



The Theory of When Brush and Ink Should Be in the Times

—The Germination of the Modern Consciousness of Painting Theory in Qing Dynasty

Dian Yu

College of Art, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

Email: lydiaiotw@163.com

How to cite this paper: Yu, D. (2023) The Theory of When Brush and Ink Should Be in the Times. *Open Access Library Journal*, 10: e10519.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1110519>

Received: July 18, 2023

Accepted: August 26, 2023

Published: August 29, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Brush and ink should change with the times, just like the trend of poetry and prose. It can be the topic sentence of a historical statement paragraph, or it can be a marching call to encourage modern people to change the techniques of Chinese brush and ink. The spirit of not sticking to the ancients, facing life, and facing the times in the theory of brush and ink proposed by Shi Tao, a famous painter in Qing Dynasty, is the germination of the modern consciousness of painting theory in Qing Dynasty. This paper dialectically analyzes the theoretical connotation of “the theory of brush and ink should be at any time”, analyzes its significance, and further studies and discusses the development of contemporary landscape painting.

Subject Areas

Art

Keywords

Shi Tao, The Theory of Brush and Ink Should Be at Any Time, Ancient Method, Our Method, Chinese Painting, Innovation of the Times

1. Introduction

Shi Tao is a genius in the history of Chinese painting. He was born in sorrow, died in peace, and was born in the turbulent years of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. At the age of three, he was taken out of the palace and fled into the mountains. He shaved his hair and became a monk. Settling in Yangzhou in his later

years, he gave up the secular life and began to practice. He became a Buddhist and Taoist, and built a big Di hall, named “Da Di Zi”. Create a generation of painting style, famous for a long time. Shi Tao put forward the theory of “brush and ink should follow the times”, expressing the painting concept that making Chinese painting modern must be based on tradition, based on the times, derived from life, and realized in form, so as to establish its own cultural norms.

2. The Background and Value Connotation of the Theory of Brush and Ink Should Be at Any Time

Shi Tao’s artistic aesthetic concepts and creation methods have made great contributions to the development of the modernization consciousness of Chinese painting. After more than a thousand years of development in the Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties, Shanshui has become a major traditional burden in the Qing Dynasty. Painting was largely influenced by the North-South sectarianism advocated by Dong Qichang in the late Ming Dynasty. The painting style is even more the same, and people follow the retro trend. At this time, Shi Tao emphasized “I use my own method”, and advocated that “pen and ink should follow the times” and “use the past to open up the present”. The landscapes, orchids, bamboos, flowers, fruits, and figures depicted strive to be innovative and break stereotypes.

Advocate painters to face life, face the times, learn from nature, go against the style of imitating the ancients at that time, strive to explore creativity, get rid of the shackles of tradition, encourage artists to express from a realistic perspective, surpass the traditional model, and lay a solid foundation for the development of Chinese art. It laid a solid foundation for creating a new era of Chinese painting [1].

Shi Tao’s works deeply reflect the viewpoint of historical materialism, emphasizing that the change of brush and ink should go with the passage of time. His works are full of the charm of nature, without following traditional techniques, they are exceptionally good. Although no one was optimistic at that time, with the appearance of the “Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou”, this group of artists began to receive wide acclaim [2]. Shi Tao paid attention to the issue of brush and ink with a developmental perspective. Because of the vivid charm of natural mountains and rivers, his paintings were outstanding and independent without sticking to ancient methods.

Shi Tao has a deep understanding of the point of view of “writing and ink should follow the times”, which is mainly due to the in-depth discussion of “yesterday’s fixed method” and “today’s indeterminate method”. The venerable said: “Yesterday was fixed, today is uncertain.” “The World Honored One said that yesterday was fixed, which is the legal meaning of the sound language that has been formed, and today’s indetermination is just the perfect and lively mechanism of the law without hindrance. Based on this, Shi Tao pointed out based on this Zen thought that yesterday’s fixed method can be summarized as Shi

Tao's theory of learning from ancient times and "I use my own method".

