

Analysis of Zhao Mengfu's "Ancient Realm"

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Abstract—Zhao Mengfu was a strong advocator and implementer of literati painting in Yuan Dynasty. He advocated the "ancient realm", which can be understood from the two aspects of "ancient" and "realm". "Ancient" means to copy the previous generation, it both includes the copy of previous literati painting's "above all material desires", and also includes the copy of literati's character and vigour of style; And the "realm" can be regarded as "artistic conception", that is, the literati painting's "simple", "elegant" and "light" style. Zhao Mengfu was actually use the past to open today, he created a new style of literati freehand painting.

Keywords—Zhao Mengfu; ancient realm

I. INTRODUCTION

In the history of Chinese painting, we could roughly divided painting into realistic and freehand painting two kinds. Realistic painting was represented by imperial-court decorative painting painters, they focused on the rules and laws; freehand painting was represented by the literati painters, they focused on the convey of artists' subject emotions and promote the "ancient realm".

II. "ANCIENT REALM" AND LITERATI PAINTING

Yuan Dynasty is the heyday of the development of literati painting, Zhao Mengfu as a pioneer and advocator of literati painting, put forward a lot of painting theories which deeply influenced the four masters in Yuan dynasty and later literati painters. Some people may question the identity of Zhao Mengfu as a literati painter since there are many imperial-court decorative paintings in his works, but if we compare his paintings with the imperial-court decorative painting works of the Southern Song Dynasty, we will find that Zhao Mengfu's painting is different from the northern court style, but also out of the influence of the late flow of Southern Song Dynasty's imperial-court decorative painting, he emphasized the feeling expression, and in technique he stressed to combine calligraphy into painting. In this way, first in aesthetic feelings it is close to the literati painting, and further the distance with imperial-court decorative painting. Zhao Mengfu often mentioned ancient realm in his painting theory and painting postscript, such as in the figure painting "Red Arhat" he wrote: "I often see the image of Arhat Lulingjia, it has the best manner of Western Regions, so people called it the best. It is because there are

many Western region people in the capital of Tang Dynasty, and they could communicate with each other with no problem. Until the Five Dynasties, although there were good painters like Wang Qihan, but their paintings are the same with the Han monks. I have been lived in the capital for a long time and I often traveled with Tianzhu monks, and they are like arhat, so I believed I have got their spirit. This painting was painted seventeen years before, and it with roughly ancient realm, I wonder what you think about it." [1] In the inscriptions, Zhao Mengfu in addition to evaluate the ancient arhat portraits, but also comment on his own painting Red Arhat, he mentioned himself often traveled with Tianzhu monks when he lived in the capital, so he believed the arhat figure painting was good enough, and with "roughly ancient realm", from which we can see, "ancient realm" is the painting style and artistic conception Zhao Mengfu pursuit. Also Zhao Meng discussed in his self postscript scrolls that: "The most valuable thing for painting is ancient realm, if you do not have the ancient realm, although the painting skill is perfect it is useless. Today people called themselves as good painter once they know how to use pencraft and colors, but they do not know that without ancient realm, their paintings have various problems, so how could their paintings been watchable? It seems that my paintings are simple but people who understand would know that they are close to the ancient and they are good paintings. This could only been known by people who knows, and people who do not know will not been told." [2] Zhao Mengfu believed that "ancient realm" is the realms which painting works pursuit, if the works do not have ancient realm, even the perfect painting skill is not useful, if only know neat, slim and beautiful color for painting, then it is a sick work that has no connotation, only works with "ancient realm" are good work. What kind of painting spirit or style is the "ancient realm" which Zhao Mengfu so advocate? What is the connotation of "ancient realm"?

III. THE CONNOTATION OF ZHAO MENGFU'S "ANCIENT" AND "REALM"

To understand Zhao Mengfu's "ancient realm", we have to start from the "ancient" and "realm" two aspects. China esteem the past over the present since ancient times, "ancient" literally can be understood as the previous generation, then the ancient of the "ancient realm" have the first layer of meaning, that is "copy the previous generation". However, there is a broad area

