

## Lesson 1: Painting the Minnow - find quiet in the ink

Welcome to our sanctuary. Before we pick up our brushes in class, let's take a collective breath. The world outside our doors can often feel turbulent and noisy. It is easy to feel as though a storm is constantly raging above us. This is exactly why we gather to paint.

Today, I invite you to change your perspective. Imagine looking at the world from a fish-eye view, looking up at the turbulent surface of a pond from the quiet depths below.

The nineteenth-century artist Xu Gu understood the feeling of living through profound upheaval. His response was to paint the "escaping fish." Beneath the troubled waters, his fish swim entirely undisturbed (水面風波魚不知). They dart away from the noise, the wind, and the waves to find peace in the depths.

When the waters calm, we find another spirit entirely: the ancient philosopher Zhuangzi's "happy minnows." Standing by the Hao River, Zhuangzi watched these tiny fish darting about and declared: "See how free the fishes leap and dart: that is their happiness." These fish do not escape; they play freely in the clear, warm shallows.

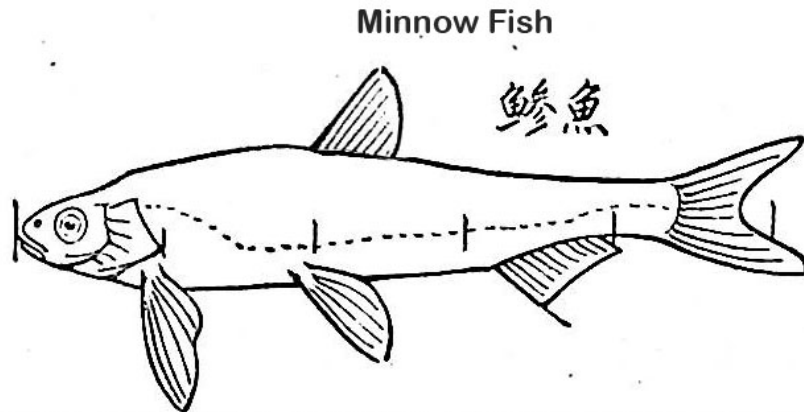
In our time together, we will use our ink to capture both the quiet escape of Xu Gu and the joyful freedom of Zhuangzi.



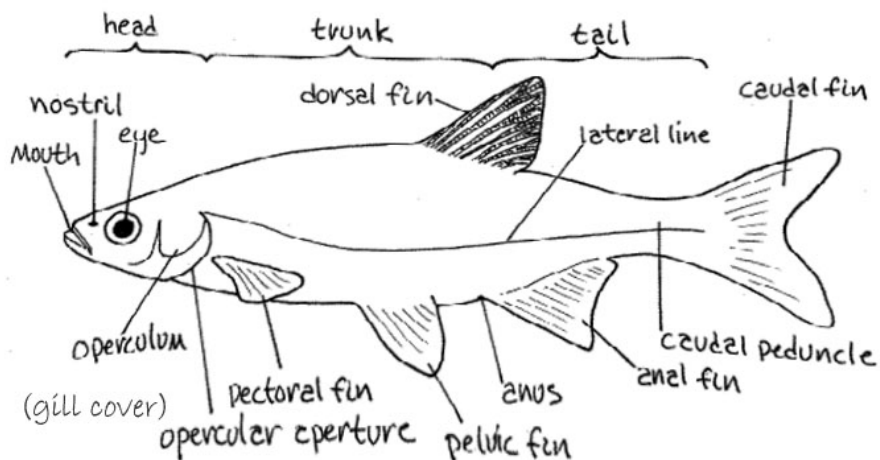
Left: a Xu Gu's "escaping fish" painting; Right: a Zhuangzi-style "happy party" fish

### The Invisible Foundation: The Math of the Minnow

Before we can capture the spirit of the fish, we must understand its simple, elegant structure.



The starting point of the dorsal fin is less than one head length from the gill opening. The pelvic fin and dorsal fin align almost perfectly on the same vertical axis. The total length of the fish is four and a half head lengths, and the maximum body height is exactly one head length.



### A generalized minnow: Body Regions and Parts

[Minnow Anatomy: The anatomical diagram showing the 4.5 head-length proportion and vertical fin alignment]

The minnow has a precise internal geometry:

- The entire length of the body is exactly four and a half times the length of its head.
- Its maximum body height equals exactly one head length.
- The top dorsal fin and the lower pelvic fins align almost perfectly on the same vertical axis.

This geometry is our anchor. However, as the master painter Pan Jinggui reminds us, once you know the math, you must let it go. If we outline every scale and fin too carefully, the fish

loses its breath and looks like dead food sitting in a kitchen basket. Instead, we will use water, ink, and timing to capture the wet, living spirit of the fish.

