

# Inheritance and Research: The “Hubei Phenomenon” of Watercolor Painting in the National Art Exhibition

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**Abstract:** Due to the excellent art education tradition and the systematic construction of watercolor painting discipline, Hubei watercolor has achieved remarkable outcomes in national art exhibitions and various exhibitions at all levels since the 1980s. Comparatively speaking, Hubei watercolor is focused on “production”, and the works of a group of watercolor painters, such as Liu Shouxiang and Xu Haigang, have made great breakthroughs in materials, techniques and language compared with those of their predecessors, and the visual and expressive power of their works have effectively supplemented the consistent “relaxation of depiction” of watercolor paintings, greatly enhancing the quality of watercolor paintings, and improving the quality of their works. The emergence of the “Hubei Phenomenon” in the field of watercolor painting in the National Art Exhibition is closely related to Hubei's own art education foundation, art theory and criticism environment, and the construction of the watercolor painting academy disciplinary system, and the academy's watercolor teaching plays an irreplaceable and constructive role in the inheritance of watercolor techniques and the exploration of the language of contemporary watercolor.

**Keywords:** National Art Exhibition; Teaching System; Artistic Technique; Contemporary Awareness.

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## 1. Introduction

“Foreign paintings imported into China, starts from the popularity of watercolors.” The earliest watercolor painting imported into China was the exported watercolor paintings of Tongchao at the Guangzhou trading port, and after the opening of Shanghai, the missionaries of Tushanwan Painting House started the teaching courses of watercolor painting. Watercolor painting is also the most effective type of art to communicate between Chinese and Western painting in the process of “The East Graduation of Western Painting”, which can not only embody the scientific rationality of Western painting about modeling, structure, light and color, but also express the traditional Chinese aesthetic ideals and emotions such as emptiness, spirit, emptiness and lightness in the drenching of water color, etc. In the color-ink and watercolor paintings by Lin Fengmian, Wu Dayu, Wu Guanzhong, etc., the lighthearted and bright language and painterly expression are the important symbols of modernity of Chinese art in the twentieth century. The easy and bright language expression and pictoriality in the works of Lin Fengmian, Wu Dayu, Wu Guanzhong, etc. are important symbols of the modernity of Chinese art in the 20th century. After the founding of New China, especially since the reform and opening up, the regional development of watercolor paintings began to spring up and show vigorous vitality, and Hubei watercolor is the best among them; In the famous watercolor painter Mr. Liu Shouxiang's active promotion, Hubei watercolor in the country “emerged”, Liu Shouxiang, Xu Haigang, Chen Yongjin, Chen Guoqing, Deng Han, Shao Yuhao and a large number of watercolor painters in the National Exhibition of Fine Arts and all levels and types of watercolor exhibitions have continued to achieve good results, according to the statistics, there are 5 times of Hubei watercolor in the National Art Exhibition who have won gold, silver and bronze awards, and more than 120 times of nomination awards, excellence awards and awards above the provincial and ministerial levels. It can be said that Hubei watercolor painters in the National Art Exhibition has created the “Hubei

phenomenon” of watercolor painting, these brilliant achievements are inseparable from Hubei watercolor academy tradition and academic environment, Hubei watercolor art materials, techniques and language of inheritance and innovation as well as Hubei watercolor creation of the contemporary awareness of high-quality, sustainable and healthy Hubei watercolor art ecosystem, the Hubei watercolor art ecosystem. The construction of a high-quality, sustainable and healthy Hubei watercolor art ecology will inevitably continue to promote the development of contemporary Chinese art.

## 2. The Academy Tradition and Academic Environment of Hubei Watercolor

Hubei Fine Arts has a excellent academy tradition, in the 1920s, enthusiastic art education Jiang Lanpu, Tang Yijing opened the Wuchang Art School, later developed into the Wuchang Fine Arts Specialized School, in 1930, according to the Ministry of Education of the National Government issued by the regulations of the Specialized Schools and renamed the private Wuchang College of Fine Arts. After the liberation, Wuchang Art College was divided into two, in 1953, in the national faculty adjustment, a part of the merger into the Central and South America College, the Central and South America College in 1956 moved to Guangzhou to become today's Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, while the other part of the Wuhan Art Teacher Training College and the Central and South America College stayed in the Wuhan part of the development of today's Hubei Academy of Fine Arts. Tang Yiho, Wen Yiduo, Xu Dunggu, Ni Yide, Hu Yichuan and other important artists in the process of Chinese art in the 20th century have contributed their strength to Hubei art, while the outstanding achievements of famous aesthetician Liu Zangji, art historian Ruan Pu, painter Zhou Shaohua and others in the field of art creation and theoretical research have set an example for the development of Hubei art; In the 1980s, Wuhan's art community was active, and the new wave art

