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Modern Exploration and Practice of Chinese Ink Art in the Late 20th Century: A Case Study of Du Dakai

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Abstract

Du Dakai is a representative artist in the field of contemporary Chinese ink. He began to do ink creation in 1990, and it was not until he changed his creative direction at the age of 47, thus starting more than 30 years of artistic innovation. This article sorts out the development and creation of Du Dakai's ink art, mainly from four aspects: artistic source, language innovation, subject broadening, and aesthetic pursuit. The study found that Du Dakai did interdisciplinary work such as decoration, murals and design in his early years, which brought unique formal conception and surface expression techniques to his ink creation. He put forward the three-no principles of "never repeat the ancients, never repeat others, never repeat oneself", which shows that he actively pursues artistic modernity. In addition, he chooses a variety of contents such as countryside, exotic, human body, still life, etc., which broadens the scope of ink painting. Guided by the aesthetic ethos of "depicting ordinary things with an ordinary mind", he bridged the estrangement between traditional Chinese painting and contemporary lived reality. Du Dakai's ink practice offers a referable pathway for the contemporary transformation of Chinese painting: it firmly preserves the cultural essence of ink as a medium while absorbing formal vocabularies of Western modern art with an open vision, pursuing a creative synthesis between tradition and contemporaneity, and between Eastern and Western artistic paradigms.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, Chinese ink painting has undergone an unprecedented wave of artistic transformation. The open social context brought by China's Reform and Opening-up granted Chinese fine arts unprecedented opportunities for development. The influx of Western modern art challenged the linguistic frameworks and aesthetic value judgments of traditional ink painting, while rapidly evolving contemporary life generated new demands for artistic expression. In 1985, *Jiangsu Art Monthly* published Li Xiaoshan's

essay *My Views on Contemporary Chinese Painting*, which bluntly claimed that Chinese painting had reached a "dead end".¹ A claim about the future of Chinese painting did not gain much support. It did push the art world to consider an important question. That question was about the next direction for Chinese painting. This situation marked a turning point for ink painting in China during the 1980s. During this period, many artists took different paths to explore modernization. Their experiments fell into several main categories.

The first major approach was Wu Guanzhong's formal beauty school. Wu focus-

ed on innovations in brush and ink formal language. He adopted Western modern art's composition principles and formal rules. He applied them to ink painting. He reduced the gap between Chinese painting and oil painting. He merged traditional and modern aesthetics. He put forward central concepts. These concepts were formal beauty and abstract beauty. He dedicated himself to "reconstructing brush-and-ink techniques via modern compositional logic", pioneering an ink art language that combines Western formal disciplines with Eastern poetic artistic conception.² The second strand is expressive ink painting, pioneered by Zhou Sicong. Zhou's mid-career stylistic shift ignited transformative innovation in Chinese painting from the late 1970s onward. Her artistic language evolved through three phases: realism, expressionism and lyrical abstraction, as seen across her *Miners series*, *Yi Women* paintings, and late-life lotus works. Her ink works, which "confront universal humanity through individual emotional perception", set a model and offered inspiration for diversified explorations in Chinese painting practice. The third strand consists of modern ink experiments led by Liu Guosong and Zhou Shaohua. Liu Guosong radically reformed traditional ink painting by merging Chinese pictorial conception with modern art; he proposed to "overthrow the dominance of central brush strokes" and invented innovative ink techniques including rubbing ink, water transfer ink and stain ink. Zhou Shaohua's magnum opus *Searching for the Source of Great Rivers* abandoned conventional topographical depictions of classical landscape painting, instead exploring vast, untamed mountains and rivers, which broadened the field's narrow interpretation of cultural tradition. The fourth strand is the exploration of "experimental ink painting" represented by Gu Wenda. As early as the early 1980s, Gu Wenda began to explore new expressive potentials of traditional Chinese ink painting. Pi Daojian systematically defined the cultural values and core issues of experimental ink painting from a theoretical perspective. Gu carried out experimental ink creation by using dislocated and fragmented calligraphic characters. With his subversive fragmented

characters and transformative experimental inkworks, he emerged as a leading figure of the 85 New Art Wave.³