Shi Tao's "I use my own method" is like a clear stream that blows away the antique and retro atmosphere in the painting industry at that time. Many people mistakenly think that Shi Tao is criticizing ancient methods. In fact, Shi Tao does not mean to completely abandon traditional painting techniques, but to carry out personal processing and re-innovation after inheriting the essence of traditional techniques, reflecting deeper spiritual and cultural connotations. Shi Tao's masterpiece "Lian She Tu" is roughly the same as Li Gonglin's work of the same name in terms of character composition, movement, gathering and separation, and basic shapes. Its composition was boldly borrowed, but it paid more attention to the depiction of details, and the line drawing was changed from orchid leaf drawing to iron line drawing, and a bold innovation was carried out in the painting method of trees and rocks. He does not reproduce the works of the ancients rigidly, but on the basis of in-depth understanding and analysis of previous experience, he selectively learns from and recreates them.

Shi Tao pointed out that (painting) lies in the determination of the spirit in the sea of ink, the life is determined by the stroke of the brush, the hair and bone are replaced by the scale, and light is released from the chaos. Even if there is no brush, ink or ink, or painting without painting, there is a self. That is to say, the painter starts from his own senses and the methods he has mastered, pursues the state of nature in practice, and will have different self-emotional experiences when facing different artistic aesthetic objects, which also reflects the important position of the creative subject "I" in painting creation. It was Shi Tao who broke through the style of imitating the ancient and retro, and the modern consciousness of breaking the shackles of the tradition played a role in fueling the development of Chinese painting, and completed the transformation from the ancient method to our own method.

Shi Tao combined "ancient methods" and "our methods" and demanded that "he does not seek to conform to the ancients, nor does he necessarily use our methods." He dispelled the opposition between ancient methods and our methods. He pointed out that "although the ancients were good at one family, they did not know how to copy them. Otherwise, how could there be a source of laws? Is it like today's scholars who are dead bones and ashes?" Only by bypassing can we transform the past into innovation. Based on this, Shi Tao unified the "ancient law" and "our law" [3].

"Brush and ink should be with the times", from the individual level, includes two stages: one is the persistent method of innovation, and the other is the indeterminate method of "no need to compare the ancient and the modern". On the artistic level, Shi Tao believes that the development and changes of art are determined by the times. Brush and ink should change with the times, just like the trend of poetry and prose. This is a very meaningful proposition. It can be the topic sentence of a historical statement paragraph, or it can be a marching call to encourage modern people to change the techniques of Chinese brush and ink.

3. Reasons for the Formation of the Theory of Brush and Ink Should Be at Any Time

Shi Tao advocated that brush and ink should follow the times, firstly because he was not constrained by the creative ideas of the ancients, he denied the clear rules and precepts, and emphasized the development of individuality. This was a very novel view at the time. Starting from his own art creation practice, he profoundly discussed the relationship between “learning from the past” and “innovating”, and criticized the old-fashioned style in the painting art world at that time. Shi Tao emphasized the inevitable connection between people and the times, and correctly revealed the law of creation. It is still the innovative spirit of Chinese painting, a model of art, and points out the direction for our contemporary art creation [4].

Shi Tao is known as a monk in identity, but his spiritual world is different, and his artistic creativity is always alive. Shi Tao was deeply inspired by Zen Buddhism, and he integrated them into his literary creation, aesthetic concepts and life concepts at that time, thus opening a new era. He is a true artist, no matter how much Buddhism has influenced him, he never gave up the soul of artistic creation in his heart because he is a monk. However, it was Zen’s metaphysical exploration of transcendence in theory, thought, and emotion that brought new trends in literary creativity, aesthetic taste, and life attitude to the cultural and art circles. Although Shi Tao’s conversion to Buddhism was not voluntary, the influence of Zen on Shi Tao and his paintings cannot be ignored. His painting skills were greatly improved. In ancient China, Chinese culture and Buddhism were inseparable. The Buddhism of the Ming Dynasty paid more attention to the uniqueness of the individual, and constantly innovated. In Shi Tao’s works, he embodies the pursuit of modern ideas and shows that Chinese artists should keep up with the pace of the times [5]. In fact, based on the large historical background of China, there is an obvious and close relationship between Chinese literati paintings and the rise and fall of Zen Buddhism. The development of any religion keeps pace with the times. For example, Zen Buddhism began to emphasize its own individuality and highlight its uniqueness in the Ming Dynasty. This represents that religion challenges the traditional closed and conservative spirit with an open attitude. This is the reason why Shi Tao put forward the theory of brush and ink should be at any time with a very modern consciousness.

