

Analysis of the Differences between Chinese and Western Painting and the Exploration of the Use of the Brush and Ink in Chinese Painting

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Abstract:

The progress in modern industrialization and the rise of the Internet have rendered increasingly abundant resources and approaches for painting. In the meanwhile, however, traditional culture is facing dramatic impacts that cannot be avoided. Coupled with the economic and social influences, people are becoming more and more unpeaceful and restless in the bottom of their hearts, as evidenced by the rising tendency of young people's difficulty in quieting themselves down to explore traditional brush and ink techniques in Chinese painting. Instead, they turn to painting forms and techniques that fit certain aesthetic requirements of art exhibitions and through which achievements can be accomplished more easily. From this perspective, the use of the brush and ink for traditional Chinese painting has been "abandoned" to some degree. It is undeniable that the creation of traditional Chinese painting calls for infusion of new elements. Art and aesthetics shall advance along with the development of the times, so it would be difficult to get adopted to the overall environment that is currently featured with diversified aesthetics if traditional elements are advocated stubbornly. But it must be clarified that Chinese painting is the traditional painting in China; it is the foundation, based on which all new and foreign thoughts and cultures are modified. In addition, the use of the brush and ink is a unique language form of Chinese painting, featured with unique technical techniques, expressive power, and cultural characteristics. From this perspective, the brush and ink are the most fundamental core of Chinese painting. Therefore, we cannot afford to abandon the use of the brush and ink as a language to express traditional Chinese painting. As a graduate student majoring on Chinese painting, I have always adhered to this principle, and will treat it as the cornerstone for my creation of paintings in the future. Based on this principle, modern new forms of painting are explored and studied in this paper to make the use of the brush and ink, a traditional expressive language of Chinese painting, serve new and modern creations.

Keywords:

Chinese Painting, Differences Between China and the West

1. Theory of “Making a Distance Between Chinese and Western Painting” by Pan Tianshou

The theory of “making a distance between Chinese and Western painting” can be considered a key proposition, or a “cultural strategy”, proposed by Pan Tianshou as regards the relationship between Chinese and Western painting. This proposition has come into being based on accumulation of practices and after a duration of time. In *A Strategy for the Survival of Traditional Chinese Painting: Pan Tianshou’s Thoughts on the Relationship of Chinese Painting*, it is pointed out that Pan Tianshou’s understanding and perception of Chinese and Western painting and their relationships have undergone a process, in which changes took place. During this process, his attitude in support of the integration of Chinese and Western painting shifted toward his theory of “making a distance between Chinese and Western painting” proposed in a later time, believing that the compromise between Chinese and Western art will undermine the characteristics of both sides.

Students, who are aware of art theories or the Marxist dialectical thoughts, all understand that total repudiation or acceptance does not prevail in either Chinese or Western painting. “Advance the culture and art of a nation by taking root in their traditions and learning from excellent cultures of other nations” can be almost considered a standard answer. Among students, however, very few are willing to explore how they should “take root” in the traditions, let alone the problem of “learning from”. I even blindly advocated the interaction and integration of Chinese and Western painting as a superb doctrine at one time until my reading of the aforesaid article. It was by then that I had come to realize that the combination of two kinds of art is not as simple as it seems to be sometimes. As pointed out by Pan Tianshou, the Eastern and Western arts exist as “two major systems that possess its own highest achievements”; and the two of them can learn from each other to supplement their own weaknesses for better development. However, if their learning from each other might undermine their own civilization achievements or eliminate the unique style of their own civilization, it would be better not to learn from each other. He once made a proper metaphor: “The national spirit is as good as the flesh and blood of national art, while foreign ideas serve as the nourishment for national art. If we rely solely on nourishment without training our muscles, there will be no successes to speak of.”

Chinese and Western painting are two systems that have evolved independently to this day. However, it is impossible to separate them from each other completely in context of globalization nowadays. Under such an impact, how can we make traditional Chinese painting adapted to the trend of the times while adhering to its traditions? As far as I’m concerned, we shall firstly realize: What is Chinese painting? What can be called a Chinese painting? What are the national spirit and humanistic connotations presented in Chinese painting? And what is the fundamental boundary between Chinese and Western painting? Explicit answers to these questions will actually make a distance between Chinese and Western painting. We shall consider the relationship between Chinese and Western painting and figure out how to advance Chinese painting with the traits of Western painting under the premise of “Chinese painting is the traditional painting of China.”

2. Fundamental Role of The Brush and Ink in Chinese Painting

Fu Baoshi proposed that “Chinese painting presents the internal power and spirit of brushstrokes when appreciated from a global perspective while the emotions behind the brushstroke technique from a local perspective.” The foundation of Chinese painting lies in the use of the brush and ink.

