

Analyzing the Inspiration of ink wash forms on the language of local oil painting creation

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Abstract: Ink wash painting, as the primary form of traditional Chinese painting, embodies profound cultural connotations and exerts a significant influence on contemporary artistic creation. As a traditional Western art form, oil painting was introduced to China and subsequently adapted by numerous artists. Through the fusion of ink wash painting and oil painting techniques, the expressive characteristics of Chinese freehand brushwork were integrated with the realistic style of oil painting. This integration has enriched the expressive language of contemporary local oil painting, endowing it with regionalized features and promoting continuous development in the field of modern painting. This paper provides an overview of the "localization" process of oil painting in China, analyzes the intrinsic connections and creative differences between ink wash painting and oil painting, and examines the influence of ink wash forms on local oil painting creation through the lens of specific works.

Keywords: Ink wash forms, local oil painting, creative language

1. Introduction

Oil painting, as the predominant Western painting form, primarily involves the artistic application of blended, opaque pigments on canvas. Utilizing the covering and transparency of these pigments, artists continuously layer and depict subjects to achieve vivid, lifelike imagery with a strong sense of visual depth and three-dimensionalism. In contrast, traditional Chinese ink wash painting employs water and ink mixed in specific proportions, applied on paper. The most basic ink wash paintings feature only black and white, but as the art form evolved, the use of color became more pronounced, eventually giving rise to the new form of "color ink painting." Comparatively, oil painting emphasizes the objective depiction of subjects, leaning toward realism, while ink wash painting often employs a freehand style to enhance its intrinsic charm, evoking an aesthetic sense of "resemblance yet non-resemblance" and thereby inviting boundless imagination.

2. The process of oil painting's "Localization" in China

As early as the late Ming Dynasty, Western missionaries introduced oil painting to China, though during this period it remained largely confined to the aristocratic class as foreign *objets d'art*, with little substantial development. Later, with the implementation of the Qing Dynasty's "closed-door" policy, this "imported" art form faced even greater resistance. It was not until the late Qing Dynasty, when foreign powers forced China's doors open, that more scholars and artists gained formal exposure to Western oil painting. Artists such as Li Shutong, Pan Yuliang, and Xu Beihong gradually adapted oil painting techniques to better align with Chinese aesthetic sensibilities. Most of these artists had studied abroad and possessed a foundation in traditional Chinese painting prior to their overseas education. After systematically studying Western oil painting, they began to approach orthodox Western works with a "localized" perspective, even advocating for the "nationalization of oil painting" and calling for the adaptation of Western oil painting to local contexts. Thus began the era of indigenous Chinese oil painting. [1]

In the early years of the People's Republic of China, influenced by positive Sino-Soviet relations, China's oil painting practice was significantly impacted beyond the political sphere. Soviet oil painting during this period, heavily influenced by political themes, often focused on eulogizing political achievements, with works predominantly in red tones and characterized by exaggerated idealization, lacking

authenticity. China introduced this entire creative approach domestically, establishing the Chistyakov teaching system for oil painting instruction. While this system helped students build a solid technical foundation and improve their oil painting skills, it also severely stifled creative expression, hindering the long-term development of Chinese oil painting.

Following the reform and opening-up period, Chinese oil painting broke free from political constraints, shifting from the glorification of political achievements to a focus on expressive, freehand artistic creation. While drawing on European artistic experiences, artists integrated traditional Chinese culture into their works to reflect a "national" humanistic spirit. During this period, influenced by economic globalization, the notion of "complete Westernization" emerged in the field of oil painting. Culturally, this perspective is flawed, as it seeks authenticity in oil painting at the expense of traditional Chinese culture, representing a misguided and one-sided approach that is ultimately untenable. [2]

3. Oil painting vs. ink wash: Connection and contrast

Oil painting and ink wash painting are both forms of artistic expression, utilizing specific mediums and materials to convey the artist's inner vision. Through diverse colors and graceful lines, artists channel their perceptions of the objective world onto canvas or paper, evoking a sense of beauty. From an aesthetic perspective, painting involves a logical contemplation of the material world, delving into nature and life forms to express profound insights about existence in a harmonious and natural manner, thereby aligning with the aesthetic value of "beauty." In essence, both oil painting and ink wash painting share the same foundational purpose: to concretely depict the artist's spiritual world through artistic creation. However, due to differences in cultural backgrounds and methodologies, these two forms exhibit significant distinctions in practice. [2]

Ink wash painting, nurtured within Chinese culture, deeply reflects traditional Confucian and Daoist philosophies, embodying a transcendent and ethereal quality that conveys the artist's emotional transference. Within ink wash painting, the meticulous "gongbi" technique shares similarities with the realism of Western oil painting. However, in terms of composition, spatial awareness, and perspective, Chinese painting tends to be more ethereal, while oil painting adopts a more "scientific" approach, emphasizing logical structure. Western oil painting primarily employs two-dimensional techniques to represent reality within the pictorial space, focusing on iconography, chiaroscuro, and perspective. In contrast, Chinese ink wash painting prioritizes the creation of artistic conception, using imagery to evoke an aesthetic experience where meaning extends beyond the literal. Thus, oil painting inherits the sculptural beauty rooted in ancient Greek traditions, while the aesthetic realm of ink wash painting is more akin to music—as Qi Baishi aptly described, "the beauty lies between likeness and unlikeness."

