The exhibition *Three Perfections: Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting in Chinese Art* explores the interconnections between poetry, calligraphy and painting. In traditional China scholars and scholar-officials were cultivated in these arts as vehicles of self-expression. Painting was regarded as ‘silent poetry’, and poetry as ‘painting with sound’. Scholars, who were trained from an early age in the ‘art of handwriting’ or calligraphy, used calligraphic brushstrokes in their paintings.

*Three Perfections* consists of paintings and calligraphy from the National Gallery of Victoria’s Asian art collection. These works, dating from the fourteenth century to the present, show the uniqueness of Chinese art and the contrast between traditional and contemporary art in the continuity of a living tradition. This exhibition was inspired by Professor Michael Sullivan’s lecture and book *The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry and Calligraphy* (1974). According to Professor Sullivan, the term ‘three perfections’ originated in the middle of the eighth century when the Chinese poet, painter and calligrapher Zheng Qian (d. 764) presented a gift of his work to the emperor in Changan. The emperor was delighted and inscribed *Zheng Qian sanjue* on it, meaning ‘Zheng Qian’s three perfections’.
From the third century BC until 1911 China was governed by a civil bureaucracy of scholar-officials under the emperor. First appointed by the emperor, and later recruited by a system of civil examinations, scholars were educated in the moral teachings of the Confucian classics. Scholars were ideally endowed with inner virtue (noble character and moral integrity) and outward refinement (cultivated and versed in the fine arts of poetry, calligraphy, painting and music).

Calligraphy is regarded in China as the highest art form. Its artistic and expressive qualities are independent of the meanings of the written words. On the art of calligraphy as a means of self-expression, revealing a person’s nature or character, the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) Confucian scholar Yang Xiong (53 BC – 18 AD) wrote:

Speech is the voice of the mind; writing is the delineation [hua: painting or picture] of the mind. When this voice and delineation take form, the princely man and the ignoble man are revealed.

In China, painting was not equated with poetry until the eleventh century, in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). Scholars who were versed in poetry and calligraphy adopted painting as a vehicle of self-expression. Su Shi (1037–1101), a famous scholar of the Northern Song, inscribed a painting by Wang Wei (699–759), renowned poet of the Tang dynasty (618–906) – the golden age of poetry – with an accompanying poem:

When one savours Wang Wei’s poems, there are paintings in them.
When one looks at Wang Wei’s paintings, there are poems.

Huang Tingjian’s (1045–1105) inscription on Li Gonglin’s (1049–c.1105) painting Resting in contemplation also reveals an understanding of the interconnectedness of the art forms at this time:

Master Li had a phrase he did not want to express in words,
So with light ink he sketched out a soundless poem.

Wang Gai (1677–1705), a scholar-amateur artist, was a native of Xiushui, Zhejiang province, but lived in Nanjing for most of his life. He became well known as the author of Jieziyuan huajuan (Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting), the most influential of all Chinese instructional manuals on painting. Wang Gai’s album of twelve leaves included in Three Perfections expresses his experience of the seasonal changes in the Jiangnan (South of the Yangtze River) region. In Listening to the rain, on the first page of the album, a poem is inscribed by the artist, in the regular style of calligraphy, in the left-hand corner of the landscape’s sky:

Trees full of blossoming wisteria cover thatched huts
Waterbirds stand in a lake of spring water
Fishing boats, facing my window, take shelter for the night
At dawn, misty lamps resemble a string of stars.
Beyond my boat, lake clouds are like flowing water,
Ten miles of beaded curtains bring back memories of Yangzhou.

This solitary sail only allows me to keep a long flute,

fully loaded with wanderings through rain and mist in Jiangnan.

In a secluded corner of the lake, enclosed by mountains, a solitary figure (the artist) takes shelter in a boat and listens to the spring rain. The misty trees and movement of the reeds in the water create the sensation of drizzling rain. Painting and poetry are so subtly interwoven that one wonders whether the poem inspired the painting or vice versa. The work crystallises the literati’s theory that painting is silent poetry, and that poetry is painting with sound. It also follows that poetry is painting without form, and painting is poetry with form.

Huang Shen (1687–1768), one of the eight eccentric masters of Yangzhou, was known to excel in the three perfections of the scholar-artist, well demonstrated in his album of ten leaves of flower and bird paintings. The fifth album leaf, *Red orchid*, is beautifully composed. The spray of red orchid sketched with swift brushstrokes in red and green is cropped at the top. A calligraphic inscription is integrated with the painting into an abstract design, leaving empty space in the left half of the painting. The poem is translated as follows:

The newly ripe cherries scatter like coins of elm seeds.

It is also April in Yangzhou.
Last night red orchids in the thatched hut burst into blossom
Worrying about the wind and rain [that might ruin the blossoms], unable to sleep.

The poem is written in a highly individualistic style of cursive calligraphy. Simplified and abbreviated, the Chinese characters appear broken up, united by a scattering rhythm.

Shitao (Daoji) (1642–1707), a Chinese Zen (Chan) Buddhist monk and painter, comments in the *Huayu lu* (*A Round of Discussions on Painting*): ‘Painting is the idea [*yi*] within poetry. Is it not poetry the *Chan* (Zen) in painting?’ Shitao compares poetry to Zen in painting. The wisdom of Zen Buddhism is transmitted from mind to mind without relying on words. Like Zen, poetry in a painting is unspoken and wordless in expression and communication. It relies on self-awakening.

*The Way, a spiritual path*, 2005, by Kim Hoa Tram, is inspired by the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. Kim was born in Saigon, Vietnam, in 1959. His family came originally from Fujian province in China. He migrated to Australia in 1984 and now lives in Melbourne. For more than twenty years the artist has immersed himself in the Zen or Meditative sect of Buddhism, which began in China in the sixth century. *The Way, a spiritual path* is a highly original and creative work that evokes a spiritual and aesthetic experience. With a mastery of calligraphy and ink, the artist has created a work that appears unassumingly simple in execution but is imbued with profound spiritual meanings. Underlying an apparent simplicity, it reveals layers of meaning and perception.
Simple, elegant brushstrokes suggest the back of a monk climbing with a walking stick. It is as if he is walking into the painting and chanting along the way – a sense of motion is created. He is engaged in deep meditation. We also see the image of a mountain, a tree and a semi-circular moon behind the mountain. A graceful, sweeping movement of calligraphy flows like a stream from behind the mountain towards the viewer. Or it could be the flowing robes of the monk or the words he is chanting. A quiet stillness is created by the empty space at the centre of the painting. As a focus for meditation or contemplation, this void at the work’s centre tends to calms the mind, removing all anxieties.

Inspired by Buddhist philosophy, the artist has composed and written a poem in the expressive semi-cursive script of Chinese calligraphy, translated as follows:

Led by our karma, we come to this life.

Loaded with karma, we depart from this world.

In life, so many anxieties, a lot of confusion

We simply cannot free ourselves from the perplexities of delusions.

Perhaps, in this state of confusion, the Way (Dao) [to spiritual enlightenment] will sprout forth.

In the middle of the calligraphy is a red seal, irregular in shape – like a leaf – that says sui yuan, meaning follow the interconnections or cause and effects in one’s destiny. The two most important characters of ‘man’ (ren) and ‘Way’ (Dao) are accentuated in darker ink to show their importance to the meaning of the poem.

Like Zen, poetry, calligraphy and painting are communications in silence which are awakened within us.

**Related exhibition**

Three Perfections: Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting in Chinese Art 三绝：诗书画