

On the "Clumsy" and "Skillful" of Chinese Calligraphy

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Abstract: There are great aesthetic differences in the aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy in different periods, different regions, and different aesthetic groups. The analysis of "clumsiness" and "ingenuity" in calligraphy aesthetics in this paper is a discussion of problems within the scope of calligraphy aesthetics. When discussing this issue, this paper divides "clumsy" and "skillful" into two pairs of concepts composed of four etymologies for comparative study, that is, "beauty" corresponds to "ugly", and "skillful" corresponds to "clumsy". Because "ingenuity" as the emphasis and pursuit of writing techniques, its fundamental purpose is to write works that look "beautiful". On the contrary, "clumsiness" is concerned with the expression of the writer's cultural accomplishment, personal temperament and ideological realm, so some calligraphers don't even care about beauty and ugliness, which is, to some extent, the transcendence of simple techniques. Therefore, Chinese calligraphers have always believed that "ancient and clumsy" is far better than "beautiful and skillful". What is the historical origin of this aesthetic tradition? What is the basis of its aesthetic idea? All will be explored in this article.

1. Introduction

In the past three decades, some words with unclear meanings have always been unavoidable when talking about calligraphy, such as "modern calligraphy", "popular calligraphy style", "folk calligraphy", "ugly calligraphy" and "writing", all of which belong to this category, and their meanings depend on the gradual generation in the process of using words. Among them, "Jianghu calligraphy", "old cadre calligraphy", "children's style" and so on, which are widely criticized by the public, are actually precisely due to their original aesthetic intention of writing "beautiful", "beautiful" and "sophisticated" characters. This is actually the pursuit and attention of writing skills from the technical level, that is, the special study of "skillful". "There is a profound relationship between sublimity and ugliness" [1]; The pursuit of the basic skills of writing is actually an essential initial step in the process of learning calligraphy, that is, the learners of calligraphy should have quite skilled writing skills and master the basic skills of writing. However, technique is by no means the ultimate goal of calligraphic art. It is a necessary tool to achieve a certain writing effect and a necessary assistant, but the core is the ability of aesthetic appreciation.

Therefore, orthodox calligraphers and calligraphers regard "ingenuity" as the taboo of calligraphy art, and think that "ingenuity" is almost equivalent to showing off skills. The concept of "clumsy", as opposed to "skillful", is widely recognized and pursued by calligraphers. "Humble" is not written badly because of the lack of skills. On the contrary, "Humble" is a naive, natural, simple and sincere

writing path developed on the basis of mastering sophisticated skills. It is the understanding and detachment of calligraphers after crossing the thousand sails. This pursuit is in line with the definition of "gentleman" in the Confucian classics. In Shuowen, "gentleman" is defined as "respect", which means "high position", and later changed to "respect". "In a certain socio-political frame of reference," monarch "is the origin of order. This order is not a predetermined form. It is not embodied by the "monarch" and then imposed on others. It is derived from the interaction between the "monarch" and the socio-political environment." [2] This aesthetic direction is also in line with the pursuit of artistic conception in Chinese aesthetic thought, that is, the appreciation of "natural beauty", "hazy beauty" and "transcendence beauty" displayed by calligraphy.

2. "Graceful and Skill" is the Taboo of Calligraphy

The essence of " Graceful and skill " as an aesthetic taste lies in that both the artistic creators and the aesthetic receivers of art agree that the superb technology is the decisive factor to evaluate the artistic level of a work. Almost all works of art will go through three main links. The first is the creation of art, which is completed by artists or art teams. The second is the communication link of art, which is publicized by various media, such as newspaper media, or curators and communication agencies, so that the works can enter the public view. Finally, there is the art reception link, in which the art works communicate with the viewers, that is, the recipients of art. Therefore, the recipients of art will play a very important role in the creation of art. Therefore, the aesthetic pursuit of "beauty and ingenuity" is actually the praise of the complex technology of "multicoloured gold carving". This aesthetic standard once occupied the primary position in Chinese history. But as early as the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties (220 AD - 589 AD), people's enthusiasm for the pursuit of the natural beauty of "nascent hibiscus" has far exceeded the "multicoloured gold carving" aesthetic performance of complex techniques. Then, both eastern and western artists try to gain more possibilities to express themselves and express their emotions, thoughts and temperament in artistic creation. Therefore, the western aesthetic concept of "imitation", which has lasted for more than 2000 years, has been subverted by "expressionism".

