

# *Upholding Tradition and Forging New Paths—On the Application of Sketching in Xu Beihong's Traditional Chinese Paintings*

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**Keywords:** Xu Beihong, sketch, traditional Chinese painting

**Abstract:** Xu Beihong considered sketching as the foundation of all figurative arts. Rigorous sketching training marked the beginning of his artistic journey and remained a consistent influence throughout his efforts to improve traditional Chinese painting. Xu Beihong's approach to sketching was not limited to a single stylistic direction but integrated various artistic elements, providing a broad scope for artistic expression. In his Chinese painting creations, the flexible manifestation of his sketching can be observed from line, form, and ink, aligning the refinement of form and space with the fluidity of brush and ink. This fusion of qualities demonstrates his understanding of the nature of different artistic media, adapting and responding to the surroundings and emotions. Xu Beihong judiciously harnessed the power of sketching to depict objects, showcasing his ability to harmonize diverse influences from classical Western and Eastern art. Through this, he transcended the rigid constraints of formalism that had begun to encroach upon traditional literati painting and breathed life into the realm of artistic creation.

## **1. Introduction**

By introducing sketching into traditional Chinese painting, Xu Beihong addressed the weaknesses in form depiction that had emerged as literati painting lost vitality. This bridged the gap between mind and object, highlighting rational thought. He observed objects personally, transforming his expression, capturing true scenes, evoking genuine emotions, and seeking real knowledge.

Xu Beihong did not engage in mere superficial manipulation of formal symbols; rather, inspired by the enlightenment of the May Fourth New Culture Movement, he approached art from a metaphysical perspective. For instance, he advocated for knowledge, urging deep introspection and profound exploration of the mysteries of the world. He pursued the liberation of human nature, implying that the Dao is not far from humanity and that humans are the measure of all things. He advocated for natural laws in art, aiming to depict human activities, respect imagination and creativity, and strive for the perfection of individual personality. He revered the revival of classical ideals, seeking to regain faith in civilization from classics, and returning to natural laws through nobility, simplicity, and serene greatness, while reshaping moral ideals within society to improve the national spirit. However, the path to reforming traditional Chinese painting has been tortuous,

met with skepticism. In particular, there have been criticisms against placing sketching as the primary foundation of figurative arts, arguing that it may undermine the ethnic identity constructed in art history by brush and ink, leading to a westernization trend in the aesthetic field.

In response to the past failures of "a combination of Chinese and Western elements," Xu Beihong provided commentary, such as his belief that Indian Gandhara art failed to capture the essence of Greek styles and lost its local advantages. Reflecting on the Western styles that flourished in the East with the rise of Buddhism, there was a risk of the robust and straightforward Han style falling into the trap of excessive refinement. However, the Tang Dynasty managed to preserve the essence while refining the rough, thus establishing a new national artistic style[1]. As Xu Beihong said, "It proves that borrowing from others must be based on one's own foundation, otherwise it will become like two broken tiles joined together for ridicule, as evidenced by both India and our country." Furthermore, Xu Beihong's practice of sketching demonstrates its applicability in traditional Chinese painting[2].

## 2. Sketch

A concise explanation of Xu Beihong's practice of sketching can be further expanded to reflect on the single-dimensional understanding of the classical tradition of sketching since the European Renaissance. This understanding confines sketching to the realm of technique, emphasizing the integration of values in black, white, and grey, and the accuracy of proportions, while overlooking the diversity of styles and downplaying the expressive impulses of inner emotions.

Within the context of Western artistic tradition, sketching serves not only as a preliminary stage in art creation but also exists independently as an artistic form. Its forms are diverse: it can emphasize the simplicity of lines, akin to how Angkor demonstrates the vitality of lines as if they were life itself; or boldly manipulate images, exaggerating characteristics to highlight personality traits, as seen in Dürer's adventurous experiments in his works. Sketching also serves as a precursor to exploring the relationship between color and space, such as Rembrandt's skillful portrayal of color variations amidst light and shadow.

Xu Beihong did not blindly follow the teaching system of the French Academy while studying French art. During specific periods such as his time at the Julian Academy and the National School of Fine Arts in Paris, he rigorously studied classical drawing techniques, laying a solid foundation for his later artistic endeavors. However, Xu Beihong's fundamental purpose in studying in France was to absorb the essence of Western culture to enrich the artistic soil of the East. He did not aim to become a defender of European civilization but rather an admirer and learner.

