

Landscape & Human Trace: the Role of Characters in Landscape Paintings and its Cultural Connotations

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Abstract: Starting with the concept of 'landscape' in Chinese painting, this paper analyses the humanistic spirit and cultural pursuits in traditional Chinese painting, further summarising and explaining the characteristics and development of the figure in landscape painting, as well as the role of the figure in landscape painting. Finally, the cultural connotation and spirit of the figure in landscape painting is summarised, reflecting the harmonious relationship between man and nature in a cultural expression of Chinese characteristics.

Keywords: Chinese painting, landscape painting, character

1. Introduction

Landscape, generally refers to the scenery of rivers in the natural environment. Since ancient times, there has been a saying in the eyes of literati as "jiangshan", which reflects the ancient people's humanistic perception of the material space such as the world and the universe. The human traces are mostly the travel footprints of the literati at that time. Literati are "intellectuals" and "educated people" with certain knowledge and experience. In the worldview and values of literati, "hermits" belong to the realm of high-level literati, and they are also the way of origin that they yearn and admire. A hermit is a person who lives in seclusion, and the ancients often used the name to make themselves clear. The characters and scenes embodied in landscape paintings are mostly for the ancient literati seeking poetic habitation. From the original "landscape" in landscape painting, "human footprints" appeared, which was an inevitable product of the historical and social development at that time. It is not only an idealized expression of political demands by ancient Chinese literati, but also an established spiritual concept in their ideological concepts.

2. The Appearance and Development of Characters in Landscape Painting

2.1 From Character Painting to Landscape Painting

Chinese ancient painting has a long history. Taking the two Han, Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties as an example. Due to the great integration of the entire Chinese nation and the background of social and economic development, character paintings depicting themes such as meritorious deeds, stories of scriptures and history, and Buddhism are the most prominent. During this period, the development of its mural art can be seen in the appearance of some mountains and rivers, but most of them are produced for decorative content. During the Eastern Jin Dynasty, in Gu Kaizhi's masterpieces "Admonitions of the Instructress to Court Ladies" and "The Picture of The Ode of the River Goddess", mythological characters were still used as the main body of the picture, while the landscape was only used as the background to set off the main characters^[1]. As a result, landscape painting began to develop independently of character painting. In the theory of landscape painting, Gu Kaizhi's "Painting Yuntaishan", Zong Bing's "Painting Landscape Preface" and Wang Hui's "Xuhua" have fully expounded and explained the attributes, creation methods and functions of landscape painting, which laid a theoretical foundation for the formation and development of landscape painting later.

The history of ancient Chinese painting believes that the Jin and Tang dynasties were the classical era of character painting, while the Five Dynasties and the Northern Song Dynasty entered the classical era of landscape painting, which completely got rid of the previous single state of subject matter and technique, and realized the spatial remodeling and scene reproduction of the natural environment. In the Northern Song Dynasty, the theme of landscape became the mainstream trend of painting,

especially the full rise of literati painting in the Yuan Dynasty, and the emergence of such forms as poetry and prose, which created new styles and paradigms in terms of concepts and techniques. As the characters appearing in the landscape paintings, although they occupy a small space, they have a clear picture theme, create an environment, and express the thoughts and emotions of the painter. While enriching and perfecting the landscape pictures, the appearance of characters also intuitively reflects the painter's subjective emotions and ideological sustenance, real life and social conditions, cultural customs and other aspects^[2]. The enthusiasm for landscape painting with characters in it shows the ancients' attitude towards the external environment "learning from nature", and it is also a concrete embodiment of the traditional Chinese thought of "harmony between man and nature", representing a very high aesthetic experience and aesthetic pursuit.

2.2 The Emergence of the Character in Landscape Painting over Time and its Development

The appearance of characters in landscape painting is of great significance in the development of Chinese landscape painting. This type of contents are collectively referred to as "spot characters". By transforming the landscape and scenery in the painting into objects that the characters and objects in the painting look at together, the artist creates an interactive atmosphere for the viewers, which not only enables the viewers to enter the artistic conception of the landscape constructed by the painter, but also enables the conception and experience of the artist's creation to pop up to convey information outside the painting. In addition, the characters in the scene can clearly reflect the characteristics of the times. The use of spot characters in traditional landscape paintings has gradually matured in the development of the times. The painters are more proficient in the use of spot characters, and pay more attention to expressing personal interests and yearning for a better life. These contents are closely related to the social and economic development of the same period, the general trend of cultural trends, and the current aesthetic trend. Therefore, under the historical background of different stages, the changes in the form, subject matter and painting method of the characters in the landscape painting can reflect the characteristics and features of different times.

