

# Brushwork and Spirit: The realistic ink figure painting of Chen Han sheng

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**Abstract:** Painter Chen Han sheng has resolutely chosen the path of realistic ink figure painting. He explores an artistic language suitable for self-expression through sketching, drawing on traditional landscape and flower-and-bird painting ink techniques for figure painting. With the sentiment of a literati, he experiences life, pays attention to society, shapes the spirit of the times with traditional brush and ink, and thus explores an academic and artistic path in realistic painting.

**Keywords:** sketching, techniques, life and society

## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the new century, the field of contemporary Chinese ink figure painting has undergone profound changes, exhibiting a trend towards diversification while also facing numerous difficulties and challenges. Particularly under the strong impact of Western contemporary art, contemporary Chinese painting is increasingly entering a postmodern state. Traditional painting languages are being eroded, and many painters are at a loss in the face of trends, losing their confidence. They overly emphasize the formal language and subjectivity of painting, focusing on the structure and concepts of the artwork, and abandoning the realistic depiction of the past, thus failing to find their own place.

## 2. The realistic ink figure painting path of artist Chen Han sheng

Artist Chen Han sheng chose the path of realistic ink figure painting in the face of trends. He finds subjects and captures inspiration from life, selecting rural and grassland figures as the main themes of his creations. He has produced a large number of realistic ink figure paintings that reflect real life and has developed his own unique formal language and stylistic techniques. In this way, he has explored a creative path that integrates academic and artistic qualities within realistic painting.

### 3. Marco Polo's encounter with the khan: Ink and Expression



Figure 1 "Marco Polo's Audience with the Khan" 180×388 cm, 2013

In a sense, figure sketching in ink figure painting is essentially about how to shape forms with brush and ink. Unlike landscape and flower-and-bird painting, where the primary learning methods are training in brush and ink techniques and copying traditional works, or like sketching in pencil, which focuses solely on solving structural and volumetric issues, figure sketching in ink figure painting requires a unique approach. It demands an artistic technique that is distinct from others yet capable of expressing one's unique feelings, which is a manifestation of individuality.

He never drafts his sketches. After clarifying his creative intent, he proceeds with confidence, as if he already has a clear vision in his mind. He wields his brush boldly, allowing each stroke to evolve naturally and completes the work in one continuous effort. Through the use of various brush techniques—such as light and heavy pressure, fast and slow movements, and the interplay of pauses and turns—and the manipulation of ink density and wetness, he freely and effortlessly captures the essence of his subject. He masterfully balances the primary and secondary elements, the large and small, the simple and complex, and the real and virtual aspects, integrating these traditional dialectical methods with his personal emotional expression. In the process of layering and blending, he develops his own unique approach.

He excels at endowing ordinary and simple postures with personality and spirit. The overall appearance of his sketching works is characterized by vigorous and varied brushwork, highly intensified yet reasonable figure shaping, a light and elegant composition, and a strict yet dynamic structure. His free and unrestrained brushwork follows his heart, with just the right rhythm and rhythm, making his works truly captivating. It can be said that in his exploration of artistic language through sketching, he has indeed taken a gratifying step forward.

#### 4. Early creation: Integrating tradition with western realism



Figure 2 "Master of the Terlegi Plateau" 250×150 cm, 2008

In his early creative endeavors, Chen Han sheng endeavored to harness the uninhibited and expressive nature of ink and wash painting while judiciously incorporating realistic techniques from Western art. His goal was to harmonize the specificity, profundity, richness, and freehand expressiveness of figure painting. He was acutely aware that this was a challenging contradiction to reconcile, and in practice, it often led to a situation where focusing on one aspect would neglect another. However, he persistently sought ways to resolve these contradictions.

His works "The Elderly" and "At the Village Entrance" successfully adapted traditional flower-and-bird painting techniques to figure painting. The resulting artworks feature rich and layered brushwork, combining dryness and moistness, and convey unique emotional nuances within a cohesive overall impression. Meanwhile, "Grain Rain" and "Summer Hoeing" employed the texturing techniques of landscape painting to deepen the portrayal of figures. "Twilight" further emphasized the subjectivity of these texturing techniques, meticulously depicting an elderly couple weathered by time and hardship.

Chen Han sheng believed that the potential of traditional ink painting had not yet been fully realized and that it still possessed the capacity for "renewal" and "revival" in the face of the new world. While preserving the spirit of traditional ink painting, he strived to create new artistic languages. His work "1934·Cai Yuan Pei" effectively applied the artistic language derived from sketching to the in-depth portrayal of the subject, fully capturing the spirit of a pillar of the academic world and a model for humanity. "The works" "Discussing the Harvest," "Noon," and "Countryfolk" applied this artistic approach to more complex scenes.

