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May You Be Well And Happy

## Summary

The article introduces the reader to the quality or nature of the Laughter of the Brush, by first distinguishing it from other kinds of laughter, citing expressions used to describe laughters' qualities. Then goes on to discuss the experience, of laughter on the inside, and silent laughter found in literary humour. The writer then asks what of painterly humour. Leading to an introduction to Chan painting, it's appearance in China, the spontaneity and laughter of the brush, and the offer to the calligrapher the professional painter, of its path to enlightenment, as meditation in action – and the joyous experience that viewing the Chan or Zen painting brings for all those with a warm inner glow.

### Laughter of the Brush – Chan Painting

Laughter of the brush is the description given to Ch'an (Chinese) or Zen (Japanese) painting. It is necessary to distinguish laughter of the brush from other forms of laughter, such as "laughter of the bush" which features the hyena in Africa and the Kookaburra in Australia. But why is Ch'an painting described as "laughter of the brush"?

Laughter of course comes in different shapes and sizes. In ascending order of noise level there is the snigger, the snort, the giggle, the chuckle, the cackle, the guffaw, the shriek and the roar. Laughter in bulk is available in "titters" the small pack; "peals" the economy size; or "gales" the giant size. Uncontrolled laughter bears the label "outburst" or more aptly "fits".

We all know the expression "That's no laughing matter" but what are laughing matters will depend on your sense of humour. For instance jokes which are sick, dirty or Irish have a limited following. Whether you are moved to laughter may also depend on where you are. Belly laughs or as the Chinese put it "spewing the rice" laughs are most often seen and heard in response to live comic performances. This is because audible laughter like courtesy and measles is catching.

Silent laughter on the other hand is private and personal. Laughter on the inside as it is sometimes called is the ultimate form of humour appreciation. It requires a peace that passes understanding; it is the topping of joy for those already blessed with a warm inner glow. Research has shown that literary humour is the main source of silent laughter. Unfortunately the hey-day of literary humour appears to have passed. The death of S.J Perelman in 1979 ended an era of outstanding humourists including James Thurber, Mark Twain, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, A.P. Herbert and Flann O'Brien. Woody Allen now carries the torch but his preoccupation is clearly with writing and directing films. Although British humourists were never as thick on the ground as the U.S., the current

crop of Clive James, John Mortimer and Alan Coren do not have the literary feel of past masters.

The explanation for the world decline in literary humour is said to be the pressures and complexities of just staying alive in today's computerised society. The late James Thurber variously described as the founding father of modern humour and its elder statesman nominated "the quiet mind and the tranquil spirit" as meaning most of the creation of humour. It must be admitted that you don't get those on supermarket shelves or at drive-in bottle shops.

What of painterly humour? Does it stand shoulder to shoulder with literary humour as a source of silent laughter?

Painterly humour will not be found in traditional art galleries. Nor can a thirst for such humour be satisfied by access to cartoons, comic strips or graffiti because there the artwork is dependent on captions designed to evoke at least a snort or a snigger. If Ch'an painting is to represent the painterly arts we must understand how it came to be known as laughter of the brush.

Up to the beginning of the seventh century Chinese painters consciously planned their work and carefully controlled their execution. Their professional skills were normally displayed on wide scrolls on which successive scenes of mists and mountains, valleys and streams could be presented in meticulous detail.

When Ch'an Buddhism was brought to China in the sixth Century by the Indian monk Bodhidharma it heralded a new and revolutionary school of Chinese painting. Most scholars were fine calligraphers but not painters in the professional sense. The Ch'an doctrine opened up the world of painting to them. In contrast to the detailed approach of the professional painter Ch'an offered spontaneity and the laughter of the brush. According to Ch'an teaching human enlightenment is available to all through meditation and those who search nature's storehouse for ultimate truth will find it exists in all things. A ladybird, a dragonfly, or a piece of bamboo are all suitable subjects for discovery.

The Ch'an artist first cleanses the mind through meditation then wields the brush with the speed of a leaping hare or a swooping falcon. The meditative process may take hours or sometimes days. Only when the mind is freed of encumbrances and attuned to nature will the brush dance across the paper producing laughter in its wake. The Thurber prerequisites for the creation of literary humour - the quiet mind and the tranquil spirit - have an obvious affinity with the Ch'an meditation technique.

When the artist's preparation is complete the wielding of the brush will have all the spontaneity of a flock of birds darting out of a forest or a frightened snake disappearing through the grass. The composition stripped to the "marrow of the bone" captures only the inner spirit or "qi" of the subject.

Viewing Ch'an or Zen painting is a joyous experience guaranteed to produce laughter on the inside and a smile on the outside of all those with a warm inner

glow. It is painterly humour equal to the best in literary humour.

Author - John Hughes