A CHINESE VIEW OF ART IN AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

A Thesis

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

A CHINESE ARTISTS' EDUCATION

This paper will address issues concerning my painting and drawing; why I do what I do and what has influenced my work.

I graduated in the Department of Art of Northeast Normal University in my country, China, in 1978. While at the university, I studied realistic painting and drawing. Contemporary Chinese fine arts have been influenced by Russian art, which is a branch of European nineteenth century classical art. It emphasizes objective observation. In the university, I had a strict basic training in drawing and painting. The basic skills in drawing and painting are regarded as important and necessary. The training in drawing began with lengthy treatments of still lifes and figures made of plaster so students could see the values (dark and light) clearly without any influence of color of subjects, and so the subjects would be completely stationary. A drawing from a plaster figure could take from eight to as many as thirty hours to accomplish. After that, the students began to draw the living human figure. After about a half year of training in drawing, the students began to study painting, beginning with still life, then landscape and the figure. Color study also emphasized objective observation. For example, the relationship among local colors (what the color of the objects
really is), the color of the light source and the colors reflected by the surroundings. A painting could have been either short-term or long-term, from thirty minutes to thirty hours.

At the beginning of the semester, the faculty members of teaching and research sections discussed the teaching plan of the whole semester including the course content, course process, teaching methods, teaching aids and so on. Every teacher could state his or her idea, then discuss, even argue it with the others. At the end, they had to agree on only one way which the most instructors thought was the best. Any instructor could have his or her own style and ingenuity, but he or she could not change the principle of the teaching plan. Every weekend, all the members of the teaching and research section had a meeting to discuss the activities of the week. Sometimes they would change the teaching plan according to the situation. This kind of training in drawing and painting took the greater part of most students' time; the rest was devoted to classes in history, literature, art education and so on. The education system in most universities in China is four years and each year contains two semesters. At the last semester, the students began to prepare their graduate show. Through this strict training, the students had a solid foundation in painting and drawing based on objective observation; however, the students' painting and drawing styles were similar because of the teaching methods.

In China, fine arts classes are held once a week in most high schools. The text books which are required by the Education
Ministry are utilized. The content of the fine arts text books emphasizes basic traditional skills of drawing and painting, such as composition, proportion, perspective, the relationships among values of the objects, the elements of color: hue (color), chroma (intensity of the hue), value; introduction to traditional Chinese painting, water color, design; introduction to Chinese artists and western artists. Many works of famous European artists such as Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), Edouard Manet (1832-1883), Claude Monet (1840-1926), Paul Cezanne (1839-1906), Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) are highly recommended as good examples in the students' training. Also, Russian artists Levitan Isaac (1861-1900), Valentin Serov (1865-1911), Ilya Repin (1844-1930), V. Surikov (1848-1916) and so on are regarded as the greatest realistic masters in China. In Beijing, we have a Centre Fine Arts Academy attached to our Fine Arts High School. In this high school, most of the courses the students take are art courses, so they have more professional art training than high school students generally. The educational system is the same as in other high schools, and lasts three years, the average student graduating at approximately age nineteen or twenty. The educational system in Beijing Centre Fine Arts Academy is five years, which is one year longer than the other fine arts colleges and departments in China.

Since 1977, China has become more and more open and more western art has been introduced. I was interested in American art, which has its own characteristics. It was vivid, varied, free, and
it emphasized subjective observation, so I decided to come to the United States to study American art and expand my knowledge of art.
CHAPTER TWO

NEW INFLUENCES

Since I came to the Department of Art at The Ohio State University, some elements have changed in my painting and drawing. I have begun to pay attention to subjective impressions. First of all, I will discuss my drawings.

I have learned some new ideas and new approaches which have influenced my work. For example, contour line drawing is a good way to study. When we make a contour drawing, the idea is to look at the object or model which we intend to draw, but not at the paper, and imagine that the pencil point is touching the model instead of the paper. Contour drawing is a way to train the sense of touch. It helps me to see the objects more carefully. When drawing such lines, I feel that the lines are the edges of the forms; the lines, therefore, stand for the structure.1 I use different quality lines to show different qualities of the structures or objects. Some lines are soft and springy due to where the structures are soft and springy, such as a woman's breast or buttock. Some lines become hard and tight where the structures are hard and strong, such as a man's shoulder, knee or muscles.

Gesture drawing is another approach I have learned here. Gesture drawing emphasizes the sense of the action. "Try to feel
the entire thing as a unity— a unity of energy, a unit of movement."² I think this point of view is right and it helps my
drawing a lot. When I draw a sketch of a figure, I just pay
attention to the movement, the action of the figure. I feel full of
energy, then the lines show my feeling.

