

Reflections on the Creation of Chinese Freehand Figure Painting

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Abstract: Chinese freehand figure painting is a traditional Chinese painting form that primarily focuses on depicting figures. Its origins can be traced back to the Han Dynasty. Throughout its long history, freehand figure painting has continuously evolved and innovated, leaving behind a rich artistic legacy for future generations. This article delves into the development of Chinese freehand figure painting, its artistic principles, themes, and its relationship with inheritance and innovation. It analyzes the characteristics of both the transmission and innovation of this art form. The development course of Chinese freehand brushwork figure painting is full of twists and turns and richness. Since the initial Han Dynasty, this art form has experienced a long process of evolution, absorbing a variety of different artistic styles and schools, and finally formed its own unique artistic characteristics and forms of expression. In this process, freehand figure painting has also produced a close connection with Chinese philosophy, literature, religion and other ideological and cultural fields, and become an important part of Chinese culture.

Keywords: China, Freehand Figure Painting, Creation

1. Introduction

The creative process of Chinese freehand figure painting emphasizes the artist's personal emotions and aesthetic pursuits. Whether it is the artist's portrayal of the human form or the expression of emotional atmosphere, it requires the artist to demonstrate their unique style and inner world while maintaining smooth brushwork. Therefore, Chinese freehand figure painting not only focuses on the artist's painting skills but also on their experiences and insights in life. It embodies a strong Chinese cultural flavor and pursues a subtle and introverted sense of beauty. It outlines the contours of the figures with precise lines using minimal ink and employs techniques such as light ink dyeing and ink rendering to impart a sense of dynamism and three-dimensionality to the composition. This unique way of expression inherits the aesthetic concept of traditional Chinese literati painting, emphasizing the expression of artistic conception and pursuing the resonance of brushwork content and emotions.

Chinese freehand figure paintings have diverse themes and creative styles. They can depict the real life of ordinary people, historical or mythological figures, as well as express the artist's understanding of nature and social environment. Different artists integrate their own thoughts and emotions into their works through their unique creative methods, creating distinctive freehand figure paintings.

The creation of Chinese freehand figure painting has a long history and embodies the essence of Chinese traditional culture. Since ancient times, Chinese painting has always focused on shaping the accurate form and intrinsic temperament of figures, portraying their individuality and emotions through the use of ink and brushstrokes. Chinese freehand figure painting, with its unique aesthetic concept and artistic techniques, has become one of the treasures of Chinese painting.

With the passage of time and the innovation of painting techniques, Chinese freehand figure painting continues to evolve and develop. Modern freehand figure paintings are not only more free and diverse in the application of ink and brushstrokes but also incorporate elements and concepts of modern art, exhibiting a richer and more diverse form of creation.

2. Evolution of Freehand Figure Painting

Chinese freehand figure painting is a vital form within traditional Chinese painting, possessing a unique artistic allure and cultural significance. ^[1]Its origins can be traced to pre-Tang Dynasty folk mural forms, and it officially emerged during the Tang Dynasty, reaching maturity during the Five

Dynasties and Northern and Southern Song periods. During the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, freehand figure painting witnessed significant breakthroughs, with more mature brushwork techniques, diverse styles, and multipleschools of thought. However, during the Qing Dynasty, freehand figure painting declined as it mostly imitated its predecessors. After the May Fourth Movement and the introduction of Western realism and various Western ideologies and concepts, freehand figure painting reached a new height, breaking away from the rigid imitation of earlier Qing Dynasty styles.

The development of contemporary freehand figure painting can be traced back to the 1950s when China began implementing modern art education methods primarily based on sketching and modeling. During this period, a group of talented young figure painters emerged, basing their work on realism while incorporating the essence of traditional Chinese painting, creating innovative and artistically valuable pieces.

In the 1980s, China witnessed the emergence of figure painters who predominantly embraced expressionism as their style. They emphasized self-expression and individuality while pursuing formal aesthetics and visual impact in their artworks. Post-1990s, with the rise of the Chinese economy and enhanced cultural confidence, the art scene began to witness a new generation of painters representing "New Literati Painting". They emphasized the inheritance and innovation of traditional Chinese culture, focusing on the cultural connotations and artistic values of their works.

In the 21st century, as globalization and cultural diversification accelerated, the forms and content of contemporary freehand figure painting became even more diverse. Freehand figure painters embarked on new explorations in terms of brushwork and subject matter, creating numerous novel and vivid artworks. Artists continually explore and innovate, absorbing more international artistic elements and modern technological tools, resulting in works characterized by an international perspective and contemporary features.