Brief introductions are presented to the spiritual verve, connotation, spirit, subjective atmosphere created by the painter, and layout of the painting in *Miscellaneous Opinions on Painting*, an article collected in *Discussion of Art* by Fu Baoshi, alongside the discussion of the use of the brush and ink. Although the brushstroke technique and the ink technique are elaborated separately, Fu Baoshi mentioned in the section of *On Spiritual Verve*: “The aura and verve is not the clouds, smokes, frogs or mists...The so-called true Qi between heaven and earth must be presented through the brush-and-ink painting.” “The aura and verve must be featured with the internal power and spirit of brushstrokes, which were called the framing method by the predecessors in ancient times and are the outlines as interpreted contemporarily.” Such opinions are in line with the vivid aura and verve, as well as the usage of brushstrokes, called for in the *Six Methods* by Xie He. Moreover, the two elements and their relationship are also interpreted in a more acceptable and understandable manner. In other words, aura and verve is not the clouds, smokes, frogs, or mists that are motionless in a painting, but the flowing and undiscernible spiritual energy between heaven and earth. It is an atmosphere that is alive and flowing, and needs be painted with the brush and ink. In a word, “the aura and verve must be featured with the internal power and spirit of brushstrokes,” which refers to the “usage of brushstrokes.”

As for the connotation behind the “usage of brushstrokes,” it should refer to the power of the brushstrokes as I superficially understood initially. In combination with my experience of copying paintings from the Song Dynasty in an early stage, I came to realize that the powerful and mighty brushstrokes that painters make with their brushes to paint tree branches should be considered the “usage of brushstrokes”—the conceptual meaning of the “brushstroke” is simply understood as expressing the quality of the lines. In a later period, thanks to more practices in copying other paintings and calligraphic works, my comprehension of the usage of brushstrokes has deepened to understand it as the usage of calligraphic brushstrokes. I have also tried to deepen my understanding through practices. For instance, I kept practicing calligraphy while copying and studying classic paintings from ancient times. However, when it came to the actual creation of a painting, I still treated expressing the quality of the lines as the key to the usage of brushstrokes in an extremely simple manner. Although the usage of calligraphic brushstrokes is indeed the core in the use of the brush and ink, it would be difficult for anybody to create artistic works if the quality of lines is solely highlighted without comprehension and expression of the “quality” of the objects to be depicted. This is also my fresh understanding of the “usage of brushstrokes” based on my experiences in creation, which can also be expressed as “the outlines as interpreted contemporarily” in Fu Baoshi’s words. In my own words, the brushstrokes shall be drawn in a form close to the “bone” of the material. For instance, the tendency in the growth of a tree, or the light and shade reflected due to the irregularity of a stone, shall be depicted in a manner close to the vein and trend of how the material will develop. This idea might sound a little virtual and elusive, but it is somewhat similar to the so-called “boundary of light and shade” in Western painting. On top of it, it may also share something in common with the highlighted

portrayal of bone joints in character sketch. At least, this is a point of view more convenient for me to understand the “usage of brushstrokes” at present.

3. Practical Application of the Brush and Ink in Chinese Painting

Huang Binhong pointed out that “The generation of aura and verve is due to the use of the brush and ink. Inappropriate use of the brush or ink will fail in expressing the aura and verve.” Huang Binhong explains the usage of brushstrokes in detail in the chapter of On Six Methods, saying that “To express the magic of brushstrokes, the positions of the major objects and secondary objects to be portrayed must be determined in the first place, followed by the determination of the shapes of the objects in the distance and proximity; then the sceneries shall be designed and arranged in the high and low places accordingly.” As for the usage of the brush and ink, Huang Binhong also proposed the famous Five Brushstroke Forms and Seven Ink Techniques principle. The Five Brushstroke Forms refers to five styles of brushstroke painting, which include “flatness”, “hold”, “roundness”, “heaviness”, and “variation”; while the Seven Ink Techniques denotes seven ways to use the ink, which include thick ink, light ink, break ink, piled ink, splash ink, burnt ink, and overnight ink.