Beyond these well-documented experimental trajectories stands an artist with a uniquely independent creative path: Du Dakai. Unlike the aforementioned artists, who sought reform from within the established conventions of classical Chinese painting, Du Dakai launched his ink painting research in 1990 at the age of 47. Prior to this shift, he accumulated over two decades of cross-disciplinary artistic experience: he worked as a fine art designer for fifteen years at Qingdao Shell Carving Craft Factory; after enrolling at the Central Academy of Arts and Design under the tutelage of Zhu Danian, he participated in creating the mural *Mount Ba and River Shu* for Beijing Capital International Airport, followed by a prolific body of murals and public artworks. His artistic practice spanned diverse mediums: oil painting, watercolor, gouache, heavy color painting, murals, comic strips and illustrations. This interdisciplinary breadth equipped him with a distinctive sensibility for formal composition and block-surface vocabulary when he turned to ink painting, freeing him from the rigid conventions of classical literati painting.

Unlike those artists who seek innovation within the traditional Chinese painting system, Du Dakai has more than 20 years of experience in the creation of arts and crafts and murals. It was not until he was 47 that he officially began to paint ink and walked out on a different creative path. In 2025, the Tsinghua University Art Museum held the "Stable Water Flow Deep-Du Dakai Art Exhibition". The special article of the exhibition completely sorted out the artistic development process of his life.⁴ Zhang Xiaoling, a famous art critic, believes that Du Dakai's profound artistic accumulation makes him open-minded when looking at art and creating. At the same time, he has always had the idea of seeking new things and changing, which makes him happy to explore the unknown fields of art.⁵ In his early years, Du Dakai studied with Pang Xunqi, Zhu Danian, Wu Guanzhong, Yuan Yunfu and others. These teachers all advocated and personally practiced artistic innovation. This kind of inheritance also lays the foundation for

others to change the direction of creation in middle age and devote themselves to ink exploration.

Du Dakai's ink exploration has a notable uniqueness. His methodology does not rely on the internal logic of classical brushwork. He re-examines the medium's potential from a fresh perspective. This perspective is that of an artistic outsider. His self-imposed "Three No-Repetitions" principle embodies a deliberate, self-conscious pursuit of artistic modernity.⁶

He revolutionized ink's formal vocabulary by introducing block-surface structures, breaking the age-old convention of line-dominated composition in traditional ink painting. He expanded ink's thematic range to encompass rural villages, foreign landscapes, human figures and still lifes, and dissolved the rift between Chinese painting and contemporary lived reality via his aesthetic ethos of "depicting ordinary things with an ordinary mind". As the Journal of Nanjing University of the Arts observes, Du Dakai translated his reflections on artistic modernity and his decorative, compositional techniques into novel ink painting forms, successfully carving out an original modern pathway for ink art.⁷ This unique creative transformation has also been affirmed by the study of art history. In his general history of contemporary art, Lu Hong listed Du Dakai as a representative case of ink innovation in the 1990s, and evaluated him in the vein of art development of the whole era.⁸

Therefore, the study of Du Dakai's ink art is of high academic value. His cross-border experience from decorative art to the field of ink is a very special case of interpreting the contemporary transformation of Chinese painting. It is not only different from the integration of Chinese and Western in Wu Guanzhong, but also different from Zhou Sicong's transformation to the direction of expression, as well as the technological innovation carried out by Liu Guosong. Du Dakai's artistic practice shows that it relies on formal composition and design. The feasible

path of thinking to reshape ink language. At the same time, his creation for more than 30 years has always broken through himself, and the vein of artistic development is clear and complete. It also provides a rare research sample for observing how artists can maintain their creative vitality for a long time after changing their creative direction in middle age.

Based on the existing research results, this article systematically sorts out the development and practice of Du Dakai's ink art from the four levels of artistic origin, language innovation, subject expansion and aesthetic character, explains the academic significance of its unique road from decoration to ink, and clarifies the modern transformation of Chinese painting in the late 20th century. The special position and artistic contribution.

1. From craft to ink: Du Dakai's artistic turning point and origin

1.1 Cross-border accumulation: language accumulation of decorative art and mural creation

Du Dakai's art did not start with ink. Before being admitted to the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts, he had been engaged in art design for 15 years in Qingdao Shell Carving Crafts Factory. This experience in arts and crafts has exposed him to the basic problems of visual creation such as formal composition, material characteristics and spatial relationships very early. After that, he studied for a master's degree at the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts, studied from Zhu Danian, and also participated in the painting of the mural *Mount Ba and River Shu* at the Capital International Airport.

