

online intensive

the dance 
of the eye

and 
the hand



painting the blind men crossing the bridge

lesson I

more fundamentals of Chinese brush painting by Bob Schmitt



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Painting “blind men crossing the bridge”

Assumptions behind the dance of the eye and the hand

As a teacher I begin with several assumptions.
Any student coming to me has 3 sets of skills to be nurtured.

First, the student has the skills of the eye - when they look at things, what do they see?

Second, the student has the set of skills of the hand - how are they able to connect what they see to the brush, the ink and the paper?

Third, the student has the set of skills of their heart/mind - how are their actions connected to the source of their energy, their spirit, the Qi?

It is from these assumptions that I now offer the dance of the eye and the hand.

These instructional videos with printable models are based on the concept that to learn Chinese brush painting one must train not only one's hand but one's eye as well.

The understanding is that continued learning is a tension between what the eye can see and what the hand can do.

And that the dance of the eye and the hand will always be in play.

That tension is always there.

Mastery is a process.

Not a destination.

Bob Schmitt

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About brush painter Bob Schmitt



I am a life long student and teacher of the traditions of Chinese brush painting.

I began my study of brush painting in 1962 watching what was then educational tv. I would sit in front of the tv after school with my brush and ink and learn basic forms. I practiced most of my life unschooled.

In the late 90s I was fortunate to begin to study with Lok Tok, Yitong Lok of Toronto and

Hong Zhang in Minneapolis—three incredibly gifted Chinese brush painters and teachers.

Since 1998 I have been a weekly student of Hong Zhang, a native of Shanghai, schooled there and now living in Bloomington, Minnesota.

I have also had a long distance relationship with Chinese master Lok Tok (now deceased) and his son Yitong Lok.

In 2001, all three of these teachers endorsed my beginning to teach Chinese painting to students here in Minneapolis.

Currently I have 40 students who before the COVID 19 pandemic came to my house for weekly instruction in Chinese calligraphy and paintings.

I also have a weekly painting practice.
To see more of my work, visit:

www.laughingwatersstudio.com

Painting “blind men crossing the bridge”

Inside Art: Blind Men Crossing the Bridge

by Stephen Addiss

Blind Men Crossing the Bridge Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768), Ink on paper, 7 1/2 x 26 inches (19.2 x 67 centimeters) Chikusei Collection Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768) has often been called the most important Zen master of the past five hundred years. Among other things, he invented the koan “What is the Sound of One Hand?” Hakuin was also the most significant Zen artist of this period, creating several thousand works of painting and calligraphy. While traditional Zen subjects had generally been limited to Zen figures, landscapes, and occasionally symbolic plants such as orchids or bamboo, Hakuin exploded the range of subject matter to include a wide range of new themes. One of these is “Blind Men Crossing the Bridge”—trying to cross a dangerous log bridge can be seen as a visual representation of crossing over to enlightenment. This is a familiar metaphor in Buddhism, such as the chant at the end of the Heart Sutra: Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha (Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone to the other shore, all hail).

In his commentary on the Heart Sutra, Hakuin wrote, “The Chinese means ‘reach the other shore.’ But where is that? Take one more step! Is there a soul on earth who belongs on ‘this shore’? How sad to stand mistaken on a wavelashed quay!”

Hakuin painted the theme of blind men crossing a log bridge at least eight times, with the landscape elements reduced to a minimum. Curiously, one painting has nine blind men, one has five, three have three, two have two, and one has only the sketch outline of a single figure; this once again demonstrates how Hakuin continued to change and experiment in his art.

In this depiction of three blind men, the shores are simply depicted on the right and left edges of the painting, mountains float in space above, and on the right a few strokes of ink suggest pine trees pointing toward the figures on the bridge. The blind men are suggested only by very simple short dashes and dots of the brush, yet they seem fully alive.

The blind men start from the right and seem to be struggling harder and harder to cross the bridge. The first holds his sandals in his hands as he reaches out with his staff, the second puts his staff in his belt and reaches out with his fingers, and the third crawls forward with his sandals tethered at the end of his staff for balance. To make the situation more difficult, the bridge does not quite reach the other shore. Will they all make it across?

