

When Eastern Art Meets Western Arts

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However beautiful an art piece might be, or however delicious the food could serve the gourmet, people never stopped to change their taste on things. It is because the human's nerves tend to gain fatigue easily when focusing on the same thing too long. Just as if you stared at certain color without blinking your eyes for half hour or so, you would feel the color having lost its attraction, or even having changed to its original hue to something different. Perhaps that explains part of the reason that all art forms have been constantly developing their new styles. Other reasons could be that the economic, social and political change of the society led to different life style and the demand for new art.

When most people were still enjoying the classical Chinese figure painting style which had prevailed in Tang dynasty, there appeared a Madman Liang Kai in Song dynasty who left his official post as an painter-in-attendance from the court and went to become a Buddhism monk. He was the first well-known artist to paint people with broad brush strokes while applying the techniques of splattering ink on paper which was usually applied on modern Chinese painting, and created distinctly different style of figure painting, such as his Celestial Man and Li Bai Reciting a Poem(see volume 1 of Chinese Painting – a Showcase to Chinese Culture). Even though Liang was not regarded as the father of modern art in China, he did make a corner stone in Chinese painting art. It was not until the late Ming dynasty that a revolutionary figure in Chinese art history, Xu Wei (1521-1593 AD) founded the genre of modern art and was worshipped as the father of modern art by numerous followers and modern art practisers, such as masters Zhu Da (1626 – 1705 AD) and Shi Tao (1642 – 1707 AD) from the early Qing Dynasty. The important figure from Beijing painting style such as Qi Baishi (1864 – 1957AD) was a great admirer of Xu and Zhu, and undoubtedly a devoted disciple to those precedent masters. Their work all featured with very expressive brush strokes and vivid figure, and usually with beautiful poems.



Just like the western modern art, Chinese modern art came to paint a lot of ordinary people and scenes of daily life, and used distinct brush strokes. During the Tang or Jin Dynasty, the celebrated artists are court painters or government officials, such as Gu Kaizhi (344 - 406 AD), Yan Liben(600 - 673 AD) and Zhou Fang(730 - 800 AD) who painted mostly figures from mythologies, emperors and court ladies, with dedicated coloring and detailed depiction of forms, a style for the taste of the royal family, or high-rank officials, or rich people. Liang was brave enough to break that rule of traditional figure painting. And the masters in Ming dynasty made the Free-hand painting style in figures, landscape and birds or flowers a very popular practice, which is opposite to the style of Tang's court painting that is called Gongbi painting style. Xu Wei made a giant stride in the course of development of Chinese painting, and made painting such a approachable media to freely express the inner spirit and emotions of the painters, which used a lot of calligraphic strokes in the painting and directly added poems to the image of the work. When we see the image, one can feel the poem; while we read the poem, one can vision the image, such as his work *The Grape and Chrysanthemum*, which have been introduced in the volume one of this book.

We may see that there are some similarities among those painters mentioned above. Liang Kai went to become a Buddhism monk after his political career from government, while Zhu Da and Shi Tao (whose original family name was also Zhu) were both offspring of the royal family from Ming dynasty and retreated from the mundane world to become the Buddhism monk after the Man People conquered the Ming emperor and built the Qing Empire. Xu Wei was never successful in his pursuit of career in government, and was even thrown into the jail for some reason. He tried writing drama also, but painting made him one of the greatest artists in Chinese history. So all those artists were not happy with their life. The loss of their home country or the huge failure in their career associated with the great disappointment at the old dynasty and resistance to the new authority made them feel estranged from the current society. With angers and frustration growing inside and pushing them to find out a way to let out, of course, emotional display on their work would be a reasonable solution for a painting artist. Thus, maneuvering the ink and varying the brush strokes just came so naturally to them. So for Chinese modern artist, they didn't start to search for the new techniques before they had that desire to express their inner emotions.



It seemed a different story for the pioneer of Post-impressionism painting master Paul Cezanne (1839-1906 AD), equally as the father of modern art in western painting. As western painting artists took techniques as a very important part of their artisanship, just as they could be bored with the old painting subject, they never gave up trying new techniques to fine tune their work. Cezanne applied distinct lines in his painting, which was usually avoided in the classical realism painting due to the requirement for a illusionary realistic look of the image, which is usually accomplished by using the shade and light to create a volume-like body of the object and depth of the space. The application of strong lines for images make it look less realistic, however, it greatly influenced the work of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973 AD), the founder of Cubism. Cezanne also innovated the short-brush stroke for an effect of shimmering light in the painting, by juxtaposing the dots of different colors of light or dark artistically to reflect the light which led to the creation of new style of Pointillism. I am afraid we have to credit all these to this talented painting master to make him worthy of the title as the father of western modern art.

