

Thoughts on the Creation of Chinese Landscape Painting Based on Painting from Life

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Abstract: Chinese landscape painting depicts the magnificent mountains and rivers grounded in the vast land of China, carrying the heroic and indomitable spirit of the Chinese nation. During the creative process, painters emphasize the transmission of spiritual charm, focusing on refining and combining the ever-changing elements of nature while drawing from natural mountains and rivers. They integrate these with their own aesthetic concepts and life philosophies to ultimately complete artworks rich in cultural connotations. Painting from life provides painters with continuous inspiration for artistic conception. By being on-site and immersed in the landscape, they can directly perceive the changing atmosphere of the natural environment, thereby evoking deep emotional responses and allowing the work to reveal the inherent laws of nature's operation. Based on this, this paper explores the creation of Chinese landscape painting based on painting from life. It first briefly explains the concept and connotation of painting from life, analyzes its important role in Chinese landscape painting, and focuses on its application in four aspects: on-site observation in composition and framing, natural transformation in brush and ink techniques, realistic reconstruction in spatial layering, and mood creation in emotional expression.

Keywords: painting from life; Chinese landscape painting; creation

1. Introduction

With the continuous improvement of social material conditions, people are increasingly concerned about the enrichment of the inner spiritual world, and the pursuit of aesthetic levels continues to strengthen. As a traditional art form, Chinese landscape painting is a treasure of traditional Chinese culture, possessing a unique artistic style and aesthetic value. It continues to blossom with new charm in the new era. Chinese landscape painting is gradually gaining widespread popularity among the public. Since the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Chinese landscape painting has established an independent and complete artistic system, accumulating rich creative techniques and injecting profound depth into Chinese aesthetic tradition. Although landscape painting is widely known for using natural scenery as its main subject, the mountains, rivers, lakes, and seas of nature are always in dynamic evolution. Relying solely on subjective imagination makes it difficult to present their vitality and touch the heart. Painting from life endows creation with authentic perception, making landscape painting exhibit a more vivid and lively artistic charm.

2. Overview of Painting from Life

Painting from life refers to the artist taking natural landscapes as the subject, personally observing and deeply experiencing them, transforming what is seen and felt into images under the brush. It emphasizes the truthful reproduction of objective nature while focusing on the integration of subjective feelings. It serves as a bridge for the artist to engage in dialogue with nature and express emotions. In the development of traditional landscape painting, the Song Dynasty's concept of "wandering within art" and the Yuan Dynasty's "freehand brushwork" both reflect the equal emphasis on on-site observation and the pursuit of artistic conception. Painting from life can effectively enhance the artist's modeling ability, make the composition more rigorous, and give natural forms more vitality. It helps the artist deepen the understanding of the connotation of landscapes, capturing the spirit of heaven and earth and the soul of mountains and rivers from drifting clouds and mist as well as interlacing trees, thereby comprehending the myriad phenomena of nature. Through the transformation of brush and ink, it elevates aesthetic experience and gradually forms a personal style of landscape artistic conception.

3. The Historical Origins of Painting from Life in China

Although painting from life originated abroad, it also has a long-standing historical background in China. The term "painting from life" in Chinese painting can be traced back to the Five Dynasties period, with Teng Changyou's phrase "skilled in painting without a teacher, only painting from life." The Southern Tang painter Dong Yuan was very adept at observing natural landscapes and refining compositions. For example, in his "Summer Mountains," he used the "hemp-fiber

texture stroke” to express the layers of mountains, which can be considered a prototype of painting from life. The Northern Song painter Guo Xi combined natural observation with humanistic conception and opened a new chapter in landscape painting. He proposed the “Three Distances” method — high distance, deep distance, and level distance — which, through the spatial representation of painting from life, showed the magnificent rivers and mountains of the motherland. In the Yuan Dynasty, Huang Gongwang’s “Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains” is unparalleled in history. His main creative technique was also through painting from life, seeking inspiration as “the brush moves with time,” blending the scenery along both banks of the Fuchun River with personal emotions to form the artistic conception of “unity of heaven and man”. In modern times, painters like Ju Chao and Ju Lian of the Lingnan School emphasized “painting from life is painting from spirit,” and Huang Binhong proposed that “the way of brush and ink must be comprehended through painting from life,” all of which are extensions of painting from life.