4. Dialectical View of Brush and Ink Should Be at Any Time

Many scholars are debating the true connotation of “brush and ink should be with the times”. Regarding Shi Tao’s painting theory, many scholars have questioned the meaning of “brush and ink should be with the times”. Therefore, it is necessary to reiterate. There are three points of view: the first point of view is “Shigu Shuo”, which believes that in context, “dang” should be interpreted as “if”. The second point of view is “contradiction theory”, which holds that propo-

sitions, examples and cases are contradictory, so it is wrong to regard innovation as the core of Shi Tao's thought. In addition, some scholars believe that Shi Tao's era was orthodox with the brush and ink of the Four Kings, and Shi Tao's paintings did not follow the "time". The third point of view is the "innovation theory", which believes that Shi Tao's original intention is "the brush and ink should be at any time".

Some scholars are still skeptical about the concept of "ages". They believe that culture and art are not only influenced by "space", but also by "times", and even by specific regional cultures. The integrity of this view is still debated. Mr. Zheng Chang had a profound understanding of this cosmopolitanism seventy years ago, pointing out that the phrase "art knows no boundaries" is actually a slogan used by imperialists to carry out cultural aggression [6]. The art of the "old era" advocates the art of the "new era", which leads to the falsehood of "emphasizing the present and depreciating the past" and "praising the present and derogating the past". For the art of the past and present, an equal value judgment should be adopted to distinguish the good from the bad, the ugly from the good and the bad from the past. The past is not necessarily bad, and the present is not necessarily good [7].

But maybe we combine the content of Shi Tao's entire painting theory and study carefully, and we will find the deeper connotation underlying this simple sentence. Shi Tao has no inclination to "view of historical progress" or "view of historical regression", neither of which is Shi Tao's original intention. The reason why scholars today find it difficult to understand "brush and ink should follow the times" is that they understand this proposition as the opposition between innovation and learning from the ancients, but Shi Tao has already surpassed the "ancient method" and "our method", and believes that "the law has no fixed form, but the spirit is formed". The era that brush and ink follow, in a microscopic sense, is composed of the world that the artist really feels. From a macro perspective, Shi Tao believes that it is a basic law that art follows the changes of the times, which clearly reflects the times and does not change with people's will.

First of all, "brush and ink should change with the times, just like poetry and prose style" shows the idea of the same origin of poetry and painting. When Shi Tao talks about brush and ink, he often connects poetry and painting. Shi Tao clearly pointed out that the painting in poetry comes from temperament, and the poetry in painting comes from the interest of the environment. This is the ideological basis for his comparison of brush and ink to "poetic style". Among them, the sentence "touching true knowledge" especially emphasizes the germination of poetry and painting (art) creation, which is a natural result, that is, "mountains and rivers meet with gods and become traces" and is not subject to subjective wishes. This idea is in the same vein as "brush and ink should be at any time".