before Yuan Dynasty, it can not all be Zhao Mengfu's copy object, literati painting's "above all material desires" and the literati's character, vigour of style are the object which Zhao Mengfu yearning and pursuit. Therefore, in order to be clear of what the previous generation means, we also need to sort out the context of the development of literati painting. Most of the scholars considered Wang Wei as the originator of literati painting, especially Su Shi compared Wang Wei with Wu Daozi and he believed Wang was more excellent than Wu. Su Shi mentioned in his poem "Fengxiang Baguan, Wang Wei Wu Daozi Hua" that: "Wuzi sujuemiao, youyi huagonglun, mojie dezhiyu xiangwai, youru xianhe xielongfan, wuyu erzi jieshenjun, youyu weiyelienren wujianyan," [3] which means that Wu Daozi's painting was excellent but it only can be counted as craftsman's work, but Wang Wei has a cultural connotation, his works were beyond the image itself. Therefore although both of their works could be called "God's work", but Wang's painting is better than Wu Daozi's by comparison. Start from Su Shi, Wang Wei's "poetry in the painting, painting in the poetry" has become an incarnation of "above all material desires", Wang Wei was also enjoyed such a high cultural status for the first time, in this position, he not only go neck and neck with Wu Daozi, but also he surpassed Wu Daozi in literati painting system. But in Tang Dynasty which considered realism as the mainstream, why appeared Wang Wei's "above all material desires"?

On one hand this was related with Wang Wei's personal experience, but more importantly is because Wang Wei has both a profound cultural heritage and also he could paint, so he could put his own seclusion thought into paintings and convey the meanings outside the painting. The difference between the literati painter and imperial-court decorative painting painter is that the literati painter pay attention to the convey of personal emotions in painting, they have strong subject consciousness, but imperial-court decorative painting painter pay more attention to the object itself and ignore the convey of painter's subject consciousness.

After Wang Wei, Dong Yuan, Ju Ran from the Five Dynasties, their interesting features of "integrate ink, water and paper together as a whole" have become the most popular style which the literati painters advocated in the middle and late Northern Song Dynasty, and it has been a comprehensive development in the mid and late Yuan Dynasty. Dong Yuan's ink landscape painting "Xiaoxiang Tu" not only the scenery is plain and leisure which in line with the interest ideal of the literati, but also the scenery of Xiaoxiang has a rich cultural connotation, it has a subtle relationship with Chinese scholar's hardship complex which involved in Chu Ci. Dong Yuan and Wang Wei were both respected by the literati painters from the mid and late Northern Song Dynasty, after that Dong Yuan has become the originator of Jiangnan ink painting school, and he is the most important literati landscape painter after Wang Wei.

In Song Dynasty the farther and son Mi Fu and Mi Youren used their achievements on calligraphy to create the technique which express Jiangnan Cloud Mountains with ink dots, it was known as "Mi Dian Shan Shui". The dot painting technique was from the impressionist effect of "Fan Tou Cun", they re-established the important position of Dong Yuan and Ju Ran in the history of landscape painting.

Song literati painting not only has got development in landscape painting, but in figure, flowers and birds paintings also appeared Li Gonglin, Wen Tong and such literati painters. Thus, the Song Dynasty literati paintings were not limited to a certain painting subject, but reflected in the creative attitude of the whole society. But for the entire Song Dynasty, because of the participation and involvement of the emperors in painting, the imperial-court decorative painting that advocates the form similarity was still occupied the dominant position.

This is the meaning and scope to clarify Zhao Mengfu's "ancient" which is "copy the previous generation" from the development of literati painting, from the above argument we can see that the "copy the previous generation" which Zhao Mengfu advocated from one hand is the pursuit of literati painting's "above all material desires", which is follow the development of literati painting since the Tang Dynasty, this was from the inheritance of painting.

On the other hand, the "ancient" that Zhao Mengfu advocate also has the meaning of pursuit the ancient literati's character and vigour of style, that is to copy the ancient from the ideological level. The thought of literati can be traced back to the Wei and Jin Dynasties, in that time the metaphysics was prevailed, and the most important value of metaphysics is to show people's self-consciousness and highlight the value of personal existence. "Wei Jin spirit" embodied a concentrated reflection of metaphysical celebrities' spiritual world, and "Seven sages of the Bamboo Grove" "was the concentrated reflection of "Wei Jin Spirit". What kind of spiritual realm is the character of the literati? In short, it is simple and insipid just like "Zhuangzi" mentioned: After carve and cut, reverted to simple.

The Tang Dynasty Wang Wei's "Harmony of poetry and painting" and his "above all material desires" in painting are both the intuitive expression of his literati thought. Su Shi from Song Dynasty was a great advocate of literati painting, he wrote in the poem: "Huihua yixingsi, jianyu ertonglin", "Shihua benyiti, tiangong yuqingxin" (Poetry and painting are originally the same thing, they are both either perfect works from heaven or fresh elegant works with taste). Su Shi believed that evaluate the painting works are good or bad with the object similarity, this view is similar to the children's knowledge. So that he opposed the blindly pursuit of the shape similarity while ignoring the artist's cultural accomplishment, character and the emotion communication function that paintings have, and he promoted the "fresh" and "natural" painting style. He also strongly praised Wang Wei's ink landscape, he wrote in the inscription that: "Weimojie zhishi, shizhong youhua, guanmojie zhihua, huazhong youshi." (Taste Mojie's poetry, you can see painting within the poetry, watch Mojie's painting, you can see poetry within the painting) He advocated to convey the poetic mood and emotions in the paintings. Through "Advocate Wang and suppress Wu", that is, advocate the cultural connotation of painting and against the painter rigidly adhere to the objective expression of the object, in order to express his aesthetic tendency and artistic ideas.