In China, the aesthetic pursuit of " graceful and skill " has also been gradually excluded from the mainstream values. If calligraphers can gain the appreciation and love of the general public through their skillful skills and visually beautiful "Meiqiao" works, they are likely to gain fame and interests quickly, which is undoubtedly a great temptation for calligraphers. Therefore, calligraphers can gain worldly fame and fortune through specialized research and display of skills, and thus quickly establish their place in the art world, that is, build their own social status as calligraphers. In the contemporary era, many calligraphers "choose to paint easily and enjoy their play in the principle of recreating nature." [3] Therefore, the pursuit of techniques and the flattery of those in power have become the path that some calligraphers who pursue fame and profit aspire to. Therefore, this part of calligraphers can only choose to write both "beautiful" and "skillful". So many people think that "beautiful and skillful" is the taboo of calligraphy. Because the pursuit of techniques will hinder calligraphers from forming their own aesthetic judgment, and will not help calligraphers to further form their own artistic style, thus affecting calligraphers' self-expression.

3. "Ugliness" and "Clumsiness" of Calligraphy

"Ugliness" and "clumsiness" in calligraphy are not derogatory words, on the contrary, "ugliness" and "clumsiness" are praise for the simple and natural elegance expressed in the works. On the other hand, "ugliness" and "awkwardness" are also under the threat of cultural rights. Calligraphy, as an art form, is a rebellion against the "enlightenment" function that has always been necessary. "In the traditional Chinese culture of the past dynasties, 'the people' rely on the culture of their upper-class

figures as the meaning mode of life. " [4] That is, the rebellion against the traditional concept of using calligraphy as a useful educational tool for rulers to publicize and consolidate certain ideas.

The ancients believed that to turn a natural person into a "gentleman" in line with the Confucian moral and etiquette norms, we must rely on the power of art. In the Preface to Mao's Poems, there are only three categories of art, "poetry, song and dance". These three categories of art, as the form of human thought exchange and emotional expression, the degree of emotional warmth expressed and the degree of emotional resonance caused by them are progressive and increasingly strong. Calligraphy, as an art form that has both the use function of writing and the artistic appreciation function of pen and ink, its writing content is almost elegant, showing the literacy of literati. The form of writing must also be able to carry the noble sentiment and rigorous code of conduct of literati as "gentlemen".

The ancients advocated the natural beauty of art, and believed that the pen and ink should learn from the outside and get the source from the inside, that is, they should use the writer's own eyes to sincerely observe the world they are in, to see the posture of flowers, the shape of water, and the outline of mountains. You should understand the communication and exchange between all things in the world and the various emotional states between people. In Chinese art, nature is more like nature as an adjective and adverbial. It is a natural state than a direct representation. The ugliness in calligraphy should also be understood in the natural concept of Chinese art. In Chinese art, nature means a state full of vitality. Natural things do not avoid the beauty and ugliness of external appearance, but are in line with the natural way. In what is called the 'art world' of today exhibition catalogues have acquired an almost ritualistic function." [5] Only then can we feel the enlightenment of external objects, instead of being an apprentice of the ancients in the inscription.

4. New Exploration of Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy: The Prosperity of Stele Studies and the Emergence of "Ugly Books"

