

# Expressions of the Freehand Brushwork Spirit in Fine Brushwork Paintings

Xiaohui Lei

Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China

**Keywords:** fine brushwork paintings; the freehand brushwork spirit; line drawing; the five-color view; drawing colors adhere to the type.

**Abstract:** The Chinese fine brushwork painting is inseparable from the “freehand brushwork” spirit no matter how the forms and contents are changed. The “freehand brushwork spirit” is a concept of artistic creation in China. It is reflected in fine brushwork paintings through line drawing and the color usage, which is confirmed by the analysis of line and color drawing in this paper. Through strengthening the expression of the “freehand spirit”, fine brushwork paintings show the aesthetic essence of traditional Chinese paintings. The “freehand brushwork spirit” is not only the essence of Chinese art, but also the essence of the world art since it enriches the treasure house of world cultural heritage.

## 1. Introduction

The Chinese fine brushwork painting is inseparable from the “freehand brushwork” spirit no matter how the forms and contents are changed. How do the fine brushwork paintings show the “freehand spirit” in the visual language of pictures? This is the focus of this paper. Classical works of art have strong national and era characteristics, which can stand the test of history. “Freehand brushwork spirit” is not only the essence of Chinese art, but also the essence of the world art. It is our responsibilities to spread the concept of “freehand brushwork spirit” to more parts of the world, which will help more people to understand the Chinese fine brushwork paintings. There are two major factors of fine brushwork paintings: line drawing and color usage. The two factors are discussed in this paper.

## 2. Line Drawing in Fine Brushwork Paintings Expresses the Spirit of Freehand Brushwork

### 2.1 The development of fine brushwork line drawing

Fine brushwork is a kind of painting gradually formed and developed under the influence of the traditional Chinese culture. Early Chinese paintings are not divided into fine brushwork and freehand brushwork. In the Neolithic Age about seven or eight thousand years ago, our ancestors used lines to represent some fragmented scenes in their daily life. Prehistoric primitive rock paintings and pottery decorative paintings are the oldest paintings. The characteristics of these early paintings are inherited by later generations of Chinese paintings, forming a modeling basis with line drawing as the main form of expression. In primitive social activities, Chinese ancestors used simple points and lines to depict and decorate their lives. From unearthed cultural relics it can be found, the main lines they used are relatively simple. They often used short straight lines, short arcs and wedge-shaped lines which are simple, vivid, powerful and not smooth, reflecting the naivety and simplicity of the primitive art. With the development of social and historical process, line drawing underwent great changes. The line drawing style became more complex, which could be divided into thick and thin parts. Line drawing also had elasticity and certain tension. Lines on the stone and brick portraits of the Han Dynasty are mature, smooth, dynamic, and had independent aesthetic effects.

Line drawing made great progress in Wei and Jin Dynasties as well as the Southern and Northern Dynasties. With the diversification of features and themes, line drawing became full and straight. Line drawing in Tang Dynasty developed in an all-round way, and became more mature and self-confident. The achievements of line drawing in Tang Dynasty were also reflected in murals,

such as the Dunhuang grotto murals and murals in Tang tombs. In the Song Dynasty, the expression of line drawing was more accurate and vivid. The artistic expression became stronger. Gong-lin Li, a painter, made great achievements in line drawing. Line drawing works became independent and eventually evolved into a special kind of painting. The achievements of line drawing in Yuan Dynasty were represented by Yongle Palace murals. Line drawing in Yongle Palace murals was strong and powerful, and was called as “iron lines”. Then the line drawing was further developed. The Ming Dynasty inherited line drawing skills, but there was little development. In Qing Dynasty, the line drawing declined. The subjects of paintings were separated from the reality and simply imitated the tradition.

Line drawing has found its own style and formed a complete system in the development process. The development of line drawing is not only the accumulation of painting history, but also the embodiment of traditional Chinese painting spirit. Thus, the study and reference of ancient line drawings will undoubtedly promote the development of contemporary fine brushwork painting.

## **2.2 Line-drawing in fine brushwork has the attribute of freehand brushwork**

The modeling of Chinese fine brushwork is based on line drawing, which is Abstracted and generalized by the painter. Therefore, the line drawing of fine brushwork is not the “reproduction” of objective things, but the subjective “expression” of painters’ inner spirit. So it can be said that the line drawing of fine brushwork has the attribute of freehand brushwork. Line drawing is one of the main characteristics of fine brushwork which makes it different from other kinds of Chinese paintings. The development of line drawing is the development of Chinese painting. Although “painting and calligraphy are of the same origin”, the development of Chinese painting is earlier than that of the calligraphy. In the evolution of Chinese calligraphy from oracle bone inscriptions to regular scripts, lines, as the structure of strokes, formed independent aesthetic values. The art form with lines as the main carrier of appreciation took its shape. In the creation of calligraphy works, the stress, speed, outlines and setbacks of the writer’s motion, as well as the intensity, wetness convergence and dispersion of the ink, can deeply influence the changes of fine brushwork, and thus produce unique visual aesthetic senses and interests.

