

## Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿: The Reform of Chinese Painting 中国画改良论

Translated by Yuan Fang and Jiachun Xie

中国画学之颓败，至今日已极矣！凡世界文明理无退化，独中国之画在今日，比二十年前退五十步，三百年前退五百步，五百年前退四百步，七百年前千步，千年前八百步，民族之不振可慨也夫！夫何故而使画学如此其颓坏耶？曰惟守旧，曰惟失其学术独立之地位。画固艺也，而及于学。今吾东方画，无论其在二十世纪内，应有若何成绩，要之以视千年前先民不逮者，实为深耻大辱。然则吾之草此论，岂得已哉。

The decadence of Chinese painting has reached its peak today! Theoretically speaking, this world's material civilization should not be going backwards. However, the style of Chinese painting today is like going fifty steps backwards when compared with twenty years ago. Compared with three hundred years ago, it is like going five hundred steps backwards and compared with five hundred years ago it is like taking four hundred steps backward. Compared with seven hundred years ago, it is like going backwards by one thousand steps and when compared with a thousand years ago, it is like taking eight hundred steps backwards. Such a national decline brings forth feelings of remorse! But what caused this decline in the art of painting? The main two reasons are the attitude of 'sticking to the old ways' as well as the loss of an independent academic status of art studies. Of course, painting is a skill, but it should also be available at a higher academic level. It does not matter how many achievements the current Eastern style of painting has in the twentieth century. In fact, it is a terrible shame if we cannot surpass our ancestors from thousands of years ago. I

am compelled to draw the following conclusions.

## 主旨与例

### Substance and Examples

凡美之所以感动人心者，决不能离乎人之意想。意深者动深人，意浅者动浅人。以此为注脚，庶下之论断，为有根据。例如，中国画山水，西人视之不美。西方金发碧眼之美人，中国老学究视之不美。刘洪升之歌，谭迷深者不之美。王蒙、倪迂等之画，文人视之美。北碑怪拙，吾人能得其美。上海月份牌，浅人视之美。

Only when not divorced from human feelings and thoughts can art arouse people's consciousness. Art with profound meaning can move people with profound thoughts; art with superficial meaning can only move shallow people. On the basis of this judgment, my following assertion is well-founded. For example, Chinese artists are obsessed with painting landscapes with mountains and rivers, but Western people do not see these paintings as beautiful. Western people have fair hair and blue eyes, but Chinese old pedants do not see these as beautiful traits. Enthusiasts of Tan do not find Liu Hongsheng's songs pleasant. Intellectuals think Wang Meng,<sup>1</sup> Ni Yu<sup>2</sup> and similar artists' paintings are very beautiful.

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<sup>1</sup> 王蒙 Wang Meng (1308 – 1385): Wang Meng's unique style of landscape painting had a profound impact on the historical changes and development of Chinese landscape painting. Most of his landscapes are natural and unrestrained. This was what made some believe he was the most unique of the four "home painting style" painters. He is also seen as the leading character in Yuan dynasty landscape painting. See: Lü Chaonan 吕超楠, "Wangmeng shanshuihua zhong de fanmidu tanxi" 王蒙山水画中的繁密感探析 [Analysis on the Multitude of Wang Meng's Landscape Painting]. *Longdong xueyuan xuebao* 陇东学院学报 05(2018): 135-138.

<sup>2</sup> 倪迂 Ni Yu (1301 – 1374), born 倪瓚 (Ni Zan): a painter from the Yuan dynasty. He was famous for his landscape paintings. His style of stroke, inking and layout style contributed to a "carefree style" advanced by him in his paintings. See: Gao Bo 高波, "Cangyou xujing: nizan fengge jiqi xingcheng" 苍幽虚静——倪瓚风格及其形成 [Grey,

Although the Bei rubbings of the Wei dynasty have an odd and clumsy style, artists like us can feel their beauty.<sup>3</sup> Ordinary laymen can feel the beauty of Shanghai's illustrated calendars.<sup>4</sup>

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Quiet and Emptiness - -Ni Zan's Painting Style]. *Taishan xueyuan xuebao* 泰山学院学报 01 (2017): 31-35.

<sup>3</sup> 北碑, also known as “魏碑”: *Wei* rubbings are the general term used to describe stone inscriptions and the calligraphy of the Northern Wei dynasty as well as the Northern and Southern dynasties, which were similar in style. y. See: Wang Jie 王洁, “Shilun beiwei datong Luoyang de weibe wenhua” 试论北魏大同、洛阳的魏碑文化 [On the Culture of Wei Rubbings of Beiwei Dynasty in Luoyang and Datong]. *Shanxi guangbo dianshi daxue xuebao* 山西广播电视大学学报 03(2009): 98-99.

<sup>4</sup> 上海月份牌 Shanghai Advertising Calendar Posters: Shanghai's century-old calendar art is recognized as the first form of Chinese advertising poster. . During the period of the Republic of China, the artists creating old Shanghai calendar posters were leading fashionable lifestyles along most recent social trends. By creatively borrowing and applying the “calendar” style from Chinese folk pictures, they had incorporated traditional stories and themes of contemporary lifestyle into commercials.. See: Yang Haijun 杨海军, Lian Tinghui 连廷辉. “Minguo shiqi Shanghai yuefenpai guanggao huajiaqun yanjiu” 民国时期上海“月份牌广告”画家群研究 [The study on the artist group of Shanghai calendar advertisement during the period of the republic of China]. *Guanggao daguan* 广告大观 03(2017): 55-61.