

# Pride in modern ink painting: Exploring Du Zilin's art at "Boundless Traveler" exhibition

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**Abstract:** Du Zilin, born in Tianjin in 1941, was admitted to the graduate program in figure painting at the Chinese Painting Department of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art) in 1979, where he studied the techniques and creation of Chinese freehand brush figure painting under the guidance of his mentor Li Zhen Jian. He has served as the chief editor of Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, director of the Oriental Art Department at Nankai University, member of the 10th and 11th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), member of the first, second, and third sessions of the Chinese Painting Art Committee of the China Artists Association, and member of the fifth, sixth, and seventh sessions of the China Artists Association. He has also been a judge for the 11th and 12th National Art Exhibitions, the China Fine Arts Golden Prize, the National Figure Painting Exhibition, and has received the Ukrainian Ambassador's Award and the Cambodian Royal Medal. Currently, he is the vice president of the Chinese Painting Society, doctoral supervisor at the China National Academy of Fine Arts, professor at Nankai University, and vice chairman of the Tianjin Artists Association. Du Zilin has held numerous solo exhibitions in Japan, Malaysia, and other locations. His publications include "Du Zilin's Sketch Collection," "Contemporary Artists Series—Du Zilin Volume," "Famous Artists of Modern and Contemporary China—Du Zilin," and "Du Zilin's Ink Paintings: Plateau Sentiments."

**Keywords:** Chinese painting, ink figure painting, realistic approach, artistic exploration, brush and ink language

## 1. Introduction

On July 5, 2016, the national tour of the exhibition "Boundless Traveler-Du Zilin's Chinese Painting Exhibition," co-organized by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the China Artists Association, the China Academy of Art, and the Chinese Painting Society, is set to grandly open its first stop at the Guangdong Museum of Art. Concurrently, the large-scale album "Boundless Traveler-Du Zilin's Chinese Painting Collection" will be published and distributed.

This exhibition is academically hosted by Shao Da Zhen and curated by Sheng Wei. It is divided into seven sections, comprehensively showcasing Mr. Du Zilin's artistic journey and multifaceted explorations through a combination of documentation and artworks.

## 2. Exhibition Sections introduction

### 2.1. Section one: Learning from interest

The first section is titled "Learning from Interest: Du Zilin's Early Paintings." This section showcases Du Zilin's "self-taught journey" before the 1980s, displaying many of his early self-taught artistic achievements, including numerous sketches, life drawings, traditional Chinese paintings, and comic strips that he created at that time.

## **2.2. Section two: Inheriting and Innovating**

The second section is titled "Inheriting and Innovating: Du Zilin's 1980s." This section showcases Du Zilin's academic and creative journey during his graduate studies at the China Academy of Art. It further highlights his explorations in the inheritance and innovation of traditional Chinese painting, particularly his in-depth work on the use of "ink."

## **2.3. Section three: Steps Across the north and south**

The third section is titled "Steps Across the North and South: Du Zilin's 1990s." This section showcases the relatively complete and independent artistic style and philosophy that emerged in Du Zilin's Chinese painting creations during this period. This unique artistic style and philosophy are founded on Du Zilin's observations and dialogues with nature, life, society, and the world.

## **2.4. Section four: Across the tianshan mountains**

The fourth section is titled "Across the Tianshan Mountains: Du Zilin's Xinjiang Themes." This section focuses on Du Zilin's Chinese painting creations themed around Xinjiang since the 1990s. These works not only incorporate the valuable experiences of many masters but also continue his own unique brushwork and spiritual expression. Many pieces originate from his most direct feelings and records.

## **2.5. Section five: The plateau of snow**

The fifth section is titled "The Plateau of Snow: Du Zilin's Tibet Themes." Du Zilin was greatly impacted by his first trip to the Ze Ku area in Qinghai's Tibetan region in 1983 for sketching, and he has continued to visit the Tibetan region for sketching for over 30 years. For Du Zilin, works about the plateau are not just a change of theme but also an internal driving force for the contemplation and experimentation of the essence of brushwork.

