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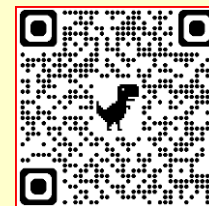
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Research on the Characteristics of Contemporary Chinese Ink Figure Painting

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Chinese ink figure painting has evolved beyond the aesthetic constraints of traditional literati painting and the singular realistic paradigm of the early modern period, growing into a diverse artistic system embedded in traditional brush-and-ink heritage while engaging with global artistic trends and contemporary social contexts. This study delineates the conceptual connotation and historical evolution of contemporary Chinese ink figure painting, and systematically summarizes its core characteristics from multiple dimensions including artistic conception and theme expression, brush-ink language and formal modeling, style diversification, as well as cultural and aesthetic orientation. By sorting out the inheritance and innovation logic between contemporary creation and traditional painting aesthetics, this paper analyzes how Western modeling concepts, modern artistic thoughts and urban cultural life reshape the visual presentation and spiritual connotation of ink figure works (Yu & Noh, 2024). The research finds that contemporary ink figure painting maintains the intrinsic charm of traditional linear modeling and ink rhythm, breaks the boundary between tradition and modernity, realism and expression, and forms distinctive features of pluralistic style integration, humanistic care awakening, innovative expansion of materials and techniques, and interactive integration of cross-cultural vision. This paper also reflects on the development predicaments faced by contemporary ink figure creation, and offers reference for the inheritance, innovation and sustainable development of ink figure painting in the new era.

KEY WORDS: Contemporary Chinese Painting; Ink Figure Painting; Brush and Ink Language; Artistic Characteristics; Aesthetic Inheritance; Stylistic Diversification

1. Introduction

As a pivotal genre in Chinese traditional painting, ink figure painting carries the aesthetic philosophy, cultural spirit and life perception of the Chinese nation for thousands of years. After entering the contemporary era, defined roughly from the reform and opening-up period to the present, the dramatic changes in social structure, cultural ecology and artistic concepts have brought profound structural changes to the creation and development of ink figure painting (Liu, 2023). Traditional ink figure painting once focused on literati mood expression, historical theme narration and moral

metaphorical implication, with relatively fixed modeling methods and monotonous aesthetic orientation. Contemporary creation, however, faces the impact of Western classical realism, modernism and postmodern art concepts, and simultaneously responds to the spiritual demands of urbanization, individual consciousness awakening and diversified cultural identity (Wang, 2022).

The boundary between traditional freehand brushwork and fine brushwork in contemporary ink figure painting gradually blurs, and the creative perspective shifts from collective historical narration to individual life experience, from simple formal depiction to deep

cultural narrative and emotional expression (Shu, 2016). Artists no longer rigidly abide by the ancient painting formulas and brushwork norms, but reconstruct the visual language of figure painting on the premise of inheriting the essence of traditional brush and ink. Existing academic researches mostly focus on the evolution of ink figure painting techniques or the stylistic analysis of individual artists, while comprehensive sorting and in-depth theoretical discussion on the overall artistic characteristics of contemporary ink figure painting are still insufficient (Zhang, 2025).

Based on the perspective of art history and aesthetic theory, this paper takes the creation phenomena, representative works and artistic trends of contemporary Chinese ink figure painting as the research object, sorts out its developmental context, summarizes its multi-dimensional artistic characteristics, analyzes the internal driving forces of characteristic formation, and explores the practical path of coordinated development between inheritance and innovation. The research aims to clarify the artistic positioning and aesthetic value of contemporary ink figure painting, and provide theoretical support for subsequent creation research and art inheritance practice.

2. The Evolution Context and Concept Definition of Contemporary Ink Figure Painting

2.1 Definition of Contemporary Ink Figure Painting

Contemporary Chinese ink figure painting in this paper refers to the ink figure creation produced in the Chinese artistic context after the reform and opening up. It differs from ancient traditional figure painting and modern ink figure painting of the Republic of China period. It takes rice paper, ink, Chinese painting pigments as the main media, adheres to the core aesthetic connotation of Chinese painting such as linear modeling and ink charm, absorbs Western realistic modeling, modern composition and expressive language, and takes contemporary social life, individual spiritual emotions, historical memory and cultural identity as the main creative themes (Wu, 2024). It covers multiple creation types such as realistic ink figure painting, expressive freehand figure painting, new meticulous figure painting and experimental ink figure painting, with strong contemporaneity, openness and pluralism.

