

Modelling and Brushwork: A Discussion on the Creation of Chinese Ink Figure Painting

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Abstract: Since the 20th century, Chinese ink figure painting has pioneered diverse expressive forms along the path of "East-West integration." With the development of the times and changing aesthetic demands, questions about the development and creation of figure paintings, which emphasize moulding, inevitably relate to the interplay between brushwork and form. This article, starting from the essence of Chinese ink figure painting and combining the creative practices of Chinese ink painters, proposes strengthening sketch training to enhance the understanding of form. It also advocates for life studies to delve into real-life experiences, aiming to convey the spirit of the era through the depiction of figures. The focus is placed on the figures themselves, followed by integration with brush and ink to address the relationship between form and brushwork. The intention is to connect with contemporary art in a diverse artistic environment to advance Chinese ink figure painting.

Keywords: Chinese ink figure painting; modelling; brush and ink; sketching.

1. Introduction

The appearance of any artwork, whether in terms of composition, moulding, or its unique artistic style, embodies the artist's personality, emotions, and cultural cultivation. Starting from the essence of Chinese ink figure painting, the author focuses on exploring the fundamental language of figure painting and further contemplates the relationship between brushwork and form, considering how to balance this point of tension in the creative process.

2. The Fundamental Language of Chinese Ink Figure Painting

Since 1949, during the transition of Chinese painting from tradition to modernity, the depiction of real-life scenes and the expression of the spirit of the times have become its intrinsic driving forces. Examining the works of influential Chinese ink figure painters since 1949, such as Jiang Zhaohe's "The Refugees", Zhou Sicong's "The Miners", and Yuan Wu's contemporary piece "Northeast Anti-Japanese Allied Forces", their commonality lies not only in the artists' superb technical skills but also in the emotional depth embedded in the works, which resonates deeply with viewers. Unlike landscape painting, which aims to create an idealized scene, or bird-and-flower painting, which expresses emotions through symbolic objects, Chinese ink figure painting—especially realistic ink figure painting—should, in the context of contemporary aesthetics, refocus its creative emphasis on the study of its core essence. The essence of figure painting is the depiction of the human form, and the key to achieving this lies in the handling of form and brushwork.

3. Brushwork and Modelling in Ink Figure Painting

Line modelling, focusing on ink and brush is the most significant external characteristics of Chinese painting, in addition to the different media, and other types of painting the biggest difference is the traditional Chinese cultural

connotations and aesthetic connotations, but also Chinese painting based on the world's art in the forest of the fundamentals, the performance of this carrier is "ink and brush". "Painting must be a reflection of the beliefs that people pursue and follow, and based on the realm, we promote the spirit of traditional culture and the humanistic realm of the times through the carrier of ink and brush, ink and brush can become a kind of 'meteorological', but also reflects how people in the natural casting of the mind and to grasp the way to set up a frame, set up an image. ." [1] Brush and ink as a carrier is to serve for painting, for ink figure painting the relationship between "modelling" and "brush and ink" has been a topic of endless debate in its development, especially for the realistic ink figure painting which focuses on modelling.

Since the 20th century, on the road of "fusion of East and West" in ink figure painting, whether it is Lu Shen and Zhou Sicong in the north under the "Xu Jiang system", or Fang Zengxian in the south under the "Zhejiang School of Figure Painting", or Huang Hai and Ye Qianyu, who entered the painting in the form of sketching, all of them have opened up various forms of expression in the creation of traditional Chinese figure paintings. Fang Zengxian of the "Zhejiang School of Figure Painting" in the north, or Huang Zhou, Ye Qianyu and so on, all of them opened up a variety of forms of expression for the creation of traditional Chinese figure paintings, and their commonality is that compared with the traditional figure paintings of the image modelling seems to be similar or not, there is more modelling rigour, which is more in line with the aesthetic needs of the times, and the difference is only in the modelling and the emphasis on ink and brushwork, which are just different. Jiang Zhaohe said when talking about sketching: "The relationship between form and spirit, although it is said to be analysed from two aspects, but not in isolation to see which one. Form is the object that exists objectively, and God is the life that is reflected in the form by the inner thought. Without God, sex is dead, without form, God does not appear, God is in the form, the form is an objective object for vision, the two are dialectical unity. All artistic and aesthetic views of the plastic

arts are supposed to start from here." [2] Zhang Jiangzhou once said: "This phenomenon reflects a kind of inertia in thinking, an unwillingness to actively confront urban issues. It is more convenient and direct to use traditional Chinese brush and ink techniques to depict ethnic minorities. Painting urban scenes is not simply a matter of changing the subject to urban themes. Traditional brush and ink techniques cannot effectively represent urban life. As the content of the artwork changes, so too must the formal language of brush and ink. Therefore, the issue of urbanization forces contemporary artists to find a transformation in their artistic language." [3]