Secondly, the key point in this painting theory is the sentence "When you ar-

rive in Yuan Dynasty, you will be like Ruan Ji and Wang Canyi". It is very important for us to understand this passage to discuss the significance of these two people in this painting theory. Taking Ruan Ji as an example, his attitude of escaping from the world and talking and avoiding society is the same as that of Yuan Dynasty painters. However, Wang Can returned to Cao Cao in the later period, "fake the high road and use his strength", and wrote most of the works that should be made of Fenghe. In short, in the Yuan Dynasty, painters had to stay away from the times and politics like Ruan Ji, or accept the rule of others like Wang Can. Shi Tao expressed such a layer of meaning: the poor painting art of the Yuan Dynasty was caused by the harsh environment of the era, which firmly grasped the core proposition of "the brush and ink should follow the times".

In the end, the sentence "The sad beauty is washed repeatedly, boiled with dry water from white water" has a deep meaning. Its preamble reads: "May the hair be lustrous, and the temples be brushed on the shoulders." This is a metaphor for painting with beauties-no matter how good the brush and ink are, it is like the luster on the "mysterious temples". Art that is out of date will be "dried", so how can we make art full of vigor and vitality? The answer Shi Tao gave was "The pen and ink should be of any age". Art must develop and change with the times, otherwise it will become "dead bones and ashes", which is Shi Tao's core argument. From this point of view, Shi Tao emphasizes the inevitable connection between man and the times, which cannot be escaped by manpower. This is not subjective "abandoning the past" and "getting rid of the present", but learning from the past and innovating.

The form of artistic expression is not fixed, but is constantly updated with the development of the times [8]. "Brush and ink should be with the times", brush and ink is regarded as the expression form of Chinese painting here, and its content is full of various forms in the aspects of brush and ink organization, color application, technique processing, position management and composition creativity, etc.

With the development of the times, we should not only focus on past achievements, but re-examine the cultural and artistic spirit of our nation. Through the inheritance and absorption of traditional culture, we can make Chinese painting glow with more vitality. Don't put "ancient and modern" in opposition, and don't put "new and old" in opposition at the same time. In the minds of Chinese painters, the new and the old are in a very relative relationship; one learns the new by reviewing the past, and one can "bring out the new" by "removing the old". Chinese painters respect the achievements of their predecessors very much, and never intend to overthrow the "past" and completely "break" with tradition and turn out to be born. Brush and ink should always be in the times, never blindly favoring the present and despising the past, abandoning the old and pursuing the new, but telling us to reaffirm the cultural and artistic spirit of our nation. Under the fertilization of his own cultural spirit, at the same time, he learned the

strengths of ancient and modern Chinese and foreign art, and made Chinese painting full of vitality.

5. The Significance of the Theory of “Brush and Ink Should Be Anytime” and Its Enlightenment to Contemporary Chinese Painting

5.1. The Meaning of “Pen Black Should Be at Any Time”

The art of painting is a unique art form, which not only provides an important supplement to the current culture, but also provides a continuation and development for the past culture.

One is to reflect the spirit of the times. Shi Tao put forward the viewpoint that “brush and ink should be with the times”, which has strong historical significance and can reflect the spirit of the times. In the process of historical development, different painters live in different times and social atmospheres, so their aesthetic views and painting theories are different. With the help of the paintbrush in his hand, the painter can depict his own different personality characteristics and thinking modes, so his paintings must contain a strong spirit of the times and reflect the development of the times. Specific painting art is an important supplement to the culture of its era, and it is also the continuation and development of the previous era. Only by constantly advancing in history can painters adapt to the new era and create paintings that satisfy viewers in the new era. Painting is an inevitable product of the era. “Brush and ink should be with the times” adapts to the requirements of historical development, reflects the spirit of the times, and promotes the sustainable development of the field of Chinese painting.

The second is to speed up the development of contemporary painters. Society is constantly developing and progressing, and painting as a reflection of social objective things is also constantly advancing. Shi Tao’s idea of “writing and ink should be with the times” has strongly promoted contemporary painters to break the inherent painting mode, clear obstacles, get rid of shackles, and create better paintings. Contemporary painters use new brush and ink ideas to show the development status of the new era, have a sense of innovation, forge ahead, enhance the vitality of painting, and meet the spiritual needs of more appreciators. Shi Tao’s painting style is unique, and his aesthetic thought of “brush and ink should follow the times” has also played an important guiding role in the establishment of other painters’ painting styles, which is in line with the historical development trend.