2.2 Historical Evolution of Contemporary Ink Figure Painting

The development of contemporary ink figure painting can be divided into three key stages. The first stage is the recovery and adjustment period from the late 1970s to the 1980s. During this period, ink figure painting broke away from the single political theme creation mode, returned to the track of artistic aesthetic itself, inherited the "Xu-Jiang System" which combined Western sketch modeling with traditional brush and ink, and focused on depicting realistic characters in life and historical revolutionary themes (Yu et al., 2024). Creation paid attention to the authenticity of figure modeling and the standardization of brush-ink application, but the artistic language and creative thinking were still relatively constrained.

The second stage is the exploratory innovation period in the 1990s. With the deepening of cultural exchange between China and the West, modern art trends poured into China, prompting ink figure painters to break the shackles of traditional norms and single realism. Many artists began to try expressive deformation, abstract ink language and modern composition layout, and creative themes expanded to urban marginal groups, female emotions and folk life scenes (Li, 2023). The pluralistic development trend of style and

language began to take shape, and the aesthetic orientation shifted from external formal depiction to internal spiritual exploration.

The third stage is the diversified prosperity period from the beginning of the 21st century to the present. Under the background of globalization and cultural self-confidence, contemporary ink figure painting presents a pattern of simultaneous development of tradition inheritance, Western integration and experimental innovation. Artists balance traditional brush-ink spirit and modern artistic expression, integrate multiple media and comprehensive materials, and the creation perspective covers history, reality, individual and society. The artistic characteristics of diversification, individuation and humanization become increasingly prominent (Chen, 2023).

3. Core Artistic Characteristics of Contemporary Chinese Ink Figure Painting

3.1 Diversified Expansion of Theme Connotation and Humanistic Orientation

Contemporary ink figure painting has achieved comprehensive expansion in theme selection and connotation expression, forming a distinctive feature that takes humanistic care as the core and covers multiple dimensional themes. Traditional ink figure painting was mostly limited to historical allusions, celebrity portraits, religious figures and literati leisure themes, with narrow vision and strong moral didactic nature. Contemporary creation breaks this limitation and closely links figure images with the real survival state of contemporary people (Yuan, 2023).

Urban life narration becomes an important creative theme. A large number of works depict urban white-collar workers, young people, street pedestrians and marginal groups, recording the life rhythm, emotional loneliness and identity confusion of people in the process of urbanization (Liu, 2024). Different from the grand narrative of traditional paintings, these works focus on trivial daily scenes and subtle emotional changes, showing the true individual living state. At the same time, historical theme creation also presents a new look. Artists no longer deliberately deify historical figures, but interpret historical characters from a humanized perspective, digging into their inner emotions and life fate, weakening the political preaching color and highlighting the temperature of human nature (Shu, 2016).

In addition, female perspective, folk custom emotion and ecological care have gradually become emerging themes. Female artists use delicate brushwork to express female self-awareness and emotional experience, breaking the male-centered narrative mode in traditional figure painting. Folk custom themed works inherit local cultural characteristics, depicting rural customs and folk life, retaining the cultural root of Chinese ink painting (Zhang, 2025). The overall theme development presents a distinct humanistic characteristic: creation always regards people as the core, respects individual personality, cares about spiritual demands, and realizes the transformation from formal depiction to spiritual care.

3.2 Inheritance and Reconstruction of Brush-Ink Language and Linear Modeling

Brush and ink is the core soul of Chinese painting, and linear modeling is the basic modeling method of traditional ink figure painting. Contemporary ink figure painting always adheres to the inheritance of traditional brush-ink charm and linear aesthetic, and completes the modern reconstruction of modeling language on this basis (Wang, 2022). Traditional figure painting emphasizes "bone method with brushwork", uses lines of different thickness, dryness

and wetness to shape figure structure and express spiritual temperament. Contemporary artists retain the expressive value of lines, do not abandon the rhythm and charm of traditional lines, and integrate the structural awareness of Western modeling (Yu et al., 2024).

In realistic ink figure works, lines undertake both structural modeling and texture expression, combining the accurate volume sense of Western sketch with the free rhythm of traditional lines. In expressive and freehand creations, lines are further liberated from the constraint of objective modeling. Artists use unrestricted, twisted or sparse lines to vent subjective emotions, making lines have independent aesthetic value beyond figure modeling (Li, 2023). The application of ink wash also breaks the simple layered rendering mode of tradition. Contemporary creation uses ink diffusion, splash ink, accumulation ink and other techniques to form rich black-and-white gray hierarchical changes, creating a hazy and implicit artistic conception, and echoing the psychological state of contemporary people.

What is different from traditional painting is that contemporary ink figure painting weakens the absolute dominance of brush and ink appropriately, integrates light and shadow processing, plane composition and color layering of Western painting, making brush-ink language more adaptable to modern figure modeling and modern aesthetic vision (Wu, 2024). It neither rigidly adheres to the ancient brushwork formulas nor completely abandons the traditional ink charm, realizing the organic unity of inheritance and reconstruction.