Line drawing plays an important role in expressing the texture, space, rhythm and emotion of the brushwork. The density, thickness, rigidity and softness of strokes, as well as the setbacks and turning points of lines are used to express spatial relations, body structures, perspective changes, as well as the states, shapes and textures of objects. The writing also makes lines more complex and diverse, and increases the “freehand” factors of fine brushwork.

Line drawing in fine brushwork shows the image through the integration of subjective and objective features, and has the function of highlighting the characteristics of the object. Line drawing reposes the painter’s feelings, experience and accomplishments. Line drawing is lifeless, but painters can express their feelings freely through line drawing, which brings the vitality to line drawing paintings. Line drawing, with the function of “independent aesthetics”, carries the spirit of Chinese art. As the subjective emotional language of the painter, lines in fine brushwork can display the artists’ feelings when the objective images are freely displayed, which makes the artistic images depicted in the pictures have their own emotions. That is the spirit of freehand brushwork.

Line drawing creates artistic images. It is the main factor of Chinese fine brushwork modeling and decorative language. The line drawing of fine brushwork is neither photographic realism nor passive objects descriptions, but the subjective control. Line drawing in fine brushwork has the same aesthetic values as calligraphy lines, which is also of great significance to the beauty of form and rhythm.

When drawing rock paintings, all human ancestors chose the form of line drawing. In the course of later development, Chinese ancestors inherited, continued and creatively developed line drawing. The Chinese ancestors created a very poetic name for line drawing, the “white sketch”. Line drawing is a process in which people understand and express objective things, and care for their minds and perceive their own emotions at the same time. It is produced by practice and summary, and can reflect the world outlook of the harmony between man and nature. The free use of line

drawing also reflects the philosophical thinking and the cultural accomplishment of painters. Line drawing was endowed with the spirit of humanistic freehand brushwork by Chinese ancestors.

According to archaeological discoveries, a large number of patterns, mythological stories and original carvings are found in line drawings. In archaeological remains, many patterns on objects are associated with the living environment and the primitive spirit. The original images found today are basically depicted by line drawing. The original images, graphics and symbols are not simply decorative “aesthetics”, but the integration of primitive religion and witchcraft beliefs. The formation of the early Chinese painting style was deeply influenced by line drawing. Line drawing can freely express the painters’ thought, which is also one of the reasons for the freehand brushwork attribute of Chinese painting.

### **3. Color Usage in Fine Brushwork Paintings Expresses the Spirit of Freehand Brushwork**

#### **3.1 The traditional five-color view**

The reason why human eyes can see objects and the colorful world is because of the role of light. Science has proved that the color of all things in the world changes with the change of light color. Fine brushwork pays attention to the expression of inherent color, generally does not consider the influence of light source and environment.

Chinese ancestors’ view of color is closely related to their living environment. It originated from our ancestors’ knowledge on the nature and the comprehensive culture. The recognition of the five colors, namely red, green, yellow, white and black, were accumulated and refined by our ancestors in their lives. The color theory of “five-color view” was gradually formed. The earliest record of the “five colors” concept is in the Rites of Zhou. The book records, “paintings have five kinds of colors.” According to archaeological findings, four painted curtains were unearthed in the No. 2 Yin Tomb of Luoyang. These four painted curtains have four colors: black, white, red and yellow. This shows that the silk paintings in the Shang Dynasty initially reflected the concept of “five colors”. The traditional concept of color had a great influence on the artistic spirit of the Chinese nation; the development history of color was synchronized with the history of Chinese art. Color usage started with painting at the same time, which can be proved in primitive rock paintings.

Ancient Chinese people’s “five-color view” is related to “the Yin-yang five elements method”, the “five tastes”, “the five internal organs”, and the five directions of “east, south, west, north and middle”. The Chinese patriarchal hierarchy, philosophical thoughts, ethics, etiquette and religions are also related to color. The formation of the “five-color view” promoted the establishment of the unique color theoretical system and deepened Chinese people’s understanding of color. The understanding of the color system reflects the value judgment, political and economic conditions, military strength, social morality, literature and art and the ideology of feudal dynasties. The concept of five colors had a very wide impact on society. From people’s clothing, food, shelter, transportation and etiquette to painting, handicrafts and traditional culture, all aspects of daily life were affected by the concept of five colors. In the Western Zhou Dynasty, people had a deeper understanding of color, and began to tell “pure colors” with “secondary colors”. “Pure colors” are the five colors. The five primary colors can only be extracted from raw materials; “secondary colors” can be obtained by mixing different “pure colors”. The concept of five colors not only plays a positive role in promoting the development of traditional colors and the prosperity of national art, but also promotes the formation of artistic styles.

