

# Comparison of Modern Chinese Freehand Figure Paintings and 19th Century French Realism Figure Paintings

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## Abstract

The May Fourth New Culture Movement is a turning point in the development of freehand figure painting in China, before which the development of freehand figure painting has gradually declined. With the introduction of western artistic ideas and schools such as realism into China, the creative ideas and forms of freehand figure painting in China have been changed. The artistic perspective of Chinese freehand brushwork painters has been changed from "interesting" themes such as Gao Shi, Maid and Immortal, which escape from reality, to "realistic" themes that focus on reality, life and the development of the times. In this paper, the similarities and differences between the representative painters and works of Chinese and Western realistic figure paintings are taken as the starting point, and the expressions and connotations of Chinese and Western artistic forms are compared, so as to analyze the similarities and differences and significance of Chinese and Western realistic figure paintings.

## Keywords

Chinese freehand figure painting; French realism; Compare.

## 1. The Origin and Meaning of Realism

The theoretical basis of "realism" has a long history. At first, we can find some clues from the "mimetic theory" of Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece. "mimetic theory" developed on the basis of Plato's inheritance of Socrates' philosophy. In his book "Republic", he emphasized "rational style" and thought that "literature and art are imitations of nature". It is untrue that art is tertiary, and it is an imitation of the real world, and the real world is an imitation of "rational style", which is separated by three layers. Aristotle, his student, further developed the viewpoint of "mimetic theory", and he also launched a discussion on "imitation" in Poetics, holding that there are three types of objects imitated by poets, one is what happened in the past or is happening now, the other is what people believe will happen in legends, and the third is what should happen. And "mimetic theory" developed on the basis of the philosophical discussion of "harmony theory" in ancient Greece. "harmony theory" means that philosophers before Socrates in ancient Greece discovered the rhythm in the movement of natural things, and found in the rhythm that natural things always maintain profound continuity and unity in the circulation and change, that is, the overall harmonious state. These philosophers try to explain all art with "harmony". Later, philosophers, literature and artists made different interpretations and discussions on "mimetic theory".

Realism emerged as a professional term in the field of literature, which was discussed in the works of German writer Schiller in the 18th century. As a concept in the field of fine arts, it was first proposed by French painter Courbet in the mid-19th century to show that it is a new art form different from the past. In addition, Durrant and others founded the journal Realism and published Courbet's artistic declaration in it. After the emergence of realism, it gradually

replaced romanticism and became a dominant literary trend and movement in the field of European literature and art.

Realistic painting emphasizes objectivity, truly reflects the artist's time, uses realistic artistic techniques to describe real life delicately, and truly reproduces typical images in typical environments. At the end of the 19th century, realism gradually gave way to other art schools and thoughts.

## 2. Representative Figures of French Realistic Figure Painting in the 19th Century

The February Revolution broke out in France in the 19th century, and the struggle between the emerging working class and the bourgeoisie became increasingly fierce. Influenced by the revolutionary movement, these artists gradually realized that it was of no practical significance to only depict nobles and heroes, and turned their attention to social life, paying attention to the life of the people at the bottom and the development of the times. It was at this stage that French realistic painting was formed and developed. A large number of realistic painters such as Courbet, Miller and Du Miai appeared.

Courbet is the founder of French realistic painting. He was born in Hornung, a small city on the border between Switzerland and France, and studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of France and the Fine Arts Institute of Sang Song. His paintings contain his precise observation and cold thinking of his time. Courbet adored the painting techniques of VelasGuizhi and copied a large number of works by masters of the same period. Courbet said, "You'd better show me angels. I've never seen anyone with wings, so I never draw angels." From his opinion, he thinks that art should be based on life, and artists should go deep into society. His figure paintings have created a number of outstanding realistic paintings, such as Quarryman, Funeral of Hornung, Return of Farmers from the Market, etc. The revolutionary spirit is also reflected in Courbet's figure paintings. He was arrested and imprisoned after the failure of the Paris Commune Movement, and wrote Courbet with a beret and a red scarf. His aesthetic thoughts and works deeply influenced the development of art in the second half of the 19th century, and also influenced Xu Beihong, a famous Chinese painter and teacher.

