

Immensity in Trivialness, Integrity in Brokenness--To View The Bapo Painting from The Dimension of Time and Space

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Abstract: The Bapo Painting is a traditional form of art in China. Painters form the pictures by depicting the fragments of cultural relics. In recent years, with the increasing academic interest in "debris" and "ruins", Bapo Painting has also attracted more and more attention from Chinese and foreign scholars. However, as "intentionally-created" fragments, the richness in time and space embodied by Bapo Paintings has rarely been explored. Therefore, this paper will research the temporal and spatial value of the Bapo Painting. On the dimension of time, the Bapo Painting aggregates the past, present, and future. First, the life of the Bapo Painting begins before creation because its subjects are all antiques. Second, the selection and description techniques of fragments in the paintings disclose the social background at the time of creation. Lastly, the fragments on the paintings can trigger people's thoughts about the future destiny of things and their own lives. On the dimension of space, the fragments in Bapo Paintings constitute integrity, showing the dialectical relationship between incompleteness and completeness. From the creator's perspective, the spatial concept reflects a cultural blend of East and West. From the viewer's perspective, the fragments in Bapo Paintings can not only arouse reflection on the overall composition and connotation, but also initiate attempts to reconstruct the noumenon of fragments. Through the integrated perspective of time and space, Bapo Paintings embody the harmony between man and nature as well as the "aesthetics of ruins" that permeates China's cultural genes. Although the Bapo Painting is excluded from the mainstream, it represents the core spirits of traditional Chinese culture.

Keywords: Bapo Painting; "intentionally-created" fragments; time and space; traditional Chinese culture

1. Introduction

The Bapo Painting is a traditional form of painting in China, also known as "JiPo", "JiZhen", or "JinHuiDui", which takes the meaning of constituting the picture by piling up the images of broken cultural relics as a kind of literati leisure. This art form originated in the Yuan Dynasty and flourished in the late Qing Dynasty. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it even turned into a form of decoration on porcelain and snuff bottles. As a result of the prosperity of export trade in these centuries, the Bapo Painting and its variations could be found in Japan, Singapore, and Southeast Asia. Although the Bapo Painting appears to be made by piling up items, the fragments in the picture were all hand-drawn. Therefore, by strict definition, Bapo Paintings are different from Western trompe l'oeil and

collages. In addition, the subjects of the Bapo Paintings must include treasures from previous generations, such as classic books, stone rubbings, and famous paintings, to name just a few. Using realistic painting techniques, most of these images appear to be damaged by worms, burnt by fire, or wrinkled, presenting a messy and broken scene.

In recent years, with the increasing interest in "debris" and "ruins" in the field of art history, the status of Bapo Painting has shifted from an insignificant trick to a cultural treasure in the eyes of scholars at home and abroad. Most research by domestic scholars focuses on the aesthetics and case study of eight broken paintings, and then extend to social, historical, cultural and other aspects. Xinyuan Zhang's *The Research on JinHuiDui's Painting* discusses the changes of color, composition, and content of the Bapo Paintings [1]. Yu Zhang's *Analysis of the Significance of JinHuiDui in Graphic Design* mainly studies the composition and ideological connotation of the JinHuiDui, and researches the connection between eastern and western collage art [2]. Yueyi Xing introduces the painting method of JinHuiDui in the article *The Study of Chinese Painting: A Study on the Art Form of JinHuiDui*, including the subject matter, composition, and dyeing techniques, as well as making a brief statement of its development context [3]. Yaming Deng's *Preliminary Exploration on the Aesthetic Ideas expressed by Bapo Paintings*, Yuanhui Zhang's *Enlightenment of the Aesthetic Characteristics of JinHuiDui to Packaging Design* and Feng Li's *Not a Book but Better than Books, Not a Painting but Better than Paintings: The Aesthetic Connotation and Its Inheritance and Expansion* all discuss the aesthetic thoughts within JinHuiDui in the 19th century from the perspective of visual art, spatial consciousness, and painting themes. It is believed that the Bapo Paintings bear the diversity, incomplete beauty, and three-dimensional visual effects. Among them, Feng Li's article adds to the issue of inheritance and extension, explaining the breakthroughs of JinHuiDui in stone rubbings, ceramics and contemporary painting and calligraphy creation in the Qing Dynasty [4-6].