In the 1980s, Du produced many murals. These included the heavy color mural *Qu Yuan Nine Songs* from 1980, the large scale mural *Five Thousand Years of Long History* from 1983, and the high temperature matte glaze ceramic mural *Ideal, Will, Pursuit*. He also contributed to landmark public art projects. One was the sculpture *Ever blooming Bauhinia*

from 1997. It was a gift from the central government to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Another was the mural *Ode to China's Millennia* at the China Millennium Monument in Beijing from 1999. These mural and public art projects gave Du strong skills in large scale spatial design. They also helped him organize complex pictorial structures. They taught him to balance material qualities with visual effects.

It is this kind of cross-border practice that lays a special foundation for his subsequent ink exploration. Du Dakai mentioned in his autobiographical description that before he ventured into ink, "I painted oil paintings, gouache watercolors, heavy colors, murals, serial paintings, illustrations, and miscellaneous". This kind of extensive involvement in creation is not a wavering direction of creation, but a conscious choice to actively take the initiative to gain the strengths of others. Drawing on Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse, Cezanne and other impressionist and post-impressionist painters, he established an understanding of the language of modern Western painting; and in the long-term practice of arts and crafts and murals, he developed a keen perception of formal composition and spatial order. These multi-party accumulations together constitute his unique artistic reserve when he turned to ink creation.⁹

Cai Jixuan's special interview comprehensively sorts out Du Dakai's early experiences of sketching and copying, and clearly elaborates the origin of his aesthetic concept of block surfaces.¹⁰ His long-term interdisciplinary creative experience liberated him from the constraints of brush-and-ink formulas in traditional literati painting. He stepped into ink creation with mature design thinking and established a visual system different from that of other painters of his time.

1.2 Mid-career Artistic Transformation: The Initiation of Ink Exploration in 1990

In 1990, at the age of 47, Du Dakai began creating ink paintings. Reflecting on this shift,

he states I started ink painting in 1990, when I was 47-rather late in an artist's life. He offers a profound reflection on this late artistic starting point: "Without sufficient life experience and a thorough comprehension of nature and existence, even if one can perceive mountain light, river hues and misty cloud scapes, one cannot truly penetrate their essence. Chinese painting originates from human ideals; it is reality filtered through idealism. Every emotion and scene demands not merely visual observation, but heartfelt contemplation. This passage points out an important artistic point: ink is not only a technique and medium, but also a spiritual expression that needs to be understood through life experience. Du Dakai turned to ink relatively late. With more than 20 years of life and artistic accumulation, he avoided the problem of some young painters' heavy techniques or empty copying. A large number of cross-media accumulations constitute the intrinsic foundation of his ink innovation. More than 20 years of cross-class creation have laid a deep foundation for his ink innovation. Many existing studies focus on the transformation of the middle year and sort out the internal logic of the transformation of arts and crafts experience into ink language.¹¹

A pivotal historical context also drove Du's shift to ink painting: throughout the 1980s, calls for reforming Chinese painting surged into a widespread artistic tide that enveloped all practicing artists. Stirred by this reformist discourse, Du began contemplating avenues for linguistic innovation in Chinese painting. He observed many artists experimenting with works stripped of traditional dots and lines, yet he chose an alternative trajectory: "At the very beginning of my ink practice, I resolved to pursue linguistic reform not through dots and lines, but through blocks and surfaces." This foundational decision defined the core direction of his ink research for the subsequent thirty-plus years.



Figure 1. Du Dakai. *Huizhou*, Ink and color on paper, 63 cm × 93 cm, China, 2014.

2. Reconstruction of Pictorial Language: Block-surface Structure and the “Three No-Repetitions” Principle

2.1 Introducing Block-surface Language into Ink Painting: Starting from White Walls and Black Tiles of Suzhou

Du Dakai's ink painting journey originated in Suzhou and the surrounding water towns of the Jiangnan region. “I began my ink practice by painting Suzhou. The white walls and black tiles in Suzhou have a strong contrast between black and white. The large and small black and white blocks are staggered in height and rich in change, which is very suitable for painting in the way of blocks.” The distinctive visual characteristics of Suzhou residential houses are just in line with his idea of using blocks to create ink. Tongli, Zhouzhuang, Yingzhi, Shitang and Wuzhen, which are ancient towns in the south of the Yangtze River, have all become the places where he sketched in his

early ink. *Huizhou* (figure 1) is a typical work of his depiction of Jiangnan houses with black and white blocks.