Zhu Da and Shi Tao lived a estranged life in their late time, trying to void the harassment and persecution of the new government, during which ordeal they found their inspiration of painting. The Post-impressionist Gauguin(1848 – 1903 AD) went to search for new painting subject in Tihiti, a distant island from main-stream civilization of Europe. Cezanne hid himself for art creation while experimenting with new painting techniques in southern France, while Van Gogh (1853 – 1890 AD) lived a isolated life in Arles and produced some later to become the master pieces of post-impressionism. Van Gogh applied many strong colored lines in his work, to create a style of painting with vibrant colors, a contrast to his destitute life situation, maybe a comfort to his constant depression.

Zhu Da painted most work of flowers, or birds with funny looks and desolate landscape. He was a great master in maneuvering the ink by producing different shades of ink with one brush stroke. In those shades, the volume is indicated, even may not clearly shown strictly to the standard of classical realism; accordingly, without real colors in painting, but we can tell “colorful” hues in the painting. This is the feature of Chinese modern art at its beginning stage, minimal application of colors, less endeavour to focus on the resemblance of the object, however, enough to satisfy the need of the painters, luckily with no interruption of extra labour to intervene his flow of artist input, in addition, with poems added to further express the spirit and thoughts of the master, aesthetic value is enhanced to the work. In Chinese poems, there are no well-defined concepts, but artistic conceptions. So the enormous room for imagination, the expressive brush strokes carried with strong emotions, the symbolic image together with the connotations beyond the words of poem, all bring up a sensational feeling of beauty to the viewers. The beauty might come after that saddest feeling delivered by the painter, combined with a refreshing feeling prompted by the painter’s intuition from practicing the new belief in Buddhism, and thus made it the most impressive one. To the painter himself, the completion of the creation of the work would bring great comfort to his wounded soul, and lead to a complete relaxation after pouring out all the restrained emotions and thoughts, and a feeling to transcend the experience of his life, as well as that of producing the art under the spiritual guidance of the new belief. Consequently, a great pleasure and self-content that is more meaningful and lasting than one received material wealth or achieved career success. That is the pleasure only associated with beauty, and nothing else.

officially became a genre in Song dynasty, and reached its peak in Ming dynasty. All the practisers had to be the scholars in order to have that particular taste. Literati's painting should be simple and pure but not plain and vague, elegant but not too fancy, concise but not superficial, primitive but not dull. The person was not only required to be very well educated in Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism and so on, but also to be very sophisticated in painting brush work and composition. You have to know the Buddhism to understand that particular meaning of being simple and pure, or the Daoism to know how to be primitive and concise, and to learn the Confucianism to grasp the essence of being elegant.

Being elegant here may take more endeavour to dig into its original meaning here. In Chinese figure paintings, there are some commonly used brush strokes, such as the silk-line brush stroke created by Gu Kaizhi (344 – 406 AD), the iron-line brush stroke by Yanli Ben (600 – 673 AD), the willow-leaf brush stroke created by Wu Daozi (680 – 760 AD). Wu was regarded as a “saint of painting” in Chinese history, however, his brush stroke was sneered at by the classical literati's painters, and thus he was expelled from that painting genre, because they felt that the willow-leaf brush stroke didn't satisfy that requirement of being elegant, not as smooth as silk-line, neither as stern as iron – line. There was something deliberately maneuvered in that brush stroke, in order to enrich the painting language, which was not encouraged in traditional literati's painting, even though it might enhance his individual style and charm the crowd. Shi Tao was an great renovator in brush stroke also, he used very bold impressionist brush stroke and smart washes in his painting and earned him the fame of being one of greatest Chinese modern artist. However, he was accepted by some orthodox art critics as a successful innovator in literati's painting and was highly regarded by them. One has to carefully study their painting works before they came to understand all that subtlety.

To achieving the effect of being pure and simple, one had to be an excellent brush work master, to immerge himself into the nature and follow its rules, and enable him to produce the image that would look as natural as it is. However, it didn't mean to achieve the exact likeness here, but that the image in painting should immediately remind you of the real thing in nature, but anything else, and make you forget that it was nothing but a painting. Because the spirit of the object reflected from the image would immediately catch your attention, and make you neglect all the techniques.

