the bamboo leaves: the tip of the brush touches the paper, and as the pressure increases, the brush widens to paint a leaf, and as the pressure eases, the line turns into the pointed tip of the leaf. Applying the correct amount of pressure, adding the right curvature to the lines, are the main subjects of intensive studies and exhausting practice. If we add the large number of leaves, the problems with their compositional placement and grouping, the relationship between the branches and the trunk, as well as the possibilities resulting from empty spaces, it is understandable that bamboo painting is not a topic for novice painters.

Bamboo painting in China has had such great importance, and so many masters devoted their lives to this topic. And yet the topic is so vast that we can only mention its main features and several painters. In the initial bamboo paintings the trunk and the leaves were outlined, and the image was filled with colour.

The greatest bamboo painter of the Song dynasty Wen Tong 文同 (1018-1079) was. His death in 1079 was mourned by Su Dongpo 蘇東坡, a poet and also a bamboo painter. The best painting attributed to Wen Tong is a large composition on silk, currently in the National Palace Museum. In this picture one branch flows downward in a fluid S, from top left corner to bottom right corner. The leaves grow out of smaller branches growing out of the nodes. Several shades of ink were used, the darkest one closest to the viewer. This picture is a detailed and meticulous nature study, showing the painter's great knowledge of laws governing the bamboo growth. It is not, however, a botanical study. The leaves, bamboo clumps, repetitions and contrasts that make the composition so alive and rhythmical, are all contributions of artistic expertise. Smaller branches or shoots utilise a painting technique applied in the paintings of some previous landscape painters when painting trees: at the end of the line they placed a tiny dot of ink, suggesting a bud, strengthening a line and giving the picture light. When painting such leaves an artist holds the brush at a right angle, guiding the tip from the base of the leaf to its edge. The very type of lines are used in calligraphy, therefore bamboo painting is, as a painting technique, much closer to Chinese calligraphy than any other type of painting.

## YUAN PERIOD

The Yuan dynasty was a very important era in the history of Chinese painting. A prominent feature of the time was the rise of literati paintings, and the increasing link between the art of poetry, calligraphy and painting. Another special characteristic was the appearance of bamboo-and-rock paintings and many painters who specialized in the topic. In order to attain a greater realism of bamboos, the painters used a thick, compact brushwork. It was more free, the line more prominent. Ink wash was either entirely eliminated from bamboo painting or applied in a limited manner. This marked a return to a full, detailed compositions of ancient masters.

There were numerous famous bamboo painters in the Yuan dynasty. Wang Bomin 王伯敏 wrote in his “A Complete History of Chinese Painting” that bamboo in ink was particularly popular during the Yuan dynasty, and that more than two-thirds of the Yuan painters were expert in it<sup>2</sup>. In Xia Wenyan’s 夏文彥 “Precious Mirror of Painting” (圖繪寶鑑), there were 175 Yuan dynasty painters, and 76 of them excelled in bamboo painting<sup>3</sup>.

Among the greatest painters were Li Kan 李衍 (1244–1320), who devoted his life to studying bamboos from both botanical and artistic point of view. Li Kan was an expert in bamboo painting. Inspired by the style of Wen Tong 文同, Li Kan had shown great variety in skills and styles. Known also as Xizha iDaoren 息齋道人, Li Kan was a high ranking official. He first learned from works of Wand E 王誥, and later from Wen Tong, and developed his own unique coloured bamboo paintings with meticulous details. He also wrote “Painting bamboo” (畫竹) which included his decades of bamboo painting experience and was the earliest book on bamboo painting. Li had left behind many works, such as “In the Rain” (在雨中), “New Bamboo Shoots” (新的竹筍) and “Bamboo in Ink” (墨竹), “Bamboo an Rocks” (竹石圖), which are greatly valued. “In the Rain” (在雨中) depicts bamboos and rocks in the rain. There are four bamboo stems with leaves, abundant but not messy. The spacing is appropriate and orderly, bringing out the graceful spirit of the bamboo.

“Bamboo in Ink” (墨竹) was painted when Li Kan was 75, and represents the style of his later works. The painting features an old bamboo stretching vertically. The stem bends slightly and there are abundant branches and leaves. The brushstrokes are smooth and the ink looks vivid. This picture

<sup>2</sup> WANG BOMIN 王伯敏, 中國美術通史 (“A Complete History of Chinese Painting”), Shanghai: Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1988, s. 156,

<sup>3</sup> WU HUNG 巫鴻, 美術史十議 (“Ten Proposals for Art History”), Beijing: Sanlian, 2008, s. 77.

