

From grandeur to delicacy: Evolution of literati brushwork from form to expression

Laura Adams^{1, a, *}, Joseph Smith^{2, b},

¹The Commercial Press Taiwan, No.200, Section 3, Bei Xin Road, Xinzhuang District, New Taipei City, 23121, Taiwan, China

²Harry N. Abrams, 115 West 18th Street, 6th Floor New York, NY 10011, United States
a.adamslaura_201588@yahoo.com, b.smith85_20230922@sina.com

***Corresponding Author**

Abstract: As one of the most important expressive languages and forms in Chinese painting, brushwork and ink not only play the most crucial artistic role in a painting but also guide Chinese painting to stay on course throughout history. Reflecting the national cultural spirit, literati painting has shaped its own charming image with its profound cultural character. Chinese painting should not be content with general formal expression; instead, it must delve into a deeper artistic realm. Over a thousand years, the richness and profundity of the changes in brushwork and ink are the inevitable results of the maturation of the aesthetic consciousness of literati painting. Its profound cultural accumulation shines even brighter in today's diverse art world.

Keywords: Brushwork and ink, Literati painting, Cultural connotation

1. Introduction

The Ming Dynasty painter Tang Yin commented on the characteristics of Chinese painting brushwork in this way: “Realistic painting is like regular script, while expressive (freehand) painting is like cursive script.” He meant that both realistic and expressive brushwork should possess the charm of calligraphic strokes, which is consistent with the traditional emphasis that “there is calligraphy in painting and painting in calligraphy.” However, Tang Yin also implied another layer of meaning: the brushwork variations in expressive painting are entirely different from those in realistic painting and are much richer. Before the Song Dynasty, Chinese painting was mainly represented in the forms of realistic figure painting, realistic flower-and-bird painting, blue-and-green landscape painting, or some folk temple murals, with brushwork characterized by neatness and slight decorative qualities. Compared with today's understanding and impression of expressive painting, the brushwork was relatively monotonous. Even in today's meticulously crafted and brightly colored modern realistic painting, the rules of line usage are almost the same as those in traditional painting and have been inherited and applied by modern realistic painters. Nevertheless, the Tang Dynasty landscape painting, which pioneered expressive painting and deserves special mention in the history of painting, emerged during this period. This can be regarded as the initial stage of expressive landscape painting. Whether it was Wang Mo's attempt at splashed-ink painting or Wang Wei's combination of blue-and-green and ink wash techniques, their influence on later expressive painting gradually expanded.

However, modern expressive painting, while inheriting the artistic achievements of predecessors and expanding the path of traditional painting, has undergone significant and profound changes in various aspects, including brushwork patterns, forms, and artistic language expression. The language of brush and ink has become much richer. It would be one-sided to attribute the richness of brush and ink language solely to the idea that “calligraphy and painting share the same brushwork.” Emphasizing that painting brushwork should have the charm of calligraphic strokes is to strengthen the role of bone method in brushwork. After all, calligraphic brushwork runs through a calligraphy work from beginning to end and is the main framework that reflects the spirit and vitality of a painting. However, a painting also has many other elements beyond brushwork, such as composition, modeling, space, three-dimensionality, reality and illusion, color, and the interlacing and superposition of shapes, all of which can lead to the endless

variations of brush and ink. Therefore, when exploring the causes of expressive painting brushwork and the relationship with brush and ink styles, no artistic effect comes simply from the result of the interconnection between calligraphy and painting. The charm of brushwork is not only an important aspect of reflecting the strength of brush but also, when influenced by various painting elements and forming visual effects, it enhances the artistic expressiveness and makes the brushwork variations more interesting and profound.



