

Chinese and Western Painting: Artistic Expressions of Cultural Differences in Artistic Conception and Space

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Abstract. Chinese and Western paintings are two long-standing traditional art forms. They have developed different cultural traditions and aesthetic tastes. When they depict nature, there are differences in visual space. These disparities manifest not only in the application of linear perspective, the complexity of compositional arrangement, and the depiction of color and illumination, but also stem from the cognitive focus and intellectual pursuits of the artists themselves. Divergent societal ideologies and diametrically opposed philosophical perspectives contribute to the distinct artistic impacts observed in Chinese and Western paintings through their respective modes of expression. What is the "artistic conception" in Chinese paintings? What do Western paintings convey? When showing their views on nature, Chinese and Western paintings have obvious spatial differences.

Keywords: Chinese and Western Paintings, Painting Expression, View of Nature, Density Structure

1. Introduction

Because of different cultural traditions and aesthetic preferences, Chinese and Western paintings show big differences in visual space when they depict nature. These differences are not only seen in technical aspects, such as linear perspective, picture density and color-light expression. They also come from artists' thinking and interests, as well as different social ideas and philosophical concepts behind them. So the two kinds of paintings have very different effects in their expression ways. This paper focuses on how Chinese and Western paintings show their views on nature. It explores their differences in spatial presentation. It also explains the artistic conception that Chinese paintings pursue and the meanings that Western paintings convey.

2. Differences in spatial expression between Chinese and Western paintings

Traditional Chinese and Western paintings both belong to representational art. They are important parts of human painting art that cannot be ignored. However, they form two different artistic systems. In terms of expression, each has its own unique painting style. For example, the density of picture composition changes, the colors have light and dark contrasts, and the lines have ups and downs in their rhythm. Western painting comes from religion and mythology. So it often uses vertical composition (also called one-point perspective). It takes the visual center as the starting point and

uses a creative mode that spreads outwards. Chinese painting, however, emphasizes "expressing spirit through shape". Its pictures either have no center, or have two or more centers. There is a lot of blank space in Chinese paintings. This blank space creates a light and empty artistic conception. In fact, it includes the artistic philosophy of "emptiness and solidity depending on each other" and "seeing the whole from small parts". So the structure of Chinese paintings follows a smart rule: "sparse parts are wide enough for horses to run; dense parts are too tight for wind to pass". Chinese calligraphy follows the rule of "hiding the start and end of strokes, with strength in the characters". Both are good examples of this artistic idea that puts imaginary scenes into paintings. Western painting, by contrast, mostly talks about space and pays no attention to blank space.

2.1. The use of perspective

Different artistic ideas lead to differences in perspective rules between Chinese and Western paintings. Traditional Chinese painting values the perspective aesthetic spirit of "emptiness and solidity existing together". This is very different from Western painting, which focuses on geometric accuracy. Traditional Chinese painting is not limited to the single vanishing point used in Western painting. Instead, it introduces a new method of contrasting color and texture. It also uses the density, dryness and wetness of brushwork to depict space [1]. Ancient Chinese people achieved a lot in exploring ways to show distance. They did not have a systematic theory. But they were good at using the height of positions, the size of objects (closer ones are bigger, farther ones are smaller), and clever overlapping to create the effect of "clear in the front and vague in the distance". For example, Shen Zhou from the Ming Dynasty was good at using this "distance method" in his work *Fisherman's Retreat in Autumn Mountains*. He used the size and position of mountains and light ink to create layered landscapes. The painting does not use a single vanishing point. It has a strong sense of space and beauty. Chinese painting focuses on freehand brushwork, expressing emotions and pursuing spiritual expression. So its perspective focuses more on creating a deep spatial environment and an intense emotional atmosphere through smart artistic skills. It fully shows the charm and artistic conception of the picture. It is not restricted by strict perspective skills or geometric accuracy. Since the Renaissance, perspective has become one of the core skills in Western painting. It is used in everything from picture design to painting expression. Especially one-point perspective (also called linear perspective). It uses a single unified vanishing point in the picture to control all lines and space. This creates a sense of spatial depth and a strong feeling of reality. Western painting tries hard to be accurate and scientific in perspective [2].

2.2. Differences in composition

The composition mode of traditional Chinese painting and its way of handling spatial relationships differ from traditional Western painting. Traditional Western painting demonstrates explicit relationships between time and space. Chinese painting is more focused on developing an effect of freely combined space, based on the painter's view [3]. For instance, it constantly changes viewpoints or places spaces and time moments together. This brings a different effect. In the arrangement of the plane, it is preferable to use horizontal scrolls. It reveals the pictorial space by "high perspective", "level perspective" and "distant perspective". Chinese painting uses the skill of "treating blank space as black". The parts without paint are also important. This creates the unique artistic conception of beauty in Chinese painting. Chinese painting rarely uses symmetrical composition. It primarily uses the "corner composition" mode. That means, in the whole picture, it pays attention to leaving blank space. But in some parts of the picture, the composition is detailed.

