

The Conception of “True Art” and “Intention”

— An Analysis of the Meaning of “True” in “Records of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages”

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Abstract: “Records of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages” is a significant theoretical work in classical Chinese aesthetics, spawning numerous enduring propositions for later generations. The concept of “true art” proposed by Zhang Yanyuan runs through the development of Chinese artistic spirit. Many scholars have interpreted it from the perspective of creative practice. This paper attempts to discuss the meaning of “true” from the standpoint of a dedicated and focused creative state, the Zhuangzi’s thoughts on the unity of intention and the Dao, and the relationship with the style of brushwork characterized by density and sparseness. The “true” in “true art” connects the artistic creative activity in the realm of the real world, the freedom in the abstract spiritual dimension, and the “Dao” that gives birth to all things as the essence of the universe. Its significance lies in revealing the ever-flowing sense of life in painting from the confines of limited creative practice. This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the historical evolution of the meaning of “true art” and the essence of Chinese artistic spirit.

Keywords: “Records of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages”, true art, intention, vitality

1. Introduction

“Records of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages,” authored by Zhang Yanyuan during the late Tang Dynasty, is regarded as the first systematic history of painting in China. It encompasses the development of Chinese painting history, painting theory, appreciation and collection, and numerous biographies of famous painters. Zhang Yanyuan particularly emphasizes the combination of specific artists’ works and creative experiences to expound his theories. This provides empirical material for future generations to study the painting styles of the Tang Dynasty and earlier periods and significantly influences the creative practices of painters after the Tang era. Among the concepts introduced in this work, “true art” is particularly iconic. In Volume Two of “Records of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages,” Zhang Yanyuan meticulously analyzes the brushwork styles of four masters: Gu Kaizhi, Lu Tanwei, Zhang Sengyao, and Wu Daozi, summarizing the realm of “intention guiding the brush, and the expression of intention in the painting.” Among them, Zhang Yanyuan holds Wu Daozi of his era in extremely high esteem, stating, “In our nation’s time, Wu

Daoxuan stands alone, with no predecessors like Gu and Lu, and no successors.” [1] Within his commentary on the “painting sage” Wu Daozi, Zhang Yanyuan writes:

“The use of boundary pens and straight rulers results in dead paintings; guarding the spirit, concentrating on the one, produces true art.” [2]

“True art” and “dead art” form opposing concepts: “Dead art covers the entire wall, akin to a stained wall, while true art, with a single stroke, reveals its vitality.” [2] Even if “dead art” covers an entire wall, it is merely like a wall covered in plaster, whereas “true art” can reveal “vitality” with just one stroke. “Vitality” is precisely what distinguishes “true” from “dead.” Zhang Yanyuan commends Wu Daozi’s artistic state, stating, “Guarding the spirit, concentrating on the one, merging the work of creation, Wu Sheng’s brushwork becomes what’s known as ‘intention guiding the brush, and the expression of intention in the painting.’” The state of guarding the spirit and focusing on the one is the foundation for creating “true art.” The essence of “true art” also lies in the vitality of the natural world’s creation, whereby Wu Daozi uses limited ink and brushes to manifest infinite “intention.” Numerous theoretical studies have thoroughly explored “Records of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages” from the perspective of Zhang Yanyuan’s artistic creation theories or psychological principles of creation. The paper “Zhang Yanyuan’s Theory of ‘True Art’” attributes “revealing its vitality with just one stroke” to the independent beauty of lines. Some scholars tend to analyze the significance of “intention not residing in the painting, hence obtained from the painting” from the standpoint of “creation psychology.” However, in reality, Zhang Yanyuan’s painting theory is inseparable from the philosophical thoughts of his time, and behind his practice, there is also abstract spiritual significance as support.

Therefore, this paper attempts to explore the relationship between “true art” and “intention” and discuss the meaning of “true” from the perspective of Zhuangzi’s artistic thoughts and painting creation, striving to combine painting practice, philosophical background, and the text of painting theory to find new entry points for interpreting “Records of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages.” This paper will be divided into five parts. The second part will examine how artists consolidate “vitality” from the state of guarding the spirit and focusing on the one, namely “intention.” The third part will combine Zhang Yanyuan’s application of Zhuangzi’s thoughts to elucidate the connection between intention and the Dao, conveyed through the unity of body and mind. The fourth part will return to the style of lines characterized by density and sparseness and establish a bridge between practicality and the abstract “Dao.” Finally, the last part will summarize and explore the meaning of “true art” and future research directions.

