

Xu Beihong's Contribution: A General Overview of the Big Concept of Chinese Painting History Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Based on the requirements of the 2022 version of the art curriculum standard, in response to the fragmented and superficial problems in art history teaching, it is proposed to integrate teaching content with Xu Beihong's contribution as the "big concept". Through Xu Beihong's artistic contributions in the innovation of brush and ink language, transformation of modeling concepts, and improvement of subject matter, the core teaching content of the overview of Chinese painting history is connected. This big concept can help students understand the modern transformation of traditional painting, assist them in forming cultural subject cognition and historical dialectical thinking, achieve a leap from knowledge accumulation to value recognition, and achieve the learning effect of ability transfer and literacy improvement.

Keywords: Big concept, Xu Beihong, Artistic contribution, Teaching content.

1. INTRODUCTION: PROBLEM PROPOSAL

1.1 Research Background

The 2022 version of the Art Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (referred to as the "2022 Art Curriculum Standards") highlights the art practice centered on "artistic experience", proposing 16 learning contents and 20 learning tasks. The content of art courses is selected and organized in a task driven manner, and the learning content is embedded into the learning tasks. In the fourth stage (grades 8-9), a learning task is proposed to provide an overview of Chinese and foreign art history, clearly stating that students need to grasp the overall development of Chinese art history from a macro perspective. This task aims to understand the background of the emergence of art works, as well as the characteristics of art in different eras and regions, to know about ancient Chinese classics and modern art works that reflect the historical process of the country, in order to enhance students' national emotions, inherit the red gene, strengthen cultural confidence, cultivate an open and inclusive attitude, and a sense of

community with a shared future for mankind. The specific content requirements for the overview of Chinese art history in the 2022 version of the art curriculum include: the first is to appreciate ancient classic art works, and understand the long history and world contributions of Chinese art; The second is to appreciate modern art works and understand the efforts made by the CPC to realize the historical mission of national rejuvenation.[1] To summarize the content requirements, it can be found that the overview of Chinese art history is actually an overview of the excellent traditional Chinese culture, revolutionary culture, and advanced socialist culture contained in art history, which also reflects the nature of art courses. The content requirements of the 2022 Art Curriculum Standards clearly state that the learning task of summarizing Chinese art history should be completed by appreciating classic art works. As there are numerous disciplines and a large number of classic works in the history of Chinese art, this study chooses the main category of Chinese painting history as the research object for overview teaching.

1.2 The Significance of Xu Beihong's Paradigm

As an important founder of the transformation of modern Chinese painting, Xu Beihong's artistic practice spans both tradition and the West. Classic works such as "Running Horses", "Yu Gong Moves Mountains", and "Five Hundred Scholars of Tian Heng" in middle school art textbooks directly reflect the transformation logic of Chinese painting from "literati painting style" to "modern realism". Taking Xu Beihong's contributions as an overview of the "big concept" of painting history, it can connect core issues such as "evolution of brush and ink", "changes in the concept of form and spirit", and "socialization of subject matter" in the history of Chinese painting, and respond to the goals of "overview learning" and "cultural understanding" required by the new curriculum standards.

2. CURRENT SITUATION OF CHINESE PAINTING HISTORY TEACHING

The history of Chinese painting is rich in content and has a profound cultural heritage. As for the current situation of art teaching, there are certain difficulties and challenges in carrying out comprehensive overview teaching of Chinese painting history in junior high school, mainly reflected in the following aspects.

2.1 Textbook Structure: Fragmentation and Logical Deficiency

The current junior high school art textbooks have rich teaching content for Chinese painting, but each version of the textbooks does not have dedicated units or class hours to systematically explain the history of Chinese painting. Relevant knowledge points are scattered in different units and class hours. Although the textbook content is rich and diverse, covering knowledge of various periods and schools of Chinese painting history, it lacks a main thread to connect them together. Due to the lack of logical organization, this knowledge lacks correlation and inspiration with each other. This often fails to guide students to think about the social, cultural, and historical background behind art works as a whole. For example, in the sixth unit of the Jimei edition of the seventh-grade textbook, "Learning to Paint Flower and Bird Paintings", although this unit learned about the expressive content and basic brush and ink techniques of flower and bird paintings, it allowed students to

experience the unique charm of using objects to express emotions in flower and bird paintings. However, the lack of effective correlation between the ink and brush evolution, subject matter changes, and social and cultural background of flower and bird painting from the Song Dynasty to modern times makes it difficult for students to construct a complete historical cognitive framework.