publication *Art Thought Magazine* played an important role in enlightening artistic thought, attracting the attention of the nation's art community by introducing many cutting-edge theories of modern and contemporary Western art, as well as highly constructive art criticism; a number of scholars in the field of art, such as Pi Daojian, Peng De, Lu Hong, Zhu Bin, Li Song, Yan Shanchu, and Huang Zhuan, actively joined in the discussion and contributed to the dissemination of New Wave ideas, while Zhou Shaohua was also a supporter of the New Wave, and painters such as Shang Yang, Yang Guoxin, Leng Jun, Shi Chong, Fang Shaohua, and Wang Guangyi were also deeply influenced by the idea of the New Wave. Critic Jia Fangzhou once said, "In the 1980s, Hubei contributed a number of excellent critics and theorists to the Chinese art world. As a review of regional art, this is a part that cannot be ignored, and it is a special case in Hubei's art world. The advancement of Hubei's art is directly related to this successive group of excellent critics." The magazine "Art Thoughts" in Wuhan, Hubei academic circle is very influential, such as Deng Xiaomang, Yi Zhongtian and other scholars also in the art world to participate in critical exchanges, become "Art Thoughts" an important source of important ideas vitality. Under the influence of the excellent educational tradition and academic environment, Hubei Fine Arts has quite an important influence in the national art world, and Hubei Fine Arts is in the forefront of the country in terms of artistic creation, both in terms of realistic techniques and artistic concepts.

The development of Hubei watercolor is inseparable from the general environment of Hubei art, and Hubei watercolor itself has an excellent academic tradition. Watercolor painting is an important part of modern Chinese art, and the spread and education of watercolor painting has profoundly influenced the modernization of Chinese art, but due to the bias of "a minority painting genre", the development and research of watercolor painting in China has been lagging behind oil painting, Chinese painting and printmaking. Wei Zhengqi also established the Watercolor Painting Research Society, which trained important Chinese watercolor painters such as Huang Tieshan, Bai Tongxu, Mai Baisen, and Pu Xincheng. In 1981, under the supervision of Mr. Bai Tongxu, Liu Shouxiang graduated from the Teacher Training Department of the Fine Arts Department of Hubei Academy of Fine Arts and worked as a teacher, dedicated to the creation and teaching of watercolor paintings, in 1984, his "cowherd boy", "Winter Flowers" at the same time was selected for the Sixth National Exhibition of Fine Arts, in which the "Winter Flowers" was awarded the Excellence Prize; in 1985, the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts in the former Department of Fine Arts Education to open the first watercolor class in 1987, under the auspices of Mr. Liu Shouxiang, the Teacher Training Department of Hubei Academy of Fine Arts to open a watercolor painting major, and in the Seventh National Exhibition in 1989, seven of Liu's students were selected for exhibition, Liu's own guidance of students were included in the exhibition, and Liu's own students were accepted into the exhibition, and Liu's students were accepted into the exhibition. In 1987, under the supervision of Mr. Liu Shouxiang, the Teacher Training Department of Hubei Academy of Fine Arts opened a watercolor painting specialty, and made a major breakthrough in the Seventh National Exhibition of Fine Arts in 1989, in which seven of the students guided by Liu Shouxiang were selected to participate in the exhibition, and Liu Shouxiang's own watercolor work, "Drizzle Runs Silent,"

