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Innovative Exploration of Contemporary Imagery Forms in Chinese Figure Painting under Traditional Concepts

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Abstract
Taking the innovative practice of contemporary imagery language in Chinese figure painting as the research object, this paper sorts out the evolutionary context of ink-wash figure painting from ancient times to the present-day era, and analyzes the aesthetic connotation of imagery and the aesthetic characteristics of the times embodied in contemporary freehand figure creation. From four dimensions — modeling expression, brush-and-ink techniques, construction of personal artistic style, and spiritual value conveyance of artworks — this paper explores innovative paths for ink-wash figure painting within the contemporary context. The transformation of contemporary figure painting at the imagery level is not merely an improvement of external forms and painting techniques, but a practical process of creative transformation for traditional imagery aesthetics. Adhering to the creative philosophy of "upholding orthodoxy without rigidly adhering to antiquity, pursuing innovation without transgressing artistic norms", creators facilitate the transformation from classical imagery to new-form contemporary imagery and contribute to the contemporary inheritance and cross-cultural communication of the oriental aesthetic system.

Keywords:
Chinese figure painting; imagery form; innovation

1. Introduction

The modernization of ink-wash figure painting represents a dynamic iterative process of continuously breaking free from established paradigms. Looking back at its developmental trajectory, the establishment of line-drawing systems in the Wei-Jin Period, the parallel development of meticulous and freehand painting in the Tang-Song dynasties, and the further emancipation of brush-and-ink language during the Ming-Qing dynasties jointly constructed a complete creation system and aesthetic evaluation criteria for traditional ink-wash figure painting. Entering the modern and contemporary era, intensified global cultural integration and collision, tremendous shifts in domestic social circumstances, and evolving public aesthetic tastes have compelled ink-wash figure painting to break inherent creative mindsets. Genuine artistic innovation neither completely negates historical traditions nor mechanically copies Western artistic models. Instead, creators conduct independent explorations rooted in local cultural heritage while responding to realistic demands of their era. The crux of contemporary innovation in ink-wash figure painting lies in re-conciling traditional

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brush-and-ink language with contemporary aesthetic preferences, as well as classical modeling paradigms with modern social contexts. It is essential to dismantle outdated creative concepts and rigid expressive approaches so as to realize the creative transformation of traditional imagery aesthetics and sustain its vitality in the new age.

2. Imagery Reflections and Contemporary Characteristics of Freehand Figure Painting

The spirit of freehand brushwork constitutes the intrinsic spiritual core of Chinese figure painting. Different from Western realistic painting that reproduces objective physical appearances, Chinese painting takes "imagery modeling" as its fundamental principle and pursues the oriental aesthetic realm of "conceiving prior to brushwork, achieving both formal likeness and spiritual resonance". Drawing upon profound local cultural heritage amid an open and pluralistic contemporary artistic environment, present-day freehand figure painting demonstrates a diverse and flourishing overall landscape. Deepening international cultural exchanges have introduced foreign artistic elements, cross-media creative ideas, and fresh aesthetic concepts into ink-wash creation. These influences have dismantled the formerly relatively monolithic mode of figure painting and fostered a pluralistic artistic landscape.

Current practical creation of freehand figure painting can be roughly divided into two major exploratory orientations. The first orientation focuses on inheriting traditional cultural context: painters delve into ancient modeling systems and brush-and-ink language, refine pictorial charm upon classical paradigms, safeguard the spiritual core of traditional imagery aesthetics, and preserve the authenticity of traditional artistic inheritance. Lu Chen once argued that ink-wash innovation must not discard brush-and-ink ontology, for the spiritual connotation embedded within traditional brushwork forms an indispensable foundation for freehand figure painting[^footnote0]. The second orientation leans toward avant-garde breakthroughs: creators break away from constraints imposed by traditional realistic modeling, transcend the limitations of single ink-wash media, deconstruct fixed creative routines, and explore novel expressive avenues from multiple dimensions.