#### **3.2 Drawing color adheres to the type**

Another important element of fine brushwork is color, which is also an important part of the artistic appearance, style and realm of paintings. Color in fine brushwork also shows the freehand spirit. Color is the basic element in the original Eastern and Western art.

The idea “drawing color adheres to the type”, or “sui lei fu cai”, was put forward by He Xie in his Ancient Paintings Records in the Southern Qi Dynasty, and then became an important criterion for artists to design colors. “Sui” means design, judgment or attachment. “Lei” means to divide

things into Abstract categories through their common characteristics or similar features; “fu” means endowing and expressing. From the literal meaning of “sui lei fu cai”, we can say that the theory of coloring in Chinese painting is the subjective expression of painters’ thoughts and feelings. The essence of “drawing color adheres to the type” is to design colors subjectively, and has the spirit of freehand brushwork. It respects objectivity and has its own subjectivity, which is in line with the spirit of Chinese culture and art. Color plays an ornamental role in the development of China. On one hand, it is relatively free, stylistic and subjective. The color concept of fine brushwork is the same as that of Chinese art. It is evolved from the world outlooks and philosophical outlooks of our ancestors. “Drawing color adheres to the type” is the generalization and summary of Chinese freehand brushwork spirit from the aspect of colors in fine brushwork. It represents the formation of the unique thinking concept of Chinese paintings.

The concept of “drawing color adheres to the type” makes the color of fine brushwork unaffected by external factors such as light source. Painters use planar color blocks to express the image. Through the coordination and unification of decorative color blocks and ink lines, a distinctive Chinese-style color expression system is established. Chinese painting has strong subjectivity, flexibility and freedom in color design. It is perceptual and has strong individuality. The painter can decide the classification and the expression of color according to their thoughts and perception. The expression of subjective colors is the need of creating pictures, not the restoration of true natural colors. Thus, the images and themes of fine brushwork paintings can become more prominent, typical and distinct.

### **3.3 The development of color usage in contemporary fine brushwork**

Contemporary people’s feelings of color cannot be the same as our ancients’ experience. The explosive entry of colorful information naturally affects painters’ feelings. How to develop new ideas and show new colors is the new mission of contemporary fine brushwork painters. The pigments of contemporary paintings also change greatly. Compared with traditional fine brushwork paintings, now there are much more choices in pigment selection. These changes greatly enrich the demands of fine brushwork painters, and help them to develop new ideas and new ways of expression. It makes people feel that fine brushwork still has a lot of expectations and the unlimited development space.

The aesthetic concept and world culture in the era of network information have a wide influence, which makes the color elements of fine brushwork richer and more diverse. The use of color forms is freer. New materials, pigments and techniques provide readers with fresh visual experiences. The color of fine brushwork bears the main function of picture effect. It is the main language style of fine brushwork and the main element of the theme. Because of the natural emotional tendency of colors, the color of fine brushwork determines the emotional tone of the picture. New materials and tools provide a strong guarantee for the innovation, which is also an important reason for the gradual transformation of fine brushwork from the traditional style to the modern style, and an important reason for the great development and changes of the values, contents, forms and means of fine brushwork paintings nowadays.

## **4. Conclusion**

Like line drawing, fine brushwork also has independent aesthetic values. Contemporary fine brushwork has various possibilities of development in the process of picture creation. It reflects the great inclusiveness and plasticity of fine brushwork, and is especially suitable for the creation of pictures with great themes, big scenes, large amount of information and strong compatibility. It reflects the rich language, profound contents, various themes and diversified thinking modes of fine brushwork, which makes it different from the traditional fine brushwork. There are little difficulties in the material and technical aspects of contemporary fine brushwork; the key to improve fine brushwork is the transmission of painters’ true feelings, that is, the spirit of freehand brushwork.

After thousands of years of development, fine brushwork has undergone great changes from visual effects to techniques and materials, and from contents to forms. In the contemporary world

where cultural and artistic exchanges are frequent, it is necessary for us to explore, to study and to analyze whether fine brushwork still has the “freehand spirit” and traditional characteristics. Now the fine brushwork painting is prosperous, and there is a trend of drawing delicate, sweet pictures with exquisite materials; fine brushwork is becoming more and more vulgar. Though the creation of fine brushwork paintings is complex and must be realistic, the painter needs to integrate his subjective will and feelings into the picture. It is necessary for us to strengthen the expression of freehand brushwork spirit, so that fine brushwork can inherit the traditional aesthetic essence of the Chinese painting, and represent the unique characteristics of Chinese art in the diversified development. What’s unique for a nation is also precious for the world. “Freehand brushwork spirit” is a concept held by Chinese artists in the process of creation, and also a catharsis of the painter’s life experience. The “freehand brushwork spirit” is the gene of Chinese arts. It influences music, architecture, opera and painting, and also enriches the treasure house of world cultural heritage.

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