And other junior high school textbooks, such as Chinese and history, especially those related to history, also involve a lot of content. This actually provides a foundation for us to carry out teaching, and also demonstrates the feasibility of teaching an overview of the history of painting in junior high school. The existing knowledge in other disciplines is not only a help for students to overview the history of painting, but also an obstacle for them to understand the history of painting.

2.2 Teaching Practice: The Dilemma of Breadth and Depth

The teaching content of Chinese painting history is extremely extensive, covering various periods, styles, and schools of art from ancient to modern times. Not only is it difficult for middle school teachers to teach and students to learn, but it is also a challenge for undergraduate students and teachers majoring in art. Faced with such a complex knowledge system, choosing which content to focus on for teaching has become a difficult problem. Through interviews and research with frontline art teachers, it is found that it is difficult for teachers to cover all aspects within limited teaching time, and grasping the key and difficult points in detail has become a challenge in teaching the history of painting. If students pay too much attention to details, it is easy to make them feel overwhelmed and unable to find the key points. If it is too brief, it will not allow students to fully understand the rich connotations of Chinese painting history. How to arrange and organize teaching content reasonably within a limited time, highlight key points, is a major issue faced by middle school art teachers.

2.3 Students' Cognition: Utilitarianism and Shallowness

From the perspective of academic performance, middle school students in grades 8-9 are between the ages of 13-15, which is in the early stage of the youth crisis period defined by Lowenfeld. He believes that the techniques of this period are of great significance to children's growth. In order to

avoid children being discouraged by their "childish" works, it is necessary to teach them specific techniques, which can help children learn to appreciate works that they may have overlooked or even ridiculed before.[2] Therefore, influenced by psychological cognition in the process of art learning, some students attach great importance to the learning of art techniques and underestimate the learning of art theory knowledge. They believe that painting techniques are practical skills that can be directly applied to the creation of works, while art theory knowledge appears more abstract and hollower. This will make them think that the course of Chinese painting history has little to do with their professional development, or that this course is boring and difficult to interest them.

Through the above analysis of the current situation of teaching Chinese painting history, it is not difficult to find that there are many challenges in this field of teaching, especially in the selection and organization of teaching content and the design of teaching methods by teachers. These issues may hinder the smooth progress of teaching activities on the history of overview painting, making it difficult to effectively achieve teaching objectives.

3. KNOWLEDGE INTEGRATION: CONSTRUCTING TEACHING CONTENT WITH XU BEIHONG'S ARTISTIC CONTRIBUTIONS

The promulgation of the 2022 version of the Art Curriculum Standards marks a new stage of core competency orientation in art education, which explicitly advocates the integration of disciplinary knowledge systems through "big concepts". Therefore, this article attempts to integrate the teaching content of an overview of the history of Chinese painting using a broad concept approach. The "big concept" is different from the complex and numerous knowledge points mentioned in traditional teaching. It is the core knowledge of a subject, like the core of an onion. All the knowledge related to it is arranged layer by layer on its periphery, and the learning of all peripheral content is constantly close to the core knowledge. It is the booster and stepping stone for students to understand and digest the core knowledge.[3] By using the important means of refining and integrating major concepts, teachers can effectively streamline and summarize the vast and complex content in the history of Chinese painting, and thus construct a clear and organized knowledge framework. Xu Beihong's artistic contributions

provide three dimensions for the integration of teaching content on the history of Chinese painting.

3.1 Innovation of Ink and Brush Form: The Link Between Inheritance and Breakthrough

In the long development of traditional Chinese painting, brush and ink, as the core of formal language, has been the focus of painters' attention for thousands of years. From the initial "drawing" and "painting" to "depiction", and then to "writing", the brush and ink language of Chinese painting has gone through a process of continuous purification and development, from the initial "unconscious" to the "conscious" after the Yuan Dynasty.[4] The exploration of brush and ink techniques at every stage of development profoundly influences the direction of Chinese painting. Chen Shouxiang mentioned in the "History of Chinese Art: Sui and Tang Dynasties Volume" that the painters of the Sui and Tang dynasties were first based on Gu Kaizhi's "painting techniques", while constantly drawing nourishment from calligraphy brushwork, gradually exploring brushwork such as "dyeing techniques" and "rubbing techniques".[5] With the independent and gradual development of landscape painting, painters began to use different brush and ink techniques to express the texture and texture of mountains and rocks, thus further forming the "texturing method" and "point method" of landscape painting expression techniques. The emergence of ink technique is a classification and sublimation of "coloring" with the use of brush, which has formed another vocabulary category equivalent to "pen", gradually forming the basis for the exploration of "form" and "color" in Chinese painting by the painter's subject.[6] It is precisely because of the exploration of brushwork and ink techniques that the formal language of brush and ink has become an important pillar of Chinese painting form.