belongs to the same style as Wen Tong's 文同 works in that it is based on careful observation and in-depth knowledge of the subject matter. It depicts a thicket of hanging leaves, immobile on a hot summer day. The mass of green is organised in the shape of a fan, with stalks painted in bright tones. The complex organisation of leaves, stalks and hues is not accidental, but strictly controlled. The picture is full of incredible understanding of the depth, the feel of growing leaves and their weight, gently bending branches. Zhang Junmai 張君勳 in his description of the painting, emphasises the visible ease with which the artist achieved his goal: "The stems, trunks and leaves are marked with greatest spontaneity, almost carelessly. The artist must have been a master of his craft. Not many before Li Kan knew the topic so well, and only few after him possessed technique that would allow them such effortless and direct expression [...]."<sup>4</sup> Just like Wen Tong, Li Kan displayed the clarity of vision, so his bamboos are functional and devoid of superfluous strokes, they are painted with beautiful strokes, in a perfect brightness. This picture was probably painted at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as the first colophon was written by Zhao Mengfu (趙孟頫) in 1308. Li Kan immensely influenced the later bamboo painters, not only because his painting set a high standard, but also because his handbook on bamboo painting occupied a significant place—both as a text, and as the illustrations, quoted and reused by writers in later periods. Li Kan also composed an illustrated handbook for bamboo painting. With time his paintings have become more and more rare, but his best work is the one depicting two clumps of bamboo and a single trunk.

Yuan dynasty bamboo painters had made great progress in the aspects of form, brushstroke techniques and composition layout. bamboo painting was accepted as an independent subject, unlike in the Song dynasty, when bamboo was adapted as the setting in landscape and figure paintings. This in turn had great effect on the bamboo paintings in the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the development of applying calligraphic methods to painting was best illustrated in bamboo paintings. Zhao Mengfu maintained in one of his poem inscriptions that one had to be skilful in calligraphy in order to do bamboo painting. That theory had great influence on succeeding painters and explained why many later calligraphers were also experts in painting orchids and bamboos.

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<sup>4</sup> ZHANG JUNMAI 張君勳, 明日之中國文化 [Chinese Culture in the Future] (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1936), 11.

In terms of painting techniques, Yuan dynasty bamboo paintings display great diversification. There were methods of “painting bamboo” and “writing bamboo”: the former referred to outlining and colour-filling, while the latter referred to painting bamboo in ink. There was also a peculiar “outlining in ink” method, which was mastered only by Zhang Xun 張遜 (ca. 1295–after 1349). His only work left is the “Outlining Bamboos” (竹大綱), in the collection of Imperial Palace Museum in Beijing.

Wang Yuan 王淵 (1260–1368) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century painted bamboo in outline only, and retained the outline style of Li Kan, the most renowned Yuan bamboo painter. Painting bamboo by means of ink only has unclear beginnings, but in all likelihood this method was not used before the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This manner of painting has gained so much recognition in the first quarter of the 12<sup>th</sup> century that it was given a separate category in catalogue of Song paintings.

An avid interest in the quality of ink and brushwork as means of expressing personal feelings that developed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, quite naturally attracted the painters’ attention to the possibilities of bamboo paintings. Of the most notable artists Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 was also a master of ink bamboo paintings, which is confirmed in his magnificent art. Zhao Mengfu was a comprehensive painter excelling in every subject. His great achievement in calligraphy also overwhelmed his fame in bamboo painting. His bamboo paintings are calligraphic in style. He stressed capturing the spirit of the object, and being true to nature. His strokes are strong and forceful. His wife, using her own name Guan Daosheng 管道昇 was one of the best Chinese female painters of the century. She had painted “Bamboo and Stone” (竹與石), “Bamboo in Ink” (竹墨) for the emperor. His son, Zhao Yong 趙雍 was also bamboo paintings expert. It was said that the Yuan emperor had combined the calligraphy of Zhao Mengfu, Guan Daosheng and Zhao Yong into one volume. Working on the concept, a group of people gathered the ink bamboo paintings of the three and combined them into a volume which is now in the Imperial Palace Museum in Beijing.

There was a great number of artists who devoted large part of their artistic lives, or even their whole career, to painting bamboo.

Gao Kegong 高剋恭 (1248–1310) was also well known for painting bamboo. He was painter of lesser skill than Zhao Mengfu, only specialized in landscape and bamboo-and-rock paintings. He learned landscape paintings from Dong Yuan 董源 and Juran 巨然, while his bamboo-and-rock paintings were learned from Wang Tingyun 王庭筠. His works won high acclaims in



his time and he had great pride in them too. Gao Kegong had fewer works left behind. One of his scroll “Bamboo in Ink” (竹墨) is in the collection of the Imperial Palace Museum in Beijing. In this picture there is a piece of rock, behind which are two bamboo trees. The strokes are solid and forceful, and the composition is very compact, showing vividly the graceful appearance of the bamboo in misty rain. There is another “Bamboo in Ink” by Gao Kegong, currently in the Imperial Palace Museum in Taipei. It has a similar composition and style.

After the early Yuan period, the most prominent bamboo painter was Ke Jiusi 柯九思 (1290-1343). As a young man, Ke Jiusi was favoured by the emperor and was appointed to work in the imperial library evaluating the antiquities, calligraphy and paintings in the royal collection. He also painted many bamboo paintings for emperor. He was a typical literati painter and an important art collector in the Yuan dynasty.

