

Integration of Chinese and Western Art in Late Ming Dynasty: Imitation and Innovation with Wu Bin as an Example

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Abstract: The late Ming Dynasty witnessed an art exchange between two distinct civilizations, the East and the West, which served as a microcosm of globalized art history in China. In the context of numerous Western religious paintings introduced to China by Jesuit missionaries during the late Ming Dynasty, whether Chinese artists who painted in ink at the time borrowed Western painting techniques in their paintings has become a subject of discussion among contemporary scholars. To further explain the integration triggered by this artistic exchange, the research analyses the attitudes of Ming society towards foreign painting. Furthermore, the study conducts the visual comparison methodology to identify the elements of Western painting that were incorporated into Chinese painting during this period, centering on the works of artist Wu Bin (1550-1643) and employing specific information as corroborative substantiation. The results of the study indicate that late Ming society did not exhibit overt animosity towards Western art and that Wu Bin's paintings contain discernible Western painting inspirations. Yet, these factors did not impede the prevalence of indigenous artistic and aesthetic inclinations in his oeuvre.

Keywords: late Ming Dynasty, artistic convergence, Ming Dynasty art, Wu Bin

1. Introduction

Since the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was sent to China as a missionary in 1582, a great deal of Western technological and cultural information propagated throughout Ming Dynasty China, including oil paintings, prints and other works of art. Many works from the late Ming period, including the masterpiece of Huizhou prints from the Wanli period (1573-1620) of the Ming Dynasty, *Cheng's Ink Garden*, and the Western religious painting *Bao Xiang Tu*, have survived to the present day owing to the prevalent appeal of consumer culture at the time.

During this time of intense artistic contact between China and the West, the question of whether or not traditional Chinese painters who painted in ink during the Ming Dynasty acquired aspects of Western art in their paintings has been an issue of contention in contemporary scholarly inquiry, with two main sources of controversy. On the one hand, it stems from the lack of directness of historical evidence. For instance, the debate over whether or not the late Ming portrait painter Zeng Jing (1564—1647), who gained much attention for being the pioneer of the painting method known as Mo Gu (the use of ink shades to express volume), which creates portraits with distinctive figures, was

influenced by Western painting methods is an important issue for scholars to research. Pan Tianshou has pointed out that in the context of the eastern broadening of Western painting at the end of the Ming Dynasty, certain painters, out of curiosity, learned from the Western painting method of expressing volume by light and dark, and formed the portrait school led by Zeng Jing [1]. The same views are shared by Zheng Wuchang, Chen Hengke and Japanese scholar Omura Nishiya [2-4]. On the other hand, the negative opinion is predominately held by Liu Daoguang, who believes that the evidence for the geographical intersection of the two men is insufficient, more specifically, the correspondence between Ricci's influence in Nanjing and the evidence showing Zeng used to live in Nanjing during the same period cannot be taken as irrefutable proof the two had an association [5]. On the other hand, stemming from what irrational Asian scholars consider as the Ming dynasty's hostility towards foreign affairs, as well as the extremely distinctive national thinking and national doctrinal identity embedded in Chinese aesthetic ideology, the subject matter related to commensurability and incommensurability in art history has consequently become a meeting place for the divergent views of Asian scholars [6,7].

This paper aims to explain the convergence of Chinese and Western painting during the late Ming Dynasty. To achieve this, the attitudes of individuals towards foreign paintings will be firstly examined from the perspective of both participants and viewers of Chinese art during the same period, aiming to analyze whether the Ming society harbored a mindset of aversion towards foreign artworks. Furthermore, this paper employs a visual research methodology to examine Chinese and European religious paintings from a specific period. The analysis focuses on the painter Wu Bin (1550-1643) and utilizes concrete and detailed data as supporting evidence. The investigation is approached from multiple perspectives, including the characteristics of Chinese painting during the artist's era, Western painting of the same period, and the potential use of Western painting techniques in Wu Bin's work. Finally, this research attempts to explore the manifestation and characteristics of the convergence of Chinese and Western art during the late Ming Dynasty.

