

The song of ink and the realm of life: The ink and wash figure paintings of Du Zilin

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Abstract: This paper delves into the artistic achievements and stylistic characteristics of the renowned Chinese figure painter Du Zilin. Du Zilin, who was self-taught from a young age, successively studied under famous masters such as Ye Qian Yu and Li Zhen Jian. His artistic career spans from the 1950s and 1960s to the new era. His works are primarily ink and wash figure paintings, covering subjects such as real-life scenes, ethnic minority customs, and ancient poetic paintings. He is particularly skilled at depicting the lives of ethnic minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang. Du Zilin's figure paintings are distinctive in capturing the essence of his subjects and creating artistic realms. He integrates the strengths of both northern and southern Chinese painting styles, drawing on Huang Bin Hong's ink accumulation techniques to form a unique brush and ink style. His works not only focus on realistic modeling but also incorporate expressive spirit, emphasizing the portrayal of light and air, and showcasing the harmony between humans and nature. Additionally, his habit of sketching and comprehensive cultivation are important factors in his artistic success. The article concludes that Du Zilin's artistic experience holds significant inspirational value for future generations.

Keywords: Du Zilin, Ink and Wash Realistic Figure Painting, Capturing the Essence and Creating Artistic Realms, Integration of Northern and Southern Painting Styles, Sketching, Artistic Cultivation

1. Introduction

Since the 20th century, Chinese painting has continued the traditions of the past while keeping pace with the times, with the most outstanding achievements being made in figure painting. In the 1950s and 1960s, ink and wash realistic figure painting had already achieved results that surpassed those of previous generations. It not only opened up a new era of reflecting people's lives but also developed the style of ink and wash realism. There were differences between the north and the south, each with its own strengths.

Since the new era, ink and wash figure painting has broken free from the shackles of the "Cultural Revolution." Whether in the creation of major themes, in the richness of depicting the lives and emotions of ordinary people, or in exploring traditions, integrating the strengths of both the north and the south, and drawing on Western influences to enhance the artistic expressiveness of modern Chinese painting, it has made epoch-making progress. Mr. Du Zilin is a renowned Chinese figure painter who emerged in the 1950s and 1960s and rose to prominence in the new era.

Du Zilin had a passion for art from a young age. Although he could not enter an art academy due to his family background, he studied diligently on his own and showed his talent early on. In the 1960s, he had already distinguished himself in the fields of illustrated books, illustrations, and sketching. He was highly valued by the leaders of his workplace, Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, and was taken on as a disciple by Mr. Ye Qian Yu in a special arrangement. After the "Cultural Revolution," he was admitted as a graduate student at Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, where he studied under Professor Li Zhen Jian and fully absorbed the essence of the new Zhejiang school of ink and wash realistic figure painting, leading to a significant change in his painting style.

In the more than thirty years that followed, he successively served as the chief editor of Tianjin Fine Arts Publishing House and the director of the Art Department at Nankai University, advancing in editing, teaching, and creation simultaneously. He repeatedly went deep into various places for sketching and life experiences, actively creating and constantly striving for improvement. By also studying and learning from

Huang Bin Hong's landscape paintings, he completed another transformation in his painting style, forming a unique personal style that reflects the development of ink and wash realistic figure painting in the new era.

2. An overview of Du Zilin's artistic career and works

2.1. First encounters and initial exploration of his works

Du Zilin and I are of the same generation, and we have known each other for over thirty years. In the early days of our acquaintance, he had already taken on a leadership role at a publishing house and would occasionally visit Beijing to liaise with authors. Whenever I had the chance, I would seek his advice on innovative techniques, and he would respond without any reservation. In just a few words, he would reveal the secrets of applying water before ink.

Since then, we have frequently crossed paths at various art events, where I have had the opportunity to see his latest works. Recently, as *Selected Works of Du Zilin* is about to be published, I have been fortunate enough to get an early glimpse. This book carefully selects his finest pieces from the 1980s onwards, including ink sketches rich in creative consciousness and finished works that retain the freshness of sketches. The subjects are primarily figures, but there are also landscapes and flower-and-bird paintings that I had not seen before. His depiction of the lotus pond makes full use of the residual ink, creating a light and misty atmosphere that easily reminds one of the style of Zhou Si cong. His landscape paintings not only have the watery ink charm of Xu Bei Hong's "Spring Rain over the Li River" but also feature the interwoven dots and lines and layered ink accumulation of Huang Bin Hong, resulting in a rich and mellow texture.