5.2. The Enlightenment of “The Black Pen of the Age” to Contemporary Chinese Painting

One is to promote painters to establish their creative character. Landscape painting occupies a very important position in the field of aesthetics, and it is also an important form for Chinese people to appreciate nature and entrust their

lives. While describing nature, landscape painting is more of an interpretation of life by literati painters. For example, scholars who suffered from political and imperial persecution in history lived in seclusion in mountains and forests, reciting poems and painting. With the rapid development of the market economy in contemporary society and the accelerated pace of people's life, it is difficult to release the body and mind under the huge pressure of life. Some painters are influenced by the social environment and blindly create related paintings that people pay more attention to, ignoring their own pursuit of beauty. The idea of "brush and ink should be with the times" can help painters understand the essence of painting, so that they can continue to spur themselves, truly achieve the unity of man and nature, and create works that are closer to life and closer to beauty.

The second is to promote painters to establish personal integrity and push contemporary landscape painting to a new height. The painter's personal style refers to the stable creative characteristics, style and other abstract expressions gradually formed by the painter in the painting process. The formation of the painter's personal style is a sign that the painter's creation is on the right track, and his personal style is displayed through the painting works. Many painters only pursue the form and visual effect of the surface of the picture, ignoring the cultivation of their own literacy, so they cannot form a personal style. Only when a painter closely combines reality with his own emotions, and expresses his true thoughts and feelings through painting, can his paintings be more authentic and form a personal style. And the viewpoint of "brush and ink should be at any time" provides an ideological basis for the painter to establish a personal style. The germination of this modern consciousness guides the painters in the new era to actively explore, strive to get rid of the shackles of tradition, try various painting methods and concepts, and push contemporary landscape painting to a new height.

6. Summary

6.1. Conclusion

Although "brush and ink" is very important, it is not a static conclusion. "Brush and ink" pays more attention to how to apply these theories to daily works, so as to present the true connotation of the work. In fact, apart from "brush and ink", many other works of art are seeking ways to keep pace with the times to present their own ideas. Huang Binhong once said: "Learning painting can not only rely on the ancients, but rely on nature. If you have your own ideas, you can change from the scope of the rules. "He used his own actual experience to vividly and aptly explain how to get ahead of the ancients. The unique method also truly embodies the spirit of not sticking to the ancients in Shi Tao's painting theory. Not only the art of Chinese painting needs to develop with the times, but other art forms also have the same development trend and ideological innovation. There will be different artistic appearances in different periods.

6.2. Suggestions

1) In the process of artistic creation, we should deeply understand and respect the uniqueness of every artist, and be brave enough to accept new techniques in order to keep pace with the times. We should incorporate traditional techniques into modern ones and incorporate them into our innovative thinking. We should not only absorb traditional skills, but also combine modern concepts to promote our artistic progress. On the basis of “brush and ink should be with the times”, Shi Tao integrated the essence of ancient Chinese art, and based on this as a guide, he created “brush and ink should be with the times” with a modern sense, injecting new vitality into the inheritance and development of Chinese art.

2) In artistic creation, we must fully realize everyone’s artistic talent. In the study of ancient methods, we should use their methods without being hindered by them, and dare to follow the times to create our own artistic methods. On the basis of inheriting the predecessors, make the past serve the present, and turn the laws of the ancients into our own. In modern times, while learning from Western painting and Western aesthetic spirit, we must also inherit this valuable experience and aesthetic spirit. Only in this way can we continue to create and develop Chinese painting art. Pass down the treasures of Chinese painting and carry them forward. Shi Tao combined the essence of historical painting with painting theory, and opened a new door to the awakening of modern consciousness by proposing the aesthetic thought of “brush and ink should follow the times”. The connotation of “brush and ink should follow the times” still plays an important role in the development of contemporary landscape painting. This article summarizes the important role of this thought in the development of contemporary landscape painting through the research on the connotation and significance of “brush and ink should follow the times”.

