



Brush, cup, ink block on felt cover

Laptop in Chinese

Matthias Reinhold attended a six-month course dealing with traditional Chinese painting at the China Academy of Arts in Hangzhou, in southeast China. He presents a report for the MePri on the teachings conveyed at the art academy in the field of tension between classical landscape painting and the present-day reality of life, and on the insights he has gained for his own art of drawing.

For centuries, painting in China has been a matter of brush and ink. The painting tool is an elastic paint brush that can absorb a lot of liquid while retaining its ability to draw sharply. It enables drawing fine lines as well as painting large surfaces. The position of the hand allows free play of the joint and thus movements in all directions. The painting ground is predominantly paper, sometimes silk. Depending on the grade, the paper possesses different suction capacities. With some paper sorts, the ink dries without altering its contour; with others, it dissolves and, when it dries, results in effects that the painter can utilize for his/her design. Once the ink has dried, corrections are no longer possible due to the low solubility. An underlying felt cover prevents the moist paper from sticking to the ground. Once painted, the paper is mounted with glue to further sheets. In the process, it is smoothed out, through which the painting gains luminosity due to the white ground.

Not only the utilized materials have remained the same over the ages. In earlier times, as today, humans, animals, plants, and landscapes are the motifs of traditional Chinese painting. Depending on the motif, different brush techniques and methods of depiction have evolved. Landscape painters address different painterly issues than painters dealing with flowers or animals. Due to the scale, landscapes must already be strongly reduced, while flowers can be reproduced 1:1. Painters concerned with the human figure, on the other hand, have to do justice to the specific motor activity of the human body. In view of these different demands, artists were always specialized on specific motifs.

In the first year of study at the “China Academy of Arts” in Hangzhou, students become familiar with traditional painting in regard to all motifs. They then decided upon one of the fields: “Flowers and Birds”, “Figure” or “Landscape”. The most important educational method of traditional painting consists in copying the works of old masters. Students learn their brush techniques and composition patterns by copying models based on reproductions.



Copies of old masters by a student of landscape painting

For example, the silk painting by Chao Ling yang from the 11th century served as a model. The picture shows a group of travelers docking their boats at the shore of a lake and walking with their baggage to a pavilion surrounded by willows. The boats moored to the shore are drawn in a detailed manner with undiluted ink. The make of the boats is just as discernable as the posture of the travelers, the construction of the pavilion, and the growth of the willows. The waves of the lake, on the other hand, are shown with barely discernable rows of curves that create the impression of a light breeze. The opposite shore of the lake is painted schematically with diluted ink and seems to lose itself in the mist. Due to the contrast of detailed foreground and a background treated as a vast surface, the feeling of an expanse is conjured. By using more or less diluted ink, the light conditions of the view to the lake are rendered in an atmospheric way. However, one cannot tell the time of day. Neither is there the sun nor shadows that would hint at its position.



*Chao Ling yang, Travelers at the Willow Pavilion, ink on silk, 23 x 24 cm,
Northern Song Dynasty, 11th century*

The unique feature of Chinese landscape painting becomes evident in the conception of light on which it is based. Light, the precondition of visibility, is not a premise of traditional Chinese painting. Even in darkness one could retrace important steps in the process of image production. Sound, smell and touch would reveal insights into the essence of that which is to be depicted, and would suffice to produce an image. The presence of light allows the eye to contribute its part to the overall impression gained by the senses. But this doesn't mean that painting is subjected to vision. Light is present in the pictures when it becomes entangled in fog and is lost in this light haze of distant mountains. Light is grasped as a materiality, like water, stone and wood, and is correspondingly treated as a matter alongside equal matters. There is no Chinese painting in which a tree casts a shadow on the ground, thus having an effect on another materiality. Hence, it is not light and color that are the fundamental shaping elements of painting but the line. Everything is constituted by the line.

Judging by the few leaves remaining on the willows, "Travelers at the Willow Pavilion" is an autumnal landscape. What is noticeable in regard to the composition of the picture is that the action takes place at the bottom edge. This is where the greatest density of drawing can be discerned, while most of the picture is sparsely drawn. The large emptiness seems to compensate for the density at the edge, so that there is a compositional balance in the rounded, almost square format.