Taking the theory of applying calligraphic methods in painting, Ke Jiusi developed it further and explained it in greater details. Ke Jiusi often drew old trees by the side of the bamboo. The misty or frosty branches gave an archaic touch to the pictures. In the “Bamboo in Ink” painted when Ke Jiusi resigned from office and visited Ni Zan 倪瓚, we can see his exquisite skills. The dark ink in front and light ink in the back makes the picture look three-dimensional. The strokes are firm but not dragging. The rocks were done in “hemp-fibre wrinkles” and look elegant. The picture is now in the Beijing Imperial Palace Museum.

The National Palace Museum houses two large paintings of Gu An 顧安 (1289-?)—magnificent examples of bamboos in the wind. Gu An worked in the first part of 14<sup>th</sup> century. Just like Li Kan’s bamboo, Gu An’s paintings are perfectly bright, without anything filling the space, without meaningless lines and unnecessary leaves. Within the limited scope of bamboo painting, orderly and clear style of Wen Tong, Li Kan and several other painters like Gu An, can be perceived as a classical manner. The topic, however, was presented in different manner. Similarly to landscape painting, bamboos can be presented in a brief, impressionistic, or nearly abstract manner. The crucial element is catching a true spirit of the plant. Wu Zhen 吳鎮 applied both the realistic and the impressionistic styles in his bamboo and landscape paintings. The bamboos resemble hemp or reed, this is indisputable.

The most famous painter who devoted his life to plum blossom and bamboo painting was Wang Mian 王冕 (1287–1359), an artist as eccentric as he was talented. Wang Bomin 王伯敏 quotes a Chinese fragment describing

the unusual behaviour of Wang Mian: “He usually wore a wide-brim hat, grass green coat and high wooden shoes. He entertained himself with wooden sword practice. Sometimes he walked through the market, singing aloud, and he could be seen riding a yellow ox and reading Han dynasty history. Some people considered him crazy.”<sup>5</sup> In his bamboo and plum tree paintings the artist depicted young shoots with fluid, lively lines, while he only sketched the flowers lightly, giving his pictures freshness and spontaneity.

A great contribution in the most impressive paintings was a large scroll painted by a less known artist, Zou Fulei 鄒復雷 (14<sup>th</sup> century). It was painted around 1360 on paper with a softly bluish hue. The composition is typical of other 14<sup>th</sup> century works, because just like Li Kan’s bamboos, it is close to the viewer, who sees a fragment, cut off at the top and bottom, but the fragment is very much elongated. The various textures in the image, like the twisted trunk and branch, flexible young shoots, are shaped with ink. Zou Fulei used a so-called “flying white” or 飛白, which is produced by quickly dragging a brush on paper, so that its hairs split and the ink is uneven, disrupted, and the paper can be seen through. Flowers and bamboo have no outlines, and ink wash technique makes the image softer. The final line, around 60-centimetre long, is like a sword blade. It is not just a show of artistic skill—the branch is perfectly proportioned in relation to the whole picture, especially straight and bent branches leading to it. The balance between the personal expression, the objective reality and brilliant technique present in Zou Fulei’s painting are the major contributions of 14<sup>th</sup> century painting into the Chinese art. This also signifies a clear break with detailed and precise painting, in the style of Northern Song Painting Academy, producing a fuller painting style, with clearer expression and more complete visions than ecstatic visions of the *chan* 禪 painters. The best Ming flower and bamboo painters, both devoted to one type and orthodox, for instance Shen Zhou 沈周 and Wen Zhenming 文徵明, followed the Yuan dynasty style.

That period saw the works of many unknown today, but truly talented artists (unfortunately, their works survived only in several copies). Among other painters who also influenced the later artists are Fang Congyi 方從義 (1302–1393), an individualist and full of strength landscape painter, Cao Zhibai 曹知白 (1272–1355), who managed to capture in his finest works the spirit of antiquity with a typically 14<sup>th</sup> century manner, and Chen Lin 陳琳 (1260–1320), whose final works seem to promise some eccentricities of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>5</sup> WANG BOMIN 王伯敏, 中國畫史 [History of Chinese Painting] (Taipei: Lanting, 1986), 34.

In late Yuan dynasty, the most famous bamboo painter was Xia Tingzhi (夏庭芝 14<sup>th</sup> century) did not have so much influence and only several of his works remained. From his only few works left behind. From his only work found today, “Bamboo and Rock” (竹岩), we can appreciate Xie’s great art. The painting was done on silk. There is a piece of rock, behind which are two large bamboos and two new bamboos. The ink varies in tones of darkness, and the entire picture is very vivid. Not much has been written on Xie Tingzhi: apart from his aliases and native province, it is known that he was skilful in poetry and specialized in painting bamboo. Among the Four Yuan Masters (元四家), Wang Meng (王蒙), Wu Zhen (吳鎮) and Ni Zan (倪瓚) were skilful in bamboo painting. Wang’s works found today are mostly his landscape paintings, hence we do not know what his bamboo paintings look like. For Wu Zhen and Ni Zan, their achievements in bamboo painting were prominent.

