

Zen painting

Delusion is the first part of this pair of paintings by Kim Hoa Tram. *Awakening* is the second part. In *Delusion*, a carefree bird seems happy chasing falling leaves, which represent desire and impermanence in life, until he falls flat on his face. He is playful and animated, flying rhythmically in and out of the picture. In the third panel, he seems to pause momentarily in the midst of leaves tingling like temple bells. Sound is evoked by visual images.

Zen Buddhism

Buddhism originated in India in the sixth century BC and was introduced to China in the first century AD. According to legend, Zen Buddhism – the Meditative School of Buddhism – was introduced to China in the sixth century by Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk from India.

Zen, usually translated as 'meditation', is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese character 禪, pronounced *Chan* in Chinese. Zen entered the Chinese vocabulary as an abbreviated form of the Indian Sanskrit word *Dhyana*.

Zen approached Buddhism in the most direct, simple and practical ways. It discarded formalities such as Buddhist scriptures, rituals and objects of worship. Zen teaching was to be transmitted, not by words but from mind to mind. It emphasises the practice of meditation as key to awakening one's true nature and uncovering innate wisdom and compassion.

Four treasures in Chinese painting and calligraphy

The 'four treasures' in Chinese painting and calligraphy are: brush, ink stick, ink stone, paper or silk. The brush is commonly made of a bamboo holder and goat or rabbit fur. Sometimes it is made of baby's hair, mouse whiskers or a lotus stalk. The ink stick is made of pine soot mixed with glue and then cast in a mould. Grinding the ink stick with water on an ink stone produces black ink. The amount of ink and water on the brush and the pressure of the brush placed on the paper create dark and light ink in tonal gradation of the black ink.

Chinese learn and practice the art of calligraphy, or 'handwriting', from an early age so that writing with a brush becomes second nature. Infused with life force or vital energy, a brushstroke is written with a sense of direction, speed and momentum. Calligraphy is regarded as revealing the character of the writer, as if one comes face to face with the person.

In traditional China, scholars took on the art of calligraphy and painting as a means of relaxation, self-expression and self-cultivation. Their paintings were not for sale but were given as presents to like-minded friends.

See 'The art of stillness', *Moon in Reflection* DVD produced by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2008 for a demonstration of Chinese painting and calligraphy by Kim Hoa Tram.

