

The Impressionistic Spirit of Xu Wei's Flower and Bird Paintings

Hua Li^{a*}, Hanyi Chen^b

Academy of Fine Arts, Zhejiang Normal University, 688 Yingbin Avenue, Wucheng District, Jinhua, Zhejiang, China

^a1297158827@qq.com, ^b782845259@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract: Xu Wei is a legend of freehand brushwork painting in Ming Dynasty. He is proficient in all kinds of poetry, calligraphy and painting, especially good at wild cursive which is freely writing with wanton vertical and horizontal genre. He focused more on the play of subjective feelings and literati's interests, so he was not restricted by the form of natural images. He dared to "break all forms" and was familiar with "casting forms and pleasing shadows". The impressionistic spirit of Xu Wei's flower-and-bird paintings has influenced a large number of later literati artists.

Keywords: Freehand brushwork; Flower and-bird painting; Impressionistic spirit

1. Xu Wei's Historical Background

Xu Wei was born in Zhejiang Shaoxing Shanyin (today's Zhejiang Shaoxing), alias Wenchang, epithet was Tianchi Old Man and nicknamed Ivy lay scholar. His had been through the miserable, desolate and lonely life, meanwhile he was quite intelligent and agile, he owned various ambitious but failed numerous times, he couldn't realize his life ideal in court, only he understood the pain that how difficult to present self talent. But there is no denying his unique attainments in poetry, calligraphy, drama and painting, especially in the creative aspects of Chinese ink freehand flower-and-bird painting. His painting has the characteristics of flying style in splashing ink and implying directly to the mindset, so it has sincerely convinced many later generations of unstinting praise. His life was full of setbacks and disappointments, which also contributed to the formation of his unique artistic style later. He began painting with an arbitrary and free attitude. He uses ink and brush to show strong subjective feelings. He is not eclectic in form and seldom inherits the painting style and techniques from predecessors. Instead, he adopts reform and originality to create new style characteristics by combining his own practice. It was these special opportunities and experiences that led public to call Xu Wei the "Van Gogh in the East" and Van Gogh the "Xu Wei in the West".

The Ming Dynasty was a golden age in the history of Chinese art with varied painting styles. Xu Wei lived in the late Ming Dynasty. He was the founder of the Chinese "splash-ink freehand painting school" and the founder of the "ivy painting school". So he created the Chinese freehand painting school. His paintings can absorb the essence of predecessors and be completely transformed, his indulgent writing with lively calligraphy, he doesn't chase resemblance but pursue the rhyme, which covers all his artworks including landscape, characters, flowers and birds painting. He has built the generation of painting style with the most outstanding representatives—flowers, which has played a non-negligible role in the development of the impressionistic spirit in the painting world of later generations.

2. The Artistic Style of Xu Wei's Freehand Flower and Bird Paintings

Xu Wei's painting style is bold and unrestrained on the whole, also his brush and ink are heroic and pamada. In Xu Wei's Shape Painting, he gives full play to his subjective initiative, so he uses the brush freely and is not controlled by the image at all. From appreciating the shadow of the painting image, he extends his creative ideas to the aesthetics. With the veiled shape and the structure of the brushwork, Xu Wei formed a freehand style.

Xu Wei considers himself to be the first in prose, second in poetry, third in calligraphy and fourth in

painting. His works have absorbed the long and bold change, while he never rely on others, he abandons fake and chases truth with heroic style, so that he sets up individual character and creativity. He is not only too meticulous in details, but also has a high degree of generalization in ink, color and brush, which is full of lyricism. The momentum of the work is bold and unrestrained, which is free from trivial matters, the line is concise and comprehensive, while the pattern is used to splash-ink with little coloring, which has distinct layers and vividly presentation. Graph of Ink Grape is a landmark work in his freehand brushwork, and it is also the most representative of his artistic attainments. It looks a little sloppy and random, but you can feel the flow of the brushwork. Grape is dyed by splash-ink, light ink and thick ink interlaced, the intersection of virtuality and reality with vivid image, as his confused life and the fate of the drift. The vines are crisscross from far to near, the shape and color of grapes and leaves have not been drawn to the standard, but that is why he painted his temperament into the painting, that is, highly summarize the picture of the object with straightforward expression instead of clumsy gestures. Not only that, Xu Wei also added the title sentence with painting and calligraphy in order to express the inner anger. "Miscellaneous Flower Picture Scroll" is also one of his freehand works, which seemingly casual, but in fact, the brushwork is brilliant. The movement track from 13 kinds of flowers, vegetables and fruits, as well as the ink rhyme under different shade, size, dry and wet with density, all of which indicate the improvisational and unrepeatable nature of Xu Wei's brush-writing. With one movement and one climax after another, it presents the most intense abstract expressionism in Chinese painting. He presented both a haphazardised halo and a well-controlled shade in his calligraphy.

He did not simply copy the physical form of the object, nor did he mechanically reproduce the objective world. Instead of holding on to the old law, he discovered it from an unexpected angle, then carried on the artistic summary processing to the object, and depicted with emotional freehand brushwork, so that it contains some kind of temperament and spirit like the feeling of being there. Xu Wei's breakthrough to the standard is not accidental, but based on his personality and inner emotion. This breakthrough also led to his artistic style of "wild" and "loose", "wild" is not traditional with rough and strange characteristics, "loose" is to break the previous rules and laws with uninhibited characteristics.

