

ASEMIC WRITING

The word *asemic* means having no specific semantic content. Asemic writing is a form of abstract mark-making that may be said to resemble print or cursive handwriting but carries no common social meaning, much like scribbling or doodling. It is mark-making for the sake of making marks.

Artist and author Remy Dean refers to this artform as “writing to escape words” and notes that its first deliberate practitioner was the eighth-century Chinese poet, philosopher, and official calligrapher Zhang Xu, known for his varied eccentricities and fondness for wine. “Reputedly, he would become so impassioned when writing his poems that his calligraphy became rushed and vigorous, sometimes so much so that it bordered on illegibility . . . Zhang Xu, though, was very happy with the results that expressed the feelings behind the words more than their literal interpretation, which he considered insufficient to convey the depth of emotion that sometimes overwhelmed him.”

Dean continues his remarks about Zhang Xu: “My favourite story about Zhang Xu is that he had passed out after an evening spent prodigiously imbibing only to awake, drunkenly inspired in the middle of the night. In the half-light he couldn’t find his brush, so he twisted his long hair together and dipped it in the ink instead. In the morning he woke to find the scroll he’d written and was most impressed with the energetic calligraphy—some of the best he’d ever achieved in terms of vitality, strength, and fluidity! The only problem being that he couldn’t read it back and had forgotten the words of the verse. However, this didn’t bother him in the slightest as he could ‘read’ the depth of honest passion usually concealed behind the intellectual meaning of words. Apparently, this innovative approach was one he would deliberately employ from then on, influencing the calligraphy of his successors.”

—Remy Dean, “Writing to Escape the Words,” *Medium*. December 5, 2021.

art [left] by Karla Van Vliet, from [Fluency](#) (Shanti Arts, 2021)



ASEMIC UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Karla Van Vliet



WHEN I DELVED INTO working with asemics a few years ago, I brought my way of being creative to the table. My artwork and writings have been my way of expressing myself. They come from a place of feeling, a place of contemplation, and are a way I maintain communion with myself. And, of course, my life experiences comes into play.

My college's slogan was "learn by doing." That philosophy has led me. My graduate work in poetry offered deep

critique of one's work, which for me always pivoted on making the poem the best it could be. For years I've worked with my own dreams and the dreams of others, exploring the messages our dreams bring us.

Years ago, I took a Chinese brush painting class being held at the Lincoln Library, a little library that serves Lincoln, Vermont, population 1300, a town nestled into the green mountains. It was an odd offering given the location, but I was intrigued. I hadn't painted in years. I had moved

from art to poetry in college, but I was drawn to this class.

As I took the brush in my hand, held lightly between thumb and forefinger, I learned the strokes that would paint chrysanthemum, orchid, cherry blossom, and bamboo, the same strokes that make up the Kanji characters of the language.

I followed the instructions of my teacher, Yinglei Zhang. I felt an ease in the process. I felt connected to the materials, as if I had been painting that way my whole life—ink, brush, rice paper.

Driving out of the mountains along the curving line of the New Haven River, I reflected on how natural this painting technique felt. I began to work with Yinglei on a one-on-one basis, learning the fundamentals of Chinese brush painting. In part that was a study into the philosophies of Eastern painting.

What I especially liked and felt an affinity toward was the significance placed on the relationship between the artist and their subject, the reflection on the deeper meanings and emotions of that connection, and the rendering of the spirit of the subject. These ideas connected with the philosophies of Taoism and Buddhism, and with the concepts that serve as a foundation for meditation and seeking a kind of peacefulness that arrives through coming to truth.

The Literati Painting Movement, which was formed in China in the



tenth century during the Tang dynasty, resonated with me most. This movement came to express the ideal of the Chinese scholar-painter, emphasizing personal expression, spontaneity, and the use of calligraphy within paintings.

As a poet this fusion sung in my heart. I studied kanji and the many kanji styles. I have always loved the beauty of language, but because I could "read" only a few Chinese characters, I was mostly taken with the lines and shapes of the characters. I was drawn to the Gyosho style, which often includes "flying" white lines in a quickly drawn ink line; the Sosho style, also called grass style, like a word-filled field; and the ancient Tensho style that is thicker and often used for chops—the red stamps that are the signature of the artist, poet, or owner of the painting.

So when I was introduced to asemic, I carried these styles in my hand. To be clear my asemics only resemble Kanji. But I can feel the influence of others on shape and line, and in the orientation of my script. I come to my writing in that meditative space as a way of expressing what has no defined words and yet is not silent. That liminal space of the between. That space which feeling rises within. 🌸