In case studies, the exploration is generally centered on a specific collection of a painter or in a museum. Yan Zheng's article *Liu Zhou's JinHuiDui* in his book *The Iron Kasaya* probes into the rubbing made by Liu Zhou and the creation of Bapo paintings on birthday celebration themes [7]. Yi Lu's *Exploring the Characteristics of the Early Bapo Paintings from the Yu's Collection Works* documents 10 pieces of the Bapo Paintings collected by the Zhejiang Provincial Museum, and explore the reform power of "Western Learning" from the perspective of combining Chinese traditional graphics and modern visual experience [8]. Qing Luo in the *Ink Painting Elegy in the Troubled Times: Yang Weiquan who painted the big era with the brush (1st Volume)*, *Ink Painting Elegy in the Troubled Times: Yang Weiquan who painted the big era with the brush (2nd Volume)* compare the Western source of physical collage and the Chinese source of painting collage, illustrating the philosophical content of "Humility and Complement" embodied by the Bapo Paintings, as well as demonstrating Weiquan Yang's Bapo Paintings in chronological order [9-10]. Qing Wan's article *Pile up the Residual Treasures in the Painting: To See the Changes of the Times from the Bapo Paintings* discussed the appearance of the Bapo Paintings in the 19th century and the popular concept, society, and visual experience at that time with Shoushan Li's works as examples [11].

In addition to domestic scholars, Western scholars have also carried out some studies on Bapo Paintings. The most representative one is Nancy Berliner, director of the Chinese Art Department of Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Nancy Berliner's article *The Eight Brokens: Chinese Visual Illusion Paintings* introduces the Bapo Paintings collected by the author in Taiwan and Beijing, explores the origin of the Bapo Painting, and introduces the Bapo Paintings drawn on different media, such as on paper and on fans [12]. She also made comparison between Chinese Bapo Paintings with the Western Visual Illusion Paintings. In 2017, the Boston Museum held an exhibition "Holding: China" at Museum of Fine Arts Boston and published the monograph *The 8 Brokens: Chinese Bapo Painting*, which explores the origin of eight paintings in Chinese visual culture and traces how they developed into an interesting and creative tradition thanks to the creation of various artists [13]. Later, Australian

scholars Jose and Nicholas wrote the book *Bapo* based on Nancy's research, which discussed the aesthetic and philosophical significance of Bapo Paintings [14].

Although there are some studies on the Bapo Painting, its richness in time and space has rarely been explored. Therefore, this paper will touch upon the value of the Bapo Painting in the dimension of time and space. By researching the temporality and spatiality of Bapo Paintings, the paper applies modern art theories to traditional Chinese art, which provides a cross-cultural perspective to view the artworks.

