

The Horizons of Watercolor Painting Creation: Watercolor and Ink Wash in the Chinese Context

Jie He

Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, 11000, Mongolia

Abstract: This paper delves deep into the intricate connection between watercolor and ink wash within the Chinese context. By analyzing the influence of ink wash on watercolor in terms of techniques, colors, and artistic conceptions, it reveals the unique charm and value of their integration. It expounds on the distinctive artistic features of Chinese watercolor painting formed during the process of drawing on the schema language of ink wash, as well as its significant role in promoting the exchange and dialogue between Eastern and Western art.

Keywords: Watercolor painting; Ink wash painting; Chinese context; Artistic integration.

1. Introduction

Wu Shuyang, an elder - generation watercolor painter in China, once profoundly pointed out that "There are similarities between watercolor painting and Chinese painting in the use of water - based colors. Chinese people have a special affinity for this genre. Therefore, watercolor painting should be further developed based on the excellent traditions of Chinese painting, rather than being regarded as an appendage of oil painting and being relegated to a secondary position." This indicates that Chinese artists have started to think more deeply about watercolor painting and explore an artistic path that combines Chinese traditions with Western expressions. Due to the similarities in the use of water and colors between Western watercolor and Chinese ink wash, Chinese painters maintain a special affinity for watercolor painting, enabling watercolor painting to accommodate and absorb elements of traditional Chinese painting. This paper aims to comprehensively explore the multi - faceted relationship between watercolor and ink wash, highlighting the unique contributions of ink wash to the development of watercolor in the Chinese context.

2. The Ink Wash Schema as the Foundation of Watercolor Creation Horizons

2.1. The Conceptual Connotations of Ink Wash

As one of the important forms of traditional Chinese painting, ink wash painting showcases its unique artistic charm through the combination of water and ink and occupies a core position in the history of Chinese art. The concept of ink wash encompasses not only technical aspects but also cultural and philosophical connotations.

In terms of color application, in Chinese ink wash painting, the use of ink color is regarded as a more important means of expression than a variety of colors. For instance, Zhang Yanyuan mentioned in "Record of Famous Paintings through the Dynasties" that "With the application of ink, the five colors are complete." Ink colors are divided into five types: scorched, dark, thick, light, and cyan. Artists use these different ink colors to represent the changes in nature, thus transcending the single - presentation of specific phenomena.

In terms of techniques, the application of techniques in ink

wash painting is extremely rich. Common techniques include baking, dyeing, breaking, piling, and splashing. These techniques emphasize contingency and flexibility, aiming to create a natural and flowing artistic effect. Compared with the layer - by - layer superposition method in Western oil painting, ink wash painting pays more attention to the unique effects generated by the blending of water and ink. Wang Hui in the Qing Dynasty stated in "The Postscript of Qinghui's Paintings" that "When creating a painting, the brushstrokes should be thick and thin, the colors should be dark and light, and the use of water should be dry and wet. Only then can one be considered a good painter. If everything is uniform, it will be dull." That is, when creating a Chinese painting, the changes in brushstrokes, colors, and water are required to create a "dense and misty" atmosphere and convey an elusive color effect.

2.2. The Historical Development of Ink Wash

The Tang Dynasty was a crucial period for the transformation of the language of Chinese ink wash painting. Wang Wei's newly - created "splashed - ink" landscape technique began to emerge, greatly enhancing the expressiveness of landscape works. Zhang Yanyuan commented on Wang Wei in "Record of Famous Paintings through the Dynasties" as being "skilled in painting landscapes" and that "I have seen his broken - ink landscapes, with vigorous and neat brushstrokes." Wang Wei also pointed out in his "On Landscape Painting" that "In the art of painting, ink wash is supreme," emphasizing the important position of ink wash techniques in landscape painting creation.

The Song Dynasty was a glorious period for Chinese ink wash painting, especially in the field of landscape painting. A large number of painters such as Jing Hao and Guo Xi made significant progress in ink wash techniques. Through the expression of artistic conception and the accumulation of brush and ink, ink wash painting not only became technically mature but also reached a peak in artistic style and philosophical concepts.

