

Learning the Art of Chinese Brushpainting: The Lotus Flower



Illustrations by Lampo Leong
Instructions by Lampo Leong with Diane Wang

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Materials: big hard 1.5" wolf's hair brush, small hard 1/2" wolf's hair brush, 2" sheep's hair brush, bottle of black liquid ink made in China or Japan, absorbent rice paper, white dishes 4" in diameter in plastic or ceramic, water container

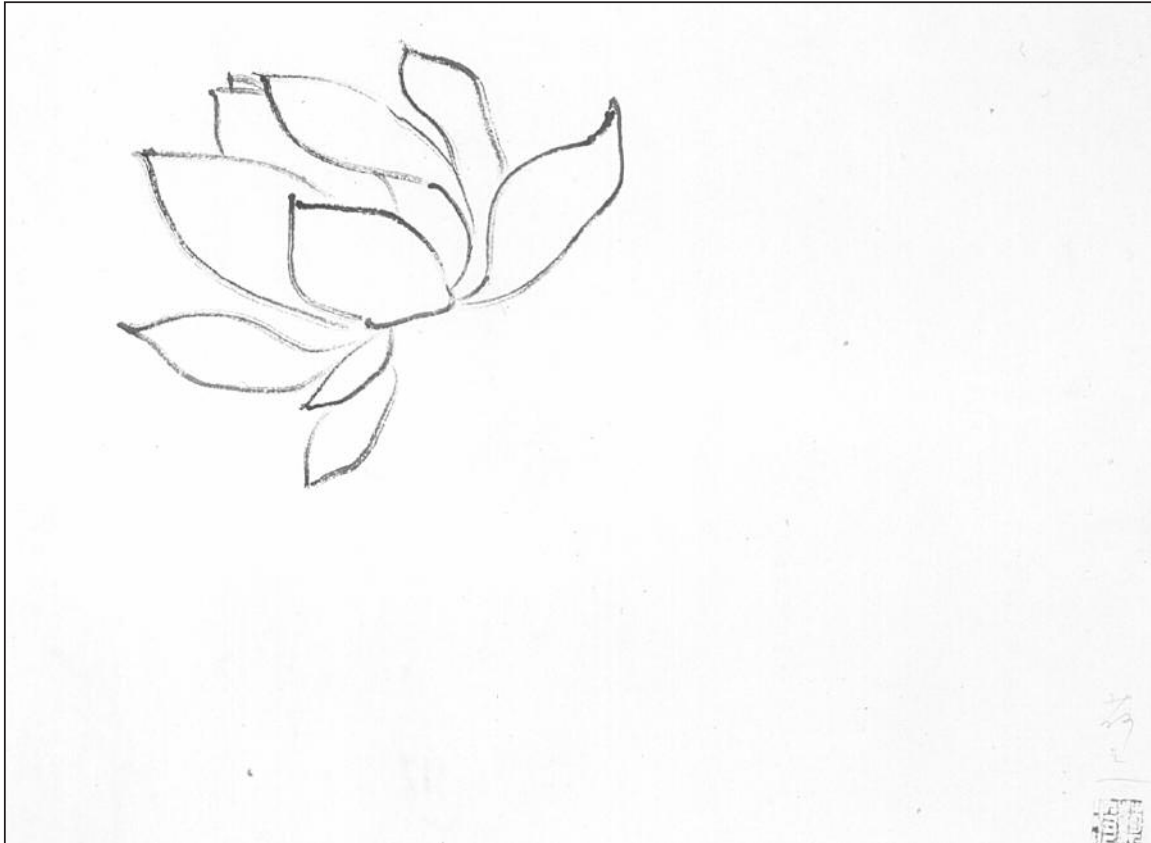


Illustration 1

The Lotus

This painting illustrates the outlining technique (*goule*) used on the flower and the boneless technique (*mogu*) used on the leaf. This exercise illustrates how the brush strokes should follow the natural structure.

The composition follows an “S” curve, which is often used in Chinese painting. It comes from the rhythm of the yin/yang symbol of Taoism (Daoism). The “S” begins from the bottom right-hand edge of the paper and moves up through the leaf to the top left edge of the flower.

Illustrations 1 and 2:

Illustration 2 shows the order for making the petals for Illustration 1.