3. The Spirit of literati Freehand Brushwork in Xu Wei's Freehand Brushwork Paintings

The impressionistic spirit of literati paintings in Ming and Qing Dynasties was the inducement for the formation of Xu Wei's freehand spirit. In the Ming Dynasty, the literati artists' pursuit of freehand brushwork has gone beyond the likeness of the image itself, who focusing on the interest of the brush and ink with the expression of personal feelings. He gave play to the lyricism of painting, advocated originality and expressed individuality, which all became the content of the aesthetic thoughts of freehand brushwork in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, so Xu Wei was the foremost representative among them. Xu Wei's literati paintings were painted for themselves, expressing his inner feelings and pleasing no one. Even in his later years, Xu Wei never bowed to life, he never succumbed to serve the hour, and always maintained the character of a scholar. Xu Wei's literary painting characteristics are mainly reflected in the subjectivization and individualization of his works. Xu Wei is good at painting the four gentlemen who are familiar to the literatis, symbolizing the pain of his life with the sad and bitter gesture of flowers. Xu Wei's freehand brushwork technique has strengthened the characteristics of literati paintings. The images under his pen can convey the charm of the images with a few strokes, which truly achieves the flair of literati paintings of "careless brushwork without similarity". He believed that the essence of art is the true feelings from people's hearts, and emphasized the "real personality". For example, there are many of his splashed ink peonies, which are intended to express his poor situation and personality. The painting techniques are applied freely, but the brush strokes are vivid and the combination of poetry, calligraphy and painting reflects the lyrical interest of Xu Wei's flower and bird paintings.

Literati painting emphasizes the expression of the artist's personality, it focuses on the combination of poetry, painting and calligraphy, and concentrates on the pursuit of inner charm in the expression of objects. The content of Xu Wei's freehand flower and bird paintings is the most typical expression of literati paintings. He urged "reject resemblance but verve", and he insisted on the development of freehand style flowers and birds, which stressed the subjectivity and unvalued impersonality.

Xu Wei, for the first time, incorporated subjective emotions into his freehand flower-and-bird paintings. He expressed his personal inner feelings through the images, which were not restricted by the established laws, and further promoted the progress of the history of Chinese flower-and-bird

paintings. The freehand flower-and-bird painting contains rich connotation, grand artistic conception, vivid and profound charm, as well as distinctive personality and unique spiritual connotation. Xu Wei inherited and studied the techniques of predecessors, at the same time, he brought forth the new ideas. His greatest artistic achievement lies in the flowers and birds brushwork, which gradually turned to freehand painting. However, there are also some paintings with literati themes. When dealing with ordinary topics, Xu Wei can use unique techniques to express common things in an eclectic way, which is extremely artistic appealing and brings different visual feelings. Xu Wei is also good at integrating calligraphy into painting with cursive, mainly wild cursive. Many of his works handed down from generation to generation are based on pure ink and wash. The changes of ink and wash in painting works are rich and diverse. The application of cursive script and splashed ink enriches its expression, embodies the spirit of writing in the creation of freehand brushwork, and leads public rich imagination.

4. Shaoxing Culture and Xu Wei's Freehand Painting

Shaoxing is one of the first 24 famous historical and cultural cities in China. It is a well known tourist city featuring historical culture and landscape scenery. With profound cultural deposits, it is a renowned town of water, bridge, wine, orchid, calligraphy and celebrated scholars. Thousands of years of civilization has left a precious historical heritage to the later generations.

The history of Shaoxing wine is closely linked with the history of its culture. Many literati have forged an indissoluble bond with it, leaving immortal masterpieces. Xu Wei is one of them, he often painting while wine tasting, so his works exudes the fragrance of wine and intoxication. Throughout Xu Wei's life, he was versatile but his lofty ambition can not be deployed, his official career repeatedly frustrated. So he can only drink with sorrow, he felt that only wine can express his ambition, so that he could forget the world's distress, thus speaking freely and pursuing his own individual freedom. I do not know whether it can be said that Shaoxing wine achieves Xu Wei, Xu Wei in turn deifies Shaoxing wine. The two are inextricably associated.

Orchid is the city flower of Shaoxing. It can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. Xu Wei wrote a lot of poems about orchids, such as "Orchid valley song" and "Orchid", also painted a lot of freehand works. For example, in "Narcissus Orchid Bamboo" and "Orchid Bamboo Picture", the strokes are concise and the verve is free. The orchids under Xu Wei's description are actually the portrayal of his life. The reason why the painting of orchids with "writing" is because the painting of orchids is to use Chinese calligraphy as the foundation, we appreciate the orchid painting is also to enjoy the painter's calligraphy skills, so that we could find its essence through the level of writing.

Celebrities in previous dynasties are the important witnesses and writers in different historical stages of the city. Shaoxing has nurtured a lot of celebrities from ancient times to now. According to their former residences, we seem to be able to notice the figures of sage pioneers walking around here in this blending time and space. This is the continuation of Shaoxing's unique cultural gene and spiritual connotation. Xu Wei's former residence is simple and low-key yet elegant. The interior and exterior layout is just like its owner, who advocating freedom and nature, thus providing a place for Xu Wei's creation.

There are various other cultures in Shaoxing, among which Xu Wei's freehand brushwork is only one corner. The two are closely related and complement each other.

5. Conclusion

Xu Wei is the master of Chinese freehand brushwork flowers and birds, he has pushed its climax of development, promoted to express the level of the spirit, all of these must associate with his bumpy life experience. He devoted himself to innovation and insisted on his own aesthetic taste all his life. He expresses his strong and stubborn personality in his works, lays stress on the creation mentality of allowing nature take its course with the casual and peaceful creative emotion, he focuses on the "still meaning", and does not be blinded by the images. He observes the world from a unique perspective and regards the world with the heart, the Chinese freehand flower and bird painting has been pushed to the highest realm where forceful thoughts and feelings can be carried out, also the unification of "ego" and "anatta" has been achieved, thus rewarding numerous literati artists of later generations.

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