



Leaving Blank Space — the Highest Realm of Chinese Painting

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Abstract: The highest realm of Chinese painting is leaving blank space. Chinese painting has always been an art upholding blank space. In the traditional Chinese painting, the subject is described more in detail, but there is nothing in the background. Wonderful effect of virtual and real life joining together, which is generated by leaving blank space, can inspire endless imagination.

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“da yin xi sheng, da xiang wu xing”. This is an important aesthetic point in Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching. “da yin” refers to the most beautiful sound. The most beautiful sound and music is “xi sheng”. It’s the sound of “the silence that is better than any sound”. It’s an ethereal sound. “da xiang” refers to the most beautiful image, so the phrase means the most beautiful image has no shape. The expression of this kind of “almost no sound” and “has no shape” in Chinese painting is leaving blank space. The real charming art is not straightforward expression, but to express its artistic conception through other means of contrast or leaving blank space.

The highest realm of Chinese painting is leaving blank space. Chinese painting has always been an art upholding leaving blank space. Blank is an important difference between Chinese painting and Western painting. In Western painting, when an artist draws and paints water and clouds, he or she would draw and paint the shape and thickness of clouds and water realistically, while in Chinese painting, he or she can leave blank space. In the traditional Chinese painting, the subject is described more in detail, but there is not one thing in the background, so all of it is left blank. Wonderful effect of virtual and real life joining together, which is generated by leaving blank space, can inspire endless imagination. Chinese painting is often a whole piece of white paper with only some strokes. The white part sets off the black part, and we can still feel the existence of cloud and water and various artistic conceptions and spaces. From this aspect, Chinese painting relies more on the viewer’s own feeling.

Chinese painting can only have two colors, black and white, just like the yin and yang fish shape shown on the traditional Chinese Taiji diagram. The whole painting only has black and white colors, representing the two sides of yin and Yang. The white dot in black means that there is Yang in Yin, that is, there is white in black, and the black dot in white means that there is Yin in Yang, that is, there is black in white.

In Chinese painting, the cloud, water, fog, wind and various spaces that has depth, various uncertain and illusory contents can be expressed by leaving blank space, which even expresses the painter’s emotions and personal thoughts. It is a unique way and the highest wisdom for Chinese painting to create artistic conception.

In the figure painting of Gu Kaizhi, a painter of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, there are all blank spaces around the figure. The main information the viewer gets from the painting is the life of the main female noble figures, and the blank around them may be imagined as a wall, or lots of other things. The painter does not show all the objects, but mainly uses the description of noble women to set off a very mysterious noble atmosphere. It is exactly this noble atmosphere that leaving blank space presents.

In the figure painting of Wu Daozi, a painter of Tang Dynasty, the figures have a natural and unrestrained look and smooth lines. Mi Fu, a painter in Song Dynasty, studied Wu Daozi’s paintings and said that his paintings “have brilliant strokes like water shield strips, concave or convex which are exactly as it should be”. Wu Daozi’s strokes have distinctive rhythm and rich expressive force, successfully show the high and low, deep and oblique levels and flowing ribbons, and “created the elegant posture” and the effect of “like wearing dress from heaven and like the wind is blowing in the painting”. Wu’s painting lets us feel that there seems to be a wind blowing the figure’s clothes, which is called “Wu’s fluttering belts” and “Wu’s style” by later generations. There are a large amount of blank space in the painting, which represents the wind and endless space.

Ma Yuan’s Fishing Alone in the Cold River in the Southern Song Dynasty takes the meaning of the poem from the Tang Dynasty: “It’s snowing, wearing straw hat and rain coat, an old man fishes alone on a cold river”. In the whole

painting, there is only one person and one boat. Except for a few little ripples, there is almost all blank space in the background. It shows the loneliness and desolation of fishing on the cold river alone while it is snow as well as the emptiness and coldness of the environment. It also highlights the word “alone”, which shows how broad the river is and how distant the artistic conception is, and sets off the cold and bleak atmosphere on the river in winter. “The reality and the unreality generate each together, and all the places without ink are a wonderful place.” The artistic conception is endless! Leaving blank spaces here is not only a kind of wisdom, but also the highest realm of beauty.

