

The Contemporary Extension of 'Capturing the Spirit Through Form': A Study on the Unity of Formal Language and Spiritual Expression in Contemporary Ink Figure Painting

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Abstract: Gu Kaizhi's doctrine of 'capturing the spirit through form' constitutes the core aesthetic principle of Chinese figure painting. Within contemporary solid ink figure painting practice, this ancient proposition remains not only relevant but has undergone profound extension within new historical contexts. This paper explores how contemporary solid ink figure painting employs concrete formal means—including figurative modelling, brush-and-ink language, and compositional structure—to transcend superficial resemblance and profoundly express the complex spiritual worlds and existential states of modern individuals. The article first retraces the traditional connotations of 'capturing the spirit through form,' then analyses the works of representative artists such as Li Bo'an, Wu Shanming, and Yuan Wu to demonstrate the high degree of unity between their formal language and spiritual expression. Ultimately, it clarifies that in the contemporary era, 'capturing the spirit through form' is not merely a creative method but also an embodiment of a humanistic spirit imbued with profound social concern.

Keywords: Capturing spirit through form, Contemporary ink figure painting, Formal language, Spiritual expression, Contemporary transformation.

1. Introduction

The relationship between 'form' and 'spirit' constitutes a foundational question in Chinese painting aesthetics. Gu Kaizhi of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, with his assertion that 'capturing the spirit and portraying the likeness lies precisely in this' [1] and his theory of 'capturing the spirit through form,' was the first to systematically place "spirit" above 'form,' establishing that the ultimate goal of figure painting lies in expressing the subject's inner spirit, temperament, and grace. This philosophy endured for millennia, becoming the unshakeable aesthetic foundation of Chinese figure painting. However, traditional figure paintings, particularly those within the literati painting tradition, often employed form to serve specific conventions and imagery. The precise depiction of anatomical structure, bodily composition, or fleeting emotional states was not their primary pursuit.

Entering the 20th century, Chinese figure painting faced unprecedented transformation under the dual influences of Western realist painting systems and the wave of the 'Art Revolution'. Xu Beihong's advocacy that 'sketching forms the foundation of all plastic arts' introduced rigorous Western sculptural principles into ink painting, unlocking new possibilities for form-shaping. Masterpieces like Jiang Zhaohua's *The Displaced People* masterfully fused realistic form with a spirit of compassion for suffering humanity, heralding a new era in modern ink figure painting. Building upon this lineage, contemporary realistic ink figure painting has matured both technically and conceptually. Distinct from traditional freehand brushwork and the clinical precision of Western photorealism, its core pursuit lies in employing highly refined and intensified ink language to construct a robust vessel for 'form,' thereby enabling the conveyance and eruption of a more profoundly resonant 'spirit.' This paper contends that contemporary realistic ink figure painting not

only remains faithful to the traditional principle of 'capturing spirit through form,' but through formal innovation, elevates it to new realms of profound realism and humanistic resonance.

2. The Dimension of Representation: Structural Brushwork and the Shaping of Inner Spirit

Contemporary ink figure painting's grasp of "form" transcends mere resemblance or lack thereof, delving instead into the subject's inner structure. Through "structural brushwork", it reveals the subject's vital state and spiritual force.

The late artist Li Bo'an's monumental work *Emerging from Bayankala* epitomises this pursuit. In this epic composition measuring 1.88 metres in height and 121.5 metres in length, the artist depicts over a hundred Tibetan figures. His subjects are rendered with robust, generalised forms, even incorporating a degree of exaggeration and distortion. Yet this sculpting of form is not arbitrary, but grounded in the artist's profound understanding of human anatomy, bone structure, and musculature. Employing predominantly dry ink and dry brush techniques, he transforms the wrinkles on Tibetan faces, the knuckles on their hands, and the physiques beneath their garments into spiritual symbols bearing the weight of historical vicissitudes and ethnic resilience through vigorous *cun-ce* (texturing) and *goulou* (outlining). Take, for instance, his depiction of the elderly figure: the brushwork concentrates on protruding bones and sunken eye sockets. The dry, parched strokes seem to engage in dialogue with the harsh plateau environment, conveying the subject's fortitude, piety, and a palpable sense of life's desolation. Here, the brush and ink serve the form entirely, and the form itself becomes a direct externalisation of spirit. As Liu Xiaolin observes: 'Li Bo'an's figures possess a monumental, sculptural quality; he "carves"