Therefore, in the creation of realistic ink figure painting, as we pursue the goal of "conveying spirit through form" and "achieving both form and spirit," the primary issue to address is the depiction of the human form. To resolve this, we can start from the following three aspects.

One of them is to strengthen the training of sketching, improve the understanding and knowledge of sketching modelling, and extract the essence from it. "Although modelling ability is not the only factor that determines creation, the stronger this ability is, the more depth its portrayal of characters is likely to have, and the higher the success rate of creation." [4] Wu Xiansheng once said, "It is not easy to draw realistic figures, and it is even more difficult to draw realistic figures in ink, requiring more work. First of all, you need to have a considerable modelling foundation, which requires a process, a lot of sketching, sketching, and creative practice is indispensable. I have seen the sketches, sketches and anatomical atlas exercises drawn by Mr Fang Zengxian for the study of figure modelling, and the degree of rigour and sophistication is by no means beyond the reach of ordinary people." [5] Throughout the 20th century, famous ink figure painters have possessed very strong sketching and modelling skills, and have a deep and profound understanding and research of Western painting. Their success provides us with a clearer and more positive direction. Only with a deeper and higher understanding of sketching can we better understand modelling in order to deal with the relationship between form and brushwork.

The creator of "Xu Jiang System", Mr Xu Beihong Jiang Zhao, has a strong element of sketching in his paintings, and their "brush and ink" is to serve the existence of modelling and structure. Even if they consciously weakened the effect of light and shadow in the sketch, but the picture still appeared a lot of side strokes to chafing performance of black and white before and after the relationship between reality and reality, still with a very strong light and shadow sketching effect. The "Zhejiang School of Figure Painting", represented by Fang Zengxian and Li Zhenjian, also came from drawing, but started modelling with structure, and the ink and brush were borrowed from the technique of writing flowers and birds for the performance of figures, and the ink and brush flavour was more prominent. Due to the special characteristics of Chinese painting ink and paper, it is often difficult to express not only the structure but also the flavour of a stroke, so we will find that the "Zhejiang School" figure painting works, most of which are dominated by a single person shaping a large scene with a relatively small number of combination of images, one of the reasons is that there are many characters to deal with the relationship between the picture is not only the ink and brush, but also the overall layout and modelling. One of the reasons for this is that when there are many figures, the relationship between the picture is not only a matter of brushwork and ink, but also the overall

layout and modelling. The difference between the northern and southern regions has led to different cultural practices between the north and the south, which has led to such changes in brushwork and ink. In the current era of Chinese painting, the requirements of various types of exhibition halls for the size of paintings objectively make the paintings bigger and bigger, which is a problem we need to face. The way to solve this problem is not to abandon sketching, on the contrary, it should be more in-depth study to use its advantages to serve our modelling. As Lu Shen said on the issue of modelling and artistic treatment: "Historically, Chinese paintings have been focused on ink and brush, which limits the development of Chinese painting. The modelling should be elaborate, and without personal originality, it is just the same. When people look at Chinese paintings, they look at the modelling first, then the brush and ink, and what impresses them most is something with shape. So historically anyone who has made a breakthrough in modelling stands out." [6] Therefore, for ink and wash figure painting, we should always put "people" in the first place, and put shaping the image in the first place, and talk about brush and ink on the basis of shape.

At different stages, the emphasis on figure modelling training varies. It begins with the initial stage of "drawing people accurately," then progresses to enhancing the sense of form and the ability to generalize, thereby improving the capacity to depict artistic subjects. This comprehensive training aims to fully develop modelling skills. Truly understanding the essence of sketch modelling, and subsequently integrating it with the brush and ink techniques of Chinese painting, allows for the effective expression of Chinese ink figure painting.