Wu Zhen (吳鎮 1280–1354) was famous for his landscape paintings, though his bamboo-and-rock paintings did not get the due admiration they deserved. Wu Zhen was simple in his style. His composition was clear, and his strokes were smooth-flowing and condensed. His excellence in rustic script enhanced his bamboo painting. Wu painted many volumes of “Bamboo Manuals” (竹手冊). Large part of the inscriptions are in fact summaries of his experiences in bamboo painting. The most famous volume among them is the one now in the Imperial Palace Museum in Taipei. It consists of 22 leaves, which feature snow-smothered bamboo, bamboo in wind, bamboo branches, rings, stems and leaves in great details. It is a comprehensive volume on different kinds of bamboo painting.

Ni Zan (倪瓚 1301–1374) had great achievement in bamboo painting, especially his painting theories from his comments on bamboo paintings. He did not look for resemblance, but the charm of strokes. He advocated blending one’s feelings into the painting. According to Ni Zan, the aim of painting was to amuse and improve oneself, and the comments of viewers did not matter. “Chinese Parasol, Bamboo and Rock” (中國梧桐竹岩) is one of Ni Zan’s early works. There is a Chinese parasol there, a piece of rock and two bamboos behind the rock. The strokes are clear and succulent. The painting has a strange style which is regarded as a deviation from Ni’s usual style. Two other of Ni’s works, “Bamboos for a Recluse” (竹枝贈隱士) and “Bamboo” (竹) display a different style. All the three pieces are in the Beijing Imperial Palace Museum.

The Yuan dynasty painters did not only paint excellent bamboo paintings on paper and silk, they also painted them on walls. Painters like Li Kan,

Shang Qi, Li Shihang, Ke Jiushi and Zhang Yanfu were experts in these mural paintings. From the imperial palace to houses of commoners, temples and monasteries, bamboo mural paintings were popular. It is a pity that these mural paintings are lost and we do not have the chance to appreciate them.

Numerous concepts or manners of representing the world through brushwork were initiated by Yuan artists, and then fully bloomed in the 15<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century, with minor additions. The interest in painting technique led monochromatic painting to perfection, which in turn made it into one of the most direct and sensitive means of expression in the world. The period of Yuan dynasty, despite social unrest and foreign domination, was not only a mere reflection of the Song dynasty spirit or a transitional period between centuries. This period was one of the most creative periods in the painting of the Far East.

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, bamboo painters could seldom break through the limits of earlier masters. Their works were mostly for play and boasting of skills. Although many painters engaged in bamboo painting, few of them were really outstanding.

## MING PERIOD

In many aspects the Ming bamboo painting was aimed at rebirth and rejuvenation of the Chinese artistic traditions. The main oeuvre of the period was created by the artists creating outside the accepted canons—the literati. Their works can be divided into two main schools: Zhe 浙 (named after Zhejiang city) and Wu 吳 (named after Wuxian) the Zhe painting was mostly (but was not limited to) monochromatic, painted in bold and broad brushstrokes, resulting in a less detailed, but more lively and dynamic painting. The Wu painting, on the other hand, attached greater significance to the technique itself.

In the Ming dynasty, painters such as Song Ke 宋克, Wang Fu 王紱, Xia Chang 夏昶, Lu Zh 陸治 and Gui Changshi 歸昌世 specialized in the topic. Others, like Wen Zhengming 文徵明, Tang Yin 唐寅, Wen Peng 文彭, also excelled in this form, even though they produced it only occasionally. In early and Ming period, many painters adopted the topic as a reflection of their mind.

Song Ke 宋克 (1327–1387) had served as an official. He was well regarded for his calligraphy and bamboo paintings. He drew slender and strong bamboos growing among mountain rocks, with a special air of period and wilfulness.

The best bamboo painter of the period was Wang Fu 王紱 (1362–1416). As a well-educated man, Wang excelled in poetry and calligraphy. He was an excellent landscape painter and his ink and wash bamboo-and-rock paintings were unique. Wang had a miserable life. His unhappy political career nurtured in him an upright character which is reflected in his works. Wang's paintings had a lofty and grand style and the richness of ink and the postures of the bamboos were refreshing and charming. Wang Fu's fame as a bamboo painter is a significant aspect of his genius, connecting him to the great minds of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. His ink bamboo paintings prove that he continued a great tradition of clear, rigorous and elegant painting of bamboo, cultivated by Li Kan 李衍 and Wen Tonaga 文同.

Among the best remaining orchid and bamboo paintings of the period is a series of four paintings on silk (currently in the Tokyo National Museum) painted by a 14<sup>th</sup> century monk known as Xie Huan 謝環 (1426–1452), and unfortunately forgotten in China. The artist combined orchids with eroded rocks, thorns and bamboo in an elegant and restrained composition, and the long twisted leaves are painted with incredibly confident and skilful single-stroke lines.

