

Research on the Development of Chinese Painting Under the Influence of Western Art Thought in the 1980s

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Abstract

This paper aims to study the profound impact of Western art thought on the development of Chinese painting in the 1980s. By analyzing the emergence of Western modernism and postmodernism, the study explores how these artistic trends were introduced into China during the 1980s and significantly influenced the form, ideas, and content of Chinese painting. First, the paper reviews the main characteristics of Western art thought and analyzes the channels through which these ideas spread within the Chinese art community, as well as the awakening of artists' self-awareness. Next, it focuses on discussing the innovations in painting form, the transformation of artistic themes, and the evolution of artistic ideas brought about by Western art, specifically elaborating on how artists integrated elements of Western expressionism, abstract art, and traditional Chinese painting into their creations. In addition, by analyzing the works of representative artists and important art events, the paper further reveals how Western art thought shaped the diverse development of Chinese painting in the 1980s. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing the profound significance of these influences on the modernization, globalization, and theoretical innovation of Chinese art, providing a new perspective for future research.

Keywords: western art thought, 1980s, Chinese painting, modernism, postmodernism, artistic ideas

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, Chinese art, particularly painting, has undergone an unprecedented transformation under the profound influence of Western art thought. With China's rapid modernization, artistic creation and modes of expression evolved dramatically. Cultural exchanges following the reform and opening-up policy provided Chinese artists with opportunities to absorb Western ideas, spurring a renewal in artistic concepts and innovations in both form and content. The emergence of Western modernism and postmodernism introduced new ways of thinking and creative techniques that encouraged artists to break free from traditional constraints and explore more individualistic, liberating artistic languages. This paper investigates the influence of Western art thought on the development of Chinese painting in the 1980s, focusing on its impact on artists' creative processes. By examining key trends such as formalism, expressionism, abstract art, and deconstruction, the study reveals how these ideas manifested in Chinese art. It also explores how Chinese artists, while integrating Western elements, maintained a connection to traditional culture, thereby forming a unique artistic style. Ultimately, this research provides fresh insights into the modernization and globalization of Chinese painting, highlighting its emergence on the global art stage[1].

2. The Main Characteristics of Western Art Thought in the 1980s

2.1 *The Rise of Modernism and the Emergence of Postmodernism*

In the 1980s, Western art thought underwent a profound transformation. Its evolution from modernism to postmodernism not only embodied an update in artistic ideas but also reflected a significant shift in the social and cultural environment. Modernism, which originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was characterized by artists' pursuit of formal innovation and an experimental spirit. They emphasized the independence of artistic creation and sought to break free from the constraints of traditional art by expressing individual emotions and inner experiences through techniques such as abstraction and expressionism[2]. However, from the late 1970s into the 1980s, as global cultural exchanges accelerated and social pluralism became increasingly evident, postmodernism began to emerge, challenging the universal truths and rational spirit that modernism had championed. Postmodernism advocates for the integration of multicultural perspectives and historical viewpoints, promotes interdisciplinary approaches, and calls for the deconstruction of tradition. Artists no longer confined themselves to a single mode of creation; instead, they reinterpreted traditional symbols, language, and forms to reflect the

complexity of society. Through this transformation, postmodernism broke away from the lofty mission and uniform standards inherent in artistic creation, championing a more relaxed, pluralistic, and inclusive mode of expression. This ideological shift not only brought a wealth of creative possibilities to global art but also had a profound impact on the development of Chinese painting in the 1980s, providing Chinese artists with new perspectives and inspiration to explore cross-cultural expression and traditional innovation[3].

2.2 The Inspiration of Western Art Thought on Chinese Artists

In the 1980s, as China gradually integrated into a globalized context, the influence of Western art thought on Chinese artists manifested in multiple layers and from various perspectives. First, the emphasis on individual independence and self-expression promoted by Western art provided Chinese artists with an entirely new creative concept. They began to realize that art is not merely the transmission of traditional techniques, but a language that reflects individual emotions, experiences, and social realities. This idea encouraged them to break away from the formulaic expressions inherent in traditional Chinese painting and to experiment with incorporating Western art elements such as abstraction, expressionism, and deconstruction into traditional ink painting. For example, many artists combined Western abstract expression with the aesthetic spirit of Chinese calligraphy and painting in their explorations, preserving the charm of Chinese painting while endowing it with a new visual language and expressive power. Moreover, the emphasis on multiculturalism, interdisciplinary integration, and a critical spirit in Western art thought led Chinese artists to adopt a more multidimensional approach to artistic expression and reinterpret traditional symbols. In the process of absorbing the ideas of Western modernism and postmodernism, they not only focused on innovations in form but also engaged in profound reflections on content[4]. Many artists, inspired by this new mindset, began to question and break through the limitations of traditional aesthetics, exploring the complex relationships between social transformation, historical memory, and individual existence. Through such cross-cultural dialogue and collision, Chinese artists gradually developed an inclusive, experimental new artistic style. They made bold innovations in painting techniques while also demonstrating a more diverse and open approach in both artistic themes and narrative styles. It is precisely this effort to merge Western avant-garde art concepts with traditional Chinese aesthetics that has driven a comprehensive transformation in the form, content, and theory of Chinese painting, marking an important transitional stage in the history of contemporary Chinese art[5].