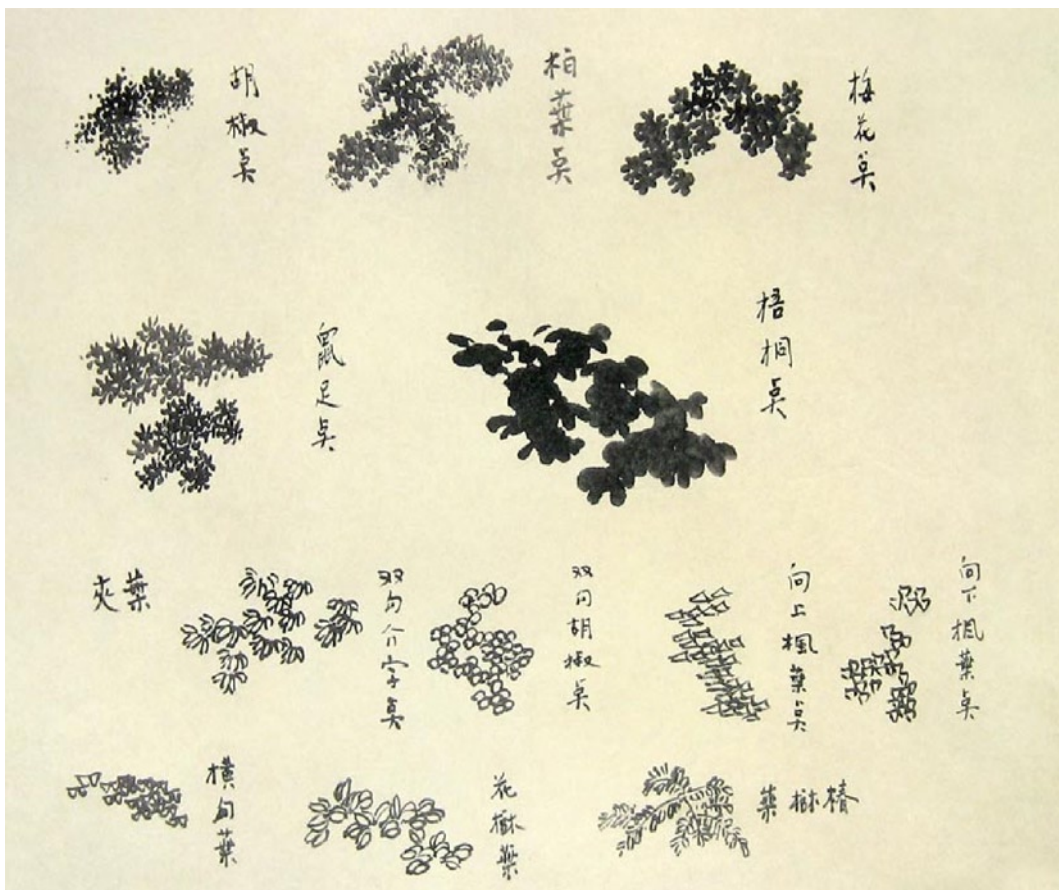
In addition to copying entire landscapes, the students practice drawing individual components separately such as trees, rocks and waters. For rocks, there are drawing instructions in five steps: first to outline the shape of the rock, then to draw the linear interior structure of cracks and crevices with the brush held upright, followed by the two-dimensional interior structure of the rock's surface with the brush held on the slant and using less diluted ink. Then, using strongly diluted ink, the rock is given the required gray tone, and finally individual lines and dots are added as grasses and mosses.

There is a similar systematic approach in place for trees. The trunk is drawn by means of two outlines. Finer pairs of lines depict branching. The type, age and location of the tree determine the shape of its branches, which in turn determines whether the lines are thin or strong, straight or crooked, directed up or down. Just like leaves grow from the branches, dots are attached to lines. In order to depict the leaves, a comprehensive repertory of dots is available. There are leaves that consist of simple dots or short lines. Others are outlined areas that form circles or triangles. The dots are grouped in such a way that they come close to the natural appearance of foliage. However, care is taken not to cover the branches and the trunk with leaves, so that the structure of the tree remains visible. The foliage of trees in the distance is schematized.