Figure 1: Tibetan Woman in the Snowy Region by Du Zilin-123cm×92cm-2011



Figure 2: Clear Clouds by Du Zilin-180cm×97cm-2008

2.2. Subject matter and style

His figure paintings primarily depict real-life subjects, with ancient themes being secondary, and a small number of works featuring foreign subjects. Within the realm of real-life subjects, there are inspiring works that tackle significant themes, but the majority focus on the ordinary and common people, especially ethnic minorities in border regions. These include in-depth single portraits, group images set in specific environments, and numerous depictions of everyday life, celebrating the true, good, and beautiful in the ordinary. The subjects he portrays include a small number of miners (such as in *The Builders*), farmers (such as in *Shandong Old Peasant*), and cultural figures (such as in *Eternal Memorial*), but the vast majority of his works depict the poetic and picturesque lives of ethnic minorities, particularly those in Tibet and Xinjiang. As for ancient-themed works, there are romantic tales of famous people and more poetic or lyrical paintings inspired by ancient poetry. Regardless of the subject matter, he approaches his beloved subjects with a simple and sincere mindset. Instead of using bold and aggressive forms to grab attention, he writes with a harmonious and gentle rhythm, expressing genuine emotions and engaging in a warm exchange of feelings with the viewer, resulting in an enduring and flavorful style.

3. The artistic characteristics of Du Zilin's figure paintings

3.1. Capturing the spirit and creating the artistic realm

One of the most prominent features of Du Zilin's figure paintings is that they both capture the spirit and create artistic realms. Traditional Chinese figure painting has always emphasized "capturing the spirit through form" in its pursuit of "spiritual expression." However, after the development of expressive (Xie Yi) painting, the advocacy of "not seeking formal likeness" has to some extent misled the development of figure painting, leading to the emptiness and stereotyping of many works. Although the intentions of pursuing beauty and goodness still exist, the pursuit of truth has been lost.

Since the New Culture Movement of the May Fourth Movement, the mainstream of Chinese figure painting that has surpassed predecessors is the ink and wash realism school. People often divide Chinese painting of the past century into two major systems: one is based on tradition and uses the old to open up the new; the other introduces Western elements into Chinese art and integrates Chinese and Western styles. The mainstream of the latter is the realist school, but there are also non-realist schools.

Du Zilin's figure paintings certainly belong to the ink and wash realism school within the system that introduces Western elements into Chinese art and integrates Chinese and Western styles. However, in terms of artistic conception and brushwork, he has absorbed elements from the traditional-based, innovation-through-heritage approach. Moreover, as his artistic cultivation has advanced, the integration of these two aspects has become increasingly seamless.



Figure 3: Winter on the Pasture by Du Zilin-291cm×145cm-2009

3.2. The integration of realism and expressiveness

Like his mentors and peers, Du Zilin's ink and wash realistic figure paintings have revitalized the fine traditions of figure painting. They emphasize not only the depiction of form but also the capture of spirit. His works are imbued with a strong sense of everyday life, distinct regional characteristics, vivid personalities, and lively spiritual demeanors. Generally speaking, in ink and wash realistic figure painting, the modeling is realistic, while the form is expressed through the freehand style of ink and wash. Realistic modeling, aided by the concepts of sketching, sharpens precise observational skills and uses the relationship between mass and plane to support line work. This revives the tradition of "capturing the spirit through form," enriching and refining artistic expression. Du Zilin is no exception. His portraits and figure paintings, guided by a realistic concept, focus on the portrayal of facial expressions, especially the eyes, as well as expressive postures and gestures. These elements highlight the diverse personalities and inner worlds of ordinary people, enhancing the quality of "capturing the spirit." Some of his works that excel in capturing the spirit, such as *Miners Who Bring Light to People* and *The Road to Happiness on the Tanggula Mountains*, successfully depict typical characters in typical environments, embodying the methods and spirit of realism.

However, his works are by no means devoid of the spirit of expressiveness. In fact, he has introduced expressive elements into realistic figure painting, and the specific approach is the combination of capturing the spirit and creating artistic realms. Through this combination, he refines his life experiences, encounters the natural world in a spiritual way, and transforms life into art. The so-called creation of artistic realms, or the creation of artistic conception, emphasizes poetic sentiment and pursues charm. Many of his works—such as "Snowy Charm of the Pamirs," "Snowy Charm of the Plateau," and "Autumn Charm"—are titled with the word "charm," which shows his conscious effort in creating artistic realms. The combination of capturing the spirit and creating artistic realms means integrating the in-depth and vivid portrayal of the form and spirit of figures with the means of creating artistic conception in landscape painting, and understanding figures as part of nature. Therefore, in his works, there is not only the beauty of human figures but also the harmony between humans and nature. He not only depicts a kind of temperament, charm, mood, and artistic conception but also portrays a realm of wonderful natural creation.