2.3. The Artistic Conception and Emotional Expression of Ink Wash

Chinese ink wash painting emphasizes the creation of artistic conception and the conveyance of emotions. Artists often utilize the characteristics of ink wash, through

techniques such as leaving blank spaces and symbolism, to express their profound understanding and emotional resonance with natural landscapes. Such an artistic form requires the audience to participate in the emotional experience of the painting when appreciating it, enhancing the vitality of the work. Ink wash painting strengthens the relationship between humans and nature, embodying the philosophical thought of "following the way of nature." Through the flexible use of ink wash, artists not only reproduce the beauty of nature but also express their respect and awe for nature, making the connotation of the work more profound.

3. Similarities in Artistic Expressions between Watercolor and Ink Wash

3.1. The Utilization of the Characteristics of "Water" as a Medium

Both watercolor and ink wash painting use water as a creative medium. The fluidity and dilutability of water are the keys for both to create unique visual effects. In ink wash painting, the use of water allows the ink color to spread and penetrate on the paper, forming subtle color changes and a sense of hierarchy. Similarly, in watercolor painting, the application of water enables the pigments to flow and mix freely, creating soft gradations and natural transitions. Based on this, the two have similar techniques. The splashing - ink and dyeing techniques in ink wash painting emphasize the fluidity of water, making the painting present a vivid and dynamic atmosphere. In watercolor painting, the wet - on - wet and dry - brush techniques also utilize the interaction between water and pigments to create rich color layers and light - shadow effects. These similarities in techniques provide shared means of expression for the two art forms.

Chinese watercolor painter Liu Yi demonstrates his masterful use of "water" in his series of works. In the humid Jiangnan region of China, in order to keep the watercolor paper moist for a long time, he even installs a humidifier indoors to achieve the desired moist effect. The hazy and dreamy beauty of ballet dancers created by Liu Yi through the wet - on - wet watercolor technique gives the audience a wonderful visual experience. In his works, the use of blank spaces also creates a wonderful artistic conception, enabling the works to resonate with the viewers visually and emotionally.

3.2. The Use of the Brush as a Tool

In the field of Chinese watercolor painting, painters tend to use the traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting tool - the brush - for creation. This preference is not only based on the painters' familiarity and profound understanding of the brush but also because the water - storage characteristics and elasticity of the brush perfectly match the creative needs of Chinese painters. As a tool for inheriting Chinese calligraphy and painting, the cultural heritage of the brush naturally integrates into the creations of Chinese painters. The application techniques of the brush, including central - front, side - front, forward - front, reverse - front, concentrated - front, and scattered - front brushstrokes, as well as the brushwork of outlining, wrinkling, dotting, rubbing, and dyeing, all these schemas derived from the characteristics of the tool are skillfully used by Chinese artists.

Taking Chinese watercolor painter Liu Shouxiang as an example, in both his still - life paintings and landscape

paintings, it is obvious that he skillfully uses the brushwork of traditional Chinese ink wash painting, such as dot - dyeing and wrinkling - rubbing. In the application of brushwork, Liu Shouxiang pays attention to the rhythmic changes of yin - yang, virtual - real, depth, and weight. These not only show the unique features of Chinese watercolor painting in terms of modeling but also in terms of cultural concepts. In his works, through the intensity of ink color, the thickness of lines, and the virtual - real composition, the freehand and virtual - real beauty of Chinese watercolor painting are reflected. Liu Shouxiang's painting practice not only showcases the localization of Chinese watercolor painting but also provides a profound interpretation of the artistic characteristics of Chinese watercolor painting.

3.3. The Relevance of Color Application

Mr. Wu Guanzhong, a famous Chinese artist, incisively pointed out that "Watercolor, water and color, its characteristics lie in 'water' and 'color'. If the advantages of water are not utilized, it cannot match the expressive power of oil painting and pastel. If the characteristics of color are not brought into play, it is inferior to the verve of ink wash painting. The magic lies in the combination of water and color. Although color - ink painting also applies colors, it uses ink that differentiates into five colors for modeling, while watercolor mainly uses colors for modeling. Watercolor painting should give full play to its own characteristics." This passage accurately summarizes that the characteristics of watercolor not only lie in the utilization of "water" but also in the expression of "color."

