

A Study on Linear Transformation from Two-Dimensional Calligraphy and Painting to Three-Dimensional Sculpture

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Abstract:

The shared origin of calligraphy and painting is a pivotal aesthetic theory in Chinese calligraphy and traditional Chinese painting, which has propelled the development of Chinese calligraphic and painterly arts. As an art form that “expresses meaning through lines”, it has been widely applied across various categories of Chinese art. Sculptural art, in alignment with calligraphy and painting, also emphasizes the fluid beauty of lines, as well as rhythm, cadence and artistic charm. This paper starts from the relationships between calligraphy and painting, calligraphy and sculpture, and painting and sculpture, to explore the evolution from two-dimensional art to three-dimensional art.

Keywords:

Shared Origin of Calligraphy and Painting, Line Drawing, Calligraphy, Sculpture

1. The Development of the Theory of “Shared Origin of Calligraphy and Painting”

The term “shared origin of calligraphy and painting” refers to the common root and parallel development of Chinese calligraphy and painting throughout history. Shuowen Jiezi (Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters) states: “Wen (patterns) are interwoven drawings.” Since ancient times, painting emerged prior to writing. Before the invention of characters, some ethnic minorities in China recorded events by the color and knotting of ropes. Primitive ancestors also depicted impressions and represented nature through painting. Thus, the emergence of painting naturally paved the way for the birth of writing. Tang Lan noted in Chinese Paleography: “With painting and a unified language, writing emerged at once when culture developed to such a demand.”

Before the advent of writing, painting served as the visual representation of language, undertaking the social functions of recording events and conveying information. As writing evolved over time, painting gradually detached from its proto-literate function and developed into an independent art form. Meanwhile, the simple and rugged “pictographic writing” was generalized, refined and symbolized, first evolving into pictographic characters, then undergoing repeated simplification and transformation to give rise to oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, seal characters, clerical script, regular script, cursive script and running script, up to the

Chinese characters used today. Since primitive painting and writing shared identical social significance and functions despite not being equivalent to each other, they share the same origin and are inextricably linked. Calligraphy, based on writing, expresses the artist's temperament, character and sentiment through dots and lines on rice paper with brushes and ink, thereby achieving aesthetic realm. From this perspective, calligraphy and painting share the same origin. Although the theory had certain limitations when proposed, it is undoubtedly valid.

The earliest interpretation of the theory appeared in Zhang Yuanyuan's *Records of the Famous Painters of All Dynasties: On the Origin of Painting in the Tang Dynasty*: "At that time, calligraphy and painting were unified and undivided, and the creation of images was still rudimentary. Since ideas could not be conveyed, calligraphy emerged; since forms could not be visualized, painting arose." Zhang Yuanyuan held that writing was created inspired by in-depth observation of natural objects, emphasizing the inseparability of calligraphy and painting in their early stages, both originating from ancestors' observation and imitation of natural phenomena. Later, in the Northern Song Dynasty, Guo Xi recorded in *Lofty Ideals of Forests and Springs*: "This is not difficult; drawing principles are similar to calligraphic techniques. It is said that Wang Xizhi loved geese, taking the twist of their necks as a metaphor for the wrist rotation in writing, which is identical to brushwork in painting. Therefore, most skilled calligraphers are often skilled painters, owing to their unobstructed brushwork." This indicates that both calligraphy and painting emphasize rhythm in aesthetic standards, enabling painters to pursue artistic realms through painterly and calligraphic brushwork, and vice versa.

The theory was extensively practiced in the Yuan Dynasty alongside the development of calligraphy and painting. During this period, Chinese literati used traditional painting to express their thoughts and emotions, spawning the Literati Painting school that unified poetry, calligraphy and painting as "The Three Perfections". The origin of literati painting can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, marked by social and political chaos, frequent warfare and widespread poverty. Coupled with the admiration for Laozi and Zhuangzi's philosophy, literati and scholar-officials chose to retire from the dark political arena and indulge in landscapes. The "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove" and other literati groups expressed their aspirations through painting, gradually forming a distinctive literati painting genre. In the Yuan Dynasty, Zhao Mengfu, as the leading representative, replaced "depiction" with "writing" in Chinese painting, applying calligraphic brushwork to painting. He systematically proposed the theory of "shared origin of calligraphy and painting" and pioneered a new artistic path—painting style based on calligraphy.