2. The Emergence of “Intention” in the State of Guarding the Spirit and Focusing on the One in “True Art”

Zhang Yanyuan continues to comment on Wu Daozi’s state of guarding the spirit and focusing on the one in his artistic creation: “In the act of moving thoughts and wielding the brush, the intention does not reside in the painting; therefore, it is obtained from the painting. It does not linger in the hand, congeal in the mind, and unknowingly becomes.” [2] Zhang Yanyuan believes that true meaning in painting can only be achieved when the artist’s thoughts extend beyond the confines of the painting and the immediate activity of the hand. In other words, when one excessively concentrates on the actual act of painting, the painting loses the “intention” that makes it vibrant and becomes what is referred to in the text as “dead art.” “Dead art” is defined as paintings created using boundary pens and straight rulers. In essence, Zhang Yanyuan argues that “dead art” lacks “vitality” because the artist confines themselves to the techniques and tools, focusing solely on the external realism of the painting while neglecting the essential artistic intention that an artist should possess before creating. Therefore, “true art” transcends the constraints of form and embodies an intangible artistic intention within specific images.

“Unknowingly becomes” provides a deeper explanation of “true art.” The artist doesn’t need to know exactly what the image they are painting looks like, but in reality, they already know what it should be. In other words, in the state of guarding the spirit and focusing on the one, the artist has already comprehended the artistic intention that guides every stroke throughout the entire painting. There is no need to consciously pursue a realistic portrayal of the external image. Zhang Yanyuan, when praising Wu Daozi’s lifelike paintings, writes: “While others are meticulous in their imitation, I, on the other hand, transcend the ordinary.” [1] When everyone else is carefully striving for an exact replica of the objective object, Wu Daozi breaks free from convention, discarding the superficial appearance and instead pursuing the inner state of the subject. This explains why Wu Daozi could depict “curved hooks and straight blades, sturdy pillars, and structural beams” without the use of specialized tools, why the facial hair in his paintings could be several feet long and appear to flutter in the wind as if growing from the flesh, and why his strokes from the arms to the feet could depict interconnected skin and veins with such vitality. It is because Wu Daozi does not confine himself to copying the surface details of the subject. He attains a transcendent state free from the limitations of external appearances, forming the spiritual essence of the subject in his mind, which allows him to paint the spirit that surpasses mere technique and visual representation, capturing the vitality of natural creation.

In the later section titled “On Painting Styles, Techniques, and Tracing,” Zhang Yanyuan elaborates on painting tools and techniques, explicitly rejecting skills that deviate from the essence of painting: “Ancient painters said, ‘Not yet reaching the height of subtlety.’ If they could moisten a piece of thin silk, adorn it with light powder, and blow on it from their mouths, they called it ‘blowing clouds.’ This is following the natural order. Although it is said to be ingenious, no brush traces are seen, so it cannot be called a painting. For landscape painters who splash ink, they also cannot be called painters; they cannot bear imitation.” [3] This passage mentions two painting techniques, “blowing” and “splashing ink,” both of which Zhang Yanyuan rejects. On one hand, these techniques lack the lines and brushwork that Zhang Yanyuan deems essential in Chinese painting and instead focus on meaningless showmanship, so they cannot be considered within the realm of painting. On the other hand, compared to the sense of lines, “blowing” and “splashing ink” primarily simulate the external appearance of the objective object in a clever way. In other words, the reason why an artist can create such lifelike clouds and landscapes using these techniques is due to the unique tools they employ, but the natural vitality is obscured by flashy techniques, relegating the artistic intention to a secondary role. If the artist has already subjectively grasped the spiritual essence of the subject they are painting, allowing the overarching artistic intention to guide their brushwork, then the intention between each stroke can naturally manifest itself without relying on any external tools. Conversely, if the artist is solely focused on copying surface details, the work will inevitably become a “dead art,” a plaster-covered wall constructed solely from materials and techniques, not a painting.

“Guarding the spirit, concentrating on the one” and “unknowingly becomes” correspond to two stages of the creative process. Only in the state of guarding the spirit and focusing on the one can the artist generate their subjective artistic intention, as Liu Xie expressed in the “silent contemplation and concentrated deliberation, thoughts extending over a thousand years,” or as Su Shi referred to as “having a well-defined plan” before painting bamboo. With such “intention” in place, the artist can break free from the limitations of technique and external form, painting images that may not depict the full appearance but convey the inner essence, thus directly accessing the intrinsic charm of painting, enabling “true art” to reveal its “vitality” even in a single stroke.

