

On the Relationship Between Poetry and Painting from the Perspective of Chinese and Western Culture

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Abstract. The relationship between poetry and painting has always been a hot trend in the history of Chinese and Western aesthetics. The representative theoretical system of poetry and painting in the West is Lessing's "poetry-painting heterogeneity", while China's cognition focuses on "poetry-painting uniformity" and "poetry-painting homogeneity". Poetry is the art of time and painting is the art of space. Because of their differences in media and other factors, they share some similarities in terms of their specialties. At the same time, due to the various aesthetic concepts between China and the West, their theories of poetry and painting are also different. In addition to exploring the boundary between poetry and painting from the perspective of media, this paper probes into the Chinese and Western poetry-painting relationship based on aesthetic concepts, explores the cultural characteristics of our nation, and absorbs foreign cultures with an inclusive attitude, thus providing a humble opinion for the study of art history.

Keywords: Relationship Between Poetry and Painting; Media; Aesthetic Concept.

1. Introduction

The research on the relationship between poetry and painting has a long history. Even for those people who are not engaged in artistic theory research, they still think of the saying that "there are paintings in poems and poems in paintings" when talking about the relationship between poetry and painting. This comes from an epigraph written by Su Shi for Wangwei's poem titled "Misty Rain Scene in Lantian County," which said, "There are paintings in poems when savoring Wangwei's poems and poems in the paintings when observing his paintings." According to the poem of Wangwei, "White stones come out from the gurgling stream in Lantian and red leaves are sparse in the jade-like hill. Rains can't be seen on the mountain road, while the dew of trees damps the clothes of passersby." [1] At present, although this painting has been lost, we can still feel the unique and cooling autumn scenery depicted by Wang Wei in the poem, where cold mountains, trickling water, shiny white stones, and red leaves can be seen with the scent of nature, thus vividly reflecting the bleak autumn atmosphere of mountains, rivers, and flora as well as forming a strong sense of the picture. Zong Baihua commented that the first two sentences can form a picture, but the latter two fail to be directly highlighted in the picture, even though skilled painters attempt to imply this meaning. It seems that people who created poems have captured this feature and used poems to make up the picture. [2] Zhang Dai once said, "Therefore, those picturesque lines suitable for painting cannot be addressed as masterpieces." [3] Poetry can create picture, but poetry is not painting in nature. What cannot be directly expressed in the picture is the essence that constitutes this poem as poetry rather than painting. At the same time, if the painting fails to give people hints or inspiration to recite this poem, the painting lacks the soul that makes it an art rather than a photo. For this reason, poetry and painting are heterogeneous but intertwined. In the past thousands of years, poetry and painting have always attracted countless scholars with their clear boundaries and clever interconnections. This interesting and subtle dialectical relationship deserves our deep thinking and exploration.

2. Boundary Between Poetry and Painting From the Perspective of Media

As the relationship between poetry and painting demonstrated in Chinese Poetry and Chinese Painting, Qian Zhongshu thought that they both belong to art with similarities, while they are not the same kind of art but with their uniqueness. [4] Belonging to different art categories, poetry and

painting have their communication media and forms of expression with respective uniqueness. Poetry is the art of language and writing, and painting is the art of design and symbols. Meanwhile, poetry is an art of time, which uses language to reproduce the plot, while painting is an art of space, which uses lines, shapes, and colors to express the form of things in space, showing the moment of the plot with a fixed static scene.

When it comes to the relationship between poetry and painting, a feasible and effective way of thinking is that of Lessing. In his famous aesthetic work *Laocoon*, he demonstrated his views on the poetry-painting relationship. Lessing thinks that poetry and painting are different art categories with huge differences. Starting with Laocoon's story, he analyzed his corresponding sculpture and poetry. He thought that Laocoon's emotion in poetry was stronger and showed hysterical whine, while Laocoon in sculpture only opened his mouth slightly and did not show great pain. [5]