2. The Perception of Western Painting in Late Ming Society

In fact, prior to Matteo Ricci's arrival in the Chinese interior, numerous unsuccessful attempts by Jesuit missionaries were denied entry, owing to the Chinese populace's apprehension towards Portuguese naval vessels during that era. Additionally, only individuals who admired Chinese culture were permitted to reside in China historically, and missionary work certainly did not serve as a means for them to gain access to the interior [8]. Matteo Ricci encountered political opposition from both the government and the local population during their missionary work in the interior, owing to their status as Western missionaries. This opposition prompted them to exercise extra caution in their missionary efforts.

Ricci possessed a profound understanding of the persuasive power of the literati community during the Ming Dynasty in China. To engage with this community, he conducted extensive dialogues by immersing himself in Chinese culture and presenting European books and paintings while providing detailed explanations-the collection of paintings predominantly comprised copper plates, engravings, frescoes, and paintings featuring Christian motifs. Ricci presented the Madonna on multiple occasions in diverse locations. The exquisite tonality, contour, and notably the verisimilitude of the depictions, which are absent in traditional Chinese portraits, elicited admiration from the Chinese spectators [9]. Gu Yuanqi, a literati of the Ming dynasty, provided an objective description of his emotional response upon viewing *the Madonna*. He noted that "the painting was crafted from a copper plate and adorned with a multitude of colors, giving it a lifelike appearance that seemed to transcend the two-dimensional confines of its frame, Madonna's facial features were rendered in a manner that created a sense of depth and dimensionality, which looked different from a living person [10]." Under the influence of Western missionaries, a group of Chinese painters, such as You Wenhui and Shi Hongji,

also emerged during the Ming Dynasty, who studied and engaged in oil painting. Furthermore, Xu Guangqi, who engaged in a collaborative effort with Matteo Ricci in the translation of literary works, expounded upon the significance of geometry in the realm of painting, particularly in the context of addressing the three-dimensional aspect of figures and the interplay between light and shadow in architecture [11].

The aforementioned artistic creations were disseminated among the general populace and gained access to the imperial palace. As a result, the missionaries bestowed upon court officials, and even the Ming emperor himself, a number of exceptional depictions of the Virgin and the Savior. In addition, the court painters were afforded the chance to gain an appreciation for European paintings through this development. A copy of the missionary's *All the Kingdoms of the World*, which was painted by the court painters, is currently held at the Nanjing Museum in China. This piece features depictions of various sea creatures, such as whales, sharks, and sea lions, and emphasizes the volumetric qualities of Western painting.

In the preceding text, it is noted that Ricci faced numerous rejections before gaining access to China's interior. Subsequently, the Christian missionary efforts in China, spanning almost two centuries, were characterized by internal and external disruptions. It has been noted that a substantial portion of the opposition to these initiatives stemmed from worries about the state's alleged colonial nature and the anticipated resistance to introducing a new religion in the nation. In the late Ming Wanli period, there was no apparent animosity towards artworks from either the court or the local society. The prevalence of Japanese and Koryo artifacts in late Ming society serves as evidence of the society's openness to foreign objects. Additionally, the aforementioned sources demonstrate that the late Ming Chinese deeply admired Western paintings that embodied a scientific ethos. Furthermore, the decision of the Ming court to replicate the cartographic works of Matteo Ricci instead of obliterating them is indicative of the Ming society's inclination towards Western artistry.

