

Feng Jianwu's Painting Language and Its Relationship with Traditional Calligraphy and Painting

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Abstract: In the modern Chinese painting world, Feng Jianwu stands out as a highly accomplished and influential artist in the realm of Chinese calligraphy and painting creation in the Bashu region of the 20th century. However, research on him has been scarce, resulting in incomplete historical materials about this great painter and a limited understanding of him among the public. As a modern calligraphy and painting master from the Bashu region, Feng Jianwu's unique understanding and insight into traditional Chinese painting, as well as his inheritance and exploration of Chinese calligraphy and painting creation, fully demonstrate his comprehensive and profound cultural accumulation and outstanding achievements in the art of calligraphy and painting. His artistic value cannot be underestimated. Throughout his artistic journey, Feng Jianwu displayed his superb artistic attainment and vibrant creativity in various aspects such as ink language, color application, painting schema, and calligraphy and painting style. All these fully reflect his tremendous creativity and innovative consciousness in artistic exploration, thus having positive enlightenment and strong practical significance for today's artistic creation. In the history of modern Chinese calligraphy and painting art, there has been little research on Feng Jianwu. Comprehensively presenting the characteristics, significance, and value of Feng Jianwu's calligraphy and painting art can serve as a case study for the history of modern Chinese calligraphy and painting art.

Keywords: Traditional; Calligraphy; Painting.

1. "Able to Enter, Exit, and Transform"

"Able to Enter, Exit, and Transform" is a succinct exposition by Feng Jianwu on the relationship between art and tradition. As a modern calligraphy and painting master from the Bashu region, Feng Jianwu's art possesses distinct personal characteristics. His lifelong exploration and creation of Chinese calligraphy and painting art, as well as his cognition and expression of painting art, are inseparable from the influence of traditional art on him. Especially the painting style that unifies poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal cutting into painting while producing novelty and surprise, all reveal the profound impact of tradition on him. A study of the evolution of his painting language and style can be conducted through three periods of his relationship with tradition.

Feng Jianwu mainly focused on copying traditions, extensively adopting and learning from traditional culture, deeply grasping the essence and classics of tradition. In the middle period, he emerged from tradition, using sketching as a form of exploration and depicting new landscapes as content, gradually exploring and creating painting languages and styles with contemporary characteristics. In the late period, he transformed tradition. His painting style had taken on a majestic and unique character, powerful and skillful. His extensive study and assimilation of seal cutting and calligraphy arts further sublimated and purified the individuality of painting language, making Feng Jianwu's artistic creation distinctive and far-reaching in influence.

2. Entering Tradition – Inheriting Traditional Calligraphy and Painting Skills

2.1. Copying Classics

By copying classic works, learners can systematically and standardly study the techniques of the ancients, and continuously deepen their understanding and comprehension in the process, thereby recognizing and mastering the laws of ink and brushwork, composition, and layout in traditional calligraphy and painting. At the same time, they can gradually clarify the internal connections and essential nature of these numerous laws. Therefore, copying classics is an indispensable path for learning traditional calligraphy and painting, and a way to understand both the how and the why.

Feng Jianwu began copying and studying various classics at home at an early age, but his truly systematic study of tradition came during his time at the Chengdu Art Academy. At that time, almost all of Feng Jianwu's energy was devoted to copying various calligraphy models every day. He systematically studied calligraphy and painting, steles, inscriptions, characters, and especially made great achievements in the "Skinny Gold Script". At the same time, Feng Jianwu's proficiency in meticulous painting also improved rapidly, earning praise from many teachers at the Sichuan Art Academy. During this period, Feng Jianwu immersed himself passionately in the vast world of traditional culture, absorbing the essence of traditional culture in large quantities, like a child who is curious about everything in the world and doesn't let anything go, without boundaries or categories.

Studying in Shanghai was a turning point for Feng Jianwu. He found his own artistic direction, giving focus to his future learning efforts, namely the "Shanghai School of Painting". Feng Jianwu studied under masters such as Wang Geyi, Pan

Tianshou, and Zhu Wenyun, who were disciples of Wu Changshuo. Here, Feng Jianwu received more rigorous traditional training from these renowned teachers. His basic skills in poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving were deepened, and his understanding and appreciation of traditional art greatly improved. During this period, in addition to deeply studying and researching calligraphy, Feng Jianwu discovered in painting that his previously most proficient meticulous style was actually full of craftsmanship. Therefore, he extensively copied and studied masterpieces from the Song and Yuan dynasties, and carefully explored the freehand painting style of the Wu School, appreciating the subtle brushwork of Wu Changshuo's integration of calligraphy and seal carving into painting. His understanding of traditional art became increasingly profound.

