

Analysis on the Maidens Painting in The Tang Dynasty: Taking *Mrs. Guoguo's Outing in Spring* as An Example

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Abstract. Maidens painting is an art genre that became prevalent during the Han-Wei dynasties. However, it was not until later in Tang that the genre prospered. This paper examines the much-recognized artwork, *Mrs. Guoguo's Outing in Spring*, painted by Zhang Xuan, and lists out analysis from multiple perspectives, including the usage of colors, the visual balance of the artwork, and the choices of attires of the figures. To list a few characteristics of the painting, viewers can see that the arrangement of figures in the artwork is not balanced when viewed from both sides. However, the painting still displays excellent symmetry. The accumulation of colors, known as “ji se ti” and women’s choice of wearing men’s clothing are other features of the artwork. In this paper, multiple theoretical sources have been adopted to assist parts of the analysis. To sum up, the painting was inherited from its pre-descendants and influenced other artists in the same era as Zhang Xuan and the later generations. Most importantly, the art genre was not limited only to the border of China but has also passed on its traditions towards arts overseas.

Keywords: Maidens Painting, visual balance, color usage, art composition.

1. Introduction

The Maidens Painting, also known as “Shi Nü Tu,” refers to the art portraiture of the lives of upper-middle-class women in Chinese feudal society. The Maidens Painting first appeared in the Wei-Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties, and later flourished in the Tang and Song dynasties. The central focus of this paper is to analyze the Maidens Painting during the Tang era, when the art form reached its epitome. The artwork examined in this paper is *Mrs. Guoguo's Outing in Spring*, painted by Zhang Xuan. The painting is considered a classic among all Maidens paintings. This paper is structured into three main areas. First, the general outlook of the artwork is briefly explored by introducing the elements and figures that constitute the painting. Second, three important components of the painting are explored in depth: the colors, visual balance, and the attire of the figures in the painting. Third, the painting and the artist’s future influence are discussed before presenting the conclusion. Overall, this paper has two purposes: (1) to provide an up-to-date analysis of the artwork that would serve future scholars in examining the painting and (2) to connect ancient Chinese artworks to contemporary art theory by systematically examining Zhang’s artwork in terms of the color usage and compositions. The following section offers further discussion on the development of the Maidens Painting since its earliest invention.

2. The Maidens Painting

The Maidens Painting focuses on portraying the subject accurately both in form and spirit [1]. Figures were often painted with graceful body postures and versatile decorations of the character features [2]. During the Han-Wei period when the genre was created, artists portrayed maidens in elegantly slender and simple art strokes [1]. Later in the Tang era, the painting technique evolved into a rich yet simplified portrayal of bodies with soft colors [1]. In the eras before the Tang period, images of virtuous, peaceful, and intelligent ladies, as well as their personalities, were portrayed in the paintings, summing up the details of the family life of the literati. However, the main purpose of paintings during the Han-Wei period was to advocate women’s righteous behavior while flaunting feudal female virtues. The trend drastically changed in the Tang era when Zhang Xuan’s artworks

gradually weakened this aesthetic view of “female virtues” by paying more attention to the beauty of life shown by women in reality [1]. With a grander scope of figure paintings, Tang artworks broke through the narrow scope describing sages, heroes, righteous men, and virgins in the Han-Wei dynasties and turned to aspects of secular life [2]. The Han–Tang transition could be interpreted as a shift in purpose, from depicting Confucian and feudal morality to portraying the beauty of everyday lives focusing on women. This shift had to do with the developments in politics, economy, culture, and foreign diplomacy with other nations. Not only did the Tang become prosperous, but women’s status was elevated as well. Consequently, artists were no longer predisposed to depict women as “objects” of men’s desire; rather, they were portrayed as free, living and breathing beings with much autonomy. In Maidens Painting during the Tang era, women’s bodies look full and round because the noble class did not worry about basic survival needs or being impelled to follow stringent rules established by society. The “rich and thick” appearance of aristocratic women became the beauty standard of society during the mid-Tang era. Hence, in the Tang dynasty, “fat for beauty” was not a blind pursuit, but a kind of progressive and healthy aesthetic thought of the human body [2]. The provided introduction of Maidens Painting leads to a closer examination of the representative work *Mrs. Guoguo’s Outing in Spring*, which is discussed next.