For example, during the Sui and Tang dynasties, landscape painting was further developed in the handling of the spatial relationship between mountains and rivers and the proportional relationship between objects and images. For example, Zhan Ziqian's "Spring Outing" depicts an early spring scene with heavy mountains, dense forests, small bridges and flowing water. The proportion of objects and images is suitable, which changed the situation in the early stage of landscape painting that "people are bigger than mountains, and water cannot be flooded". During the Southern and Tang Dynasties of the Five Dynasties, the scene characters in Zhao Gan's "The First Snow on the River" show the scene of fishermen fishing on the river bank in the cold and windy winter. These themes involving civilian life reflect the painter's careful observation of civilian life. In terms of theory, Guo Xi put forward the famous "Three-Distance Method" in "Lin Quan Gao Zhi", and expounded that landscape painting should have a "feasible", "hopeful", "tourable" and "livable" painting environment. To a certain extent, this is a summary of the creative experience of landscape painting in the Northern Song Dynasty and before the Northern Song Dynasty, and it is also a generalization and elucidation of the theory of landscape painting.

3. The Role of Characters in Landscape Painting

3.1 From Point to Area

Although the spot characters do not occupy a large area in the landscape screen, and are only used for decoration, they can play the role of finishing touches and seeing the big from the small. The places where the spot characters exist are mostly the visual focus of the picture. The spot characters are not only the people and objects in the painting, but also the expression and sustenance of the painter's emotional mind. Proper handling of the characters in the scene can not only enrich the structural elements of the landscape painting, but also help to express the various natural and humanistic connections in the artistic conception of the landscape.

Judging from the handed-down masterpieces, for example, Zhan Ziqian's "Spring Outing" in the Sui Dynasty is the oldest scroll in existence so far, and the whole scroll shows the basic paradigm of Chinese landscape painting. The picture depicts a vast landscape scene in a panoramic way. The picture is dominated by mountains and rivers; and the characters, ancient temples, ships, and attics are integrated into the landscape and become an important landscape in the picture. These landscapes

cooperate with each other, and use the objective objects of their images to express the relationship between the size, height, distance of the objects in the picture. In addition, it is embellished in the details: there are boats in the rivers, and there are three or four characters with different expressions and postures in the boats, which integrates the human voice and the pictures of mountains and rivers together, and construct the picture proportion of the whole picture through the images of mountains, rivers, ships, characters and so on. The formation of a new pattern of landscape painting in the Sui Dynasty made the expression form and aesthetic orientation of Chinese landscape and character painting more mature. In addition, Ma Yuan's "Treading Songs" in the Southern Song Dynasty depicts the scenery on the outskirts of the capital with sunny weather after the rain, and also reflects the joyful scene of farmers walking on the ridges during a harvest year. The picture adopts a "one-corner" layout, which is divided diagonally from left to right, forming a structure of left solid and right imaginary. On the left side of the picture, the odd peaks and boulders are a bit heavy, so the artist arranged the distant mountains, palaces and pavilions on the right, especially the swaying branches of sparse willows and green bamboos, as well as the characters on the spot, so as to be still and move, and make the left and right sides of the screen visually balanced. Furthermore, Huang Gongwang's landscape work "Visiting Dai in Yanxi" in the Yuan Dynasty is based on the stories of real historical characters. When Wang Huizhi, a famous calligrapher of Jin Dynasty, was traveling to Yanxi to visit the character painter Dai Kui, he was fascinated by the beautiful scenery of sunny after snow on the way. He walked slowly and admired it for a long time. He didn't arrive at the destination until nightfall, and he returned full of excitement. On the top of the picture are hilly mountain peaks. There are scattered village houses on one side of the mountain, but the village is empty. Below is the zigzag and meandering Shanxi. There is a small boat in Shanxi. One person in the boat put up his sleeves to keep out the cold. The boatman was paddling hard. The direction of the boat should be to leave the village. The picture is bleak and cold, and the cold is pressing. The dead branches of the tree in the painting are deliberately left blank, showing the snow that has not yet melted. The mountains and rocks are stacked, and the structure is complicated, but the outline is simple, and only a little brush and ink are used at the root of the stone, which looks ethereal and free.

3.2 The Suitability for Traveling

Landscape paintings based on human activities are widely created, such as traveling and outings, searching for immortals and visiting roads, and living in seclusion and meeting friends. These human activities can, on the one hand, set off the theme of the work, and on the other hand add interest and vitality to the content of the picture, creating an artistic achievement of "suitable for traveling and living". Since the form of characters appeared in landscape painting, it has provided a broader social platform and communication gathering point for the humanistic class. People's yearning and love for nature are innate emotions, and literati have a particularly strong yearning for the natural environment. In real life, ancient literati traveling through mountains and rivers has certain limitations, but landscape painting makes viewers feel as if they are in springs and ravines, hear the sounds of apes and birds, and witness the scenery of mountains and waters, as if walking among the beautiful landscapes of virtual scenes. It is a kind of spiritual travel, so as to obtain spiritual comfort and satisfaction.