2. The Bapo Painting as “Intentionally-created” Fragments

Regarding the study of fragments, Yan Zheng's monograph *The Iron Kasaya* is one of the most representative works [15]. The book covers a wide range of artistic fields, such as statues, cities, architecture, artifacts, literature, stone, and installations, and explores the potential of materiality in studying art history from the perspectives of destruction, crushing, regeneration, and aggregation. The book says that the study of art history, in a sense, originated from fragments. The Iron Kasaya is spread out around fragments. It primarily describes the damaged warrior statue "The Iron Kasaya" in Lingyan Temple, the picture of the Epang Palace, dragon tank and black basin accompanied by literary imagination, Liu Zhou's JinHuiDui and the installation works of contemporary artist Bing Xu. Although all the above cases are related to debris, their nature is rather different. Adapting Alois Riegl's value classification, this article divides the fragments of cultural relics into "unintentionally-created fragments" and "intentionally-created fragments". The so-called "unintentionally-created fragments" refers to the fragments damaged due to the influence of the external environment. For example, the iron statue mentioned in the book was eroded by wind and rain, and ultimately, only a fragment shaped like the remains of a kasaya survived. By contrast, the intentionally created fragments were produced for the need for emotional expression and deliberate artistic creation. This type of fragments includes Bing Xu's installation artwork "Where Does the Dust Itself Collect" in memory of 9/11, the Japanese national treasure "Collection of the Songs of 36 Fairy Singers" collected by Nishi Honganji temple, which applied a variety of splicing techniques to design the writing paper for the beauty of extreme luxury [16]. The Bapo Paintings, which this paper will focus on, also belong to the intentionally-created fragments.

It is said that the famous Yuan Dynasty literati Xuan Qian invented the predecessor of the Bapo Paintings. He randomly piled up food residue scraps and depicted them in pictures. Since the monk Liuzhou created the entire form rubbing in the 19th century, the rubbings of the objects have gradually become the primary source of the fragmented image. [17]. In his book *A Story of Ruins*, Wu Hung pointed out that the signs and marks on the rubbings could be classified into "inscriptions" and "damages". The inscriptions were intentionally made, while most of the damages were caused by nature. It can be said that the rubbing itself is a faithful chronicler of "intentional" and "unintentional" message. When the painter intended to create a Bapo Painting, he often chose only part of the complete rubbing of items. As a result, these "intentionally-created" fragments in the Bapo Paintings overlap with the "unintentionally-created" fragments of the original tablet inscriptions, paintings, calligraphy, and utensils in the form of rubbings, turning into the concentration of time and space.

2.1. The Temporality of The Bapo Painting

In the dimension of time, the selection of fragments and the painting techniques can reveal the painter's social, historical, and cultural background and era. For instance, when Liu Zhou created Bapo Paintings, his living environment was relatively stable, so most of the themes of his works were to celebrate his life and praise the ancient times. Moreover, the appreciators of his works were limited to literati scholars. However, with the change of social structure and economic prosperity in the Ming

and Qing Dynasties, the Bapo Painting has become a mature type of art and was welcomed by the civic class because of its auspicious meaning. In Chinese culture, the number "8 (Ba)" is a lucky number, and the pronunciation of "broken" is similar to that of "longevity" in Chinese. Gradually, the artworks' themes and styles became more secular and commercialized. Regarding the content of the fragments, the types of antique rubbings extended to dozens of auspicious items, such as painting and calligraphy, ancient books, letters, coins, and pawn tickets.

In addition to meeting the market's needs, Bapo Paintings also quoted from the past and reflected the current situation. Figure 1 shows Weiquan Yang's work, "JinHuiDui Bapo Tu" in the late Qing Dynasty, which congregated the covers, illustrations and texts of ancient books, casting light upon the historical background of the Taiping rebellion. His other piece of work "JieYuHuanBao Tu", as shown in Figure 2, is composed of images of bronze wares and ancient coins. Furthermore, in the mature period of the Bapo Paintings, China is amid difficulties from within and without. Therefore, in the Bapo Paintings which referenced current affairs, most of the fragments are in grey tone, setting off a grieving, depressed and silent atmosphere. By comparison, in the more commercial and popularized Bapo Paintings, the colors of the fragments are rich, bright, and gorgeous, creating a warm and festive atmosphere, which is more in line with the aesthetic requirements of the public.



(Photo source: Xinyuan Zhang)

Figure 1: Weiquan Yang's "JinHuiDui Bapo Tu".



(Photo source: Xinyuan Zhang)

Figure 2: Weiquan Yang's "Jie Yu Huan Bao Tu".