2.2. Study and Creation

After the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War, Feng Jianwu returned to Chengdu and made a living by selling his paintings. Mere imitation could not satisfy the buyers' desires. From that time on, Feng Jianwu painted many traditional-style bamboo, begonia, apricot blossom, peach blossom, narcissus, hydrangea, plum blossom, and other flowers, as well as some landscapes in the traditional style. However, what Feng Jianwu painted most at that time were fashionable ladies' portraits. These portraits have since been lost, but according to the poems inscribed on the remaining paintings, most of these fashionable ladies were beauties and socialites active in Chongqing's social circles. This shows that Feng Jianwu's works at that time had already begun to focus on real life, albeit using a clever traditional painting style. At that time, one of Feng Jianwu's paintings on a folding umbrella could sell for 50 silver dollars, while an acre of farmland was only worth 50 silver dollars. This is sufficient to demonstrate that on the path of traditional study, Feng Jianwu's painting had reached maturity and had gained a certain social influence and market value. At the same time, we can also see that Feng Jianwu's works at this time tended to cater to secular aesthetics. During that period, Feng Jianwu created a large number of meticulous figure paintings and flower-and-bird paintings filled with an aura of wealth and nobility, which were worlds apart from his later powerful and vigorous freehand ink paintings. It can be seen that Feng Jianwu spent a relatively long time in the realm of tradition, and many people even believed that compared to the innovative momentum that had already begun during his time in Shanghai, Feng Jianwu's artistic creation at this time had stagnated and made no progress. However, from another perspective, perhaps he had gained more accumulation. His extensive study and practice had further solidified and improved his painting skills and traditional foundation, laying a more solid foundation for his future pursuit of change and innovation.

3. Breaking Away from Tradition – Breakthroughs in Form and Content

3.1. Emerging from Tradition through Sketching

Just as a volcanic eruption requires years of accumulation before reaching a critical point and erupting, Feng Jianwu, who had walked the path of tradition for too long, realized that to innovate in Chinese painting, it was necessary to "create new forms that fit new content" [1]. At this time, Feng

Jianwu's younger brother, the famous traditional Chinese painter Shi Lu, put forward the renowned creative principle of "reaching out to tradition with one hand and to life with the other; life brings me new ideas, and I convey the spirit of life" [2], which had a profound impact on the art world at that time. In his view, the creation of form "does not come out of nowhere or from the outside, but can only be sought by starting from the source of life and following the river of tradition" [3]. From this period onwards, Feng Jianwu attached great importance to sketching and began to travel across the magnificent landscapes of China, including Emei, Qingcheng, Huangshan, Guilin, Lijiang, and other places, observing life and nature in depth. Sketching is a form imported from abroad, but Feng Jianwu's sketching did not depict the actual scene like Western painters; instead, he highly refined it using traditional Chinese aesthetic methods. Many of his works during this period were created on the basis of sketching, which not only had a sense of life but also a beauty that transcended life, with a foundation in tradition, achieving a high artistic level.

If Feng Jianwu's earlier works emphasized brushwork over content, with tradition surpassing life, then his painting creations in the late 1950s gradually began to break through the constraints of tradition and entered into an exploration of brushwork itself based on sketching. However, it was the two-month-long journey during the summer vacation in 1962 that truly brought about a significant change in his painting style, leading to the formation of his own creative style.

This journey was the longest and most extensive sketching trip Feng Jianwu had ever taken. In just over two months, he traveled through five provinces including Sichuan, Hubei, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Guizhou, enjoying countless famous mountains and rivers. Upon his return, he incredibly brought back over 300 sketching drafts, accumulating an incredibly rich amount of creative material. This is what is meant by "learning from nature outside and drawing inspiration from within." Afterward, Feng Jianwu seemed like a changed person, with his artistic style undergoing a sudden transformation, forming a painting style praised as "with the clear sky and mighty sea, vast and majestic," breaking away from his previous conventional style, finally breaking through the barriers, and based on sketching, he carved out his own world, allowing his personal style to emerge.

His painting style changed dramatically within a year or two, making him a prominent painter in the southwest region with a unique style. During this period, Feng Jianwu created a large number of excellent works, such as "Mountainous Region of Nantong," "On the Road to Qingcheng," "Wheat Waves Amid Chaotic Mountains," "A Corner of Nantong Coal Mine," "Resting in the Melon Shed," "Solitary Peak in the Twilight," "The Sound of Oars Makes the Mountains and Rivers Green," and "A Bumper Harvest in Sight." These works changed from their previous appearance, on the one hand, inheriting the excellent tradition of literati painting that combines poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving, and on the other hand, breaking through the limitations of literati painting being overly refined and difficult to reflect social life, emerging from tradition to form his own unique artistic expression style. This period became a turning point in his artistic journey.

