Aesthetic Features of Chinese Freehand Painting from the Perspective of Art History

Linlin Xu 1, 2
1 Jiaying University, Meizhou, Guangdong 514015, China
2 Philippine Christian University, Manila 0063, Philippine

Abstract: Chinese freehand painting still has distinctive aesthetic characteristics even today when culture and art coexist and cognition. Understanding the aesthetic expression of Chinese freehand painting from the perspective of art history is conducive to a deeper understanding of freehand painting, thus providing guidance for contemporary art creation and innovation.

Keywords: Chinese Freehand Brushwork; Art History; Aesthetic Features.

1. Introduction

Today's world is in an era of great cultural development and integration. People in different countries and regions can understand and appreciate the culture and art of other regions with the help of advanced Internet technology. They can study and interpret their respective cultures and arts, thus gaining more perspectives and viewpoints. For every native Chinese who has been surrounded by traditional Chinese culture since childhood, traditional Chinese culture and art is still the most familiar and empathetic, and the influence of traditional Chinese aesthetics can be found in every aspect of life. Compared with people who have grown up in other cultures, it is easier for us to understand and feel the values and aesthetics conveyed by this aesthetic representation. For most Chinese people, even a person who has not had much contact with and studied Chinese painting knowledge can see the difference between Chinese painting and other types of painting at a glance. So how did Chinese freehand painting come to form the established impression of aesthetics today? To answer this question accurately, it is necessary to understand freehand painting in the context of art history.

2. The Connotation and Development of Chinese Rendering Painting

2.1. The Connotation of Chinese Rhythmic Painting

When we talk about Chinese freehand painting, we can immediately think of the wildness of Liang Kai's Splashed Ink Immortal Picture in the Southern Song Dynasty, the hazy poetry of Mi's landscape in the Northern Song Dynasty, the freehand flower and bird paintings of Xu Wei in the Ming Dynasty, and Zhu Da (ba da shan ren) in the Qing Dynasty, who painted the fish and birds with white eyes looking up to the sky in drooping pens, making natural creatures have anthropomorphic emotions, and so on. We have a general and intuitive impression, that is, the objects in these paintings are not so similar to the landscapes, figures, flowers, birds, fish and insects that exist in the objective real world, but we can still recognise the painters at a glance. What is the object depicted, and feel the vivid and lively spirit and charm from it, feel the visual beauty of the change of ink colour and line of the picture with little colouring, and understand whether the painter is unrestrained or elegant when painting Delicate state of mind, and fascinated by it.

Unlike those art schools with clear concepts and styles in Western art history, we cannot use a precise definition to strictly distinguish and define the concept and category of freehand painting. Freehand painting is not a specific product of a certain era, but has been continuously developed and evolved in the long history of Chinese painting, and finally formed a conventional painting concept. Therefore, the question of what is Chinese freehand painting has been answered, that is, freehand painting exists as a technique and style of Chinese painting, which not only contains the meaning of painting skills that have high requirements for ink expression and object image processing, but also can be used as a style definition to pursue vivid charm and express the artist's artistic concept of personal artistic emotion. We can have a deeper understanding of this issue from the history of the development of freehand painting. From the perspective of art history, it can help us better understand the artistic aesthetics and requirements of Chinese freehand painting.

Figure 1. The freehand painting of flowers and birds by Zhu Da (named Bada Shanren)
2.2. The Historical Development of Chinese Rendering