## **2.6. Section six: A Journey of thousands of miles**

The sixth section is titled "A Journey of Thousands of Miles: Du Zilin's Travel Footprints." This section displays the results of Du Zilin's sketching and creation across various places in China and overseas. For Du Zilin, adjusting the artistic language according to different subjects is both a challenge from life and an opportunity for innovation. Different regions, civilizations, and people always have vivid personalities in his works.

## **2.7. Section seven: The symphony of lines**

The seventh section is titled "The Symphony of Lines: Du Zilin's Sketches and Life Drawings." This section focuses on Du Zilin's sketches. Always having a sketchbook at hand is Du Zilin's artistic habit. His sketch works, especially in the use of "lines," are particularly eye-catching and full of artistic charm.

# **3. Academic evaluation**

## **3.1. Shao Da Zhen: Du Ziling's artistic achievements**

Shao Da Zhen, academic director of this exhibition and professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, commented that Du Zi ling is one of the representative figure painters in contemporary China who work with ink and wash. His aesthetic ideals and artistic pursuits share similarities with those of outstanding artists of the older and same generations since the 20th century in many aspects, yet he has his own understanding and perception in terms of subject matter and formal language, endowing his works with a unique personal style. Du Zi ling 's persistence in realistic techniques and ink-and-wash figure paintings with a realistic spirit stems from his firm belief in carrying forward figure painting through the language of ink and wash. He is rooted in life, seeking creative resources from real life, and engaging in life drawing of figures, which he regards as an indispensable basic skill that he can never do without.

### 3.2. Xue Yongnian: The artistic characteristics of Du Zi ling

Xue Yongnian, professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts and director of the Theory Committee of the China Artists Association, noted that Du Zi ling's realistic ink-and-wash figure paintings, like those of his teacher generation and peers, have revitalized the fine tradition of figure painting. They attach importance to depicting forms and, more importantly, to capturing the spirit. His works are generally rich in the flavor of life, with distinct regional characteristics, vivid personalities of the figures, and lively spiritual outlooks. Du Zi ling's paintings are indeed a realm of life and a song of brush and ink. Looking back on his achievements and summarizing his artistic path, his low-key character, unceasing striving, the integration of northern and southern artistic styles, and the application of accumulated ink are all important experiences in his success. However, the most precious experiences can be summed up in three aspects: first, life; second, sketches; third, cultivation.

### 3.3. Sheng Wei: Du Zi ling's artistic life

Sheng Wei, curator of this exhibition and deputy editor-in-chief of *\*Art Magazine\**, holds that Mr. Du Zi ling's artistic life is an epitome of painters of his generation. As the saying goes, "A traveler's journey has no boundaries." As an important representative of this generation of Chinese artists, he has not only organically integrated a series of originally opposing categories such as Western painting and traditional Chinese painting, Northern School and Southern School, tradition and modernity, promoting the inheritance and development of freehand brushwork in Chinese painting, especially figure-themed works in the contemporary era, but also set a dual model of life and art for later learners.

### 3.4. Exhibition tour schedule

It is learned that this exhibition is the first stop of the national tour of "Boundless Journey: Du Zi ling's Chinese Painting Exhibition". After the conclusion of this exhibition, the tour will be held at Shandong Art Museum on September 22 and Zhejiang Art Museum on October 29 respectively, and will conclude at the National Art Museum of China on November 22.

### 3.5. Appreciation of works

Opening the soon-to-be-published *\*Selected Works of Du Zi ling\**, a sense of pride in China's modern ink figure painting wells up in my heart. Du Zi ling, who has worked diligently in this field for decades, is one of the representative contemporary ink figure painters in China. His aesthetic ideals and artistic pursuits share similarities with those of outstanding artists of the older and same generations since the 20th century in many aspects, yet he has his own understanding and perception in terms of subject matter and formal language, giving his works a unique personal style.

