

## First Step

Like people in other professions or hobbies, new figure painters need two things — ambition and skill. To keep your ambition focused is of the foremost importance. On the technical side, the basic skills for Chinese figure painting are more or less the same as those for a Western figure painter. If you have learned to draw human figures, congratulations! You are at a good starting point; otherwise I recommend that you study drawing first.

I say this because Chinese figure painting is a much-innovated tradition — far more than landscape or bird-and-flower. In the 20th century, the great realist painter and art educator Xu Beihong (1895-1953) emphasised drawing from life. He had a famous maxim: “Artists are not worthy being teachers (for artists).” He revolutionised art education by adding drawing into the curriculum for all art



Admonitions of the Court Instructress to Palace Ladies (detail) by Gu Kaizhi. In our eyes, these well-proportioned figures cannot be likenesses of particular people.

(James Ayres, *The Artist's Craft*, Phaidon, 1985) but their paintings did not look “Chinese”. Over centuries Chinese painters have developed highly mature and sophisticated types of strokes. As in Chinese calligraphy, Chinese painters preferred neat and spontaneous strokes without retouching. The Chinese quality of a painting lies in, among other things, the special brushwork and ink application, and it takes time to master such skills.

In former times, Chinese artists used to learn brushwork skills by copying other, earlier artists' works and when they created a new painting they tried to match their images to the patterns they had learned. Compare the nose of the ladies in three paintings created in different periods of time by three different artists and you will see that a pattern was repeatedly used. Neat and beautiful as the “one-stroke” method is, it is no guarantee for a truthful representation.

Obviously, if one sticks to this type of neat stroke that refuses retouching, one is likely to achieve good brushwork at the expense of formal accuracy. Of course some masters can achieve accurate depiction and highly spontaneous brushwork, as shown in Xu Beihong's portrait. But it is impractical to expect a beginner to achieve this. To have a good grounding in figure painting, I strongly recommend the following principle — it is better to have loose brushwork than loose form.

I propose this because, as I have said before, Chinese figure painting is a revolutionised tradition. So, unlike Chinese landscape and bird-and-flower paintings whose basic brushwork is achievable through copying formulae, contemporary Chinese figure painting offers few ideas. To gain good brushwork, a figure painter also has to practise other genres of painting. This I will discuss later.

students. This narrowed the gap between Western and Chinese figure painting. Xu's influence is ubiquitous in Chinese fine arts today. Another art educator Pan Tianshou (1897-1971) in his teaching stressed the copying of ancient works, but while asking students of bird-and-flower and landscape paintings to devote most of their time to copying, he too gave students of figure painting more time to draw from life at the early stage of study. It is clear that drawing from life is the foundation for successful figure painting, in China as well in the West.

In today's art nothing is sacrosanct. Different schools of art take a variety of approaches. As the goal of this book is to introduce realist figure painting skills, readers should ideally have some drawing experience. If, however, you intend to learn how to reproduce works of ancient masters, you should also study traditional brushwork and ink skills by copying from ancient works. In fact naturalistic drawing could hinder your command of ancient skills. Nowadays the pictures on fake handicrafts sold in roadside shops or stands are often betrayed by the use of correct anatomical presentation as taught in art schools today, but which was unknown to ancient Chinese painters.

## **Chinese Manners**

Those who study Chinese art often encounter a problem — how “Chinese” is his or her painting? Using Chinese instruments is no guarantee for producing a painting in real Chinese style. As early as in the late 17th century European artists began to use Chinese ink (once erroneously known as the “Indian ink”) and Chinese brushes,



Jade Lady, from wall painting of the Yongle Palace, Yuan Dynasty (1271 – 1368)



Han Xizai's Nightly Feast (detail) by Gu Hongzhong (10<sup>th</sup> century)



The Moon Goddess by Tang Yin (1470 — 1523)

Those paintings were created by different masters. Note that the nose in all of them was executed with the same single hooked stroke.

Portrait of Li Yinquan by Xu Beihong (1895 — 1953)

This masterpiece is admired for accurate depiction and spontaneous brushwork.