Expanding thematic boundaries, increasingly diversified techniques, pluralistic brush-and-ink charm, and time-responsive pictorial conception stand out as distinctive contemporary features of freehand figure painting. Traditional figure painting was largely confined to literati recluses, mythological allusions, and court ladies, with relatively narrow narrative perspectives. By contrast, contemporary freehand figure painting grounds itself in real-world society, incorporating urban daily life, rural transformations, military imagery, ethnic minority livelihoods, street-scape customs, and role-models of the era into its creative vision. It comprehensively documents the humanistic landscape of contemporary society and the inner spiritual world of ordinary individuals. Technically, painters no longer mechanically apply inherited brush-and-ink formulas. They synthetically deploy effects such as ink-wash diffusion, dry-brush texture, layered color glazing, and interplay between void and solid to enrich ink-wash hierarchies and strengthen visual expressiveness. Such evolution does not subvert tradition; rather, it represents an inevitable adaptation of traditional imagery aesthetics to contemporary contexts and an important source of enduring vitality for ink-wash figure painting across generations.

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3. Innovative Practical Forms of Contemporary Chinese Figure Painting

Deep integration of realistic modeling competence with traditional imagery aesthetic concepts forms a vital creative foundation for Chinese figure painting. These two elements complement one another and jointly underpin innovative practice in contemporary figure painting. Solid realistic craftsmanship guarantees accurate figural depiction and sufficient visual appeal; imagery aesthetic thinking endows artworks with oriental conception and spiritual essence, avoiding flatness and hollowness stemming from pure realism. Explorations in contemporary figure painting modeling need to address two facets simultaneously: on the one hand, grounding creation in real-life experiences to reflect modern people's physical appearances, demeanors, temperaments, and mental states; on the other hand, revisiting traditional artistic heritage, absorbing essences of classical modeling thought, and renewing creative thinking in dialogue with modern aesthetics.

Today, thematic subjects for figure painting keep expanding, encompassing street-scape life, portraits of urban youth, military motifs, ethnic features, social development, and intangible cultural heritage. These abundant themes furnish rich materials for artistic innovation. Confronting diverse subject matter, contemporary painters hold differentiated creative pursuits: some prioritize harmony between composition and modeling, pursuing complete narration and pictorial balance; others reject excessive embellishment, striving to restore authentic life and capture natural human expressions; still others focus on facial expressions and bodily movements to excavate humanistic values and epochal implications behind visual images. Regardless of chosen creative paths, sound modeling capability and mature pictorial control serve as prerequisites for innovation. Distinct personal styles and profound conceptual depth derive from painters' long-term artistic practice and intellectual reflection.

It must be clarified that formal innovation does not mean deliberately pursuing novelty at the expense of modeling fundamentals. Disregarding objective anatomical principles and one-sidedly chasing sensational visual effects will reduce figure painting to hollow visual symbols and deprive it of its artistic essence. In terms of brush-and-ink expression, contemporary creators uphold the core principle of "five tonalities of ink", investigating the rich chromatic hierarchy of scorched, dense, heavy, pale, and clear ink shades while seeking technical breakthroughs from classical traditions. Many painters draw inspiration from Wu Daozi's artistic legacy: taking ink-wash as the base and supplementing with subtle color glazing, they leverage the interplay between ink and color to construct ethereal, elegant pictorial atmospheres, revitalizing classical brush-and-ink techniques in contemporary contexts.

3.1 Characteristics in Stylistic Formation of Contemporary Ink-Wash Figure Painting

Mainstream contemporary ink-wash figure creation is categorized within academic discourse as the "New-Tradition" system. It assimilates rigorous figural construction logic from Western realistic painting while inheriting brush-and-ink charm and imagery spirit from literati painting, representing an evolved form of the "Xu-Jiang System" adapted to contemporary times. In research concerning the "Xu-Jiang System", Xu Peijun notes that this Sino-Western integrated framework introduced realistic modeling into ink-wash figure painting and profoundly transformed the developmental trajectory of modern figure painting[^footnote1]. Contemporary New-Tradition figure painting evolves directly upon this foundation.

