

IN THE FOREGROUND: OBJECT STUDIES

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

“AN EXPRESSION OF THE POETIC SELF”: YUEFENG WU ON THE STELE INSCRIPTION OF THE JIU-CHENG PALACE



Detail of Ou-yang Xun, Jiu-Cheng Palace Stele Inscription, 632 (early Tang dynasty)

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Transcript

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Join us for an immersive personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode, Wu Yuefeng, a graduate student in the Williams Graduate Program in the History of Art, discusses a work of calligraphy that dates to the early Tang Dynasty in China, around 632. This inscription has influenced generations of practitioners with how the brushstrokes skillfully balances liminality and tranquil harmony.

Yuefeng Wu

My name is Wu Yuefeng Wu, and today I will introduce you to a work of Chinese calligraphy known as the Stele Inscription of the Jiu-Cheng Palace. The work was created by Ou-yang Xun in 632, during the early Tang dynasty. When we speak of an art of writing, the association is usually more literary than visual. Writing is an art of rhetoric and argumentation, of prose style and poetic effect. Words are important only insofar as they serve as a vehicle for meaning, and for the message that we intend to convey. Indeed, we see words more as a signifier of other things. The word cow stands for the milk making animal and few words stopped to ponder the visual qualities of the letters, a circle, joining a semicircle and a zigzag pattern. No, our eyes meet, assign, excavate its meanings and move on, leaving the visual forms behind.

Calligraphy demands a reverse kind of reading, where visual form stands independent from verbal content—as important, if not more so. A student of calligraphy would learn to practice by closely looking at historical paragons, reading each character by tracing the movement of lines and shapes from the beginning of the first brushstroke to the end of the last.

A canonical example well demonstrates this pedagogical process. The character that I will focus on in this episode comes from the Tang dynasty stele inscription of the Jiu-Cheng Palace, by the hand of Ou-yang Xun, one of the most famous calligraphers of the seventh century, created in 632. The stele is more than two meters tall and one meter wide, made of dark stone, topped by winding dragons and supported by a turtle-looking creature at the bottom. The more than 1200 characters are carved in the middle on the stele proper, and it is in the beginning of the text that we find the character that I'm going to speak about today.

This character, *“xiu,”* is commonly used to denote the season summer. At this point, I would encourage you to turn to the image in this episode. Now let's move through it together, one brushstroke at a time. We begin at the top with a long horizontal line, slightly sunken in the middle, but swelling at the two ends. Even with a largely rectilinear form, the calligrapher varies its thickness and curves up its bottom edge, to avoid the tedium of a continuous straight line. Then a small triangular dot falls left leading to the central square that contains two slim strokes. Its left edge shows the tip of the brush at the top where the downward motion begins. And immediately to the right, a tiny gap is left open to allow for the circulation of air in the otherwise enclosed space. At its bottom, one angular horizontal stroke fully seals the box, though its overextension to the left is not required information for the character and is thus purely ornamental.

Taken as a whole, the upper half of the character is highly architectonic. It has a stable structure, largely consisting of horizontal and vertical lines. These lines are not precisely horizontal or vertical. In fact, the horizontal strokes all follow a diagonal motion from lower left to upper right. And the vertical edges of the square start to press inward at the bottom, creating a narrowing effect in the center of the character. These formal maneuvers make the character visually more interesting and create an imbalanced tension in the composition, which is only resolved by the addition of the second half. Three curving strokes stretch across the lower part, supporting the architecture above. The first flows smoothly from the center to left, gradually diminishing in thickness until a pointy

tail is formed. The second starts at the right before bending around to the left, yet it differs slightly from the previous left stroke in length and direction.

As a general rule of thumb, variation is preferred and repetition avoided. For the calligrapher's goal is to make a character beautiful and a text visually interesting, both on the level of individual brushstrokes and the composition as a whole. Finally, one heavy stroke stretches outward to the right, dominating the lower section. Its gentle curvilinear top edge is juxtaposed with the strong angular bottom edge. And in one single stroke, Ou-yang Xun combines two distinct calligraphic traditions: the flowing softness of southern cursive brushwork and the angular rigidity of northern stone carving.

[musical interlude]

Looking at the composition as a whole, we see a harmonious coexistence between tension and stability. In other words, the tension created in the upper architecture is still visible, but it is balanced by the arrangement of the free flowing strokes at the bottom. They spread out to provide a solid foundation, but contrast with the regularity of the upper structure. Particularly the exaggerated length and mass of the lower right stroke serve to balance out the upward diagonal motions of the horizontal lines. This achieves a stable triangular composition. Going from top down, the character stroke widens and narrows at the waist, before opening up even further at the bottom. To speak in anthropomorphic terms, the tight torso and outstretched limbs of the character exhibit a posture simultaneously austere and relaxed.

By pushing stable pictorial structures to the thresholds of imbalance, Ou-yang Xun illustrates achieves in this composition a combined effect of awesome liminality and tranquil harmony. This was a distinctive trait of his calligraphic style that has been much praised by historical commentators. Ever since its unveiling, the Jiu-Cheng Palace inscription has been given the highest accolades

by calligraphers and theorists. In the early modern era, it was even deemed the unrivaled pinnacle of the standard script. And according to the 10th century history of the Tang dynasty, practitioners of calligraphy soon took Ou-yang Xun's inscription as a paragon for imitation. Rubbings were made immediately after the erection of this stele, and countless versions circulated during the Ming and Qing dynasties. These reproductions contributed to the persistent popularity of the so-called "Ou-yang Xun" style, and his canonization and the history of calligraphy.

As a documentary and artistic object, the Jiu-Cheng Palace stele has a particularly complicated history of making and reception. It was commissioned by Emperor Tang Taizong to commemorate the discovery of a sweet-tasting spring in his summer palace; its text was composed by a wise prime minister, who recorded the history of the palace and the discovery of the spring before counseling the emperor against excess. Then the text was put to calligraphy by the most celebrated hand of the day, and carved on the stone by an anonymous but highly skilled craftsmen. Though the contents of the inscription could be very interesting to historians and archaeologists of the tongue civilization. It was the visual form of writing that sparked a thousand-year-old conversation that persisted through the centuries.

[musical interlude]

Today, the Jiu-Cheng Palace inscription is still widely imitated by students of calligraphy and is often regarded as an introduction to the practice. As an instructor once said to me, "many more years must you immerse yourself in the acquisition of this one style, before moving on to learn another style or starting to form your own." Not unlike painting and sculpture in early modern Europe, Chinese calligraphy is first a practice of imitation. Only after the formal skills have been successfully mastered through close looking and imitation can calligraphy become an art for the expression of the poetic self.

Caitlin Woolsey

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Objects Studies*. For more information on this episode and the artwork discussed, please visit clarkart.edu/rap/podcast. *Object Studies* is created and produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with editing and musical interludes by John Buteyn, theme music by lightchaser, and additional support provided by Annie Jun, Jessie Sentivan, and Caroline Fowler. The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. As we learn, speak, and gather at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.