3. The Specific Influence of Western Art Thought on Chinese Painting

3.1 The Transformation of Artistic Form: From Tradition to Modernity

In the 1980s, building on the profound charm of traditional Chinese painting, Chinese artists began boldly incorporating the expressive techniques of Western modern art to explore a new form of art that was both rich in traditional connotations and imbued with a modern spirit. Traditional Chinese painting has always centered on conveying artistic conception and poetic expression, emphasizing the rhythmic flow of ink and the intentional use of blank space between brushstrokes. However, inspired by Western ideas such as expressionism, abstract art, and collage, artists gradually broke through established modes of expression. In their creative practice, they experimented with combining traditional brush techniques with modern compositional concepts. By reinterpreting traditional themes, they not only preserved the spiritual essence of traditional art but also injected the free expression and formal innovation characteristic of Western modern art. For example, when depicting landscapes and flowers or birds, artists no longer adhered strictly to the traditional gradation and layering of ink but instead boldly used striking contrasts of color blocks and non-linear compositions to create a brand-new visual impact. At the same time, Chinese artists demonstrated great openness and experimental spirit in absorbing and integrating Western artistic techniques[6]. They not only drew upon Western expressionism and abstract art but also actively experimented with emerging media such as collage and installation art, thereby broadening the expressive field of painting. In this process, some artists explored the possibilities of abstract ink painting by intertwining ink and color to convey inner emotions and the complexity of modern society; others employed methods like color block collage to break the planar limitations of traditional painting, creating works with a sense of depth and dynamism; while still others stepped beyond the conventional boundaries of painting to introduce contemporary art forms, such as installation art, into their practice. This fusion and innovation propelled Chinese painting from tradition to modernity in terms of form, providing a broader canvas for artistic expression and laying a solid foundation for subsequent artistic development[7].

3.2 The Transformation of Concepts and Content: From Expression to Exploration

In 1980s Chinese painting, artists not only made bold innovations in technique and form but also achieved a profound transformation in their underlying concepts and content. Artistic expression gradually shifted from a traditional, single narrative to a multifaceted exploration of individual emotions and social issues. Confronted with

increasingly prominent cultural conflicts amid modernization and the impact of diverse ideas in a globalized context, artists began to incorporate the complex contradictions of social reality along with their inner experiences into their creations. They were no longer content with conventional aesthetic expression; instead, they sought to use their works to explore the tension between the individual and society, the relationship between historical memory and contemporary change, and the reconstruction of traditional culture within a modern framework. This transformation meant that paintings evolved from mere displays of beauty into powerful mediums for in-depth analysis and reflection on society, history, and human nature[8]. Simultaneously, a shift in subject matter greatly enriched the connotations of Chinese painting. Traditional themes such as landscapes and figures gradually gave way to broader and more modern subjects, including urban landscapes, industrialization, and social transformation. The emphasis on freedom and a critical spirit in Western art thought provided Chinese artists with entirely new perspectives, enabling them to confront reality head-on and question established cultural symbols and traditional narratives. Through this expansion of thematic focus, artists demonstrated a keen sensitivity to the pace of modern life and engaged in profound contemplation of social contradictions, thereby stimulating a more diverse and nuanced discourse on the contemporary world. Overall, during this period, Chinese painting, through relentless exploration, achieved a transformation from mere surface aesthetics to a deeper spiritual expression, showcasing artists' innovative interpretations of contemporary challenges and future possibilities[9].