This kind of surface processing technique did not come out of thin air. He painted large-scale murals in his early years and accumulated experience in large-scale picture composition, which helped him establish the flat visual order of the picture. Judging from the picture form, this kind of geometric landscape jumps out of the inherent pattern of traditional brush and ink, with prominent modern aesthetic characteristics.¹²

Du Dakai's painting technique is very distinctive. He first outlined the sparse rhythm of the house with lines, and then used light ink or color blur to draw the layer and spatial sense of the picture, and softened the stiffness of the color block with the trees. He often uses light ink to balance the large-area color, contrasting with the partial bright and white sky, so that the overall picture tone is elegant and steady. This



Figure 2. Du Dakai, *Seventh Impression of Meizhou*, Ink and color on paper, 248 cm × 123 cm, China, 2015.

painting method not only retains the charm of traditional Chinese painting lines, but also combines the spatial and volume expression of Western painting, forming his unique block painting style. Two representative works fully demonstrate this block-surface creation mode. Works such as *Seventh Impression of Meizhou* (figure 2) adopt vertical elongated layouts, decomposing Hakka village buildings through geometric blocks while weakening traditional texture brushstrokes and emphasi-



Figure 3. Du Dakai, *Deep Pond with Reflections*, Ink and color on paper, 250 cm × 237 cm, China, 2012.

zing flat pictorial order. *Deep Pond with Reflections* (figure 3) delivers striking planar contrast between heavy mountain blocks and blank pond space, serving as a typical manifestation of the block-surface approach to ink painting.

This kind of artistic attempt is not only a new technique, but also a new way of looking at the picture. Du Dakai felt that everything in the world could be simplified into basic geometric shapes, and these shapes themselves