That type of work can only be accomplished when the painter's brush work has reached a highly sophisticated level and was led by the nature itself, instead of by the painter's hand. Also the painter has to have very thorough knowledge of the object, from its appearance to its inner characters, and can call them out anytime during the process of his artistic creation. For example, when one paints a pine tree, he should already have its image in his mind before he takes the brush, then he may take a deep breath to vision the spirit of the pine tree. This vision is greatly influenced by his mindset of that moment. As we all know the pine is an evergreen plant that can live for many years, as well stand the cold winter and get even greener in snowy season. So pine is a symbol for longevity, vitality and perseverance in Chinese culture, however, which character the painter was going to display in his work mainly depends on his current mood, the thoughts propelled by that defined circumstance and his own stories. Some painter might be inclined to express the longevity and vitality of the pine, especially when he put it together with the cranes in the same painting, while other painters might like to expression the perseverance of the pine, to show their formidable strength and unbendable integrity. Different visions of those characters in

the painter might affect the brush language and bring up different expressions to the image and make its display not the same.

However, the traditional literati painting finally retreated from art battle field after centuries of glorious history when the Qing dynasty was overthrown and replaced by the Republic of China in year 1911. Then the following New Culture Revolution launched by some intellectuals who had studied abroad gave it a deadly blow by completely negating the Confucianism who had dominated the ideology of China for about two thousand years. Lingnan School of painting appeared at this time of break-point between new culture and traditional Chinese culture. It was a school created by Gao Jianfu(1879 – 1951 AD) and his friend Chen Shuren. Gao first took training in traditional Chinese paintings, then went to Japan for an exchange in art, and brought some fresh ideas and techniques of western painting back to China, since Japan had been one of pioneers to learn from advanced western European countries. Then, Xu Beihong (1895 – 1953 AD) who studied painting in France came back China to teach western painting as a professor in Art Academies in Beijing. Xu was also regarded as a member of the Lingnan painting school. This school was well-known for its effort to incorporate western painting techniques into traditional Chinese painting. Gao's painting kept the freehand brush work for its expressiveness and spontaneity, while applied the realism drawing and painting techniques to make the image look more real. There was also inscription and seal applied in the painting, so, maybe it could be taken as the new scholar painting with new ideas and new techniques, to be differentiated from the ones without inscription, which are solely focused on the fine depiction of the work and mainly for the taste of the image itself. Xu painted both oil painting and Chinese painting, and was so good at painting horses in Chinese freehand brush style that he was mostly known for his horse painting among Chinese people, perhaps some of them don't even know that he was also good at oil painting.

The New Culture Revolution started in year 1915 of last century, soon after the end of Qing dynasty, the last one of Chinese feudal empires. Most leaders of the revolution had studied abroad, who were strongly against the Chinese traditional culture without reservation, and enthusiastically welcomed the western culture without hesitation. (Politics could be involved in the situation to certain degree). Luckily, the Chinese brush and ink were still kept, to make the Chinese calligraphy and painting practice still possible. It was not that Chinese traditional paintings are not beautiful, but because after over a thousand years of facing the images produced by the same set of tools had created the sensational fatigue to the appreciators' eye. I had tried to show some Chinese master pieces of antique time to people of various nationality who all responded that they were elegant, still they could feel more attached to the type of art produced by their own people, due to the culture habit – a habitual way of thinking under the strong and long-time influence of certain culture.

The interesting thing is that the western modern art were in its feverous renovation around the same period. After the style of new realism, new classism, there appeared fauvism, impressionism, post-impressionism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, abstractionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, and so on. It was also not that the paintings from the renaissance period were not attractive enough, the smile of Mona Lisa by da Vinci was possibly able to catch the soul of all people in the world, but the artists' sensitivity made them always restless in searching and trying new things.

According to the official record, among those modern western masters, Picasso was probably the one who had visited China and highly regarded Chinese painting by saying that the true art was in China. Whether the comment was reasonable or not, it did say a fact,

that the western modern art renovation had got influence from Chinese art, the painting or the calligraphy. Just from the distinct brush lines they applied whether in post-impressionism style, the cubism, or the abstractionism, they can't deny this truth. Some may argue that those masters didn't borrow those elements directly from China, but from the Japanese art such as Ukiyoe, which could be true. Picasso himself just had a great collection of Japanese Ukiyoe art at home. The same case applied to some other modern artist. The thing is that Chinese neighbour Japanese might also like Chinese art and it was quite usual for neighbours to borrow from each other. We just need to see where the root is from. As a matter of fact, those impressionist, or cubists also learned from the primitive art in Africa and the Oceanian culture and then influenced the later artists.

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