

The Brush Gathering: A Refined Assembly Ruined by Painters

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1 Introduction

Forty years ago, brush gatherings were vibrant events, as I witnessed at the Yan'an Hotel, observing renowned painters such as Xie Zhiliu, Lu Yanshao, Qi Gong, Tang Yun, Cheng Shifa, Wu Qingxia, Han Min, Chen Dayu, and Song Wenzhi. Historically, refined assemblies of literati have been vital for cultural exchange. The Orchid Pavilion Gathering in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, attended by Wang Xizhi, produced the *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection*, hailed as the “world’s finest running script” and a pinnacle of such gatherings. Similarly, Su Shi’s *West Garden Elegant Gathering* in the Northern Song Dynasty, with landscapes as paper and poetry paired with wine, created a spiritual sanctuary that “shone with literary brilliance, illuminating an age.”

Yet, modern brush gatherings often deviate from this tradition. Painters mimic ancient forms but lack devotion and purity toward art. At some gatherings, painters, who should hone their craft, engage in mutual flattery and commercial hype, producing hollow, chaotic collaborative works—devoid of charm and soul, unbearable to behold. Such superficial “elegant gatherings” serve little purpose. The Yushan Gathering of the Ming and Qing periods, convened by Gu Ying, fostered literary friendships and spurred artistic flourishing, unlike today’s profit-driven, impatient gatherings that lack cultural depth and heritage. Historically, literati inspired one another to create works reflecting their era’s spirit, a quality now scarce in brush gatherings.

Admittedly, brush gatherings hold value as a traditional form, but they must return to the essence of refined assemblies. Painters and organizers should encourage genuine artistic exchange and intellectual collision, eschewing impatience and utilitarianism. Only then can brush gatherings reclaim their integrity, becoming platforms for advancing cultural and artistic development, allowing historical cultural veins to thrive. Otherwise, they risk existing in name only,

losing their significance as conduits for cultural exchange and artistic creation, becoming mere footnotes of regret in cultural history.

2 Proposed Principles for Brush Gatherings

To restore the integrity of brush gatherings, three core principles are essential:

2.1 Eliminate Utilitarianism

Participants should be like-minded literati, as in the West Garden Gathering, where Su Shi became central due to artistic mastery, not political status.

2.2 Purity in Creation

Less mutual flattery and more inclusive dialogue are needed. Wang Xizhi, sober, could not replicate the *Preface to the Orchid Pavilion Collection*'s divine charm, proving the irreplaceable nature of artistic inspiration.

2.3 Cultural Continuity

The Yuan Dynasty's Yushan Gathering lasted over a decade, with 140 participants forming the *Caotang Elegant Collection*, building a regional cultural community. Today, a gathering lasting ten days is miraculous.

3 Symptoms of the Modern Brush Gathering's Alienation

Modern brush gatherings exhibit two primary symptoms of alienation:

3.1 Assembly-Line Mode

Gatherings often cram dozens of works into one to two hours, with painters acting as "art workers." Zhou Sicong once tore up her work in protest at a gathering's quality—a rare display of artistic integrity today.

3.2 Hollow Cultural Content

Unlike the depth of ancient gatherings, such as the Fucha Town assembly's discussions on tea history and craft, modern events feature song-and-dance performances and leadership speeches, with creation time under 30%.

4 Causes of the “Ruination”

The decline of brush gatherings stems from three causes:

4.1 Market Logic Intrusion

Without art intermediaries, painters face capital directly. Professional painters charge thousands for appearances, while those with titles demand nearly ten thousand.

4.2 Imbalanced Evaluation Systems

Gatherings have shifted from “bonding through shared principles” (Cao Pi) to ranking by titles and fame. The Ming Dynasty's *Apricot Garden Elegant Gathering* depicted equal dialogue, unlike today's leader-centric events.

4.3 Mutated Creative Ecosystem

Ancient gatherings yielded masterpieces, while today's collaborative works are often dull, perfunctory, and lack emotional resonance.

5 A Successful Example and Reflection

Brush gatherings can still succeed. A company invested 5 million yuan over ten years, yielding a value increase to 100 million yuan. Twenty years ago, I attended a well-organized gathering in Shandong, organized by Xie Hai. A 60 cm-wide rice paper scroll stretched across a 20-meter table, with each painter assigned a one- or two-meter section. This prevented lazy contributions, as peers watched,

and unsatisfactory sections could be cut without affecting the whole—a stark contrast to flawed collaborative paintings.

6 Poem

After dinner, about to depart by car,
Suddenly, voices call from within.
A ten-meter scroll, I paint one foot,
Wielding the brush, lost in ceaseless thought.