



2.3a Reading 3: "Calligraphy"

From the *Asian Art Museum*

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Calligraphy

Calligraphy (artful writing) has been considered the ultimate art form by the Chinese educated elite since at least the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). A calligrapher was expected to demonstrate strength of personality through the use of brush and ink.

Though there is no denying that content is important, Chinese calligraphy can be enjoyed for its visual artistry. A full appreciation requires an understanding of the various styles and their traditions, the basic principles of stroke order and placement, and the philosophy behind calligraphy. These three aspects make calligraphy the most respected of the fine arts in China.

Calligraphy is in fact a dance in which the artist has three partners: the brush, the paper (or silk), and the ink. The rhythm and flow for the dance are controlled through character size, contrast between light and dark, and speed of application of the line. In the more formal scripts, the brush is filled often, placed with care, and moved with deliberation, resulting in uniform brush strokes. In the more spontaneous forms, the brush is filled less often and moved with speed and spontaneity. A series of characters can also vary greatly in size.



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Scripts and Styles

Five basic scripts are regularly used in Chinese calligraphy; three are formal and two are informal. These might be compared to modern Western handwriting, in which there are two basic scripts: printing (formal) and cursive (informal). Each individual has his or her own style, whether he or she is painting or writing in cursive.

Formal Scripts

- **Seal script** developed directly from China's most ancient forms of writing.
- **Clerical script** (*lishu*) is an archaic script.
- **Standard script** (can be compared to Western printing).

Informal Scripts







- **Semicursive script** can be compared to Western longhand.
- **Cursive script** is the most abbreviated and spontaneous.



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Scripts

Five basic scripts have emerged over 2000 years: Calligraphers design each character to fit into an imaginary square—whether it is composed of one or sixty-four strokes. Writers must create each stroke of a character in a particular order, essentially from left to right and from top to bottom.

The evolution of the Chinese character dragon (<i>long</i>) in various script types:		
 Oracle-bone	 Seal	 Clerical
 Cursive	 Semi-cursive	 Standard

There are five basic scripts regularly used in Chinese calligraphy:

Seal script (Chinese: *zhuanshu*)

These careful, straight lines are related to the earliest forms of Chinese writing.

Clerical script (*lishu*)

More angled strokes allowed clerks to write official documents more easily and quickly.

Standard or regular script (*kaishu*)

This clear and easy to read script is commonly used in printed books and signs today.

Semi-cursive script (*xingshu*; “running script”)

Strokes tend to run together within each character, but the artist usually lifts the brush between each character.

Cursive script (*caoshu*; “grass script”)

In this free and spontaneous script, artists may get away with abbreviating and abstracting the characters. Characters may run together.

Asian Art Museum Education Department