4. The Influence of Ink wash forms on local Oil Painting creation

Although oil painting was introduced to China as early as the late Ming Dynasty, its development in the country spans only a century. Within this relatively short period, this quintessential Western art form gradually integrated with traditional Chinese culture and continued to evolve. Chinese painters have made significant contributions to the localization of oil painting. Lin Fengmian formally introduced the oil painting system to China, while Wu Guanzong further explored the interplay between ink wash painting and oil painting. Through the persistent experimentation and innovation of generations of artists, oil painting has gradually taken root in the cultural soil of China. The pursuit of blending Eastern and Western artistic traditions became a lifelong artistic endeavor for these painters, and their oil paintings are imbued with traditional Chinese aesthetic sensibilities.

Lin Fengmian, a representative painter of modern Chinese art, studied in France, where he was exposed to various Western art forms and absorbed the techniques of Impressionism. In his later creations, he integrated traditional Chinese ink wash methods, ultimately achieving a fusion of Eastern and Western painting spirits, as illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1 Lin Fengmian's oil painting

This oil painting by Lin Fengmian primarily consists of three parts: the distant view of cloud-shrouded mountains, the mid-ground of houses under the forest, and the foreground of green fields. The painting showcases the vibrant colors characteristic of Impressionist works, yet it does not employ the traditional Western oil painting techniques of chiaroscuro contrast and the physical depiction of scenery. Instead, it integrates the creative features of traditional ink wash painting, using the "blank space" technique of Chinese landscape art to convey spatial layers. Although the depicted scenery is realistic, the painter did not follow the representational approach of oil painting, nor did he emphasize architectural structure or spatial contrast. Rather, he employed the ethereal quality of ink wash to present a tranquil rural landscape, achieving a strikingly authentic effect.

Wu Guanzong, a student of Lin Fengmian, was deeply influenced by his teacher's creative philosophy, and his works exhibit a fusion of Eastern and Western artistic elements. In Wu Guanzong's view, the appeal of Western modern painting lies in its ability to express individuality, authenticity, and genuine emotional attitudes. However, he personally rejected the emphasis on "light and shadow"—the contrast between light and dark—in Western painting. Consequently, in his own works, particularly in figure painting, he did not highlight the effects of light and shadow. Instead, he leaned toward the approach of traditional Chinese figure painting, applying skin tones in a "flat wash" manner. An example is shown in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2 Wu Guanzong's oil painting

From this work, it is evident that Wu Guan zong applied only minimal and understated chiaroscuro effects in the depiction of the figures. Rather than deliberately imitating the anatomical structure typical of Western figure painting, he used simple lines to convey the plump and full-bodied form of the female subject. This simplified external representation more effectively highlights the inner world of the characters, thereby reflecting the painter's creative intent.

By analyzing the evolution of local oil painting in China over the past century, the cultural influence of the ink wash aesthetic is apparent. Through the artistic conception of ink wash, Chinese oil painting distinguishes itself fundamentally from Western painting, thus exploring a path unique to Chinese oil painting creation. Generally speaking, in the creation of local oil painting, to minimize the influence of light, shadow, and architectural structure, artists often choose desolate and subdued scenes as subjects. This better leverages the characteristics of ink wash techniques, using only dots and lines to achieve compositional balance. This approach not only lends the painting a sense of simplicity but also embodies a tranquil and natural cultural connotation. In terms of color palette, artists tend to avoid overly contrasting hues, opting instead for muted tones closer to the monochromatic quality of ink wash. This reduces the contrast between light and dark, relying more on the density of dots to suggest the volume of objects or architecture, thereby achieving harmony in the composition and aligning with traditional Chinese aesthetic principles.

5. A Correct understanding of the "Localization" of oil painting

5.1. Moving beyond superficial integration

Achieving true "localization" of oil painting requires more than just adopting a freehand style or mechanically incorporating ink wash elements into the artwork. Instead, it should genuinely reflect the essence of Chinese culture and the artist's inner artistic world. Many contemporary painters, in an effort to showcase the application of ink wash aesthetics in oil painting, deliberately pursue subdued visual effects, often overlooking the importance of light and shadow contrast in enhancing the overall impact of the painting.

5.2. Constructing a linguistic system

The development of Chinese oil painting has been relatively brief, resulting in shortcomings in both creative techniques and formal language. Therefore, oil painters must continuously explore, innovate, and refine their approaches in the new era. By integrating indigenous Chinese elements, they can achieve a genuine fusion of Eastern and Western artistic traditions.

5.3. Returning to the roots of life

Art originates from all aspects of life, and artists' creations are grounded in their personal perceptions and experiences. As such, painting should serve life. For a long time, Chinese oil painting was heavily influenced by political factors, leading to many negative consequences. In the new era, it is essential to move away from these past tendencies and orient oil painting toward life and society, capturing the multifaceted realities of modern China.

6. Conclusion

The inspiration drawn from ink wash forms for the language of local oil painting creation is, in essence, a profound dialogue between the spirit of Chinese aesthetics and the form of Western painting. From the initial attempts at "nationalization" in the early stages to contemporary artists' explorations in blending the essence of ink wash with the language of oil painting, Chinese oil painting has gradually moved beyond mere imitation of Western techniques. Instead, it draws nourishment from traditional culture, forming a unique expression that combines the depth of realism with the charm of freehand brushwork. True "localization" is not merely a grafting of forms but requires the transformation of cultural spirit within the creative core. In the future, the development of local oil painting must remain rooted in real life, striking a balance between Eastern aesthetics and Western media to construct a visual language system that is both grounded in national heritage and vibrant with contemporary vitality.

7. References

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