

An Exploration of Xu Beihong's Thought on the Improvement of Chinese Painting

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Abstract

At the beginning of the twentieth century, traditional Chinese painting was still in decline. As one of the key figures in the "Western learning to the east", Xu Beihong realized that new blood was necessary for Chinese painting to revive. He put forward his 'Theory of the Improvement of Chinese Painting', advocating the development of 'traditional Chinese painting', based on modern Chinese realist art, and the application of Western realism to Chinese painting. As the founder of modern Chinese art education, Xu Beihong's work and significance in art history will be assessed in an objective and scientific manner, with a view to providing reference value in terms of methodology and attitude in future studies of Chinese art history.

Keywords

Xu Beihong; Chinese painting improvement; Art education.

1. THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF XU BEIHONG'S THEORY OF THE IMPROVEMENT OF CHINESE PAINTING

Realism was a lifelong artistic philosophy of Xu Beihong, the formation of which was inextricably linked to his childhood learning experiences. Xu Beihong was born in the small town of Riverside in southern Jiangsu province, and although he came from an ordinary background at a young age, his family had a good cultural background and his father was his initiating teacher in painting. Xu Dazhang, known as Chengzhi, taught himself to paint at an early age due to the poverty of his family and eventually became a well-known local painter. From the age of nine Xu Beihong learned to paint under Xu Dazhang, and when he first started, Xu Beihong's father made it a point to make him sketch. This education by his father made Xu Beihong aware of the importance of accuracy and truthfulness when he was first learning to paint. At the same time Xu Dazhang's approach to painting training influenced Xu Beihong's artistic creation throughout his life, both during his study and teaching years, and he always placed great emphasis on the role of sketching. Xu Beihong believed that sketching was the foundation of all plastic arts, and he had very high requirements for his students' sketches when teaching, saying that "sketching is the foundation of all plastic arts". Xu Beihong once said of Xu Dazhang's painting: "He was a subtle observer and a creator of things. Although he lived in a poor countryside and was born in a poor family, he liked to draw what he saw, such as chickens, dogs, cows, sheep, village trees and cats, and flowers, and was especially good at drawing people. Free parents and sisters (the late gentleman had no brothers) to the neighbourhood you beggar, are deliberately portrayed, even if they are imitated the late gentleman had no teacher, a creation, so his work, little conrontion and especially more true. Keep the strict model of Song Confucianism, take away not meticulous." [1]

It was this slightly naturalistic training in painting that Xu Beihong received as a child, due to the influence of his father. Later, Kang Youwei's criticism of the art since the Four Kings and his admiration for Song painting coincided with Xu Beihong's ideas. So the combination of the

realist ideas formed from childhood and the realistic ideas promoted by the Renovationists formed a powerful spiritual conviction for Xu Beihong, and was an important source of thought for his theory of the improvement of Chinese painting.

2. XU BEIHONG'S IDEAS AND INFLUENCE ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF CHINESE PAINTING

Against the background of the decadence of modern Chinese painting tradition, Xu Beihong put forward the Theory of the Improvement of Chinese Painting in May 1918, which included his famous declaration: "The good of the ancient method is kept, the dying is succeeded, the poor is changed, the inadequate is increased, and the Western painting can be adopted into the integration." [2]

At that time, traditional Chinese painting was still concerned with charm rather than resemblance, and Xu Beihong believed that the traditional expression of Chinese painting at that time could no longer carry Chinese art and culture, and could not fully present the beauty of all things. [3] Xu Beihong emphasised that only by conveying the divine in the form was a perfect work of art, and he advocated the creation of art with a sense of truth, advocating "the classicalism inherent in our country", which was also Xu Beihong's basic idea of improving Chinese painting. The ultimate aim of Xu Beihong's "realism" was to "go alone and not pick up the wisdom of others", [4] so that "the idealism of our country could shine brightly in the world". [5]

Xu Beihong incorporated Western painting techniques into the reform of Chinese painting, advocating light and shape, paying attention to the anatomical structure of the subject and the precise grasp of the skeleton, and emphasizing the ideological connotations of his works. [6] Xu Beihong's advocacy of modern Chinese art into the fresh blood, in the Chinese painting world at the time set off a considerable wave, making it vigorous and fruitful its unique aesthetic concept also allows the traditional art of Chinese painting has a richer picture effect.