Wang Fu had great impact on other painters. Many learned his style, and the most famous was Xia Chang 夏昶 (1388–1470). Xia Chang had the favour of the emperor because of his outstanding calligraphy. He served as a civil servant for more than forty years. As an official, Xia Chang was easy-going and popular. He was skilful in literature, calligraphy and bamboo painting, and his style was more refined than that of Wang Fu 王紱. He attached great importance to realism rather than the spirit and mood of the objects. Xia Chang's ink bamboo painting had beautiful structure and strict discipline like the style of Li Kan, the Yuan dynasty bamboo expert. He liked to make colossal pieces which, despite their size, were flexible and realistic. His best works should perhaps be considered long horizontal scrolls, where he painted rocks and streams with bamboo. In some works Xia Chang is so close to Wang Fu's style that his works can be taken for Fu's. Xia Chang's scrolls usually present long views of river banks with details close to the viewer, organised so that they seem to be cut off from the top and bottom. Bamboos among rocks show the diversity of water plants. In the scrolls in a private collection in Hong Kong, bamboo stems are cut off from the top and bottom, which brings them to the foreground of the picture. No later painter exceeded Xia Chang mastery of bamboo paintings, which allowed him to produce a unified style.

During that period there were also other bamboo painters, including Chen Jiru 陳繼儒, Zhang Yan 張彥. The mainstream painters of the period were the Wumen School painters 吳門畫派. Most of them excelled in landscape, figure and flower paintings, and few specialized in bamboo paintings. Bamboo was drawn usually as part of the setting only. A characteristic feature that dominated their painting was a type of free expressionism, strongly anchored in painting tradition. All of them were literati painters, and since many of them were as well versed in calligraphy as they were in painting, it was becoming more and more popular among friends and artists to add a poem to a picture to enhance the mood or to emphasize the concept of the picture. The more outstanding painters were Wen Zhengming 文徵明, Tang Yin 唐寅, Wen Peng 文彭, Zhou Zhimian 周之冕, Chen Daofu 陳道復 and Shen Zhou 沈周.

Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470–1559) was one of the most talented painters of the period, an embodiment of an ideal literati painter. Some of his bamboo paintings are close to the Yuan dynasty spirit. In the pictures in, for instance, the National Palace Museum, the ink is rich and varied, the brush strokes are decisive, hard, but light and fluid. In the thick and short bamboo leaves Wen Zhenming imitates Wang Fu's (王紱) manner. When he was older, the artist used wide strokes heavy with ink in silvery hues or in wet, shining black, and particular lines are connected in ink wash technique. The artist uses also a large number of dots in various sizes, not only to mark plants, but also to serve as accents. In this way he also uses some short vertical lines.

Tang Yin's 唐寅 (1470–1523) bamboo paintings were smooth and fluid in strokes, displaying great brushstroke techniques. He had served some minor posts in the civil service. He was well-known for painting bamboo and he usually did new bamboo shoots. His strokes were elegant and overwhelming. He absorbed the essences of Wen Tong, Li Kan and Zhao Mengfu and formed his unique style. His "Elegant Bamboo and Rock" (雅竹和岩) is now in the collection of Imperial Palace Museum in Beijing. Tang Yin had great fame and influence in the late Ming period.

Wu Bin 吳彬 (1573–1620) of the Ming dynasty claimed that although Tang Yin was not as good as Wen Tong, he was definitely better than Li Kan. In the huge collection of the Imperial Palace Museum, there are two very extraordinary bamboo paintings—Wu Bin's "Outlined Bamboo" (竹概述) and Chen Daofu's 陳道復 "Bamboo and Birds" (竹鳥). Not much is known about the two painters, though Wu was probably a court painter. "Outlined Bamboo" was done on paper. There is a single bamboo stem

outlining method of Yuan master Zhang Xun 张逊. The brushstrokes are mature and the picture is very vivid. "Bamboo and Birds" is the only remaining painting by Chen Daofu. It features three large bamboo stems in ink and wash, and a piece of rock under the bamboos. The composition and brushstrokes resemble those of Yuan painters, while the style of the rock is typical of mid-Ming period. The birds winging through the bamboos add vitality to the picture.

Ji Sheng 計盛 (Ming period) was an expert specializing in painting bamboo. He served as an official and later became an ambassador to Korea. Beside painting bamboo, Jin dabbled in literature and calligraphy. His best work was the "Outlined Bamboo and Rock" (概述竹岩) which is now in the Beijing Imperial Palace Museum. The painting has a stable structure, vivid images and well-arranged ink tones. It shows good balance in void and solidity.

Other famous bamboo painters included Yao Shou 姚綬 (1423–1495). Yao Shou was well-learned in poetry and calligraphy. He excelled in painting landscapes, figures and bamboo-and-rock. His works were refreshing and natural and his strokes forceful. Yao Shou was skilful in literature. He served as an official; he liked to paint after drinking and had an unrestrained style. He was very influential at the time and Wen Zhengming had high acclaims on his works. There are many bamboo paintings by Yao Shou in the Imperial Palace Museum in Beijing.

Late Ming painters had strong predilection for copying archaic styles. The method of "outlining and colour-filling" was not popular and the common style was ink and wash freehand. The paintings were generally unrestrained and overwhelming. Among the bamboo experts were Feng Qizhen 馮起震, Lu Zhi 陸治. Others like Xu Wei 徐渭, Sun Kehong 孫君澤 and Lan Ying 藍瑛 were famous for painting other topics, but their bamboo paintings were exquisite.