In the Qing Dynasty, the proposition of "integrating bronze and stone inscription styles into painting" emerged, emphasizing that "painting techniques follow calligraphic rules" and applying the brushwork of bronze and stone inscriptions to painting. Artists such as Wu Changshuo and Huang Binhong maximized the brushwork with epigraphic charm, creating a vigorous and ancient calligraphic and painterly style. To this day, the idea of "shared origin of calligraphy and painting" continues to enrich the techniques of Chinese painting and calligraphy, inspiring artists with divergent thinking and further promoting the integration and development of the two art forms.

2. The Practice of the Theory of “Shared Origin of Calligraphy and Painting”

2.1. Zhao Mengfu’s Integration of Calligraphy into Painting

Zhao Mengfu’s *Elegant Rocks and Sparse Woods* (Figure 1) best embodies his idea that “calligraphy and painting are inherently the same”, where every line and dot embodies the essence of calligraphy. The painting depicts ancient trees and new bamboos growing among elegant rocks, with an inscription: “Rocks are painted with flying white brushstrokes, trees with Zhou script, and bamboos with the Eight Principles of Yong. If one understands this, one shall know that calligraphy and painting are inherently the same.” This inscription reflects Zhao Mengfu’s practical experience in calligraphic and painterly creation. He painted bamboos like writing characters, applying the “Eight Principles of Yong” from calligraphy, using flying white brushstrokes for rocks and seal script techniques for trees, making viewers perceive calligraphy while appreciating the painting. The shades, dryness/wetness, squareness/roundness and speed of brush and ink demonstrate the painter’s literary and calligraphic accomplishments, expressing boldness through “freehand brushwork”. This research and practice of calligraphic brushwork not only facilitated the integration of calligraphy and painting but also greatly promoted the development of literati painting, making the theory of “shared origin of calligraphy and painting” a unique landscape in the history of Chinese art.



Figure 1. Elegant Rocks and Sparse Woods.

Zhao Mengfu’s concept is also reflected in *Two Rams* (Figure 2). For instance, the longer wool of the goats is painted with dry brushes, resulting in abundant flying white brushstrokes, which enhance the permeability between tufts of wool. The flying white brushstrokes on the goat’s body echo the blank spaces on the ears and head, making the goats vivid and harmoniously proportioned.



Figure 2. Two Rams.

Zhao Mengfu in the Yuan Dynasty practiced and advanced the theory of “shared origin of calligraphy and painting” on the basis of predecessors, applying calligraphic brushwork to traditional Chinese painting, laying an essential practical and theoretical foundation for the mainstream ink wash paintings and theories of later generations.

2.2. Huang Binhong’s “Five Brushstrokes and Seven Ink Techniques”

Huang Binhong, a representative of the Qing Dynasty’s “painting techniques follow calligraphic rules”, achieved remarkable accomplishments in both Chinese painting and calligraphy. These achievements stemmed from the influence of his enlightenment teacher in childhood, who taught him that monotonous calligraphy resulted from rigid adherence to fixed methods without flexibility, and enlightened him on the aesthetic and technical significance of painting for calligraphy, as well as the possibility for calligraphy to borrow painting techniques to enrich emotional expression. His innovation is exemplified in the long scroll Thousand-Character Classic in Cursive Script, where he skillfully applied clerical script turning techniques to cursive script, making each stroke steady and powerful. Focusing on the coherence of brush momentum rather than decorative ink effects, he achieved vivid overall artistic charm, truly realizing “calligraphy with painterly qualities”. Huang Binhong’s regular script, clerical script, running script and cursive script all feature distinctive personal aesthetics, rooted in traditional culture while presenting unique features with the times, injecting new vitality into Chinese calligraphy.