3. Viewing the “Vitality” in “True Art” Through the Connection of “Intention” and the Dao

The philosophy of Zhuangzi plays a predominant role in “Records of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages.” Phrases used by Zhang Yanyuan, such as “forgetting oneself and leaving form behind,” “the body is like withered wood, the mind like dead ashes,” “profound transformation without words, the work of the spirit alone,” are borrowed from the book “Zhuangzi” and are in harmony with Zhuangzi’s concept of the unity of Heaven and man. Xu Fuguan stated, “In Zhang Yanyuan’s ‘Records of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages,’ while his evaluation of figure painting is indeed based on the lively concept of ‘qi and rhythm’ in the Six Laws, he often directly aligns with the fundamental spirit of painting. Inadvertently, it connects with the artistic spirit opened up by Zhuangzi.” [4]

The text repeatedly uses anecdotes from “Zhuangzi” to comment on Wu Daozi’s artistic state, such as “Pao Ding cutting up an ox” from “Zhuangzi: Care of Life,” “the Yan carpenter using an adze” from “Zhuangzi: Xu You Gui,” and the story of “Dongshi imitating a frown” from “Zhuangzi: Heaven’s Course.” Zhang Yanyuan uses Pao Ding and the Yan carpenter’s mastery of their tools and the Dao to metaphorically describe Wu Daozi’s artistic realm. Pao Ding dissects oxen by the thousands, yet his knife remains as sharp as if it were just freshly sharpened. This illustrates that his extreme proficiency with technique is, in essence, a profound understanding of the rules governing ox dissection. This understanding of the rules stems from Pao Ding’s comprehension of the “Dao” of ox dissection, eliminating the dichotomy between the self and the object, achieving a fusion of self, knife, technique, and the object into a state of unity with the “Dao,” and subsequently entering a state of forgetfulness of self, unconstrained by the details of external objects, and capable of “doing as the heart desires without overstepping boundaries.” Similarly, Wu Daozi can depict “curved arcs, straight blades, sturdy pillars, and hooked beams” without using boundary pens and straight rulers because he has reached the artistic level where intention and the Dao are in harmony.

“Guarding the spirit and focusing on the one” draws from the text of “Zhuangzi: Carving Up an Ox,” where it says, “The way of pure simplicity is to guard the spirit, guard it without losing it, and become one with the spirit. When one is one with the spirit, the essence is in harmony with the order of Heaven.” In this context, “guarding the spirit” aligns with Daoist thoughts of being detached and preserving the mind, which resonates with the text’s statement, “intention becomes chaotic, external things enslave it.” [2] In the act of creating, artists free themselves from external distractions, remove stray thoughts, concentrate with undivided attention, and avoid mental confusion and obscurity, thus enabling them to achieve “focusing on the one.” In this context, “focusing” implies a high degree of concentration, concentrated on the awareness of beauty and the visual image. “The one” in Daoist philosophy can be understood as the abstract essence of the “Dao,” which, in the context of specific painting, refers to the “essence” and “vitality” that the artist must fully capture in the process of creation. These are the continuous “intention” that manifests between brushstrokes, which unifies the entire composition, forming a continuous “intention.” [5] This means that subject and object are unified, the artist’s intention and the object’s “essence,” “spirit,” and “rhythm” are in harmony, the image’s “form” and “spirit” are integrated, and the artist enters a state of complete naturalness, freedom, and unity with the “Dao.” Zhang Yanyuan also adds that “essence, spirit, and appearance all originate from the original intention.” [6] The so-called “rhythm,” “spirit,” “vitality,” “essence,” “spirit,” and so on all manifest through “intention” or “original intention.” Therefore, “intention” is both the spiritual aspect that painting ultimately captures and expresses and the starting point for representing the subject.