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Contemporary painters have broadened their creative horizons. Moving beyond purely indigenous traditional frameworks, they proactively absorb compositional and modeling approaches from Western modern art to reshape their artistic identities. Numerous contemporary creators incorporate decorative modeling from Gustav Klimt, emotionally charged lines by Egon Schiele, and symbolic abstract language from Joan Miró, merging foreign artistic devices with native ink-wash traditions. Meanwhile, painters infuse their works with personal sentiment, epochal awareness, and lived experience shaped by individual life trajectories, artistic accumulation, and aesthetic perception. They realize the localization of foreign techniques, modernization of traditional approaches, and materialization of distinctive personal artistic language.

Looking back at modern figure-painting history, many canonical works have already practiced Sino-Western integration. *Refugees* by Jiang Zhaohe adopts Western techniques of light-shadow and volume construction to mitigate the flatness of traditional ink-wash. By combining realistic modeling with freehand brushwork, it truthfully depicts people's sufferings in a special historical era and endows ink-wash figure painting with powerful realistic narrative capacity. *Blood Is Thicker Than Water: Norman Bethune* by Wang Zan draws upon Western knowledge of human anatomy and spatial perspective to remedy modeling deficiencies in traditional figure painting. It portrays vivid three-dimensional figures while balancing realistic texture with brush-and-ink resonance. Explorations undertaken by preceding artists lay groundwork for later-generation innovation and confirm Sino-Western integration as a vital developmental direction for ink-wash figure painting. Some creators experiment with figural exaggeration and partial deconstruction to break standardized traditional figurative patterns. Painters such as Ji Jingning and Li Xiaoxuan employ figural exaggeration and formal distortion to amplify emotional intensity and strengthen individual artistic traits. Nevertheless, such deformations still comply with ink-wash brush-and-ink norms and overall pictorial rhythm, without violating inherent laws of traditional art, achieving "altered forms yet preserved spirit, transformed techniques yet sustained Dao".

Unlike traditional figure painting that emphasizes complete narration and elaborate scene arrangement, many contemporary innovative works abandon complex plot development. Centering upon human subjects within real-world settings, they convey inner emotions and existential states through subtle gestures, facial shifts, and bodily rhythm. This narrative-simplifying mode weakens story-telling functions yet enhances empathic resonance. It enables audiences to engage in direct spiritual dialogue with depicted figures and creators' thoughts, amplifying the expressive force of artworks.

Against the backdrop of globalization, modern and post-modern Western artistic ideologies offer new references for domestic figure-painting creation. Western approaches to planar visualization, collage, and fragmented representation provide fresh sources of inspiration. Chinese creators judiciously absorb collage composition and planar visual effects while anchoring their work to oriental imagery aesthetic core. Consequently, they develop artistic identities that combine international vision with local characteristics, expanding ink-wash figure painting beyond confined artistic circles and reinforcing both epochal and global dimensions of works. From grand narratives of revolutionary-themed art, to humanistic reflections triggered by Scar Art, and onward toward today's pluralistic co-existence, ink-wash figure painting keeps evolving by overcoming bottlenecks, updating techniques, and renewing aesthetic standards, generating unique artistic appearances for the new era.

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3.2 Creative Core and Spiritual Connotation of Contemporary Figure Painting

The value destination of artistic creation lies in high-level unity between outward form and ideological content, between painting technique and spiritual essence, and between temporal context and humanistic reflection. Contemporary renewal of ink-wash figure painting involves not only technical and formal adjustments but comprehensive upgrading of humanistic thought, epochal values, and spiritual connotations. In contrast to traditional figure painting, which prioritizes atmospheric conception and literati emotional expression, contemporary ink-wash figure painting is rooted in modern social realities and the everyday lives of ordinary people. It bears humanistic contemplation and the spirit of the age through renewed artistic forms, achieving unity among artistic expression, realistic representation, and spiritual transmission.

High-quality contemporary ink-wash figure creation breaks free from stylized constraints. Instead of mechanically copying ancient models or conforming blindly to inherited aesthetic criteria, it draws creative nourishment from real-life society and social transformations to build modeling and brush-and-ink systems suitable for contemporary aesthetics. Innovation by contemporary painters represents thoughtful, voluntary breakthroughs. Rather than mechanically replicating inherited techniques and creative ideas, they interpret modern society through individualized perspectives and express personal sentiments. While carrying forward cultural heritage, they highlight creative individuality and construct renewed ink-wash creation systems.