As a representative of the innovation of modern brush and ink, Xu Beihong adheres to the essential characteristics of Chinese painting in terms of inheritance: insisting on the outlining method of line modeling and traditional ink and wash media, using traditional techniques such as hooking, dyeing, and boneless to maintain the pattern of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and printing integrated. On the basis of inheriting and developing traditional calligraphy and painting, Xu Beihong has also made bold innovations. "There are real mountains and rivers, and only smoke and

clouds can bring joy and happiness. If one does not grasp something now, but wants to use ink and brush to convey its charm and make it sound, where will the ink and brush fall.”[7] He firmly believes that without grasping the true form, there will be no place for ink and brush to “land”. Based on this, he boldly borrows Western sketching techniques, striving to achieve a “real” modeling effect. He has integrated the “scientific realistic modeling” techniques of composition, perspective, anatomical proportion, structural expression, and light and shadow effects from sketching into traditional Chinese painting, thus creating a “brush and ink form that incorporates elements of sketching”. This transformation not only maintains the writing rhythm of ink and brush, but also strengthens the expression of object texture, breaking through the excessive emphasis on the essence of ink and brush in the Ming and Qing freehand tradition, and achieving a modern transformation that combines form and spirit.

When constructing the teaching content of Chinese painting history, vertical and horizontal connections can be designed around the core proposition of “innovation of brush and ink forms”. Based on Xu Beihong’s innovative practice of calligraphy and painting, a teaching framework of “tracing the lineage of techniques - cross-cultural dialogue experiments - aesthetic value reassessment” is established. In the section on tracing the lineage of techniques, by comparing the linear expression of Gu Kaizhi’s “Gao Gu Suo Hair Brushwork”, Fan Kuan’s “Raindrop Texture”, and Xu Beihong’s fusion sketch, the transformation trajectory of “shaping with lines” from formulaic to realistic is sorted out, revealing the dialectical relationship between the autonomy of brushwork and the reproducibility of objects among painters throughout history; The cross-cultural dialogue experiment can set up a topic of “Ink Ink Intervention in Sketching”, such as simulating dignified turning points with strokes and ink splashing to reconstruct the layers of light and shadow, allowing students to experience the transformation path of traditional ink painting modernization within the limitations of rice paper and ink painting; The re-evaluation of aesthetic value relies on classic works such as “Yu Gong Moves Mountains” and “Running Horses”, deconstructing Xu Beihong’s specific technique of transforming calligraphy strokes into human anatomical tension, guiding students to recognize that the essence of “modernity” is the transformation of brush and ink genes (such as

handwriting and sense of program) rather than fragmentation. This teaching construction adopts a three-dimensional dimension of “historical logic + practical perception + critical thinking”, enabling students to understand that the “dynamic inheritance” of traditional brush and ink requires not only a deep understanding of the language system of brush and ink itself, but also the activation of its endogenous creativity through the collision of Eastern and Western visual experiences.

3.2 Transformation of Styling Concepts: A Bridge between the Ancient and Modern Views of Form and Spirit

The concept of form in Chinese painting has evolved over thousands of years, forming a dialectical system centered around the concept of “formism”. In the ancient period (pre-Qin to Ming and Qing dynasties), there was a gradual development, from the simple political and religious functional forms of the Qin and Han dynasties to the establishment of the theoretical framework of Gu Kaizhi’s “writing gods with form” and Xie He’s “responding to objects with pictograms” in the Northern and Southern Dynasties. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, Zhang Zao proposed the concept of “learning from nature outside and gaining inspiration from the heart within” to achieve a fusion of subjective and objective elements. In the Song and Yuan dynasties, literati paintings broke free from the constraints of form with freehand brushwork, while in the Ming and Qing dynasties, there was a dual path of court realism and literati expression. Looking at the concept of form in ancient painting, it can be seen that painters always regarded “using form to express spirit and combining form and spirit” as the dominant idea of form in their creation, rather than taking similarity to the object as the highest pursuit of form.