Winckelmann believes that the sculpture Laocoon did not cry because the sculptor wanted to show the lofty qualities of the Greeks, but Lessing denied Winckelmann's view and believed that the sculpture was only designed to show supreme beauty. Poetry is the art of hearing. The Classic of Poetry, as the beginning of ancient Chinese poetry, is told and expressed in the form of singing, which can be understood as present folk songs. Later Yuefu poems are also created for court sacrifice or banquet performances. Painting is a visual art aiming at the beauty of objects and its standard is to accurately present the objects to be expressed, while this expression effect is limited by the differences and attributes of objects. However, poetry can transcend visual expression and stimulate people's infinite imagination. Therefore, Lessing thinks that poetry is superior to painting. I think this view has its limitations. Due to the limitation of region and times, he can't consider the Chinese painting that pursues an artistic conception of beauty and the thought-provoking modern art that triggers reflection in the future. However, Lessing's view allows us to conclude that the standards of beauty pursued by poetry and painting are different. Because of media differences, poetry and painting rely on language and lines, so painting is fixed and limited compared with poetry. Based on the differences in artistic characteristics when an artist shows a plot or scene, it is necessary to make choices and leave out some elements. He needs to use symbols as media, endow symbols with meanings, and let viewers understand the content expressed by the author through the extraction of these symbols. Therefore, if artists want viewers to clearly understand the picture, they need to highlight the greatest characteristics of the objects. However, poetry does not have this restriction, which is different from the oneness and fixity of painting. Poetry does not need the silent symbols needed by painting to express it. Language is direct. Poets can let readers grasp the plot through the direct explanation of names. At the same time, poetry has context, and poets' expressions can be diversified. In *Laocoon*, Lessing takes Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, as an example. When artists express the god of love and beauty, they need to emphasize her beauty instead of expressing her angry manner. If artists express the angry god of beauty, the viewer will be guided by the anger in the picture, which will create obstacles to identifying her identity as the god of beauty. However, the poet will not have this trouble. The poet can directly explain that the object he expresses is Aphrodite, and then describe her anger. Poetry is diverse and can be expressed in both positive and negative ways. Based on the above identity premise, readers will not doubt the identity of the poet's object. In a word, poetry and painting belong to the art with similarities, but they have their limitations and special features brought by their media.

3. Relationship Between Chinese and Western Poetry and Painting Based on Aesthetic Concepts

Since the research on the relationship between poetry and painting has lasted for a long time, its research has become more diverse and complex. There are different opinions on whether the theory of "demarcation between poetry and painting" and "poetry-painting advantages and disadvantages" is correct or not. However, it is undeniable that Chinese and Western poetry and painting do have their specialties and similarities based on the media differences. However, it is unreasonable and

unconvincing to analyze Chinese poetry and painting with all the theories of Western scholars such as Lessing. It is undeniable that differences exist between Chinese and Western poetry and painting theories, which stem from their differences in philosophical thoughts and aesthetic basis.