As a master of modern Chinese landscape painting, Huang Binhong’s creative career is divided into two periods: the “White Binhong” period and the “Black Binhong” period.

In the “White Binhong” period, Huang Binhong copied works of Shen Zhou, Dong Qichang, Shi Tao, Yun Shouping, Jianjiang and others in his early years, absorbing the elegant and beautiful style of Dong Qichang’s paintings, the flexible brushwork of Shi Tao, and the folding belt texture method typical of Jianjiang. He then learned from the Four Masters of the Yuan Dynasty: the dry brush techniques for withered grass and stones in Huang Gongwang’s light crimson landscapes, the splash ink techniques of Ni Zan, and the ink-wash effect of Wu Zhen’s preference for wet brushes. Among Northern Song masters, he focused on copying Li Cheng and Fan Kuan’s layered and profound works painted with accumulated dots, learning ink soaking techniques; among Southern Song masters, he learned the powerful brushwork of Ma Yuan and Xia Gui. During the “White Binhong” period, Huang Binhong derived his unique aesthetic taste and painting style from copying traditional masters, embodying the transition from “learning from nature” to “drawing from the heart”.

Influenced by multiple factors, Huang Binhong’s works shifted from “white” to “black” in his later years. He formed a style characterized by darkness, thickness, heaviness and density through perceiving, comprehending and summarizing numerous previous sketches, thus inaugurating the “Black Binhong” period. He innovated continuously on the traditional basis, summarizing the “Five Brushstrokes” (smooth, round, sustained, powerful, varied) and “Seven Ink Techniques” (thick, light, broken, accumulated, scorched, washed, retired ink) in brushwork. All these theories were based on his profound understanding of calligraphy and applied to paintings. For example, in *Sitting in the Rain on Qingcheng Mountain* (Figure 3), Huang Binhong used ink soaking and color soaking techniques to create a misty rain effect, presenting

a quiet and moist landscape of mountains and cottages. The painting features a harmonious combination of virtuality and reality, reasonable blank spaces, and a profound sense of massiveness, truly realizing “painting with calligraphic qualities” in Chinese painting.



Figure 3. Sitting in the Rain on Qingcheng Mountain.

Huang Binhong's art is characterized by “emphasis on inner beauty and vigorous richness”. In Chinese painting, he prioritized the inner beauty of brush and ink momentum over the external beauty of structural and compositional rationality. His innovation in brush and ink was rooted in profound national spirit and the theoretical foundation of ancient Chinese art. He absorbed the strengths of ancient painting masters and formed an independent aesthetic style through personal artistic processing, providing a powerful practical example for the development of the theory of “shared origin of calligraphy and painting”.

3. Modeling with Lines

The inherent connection between calligraphy and painting has been corroborated by numerous theories and practices since ancient times. In modern times, Xu Bing combined the two-dimensional arts of calligraphy and painting—both “modeling with lines”—to create Text Sketching (Figure 4), a landscape painting expressed through characters, by writing landscapes in response to real mountains and transcending the concepts of calligraphy and painting to touch the essence of Chinese culture.

The integration of calligraphy and painting occurs within the two-dimensional space. The evolution from two-dimensional art to three-dimensional art refers to the stereoscopic development of calligraphic and painterly art forms, giving rise to two major artistic approaches: integrating painting into sculpture and integrating calligraphy into sculpture.



Figure 4. Text Sketching.

