

The Influence of Song Dynasty Literati on Chinese Painting

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Abstract: During the Song Dynasty, the literati not only played a significant role politically but also wielded dual functions of inheritance and innovation in the cultural and artistic domains. This paper examines how, through their unique epochal context, cultural vision, and aesthetic preferences, the literati managed to effect a profound transformation in the value orientation of Chinese painting. It analyzes the new trends in the development of Chinese painting art during the Northern Song period through the change of patrons, the evolution of theme selection, and innovations in artistic expression. The pursuit of the "non-utilitarian" in painting by Song Dynasty literati not only enriched the connotations of Chinese painting, marking a transformation in spiritual pursuits but also laid a solid theoretical and practical foundation for the literati painting of later generations.

Keywords: Song Dynasty Literati; Literati Painting; Scholar-Painter Art.

1. Introduction

During the Song Dynasty, there was a continual emergence of literati who were also active on the political stage. They embraced the consciousness of "taking the world as their own responsibility" as a common awakening. Not only did they participate in national politics, but they also inherited and created Chinese culture and art with their unique perspectives and profound cultural literacy, covering a wide range of knowledge fields such as art, culture, and history. During this period, the literati group developed rapidly, and its uniqueness was highlighted, thanks to the early Song rulers' preferential treatment of scholars and the political attitude of valuing civil over military affairs, creating a superior social environment for the literati. Against this backdrop, the consciousness of the literati began to shift from "pacifying the world" to pursuing personal value and "self-cultivation." In terms of painting art, the transformation in the value orientation of the Song Dynasty literati influenced the aesthetic appreciation of later generations and propelled the direction of painting art, significantly affecting painting styles, themes, and expressive techniques. Gradually, literati became the mainstream in painting after the Song Dynasty. Su Shi, as a representative figure of the Song Dynasty literati, proposed the concept of "literati painting" that fits the temperament of the literati class. By the Ming Dynasty, Dong Qichang further proposed the concept of "scholar-painter art." Literati painting evolved from an initial cultural phenomenon into a deeply influential traditional cultural school. This paper will explore in detail how the Song Dynasty literati, through their unique cultural perspective and aesthetic orientation, impacted the development trajectory of Chinese painting art from the following three aspects.

2. The Change in Patronage: From Utilitarian to Non-Utilitarian Section Headings

In the era preceding the Song Dynasty, painting creation was predominantly aimed at fulfilling the needs of political governance or moral education, serving to disseminate ideological and educative messages among the populace. The

"practicality" of painting creation was its ultimate goal, with the sponsors being the ruling class and upper echelons of society, reflecting their aesthetic demands and value orientations rather than those of the painters themselves, which often came with specific demands for technique. As a result, professional painters found themselves in a diminished role during the creative process, primarily tasked with providing their technical skills and techniques. This "practical" and highly utilitarian stance on painting continued up to the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties. However, with the advent of the Song Dynasty, due to their unique social status, literati developed literati painting, which was characterized by "amateurishness" and "non-utilitarianism" as its core traits, forming the essence of literati painting. This allowed for a more genuine reflection of personal emotions or the aesthetic preferences of their class.

Painters of the Northern Song were relatively free literati artists, who viewed painting as a personal hobby to express inner feelings, rather than a means to make a living. It can be said that the uniqueness of literati painting in technique and understanding stemmed almost entirely from the amateurishness and non-utilitarian nature of the literati. Moreover, most Song Dynasty literati painters were from the upper classes of society, hence relatively well-off, creating more for self-entertainment and friendly interactions with peers. They were their own patrons and did not need to rely on others. Since the literati were mostly amateurs in painting, it was unrealistic to expect them to achieve the technical proficiency of professional painters. Ni Zan, for instance, believed that painting should not strive for likeness but merely serve as a leisurely pastime. Therefore, the first characteristic of Song Dynasty literati art was a casual approach to painting technique, which later led to the pursuit of expressiveness in literati painting. Unlike court painters who served rulers, literati paintings were free from educational and consolidating rule constraints and did not need to win the rulers' favor.