Not only that, these "intentionally-created" fragments in the painting can trigger people to think about the life history of objects. Chinese scholar Jian Xu pointed out that artifacts are overlapping shadows formed by continuous processes [18]. The Bapo Painting is precisely the concentration of this continuous process. The fragments depicted in the paintings are all old objects, so it can be said that the life journey of the painting had already begun before the painting was created. Moreover, the various fragmentary images in the Bapo Paintings prove what Giorgio Agamben wrote in his book *Ninfe*: "The image is not a non-historical existence, but a historical reality inserted into the process of cultural transmission", "The life of the image is not composed of simple immobility, nor is it composed of orderly movement, but is composed of a moment that firmly grasps the tension between the two" [19]. Additionally, the Bapo Painting is made of thin crisp paper, which means that tearing, moisture, mildew, fire, worm damage, and other hazards can easily destroy the artwork. Furthermore, nor can it weather the natural aging of the paper fiber. The images of broken, torn, burned, stained, and dilapidated cultural relic fragments are painted on this fragile medium. The original incomplete images of antiquities in the picture experience secondary damage, making it more obvious how fragile the antiques are in front of natural and human strength, thus encouraging people to cherish and respect the ancient objects and people's lives. Since the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the ancients generated the adage "respect and cherish the letter and paper", which is to treasure the words and paper containing Confucian classics and sages' names. The Bapo Painting takes the "letter and paper" as the objects of representation. Through the detailed description of the damaged objects, the respect towards the "letter and paper" is demonstrated, endowing people a perception of the old saying. The Bapo Painting may be a kind of ink play, but it can reflect a deeply-rooted cultural belief.

2.2. The Spatiality of The Bapo Painting

From the spatial point of view, the fragments depicted in the Bapo Paintings do not exist in isolation. Under the ingenious arrangement of the artist, the collection of the fragments constitutes complete integrity, showing the dialectical relationship between incompleteness and completeness. For the creator, the Bapo Paintings reflect the spatial concept of integrating eastern and western cultures. Baihua Zong's book "A Walk into Aesthetics" pointed out that "The symbol of our spatial consciousness is not the straight passage as that of Egypt, nor the three-dimensional statue of Greece, nor the endless space of modern European people, but the migration, looking at the journey of a goal (Dao)! Our universe is that time leads the space, thus achieving a rhythmic and musical 'time and space integration'." [20]. This paragraph brilliantly summarizes the spatial characteristics which are beyond reality in traditional Chinese paintings. The practice of collecting the fragments was deeply influenced by local traditions. In the Tang Dynasty, people placed multiple works on a single screen together for appreciation. In the Qing Dynasty, the monk Liu Zhou attempted to scatter and stack images on a flat surface. However, when it comes to paying great attention to the construction of realistic space, the Bapo painters were likely to absorb the painting techniques introduced from the West in the 18th century. In order to present the stereo space more realistically, the painters would differentiate between the bright side and the dark side using the sketch technique. In this way, the picture looks like a simple stacking of scrolls, rubbings, and other tangible pieces of antiques, and even some of the overlapped parts represent translucent visual effects. Despite absorbing western painting techniques, Bapo Paintings are significantly different from western collages with similar visual effects [21]. The core idea of Bapo Paintings is combination and restoration, which is very different from the collages created by the West, which aim to break and reorganize [22]. With the wide circulation of many incomplete flower-and-bird paintings, figure paintings, stone tablet inscriptions and other works in the picture, the painters broke the constraints of the traditional painting composition. Instead, they reorganized the small fragmentary pictures into a new complete picture, providing a broad sense of time and space [23]. Different spatial concepts and realistic creation

methods create a unique spatial sense of integrating of the charm of Chinese traditional brush and ink as well as Western art.

