

Bei-hong Xu's "Transformation from the Skill to the Ideal"

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Abstract: The formation of artists' ideas is inseparable from the social background, which cannot be separated from the specific historical environment. In Bei-hong Xu's era, "the spreading of western learning introduced into China" was a major social trend. The western realistic spirit was respected by elites from various disciplines, and became the direction which guided the transformation of traditional Chinese painting. Influenced by this thought, Bei-hong Xu started to learn western realistic painting and determined to improve Chinese painting. Finally he realized the "transformation of Realism from the skill to the ideal". This paper starts from the background of the times and analyzes the formation and maturity of Bei-hong Xu's artistic viewpoint, so as to explain the "transformation from the skill to the ideal". Then authors return to the background of the times and analyze the significance of that transformation.

1. Introduction

Bei-hong Xu was born in 1895. The year marked the end of the First the Sino-Japanese War and witnessed the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which greatly deepened Chinese peoples' suffering. Under the pressure of semi-colonialism and semi-feudalism, how to save the nation from peril became the theme of the era. Influenced by the thought of "the spreading of western learning introduced into China", people began to attach importance on the "humanistic pragmatism" function of cultural and artistic works. "Saving China through culture" became the fashion of the times. You-wei Kang, Qi-chao Liang, Du-xiu Chen and Yuan-pei Cai took the lead in raising the banner of "Art Revolution" and advocating the transformation of Chinese painting through Western painting methods.

As the leader of the Hundred Days' Reform in 1898, You-wei Kang was also the first person who put forward the reform of traditional Chinese painting. You-wei Kang directly pointed out in his Preface to the Collection of Paintings in Wan Mu Cottage that "Chinese modern paintings are in great decline." You-wei Kang believed that the art code of "study style" in traditional Chinese painting was obviously contrary to the spirit of science. He highly praised the paintings of the Five Dynasties and the Song Dynasty, but criticized the paintings of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Du-xiu Chen, one of the leading figures in the New Culture Movement, also made similar criticisms on traditional Chinese painting. In *Art Revolution: Reply to Answer to Cheng Lv*, he proposed that we should adopt the western realistic spirit to improve Chinese painting. Similarly, Yuan-pei Cai, the president of Peking University, pointed out in his article *The Evolution of Fine Arts* that "Chinese pictures are the most developed in fine arts, but they are less created and more imitated. Western painters always create new styles. Their paintings about the air, the light and shadow, the distance relation and the characteristics of people are much more advanced than ours."

In the society at that time, the views of You-wei Kang, Du-xiu Chen, Yuan-pei Cai and other cultural elites represented the opinions of a large number of people. At the same time, their ideas exerted a profound impact on the young Bei-hong Xu. That influence was also deepening in Bei-hong Xu's study and creative practice. Although their views were only artistic propositions, they embodied social consciousness. It reflects that the traditional "ideal" of Chinese society absorbed "skills" from West culture. That is the so-called "transformation from the skill to the ideal".

2. Conceptual Construction: How to “Transform from the Skill to the Ideal”

Bei-hong Xu’s artistic viewpoint of “realism” was not achieved overnight. The construction of his “realism” theory was gradually completed with his artistic practice. This paper divides the formation of Bei-hong Xu’s artistic concept into four periods: childhood and the enlightenment period of his self-study, the period of knowing You-wei Kang and teaching at Peking University, the period of studying in France and the period of mature concept, so as to explain how Bei-hong Xu embodied the consciousness of “skills” in Western art into the traditional Chinese “ideal” in detail.

2.1 Childhood enlightenment and the tortuous learning experience

Bei-hong Xu’s enlightenment teacher should be his father, Da-zhang Xu, who was a private school teacher. Da-zhang Xu learnt painting by himself. Bei-hong Xu once recalled that his father had “keen observation and creative understanding... He liked to paint what he saw, such as chickens, dogs, cows, sheep, villages, trees, cats and flowers. He was especially good at painting characters.” In 1905, Da-zhang Xu drew a painting named Instruction, which had strong characteristics of traditional Chinese painting and was somewhat different from the western “realism”. But the faces of characters were relatively realistic. Bei-hong Xu called it as “a creation without formers”. From this point of view, Bei-hong Xu’s father also had important influences on the formation of Bei-hong Xu’s painting concept.