Alfreda [1] show Following the infamous "Wutai Poetry Case," the political environment for the literati became tense, and their speech was greatly restricted, preventing them from expressing emotions through literature. They urgently needed a more subtle way to express their feelings. Under such

circumstances, painting became the most tactful outlet for the literati. The works placed greater emphasis on the artistic conception and personal qualities and cultivation of the artist, conveying dissatisfaction with national policies or personal sorrows and melancholies. This intangible charm reflected in their paintings, the so-called "poetic" or "artistic conception," became the most precious element of their works. They valued the mood conveyed in the painting, as well as the painter's character, cultivation, and judgment of the times. It was during this period that themes reflecting personal integrity and character, such as the "Eight Views of Xiaoxiang" and "Plum, Orchid, Bamboo, and Chrysanthemum," thrived. The charm, which has no specific form, could be based on likeness or achieved through surpassing likeness with a more relaxed and casual expression, with most literati opting for the latter approach. Or to say, the "non-utilitarian" aspect of literati painting stems from its "amateurishness."



Figure 1. Su Shi, Ink Bamboo Painting

Su Shi believed that a qualified literati "should be able to write without seeking office and paint without seeking to sell, using literature to express one's heart, and painting to suit one's intention" ("On Paintings for Zhu Xiangxian"). A true literati should express his heart through literature and painting, not for sale. Song Dynasty literati painters, due to their unique lifestyle and value system, would instinctively despise this art trading method. Li Sheng [2] show They looked down on professional painters and paintings that catered to society and the upper class for profit, branding them as "vulgar." In the literati circle, "vulgar" is a term with a significantly negative judgment, implying not just extremely poor aesthetic taste but also a denial of one's social and personal status. However, by the Ming and Qing Dynasties, most literati painters were lower-class literati, unlike the social status of Song Dynasty literati. Their survival situations were more challenging, and they would also sell their works to maintain a livelihood. This shows that the literati painting influenced by the literati began to gradually move towards secularization in its later development, eventually forming a situation where it could be appreciated by both the refined and the common.

3. The Selection of Themes: The Rise of Landscape

In the long course of painting development, figure painting stood out uniquely before the Song Dynasty, with the Tang Dynasty emphasizing "capturing the spirit through form" to reflect a kind of splendid beauty. The Two Song Dynasties marked a crucial period in establishing the unique style of Chinese painting, centered around Su Shi, the literati circle proposed "literati painting," which pushed forward the development of literati painting and laid the foundation for literati painting in art history. Particularly notable was the development of landscape and bird-and-flower painting, which brought these genres to the forefront. Works by Zhou Wenju and Gu Hongzhong in figure painting represented the last glimmers of the glorious Tang tradition in figure painting, which then gradually faded in prominence on the painting scene, its renown diminishing until a resurgence in the late Ming Dynasty with figures like Chen Hongshou and Cui Zizhong. From the flourishing of figure painting to the rise of landscape and bird-and-flower painting, under the influence of Tang Dynasty societal thought, painting placed greater emphasis on moral education. Tang Dynasty painting theorist Zhang Yanyuan stated in "Famous Paintings through the Dynasties" that "painting accomplishes moral education, assists in social relationships, probes the profound and subtle, sharing merits with the six classical arts, operating in all four seasons," asserting that "painting shares the same function as the six classics." Into the Two Song Dynasties, with the overall development of painting, the rise of Neo-Confucianism provided a suitable environment for the flourishing of landscape and bird-and-flower painting. The rise of landscape during this period and its underlying reasons are closely related to the development of painting techniques, the continuous improvement of the academy system, and the literati's use of brush and ink to express their innermost feelings under the political climate.

Early Song landscape painting, represented by Fan Kuan, Li Cheng, and Guan Tong, focused on learning from nature and adopting natural methods, forming their distinct artistic characteristics. Their techniques and methods also influenced literati and academy painters of the Northern Song. Unlike the prevalence of blue-and-green landscapes in the Sui and Tang periods, Northern Song literati paintings shifted from blue-and-green to ink wash, from realism to expressive representation, and from separation of brushwork to the unity of painting and calligraphy. These changes were inseparably linked to the contemporary environment and the literati's pursuit of symbolic meaning in painting themes.