Feng Qizhen 馮起震 (1553–1644) was skilful in painting bamboo and calligraphy. He liked to do long scrolls or colossal pieces. Using succulent and smooth strokes, Feng Qizhen allowed the wind direction to unite the bamboos into a complete and harmonic composition in his works.

Lu Zhi 魯治 (17<sup>th</sup> century) as a scholar excelled in poetry, calligraphy and bamboo painting, his works showed an air of fading detachment. He was a bamboo painter as well as a calligrapher. He had studied the past masters, but managed to form his own original style and elaborated on the importance of capturing the natural spirit of the bamboos. In his later years, he lost the use of

his right arm and started painting with his left hand. His remaining works included “Orchid and Bamboo” (蘭花和竹子) and “Bamboo and Rock” (竹岩).

Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593) was a master of freehand style. His bamboo paintings were succulent and forceful. He had written a great number of poems in bamboo paintings displaying a heroic and flamboyant mood. Although Xu Wei is often associated with illustrative paintings, his best work is possibly a landscape “Bamboo and Rock” (竹岩), painted in ink and pale ink wash of colours.

Sun Kehong 孫君澤 (1533–1611) had served as an official. He was later dismissed and entertained himself with painting and calligraphy. Song excelled in highly realistic flower-and-bird paintings. His ink bamboos were following the style of Wen Tong 文同. He liked to copy ancient styles and his works often showed the influence of ancient masters. His bamboo paintings displayed an elegant mood, his brushstrokes were vivid and decisive.

Lan Ying 藍瑛 (1585–1664) had been skilful in painting since he was young. He had copied many ancient masterpieces and his paintings often followed ancient rules. However, he developed his own style in later years. He was a versatile painter specializing in different topics. Although he copied from ancient works, he did not confine himself to orthodox styles. This is best illustrated in his “Bamboo and Rock” (竹岩), one of the leaves in the “Volume of Landscape Paintings After Ancient Style” (江皋话古图). His paintings are more elegant and restrained than the paintings of his followers, although he is traditionally considered to be following the style of Ma Yuan 馬遠, a Song dynasty painter. The mentioned picture has minimal amount of ink and delicate colours, and does not possess a brilliant brushwork. The broken ink of the rocks in the foreground and in the distant hills, spots and dots on faraway hills are planned to speak just enough, and the simple means Lan Ying’s painting has a realistic character and mood.

## QING PERIOD

Bamboo paintings underwent great changes in concepts and contents in the early Qing years. With the overthrowing of the Ming regime, many scholars and officials turned to live recluse lives. Some of them amused themselves by painting, and the topic of bamboo was taken as a convenient means of expressing their thoughts. After the fall of Qing dynasty there was no discontinuity in the painting tradition. Many painters considered to be



Qing painters were born, created the majority of their works during the previous dynasty, and they also died during that dynasty. Chinese 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century painting, including bamboo painting, makes one of the most stimulating studies in all the art history in China. Due to its numerous facets, namely coexistence of various styles and very personal and individual character, the Qing bamboo painting much more attention that it has so far received in order to fully evaluate its achievements. The topic is further complicated by the fact that so many artists were eclectic in their styles, and often the pictures in one style are as typical as other pictures, painted in a completely different style.

During the period, outstanding bamboo painters included Gui Zhuang 歸莊, Dai Mingyue 戴明說. Other famous painters like Shitao 石濤, Wang Hui 王翬, Bada Shenren 八大山人, Wu Li 吳歷 and Yun Shouping 惲壽平 also created very good bamboo paintings.

Gui Zhuang 歸莊 (1613–1673), the son of Gui Zhuangji 歸莊集, learned from his father. After the fall of the Ming dynasty, Gui Zhuang became a recluse and lived in monasteries. He was renowned for his high integrity reflected in his works. Gui Zhuang's bamboos are an example of a rich play with ink hues, and most importantly they are a fine example of realistic atmospheric effects and logical connections, which release the strain on the viewer's imagination.

Dai Mingyue 戴明說 (?–1660) was a Ming Official who continued his public office in the Qing government. He dabbled in calligraphy, painting and bamboo painting. The Qing emperor admired his paintings so much that he awarded Dai Mingyue a silver seal. He learned from the style of Lu Zhilü 陸治 and was particularly famous for his snow-smothered bamboos. His brushstrokes were thrusting and powerful and his composition resembled those of the Yuan masters. He often painted large bamboo stems which reached from the bottom of the paper to the top, creating a grand and majestic atmosphere.

Chinese painting of the later periods can be generally divided into two paths: one of them markedly homogenous, and the other diversified. The homogeneity is a characteristic of 16<sup>th</sup> century artists, while the diversity can be found in the works of artists who painted in a personal, without abandoning tradition or belonging to any school or group. It is also not a coincidence that the greatest individualists withdrew from social life and were seeking freedom in Buddhism and wandering through China.