1. Use the large, hard brush and wet the brush completely. Then dry it on the edge of the water jar. Pour ink into the ink dish. Pick up some ink with the large, hard brush and use a different dish to dilute it with a small amount of water to create a light gray ink.
2. Load the entire brush evenly with the gray ink. Dry the brush well on a paper towel so that you can create dry, gray strokes.
3. Hold the brush low, near the tip, and keep the brush vertical for all of the outlining strokes. Practice the stroke before beginning. Note that each of the lotus outline strokes is done this way:
 - Keep the light gray ink on the brush; before starting the stroke dip the tip of the brush into a little darker ink.
 - Start each stroke by a reverse movement, moving upward for about 1/8" before coming down. Do this for all lines.
 - Move the entire arm and hand to draw each stroke. This is important to Chinese brush-painting. Do not use only your wrist or fingers to move the brush. Even if you rest your hand on the paper for doing detailed work, you need to move the entire arm to make the stroke. The energy and control expressed in Chinese brush strokes comes from using the entire arm, sometimes the entire body.
 - The strokes always go from the tip of the petal toward the center of the flower.
4. As you do the petals, note that you break down the contour into several strokes. Do not attempt to do each petal with one stroke.
5. Do not trace the shape, but try to vary the speed of the strokes so that you can get dry and wet effects. This will create a rhythm and expressive quality in your work.
6. Begin with the petal labeled "1" on Illustration 2. This petal is done using three strokes. Note the difference in the curves on the left and right sides of the petal.
7. The next petal (labeled "2" on Illustration 2) becomes more dry and uses less pressure as it approaches petal 1. This gives the illusion that it is behind the first petal. This is true of all the petals.
8. Draw all ten petals of the lotus, doing them in the order indicated on Illustration 2.

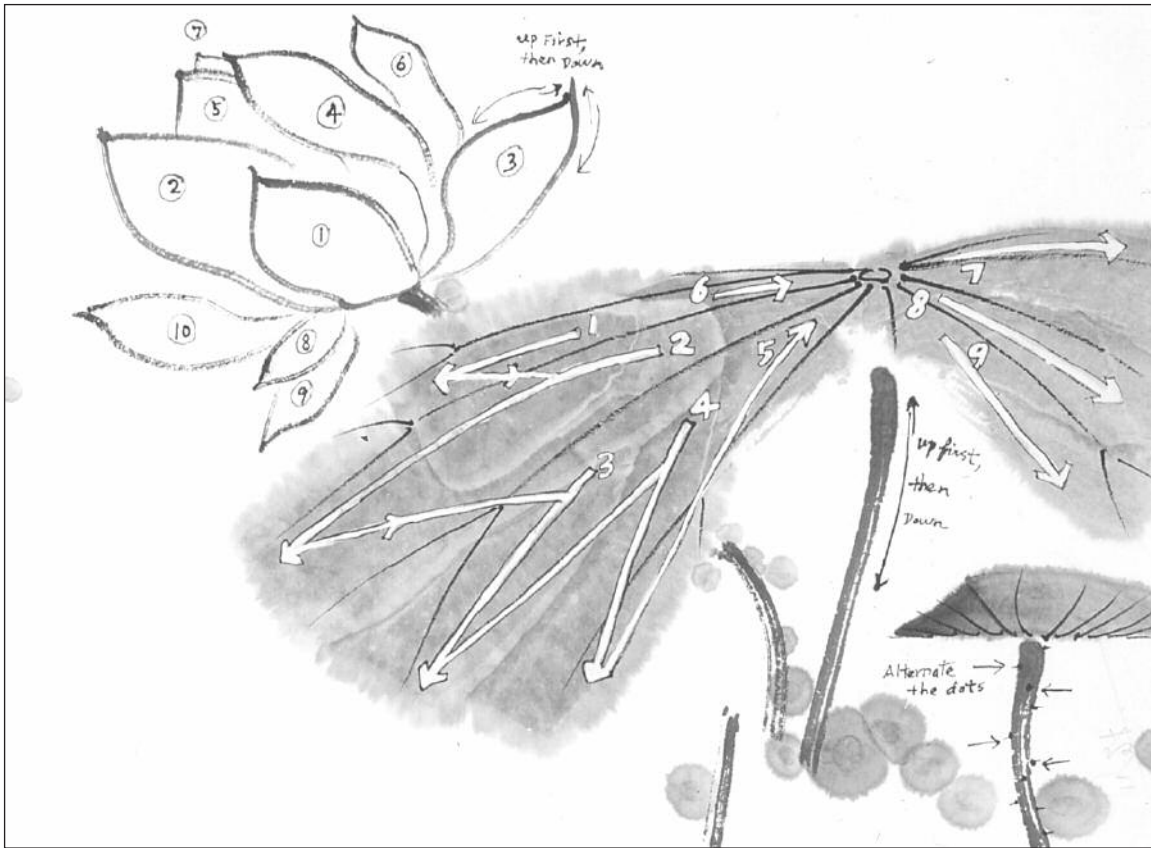


Illustration 2



Illustration 3

Illustrations 2 and 3:

Illustration 2 explains the complicated stroke movement in order to achieve the effect shown in Illustration 3.