Song Dynasty landscape paintings often featured light ink washes combined with color, favoring themes such as gnarled trees, strange rocks, and plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum, which did not demand excessive pursuit of likeness and were easier to master while also being able to express moods. These subjects could also hint at special symbolic meanings. Literati painters disdained creating auspicious subjects favored by rulers. Li Cheng, for example, adeptly used light ink to depict rich layers and vast spaces, expressing broad-mindedness with scenes of "sparse weather and clear forests." Early themes were diverse, with snowy landscapes and ancient pines becoming the main subjects later on, even pioneering the "wind and rain" theme, which has metaphorical interpretations of rise and fall, prosperity and decline in literature. The later themes of snowy landscapes

and ancient pines more reflected a harsh reflection on societal conditions and a praise of one's own character quality. Thus, appreciating Li Cheng's paintings hinges on understanding the metaphorical techniques in his works. Li Gonglin, on the other hand, focused on studying the decorative patterns of ancient bronzes, incorporating the primitive lines into his line drawing technique, different from the "ink play" focused on by Su Shi and Mi Fu, injecting a strong academic vitality into painting. Meanwhile, the rise of epigraphy in the Northern Song also opened new perspectives and materials for the literati class, and by the Qing Dynasty, epigraphic texts from ancient anonymous authors were integrated into paintings by artists, with the Yangzhou school's Jin Nong leading a group of painters who consciously blended epigraphic brushwork into the creation of figures and birds-and-flowers.



Figure 2. Li Cheng, Autumn Mountain with a Serene Monastery

For literati painters, the purpose of creation was actually more about expressing the current inner feelings and moods of the literati class with landscape painting, which was less bound by form compared to figure painting, requiring less in terms of painting technique and likeness. Of course, the choice of themes and their underlying connotations were not static; for example, the "Xiaoxiang theme," filled with negative emotions and a sense of separation and melancholy in the Northern Song, became a purely painting theme in the Southern Song after losing the support of the literati group, with its underlying connotations gradually fading away.

4. The Shift from Subject to Object: "Likeness" and "Unlikeness"

From Gu Kaizhi's "lively spirit resonance" to the supreme "divine quality" of Song Dynasty academy paintings, and then to the literati-led painting referred to as "leisurely self-entertainment," there is a combination of subject and object, with a differing emphasis between the two. Gu Kaizhi seemed to prioritize "spirit" over "form," yet his approach was still grounded in "form." However, the rise of literati painters in the Northern Song Dynasty focused on expressing personal emotions and pursued "unlikeness." For instance, Su Shi believed that painting for likeness was something "seen among children next door" (from "Two Branches by Registrar Wang of Yanling"). The earliest theoretical explanation of the theory of form and spirit among the literati was by Ouyang Xiu, and as a disciple of Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi naturally provided a thorough discussion. Su Shi, as a pivotal figure within the literati circle, did not leave behind systematic theoretical works, but his critiques of painting are found in a large number of prefaces and poems.

Regardless of the reasons for literati painters' preference for a style leaning towards expressiveness, their views have shifted the value orientation of the painting scene. After reaching the peak of the trend of "unlikeness," literati painters began exploring and pursuing ink and brushwork. The reintroduction of Western painting during the Ming and Qing Dynasties triggered conceptual and cultural conflicts, leading to a long-term discussion on "likeness" and "unlikeness," essentially seeking a balance. This discussion continued until modern times when Qi Baishi proposed that painting lies "between likeness and unlikeness," based on the Ming and Qing discussions, blending secularization with the literati's aesthetic taste.

As observers appreciate literati paintings, they engage in endless imagination prompted by the objects depicted in the works, focusing more on the combination of "object and poetic pursuit." Works that do not seek to replicate form, though deviating from "form" to some extent, provide more space for subjective imagination. Everyone can interpret the space within the painting at different levels, offering more for the viewer's part, thus less likely to tire of it. The demand for imaginative space is rooted in the human brain, determining that literati paintings are more enduring to view.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the influence of Song Dynasty literati on Chinese painting is multifaceted, from the selection of themes to changes in patronage, and the restructuring of painting philosophies, all deeply reflecting the Song Dynasty literati's values, aesthetic concepts, and profound understanding of nature and society. They sought innovation in techniques and

pursued "artistic conception" and "poetic sentiment" in artistic expression, striving to convey personal emotions and spiritual aspirations through painting. This non-utilitarian pursuit of art not only enriched the connotations of Chinese painting but also laid a solid theoretical and practical foundation for the literati painting of later generations. The rise of literati painting in the Song Dynasty represented not only a transformation in artistic style and technique but also a shift in cultural attitude and spiritual pursuit.

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