3.3. The depiction of ethnic minority customs

The combination of capturing the spirit and creating artistic realms is particularly suitable for depicting the life and customs of ethnic minorities. His numerous works depicting the snowy plateau not only use the brush of capturing the spirit to portray the simple and strong vitality of the Tibetan people but also employ the beauty of creating artistic realms to place the subjects in an environment filled with wind, snow, and sunshine, where they coexist with creatures such as yaks, camels, dogs, and horses, constructing a realm of unity between humans and nature, one that is pure, serene, and solemn. His inscription on "Tibetan Customs" reveals that this combination stems from his deep appreciation of the beauty of Tibet. He wrote: "Tibet is the place closest to the sun, the place closest to heaven...Here, there are unique snowy plateau landscapes, as well as the Translation of southeastern Tibet that resembles the charm of the south. What is more admirable is the group of Tibetan compatriots who possess firm beliefs and live happily. I have been painting Tibetan life for more than twenty years and deeply feel the simplicity and bravery of the Tibetan people. The ancient Tibetan culture, religion, and medicine are all deeply moving to me. Tibet—beautiful Tibet.



Figure 4: Miss Dan Zhi la Mao by Du Zilin-60cm×49cm-2016

4. The integration of brushwork and modeling

4.1. The combination of northern and southern painting styles

Another prominent feature of Du Zilin's ink and wash figure paintings is the integration of the strengths of both northern and southern painting styles in the relationship between brushwork and modeling. He draws on the brushwork from landscape and flower-and-bird paintings, especially successfully introducing Huang Bin Hong's ink accumulation technique from landscape painting into figure painting, thus forming a unique painting style. As is well known, the most important issue in the artistic expression of ink and wash realistic figure painting is the unity of brushwork and modeling. Brushwork, as the core of the artistic language of Chinese painting, is used not only to "depict objects and forms" to meet the requirements of modeling but also has a relatively independent beauty. This independent beauty is not purely formal; rather, it expresses emotions, personality, and the spirit of the times through the form, structure, and movement of the brushwork.

Since modern times, in terms of using brushwork to achieve modeling (excluding Ye Qian Yu's simplified brush dance figures), there have basically been three forms: The first is the traditional combination of outlining to establish the structure and the shading and texturing techniques from landscape painting, represented by Jiang Zhe He. The second is the introduction of the liveliness of compound-line sketching into ink and wash figure painting, represented by Huang Zhou. The third is the application of the dot-based brushwork from expressive flower-and-bird painting to figure painting, also known as expressive figure painting, represented by the New Zhejiang School. The first two originated in the north, one after the other, while the last one began in the south. Before the new era arrived, these different approaches coexisted without contradiction.

4.2. The diversity of brushwork styles

Du Zilin's figure paintings initially began with studying the works of Jiang Zhe He through printed images, and he was also influenced by Huang Zhou. He had already acquired the Northern approach to handling the relationship between brushwork and modeling, possessing strong modeling capabilities. After further studies in Hangzhou, he was also influenced by the New Zhejiang School, drawing on the techniques of expressive flower-and-bird painting. He used a brush for ink sketching, shaping through the movement of brushwork, dots, and lines, integrating the strengths of both Northern and Southern styles, and achieving a combination of vivid brushwork and precise modeling.

Regarding his characteristics in brushwork language, he combines the Northern style's meticulous depiction, in-depth rigor, richness, and emphasis on modeling with the Southern style's ability to distill and generalize, focusing on personal perception, maximizing the effectiveness of brushwork, and bringing out the charm of ink and wash. Du Zilin's brushwork not only meets the demand of "brushwork should follow the times" but also reflects his advocated beauty of "brushwork should follow one's temperament." This kind of brushwork beauty, as a "meaningful form," is approachable, not overly aggressive, lively yet elegant, and rich in connotation.

4.3. The use of sparse and dense brushwork

In the integration of brushwork and modeling, Du Zilin also varies his brushwork according to the specific content he is depicting. Some of his works are characterized by bold and vigorous brushstrokes, others by free and relaxed ones, and still others by simple and lively ones. However, overall, his brushwork style can be summarized into two main types: sparse and dense.