3. Mrs.Guoguo’s Outing in Spring

During the Tang period, Zhang Xuan, a well-renowned artist, depicted the living state of the Tang population in 752 A.D. Using paint strokes, Zhang restored and composed the scene portraying Mrs. Guoguo, the third sister of Yang Yuhuan, Emperor Xuanzong’s favorite concubine, going on an expedition with Yang and an entourage [3]. Mrs. Guoguo came from a prosperous noble family. Therefore, in the artist’s creation, one can clearly see her living environment and living conditions, all of which are depicted meticulously and vividly. In the painting, Mrs. Guoguo, clad in a green coat, red skirt, and white scarf, is sitting on a green saddle covered with delicate embroidery patterns of gold and silver strands, showing her unique style and life. The scene illustrated in the artwork is very opulent and noble as Mrs. Guoguo has a visually appealing appearance. Furthermore, the characters in *Mrs. Guoguo’s Outing in Spring* have different visual outlooks. Some are stiff and serious, whereas others are relaxed; some are looking left, while others are looking right. The characters look relatively fat and bloated, with round faces and rosy skin, the plump skin looming under the clothes. The composition, coloring, lines, and a series of details together express the characters’ grace, opulence, and laziness. The distinctive external attributes of the characters in the picture are combined with the character and demeanor. The characteristics of Zhang’s artwork truly reflect the aesthetic ideal of figure painting in the heyday of the Tang dynasty.

3.1. The Color Usage

Numerous details go into the artwork, and they can be analyzed separately. The first analysis concerns the color usage in the painting. To begin with, the tone of the artwork is bright and colorful [4]. The application of color is relatively subjective and often tests the creativity and ability of the artist. The colors in the Maidens Painting of Mrs. Guoguo are what attract the viewers in the first place as they establish a sense of harmony within the artwork. If the viewers take a closer inspection, they can identify three methods of color application. The first method is using contrasting colors, such as pink, black, and green, to highlight the features of the figures. The second method entails applying similar colors on individual figures to create a sense of atmosphere. Besides the second method, pink colors are applied to the dresses of different ladies while green and white also become components of the visual language of the artwork. The third method of color application is using colors to depict the unique textures of dresses, which involves applying dense colors to illustrate the lines in order to differentiate the individual layers of the dresses. At the same time, different colors than the main color pink are used to illustrate the belts. Besides that, the predominant colors of the painting are mainly monochrome and intermediate color. Monochrome refers to an unharmonized

single pure color, while an intermediate color is two or more colors harmonized or superimposed and having a relatively low saturation. In addition, plant colors and mine scouting are used. Moreover, rouge is used as a base color for pink dresses. Although the dresses may appear monotonous, the application of the rough color serves to retain the mineral pigment particles while providing a solid foundation for the subsequent application of color. The technique of adding colors on top of each other is known as the *accumulation of color body*, or “ji se ti.” With regard to the keynote colors, Zhang Xuan prefers to use red to achieve the joyful and relaxed atmosphere of the spring outing while letting the color express the distinction between the masters and servants. The colors in the whole painting are elegant and fresh, and the overall visual appearance is evocative. The warm colors red and yellow are used to compose the main tone of the picture, and the cool stone green is used to enrich the picture. Lastly, the combination of red and green reduces the gaudiness of red while appearing calm and elegant [4]. The painting *Mrs. Guoguo's Outing in Spring* is considered representative of the figure painting of the Tang dynasty, which makes the overall style heavy, thick, dense, and complex.