As for the viewers, because the Bapo Paintings adopt the "picture-in-picture" composition, the appreciation of the painting is a process of "from far to near and then from near to far". The viewer first sees the whole picture from a distance to form a preliminary impression and then focuses on the fragments in the painting, carefully examining the details of the text, patterns, seals, signatures, and ancient traces within and finally, put the sight away and re-examine the layout of the picture to understand the main idea of the painting. For example, as presented in Figure 3, the painter Wei Zhu created a Baisui Tu (1908) in the Taiping Rebellion period. The picture is simply composed of images of a pile of broken pages, but looks like the shape of a dragon from a distance.



(Photo source: Museum of Fine Arts Boston)

Figure 3: Wei Zhu's Baisui Tu.

In this dialectical relationship between fragmentation and integrity one can also feel the myth caused by the image. If you only focus on the overall picture, you will miss the rich contents of the "small pictures" within the fragments. If you only focus on the fragments, you will not understand the idea of the whole picture. According to the Gestalt Theory in psychology, when we realize that debris belongs to a complete organism, we will try to reconstruct its material integrity and historical context, which means we no longer solely focus on the debris itself. From this point of view, the fragments in the Bapo Paintings can not only trigger people to think about the overall composition and connotation of the work, but also encourage people to reconstruct the original object of the fragments [24].

Finally, viewed from the combined perspective of time and space, the Bapo Painting is the embodiment of the unity between man and nature. Furthermore, it is also a reproduction of the "ruins aesthetics" that permeates into China's cultural genes. Traditional Chinese culture has a deep aesthetic feeling toward history and natural ruins: The unique temporal aesthetics, the inherent historical consciousness and the suffering spirit, especially the deeply-rooted moral concepts and political

consciousness, give rise to profound feelings toward home and country in the face of historical ruins; Taoist thought of "the use of the useless" along with Zen's thought of Dharmata makes the natural ruins become philosophical and aesthetic subjects [25]. The Bapo Paintings depict the fragments of historical and natural "ruins" from the past dynasties, and artificially emphasize the feeling of dilapidation and desolation. The natural decay is expressed and reproduced manually, which reflects the idea that man is an integral part of nature. As the subject demonstrates signs of life in the expression of the artistic motif, the incomplete sense of the media reveals a kind of defective beauty, and then the subject's feelings and natural forces are integrated, demonstrating the beauty of ruins [26]. In the intersection of time and space, the painter brings a unique emotional experience to the viewers so that the Bapo Painting can become an art form appreciated by scholars and laymen alike.

3. Conclusion

In the work, we discuss the temporality and spatiality of the Bapo Painting as "intentionally-created" fragments. Although the Bapo Paintings are made up of "fragments", they contain immensity in trivialness and integrity in brokenness. The Bapo Paintings carry rich time and space connotations rooted in the profound cultural traditions, as well as unique painting style due to the integration of Eastern and Western cultures. In other words, what is incomplete in the Bapo Paintings is the form, while the spirit of the Bapo Paintings is overwhelmingly intact. From the composition, we can simultaneously see the creators' inheritance and rebellion against tradition. On the one hand, they draw the essence of the past and present it with superb brushwork in order to protect the dying Chinese traditions; on the other hand, the artists constantly break the constraints of traditional literati painting layout, actively absorbing western techniques. This is a typical illustration of innovation in inheritance, creating a new combination of Chinese and western art. In addition, although the Bapo Painting was born in a mourning age, it always contains auspicious meanings representing hope in life, highlighting the Chinese nation's unyielding optimistic spirit in plight. Although the Bapo Painting has permanently been excluded from the mainstream in the era of literati painting, its innovative, optimistic qualities are precisely the core beliefs of ancient Chinese civilization. In the future, more attention can be paid to the time and space represented by specific paintings, especially anonymous ones. There are plenty of unsigned Bapo Paintings that have survived from earlier times but received little academic interest. If we can explore these unknown paintings from the two dimensions, it can greatly enhance our understanding about the formation of Bapo Paintings' artistic philosophy and its influence on contemporary and modern Chinese culture.

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