Study trips in nature offer the opportunity to familiarize oneself with the motifs in a direct way. Excursions to gardens, hikes in the mountains, along rivers and lakes are part of the curriculum. The aim is to experience animals and plants in their natural surroundings, to grasp the expanse of the landscape through hikes, and to take in the mood of various times of the day. Impressions are captured with pencil and ink in sketchbooks. Sketches of specific motifs are often made from various angles. Individual elements are picked out and studied in detail, while others are only quickly noted down. The various sensory impressions are combined with the sketched views to form a unified, overall image. As is the case with Dai Guangying's drawing of a garden, the vantage point of the artist cannot be determined. From a slightly raised position, the viewer looks down on the scenery of buildings, trees, rocks, and a pond.



Trees (copy after Gu Kun bo (1905 to 1970), ink on Chinese paper, approx. 30 x 50 cm, 2005



Gu Kun bo, ink on paper, approx. 24 x 33 cm



Dai Guangying, Garden, pencil on Chinese paper, approx. 30 x 40 cm, 2005

Dai Guangying is a landscape painter and teaches painting courses at the China Academy of Arts in Hangzhou. She keeps to the approach trained outdoors even when she deals with an interior, like in this picture the interior of a tea house (next page). She sketches the pieces of furniture and simultaneously starts arranging them on the sheet. In the color version, she falls back on the arrangement of the pencil drawing and develops it further. She leaves out objects, adds others and changes their proportion and position. She links the structures of grids, tiles, curtain, wall, bricks, wooden frames, and house plants to form an airy fabric.

The furnishing appears old-fashioned, but that is not actually the case. Electric light illuminates the groups of seats, synthetic materials replace wood and bamboo – all the details of the present-day that intervene in the painting and bear witness to a change which both the objects of everyday life and their reproduction in art are subjected to.

Within just a few years, a building boom has radically transformed Hangzhou, which with a population of eight million is relatively small in Chinese terms. The picturesque cultural city on the West Sea has turned into a business hub. There is an increasing amount of motorized traffic between the high-rises of banks and cell phone companies. Cell phones can be seen and heard everywhere. Huge billboards dominate the

cityscape. Traditional painting is also often used for advertising and to decorate hotel and restaurant walls. There is a deep rift between the classical landscape motifs from times long past and the everyday environment in which they today appear.

Dai Guangying's painting reveals a cautious approach to the present based on her studies of traditional painting. In a conversation she explains to me to what extent this approach is compatible with the tradition:

One of the preconditions of Chinese painting, she says, is to paint things with which one is really familiar. So as to learn to understand a thing, it must always be present for the artist. The everyday environment of most painters today is no longer the countryside, though, but the urban living and working situation which has now become the familiar surroundings. It is logical in the sense of the Chinese tradition to deal with this environment, even if new motifs that hitherto have not been the subject of painting are subsequently added. And it is appropriate to make use of the techniques learned during one's studies.



Dai Guangying, *Tee House*, pencil on Chinese paper, 2005



Dai Guangying, Tee House, ink and water color on Chinese paper, 2005

The principle, which Dai Guangying mentions here, indeed invites one to deal with motifs that until now have not belonged to the canon of Chinese painting, while making use of the century-old experiences gained in regard to the pictorial representation of human existence and man's environment, albeit under the condition that one is familiar with these motifs. During my stay in China I also felt invited to proceed in this manner, even though I was shaped differently in artistic terms than my Chinese fellow students.

Despite all differences, however, I was quickly able to establish what we have in common in regard to artistic development. I also profited quite a bit from the trips I used to take in Germany and Switzerland.

In the mountains, I studied dead and weathered trees. The bare and windswept branches, the rough bark and the knotty trunks triggered elementary graphical experiences. I later fell back on these experiences when doing my large-format charcoal drawings. Similar to ink, one can draw lines and surfaces in any form and intensity with charcoal. The movement of the arm and hand substantially contributes to coming upon the form, as is also the case when using a brush.

I didn't have detailed images of old masters to copy as a basis, but I had studied a number of models from European landscape painting such as Albrecht Dürer, Carl Blechen and Pierre Bonnard in such detail that I could deduce their drawing and painting techniques as well as their methods of composition.