3.2. Visual Balance

The second analysis of Zhang's work concerns visual balance. Balance is an indispensable aspect of painting and a visual element that creates stability in the artwork. Balance does not mean symmetry as artists sometimes like to use asymmetry or inequality to create a sense of overall stability. *Mrs. Guoguo's Outing in Spring* adopts an asymmetrical composition but expresses a feeling of symmetry. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the second masterful attempt at composition, namely the construction of a triangle among the figures. When viewed from right to left, as was the viewing habit of the ancient Tang connoisseurs, one can observe the figure in blue clothes riding a horse, followed by the figure in red on horseback and the attendant on a black horse; then comes two groups of figures and horses' side by side, and finally the viewer's eyes arrive at three groups of figures and horses that are side by side in a sequence. The visual arrangement of the figures is in a triangle, enhancing visual coherence and stability [5]. The number of figures on the right side of the painting is less than that on the left side, but this does not affect the overall visual balance of the picture. According to researcher Li Lin, objects on the right side of artwork always look heavier than the left part [5]. Li's theory corresponds to the artwork as the painting looks stabilized despite the disproportioned arrangement of figures when comparing the left side to the right side. Conversely, if the viewers purposefully swap the positions of characters on the left and right sides of *Mrs. Guoguo's Outing in Spring*, they can clearly perceive that the painting presents a situation where the right side is heavier than the left [5]. This phenomenon thus proves Li's argument. What seems like a natural arrangement is, in fact, created under careful and elaborate design [5]. It is precisely because the painter has to consider the viewers' viewing angle in every aspect of the arrangement of the whole and the details that the meaning of the picture can be conveyed clearly.

3.3. Attire of the Figures

The third analysis of the artwork is related to the attire of the figures. The four women in the painting are all wearing silk shawls and skirts, while the rest are wearing men's round-neck gowns. Among them, there are five female images with a complete set of men's clothing, reflecting the unique aesthetics and sartorial culture of the Tang dynasty. A black gauze cap, a round-neck gown with a belt, and black boots constituted the typical attire of men in the Tang dynasty [6]. During the Tang era, only elite women could wear men's clothes and ride the emperor's three-maned horse. Mrs. Guoguo fits this requirement due to her kinship with Yang Yuhuan. Despite that, she had a positive relationship with Emperor Xuanzong. Concerning the custom of women wearing men's clothing, it is worth mentioning that new female aesthetics emerged in the Tang dynasty. Women no longer catered to feudal morality as the aesthetic standard and began challenging societal norms by wearing men's clothing. The women pursued gender equality and began a fashion trend of wearing men's clothing, from Wu Zetian and Princess Taiping in the upper class [7]. The first female emperor in

history, Wu Zetian, and other female aristocrats including Princess Taiping, Empress Wei, and Princess Anle took great interest in administration and politics and participated in state affairs and diplomacy [8]. Although these powerful women were much blamed for their voluminous consumption habits, the social status of women in the Tang dynasty improved significantly [9]. Women's use of men's clothes also conveys the fact that the Tang dynasty attached great importance to gender equality and respected women's status [7]. Women's clothing in the Tang dynasty developed by inheriting from the Han clothing culture tradition while fully absorbing the positive elements of the clothing culture of the western regions. Women's clothing in the Tang dynasty was a fusion of the northern nomadic and Han cultures. The northern nomadic ethnicities' notion of beauty changed the aesthetic thought of women in the Tang dynasty, replacing feminine softness with masculine vitality. Thus, women in the Tang dynasty, influenced by the feminist thought of minority nationalities, could play outside, wear nomadic uniforms, ride horses, and practice archery and other activities; this initiated the trend of women wearing men's attires [7]. All of the abovementioned descriptions are realized and become representative of Zhang's artwork.