4. The Role of Painting from Life in the Creation of Chinese Landscape Painting

4.1 Helps Improve the Creator’s Observational Ability

During the process of on-site painting from life of natural landscapes, the creator needs to spend extended periods in the mountains and forests, carefully observing the myriad phenomena of nature. From the overall layout to the details, the artist gradually establishes a comprehensive perception of natural scenes. This process is an exercise in perception and understanding. Through repeated contact with real mountains and rivers, the painter gradually develops a keen sensitivity to natural elements such as changes in light and shadow and spatial layering, enhancing the overall grasp of the structure and form of the scenery. Compared to creating purely from imagination, painting from life confronts the artist with complex and ever-changing natural scenes, training their ability to quickly extract key points and analyze spatial relationships, making observation deeper and more organized. When faced with changing weather, the creator must constantly adjust viewpoints, honing their visual capture skills. The experience accumulated through observation transforms into precise depictions under the brush, enabling the painter’s understanding of landscape to reach the level of “recognizing its form, grasping its momentum, and comprehending its meaning.”

4.2 Helps Improve the Creator’s Sketching Ability

While painting on-site amidst mountains, rivers, forests, and springs, the creator must quickly capture the basic structure of the scenery within limited time and constantly changing natural conditions. This requires the artist to maintain highly concentrated attention and swift, decisive brushwork to complete the initial composition. It effectively sharpens the creator’s ability to judge the overall structure of the landscape, allowing them to select objects efficiently within a short time, thereby enhancing their ability to grasp key points in complex scenes. Painting from life often involves continuous changes in climate, light, and angle, requiring the artist to complete the sketching task within a limited timeframe. This forces the use of more concise lines and more generalized brush and ink language to express the spirit of nature, strengthening the painter’s expressive power. Sketching condenses aesthetic consciousness and has profound significance for understanding natural structures and grasping rhythm and cadence. Long-term on-site sketching enables the creator to gradually form stable and efficient observational and judgment abilities, allowing them to respond quickly to different subjects and complete compositions with artistic tension.

4.3 Helps Improve the Perspective Effect in Painting

Although Chinese landscape painting differs from the focal-point perspective method used in Western painting, it emphasizes traditional spatial composition methods such as high distance, deep distance, and level distance, which also rely on the artist’s keen grasp of spatial relationships. Painting from life enables the creator to be on-site, observing the spatial distribution of natural scenes more clearly, allowing them to better perceive foreground and background occlusions and the layers of near and far. This helps the artist accurately judge the overlapping relationships of mountain bodies and the layering of trees, thus making the composition structurally more three-dimensional. Painting from life requires the artist to capture multidimensional spatial information within a short time, gradually building an understanding of depth relationships during observation, thereby improving the overall spatial logic of the composition. When dealing with complex mountain formations and water veins, the experience of painting from life helps the artist flexibly use the “scattered-point perspective” compositional method, enabling various elements — though not seen from the same viewpoint—to be organically unified in the painting, forming a natural and coherent spatial transition. The continuous observation of foreground, middle ground, and background during painting from life also strengthens the creator’s ability to distinguish layers and arrange elements with varied positioning in composition, giving the artwork a rhythmic beauty[1].