Bei-hong Xu’s life was not always so smooth and stable. In 1908, the teenager had to travel with his father because of floods in his hometown. But for Bei-hong Xu, it was also a blessing in disguise. In 1909, 14-year-old Bei-hong Xu met Tie-sheng Cao in Liyang. Cao gave him a copy of the European master’s painting, which was also the first Western painting Bei-hong Xu saw in his life. In 1913, Bei-hong Xu taught at Pengcheng Middle School. He received a copy of one famous Louvre painting brought back by his fellow countryman Zi-ming Xu. Subsequently, Bei-hong Xu entered the Shanghai Academy of Painting and Art, taught at Yixing Women’s Normal School, and was employed by Hartong Academy of Painting. In such a short period of years, Bei-hong Xu successively contacted some copies of Western paintings and made a brief study on them, thus gaining a preliminary understanding of Western paintings.

Bei-hong Xu’s father had buried the seed of “realism” in heart since he was a child; his experience later in life promoted Bei-hong Xu to embark on the way of studying “realism” from Western painting.

2.2 Formation of ideas under the guidance of masters

1916 was an important turning point for Bei-hong Xu. This year, Bei-hong Xu became a student of You-wei Kang and was hired as a painting teacher of You-wei Kang’s “Zhai Museum”. You-wei Kang praised the realistic techniques of Western painting and the “court painting” of the Six Dynasties, Tang and Song Dynasties. Bei-hong Xu was immersed in the folk realistic tradition from an early age, and had contacted many western paintings in his previous experience. So Bei-hong Xu began to strive to become a practitioner of this idea after he met You-wei Kang. Thus, in May 1918, Bei-hong Xu delivered a famous speech entitled The Method of Improving Chinese Painting, and put forward his declaration of using Western painting concepts to improve Chinese painting.

Through Bei-hong Xu’s painting Celebration to the Sixty Year Old Birthday of Nan-hai Kang during this period, we can see that Bei-hong Xu still referred to traditional painting methods of Chinese folk portraits in his early paintings. If we judge Bei-hong Xu’s paintings at that time with the standards of traditional paintings or western paintings, it would be a bit awkward. However, it did not affect You-wei Kang’s affection and esteem for Bei-hong Xu, because Kang believed in Bei-hong Xu’s potential. Before Bei-hong Xu went to Japan, You-wei Kang gave him the inscription of “vivid and spiritual painting”. From this it can be seen, You-wei Kang had earnest expectations for Bei-hong Xu.

During this period, Bei-hong Xu was deeply influenced by You-wei Kang, and held the same opinion on the improvement of traditional Chinese painting with Kang. However, this kind of influence and proposition had limitations. In terms of Bei-hong Xu’s experience at that time, he had

only vague understanding on the history and theoretical knowledge of Western paintings. At that time, many propositions put forward by Bei-hong Xu were only speculations on the basis of some practical experience. For example, he once put forward that “in future painting, dark places should be more than bright places. It seems that the dark places can be drawn at first, and then the bright places can become visible through mineral color application.” “It seems” showed Xu’s speculation. Therefore, Bei-hong Xu’s artistic view of “realism” was still in the exploratory period.

2.3 Studying in France

Bei-hong Xu really understood the spirit of Western painting, and gradually established his own artistic concept and discourse power in the domestic art circles after he went to France to study painting. Bei-hong Xu said, “So I carefully studied the works of the ancients and did not paint for months. Then I gradually learned to draw these pictures.” Until 1919, when he arrived in Paris, France, Bei-hong Xu consciously cleared up the unorthodox Western painting techniques he had learned before and began to really understand Western art. In 1921, he recorded what he saw, heard, learned and felt when he was in France in *To the Dawn Art Club*. In the article he mentioned, “Aesthetics is to study the difference of human’s preferences; archaeology is to study history through antiquities”. It can be seen that Bei-hong Xu not only learned western painting skills in France, but also made a systematic study on the history of Western art. Therefore, this period of study in France can be called as “tracing back to the origin”.