was awarded the Third Prize. Since then, "Autumn Water is Silent", "Fresh Fruit" and other works in the National Art Exhibition and various exhibitions at all levels of awards, and from the Ninth National Art Exhibition, as a watercolor, pastel exhibition of the jury, moral and artistic Mr. Liu Shouxiang has become a true leader of watercolor paintings in Hubei. In 2009, Hubei Academy of Fine Arts started the earliest watercolor painting department in the country, which became an important art event in Hubei art education, promoted the systematization of watercolor discipline and the cultivation of watercolor talents, and became an important source of strength for the development of watercolor in Hubei in the future. In 2014, in the 12th National Art Exhibition, Xu Haigang's watercolor work "People on the Bright Treasure Festival" was awarded the only gold medal for watercolor paintings, and Chen Yongjin's work "Mountain Fire" won the excellence award. Chen Yongjin's "Mountain Fire" won the Excellence Award, and a total of 22 works of watercolor in Hubei were selected, creating the "Hubei Phenomenon" in the field of watercolor painting in the National Art Exhibition. In the watercolor category of the 13th National Art Exhibition, Shao Yuhao's watercolor painting "Fire Ambition - China's Firefighting Power", Xie Weiye's watercolor painting "Yuejie No.2", and Bai Luyang's "Great River" were all selected as works to be sent to Beijing.

The "Hubei phenomenon" of watercolor painting is closely related to Hubei's own art education foundation, academic environment and the construction of watercolor painting academy discipline system, and the watercolor teaching in the academy has played an irreplaceable and constructive role in the inheritance of watercolor painting techniques and the exploration of contemporary watercolor language. As an art practice course, watercolor teaching demonstration can present the teaching more intuitively and vividly, and the on-site observation can let the students experience the technical beauty and material beauty of watercolor painting very effectively; teaching and learning, teacher-student interaction and communication is also conducive to the teacher's own research and innovation of watercolor technique and language, of which there are many examples of classroom demonstration works in the exhibition. In 2010, the "Research on Teaching and Creation of Watercolor Painting" of the Department of Watercolor Painting of Hubei Academy of Fine Arts was awarded "National Fine Course", and in the academic research of watercolor painting, the research project "Constructing a Teaching System of Watercolor Painting featuring the Regional Culture of 'Jiangnan Plain'" was awarded 'Second Prize of Teaching Achievements of the Seventh Hubei Higher Education Schools'. The academic background of watercolor painting in Hubei enhances the spiritual character of Hubei watercolor, whether in the exploration of watercolor language or the innovation of artistic concepts, Hubei watercolor painting creative group is becoming the most important force in the creation of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting. Mr. Liu Shouxiang's death in 2020 because of the covid pneumonia is undoubtedly a great loss of watercolor painting in Hubei, but the disciplinary system of watercolor painting established by him and the high-level echelon of watercolor talents have matured, and they are demonstrating their strong creative strength in the national watercolor painting creation.

