

Simple Language-Exploration of Teaching Methods for Expressive Sketching

Li Zhan

Oil Painting Department, School of Fine Arts, Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, Beijing, China
420497085@qq.com

Keywords: Contemporary Chinese Painting; Traditional Aesthetic Spirit; Expressive Drawing; Art Education

Abstract: In Western traditional art, sketching is often regarded as a draft for creating oil paintings, and the expressive power of its painting language has not received sufficient attention. However, in traditional Chinese art, the modeling language of ink and wash materials shares considerable similarities with sketching. Therefore, the expressive sketching in contemporary Chinese painting has achieved remarkable success. This article elaborates on the differences between expressive sketching and realistic sketching, the phased achievements of Chinese expressive sketching, and discusses related teaching issues based on the creative rules of expressive sketching.

1. Introduction

In the Western tradition, sketching is often regarded as an initial training course for learning painting and as a preparatory sketch for creating oil paintings. Therefore, although the sketches left by painters such as Rubens and Ingres are exquisite, they cannot be considered complete works of art, which is determined by their understanding and attitude towards sketching. As art has developed to the contemporary era, this behind-the-scenes hero, sketching, has gradually attracted attention. With its unique simple and straightforward quality and plain and elegant style, it has gained an equal status with many other materials.

Our traditional Chinese ink art shares many similarities with expressive sketching, both focusing on the black-and-white relationship and line modeling in the picture. Therefore, Chinese painters have a natural affinity for expressive sketching, and contemporary masters such as Yuan Yunsheng, Tang Yongli, and Chao Ge have emerged. In the contemporary art world of China, sketching has not only become an important way to learn painting but also an important form of artistic expression. As a result, China has held large-scale exhibitions of sketching art works such as the "National Sketch Art Exhibition" and the "Sketch Works Exhibition of the Chinese Realistic Painting School", demonstrating the significant achievements of contemporary Chinese sketching. This article will discuss some issues related to the creation of expressive sketching and summarize some teaching methods from them.

2. The Emergence of Expressive Sketching

Since the introduction of sketching by modern Chinese art pioneers such as Xu Beihong, major art academies have regarded it as an indispensable foundational course for shaping skills [1]. When beginners start learning to paint, they are usually taught realistic sketching, which enables them to have an overall grasp of the various elements in the picture and be well-prepared. During the process of learning realistic sketching, perspective and anatomy become convenient methods, providing regular rules for realistic sketching, allowing us to place the objects seen by the eyes appropriately on the canvas and, based on this, repeatedly adjust the position, proportion, shape, and black, white, and gray relationships of the objects in the picture, gradually cultivating a meticulous painting ability and character. After such training, adding colors on this sketching foundation becomes more effortless.

It can be seen that realistic sketching helps cultivate a rational painting quality in painters. For this reason, sketching is often regarded as a symbol of rationality in Western art history. Classical painters regarded sketching as the internal structure of painting, which supports the harmonious relationship of a picture. Painters such as Poussin and Ingres discovered a rational value in sketching and regarded color as an accompaniment or decoration to sketching, even viewing color as an unpredictable and unruly element. He said, "The expressiveness of a painting depends on the artist's rich knowledge of sketching. Without absolute accuracy, there can be no vivid expression" [2]. This view sparked a famous debate between classical and romantic painters.

There is a basis for regarding color as an unruly element in painting. Since Titian, color has shown another force beyond rationality, that is, emotional expression. With the end of the debate between sketching and color, color, as an expressive language in painting, has finally been affirmed by history. At the same time, the expressive potential of sketching has also begun to be valued by painters. We can find in the works of painters such as Van Gogh and Picasso that sketching, after breaking free from the framework of realistic style, has presented a rich appearance. Considering the current situation of contemporary Chinese society and art education, "the single medium's expression form can no longer fully meet the creative needs of students majoring in shaping arts under the innovative concept." [3] Only by continuing to discover rich expressiveness from this simple effect can we further develop students' creative potential.

