

Thoughts on Traditional Chinese Art

June 01, 2005 |

(Clearwisdom.net) Traditional Chinese art is quite different from that of the West. The Chinese people believe that the world is ultimately impossible to understand, and that all things are constantly changing. Therefore, it is neither possible nor necessary to accurately depict objective matters. Chinese art emphasizes expression and symbolism. There is an ancient saying, "Poetry is used to express the mind." Likewise, the focus of Chinese painting is to impart the spirit.

Chinese art stresses restraint and rationality. Ancient philosophies sought unity between nature and mankind, which brought peace to the minds of artists and gave them a way to understand and approach the unknown. The mysterious concept of "Tao," which literally means "the way," is both all encompassing and inexplicable. Painters use the space between objects to allude to its omnipresence, while poets create an atmosphere of indifference and emptiness to describe the realm of being one with the surrounding without self-awareness. What they express are beyond our sensory organs. True appreciation of the art comes from imagination and enlightenment and brings a rational understanding of the universe. The art must be subtle to give the viewer space to imagine and reach this realm.

Confucius said, "The Kuan Tzu (a musical instrument) gives pleasure but not indulgence and allows for grief without being too painful." We can imagine long notes gliding smoothly down the Kuan Tzu's seven strings, just like Lao Zi said, "Great music doesn't need many notes."

Yuan Dynasty poet Ma Zhiyuan (1250-1324) wrote the famous

"Autumn Thoughts." The short poem contains merely 28 characters. These objects paint a picture of melancholy in the readers' minds and bring them to a different world. The literal translation of the poem is as follows:

"Wilting vines, an old tree, and a dark crow;
A small bridge over a river, houses are nearby.
On this ancient path, the westerly wind blows on my thin horse.
The sun is setting,
But the broken-hearted one is still far away from home."

For over a thousand years, Chinese art has expressed thought without being melodramatic. It is one manifestation of the culture and wisdom of China.

CATEGORY: Traditional Culture