

Study on the Development Trends of Contemporary Chinese Urban-themed Ink Painting

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Abstract: With the accelerated process of globalization in the 21st century, China's connection with the international community has reached an unprecedented level. Against this backdrop, contemporary Chinese art has exhibited a diverse trajectory of development. Urban-themed ink painting, as an important manifestation of the spirit of the times, shows significant differences in its forms of expression, creative concepts, and techniques compared to traditional ink painting, making it challenging to interpret using conventional aesthetic standards. This study takes the "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" as a research perspective, analyzing the background of the exhibition's establishment, the evolution of its themes over the years, and its distinctive features. It aims to uncover the diverse representations of urban-themed ink painting in contemporary art and explore its development trends. The goal of this research is to provide new perspectives and lines of thought for the creative practice of urban-themed ink painting within a diversified artistic environment.

Keywords: Urban-Themed Ink Painting; Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale; Development Trend.

1. Introduction

Art is rooted in life. Any exploration of the developmental trajectory of contemporary Chinese urban-themed ink painting will inevitably address how this art form captures the urban landscape and the accompanying social transformations amidst the process of urbanization. As a frontier city at the forefront of China's reform and opening-up, and one of the first to actively engage in depicting urban landscapes, Shenzhen provided the context for the emergence of the Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale. Moreover, as a platform for showcasing the creative works and theoretical achievements of contemporary ink art, it offers a wealth of case studies and research material for understanding and analyzing the development trends of urban-themed ink painting.

2. Overview of the Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale

Since the 1980s, alongside China's reform and opening-up, ink painting has entered one of the most open and flourishing periods in its history, yet it also faces many thought-provoking challenges. In this historical context, the "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" has been dedicated to a comprehensive and systematic presentation of the various exploratory achievements in the modern development of Chinese ink painting. The artworks featured in each edition of the Biennale not only showcase the contemporary landscape of ink painting but also reflect a broader focus on the modern development trends of this art form.

The "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" originated from two earlier international ink exhibitions held in Beijing in 1988 and Shenzhen in 1992. Since 1998, it has been officially hosted by the Shenzhen Municipal Government, establishing itself as a permanent international art exhibition in China. It provides a consistent platform for ink artists to showcase their works and engage in academic exchanges. In today's globalized context, the Biennale has played a significant role in promoting the international development of

Chinese ink art[1]. Since the 1980s, the transformation and reform of Chinese art in the New Era have made the innovation of traditional Chinese painting a particularly important topic. In the early 1990s, the young cultural landscape of Shenzhen also embarked on the modernization of traditional ink painting. At that time, China was riding the wave of reform and opening-up, and as a frontier city in this movement, Shenzhen faced unprecedented opportunities for cultural and artistic development. It was in this social context that the Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale emerged. From its inception over thirty years ago, the "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" has evolved from a regional exhibition into an international art event of global influence. Each edition has attracted numerous artists from both China and the West, showcasing a vast array of innovative and contemporary ink artworks. The Biennale has facilitated exchanges and collaborations between Chinese and Western artists, becoming a significant platform for advancing Chinese ink art on the global stage.

3. Changes in Exhibition Characteristics and Theme

This exhibition is the only biennale in the world that employs an international curatorial mechanism with ink art as its cultural medium. Expansive in scale and emphasizing the integration of tradition and modernity, each edition of the biennale is structured around distinct core themes. It is dedicated to transcending the temporal and spatial boundaries of ink painting and ink art. The biennale bridges the gap between Chinese ink culture and diverse foreign cultures, using thematic frameworks to guide the creative direction of artists while also offering viewers a pathway to interpret the deeper meanings of the artworks. It seeks to resolve the disconnect between direct visual perception and the transcendent aesthetics of ink brushwork, as well as facilitate the sensory exchange between machine-generated imagery and ready-made installations. These efforts reflect the curators' acute awareness of artistic trends and socio-cultural dynamics, while also infusing the exhibition with a distinctive

academic ambition and cultural depth. This series of innovations highlights the unique position and significant role of the "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" in promoting the internationalization of Chinese ink art.

