

## The Innovative Development of Mural Painting and Public Art Discipline Construction

Xiao Ding

Department of Mural Painting and Synthetic Materials Painting, Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, Wuhan, P.R. China

dingykyk1979@163.com

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**Abstract:** In the contemporary era, mural painting and public art serves as one of the most important carriers that help strike a balance between promoting the ideological progress of society and meeting the cultural needs of the people. Aiming at the exploration of effective discipline development and expanding the disciplinary boundary, this paper adopts the research method of case study and focuses on exploring ways to innovate mural art education. The paper finds that, further development of the discipline can be conducted from a number of areas, including wider involvement in public-space-related construction practice at municipal and provincial level, theory development and talent cultivation. In face of the growing demand of the public, it is highly imperative that higher educators at administrative level consider how mural painting and public art can make use of the opportunity, expand the boundary of the discipline and further explore its depth.

### 1. Introduction

Mural painting is an old form of art that can be traced back to ancient times when we explore the origin of art. It is one of the rare pieces that capture the early human's artistic imagination and social creativity. Public art, as an art concept arising from the construction of modern cities, includes not only art forms such as frescoes, sculptures, decorations, and behaviors, but also emphasizes the correlation of public life, that is, publicity (Zhang Di, 2012). It expands the diversified ways of expression, featuring both a strong comprehensive nature and a distinctive era.

The Department of Mural Painting and Synthetic Materials Painting of Hubei Institute of Fine Arts was established in 2001. On the one hand, it has a solid foundation in painting. Since the end of the 1970s, mural art works represented by artists from Hubei Province, together with the mural painting at the Capital Airport, has developed and formed its own artistic characteristics and had a great impact in China. On the other hand, since 2012, the development of public art has gradually improved, and a complete teaching system is formed. Hubei Institute of Fine Arts thus became the first and only teaching body of mural painting and public art major in Central China (Ding Xiao and Ye Qing, 2016).

Through more than two decades of discipline construction and development, mural painting and public art at Hubei Institute of Fine Arts has become a new major with a complete and high-quality curriculum system. Relying on the profound inheritance of the school's painting discipline, we have integrated the innovative advantages of the design discipline, and are highly rich and inclusive in artistic connotation. It aims to promote the construction of contemporary urban culture and serve the public and economic development. From a practical point of view, modeling arts dig into the contemporary public space, and it has a broad space for expansion.

It is also based on this background of development that on the one hand we have an open degree of discipline extension and can actively embrace a bright future of discipline development; yet on the other hand, we lack the reference for discipline systems and templates for innovative development, which become the obstacles to disciplinary development. In view of current situation of the weakness in the construction of mural painting and public art major and the era's demand at

the present stage, it is urgent to propose ideas and innovative development for the discipline construction that can meet the current situation and contribute to long-term planning.

## **2. Social Demands of Mural Painting and Public Art**

At present, artworks of mural painting and public art exist in the public space around us, affecting and shaping people's quality of life and lifestyle, and play an important role in the contemporary urban environment and cultural advancement. Since the 1980s, the frescoes and public art creations by Chinese artists begun to take shape, formed Chinese characteristics and exerted a tremendous impact (Ding Xiao and Ye Qing, 2016).

Now we are facing the best opportunity to develop mural painting and public art. From a historical point of view, art experienced a period of development that satisfied the demands of social functions and one-sided emphasis on independence and individuality. However, in the background of post-modernism, art re-emphasized the relationship between society and tradition. With the gradual integration of art and life and the different categories of art, the public needs to become one of the main elements in artistic creation.

More than 1000 years ago, during the Sui and Tang Dynasties in ancient China, accompanied by the prosperity of Buddhism, devout Buddhists devoted tremendous manpower, materials and financial resources to create a splendid religious temple, fresco art and sculpture works similar to that of Mogao Grottoes at Dunhuang and other places. The works have a wider range of fresco art styles and themes. The character images, creative styles, use of materials, brilliant colors and charming shapes have all reached an unprecedented height (Cao Dandan, 2016).

In the 21st century, the world's pattern has gradually become clear, while in some countries the demand for art's social function tends to weaken; at the same time, the trend of urbanization has transferred from developed countries to developing countries. The change from learning the economic model to all-round learning of development model will naturally lead to confusion in emerging economies. Frescoes and public art, advocating social functions of multi-culture and multi-level cultural integration, will inevitably play an increasingly important role in regional economy and urban development, attaching more importance to public art in social life (Ding Xiao and Ye Qing, 2016).

From the social aspect, people in the present era are no longer satisfied with a materialized and popularized living environment; rather they pursue individualized, specialized living space and unique cultural tastes. The aesthetic characteristics of frescoes and public arts include subjectivity, sociality, historicity, spatiality, openness, materiality, and publicity (Wang Chuntao, 2017), and it corresponds to the concern for social core values and appeals.