Figure 1:"A Panoramic View of Lake and Mountains" by Tang Yin

2. Northern song landscape painting and the origins of freehand brushwork

Northern Song Dynasty ink-wash landscape painting was the earliest major medium to showcase the charm of ink and brush expression. However, as one of the forms of freehand brushwork, flower-and-bird and figure painting did not mature until the Southern Song Dynasty (the works of Cui Bai, Zhao Chang, and Li Gong Lin from the Northern Song period should be categorized under realistic painting in terms of the artistic laws and characteristics of freehand painting). Examining the works of two heavyweight Northern Song Dynasty landscape painters, Fan Kuan's *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* and Guo Xi's *Early Spring*, the independent aesthetic significance of ink and brush had not yet been isolated. Whether it was Fan Kuan's use of layered ink and brush effects to pursue a sculptural, three-dimensional form of rocks, or Li Tang's use of axe-cut texture strokes to create a solid and substantial mountain shape, they both

unanimously emphasized the contours and transitions of the mountains and rocks with extremely clear and solid painting techniques, employing realistic methods. For example, short-line brushwork, block modeling, and so on, with multiple layers and repeated outlining and shading, aimed to present the texture, especially the weight, of the mountain shapes as the central focus of the painting. “Learning from nature externally and finding inspiration internally” was always the creative philosophy of Northern Song Dynasty landscape painters and became the common pursuit of all painters of that period (including a large number of landscape painting masters such as Dong Yuan and Ju Ran). The meticulous depiction of natural phenomena, such as every plant and every mountain and river, led to the downplaying of the “void” relative to the “solid” in the handling of the relationship between ink and brush, while emphasizing the solid structural form. Through such detailed and in-depth modeling techniques, the mountain and rock forms in each painting appeared very substantial and had a stronger and clearer sense of three-dimensionality. This was also the earliest ink-wash landscape painting with a realistic effect. However, it could not yet be fully classified under the category of freehand landscape painting that developed later.



Figure 2: "Early Spring" by Guo Xi, Northern Song Dynasty



Figure 3: "Travelers by Streams and Mountains" by Fan Kuan, Northern Song Dynasty

3. Literati freehand & ink-brush transformation

On the path of the development of literati freehand brushwork, a painting method and effect that advocates light ink wash gradually became the main landscape style focusing on ink and brush expression. This style also formed the overall artistic tone of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. This phenomenon is somewhat different from the Northern Song Dynasty academy-style painting, which emphasized shaping and representation and tended to keep the picture surface relatively dry and concise. (the picture surface relatively dry and concise). Although both focus on the aesthetic orientation of strong and vigorous ink wash to represent nature, there are still different painting feelings when examined carefully. The first change is in the gradual shift in the painters' mindset.

In fact, as early as the Northern Song Dynasty, another form of painting different from academy-style painting had already emerged in the creative process, namely literati freehand brushwork. These painters regarded the "entertainment" aspect of painting as the main way to express their emotions. Most of them were originally poets and literati before they started painting, and later became part of the official class as scholar-officials, such as Wen Tong, Su Shi, and Zhao Meng Jian of the Southern Song Dynasty. Their relatively leisurely and comfortable lives allowed them to indulge in the pleasure of painting and calligraphy. However, they did not aim to leave a mark in the history of painting. Instead, they sought to relax and entertain themselves through the literati freehand style of poetry, calligraphy, and painting, pursuing a free and unrestrained artistic feeling on the canvas and emphasizing the comfort of brush and ink expression.

Under the influence of this mindset, especially in the freehand paintings of the Yuan and Ming dynasties, the brushwork no longer consisted of short lines. It was no longer about using strong, angular brushstrokes to pursue the expressive power of ink lines, nor was it about using thick ink to layer and build up the shapes of mountains and rocks as seen in Northern Song paintings. It was also different from the Northern Song approach of making paintings as dense and substantial as lacquer. Instead, these paintings featured longer

lines or a combination of long and short lines that created a looser and more moist effect. The brushwork used to outline shapes became more "textured" and less smooth, giving the painting a stronger sense of "wetness" and achieving an ink-wash effect that seemed fresh and still wet on the canvas. This created a subtle and almost ethereal feeling in the brush and ink. Previously, the attitude of "ten days for a mountain, five days for a river" was emphasized in creating a landscape painting, focusing on a solid and stable feeling between shapes and aiming for a rich and full artistic expression. However, this gradually shifted towards seeking change in the void.