Since the late Qing Dynasty, the promotion of the understanding of traditional Chinese literature and art and the personal experience of the modern national suffering have led to the mainstream pursuit of ancient, clumsy, heavy, large, depressed and profound aesthetic taste, and the pursuit of elegant and light aesthetic taste and perfect form, which have always occupied the mainstream position in history, have gone to the edge. Because of "awkwardness" and "truth", literature and art can shake off unnecessary decorations, obtain freshness with truth, and retain the eternal vitality in life with awkwardness; Because of "heavy" and "depressed", the historical precipitation of literature and art and the personality cultivation and emotional experience of artists "people" can be imperceptibly integrated into the works and transformed into a form with historical weight, emotional weight and personality weight; Because of "big" and "muddy", all the flashy and trivial things in the world of life can be stripped off, and the free soul of "human" can travel through time and space, with a kind of immortal value that is comparable to the life of heaven and earth, and the same light as the sun and moon. The style of stele study and calligraphy has covered everything, from the ancient Zhongding and Yi characters, imperial edicts, power, ancient mirrors, seal mud, Han bricks, tile tiles, criminal bricks, epitaphs, statues, inscriptions, cliffs, to bamboo slips, wooden casks, silk books, scrap paper, and so on. "In order to reach the goal of human beings, we must not give in at a certain point, but reverse our destiny." [6] Thus, the prosperity of traditional stele studies has opened a new and broader perspective of learning from tradition for contemporary Chinese calligraphy.

The "ugly book", which has been hotly discussed recently, is not only the extreme manifestation of "ugly" and "clumsy" in calligraphy, but also a new attempt by contemporary calligraphers to create calligraphy. According to the Confucian concept of "knowing people and discussing the world", the value construction of traditional calligraphy lies in the social status of calligraphers, which has a great

impact on the value of their calligraphy. Therefore, calligraphers broke through the cultural tradition and authority built by ancient inscriptions and wrote "ugly books" at will to express sincere personal feelings and emotions, in fact, they risked huge reputational and interest risks. Because the tradition of calligraphy is not easy to be shaken, if shaken, most of the other people who rely on traditional ink to establish their reputation will face a huge crisis. As a result, the "ugly book" has caused a great uproar in the contemporary Chinese calligraphy circle, but it has also been widely depreciated, which is due to interests.

In fact, several representative artists recognized as "ugly books" in China, such as Shen Peng (b.1931), Wo Xinghua (b.1955), Wang Yong (b.1948), Shi Kai (b.1951), Zeng Xiang (b.1958), Wang Dongling (b.1945), He Yinghui (b.1946), Yu Mingquan (b.1963), etc., are not anti-traditional in nature. On the contrary, they are all very strict, serious and highly diligent copyists, "It has often been said that the real or dominant subject-matter of twentieth-century art is art itself." [7] However, after learning from the ancients, they did not stick to the ancients' pen and ink methods, but based on the present, they innovated their own writing methods.

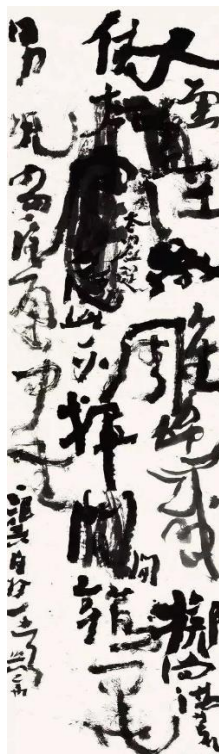


Figure 1: Wo Xinghua's calligraphy works

For example, the ugly book represents the calligrapher Vo Xinghua, who has posted a wide range of books every day. In fact, he has always kept in awe of tradition in the process of innovation of his "ugly book". Vo Xinghua believes that calligraphy emphasizes the form of composition to enrich the connotation of the work, so it will not ignore the expression of the structure. Vo Xinghua's calligraphy works (as shown in Figure 1) make people feel not the words at the first time, but the pattern formed by the pen and ink and the remaining white. It is a variety of calligraphic languages, such as thickness, square and circle, size, front and side, density, virtual and solid, dry and wet, thick and light, and so on. Then they can fully feel the visual beauty of calligraphic art. Vo Xinghua's works really show the vitality of the artist's writing, which is the vitality of the black ink painted on the white paper, which grows out of the shackles of the rules of pen and ink. This is an aesthetic feeling constructed with pure strength and passion. This is in fact the same as the concept of the movement of the body and the dynamic of time that was advocated by American abstract expressionism after the 1960s.