Xu Beihong's approach to sketching art goes beyond mere representation of the real world; it embodies the emotional expression of the artist's life will, thereby achieving freedom and perfection in individual artistic creation. Building upon this foundation, he promoted the development of harmonious artistic forms, expanding the boundaries of sketching art with boldness yet within disciplined limits. His works are infused with emotional outpouring and rational critical reflection. Xu Beihong valued the beauty of brushstrokes, imbuing them with a rhythmic quality akin to music, thereby granting independent space to expressive elements within his holistic creations. He emphasized the precision of form while pursuing dynamic expression, allowing individual trajectories to transcend technical constraints and manifest authenticity. The fluctuating and rhythmic brushstrokes convey profound meanings through form, evident in his character portrayal and poetic narrative of images, demonstrating Xu Beihong's self-awareness of Chinese culture and profound understanding of traditional essence.

From a young age, influenced by his father Xu Dazhang's artistic guidance, Xu Beihong naturally inherited the essence of brushwork. Family tradition provided him with an initial

understanding of Chinese art, laying the groundwork for his unique artistic perspective that navigates between history and modernity, East and West. Embracing the "peak theory of the Tang and Song dynasties" reflects his efforts to reevaluate all values through the intrinsic cultural perspective of the nation.

Xu Beihong consistently upheld the spirit of preserving tradition while innovating in his exploration of traditional Chinese painting. His sketches deeply embody symbols of Chinese culture, steadfastly maintaining traditional forms of expression. However, we should not overlook his efforts to revitalize traditional Chinese painting through reforms, drawing various artistic techniques from sketch training and courageously using rationality to depict the truth of the ink-and-brush world. This not only reflects Xu Beihong's discovery of national identity through exploring Western classical art but also his proactive attitude in confronting contemporary challenges in Chinese art, promoting communication and integration between East and West, eliminating barriers, breaking free from constraints, and focusing on exploring the essence of artistic creation.

### 3. Traditional Chinese painting

#### 3.1 Chinese art

Staying within the confines of past artistic systems, attempting to integrate historical resources within a certain scope for innovation. Despite structural expansions during this process, ultimately, the inherent logic constraints prevent breaking free from the stylistic constraints of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Carelessness can easily erode rational considerations of the image itself, overshadowed by the strong cultural visual perception and habitual expressions, posing a dilemma for 20th-century Chinese art[3].

The fragmented traditional understanding in the Chinese art scene often tends to use past developmental outcomes as the logical basis for viewing the entire history of art, thus falling into circular reasoning. Based on this, Xu Beihong maintains a cautious stance and does not take everything doubtful as a premise for argument.

How to effectively introduce external influences and break free from the constraints of ink and brush language on figurative art? Xu Beihong's answer is to introduce the spirit of Western realism, guided by rational judgments of values, to maximize the expressive capacity and spiritual depth of images, rather than resorting to clever naturalistic presentations, all built upon a solid foundation of sketch training. Thus, Xu Beihong integrates Western artistic qualities, combining the strengths of multiple artistic elements in his sketch practice, marking a preparatory phase for his reform of traditional Chinese painting.

Xu Beihong's journey in national art is characterized by a strong goal-oriented approach. How he carefully and deeply explores the guiding significance of sketching in traditional Chinese painting, from sculptural line shaping to creating spatial contrasts in light and dark, Xu Beihong continuously refines national art in a straightforward yet profound manner.

Copinism is practiced, where the essence of Western peak-period sketch art is studied and expanded upon. This aims to reform and elevate the new outlook of national art. However, this process is not confined by stylistic schools; its essence is seen as a remedy for the emptiness and opportunism, embodying Xu Beihong's open prospects for the Chinese art scene[4]. It is precisely the diversification of concepts, techniques, and forms, and the multidimensional review and adoption of excellent artistic traditions from both China and the West, that constitute the fundamental developmental direction of contemporary painting. Creation is not merely groundless or sourceless; it evolves through inheritance and innovation, mutually influencing and causing each other.

