

An Exploration of the Water Painting Method in Ancient China

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In traditional landscape painting in China, water has always occupied an important artistic position and space, and painters in different ages had different ways to express water. Systematically sorting out the methods of water painting in Chinese painting is of great significance for us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the artistic styles, cultures and artistic languages of different times. It is also of great reference value for those learning Chinese painting.

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The Research Value of Traditional Techniques

In *Lin Quan Gao Zhi*, Guo Xi said: “Mountains take water as their blood, vegetation as their hair, and clouds as their spirit. So, mountains are alive with water... The water takes mountains as its face... So the water looks charming with mountains... This is how landscape is arranged”.¹ In landscape painting, water flows along the mountains and the mountains adapt to the shape of the water. The two are interdependent and complement each other. Mountains are like bones, and water like the soul; the water has the difference between dynamic and static, along with virtual and solid forms, and mountains have bending and leaning postures, which appear to be scattered and with different heights. Water in different states has different ways of expression and painting techniques, and has different spiritual directions in different times. The discussion on the evolution of water painting techniques in landscape painting is of reference significance for contemporary people to learn from the ancients and innovate.

Ancient Techniques Combing and Research

In fact, from a large number of painted pottery in the Neolithic Age, we can already see patterns symbolizing water, including the swirling wave pattern, the water ripple pattern, and the pattern of fish playing in the water, etc. The emergence of these patterns is not only the embodiment of primitive human worship of water, but also the earliest works on water. In the Qin and Han dynasties, water patterns and images emerged on popular silk paintings, lacquerware, picture bricks and other carriers. In this period, however, the depiction of water was more of a pattern nature than a pictorial nature. In the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the expression of water in painting was mainly based on the water pattern outlined by lines or coloring with such colors as stone blue and stone green. One example is the classic work *Ode to the Goddess of Luo River* by Gu Kaizhi, a master

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¹ Northern Song Dynasty. Guo Xi. *Lin Quan, Gao Zhi, Landscapes. The Artistic Subcategory of Calligraphy and Painting. E-version of Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* in Wenyuan Pavilion.

painter in the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The work depicted the moving love story between Cao Zhi and the Goddess of Luo River, with water in many scenes. Here, water has the role of indicating where the story took place and the identities of the characters, as well as driving the development of the story. During the period of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, landscape painting was not completely independent from figure painting, and the relationship between figures and the background landscape was still “people are bigger than mountains, and there is no wave on the water”.² Most of the water is outlined with thin and powerful lines, like the silk spinning of spring silkworms, so as to express the rushing water, the appearance of surging waves or swirling water, bringing dynamic and fun to the whole painting. This way of outlining water patterns with lines is very decorative, which should have a mutual reference relationship with the popular water decorations and patterns at that time. Until the Song Dynasty, the technique of outlining water remained very common.

Zhan Ziqian’s “Spring Excursion” was an important symbol of Chinese landscape painting becoming independent. It shows the open landscape through a panoramic composition, abandoning the dysfunctional relationship between people and scenery in the past, and presenting the beauty of thousands of miles of grand mountains and water in a limited space. In the painting, a large area of the lake was outlined by the later popular “net cloth technique”. The ripples are fine, and the two rows intersect, forming a diamond-shaped wave pattern like a net cloth. The lines are smooth and compact, but the detailed water patterns are with changes, looking both decorative and lively. The water pattern was orderly arranged from the nearest place to the furthest distance, naturally connecting with the sky, forming a beautiful scene of water and sky blending, and giving the painting the change of virtual and solid and a depth of space. To landscape painting, this was a great progress and also indicated that landscape painting was about to enter a mature stage.

The inheritance of this progress can be clearly seen in the “Rivers, Mountains and Pavilions” now collected in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. In this painting, the technique of painting water was in the same vein as that of “Spring Excursion”, but was with improvement. The painting technique of water pattern was a semi-circular curved wave line, which was carefully sketched with middle strokes to form the water pattern in the shape of fish scale, so it was named the technique of “fish scale patterns”. “Fish scale pattern” and “net cloth pattern” are very similar, but the shapes are slightly different, showing the inheritance and reference relationship between the two. The “net cloth technique” is outlined with thin lines with a long and gentle arc, composed of woven lines that are more suitable for the performance of the calm water surface effect, while the “fish scale pattern” is with more round ripple arcs, more suitable for the depiction of the water surface that is blown by the wind and has produced ripples. From the Sui and Tang dynasties to the Song dynasties, these two techniques were widely used, which can be seen in Li Zhaodao’s “Painting of the Emperor of Ming Coming to Shu”, Wei Xian’s *Painting of Noble Men*, and Han Gan’s *Painting of Early Snow on the River*.