the spirit with his brush.’ [3] This ‘capturing spirit through form’ is achieved through the extreme intensification and refinement of bodily structure, where the ‘spirit’ is a colossal life force condensed within the form. Similarly, the works of painter Yuan Wu profoundly embody the unity of form and spirit at the structural level. In pieces like *Dawn at the Jokhang Temple*, his treatment of Tibetan figures equally emphasises a sense of mass and volume. He adeptly employs expansive ink washes and dry-brush techniques to sculpt volume. Figures’ silhouettes and drapery folds transcend mere linear outlines, instead manifesting as solid, textured masses through variations in ink density, moisture, and dryness. This emphasis on ‘substance’ imbues his silent subjects with palpable inner energy and religious devotion. This spiritual quality is precisely established through such weighty, unadorned “form”.

3. The Rhythm of Imagery: Expressive Brushwork and the Manifestation of Emotional States

Whereas artists like Li Bo’an and Yuan Wu represent the majestic and solemn facet of “capturing spirit through form,” Wu Shanming’s “freehand line drawing” illuminates its agile and nuanced dimension. Wu Shanming’s distinctive artistic contribution is rooted in his masterful integration of the inherent “calligraphic quality” found in traditional Chinese brush techniques with a foundation in realistic representation. He elevates the very act of constructing “form” into a dynamic realm where emotion, personal expression, and refined artistic sensibility converge and flow unrestrictedly.

Wu Shanming boldly pioneered and expanded new aesthetic frontiers within the medium of aged ink painting. The unique charm of aged ink resides in its capacity to preserve the skeletal strength and structural integrity of individual brushstrokes, while simultaneously allowing for exceptionally mellow, diffuse, and atmospherically hazy ink washes to emerge through natural diffusion on paper. In his landmark series, ‘*Highland Melody*,’ his depictions of Tibetan maidens and herdsmen consciously depart from the chiaroscuro modeling and volumetric techniques characteristic of Western drawing traditions. Instead, he utilizes exceptionally relaxed, fluid, yet precisely controlled lines to delineate essential forms and anatomical structure. He then constructs depth, texture, and spatial presence through the gradual accumulation, diffusion, and delicate layering of pale, weathered ink tones. Within this softly diffused, mist-like ink ambiance, the facial expressions of his figures emerge with exceptional purity and serenity; their gazes seem to penetrate the ethereal haze, reflecting an inner state of crystalline clarity and spiritual tranquility. Though not strictly representational in a photographic sense, this distinctive approach to “form” vividly embodies the ancient artistic principle of ‘scattered brushstrokes and sparse dots, where the unpainted gaps suggest fullness’ [4], thereby offering a profound and perfect interpretation of the classical Chinese painting ideal that values ‘incomplete brushwork yet complete meaning.’

Through nuanced manipulation of ink’s variables—its dryness and wetness, density and lightness—coupled with expert control of the brush’s motion, including its speed, rhythm, pauses, and emphatic accents, the artist succeeds in directly materializing both the inner spirit of his subjects and his own deep emotional resonance with the pristine, snow-

capped highland landscapes onto the xuan paper. Art critic Xue Yongnian, reflecting on Wu’s artistry, aptly observed: ‘Wu Shanming pushes the transparent and lustrous qualities of aged ink to their utmost expressive potential, rendering his figures Substantial in presence yet ethereal in quality, thereby infusing realistic depiction with a profound sense of poetic grace.’ [5] In this context, the concept of ‘writing’ within the phrase ‘capturing spirit through form’ takes on a dual significance: it refers simultaneously to the act of ‘lifelike representation’ and to that of ‘expressive, calligraphic inscription.’ Thus, formal artistic language in Wu’s work serves not merely as a tool for crafting imagery but evolves into an organic, indispensable component of the spiritual and emotional content itself, ultimately conveying an enduring aura of profound dignity, serene vitality, and timeless artistic resonance.