4. Representative Works and Schools of Chinese Painting in the 1980s

4.1 The Creative Exploration of Representative Artists

In the 1980s, a group of representative artists emerged in China who, with their unique perspectives and courageous spirit of innovation, explored how to integrate Western art thought and techniques into their works while maintaining the distinctiveness of Chinese culture. Take Chen Danqing as an example: in his creative practice, he absorbed both the techniques of Western realism and modern painting, while also focusing on reinterpreting traditional subjects. His works often examine Chinese history and contemporary reality from a distinctive perspective, conveying reflections on traditional culture and critiques of contemporary social phenomena through delicate brushwork and striking color contrasts—an organic fusion of Western artistic techniques and Chinese aesthetic sentiment. Liu Xiaodong's creations, on the other hand, placed greater emphasis on social reality and individual fate. Through bold composition and realistic representation, he captured the humanistic care and social transformation within the modernization process. In his works, one can see explorations of light, space, and the human form that are characteristic of Western art, while also sensing a unique emotion and humanistic spirit deeply rooted in Chinese society[10]. At the same time, the “New Generation” of painters and the “avant-garde” art movement gradually emerged during this period, driven by the trends in Western art. Artists within these groups broke away from the established modes of traditional painting, drawing on various forms such as Western abstraction, expressionism, and conceptual art, and boldly exploring new artistic languages and means of expression. They emphasized the direct presentation of personal experience and social reality, rejecting singular, rigid artistic narratives. Through cross-media and interdisciplinary experiments, they attempted to construct a pluralistic, open, and critically spirited artistic ecosystem. The formation of these art movements not only reflected Chinese artists' profound understanding of Western modern and postmodern art theories but also demonstrated their acute grasp and independent reflection on the tension between traditional and modern Chinese culture in their pursuit of localized innovation. Overall, the artistic explorations of this period not only promoted the diversification of Chinese painting's form but also laid a solid foundation for the development of contemporary Chinese art in the years to come.

4.2 Important Exhibitions and Events in Chinese Painting in the 1980s

The 1980s marked a period of rapid development in Chinese painting. With the impetus of reform and opening-up, the art community gradually shed the rigid ideological constraints of the past and began to absorb and explore Western modern art thought. The important exhibitions and art events that emerged during this period not only provided artists with opportunities to showcase their innovative achievements but also became crucial driving forces for the modernization of Chinese painting. These exhibitions sparked a wave of innovative artistic ideas domestically and paved the way for Chinese painting to enter the international art stage. Among these, the “Xingxing Art Exhibition” (held in 1979 and 1980) is considered a milestone in the history of contemporary Chinese art. Organized spontaneously by a group of avant-garde artists, this exhibition displayed a large number of works that broke through traditional artistic norms, including styles such as abstraction, expressionism, and surrealism, which strongly challenged the mainstream aesthetic values of the time. This exhibition not only marked the awakening of modern Chinese art but also set a precedent for grassroots exhibitions organized by independent artists, prompting a flourishing of experimental art activities during the 1980s. The “85 New Trend in Art” (1985–1989) was one of the most influential art movements in the development of contemporary Chinese art. This

movement spanned multiple cities across the country and involved several art groups, including the “Northern Group,” the “Southern Artists Group,” “Xiamen Dada,” and “Chishe,” encompassing various art forms such as installation art, conceptual art, abstract expressionism, and the new trend in ink painting. Exhibitions during this period, such as the “Chinese Youth Art Exhibition” in 1985 and the “Modern Art Exhibition” in 1986, showcased a large number of experimental works influenced by Western art thought. In these exhibitions, artists boldly experimented with non-traditional materials, mixed media, and interdisciplinary forms of expression. These exhibitions reflected Chinese artists’ deep contemplation of modernism and postmodernism and helped transition painting from purely visual aesthetics to a deeper engagement with social thought and conceptual expression. Furthermore, the “Chinese Modern Art Exhibition” in 1989 (also known as the “89 Modern Art Exhibition”) is regarded as an important milestone marking the entry of contemporary Chinese art into the international art system. Held at the China Art Museum, it gathered the most representative avant-garde artists and their works from across the country, showcasing the diverse exploration of form, ideas, and social issues in Chinese art. Although the exhibition eventually sparked controversy and was closed early due to its radical artistic concepts and challenge to traditional art language, the event did not hinder the development of contemporary Chinese art. On the contrary, it drew international attention to the experimental spirit and ideological transformation of Chinese artists, propelling Chinese painting onto a broader international stage in the 1990s. In addition to these national-level exhibitions, many regional art exhibitions and activities also played a significant role in driving the development of Chinese painting in the 1980s. Art institutions such as the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, and the Central Academy of Fine Arts became important bases for avant-garde experimentation. Many artists held small-scale exhibitions and discussion sessions in these venues, fostering an integration of theory and creative practice. These art activities not only gradually liberated painting from the constraints of the academic system but also facilitated the formation of more independent art groups. Overall, the exhibitions and art events of the 1980s formed key milestones in the development of modern Chinese painting. They provided platforms for artists to express personal ideas and experiment creatively, and they enabled Chinese painting to gain greater influence on the global stage. Under the impetus of these exhibitions, Western art thought was further absorbed and localized, forming a modern painting style with distinct Chinese characteristics. The changes brought about by these exhibitions not only transformed the face of Chinese painting but also had a profound impact on later contemporary art trends, laying the foundation for artistic innovation in the 1990s and beyond.