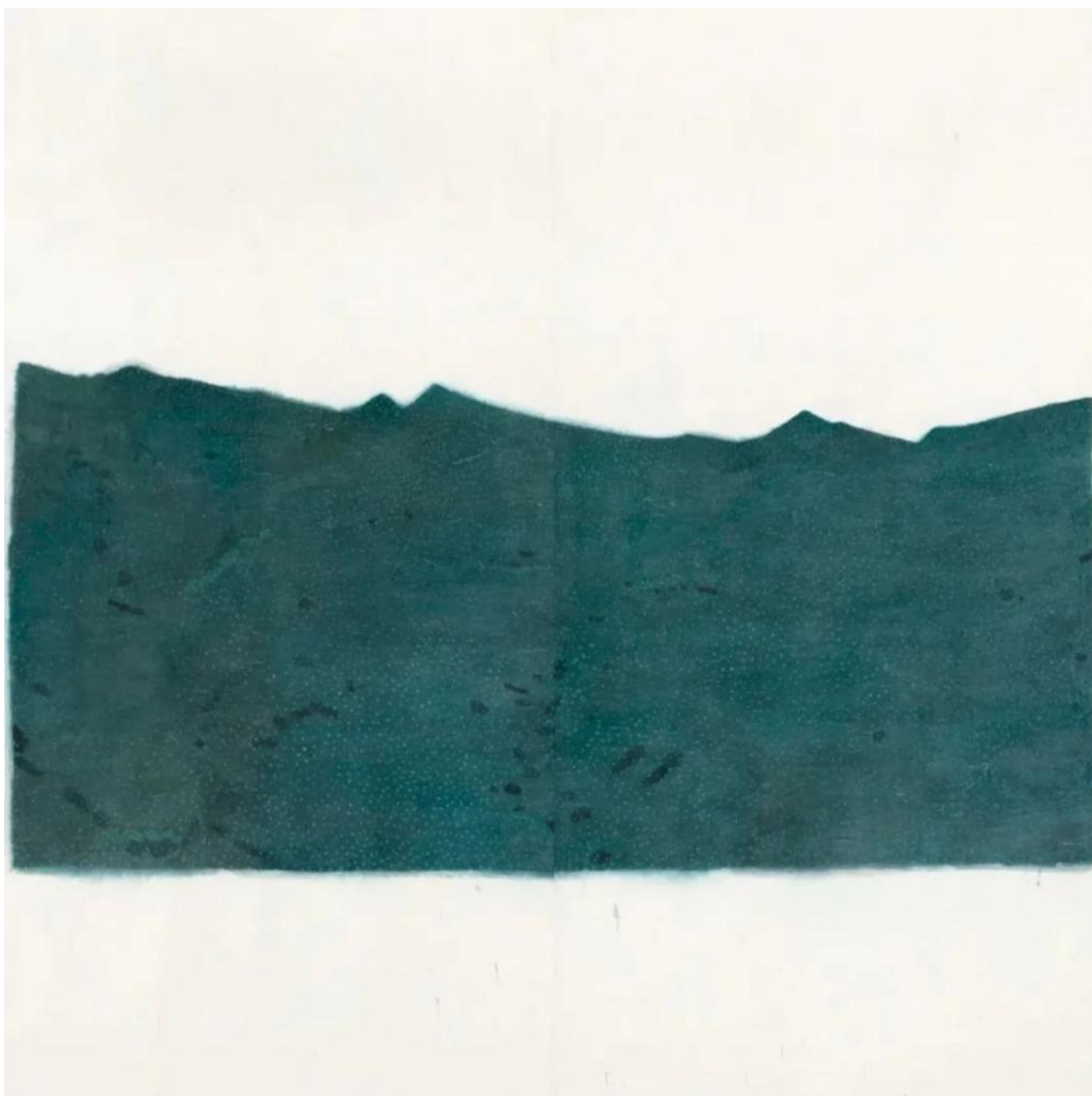


Figure 4. Du Dakai. *Green Mountains Stand Like Screens*, Ink and color on paper, 250 cm × 237 cm, China, 2012.

contained many traditional cultural connotations. The *Green Mountains Stand Like Screens* (figure 4), the composition is very bold. The top and bottom of the picture are left blank, and the middle mountain divides the picture into three parts, simplifying the landscape into a geometric combination. His understanding and reprocessing of the shape is to interpret the pen and ink spirit of traditional landscape in a contemporary way.

2.2 Self-awareness of Innovation: “Never Repeat the Ancients, Never Repeat Others, Never Repeat Oneself”

When Du Dakai started ink creation, he established the famous “three no’s” principle: never repeat the ancients, never repeat others, never repeat oneself, which became the core criterion of his artistic exploration. In his discussion on the language

of Chinese painting, this concept was further expanded, advocating that ink creation should be based on reality and avoid simply copying the traditional model.¹³

“Never repeat the ancients” denotes critical inheritance of tradition rather than uncritical reverence. Du argues that the loose, desolate aesthetic of literati painting is still upheld as the so-called authentic “orthodox tradition”, yet many contemporary works merely replicate classical formulas at the cost of disconnection from lived reality—a practice that runs counter to core contemporary cultural values. He advocates “taking nature and daily life as teachers: maintain an artistic kinship with pre-existing forms from all eras and cultures, yet preserve critical creative distance from them.”

“Never repeat others” demands the pursuit of an independent artistic vocabulary and personal style, rejecting blind conformity to prevailing artistic trends. Du consistently surveys the contemporary art landscape with an inclusive perspective, drawing creative nourishment from all eras and cultures without Eastern-Western bias, while constructing a self-contained artistic theory and creative system of his own.

“Don’t repeat oneself” means constantly seeking new and achieving self-breakthrough. Even though he has formed a mature personal style, Du Dakai still maintains a sober introspection: “Even if it’s my own style, I can’t change it all the time.” It is this never-stop sense of exploration that supports his uninterrupted ink creation for more than 30 years.

2.3 Contemporary Reflections on the Linguistic System of Chinese Painting

Du Dakai is not only a creative practitioner, but also has a strong sense of theoretical reasoning, and has systematically combed and reflected on the language system of Chinese painting. In his opinion, the Chinese painting language system contains five core elements: based on blank space, shaping images with lines, flatness, decorativeness and stylization, and similar and non-similar modeling concepts. These five elements are related to each other and rely on each other.

As for “blank as the background”, he explained: “That is, there is no preset scene,

no specific time and space attributes, and no objects on the picture. In such a blank state, the influence of the line on the vision will be clear and distinct”. Talking about “similar and dissimilar”, he believes that this is the unique artistic wisdom of the Chinese people, taking into account realistic aesthetics and aesthetic ideals.