3. Aesthetic Concepts in Freehand Figure Painting

The aesthetic concepts in Chinese freehand figure painting refer to the subjective understanding and expressive methods employed by artists in portraying human figures. It is a form of painting that pursues artistic conception and emotion, capturing the spirit and emotions of the figures through concise brushwork and vivid portrayal. This is achieved by using a "line-based modeling" approach to convey their emotions and subjective feelings. In the late Qing Dynasty, the "line-based modeling" was one of the primary techniques used by renowned figure painter Ren Bonian. He employed variations in the thickness, angularity, dryness, wetness, and ink intensity of lines to depict the distinctive characteristics and inner emotions of the figures. Simultaneously, Ren Bonian paid close attention to the use of ink, using variations in ink density, dryness, and wetness to portray the figures' postures and texture.

The core of the aesthetic concept in Chinese freehand figure painting is the idea of "image modeling," which is based on the philosophy of "harmony between heaven and humanity." When creating their art, artists are not bound by the natural forms of objective objects but rather freely express the imagery they perceive in their minds. Therefore, Chinese painting theory often refers to figure painting as "capturing the spirit" and advocates achieving a harmonious combination of form and spirit in their artwork. The pursuit of form in figure painting is not merely about lifelike depiction of objective human figures but emphasizes the expression of inner meaning in the formation of imagery, reflecting the artist's cultural and artistic cultivation. For instance, the *Splashed Ink Figure of an Immortal* by the Southern Song painter Liang Kai depicts the facial features of the character in an exaggerated manner. As shown in Figure 1, the figure is short in stature, depicted with exaggerated movements, conveying the carefree and unrestrained nature of the immortal. The artist employs concise ink lines to cleverly represent the form and spirit of the figure, translating the imagery into specific artistic language.

In the portrayal of freehand figure modeling, the coordination of time and space is crucial for creating various artistic conceptions and emotions. Time can be used to depict the dynamics and life processes of the figures, while space can portray the environment and social context in which the figures exist. Through the interplay of time and space, artists can create rich and diverse artistic conceptions and emotions. For example, the painting *Spring Outing of Lady Guo* by Tang Dynasty painter Zhang Xuan depicts a scene of a group of people and horses going on a spring outing. The painting conveys the opulence and grandeur of Lady Guo and her entourage. The figures in the painting are vivid and their movements are fluid, expressing the joyful atmosphere of the outing. Simultaneously,

the artist portrays the natural environment with details such as the beautiful spring weather, blossoming flowers, and chirping birds, integrating this sense of joy into the natural landscape, making the painting more lively and natural.



Figure 1 Liang Kai "Splashing Ink Immortal Figure"



Figure 2 Chen Hongshou "Tales of the West Wing"

Effective communication of imagery and expression of the imaginal are key to enhancing the expressiveness of freehand figure modeling. Imagery communication refers to the process by which the artist conveys and the viewer perceives imagery through the artwork. In the creative process, artists infuse their subjective emotions into objective objects, and viewers, in turn, understand the artist's emotional expression by perceiving the imagery in the artwork. For example, As shown in Figure 2, the

illustrations of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* by Ming Dynasty painter Chen Hongshou bring the characters to life with vivid depictions, flowing lines, and an emphasis on the characters' inner emotions. The artist captures the handsome appearance of Zhang Sheng, the modesty of Yingying, and the cleverness of Hongniang, vividly portraying the characters from the novel. These figures convey rich imagery through the artist's brushwork, allowing viewers to deeply feel the emotions of the characters and the story within the artwork.

4. Subject Selection

Freehand figure painting is an art form that emphasizes portraying the inner qualities and emotions of individuals. When creating freehand figure paintings, the choice of suitable subject matter is of utmost importance. Firstly, subject matter selection should relate to the artist. Artists have their own life experiences and emotions, and selecting a subject matter related to one's own experiences can better express their viewpoints and emotions. For example, if you are deeply interested in family values and relationships, you can choose family-themed figure painting to convey your love and concern for family.

Secondly, subject matter selection should align with societal concerns. Figure painting is not only an art form but also a means to convey social information and address societal issues. Artists can choose subjects related to social problems to express their thoughts and advocate for social issues through their artwork. For instance, you can choose to depict the challenging lives of individuals in the lower strata of society to prompt viewers to contemplate social justice.