It is just like the Renaissance period in Europe when the demand for ideology and culture sprouted in the emerging class. For example, after the eleventh century, with the recovery and development of European economy, the rise of cities and improvement of living standards, people gradually changed their pessimistic and desperate attitude towards life and began to pursue the pleasure of secular life (Wu Yujin and Qi Shirong, 2011). In the fourteenth century, urban economy flourished. At the time, Italian citizens and intellectuals disliked Catholic theocracy and fiction. However due to the lack of a mature cultural system to replace Catholic culture, they resuscitated ancient Greek and Roman culture to express their own cultural concepts and reached a pinnacle of human art and culture.

Under such a social background, the advancement of modeling arts, better teaching practice, research on art theories, and training of relevant talents are the major needs of today's socio-economic and cultural development for the cultivation of art talents in higher education. The objective needs of professionals in mural painting and public art will become one of the main forms of art education and art itself at present and in the future.

## **3. The Status Quo of Mural Painting and Public Art at Hubei Institute of Fine Arts**

Since the setup of mural painting major at Hubei Institute of Fine Arts in the late 1980s, Chinese

painting, oil painting, printmaking, sculpture, etc. have all become the fundamental disciplines in Chinese higher art colleges. However, as to the construction and development of mural painting, each colleges and universities have their own focuses and formed a distinctive mural painting disciplinary system. In 2012, considering its own characteristics, the development of the times and the publicity of public art, Hubei Institute of Fine Arts took the lead in combining mural painting with public art and set up public art major. Meanwhile, in the process of perfecting the discipline construction of murals and synthetic materials painting, in addition to mural art direction, public art major became a new perspective of development. Thus Hubei Institute of Fine Arts formed a dual-dimension that attaches importance to the inheritance of mural painting and confidence in public art.

At present, in the Department of Mural Painting and Synthetic Materials Painting at Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, there are two majors: mural painting and public art. There are two standard classes for mural painting and one standard class for public art. Three teaching and research offices are responsible for specific teaching management: they are mural painting office No.1, mural painting office No.2, and public art office (Ding Xiao and Ye Qing, 2016).

As for the faculty, there are 20 full-time teachers, including 1 professor, 4 associate professors, 5 lecturers, 5 teaching assistants, 4 administrators, and 1 laboratory technician. The teaching and research aims at mural painting, lacquer painting, and public art (Ding Xiao and Ye Qing, 2016). With a scale of about 280 undergraduate students, there is a great potential for future development.

Table 1 Status Quo of Discipline Construction of Mural Painting and Synthetic Materials Painting Department

| Major      | Teaching and Research Office | Faculty |                                      | Student Scale |                 | Curriculum     |            | Teaching Facility |     |            |
|------------|------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------|------------|-------------------|-----|------------|
|            |                              | num.    | title                                | num. of class | num. of student | regular course | key course | studio            | lab | technician |
| mural art  | mural painting office No.1   | 6       | 2 seniors<br>1 lecturer<br>3 juniors | 9             | about 200       | 32             | 1          | 8                 | 6   | 1          |
|            | mural painting office No.2   | 4       | 1 senior<br>3 lecturers              |               |                 | 30             |            |                   |     |            |
| public art | public art office            | 5       | 2 seniors<br>1 lecturer<br>2 juniors | 3             | about 80        | 32             |            |                   |     |            |

As for the curriculum's hardware construction, currently there are two majors, i.e. mural painting and public art and three studios that are responsible for the daily management of teaching and research. Besides, the department has 8 painting studios, 6 laboratories and 1 provincial key course.

In terms of curriculum setting, both mural painting office No.1 and mural painting office No.2 provide 10 compulsory courses of visual arts. As for specialized course, they offer 9 and 8 courses respectively. The proportion clearly points out that undergraduate education is based on basic visual training and shaping. The establishment of a discipline system still requires a long-term plan. As for elective course, both of the two offices provide 6 courses. The concern is that: though based on the basic visual ability training, the direction for development is still relatively diverse.

There are some obvious differences in the curriculum setting between public art office and the two mural painting offices. As for compulsory course, public art office provides 13 specialized courses and 4 practice courses, which emphasizes the practicality of public art and its multi-directional development. As for elective course, the office offers only 1 course, which reveals the need for expansion of new directions in public art. In fact, they jointly released a signal that the society's demand for public art major is urgent.

In terms of discipline construction and development, mural painting and synthetic materials

painting department not only combines the contents of art discipline with design discipline, but also has the potential for cross-disciplinary integration. Therefore, by the establishment of mural painting and synthetic materials painting in a relatively feasible teaching model, we set up the only teaching body in central China that is a combination of mural painting and public art. It serves as the frontier of discipline construction and a mature template for future development.

Based on this perception, in 2015 the teaching and research team of the Department of Mural Painting and Synthetic Materials Painting at Hubei Institute of Fine Arts drafted a development plan for 2016-2020, and made it a strategic guideline for discipline construction and development in the following five years. That is to say, we must strive to build five platforms that compose the “talent incubator”: team building, facilities building, teaching resources and curriculum, management building, and teaching and research achievements (Ding Xiao and Ye Qing, 2016). The current teaching system relies on the “talent incubator” formed by these five platforms, and it directly points out the development path of the talent training system. The main part of this chain link will be beneficial to the cultivation of future high-end application-oriented and prominent academic talents, and facilitate the sustainable improvement of the two academic orientations of mural painting and synthetic materials painting.