As the exhibition progressed, the "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" has steadily expanded its international influence, becoming a prominent event in the global art scene. Each edition of the biennale undergoes subtle yet profound changes in both theme and format, responding to contemporary trends while steadfastly upholding the traditional spirit of ink art. The artworks continuously push the boundaries of public perception regarding urban-themed ink painting, skillfully blending traditional brushwork with modern elements to present a unique artistic identity. For instance, the second edition of the Biennale introduced the theme "Ink and the City," utilizing ink painting to depict modern urban landscapes, the appearance of city dwellers, as well as their mindset, emotions, and beliefs. This central theme also served to expand the expressive scope of ink painting, highlighting the new challenges that ink art faces in contemporary society[2]. Each subsequent edition of the Biennale is curated based on a reflection and analysis of previous exhibitions, as well as an understanding of current trends in the development of ink painting. With a focus on examining the diverse forms of contemporary ink painting and evaluating the possibilities and limitations of its transformation and expansion as a traditional art form, the Biennale consistently returns to exploring the essence of ink painting. At the same time, it introduces innovative design concepts and experimental creations to broaden the horizons of contemporary ink art. The fourth edition of the Biennale consisted of five sections: "Design Ink," "Brush and Ink in the Contemporary," "Ink Space," "Urban Ink," and "Modern Korean Ink"[3]. The fifth edition of the Biennale featured four thematic exhibitions: "Design Ink," "Inheritance of Brush and Ink," "Ink·Life·Aesthetic Delight," and "Modern Singapore Ink." Additionally, the event included the "National Urban Landscape Painting Exhibition," co-hosted by the China Artists Association and the Shenzhen Municipal Government[4]. The sixth edition of the Biennale presented four thematic sections: "Brush and Ink·Urban," "New Media·Ink·Urban," "Shenzhen Stories," and "Modern Japanese Ink"[5]. The seventh edition of the Biennale featured a thematic exhibition divided into four main sections and five units: "New Horizons of Brush and Ink," "New Language, Inherited Charm," "the emerging artists' exhibition," "New Ink Artists," the special exhibition "Online Realities," and the invited exhibition "Hong Kong Ink"[6]. The eighth edition of the Biennale featured two thematic exhibitions: "Morphology of Ink: Overview of Brush and Ink" and "Graphology of Ink: Prototype Research." The exhibition "Morphology of Ink: Overview of Brush and Ink" was further divided into three units: "Continuation of Brush and Ink," "Transformation of Brush and Ink," and "Expansion of Brush and Ink"[7]. The ninth edition of the Biennale comprised three main sections: "New Chinese Painting and New Ink Painting," "Pengcheng Ink Charm," and "New Horizons in the Sea of Ink"[8]. The tenth edition of the Biennale coincided with the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening-up and the 30th anniversary of the "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale." Over the past 30 years, the Biennale had explored nearly every creative phenomenon and issue faced by ink art. In the foreword, curator Dong Xiaoming wrote, "This edition is titled 'Ink Now,' with the aim of examining and assessing the

present state of ink art, thereby inspiring reflection and foresight on its future." [9]

Looking back at the ten previous editions, it is evident that the history and evolution of the "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" go far beyond a mere series of exhibitions. The Biennale has consistently centered its research and practice on using ink art to represent "urban culture" as its academic focus, while continuously expanding and diversifying its scope. It serves as a vivid testament to the ongoing innovation and evolution of contemporary Chinese urban-themed ink painting. The exhibition itself has become a valuable resource for studying the developmental trajectory of Chinese ink art.

The thematic frameworks of the Biennale across its editions have established a series of topics related to the contemporary development of ink painting. From themes like "Urban Landscape Painting" to "Urban Ink," the exhibition has consistently aligned itself with the pulse of the times, addressing social issues and cultural conflicts arising from the process of urbanization. From its early focus on showcasing the refinement of traditional ink painting techniques and exploring the modern transformation of traditional ink art, to its later inclusion of diverse practices within a global perspective, emphasizing cross-disciplinary collaboration and media experimentation, the Biennale has evolved. It has further deepened its inquiry into the role and function of ink art amid the process of urbanization. Throughout its history, the exhibition has consistently sought to expand the expressive potential and social relevance of ink art. In this sense, the thematic progression of the Biennale has effectively reflected the developmental path of contemporary Chinese urban-themed ink painting. Artists, through this platform, have not only showcased the unique allure and innovative capabilities of Chinese ink art to the world but have also facilitated cultural exchange and mutual learning between Eastern and Western art. The Biennale has extended the depiction of traditional landscapes to encompass the portrayal of urban individuals, urban ideologies, and urban emotions, while also presenting a pathway for the contemporary transformation of traditional Chinese painting. Additionally, it has delved deeply into numerous issues closely related to the contemporary development of ink painting. The "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" has consistently kept pace with the pulse of Chinese ink art's evolution, continuously introducing new themes that both accompany and propel its progress. Reviewing the catalogues of past editions of the Biennale is akin to unfolding a grand panorama of the contemporary development of traditional ink painting.