4. Examining the Construction of “Intention” Through Linearity in “True Art”

In the essay on the “Six Laws of Painting,” Zhang Yanyuan posits the view that “essence and spirit originate from intention and return to brushwork.” [6] “Intention” serves as the starting point of creation, and “brushwork” acts as the bridge connecting abstract artistic intent with the visual representation on the canvas. Zhang Yanyuan introduces the important theory of “calligraphy and painting sharing the same essence,” indicating that the artistic intent in painting comes from the brushwork of calligraphy. He notes, “Hence, many skilled painters are also adept at calligraphy.” [6] Linearity plays a pivotal role in Chinese painting, significantly shaping the artistic style and serving as the foundation for expressing artistic intent. When asked about the quality of brushwork, Zhang Yanyuan replied, “If one understands that painting has two aspects, density and sparsity, then one can evaluate paintings.” [7]

Whether it’s Gu Kaizhi’s “sublime and ingenious” works, Lu Tanwei’s “refined and lifelike” style, Zhang Sengyao’s “short and yet vivid” approach, or Wu Daozi’s “divinely inspired” creations, their paintings are primarily distinguished by their unique aesthetic styles resulting from different brushwork techniques. Zhang Yanyuan classifies the artistic styles of Gu Kaizhi and Lu Tanwei as “dense style.” He describes them as follows:

“Someone asked me about the brushwork of Gu, Lu, Zhang, and Wu. I replied: Gu Kaizhi’s strokes are vigorous and continuous, they circulate endlessly, their rhythm is free and easy, their wind and speed are like lightning, the intention precedes the brush, and the painting fully embodies the intention. In the past, Zhang Zhi followed the methods of Cui Yuan and Du Du in cursive script... Later, Lu Tanwei also created a single-stroke painting, which continued uninterruptedly. Therefore, we know that calligraphy and painting share the same brushwork. Lu Tanwei’s brushwork is sharp, smooth, captivating, novel, and extraordinary; he had a renowned reputation in the Song Dynasty, and there was no comparison during his time.” [8]

The “dense style” brushwork is characterized by strokes that are “sharp, continuous, free-flowing,” such as Gu Kaizhi’s continuous and densely intertwined lines in “The Admonitions Scroll of the Court Instructress,” where the heavenly chariot gracefully ascends amidst swirling auspicious clouds. In contrast, Lu Tanwei employs slow, deliberate brushwork, creating powerful, precise strokes that maintain the continuity of cursive script into the realm of painting. Zhang Yanyuan also praises Wu Daozi’s “sparse style,” characterizing it as “brushwork that does not fully enclose and yet fully embodies the intention.”

The “sparse style” brushwork is marked by discontinuous, concise lines. Zhang Sengyao and Wu Daozi are considered representatives of this style. Zhang Sengyao was a reformer who transformed the language and artistic structure of figure painting. Building upon the styles of his predecessors, Zhang Sengyao developed a unique aesthetic style called the “sparse style.” Wu Daozi further matured this “sparse style.” Regarding the characteristics of Zhang Sengyao and Wu Daozi’s brushwork, Zhang Yanyuan provides more detailed descriptions in “Records of Famous Paintings Throughout the Ages”:

“Zhang Sengyao dots, pulls, chops, and brushes, following the ‘Brush Array Chart’ of Wei Fu-ren. Each dot and stroke is distinct and clever, the hooks and blades are sharp and numerous.” [8]

“Zhang was known as the ‘crazy calligrapher,’ and Wu was called the ‘saint of painting.’ They were divinely inspired and endlessly creative. While others focus on the intricacies, I concentrate on the sparse strokes, sometimes leaving gaps. Even with sparse brushwork, one can sense the missing parts. Although the brushwork is not fully enclosed, the intention is complete.” [1]

“The charm of Zhang and Wu lies not in their brushstrokes but in their artistic talent. Their works respond to their intention with just one or two strokes, while others may have detailed depictions.

This style is described as ‘not fully enclosed but fully embodies the intention.’” [7]

The “sparse style” brushwork is characterized by strokes that are intermittent and succinct. Zhang Sengyao incorporated elements from calligraphy, using the brush to create diverse, dynamic, and forceful lines that emphasize the liveliness and energy of his subjects. Wu Daozi inherited Zhang Sengyao’s sparse style, using quicker brushwork that maintained an energetic, powerful quality. With just one or two strokes, he could convey the essence of the subject. Zhang Yanyuan described Wu Daozi’s work as having “curled hair and flowing beards, several feet long, appearing as if they were growing naturally from the flesh, vigorous and abundant.” [1] This style was further elaborated by Zhu Jingxuan, who depicted Wu Daozi’s “standing brush, sweeping with power” technique.