This creates a sense of balance. Traditional Western painting, however, often uses symmetrical and balanced composition. It uses these two kinds of composition to develop a sense of balance for the eyes. For example, Raphael used brilliant composition and symmetrical skills in his work, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. This created a solemn and respectful atmosphere. The Virgin and Child were placed in the center of the composition. They seemed to be the visual focus. The other figures and decorations around them were arranged evenly. They matched each other. This showed Raphael's great composition skills.

2.3. Color and light

Chinese and Western paintings also have their own features in using colors. Chinese painting developed from "danqing" (mineral-based colors) to ink wash. Its colors changed from simple to rich. However, it still keeps things simple and focuses on general beauty. It describes light and shadow in an undefined, abstract way. This often includes the use of thick and thin brushwork to represent forms of objects which do not directly show light as in Western painting [4]. More importantly, traditional Chinese painting comprises feelings and conception. The abstraction of brushwork creates a certain mood. For Western artists, however, very much interested in showing effects of light and shade, especially after the Renaissance when painters with accurate perspective copying natural lighting changes through shadows placed great importance on displaying effects of light and shade [5]. They used chiaroscuro (the contrast between light and dark) and shadows to shape the shape and layers of objects. This created a real 3D effect. At the same time, they focused on the source and angle of light. They studied intensely how light affects the shape and color of objects. They tried to make their works have a strong visual impact.

3. Analysis of philosophical concepts behind spatial differences

Western painting and Chinese painting are two necessary parts of the world's painting art system. There are significant differences in their creative spaces. Chinese painting tends to be free and expressive. It pursues "resemblance in spirit" instead of being limited to "resemblance in shape". Western painting, however, focuses more on realistic representation. It tries to show objective things accurately. This difference in painting style is caused by the profound differences in cultural meanings between China and the West. The differences in aesthetic concepts, habits, and cultural background comprise the basic elements of modes of thinking or ideology [6]. The Chinese artistic spirit originates from Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist ideas. There was always a place for such thoughts in traditional artistic creation. This provides Chinese art with a peculiar charm. The spirit of Chinese art is also based on the ideas from these three schools: the works of fine arts and crafts demonstrate at large the concept of great nature's creation "the unity between man and nature", displaying fully the harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature- an emotional connection [7]. The earliest form of Chinese aesthetics believed in the supreme concept of "the unity of man and nature". It longed for a poetic world where man and nature live in harmony. The idea of "starting from nature and ending with nature" has long been recorded in *The Book of Changes*. The simple three-line trigram in this book has three lines. They stand for "heaven, earth and man". This perfectly exemplifies combining the "three powers" (heaven, earth and man). Chinese aesthetic artistic conception takes this as the highest goal. It attaches great importance to the harmony of nature. Western artistic spirit is very different from that of the Chinese. The former focuses on nature and shows the "pure art of nature". The latter emphasizes the opposition between man and nature and shows the "unique art of man". The root cause of this difference is that their artistic spirits come

from different sources. There are many arguments about the origin of Western art. But most people agree that it started in Mesopotamia and Egypt. After a long development period, the feudal system in Western society was replaced by the new capitalist system. This capitalist system has become the foundation of modern Western society and continues today .

The ideas of freedom, democracy, commodity economy and emancipation came under the capitalist system. They have had a deep and long-lasting influence on the Western artistic spirit. So Western culture is very different from Eastern culture. This is the key reason for the big differences between Eastern and Western artistic spirits.

3.1. Traditional Chinese painting

Traditional Chinese art values inner spirituality, using nature to reflect emotions and connect to the spiritual realm. Painters seek peace and transcendence through natural scenes, expressing reverence for nature. Eschewing direct replication, it employs simple, abstract techniques to convey nature's essence, combining brushwork and ink to express profound emotions and an ethereal aesthetic. Landscape painting illustrates the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature through natural elements. It uses tall, dangerous, strange and beautiful mountains and winding rivers to highlight nature's mystery, depth and grandeur. This shows painters' unique emotional tendencies and aesthetic tastes. In ancient Chinese paintings, the changes of time and natural laws are often demonstrated through the different scenery of the four seasons and the changes of clouds in the sky. By showing the differences in wind, rain, clouds, mists, plant changes and natural climate in different seasons, painters can better show the changes and rhythms of nature. "The connection between man and things" is a common way of thinking in traditional Chinese painting. It posits a shared destiny between humanity and nature. Artists convey emotions via natural elements—mountains, rivers, flora, wind, clouds, and water—demonstrating both nature's beauty and a profound ecological understanding. This approach fosters a harmonious human-nature relationship, reflecting inner peace and ethical integrity through landscape art.