Among the Four Monks of early Qing, Shitao 石濤 (1642–1707) was the

best in painting orchids and bamboos. He became a monk when he was young and spent his life in various Buddhist monasteries, where he met many intellectuals, who chose recluse life after the fall of Ming dynasty. The final years of his life Shitao spent as an abbot in Nanjing. During his life, his pictures were probably known only to a relatively small group of his companions, and only one found its way to an imperial collection. His bamboos show complex brushwork and strong hue contrasts. Despite their complexity, his pictures display a simple and true expression, being the result of a direct contact with nature. The trees, rocks, and bamboos are not made by copying from a handbook, but from a personal experience and meditation on nature. Shi Tao was in some respect the most talented and the most original artist of Qing dynasty. He himself rebelled against the weight of tradition, overwhelming to many young talented artists. He emphasised the need to study ancient masters as an indispensable part of learning, leading to understanding and mastering technical skill. According to him it was important to capture the ancient spirit, but not external similarity. His works display much greater variety than the works of his contemporaries, resulting not only from technical mastery, but rather from the never ending diversity of nature he observed and so exceptionally depicted. His works had very high standards. He usually painted in ink and wash freehand style. His style was original: his strokes showed an impressive and free-flowing mood. There was also a generous use of heavy dark ink interspersed with lighter touches. Sometimes, Shi Tao also did small refreshing and elegant pieces such as the “Bamboo in Ink”.

Zhu Da 朱耷 and Hong Ren 弘仁 were also experts in painting bamboos. Zhu Da 朱耷 (1626–1705) also known as Bada Shanren 八大山人 was a descendant of an imperial line of Ming dynasty. It is not known when he became a monk—he used different names, but almost all of his works are signed Bada Shanren. The topics of his works were landscapes, animals and plants (including bamboo). The lines he used were broad and strong or delicate, sketch-like and broken; the ink was either wet and flowing or dry and soft. The artist was a master of bamboo composition, and although his works seem to be simple and free, they are in fact well-composed. This may perhaps be due to his natural feeling for drawing rather than careful planning present in the works of Ming and Qing painters. Bada Shanren’s line appears to be carefree, but a comparison with the works of his followers shows its strength and vitality. Empty spaces in his compositions are applied with the same skill as in the Southern Song dynasty paintings. The landscapes and

bamboo paintings could serve as a topic for a separate study. Some of the works are almost overloaded with thick leaves, while others are no more than a simple sketch.

Hong Ren 弘仁 (1610–1663) became a Buddhist monk after the fall of Ming dynasty and he spent his life partly as a recluse; he did not occupy any official positions and very little is known about his life. He cultivates a specific style, devoid of typical of his time eclecticism. His style is based on Ni Zan's 倪瓚 style, but was modelled directly on it. His bamboo paintings are different from pale imitations of Ni from Ming and Qing period. Hong Ren adopted Ni Zan's sparse dry ink application, elegant bamboo and a simple outline, but used these elements in a unique manner. His compositions are much more complete, and the relationships between shapes, rocks and different bamboo forms are much more complex. His works show solitude and withdrawal.

Wu Hong 吳宏 (1637–1687), one of the Eight Masters of Nanjing 南京八家, applied rustic script calligraphy strokes which resulted in an impression of great strength. Wu had done a "Bamboo in the Storm" (竹風暴) which was a little rash and gave a crude and rough feeling. Some later painters were influenced by his style. He used ink wash on delicate colours or painted over the ink. Paint and ink are often very wet, which allows to smear and disperse in a controlled way, to achieve clear results.

The most prominent feature of the period was the appearance of the Yangzhou School led by the Eight Eccentrics 揚州八怪. Although each had his personal style, the Yangzhou painters shared a common preference for topics like plum blossoms, orchids, bamboos and chrysanthemums. Among them, Zheng Bangiao's 鄭板橋 (1693-1765) ink bamboo paintings were considered as having reached the highest standards. Zheng was a well-known artist. He had served in the civil service and was dismissed. Afterwards he settled in Yangzhou and sold paintings for a living. He specialized in painting orchids and bamboos in freehand style. Although he copied the styles of Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593), Shitao 石濤 and the Song and Yuan masters, Zheng Bangiao was able to extract the essences and elaborated on compromising realism with artistic presentation. His bamboo paintings were the true reflection of his mind and charm.

Zheng Bangiao emphasized that one should not "have the bamboo in one's mind" before painting, which meant that one should paint naturally according to one's thought and mood. Such improvisation would lead to spontaneity and smoothness. Zheng used simple strokes to convey the spirit

and charm of the bamboos. His works carried a strong sense of realism, reflecting his concern for the life of ordinary people. In his paintings, we can find a unity of poetry, calligraphy and painting. The poetic inscriptions, one of Zheng's significant characteristics, were an inseparable part of the paintings.

Other painters of the Eights Eccentrics 揚州八怪 were also very skilled, for instance, Li Shan 李鱣 (1686–1762), Wang Shishen 汪士慎 (1686–1759), Li Fangying 李方膺 (1696–1755) and Luo Pin 羅聘 (1733 – 1799).

