



The Spirit of Freehand Brushwork in Chinese Oil Painting

Feng Jiarui¹

¹Hubei Minzu University, Hubei, 44500, China

²Philippine Christian University Center for International Education, Manila, 1004, Philippines

Email: 727752256@qq.com

Abstract: Freehand Brushwork is a unique artistic language in Chinese painting and calligraphy, celebrated for its ability to express emotion and spirit in the process of artistic creation. This paper aims to explore the spiritual connotation and artistic aesthetics of Freehand Brushwork oil paintings, and to examine the use of traditional Chinese Freehand Brushwork techniques in the expression of Western painting. By reconstructing the language of oil painting expression with traditional Chinese techniques, the paper seeks to investigate the Freehand Brushwork spirit of Chinese oil painting, which is deeply rooted in the Chinese idea of the 'unity of heaven and man' and 'respect for individuals'. The paper presents a critical analysis of the aesthetic and expressive features of Freehand Brushwork oil paintings, shedding light on the unique artistic characteristics of Chinese oil painting that distinguishes it from other painting styles. This paper contributes to the understanding and appreciation of Freehand Brushwork oil paintings and serves as a guide for artists seeking to master the Freehand Brushwork techniques in their artistic creations.

Keywords: Chinese oil painting, the spirit, freehand brushwork

Introduction

Freehand brushwork, also known as "写意" in the Chinese language, is an artistic method that reflects an artist's way of thinking about constructing a visual image and can be considered one of the methodologies of artistic creation^[1]. The history of oil painting in China has been long and arduous since its introduction from the West. It is a history of Chinese learning from Western art and the integration of both Eastern and Western styles in oil painting. Chinese artists have not only created numerous outstanding works but have also blended the characteristics of Chinese ink painting and explored a path that showcases a Chinese style of realistic oil painting. During this development, Chinese artists continuously explored new paths by integrating the realism of traditional oil painting with the essence of Chinese tradition. In this way, the spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting has been conveyed worldwide. The term Freehand Brushwork (写意) is composed of two characters: "写," which is an action performed with the strength of the arm or hand, and "意," a basic method of Chinese painting. It is the opposite of delicate and neat brushwork, commonly known as 'rough brushwork'^[2]. The spirit of Freehand Brushwork is the unity of subject and object, the perfect combination of the artist and artwork, and the intrinsic quality of painting creation. Chinese painters have been exploring paths by integrating the realism of traditional oil painting with the essence of Chinese traditional painting to convey the spirit of China to the world.

Literature Review

From the perspective of traditional painting, many artists have taken the initiative to integrate traditional Chinese culture to find, develop and enrich oil painting, strengthening and expanding the depth and breadth of their artworks and highlighting their cultural traits. A synthesis of existing literature reveals that most domestic scholars have explored the spirit of Freehand Brushwork from the level of artistic expression and painting technique, arguing that Freehand Brushwork is not only a painting technique, but also a kind of imagery and a way of conveying emotion. Since ancient Greece, through thousands of years of change and turnover, the spirit of Western oil painting remained unchanged in its focus on empirical methodology^[3]. Freehand Brushwork in Western painting is the process by which artists freely express their own aesthetic sensibilities^[4]. Westerners have also taken note of the Chinese concept of imagery, which is considered to belong to the realm of psychology, where the term 'imagery' denotes the importance and recollection of past perceptual and perceptual experiences in the mind^[5]. In Expressionism, the artist is free from the constraints of image and colour and pursues the free play of subjectivity, which is also a kind of 'Freehand Brushwork'. In Western oil painting, the artist's inner vision and the extraction of the form of the painting itself are the starting point for artistic creation, and the process of creation is accompanied by the author's emotions. Western oil painting artists are always accompanied by changes in the author's image and emotions in the process of creation, and

[Received 20 Feb 2023; Accepted 03 Mar 2023; Published (online) 31 Mar 2023]



Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

they grasp and recognise the laws of nature through the characteristics between the things they depict, creating a way of thinking about the beauty of oil painting art from realism.

From the perspective of traditional Chinese painting, many artists have taken the initiative to search, develop and enrich traditional Chinese culture in their exploration of oil painting. Their research improved and expanded the depth and breadth of studies on art, highlighting the cultural qualities of China. It is because of the insights to the art that has made spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting remarkable and long lasting^[6]. A synthesis of the existing literature shows that most domestic scholars have discussed the spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting from the level of artistic expression and painting techniques, arguing that freehand brushwork is not only a painting technique, but also a imagery and a way to convey emotions.