In contrast to the Chinese practice of spreading the paper out horizontally, I draw on large sheets of paper attached vertically to the wall. A further difference is that a Chinese landscape painter already has the picture he wants to paint in his mind before he starts working, while I in most cases do not have a clear conception of what the picture should look like when starting off. It often happens that an object crystallizes only during the course of the drawing process. The charcoal drawing "Autobahnbrücke" began very delicately at one spot with quickly drawn, short lines and was continued at another spot with a grid structure. Textures then overlapped in which a view of a landscape could gradually be made out. The grid in the foreground solidified to become balcony railings. The omitted stripe on the horizon became a highway lane on a bridge over a field with a few trees.



Autobahnbrücke (Highway Bridge), charcoal on paper, 156 x 195 cm, 2004

Despite this different approach, the charcoal drawings do have several things in common with Chinese ink drawings. The impression of spatial depth in “Autobahnbrücke” is created in a similar way as in the silk painting, “Travelers at the Willow Pavilion”, through reduced intensity towards the center of the picture, where there are delicately treated sections, while the most intensive black areas are mostly at the edge of the picture. The composition distributes the darker and lighter sections in a balanced way. The viewer’s attention is not drawn to a center but can instead freely roam within the image space. The white of the paper is exposed in such a way that one has the impression as if the drawing shone through from the back. Light is an essential element of composition, but not in an illusionistic sense. The materiality and structure of the objects are instead defined by the form and character of the charcoal stroke. The drawing was done about a year before my study visit to China.



Using the techniques taught by Dai Guangying, I attempted to depict Hangzhou and the environs the way I perceived them in regard to their spatial contexts during the course of my half-year visit, when taking walks, bicycle tours and taxi rides. The city consists of different zones. I chose the format of the classical Chinese scroll. This vertical format allowed me to arrange details of the zones from top to bottom. At the top, hills rise from the clouds, like a citation of traditional painting, and run to the shore of the West Sea. The center of the city is depicted as a dark silhouette at the right edge in the middle, with fallow land below it. A single skyscraper rises as the harbinger of a planned new business district on the bank of the river.

Landscape (Hangzhou), ink on Chinese paper, 139 x 45 cm, 2005



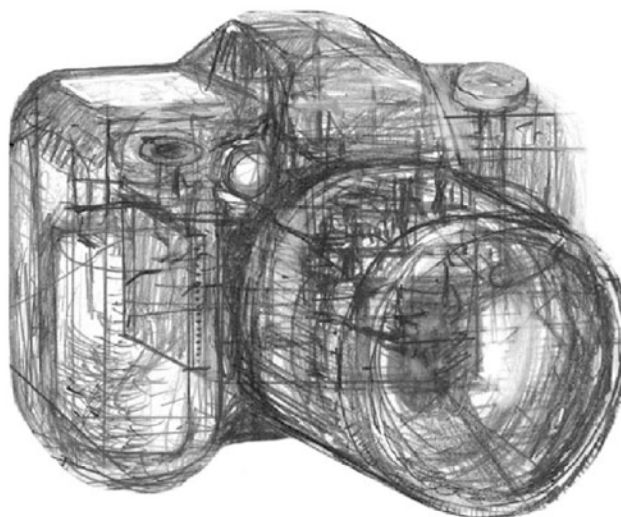
During my stay in China, drawing proved to be a means of communication in daily life. When my limited language capabilities were exhausted, drawing was perfectly suited to communicate what I wanted to say. For example, to make it clear to a salesman in an electronics shop that I wanted to buy a mini disc player, a quick scribble helped. In this manner, and with a few English words and gestures, I was able to do most of my shopping.