3. Analysis of the Works from Professional Painters with Wu Bin as an Example

It is worth noting that the Western paintings received by Matteo Ricci, as previously mentioned, were introduced to the court during the Wanli era. Therefore, the focus of this case study pertains to Wu Bin, who held a position as a painter at the court painting institute located in Nanjing. Wu Bin's artistic oeuvre is classified under the "late Ming variant painting style" owing to his unique and unorthodox figure-shaping technique, distinguishing his late Ming figure painting from that of his contemporaries. According to James Cahills, the variation observed in Wu Bin's painting style was not a result of spontaneous creativity, but rather a consequence of the visual influence of Western painting from the late Ming period in the eastern region. Cahills notes that Wu Bin's origins can be traced back to Fujian Province, a bustling trading hub during the period in question, where messengers were frequently dispatched. Additionally, it is mentioned that the Wanli emperor had requested a larger version of a print provided by a foreign diplomatic envoy, and Wu Bin probably played a role in its production [12]. Nonetheless, this previously stated conjecture lacks conclusive evidence. Therefore, in order to substantiate the claim that the works of missionaries influenced Wu Bin's artistic style, this study will undertake a comparative analysis of Wu Bin's depictions of Buddhist figures and landscape subjects with corresponding Christian artworks from the perspective of iconography and technique.

3.1. The Artistic Depictions of Buddhist Figures

The twenty-five great ones of the Śūraṅgama Sūtra is considered to have originated during the early stage of Wu Bin's oeuvre, during which the figures had already acquired fundamental attributes such as peculiar countenances and a sense of antiquity. One of the literary works, namely *Bhaiṣajyārā-*

ja and Bhaiṣajyasamudgata (Figure 1), portrays a pair of siblings who possessed significant expertise in the field of medicine who resided in ancient India, and pharmacology, as mentioned in the *Shurangama Sutra*. The two individuals in the painting are highly interactive. The figure on the right is observed to be looking back, with slightly parted lips and raised eyebrows, suggesting that they are conveying a message. Meanwhile, the figure on the left is seen looking towards the former, with a broad smile on their face, indicating their apparent approval of the message being conveyed. This secular representation of the Buddhist figures deviates from the conventional portrayal of their grandeur and transcendence, instead exuding a charming and clever demeanor. The artist's brushwork is characterized by meticulous attention to detail, while the lines are both tense and elastic, exhibiting a fine yet clumsy quality. Of particular note is the artist's skillful handling of the clothing, which displays a smooth and rhythmic silk overlap. The careful combination of lines within the painting achieves this sense of rhythm. Take the figure on the left as an example, the artist has employed a technique wherein the headscarf and clothing pattern has been segmented into distinct blocks. Within these blocks, the artist has utilized nearly parallel arcs, varying in length, direction, and orientation, to create a sense of contrast and interpolation. For instance, the headscarf is depicted using two groups of parallel arcs, each oriented in a different direction. The long sleeves of the garment are represented using long arcs, conveying a sense of calm drooping, while the short arcs are used to depict the garment's bends. The space between the two sleeves of the garment is also rendered using similar techniques. The garment between the two sleeves comprises numerous small, intermixed vertical and horizontal blocks that exhibit a high degree of density and contrast with the front sleeves to produce a sparse appearance. It is noteworthy that the artist opted not to connect the line of the right knee of the figure situated on the left-hand side of the picture to the remainder of the composition, likely as a means of conveying a sense of three-dimensionality.

The amalgamation of lines in this artwork is characterized by a rhythmic pattern and a moderate degree of volume, evocative of the style of Western printmaking and serves a decorative function. Li Chao conducted an analysis on the distribution of Jerónimo Nadal's book *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, which was published towards the end of the 16th century. It was observed that this atlas had already made its way to Nanjing by 1605 [13]. *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* employs a technique whereby the artist partitions the two-dimensional plane into distinct segments, and utilizes parallel lines of varying directions and curvatures to give form and volume to the depicted figures, similar to how Wu Bin's lines combine in his painting. Upon examining Wu Bin's additional works, namely *The Guanyin with Fish Basket* (Figure 2) and *Buddha Axis* (Figure 3), it is apparent that the artist utilizes smooth and thick brushstrokes to delineate the direction of the clothing pattern. Additionally, the artist utilizes thin strokes to connect the blocks between the thick lines, a form of printmaking that is particularly evident in both works.