In his essay "Freehand Brushwork and Spirit of Freehand Brushwork in Chinese Oil Painting", Liu Xi Lin illustrates the relationship between freehand brushwork and the spirit of it. He discussed from the introduction of the freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting to the exploration of the meaning of the word, the influence of Chinese philosophy on the art of writing, and how freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting and spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting have become the aesthetic banner of literati painting. Finally, the essay points out that the spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting is a harmonious unity of subject and object and a perfect union between the artist and the work of art. The spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting is the highest level and intrinsic quality of painting creation.

In Western art, it can be said that it is emotion that gives imaginative thinking the space for imagination and association^[7]. Creation in Western painting is the process by which the artist freely expresses his aesthetic feelings. Westerners have also taken note of the Chinese concept of imagery as belonging to the realm of psychology, where the word 'imagery' denotes the meaning and recollection in the mind of past perceptual and sensory experiences^[8]. In Expressionism, the artist is free from the constraints of image and creation, and pursues the free play of subjectivity, which is also a kind of 'imagery'. In Western oil painting, the artist's vision and the extraction of the form of the painting itself are the starting point of artistic creation, and the process of creation is accompanied by the author's emotions. Western oil painting artists always accompany the author's image as well as his emotions in creation. By exploring the characteristics between the elements depicted to grasp and understand the laws of nature, the artists developed realism to create beautiful oil painting art.

Western artists take imagery as the way of art thinking to extended the image of representation to their own perceptual decomposition. As a result, they create distinctive images of painting^[9]. To understand freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting, people need to know that art is to create an image to give full expression to the idea, where the "image" is the basis and the "idea" is the dominant one. The artists are not limited by the creation objective or bound by the figurative form, rather, they use their imagination. This spirit of imagination has been present in traditional Chinese art since ancient times, whether in the painted pottery and bronze art of the prehistoric Shang and Zhou dynasties, or in the painting and sculpture of the Han and Tang dynasties. The calligraphy and painting of the literati in Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as the folk art that has been passed down from generation to generation, are all an intangible cultural heritage of Chinese art. Since its introduction to China, oil painting has gone through a series of changes and challenges, from imitation and borrowing to reconstruction and innovation. After generations of hard-work of the artists, oil painting has blossomed in this fertile land of China. In the history of creation, the artists tend to be expressive in a realistic way, and the Western oil painting techniques are highly integrated with the Oriental painting styles to show its unique artistic value.

Chinese Oil Painting

Throughout its centuries-long history in China, oil painting has been the constant subject of experimentation and exploration by its creators after its introduction to China. Chinese Oil painting did not enter into fast development until the end of the Opium War in late 19th century. With the continuous exploration and accumulation of the early stages, Chinese artists finally mastered this painting technique and oil painting became a new art culture in China.

There were several stages for the introduction of oil painting to China. The first stage was in the 1930s and 1940s, when a group of young artists with artistic dreams went to France and Japan to learn from the west. For example, Liu Haisu, an artist of impressionist art, was adept at subjective expression. He studied an intrinsic relationship between painting and late Impressionist art during his further studies. Lin Fengmian, an artist specialised in art expression of emotion, believed that Western art focused on imitating nature. The western art tended to be realistic, while Eastern art depicted imagination and tended to be idealism. His oil paintings expressed Chinese feelings and emotions in the form of Western modernism, presenting the sense of realism in Chinese art. The second stage was in the 1950s, when a group of young artists were sent to the Soviet Union for art training. Some Soviet experts came to China to conducted oil painting training courses at the same time; the third stage was in the 1980s, when Chinese artists traveled to West to study. As the literary and artistic circles searched for the history in tradition, the issue of nationalised representationalism attracted widespread attention from oil painters. Freehand brushwork, mood brushwork, image brushwork, representationalism, representational brushwork and representational language began to be explored and used more by oil painters.

These three stages of overseas study played a very important role in the development of Chinese oil painting and the spirit of Chinese oil painting realism. First of all, the overseas study provides the Chinese artists a good understanding on the techniques, materials and pictorial language of Western oil painting, which enabled them to judge and appreciate the quality of oil painting; secondly, it helped the acceptance of oil painting in China; and finally, it diversified the Chinese oil painting in terms of expressive themes and expressive forms. A distinctive Chinese modern and contemporary art was formed since then.