For example, when we enter an exhibition hall, the artistic aura conveyed by landscape paintings from different periods, such as the Northern Song and the Yuan and Ming dynasties, feels completely different. One is the grand and masculine beauty of the Northern Song, while the other is the elegant and gentle beauty of the Yuan and Ming. It is a transition from majestic grandeur to the delicate and lingering beauty of a moonlit dawn. In the process of contemplating nature, literati painters developed a different kind of artistic inspiration from the grand and magnificent styles of Northern Song masters. They began to focus on a lyrical aesthetic consciousness and used their brushwork to express nature in a more emotional way. They no longer wanted the physical forms of nature to dominate the emotional space of their art. Instead, they shifted from a mindset of shaping forms to one of expressing emotions through freehand brushwork.

Thus, the grand and solemn style of Northern Song landscapes gradually evolved through the expressive power of literati brushwork. The paintings became more fresh, open, elegant, and tranquil, giving the ink and brush symbols a relatively independent aesthetic space for expressive imagery. The traditional ink layering was replaced by more relaxed and elegant line work. We can see a gradual shift from short lines to longer ones, and from angular transitions to smoother, rounded ones. The brushwork became more free and uninhibited. As a result, the aesthetic paradigm of the strong and vigorous ink-wash painting style, which was established by Ju Ran, Fan Kuan, Guo Xi, and Li Tang during the Northern Song Dynasty, gradually disintegrated in the literati ink-wash paintings of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. A new language structure for landscape painting emerged, along with a more self-expressive and uninhibited ink and brush performance.

4. Evolution of ink and brush: Composition, void& solid, conventionalization

The following three changes essentially outline the trajectory of the evolution of ink and brush.

4.1. Change in composition

All characteristics of ink and brush language are not only the most fundamental elements that constitute a painting but can also be used to alter the structural relationship of a painting, whether locally or as a whole. This is because during the expressive process, an inappropriate compositional layout can conflict with the writing-like brush movement. In other words, a certain composition will produce a certain ink and brush language. For example, the two most representative works of the Northern Song Dynasty, Fan Kuan's *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* and Li Tang's *Pine Wind in the Deep Valley*, both adopt a full and top-to-bottom composition. There is always one or two prominent boulders placed in the center of the painting, serving as the towering main peak. However, the Yuan Dynasty painter Huang Gong wang lightened this kind of full composition and diluted this compositional style. He often used a more gentle and flat composition to provide space for expressive brushwork. The intention was to allow the brush and ink to be fully and freely expressed during the writing-like process, just like a calligrapher writing a running script. Only with sufficient brush movement speed can the pleasure of writing be achieved. As a result, with faster brush movement, the variations in ink density became richer, and the flying-white effect became more prominent. This is why we can strongly feel that the dark and heavy paintings of the Northern Song Dynasty were soon replaced by the bright and clear visual images of later times.



Figure 4: "Ink Grapes" by Xu Wei

4.2. Changes in the elements of void and solid

Northern Song Dynasty ink-wash painters, in the process of depicting landscape paintings, placed great emphasis on natural creation, prioritizing the arrangement of realistic scenes and pushing the composition towards fullness. This focus on the solid and substantial necessitated the downplaying of the void. In the evolution of various compositional layouts in Chinese painting, the void was typically highlighted through the depiction of clouds and water or the use of negative space, thereby accentuating the layered effect of mountains and rocks. However, at that time, Northern Song landscape painters did not yet possess a strong aesthetic consciousness of the void. For instance, even though a white cloud was placed next to the large boulder in the upper left corner of *Pine Wind in the Deep Valley*, it was still rendered with a realistic approach, appearing overly deliberate and somewhat isolated. This is quite different from the later literati painters' pursuit of expressive effects and their understanding of the relationship between void and solid.

