

# Discussion on the Decorative Interest and Charm of Figure Paintings in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties of China

Shaoduan Zhang  
Luoyang Normal University  
Luoyang, China

**Abstract**—The Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties was a period of great change in Chinese history. Both the social history process and the cultural and academic spirit have experienced this unprecedented change. In the field of painting art, painting has changed from the original decorative painting form attached to various carriers into an independent form for people to appreciate. Scroll painting began to become a new form of painting. Developed to the Wei and Jin dynasties, both the figures and the composition of the figure painting had a new form. The formal beauty laws of the decorative paintings, such as balance and symmetry, contrast and harmony, change and unity, tempo and rhythm, were the highly summarized crystallization of the figure and spirit of the figure painting, revealing the classic decorative beauty.

**Keywords:** Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, figure painting, decorative beauty

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties were a period of great change in Chinese history. Both the social and historical process and the cultural and academic spirit had undergone the unprecedented change. Painting was transformed from folk craftsmanship to scholars' literati and officialdoms' paintings, and scroll painting began to become a new way of painting, from the original form of decorative painting attached to the carrier to an independent form for appreciation. The emergence of famous artists, as well as artistic practice and theoretical exploration, had promoted the transformation and change of painting, making painting art increasingly mature and independent. During that period, a group of outstanding artists such as Gu Kaizhi, Cao Buxing, and Lu Tanwei had emerged, and they had left a lot of immortal paintings to their posterity, especially characters such as "the Picture of The Ode of the River Goddess", "Admonitions of the Instructress to Court Ladies" and other representative figure painting works. The lines of the paintings in the works are smooth and flexible, the composition is full of figures, the characters are prominent, the characters are bright, the colors are colorful, and they are richly decorative.

Decoration is the enrichment and sublimation of the natural image, and is the result of the artist's deliberate

understanding of nature. Decoration is not simply the modification of the surface, but the unified and overall creation that is applicable to the appearance of beauty, content and form, value and aesthetics. Mr. Chen Zhifo, a modern art educator in China, once pointed out that "literally, decoration seems to have additional meaning and extravagance, which can give people a sense of extra value, but we must know that this is by no means the original meaning of decoration. No matter the structure or the plane, it must be aimed at achieving harmony. Therefore, the decoration effect can be obtained without decoration, but the original intention of the decoration is not lost, and it is not necessary to add a lot of decoration to be decoration." Decoration takes the pursuit of flatness, simplification, stability, exaggeration, rhythm, and idealization as the basic rules and methods for shaping its own image. Decoration itself is an art, and decoration makes art more perfect. It is an art form integrating aesthetics and visual art. From the development of Chinese figure painting till the Wei and Jin dynasties, both the figure and the composition of the figure have a moving form. In the picture, the formal beauty rules of decorative painting such as balance and symmetry, contrast and harmony, change and unity, rhythm and rhythm are figure painting, which is the highly summarized crystal of Xingshen reveals the classic decorative beauty.

## II. THE PROGRAMMATIC BEAUTY OF FIGURE MODELLING

Most of the paintings before Qin and Han Dynasties in China were attached to buildings or handicrafts, and the most primitive state of plastic art was decorative paintings, which emerged from decorative paintings aimed at independent aesthetics. They mostly sketch the outline of the object with rough and simple lines and then fill with colors. In other words, Chinese figure paintings began to be shaped in lines from the pre-Qin period. The painting "Dragon and Phoenix Lady" unearthed from the tomb of Chu in the Warring States period in Changsha in the 1950s is the earliest independent figure painting seen today. It has high artistic and archeological value. It depicts a noble woman praying for ascension. The figure in the painting is gorgeously dressed, with delicate face and slender waist. Its modeling is extracted from the previous character modeling method into a stylized

language form, which is rich in decorative meaning. Subsequent Chinese figure paintings continued this decorative painting feature, and continued to follow the flat stylized features of line modeling. Although to a certain extent, it had broken through the strong decorative style of the past, but the decorativeness of the figure painting that had just emerged was obvious compared with the latter figure paintings. The famous painting, "the Picture of The Ode of the River Goddess" by Gu Kaizhi, who was a famous painter from the Eastern Jin Dynasty, describes the love between Cao Zhi and Luo Shen. The picture unfolds with the development of the plot, depicting scenes such as carriages, boats, mountains and rivers, and immortals like Nvwa and Thunder God. The thin-cloth and wide-sleeved clothing and the sculptural style of the bones convey the character's mentality and emotions. This line form is called "Gossamer" in later generations. The shapes of the rocks and trees in the background of this painting are relatively stylized, without too much detail. In the painting, the mountains and trees are stained without any damage, and the mountain shape is also lacking changes. The shape of the trees is like a peacock, which is full of decoration. This is best reflected in his other handed-off picture, The Painting of Paragons Renzhi. The treatment of clothing lines in "The Painting of Paragons Renzhi" is not to describe these undulating and complex parts with realistic lines that change and twist, but to use slightly circular arcs of the same size, consistent from start to end in parallel or mutually enclosing to form a dense line group. This is not a group of lines that follow the direction of the regular clothing pattern, but a group of highly ordered and very rational combinations of lines. Layer by layer, like the lines of a decorative painting, the same lines appear repeatedly, forming a repetitive formation without letting people feel boring, making the entire picture full of decorative interest.