3. Achievements of Chinese Expressive Sketching

Chinese painters' thoughts on sketching have been deeply influenced by our traditional artistic wisdom. Ancient Chinese painters had already proposed the view that it is better to be clumsy and simple than to be flattering and ingenious [4]. In terms of sketching, clumsiness means that the expressive elements do not conform to the ideal space and texture; ugliness means that the created form fails to capture the objective shape. It can be seen that the traditional Chinese art has long possessed an aesthetic and value concept of breaking away from external constraints and highlighting subjective feelings through expressive language.

The creation of expressive sketching does not pursue special subjects or images, but takes personalized language as the core of the sketching work, and expresses a form of interest through the free composition of various elements. Yuan Yunsheng has been concerned about the combination of traditional Chinese art spirit and contemporary art throughout his life, and has created a large number of classic sketching works. Among them, the "Human Fables" series expresses highly tense black and white forms through pen sketching. These works have fragmented shapes. If judged by the standards of realistic sketching, they are obviously fragmented and not "integrated" enough. However, excellent artists precisely use this visual effect to create a richness in the picture. In addition, these works have shapes that are like flames, flying and ethereal, and are

divided like the layers of flower buds. This reflects the symbolic meaning that the artist has given to the form, fully expressing the infinite vitality of human beings. Overall, Yuan Yunsheng's sketches are clearly influenced by Western Cubism, but we cannot say that what they embody is merely the beauty of composition. What is more important is that we are moved by the life symbol with an oriental flavor contained within them.

Since Xu Beihong introduced sketching into the Chinese painting modeling system, many painters in modern times have been exploring the way to integrate the two. Tang Yongli is a famous contemporary Chinese ink painter. His linear sketching is unique, integrating Western art anatomy with Chinese ink line drawing, becoming an indispensable model in Chinese linear sketching teaching. Tang Yongli is good at depicting elderly people with wrinkles all over their faces and young girls with flowing skirts. But no matter what the content is, the painter always emphasizes the line elements as the main character in the picture. In a work titled "The Old Man", Tang Yongli treated the old man's hair as white and painted his skin color very dark, exaggeratingly highlighting the features of the old man's weathered face. Moreover, the painter did not fill the entire face with tones but left the dark parts blank, focusing on depicting the expression on the front of the face, presenting the rich content of the face as a stage for lines. Through such treatment, the painter highlights the visual center content he is subjectively concerned about, making volume an auxiliary of lines and handling the picture with clear priorities and a rhythmic sense.

Different from Yuan Yunsheng's symbolic sketches and Tang Yongli's linear sketches, Chao Ge's sketches pay more attention to the expression of ethnic emotions, reflecting a sketching style with a strong exotic flavor. Chao Ge is a Mongolian painter, and his sketches mostly draw on the landscapes and figures of Inner Mongolia in China. His sketches simplify the outer contours of things but are different from the geometric simplification of Western artist Ingres, instead reflecting a rough and bold ethnic character of the grasslands. In landscape works, he draws clouds as uneven circles and generalizes the grassland as intersecting lines, presenting an abstract beauty with an oriental flavor. Similarly, Chao Ge's figure sketches do not focus on the depiction of detailed expressions but generalize on a large scale and do not emphasize the contrast of light and shade. Instead, he regards the distinction of light and shade as the undulation of gullies, through which the painter seems to create the vastness and openness of the grasslands within the contours of the human face.

Through the analysis of the works of the above three painters, we can find that Chinese expressive sketching has achieved a high level of accomplishment, reflecting unique modeling characteristics and ethnic emotions. At present, more and more teachers in art academies have discovered the insufficiency of realistic training in teaching effectiveness and have begun to draw nourishment from traditional Chinese concepts of modeling such as "form and spirit", gradually forming new teaching ideas[5].