Notebook Hotrock: Mini Disc Player, ball-point pen on paper, 21 x 15 cm, 2005

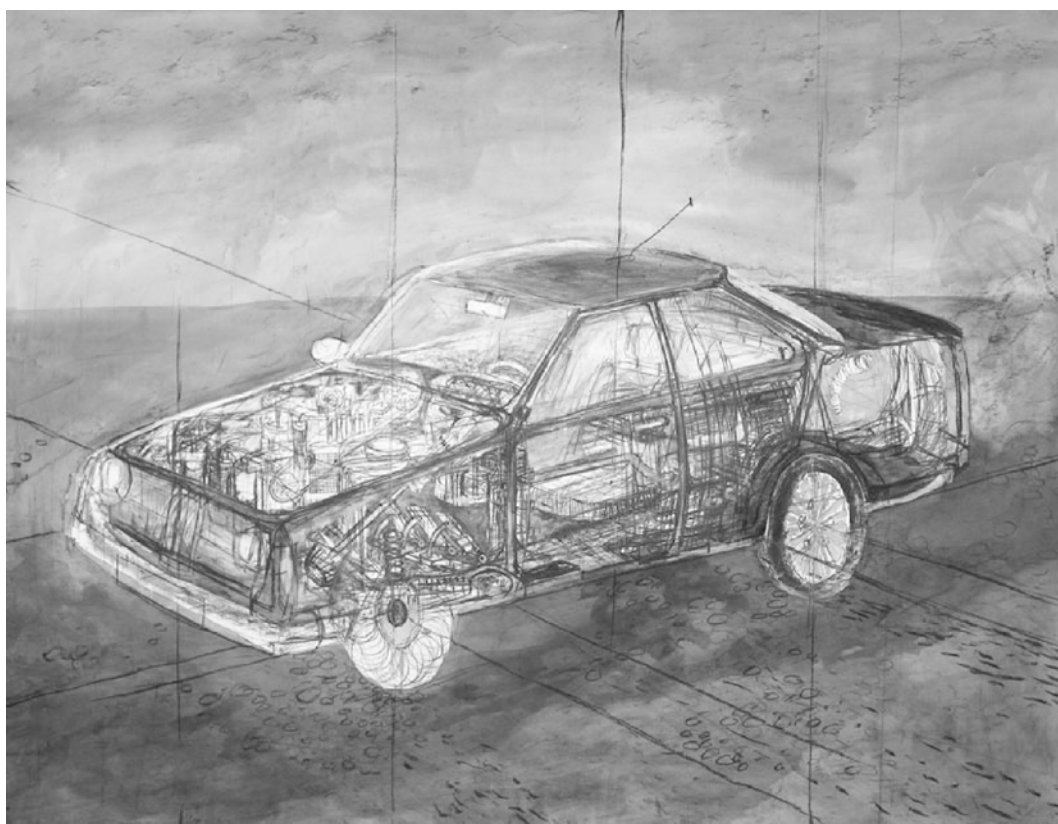
My Web log "chinaclips" (<http://chinaclips.de/>) was also of great direct use. Regardless of time difference and geographical distance, the images and texts provided a real-time report with which I could communicate from afar. Next to photos, drawings are an important element of this Web site. In many cases it was not possible for security reasons or the light conditions to photograph a certain motif. Or it simply wasn't there in the desired form.

So-called "webicons" (pencil drawings processed on the computer) serve as navigation elements for the visitor of the site. The webicon "camera" displays the inside of a digital reflex camera. Through the housing one can faintly make out the triggering mechanism, the power supply via the rechargeable battery, image recording via the chip, and the storage of the image data on the memory card.

Camera, pencil drawing processed on the computer, 2005



The X-ray view of the inside of a closed object had already been a means to approach its structure and function in works created “before China”. In such depictions, I continue to be concerned more with what is subjectively grasped than with what is correct in terms of exact function. What I know about the inside, without being able to directly check it in the object when drawing, reveals what I indeed still remember. The charcoal and ink drawing “Auto” was created under these conditions. The – from a mechanical point of view – erroneous construction offers room for associations that can readjust one’s view of the object, which is obstructed by habit.