The idea of a perilous bridge maintained its importance to Hakuin through the years. In his sermon “Awakening from Day-Dreaming,” he writes, “The bridge which takes us across our floating world is dangerous for the feet which walk over it.” Yet words alone cannot be as powerful as when combined with a painting; in Hakuin’s portrayals of blind men trying to cross a log bridge, he created images that can resonate with us all.

Stephen Addiss is an author, painter, calligrapher, and art professor at the University of Richmond in Virginia. He is coauthor of *The Sound of One Hand: Paintings and Calligraphy by Zen Master Hakuin*, with Audrey Yoshiko Seo.

Painting “blind men crossing the bridge”

On Hakuin Ekaku’s painting titled, “Blind Men Crossing the Bridge”.

Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1769) is known for having revitalized the Rinzai school of Zen through his use of the koan system. A koan is a story or question that is meant to take the Zen student beyond mere intellectual discrimination and dualistic reasoning. The question, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” is an example of a koan Master Hakuin created after finding that many of his students were having trouble with the koan “Mu”. Mu, or Joshu’s Dog, is the first koan in the book, *The Gateless Gate*.

Hakuin Ekaku is also known for his many works of art including the above shown “Blind Men Crossing the Bridge,” a scene he painted on more than one occasion. This painting is one of three with three monks on the bridge. Others had as little as one monk, or as many as nine.

“Blind Men Crossing the Bridge” is typically described as a representation of trying to cross over into enlightenment but considering Hakuin’s deep interest in the koan system, it may also be interpreted as the Zen student’s struggle with the koan. The grasping and clawing at the air is a symbol of intense effort. The blindness represents ignorance of one’s true nature. The bridge itself may be said to represent the koan. Yet if we make these simple comparisons and go no further we would miss the meaning imbued in the bridge that ends in mid-air. To understand this meaning, the mind of the student must be revealed.

The mind of the beginner student is just like our own in that it interprets the world conceptually and in dualistic terms. Put simply, things are either a or not-a. They are either here or there. They are now or then, big or small, hot or cold, etc. In the physical world this conceptual orientation can be quite successful in dealing with most things in life and in resolving many of our daily problems. With it we can drive to work each day or land a spacecraft on a comet. Yet the usefulness of the conceptual mind in dealing with these things masks its limitations.

The koan unmasks the limitations of conceptual, dualistic thinking. It does this not with a simple presentation of something nonsensical but with a statement or question that invites the student to go beyond conceptual thought.

In Koan 40 of *The Gateless Gate*, for example, Hyakujo places a water vase on the ground and asks his monks, “Who can say what this is without calling its name?” This question invites a non-conceptual response and the chief monk responds with, “No one can call it a wooden shoe.”

If, at this point in hearing the koan you examine your inner state, it will likely be found to be the same as that of any beginner Zen student. Hyakujo’s question and the chief monk’s response will have left your mind blank. If you then try to figure out the “correct” response, you will have missed the mark and fallen back into conceptualizing.

In Hakuin’s “Blind Men Crossing the Bridge,” the exact moment the mind becomes blank is the point where the bridge ends in mid-air. There, the limits of conceptual thinking have been reached and the Zen student must realize a new way of being to continue on his or her way.

Koan 40 ends with Isan, the cooking monk, tipping over the vase with his foot and leaving the room. Through direct action, he reveals himself while showing how the conceptual mind sometimes prevents our seeing the obvious or, so to speak, the bridge that continues past the point where it appears to end in mid-air.