5. The Profound Significance of the Impact of Western Art Thought in the 1980s

5.1 The Modernization of Artistic Theory

In the 1980s, the introduction of Western art theory marked an important turning point in the modernization of Chinese art theory. During this period, the Chinese art community gradually broke away from the long-dominant traditional aesthetic and cultural inheritance, beginning to incorporate Western modernism, postmodernism, and the philosophical ideas underlying these movements. Inspired by Western art thought, artists and theorists re-examined the inherent paradigms of traditional Chinese aesthetics and began critically exploring the relationship between artistic creation and the expression of ideas. Their focus shifted from merely the superficial form of artworks to the notion that art should serve as a vehicle for reflecting individual subjective experiences and the conflicts of social reality. Gradually, art theory evolved from an emphasis on technique and form to an exploration of the deeper meanings behind creative works. The introduction of theories such as deconstruction, phenomenology, and semiotics into the Chinese academic sphere provided fresh perspectives for art criticism and creation. At the same time, this modernization process encouraged art critics and scholars to reinterpret traditional art, seeking innovation within continuity, and fostering a dialogue between traditional artistic values and contemporary art movements. In their creative practices, artists continuously experimented with integrating abstract expression, collage techniques, and cross-media expression with traditional Chinese ink painting and calligraphy. The resulting diverse theoretical framework not only enriched the connotations of Chinese art theory but also provided a solid theoretical foundation for subsequent artistic creations, demonstrating the spirit of constant innovation and change that characterizes Chinese art in a global context.

5.2 The Global Vision of Chinese Art

Since the 1980s, with the deepening of China’s reform and opening-up, Chinese art has gradually broken free from its previously closed state and moved toward internationalization. While absorbing Western modern art thought, artists also began actively stepping onto the international stage by participating in various international exhibitions, art festivals, and academic seminars, engaging in extensive exchanges with artists from around the world. In this process, they not only learned advanced Western creative techniques and theories but also drew inspiration from the collision of different cultures, thereby enriching their own modes of artistic expression. Artists gradually

recognized that globalization is not merely an economic phenomenon but also a cultural and social transformation. Consequently, in their creative practices, they paid keen attention to capturing global political, economic, and cultural changes, seeking to reflect the characteristics of an era marked by the blending of diverse cultures and to explore issues of cross-cultural identity and differences through their works. Moreover, an international perspective encouraged Chinese artists to engage in bold innovative practices while maintaining their cultural heritage. They employed a variety of artistic media—such as painting, installation, and video—to not only depict the realities and cultural conflicts of contemporary society but also to present a universal humanistic concern that transcends geographical boundaries through symbols and metaphors. Scholars and critics also began to re-examine the position of Chinese art on the international stage, emphasizing that in the wave of globalization, it is essential to both absorb foreign influences and uphold cultural confidence by promoting a unique national spirit. Gradually, through continuous integration, Chinese artists developed an artistic language that is inclusive and open, enabling them to converse with the international art community while showcasing the unique charm of their native culture. Overall, the globalization process since the 1980s has not only propelled technological and conceptual innovation in Chinese art but also infused contemporary Chinese art with new vitality, positioning it in an irreplaceable and unique place within the global art map. By continually expanding the boundaries of creation, Chinese artists are now moving toward a more diverse and open future with a completely renewed vision and posture.

6. Conclusion

Through the discussion presented in this paper, it is evident that Western art thought in the 1980s has had a profound and far-reaching impact on the development of Chinese painting. The introduction of theories from modernism to postmodernism opened up entirely new perspectives for Chinese artists, empowering them to boldly integrate techniques such as abstraction, expressionism, and collage into traditional ink painting, thus exploring a diversified artistic form. At the same time, during this period, artists underwent significant transformations in both their concepts and content; no longer confined to traditional subjects such as landscapes and figures, they began to address contemporary social changes, cultural conflicts, and issues arising in a globalized context, thereby enriching and complicating the content of their paintings. Furthermore, by analyzing the creative works of representative artists such as Chen Danqing and Liu Xiaodong, as well as by examining the emergence of the “New Generation” of painters and avant-garde art movements, we can see that Western art thought not only stimulated a rethinking of traditional aesthetics but also prompted continuous localized innovation in artistic practice. Various important exhibitions and art events provided broad platforms for this process, facilitating a transformation in Chinese painting from traditional to modern in terms of technique, ideas, and themes, and gradually establishing its unique position on the international art stage. In summary, the introduction of Western art thought in the 1980s not only promoted the modernization of Chinese art theory and the formation of a global vision for Chinese art but also brought unprecedented vitality and transformation to contemporary Chinese painting. Future research may further explore the mechanisms of interaction between Eastern and Western art within a broader framework of cultural exchange and interdisciplinary integration, deepening our understanding of their far-reaching significance for contemporary art innovation.

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