3.2. Breaking Through Tradition with New Content

In the early 1950s, the founding of New China brought

about tremendous changes, and it seemed that every field needed to change in order to progress, including the art field. The artistic form and spiritual orientation of Chinese painting underwent fundamental and significant transformations. A large number of artists used new content to praise the realities of the time. Feng Jianwu's paintings also swept away the escapist sentiments of turbulent times and no longer focused on depicting flowers and plants. Instead, he delved deeply into life, drawing inspiration from the atmosphere of daily life and abundant material to create new painting content, thereby achieving a breakthrough in tradition. The implementation of land reform policies and the transformation of ideas led Feng Jianwu to gradually change his attitude towards life and proactively alter the themes of his paintings. During this period, his teacher Wang Geyi, who was far away in Shanghai, often wrote letters encouraging him to break through his past creative style and explore a new creative approach under the new policies. To depict new social themes and styles, Feng Jianwu insisted on engaging in painting and sketching practices, frequently venturing into rural and mountainous areas, gradually undergoing a transformation. Feng Jianwu began to use his comprehensive artistic cultivation and painting experience to depict reality, creating new painting content and artistic forms. During this time, he created a series of works reflecting socialist construction, such as the meticulously detailed and brightly colored figure painting "Gallop," which depicts a lively scene of people riding horses and waving flags. "Ode to Qingyun," inspired by the "Book of Songs," uses history as a mirror to praise the present. These paintings earned him recognition and praise from the new regime at the time. In addition, many of his paintings depicted socialist rural themes, which constituted the main part of his work at that time. It is evident that Feng Jianwu's works directly focused on real-life scenes, such as "Vegetable Harvest," which, like realism, depicts a prosperous and happy rural harvest scene. These works represent Feng Jianwu's innovation in Chinese painting art, driven partly by political motives of the time and partly by his direct experience of nature and life. They are the result of his dedication to exploring his own painting language and formal expression in the new social environment.

4. Transforming Tradition

4.1. A Fusion of Ideas and Achievements

Based on a vast collection of sketches and fieldwork pieces, Feng Jianwu advocated that "art should reflect life, focusing on depicting new life, new scenery, and creating themed works that keep pace with the times, rather than going against them." [4] He believed that artistic creation should not be confined to the study, but should pulse with the times, delving into life to discover materials that reflect the spirit of the era, and using art to mirror the face of the times—this is the primary task of artistic creation. Only by returning to life and producing art from the life of the times can one create true art; otherwise, the so-called art is merely a worthless, "outdated" creation.

When it comes to handling the relationship between tradition, real life, and foreign cultures, Feng Jianwu once said, "I always focus on two points: tradition and life. At the same time, one must actively absorb the nourishment of foreign art in order to transcend tradition, return to life, and achieve breakthroughs in artistic creation." [5] To this end, he also proposed the idea of "entering, exiting, and

transforming" in artistic creation. He often said, "To learn tradition, first, you must delve into it; second, you must emerge from it; and third, you must follow nature's creation. To delve into it, you must reach a profound understanding, and then you must emerge from it, which requires a deep dive into life. Without life, you will inevitably become a prisoner of the ancients." [6] It can be seen that Feng Jianwu had formed his own theoretical advocacy for guiding artistic creation. Although this advocacy was limited by various era constraints, its valuable aspect lies in his emphasis on the role of traditional cultural foundations and traditional ink painting techniques in calligraphy and painting creation amidst an atmosphere advocating artistic innovation through new content and themes. Moreover, at this time, his traditional calligraphy and painting techniques had reached a high level of proficiency, and his passion for blazing his own trail had been brewing for years, eagerly seeking an outlet.

However, just as he was preparing for another round of reform and innovation, the Cultural Revolution came, forcing Feng Jianwu to interrupt his artistic creation. The decade-long catastrophe inflicted great suffering on Feng Jianwu. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, in order to heal the wounds in his heart, Feng Jianwu once again threw himself into the embrace of art. He continued to uphold his aspiration of excavating creative potential from life, further deepening and enriching the creation and refinement of ink painting inspired by nature, and unleashing the tension and implication of painting expression from his profound practice in seal script calligraphy and painting, thus shaping the direction of a new ink language and style.