The modelling of Chinese figure painting is not completely realistic, but focuses on expressing the structure, proportion, and height of the characters in the technique. It does not emphasize the light and shade, and the effect of light and shadow. Because the figure painting is based on line modeling, this largely exerts the painter's subjective initiative, boldly exaggerating, generalizing, and refining the figure modeling, shaping at will, and "painting spirit by form". Although the external appearance of the shape is far from the appearance of the objective object, it expresses a unique charm of the shape in naivety and innocence, and the figure painting is based on the human as the main spirit. In Gu Kaizhi's painting theory, in particular, he proposed "painting spirit by form" in "Comments on the Excellent Paintings in Wei and Jin Dynasties", emphasizing "being lifelike" and "from communication to vividness", and in "On Painting", he proposed "shifting imagination to get magical achievement", etc., which have become the highest standards of aesthetics and creation of Chinese painting later. Most of the female images depicted in the figure paintings of the Wei, Jin, and the Northern and Southern Dynasties are dominated by ancient virtuous wives, martyrs, and fairies in myths and legends. When expressing these women who are far away from real life and have idealized colors, the artists' most

concern is how to publicize their inner spirits through the expression of the female external forms. For example, Gu Kaizhi's portrayal of Luoshen in "the Picture of The Ode of the River Goddess" based on Cao Zhi's "The Ode of the River Goddess". The female images in Gu Kaizhi's works are mostly clear bones, towering hair, long skirts sloshing, belts floating, elegant and solemn, which has shaped the typical beauty of women in China in that period. This kind of flat image free of objective, natural, dark light and shadow effects and second-dimensional space to represent three-dimensional is a generalization and refinement of objective character image, which has a common modeling concept with decorative arts.

### III. A COMPOSITION FORM THAT BREAKS TIME AND SPACE

Studying the decorative nature of figure paintings is actually a discussion of specific expressions of figure paintings, mainly the image expression concepts and its formal beauty expression characteristics, as well as the composition forms.

The choice of real images in Western picture composition has become a "managing position" in China, that is, the combination and arrangement of the positions of the images in the picture. The word "layout" is often used in this process. Different perspectives of space and time are used to form scatter perspective of the screen, and the main image of the screen is centered on "I". In "the Picture of The Ode of the River Goddess", the main characters repeatedly appear in different scenes and the image is full of change. The arrangement of heights, distances, and sizes is scattered and orderly. Its background stylized shape is full of decorative meaning. Although there is not much of it, it plays the role of dividing the picture and unifying the entire scroll. It shows the important formal beauty principle of contrast and harmony in modern decorative painting. The composition of "Admonitions of the Instructress to Court Ladies" is not like the "compressed" space-time continuity of "the Picture of The Ode of the River Goddess", but it is more freely combined according to each plot. The wonderful thing about composition is that through the extension of the "making force" of the scroll, guide the vision from right to left to immerse in the painting, use the plot to describe the emotional fluctuations caused by the changes in the narrative, and then introduce the vision from left to right to form a roundabout trend, full of momentum, full of spirit, and gathered together into a true spirit, which make people appraise, associate with a person, and can't get tired of it. Coupled with the line rhythm such as "silkworm spinning" and elegant colors of "slightly add embellishment without retouching", the entire picture reveals a decorative charm full of Chinese classical flavor.

### IV. THE BEAUTY OF TEMPO AND RHYTHM

Chinese figure paintings are shaped by lines. But the lines do not simply serve to define the contours, and they have their own independent beauty. Zhang Yanyuan said in his "Historical Famous Paintings of All Dynasties" that Gu Kaizhi's paintings are "tight and powerful, continuous and

lasting, cyclical and detached". Tang Hou of Yuan Dynasty described Gu Kaizhi in "Painting Book" that his use of pens is like "silkworm spinning" and "spring clouds floating and water flowing". At the same time, the arrangement and combination of lines is obviously subjective and artistic, dense and orderly, and highly in order.