3.3 Blending and Diversification of Artistic Styles

Style pluralism is the most prominent visual feature of contemporary ink figure painting. After long-term exploration and integration, four mainstream style categories have been formed: traditional freehand style, realistic integration style, expressive deformation style and experimental comprehensive material style (Chen, 2023). These styles develop side by side and blend with each other, breaking the single style pattern of traditional figure painting.

Traditional freehand ink figure painting inherits the artistic concept of "writing spirit rather than form" of literati painting, pursues concise brushwork and implicit artistic conception, focuses on capturing the charm of figures, and retains the most authentic traditional aesthetic temperament. Realistic integration style takes the "Xu-Jiang System" as the foundation, absorbs Western anatomical modeling and perspective principles, makes figure shape more accurate and vivid, and is good at depicting real life scenes and historical grand themes (Liu, 2023). Expressive deformation style breaks the shackles of objective reality, carries out subjective deformation and exaggeration on figure proportion and image, focuses on emotional expression and spiritual metaphor, with strong modern subjective consciousness.

Experimental ink figure painting takes breakthrough and innovation as the orientation, breaks through the traditional media limitation of ink and rice paper, integrates acrylic, mineral pigment, collage and other comprehensive materials, and absorbs the language of modern installation and abstract painting (Yuan, 2023). The boundary between painting and modern art is gradually blurred. The mutual penetration and integration of various styles make contemporary ink figure painting have rich aesthetic layers, and can meet the diverse aesthetic demands of different groups.

3.4 Innovation of Material Techniques and Modernization of Composition Layout

Contemporary ink figure painting has achieved obvious breakthroughs in material application, painting techniques and

composition layout, showing distinct modern formal characteristics. In terms of materials, in addition to the traditional Xuan paper, silk, ink and plant pigments, artists widely use leather paper, flax paper, mineral pigments and comprehensive synthetic materials (Liu, 2024). The application of new materials enriches the texture layering and color expression of works, changes the elegant and simple color tendency of traditional ink figure painting, and presents rich and colorful visual effects.

In terms of techniques, on the basis of inheriting traditional rubbing, dyeing and dotting techniques, contemporary creation introduces light and shadow shading, plane segmentation, space superposition and other modern painting techniques. The processing of picture space breaks the scattered perspective of traditional Chinese painting, and reasonably uses Western focal perspective and modern plane composition to enhance the spatial sense and visual impact of the picture (Shu, 2016). Some works adopt flat composition and blank space reconstruction, redefine the picture rhythm through the interspersed arrangement of figures and the contrast of virtual and real, making the composition more in line with modern people's aesthetic habits.

The modernization of material techniques and composition layout makes contemporary ink figure painting get rid of the rigid formula of traditional composition, enhances the formal sense and visual expression of works, and forms a formal language feature compatible with contemporary artistic context.

3.5 Cultural Identity Integration and Aesthetic Boundary Expansion

Contemporary ink figure painting is in the cross-cultural context of globalization, showing the characteristics of cultural identity integration and aesthetic boundary expansion. On the one hand, artists always adhere to the Chinese cultural root, inherit the aesthetic connotation of traditional Chinese painting such as implicit artistic conception, virtual-real coordination and artistic mood expression, and maintain the national character of ink figure painting (Zhang, 2025). On the other hand, it actively absorbs the beneficial components of Western classical art and modern art, integrates Western modeling concepts, emotional expression methods and creative thinking, and breaks the closed aesthetic boundary of traditional ink painting.

This cross-cultural integration is not simple copying and superimposition, but internal fusion based on cultural self-confidence. Contemporary ink figure painting neither blindly follows Western art trends nor rigidly adheres to traditional inertia, but forms a unique aesthetic system with both traditional cultural heritage and modern global artistic vision (Wang, 2022). It can not only express the spiritual connotation of Chinese culture, but also be understood and recognized by the international art circle, realizing the cross-cultural communication and spread of Chinese ink figure art.

4. Internal Driving Forces for the Formation of Contemporary Ink Figure Painting Characteristics

4.1 Social Transformation and Changes in Public Aesthetic Demand

The transformation of Chinese social structure and the acceleration of urbanization are the realistic driving forces for the formation of contemporary ink figure painting characteristics. The profound changes in people's life style, spiritual concept and aesthetic taste after the reform and opening up have made the traditional single and

formulaic ink figure creation unable to meet the diverse aesthetic demands of the public (Li, 2023). People begin to pay attention to individual life experience, emotional release and spiritual resonance, which promotes the continuous expansion of creative themes of ink figure painting and the continuous innovation of artistic language. The rise of urban culture, youth culture and mass culture also provides rich creative materials and aesthetic orientation for contemporary ink figure creation.