The second point is sketching, here sketching is divided into two aspects, one of which is sketching on skills, referring to sketching to shape the image. Sketching in ink and wash figure painting is different from sketching in western painting, not only the observation method is different, but also Chinese painting is not affected by light, and it is concerned with "yin and yang, reality and emptiness". From the very beginning of learning to draw, we have been stressing the concept of "rigorous and accurate modelling" of western drawing and the cultural spirit of traditional Chinese ink painting are in "conflict", which is related to the cultural environment we live in, and it is not possible for us to completely abandon drawing and break the "convention". We can't completely abandon sketching and break the "convention". In this regard, one of the most important ways to balance the relationship between modelling and ink and brushwork is through sketching. Sketching is throughout the entire ink figure painting study and creation, different stages of our purpose for sketching is different. "Sketching is another important method of exercising figure modelling, and is an important means of learning ink figure painting, through sketching can not only enable you to master the method of observing and understanding and the ability to express the object, but also is the best way to verify the combination of copying the traditional techniques and the laws of nature." [7]

Higher requirements of sketching is to research, experiment for the purpose, from observation to thinking, through the ordinary appearance, to discover the object's state of mind, feel its inner world, and then detached from the object to convey the inner feelings, return to the essence of sketching rather than photo-shopping. This kind of sketching can't stay in the stage of realism, but emphasises the feeling, and penetrates into the inner spirit of the object. In the process

of sketching to avoid programming, to look for different models in the modelling of ink and brush to give the feeling of its contrast changes, through this sketching out of the works, is the unity of the subject and object, neither completely objective, nor completely subjective, is more touching re-creation of the painting. The purpose of doing this is to exercise observation, perception of "form" and generalisation of "basic shape" in the process of sketching. Through sketching, we break the inertia thinking, cultivate the "feeling", strengthen the expressive power of brush and ink, enrich the possibilities of brush and ink, and find ways and means to strengthen the feeling without losing the modelling through such training.

Another purpose of sketching is to go deeper into life, in order to understand more deeply the real state of the object to be expressed. Only familiar with the performance of the object, in order to the character of the real state of natural expression, a character's image is not simple appearance, which includes its inner cultivation life experience occupational class and so on. Only by really going into their lives can we achieve a true expression, painting is the expression of emotion, never just stay on the surface, is the pursuit of the spirit. When we express people, we have to have higher requirements and make them have a "sense of life". In his "Creation Notes," Tian Liming wrote: "The emotions of Eastern people reveal their character in subtle details and display depth in simplicity. Simplicity encompasses vastness, while openness contains wisdom. It seems that everything is embraced within simplicity. Simplicity excels in its naturalness; only what is natural can be considered truly simple." [8]



Figure 1. Zhou Sicong, Miners-1: The King's Way to the Happy Land. 177-236cm 1982

Zhou Sicong's series of Miners (Figure. 1) can strongly illustrate the importance of in-depth sketching. If "The People and the Premier" is a representation of her realistic talent, then the picture that takes the image of miners as a prototype to express the situation of the Chinese people in the historical period of the motherland which was plagued by many disasters and difficulties is the beginning of the transformation from realism to expression, from figurative modelling to personalised modelling language, and it is also a breakthrough in the relationship between modelling and ink and brushwork. It is mentioned in the article "Revelation of History - Conceptualisation of the Creation of the Miners' Picture" that in order to create this theme, they went to different mines several times to understand the state of familiar miners, their sufferings, struggles, their joys and sorrows. "We decided to go to Liaoyuan Coal Mine in Jilin Province to live in depth. So we chose this mine because it

used to be one of the coal mines where the Japanese militarists concentrated the most Chinese labourers' drudgery in order to plunder our country's resources during the period of pseudo-Manchu, and the old miners here were the ones who felt the pain of losing their country the most deeply." [9] In the process of in-depth sketching, Zhou Sicong drew a large number of sketches of the image of miners and miners' children) (Figure 2), and through the communication between the miners to do the oral text material collation, really from the image to the culture of the miners' life in depth, into their emotions in order to express their image of the times. In the final picture, we can also feel the mapping of the miners' sketching image in the facial image, and we can experience their shadows in the complete creation of the characters' inner shape.