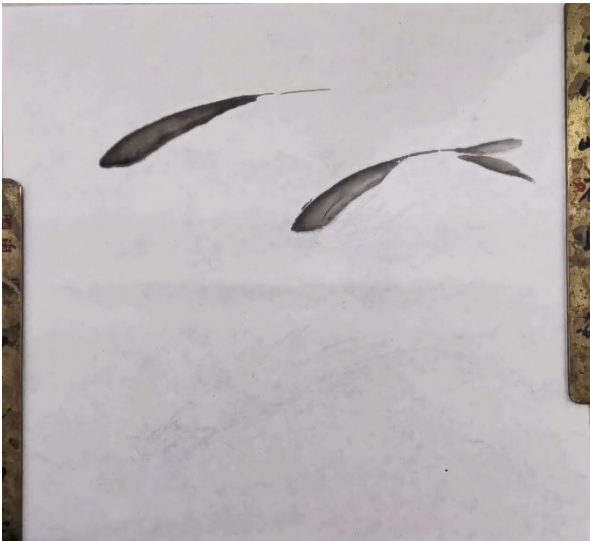
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### The 3-Step Minnow: Timing, Tools, and Touch


During our live session, I will guide you through these exact steps on camera. You do not need to practice this before we meet; simply read through to familiarize yourself with the rhythm of our painting.

**Step 1: The Headless Body Wash** We begin by establishing the volume and movement of the fish, leaving the face for later.

- **The Brush:** We will use a large, soft brush, utilizing the side or the "belly" of the bristles.
- **The Moisture:** Load your brush with a wet, light-to-medium grey wash.
- **The Action:** Do not start at the nose! Leave about 1 inch of blank, dry paper at the front. Starting just behind where the gills will be, pull a smooth, confident sweeping stroke for the back, tapering off into the thin tail. The body should be about 3.5 inches long and 1 inch high.



[Image: A single, grey wash stroke showing the body and tail, with the head area intentionally left blank]

 **The Golden Rule of Timing: Nectarine to Peach** *Stop right here.* Do not try to add a second layer to modify that first stroke. If you look closely at your paper, the wet ink is shining like the smooth skin of a nectarine. You must wait. Watch the paper until the shine fades and the surface looks dull and damp—like the fuzzy skin of a peach.

**Step 2: The Head and Face** Now that our body is perfectly "peach-damp," we will give the fish its awareness.

- **The Brush:** Switch to a smaller, pointed, stiff brush. We will use the fine tip.
- **The Moisture:** Load your brush with dark, rich ink.
- **The Action:** Now we fill in that 1-inch blank space at the front. Paint the dark top of the head. Because the grey body is damp, let just the back edge of your dark head touch the body so the two inks bleed softly together (wet-into-wet). Keep the very front of the face on dry paper (wet-on-dry) so your sharp details—the mouth, the eye, and the gill line—stay crisp and do not blur.