In modern times, the concept of form in Chinese painting has opened a new chapter in the collision and integration of tradition and modernity, local and Western styles. Xu Beihong’s practice of realistic modeling concepts has brought profound changes to the development of Chinese painting modeling. He believed, “Therefore, in order to revitalize Chinese art... and to save the current problems, we must adopt European realism.” “Art should follow the path of realism, but it cannot blindly imitate.”[8] So in terms of modeling methods, he introduced the foundation” of Western sketching, emphasizing object structure, proportion,

perspective, etc., making Chinese painting modeling more rigorous and scientific. Xu Beihong always adhered to the viewpoint of "lifelike and combining form and spirit" in Chinese painting style. He said, "Being vivid(miao) belongs to beauty, and being alike(xiao) belongs to art. Therefore, paintings must be realistic in order to be lifelike." [9] Its "Miao Xiao Theory" has promoted the modern transformation of painting modeling concepts - it not only introduces the Western sketch science system to strengthen anatomical structure and spatial perspective, but also preserves the writing rhythm of ink lines in the works, dialectically unifying "Xiao" (precise modeling) and "Miao" (conveying charm), reconstructing a modern modeling paradigm that combines realistic depth and Eastern connotations. This styling concept achieves self-renewal by absorbing heterogeneous cultures, and its essence is a diverse interpretation of "reality" rather than a simple visual reproduction.

Constructing the teaching content of Chinese painting history based on Xu Beihong's "Miao Xiao Theory" of form, with "dialectical theory of form and spirit" as the theoretical hub running through the teaching mainline. Anchoring Xu Beihong's core proposition of "lifelike and possessing both form and spirit", this paper analyzes the dialectical relationship between "beauty" (charm) and "likeness" (likeness), and connects the millennium evolution from Gu Kaizhi's "writing spirit with form", Zhang Cong's "blending of mind and matter" to the "image transformation" of the Eight Great Mountains people, revealing the essential law of Chinese painting seeking balance in the dialectics of form and spirit. When exploring the development of the concept of form, a dual module of ancient tracing and modern transformation is set up. The ancient part analyzes the functional transformation from traditional line drawing to scientific form by comparing the linear transmission of spirit in "the Picture of The Ode of the River Goddess" and the combination of lines and surfaces in "Yu Gong Moves Mountains". By contrasting the realistic foundation of Fan Kuan's raindrop texture with Xu Wei's freehand brushwork, this paper elucidates the aesthetic value of the Song and Yuan literati paintings' emphasis on both form and spirit. The modern transformation focuses on the practice of integrating Chinese and Western elements, deconstructing the innovative path of integrating anatomy into white drawing in "Jiu Fang Gao", and demonstrating that Xu Beihong, while continuing the tradition of "bone technique

and brush strokes", systematically strengthened Zhang Zao's observation system of "learning from nature" through sketching. Finally, cross-cultural thinking is introduced to engage in a critical discussion around whether realism severs tradition. This architecture uses Xu Beihong as a prism to reflect the essence of the evolution of Chinese painting concepts, enabling students to not only grasp the historical lineage of the evolution of painting concepts, but also to engage in critical thinking about the transformation of traditional modeling concepts in contemporary times.

3.3 Improvement of Painting Themes: Mapping of the Spirit of the Times

The subject matter of Chinese painting has undergone thousands of years of evolution. From the pre-Qin to the Qin and Han dynasties, it focused on political, religious, and mythological themes. The flourishing of Buddhism in the Wei and Jin dynasties gave rise to the transformation of figure painting. The diverse aesthetics of the Sui and Tang dynasties promoted the independent development of landscape, flowers, and birds. The civic culture of the Song and Yuan dynasties nurtured the flourishing of genre painting. The literati paintings of the Ming and Qing dynasties used plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, and chrysa. In modern times, Xu Beihong has responded to the changes of the times by improving the topic and constructing a triple breakthrough.