Miller is a famous realistic farmer painter in France in 19th century. He was born in a farmer's family and had deep feelings for farmers. Most of his works depict farmers' work and life, and interpret the local conditions and customs of farmers and rural areas from a unique perspective. His work "Night Bell" depicts the scene of a young couple working under the hazy dusk, with ragged clothes and rudimentary tools, showing the unsatisfactory life. However, from its demeanor and actions, it also shows a good yearning for future life. Du Miai's works are good at mocking and criticizing the society and the ruling class with exaggerated and symbolic artistic expressions, and he is a famous French realistic critical painter in the 19th century.

## 3. The Development of Chinese Modern Realistic Freehand Figure Painting

### 3.1. Freehand Figure Painting Before the 20th Century

The earliest origin of freehand figure painting in China can be traced back to Song Dynasty, when Liang Kai initiated the technique of reducing strokes. Since then, freehand figure painting has gradually entered the mainstream creation. However, freehand figure painting, which can reflect real life and realistic techniques of the times, has been developing gradually, resulting in many shortcomings, especially in the Qing Dynasty. Painters are addicted to making a living from the ancient people's powder books, and the painting style has become increasingly withering. This is also related to the artistic spirit of "respecting Italy" and traditional

philosophy pursued by Chinese literati and painters in the social environment at that time. Pursue the ideological character of "clearness, quietness, emptiness, mystery, distance and rhyme" that Taoism will seek. After the Song Dynasty, with the aggravation of social contradictions, the literati class quit secular competition and chose "avoiding the world" to escape from real life. Scholars regard freehand brushwork figures as a form of emotional expression. Most of them choose to express the images of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism such as "hermit", "fisherman", "maid" and "Lohan", so as to express their strong inner feelings and pursue "artistic conception", while ignoring the colorful real life.

Today, it seems that the literati's "Shang Yi complex" has inspired the noble sentiment of literati's "born" life. However, if the figure painting blindly uses the technique of drawing lessons from the past and describing the present, it lacks the description of real life, so it is better to learn from the ancients than from nature. In this way, the important characteristics of life reflected and reappeared by the figure painting are completely lost, and the freehand figure painting is pushed to the embarrassing situation that the theme is too narrow and the shape is too loose, which also causes the loss of the spirit of Chinese freehand figure painting.

### 3.2. Freehand Figure Painting After the 20th Century

After the 20th century, with the great changes of the times and the integration and absorption of western culture, Chinese freehand figure paintings have also undergone historic changes inherited from classical images in modern times. After the May Fourth Movement, the great changes in society and the impact of a large number of western culture and artistic thoughts on Chinese painting art have led to the emergence of numerous outstanding realistic freehand painters and works with the spirit of the times. For example, a group of painters such as Jiang Zhaohe and Xu Beihong have created excellent realistic works that pay attention to the reality and the toiling masses. These painters used paintbrushes as weapons to profoundly expose the ugly faces of Japanese aggressors. Xu Beihong, a famous Chinese painter and educator, studied in France in his early years and was deeply influenced by French realist painters, who advocated realist creation. At the time of national peril, he created Chinese painting *Jiufanggao*, *Yugong Removing the Mountains* and other works expressing national spirit, and also created realistic themes such as *Ba people's drawing water* and *Ba poor women*. Xu Beihong's student, Jiang Zhaohe, created "The Map of Refugees" during the Anti-Japanese War. On a 2-meter-wide and 26-meter-long scroll, the picture uses realistic artistic techniques to depict hundreds of dead and injured compatriots, such as the elderly, mothers and children, and shows the tragic images of the Japanese invaders in the world.

In the middle of the last century, freehand brushwork figure painting made new progress. Under the strong impetus of "literature and art serving socialist politics" and "socialist realism", representative freehand brushwork figure painters with the spirit of the times appeared in different periods, such as Ye Qianyu and Lu Chen. Their works are full of longing for the working class and a better life in reality. Although from today's perspective, these works are inevitably bound by ideology and lack of individuality, besides the convergence of artistic styles, the exploration of realistic creation of freehand figure painting has also laid the foundation of modern Chinese figure painting.