However, Du Dakai not only interprets tradition, but also cares more about the development problems encountered by Chinese painting. He believes that the main problem of Chinese painting is that it is detached from reality. Ink should not stick to the creative context of the ancients.¹⁴ The times and people’s feelings have changed, and ink should reflect real life. Therefore, it is proposed that “ink should be replaced at any time”. Facing the problem of the integration of China and the West, Du Dakai has an open-mind attitude. He admits that Western painting training can expand the expression ability of Chinese painting, but he always retains Chinese cultural feelings in his heart and believes that his spiritual core is very localized.¹⁵ This open and adherent position makes his artistic exploration combine cultural position, inclusiveness and creative vitality.¹⁶

3.Theme development: diverse creation from rural to exotic

3.1Rural theme: take ordinary daily life as the protagonist of painting

Du Dakai’s major breakthrough in the theme of ink is to change the countryside from the accompaniment of traditional landscape paintings to the main object of painting. In ancient landscape paintings, most villages are hidden among the mountains, forests and trees, which are just the decoration of the scenery. However, the countryside in Du Dakai’s paintings is mostly shown in the middle and near scenes. Even modern houses with ordinary appearances in reality have been given a simple beauty and become a symbol of contemporary rural life.

Du Dakai’s description of the countryside began with his trip to Suzhou in 1990, and has been creating for more than 30 years since then. He said, “I paint the countryside to leave

some memories for myself and history.” In his eyes, the countryside is not only a painting material, but also carries cultural memory and the changes of the times. He once thought that ancient painters rarely depicted the phenomenon of rural areas, and found that except for Shen Zhou and Shi Tao’s occasional involvement, almost no painters specialized in the countryside. Even if ancient painters did not regard the countryside as a forbidden area for creation, they ignored this subject for a long time. This understanding made him more determined to create rural themes, which is not only an expansion of the scope of the subject, but also an adjustment of the value orientation of traditional painting.

The countryside he wrote is not a beautified pastoral scene, but a true reflection of the modern countryside. Houses, factories, walls, telephone poles and other ordinary things are all included in the picture. As curator Zhang Gang said, in the future, rural architecture will gradually disappear in urbanization, and people can still experience the poetry of ordinary life from Du Dakai’s paintings.¹⁷

3.2 Exotic Landscapes: Cultural Dialogue Embodied in Ink Charm

Du Dakai has traveled extensively across Europe, Asia, North and South America. His central artistic challenge has long been determining how to depict foreign regional landscapes with culturally rooted Chinese ink language while retaining the intrinsic lyrical charm of ink painting. After years of experimentation, among contemporary Chinese ink painters depicting foreign vistas, Du alone successfully captures the subtle cultural spirit latent within unfamiliar landscapes.

In series such as *European Streetscapes* and *Ireland*, Du constructs spatial depth through variations in ink saturation, moisture and linear contour, integrating subtle light-shadow effects to amplify volumetric realism. While preserving ink’s distinctive lyrical quality, he accurately captures and conveys the unique cultural temperament embedded within foreign landscapes. Take *Ireland No.1* (figure 5) as an example: the vertical canvas stands nearly 1.4 meters tall, with vast blank white space occupying the upper half and a receding streetscape filling the lower half, creating