"Weight" or "Scribble" drawing is another way of drawing which
I had never heard of before I came to OSU. Weight drawing attempts
to show the weight and solidity of the model. It moves from the
core (the motivation of the form) to the surfaces. When I draw, I
think about the work as if I were building up figures with a mass of
clay instead of drawing with lines. This helps me to understand
more about the volume and structure of the model. In weight
drawing, black and white are not determined according to shadow and
light, but according to the core. Black becomes a psychological
feeling of weight. Weight drawing makes me understand the subject
or figure in another way.³ It is very useful for me to understand
more profound and wider ideas about drawing.

Negative Space Drawing is another way to draw which I have
learned here. The key components of composition are positive
shapes, negative spaces and the format (the relative length and
width of the bounding edges of the paper surface). Positive shapes
and negative spaces are the whole thing and they can not be
separated. When I draw, I pay more attention to the relationship
between the positive shapes, negative spaces and the format.⁴
CHAPTER THREE

THEORY OF DRAWING

I think we need both feeling about the objects and understanding about the theory of drawing. When I draw, I emphasize three concepts: dark and light, void and solid, loose and tight.

Dark is caused by weak illumination and light is caused by strong illumination. Objects show a specific relationship between light and shadow because of the differences of the distribution of light on the objects. When I draw, I observe three conditions which affect the object. First is how much light is on the object and the distance between the object and the light source. The sides of the object which are nearer to the source are lighter and the sides of the object which are farther away are darker.

The second condition is the local color of the object because this affects the value. For example, if two apples are illuminated by the same light source, one may be darker than the other because the dark one is a red apple and the light one is a yellow apple.

The third condition is the angle between the sides of the object and light source. If the side of the object is at a right angle to the light source, it is lighter than it would be if it were not at a right angle.
Void and solid is another concept which I observe when I draw. Human eyes have a certain tolerance for light. If the light is too strong or too weak, we cannot see the objects clearly, that is the "void". If the light is moderate, we can see the objects very clearly, that is "visual saturation" or "solid". Human eyes have different reactions to different illumination on the objects. For this reason, I draw the very light parts and the very dark shapes of the subject in a more generalized manner because these parts are "void", and I draw the parts of the visual saturation (the parts of grey tone) in greater detail because they are "solid".

Loose and tight are different qualities of human visual perception. If we compare a piece of cotton and a piece of iron, we feel the cotton is soft, light and fluffy; the iron is hard and heavy. If we compare the bark of a tree to a piece of glass, we feel the bark of a tree is rough and the glass is smooth. The feeling of the cotton and the tree are "loose" and the feeling of the iron and glass are "tight", therefore, loose and tight are linked with the quality of the objects. When I draw different things, I use different kinds of lines. For instance, when I draw hair, I use loose, porous, soft and thicker lines in order to show its quality. When I see objects which are the same quality, I feel the object which is in the light is loose; the object which is in the shadow is tight. So I draw the parts of light of the objects loose and draw the parts of shadow of the objects tight.

Dark and light, void and solid, loose and tight are the "objective observation" in drawing which I have maintained from my
earlier training in China. At the same time, I have begun to draw with "subjective observation". That is to arrange dark and light, void and solid and loose and tight, not only according to the objective facts, but also according to my subjective feelings. Sometimes, I make dark and light, void and solid, loose and tight if they are necessary for the composition, movement, visual rhythm and so on.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE SUBJECTIVE INFLUENCE

My painting too, has changed from objective observation to include my subjective impressions. I think we do need to know the theory of color, we do need to study the relationship among local colors, the color of the light source and the color reflected by the surroundings; however, a piece of art work which shows only the right relationships among the colors is not a good work. A work of art should show the artist's own personality, the artist's idea, feeling, emotion. The Impressionists have influenced my work a lot. Pissarro (1831-1903) said, "Look for the kind of nature that suits your temperament. . . Do not proceed according to rules and principles, but paint what you observe and feel. Paint generously and unhesitantly, for it is best not to lose the first impression." I agree with his idea. When I paint, I pay more attention to strengthening my impression. For example, when I painted "Fruit", I found that the different colors of fruit, the red apples, the yellow oranges and the green pears were so bright and brilliant. The contrast between the warm color and cool color was so strong. I kept this impression in my mind and strengthened it. I made the warm color warmer and cool color cooler and achieved, through emphasizing my subjective reactions to what was already
there, color results that I found more satisfying than if I had just objectively copied what was there (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Fruit, 1985, oil on canvas, 25 x 25 inches.