4. Teaching Ideas for Expressive Sketching

The author believes that creating expressive sketches begins with breaking the internal framework of realistic sketches. A painter's style language is not something that is considered in advance and then reflected on the canvas; rather, it is a path that emerges naturally as the painter breaks the current framework and follows unconscious choices. Therefore, when we take bold steps forward, our true artistic feelings also move forward in tandem.

As we mentioned earlier, perspective and anatomy are the foundations of realistic painting and have become a gateway for us to enter professional studies. However, this rationalistic form of painting is not the only face of painting. After mastering the modeling language of sketching through perspective and anatomy, these methods become an obstacle to further creating new

appearances. Therefore, to create expressive sketches, we must first break free from the constraints of perspective and anatomy.

In realistic sketches, tones are deepened or lightened based on spatial relationships. Perspective and anatomy provide a basis for shaping space, allowing students to have a method to follow and fill the black, white, and gray tones in an orderly manner on the canvas. However, tones that do not exist based on spatial relationships will appear very discordant in the picture and are often considered as bad problems such as dirty, greasy, and gray in sketches. But in fact, just as brushstrokes were considered discordant elements in the eyes of classical painters but became a language for expressing emotions in the eyes of expressionist painters, these dirty, greasy, and gray effects are also a possibility for the expressive language of sketches. Painters gradually discover the expressive power contained in dirty, greasy, and gray tones, organize them skillfully, and play with the composition of points, lines, and planes to create an expressive sketch.

In fact, the difficulty of creating expressive sketches is no less than that of realistic sketches. Realistic sketches require the elements in the picture to perfectly adhere to rational accuracy, while expressive sketches pursue a more accurate expression of emotions. Painters need to transform emotional power into the modeling language of sketches, which requires them to try different composition methods extensively, gradually clarify their own preferences, and know how to arrange these elements to express such preferences. However, even for expressive sketches, the training of realistic sketches is still important. This is not only because painters discover the possibilities of sketching language in realistic training but also because they learn in realistic training how to refine the various elements in the picture to perfection. Based on perspective and anatomy, painters can appropriately fill the black, white, and gray tones in the picture, making it increasingly refined. Without this reference, expressive sketches require painters to know where to place the elements in the picture to form a specific rhythm and convey a specific emotion.

5. Conclusion

In summary, expressive sketches are in contrast to realistic sketches. In the teaching system of art academies in China, expressive sketches have gradually emerged as personal styles after we have learned realistic sketches. Sketches are not necessarily just the internal structure of painting; their simple language also contains some expressive power. Especially for Chinese painters who have long been influenced by the traditional art of black and white modeling, the expressive power of sketches is worth exploring. This article has listed the expressive sketches of painters such as Yuan Yunsheng, Tang Yongli, and Chao Ge, showcasing various sketching styles such as symbolic sketches, linear sketches, and sketches with ethnic flavors, demonstrating the diversity and innovation of contemporary Chinese expressive sketches. It can be said that expressive sketches focus on the essential issues of modeling language and can prompt painters to think about the innovative development of art. This is an extremely important matter in today's era of increasingly developed AI-generated art.

References

- [1] Wang Tianxiang. *From Realism to Social Realism: Two Phases of Chinese Higher Art Education in the 20th Century—Taking Dai Ze's Art Notes as a Clue*. *Art Research*, 2024(6), pp.66 - 70.
- [2] Ingres. *Ingres on Art*. Translated by Zhu Boxiong. Shenyang: Liaoning Fine Arts Publishing House, 2010, p.33.
- [3] Guo Shanshan. *Research on the Teaching Methods of Creative Sketching for Fine Arts Modeling Majors in Colleges and Universities*. *Art Literature*, 2024(7), pp.98 - 101.
- [4] Guo Chukai. *Conceptual Analysis of Fu Shan's Aesthetic Thought of "Four Preferrings and Four Avoidings"*. *Beauty & Times*, 2024(2), pp.6 - 8.
- [5] Wu Fang, Yang Zhongwei. *"Form and Spirit" in Sketch Teaching*. *New Arts*, 2024(3), pp.247 - 253.