#### **4. Solutions to the Predicament of Mural Painting and Public Art Major**

At the early stage of modern mural painting in China, there have been times when frescoes were prosperous due to concerns from government and society. For example, in 1979, when the Beijing Capital International Airport was completed, the commander of airport construction Li Ruihuan visited Professor Zhang Ding at Central Academy of Arts and Crafts. Under the organization of Professor Zhang, over 40 painters, art and craft artists, and some students of mural painting created a mural art work with a total size of nearly 500 square meters. In the work, the themes and artistic styles are quite diverse. It includes traditional heavy-colored painting, ink painting, ceramic mosaic, etc. When the first series of mural paintings was unveiled, the public was thrilled and excited. Deng Xiaoping, the national leader, also gave positive recognition. Since then, mural painting in China has finally ushered in a golden age of revival, and outstanding works began to emerge (He Keren and Yuan Yunsheng, 2017).

Obviously, government’s attention and society’s needs is an external boost to the development of mural painting and public art. At present, the social environment for development of mural art and public art is obviously better than that in the 1970s and 1980s. It is on this premise that the possibility for better development of this major has greatly increased. For the policy part: the setup of a sound and effective quality assurance and monitoring mechanism that accords with the characteristics of art college; the establishment of a flexible and competitive employment mechanism; a personnel mechanism that cultivates, imports, stabilizes and motivates talents; standardization and institutionalization of the faculty; strengthening of courses and establishment of appropriate and flexible adjustment system for courses; further investment in laboratory platforms; emphasis on the urgent need of building the department’s exhibition hall and allocation of relevant funds; and promotion of other teaching and research conditions. All these are important external forces for the development of mural painting and public art in the current favorable situation.

For internal construction, “cultivate future high-end application-oriented and prominent academic talents, and facilitate the major’s sustainable development” is the ultimate goal of construction of mural painting and public art in the next five years. Thus, the five platforms—team building, facilities building, teaching resources and curriculum, management building, and teaching and research achievements—will be the concrete foothold to build this system (Ding Xiao and Ye Qing, 2016).

In the setting of specialty, Chinese painting major is one of those that first began to conduct systematic discipline construction. The branches of Chinese painting have existed since the ancient times: in the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Yanyuan’s *Famous Paintings of Ancient Dynasties* was divided into six categories: characters, houses, landscapes, pommel horses, ghosts, flowers, birds, etc. The increasingly meticulous classification corresponds to the booming period of study on Chinese

painting theory and the construction of its discipline system. This is the kernel and starting point for the disciplinary development at Department of Mural Painting and Synthetic Materials Painting.

Under the premise of a clear discipline division, we should: actively import high-level professional talents in multiple ways; continuously strengthen the training of full-time teachers and establish a high-quality teaching and research team; improve the teaching and research facilities step by step; build the “Public Space Modeling Art Teaching and Creation Research Office” and use it as a terminal to link six laboratories to form a laboratory system platform; gradually provide conditions for personalized academic research and learning for teachers and students; track and grasp academic frontiers and provide insights into trends in disciplinary development; adapt curriculum to the needs of social development; promote the institutionalization and standardization of teaching and research management; attach equal importance to procedure management and target management; explore management model for part-time teaching and research groups; guide teachers to understand duality and lay emphasis on teaching and talent training; continuously increase the academic level; establish a storage of teaching and scientific research achievements; promote and expand the effects of teaching. The five platforms—team building, facilities building, teaching resources and curriculum, management building, and teaching and research achievements—have already become a clear direction for discipline construction at the present stage. They also laid a solid and comprehensive foundation for the systematic construction of mural painting and synthetic materials.

After setting the general direction of development, the Department of Mural Painting and Synthetic Materials Painting at Hubei Institute of Fine Arts drew up a detailed annual discipline construction plan. From the aspects of student enrollment, faculty and external linkage, a reform of the discipline system was completed, thus it returns to the essence of education. It does not only optimize the education system of mural painting and synthetic materials painting, but also takes social function into account.

## 5. Conclusion

From the discipline development of mural painting and public art, it can be concluded that its discipline construction not only involves subjective mobilization, but also depends on the favorable external environment. Therefore, it needs a long-term discipline construction plan. On the one hand, we should: promote the department’s level of education and overall competence; optimize the construction of curriculum system; deepen the expansion of disciplinary development, and stimulate innovation in teaching reform and talent training. At the same time, the building of teaching and research facilities should be based on the principles of economy, practicality, high-quality, and continuous upgrade. We should not only attach importance to the construction of hardware and software, but also work according to the marginal principle. Respect the law of education and lay a solid foundation. China’s higher education still has a long way to go, especially for humanities such as arts. After we learnt from the model of discipline construction in other countries, we must turn to a growth mode that fits our own situation.

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