

Oriental people, using the  
universal language of art,

# Speak Through Suiboku

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If you should one day settle down with a *fude* or two, a *suzuri*, some *kami*, and a piece of *sumi*, you might stumble onto a whole new world of beauty and enjoyment. These strange-sounding things are the instruments of *suiboku*, an oriental art technique which is centuries old.

*Suiboku* literally means ink-and-water. *Suiboku* painting has its main emphasis on shading black ink into gray with a single brushstroke.

The brush is called a *fude* and can be one of two types: *shohitsu* is used for calligraphy; *gahitsu* is used for painting. There are also several types of *gahitsu*, some for drawing delicate lines, some to use with color, and some for outline. The brush called *tsuketate* is an all-purpose brush and is big and long with firm bristles. This brush is considered best for the beginner.

*Sumi* is ink and is considered the essence of *suiboku*. *Sumi*-making developed in China long ago and has become an art in itself, for the *sumi* usually used comes in a solid form, the surface carved with delicate figures of birds or flowers or trees.

There are two ways of making the basic piece of *sumi*. One is to combine the soot from the smoke of burning pine wood with the glue from fish bones. This type produces a brown-black ink tone. The other method, which uses soot from burning oil, produces the more desirable blue-black tone.

The *suzuri*, or inkstone, is inseparable from the *sumi*, for its surface is used to grind the ink. The *suzuri* is made from hard types of surfaces like copper or jade. These inkstones are available in a variety of shapes and sizes, but the most common one is a rectangle about five inches long.

The grinding of the ink is a process which must be given much thought and care. The depression in the inkstone should be filled about half full of water. The *sumi* is held straight and firm and rubbed around on the flat surface, then dipped into the water. Rubbing back and forth will not only tire the arm, but the ink and water will not mix well.

Selection of paper or *kami* is from two kinds. Handmade paper or rice paper absorbs water and is best. Machine-made paper is glossy because of its oil or wax content and is not good to use.

Before beginning to paint, it is necessary to warm up the arm by swinging it in large arcs. Since *suiboku* is such a gentle, delicate form of art, it is also essential to put the mind in a happy state by thinking cool, calm thoughts.

The proper way to hold the brush is by grasping it between the index finger and the thumb in the middle of the stem, with the middle finger just below the index finger. It is important not to be tense, for this will inhibit free movement. Use the whole arm, and keep the hand and arm clear of the paper.

After a few practice sessions to get the feel of the paper, work may be started on speed. It is suggested that the painter think of his work in terms of music, making strong swift strokes for things of that nature—rocks or huge trees—and gentle, flowing strokes for delicate interpretations of birds and flowers.

More difficult to understand and accomplish is the principle of the wet and dry strokes. With the wet stroke, speed is necessary to avoid a fuzzy effect; but, if done correctly, a beautiful highlighted effect can be achieved. The dry stroke, accomplished by using the brush repeatedly without dipping into the ink or water, gives a nice change.

There are innumerable fine points to *suiboku* far beyond these basic fundamentals, but there is one more main point to remember. No matter how good the technique, a picture done in the *suiboku* manner will be nothing unless it is given life through the soul and spirit of the artist.

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