4. The Realm of Totality: Resonance Between Compositional Form and the Spirit of the Age

The concept of “capturing the spirit through form” extends far beyond the nuanced portrayal of individual figures; it is equally, and perhaps more profoundly, embodied in the holistic composition and deliberate formal arrangement of the entire artistic work. In the realm of contemporary ink figure painting, artists frequently make use of expansive narrative scenes or moments charged with dramatic tension to reveal not only the spiritual essence of a specific group but also the broader psychological and emotional contours of an entire historical era.

Re-examining Mr. Jiang Zhaohua’s seminal work, *The Migrant Workers*, we find that its “spirit” is conveyed not solely through the meticulously rendered expressions of each war-ravaged individual, but also—and more significantly—through the scroll-like, almost cinematic flow of its composition. This structural choice masterfully fuses countless isolated experiences of suffering into a unified and moving symphony of collective sorrow, one that resonates with the weight of national memory. It is through this integrative visual strategy that the “spirit” of the piece acquires its distinct collectivity and monumental emotional impact.

Entering the contemporary era, the work of Liu Jin’an provides another compelling paradigm for understanding this principle. His *Migrant Workers* series consistently presents groups of figures arranged in dense, almost sculptural formations, evoking a sense of both solidarity and confinement. Through assertive, bold brushstrokes and deeply sombre ink washes, Liu constructs a richly layered yet palpably oppressive visual architecture. In doing so, he moulds the collective identity of migrant labourers into a solid, silent, and enduring ‘whole’—a social body that is at once resilient and overlooked.

This distinctive formal language does more than represent physical presence; it powerfully communicates the immense weight of life shouldered by this vast social group, their rugged tenacity, their unspoken dignity, and their marginalised existence within the modern urban landscape. Such artistic approaches, which convey the spirit of the age through integrated and large-scale formal strategies, represent a sophisticated and successful macro-level realisation of the ancient ideal of ‘capturing the spirit through form’.

5. Conclusion

Through meticulous analysis and thoughtful examination of the aforementioned artists and their diverse creative practices, we can distinctly and profoundly observe that the time-honored aesthetic principle of "capturing the spirit through form" not only maintains formidable and enduring vitality within the expansive realm of contemporary ink figure painting but has also acquired even more vigorous and multifaceted artistic energy. This revitalization has been achieved through the substantial enrichment, refinement, and conceptual deepening of formal language, as today's artists engage in increasingly profound and nuanced explorations of 'form' from diverse technical, philosophical, and cultural dimensions. Whether it is the monumental spiritual presence sculpted by Li Bo'an and Yuan Wu through their masterful and intentional structural brushwork, the subtle and delicate lyrical emotional resonance conveyed via Wu Shanming's highly expressive and calligraphically infused brush intent, or the powerful contemporary ethos constructed through holistic, innovative, and daringly reconceived compositional arrangements—all of these multifaceted approaches profoundly and convincingly demonstrate that in contemporary ink figure painting, formal language and spiritual expression are deeply interconnected and inseparable facets of a unified artistic whole. The pursuit of representational form ultimately transcends mere technical display, superficial imitation, or virtuosic execution; its deeper and more essential purpose lies in capturing the subject's intrinsic spirit with greater depth, authenticity, psychological insight, and emotional richness. This spirit encompasses not only the inner soul, essential character, and existential essence of the depicted subject but also vividly

reflects the artist's own unique temperament, personal cultivation, worldview, and emotional depth. Simultaneously, it serves as an expressive mirror to the shared spiritual portrait, collective consciousness, and underlying cultural dynamics of our era, thereby connecting individual artistic expression with broader cultural, social, and humanistic narratives. Thus, the innovative creative practice of contemporary realistic ink figure painting constitutes both a meaningful extension and a significant elevation of the classical theory of 'capturing spirit through form' within a modern context. It dynamically revitalizes this enduring traditional artistic philosophy through continuous and meaningful dialogue with contemporary reality, critical engagement with modern visual culture, and thoughtful interweaving with universal humanistic concerns, thereby achieving fresh academic significance, renewed conceptual relevance, and enduring artistic brilliance.

References

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