In addition to the treatment of lines, the figures in the three paintings mentioned above are all slightly sideways, breaking the symmetrical form of purely frontal faces, which reduces the solemnity of Buddhist figures from the picture effect and conveys the compassionate spirit of Buddhist figures instead. Simultaneously, during the development of the Western Madonna, it is typical for the countenance of the Madonna to be inclined downwards in a slightly oblique fashion. Simultaneously, during the creation of the painting depicting Madonna, the countenance of Madonna is frequently depicted with a downward gaze and a tilted somewhat orientation. Take the oil painting titled *Madonna and Child with Saints* by the Italian painter Bellini (1459-1516) as an example. Despite the central position of Madonna, her head is turned towards the lower left of the picture, creating a solemn yet intimate expression. The artwork effectively combines elements of secularity, divinity, and humanity.



Figure 1: Bhaiṣajyarāja and Bhaiṣajyasamudgata (Wu Bin, ink and colors on paper, 62.3x35.3cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei, artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the National Palace Museum, Taipei).



Figure 2: The Guanyin with Fish Basket (Wu Bin, ink and colors on silk, 187.8x85cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei, artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the National Palace Museum, Taipei).



Figure 3: Buddha Axis (Wu Bin, ink and colors on silk, 188.5x85.2cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei, artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the National Palace Museum, Taipei).

3.2. Landscapes and Still Life Paintings

The landscape painting style of Wu Bin developed at a later stage compared to his figure painting style. The painting titled *Picturesque Scenery of Mountains in Shaoxing* is considered the earliest instance of this peculiar style, which was created for Mi Wanzhong and is currently housed in the Shanghai Museum. Although this painting inherits the giant scroll style of landscape painting from the Northern Song Dynasty, it gives a sense of unpredictability and mystery. In the long and narrow painting, the mountains are in many different shapes, with houses, buildings, and mountain stacks appearing. The artist purposefully amplifies the disparity in elevation between the mountain summit and base, imbuing the mountain peaks with a sense of soaring into the sky. The composition is visually impactful through the layering of comparable mountain forms to construct a cohesive environment. The abrupt presence of white space and clouds contrasts with the rest of the image, generating a disorienting illusion that may bewilder the observer. Subsequently, Wu Bin has depicted a variety of landscape paintings that feature the aforementioned imaginative setting.

Among them, the *Ten Views of Lingbi Stone*, a scroll also created for Mi Wanzhong, was sold for a record-breaking amount of 512.9 million yuan at the 2020 Poly auction in Beijing, thereby becoming the most expensive piece of ancient Chinese painting. Within the work, Wu Bin utilizes a stone of interest procured by Mi Wanzhong as a point of reference and proceeds to depict it from ten distinct vantage points. This approach diverges from the conventional Chinese painting technique of utilizing a dispersed perspective and instead incorporates a distinctive mode of expression that

integrates the perspective method of Western painting. Upon initial observation, the image appears to resemble a mass of flame, while upon closer inspection, it takes on the characteristics of a towering and precipitous mountain range. Notably, there are discernible white striations that run between the peaks, evocative of the flow of water. In terms of brushwork, this painting also differs from the traditional painting technique of outlining the rocks with lines, instead leaving the edges of the rocks and the highest points white, similar to the highlights in Western painting, thereby mitigating the rigidity of the edge lines. When depicting the shaded and depressed areas of the stone, the artist applies a darker ink rendering to express the texture and volume of the stone. At this time, the white lines flow like flowing water between the mountains and heaven and earth, making the picture thick yet full of spirit. In this work, the presence of “line” is weakened, and the sense of “shape” is enhanced, adopting the methods of Western painting techniques while being full of the aesthetic interest of traditional Chinese painting.