During the creation process, he relied solely on his mental draft, freely expressing himself with his brush. While deeply depicting the subjects, he maximized the liveliness of the figure modeling and brushwork. The

deliberate "torn paper" technique not only created an illusionary environment but also gave the overall composition an effect similar to ancient "Lou Lan manuscripts" and other fragmented papers, thereby enhancing the sense of history and vicissitudes in the artwork.

### 5. Epoch and Psyche in 'The grand passage' & 'Frozen clouds'



Figure 3 "The Grand Passage" (Detail) 180×194 cm, 2009



Figure 4 "Frozen Clouds" 198×169 cm, 2006

The techniques and subjects of an artist within a certain period are determined by the specific environment and mental state he is in during that time. When the mental state changes, the elements in the

artwork may also change accordingly. In the process of change, it is necessary to absorb new elements and express different emotions.

From Chen Han sheng' s works such as "Frozen Clouds" and "The Grand Passage," it is evident that he pays more attention to the psychological state of ethnic minorities in the face of rapid social development in the new era, as well as their longing for, confusion about, and the conflict between their rugged life states and reality in modern life. There are no gaudy colors or exuberant scenes in the paintings; instead, there is silence and tranquility, solemnity and solemnity. With simple composition and minimalistic colors, he can narrate a story that deeply touches the heart, fully demonstrating his unique artistic perception and lofty pursuit.

In this process, while maintaining his creative tradition, he keenly captures the authentic experience of contemporary life and perceives the pressing issues of contemporary society from the predicaments of individual lives.

## **6. Resolving the contradiction between brushwork and form**

Brushwork and form seem to be a contradiction in contemporary art. Emphasizing brushwork often leads to the neglect of realistic representation, while faithfully depicting the subject can significantly diminish the charm of brushwork. Chen Han sheng has resolved this contradiction in his own way. He strives to break free from traditional modes of expression and seeks a new language of his own, that is, the originality of ink and wash language. This is fully reflected in his large-scale historical work "Marco Polo's Audience with the Khan." The imaginative conception combined with profound contemplation of reality in the painting endows the brushwork with new vitality and realizes the transcendence of spirit over form. Although the work does not deliberately pursue modernity and leaves no trace of imitation, the unique composition of ink colors, spatial division, and the relationship between points, lines, and planes all reflect a sense of modernity.

The spirituality of contemporary art is based on contemporary culture and grounded in contemporary experience and practice, reflecting contemplation and expression of contemporary issues. The expressiveness of form must be concentrated in these elements. After years of rational thinking and exploration, Chen Han sheng has naturally developed a new mode of expression through his affinity with the grasslands. In his modern-feeling series of small grassland landscapes, we see how he deeply explores the grassland theme and reasonably utilizes new materials. While adhering to tradition, he borrows from the language of modern painting to create a new type of realistic ink painting style that reflects the grasslands. This mode of expression changes the extremely mature values and styles formed by traditional Chinese society and realizes the desire and effort to engage with contemporary and national culture in a new ink-based manner.

## 7. "Countryfolk": Painting as a way of life



Figure 5 "Countryfolk" 192×178 cm, 2003

The Preciousness of Chen Han sheng Lies in Treating Painting as a Way of Life. In contemporary society, the media that directly record and reflect society have become increasingly powerful, and the function of painting in this regard has been increasingly weakened. It is no longer a means of vividly recording the times and social events. Instead, it mainly expresses the artist's personal emotions and aesthetic tastes through its own language. Chen Han sheng's paintings are always based on life, vivid and touching. The artistic personality and temperament formed and perfected on the basis of his profound tradition are not only culturally rich but also uniquely charming. His forms embody the vitality of life. Because each painting represents a certain objective object while also reflecting the painter's personal character, his grassland figure paintings created with traditional ink and wash will continue to produce new and creative works, and will surely open up new horizons.

## 8. Conclusion

Chen Han sheng's realistic ink figure painting is not only an inheritance and development of traditional ink language, but also a profound expression of contemporary social reality and humanistic spirit. He draws inspiration from life, using rural and grassland figures as his main themes, and endows his works with profound cultural connotations and artistic value through unique brushwork and formal language. From the early integration of traditional and Western realistic techniques to the later keen grasp of the spirit of the times, Chen Han sheng has always been exploring a creative path that combines academic and artistic qualities. His works not only show the predicaments and pursuits of individual life, but also reflect the pressing issues of contemporary society, providing new possibilities for the "renewal" and "revival" of traditional ink painting in the new era. Chen Han sheng's artistic practice proves that painting, as a way of life, can not only convey the artist's emotions and aesthetics, but also become a bridge connecting tradition and modernity, individuals and society.