Although Zhang Yanyuan categorized brushwork into two styles, dense and sparse, he clearly favored the clear and direct lines of Wu Daozi and Zhang Sengyao, considering their brilliance to lie in “brushwork that is not fully enclosed but fully embodies the intention.” Much like in calligraphy, as long as the intention is present, leaving gaps and omissions with the brush allows the artist to guide viewers’ imaginations to comprehend the artistic intent. Excessive attention to detail in brushwork can conceal the artistic intent, while the breaks and omissions in brushstrokes highlight the artist’s aim for infinite abstraction in their “intent.” Thus, limited and “incomplete” “brushwork” can reveal boundless and “complete” “intent.” [9] It’s evident that the sparse brushwork of Wu Daozi and Zhang Sengyao is ingenious in its ability to vividly and directly express the hidden “intent” amidst the dense style.

As “intent” or “Dao” is inseparable from the essence of all things in the universe, the “intent” or “essence” that breathes life into the images on the canvas forms an integral whole. Emphasizing the “fullness of the essence” and “fullness of the spirit” implies that this abstract and boundless “intent” must be comprehended as a whole, permeating the entire process of painting, resulting in a seamless expression of artistic intent. Just like the saying from the late Tang Dynasty by Sikong Tu in “Twenty-Four Poetic Forms,” “Not a word written, yet capturing the essence of elegance.” “Intent” does not dissipate due to sparse brushwork; instead, it becomes more apparent through the simplicity of the brushwork. Conversely, an excessive, intricate, or dense array of lines hinders the expression of “intent.”

This concept aligns with the earlier idea of “unaware yet aware.” If breaking free from the constraints of external forms and focusing on entering a state where intent and Dao converge characterizes the artist’s preparatory work before painting, then here, “brushwork that is not fully enclosed but fully embodies the intention” signifies the artist’s requirement to discard unnecessary external details during the creative process. They strive to access the abstract “essence,” “spirit,” or “qi” above the form. It also implies avoiding excessive deliberate embellishment and aiming for the realm of “nature” and “creation,” constructing a space for viewers to employ their imaginations in perceiving the artistic intent, especially through gaps and omissions. This “brushwork that is not fully enclosed but fully embodies the intention,” esteeming abstraction, simplicity, and caution against excessive detail, became particularly pronounced in later literati and landscape painting.

For “true art,” the “intent” before the brush touches the canvas and the brushwork that carries the “intent” are inseparable. In the practical realm of painting, the metaphysical “intent” formed by the amalgamation of “essence,” “spirit,” “vitality,” and “qi” manifests as abstract sensations evoked by the lines and images on the canvas. Simply achieving “guarding the spirit” and “focusing on the one” provides the prerequisite conditions for “preserving the intent with the brush and conveying the full intent in the painting.” However, the “incomplete” brushwork is what realizes the “true” form. This is precisely why Zhang Yanyuan attributes the essence and spirit of brushwork to “intent,” considering “intent” as the most fundamental aspect, while acknowledging the vital role of “brushwork” in achieving artistic expression.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Wu Daozi's "intent" first arises from the spiritual state of guarding and focusing on the intent before the act of creation. It is then embodied in the lines of sparse brushwork, emerging seemingly from blank and omitted areas. This leads to the philosophy of Zhuangzi, specifically a state of natural freedom. The "truth" of "true art" connects the artistic creative activity on the level of the real world with the freedom on the abstract spiritual level and the "Dao" that generates all things as the essence of the universe. The significance of this "truth" lies in liberating painting from a mere mechanical tool or pure work of art and revealing the ever-present sense of life within the limitations of ink and brushstrokes. In this context, a lifeless painting becomes a "true painting" in Zhang Yanyuan's perspective. In subsequent discussions on art theory by later generations, the requirements of "essence," "spirit," and "vitality" posed by "true art" have consistently been considered as the essence of Chinese art. Conversely, the philosophical concept of "Dao" in Zhuangzi's thought is not only a concept within the philosophical domain but also the fundamental guiding force behind the continuous development of the Chinese artistic spirit, permeating artistic creation from top to bottom. However, as history unfolds, dynasties change, different cultural influences collide, and new philosophical trends emerge, people's views on art and their standards of evaluation evolve. Simultaneously, the spirit conveyed by "true art" takes on different forms. Therefore, by considering factors such as social, historical, and political backgrounds and comparing art theories from different periods, we can discuss the historical evolution of the meaning of "true art." This exploration can provide a deeper understanding of the Chinese artistic spirit and is an area of study that urgently requires further exploration.

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