

# The artistic conception expressed through brush and ink in Chinese painting

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**Abstract:** Chinese painting brush and ink continuously absorb the connotations, wisdom of literati and the classic cultures from both China and abroad. Through different arduous explorations and bold attempts by painters of successive dynasties, the connotation of Chinese painting brush and ink has been developed and gradually matured, thus leading Chinese painting brush and ink to the way of charm. Chinese painting pays great attention to the expression of artistic conception in the picture. Only by reflecting the painter's own thoughts and emotions in the picture can a touching artistic conception be achieved, realizing the integration of brush and ink with the scene. Chinese painting brush and ink constantly inherit the most excellent cultures of the Chinese nation and carry the vitality of Chinese national culture.

**Keywords:** Chinese painting, brush and ink, artistic conception

## 1. Introduction

Today's society is a comprehensively developing aesthetic era, in which art has experienced ups and downs and is showing a diversified trend. The creation and pursuit of brush and ink in Chinese painting have become the main characteristics of its expressive form. Through arduous exploration and bold attempts by painters of successive dynasties, the techniques of brush and ink have gradually matured, and the connotations of Chinese painting brush and ink have been profoundly developed, leading to the way of charm. Meanwhile, influenced by the history of traditional Chinese culture and the philosophies of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, Chinese painting has continued to evolve. The concepts of "conception preceding brushwork" and "brushwork exhausted but conception remaining" emphasize the importance of artistic conception in Chinese painting.

## 2. The cultural connotations of Chinese painting brush and ink

### 2.1. The close connection between Chinese painting brush and ink and abstraction

The language of brush and ink in Chinese painting is generally closely related to abstraction. It is not possible to separate the language of Chinese painting brush and ink from its abstract nature. Abstraction holds a special position in Chinese painting and is a primary manifestation of its artistic conception. Without abstraction, the charm of Chinese painting brush and ink cannot be fully realized. From a formal perspective, the artistic language of Chinese painting mainly refers to brush and ink as well as artistic conception. As a whole, the picture always exists in a unified and inseparable manner.

### 2.2. The relationship between brush and ink, naivety, tension, and the painter's inner world

In the subtle artistic conception of Chinese painting, naivety is also an important form of expression. The naivety manifested in the painting not only stands out in the picture but also brings about a renewal of techniques and an entirely new aesthetic experience. Traditional wisdom in brush and ink requires a certain degree of regularization. The tension expressed through brush and ink is a typical style of Chinese painting, and its characteristics play a significant role in the painting's formal language, content, and the spiritual essence of the artist's inner world. However, the brush and ink of Chinese painting cannot exist

independently. To be fully realized, they must be integrated with the painter's inner self. The aesthetic ideals of the artist and the spiritual state they convey are reflected in the aesthetic quality of the brush and ink themselves. Since each artist has different life experiences and levels of cultivation, the brush and ink they present become a unique feature that matches their ideological and cultural temperament. The differences in brush and ink express the artist's ideological understanding, cultural cultivation, artistic conception, and spiritual and emotional state in diverse ways.

For example, Huang Quan from the Five Dynasties period was a court painter favored by the rulers. His work "Sketch of Rare Birds and Animals" demonstrates a delicate and bright style, reflecting the characteristic of "the wealth of the Huang family"[1]. In contrast, Zhu Da, a monk in the early Qing Dynasty, refused to serve the Qing rulers after the fall of the Ming Dynasty. His painting "Solitary Bird" features only one bird with a disdainful expression, revealing the artist's cynical and sorrowful emotions towards the world. The key to the use of brush and ink lies in whether the painting is vivid and whether the rhythm of the picture is fully saturated. The vividness and rhythmic saturation of the painting are achieved through the way brush and ink are used and by transcending self-awareness. The subjective self-awareness, as the source of creation, reflects the natural objects before the eyes and then transforms the natural state into an inner state, presenting the wonderful integration of man and nature.