4. Influences

Viewers may ponder the influences of Zhang Xuan's paintings – Zhang unlocked a new artistic tradition in East Asian art history. First, Zhang Xuan influenced Zhou Fang, another influential painter who portrayed maidens in his works during the late Tang period. Zhang's style shares similarities with Zhou's renowned artwork *Court Ladies Adorned by Floral Ornament*. Zhou's painting, just like Zhang's, illustrates the life of the royal ladies, except that Zhou improved upon Zhang's techniques with regard to the characters' expressions. In the painting, the ladies of the deep palace appear to be privileged and plump, yet depressed, living a listless life [10]. It is worth mentioning that the ladies' apparent state of depression had to do with the political change in the late Tang period when A Lushan rebelled against the empire. Zhang Xuan's paintings also had an impact on the Maiden paintings in the late Tang Dynasty and the Song and Ming dynasties. Particularly, he inspired Tang Bohu of the Ming Dynasty, who showed that he had inherited the style and techniques of Zhang through the usage of clear and precise lines, plump figures, quiet and elegant temperament, and simplified background in his painting *Maid with Peony* [10]. In terms of international influences, the Maidens Paintings incorporated many elements from minority and foreign ethnicities and passed on their influence to Goryeo and Japan. However, the portrayal of women as thick and round was classified as a preference of the Tang era only and slowly became lost with time [1]. Nevertheless, the elements of Zhang's Maidens paintings were not lost in Japanese art. Many Ukiyo-e paintings composed during the Edo period share several similarities with Zhang's artwork. Ukiyo-e and Maidens Painting both use the method of composition of figures in groups to depict large scenes. Such composition is observed in *Playing in Summer* by Utagawa Kunisada (Toyokuni III). Besides that, the backgrounds of the Tang dynasty Maidens paintings are all monochromatic, and almost no undertones exist in the background except for the detailed depiction of the figures themselves, so as to highlight the figures in the paintings. Ukiyo-e beauty paintings also have monochromatic backgrounds [11]. More importantly, during the Edo period, Ukiyo-e enhanced Zhang's style by incorporating natural scenes in the background to highlight the figures. Borrowed from the Maidens Painting are also the themes that Ukiyo-e beauty paintings try to depict. While the Maidens paintings depict the everyday lives of the noble class, Ukiyo-e also illustrates the daily lives of Geisha [12]. Ukiyo-e artworks focus on livelihood. However, there marks a significant difference in the class of the figures portrayed. The Maidens artworks portray upper-class women, while the Ukiyo-e beauty paintings depict the lower class. use.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper has successfully summarized and analyzed the essential aspects of the Maidens Painting during the Tang dynasty as well as the painting *Mrs. Guoguo's Outing in Spring* by Zhang Xuan. More importantly, the author has touched upon the roots, origins, transitions and influences of the Maidens painting and incorporated key arguments in the three analytical sections, addressing color usage, visual balance, and the clothing of the figures. The author hopes that this paper can serve as a beneficial reference for future art historians for research in the realm of Chinese Art. More importantly, the author hopes that the three sections in the paper ignite the interest of art historians and theoreticians to analyze Zhang's artwork from the lens of contemporary art theory. Lastly, it is necessary to state that the Maidens painting is a valuable and essential part of ancient Chinese paintings and figure paintings. The paintings portray the form, clothing and head accessories of women of various dynasties. In some Maidens paintings, one can not only observe various decorative utensils for daily life during the period the work was created but also the decorative elements of the artworks including bronze mirrors, porcelains, traditional furniture, lacquer ware, and decorative accessories of jade ware. It is sufficient to say that the Maidens Painting has a subtle influence on the cultivation of the viewer's own ability for aesthetic appreciation. The Maidens paintings also fully demonstrate the impressive artistic achievements of ancient painting masters. Paintings of Chinese maidens in the Song and Yuan dynasties are very rare; this has a lot to do with the prevalence of Chinese flower-and-bird paintings in the particular period. The Tang dynasty was the most glorious period of feudal society, and it was also the most prosperous period for Maiden's paintings. The painters took the initiative to enter noble women's life, paid close attention to the rich and colorful Chinese realist society, and were especially keen on expressing the idle, monotonous, and leisurely lifestyle of ancient noble women. The spirit of the painters is worth studying as a contemporary art practitioner. Particularly, their dedicated effort to create a new genre in Chinese art is worth researching by innovative artists.

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