



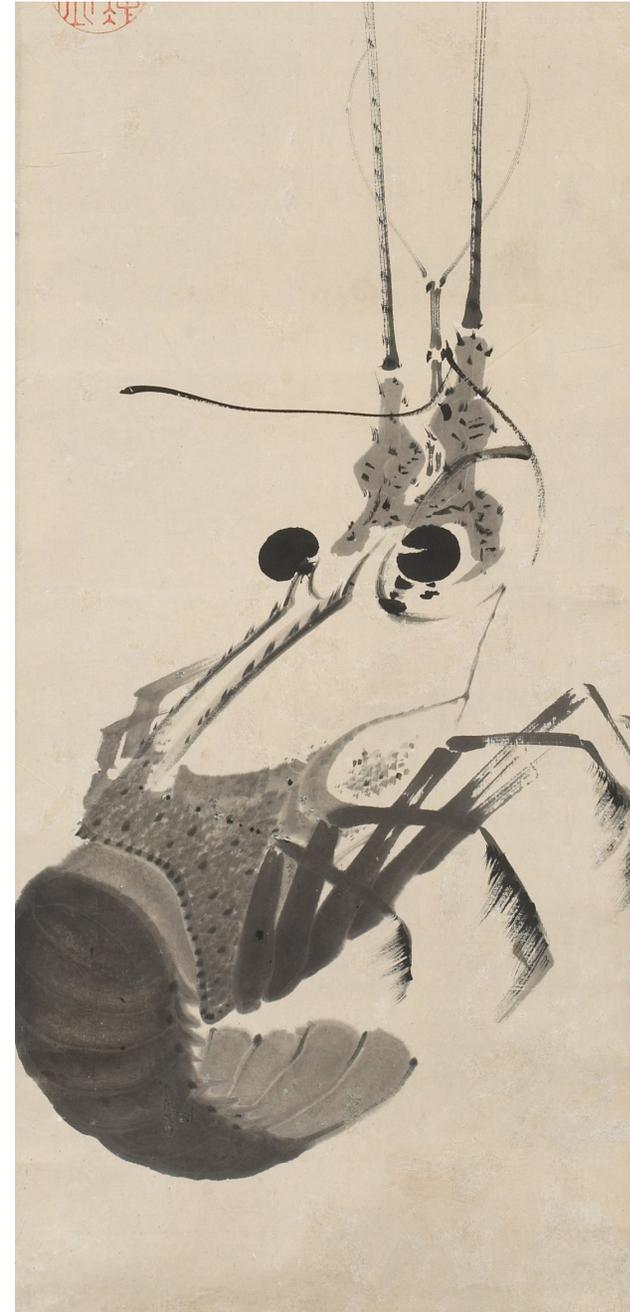
## Excerpt from “Background and Essence of Japanese Ink Painting”

In order to get a clear sense of what ink painting is all about, I think it is useful to look at the differences between this style and Western painting. The goal of classical Western painting is to depict the world and its objects as realistically as possible. To achieve that goal, it has developed a precise structure of foreground, background, and central object, creating a three-dimensional perspective. This style of painting needs light, shadow, and, most of all, color. Ink painting uses none of these aids. Even though it, too, depicts a view of the world, its goal is not to produce a realistic picture of it, but rather an expression of the perception a painter wants to convey. It is an attempt to capture, in condensed form, the essence of an object, a person, or a landscape as seen through the eyes of the painter. For that reason, suggestion plays a key role. Suggestion and simplification in a painting imply reality.

In Japanese ink paintings we see the traditional aesthetics of simplicity combined with a distinct emphasis on intuitive expression. A sense of harmony, so typical in Japanese culture, pervades every scene. This explains why paintings that depict flowers, birds, and landscapes are so popular.

This style of painting, heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism, uses only black ink. However, according to Oriental understanding, black ink is not simply black. It has many different shades, representing the highest level of color simplification.

Different degrees in tone do not represent different shades of light or brightness; rather, they produce an awareness of color by creating a contrast with the white surface. This is what gives a painting the appearance of color.



Itō Jakuchū, *Spiny Lobster* (detail), late 18th century, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 39 1/8 × 11 1/2 in (99.38 × 29.21 cm). Minneapolis Institute of Art; Bequest of Louis W. Hill, Jr. (96.146.20).



## A World of Edo Art Creatures of the Sea

The tones also serve as an immediate expression of emotions, mirroring the intensity of the interest the painter brings to the work. In a sense, it is the process that gives sumi-e its expressionistic character.

In addition, the white surface of the picture is not simply an open space left after the theme of the picture has been established, as is often the case in Western paintings. Instead, it is an essential part of the picture. White surfaces come alive and gain depth when they become one with an object and a technique, creating a form.

For example, suppose that as you watch a wild flower your heart is touched by its vitality. As the radiance of the ink is transferred to the paper with the stroke of a brush, the flower in your picture seems to “breathe,” and this breath begins to fill the white space surrounding it, just as it does in nature. In ink paintings a line does not represent the contour or the outer edge of a form; rather it represents the inner power of the painted form itself. It represents soul, spirit, and life rhythm all at once.

After this art form arrived in Japan from China, it was heavily influenced by Taoism and especially by Zen Buddhism. The concept of “white space” is a direct expression of Taoism and Zen Buddhism. The understanding of movement, of the “real” flowing and dissolving into “nothingness,” and the existence of “emptiness” are of central significance to both beliefs.

The essential character of ink painting, expressing the dynamics of life, is, quite possibly, a foreign concept for Western artists, because you have to become one with the object in the painting. In Western paintings, you are not the flower. However, picture yourself painting outside. Sense the rays of the sun on your skin; let your eyes gaze into the distance. This is a moment when you begin to become one with the flower.

Or think of music. Landscapes, birds, and rocks are notes created in nature. First you study the notes, next you practice on your instrument, and then your emotions play these notes.

When you experience how the gentle, tender shades of the ink and a simple line, created from a state of inner quiet, are transformed and express the most powerful energy, you will have a sense of what these philosophies are all about.

Okamoto, Naomi. Excerpt from “The Basics: Background and Essence of Japanese Ink Painting.” In *Japanese Ink Painting: The Art of Sumi-e*, 8–9. New York: Sterling Publishing Co. Inc., 1996.