After the 1970s, China's society and economy developed rapidly, and the creation of freehand brushwork figures realism entered a period of "a hundred flowers blossom". Realistic creation not only pays attention to workers and socialist construction, but also depicts the changes of people's life and economic construction under the social environment of rapid economic development, which has a strong mark of the times and typicality. Here, we should pay attention to a problem. Realistic freehand figure painting is not copying western modeling and expression, but on the basis of inheriting Chinese traditional spiritual connotation and pen and ink

techniques, absorbing and integrating western techniques, paying attention to reality and the pulse of the times, and gradually forming its own new artistic expression and language.

#### 4. Comparison of Realistic Figure Painting Between China and the West

Whether it is Chinese painting art or western painting art, it has realistic factors and characteristics in different degrees from the beginning, and changes with the changes of social and historical conditions. Realism in China and France is developing with different artistic ideas, and there are many similarities between Chinese and Western realistic figure paintings: First, the themes are concerned about the times and the working people at the bottom. Xu Beihong, a famous Chinese painter and educator, studied in France in his early years and was deeply influenced by French realistic painters such as Courbet, who advocated realistic creation. At the time of national peril, he created Chinese painting *Jiufanggao*, *Yugong Removing the Mountains* and other works expressing national spirit, and also created realistic themes such as *Ba people's drawing water* and *Ba poor women*.

Xu Beihong's student, Jiang Zhaohe, created "The Vagrant Map" in the period of national suffering. On a long scroll with a width of 2 meters and a length of 26 meters, this map uses realistic artistic techniques to depict hundreds of compatriots suffering from casualties, such as the elderly, mother and child, and shows the tragic images of the world where the Japanese aggressor troops are suffering from grief and sorrow. Shang Hui, an art critic, commented on "The Portrait of Refugees", saying: "This masterpiece, the first in the history of Chinese painting to show tragic and tragic emotions, has left a memory of national humiliation and struggle for history with realistic modeling language and psychological depiction of characters." French painter Courbet's *Quarryman*, Miller's *Evening Bell* and other works are the true reflection of the painter's change of the times and his real life.

Secondly, the objectivity of description is a true reflection of real life, and the typicality and criticality of characters show the spirit of the times. From the works of Chinese freehand brushwork painter Jiang Zhaohe and the works of Courbet and Miller, we can realize that the created characters are the true portraiture of millions of peasants and workers, and we can also feel their yearning for a better life in the future from the characters. Finally, the authenticity of the details of the work. They reflect the face of their lives through different forms of artistic expression.

However, in the development of Chinese and Western cultures, they also show their own unique realistic artistic features: First, the differences in painting tools and materials. Chinese freehand figure painting is an artistic creation with brush, rice paper and ink as materials, emphasizing line modeling, striking a balance between "likeness and dissimilarity", and expressing the image with the change of wet and dry shades of ink and wash. The color is relatively simple, that is, "applying colors according to the class" removes the influence of light and shadow, and grasps the internal structure of the image to express the characters. What is more here is to seek its "poetic" expression. Western realistic painting takes oil canvas and oil painting pen as the media for artistic creation, emphasizes the rich and delicate expression of color, emphasizes the change of light, and enriches the picture through the change of stroke. The second is the different roots of painting theory. Influenced by the traditional thoughts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, Chinese freehand figure painters pursue an expression of "artistic conception". Western realistic painting is more direct in emotion and more "rational".

#### 5. Conclusions

Realism reflects the artist's concern for the society in which he lives, but can't be simply regarded as a certain technique or genre. It is a way for artists to know the real world, feel the real world and express our times. Although Chinese and Western realistic figure painters live

in different cultural and social environments, they feel the flavor of the times in real life, eulogize the amorous characters of the times he lives with their own brushes, and express their inner feelings.

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