3.1 Theory of the Relationship Between Chinese Poetry and Painting

The evolution of the relationship between Chinese poetry and painting is very clear and specific, which is not as controversial as western theories. The theory of “poetry-painting uniformity” is widely recognized. In the pre-Qin period, due to the influence of the ritual and music system and Confucianism occupying the mainstream of social thought, the educational significance of poetry was emphasized. There is a saying in the Volume XIII of Discourses in the Balance that “Put into the empty wall, it has both forms and shapes. People who don’t get encouragement and persuasion have no words and deeds.”[6] Wang Chong thinks that painting can’t play a strong role in educating people compared to poetry, which shows that poetry has a higher status than painting at this time. After the West Jin Dynasty, the concept of poetry and painting was updated, and the social function of painting was promoted to the same weight as poetry. There is a saying in Famous Paintings of Past Dynasties that “words are better in publicizing things and paintings are better in preserving forms.”[7] It comes from Lu Ji, a literary theorist in the West Jin Dynasty. He believed that poems are good at describing things in words, while paintings are good at depicting the shape and state of things. In Liu Xie’s Literary Mind and Carving Dragons in the Southern Dynasty, “paintings focus on shapes and colors, while poems focus on feelings.”[8] Meanwhile, Shao Yong’s Chant of Poetry and Painting in the Northern Song Dynasty also expressed the same opinions that “paintings are adept at shaping a thing with colors. The ingenious colors exhaust all the scenery. Poetry is adept at depicting things with words. The ingenious words exhaust all the feelings.” Before Tang and Song Dynasties in China, the research on the differences between poetry and painting, which summarizes that poems are excellent in emotional depiction and paintings are in shape description, coincides with Lessing. However, with the integration of poetry and painting after the Tang and Song Dynasties, the artistic differences between poetry and painting are gradually diluted. As early as the West Jin Dynasty, “poetic pictures”, “painting poems”, and other blending samples of poetry and painting appeared one after another. At the same time, many literati devoted themselves to building poetry and painting into a whole in the later period. Painting modeling in Song and Yuan Dynasties showed a trend from concrete to abstract symbols that did not break away from objects. Many paintings in the Song Dynasty use meson points to depict trees, which is difficult for viewers to see the specific tree species. However, this expression technique is not separated from the object itself but a model painting method obtained by refining abstraction. Many paintings such as Collections of Plum Blossom Shapes appearing at this time also reach this conclusion. With the development of history, the theme of poetry gradually got rid of the purpose of discussing philosophy in the pre-Qin period and turned to objects, providing depicting objects for paintings. As early as the Wei and Jin Dynasties, landscape poetry tended to appear in drawings. In Song and Yuan Dynasties, the language directly listed by a series of nouns was the further development of this trend. For example, Ma Zhiyuan’s “withered vines, old trees, dark crows, and small bridges; flowing water, ancient roads, west winds, and thin horses”, Bai Pu’s “In thousands of courtyards are spring mountains, warm days, and breeze; handrails, pavilions, curtains, willows, and swings”, all of which turn the language description to the static description that painting is good at, giving people a strong sense of the picture.

To sum up, Chinese poetry and Chinese painting in history have always gotten close to each other in their development. The reason why poetry and painting can integrate together is that they have a common concern, the artistic conception. Different from the Western countries looking for the intersection of poetry and painting in material media, Chinese poetry and painting find the medium of “artistic conception” including “meaning” in words and “artistic environment” in painting in their inner aesthetic experience, which makes them intertwine perfectly. As for the so-called “poetry expresses ambition”, poems and paintings before Wei and Jin Dynasties have strong ethical features. Due to the influence of Taoism and the rule of darkness until Wei and Jin Dynasties, literati chose to

avoid the world passively and indulge in landscapes, so poems and paintings became their spiritual sustenance and the medium of feelings expression. The aesthetic thoughts in Wei and Jin Dynasties profoundly influenced the literary and artistic spirit of later generations. Zong Bing said in the Preface to Landscape Painting: “Sages should present things with Taoism and harbor generosity and clear minds to savor various aesthetic objects. Mountains and rivers with their essences are interesting and unique.” [9] After Jin Dynasty, landscapes became independent aesthetic objects and more literati paid attention to using poetry and painting to convey their thoughts, intentionally sending their feelings to landscapes, leading to infinity with limitation, and pursuing spiritual freedom. Su Shi once said in Praise of Poem and Painting of Dark Bamboo Screen, “Poetry that can’t be exhausted turns into books and paintings, which are all the supplement of poetry.”[10] It can be seen that most of the painting themes created by ancient Chinese literati and painters are not to use illustrations to express the story but to choose a way to express their thoughts at will.