3.1. Integrating Painting into Sculpture

Since the Neolithic Age, practical sculptures created by primitive ancestors have embodied the core characteristics of ancient Chinese sculpture: “integration of painting and sculpture” and “color serving form”. Ancestors combined painting with ceramic sculpture to aesthetically decorate daily utensils. For example, the maiden-head-shaped painted pottery bottle unearthed at Dadiwan in Qin’an, Gansu, is decorated with triangular stem-leaf patterns and simplified bird patterns. Moreover, numerous examples exist throughout ancient Chinese history. Liu Daocheng recorded in *Supplements to Ancient Famous Paintings* (Song Dynasty) that Yang Huizhi created extremely charming works by integrating sculpture with painting. For instance, he sculpted a statue of the famous actor Liu Beiting at Jingzhao Mansion, where passers-by could recognize Liu Beiting merely by the back view, demonstrating the extensive application and development of the painting-sculpture integration in ancient Chinese sculpture. This form was used for thousands of years, yet painting remained integrated into sculpture as a two-dimensional form. Nevertheless, the ancient Chinese ideology of “painting and sculpture are inseparable” enabled artists to subjectively absorb painterly brushwork and human body representation techniques, eventually presenting them in three-dimensional art.

Given the inextricable connection between traditional Chinese painting and sculpture, it is necessary to explore the bond linking them. When discussing the methodology of Chinese painting, Shi Lu stated: “Lines are transformed into brushes to establish form, convey spirit and express charm. Though simple, lines generate diverse beauties through cadenced variations.” “Line” is the modeling method of Chinese painting. Throughout the history of Chinese art, “modeling with lines” prevails across various art fields, constructing a unique artistic style distinctive to the Chinese nation. Thus, traditional Chinese sculpture, nurtured by unique creative thinking and methods, inherits the artistic gene of linear language and establishes the artistic tradition of “modeling with lines”.

Throughout the history of figure sculpture, He Chaozong of the Ming Dynasty pioneered the rapid development of Dehua porcelain sculpture in the Ming Dynasty with his artistic feature of “sculpting form and painting quality”. His statues are based on stereoscopic “linear” language, combining the jade-like warm “Chinese white” porcelain with his personal aesthetic imagery to showcase national aesthetic and artistic spirit. Furthermore, line is an abstract language, and China has been a reserved and restrained nation since ancient times, which determines that Chinese art is an impressionistic art expressing imagery. Therefore, He Chaozong’s line-based ceramic

sculpture set an example for the pursuit of imagery beauty in traditional ceramic and sculptural art. His most renowned work, *Guanyin Crossing the Sea* (Figure 5), stereoscopically materializes line drawing through sculptural techniques. He uses linear elements to represent the outer contour, block transitions, clothing folds and decorations of the Guanyin statue. Based on a thorough understanding of Guanyin's character, he creates the overall form "by capturing imagery", integrates the formal meaning of lines, deletes secondary physical forms and textures, captures the general momentum of form with a highly concise approach, and simplifies and exaggerates features to form linear contours. As described by Mr. Li Zehou, the "rough outline of the overall image" demonstrates the roundness and solemnity of the Guanyin statue. The carving of clothing folds combines the strengths of Gu Kaizhi's "dense style" (Eastern Jin Dynasty) and Zhang Sengyou's "sparse style" (Southern Dynasties), featuring a well-organized combination of density and sparseness, and unrestrained brushwork like "water shield strips". In details, hair strands are carved with even and fine lines, where dense and repeated lines form a rhythmic beauty with the large blank spaces of the headscarf.

In modern times, numerous artists integrate painting into sculpture. Shiwan ceramic sculpture in Foshan, Guangdong, is a typical representative. Pan Chaoan, a leading inheritor of Shiwan ceramic sculpture, is both a sculptor and a painter. He integrated the "Dai Style" created by Dai Dunbang with traditional Shiwan ceramic sculpture to create unique figure statues. A comparison between his sculptures and paintings (Figure 6) shows that the outer contours of the figure statues are as smooth and powerful as line-drawn figures, without complex structural transitions, presenting a coherent and vivid artistic charm. In an interview with art historian Song Weiguang, sculptor Huang Sheng further stated that the muscle modeling of the figures in his work *Wu Song Fighting the Tiger* (Figure 7) was inspired by the figures painted in Guan Xiu's *Arhat Paintings* (Figure 8). He absorbed figure modeling methods from traditional painting to create simple and powerful sculptures, emphasizing that Western art expresses realistic "texture" through blocks, while traditional Chinese sculpture expresses inner freedom through the "texture" of lines.