The renewal of thematic expression manifests the upgrading of artworks' spiritual connotation. In major-theme creation, contemporary painters move past outdated narrative formulas, rejecting formulaic scene rendering and symbolic stacking. They excavate deep-seated humanistic implications behind subject matters, embedding the spirit of the times into individual destinies by translating grand themes onto individual human subjects. Former major-theme figure paintings tended to rely on spectacular battle scenes to deliver themes through intense visual impact, resulting in relatively homogeneous representational forms. Contemporary creators shift their focus away from grand spectacles toward individual existences and spiritual perseverance across diverse social groups. Micro-perspectives bear weighty macro propositions, granting artworks both historical profundity and humanistic warmth.

Such reflective creative thinking yields dual values: first, it revises public stereotypes concerning thematic painting and reshapes aesthetic logic for major-theme ink-wash figure works; second, it infuses contemporary sensibility into realistic ink-wash creation, mitigating the datedness of conventional realism and adapting to present-day aesthetic tastes and communication environments. Under such creative philosophy, ink-wash figure painting evolves beyond mere visual appreciation to become an important medium for documenting societal shifts, disseminating national ethos, and carrying humanistic reflection.

Tradition and modernity are not mutually opposed or disconnected but form a coherent, evolving continuum. Their aesthetic divergences arise from divergent cognitive and aesthetic habits shaped by distinct eras. Traditional art represents the "contemporary creation" of past epochs, while today's art will constitute new traditions for future generations. The core objective of ink-wash figure-painting renewal is to achieve organic connection between tradition and modernity rather than completely severing historical ties. Outstanding contemporary ink-wash productions preserve the spiritual core of imagery aesthetics and unique oriental brush-and-ink charm. Meanwhile, they respond to contemporary social-humanistic features, public spiritual

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aspirations, and new-media developments, reaching the creative realm of "upholding orthodoxy without conservatism, pursuing innovation without violating norms".

Through long-term practical explorations, contemporary painters have sorted out laws governing traditional brush-and-ink and summarized present-day creative experiences, gradually establishing personal, time-attuned creative logics. Rooted in local cultural heritage while safeguarding the spiritual essence of oriental art, they embrace epochal transformations and break stylized shackles. Sustained explorations in modeling, brush-and-ink, thematic material, and spiritual expression enable ink-wash figure painting to retain millennia-old oriental cultural heritage while manifesting humanistic character and artistic vision belonging to the new era, accomplishing the transition from traditional imagery toward new-form contemporary imagery.

4. Conclusion

Wang Wei's proposition of "poetry in painting, painting in poetry" embodies the supreme pursuit of traditional imagery aesthetics and has remained an aesthetic criterion for Chinese figure painting across centuries. Painting is a visual art as well as a carrier of spirit. Artistic renewal always resonates synchronously with social changes and humanistic progress. Within today's pluralistic and intercultural artistic environment, numerous independent-minded, innovative, and humanistic-minded artists keep advancing the modernization of ink-wash figure painting and revitalizing this age-old artistic category in new historical circumstances.

Regarding artistic development, Wu Guanzhong argued that art must preserve national roots while engaging with the wider world to achieve lasting vitality[^footnote2]. Looking forward, Chinese ink-wash figure painting shall abide by the core principle of "upholding orthodoxy while pursuing innovation". Grounded in tradition, oriented toward present-day realities and future prospects, it shall continuously explore contemporary expressions for traditional imagery aesthetics, allowing millennia-old Chinese figure painting to shine more brilliantly in the new era. Contemporary formal-imagery innovation in ink-wash figure painting extends beyond technical and formal breakthroughs; it also entails the continuation and reconstruction of traditional cultural spirit. Brush-and-ink constitutes the external vehicle for Chinese figure painting, whereas traditional cultural spirit, oriental imagery essence, and humanistic-patriotic sentiment represent the life-giving source for enduring brush-and-ink art.

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