Chinese poetry and Chinese painting can be integrated, and their diluted difference lies in the artistic conception that they both pay attention to, which is fundamentally impacted by Chinese traditional aesthetic thoughts. It can be said that all art of a high realm is philosophy. When it comes to ancient Chinese aesthetic concepts, it is impossible to neglect the study of Taoist philosophy, which holds that the origin of things is “Taoism” which can be simply understood as the law of natural changes. There is a saying in the Journey to the North in Chuang Tzu, “The beauty of heaven and earth is silent, clear rules of four seasons are not be discussed, and everything is reasonable in a reticent way. Sages are the beauty of heaven and earth to the principle of all things.”[11] We can see that Chuang Tzu affirms the beauty of external form, but this beauty comes from the “heaven and earth” which conforms to Taoism and does nothing, profoundly impacting the prosperity of landscape poetry and landscape painting. At the same time, Chuang Tzu also believed that true beauty is spiritual beyond forms, so the art of expressing beauty should also be based on an inner spiritual experience. Only when you forget yourself and external things to truly understand Taoism can you create good works of art. It is because of the influence of the Taoist aesthetic concept on the inner spiritual world that ancient Chinese art forms are pursuing a realm of beauty that unites with Taoism as well as an intersection and penetration between poetry and painting.

3.2 Western Theory of the Relationship Between Poetry and Painting

The western theory of poetry and painting can be said to be constantly developing in the debate. Although current western academia generally believes that the main stream theory on relationship between western poetry and painting emphasizes their boundary and difference, the theory that western poetry and painting are uniforms is even older if we trace it back to its source. As early as the ancient Greek poet Simonides put forward the view that “painting is a silent poem, while poetry is a sound painting.” Plato believed that art comes from imitating the real world, but it is not a real existence and does not grasp the truth. At the same time, he also held that this imitation of art would confuse people and lead to dangerous consequences. He even put forward the statement in the Republic that “except for poems praising God and good people, all poems are not allowed to break into the republic,”[12] which shows that all art forms can’t be highly recognized by him, except poems praising God and good people. Therefore, considering the educational role of art, poetry is higher than painting in Plato’s opinion. However, his student Aristotle critically inherited this view. He agreed that poetry and painting are the art of imitation and mentioned that “some people use color and posture to create images and imitate many things; while others use sound to imitate... All this is imitation, but there are three differences: the medium used for imitation, the taken object, and the way adopted.”[13] Aristotle’s view of poetry and painting is different from Plato who believed poetry is superior to painting. On the contrary, he believed that visual art can make us perceive the differences between things more clearly. Although Aristotle held that both poetry and painting are imitative art, which seemed to recognize the uniformity of poetry and painting, the root of the poetry-painting homogeneity also stems from his imitation theory. Some scholars, mainly Lessing, think that imitation theory can not prove the theory of poetry-painting uniformity. Because all art forms are the

reproduction and reconstruction of the real world and the result of imitating nature, which is the common law of art, that is, the poetry-painting homogeneity is based on the imitation and reproduction of the objective world by art, further thinking about the more concrete and microscopic differences between poetry and painting. However, with the embryonic development of western modernism, painting gradually does not pursue absolute rationality, the time and space of poetry and painting are gradually broken, and the differences between them are diluted in some forms of expression.

The formation of the theoretical system of the relationship between poetry and painting in the West can not be separated from the influence of western aesthetic thought, which was put forward by the Pythagoras School. They believed that everything is composed of numbers, numbers constitute the harmony of the universe, and beauty is born from harmony.[14] The emergence of harmony emphasizes the role of the whole, and harmony can be achieved only when the individual and the whole rely on each other. Influenced by his aesthetic thoughts, artists pay great attention to the harmony of digital relations among various parts of the picture in order to achieve beauty. For example, Polyclitus' Spear Holder is extremely fastidious about the harmony of proportions among all parts of the human body, especially the arms and palms showing the dynamics, so as to realize the beauty of dynamics and the human body. It can be seen that western sculpture and painting put more emphasis on visual perception and they highlight the line relationship of the work itself rather than the spiritual realm expressed by the work. However, poetry is not limited by visual elements. Although it is still pursuing harmony, its medium relies on language and characters, so it is not necessary to emphasize proportion and numbers like painting. It is based on the western rational aesthetic thought of pursuing digital harmony. Aside from modernism, western poetry and western painting have different aesthetic evaluation criteria. Although both of them reproduce the real world, they cannot find an intersection like "artistic conception". Therefore, the widely recognized western theory of the relationship between poetry and painting is the poetry-painting heterogeneity.