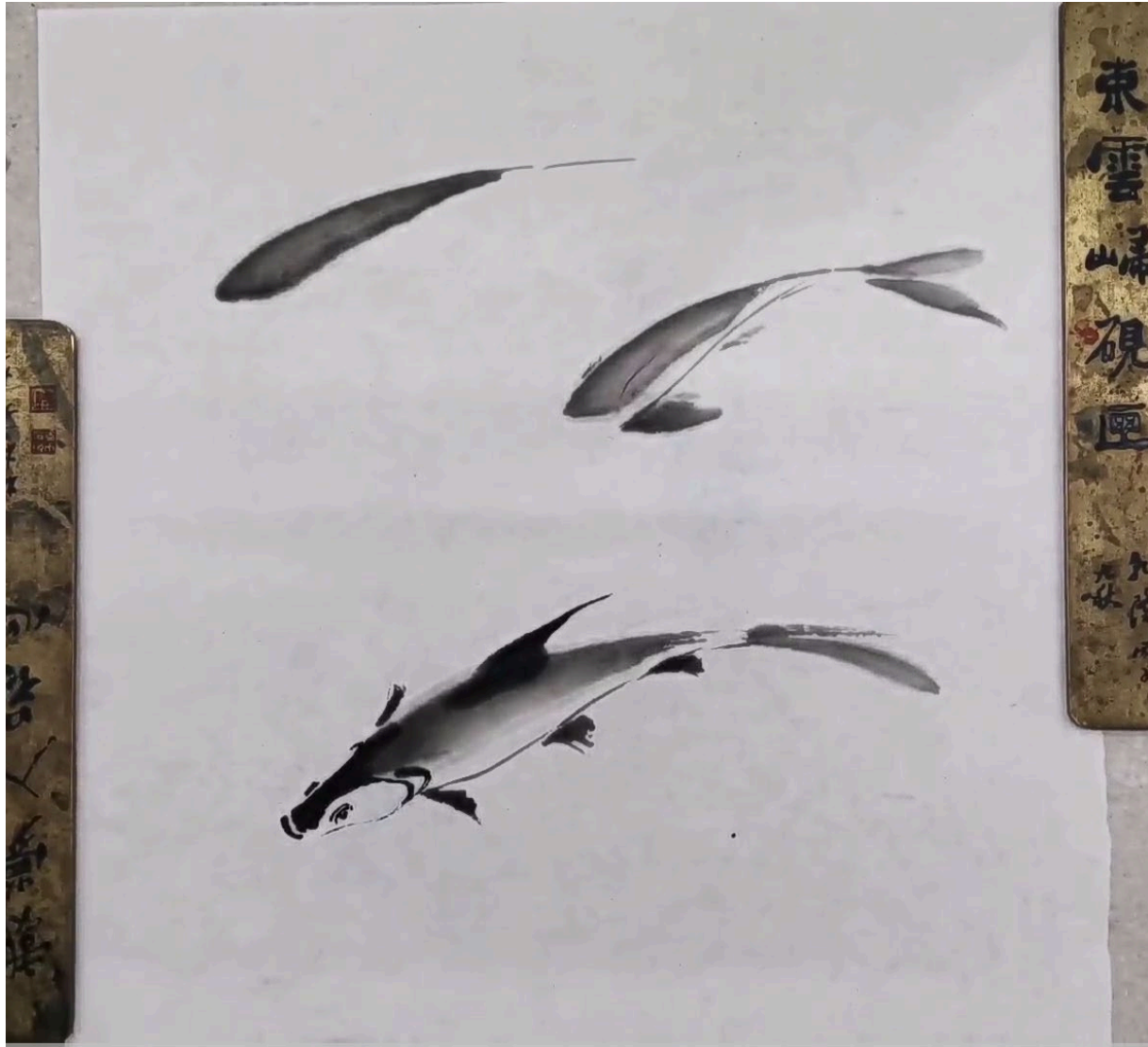


[Image: Close-up of the dark head being added, showing the crisp eye on dry paper and the soft blend where the head meets the grey body]

**Step 3: The Sweeping Fins** Finally, we give our fish the ability to navigate the currents.

- **The Brush:** Keep your small, pointed, stiff brush. We will use the side of it for sweeping strokes.
- **The Moisture:** Use medium-grey to light ink, but make sure the brush is **rather dry** (thirsty).

- **The Action:** Because your brush is drier, you do not have to rush. You can breathe, move slowly, and maintain perfect control. Pull gentle, sweeping side-brush strokes to create the dorsal fin on top and the pelvic fins below. The drier brush prevents the ink from flooding the wet paper, keeping the fins delicate and full of life.



[Image: The final minnow, complete with sweeping side-strokes for the fins]

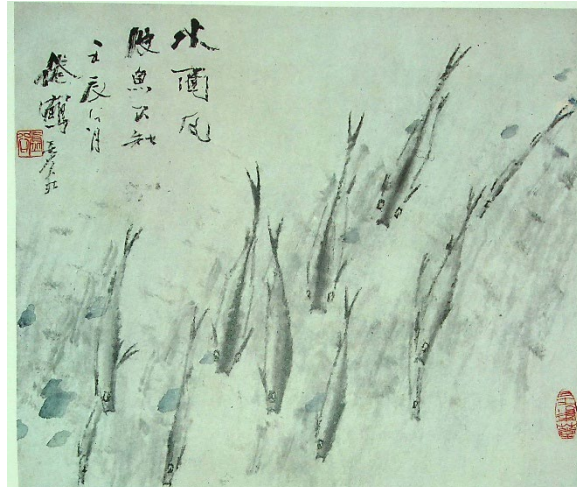
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### Setting the Stage: The Flowing Aquatic Plants

A fish cannot truly swim on blank, dry paper. To give our escaping minnows a place to hide, and our happy minnows a place to play, we will also create a gentle environment using flowing aquatic plants.

## 2026 Painting Fish in Ink and Watercolor with Henry Li

These plants are not the main actors in our painting; they are the stage setting. We will not paint them with stiff, detailed outlines. Instead, using varying tones of wet, rich ink, we will paint soft, rhythmic strokes that mimic the sway of the underwater current. Even without painting a single drop of blue water, the presence of these softly flowing plants will bring the invisible stream to life, giving our minnows a complete, peaceful world to inhabit.



**Left and Above:** 水面风波鱼不知 *Beneath troubled waters, the fish are undisturbed.*

*Two paintings of minnows by Xu Gu*

**Below:** Colorful minnow by Wang, Yachen



For now, simply set up your painting space. Gather your soft and stiff brushes and your semi-sized Xuan or mulberry paper and enjoy the anticipation of creating your own peaceful underwater sanctuary. I look forward to sharing this practice with you in class.