Thus it can be seen that the "ancient" Zhao Mengfu advocated is both advocate the succession of literati painting's

“above all material desires” and also the pursuit of literati scholar's character and vigour of style.

So what does the “Realm” of the ancient realm mean? Realm can be seen as “artistic conception”, and how to achieve the painting’s “artistic conception” is related with the style. Mr. Wu Yifu summarized the style of literati paintings as: “Simple”, “Elegant”, “Light”. These styles could also be seen as the characteristics of the artistic conception of literati painting. Literati painting advocated the style of “simple” more prominent. As for the landscape painting, the works of Dong Yuan and Ju Ran are all thick and intense without simple style yet, from the Southern Song Dynasty’s Ma Yuan and Xia Gui’s “half” and “corner”, the simple style began to form, and to the Yuan Dynasty it could see I in the simple style. Zhao Mengfu in his self-inscription painting scroll also said: “... Wusuo zuohua, sihujianshuai, ranshizhe zhiqi jingu, guyiwei jia..”[4] Zhao Mengfu pointed out that my work seems very simple and hasty, but those who appreciate my work can see that my work is full with ancient realm, so they will think it is a masterpiece.

“Elegant” and the vulgar are opposite, the literati and scholars believed that the elegance in painting could only be understood by those who were full of poetry and literature and with high cultural cultivation, vulgar people can only see it but can not understand it. Elegance can be reflected in the painter's character, and also can be reflected in the style and theme of his paintings. Such as Wang Wei and Wu Daozi, one is not officer and one is, in style one is mainly with water ink, other is mainly with meticulous painting, in painting themes one is mainly with landscape and other one is mainly with figures. Literati painters were deeply influenced by Lao Zi’s thought, in his “Tao Te Ching” Lao Zi pointed out: “The fancy colored clothes make people blind, the beautiful music make people deaf, delicious food make people lost taste, field hunting make people’s mind go crazy, rare goods make people steal and rob. So that the saint pursues full belly not the outside beauty, so they left latter to get the former.”[5] So in the eyes of the literati painters, colors are vulgar and ink is elegant, only the ink could create coke, thick, heavy, light, clear five tones, and the works created with ink are fresh and elegant, without the meticulous works’ vulgarity and artisan habits.

“Light” means plain, innocent, natural, in the Yuan Dynasty and later painting history works, “light” was always a standard of comment, “light” is better, Guo Ruoxu mentioned in the “Tuhua Jianwen Zhi” that: “Dong Yuan's landscape painting and ink paintings are like Wang Wei ...”, Mi Fu from the Northern Song Dynasty pointed out in “Painting history” that: “Dong Yuan’s works are more plain and innocent, Tang Dynasty has no such work, their style is so elegant which made them the masterpieces with no one can compare...”, They all praised plain and innocent as the features of Dong Yuan’s works, and Yuan Dynasty Zhao Mengfu, Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan and others’ paintings were also reflected the plain and fresh style.

The artistic conception of literati painting which take “Simple, elegant and light” as its main features is what the literati painters always advocated and pursuit, and Zhao Mengfu was the advocator and implementer of literati painting.

His painting theory and painting style could be found in the works of It can be found in the works of four masters in Yuan dynasty.

IV. CONCLUSION

The “ancient realm” that Zhao Mengfu advocated was not blindly copy and pursuit the previous generation, but use the past to open today, he created a new generation of painting style. Although he praised the majestic Tang Dynasty paintings, but he did not entirely in accordance with predecessors’ paintings, such as his painting “Red Arhat” was against the traditional brushwork techniques, it has rough constitution, random and free use of colors, different from the traditional painting’s “Three alum nine dye”, but with a little freehand. The arhat’s red coat painted with cinnabar but without colored outline, the red carpet he sat on and the background were also rendering freely. It was different from the current slim and colored painting style at that time, and also different from the ancient painting style of Tang and Northern Song Dynasty. Thus, the “ancient realm” Zhao Mengfu advocated on one hand is to show his demeaning of the Southern Song Dynasty’s slim and colored painting style, on the one hand he created a new generation of freehand painting style of literati paintings by using the past to open today.

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