Furthermore, subject matter selection can also be based on historical contexts. History is the accumulation of human civilization, and selecting figures with historical backgrounds as the subject matter allows artists to not only express reverence and love for history but also recreate the images and personalities of historical figures through art. For example, you can choose to depict ancient Chinese scholars or historical events, using art to recreate historical contexts.

Finally, when selecting subject matter, the acceptability by the audience should be considered. Different individuals have varying preferences and interests in figure painting subject matter. Artists can choose suitable subjects based on their target audience.

5. Pen and ink expression

The art of freehand figure drawing emphasizes the use of brushwork, particularly focusing on the flexibility and variation of brush techniques. Freehand figure drawing aims to capture the essence and expression of the figure through concise and powerful lines. By using different widths, intensities, and shades of ink lines, the artist depicts the texture, clothing folds, and lighting effects of the figure, creating a sense of depth in the artwork. The dynamic and varied brushstrokes showcase the artist's aesthetic vision and skill. Looking at the works of the renowned figure painter, Mr. Huang Zhou, we can see his unique artistic style, filled with individuality and innovation. Originally born as Liang Gantang in Lixian County, Hebei Province, China, Huang was an influential figure painter, collector, and social activist in modern Chinese art history. His notable works include "When Apple Blossoms," "The Storm in the Ancient Times," "Going to the Market," "Hundred Donkeys," "A Night Journey in the Snowstorm," "Delivering Grain," and "Dedication to the People." Firstly, his freehand figure painting emphasizes abstraction and simplification of form. He often uses concise and lively lines to outline the figure, removing unnecessary details and creating a simpler and purer representation of the figure. This technique allows viewers to focus on the expressions, movements, and postures of the figures, experiencing the emotions and meanings conveyed by the artwork more profoundly. Secondly, he excels in capturing the charm of ink wash. He paints quickly with powerful yet simple brushstrokes, using varying degrees of ink intensity to portray the three-dimensionality and form of the figures. Skillfully utilizing the different variations of ink wash, the artwork gains a sense of depth and space, while the changes in dryness, wetness, thickness, and lightness of the ink adds a special texture to the artwork. His works often carry emotions and a sense of liveliness. He has a keen eye for capturing the expressions and emotions of his subjects, expressing their inner worlds through bold brushwork and expressive forms. Huang often chooses ordinary people as his subjects and depicts their emotions with delicate strokes, allowing viewers to feel the joys, sorrows, anger, and happiness of the figures, creating an easier resonance between the viewers and the artwork. Furthermore, the use of ink is also of paramount importance. By employing different degrees of dryness, wetness, thickness, and lightness of

the ink wash, the artist can depict the lighting effects and temperament of the figures. Areas with thicker ink emphasize important parts of the figure, making them stand out, while areas with lighter ink represent the softer aspects of the figure. The charm of freehand figure painting lies in its freedom from the constraints of form and details. Artists can freely add or discard details according to their observations, imagination, and expression needs, achieving their goal of portraying the figure. This gives artists great creative space and enables viewers to better experience the artist's emotions and thoughts within the artwork. The allure of freehand figure painting also lies in its unique aesthetic style. Through concise and emotions, personalities, and spiritual connotations. Viewers can perceive the artist's artistic pursuit and profound understanding of the figure from the artwork. This abstract and concise way of expression endows freehand figure painting with a strong artistic sensibility and imagination.

The art of freehand figure painting emphasizes the skillful use of brushwork, particularly focusing on the fluidity and versatility of brush techniques. Freehand figure painting strives to depict the essence and emotion of the subject through concise and powerful lines. The artist employs varying widths, intensities, and shades of ink lines to convey the texture, clothing folds, and play of light and shadow on the figure, imbuing the artwork with a sense of depth. The dynamic and varied brushstrokes demonstrate the artist's discerning aesthetic eye and technical prowess. This can be seen in the works of renowned figure painter Huang Zhou, whose pieces are characterized by their individuality and innovative approach. Originally known as Liang Gantang, Huang Zhou was born in Lixian County, Hebei Province, China. He was a prominent figure painter, collector, and social activist in modern Chinese art. Some of his notable works include "When Apple Blossoms," "The Storm in the Ancient Times," "Going to the Market," "Hundred Donkeys," "A Night Journey in the Snowstorm," "Delivering Grain," and "Dedication to the People." Firstly, Huang's freehand figure paintings emphasize the abstraction and simplification of form. He frequently employs concise and lively lines to outline the figures, omitting extraneous details and achieving a simpler, purer representation. This technique allows viewers to focus on the expressions, gestures, and postures of the subjects, enhancing their experience of the artwork's emotional depth and conceptual meaning. Secondly, Huang demonstrates mastery in capturing the subtle nuances of ink wash. His rapid brushwork, combined with powerful yet simple strokes, imbues his paintings with a sense of three-dimensionality and form. By skillfully manipulating the various gradations of ink wash, he creates a layered sense of space within the artwork. The interplay between dry and wet, thick and light ink wash further adds a unique dimension to his works. Huang's pieces often exude emotion and vitality. With his keen observational skills, he adeptly captures the subjects' expressions and emotions, using bold brushstrokes and expressive forms to reveal their inner worlds. Huang often chooses ordinary individuals as subjects, employing delicate brushwork to evoke viewers' empathy and offer glimpses into the subjects' joys, sorrows, anger, and happiness.

