

Chinese Seals

The bright red shapes of seals (sometimes called “chops”) are a distinctive feature of traditional Chinese paintings. Seals are printed onto paintings (paper or silk) using a sticky red paste called cinnabar. “Cinnabar” (mercuric oxide) is the colour in the paste, which also contains fibres and oil.

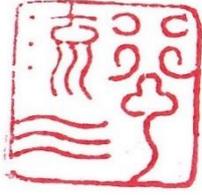
Seals are placed on paintings by the artist, and also by collectors. This is why famous Chinese paintings have multiple seals on, from all the connoisseurs who have owned them. The artist may apply one or more seals: their name plus “leisure seals” with phrases, proverbs or quotes from poems, which express their character or the mood of the painting. Seals are unique to the artist, and are a key way of identifying and authenticating paintings.

Seals are made of stone, though ancient ones could be metal or clay. The seal often has a decorative carved top, a dragon or lotus leaf perhaps. They can be intaglio - white characters on red ground (also called yin seals) - or relief - red characters on white ground (yang seals). The shape is usually square, with artistic oval or irregular shapes for leisure seals. The words are traditionally represented in the ancient “seal script”. Modern seals may be quite free, or look back to older styles, such as the Han dynasty.

If you want a name or leisure seal produced specifically for you, ask a professional to carve it. Reasonably priced wood and rubber seals can also be found. To use your seal, stir the paste evenly to make a dome on the dish, tap the seal on the paste until evenly covered, have a pad under the painting of slightly giving materials, lower the seal carefully into position and press down firmly, then lift straight off. Wipe the seal and store it carefully; dispose of the wipe with care as cinnabar paste is poisonous.



This intaglio seal was carved by Qu Leilei, and says “The brush sings”, part of the famous phrase about painting “the brush sings and the ink dances”.



This relief seal was bought in China, and says “wandering cloud, flowing water”, a reference to flowing and expressive calligraphy.

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