Auto, charcoal and ink on paper, 150 x 195 cm, 2006

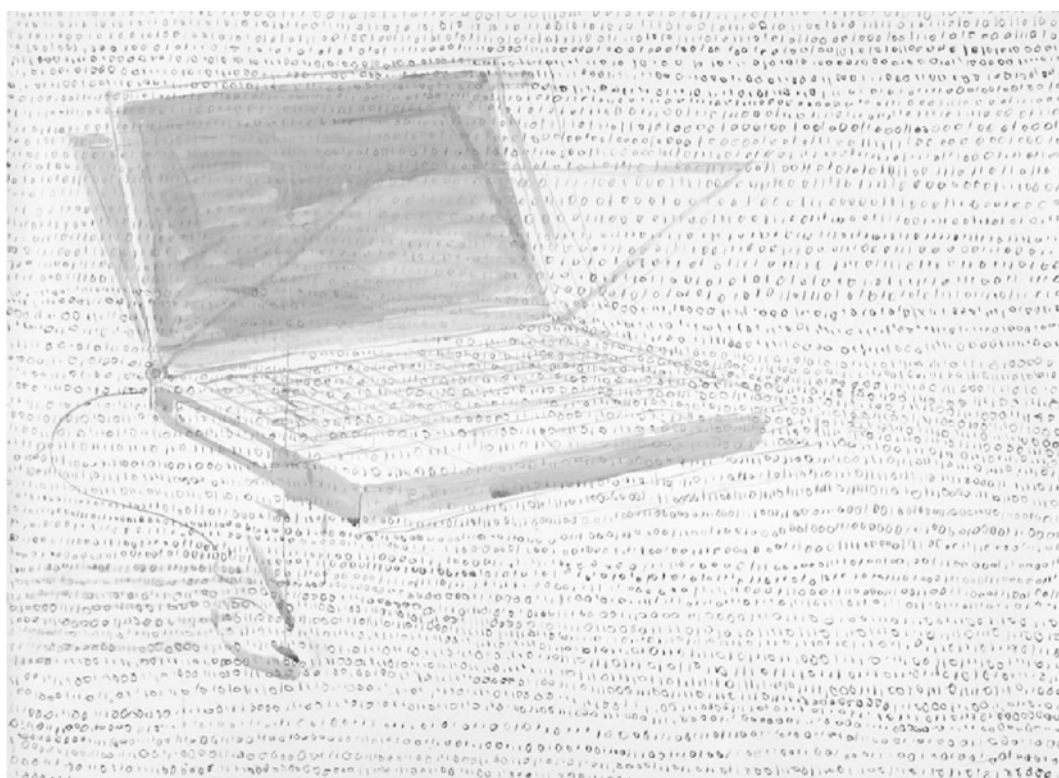
In Chinese painting, it is not about grasping the landscape in a topographically exact manner, and the same is the case with the depiction of the car. It needn't be used as a construction plan for a roadworthy version, yet it must function as a composition and should give the viewer the feeling of penetrating through the object. To achieve this, the structure of the object must be comprehensible. With a landscape, the structure can be openly read. Feet can traverse the expanse, hands can touch the material, and the eyes contribute their part to structuring and merging the impressions. If one mountain covers another mountain, then it is moved in the painting to make the other one visible as desired. This is more

complicated with houses. Like in “Travelers at the Willow Pavilion” or Dai Guangying’s garden drawing, a house is depicted in such a way, if possible, that two walls and the roof can be seen. Openings such as doors and windows frequently give the opportunity to look inside the house, thus combining the interior and exterior view.

In the case of a car, one can at best gaze through the windows. In order to see the engine, the hood must be opened. To see even more, the car must be taken apart. But if the individual components are no longer where they belong, the overall impression is lost. The X-ray view allows one to have both, the view of the components and the overall impression.

However, this rendering of transparency is not in line with the pure teachings of Chinese painting, which fundamentally dispense with creating an illusion of something. The X-ray effect, though, is based on the viewer spatially interpreting the crossings of lines, which is basically an illusionistic solution.

A “Chinese” solution would lie in the juxtaposition of lines, not in a crossing.



Laptop, charcoal and ink on paper, 150 x 195 cm, 2006

Another attempt to approach a contemporary object is the ink and charcoal drawing of a laptop. I at first capitulated in face of the extremely tiny structure of the inside and switched to the area of writing, to an immaterial area, then, which is the essential part of a computer, namely, the software. The basis for calculation is the binary number system. Information is coded via the sequence of two electronic states: energy on or off. In the drawing, these codes are translated into the digits zero and one. This representational solution corresponds with many Chinese pictures to which a poem is calligraphically added. A poetic level thus supplements the pictorial level. In the case of the "Laptop", poetry is reduced to the absolute minimum and merely consists of the concrete rhythm of the two digits.

I did several new drawings since returning from China, which in technical and methodical respect make use of what I learned there. A further horizon of issues opens up in the process, having to do with the following questions: Can a photographic conception of light and shadow be integrated in the Chinese conception of light? How can I transform the interior space of electrical appliances into drawings without proceeding in an illusionistic way? What role can writing play in this context?

Matthias Reinhold, September 2006