The differences between Chinese and Western paintings in their views on nature and literary trends are mainly seen in their deep understanding and complex handling of nature. Chinese painting focuses more on completely showing nature's beauty and the mysterious world. It emphasizes the flexibility of "spiritual perception", the sharpness of "feeling" and the magic of "emptiness and solidity depending on each other". Its beauty is not only in the picture's smart composition and wonderful colors. It is also in the painter's careful spirit and understanding of nature. The "artistic conception" that Chinese painting pursues is an aesthetic feeling without specific images. It shows a kind of hidden beauty and subtle life philosophy through careful brushwork and arrangement. Unlike Eastern painting, Western painting focuses more on showing nature objectively. It emphasizes the impact of perspective and light and shadow. It tries to show the forms of nature realistically. This difference is clearly seen in the different understandings and attitudes towards nature between China and the West. Chinese painting often uses bold brushwork and colors to express the painter's subjective emotions and transcendent images fully. Western painting, however, tends to focus on the objective description of natural things and strict scientific analysis. This different understanding of history and philosophy also makes Chinese and Western paintings have obvious differences in expressing artistic conception. The "artistic conception" in Chinese painting is not only a perfect description of natural things. More importantly, it combines the painter's inner world, deep philosophical thoughts and aesthetic ideals. With the spirit of "spreading truth through painting," Chinese painting perfectly combines philosophy, literature and art. It forms a unique artistic expression style. Western painting, on the other hand, is greatly influenced by science and

logic. Strict rational and logical analysis is fully shown in Western painting. This philosophical thought is fully reflected in painting. So Western painting focuses on exploring forms and analyzing beauty objectively. Chinese and Western paintings have different understandings of nature, literature, philosophy and other ideas. This leads to differences in how they show artistic conception. Chinese painting takes "conception" as the core. It expresses the deep reasons and emotions in the painting. Western painting pays more attention to showing nature and explaining aesthetic rules logically. These are two very different ways of expression. They show the big differences in aesthetic concepts between China and the West. They also show the big differences in culture, philosophy and other aspects.

3.2. Western painting

Western painting's view of nature, rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, emphasizes "imitating nature" and "the form of beauty". Enhanced by scientific advancements like perspective and anatomy, it achieves realistic 3D representation on 2D surfaces. This approach meticulously captures shape, color, and light, reflecting a fact-based, free-thinking aesthetic, exemplified in landscape and figure paintings.

Traditional Western painting emphasizes the realism and objective expression of art. It has the feature of realistic painting. It focuses on showing nature and tries to be lifelike. It makes viewers feel like they are in the scene. Through scientific perspective, anatomy and color theory, artists try to make paintings show a real 3D space effect on paper.

Artists often depict natural scenery with realistic detail, employing rich colors and transparent layers to replicate the true hues of objects and the refractions of light. This technique, aimed at mirroring objective reality, embodies the philosophical aesthetic of Western painting, emphasizing the authenticity of unity and objective existence.

Traditional Western painting also pays much more attention to rational analysis and scientific exploration than traditional Chinese painting. It deeply studies perspective and anatomy in painting. The perspective allows Western painting to copy 3D scenes more realistically on 2D pictures. Rich anatomical knowledge helps Western artists easily paint the shapes of human bodies and animals. They have a high level of skill in this area. Western painters are sensitive to changes in light and shadow. They use the small changes of light and shadow skillfully. They describe the various forms of all things in detail. This shows the 3D sense of objects. There are also big differences between Eastern and Western techniques regarding how to show nature's beauty and the picture's formal beauty. Western painting organizes the picture through mathematical proportions, such as the golden ratio and symmetrical balance. This achieves formal beauty and harmony. This closely relates to the Western philosophical idea emphasizing order, harmony and balance [8]. Landscape painting is a major type of painting. It mainly reflects Western painters' love and pursuit of the beautiful scenery in nature and the "god of nature". They use their brushes to paint the tall mountains, long rivers, growing grass and flying warblers in nature. They freeze these scenes on the canvas. Regarding emotional expression and artistic aesthetic experience in traditional Western painting, Western artists are good at putting their emotions into natural landscapes. They express their inner world through describing natural landscapes. This emotional connection makes Western painting not only a show of objective things. It is also a work of art that shows the artists' emotions and thoughts.

At the same time, the paintings of Western painters bring people a real experience. They make viewers feel like they are in the scene. Through the artists' excellent painting skills and control of details, natural landscapes are fully shown in front of people. People are deeply attracted to the world created by the painters and cannot get out of it.

4. Conclusion

The inner reason of Western philosophy is that it emphasizes "dividing" objects rather than "combining" them. This forms a unique philosophical view of nature in painting. Westerners are used to seeing the world as separate parts. They firmly believe in the dualistic analysis method. This way of thinking makes absolute and maximum differences. It makes Westerners insist that truth and mistake cannot be reconciled. It also makes them think that spirit and matter are opposite. Philosophical dualism influences art. It makes Western painting attach great importance to truth and science. Aristotle pointed out clearly that "the main forms of beauty are orderliness, proportion and clarity". Leonardo da Vinci was very good at anatomy. He knew human body proportions very well. This laid a solid foundation for his perfect paintings. Western painting emphasizes accurate object depiction and scientific mastery due to its focus on the moral dichotomy of right and wrong. Conversely, Chinese philosophy values the harmonious integration of opposites, influencing art towards freehand brushwork, symbolic expression, and the pursuit of "the unity of man and nature." This is exemplified in classical gardens and poetry, which blend scenery and emotion through techniques like "painting mountains and modeling waters," achieving a holistic unity.

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