With the goal of achieving painting's independence, it demands both lifelike depiction and

pursues independent thinking and personal liberation. It avoids excessive focus on past expressive paradigms, blindly following predecessors, or overly esteeming the past at the expense of the present. Nor is it about deconstructing all meanings into chaos and vagueness as the norm; instead, it ultimately returns to the diverse realities of life, vividly portraying reality with full vitality. Reforming traditional Chinese painting is not only about reconstructing painting forms but also about enlightening the modernity of national spirit and serving the world with a firm heart.

In the *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains* series, Xu Beihong depicts the mountain workers by subtly shading the transitions between muscles with light ink, without overly emphasizing the effects of light and shadow. This demonstrates both his profound understanding of traditional media characteristics and his concern for maintaining the spatial integrity of line expressions in ink painting. Therefore, he avoids excessive reliance on light and shadow.

Xu Beihong's introduction of sketching techniques into the realm of line expression in traditional Chinese painting marks the starting point of his efforts to improve national art. Rather than simply rebuilding on the ruins of tradition, he fosters a constructive interaction between Eastern and Western art through continuous boundary-crossing. The robust and vigorous iron-line sketches better integrate the spatial representation of the painting, thereby dispelling confusion brought by materialistic ink and brush techniques. In Xu Beihong's traditional Chinese painting creations, sketch training is broken down and recombined as a catalyst for creativity. This process breaks the unidirectional cycle of traditional forms of expression, opening up new dimensions of creativity and offering a reinterpretation of the spirit of creation.

The color rendering is finely executed, coordinating environmental hues, showcasing sunlight's illumination through color blending, and gradual shifts between light and shadow at the transitions of forms. Basic colors are emphasized to distinguish objects by their hues, depicting vivid individual differences among the figures of the laborers, whether their skin tones are dark or light. The color rendering is characterized by distinct layers and rich content, avoiding a heavy impasto style, instead opting for transparency, brightness, and subtle rendering to emphasize simplicity. This approach pays homage to the traditional spirit of ink and brush by showcasing the lightness and fluidity akin to ink wash painting, all without compromising the relationship between ink and brush.

In contrast to traditional color methods that separate objects from their environment in pursuit of permanence, Xu Beihong emphasized "clear distinction between black and white" in his "New Seven Laws," akin to "assigning colors according to the category" in the "Six Laws of Xie He," stressing the complementarity of black and white. This approach does not diminish the role of color but rather complements traditional color techniques.

Ancient color application emphasized constancy, unaffected by changes in light, yet it tended toward stylization and reliance on formulas. Therefore, Xu Beihong dedicated himself to meticulous color studies, stating, "Nowadays, brushes are abundant in quality, yet colors are becoming coarse!"[5] He believed in lively representations of form. In traditional Chinese painting, handling mineral colors often requires secondary adjustments of light and shadow to avoid flat and dull compositions. He suggested prioritizing darker areas in painting first, followed by applying mineral colors to lighter areas to better depict forms.

In the traditional Chinese painting *Jiufang Gao*, Xu Beihong emphasizes linear characteristics, refraining from heavy ink shading in light-dark transitions. This technique fully showcases the traditional Chinese painting tradition of emphasizing form through lines. Xu Beihong "appropriates" Western knowledge of perspective and anatomy to remedy the shortcomings of traditional Chinese figure painting since modern times, such as "limbs at right angles, limited body movements, fixed head position, and constrained arm extension towards the viewer." This approach liberates the depiction from symbolic abstraction, demonstrating Xu Beihong's profound understanding of human body structure[6]. Therefore, the painting emphasizes coherence of body

posture, unified rhythm, and natural movement of figures, avoiding exaggeration while conveying vitality through dynamic gestures.

The depiction of Jiufang Gao's characters showcases a diverse range of postures, flowing with lifelike vigor through varying brush strokes that encapsulate the aesthetic principles of thickness, density, focus, and lightness, returning to the essence of the nation's spiritual homeland. Correspondingly, in the portrayal of the horse-holder, muscular strength is prominently displayed beneath the clothing, emphasizing the vigor of human movement. Facial expressions are minimized in favor of conveying male strength through consistent brushstrokes that accumulate the imminent burst of energy.

