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The Analysis of Western Art History Theory and Chinese Landscape Painting

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Abstract: According to James Elkins, all art history belongs to western art, no matter which country or region it comes from. The reason is popular historical art theories and textbooks come from the west as well as the goal and research method.

This essay will first analyse a Chinese paintingwith Erwin Panofsky's argument about three different aspects on appreciating paintings, followed by the thinking about Elkin's introduction. And it will conclude that the western theory is being using by the world successfully, as the non western art will find their own way to appreciate their works.

Keywords: Chinses landscape paintings, iconography, iconology

1. Introduction

James Elkins states that all art history belongs to western art, no matter which country or region it comes from. The reason is popular historical art theories and textbooks come from the west as well as the goal and research method. At the beginning of the development of western art history, the focus was placed on understanding western artworks, and the practice of non-western culture works was seldom considered. Therefore, the feasibility of western art history method on other cultures is doubted. Elkins tends to discuss this question and argues that Chinese landscape painting as a non-western art, is viewed as western art history due to the western method with which it has been analysed and recorded. This essay does not agree with Elkins. The western theory can be used on Chinese landscape painting in a correct and comprehensive method, although there are some mistakes made by the differences in the understanding and translation between the two languages. Moreover, using western art history theory does not mean abandoning the original culture's system. It helps native readers to know their culture from another perspective as well as understanding it in a theoretical way and encourage foreign readers to study this culture in an easier way.

This essay will first analyse one Chinese landscape painting (Shen Zhou's Autumn Colors among Streams and Mountains) with Erwin Panofsky's argument about three different aspects on appreciating paintings, followed by the thinking about Elkin's introduction.

Panofsky introduces an approach about three stages of considering and evaluating paintings, which are useful for readers to appreciate artworks. The first stage, pre-iconographical description, pointing out the primary impressions and ideas of painting. For example, whether the characters are animals or plants, whether the colours are dark or bright. In Shen Zhou's painting, black, white and grey are used to depict mountainous peaks with dense trees and looming houses. In Chinese traditional painting technology, artists do not adopt the western perspective composition method to imitate the natural scenery in reality. At the same time, the painter replaced the waves of the water with large blank spaces to show the surface of the river. The artist added a boat in the lower right corner of the blank and clumps of reed on the riverbank, leaves space for the image and allows readers to imagine such a scene for themselves.

2. Iconography

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The second stage, iconography, explains the stories in the content of paintings to explore some special meaning and symbol of the story. In Autumn Colors among Streams and Mountains, the subject matter is mountains and rivers. To be specific, in ancient Chinese philosophy, the analects of Confucius and Laozi of Taoism both used mountains and rivers to refer to virtuous people, so many scholars wanted to live in nature with mountains and rivers to improve themselves, such as being a person who values not money and power but morality.

In the third stage, iconology, readers are requiring to possess not only the first two stages of individual experiences and scholarship of allusions in context, but also need to know the author's painting style, historical background and the culture of the society at that time it was created. Readers are going to combine them together and then these will be appropriate for an accurate understanding of the painting.

Firstly, the large blank spaces in the author's method of painting, which is a tradition of landscape painting. Artists also do this to give the audience room to imagine, to strengthen resonance and interaction. Shen imitated the previous artist Ni Zan's use of dry brushes to paint mountains to show how trees and grass look on them. Shen combined Ni's style with his own observation of nature to create this unique piece. Secondly, Shen was not successful in the process of becoming an official, which made him tend to live in the quiet nature, away from the complex life of being an official, which made his living environment become beautiful as well as purify his spirtual world, showing his yearning for simple life.

Above all, the theory of western art history can be correctly applied to Chinese landscape painting to some extent, but it requires a wealth of relevant knowledge. As Elkins points out, most of people study in art history are rely on western scholarship, who may find it easy to understand by using the research methods and academic words they are familiar with, but this also leads to some misleading diction.

3. Conclusion

Reading Elkins' article makes me rethink the independent development and existence of Chinese culture as non-western art culture. This is a transformation of thinking methods, which will not erase the characteristics of Chinese culture itself. Although traditional Chinese culture has not been highly prioritised by China, and no systematic local theory has been found, many Chinese scholars are working hard for this purpose. Additionally, a scholar from Taiwan, Li Lin discusses a series of styles of Chinese landscape paintings. In the process of non-western cultural countries to find the best way to appreciate their own works of art, western art history will play a helpful role and become the basis for their development. Because the western theory is already become a complete system and being adopted in the whole world, this benefits scholars in art history. However, the most important thing to pay attention to is getting rid of western theories and forming their own knowledge system.

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