In the Five Dynasties, the “Xiaoxiang Painting” painted by Dong Yuan, a painter of the Southern Tang Dynasty, shows another aspect of water. In the painting, there are mountains and hills covered with vegetation, and the large lake is expressed through white space. In the water, two ferrying boats echo the people waiting for the boat on the shore. On the shore, the fishermen are working hard. Vaguely, we seem to hear fishing songs floating in the painting, making the entire painting look peaceful and idyllic. The mountains and hills were

² Tang Dynasty, Zhang Yanyuan, Famous Paintings in All Dynasties. Vol.1. *The Artistic Subcategory of Calligraphy and Painting. E-version of Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* in Wenyuan Pavilion.

expressed by the techniques of spot dyeing with ink and rubbed with Pima technique, vividly showing the moist Jiangnan scenery. The technique of leaving empty space was relatively rare at that time, and it did not become a fashion until the Yuan Dynasty, which we will discuss later.

“Mountains in the Sunshine with Temple” by Li Cheng of the Northern Song Dynasty. In the treatment of a large area of water, “Mountains in the Sunshine with Temple” and “Xiaoxiang Landscape” both adopted a technique of empty space to express water, but in terms of the expression of water mouths and waterfalls, it adopted a reverse “outline technique”. The artist sketched the rubble and the cliff at the water mouth, rendering the water in ink but leaving white lines to express the sense of lines. The water mouths and streams painted in this way are extremely vivid and realistic, and the waterfalls also appear to have the beauty of both power and speed, showing the spirit of “water rushing down”.

In addition to the ink painting, there were also many green or golden landscape works in the Song Dynasty, such as the Song Dynasty painting of “Golden Pond Racing”, Wang Ximeng’s “A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains”, Wang Shen’s “Snow in the Fishing Village”, Zhao Boju’s “Autumn Scenery of Rivers and Mountains” and so on. In these works, some of them used the combination of the outlining technique and the smudging technique, and some used the white space or color techniques, forming a variety of artistic features. In the Song Dynasty, there were also many works with water as the theme, among which the most representative is Ma Yuan’s “Twelve Sections of Water Painting”. The “Water Painting” took water as the theme, except for a few individual pages showed a few water banks, rocks, it completely showed different artistic conception through the description of different modalities of water. In terms of techniques, it adopted the method of drawing lines as the main and color rendering as the auxiliary. Its line organization is highly condensed to the real nature, breaking through the too stylized water outline mode in the past, and introduced a more changeable expression technique.

Landscape painting in the Yuan Dynasty developed rapidly, and the involvement of literati made landscape painting endowed with high cultural value. In the Yuan Dynasty, a large number of scholars, intellectuals and even the landlords were greatly impacted. Unwilling to be oppressed and insulted by another nation, some of them voluntarily or were forced to give up their official career, and express their feelings in calligraphy and painting. As a result, landscape painting became a peaceful corner for their soul. At the same time, the decline of the court painting academy also transferred the dominant power of the painting art from the court painting academy to the non-official scholars and intellectuals. Therefore, the ideological and philosophical nature of painting was greatly increased, and the theme of seclusion and the artistic conception of emptiness and distance were increasingly valued by painters. In this period, water or clouds were mostly expressed in the form of white space, which was also related to the Taoist and Zen thoughts that were advocated by scholars at that time. Blank is “void” and “empty”, but the void is not equal to “nothing” or no fun, on the contrary, it is “being”, a hint with richer and deeper meanings, and a great complement to the ink. “Living in Fuchun Mountain” showed the beautiful scenery of Fuchun Mountain in Fuyang, Zhejiang Province, where Huang Gongwang lived in seclusion in his later years, and this painting was painted at the request of his friend Zheng Wuyu. Most of the virtual landscape of the painting is water, which echoes the solid mountains and rivers. The painting technique of water is mainly white space, and only the bank at the foot of the mountains was rubbed with light ink, or the dry ink was sketched slightly to show the state of water. In fact, the essence of the white space scheme is very similar to that of the water painting scheme based on ink or color flat painting. The empty space can be seen as white, the ink