5. Application of Painting from Life in the Creation of Chinese Landscape Painting

5.1 On-site Observation in Composition and Framing

In painting from life, the artist should deeply enter the mountains and forests by “moving to change the scene,” selecting different perspectives for observation to find the best viewpoint. Methods such as panoramic observation, bird’s-eye view, and worm’s-eye view can be used to capture the spatial relationships of natural scenery from multiple angles, avoiding rigid composition and monotonous structure. During on-site observation, the artist should first establish the main visual focus and clarify the primary subject of the painting, such as towering peaks or layered forests, and arrange the foreground, background, and auxiliary elements around the subject to form a layout with clear hierarchy and interplay between solid and void. The three-stage observation method can be adopted: taking details from the foreground, capturing the structure from the middle ground, and observing the momentum and atmosphere from the background, to construct a complete spatial layering. To ensure overall harmony of the composition, attention should also be paid to the interplay between elements — whether the movement of mountains and flowing water is unified, whether the distribution of trees forms rhythm lines guiding the viewer’s sight, and whether the skyline and landforms achieve fusion in spirit and rhythm. On-site observation should also be compared across different times of day to capture the visual differences caused by changes in light. Morning mist, afternoon shadows, and evening glow all impart different tones to the landscape. The artist can record these changes and select the most expressive light and shadow effects for composition. Meanwhile, combining quick sketches and simplified notes during observation helps promptly record the positions of objects, laying the foundation for subsequent in-depth creation. In on-site observation for composition and framing, the artist should appropriately simplify and select, extracting representative elements from the real scene and removing minor branches that interfere with sightlines, ensuring the composition possesses both natural form and brush-and-ink beauty. A viewfinder can be used to assist observation, training the artist to screen elements within a limited visual field and thereby improve the artistry of composition [2].

5.2 Natural Transformation in Brush and Ink Techniques

In the creation of Chinese landscape painting, painting from life can promote the natural transformation of brush and ink techniques. The artist should transform natural scenery into expressions that conform to the brush and ink language of landscape painting, so that the real scenes seen during painting from life are presented with artistic appeal through the use of brushwork and ink techniques. During the painting process, appropriate texture strokes should be selected based on the forms and structures of mountains, trees, water, and other elements observed. For steep cliffs, the “axe-cut texture stroke” can be used to express their rugged and heavy nature; for soft hills, “hemp-fiber texture stroke” or “cow-hair texture stroke” can be used to express their layered softness. Different natural forms require matching brush languages to accurately convey the characteristics of the objects in the composition. The artist can carry a small sketchbook during painting from life to quickly record different landform structures and note texture stroke experiments, gradually finding brush techniques that suit natural features through repeated practice. Ink use should be flexibly adjusted in dryness, wetness, and concentration according to the actual light and shadow conditions on site. The outlines of distant mountains, which are blurred, can be rendered with light ink to create a sense of distance and vagueness, while trees and rocks in the foreground, which are clear, can be outlined with dark ink to increase emphasis. During painting from life, close attention should be paid to changes in light and shadow, noting the warm and cool variations in shadowed areas and adjusting the ink accordingly to achieve unity of ink layering and spatial relationships. Multiple brushes dipped in inks of varying concentrations can be prepared for testing strokes to quickly adapt to the rhythm of light and shadow in natural scenes. The artist should correspond the observed natural textures in painting from life with brush and ink techniques, forming an expression that changes with the environment. When encountering rough and cracked rock surfaces, dry brush short strokes combined with side-tip rubbing can be used to express the mottled texture of rocks. In scenes with dense forests, the main branches should be outlined with the brush tip, then wet ink can be used to dye leaves and strengthen the layering of the composition. Multiple technique combinations can be experimented with during the painting stage to timely transform natural observations into brush language, recording successful expressions as important technique accumulation [3].

5.3 Realistic Reconstruction of Spatial Layers

To effectively achieve the natural restoration of spatial layers, the creator needs to consciously employ multiple observation and recording methods during painting from life, combining the traditional compositional techniques of high distance, deep distance, and level distance to organize the natural space. During on-site observation, a layered observation method is used to deconstruct the scene, dividing the real view into three levels: foreground, middle ground, and background for separate recording. The foreground mainly focuses on elements with detailed expression such as trees, rocks, water surfac-