In fact, the term “Xieyi” did not exist from the very beginning. Like Liang Kai mentioned above, the art critics at that time generally referred to his paintings as rough brush or stick-stroke paintings. In the early development stage of Chinese painting, people attached great importance to the relationship between form and spirit, and tried to explore the expression of form and spirit in painting. For example, Gu Kaizhi in the Eastern Jin Dynasty put forward the painting theory of “using form to describe the spirit”. The theory of "Six Laws", and this standard also reflects his aesthetic concept of painting, which has been accepted and recognized by more people, so that it has also become a theoretical summary guiding painting creation. The first lecture of the Six Laws What he achieves is "vivid charm", and the pursuit of charm has become the creative ideal of many painters in later generations. In the Tang Dynasty, there were paintings in Wang Wei's poems, and there were poems in the paintings. The requirements for the artistic conception of paintings were raised to a new level, and he created the broken ink landscape of "light ink and clear brushwork". The flower and bird paintings painted by Xu Xi of the Five Dynasties also pursued a natural atmosphere. He first wrote flowers and leaves with ink, and then applied light colors on them, creating the falling ink method. The literati landscape paintings in the Song and Yuan Dynasties also pursued a vivid charm of "living and traveling". When creating literati paintings, they did not seek detailed similarities in shape. It expresses the aesthetic demands of literati paintings. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, freehand brushwork truly became the mainstream of the painting world. At this time, the creation of paintings emphasized the integration of poetry, calligraphy, painting and seal, and pursued an expression of artistic conception. For example, Lin Liang developed the "court style" freehand brushwork in the Ming Dynasty, Shen Zhou's thick ink and light colors, and Xu Wei's wild rhyme of survival. Dong Qichang commented: "The only way to paint landscapes is freehand brushwork, why? It changed people's painting aesthetics and concepts at that time. The works of Bada Shanren, Shi Tao, Wu Changshuo in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Qi Baishi, Zhang Daqian, Pan Tianshou, Li Keran and other painters in modern times made the charm of freehand painting more deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, and made freehand painting flourish and Types of Chinese painting.

2.3. Classification of Chinese Rendering

Chinese freehand paintings can be divided into freehand characters, freehand flowers and birds, and freehand landscapes in terms of subject matter, which have both common characteristics and individuality. We use some representative works to interpret the artistic expression of freehand painting with different themes, and to interpret the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese freehand painting.

In terms of figure painting, Liang Kai's "Picture of Immortals Splashed Ink" in the Song Dynasty is known as a representative work of freehand figure painting. From this painting, we can see the roughness of the characters, the bold use of ink, and the artist's very simple but powerful brushwork, showing a very vivid charm. In terms of character image creation, the picture does not depict the details of the characters in detail, and deliberately compresses the normal distance of the characters' facial features, which reminds us of the nobility and refinement of immortals. At the same time, we will be attracted by the dripping ink and ink in the picture, and feel the elegant spirit of the characters. Comparing Ren Bonian's "Portrait of the Sour and Cold Captain" in the Qing Dynasty, we can see that freehand brushwork also has a strong expressive force in the expression of portraits that relatively require objective and realistic representation. "Portrait of the Sour and Cold Captain" is one of the many portraits that Ren Bonian made for his close friend Wu Changshuo. We can see that the person in the painting is wearing a red tasseled cap, high boots and a khaki robe, covered with a black mandarin jacket, with horseshoe sleeves clasped in front of his chest, staring ahead with a calm demeanor. Although there is not much ink in the whole painting, and the color is lightened, he cleverly uses the boneless method to shape the characters. The characters' physical and spiritual characteristics are vivid, and the lines and ink color changes are intriguing. On the basis of pursuing similarity, he pays more attention to the display of spiritual outlook. Of course, there are many well-known freehand figure paintings that can help us understand the aesthetic characteristics of freehand figure paintings. Some modern and contemporary painters have also created a lot of freehand figure paintings that reflect contemporary life and the spirit of the times, such as Yuan Wu, Zhou Jingxin, etc. Their paintings are very powerful in terms of visual image expression, and the display of this visual impact and expressive force cannot be separated from the display of elements such as brush and ink, meaning and so on required by freehand brushwork.
Freehand flower-and-bird painting in addition to Zhu Da’s flower-and-bird works mentioned above, there are many other freehand flower-and-bird paintings that allow us to feel and understand the painter's aesthetic concept and artistic concept. Xu Wei’s masterpiece "Ink Grape Picture" shows the height of freehand flower-and-bird painting in the Ming Dynasty, and also clearly shows Xu Wei's artistic style and personality. When Xu Wei painted this painting, he had been wandering half his life and had tasted the ups and downs of the world. He knew that his talent would not be met and it would be difficult to achieve revenge in life. Therefore, we can feel his depression and resentment from the seemingly ordinary painting "The Picture of Ink Grapes", on a hanging grape vine, the change of the thickness of the dots of ink and wash and the thickness and twists and turns of the lines show a state of wanton creation. Qi Baishi’s freehand sketches such as flowers, birds, fish and insects are well known to more people. His paintings are not as elegant as those of painters with deeper literary qualities such as Zhu Da and Xu Wei, but he draws materials from nature and life. In addition to the rich and colorful colors of folk art, it also forms a sharp contrast with the rich and changing ink colors, and integrates folk aesthetics and literati aesthetics, making the paintings both elegant and popular, full of lively and natural atmosphere, which is why Qi Baishi's paintings are full of vitality and vision. The soul of expressiveness.