Large Leaf:

1. Use a large, soft brush and load it thoroughly in the dark gray ink. You will want a wet brush for these strokes.
2. Before you start the first stroke of the leaf, dip the tip in the black ink. Use the side of the brush, not the tip. Lay down the brush with the tip facing the top edge of the paper. Place it in the upper left corner of where the leaf will be, where it says “1” on the leaf strokes.
3. Move the brush in the path indicated for strokes 1 through 4 on the Illustration 2 leaf. Make these strokes in one continuous zigzag motion, without lifting the brush from the paper. Notice how the darker ink at the tip of the brush creates variation on the leaf when you use the side of the brush to paint.
4. Notice that the edges on the lower left of the lotus leaf are definite and not simply diffused where the ink has run. The right edge of these strokes is softer and diffused.
5. When the brush is more dry, continue with strokes 5 and 6. Notice where the brush strokes start and end, marked on Illustration 2.
6. Add a little more ink to the tip of the brush before doing strokes 7, 8, and 9.
7. Notice as you work that the top edge should be more flat and sharply defined, compared to the bottom edge of the leaf. This is how the lotus leaf appears from the side. Moreover, this adds an important contrast and variation of edges.

Small Lotus Leaf:

1. Change to the large, hard brush and load it with gray ink.
2. Dip the tip of the brush in darker ink just before beginning the stroke.
3. This stroke begins using the tip of the brush. Then you press and angle the brush to use the side for the broader section of the leaf. Return to the tip of the brush by turning the bristles counterclockwise and gradually moving the brush back to the vertical position to finish the stroke.



Illustration 4

Illustrations 4 and 2:

Illustration 2 explains the stroke structure and movements to achieve the effect shown in Illustration 4.

Veins on Leaf:

1. Use a small, hard brush with undiluted ink. Dry the brush well before loading ink so that you can achieve a dry, sharp stroke.
2. Paint the veins while the ink on the leaf is still a little wet to show that the veins blend with the leaf, but do not do them immediately after you paint the leaf, while the paper is still saturated. Otherwise ink for the veins will be too diffused.
3. Paint the center circle of the leaf first.
4. Paint the veins with the same sort of stroke used for the petals.
5. Notice the spacing and shape of the veins in Illustration 2. The veins are not parallel to each other, but radiate from the center. Your actual stroke, however, should fuse into the leaf you have already done, as in Illustration 4.

6. On the small furred leaf, the veins go from the bottom to the top edge of the pod. Notice that the veins are not parallel. These veins are emerging and radiating from the center around the stem as well.

Stems:

1. Use the large hard brush and load it with gray ink. Dry the brush well so that you can achieve a dry gray stroke.
2. The stroke used for stems also begins by placing the brush on the paper and making a small reverse movement. Move the brush up and then draw it down in a quick, energetic and even stroke. The ending of this stroke should be square and definite.
3. Note that the stems do not reach all the way to the bottom edge of the paper. This indicates that the stems emerge out of water.
4. Note also that the stems should not be parallel. Be sure that the stem for the flower that goes behind the leaf lines up correctly.
5. Notice the angle and grouping of stems. A broken stem is used to balance the placement of elements.
6. Use a small, hard brush with dark ink to make the small dots on the stem. These are course hairs, not quite thorns, which texture a lotus stem. Notice that these should not all be done in a row but should wind around the stem in a more random way.

Stamen:

1. Use a small, hard brush and load it with wet dark ink.
2. Create oval dots for the stamen. Do this by using the tip of the brush and applying a small pressure.
3. The oval marks should not be scattered. Rather, they come from the center of the flower and appear to come from behind the petal.
4. The grouping is important. The oval marks should be clustered more in some areas than other. Be aware of the relationship of the marks with the contour line defining the petal. Some of the marks are farther from the line, while others are closer.
5. Altogether, the marks form a half-circle around the petal.

6. After forming the oval marks, dry the brush and point the tip. Make very thin lines to indicate the stalks of the stamen. These should be oriented toward the center of the flower behind the front petal. Those oval marks that are next to the petal edge will not need such connections.

Dew Drops:

1. Chinese artists will often use very faint gray dots to complete the composition of a painting. If asked what these represent, an artist might say they are “dew drops.” Their main function, however, is to unify the composition and create a sense of space behind the image. The overall placement of the dew drops should contribute to the “S” curve of the composition, helping to lead the eye along the path.
2. Use a large, soft brush. The ink should be so diluted that it barely shows on the paper when it is dry. You might want to use the “dirty” water you have been working with as you have painted. Do not add more ink to this water.
3. The “dew drops” are done in a darker ink on Illustration 2 so that you can see and consider their placement. Note the relationship of the dewdrops to the stems and to the space around them. The drops do not all line up. Some are on the left and others on the right of a stem. The drops also vary in size. There is a rhythm to their placement, so that they do not all march in a row. Instead, some are crowded together and others are by themselves.

Signature or Seal:

1. A signature or seal, or in this case two seals, are used to enhance the composition. The seals might be the artist’s name, or they could be “leisure seals” (*Xianzhang*), expressing some philosophical view of the artist.
2. The placement of the seals or signature helps achieve balance in the composition. There is no standard place to put the seal or signature.
3. The seal and signature should follow the flow of the painting. This usually means it will be placed in a more active part of the painting rather than in an empty space.