Through the picture, it can be seen that Gu Kaizhi used "iron line drawing" of the same size, the same start and end, and slightly curved, compact, and well-rounded lines arranged together to express the figure's clothes. Gu Kaizhi is the representative of "dense body" with fine and continuous lines. The ancients said: "Being sparse that can pass a horse, being airtight that can't even pass the wind". Although Gu Kaizhi's lines are similar and dense, they do not make people feel oppressed and complicated, but they show a slow and natural feeling. If the character image on the screen is regarded as a planar composition of some spatial structure, then these lines completely meet the aesthetic requirements of the planar composition line. First of all, it has a certain sense of tempo. The repeated appearance of many identical lines in accordance with the law of folding clothes makes people feel a sense of rhythm contained in it. Secondly, it has a certain sense of rhythm. These lines are not rigid and unchanging simple lines, but each line has an arc shape. According to the appearance of each line, the role is different, and the radiants are different. The combination of these varied lines creates a rhythmic beauty. The envelopment of lines and lines forms a visual effect of "moving with wind". Lines are definite and immovable, their thicknesses are consistent, and they move toward a certain level, while the line group formed by the combination of lines is moving, windy and charming. [4] These seemingly simple lines are arranged and interspersed together to make the whole picture move instantly. It is tight, loose, sparse, and dense, and the lines are bent and changed, making the whole picture look like a beautiful melody.

Due to the requirements of specific plots, the images on the screen are generally closely related to the development of the plot. According to the advancement of the plot, the characters appearing at different times are cleverly arranged on the same screen. This actually means breaking the specific time and space, and freely composing the painting. In the painting, by arranging the height of the object up and down, in the course of time, in accordance with the regulation of people's "visual", one by one, to focus people's attention on the main parts of the picture. And in the picture, before the warmest part of the picture appears, the reader's mood is often calmed down and relaxed. The most important part of "the Picture of The Ode of the River Goddess" is "As flying fish guarding Luo Shen's carriage, the gods left with the clanging jade phoenix. Six dragons advanced side by side, calmly driving the cloud carriage. The whales leaped on both sides of the carriage, and the waterfowls circled around to guard it". The dragons, fish, and whales in this paragraph are all lively and vivid. Cloud carriage and clouds are flying, which shows a wild and immersive scene. And before that, after the lively scene of "Pingyi stopped the wind, Chuanhou stopped the waves, Fengyi struck the god drum, and Nvwa

made a clear singing", a serene and peaceful scene as a psychological adjustment is set up, "advance and retreat are unpredictable, like leaving and returning. Her eyes were bright and radiant, and her words have not been exported, but they have become fragrant." On the painting, Cao Zhi is opposite to Luo Shen, and he is ashamed to speak. In this scene, the painter moved from the original to the back of the picture. This method of intentionally changing the sequence of plot development is to find a psychological balance for the audience between the two lively scenes. Throughout the entire picture, the storyline promotes the movement and stillness of the picture, and the many characters in the painting are dense and orderly, appearing in an scattered but orderly transformation, making the picture and the contrast of movement and quietness. At the same time, the harmonization of the background makes the entire picture run through, making the whole picture full of rhythm and beauty.

#### V. IT IS FULL OF DECORATIVE COLORS

As the expressive color of the painting language, its significance in the modeling structure of the entire screen is not to reproduce the color relationship of the natural form, but to perform color configuration according to the structural relationship of the shape. The colors of traditional Western painting are determined based on optical principles. They are scientific and the painters have deep studies on color. In contrast, Chinese realistic figure paintings are free in color combinations, which are based on the needs and objects of the painters. The purpose is not to portray the figure but to portray the image in the author's mind. Therefore, the color of realistic figure paintings is highly decorative. During the Wei and Jin dynasties, the "six methods" had not yet appeared, so the colors of figure paintings in this period was mostly based on the painters' subjective aesthetics and needs. The coloring in the pre-Qin period was relatively simple and vivid, mostly flat painting on a large area, which makes the picture show an ancient, simple, and bright effect, with obvious decorative effects. By the Wei and Jin dynasties, this simple flat-coating had been improved to a certain degree, with the ink staining. However, due to the influence of murals, in the figure paintings of this period, they were slightly dyed, but most of them were flat-painted, giving a simple and clean feeling. Although the colors used in this period were relatively bright, and there are many flat paintings on a large area, people do not feel "vulgar" but have reached the current color standard for fine brushwork: "thin but not bleached, thick but not cloudy, heavy but not greasy, thick but not gorgeous, gorgeous but not vulgar, heavy but clear", forming the simple, clean and elegant national style of Chinese painting.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, as the "transition period" and the "aesthetic" formation period of painting, various forms of painting developed and merged with each other and influenced each other. Scroll paintings of characters based on "line, ink, and decorative color" are

drawn from other forms of painting and become a new form of painting. It integrates traditional Chinese decorative styles and finds its own development path, so it has a very strong vitality and has a profound impact on later even modern realistic figure paintings.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Chen Shouxiang, *Dynastic History of Chinese Painting — Paintings of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties* [M]. People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2000. (in Chinese)
- [2] Yu Jianhua, *Chinese Ancient Painting Theory* [M]. People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2004. (in Chinese)
- [3] Wang Ziming, *Evolution of Chinese Figure Painting* [M]. Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2006. (in Chinese)
- [4] Pan Tianshou, *History of Chinese Painting* [M]. Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1983. (in Chinese)
- [5] Zhang Tinglu, *The Artistic Design Thesis Collection of The Central Academy of Arts and Design* [M]. Beijing Arts and Crafts Publishing House, 1996. (in Chinese)