Moreover, the "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" places a special emphasis on discovering and nurturing young artists, providing them with a platform to showcase their talent and exchange ideas. This focus is evident in the age demographics and stylistic diversity of the participating artists over the years. Notably, the seventh edition introduced a dedicated section, "New Ink Artists," highlighting emerging talents. With their fresh perspectives and fearless experimental spirit, young artists have infused urban-themed ink painting with new vitality and potential. In terms of artistic expression, the "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" demonstrates a high level of inclusivity, placing a strong emphasis on innovation and experimentation. It challenges the boundaries of traditional ink painting by exploring cross-disciplinary integration with other media and techniques, continuously expanding the contemporary expressive

potential of ink art. Additionally, the Biennale emphasizes an international perspective, consistently inviting both domestic and international artists to participate. This approach has significantly enhanced the exchange and influence of contemporary Chinese ink art on a global scale.

In summary, it is evident that the "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale" has shown an increasing focus on urban themes. From its initial continuation of traditional ink painting in terms of both technique and subject matter, it has expanded beyond the classic themes of landscape and floral-bird paintings, extending its perspective to encompass urban landscapes and figures. This thematic expansion serves as a testament to the modernization and development of traditional ink painting, highlighting its evolution and adaptability in response to contemporary subject matter. Secondly, as the Biennale progressed, an increasing number of experimental ink artworks featuring cross-media and multi-technique integration began to emerge. These innovative works became a recurring focus in subsequent editions, often with dedicated thematic sections. This cross-disciplinary fusion has not only enriched the expressive capabilities of traditional ink art but also opened up new possibilities for its development within the realm of contemporary art. Third, the international vision of the Biennale has become more and more broad. The artists invited in previous exhibitions have brought together the excellent works of ink artists from different countries, and promoted the global exchange and cooperation of ink art. This exhibition not only had a profound impact on the development of Chinese fine arts, but also played an important role in laying the foundation and promoting the cultural construction of Shenzhen, a young city. The successful promotion of the Biennale has led to the continuous innovation of urban theme ink painting, which not only makes Shenzhen's status in the field of Chinese ink art continue to rise, but also adds a deep and profound color to the cultural heritage of the city, and is also an artistic representation of the process of social urbanization since China's social reform and opening up.

4. Contemporary Expressions of Urban-themed Ink Painting

The "Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale," as a permanent exhibition of ink art organized by the government, provides crucial platform support for the contemporary development of ink painting. Keeping pace with the times, it employs ink painting to directly depict and represent modern urban landscapes, scenes of urban life, and the figures of city dwellers[10]. From a thematic perspective, the contemporary presentation of Chinese urban-themed ink painting is diverse. An overview of the works exhibited at previous editions of the Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale reveals two main categories. The first category includes depictions of urban landscapes, such as Song Yuming's "Shennan Avenue in the Rain"(Figure 1), Li Baolin's "Mountain City"(Figure 2), and Fan Yang's "Backstreet of the City" (Figure 3). These works differ from traditional landscape paintings, as they primarily utilize traditional ink painting techniques to portray modern urban scenes. However, there are significant differences. For instance, when depicting contemporary urban scenes, these works must break free from the constraints of form, unlike traditional landscape paintings. As Chen Hao mentions in his monograph: "First, it is crucial to break free from the

constraints of form and avoid letting rigid architectural structures dictate the brushwork and imagery. If the depiction of buildings becomes overly literal, it risks falling into the realm of topographical maps, akin to what the ancients referred to as mere geographical illustrations." [11]