The sparse style comes in two forms. The first type evolved from sketching and is primarily based on line drawing. It uses dry brushstrokes for white-line sketches, shaping with lines and occasionally employing a bit of heavy ink for thick lines or light ink for dry shading. The use of color in this type is relatively simple.

The second type is a development of the New Zhejiang School. It combines points, lines, and planes, using both large and small brushes to create a mix of thick and thin lines, as well as large and small areas of ink. This style fully exploits the artistic charm of brush and ink in both outlining and dotting.

However, unlike the older generation of the New Zhejiang School, Du Zilin also employs dry brush techniques. In the interplay between lines and planes, the combination of dry and wet brushstrokes is more harmonious and integrated.

5. Innovation and integration of brushwork techniques

5.1. The diversity of dense brushwork

There are also two types of dense brushwork. The first type uses a deep, heavy, and intricate background to set off the figures, with meticulous and thorough depiction of the characters. The composition is densely packed and full, emphasizing a sense of three-dimensionality. This type employs both splash-ink and accumulated-ink techniques, but the latter is predominant, seemingly taking the Northern style as the foundation and the Southern style as the application. The second type uses multi-layered brushwork, dots, and lines to portray both the figures and the environment, integrating the figures with the setting and enhancing the overall sense, the feeling of sunlight, and the hazy atmosphere. This dense style, which has

both density and sparsity, not only incorporates the Northern style into the Southern style but also introduces the accumulated-ink technique from Huang Bin Hong's landscape paintings into figure painting.

5.2. The combination of dry and wet painting techniques

I personally have a greater preference for the last type. Over a long period of practice, Chinese ink painting has developed two main techniques: the wet painting method, which creates a single, complete image with water and ink, and the dry painting method, which involves repeated applications of ink to build up layers. Within the wet painting method, there are two subtypes: the splash-ink technique, which focuses more on areas than lines, and the broken-ink technique, which is more challenging to shape but easily achieves the accidental effects of ink diffusion. The splash-ink technique is more about areas than lines, the accumulated-ink technique is more about lines than areas, and the broken-ink technique is difficult to shape but easily achieves the accidental effects of ink diffusion. Wet painting is easy to make bold and free but not easy to make thick; dry painting is easy to make rich and mellow but not easy to make ethereal.

Du Zilin's brushwork is a combination of dry and wet painting techniques, integrating splash-ink, broken-ink, and accumulated-ink methods. In these combinations, he can bring out the structural role of lines, especially excelling in the complementary use of lines and small areas. His brushwork appears disconnected but is actually continuous, and his ink application is ethereal yet profound. He diligently practices Huang Bin Hong's brushwork and ink philosophy: "Varied and irregular, large and small, slanted and upright, fat and thin, long and short, looking up and down, continuous and broken, aligned but not aligned, this is the inner beauty." He enables different points, lines, and areas, primarily based on lines, to achieve flexible and powerful brushwork and ink that is "light but thick, solid but clear" through movement and interweaving, completing a personalized brushwork beauty.



Figure 5: Lantern Festival and the Welcoming of the New Spring by Du Zilin-Chinese Painting-185cm*145cm-2008



Figure 6: Dawn in Xishuangbanna by Du Zilin-365cm×144cm-2008

6. The Expression of Light and Air

Du Zilin's ink and wash realistic figures are primarily ink-based with color as a secondary element, often employing light colors and occasionally using bright hues for emphasis. However, a very distinct feature is his conscious effort to express light and air. His early works already emphasized a certain sense of light, and later, with a large number of works combining the capturing of spirit and the creation of artistic realms—especially those depicting Tibetan customs—he intentionally pursued the expression of daylight, sunlight, and air.

Many of his works' titles reveal this intention, such as *In the Sunlight*, *Under the Golden Sun*, *Autumn Sun*, *Three Generations on the Prairie in the Sun*, *The Setting Sun in the Snowy Region*, *Sunlight Illuminates the Harmonious Plateau*, *Morning on the Prairie*, *Early Spring in February*, and *The Dairy Fragrance of the Pasture*. This is evident in all of them.

It is worth noting that in his expression of light and air, whether in works that omit the background of the figures or those that use focal perspective to depict spatial relationships, he skillfully integrates Chinese and Western elements in the combination of brushwork and modeling, and figures and space. He absorbs the light and color elements from Western painting, organically combining free and lyrical brushwork, accurate representation of objects, and the integration of context and space. The portrayal of light and air is just right, either forming a lyrical overall tone or enhancing the artistic conception of "sunlight illuminating the harmonious plateau."