Additionally, mastering the use of ink is crucial to the art form. By skillfully manipulating the degrees of dryness, wetness, thickness, and lightness of the ink wash, artists can effectively depict the interplay of light and shadow and convey the subjects' individual temperaments. Areas with denser ink help emphasize important elements of the figure, allowing them to stand out, while lighter ink lends a softness to more delicate features. The allure of freehand figure painting lies in its freedom from strict adherence to form and details. Artists can freely incorporate or omit details according to their observations, imagination, and expressive needs, ultimately capturing the essence of the figure. This creative liberty provides artists with ample room for expression and enables viewers to better connect with the artist's emotions and thoughts within the artwork. Furthermore, the appeal of freehand figure painting also resides in its distinctive aesthetic style. Through concise and summarized brushwork and the artful incorporation of ink wash, artists can distill the key characteristics of the figure within the limits of the canvas. This enables them to express the subject's emotions, personalities, and spiritual essence. Viewers are able to perceive the artist's pursuit of artistic excellence and profound understanding of the figure through these art pieces. This abstract and concise method of expression endows freehand figure painting with a profound artistic sensibility and rich imagination.

6. Inheritance and Development

In terms of inheritance, contemporary freehand figure painting inherits the artistic elements and expressive techniques of traditional Chinese painting. Firstly, lines, a critical element of traditional Chinese painting, continue to play a central role in contemporary freehand figure painting. Additionally, the use of ink remains an indispensable element in contemporary freehand figure painting, with variations in ink intensity and layers conveying the tension and three-dimensionality of the artwork. Moreover, freehand figure painting inherits the aesthetic characteristics of traditional Chinese painting,

such as pursuing artistic conception and lively atmosphere.

Regarding development, contemporary freehand figure painting has seen innovations in materials, language, and subject matter. Firstly, in terms of materials, contemporary freehand figure painting no longer confines itself to traditional brushes and rice paper but incorporates various modern technological means, such as airbrushing and printing techniques, enriching the expressive power of the artwork. Secondly, in the realm of language, contemporary freehand figure painting draws inspiration from Western modern art forms, creating a contemporary painting language with distinct characteristics. Additionally, contemporary freehand figure painting explores a more diverse range of subjects, extending from traditional figure portrayals to the representation of modern society, environment, and human nature. To illustrate the close relationship between inheritance and development in contemporary freehand figure painting, we can consider the artist Li Jin as an example. He focuses on the relationship between people and nature in modern society and employs freehand techniques to portray the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature. His works not only possess the ink charm of traditional freehand figure painting but also exhibit the aesthetic features of contemporary innovation.

In conclusion, contemporary freehand figure painting is closely connected to both inheritance and development. On one hand, it inherits the artistic elements, expressive techniques, and aesthetic characteristics of traditional painting, allowing this traditional art form to persist and evolve. On the other hand, contemporary freehand figure painting innovates in materials, language, and subject matter, infusing new vitality into this traditional art form. It is this perfect combination of inheritance and development that allows contemporary freehand figure painting to stand out in the context of today's multicultural world, showcasing its unique artistic value.

7. Conclusion

Freehand figure painting is a unique form of artistic expression. Through concise brushwork and vivid imagery, it reveals the personalities, emotions, and destinies of the depicted individuals. In freehand figure painting, artists combine their innermost feelings with the portrayal of characters, enabling the audience to sense the souls and emotions of these figures^[3]. In our exploration within this article, we've delved into the historical origins, stylistic perspectives, and subject matter of freehand figure painting. We've also analyzed the value and significance of freehand figure painting in contemporary society. Freehand figure painting is not only a form of artistic expression but also a means of cultural heritage and the expression of human emotions.^[2] It possesses boundless imagination and creativity, transcending the limitations of time and space to present the vitality and artistic resonance of the depicted characters.

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