Clearly, Northern Song landscape painters were largely consistent in their treatment of the relationship between the void and the solid in their paintings. The depiction of the void was primarily aimed at realistically representing nature, in order to better emphasize the solid elements in the painting. However, after the Yuan Dynasty, the void not only became more prominent in paintings, but also shifted away from the general criterion of realistically representing reality, driven by the aesthetic demands of ink and brush. The decision of whether to render something as void or solid was usually determined by the compositional needs of the ink and brush imagery, down to the handling of individual brushstrokes. For example, when several solid brushstrokes appeared, the artist would consider interspersing them with void elements, such as flying-white or negative space. This undoubtedly highlighted the importance of the void, making its

significance more distinct and the understanding of the relationship between void and solid more profound. This represents a sublimation of the consciousness of handling the void in artistic creation.

Once the position and importance of the void were highlighted, the composition of ink and brush also changed accordingly. After the Yuan Dynasty, literati painters approached their work with a more relaxed and casual mindset, pushing expressive brushwork to its extreme. This led to the aesthetic charm of Ni Zan's ink and brush style being highly esteemed in later painting circles. Ni Zan's landscape paintings were distinct not only from those of his contemporaries like Huang Gong wang and Wang Meng, but also from the painting styles of Northern Song masters such as Ju Ran, Fan Kuan, Guo Xi, and Li Tang. He pioneered a new and unique artistic conception of lonely and desolate landscapes, reorganizing the natural world in the minds of literati painters and creating a completely different aesthetic style from the majestic and grand landscapes of the Northern Song period. This was the result of a renewed appreciation of ink and brush.

4.3. The formation of conventionalization

One of the most distinct features of Chinese painting is the conventionalization of its artistic language. Figure painting, landscape painting, and flower-and-bird painting all strictly adhere to this principle and its patterns. In addition to the changes in composition and the elements of void and solid mentioned earlier, the formation of conventionalization is another aspect of the continuous evolution of ink and brush. Ink and brush can vary endlessly, but these variations mainly arise from two sources. The first is the distinctiveness and unique characteristics of different materials. As the social economy gradually prospered, the emergence of a large amount of raw Xuan paper and the corresponding improvement in the quality of brushes and ink provided more room for the development and expression of the calligraphic nature of ink and brush. The second is the need to distill and generalize natural forms. This is quite different from the Western painting principle of necessarily sketching from life and reproducing reality. Traditional Chinese painting, from modeling to ink and brush composition, emphasizes the construction of imagery. It extracts the most characteristic elements that meet the expressive needs of ink and brush from the diverse natural objects, turning the complex into a set of regular patterns that can be followed. This has established a set of corresponding expressive symbols for the formal beauty of ink and brush, such as the “ge”, “jie”, and “fen” character methods in bamboo painting, as well as the various texture strokes in landscape painting, all of which connect the language of ink and brush with the representation of natural forms.

For ink and brush, they can be aesthetic symbols that both conform to the representation of natural forms and transcend the reproduction of objective reality. If they are isolated and considered without any concrete content, their expressive framework becomes closer to abstraction. Although they allow each artist's individual emotions to be fully expressed, they can also easily devolve into a mere play of ink and brush. (However, under the social conditions and cultural background at that time, literati painters could hardly have had the awareness of abstract expression.)

5. Imaginative creation and the pursuit of imagery in ink and brush

Before abstract ink and brush could appear independently on the art scene, whether it was Northern Song Dynasty landscape painting evolving from its nascent stage to maturity, or literati and scholar-officials of later periods pushing the expressive power of ink and brush to new artistic heights, there was a commonality. Due to the limitations of the objective conditions at the time—such as inconvenient transportation—the famous mountains and rivers depicted by the literati were often based on artistic imagination inspired by century-old poetry, travelogues, or folk legends. This is the essence of imaginative creation and the unique expressive feature of Chinese painting. Thus, achieving the imagined (or “armchair traveling”) effect of landscapes—where the scenes are both visually appealing and habitable—became the ideal pursuit of traditional landscape painting. From Fan Kuan to Huang Gong wang, to Shen Zhou and Shi Tao, spanning over a thousand years across the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, literati constructed their artistic ideals by representing the grandeur of famous mountains and rivers, forming the most representative symbols in landscape painting and becoming the eternal spiritual pursuit of each era. Ink and brush, having gone through explorations in different periods, have developed into a myriad of symbols, successfully expressing the literati painters' understanding and pursuit of ink and brush. On this long journey of

exploration, the style of ink and brush language has become increasingly mature and sophisticated, with most reaching an artistic realm of perfection.