7. Artistic achievements and summarization of experience

7.1. The artistic value of Du Zilin's paintings

Du Zilin's paintings are truly a realm of life and a song of brush and ink. Reviewing his achievements and summarizing his artistic journey, his modest character, relentless pursuit, Integration of northern and southern styles, and the use of accumulated ink are all important experiences in his artistic development. However, I believe the most valuable experiences are threefold: life, sketching, and cultivation.

7.2. The importance of sketching

Both sketching and traditional Chinese painting are arts of line. Sketching is not only a means of recording life but also a bridge to experiencing it and an art of distilling life. For Du Zilin, the habit of sketching began in his teenage years and has continued to this day. He said, "During my early years, I received help from many mentors...I cut packaging paper into the size of 64-page comic books, bound them into sketchbooks, and kept them in my pocket, drawing whenever I had the chance. The guidance and inspiration from Mr. Ye Qian Yu have become a lifelong habit for me." "From 2010 to now, over five years, I have completed dozens of sketchbooks, which are more than a meter high." Compared to images, sketching has a more direct relationship with life, and compared to sketching, it grasps the subject more quickly. It not only cultivates keen observation but also exercises holistic understanding. Unlike photography, sketching encourages the artist to perceive objects with the heart and capture them with lines, allowing for high-level generalization and freehand expression. Sketching is both learning from nature and drawing from the heart, connecting life on one hand and creation on the other. Using a brush and rice paper for sketching also helps to achieve a combination of vivid brushwork and accurate modeling in a calligraphic manner. Du Zilin's continuous sketching allows the objects in his paintings to be transformed through the prism of his mind and integrated into his ink figure paintings, becoming an important condition for the liveliness and calligraphic nature of his works.

7.3. The importance of comprehensive cultivation

Artistic principles indicate that, after reaching a certain level, painting becomes an expression of one's cultivation. For modern Chinese painters, there are three main aspects of cultivation: personal character, traditional knowledge, and interdisciplinary learning. Personal character cultivation is related to humanistic care, artistic individuality, and artistic realm. Traditional cultivation is about the cultural accumulation and national characteristics of Chinese painting. Interdisciplinary learning is about updating knowledge structures and the modernization of Chinese painting. Among his peers, Du Zilin is a painter with comprehensive cultivation, valuing all three aspects and increasingly so. His interdisciplinary learning began with his editorial career in his youth, which led to a well-rounded cultivation covering all types of fine arts. Since the reform and opening up, his learning has become even richer. The formation of a cross-cultural perspective has enabled him to actively absorb beneficial elements from Western painting and express the aesthetic experiences of modern people. His traditional cultivation has become more conscious since his further studies in Hang Zhou. He understands that the development of Chinese painting is "a 'growth' based on tradition, a unity of the new and the old." Therefore, he continuously improves his

traditional Chinese learning, including philosophy, classical literature, poetry, and calligraphy. Naturally, his works are rich in poetic conception and calligraphic expressiveness. His paintings, such as *The Great Auspiciousness* depicting a Hui ethnic elder with a sheep and *The Great Luck* showing a minority woman with chickens, inherit the traditional use of homophonic symbolism, blending ancient charm with contemporary sentiment, and are appreciated by both the refined and the common. These also stem from his traditional cultivation. Du Zilin pays great attention to personal character cultivation, always being indifferent to fame and fortune, and maintaining a low profile. He not only regards painting as part of his life but also sees personal character cultivation as a necessary path to elevating his spiritual realm. In summary, cultivation deepens perception, enlightens culture, and elevates the spirit, ensuring artistic progress. Believing that he will continue to strive, he is sure to create new glories, and his experience will become a valuable asset for his peers and future learners.

8. Conclusion

Mr. Du Zilin's artistic career is a microcosm of the development of modern Chinese ink figure painting. With his profound life experiences, exquisite brushwork skills, and comprehensive cultivation, he has perfectly integrated tradition and modernity, realism and expressiveness, creating unique and stylish artistic works. His paintings not only display the charm of human figures and the harmony with nature but also convey his love for life and pursuit of beauty. Du Zilin's artistic achievements are not only a personal honor but also a vivid testament to the development of Chinese painting in the new era. His artistic experience offers valuable insights to future generations and inspires more artists to keep moving forward on the path of inheritance and innovation, continuing to write brilliant chapters in Chinese painting art.