
A single brushstroke

Interview with Beppe Mokuza Signoritti

For over thirty years, Italian zen and sumi-e master Beppe Mokuza Signoritti has dedicated himself to Japanese ink painting and zen meditation. He has organized exhibitions, workshops, conferences and demonstrations all over Europe. He also initiated the 'Ecole Internationale de Sumi-e' in Versailles, which offers the possibility to be a professional sumi-e teacher in France.

What does sumi-e mean?

The Japanese term 'sumi' signifies black ink, 'e' signifies painting. In traditional sumi-e one paints with black ink and all its possible nuances, ranging from pure black to the lightest possible shade when diluted with water. This method of painting was introduced in Japan by zen-monks and comprises much more than a painting technique. In sumi-e, reality is rendered to pure simplicity. Whether the subject is bamboo, orchid or flowering branch, the spectator is touched by the spontaneity and vividness it radiates.

Actually, sumi-e paintings are direct sketches in black and white, the white rice paper representing the universe and the black ink representing the material forms that constantly appear and disappear in the universe. Sumi-e respects and follows the rules of nature, in composition, the way in which leaves unfold from a branch, all created in harmony. In nature, everything comes into existence spontaneously while following regular patterns. The painter submits to this spontaneous and simple expression of creation. This is the very paradox of vivid sumi-e. It is not the painter, but life creating itself. We painters simply pass on that vital energy of life.

Sumi-e is suited for who?

Sumi-e suits everyone. All people are touched by beauty and harmony. However, sumi-e appeals most to people of greater spiritual sensitivity and receptiveness. They ask themselves questions; they are inclined to organize sumi-e activities too.

Sumi-e may be practised as an art form, without zen meditation. However, it differs significantly from western art, in which a stroke of the brush may be painted over, a work may be preconceived in sketches, where layer over layer is a common technique. Corrections can be made, retouching and harmonizing the composition is acceptable. In sumi-e, this is not possible. Sumi-e requires an instantaneous, spontaneous stroke of the brush. If that stroke comes out wrong, the work has to be discarded.

Sumi-e and the relation to Zen

When practicing sumi-e with concentration, zen-meditation occurs almost by itself. My teacher, Zen master Roland Yuno Rech, once said: "Sumi-e is a path that leaves tracks on paper where the path of zen leaves no visible traces."

Everything in zen and sumi-e is directed at learning to be present on the spot we find ourselves in, the mind always aligned with the body, coinciding with the present action or the object we are concentrating upon. Sumi-e may be considered an expression of zen-meditation, substituting the correct body posture while seated by handling the brush correctly. A path that may also be travelled by holding a knife the appropriate way when cutting vegetables, or when cooking.”

What are the benefits of practising sumi-e?

Through sumi-e it is possible to experience, to find back clarity and stability of mind, unperturbed by outside influences. It is not a matter of technique or being a talented painter. It is the art of rediscovering the deep mental strength, our Buddha nature, the things we have in common with all living creatures. The mind, body and the object being painted are really becoming ONE.

A brushstroke, executed with utmost concentration, may invoke great beauty, appealing to all. It is a skilful means to indicate a path to spiritual awakening, a way that eventually coincides with the very experience itself.

Eventually, sumi-e will make you feel better, more receptive, more present, more mindful. You will come in closer contact with that part of yourself underneath our emotions and thoughts, the true part of yourself, the impersonal self.

What is the role of the teacher in sumi-e?

The teacher guides a pupil pass his or her obstacles, emotions, thoughts. A teacher helps a pupil to express what cannot be explained in words. This requires a mind uncluttered by thoughts or emotions. To obtain such a state of mind takes a lot of exercise, and repetitive painting of a subject like a leaf or a section of bamboo is necessary for learning and to refine the mind. In doing so one discovers the part of oneself that has been suffocated by emotions and thoughts.

In close collaboration with a teacher, one learns to exhume that part. This process is impossible without a teacher, as no one can see his or her own blind spot. The pupil repeats painting the model, the teacher corrects the pupil over and over again, pointing out the flaws. It is a delicate process. In my view, it is a path the pupil has to travel until she or he really understands the model. Once this has been internalized, anything can be painted. And while painting, one becomes more and more attentive.

This may bring harmony in life and makes it possible to tap into the source of life itself, a source present in all of us.