3.3 Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Western Theories of the Relationship Between Poetry and Painting

Due to the cultural differences between China and the West, there are natural differences in aesthetic basis, which leads to the differences in the theory of the poetry-painting relationship between China and the West. The relationship between poetry and painting in China took a road of unification, integration, and mutual integration before modern times. However, the research on the relationship between poetry and painting in the West is full of arguments and refutations. Before the end of the 19th century, the heterogeneity of poetry and painting was more recognized. The aesthetic concept in ancient China is based on "Taoism" and literati painters hope that their works can conform to "Taoism" to achieve the realm of "harmony between man and nature", so they endow the natural landscapes with their emotions and aspirations to express their feelings. It is precisely the attachment of the creators' personal emotional and spiritual world that forms an inner spirit outside the surface in Chinese painting and poetry. Pursuing the aesthetic basis of "Taoism" makes the expression of Chinese painting pay attention to vivid charm. The four unique features of "poetry, painting, calligraphy, and printing" pursued by Chinese literati paintings is the result of the integration of various art forms. Although the four are different art categories, the existence of charm makes the four become one and its purpose is only to pursue the charm of the picture. I think that whether it is the existence of painting poems or poems, its purpose is to better convey artistic conception. Literati is not deliberately for the establishment of the poetry-painting uniformity but only concludes in historical practice that the integration of poetry and painting can better achieve vivid charm and realize the expression of artistic conception.

Because of the influence of Pythagoras school's idea that "beauty is the harmony of numbers", western art is more about exploring the objectively real world, and artists study science and anatomy to realize beauty. Classical Western art shows the real world rigorously and objectively according to scientific theories such as physics, anatomy, and optics from the perspective of volume, light, and

shade. It is this rationalism that makes painting lacks the expression of subjective emotion. Both Leonardo da Vinci's "sketch is the foundation of all painting" and Michelangelo's "perfect skill, magnificent boldness of vision, and profound thought" reveal the rationality and authenticity of classical Western painting. Although Impressionism later broke the painting principle of reflecting objective reality like a mirror to pursue visual effects and subjective emotional expression, it was still different from Homer, Shakespeare, and other poets' rich and strong emotional expression and thinking about human nature.

Zong Baihua believed that it is not convincing to mark the complexity of the relationship between poetry and painting with a single "similarity" or "difference" because of their great differences in cultural connotation and aesthetic basis. In my opinion, the poetry and painting studied by the Chinese and Western theoretical systems have their specific premises, while China is more aimed at literati painting and landscape painting. Apart from the aesthetic basis mentioned above, because its creators have the combined identity of poets and painters, their poetry and painting have a corresponding connection to the creators' identity before they are created. In the West, it is based on the art of imitation of poetry and painting before further analyzing the differences between poetry and painting. If the Chinese theoretical system also regards poetry and painting as the fundamental point of view, the Chinese theory of poetry and painting will be able to find out their differences. Considering that not both poetry and painting are the art of artistic conception creation, this point of view is only a hypothetical demonstration. To sum up, according to the development process of poetry and painting theory, we can roughly think that the West mainly emphasizes the heterogeneity of poetry and painting, while China mainly emphasizes the uniformity of poetry and painting. However, this is not absolute and there are still many intersections between Chinese and Western theories of poetry and painting.

4. Summary

By analyzing and comparing the theories of the poetry-painting relationship between China and Western countries, we can find the differences between them based on cultural background and aesthetic basis. However, they are not poles apart, especially under the background of cultural globalization. Chinese and Western cultures permeate each other, and the source of modern aesthetic theory is not limited to the thinking mode of either China or the West. It is not convincing enough to simply analyze their relationship with the theory of uniformity or heterogeneity. With the influence of science and technology on the media, poetry and painting are quite different from the past in terms of expression and media. Now the trend is to break the boundaries not only between poetry and painting but also between China and the West. Although poem and painting as two different art categories show their specialties, their respective uniqueness increases the diversity of artistic expression. I believe that under the influence of modern technology, the relationship between poetry and painting will be more complex and closer in the future. However, what remains unchanged is that poetry and painting can bring out the best in each other and show the charm of art.

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