The lines delineate the muscle structure logically, shaping not only the outer contours but also defining the internal spaces of the body, allowing viewers to experience a visual effect akin to Greek sculptures on a flat surface. In other words, the contour lines no longer merely define the flat areas of the image but play a role in visual vanishing points in three-dimensional space, expanding the boundaries of artistic language beyond creating visual illusions, showcasing the unique expressive power of painting.

Xu Beihong, with his extensive training in figure sketching, seeks to merge form and spirit, creating distinctive character images. For instance, the bowed horse handler embodies the simplicity and serenity of classicism, releasing the vigorous vitality, while the elongated figure in "Jiu Fang Gao" balances sturdiness and magnanimity, with its keen eyes seemingly seeing exceptional horses. The black horse is rendered in ink, its texture and form vividly conveyed through the flow of ink, almost palpable in its robust physique.

### 3.2 Sketching and traditional Chinese painting

In these two works, Xu Beihong preserved the form of line drawing, allowing these powerful lines to become the primary means of depicting the structure of the figures. In his exploration of traditional Chinese painting, especially in his depictions of various horses, he transcended the limitations of linearity. By interweaving lines, ink, and color, he collectively expressed the depth of space and the marvel of creation[7].

For instance, in *Gallop Horse*, he focused on the application of techniques, using ink and wash fluidly to blend light and shadow, revealing the muscular texture and strength of the galloping horse. He fully utilized the versatility of ink, managing the relationships between light and dark, gradually surpassing the constraints of lines to explore new boundaries of form. He overcame tendencies towards arbitrary expression, with ink rigorously adhering to the laws of form without indulging in excessive sweetness, disorderliness, or impatience. Clear lines gradually fade away, blurring the boundary between outlining and coloring, each complementing the other. Thus, sketching merges with ink painting, mutually inspiring each other. Consequently, the traditional charm of ink and the rational structure are extended and revitalized in his works, exuding new vitality.

This isn't about merely transforming traditional aesthetics but uncovering the soul of creation hidden within ink and brushwork. As Jing Hao's "Notes on Brush Techniques" from the Five Dynasties put it: "The painter paints. He measures the object's form to capture its truth. Take the object's splendor, take its substance, but do not mistake splendor for substance. If you do not understand technique, it may seem plausible, but true depiction is unattainable." [8] This reflects Xu Beihong boasts strong foundation in sketching, he adheres to principles like "prefer squareness over roundness," "prefer simplicity over skillfulness," "prefer roughness over refinement." In light and shadow, the skin's quality and the contours of bones and muscles are visible, emphasizing choice over trivial details, seeking overall harmony. This isn't just about mechanical realism or copying

ancient models but about infusing passion while avoiding disjointed, deconstructed, or overly vibrant expressions.

Therefore, in *Galloping Horse*, the horse's posture is smooth and natural, almost as if "moving out of the wall," also it maintains structural stability in motion. Xu Beihong combines the true nature of the horse with its spiritual essence, closely linking the artist's emotions with it. He remains faithful to nature, drawing with his heart. At the same time, he also transcends material constraints, promotes idealism, and surpasses the limitations of realism to achieve a poetic expression. His rationality and caution do not suppress emotional bursts, reflecting Xu Beihong's progressive spirit in both sketching and traditional Chinese painting.

From Hegel's three types of artistic beauty, the concept of this work fits a perfect form that transcends abstract determinations. The unity between concept and image is achieved. Yet, the silent neighing of the horse and its galloping hooves seem to raise dust, almost as if it is galloping through the air. Consequently, the mind gradually detaches from the shape of the body, roaming freely and contentedly.

#### 4. Conclusion

The author believes that Xu Beihong's exploration of incorporating sketching techniques into traditional Chinese painting holds practical significance for contemporary Chinese art practices. In the context of today's globalized perspective, correctly integrating foreign cultural elements can positively impact local culture. Simultaneously, it is essential to avoid the stifling effect of adhering solely to formal traditions, which can hinder creative development. This includes the blind exclusion of form and color, the dissolution of thematic and sublime qualities, and the indulgence in a decadent end-of-era aesthetic. Influenced by Chinese philosophical thoughts such as "harmony generates life, sameness leads to stagnation" and "a stone from another mountain can polish jade," Xu Beihong's value judgments offer timeless and positive insights. He truly managed to extract the essence and discard the dross, paving a broad path for the flourishing of national art.

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