In terms of color application, ink wash has also influenced the color use of Chinese watercolor painters to a certain extent. For example, Liu Shouxiang's early watercolor paintings presented a strong appearance of traditional Chinese painting schema, with plain colors as the main tone. He once said, "Having colors but not seeing colors, having light but not seeing light." However, during his visit to Europe in the 1990s, after fully experiencing the color appearance and artistic charm of European paintings and actively absorbing the characteristics of Impressionist paintings, he broke through the traditional schema concept in color, resulting in a huge change in his later watercolor painting appearance, that is, from "color - less" to "color - ful," and developed his own complete color spectrum with "elegance" as the inner essence.

Mr. Liu Shouxiang is located in the Chu cultural region rich in material cultural heritage. The color combination of red and black, which is the main tone of Chu lacquerware, not only sets off the elegance and richness of the lacquerware but also presents a strong decorative effect, making the utensils show a stable and dignified beauty. Mr. Liu Shouxiang also draws on the color combination of Chu lacquerware and integrates the classic combination of red and black into his watercolor painting creation, making the works present the unique style and profound cultural connotations of Chu culture in terms of color. The application of this color not only enriches the expressiveness of his watercolor paintings but also constructs his classic watercolor painting appearance and schema.

4. The Influence of Ink Wash Schema Language on Watercolor's Modes of Expression

4.1. The Imitation of Artistic Conception Creation

The ink wash schema language, which emphasizes artistic conception and emotion, has a profound impact on the modes of expression of watercolor. Artists strive to create an artistic atmosphere similar to that of ink wash painting through flexible watercolor blending methods and color selection. When holding the pen, the flow of watercolor brushstrokes interweaves with the brushwork of ink wash, forming an artistic - conception experience that transcends time and space, reflecting the profound observation and perception of nature.

Taking the watercolor works of Chinese painter Wang Yong as an example, celadon is not only a symbol of traditional Chinese culture but also an indispensable element in his artistic creation. In his paintings, the color of celadon is fresh and elegant. One more bit would be too strong, and one less bit would be too weak. As if with just a few casual strokes, he organically combines light, objects, emotions, and thoughts. This unique expression and interpretation of color and light - shadow make the works vivid, alive, quiet, and full of emotions. He borrows the form of Western painting and injects the concept of Eastern aesthetics, and the aesthetic taste of Chinese painters is fully revealed in his works.

4.2. The Application of the Blank - Space Technique

Leaving blank spaces is a very important technique in Chinese ink wash painting. Through exquisite blank - space design, artists not only provide a free - flowing space for the viewers' thinking and emotions but also make the works contain infinite imagination and profound meaning in simplicity. As the saying goes, "Black and white interact, and the areas without painting all become wonderful realms." This technique makes the works seem simple but full of profound artistic conceptions, allowing the viewers to feel a more abundant artistic connotation in the blank spaces.

The concept of "Bai Bi, Wu Jiu" is pointed out in the Bi hexagram of "The Book of Changes". "Bai Bi" refers to plain and unadorned decoration, that is, without external decoration and modification, emphasizing that things should maintain their most natural state. It pursues returning to nature, that is, the inner authenticity and natural beauty, rather than relying on external gorgeous decoration. In the context of "The Book of Changes", "Bai Bi" is interpreted as "the image of emerging from simplicity to refinement, and this is without fault." It means that starting from the essence, the naturally emerging culture and decoration are in a state that requires no worry, so it is said to be "without fault." In short, "Bai Bi" embodies an aesthetic concept of simplicity without losing connotations, emphasizing presenting the essential beauty of things in the most simple form.