3.3. Visual Comparison Results Analysis

The above comparison of specific images of Wu Bin’s figure painting and landscape painting with reference to Western methods shows that Wu Bin’s paintings, both figure and landscape paintings, can find elements similar to Western paintings of the same period. Wu Bin’s technique of conveying volume through the minimalism of clothing patterns in the creation of Buddhist figures closely resembles that of contemporaneous Western copper engravings. This is particularly evident in works such as *the Guanyin with Fish Basket* and *Buddha Axis*, where the artist employs distinct directions and orderly groupings of lines to depict various segments. The lines are consistently uniform in width and slightly rigid, suggesting a deliberate emulation of the line-carving texture characteristic of Western copper engravings. In creating landscapes and still-life subjects, the painter intentionally enhanced the contrast between the size of images near and far, in line with the principle of Western perspective, and the expression of objects’ light and dark sides is also quite conscious of Western three-dimensional expression. Accordingly, during the Wanli period, Wu Bin, who served as a painter at the inner court in Jinling, must have had sufficient conditions to appreciate these paintings brought by the Western priest and to incorporate these elements of Western painting into his works, either consciously or unconsciously.

Furthermore, while Wu Bin’s artistic creations incorporated methodologies and motifs from Western painting, resulting in the emergence of a novel style of works that amalgamated Eastern and Western influences, they did not effectuate substantial alterations to the underpinnings of conventional Chinese painting, but rather, attenuated certain aspects of it. The reason for this phenomenon is that Chinese painting had already established a sophisticated aesthetic framework prior to the introduction of Western painting during the Ming Dynasty. Moreover, the traditional Chinese values of centrism and self-supremacy persisted significantly, owing to the centralism that developed in China during a prolonged period of geographical isolation. As a result, the exchange process between Chinese and Western painting was marked by contradictions and struggles, conservative forces opposed the integration process, resulting in a limited absorption of Western elements by many painters who engaged in exchange activities. Consequently, the integration of painting styles remained elusive. In particular, Wu Bin is a professional painter; unlike amateur painters who are relatively free to create, his creations are still oriented to mainstream traditional aesthetics. Therefore, his exaggerated and deformed creations with obvious personal style are only a fusion of innovation following conventional Chinese painting and topping with Western painting techniques, which basically ensures the absolute dominance of local art and interest. The preservation of the predominant status of regional art and its associated interests remains assured.

4. Conclusion

In summary, this paper provides an objective account of the background of the eastern arrival of Western painting in the Ming Dynasty and the current state of its study, pointing out two primary sources of controversy in contemporary scholarly research: the inadequacy of empirical evidence in historical documents and the hatred of Eastern scholars toward foreign affairs. In order to discuss whether or not hatred applies to the context of Western art coming to China in the late Ming Dynasty, this paper argues for the friendly acceptance of Western painting in the late Ming society from the local society and the court, respectively. Second, the paper takes Wu Bin as a case study and analyses the elements of Western painting in his paintings, confirming that late Ming painters did refer to Western methods and concluding that, although the artistic fusion under the gradual graduation of Western painting, the artists' absorption of Western painting techniques was minimal at the initial stage of the late Ming Dynasty, and they still emphasized the art of their own culture as the main body and Western art as the support in their paintings.

The examination of this manuscript holds a vital place in comprehending the interplay between Chinese and Western art within the framework of Western painting during the latter part of the Ming Dynasty. Nevertheless, it is subject to certain constraints. The present study solely utilizes Wu Bin as a case study and omits various other painters from the late Ming period, thereby limiting the scope of the analysis. Additionally, the selected examples may not comprehensively represent the subject matter. The scope of this paper's case samples is restricted to paintings and does not encompass artifacts or other related items. The subsequent academic inquiry may delve into the degree of involvement of European art from various genres in China and conduct a more comprehensive analysis of the influence of Western painting on the art of late Ming China.

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