### **2.3. Cultural & Ideological aspects of Chinese painting brush and ink**

The brush and ink of Chinese painting continuously absorb the connotations, wisdom of literati, and the classic cultures from both China and abroad. Through different arduous explorations and bold attempts by painters of successive dynasties, the connotations of Chinese painting brush and ink have gradually matured and developed, thus leading to the way of charm and spirit. The "Six Principles" of the Southern Dynasties painter Xie He include "vividness of expression, "which emphasizes the spiritual state and character of the figures;" structural method in the use of the brush," which highlights the importance of brushwork;" assigning the colors according to the category," which refers to the general classification of inherent colors;" representing the form in accordance with the object, "which pertains to the ethical perception of form;" placing the elements in an appropriate position, "which concerns the spatial arrangement of objects; and "transmitting and copying, "which means learning from tradition. The beginning and development of Chinese painting are closely related to the philosophies of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Taoist philosophy advocates a simple and unpretentious cultivation, focusing on the plainness of ink to achieve a high spiritual realm. Confucian thought has a profound influence on Chinese painting, emphasizing the expression of subjective emotions and highlighting the duality of brush and ink as yin and yang, with white representing yang and ink representing yin, in accordance with natural laws. Zen Buddhism has been integrated by literati and artists into their character, brush and ink creation, and self-cultivation processes. The long history and profound influence of traditional Chinese culture, especially the philosophies of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, have continuously propelled the development of Chinese painting, with the use of ink and brushwork being of great significance in painting.

### **2.4. The evolution of the artistic conception of Chinese painting brush and ink**

## **3. The expression of brush and ink in Chinese painting**

### **3.1. Essentials of Chinese brush and ink techniques**

From the works of ancient painters, it is evident that brush and ink techniques are the fundamental skills that every Chinese painter must master. However, one should not favor either the brush or the ink, as this could lead to an imbalance in the expression of Chinese painting, resulting in issues such as "bones overpowering flesh "or" flesh overpowering bones." Ancient Chinese painting theorists placed great emphasis on the study and practice of brush and ink techniques, drawing many conclusions. Chinese painters throughout history have always valued the cultivation of brush and ink skills. For viewers, understanding some basic brush and ink techniques can also enhance their cultural literacy and appreciation level. The content of Chinese painting brushwork and ink techniques is very rich. Below are some basic techniques of Chinese painting brush and ink.

Xie He of the Southern Qi Dynasty, in his book *Catalogue of Ancient Paintings*, placed "structural method in the use of the brush" as the second of the "Six Principles," emphasizing the importance of brushwork. Zhang Yan yuan of the Tang Dynasty also mentioned the importance of the "bone" in Chinese painting brushwork in his *Records of Famous Paintings through the Ages*. It is clear that the key prerequisite for painting good Chinese paintings is the use of the brush, and the lines in Chinese painting are the main form of expression. The various expressions of lines in Chinese painting all depend on the use of the brush, and the brush must also be combined with strength. As people say, "Understanding' brushwork' should refer to knowing how to combine the brush with strength"[3].

There are many forms to express lines in Chinese painting. In ancient times, to depict various textures of clothing, eighteen different line-drawing styles were created, mainly including the ancient freehand style, the flowing cloud and running water style, the iron wire style, the zither string style, the orchid leaf style, the bamboo leaf style, etc. In landscape painting, there are also many different texturing techniques, mainly including the random hemp texture, the sesame texture, the rolling cloud texture, the hemp texture, the untying rope texture, the lotus leaf texture, etc., which are mainly used to represent the different textures of light and shade, orientation, and convexity and concavity of mountains, rocks, and trees. There are also many different dotting techniques in Chinese painting, mainly including the character "jie" dot, the character "ge" dot, the plum blossom dot, the mouse head dot, the large and small mixed dot, the pine needle dot, etc. These are created based on the morphological characteristics of leaves and methods for depicting plants.