Ni Yunlin’s *Autumn of Fishing Village after Raining* is with the composition of “one river and two banks”. The painting is very clean and simple, and we can feel the “elegance” in the painting. In the foreground of this painting, there are some withered trees and some craggy rocks. In the background far away, there are some mountains and in the middle it is the surface of a large river. The painting uses dry and light ink and just a few strokes show the whole landscape and show the refinement of the painter’s brushwork. The large blank space gives a feeling of loneliness and seclusion. However, it does not make people feel “empty”, but sets off the broadness of the river and the distance of the clouds. In the background, blank space generates a peaceful sense of Zen and space. The secluded and desolate atmosphere permeates in the painting. Ni Yunlin conveys infinite artistic conception with just a few strokes and brushes and large blank space. This is just as his words on painting pavilions and houses recorded in *The Collection of Pavilions Drawings in Qing Dynasty* goes: “Don’t drawing many things, otherwise the painting wouldn’t be very elegant.”

In Qing Dynasty, Zhu Da’s paintings only have a few strokes to show flowers and birds. It can be said that they are so simple that they couldn’t be simplified any more. There were a lot of blank spaces left in the paintings. The painter did not make too many depictions and decorations, and he roughly shows the images of fish and birds. Fish seemed to swim in the water and birds seemed to stand in endless space, which sets off the eyes and dynamics of fish and birds, and this made an outlet of the depression for the painter and makes people feel mysterious and silent. Zheng Banqiao called it “reduced strokes painting”. However, looking at these paintings with simple strokes and clean blank space, we don’t feel empty or scarce. It can be said that the spirit of “few wins many” and “fullness in the spirit of emptiness” reverberates in the air, which is breath-taking. A sense of solemnity and loftiness impacts our vision and stuns our mind. This kind of minimalist blank space is water, air as well as space, and it also hides the endless aloofness and pride, profound life thoughts and deep philosophical thinking of Zhu Da.

In the Qing Dynasty, Zheng Banqiao was good at drawing bamboo. He thought the disordered bamboo shadow was a natural painting. He said: “Whenever I paint bamboo, I don’t have a teacher for me to follow. I often get the bamboo shape from their shadows on the window paper as well as the wall under the sun and the moon.” Through observation and practice, he summarized the three stages of bamboo painting, namely “bamboo in my eye, bamboo in my mind, bamboo under my brush”. In real life, bamboos live in a certain environment. When a painter sees them, they become the image of bamboos in the painter’s eyes, then it turns into the image of bamboo in the painter’s mind, and finally it becomes a paint, which is the image of bamboos under the painter’s brush. The bamboo under the brush is an artistic creation, which eliminated the over-elaborate background. For instance, the background of bamboo paintings, which imitate their shadows on walls under moon, is blank space, and this sets off the main image and shows all void or the real existence such as the space or the walls and so on.

Leaving blank space is the space is leaving a living eye and breathing space in the painting, and its purpose is to not make the painting seem too stuffy. The composition with blank space can convey endless artistic conception and the endless emotion, which is closer to the things of in our hearts, and maybe it can’t be expressed with ink. If the painter feels that the description cannot express his ideas, he leaves a blank space.

Leaving blank space is an art with Chinese characteristics, and it is widely used in all aspects of our lives. In Chinese painting and calligraphy, there is the principal of “the white part sets off the black part”; in music, there are overtones; in opera, there are actions without related props to show the scene; in poetry, there are meanings outside the words.

Chinese calligraphy and Chinese painting have the same origin. They both use two colors, black and white. A piece of white paper with black characters dancing on it, thick and thin, dense and sparse with its own order, and beauty rises in the brilliant black and white.

When we are listening to the traditional famous music “High Mountains and Flowing Water”, there are high and low pitches in it, and there are also sudden pauses. The high pitches make people feel excited, and the low pitches and pauses make people associate and imagine things, and the tune lingered in your room. These pauses are the blank space in music.

In traditional Chinese opera, blank space is presented as some actions without related props. We often see an actor running around on stage, looking like riding a horse, and with various expressions. Although there is no horse or reins, the audience still feel like a horse is there. This horse is a kind of blank space in the opera, which makes the audience imagine.

Blank space is like the extreme void, extreme quietness and extreme emptiness. Chuang Tzu said that “da mei wu yan”. The biggest beauty doesn’t need explanation and over-decorations. It is this speechless beauty that represents few wins many and eliminating over-decoration and going with simplicity. It’s like a line in Bai Juyi’s *The Pi-pa Player* goes: “Silence here is better than sound”. There’s an end to the words, but not to their message. Leaving a blank space creates a broader, profound and lasting void artistic conception, and inspires endless imagination. This is the significance of leaving blank space.

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