4.2. The Remarkable Late Achievements

Remarkably, Feng Jianwu, who had endured so much hardship, seemed more energetic than ever, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. With boundless artistic enthusiasm, he practiced the creative principle of "following nature and drawing from the heart," traveling extensively throughout the country to explore its extraordinary mountains, exotic waters, and picturesque landscapes, truly embodying the spirit of "the painter knows no age, nor does his art grow old." Traditional Chinese art emphasizes accumulation and inclusiveness, and many artists only gradually attain the realm where "art approaches the Way" and their creative work reaches its pinnacle in their later years. The great Tang dynasty poet Du Fu commented on the Southern Dynasty writer Yu Xin, saying, "Yu Xin's writings matured with age, his vigorous pen soaring with unrestrained imagination." For Feng Jianwu, could it not be said that "his passion for painting grows stronger with age"? His later works have transcended the relationship with tradition that characterized his early and mid-career periods, entering directly into a state of purification and authenticity, where tradition is embodied in his brushwork. His artistic forms exhibit a style that is thick and robust, vigorous and powerful, with a majestic and unusual charm, reaching the realm where "skill approaches the Way" and the distinction between subject and object disappears.

After the 1980s, with his rich life experiences and profound artistic accumulation, Feng Jianwu's calligraphy and painting art matured even more, with tradition and his own style flowing like Tai Chi in his hands, allowing his art to reach its peak. Masterpieces such as "Emei, the Most Beautiful Mountain in the World," "The Peach Stone of Huangshan," "Monkeys Watching the Sea," "The Moon Rising Over the Surging River," "Towering Above the Summit of Emei,"

"Morning Glow Over Emei Ridge," "Moonlight Over the Pond," "Spring Clouds Over Emei Ridge," "Silver Rooster of Emei," "Bright Moon Shining on Snow," "Sudden Rain Over the Turquoise River," "Wild Ducks on the Spring River," and the "Mountain City Series" have emerged one after another, establishing his status as a master in contemporary Chinese painting. Throughout history, artists who have had a profound impact on the history of art are those who have broken free from constraints, blazed their own trails, and formed their own distinct creative styles. Feng Jianwu can be said to be a typical example in modern Chinese art history of an artist who, while deeply rooted in tradition, has also created his own unique style.

5. Conclusion

Through analysis, we can see that Feng Jianwu's inheritance of tradition is creative. He did not simply maintain tradition but conducted in-depth and comprehensive research and study of it, continuously excavating and sublimating its essence, thereby deriving and creating his own artistic style. His inheritance of tradition is not only reflected at the level of artistic language and techniques but also delves deeply into the spiritual core of traditional culture. His adherence to and promotion of excellent Chinese culture make his process of inheritance immensely valuable and significant. Looking at Feng Jianwu's works today, we can still feel the profoundness and extensiveness of Chinese traditional culture, as well as its powerful vitality that continues to evolve and grow. There is no doubt that Chinese traditional culture carries rich national historical information and is the matrix of our culture. In today's globalized world, cultural identity and the pursuit of cultural belonging are very important and unavoidable topics. The future development of Chinese art still needs to draw nourishment from traditional culture. From the relationship between Feng Jianwu and traditional culture, we can clearly see that artistic innovation is not water without a source; rather, it must be deeply rooted in the cultural soil that nourishes it in order to bear fruit.

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Collection of Works



Fig 1. "Fairy Peach Stone of Mount Huang" (1980) (97/96cm)



Fig 2. "Gathering Rain over Cangjiang River" (1981) (95/88cm)

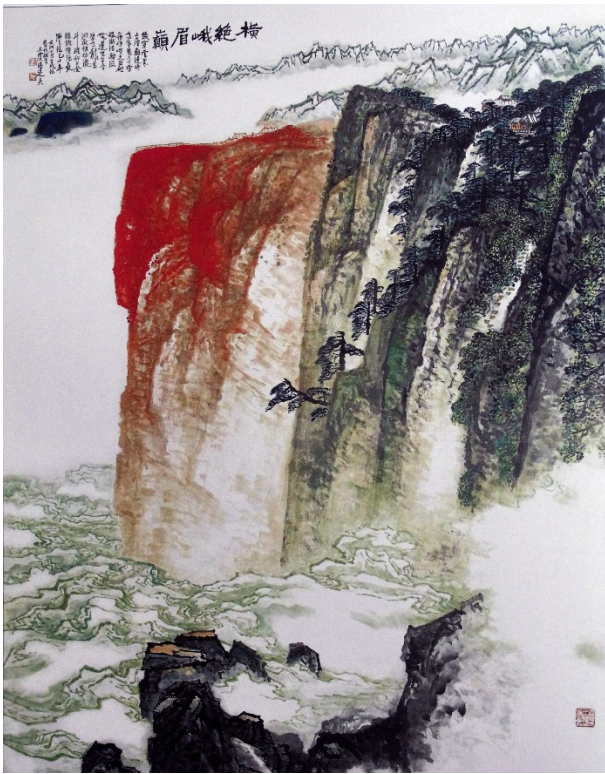


Fig 3. "Emei, the Most Exquisite" (1982) (204/190cm)



Fig 4. "Bianmen, the Most Perilous" (1982) (204/190cm)