can be seen as black, and the color green is green. In this sense, the three methods are actually one. But there are some differences. Although ink or color dyeing has a strong decorative effect and visual impact, it has lost the void and mysterious sense brought by the blank, as well as the deep philosophic reflection behind the empty space. No matter what technique of water painting, it has its own advantages and suitable environment, and there is no difference of superiority and inferiority, and the specific application of techniques depends on the comprehensive consideration of the painter's preferences, the use of materials and the needs of expression and other factors.

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the technique of painting water has become very perfect, whether it is outlining, leaving empty space, color setting, ink staining, wrinkle rubbing or the combination of several techniques, it had reached a very high level. Especially since the Yuan Dynasty, raw rice paper has gradually been widely used and reached its peak in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Raw rice paper is different from silk and cooked rice paper, it is very suitable for wrinkle rubbing, breaking ink and other techniques, providing material support for the combined use of various water painting techniques. For example, Wang Ji's "Huashan Paintings" was a combined use of the techniques of leaving empty space, rubbing and flat coating; Qiu Ying's "Peach Land" is the fusion of color-setting technique, line drawing technique and smudging technique; and Yuan Jiang's "Painting of Epang Palace" was a combination of the color-setting technique, the technique of leaving empty space and the smudging technique.

Innovation in Modern Techniques

In modern times, the techniques of ink painting have become more and more varied, and there have been a number of painters who make good use of ink to express the mist on the water and the dexterous flow of water. For example, Fu Baoshi's painting "Night Rain in Bashan Mountain" shows the atmosphere shrouded in smoke, which is vast and majestic. His original brush and ink method and bold water method paint the scenery of night rain of Bashan Mountain, which makes the ink dripping and the mountains moist. In addition, due to the mutual exchange and learning of Chinese and Western cultures and the increase in the number of students studying abroad, the techniques of Chinese painting have also had more new attempts. The landscape paintings of Gao Jianfu, one of the founders of the Lingnan School, not only pay attention to the precious Chinese tradition of brush and ink, but also fully absorb the skills of Japanese painting and Western painting, opening up a new way in the field of Chinese painting. In his painting "Landscape", the ink and color blend, and the brushstrokes hide in the ink and brush. The whole work shows the characteristics of a strong western painting, ochre sky light through the color of dusk, the distant temple seems embedded in the dark mountains, the stream flowing from the temple in the moonlight is more bright and bright by the two sides of the ink mountain, the horizon a row of geese flying south, so that the whole scene gives people a lonely feeling. His technique of painting water is not only the inheritance of the traditional technique of leaving empty space, but also reflects his own new understanding of the traditional method.

Conclusion

Throughout the dynasties, during the Six Dynasties, the methods of drawing water were mainly outlining and color setting; from Sui to Tang and to Song dynasties, the dyeing method was more common, but there were

also some examples of expressing water through blank space; after Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, due to the rise of literati painting, the method of painting water mostly adopted the method of “borrowing the ground as water”, or adding a little dyeing, or naturally outlining water patterns on the water bank, rocks, and boats. From the rough line method to the extremely simple but infinitely charming technique of leaving empty space, all painting techniques were extracted from water in nature after typification and symbolization, and all had their unique form beauty.

The development of Chinese culture solidly promoted the development of the Chinese painting art and the enrichment and maturity of painting techniques. By studying the various ways of expressing “water” in Chinese painting throughout the ages, on the one hand, we can find the unique position of water in Chinese painting, especially landscape painting, on the other hand, this is also a summary of traditional water painting techniques. Such a summary is not only conducive to the retention and understanding of traditional techniques, but more importantly, it can provide reference for learners and provide a basis for the creation of later painters. The inheritance, innovation and development of Chinese painting should also be based on the respect and learning of the tradition.

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