The use of the brush is highly valued in Chinese painting, focusing on the method of brush manipulation. For example, it is advocated that the tip of the brush should be hidden and not exposed when using the brush. Huang Bin Hong once summarized the ancient experience of brush use and proposed the "five brush" theory, namely "flat, round, lingering, heavy, and changeable." In brushwork expression, there are distinctions between central tip, side tip, and reverse tip. There are also some taboos in brush use, mainly referring to three prohibitions: "first, avoid being rigid; second, avoid being overly carved; third, avoid being knotted."

### **3.2. Importance& Basics of Chinese painting Brush& Ink**

The modeling in Chinese painting also relies on the use of ink, as the forms in Chinese painting are expressed through ink. There is a saying in Chinese painting known as the "Five Ink Tones and Six Colors." The "Five Ink Tones" refer to dry, wet, thick, light, and black; the "Six Colors" are based on the "Five Ink Tones" with the addition of white.

Common ink techniques include the use of dense ink, light ink, broken ink, splashed ink, accumulated ink, and charred ink. These are the basic ink methods frequently employed by Chinese painters. There are also less commonly used ink techniques such as staining, rendering, and soaking.

The brush can be used to create any form of painting, and ink can record text as well as produce shades of black, white, and gray. These are the characteristics and advantages of the application of brush and ink. The ancient concept of "calligraphy and painting sharing the same origin" is also based on this feature for interpretation. The brush and ink in Chinese painting refer to the specific methods of using brush and ink. "Brush" means the manipulation of the brush, and "ink" means the application of ink. Another layer of meaning of "brush and ink" in Chinese painting is the skill, knowledge, and cultivation in using brush and ink. Every technique, such as outlining, texturing, wiping, dotting, and staining, is carefully considered. The charm and spirit of Chinese painting are manifested in the full and natural application of ink, but ultimately, they are rooted in the use of brushwork.

## **4. The pursuit of artistic conception in Chinese painting brush and ink**

### **4.1. Brush, Ink & Emotion in Ming-Qing painting**

Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese painting artists have placed greater emphasis on expressing their own emotions through the language of Chinese painting brush and ink, elevating the traditional expressive brushwork of Chinese painting to an artistic realm that conveys the painters' feelings. After the May Fourth Movement, by absorbing the essence of Western painting, a number of works combining Chinese and Western elements emerged. Through continuous exploration, contemplation,

refinement, selection, and accumulation, painters have achieved unprecedented development and remarkable accomplishments in the realm of Chinese painting brush and ink. With their innovative brush and ink techniques, they express boundless love for the new social life. The brush and ink of Chinese painting possess a unique temperament rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Only by integrating and accurately applying the brush and ink can their full potential be realized, yielding unexpected effects. Emotional expression also holds a significant position in Chinese painting brush and ink. One key aspect is that artists convey their thoughts and emotions through the medium of brush and ink, shaping their inner worlds and evoking the sentiments of viewers.

For example, the Yuan Dynasty painter Ni Yunlin imbued his landscape paintings with a sense of elegance and comfort by projecting his emotions onto the natural scenery. In contrast, the Qing Dynasty painter Zhu Da often depicted strange mountains and grotesque rocks in his landscapes, evoking an atmosphere of desolate wilderness. The painter Shi Tao, on the other hand, delved deeply into nature, creating works with ever-changing brushwork, uninhibited brush strokes, touching emotions, and profound artistic conception. His passion for life gave birth to a charming and diverse artistic style. His works, such as "Huang Shan Painting," exemplify his unique artistic approach. By fusing their emotions with the scenery they depict, artists achieve a method of expressing artistic conception. Only when a painting possesses a certain artistic conception can it be considered a meaningful and perfect work. Artists use the brush and ink in their paintings to convey the emotions they wish to express.