Figure 2: Wang Yong's Calligraphy Works

Other famous calligraphers of "ugly book", such as Wang Yong, a professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the best art college in China, have unique style of his calligraphy works (as shown in Figure 2). His calligraphy lines can be seen as rough, wild, simple, exaggerated, with the great beauty of simplicity and rough. His aesthetic consciousness in calligraphy is completely separated from that of the general public. He has spent his whole life exploring the popular style of calligraphy, and has deliberately distanced himself from other calligraphers in creation, trying to express the charm, momentum and emotion.



Figure 3: Shi Kai's Calligraphy Works

Another calligrapher, Shi Kai, is a dissolute and famous artist with high morale. He dances freely and goes his own way, thus revealing a kind of confidence and calm for artificial arts. His calligraphic works (as shown in Figure 3) have distinctive personal features. The cursive script is square and rough, and the seal script is flexible, all of which are quite different from others. Shi Kai, under the guidance of Chen Zifen, a famous scholar, has developed his unique style of cool and elegant style under the nourishment of traditional culture. "It is true that some contemporary artists have the intention to break away from western civilization and completely abandon their values." [8] The Zen spirit from calligraphy makes Shikai's calligraphy far away from any contemporary calligrapher in terms of artistic conception and style. What is particularly valuable is that this kind of Zen Qi is not deliberately created, but naturally revealed. "It is in such a concrete case that the dangers of the 'religion of progress' to the progress of art become most easily demonstrable." [9]



Figure 4: Zeng Xiang's calligraphy works

Zeng Xiang, a calligrapher who works in the Chinese Academy of Art, is famous for his works (Figure 4). When he creates, he will roar with a loud voice, which is impressive and expressive. Zeng Xiang's calligraphy is famous for "crazy, crazy and crazy", and his "roaring book" has become the continuation and development of Japanese "little character school" calligraphy in China. His own experience from the exploration of western art history is that calligraphy needs innovation. Only by innovation can the horizon of calligraphy creation be broadened and the world of calligraphers be opened.

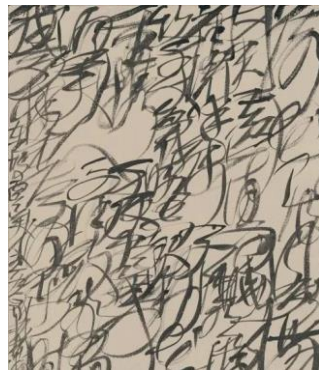


Figure 5: Wang Dongling's calligraphy works

The calligraphic works of Wang Dongling, a Chinese calligrapher living in the United States (see Figure 5), have the name of "disorderly calligraphy". The scene where he created his calligraphic works is like the scene of performance art. The reason for this is that Wang Dongling has a deep connection with the experimental ink painting movement in the 1990s, which has raised the importance of the form of calligraphy to the content. Wang Dongling pays attention to the problems of calligraphy performance, focusing on the writing behavior to express the relationship between art and body. These artists who have made valuable innovations in the art of calligraphy, the "ugliness" in their works is an aesthetic practice at the beginning, which is a creative interpretation of tradition, rather than low-level ugliness. "And yet it may have been the appeal of these fanciful interpretations of the art of the past which contributed to the insistent demand that the artists of the present should also, in their term, express their own age." [10]

5. Conclusion

Chinese calligraphy is not always "beautiful" in history. The official script is thick and thick; The tablet is majestic and magnificent... Even the calligraphic style of Wang Xizhi, who is respected by later generations as a calligrapher, is calm and cheerful, and has a lofty purpose. However, due to the misreading and misinterpretation of the style of Erwang's calligraphy in history, people often regard beauty and sweetness, that is, "Meiqiao", as the synonym of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy. Up to now, some calligraphers who do not have a deep understanding of tradition and are famous and prominent, take advantage of the traditional name of the two kings to oppose the simple, heavy, solemn, gloomy, bold and ancient "ugly" style with beauty and sweetness, which is really a fallacy of calligraphy aesthetics. In view of this, it is necessary for us to differentiate and analyze the concept and connotation of "beauty" and "ugliness" in art aesthetics, and return to the aesthetic realm of "ingenuity, simplicity and simplicity".

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