Figure 4. "Traveling in Mountains and Streams", now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, on silk, 206.3 cm x 103.3 cm

Landscape painting is a very early focus on the concept of brush and ink and rhyme performance, Chinese painters in ancient times painted landscapes, especially the Song and Yuan landscape painters to pursue a kind of travel, and then based on their own feelings and perceptions of the landscape nature, in the mind after the reprocessing of the natural mountains and rivers after a kind of display. For example, in the Northern Song Dynasty, Fan Kuan’s "Traveling in the Mountains", the visual composition of this panoramic landscape painting, although it does not conform to the visual laws of the objective world that we see with our human eyes, but it has a logical existence on the picture expression, which can present a very bold, very broad and far-reaching landscape scenery, and it is a kind of presentation of the landscape scene in people's mind. Therefore, the composition of Chinese paintings has three ways of expressing spatial depth: high, flat and deep, which is very different from the rational perspective of Western paintings. The perspective of Chinese pictorial paintings is full of sensibility, but this method is more capable of conveying people's expression of the vastness and majesty of the great mountains and rivers. Of course, some landscape paintings by the literati of the Yuan Dynasty, though filled with a feeling of solitude, still use a large amount of white space to express a very expansive mood. For example, Ni Zan's Six Gentlemen, which depicts six trees growing on a small hill on the shore of Taihu Lake, gives us a sense of the artist's use of very lightened brushwork to express an atmosphere of purity and seclusion. The three-part composition of the whole painting has a very large blank space, which seems to be blank on the screen, but in fact when we see the whole painting, we will feel a kind of ethereal mood, that is, the emptiness but not empty, which is what is said in Chinese philosophy, and this kind of white space gives people more space to imagine, instead of being blank or incomplete, and creates a stronger visual contrast on the screen.

3. Conclusion

Through the interpretation of freehand paintings of different themes, we can find that the aesthetic commonality of freehand paintings lies in the expression of brush and ink, the expression of artistic conception, and the display of the painter's personality and emotion, and this has become the pursuit of modern oil painting artists. An important reference for the road of "sinicization of oil painting". We can see that the creation of contemporary Chinese oil paintings also presents an appearance that combines many traditional Chinese painting techniques or traditional Chinese aesthetics. For example, it can be said that a certain aesthetic freehand oil painting or imagery oil painting has been formed. Although oil painting materials are used, many traditional Chinese aesthetic spirits or aesthetic characteristics have been integrated into the performance of the picture, the spirit or charm of the picture. Of course, there are also some paintings like German expressionism, which pursue strong emotions or emotional expressions, like Chinese freehand brushwork, which do not seek similarity, but are in the atmosphere and foundation of Chinese culture, and express the life and spiritual characteristics of Chinese people. Therefore, it is easier to be empathized by the viewer. Therefore, no matter what the painting materials or techniques are, in terms of aesthetic presentation, Chinese and Western art have the common aesthetic characteristics pursued by art creators. We must be rooted in culture and express our hearts, so that such artistic creation can have the charm of moving people.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the professors at Philippine Christian University for their guidance and all my colleagues and classmates for their help and support. This thesis is also one of a phased achievement of the project "Research on the Aesthetic Characteristics of Meizhou Hakka Folk Plastic Arts and Regional Art Creation Practice". (2023SKM06).

References