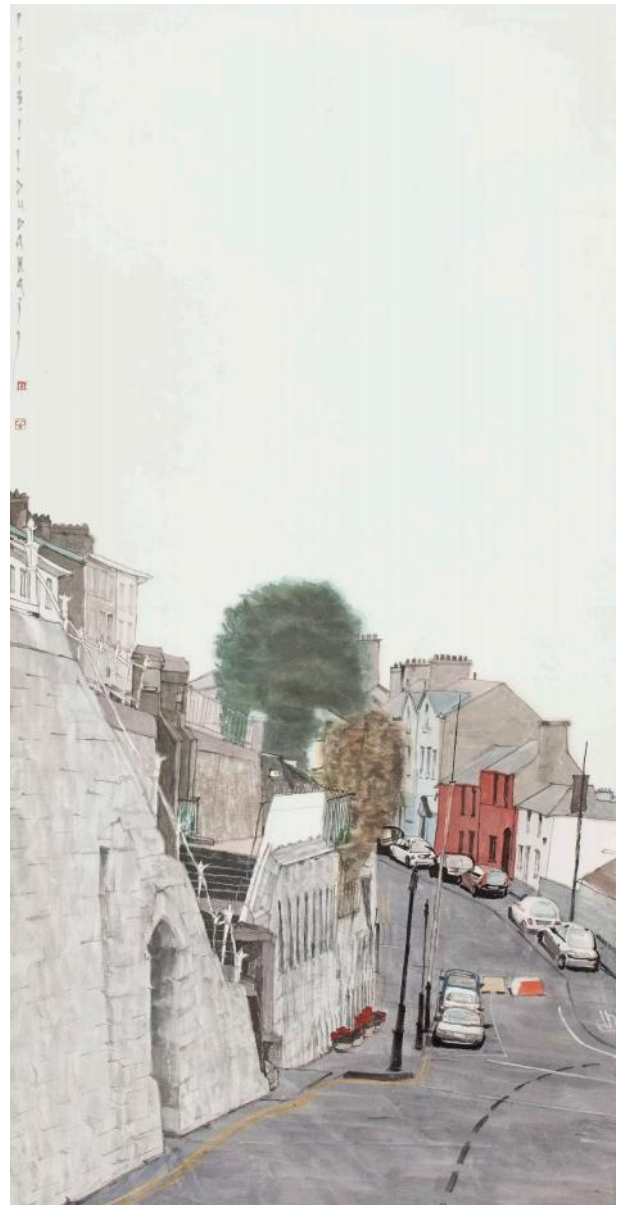


Figure 5. Du Dakai. *Journey to Foreign Lands – Ireland No.1*, Ink and color on paper, 138 cm × 70 cm, China, 2013.

striking formal contrast.

Du Dakai said frankly, “I have always wanted to paint Europe with ink, but I know it’s not easy after practice. Language has an object, which has achieved different forms of art. Europeans paint oil paintings and Chinese paint ink paintings for reasons.” It is precisely because he clearly understands the difference between media characteristics and culture that his exotic theme creation has not become a simple ink landscape postcard, but stands on the visual logic of Chinese ink and reinterprets

his experience of exotic culture.

3.3 Human body and still life: the expansion of a variety of themes

In addition to rural and exotic landscapes, Du Dakai also extended his ink creation to human body, still life, flowers and other themes, forming a rich creative appearance. The “Du Dakai Ink Works Exhibition” held by the Tsinghua University Art Museum in 2017 exhibited various works such as landscapes, human bodies and still lifes.¹⁸

The ink body written by Du Dakai is very distinctive. He appreciates the beauty of a healthy and full human body, prefers plump models, and does not pursue pathological thinness. In a few strokes, the images of women with different postures are vividly presented on the paper. He often only draws the dynamics of the characters or parts of the body, and relies on blanks to arrange the picture. This kind of aesthetics is not only different from the softness and gentleness of traditional maid paintings, but also different from the performance of the human body idealized by Western classics, showing the vigorous vitality of the human body in a simple and fresh way.

In the theme of still life, Du Dakai also has his own characteristics. Pumpkins, coconuts, fruits and vegetables, which are common in life, have become the objects of his paintings. He uses color overlay and white white contrast to break out of the subject restrictions of traditional ink, making ordinary still lifes artistic. In his eyes, fruits and vegetables are like different lives. The differences in the forms of fruits and vegetables correspond to different life situations. It is this kind of thinking that makes his still life not only paint the object itself, but also support his understanding of life.

4. Simplicity and Naivety: Aesthetic Qualities within Du Dakai's Ink Creations

4.1 Aesthetic Stance: Representing Common Objects through a Dispassionate, Unadorned Perspective

Du Dakai's art features a central aesthetic principle. This principle is that one should

depict ordinary things with an ordinary mind. Several scholars have applied the Song dynasty term *pingdan tianzhen*, which means plainness and innocence, to his work. This term was originally used by Mi Fu to describe the paintings of Dong Yuan, a master from the Five Dynasties period. Dong Yuan lived in the Jiangnan region and created soft and elegant landscapes. Du Dakai, however, lives in northern China. His works still achieve a similar gentle subtlety because of his simple and pure treatment of ink as a medium.

Du Dakai once said, “The world seen by drawing eyes is for nothing else, but because of its reality, nothing is more valuable than the truth.” He is good at exploring beauty and interest from ordinary things.¹⁹ The simple houses in the twilight, the messy iron fences on the hills, and even the ashtrays full of cigarette butts, these ordinary things that are not valued in traditional Chinese paintings have become the themes of his paintings, replacing the common themes in the past. *Coconuts* (figure 6) is his representative work of depicting daily objects and exploring the poetry of life.