Firstly, he has reconstructed the subject matter of historical figure paintings. His figure paintings emphasize the expression of classical Chinese historical themes, and his works are full of classical and romantic imagination. When talking about Xu Beihong's classical works, Xie Lifa said, "He chose the most difficult path. If it weren't for the spirit of Western classical and romanticism inspiring him, no one would dare to try such a complicated and elusive subject matter in Chinese classical history." [10] Inspired by Western classical romanticism, Xu Beihong broke through the traditional literati's tendency to avoid the world and reconstructed historical narratives with masterpieces such as "Yu Gong Moves the Mountains" and "Five Hundred Scholars of Tian Heng". He used realistic techniques to reshape ancient sages, used light and shadow composition to enhance heroic spirit, and infused national spirit into virtual situations, building a bridge between classical ideals and modern enlightenment.

Subsequently, inspired by the socialist realistic art of the Soviet Union, Xu Beihong began to experiment with realistic themes of concern. In his "Opinions on Modern Chinese Art," he said, "Art is related to the expression of life. Studying art cannot be separated from life. From ancient times to the present, we painters have ignored the description of life and only focused on abstract ideals such as landscapes, characters, birds, animals, flowers, etc., or imitated ancient works, only emphasizing aestheticism." [11] After making such remarks, around 1937, he began to create works on realistic themes. Examples such as "Ba People Collect Water", "Boatman", "Laundry", etc. have transformed the "feasibility and expectation" of landscape painting into the "livability and sensibility" of figure painting, making traditional brush and ink deeply involved in social reality expression for the first time. He also inherited the tradition of using flower and bird paintings to express his aspirations, endowing images such as lions, horses, and eagles with metaphors of the times: "The Injured Lion" symbolizes the will to resist the war, while "Running Horse" projects the spirit of national progress. Its innovation lies in elevating the residence of literati to a symbol of publicness, and through intertextuality between inscriptions and images, it enables traditional themes to carry intellectuals' systematic thinking about the fate of their families and countries. Xu Beihong's theme improvement ultimately led to the transition of Chinese painting from a literary study to the public domain, achieving a deep integration between traditional themes and the national spirit of the 20th century.

In the construction of teaching content on Chinese painting themes and the spirit of the times, with Xu Beihong's reform practice as the hub, it can be carried out through a dual path. Firstly, a vertical comparison is made between Xu Beihong's figure paintings (such as "Five Hundred Scholars of Tian Heng") and classic traditional figure paintings (such as "Han Xizai's Night Banquet"), focusing on the transformation of historical themes from "private collection records" to "public spiritual totems", and explaining how painting reflects the needs of the times through material selection. Secondly, taking "horse" as a cross era symbol clue, connecting Li Gonglin's "Five Horses", Lang Shining's "Hundred Horses", and Xu Beihong's "Running Horses", through dissecting the literati elegance of Tang and Song meticulous brushwork, the collision of Chinese and Western cultures in Qing dynasty palace painting, and the national spirit symbol of

modern ink painting, the evolution trajectory of the traditional image of "horse" from an aesthetic object to a spiritual carrier is intuitively presented, reflecting the deep transformation of Chinese painting themes from individual lyricism to collective discourse with the social context. These two paths are centered around the interaction of "theme era", forming a three-dimensional framework from case analysis to symbol tracing, ultimately leading to the core proposition of painting history teaching - the evolution of painting themes is essentially a creative response of national cultural genes to the demands of the times.

Xu Beihong's personal artistic exploration trajectory (traditional foundation building - learning from Europe - local transformation) naturally corresponds to the evolutionary logic of Chinese painting history. Therefore, taking Xu Beihong's artistic contributions as the main concept, it can connect important contents of Chinese painting history and achieve the teaching goal of overview. This broad concept, which takes key innovators as cognitive coordinates, can elevate the study of painting history beyond the level of knowledge accumulation and elevate it into a thinking training for cultivating cultural subject consciousness in the context of globalization.

4. CONCLUSION

By incorporating Xu Beihong's contributions as a major concept into the teaching of Chinese painting history, it is possible to connect the three major threads of ink and brush innovation, breakthrough in form, and theme transformation through his "fusion of Chinese and Western" artistic practice, and to map the whole through individual cases - his artistic exploration runs through the core thread of the modern transformation of Chinese painting. It not only provides a unique entry point for overview teaching, but also helps people to have a deeper understanding of the development process of Chinese painting. Because Xu Beihong is a key figure in the history of Chinese painting, only by grasping the overall history of Chinese painting can we know and understand where Xu Beihong's contributions lie. But in teaching, it is necessary to avoid interpreting Xu Beihong's contributions in isolation, and to closely integrate them into the overall framework of Chinese painting history, so as to effectively complete the learning task of summarizing Chinese painting history.

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