Li Shan 李鱣 (1686–1762) was once a court painter. He learned from Jiang Tingxi 蔣廷錫 and later was influenced by Shitao 石濤. His style was unrestrained and overwhelming. Wang Shishen 汪士慎 (1686–1759) had led a poor life. He sold paintings in Yangzhou. When he grew older, he lost sight, but he continued to paint. He was well known for his outstanding plum blossom, bamboo and orchid paintings. He was also highly regarded for his calligraphy and seal engraving. His strokes were slender and forceful, showing a vivid imagery.

Another famous Yangzhou painter, Gao Fenghan 高鳳翰 (1683–1749) had been an official, but resigned and sold paintings in Yangzhou. He lost the use of his right arm at the age of 55, and painted with his left hand. His landscape and flower paintings were exquisite, and his bamboo paintings, especially the bamboo-and-rock in the snow, were exceptionally good. “Bamboo in the Snow” (竹雪) was his best masterpiece. The snow smothering the leaves were done with scorched ink and blank spaces. They looked most realistic.

Bamboo paintings experienced a downfall in the late Qing years. There were relatively fewer bamboo painters in the late Qing, when painting became more commercialized and the art of bamboo painting declined. There were few expert bamboo painters and the works were poorer. There was Zhao Zhichen's 趙之謙 (1829–1884) “Outlined Bamboo and Rock” (概述竹) which is now in the Zhejiang Provincial Museum. Other artists like Hu Yuan 華嶽, Xi Gang 奚岡 drew bamboos only occasionally. Their strokes were quaint and subtle.

In modern times, artist like Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻 also did bamboo paintings. Xu Beihong emphasized the artistry, as well as spontaneity. His works were enriched by modern techniques of the west. He learned from ancient styles; his gigantic paintings were quiet outstanding. He was also a famous collector of bamboo paintings.

The bamboo paintings of the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasty lead to

a greater harmony between calligraphy and painting. Such specialisation in one topic only is subtle and intangible, and defies all efforts to explain it. The bamboo itself is a composition of a variety of features: the softness of delicate shoots and sharp elegance of leaves, the rigidity of pipe-like segments with the flexibility of the whole branches. The wind makes this plant a true song of motion. Thus, it requires a sensitivity and a feeling hand, not only skill, to present its various moods.

During the Yuan dynasty bamboo painting was extremely popular. A new and significant stimulus for this type of painting were the works of Gu An and Li Kan. According to modern scholars, the artists of that period considered bamboo a symbol of China under the capricious barbarian rule. It is also possible that bamboo painting was simply a natural consequence of a more recent, but highly prolific discovery of the great pleasure of calligraphy that bamboo painting gives the artists. The secret of this type of painting is the ability to lead the brush quickly. It might seem that contemplative painting has stepped outside the limits of ordinary painting. Towards the end of the short Yuan period, the tendency to paint objects with absolute accuracy has appeared so suddenly that it might raise suspicion of the first influences of the West. On the other hand, however, purely Chinese features became more prominent in painting. The painters of that period introduced into bamboo paintings such elements that enabled a further evolution during the Ming period.

During the Ming dynasty painter Wen Zhenming introduced more elements, with a detailed study of bamboos, which later became quite monotonous, as the artists only reiterated their achievements. Never before has Chinese art presented such individualism and shown such rebelliousness. A forceful focus was achieved by merely several lines and little amount of ink. Many artists were quite skilled at combining reality with illusion. Their works were full of rebellion, which was a final spark of the fire that was burning in the precious periods.

The fall of the Ming dynasty and ascending to the throne by the Qing rulers did not cause a significant decline of the cultural life in China. The early Manchu period in the bamboo painting was a continuation of the late Ming period. The rapid division in artistic trends began at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Most artists created highly individualized works. They followed schools and masters from different periods. Hong Ren and Wu Hong created fascinating and original works. The internal political decline of the Manchu period strongly influenced the end period of the dynasty. The 19<sup>th</sup> century

saw a significant decline of the quality of Chinese painting. Therefore that period should be evaluated according to different criteria, as the literati and their works, and the golden era of bamboo paintings are gone forever.

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## MALARSTWO BAMBUSOWE ZA DYNASTII YUAN, MING I QING

### Streszczenie

Bambus w malarstwie dynastii Yuan, Ming i Qing został potraktowany jako samodzielny temat. Cechą charakterystyczną, która dominowała w ich malarstwie bambusów, to pewien rodzaj swobodnego ekspresjonizmu, silnie jednakże zakotwiczonego w tradycjach sztuki malarskiej. Wszyscy ci malarze byli uczonymi, a ponieważ wielu z nich było tak biegłymi w kaligrafii, co w malarstwie, stało się coraz bardziej popularne wśród artystów, jak i pośród ich przyjaciół, dodawanie wiersza do obrazu aby w ten sposób poezją wzmocnić nastrój czy też koncepcję.

**Słowa kluczowe:** bambus, Yuan, Ming, Qing.

**Key words:** bamboo, Yuan, Ming, Qing.