#### **4.2. The techniques and interrelationship of Chinese painting brush and ink**

Traditional Chinese painting "brush and ink" sometimes depicts the lines and textures of objects, but it does not entirely pursue the realistic texture of the objects. Instead, painters place greater emphasis on the interdependence and vitality of brush and ink. As the ancients said, "Where the brush is, the ink is; where the ink is, the brush is. Where the brush is, the structure is; where the ink is, the structure is"[4]. The brush and ink complement each other and are interdependent. For example, Liang Kai's "Splashed Ink Immortal" demonstrates the interplay of brush and ink. The brushwork is just right, with simple lines on the face and chest, while other parts are rendered with uninhibited and bold brush and ink, as if the painter were in a state of complete freedom.

When Chinese painters create, the brush and ink should appear natural and flavorful. The key is to focus on the application of brush and ink, ensuring that the brushwork is light but not frivolous, and heavy but not rigid, which correctly reflects the method of using brush and ink. When applying ink, it should highlight the natural state of the picture, making the painting appear fully expressive and integrated with nature. The essence of brush and ink is mainly reflected in the variations of density, dryness, and wetness. The brushwork should be smooth, free, and natural. For example, Ni Yunlin's landscape paintings from the Yuan Dynasty often use side brush, dry brush, and texturing techniques. He liked to depict the scenery of Lake Tai, and his paintings contain an elegant artistic conception. The expression of brush and ink, through complementary means and the organization of the picture, is closely related to the painter's aesthetic taste and connotations. The main manifestation of brush and ink is in the use of lines, and the painter's own character traits are also reflected on the painting. Painters usually project their emotions towards all things onto the "brush and ink," using it to express the flow of different emotions in their hearts. For example, Wu Dao zi's "Wu's belt in the wind" style is demonstrated in his work "The Heavenly King Sending His Son," which shows Wu Dao zi's strong, unrestrained, richly varied, and well-arranged line drawing artistic style. He emphasized that different forces applied to the lines result in different expressive powers.

#### **4.3. The integration of artistic conception and brush and ink in Chinese painting**

Chinese painting places great emphasis on the expression of artistic conception in the picture. Only by reflecting the painter's own thoughts and emotions in the painting can a touching artistic conception be achieved, realizing the integration of brush and ink with the scene. Artists possess rich imagination, which originates from the objects in real life. The various intense images in life inspire and influence painters. Through the expression of brush and ink, painters blend the scene and emotion. The vivid charm that painters express is the highest spiritual realm created by the painter's soul. The artistic conception of the

picture is a comprehensive reflection of the painter's inner cultivation and the expression of his or her own thoughts and emotions on the canvas.

#### 4.4 The integration of artistic conception and brush and ink in Chinese painting

The brush and ink of Chinese painting continuously inherit the finest elements of Chinese national culture and carry the vitality of Chinese national culture, while also drawing on the essence of various cultures from both China and abroad. Judging from the contemporary nature of Chinese painting brush and ink today, it is evident that a painter's works reflect their unique characteristics and national features through brush and ink [5]. With the diversification of contemporary social culture, Chinese painters must keep pace with the times, innovate the brush and ink of Chinese painting, and reform and innovate on the basis of traditional Chinese painting techniques.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, a fine piece of Chinese painting embodies the painter's aesthetic ideals, spiritual state, and cultural cultivation, presenting a sense of rhythm. It enriches the content and artistic form of Chinese painting and renders the painting language more colorful. This is the essence of innovation in the brush and ink of Chinese painting, achieving a wonderful realm of unity between man and nature, transcending one's own subjective consciousness. These are also the sources of the charm of Chinese painting brush and ink. Meanwhile, the brush and ink of Chinese painting have integrated the philosophies of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism from traditional Chinese culture, thereby creating a beautiful artistic conception and reflecting the painter's inner cultural refinement. The brush and ink of Chinese painting evolve with the times. After the collision of Chinese and Western cultures, Chinese painting continues to develop and improve, making its brush and ink charm more vibrant and full of life.

## 6. References

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