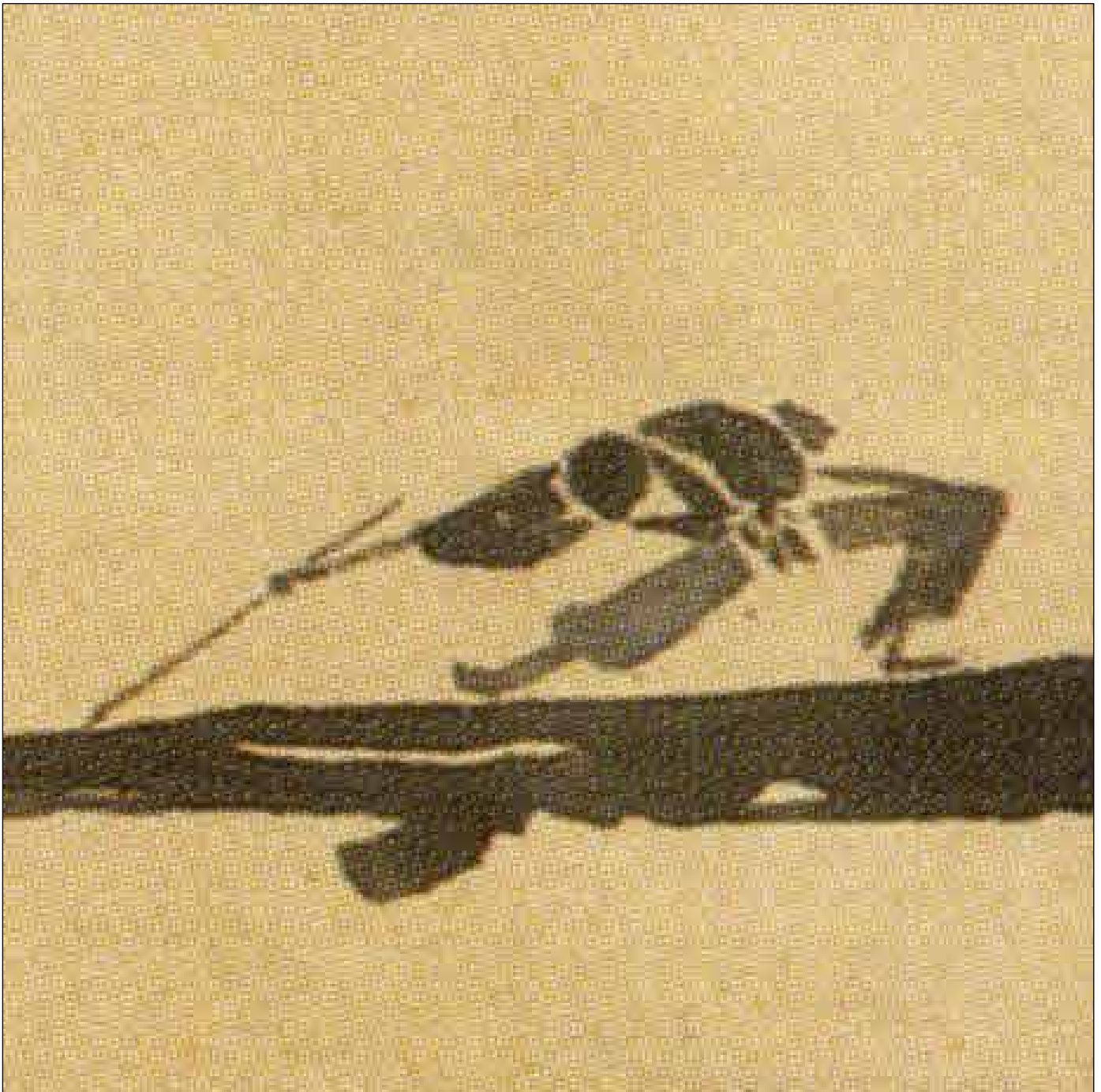
Hakuin does not paint the bridge continuing on to the other side because to do so would be just another conceptualization. Instead, he leaves the painting blank for us to use as a visual koan to still our conceptual mind and discover our formless, true nature.

Painting “blind men crossing the bridge”

figure number 1

where is the tension in the figure?
where are the bones of the figure
where are the points of contact?
what keeps him balanced?

where is the ease?
what is the fabric?
where is his center?



Painting “blind men crossing the bridge”

figure number 2

where is the tension in the figure?
where are the bones of the figure
where are the points of contact?
what keeps him balanced?

where is the ease?
what is the fabric?
where is his center?



Painting “blind men crossing the bridge”

figure number 3

where is the tension in the figure?
where are the bones of the figure?
where are the points of contact?
what keeps him balanced?

where is the ease?
what is the fabric?
where is his center?