Figure 1. Song Yuming, Shennan Avenue in the Rain, 59-39cm



Figure 2. Li Baolin, Mountain City, 150·127cm



Figure 3. Fan Yang, Backstreet of the City, 55·42cm

The second major category focuses on depicting urban life, primarily through figure painting. This category includes works that portray scenes of urban residents engaged in various activities essential for survival and development within the city environment. For instance, Tang Yongli's "World Cup in June"(Figure 4) depicts the state of urban life during World Cup events, while Huang Yihan's "Chinese New Generation: Cartoon Era · Gaming with Digital Lara"(Figure 5) reflects the influence of cartoon and digital culture

on the younger generation in the context of urbanization. Another subcategory explores the psychological impact of urbanization through symbolic imagery, such as Li Xiaoxuan's "Chaotic Space" (Figure 6), which uses the expressions of figures and the manipulation of color tones to convey an abstract representation of urban psychology. Additionally, some works address the artistic representation of urban symptoms brought about by the process of urbanization. For example, Shao Ge's "Soft Shadow II" (Figure 7) employs an abstract and exaggerated style, with a monochromatic palette of black, white, and gray, to convey a sense of intense conflict between individuals and their environment. In short, the works that show urban life are more flexible and diverse in techniques and forms, and the pictures are more diversified.



Figure 4. Tang Yongli, World Cup in June, 179·143cm



Figure 5. Huang Yihan, Chinese New Generation: Cartoon Era · Gaming with Digital Lara, 230·230cm



Figure 6. Li Xiaoxuan, Chaotic Space, 178·97cm



Figure 7. Shao Ge, Soft Shadow II, 345·158cm

Overall, the contemporary presentation of Chinese urban-themed ink painting retains the essence of traditional ink art while incorporating urban elements from modern society. This approach not only expands the subject matter of traditional ink painting but also brings active innovation and breakthroughs in artistic techniques.

5. Development Trends of Urban-themed Ink Painting

One of the key indicators of human civilization's progress is modern development, which has manifested in China with a distinct Oriental flair. China's modernization process has not only drawn from the general experiences of other nations but is also deeply rooted in the country's specific context, reflecting China's cultural stance and values. As Engels once remarked, "Civilization is a matter of practice." Thus, China's modernization is essentially the civilization practice of China in the current era. In this light, the development of contemporary Chinese urban-themed ink painting today is, in fact, the result of innovative practices of traditional Chinese ink art within the process of urbanization.

With the development of society and the change of the field generated by art in today's urbanization, some difficulties will inevitably be encountered when traditional ink painting is used to express the current life. In the contemporary society, the things we see include some scientific and technological products and some elements of foreign western culture, which are filled with the current real life. In the context of the development of Chinese contemporary urban ink painting, the Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale, as a microcosm, not only shows the diversity and The Times of this art form, but also reflects the challenges and opportunities it faces. As a significant international art event, the Shenzhen International Ink Art Biennale has played a crucial role in promoting the diversification of urban-themed ink painting styles, enhancing the quality of the artworks, and expanding international exchanges. Looking back at previous editions of the Biennale, it is evident that Chinese urban-themed ink painting has been evolving in tandem with the process of urbanization in Chinese society, influenced by urban culture and shifting aesthetic values. This evolution is marked by a distinct trend of growth, characterized by ongoing breakthroughs and innovations. It is not merely an inheritance of traditional ink painting but also a contemporary presentation of ink art against the backdrop of modern urban life. In terms of both artistic style and thematic expression, contemporary Chinese urban-themed ink painting exhibits a trend of integration—an integration not only of techniques but also a profound dialogue between tradition and modernity.

6. Conclusion

In the future creation of urban-themed ink paintings, we can anticipate that artists will continue to explore themes closely related to urban life, such as changes in the urban environment, the living conditions of city dwellers, and the impact of urban culture on individual psychology. Artists will employ ink painting as a traditional medium, blending it with contemporary artistic language and techniques to create works that reflect the spirit of the times and urban culture. At the same time, with advancements in technology, the integration of digital art, virtual reality, and other new media technologies will further diversify the expressive forms and dissemination methods of ink art, injecting new vitality into its contemporary development. In addition, the education and popularization of ink art will also be strengthened, through various forms of exhibitions, lectures and workshops, so that more people can understand and appreciate ink art, so as to promote the wide spread and in-depth development of ink art in contemporary society.

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