There is an opinion that the realistic methods adhered to and the realistic spirit conveyed by China's modern figure painting run counter to Western modern art, thus lacking modernity and being an outdated form of painting. Another opinion holds that because it draws on and absorbs Western techniques to enrich the expressive methods of traditional Chinese figure painting, it has led to the loss of the ink tradition in figure painting. As a result, modern realistic Chinese figure painting has been "Westernized" and lacks national spirit.

Looking at the world art scene in the 20th century, it must be acknowledged that Western modern art took the lead and exerted a great influence. Its emergence is closely related to the historical and cultural background of Western society moving towards modernity, Western modern philosophy, people's modern living environment, and new aesthetic pursuits. In other words, its emergence and existence have an inevitable necessity. However, this does not mean that Western-style modernism should dominate the world, and traditional art forms including realism should be put on the shelf and no longer have survival value. In fact, the evolution of art from tradition to modernity takes different forms in various nations and regions, which is inevitably restricted by the specific historical culture and productivity development of the nation and region, and cannot be separated from society's demand for art and the public's aesthetic habits. It is unrealistic and impossible to impose a single artistic model on different nations and regions. The philosophical concepts of "harmony" and "the unity of man and nature" advocated by traditional Chinese culture determine that art develops in gradual changes without seeking drastic reforms; it adheres to the

principle of bringing forth new ideas from tradition rather than pursuing novelty and uniqueness by subverting tradition.