6. Personalized ink and brush in late ming and early qing

Several extraordinary masters who emerged in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties reinterpreted the life characteristics and spiritual connotations of ink and brush with their highly personalized brushwork and emotional expressions that transcended the ordinary. They transformed the majestic and solemn ink and brush styles of the Tang and Song dynasties, as well as the pure and gentle, harmonious, and transcendent ink and brush imagery of the Yuan dynasty, into a new, stern and unconventional aesthetic style.

6.1. Xu Wei's brushwork style and artistic expression

In the realm of ink-splashed flower-and-bird painting, Xu Wei of the Ming dynasty was known for his uninhibited and exuberant style. The movement of his brush and the changes in ink often brought a refreshing visual experience, with unexpected twists and turns. This was quite different from the common Yuan dynasty aesthetic of loneliness, transcendence, or clear and elegant brushwork. His free and unrestrained use of brush and ink created a sense of abandon, as if he were alone in his artistic world. The traditional literati painters' emphasis on modesty and elegance was no longer present. Instead, Xu Wei, with his unique and personalized brushwork, channeled his emotions and vented his frustrations through his art, even though this was often out of necessity. This great Ming dynasty painter, with his proud and independent spirit, truly conveyed the tenacious vitality inherent in ink and brush. In a sense, while the ink and brush of the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties mainly reflected the traditional Chinese cultural spirit and the charm of the scholar-official class through an elegant and clear artistic style, Xu Wei added new artistic languages and expressions related to the meaning of life. Undoubtedly, his work had a strong artistic expressiveness and impact on later generations, who based their literati painting spirit and traditional cultural cultivation on ink and brush. Ink and brush were not only a means for literati to express their gentle and refined nature and to cultivate their minds in their spare time but also a way to express the full range of human emotions through the full display of artistic personality. The strong characteristics of Xu Wei's brushwork and the extent of his artistic personality are evident in his work. Today, artists who regard art as their life and strive to create their own personal styles highly admire Xu Wei's brushwork style. Compared to other painters of his time, such as Chen Chun or Lin Liang, Xu Wei's work clearly stands out.

6.2. Bada shanren's brushwork style and the realm of freehand expression

Freehand painting has always emphasized the artistic expression of simplifying complexity. Thus, each refinement and generalization of the pictorial forms is an effort to create an artistic effect where less is more, which is particularly prominent in Bada Shanren's ink world during the early Qing Dynasty. From the Northern Song to the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods, freehand painting undoubtedly reached its peak, an unprecedented artistic height, which is the best reflection of the artistic realm of "after extreme gorgeousness, comes simplicity." It is a path of exploration towards returning to simplicity and authenticity. Bada Shanren's superiority lies in his ability to rationally discard redundancy and concisely generalize while inheriting traditional techniques. If a form can be constructed with a single line or a drop of ink, he would not use more. Unlike several other extraordinary masters who reinterpreted the solemn ink and brush style of the Tang and Song dynasties, and the pure and gentle, harmonious, and transcendent ink and brush imagery of the Yuan dynasty with a stern and unconventional style, Bada Shanren redefined the life characteristics and spiritual connotations of ink and brush through his highly personalized brushwork and emotional expression.



Figure 5: Works by Bada Shanren

7. Conclusion

Over the past thousand years, the richness and profundity of the evolution of ink and brush are the inevitable results of the maturation of the aesthetic consciousness of literati painting. Its profound cultural heritage shines ever more brightly in today's diverse art world.

8. References

- [1] Yu Jianhua. A History of Chinese Painting. Southeast University Press,2009.
- [2] Wang Bomin. A History of Chinese Painting. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House,1983.
- [3] Zong Bai Hua. Aesthetic Walks. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House,1997.
- [4] Zeng Chang Qiu. Chinese Traditional Culture. Central South University Press,2004.