Though it is easy to understand the Five Brushstroke Forms and Seven Ink Techniques under the theoretical framework, it is difficult to master and apply them proficiently in creation of paintings. For beginners of painting, extremely flat brushstrokes might lead to inflexible lines; brushstrokes, which are written with the brush held with too much strength, might cause sticky and sluggish images; brushstrokes that are too round might make the portrayed objects lack of vigor and appear inappropriately soft; heavy brushstrokes might produce turbid and unclear images; and brushstrokes that vary too much might present an unnatural and artificial work. Using the aforesaid brushstroke methods inappropriately without understanding their essences would lead to a great number of problems. This is the same in the use of ink techniques. For instance, thick ink is prone to caking and hardening; it is easy for overnight ink to become turbid and dirt; and light ink is so light that it might create unsolid images. The magic of ink techniques is attributed entirely to the use of the brush, while the magic of using the brush is based on calligraphy. Gu Ningyuan, a painter in the Ming Dynasty, pointed out that “If the brushstrokes are applied based on dryness and dullness of ink alongside a hazy atmosphere, there is no use of the brush and ink to speak of; if they are applied based on accumulation of ink without polishing the painting with water, nor is there the use of the brush and ink to speak of.” The relationship between the brush and ink is “No ink can be applied without the use of the brush, and ink is the only means to express the magic of the brush.” “When it comes to the usage of the brush, the usage of ink must be considered; the magic of ink techniques is attributed entirely to the use of the brush.” The brush and ink have been closely tied ever since Jing Hao in the Tang Dynasty. The combination of the brush and ink is a must for the creation of paintings, and the brush and ink cooperate with each other to generate the aura and verve of the paintings. When I studied and copied Wang Meng’s *Dwelling in the Qingbian Mountains*, I resorted to the use of a dry brush with little ink based on the wrinkle method rather than the use of a wet brush to delineate the images and polish the painting with water, due to my shallow understanding of the use of the brush and ink and the lack of practical experiences. In doing this, I copied the original work blindly and ignored the light and shade of the mountains, rocks, and trees caused by their directions toward the sun, thus resulting in an unsatisfactory visual effect and some inconsistencies in expression compared with

the original work. Wang Meng's paintings are featured with complex contents and a good number of brushstrokes by the wrinkle method, which will easily make the learners of his paintings focused on his brushstroke techniques while ignoring his ink techniques, resulting in the error of "the presence of brushstroke techniques while the absence of ink techniques." On the contrary, when I studied Hong Ren's paintings by coping his works, I was faced with the problem of "the presence of ink techniques while the absence of brushstroke techniques" due to the simplicity of and limited brushstrokes by the wrinkle method in his works. Although brushstrokes are adopted by Hong Ren in watering and coloring his paintings, either no brushstrokes or apparently prominent brushstrokes might occur in my actual creation of paintings due to my poor mastery of this method. I tried and applied this method to draw large-sized paintings with due attention. As a saying goes, "A painting with the presence of outlines but the absence of the wrinkle method lacks brushstroke techniques; while a painting with the presence of the wrinkle method but without the differentiation between lightness and heaviness and between light and shade lacks ink techniques." Theories of painting are always considered simple and easy to understand when they are read for the first time, but they can be deciphered more profoundly after some practices and personal experience in painting.

4. Conclusions

Virtualness and Reality, an article collected in Self-statement by Huang Binhong, elaborates on brushstroke techniques, covering flatness, hold, roundness, heaviness but not variation. The core of virtualness and realness also lies in the use of the brush and ink. In other words, "The exquisiteness of a painting relies on sketching completely; the rendering is performed after the sketching is done." Sketching refers to the use of the brush, and rendering means to color the painting with the ink. The quality of the work by the brush and ink is closely correlated to the quality of the entire painting. However, either the brush or ink techniques must be highlighted to present a distinction between virtualness and reality, or there would be no space for creation. This is the so-called coexistence of existence and nothingness (virtualness and reality) in the Tao Te Ching of China. In using the brush, it is easy to draw images with the brush on the paper but difficult to draw the artistic conception with the brush off the paper. Similarly, it is easy to draw real parts but difficult to draw virtual parts in a painting. This is because the brush and ink must be applied on the Chinese art paper on one hand, but the virtual parts cannot be outlined and polished repeatedly and carefully like the real parts. Too apparent mistakes are not allowed because it would be difficult to remedy such mistakes. If errors are made in the real parts, they may be adjusted and fixed with the help of thick or heavy ink. For errors in the virtual parts, however, repeated modifications would only lead to stiffness of the images and allow no room for further creation. This will even bring significant negative impacts on the entire painting. I always leave out the areas for virtual parts on purpose when the real parts are painted. Sometimes, a goat-hair brush will be used to wet the boundaries between the virtual parts and the real parts with water or light ink for transition, so that the virtual parts and the real parts can be integrated in a better manner. For blank spaces left that will render more space for imagination, they must be handled with more skillful techniques. This is also a matter concerning the use of the brush and ink. The virtual and real parts are like the positive and negative shapes in Western graphic design, both of which serve as a key element for the integrity of a work and are equally important in the arrangement of the layout. The negative parts, which are the blank spaces (virtual parts) in traditional Chinese

painting, are often neglected or placed in a less important position when a person starts to learn Chinese painting. This is also a mistake that many beginners of Chinese painting are easy to make in practice.

Conflicts of Interest

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