Figure 1: Customs of Pamir – Du Ziling, 115cm × 96cm, 2007

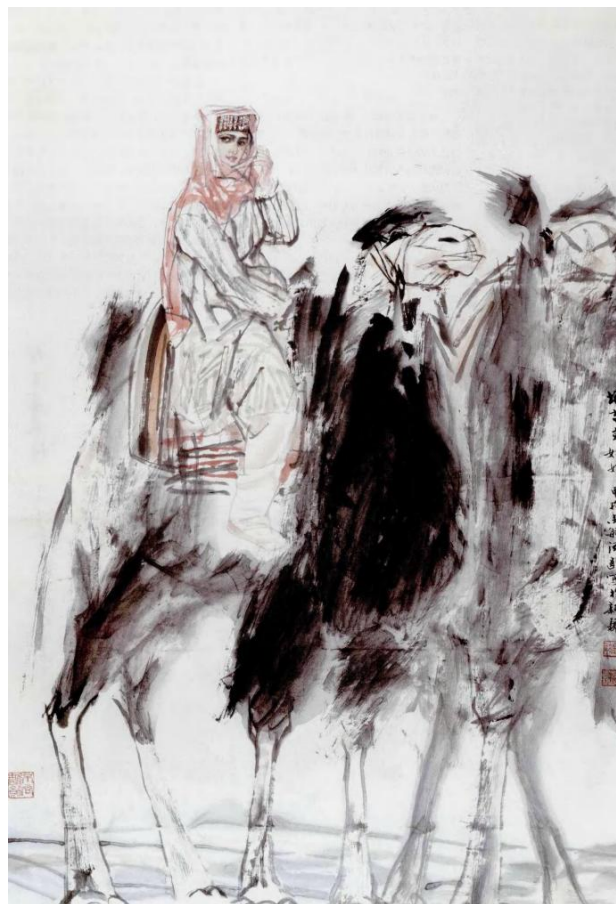


Figure 2: Tajik Girl, Du Zi ling, 137cm × 96cm, 1994



Figure 3: Customs of Pamir - Du Zi ling - 180cm × 97cm - 2007



Figure 4: Dai Girl, Du Zi ling, 46cm × 59cm, 1980

#### 4. Artistic creation concepts

Like many contemporary traditional Chinese figure painters, how to handle the relationship between sketch modeling and ink-wash language has always been the focus of Du Ziling's exploration in figure painting creation. He inherits the experience of senior artists, attaching importance not only to the structure of figure modeling but also to ink-wash language. Like many of his peers, he holds the view that the shaping of the form and spirit of figure images is a common pursuit of Chinese and foreign art, only with different ways of expression. The "difference" indicates the divergence in painting languages, but they are not entirely distinct. For example, in representing the form of objective objects and handling the relationship between lines and surfaces: traditional Chinese painting mainly uses lines supplemented by blocks; Western painting mainly uses surfaces supplemented by lines. The former emphasizes freehand brushwork while also requiring resemblance in form; the latter emphasizes realism while also paying attention to verve. Moreover, in different historical stages of Chinese and Western painting, there are different emphases in

aesthetics and varied forms of expression. For instance, the expressive language of Chinese literati painting is quite different from that of painting in the Tang and Song dynasties. Du Zi ling insists on extensively absorbing the traditions of modeling and spirit-expression in both Chinese and foreign painting, and makes great efforts to cultivate his modeling ability and refine his ink-wash skills.

## 5. The influence of the new Zhejiang school

The significant contribution of the New Zhejiang School lies in creatively integrating the sketch modeling of Western painting with the ink-wash techniques of traditional literati flower-and-bird painting and landscape painting, endowing figure images with more vivid verve and charm. During his postgraduate studies at Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, Du Ziling studied and applied the methods of the Zhejiang School, and had a thorough understanding of absorbing the ink-wash techniques of landscape and flower-and-bird painting for figure painting creation. This was because landscape painting was also what he learned and loved. The vigorous, rich, and lush painting style of Huang Binhong's landscape paintings, which reveals strength in brushwork and charm in ink, inspired him a lot.

In his ink figure painting creation, he uses free and easy ink techniques with a combination of dry, wet, thick, and light strokes, incorporating dotting and dyeing into line drawing. Through continuous exploration in practice, he pondered over how to overcome the drawbacks of being flimsy, loose, and fragmented that can easily result from excessive emphasis on dotting and dyeing. Drawing inspiration from the ink accumulation method of the Northern School, which achieves a rich and lush effect through layers of dyeing, he consciously absorbed the strengths of both Northern and Southern Schools, striving to make his ink-wash both free, lush, and vibrant as well as solid, integral, and concise. He strictly and generally grasps the physical structure, depicting the spirit through the form, so as to portray the characters' personalities and inner activities.

He gives full play to the expressiveness of black-and-white changes, boldly leaving blank spaces while emphasizing black-and-white contrast, and skillfully arranges the relationship between void and solid, complexity and simplicity, thickness and lightness—with both meticulous planning and occasional spontaneous gains. On the painting, ink and color blend and complement each other, subtly integrating the varied color relationships of Western painting into the fluent ink-wash techniques.

## 6. Artistic style and life experience

The style of works is closely related to the author's life experience and artistic cultivation, and also a true expression of the author's thoughts and feelings. Du Zi ling is sincere and simple. After long-term efforts, he has achieved success in art. He knows well that although he has paid countless hardships for it, he will never forget the gifts from the times, the inspiration from the tide of reform and opening up, the help from many virtuous people, and the support and cooperation from the depicted objects. He keeps a low profile in life and paints honestly. His works contain sincere and simple feelings, a strong intention to sing for the people, and the ambition to explore the revival of modern Chinese figure painting. His art has been recognized and praised by the industry and the audience, but he is not complacent or slack at all, and still works diligently. We believe that his art will show new brilliance in exploration and transformation.

## 7. Conclusion

This exhibition is not only a summary of Mr. Du Zi ling's artistic achievements, but also a tribute to his spirit of artistic exploration. Through this exhibition, we see the infinite possibilities shown by an artist in continuous exploration and innovation, as well as the unique value and development potential of Chinese ink figure painting in contemporary society. Mr. Du Zi ling's artistic journey, as revealed by the exhibition theme "Boundless Journey", is endless and full of hope.