In the practice of Chinese watercolor painting, this aesthetic concept is fully reflected. For example, in his watercolor painting "Xiaozhaxi's Winter", Chinese painter Xiong Libin uses the wet - on - wet method to spread gray - toned colors on the canvas. He uses a large area of "blank" painted with a small number of brushstrokes and colors to represent the snow - covered ground, snow - capped mountains, and the sky, providing the audience with endless

room for imagination and embodying the artistic effect of "silence is more powerful than words at this moment." This large - area gray - toned blank space is not only the presentation of the Chinese classical aesthetic schema but also an artistic interpretation of the philosophical thought of "Bai Bi, Wu Jiu." Through such color application, Xiong Libin's works not only enrich the expressiveness of watercolor painting but also construct his classic watercolor painting appearance and schema.

5. Conclusion

The ink wash schema language, as the profound foundation of Chinese culture, provides an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the development of watercolor painting in China. In terms of techniques, colors, and the creation of artistic conceptions, watercolor and ink wash are mutually integrated, forming the unique artistic characteristics of Chinese watercolor painting. This integration not only reflects the artists' recognition and inheritance of traditional culture but also demonstrates the achievements of the exchange and dialogue between Eastern and Western art in the context of globalization.

In the future, Chinese watercolor painting should continue to integrate modern art concepts on the basis of maintaining traditional aesthetics, and continuously innovate and break through. Through such continuous exploration and practice, watercolor painting will play a more important role in the Chinese art system, becoming an artistic bridge connecting the traditional and the modern, the East and the West, and promoting cultural exchange and dialogue.

References

- [1] Wu Shuyang. Some issues on watercolor painting creation [J]. Art, 1961(06): 24 - 26.
- [2] Zhang Yanyuan. Record of Famous Paintings through the Dynasties [M]. Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2011.
- [3] Zhang Yanyuan. Record of Famous Paintings through the Dynasties [M]. Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2011.
- [4] Wang Wei. On Landscape Painting [M]. Zhonghua Book Company, 2018.
- [5] Yu Jianhua. A History of Chinese Painting [M]. The Commercial Press, 2015: relevant chapters on the development of painting in the Song, Liao, and Jin dynasties.
- [6] Zong Baihua. Artistic Conception [M]. Peking University Press, 2004: relevant chapters on the analysis of the artistic conception of Chinese art.
- [7] Li Zehou. The Course of Beauty [M]. Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2007: relevant parts discussing the relationship between humans and nature in traditional Chinese art.
- [8] Liu Shouxiang. Watercolor Painting Tutorial [M]. Higher Education Press, 2016: content introducing watercolor painting techniques and the use of water.
- [9] Liu Yi's Watercolor Works Collection [M]. People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2010: works and elaboration of creative concepts by Liu Yi can be consulted.
- [10] Liu Shouxiang. Research on Watercolor Painting Art [M]. Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2018: chapters on Liu Shouxiang's creative concepts and technique applications.

- [11] Qiu Zhenzhong. 167 Exercises in Chinese Calligraphy [M]. Renmin University of China Press, 2005: content related to brushwork techniques of the brush.
- [12] Wu Guanzhong. I Owe My Art to Painting: The Autobiography of Wu Guanzhong [M]. People's Literature Publishing House, 2004: parts discussing the characteristics of watercolor art.
- [13] Liu Shouxiang. My Path in Watercolor Art [J]. Art Research, 2010(03): 45 - 49.
- [14] Research on the Art of Chu Lacquerware [M]. Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House, 2012: chapters related to the color characteristics of Chu lacquerware.
- [15] Wang Yong's Watercolor Works Collection [M]. Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2015: works and elaboration of creative concepts by Wang Yong can be consulted.
- [16] Zong Baihua. The Realm of Art [M]. The Commercial Press, 2011: theoretical elaboration on the creation of artistic conception.
- [17] Huang Shouqi, Zhang Shanwen. Annotations and Translations of "The Book of Changes" [M]. Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2018: annotations related to the Bi hexagram.
- [18] Xiong Libin's Watercolor Works Collection [M]. Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2016: display and interpretation of "Xiaozhaxi's Winter" and related works.