Figure 5. *Guanyin Crossing the Sea.*



Figure 6. *Treasure Vase Dragon King: Painting and Sculpture.*



Figure 7. *Wu Song Fights the Tiger.*



Figure 8. *The Sixteen Arhats.*

3.2. Integrating Painting into Sculpture

The creative concept of “integrating calligraphy into sculpture” was proposed by sculptor Huang Sheng. Through years of artistic creation, he implicitly integrated calligraphy into sculpture, creating diverse and highly concise lines in sculptural works. In an interview with art historian Song Weiguang, Huang Sheng stated that the internal structure of sculptural art shares certain similarities with the spatial treatment of calligraphy. For example, in *Zhang Qian Stele*, ancient artists applied different spatial treatments—compression or stretching—to different characters. Huang Sheng absorbed these spatial techniques and applied them organically to sculptural creation. Based on personal aesthetic imagery, he deformed and compressed figures to enrich layers, and strengthened the “linear language” through compression, ultimately presenting a stereoscopic sense of writing. The cursive script of the Zhang Dynasty is extensively applied by Huang Sheng to his sculptures. For instance, *Five Heroes on Langya Mountain* (Figure 9) is a successful work where he applied the writing rules and brushwork of Zhang Dynasty cursive script to sculptural carving techniques.



Figure 9. *The Five Heroes of Langya Mountain.*

Calligraphy inspires artists not only spatially but also spiritually in expression. This is because calligraphy is an art form that writes the imagery of things through lines with brushes and ink as media. Through brush and ink techniques, artists integrate temperament and emotion to reach the “realm of heaven and earth”, express heartfelt feelings, and enhance personal “cultivation” and “nurturance”. It is evident that both calligraphy and traditional Chinese sculpture emphasize the unity of form and artistic conception in expression and spiritual connotation, namely the “harmony between man and nature”. Developed within the same cultural context, calligraphy and

traditional sculpture both carry the unique aesthetic concepts of the Chinese nation. Against this background, “integrating calligraphy into sculpture” is an effective approach for artists to broaden creative thinking and techniques.

The integration of calligraphy into sculpture endows statues with both realism and transcendent artistic conception. Drawing on calligraphic brushwork and aesthetic principles provides contemporary sculpture with richer and more profound creative paths, which is not only a method for contemporary people to learn from the past and expand the present but also brings new enlightenment and influence to contemporary sculpture. With cultural development and revival, calligraphy will surely inject new vitality into the development of contemporary art.

4. Conclusions

The theory of “shared origin of calligraphy and painting” expounds the relationship between “calligraphy” and “painting”. Despite essential differences, the two art forms are closely linked in character expression and aesthetic representation. Since Zhang Yanyuan proposed the “unity of calligraphy and painting” and “shared techniques of calligraphy and painting” in the Tang Dynasty, the theory has been summarized, generalized and developed by numerous art theorists, becoming one of the oldest propositions in the history of Chinese painting theory. From Zhao Mengfu’s representative works of “shared origin of calligraphy and painting” in the Yuan Dynasty to Huang Binhong’s “calligraphy with painterly qualities and painting with calligraphic qualities” in the Qing Dynasty, countless masters have practiced and verified the correctness and feasibility of the theory, making indelible contributions to the future development of Chinese calligraphic and painterly arts.

Furthermore, as Cheng Ji stated: “Philosophy always provides a background for technical activities with its broad thinking, and reveals ideal technical goals for humans by transcending specific practices. This is of great value for ordinary craftsmen to overcome the blindness of technical work and more clearly understand the nature, laws and values of technology.” Through research and understanding of calligraphy and painting, this paper recognizes their unique aesthetic characteristics and the creative method of “modeling with lines”, providing new ideas and inspiration for the development of traditional Chinese sculpture. The integration of calligraphy, painting and sculpture promotes the evolution and development from two-dimensional art to three-dimensional art.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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