### 3. The Inheritance and Innovation of Hubei Watercolor Material Language

Chinese watercolor painting is “watercolor painting with a new quality” after the “integration of East and West.” The expression of traditional Chinese aesthetic ideals and emotions, such as emptiness, spirituality, emptiness and lightness in watercolor, is an important artistic practice of watercolor painting's Chineseization. However, watercolor painting is different from traditional Chinese painting, the contradictory unity of “watery” and “colorful” is the fundamental reason for the unique charm of its artistic ontology and language, and has sharpened the development of Chinese watercolor painting; Traditional watercolor painting relies more on “wateriness”, and “lightness of touch” is an important language feature of traditional watercolor painting, but it may also limit the expansion of watercolor painting in artistic language skills. The in-depth study, inheritance and innovation of “colorfulness” and material techniques are the important reasons for the breakthrough of Hubei watercolor, which has gained a great improvement in the quality and expressiveness of watercolor art. Hubei watercolor, with its unique and strong visual expressiveness, breaks the weaknesses of watercolor paintings in terms of modeling space and expressiveness. By virtue of its unique and strong visual expression, Hubei watercolor broke the “vulnerability” of watercolor painting in terms of modeling space and expression, adapted well to the exhibition mechanism of contemporary art, and became an important type of art in the National Art Exhibition. Liu Shouxiang has repeatedly said openly and frankly that the spiritual character and aesthetic judgment are the important reasons why Hubei watercolor can be unique, and one of the most important features of Hubei watercolor is the beauty of “production”, which solves the many limitations of the on-site sketching of watercolor paintings, and can be more comfortable with the details of the carving, and in terms of the completeness of the picture and the degree of refinement, the comprehensive use of the material performance of the painting is very effective, and the use of the material performance is very important, as well as the quality of the painting. As early as participating in the Sixth National Art Exhibition, Liu Shouxiang tried to use the technique of spraying water and sprinkling salt, using the natural collision of salt and water to obtain a very unique effect, which was recognized by the art world and won the Outstanding Work Award. 1985, Wang Zhaomin came to Wuhan to hold a painting exhibition and give lectures, and Liu Shouxiang was deeply inspired, and began to make more in-depth research on the material techniques of watercolor paintings. His still life series uses Chinese pigment to “bury” the color first, then “wash” the color, and then use watercolor to “solidify” the color method, to achieve a heavy sense of expression like oil paintings; Liu Shouxiang's exploration of Chinese color expression has left a lasting impression on people. Liu Shouxiang's exploration of Chinese color expression leaves a strong impression. The contrast between the black of the lining cloth and the bright colors of the fruits gives the traditional color image of ancient Chu lacquer ware; this is the mental image of the color generated through aesthetic perception, which constitutes the readability and humanistic connotation of the works. Liu Shouxiang's series of works of Jiangnan, the town of water, have the imprints of the time, the memories of the past and the faint nostalgia of

the past. It seems that there is a kind of narrative plot that needs to be expressed, which awakens a kind of subconscious once upon a time and past, which is both familiar and unfamiliar, which is blurred by the boundaries between the existence and the consciousness, and the paradoxical sense of being unfamiliar and familiar at the same time always strikes the heart of the human being. His paintings of Tashkurgan, Gannan, fishing ports, and the Apennines beyond the country's borders, through realistic and delicate portrayals and the blending of water and color on the paper, always combine the beauty of materials with the beauty of form, and the feelings are born in the scenery, stirring up moving emotions and presenting the humanistic qualities of the richness of the humanities.

Xu Haigang is another “award-winning expert” of Hubei watercolor, he is a watercolor painter with a more introverted and persistent personality, his watercolor works in the pursuit of color at the same time, and did not sacrifice the flow of water and color mingled with the beauty of the traces, while borrowing the color expression of oil paintings, the formation of the resonance of the water and the color, and will be the traditional watercolor painting The light and simple expression of traditional watercolor painting has been upgraded to a new level, and a significant breakthrough has been made in the expression of themes and ideas. Xu Haigang's preference for Tibetan themes, the 12th National Art Exhibition Gold Medal watercolor work “People at the Liangbao Festival” expresses the folk activities of Tibetan compatriots in terms of theme, the light coming from the distance illuminates the faces of the crowd gathered together, and through the delicate realistic watercolor technique, the contemporary watercolor is presented with artistic expressiveness not inferior to that of oil paintings in the slightest, and it brings out the solemn and sacred spirit of the times of the Tibetan people in the Snowy Plateau. spirit of the times. “People at the Liangbao Festival” demonstrates a thematic ability to create a grand narrative, and it is reasonable to win the gold medal, with the advantage of the home field, but more importantly, it is very good in terms of thematicity and visualization, and it is very suitable for the National Art Exhibition's demand for the expression of the people's nature and the nature of the times. Xu Haigang has been insisting on watercolor sketching for a long time, and technically he adopts the method of juxtaposition of small brushstrokes of color, the combination of translucent color and the texture of the paper, and the formation of a unified but richer color effect through the overlapping of multiple layers, which fully illustrates the important value of pictoriality. Contemporary painting does not take sketching as the only channel for artistic creation, and emphasizes more on the ability to transform and express images, but in the context of Chinese contemporary art, the ability of sketching is still very important, and it can express the creator's individual emotions and feelings more truly at the moment. How to use color for modeling, how to grasp the full use of images and at the same time reflect the painterly nature of the works.