4.2 Cultural Exchange and Collision between Chinese and Western Art

The in-depth cultural and artistic exchange between China and the West is the external driving force for the stylistic diversification and language innovation of contemporary ink figure painting. Since the 20th century, Western realistic painting, modernism, postmodern art and other ideological trends have entered China, providing new reference dimensions and creative ideas for ink figure painters (Yu et al., 2024). Artists learn from Western modeling techniques, composition methods and emotional expression concepts, and reconstruct the visual language of ink figure painting. At the same time, the inheritance and revival of traditional Chinese culture in the contemporary era make artists re-examine the value of traditional brush and ink, forming a development pattern of "taking tradition as the root and Western learning as the reference".

4.3 Self-discipline Development of Ink Painting Art and Artist Subjective Consciousness Awakening

The self-evolution and internal inheritance of ink painting art itself are the inherent driving forces for the characteristic changes of contemporary ink figure painting. The development of art has its own logical law, and the defects of traditional ink figure painting in realistic modeling and modern emotional expression promote artists to carry out endogenous innovation (Chen, 2023). Meanwhile, the awakening of contemporary artists' subjective creative consciousness makes them break the shackles of traditional norms and official creation standards, pay attention to personal artistic personality and emotional expression, and pursue individualized artistic style and creative language, which directly promotes the pluralistic development of contemporary ink figure painting styles.

5. Development Predicament and Future Development Trend of Contemporary Ink Figure Painting

5.1 Main Development Predicament

While contemporary ink figure painting presents a prosperous pluralistic development trend, it also faces obvious development predicaments. First, the alienation of brush-ink spirit appears in some creations. Some artists blindly pursue Western formal language and material innovation, abandon the core charm of traditional brush and ink, leading to the loss of national cultural characteristics of works (Wu, 2024). Second, stylistic homogenization is prominent. A large number of creators follow the popular creation mode blindly, lack independent artistic thinking and personalized language, resulting in serious convergence of work style and theme. Third, the balance between innovation and inheritance is difficult to grasp. Some rigidly adhere to traditional formulas and lack the power of modern innovation; others over-emphasize experimental breakthroughs and break away from the cultural root of ink painting (Liu, 2023). Fourth, the depth of humanistic connotation is insufficient. Many works stay in the superficial depiction of formal images, lacking in-depth exploration of social reality and human spiritual essence.

5.2 Future Development Trend

In the future development process, contemporary ink figure painting will adhere to the development path of inheriting tradition, integrating foreign cultures and keeping pace with the times. Firstly, it will further return to the essence of traditional brush-ink spirit, take traditional aesthetic philosophy and cultural connotation as the foundation, and maintain the unique artistic charm and national character of Chinese ink figure painting (Zhang, 2025). Secondly, it will deepen the integrated innovation of Chinese and Western art, absorb modern artistic language and creative concepts with a more open vision, and form a more mature modern formal language system. Thirdly, it will strengthen the depth of humanistic care, root creation in real social life, dig into the spiritual state and survival predicament of contemporary people, and enhance the ideological connotation and artistic depth of works. Fourthly, personalized creation and differentiated style development will become the mainstream, and artists will establish unique artistic language based on personal perception and cultural accumulation, avoiding stylistic homogenization (Yuan, 2023). In addition, the integration of new media art and ink figure painting will become an important development direction, expanding the expression carrier and communication boundary of contemporary ink figure painting.

6. Conclusion

Contemporary Chinese ink figure painting is a modern artistic form evolved on the basis of traditional figure painting, under the influence of social transformation, Chinese and Western cultural exchange and artistic self-development. It forms prominent artistic characteristics in theme connotation, brush-ink language, style presentation, material techniques and cultural aesthetics, showing the development pattern of humanization, diversification, modernization and cross-cultural integration. Inheriting traditional brush-ink charm and linear aesthetic essence, it absorbs Western modeling concepts and modern artistic language, expands creative themes and formal boundaries, and carries the spiritual pursuit and cultural identity of contemporary Chinese people.

Although contemporary ink figure painting faces predicaments such as the loss of brush-ink spirit, stylistic homogenization and insufficient connotation depth, its overall development trend is positive and open. In the future creation and inheritance, contemporary ink figure painting needs to always adhere to the cultural root of traditional Chinese painting, take real life as the creative source, balance inheritance and innovation, tradition and modernity, nationality and internationality, continuously enrich artistic language and connotation expression, and maintain lasting vitality in the development of contemporary art and cultural inheritance. As an important part of Chinese contemporary art, ink figure painting will continue to record the times, express human feelings and inherit culture, and write a new chapter in the development of Chinese national painting.

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