"Spring" is one of my favorite paintings. When I went to the Park of Roses to paint in spring, 1985, I felt that everything was fresh: fresh color, fresh air. I felt fresh air was flown through the trees. All the fresh things were bathed in the rays of the spring sun and full of life. So, I tried to paint with these feelings and I feel satisfied with the results (Figure 2).
"Forest" is another of my favorite paintings. I remember I walked around in the Park of Roses for a long time hunting for a suitable subject to paint during an afternoon in spring, 1985. I could not find a scene which stimulated my intense emotion. The sun would soon go down and I was disheartened. Suddenly, I stopped in front of a forest. I was strongly attracted by the color of the forest. The parts which were lit by the setting sun were so orange that the local color of the tree was changed, as were the parts which in the shadow were so blue. The evening glow gave the forest an element of mystery. I was very excited and was, in spite of everything, compelled to paint. I think "Forest" shows this feeling (Figure 3).
Figure 3. Forest, 1985, oil on canvas, 29 x 32 inches.

"The Girl in a Blue Dress" is my favorite painting. The color of the painting is soft and uncomplicated in order to describe the girl, who was simple, gentle, quiet and soft. She had classical beauty: light golden hair, blue eyes and blue dress. Her pink face, rose red lips and gray background, all appeared harmonious and soft. I tried to show these impressions and I think I have succeeded (Figure 4).
Figure 4. The Girl in a Blue Dress, 1985, oil on canvas, 24 X 29 inches.

In my work, I use different techniques to show my different feelings. For example, the styles of my two paintings, "A Country Scene" (Figure 5) and "The Memory of the Forest" (Figure 6) are different. I painted "A Country Scene" in early summer, 1986. I felt the simple cordiality of the surroundings: the stock barn, the stone wall, railing and haystack, I could smell the haystack, the grass and the soil. The thickness of my paint corresponded with the physical objects. The colors I chose reflected those colors I saw.

The forest in the painting "The Memory of the Forest" was the place where my husband and my son and I had strolled one summer evening several years ago in China. I remember that evening, it was
quiet and cool. We walked in the forest slowly and talked about the past as well as our future. My son was playing while we were walking. I had a very enjoyable evening with my family. Now that I am studying at OSU, far away from my family, I feel very lonely. The emptiness of the forest reminded me of the emptiness I feel in my heart. I used thin paint, soft color to express the dim image of my past with my family. Every color is harmonious and soft. I tried to show these impressions and I think I have succeeded.

Figure 5. A Country Scene, 1986, oil on canvas, 27 x 23 inches.
Figure 6. The Memory of the Forest, 1986, oil on canvas, 25 x 25 inches.

I pay attention to both observation and my feelings when I paint. Before I paint, I have to observe the objects for a long time to find something which is interesting. If I can not find it, I do not paint. I think the real impressions are the most important thing in painting; otherwise, the art work must be affected and moan and groan without being ill, and the art work will loose its artistic charm.

Last spring, I started trying to make abstract paintings. It is not easy for me compared with realistic painting. I used to look at the objects of the world realistically. Now I have to change my mental approach. On the other hand, I should learn how to look at the world abstractly because I want to learn abstract painting. I have looked around for a long time, trying to observe objects in a
new way; trying to make my eyes see abstractly. An idea came into my mind: paint an abstract eye. I used a simple shape, point, line and simple color: red, dark blue and white to paint a strong shape, strong color contrasts, strange abstract eye (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Untitled, 1986, oil on canvas, 21 x 17 inches.

"The Red" is my favorite abstract painting. I think red color symbolizes hot, loveable, exciting, angry and indignant feelings. I tried to show these feelings. I used a painting knife, applying the thick paint without the least hesitation. I tried to show not only the color, but also the texture (Figure 8).
Figure 8. The Red, 1986, oil on canvas, 24 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

I think that there are three fundamental aspects of drawing and painting. The first is objective observation, that is, in drawing, the objects show different relationships among dark and light, void and solid, loose and tight. In painting, the objects show different relationships among local color, color of the light source and the color reflected by the surroundings. The second aspect is the subjective impression, which is the artist's emotional reaction to the subject matter. In other words, it is the artist's awareness of the effect the subject matter has upon her or him. It requires the organization, selection and summarization of the drawing or painting according to subjective observation. The third aspect is the possibility of using materials to realize the first and the second. Different materials determine different ways to draw and paint, and different materials show different effects in drawing and painting. In China, drawing and painting emphasize the first aspect just described; in America, drawing and painting emphasize the second and third. I think they should be combined. The three aspects of knowledge in drawing and painting are so related to each other that they can not be separated. One of the founders of abstract art, Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) said,
Contemporary art in this sense is truly anarchistic: it not only reflects the spiritual standpoint already conquered but also embodies the spirit as a materializing force, ripe for revelation.

These two elements have always existed in art. They are:

1. Total abstraction
2. Total realism

These two poles open two ways that lead ultimately to one goal.

Between these poles lie many combinations of the different harmonies of abstraction and realism.6

What he says is true. I am going to find a new way which will combine realistic and abstract art.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


2. Nicolaides, p. 16.

3. Ibid., Section 3.