For example, in the history of painting theory, Guo Xi was the first to clearly and concretely put forward in his "Lin Quan Gao Zhi", "It is believed that there are natural landscapes that can be walked, some that can be watched, some that can be played, and some that can be lived. If these can be expressed in the painting, then this painting is wonderful. However, those can be walked and watched are not as high as those who can live and play." Landscape painters should strive to create a realm of beauty, so that the viewer "seems to be in this mountain", creating a feeling of being able to swim and live, and to obtain spiritual satisfaction. At the same time, the creation of realm is inseparable from the beauty of expressing the "intention" of mountains and rivers. The so-called "the shadow of the mountains in spring is as faint as the smile of a beauty" and "the mountains in winter are bleak and colorless as if falling asleep", etc., indicating that Guo Xi saw the beauty of the "meaning" of landscapes, which is closely related to the communication between people's feelings and natural scenery. He and his contemporary Su Shi both saw the similarities between poetry and painting in artistic conception. Guo Xi also emphasized that painters should not simply imitate one genre, nor should they stick to the scenery of one time and one place, but "should there be breadth and depth in the aesthetic appreciation of natural objects", widely absorb the "essence" of landscape beauty, and then sculpt and create again.

3.3 Poetic Landscape

Poetry is the inheritance of culture and an important feature of the later development of literati painting. Since the Yuan Dynasty, literati painting has become the mainstream of the painting circle. The lyrical, freehand and personified unique style of landscape painting is closely related to the reclusive life of the literati. Poetry, as a carrier of Chinese culture, has a long history, and the main carrier of poetry is the near-style poems and ancient-style poems that reached their peak in the Tang Dynasty, as well as the most popular words in the Song Dynasty and the songs of the Yuan Dynasty. This and the development process and nodes of landscape painting belong to the stage of integration, coexistence and mutual promotion.

The spot characters are often the finishing touch in landscape paintings, and are an important carrier of the painter's emotional expression. The painter often compares the spot characters in his works to himself, and projects his emotions and wishes on the person in the painting, make it his own emotional sustenance and expression of spiritual thoughts. For example, "Tao Yuanming's Poetry Album" is a color painting on paper created by Qing Dynasty painter Shi Tao. The painting expresses his beautiful ideals by depicting Tao Yuanming, a hermit who returns to nature, who is less than honorable and does not cooperate with the ruler. Shi Tao focuses his perspective on the cottage where the poet and the hermit are located. The cottage is surrounded by green pines, implying the noble character of the hermit, and the image of the poet is placed among the mountains & rivers, the forest house and the twilight, which sets off the poet's spiritual outlook and refined temperament, and also reveals the painter's yearning for Tao Yuanming's reclusive life in his later years.

4. Cultural Connotation of Characters in Landscape Paintings

After the Northern Song Dynasty, landscape painting gradually focused and paid attention to the characters in the scene, which reflected a direct expression of the ancient people's cognition of the world view at that time, that is, the emotional expression of "expressing love to the mountains and rivers between sky and earth". Of course, paintings with different themes will have different reflections on their expressions and intentions. Painters will also reflect their class-level limitations in terms of content and form of expression due to their different class status.

In traditional Chinese culture, human is the intermediary between sky and earth, which constitutes the special status of human. In the development process of landscape painting, human evolved from painter to "painting entrant", which also reflects the ancient people's cognition and thinking about human. This is related to the many progressive viewpoints put forward by some enlightenment thinkers at that time, and it is a manifestation of the idea of equality of natural human rights.

Landscape painting is also a manifestation of the ancients' respect for Taoism and nature. "Retreat" is the ideological realm that ancient literati longed for. If a person retreats, the person will be faced with a harmonious coexistence of natural environment and living conditions. Depicting landscapes is a more convenient way to achieve this ideal goal. Having a reverence for the natural world, yearning for an ideal seclusion life, having certain rights and wealth, mastering some techniques and means of building mountain dwellings, and being rich in cognition and knowledge interweave together as an "invisible net", making the literati wander between returning and retreating. This is the most fundamental contradiction in the heart of Chinese feudal literati.

The development of landscape painting has formed the spirit of landscape culture, and the expression of characters in the painting constitutes the core of its cultural connotation. This is the fusion of the humanistic theory and ideal practice of traditional Chinese culture with artistic expression as the carrier. Due to the long-term influence of Chinese traditional ideology and culture, Chinese landscape painting follows the ethical value of traditional Chinese aesthetics, emphasizing artistic expression, lyricism and expressiveness. Poetry, picture scrolls and gardens constitute the ideal sustenance and spiritual destination of ancient Chinese literati, and then evolve into the spirit of landscape culture. Through continuous collision and fusion, it influences and determines the constant change and development of traditional Chinese artistic thought and aesthetic taste, forming the spirit of traditional Chinese art and culture.

5. Conclusion

In the famous landscape paintings of the past dynasties, the forms, contents and techniques of

landscapes and characters have different changes, which are closely related to the contemporary social economy and the characteristics of the times. It reflects the painter's emotion and attitude towards life pursuit and natural yearning, and then indirectly reflects the current social life situation and the painter's aesthetic concept at that time.

Landscape painting is a unique carrier of Chinese humanistic spirit, in which the landscape and human traces are the painter's emotional carrier and cultural symbol. The fusion of the characters and the landscape environment creates a landscape artistic conception in which the scene and the environment, the characters and the nature blend with each other, and the harmonious coexistence between man and nature is recorded and expressed in an artistic way.

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