3. COMMENTARY ON XU BEIHONG'S IDEAS ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF CHINESE PAINTING

3.1. The Shortcomings of Xu Beihong's Improvements

Even though traditional Chinese painting was stagnant or even regressive at the time, Xu Beihong was anxious to find a breakthrough, he merely improved Chinese painting in a biased manner, lacking a focus on and understanding of the cultural connotations and intrinsic values of the art of traditional Chinese painting. This raw and immature means of innovation is a poor move in the path of artistic development. [7]

In the early days of Chinese painting improvement Xu Beihong was an extreme attacker of traditional Chinese painting, an attitude that was firstly due to his internal preconceived prejudice against literati painting, which resulted in strong internal resistance; and secondly because Xu Beihong had a strong sense of mission and spiritual conviction for the improvement of Chinese painting that originated from his heart. Although Xu Beihong's ideas for improvement are full of overblown radical rhetoric, his own exploration and ambivalence in his painting practice can also be seen as some kind of implicit amendment to his extreme words and actions.

3.2. The Positive Significance of Xu Beihong's Improvement of Chinese Painting

Xu Beihong's "improvement of Chinese painting" was an educational system painstakingly established by Xu Beihong. As a vigorous and historically significant art improvement movement, Xu Beihong ignored the laws of the development of Chinese and Western art when

he first carried out the improvement of Chinese painting, and could not accurately foresee the inherent contradictions contained therein. "There was a fundamental difference between the idea of 'realism' in traditional painting and the idea of 'realism' that he later expressed. The contradiction and conflict between the two, Xu Beihong did not really develop the problem and take measures to solve it. But we cannot deny his education system, it was his improvement of Chinese painting that allowed later generations to explore more in the way of realism.

In fact, his strong critical attitude towards traditional Chinese painting was also rooted in the goal of 'improving traditional Chinese painting'. Xu Beihong saw realistic art as a "wisdom art" with a scientific spirit of knowledge, a remedy for China's decadent and old-fashioned style, and believed that "realism" was no longer just a technique, but "a movement in art to seek truth, to sing wisdom". The "realism" was no longer just a technique, but "a movement of truth-seeking, an art of wisdom." [8]

4. CONCLUSION

The fundamental reason for Xu Beihong's widespread approval of the reform line was undoubtedly his lifelong goal of incorporating Western realism into "our inherent classicism". Although the controversy over Xu Beihong still exists today, with critics arguing that Xu Beihong brought Western oil painting techniques into Chinese painting, destroying the traditional line-based values of Chinese painting, I believe that it was Xu Beihong's reforms and innovations to Chinese painting that changed the face of Chinese painting and made it more realistic, a great contribution to Chinese figure painting. For the entire period, Xu Beihong's achievements and artistic accomplishments still qualify him as a great artist.

It should be said that while Xu Beihong was unduly critical of this tradition, his positive influence and worthy contribution to the improvement of Chinese painting should not be forgotten; yet when we emphasise his influence and achievements, we cannot deny his slightly radical stance when it comes to the tradition of Chinese painting. While Xu Beihong's idea of improvement provides us with valuable experience, it also offers lessons worth reflecting on and summarising.

The development of everything has an inevitable process from weakness to strength, and from strength to weakness, while the pushing of the new will lead to another form of iteration. [10] History cannot be chosen, and we cannot think backwards about it, but the paths taken by those who have gone before us will inevitably provide lessons for those who come after them.

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