by an imperial court which Cusanus branded as treacherous, and was ra-
bidly rejected by a band of Aristotelian monks led by Gennadios, later in-
stalled as Patriarch of Constantinople by the victorious Turks when the city 
fell in 1453. In the Latin West, one Johannes Wenck wrote a bitter attack 
on Cusanus’ first scientific masterpiece, *On Learned Ignorance*, which 
Cusanus identified as an outburst from the dominant “Aristotelian sect” 
within the Church: the foes of the Re-
naissance, whose thinking in fixed cat-
egories reminds us of many “fundamen-
talists.” The heirs of Cusanus' enemies still exist vocally in every reli-
gious group today—as well as among the 
thetheistic Enlightenment set who 
run the networks of Freemasonic insti-
tutions in Europe and the Americas and dominate the academic and sci-
entific establishments. This is why the 
German cardinal’s writings remain 
controversial today.

Translator Wertz calls for a return 
to Cusanus’ Platonic ecumenism in an 
era when the whole world risks be-
coming enflamed in confessional war-
fare, especially between Muslims and 
Christians, but also, between different 
Christian confessions. The Orthodox-
Catholic conflict has persisted ever 
since the fragile unity of the Council of Florence was shattered in the 1440’s 
and 1450’s. We see the cruelty of such 
“religious” strife in the Balkan cockpit 
today. The method of Cusanus points 
to the only way to prevent this tragedy 
from spreading over the globe. For 
Cusanus’s alternative lies not in main-
taining a fixed and inhuman status quo, 
but in forcing a radical shift in men’s 
thinking everywhere, to open a path-
way for the *imago viva Dei* in all peo-
tales to shine forth in a resurgence of 
human creativity and progress.

—Nora Hamerman

### Zen Buddhism and the Decline of Chinese Painting

In China, poetry, music, and early 
painting all originated from one 
great invention: the beautifully con-
structed Chinese language. The sound 
of the tongue, with its different tones 
for pronouncing a syllable by the Han 
nation and most of the dialects, made 
it possible for the ancient poets to relish 
their strictly regulated verses. Chinese 
music, then, derived from singing clas-
sical poetry.

Furthermore, the pictographic 
form of the language made it possible 
to extend the art of calligraphy far 
beyond its counterpart in Sanskrit, for 
example. Chinese characters origi-
nated as pictographs cut on turtle 
shells, which were then imprinted as 
calligraphy on various available mate-
rals; thus, calligraphy matured before 
and independently from painting, which depended upon the much later 
invention of paper for ink art. Callig-
raphy is a form of art much appreci-
ated by Chinese men of letters, but it 
is an abstract art form.

To understand the art pioneered by 
classical court painters, and the pecu-
liar abstract path taken later by the 
“literati” school of Chinese impres-
sionists, we have to distinguish the dif-
ferent concepts of nature among Chi-
inese philosophies.

Confucians placed great emphasis 
on the “Way of Heaven” (*T'ian-tao*, 
the Minimum) and the “Way of Man” 
(*Jen-tao*, the Minimum), viewing 
“Heaven” not only as “nature,” but 
also as the source of all life and human 
values. The concept of “Heaven” en-
compases the “universe,” an organism 
brimming over with creative life force, 
the *logos* that gives people moral com-
mitment to understand Heaven. The 
creation of life is not viewed as a me-
chanical physical process, but as a spir-
ital, purposeful procedure. In other 
words, “man” is the result of “Heav-
en’s” unceasing creation of new beings 
with more and more wisdom. Relying 
on the wisdom and virtues bestowed 
by Heaven, man creates an increas-
ingly sophisticated and refined culture 
and cultural values. Confucianism is 
the kind of humanism which does not 
deny the supreme power of Heaven, 
but seeks to investigate things in order 
to understand it.

Because of the system of universal 
civil service examinations based on 
these principles, official court painters 
tended to share the Confucian outlook.

On the other hand, both Taoism 
and Buddhism reject the idea that 
Heaven can be presented intelligibly 
to human beings. Nature to them is 
incomprehensible; human life has no 
purpose but to obey the mysterious 
“Great Way.” While Taoism retains 
a passive and artistic view of nature, 
Buddhism leans toward an unblended 
religious sense of art. A faction in art
works produced in this period was political and educational; in style, the works tended to be elaborate and ornate. By the mid-Sung (c.1100), however, the school of "literati painting" had already emerged. With the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), there was no longer a formal painting academy within the imperial palace, and the court style of painting declined. At this point, the literati school of painting entered the mainstream, and the leadership in Chinese painting circles fell into the hands of literati painters.

Tung Chi-ch'ang (1555-1636), the most important Chinese painter of the literati school and the most influential writer on the theory of painting in the late Ming (1368-1643) period, based his aesthetics on Zen Buddhism, naming his two studios "Zen of Painting" and "Zen of Ink." Tung's painting opened up a new direction for the later Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1911). He was interested in the formal structure of the picture and stressed the importance of studying ancient paintings and calligraphy. As an art theorist, he divided previous Chinese painters into Northern and Southern Schools.

Naturalism, favored by the Northern School and some of Tung's contemporaries, prized paintings that reflected and imitated natural beauty. The painting of the Northern School is characterized by colored landscapes executed in linear contours, curves, and short strokes. Calligraphy and painting were kept separate and prevented from influencing each other.

Tung Chi-ch'ang's advocacy of the Southern School had a long-lasting influence on later aestheticians, as a result of Zen Buddhism's rising ascendancy over Confucian philosophy as the Ming dynasty collapsed into moral and economic decay. Tung established the Southern School as the orthodox lineage of painting, enhancing literati painting through its association with Zen philosophy. Later, painting and calligraphy became more and more alike, and abstract painting arose as a sort of Chinese-style impressionism. Earlier Confucian efforts to artistically capture scientific lawfulness in nature were almost completely lost.

This two-volume set is compiled with extensive plates of Chinese painting and calligraphy, and includes extensive biographical and critical material that demonstrates the past three hundred years of Chinese art along the path taken by Tung. A fair portion of the illustrations appeared in exhibitions of the painter in major U.S. cities, which were the largest display of Chinese art ever presented in the West.

—Ray Wei