6.3. Innovation

1) Research perspective innovation. Looking through a large amount of literature, I found that the previous analysis of Shi Tao’s “brush and ink should be at any time” mainly focused on the study of its connotation or the judgment of the correctness of this point of view. The research on this view with dialectical thinking is less involved. This article mainly starts from the background and value connotation of the theory of brush and ink. It is hoped that the dimension of research can be enriched, making the research on this issue more comprehensive and perfect.

2) Research method innovation. This paper adopts literature research method, survey analysis method, empirical analysis method, and specific case analysis in the research method. The research results are time-sensitive and easy to popularize and apply.

6.4. Research Insufficiency and Prospects

1) Based on the research on the modern consciousness of “The Theory of

Writing and Ink should be at any time”, I was restricted by my own cognitive level and understanding ability when I wrote it. There are also certain limitations in the research process of this paper: First, in terms of research methods, this paper mainly adopts qualitative research method, and uses less quantitative research. It does not fully combine questionnaire survey and statistical analysis methods. The objectivity of data acquisition is insufficient, and the process relies heavily on expert literature. In the future, the method of questionnaire survey can be used to investigate the opinions and effective experiences of professionals in the industry in a larger area, and obtain more quantitative data.

2) Mainly focus on the research on the theory of “The Theory of Brush and Ink at Any Time”, with little combination of theory and practice. Based on the review and summary of relevant literature, this paper identifies the background and influencing factors. In order to be more in line with the actual situation, the identification of influencing factors should be more distinctive, so the selection of influencing factors in this paper can be identified in relevant case applications. In the future, we can further collect influencing factors. While taking into account the ancient and modern times, we must also combine the actual situation to study various cases of the practical application of the Theory of Brush and Ink Dang Sui in the field of modern and contemporary art, and try to make the selected influencing factors comprehensive and representative.

The above is my opinion. It can be said that the benevolent sees benevolence and the wise sees wisdom. The brush and ink mentioned in Chinese painting are actually the basic elements and forms of expression of Chinese painting art. Brush and ink are art, and art is freedom. All art will eventually inadvertently leave its imprint of the times. Just like Shi Tao’s ever-flowing soul of artistic creation, the brush and ink do not compete for the first place, but the competition for eloquence.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Yang, Y.P. (2012) On the Significance and Influence of “Brush and Ink Should Be in the Age”. *Art Education*, No. 7, 124-125. (In Chinese)
- [2] Wei, B. (2012) Brush and Ink Should Follow the Times—Analysis of Shi Tao’s Painting Art. *Writer*, No. 8, 209-210. (In Chinese)
- [3] Han, G. (2013) Distinguishing the “Innovation” of Shi Tao’s Painting Studies—Centering on “Brush and Ink Should Follow the Times” and “Borrowing the Past to Invent the Present”. *Journal of Chinese Culture*, 20, 83-89. (In Chinese)
- [4] Li, Q. (2011) Discussion on “Brush and Ink Should Be at Any Time” and the Spirit of the Times of Chinese Painting. *Popular Literature and Art*, No. 3, 57. (In Chinese)
- [5] Zhou, M.Y. (2007) Brush and Ink Should follow the Times—Thoughts on Chinese Ink Animation. *Movie Review*, 29, 20-21. (In Chinese)
- [6] Zheng, C. (1934) Chinese Painting. *Cultural Construction* (First Issue). (In Chinese)

- [7] Li, X.Q. (2013) The Development and Innovation of “Brush and Ink Should Be at Any Time” from the Perspective of Chinese Painting. *Grand Stage*, No. 11, 89-90. (In Chinese)
- [8] Wang, L. (2012) The Era Exploration of the Brush and Ink and Form of Chinese Landscape Painting. Master’s Thesis, Southwest University, Chongqing. (In Chinese)