es, and slopes; the middle ground pays attention to medium-sized structures that serve as connections, such as mountain ridges, forests, and villages; the background mostly consists of clouds, mountain peaks, and the skyline, which act as the backdrop to close the scene. Different sketching techniques should be used for each level of observation: fine brushwork to express texture in the foreground, emphasis on the contours of forms and structures in the middle ground, and simplified or light brushstrokes for the outlines in the middle and distant background. This approach helps the artist arrange spatial relationships methodically in the subsequent composition. Spatial arrangement can adopt the staggered placement method, orderly distributing elements such as mountains, trees, and water systems in the composition to create a sense of depth through blocking, overlapping, and contrast. Low trees can be placed in front of mountain bodies, using small elements to lead the viewer's gaze towards the middle and background. When arranging the distant view, the contours can be blurred to naturally connect with the foreground and middle ground, forming a progressive spatial transition. Photography can assist in comparing spatial relationships from different angles during painting from life, analyzing the depth trends of objects in space to achieve more reasonable spatial conversion in the composition. To enhance the rhythm and variation of spatial layers, a segment division method can be used to divide natural elements into multiple visual units arranged with varying densities, forming a rhythm of near and far, solid and void. A blank water area can be arranged in the composition as a visual buffer before connecting to distant mountains, which both segments the picture and enhances the perspective effect. The relative positions of each spatial segment should be recorded during painting from life and repeatedly adjusted in sketches, ensuring the reconstructed composition is layered without disorder [4].

5.4 Mood Creation in Emotional Expression

In the creation of Chinese landscape painting, to naturally infuse emotion on the basis of painting from life, personal emotional experiences should be introduced during observation and depiction. Through the refinement, selection, and reconstruction of natural scenes, the external landscape and internal emotions are organically integrated. During on-site painting, attention should be paid to choosing scenes that can evoke inner resonance as the subject. Different painting subjects can be selected according to the current emotional state—for example, depicting a vast misty lake when the mind is peaceful, or steep and rugged cliffs when emotions fluctuate—creating emotional resonance with the natural scenery. This allows personal feelings to be injected into composition, brushwork, and ink use, laying an emotional foundation for subsequent mood creation. During painting from life, emphasis should be placed on expressing the spirit rather than exact form. Unnecessary elements should be appropriately reduced based on emotional expression needs, while symbolically meaningful elements should be strengthened. The layered clouds and mist of distant mountains can be retained to create an ethereal mood. Meanwhile, brushwork may be slightly exaggerated and ink used to render the atmosphere, making the imagery not just a likeness but more about meaning. In composing the image, skillful use of blank space and the interplay of reality and void enhances mood expression. When painting from life, spatial arrangement should reasonably employ blank space to express an ethereal, unreachable realm, conveying an emotion of transcendence beyond the mundane. Light brushstrokes can depict distant mountains and clouds, creating a visual effect of mutual generation between presence and absence, reality and void, giving the painting richer emotional expression. Various compositional schemes should be tried, comparing the emotional direction under different layouts to choose the composition that best conveys the intended mood. Meanwhile, ink tones, dryness, and wetness should be adjusted according to weather, lighting, and mood during painting from life. Light ink can express the tranquility of morning forests; wet ink can render the misty imagery after rain; dense ink can emphasize the somber atmosphere of deep mountains and valleys. Different ink tones can be prepared for testing strokes, comparing tonal changes' effects on emotional expression to select the means that best conveys subjective feelings [5].

6. Conclusion

In summary, artistic conception is the core of Chinese landscape painting. During the creative process, painters can achieve a deep integration of personal emotions and natural scenery through painting from life, creating captivating and emotionally powerful scenes. They depict the majestic mountains and rivers authentically, endowing their works with the artistic tension that moves people's hearts and evokes emotional resonance in viewers. Throughout the process of painting from life, the painter's observational and compositional skills are continuously honed. Walking among the mountains and forests and perceiving the myriad phenomena of nature, the painter, while meticulously portraying natural forms, constantly stimulates an inner desire for expression, thereby cultivating artistic taste in a subtle and profound way.

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