The growth and development of oil painting in China has enriched the form of Chinese art and opened up a new dimension for art development. In this process, the artists did not simply copy Western oil painting, instead, they took a different path to integrate Chinese art and Western art. In this way, the artists began to try to combine the realism of traditional Chinese painting with oil painting, wandering between realism and idealism, hoping to explore a path that would fit in with traditional painting on a linguistic level. A large number of outstanding oil painters began to explore the integration of Western oil painting with local Chinese culture.

The Connotation of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting

In the Chinese art tradition, freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting is not only a cultural spirit, but also a way of thinking, an aesthetic requirement and an artistic language. Freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting is the foundation and idealism is the dominant theme. In figure painting, freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting is often inseparable from theme expressing, and in landscape painting and bird painting, realism is expressed in the creation of a landscape and the fun of the scene. Freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting is an expressive form of oil painting that incorporates the idea of realism into oil painting. In the history of Chinese culture and art, the idea of paint with pictures is an important creative idea and a core concept of traditional aesthetics. "The key to Chinese oil painting is to create images that incorporate elements of the essence of Chinese culture and have a clear national cultural gene^[10]. In freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting, it does not mean to make up the painting out of nothing, rather, it is made on the basis of the relationship between light and dark in the picture, transforming the content of the picture into a contextualised expression of the traditional Chinese spirit to meet the aesthetic needs of Chinese art.

The collision and fusion between Western oil painting and Chinese painting has given rise to the genre of Chinese oil painting, which combines the realistic style of Western oil painting with the permeable and ethereal style of Chinese painting. Lin Fengmian, Wu Guanzhong and Liu Haisu are typical representatives of Chinese oil painters who unified the language of Western oil painting with the creative form of Chinese painting and made a monumental contribution to the Chinese painting by infiltrating the concept of "Western for Chinese, East for West" into the creation of oil paintings. It combines traditional cultural heritage with the characteristics of the times. Through distinctive artistic imagery, unique forms of expression and personalised colour application, it expresses the calm and elegant style of painting.

Expressing of spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting

1.The image of painting presents the western oil painting

Spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting is not a subjective invention, but a creative form that integrates mood, emotion and nature. It is the expression of artist's own quality, view of life, values, and world view, which are integrated into the painting for emotional communication purposes^[11]. In traditional Chinese cultural philosophy, it is in the composition of the picture that the artist's personality and feelings are revealed. The "image" in Western painting is the constant pursuit of the reality of the object in the relationship between subject and object. The "image" in Chinese painting, on the other hand, is the constant pursuit of the expression of individual thoughts, so the two are fundamentally different. At the same time, the "image" in Chinese painting includes "fun", which is independent from language, whereas it did not appear until the Impressionists in the west. However, the forms and techniques of Western oil painting have value for Eastern painting. By integrating the west with the mood of Eastern painting, a new pictorial language is created, whose core feature is "unity of mind and state", which means that the emotions are integrated into the scene, and that the emotions are harmoniously unified and complement each other. The formal language of realistic oil painting combines realism and idealism. It presents a more characteristic creativity and novelty. It is based on reality, but it is superior than reality and beyond objectivity. It seeks the best balance between similarity and dissimilarity, with an interpreting to the perception and understanding to nature and emotions in a unique way.

Western oil paintings often use focal point perspective, while Eastern paintings are prefer scattered perspective, which is more artistically expressive and allows different elements and objects to be integrated one painting. Spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting is expressed in the thought and language of Oriental painting, such as the use of form to convey the spirit and the creation of imaginative space such as white space to achieves the unity of depicting the essential characteristics of objective things. In Lin Fengmian's works, the combination of realism and idealism is expressed through the combination of reality and ideality, movement and stillness. He chooses to use fresh, bright colours and shadow effects in his works, featuring "unity of mind". His works emphasises the creativity of the painter and the emotional involvement in the painting, rather than simply depicting the characteristics of objectives. It shows the philosophical idea of 'the unity of heaven and man' in traditional Eastern culture. At the same time, his works

emphasises the importance of looking but not seeing' in painting. The uncertainty of artistic technique and the effect of reality and illusion are important ways of presenting his mood. For this reason, the viewer can have a strong emotional resonance with the painter and the work itself.