Figure 2. Zhou Sicong, Sketches of miners, 1980

As for the deformation of the characters' body language, Mr Zhou Sicong said: "When I painted the Miners' Picture later, its content was to express the history of the Chinese people when they were the slaves of the country, and the thoughts and feelings of the Chinese people at that time were distorted, and in the state of repression, it would not be possible to remain unchanged by itself. I wanted to paint that kind of repressed state, the kind of state where you can't get up from the pressure. Under the demands of such thoughts and feelings, I began to distort people a bit." [10] Zhou Sicong realistic modelling ability is indisputable, "miners" of this modelling and ink processing, not deliberately borrowed from the West, but the true feelings, is the artist of the times background character care after in-depth understanding of the emotional and artistic crystallisation, for the creation and development of Chinese ink and wash figure painting provides a very valuable research value of the significance of the creation and development of Chinese ink and wash figure painting.

Critic Shao Dazhen, in his article "Practice and Theory", commented on contemporary ink figure painting painter Yuan Wu: "He attaches great importance to sketching, and attributes the purpose of sketching to two things: to collect materials and to train modelling." In the article "About Creation", Mr Yuan Wu talked about the creation of the Resistance Group Painting: "Another taboo in creation is to work behind closed doors, make up plots, make up images, tell stories or think about what others have painted before. Even as I painted the Resistance Group Painting (Figure 3), I went to the Northeast forest area several times in winter to repeatedly experience how people in the cold survive in the sea of snow and ice, and only then was I able to paint a picture with content." [11] Without going deep into life and having real feelings, it is never possible to create works that move people. Sketching in both senses is the necessary way to learn and create Chinese ink figure painting, and it is also the most effective way to deal with the relationship between modelling and brushwork.



Figure 3. Yuan Wu, Resistance Group Painting, 580·330cm, 2009

With the development and progress of society, humanity now lives in a new media environment. We can easily use various technological means to display or "restore" different figures in images. However, technology cannot replace art. The characteristics of figures inevitably differ across different eras, social classes, and cultures. While some superficial features are easy to depict, the cultural context of different periods and the unique characteristics shaped by each era present challenges that require careful thought and attention in figure painting. This is precisely why sketching remains so important. Art can let imagination soar, but it must remain grounded. A good work of art must also stand the test of time.

Most contemporary Chinese ink figure painters do not use traditional imagery or techniques in their work. Traditional brush and ink forms are not well-suited for depicting the lifestyle and mental state of modern urban people. Instead, artists tend to explore the possibilities of the medium itself within its limitations, using it to shape and represent the external world. [12] As Chinese ink figure painting has evolved to the present day, we cannot overlook the positive influences brought by Western painting. However, it is also important not to blindly regard Western painting as the model or direction for the development of Chinese painting, as this would be a case of mistaking the means for the end. The essence of figure painting is to depict the human form; only by effectively capturing the form can we evaluate its quality, rather than merely prioritizing expression over form. "Freehand brushwork" is not unique to Chinese painting; thus, an excessive focus on "Freehand brushwork" at the expense of form will inevitably hinder the long-term development of figure painting. [13]

4. Conclusion

Chinese ink figure painting must "keep pace with the times" and seek to expand and integrate new influences. The idea that "brush and ink must follow the times" should not be

mere rhetoric; truly keeping up with the times requires a deep understanding of its characteristics. How do we adapt to the times and make use of contemporary elements? This integration should go beyond superficial materials and techniques, and instead focus more on the internal aspects: how to blend these influences in a way that better highlights the "xieyi spirit" of Chinese painting. Today, many Chinese artists like to use "ink and wash" elements. The spirit conveyed by this "ink and wash" reflects the aesthetic taste of the Chinese people. The effect of "ink and wash" can also be seen in oil paintings, printmaking, and even sculpture. It is a mode of expression and should not be regarded as unique to Chinese painting alone. Especially in today's diverse artistic environment, we need to think critically about how to distinguish the true essence from superficial imitations, to trace back to the origins, and to explore how to connect the spirit of Chinese culture with the current era in order to develop Chinese ink figure painting.

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