Chen Yongjin of Wuhan Academy of Painting is also a representative figure of watercolor in Hubei, in 2009, his “Cruise” won the silver medal of the 11th National Art Exhibition, and in 2014, his landscape “Fire on the Mountain” won the “Award of Excellence” in the 12th National Art Exhibition. This “Mountain Fire” was praised by Liu Shouxiang as one of the best watercolor landscapes, which breaks the boundaries of certain watercolor painting

techniques. Although the subject matter is common, the excellent watercolor expression skills turn the corrupt into magic and achieve very good artistic effects. In addition, Shao Yuhao, Li Ning, Deng Han, Bai Luyang and a group of Hubei Academy of Fine Arts watercolor painting department of the stalwarts, academic and professional standards are also very high, Deng Han's watercolor works, "Thursday Afternoon," "Objects," "1979" in the Hubei Provincial Exhibition of Fine Arts won the gold and silver medals, and was selected for the 11th, 12th, 13th National Exhibition of Fine Arts. due to the strong academic and artistic characters of the works represented, the lack of narration on the theme also affected his performance in the National Art Exhibition; Shao Yuhao in the watercolor exhibitions also achieved very good results, the work of the "fire ambition - China's firefighting power" won the thirteenth National Exhibition of Watercolors in Beijing; Li Ning's "Chinese Power", 'Harvest' and other works, Liu Zhiping's 'Sunny Childhood', 'Golden Autumn', 'Clouds in the Sky' and other works have been selected for the National Art Exhibition for many times, in the artistic language and subject matter, are fully embodied in the relationship of inheritance and innovation between them and the previous generation of watercolor painters.

#### **4. Contemporary Awareness Presented in Hubei Watercolor Creation**

Through its own artistic practice, Hubei watercolor has demonstrated its persistent pursuit of the material language and artistic quality of watercolor painting, established the stylistic characteristics and artistic status of Hubei watercolor in the national watercolor painting community, and improved the artistic expression of contemporary Chinese watercolor painting. The exploration of Hubei watercolor in the language of watercolor technique has achieved the success of Hubei watercolor, but it is absolutely impossible to take the language of watercolor technique as the only goal of Hubei watercolor, Mr. Liu Shouxiang once said that the high technicality of watercolor painting is also its limitation, and even some of the works of the Gold Medal may not be the ideal language of watercolor in terms of the language of art. The innovation and development of material technique and language is not the whole of the artistic value of watercolor painting. Good technique and skill always serve the picture and reflect the humanistic spirit and contemporary consciousness of the work.

In terms of aesthetics, modernity has a calm, rational, quiet simplicity and fashion, which is usually used to express the formal aesthetics of art works, form, order, structure, and rationality, which are the typical characteristics of modernity; while contemporary artists pay more attention to the ability and sensitivity of the present, realistic humanistic care, which is also embodied as a kind of transcendentalism, a kind of dynamic reaction and presentation beyond the reality of daily experience. The influence of Hubei watercolor is built on the academy watercolor system, on the one hand, it pays attention to the most basic modeling, material, language, form and other modern value norms of easel painting, and makes use of the material and technical aesthetics to achieve high quality and high quality of the works, which fully reflects the Hubei watercolor is more rigorous, exquisite, and by the technology of the art of the modern elite; on the other hand, Hubei watercolor is also in the academy watercolor constantly seeking a contemporary expression, embodying a