2. The expression of mood and context

In expressing the spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting, whether it be a spectacular mountain or river or a small idyllic scene, the artist has a unique perspective of observation. The artist's perception of freedom and life is incorporated into the detail and layout of the paintings, giving them a rich humanistic connotation. The fusion of oriental pictorial language and western oil painting techniques creates a unique mood of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting. This mood can only be understood rather than conveyed. It is reflected in the images depicted in the works and in the techniques used to create them, conveying an intangible mood to the viewer through the tangible images and techniques. The aesthetics of oil painting is reflected in the creation of works that depict both the characteristics of the object and its supremacy over the objective object. In Wang Coronet's paintings, the artist uses clear, simple lines, subtle ink colours and a compositional approach to draw the outlines of the plum blossom. It reflects the spiritual symbolism of its freshness, elegance and nobility. Wang Guan liked the plum blossom not for its shape and colour, but for its inner character against the wind. The plum blossom is proud and unyielding, resolute and elegant, which is the spirit the artist wanted for his self-growing. He hopes that he too would be like the noble plum blossom. In his paintings of plum blossoms, he incorporates such generosity into his work, not only by depicting the form of the plum blossom, but also by depicting its soul. In Western oil paintings, the viewer sees a realistic view of the plum blossom, a specific and rich, colourful expression technique, but the plum blossom in Chinese realistic oil paintings finds a dynamic balance between realism and imagery, allowing the viewer to feel the soul of the plum blossom as an object personified in reality and ideality.

3. Subjective emotion and aesthetic conveying

In order to express the imagery accurately, the painter will depict the picture in composition, color and modeling, etc. With careful design and inner examination, the painter's spiritual will and the picture occupy an important place in the visual expression. Chinese oil paintings have the aesthetic character of scholarly serenity, elegance and introspection. In terms of the language of colour, it can highlight the individual characteristics and aesthetic tendencies of the painters themselves. The harmonious tonal relationship conveys a subjective mood and emotion. Painting is no longer limited to the visual reproduction of colour, but also highlights the painter's own aesthetic and emotional communication.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of Chinese oil painting, the spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting has blended elements of Western painting with the traditional style and spirit of Chinese painting. It uses oil painting as a basic creative tool to express the spiritual connotation of realism through the cohesion of images and emotions. spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting has its own unique artistic language system and creative techniques, forming aesthetic characteristics and cultural values with unique Chinese characteristics in terms of concept, form and colour. By borrowing from the West, Chinese oil painters have sought a new artistic path in accordance with national aesthetic habits, using the language of oil painting to convey the spirit of contemporaneity art on China. After breaking away from the external images, Chinese oil painting established its own image of the language. At this very moment, there is a growing number of studies on Chinese oil painting industry to re-examine the spirit of freehand brushwork in Chinese oil painting language with a more open mind. If the integration of the above elements is made, there will certainly be more distinctive, stylistically diverse oil paintings with Chinese charm and connotation.

REFERENCES

-
- [1] Kong, Guang. (2020). Realistic oil painting and the spirit of realism in Chinese oil painting. *Art Education Research*, 18.
 - [2] Xu Li, Zhan Jianjun, Shao Dazhen, Jin Shangyi, Xue Yonian. (2017). Perceiving China in the Meaning of Beauty - The Spirit of Writing as the Core of Chinese Oil Painting, 19.20
 - [3] .Wang Jialiang. (2017). A Comparison of the Spirit of Writing in Chinese and Western Oil Painting Art. *Popular Literature and Art*, 49.
 - [4] Liu Xilin. (2008) Writing and the spirit of writing. *Fine Arts Research*, 59.
 - [5] Xie Yongqi. (2022). Experimental discussion on the "spirit of writing" and cultural character in contemporary oil painting landscape creation. *Cultural Industry*, 67.
 - [6] Shen Xing. 2005(3) Simplicity, clarity and timelessness - the oil painting of Professor Su Tianci. *Art Gallery*, 56-47.
 - [7] Shao Dazhen. (2005). He was ahead of his time: A brief discussion of Lin Fengmian's artistic thinking, in *Lin Fengmian Studies*, Chinese Academy of Fine Arts Press.

[8] Liu Xi Lin. (2008) Writing and the spirit of writing. Art Research, 59.

[9] Kong Guang. 2020 (21), Writing oil painting and the spirit of writing in Chinese oil painting. Art Education Research, 18.

[10] Zhang Bo. (2014). A preliminary exploration of the spirit of writing in Chinese oil painting, Art, 29.

[11] Wang Yong, The spirit of writing in Chinese oil painting, Fine Arts, 2016 (10), 96