At this stage, Bei-hong Xu’s understanding and concept of art have reached a certain depth and height; his understanding of Western art history also changed. Bei-hong Xu no longer took it for granted that “modern European painting has been perfect to the extreme” as he did in 1918. He began to believe that “art in the world flourished in the Greek era more than 400 years ago”. However, Bei-hong Xu’s viewpoint at this time was consistent with his opinion in the *Beauty and Art* issued in 1918. So it is more appropriate to call it sublimation than a change of concept. At that time, Bei-hong Xu believed that the “art” of technology was the necessary preparation for “beauty”. Only through the “realistic” method can we finally achieve the height of “freehand brushwork”. The so-called “transformation from the skill to the ideal” is also the relationship between “art” of “realism” and “beauty” of “freehand brushwork”.

2.4 Returning home to clear up confusion and form mature concepts

Bei-hong Xu’s idea of improving Chinese painting with Western “realism” spirit never wavered after its establishment. But after he returned to China and faced the situation of domestic painting circles, this view became more complex and mature. In 1928, after several years of widespread dissemination, the Western painting ideas were accepted by the Chinese painting circles. At that time, the main contradiction faced by domestic painters was no longer the antagonistic relationship between Chinese painting and Western painting, but the different treatment between diversified schools of Western painting. Artists held realistic Western painting ideas and the modern western painting ideas launched a debate. At that time, Bei-hong Xu published *Confusion, Confusion without Solution* reply to Zhi-mo Xu and Beihong’s *Statement* successively, which marked the basic establishment of Bei-hong Xu’s “realism” theory.

Bei-hong Xu mentioned in *Beihong’s Statement* that “art is not easy; we should not follow the fashion or be contented with small achievements”. Such edification influenced Bei-hong Xu’s aesthetic idea, promoting him to form the serious attitude toward arts. Bei-hong Xu believed that people who acted boldly without profound research could not be regarded as creators; the correct methods should be start from the objective reality and observe objects without bias. So Bei-hong Xu firmly opposed the painting idea of modernism.

At that time, Bei-hong Xu did not only regard “realism” as the “art of wisdom” with scientific spirit, but also linked this style with virtues and the spirit of seeking truth in Chinese tradition. At this that, “realism” was really transformed from “the skill” to “the ideal”.

3. Returning to the Age: The Meaning of “Transformation from the Skill to the Ideal”

Nowadays, many articles on art education inherit and promote Bei-hong Xu’s artistic conception, but there are more and more critiques on his viewpoints. A typical example is Guan-zhong Wu, who criticized Bei-hong Xu was “blind to beauty”. However, we must analyze Bei-hong Xu’s aesthetic thought from the historical background so as to get an objective evaluation.

After studying in France and returning home, Bei-hong Xu’s aesthetic thought of “realism” grew from a practical footnote of You-wei Kang’s opinions to his own theoretical viewpoint with an ideological core. Bei-hong Xu’s “realism” is different the traditional realism in western art history. More precisely speaking, his “realism” is a kind of recognition on the western modern ideological and theoretical system under the special background of modern China and under the impacts of Western politics, military affairs and culture. It is precious because the “realism” advocated by Bei-hong Xu embodies the “beauty” of the whole Western civilization since Greece. As long as there is an exact “virtue”, it can be appreciated. To a certain extent, it retains the confidence of traditional Chinese culture. Like Bei-hong Xu’s opinion mentioned in *Confusion without Solution*, we need to “independent advance and never take up or adopt others’ thoughts instead of using our own”.

What is “transformation from the skill to the ideal”? It does not only represent Bei-hong Xu’s usage of Western “realism” to revise the traditional Chinese painting ideas, but also represents a correct and positive learning attitude of Chinese people in that era, facing the impact of the Western waves. Moreover, it is a positive countermeasure adopted by China when facing the invasion of foreign cultures, just as people in the Tang Dynasty accepted the skills of “Hu culture” but kept the cultural core of “ideal”, thus making Chinese culture more diversified. Today, in the face of Western cultural impacts, we should not lose our cultural confidence for the core of our culture.

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