transcendental response and presentation of the daily experience. On the other hand, Hubei watercolor also continuously seeks for a contemporary expression in the academy watercolor, reflecting the contemporary humanistic consciousness and care, especially the young generation of watercolor painters, began to seek to subvert and break the more vernacular realistic performance, from the expression of the artistic language and the subject matter of the works, reflecting the contemporary watercolor painters in Hubei have shown the courage to innovate and explore the spirit of a contemporary creative consciousness of self-consciousness. Artistic expression requires a medium, and it is an indisputable fact that the limitations of traditional materials are not as important as the singing of songs and chants, as the dancing of hands and feet. Contemporary art constantly breaks through the limitations of traditional media, and even does everything, but watercolors are ultimately easel paintings, and it is the value and significance of contemporary Chinese fine art to present the contemporary concepts and consciousness in the limited space of easel paintings, and to embody contemporaneity on the expression of traditional easel paintings. This is the value and significance of contemporary Chinese art. In fact, contemporary consciousness does not avoid the theme, but obviously it is no longer naturalistic or purely narrative, and no longer expresses the beauty for the sake of form, but expresses the current aesthetic concepts and humanistic values through the theme. From this point of view, the works of Hubei watercolor painters, such as Chen Guoqing, Deng Han, and Shao Yuhao, fully reflect the judgment and practice of contemporary consciousness. Chen Guoqing is an important representative of Hubei's watercolor painters, and has made outstanding achievements in national art exhibitions since a long time ago. Unlike most of the Hubei painters who emphasize on "production", Chen Guoqing insists on the pursuit of pictoriality, and his solid modeling ability and grasp of water and color make his watercolors unique, but he has never been confined to the circle of watercolors, and has a very sensitive attitude towards the contemporary cutting-edge art trends. However, he has never been confined to the watercolor circle, and he has a very keen observation of the contemporary art trends, and his works will have a very novel appearance in different periods, presenting a strong contemporary consciousness. Mr. Liu Shouxiang praised Deng Han as a potential watercolorist, such as the series of works of "Red Door", through the modern composition of "large color field" to obtain a special visual expression, through the arrangement of the objects presented between the real and unrealistic spatial expression, reflecting the value of a contemporary judgment, but too strong academic and artistic insufficiency in the thematic narrative also affected his performance in the National Art Exhibition; Shao Yuhao is also a watercolorist with a very strong sense of contemporary awareness, and his experimental exploration of painting space is fully reflected in the contemporary expression of traditional Chinese cultural imagery in works such as the "Cyanotype Fish" series. Hubei art has always been the most advanced in the technical level, but the pioneering nature of artistic concepts has never been absent, and the contemporary expression of Hubei watercolor is becoming the direction of substantial breakthroughs and development of Hubei watercolor in the future.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Due to the excellent art education tradition and systematic

construction of watercolor painting discipline, from the 1980s, Hubei watercolor in the National Art Exhibition and various exhibitions at all levels and constantly achieved very good results, in comparison with watercolor paintings in Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu and other regions, Hubei watercolor heavy “production” to Liu Shouxiang, Xu Haigang and other watercolor painters. The works of a group of watercolor painters have made a big breakthrough in the language of watercolor painting materials and techniques compared with those of the previous generation of watercolor painters, and their visual and expressive power have effectively supplemented the “relaxed writing” of watercolor paintings, and greatly enhanced the expressive ability of watercolor paintings in the grand narrative and thematic art creations, and made a fairly important contribution to the construction of the visual nature of contemporary watercolor paintings. It has made an important contribution to the visual construction of contemporary watercolor painting. The emergence of “Hubei Phenomenon” in the field of watercolor painting in the National Art Exhibition is closely related to the foundation of art education in Hubei, the environment of art theory and criticism, and the construction of the academic discipline system of watercolor painting, and the teaching of watercolor in the academy plays an irreplaceable and constructive role in the inheritance of the watercolor technique and the exploration of the language of contemporary watercolor. As far as the National Art Exhibition is concerned, the contemporary art exhibition space has a very close relationship with the presentation of artistic effects. When people stay in the space of art museums, the visual tension will definitely be the first to dominate, and in the limited time and limited energy, the viewers' eyes are often attracted by the huge and well-produced works, but the works that are timeless and adhere to the ontology of the language of art and the expression of personal emotions are the prerequisite and foundation for the existence of art classics. Therefore, to deal with the conflict and contradiction between visual, thematic and artistic ontological language is a problem that Hubei watercolor must study and explore. In addition, it is obvious that contemporary painting is not a

problem to use and borrow existed images, but how to use images or how to deal with images is the key to the problem, that is to say, the use of images needs to have the ability to convert images, and not to lose or sacrifice the painting is the most important bottom line of contemporary painting. Hubei watercolor also in the college watercolor constantly seeking a contemporary expression, reflecting the contemporary humanistic consciousness and care, especially the young generation of watercolor painters, began to seek to subvert and break the more vernacular realistic performance, from the expression of the artistic language and the subject matter of the works, reflecting the contemporary Hubei watercolor painters have shown the courage to innovate and explore the spirit of a contemporary creative consciousness of self-awareness.

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