

Mulberry Paper

22 October 2024

By Emma Crichton-Miller

Emma Crichton-Miller is Editor-in-Chief of The Design Edit, and an arts journalist, editor and writer. She contributes regularly to the Financial Times and is a columnist on Apollo Magazine.

Ink paintings are one of the fundamental art forms of China. The discoveries of ink and paper-making during the Han Dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) enabled the rapid spread of literacy, embedding writing, or calligraphy, at the heart of Chinese culture. The tools of ink painting - the bamboo and animal hair brush; the ink made from pine soot and animal glue; the variety of ink stones and the paper - were the tools equally of poetry and philosophy. The Tang Dynasty (618-907) in particular saw a surge in ambition in ink painting, with the emergence of landscape paintings that reflected Daoist, Confucian and Buddhist principles. The art form has remained a significant thread within Chinese art production to the present day, evolving through a process of observing tradition whilst innovating in style, subject and technique.

Fundamental to the quality of the art form is the paper. The most highly valued paper was that made from the bark of the mulberry tree, principally the Paper Mulberry (*Broussonetia Papyrifera*). This has been used for papermaking in China since a period between the 2nd and 8th century. The technology is found also in Korea, where the oldest existing block print in the world (c. 751 AD) is printed on what the Koreans refer to as hanji paper, made using mulberry bark fibres. It is thought that the Japanese learned the craft from the Koreans, adding their own refinements to the process and using the material not just for calligraphy and print making but also for origami.

High quality Chinese Sangpi and Xuan (especially refined paper), Korean Hanji and Japanese Washi are all typically made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry, which is pounded by hand and mixed with water to produce a paste, and dried into sheets. An important additional substance is the mucilage that oozes from the roots of Hibiscus manihot, which helps suspend the individual fibres in water. The pounding compacts the fibres, to limit the amount that the inks bleed.

To admire the discernible contribution of mulberry paper to the overall impression of Asian ink painting, you need to get up close. At The Treasure House Fair, three galleries will be showing examples. Michael Goedhuis has been showing Chinese Ink Paintings in the west for more than a decade. His 2012 exhibition "Ink: The Art of China," at the Saatchi Gallery in London introduced visitors to some of the fifty among the many thousands of Chinese practitioners who are well-respected in the west. This year he will show a range of styles and approaches, from the more classical to the decisively radical. Guan Zhi's poetic landscapes follow closely the DNA of the masters, with his avowed intent, according to Goedhuis, being to transform "the classical canon of Chinese ink painting into works which are meaningful to both Chinese society and the West today." Wei Ligang meanwhile creates abstract ink paintings composed from deconstructed characters, recalling but also confounding well-known calligraphic scripts. The specific absorbency of fine xuan paper is critical to the impact of colour and form in his 2011 ink painting, Magnificent Palace.



Guan Zhi, *Autumn Lake*, 2023. Ink and colour on paper. Signed.
Image courtesy of [Michael Goedhuis](#)

Gallery Sundaram Tagore shows the spectacular work of New York-based Japanese artist Hiroshi Senju. Balancing on the cusp of abstraction, his often monumental images of waterfalls and cliffs draw on the material presence of mulberry paper - its substantiality that also allows for his conjuring of fine elusive phenomena such as mist and spray. In this way Senju marries the muscular aspects of American Abstract Expressionism with the subtle poetry of Japanese traditional ink painting. The three-dimensional quality of mulberry paper is explored explicitly by Neha Vedpathak, a Detroit-based artist who creates sculptural installations and wall reliefs made from paper. Inspired by nature, she plucks apart the fibres of mulberry paper to create lace-like networks of fibre, which she then paints and stitches into abstract compositions. The Korean artist Chun Kwang Young exploits the sculptural potential of paper further with his well-known Aggregations, a series of tactile, abstract assemblages made from thousands of triangular forms wrapped in harji, traditional Korean mulberry paper. These have grown into larger scale floor based sculptures and installations, with their own life, as if the mulberry tree itself had reclaimed its living matter.



Chun Kwang Young, *Aggregation 17 - JL038 (Star 12)*, 2017. Mixed media with Korean mulberry paper.
Image courtesy of [Sundaram Tagore Gallery](#)

Also at The Treasure House Fair, Gallery 3812 had on show the range and variety of Chinese ink specialists from the renowned Hsiao Chin to Qian Wu, one of the outstanding emerging artists who form part of the gallery's Ya! Young

Art programme. Hsiao Chin is part of the post-war generation of Chinese artists who, travelling after the war, sought to bring the traditional vocabulary of Chinese ink painting into conversation with European and American modernism. His lyrical, geometrical abstractions introduce mulberry paper to a sphere dominated in the west by canvas. Qian Wu, meanwhile, born in 1991 in Xiamen, China, but educated equally in the United States and China, crosses between canvas and paper, exploring an abstraction that draws confidently on both traditions, mixing acrylic, oil and ink. As he makes clear, mulberry paper may reach into the past, but is today as potent and expressive a contemporary medium as any other.