This kind of aesthetic pursuit is not deliberately new, but comes from internal cultural cognition. Du Dakai proposed that the purity of ink itself has symbolic meaning. If reality is abstracted and rational thinking is biased, it will rise to the expression of ideas. He looks at ordinary things from a peaceful perspective, distills poetry in the ordinary, and really practices the concept that art comes from life.²⁰

4.2 Two characteristics of geometric modeling and image expression

Another obvious feature of Du Dakai's ink is the combination of geometric modeling and artistic expression. Geometric modeling is Du Dakai's understanding and retransformation of traditional landscape brush and ink. It can be seen in many of his works that he feels that all kinds of things in the world can be simplified into simple geometric figures. Moreover, there are traditional cultural connotations and symbolic connotations behind each graphic.

Du also applies the logic of spatial mirroring in his paintings. He often divides the composition along horizontal lines like sea surfaces, lakes, mountain ridges, and horizons.



Figure 6. Du Dakai. *Coconuts*, Ink and color on paper, 63 cm × 93 cm, China, Tsinghua University Art Museum, 2019.

This division creates mirroring or opposing spatial zones within the frame. These zones produce landscape views that reflect one another. Du Dakai's work *Sparse Tree Shadows Upon Clear Blue Water* (figure 7), half of the picture is the reflection of someone blue, and the other half is like a dry lotus and a desert, which can make the viewer have rich associations and let people experience the beauty of the picture in combination with their own state of mind. His paintings are neat and orderly brought by geometric composition, which is also very poetic, and the picture is full of charm.

4.3 Enlightenments for the Contemporary Transformation of Chinese Painting

Du Dakai's ink creation has brought a lot of inspiration to how Chinese paintings can adapt to the current era. He has done decoration, murals and design before. These cross-field experiences make him think that the ideas of ink are different from those of traditional

literati painters, and he uses modern painting techniques such as composition and surface in ink. This observation angle of jumping out of the old circle has also become an important reason for him to break the old painting routine.

His creations also demonstrate how to keep tradition and make changes. Du Dakai has a deep Chinese cultural background in his bones. He has always valued the cultural connotation of ink itself, and also respected the characteristics of painting materials such as pen, ink and paper. At the same time, he is open-minded and draws on the expression of Western modern art to make a new combination between old tradition and reality.

He painted ordinary things in life with a peaceful mind, which brings traditional Chinese painting closer to real life. Countryside scenery, modern buildings, and various daily objects have become the materials for his paintings. Ink is no longer limited to the freehand painting style in ancient times, but is



Figure 7. Du Dakai, *Sparse Tree Shadows Upon Clear Blue Water*, Ink and color on paper, 76 cm × 149 cm, China, 2008.

reconnected with real life.

His artistic pursuit also reflects the idea of taking the initiative to keep up with the times. Du Dakai felt that art must fit the era and reflect the characteristics of the times, so that it can have real meaning and be written into the history of art. It is this way of thinking about art in combination with the times that makes his creation always oriented to reality and not rigid.

Conclusion

Du Dakai's ink creation path is very special, slowly turning from decoration and design to ink. He didn't officially cultivate ink creation until he was 47 years old, bringing all the cross-field experience accumulated in the past 20 years into ink creation. He takes the block structure as his main painting language and adheres to the creative concept of "not focusing on retro people, not repeating others, and not repeating himself". After more than 30 years of continuous exploration, he has formed a unique personal style.

In terms of painting techniques, he used the compositional thinking cultivated by decoration and murals in ink, and used the block effect to break the traditional single painting method of ink relying only on lines. In terms of painting content, he is no longer limited to the three themes of traditional landscapes, flowers and birds, and characters, but boldly adds rural scenery, exotic scenery, human body, still life and other diverse contents, which greatly expands the scope of ink expression. In terms of aesthetic pursuit, he advocates drawing ordinary things with an ordinary mind, so that the ink becomes simple and realistic, close to the life of modern people.

Du Dakai's exploration is of great significance to the contemporary development of Chinese painting. He shows us that traditional Chinese painting is not rigid and fixed, and can completely combine with current life to produce a new face; Chinese and Western art is not antagonistic, and it can completely keep the background of local culture, while absorbing the advantages of the West and making a new integration. As he said, contemporary Chinese art should make its artistic language seen, understood and recognized by the world.

In the process of Chinese art moving towards modernity, Du Dakai has left valuable artistic experience with his own unique creative path. He also told us that real innovation is not to abandon tradition, but to understand tradition, keep up with the times,

and be inclusive and open.

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Editor: Liu Ge

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