THE CONCEPT OF BEAUTY IN PAINTING BY QI BAISHI: MODERN TREATMENTS

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to identify the foundations of the beauty concept in the works by Qi Baishi from the point of view of modern interpretations. The objectives of the article are: to provide a historical overview of the activities by Qi Baishi; to identify the main components of the beauty concept in the artist's works, as well as to verify the theses put forward using a mini-survey for the students. The methodology included among others: methods of art history analysis, content analysis of scientific literature on the research topic, the method of statistical analysis. The research materials were paintings by Qi Baishi in three genres «Mountains and Water», «Flowers and Birds», «Shrimp in Ink», as well as the results of a survey of 3rd year students, studying in the specialty «Painting and Graphics». The main research results are: three main components in the beauty concept by Qi Baishi were identified, the assessment of these components by students was considered, and a generalized concept of beauty in the works by Qi Baishi was formulated on the analysis results.

Keywords: Chinese traditional painting. Taoism. Confucianism. Concept of beauty. Qi Baishi.

RESUMEN

El propósito del estudio es identificar los fundamentos del concepto de belleza en las obras de Qi Baishi desde el punto de vista de las interpretaciones modernas. Los objetivos del artículo son: proporcionar una descripción histórica de las actividades de Qi Baishi; identificar los principales componentes del concepto de belleza en las obras de la artista, así como verificar las tesis planteadas mediante una mini-encuesta a los estudiantes. La metodología incluyó, entre otros: métodos de análisis de historia del arte, análisis de contenido de la literatura científica sobre el tema de investigación, el método de análisis estadístico. Los materiales de investigación fueron pinturas de Qi Baishi en tres géneros «Montañas y Agua», «Flores y Pájaros», «Camaron a Tinta», así como los resultados de una encuesta a estudiantes de 3er año, cursando la especialidad «Pintura y Gráfica ». Los principales resultados de la investigación son: se identificaron tres componentes principales en el concepto de belleza de Qi Baishi, se consideró la evaluación de estos componentes por parte de los estudiantes y se formuló un concepto generalizado de belleza en las obras de Qi Baishi sobre los resultados del análisis.

Palavras-chave: Pintura tradicional china. Taoísmo. Confucianismo. Concepto de belleza. Qi Baishi.
The relevance of the research topic is due to the fact that postmodern tendencies prevail in contemporary art, which increasingly absorb traditional forms and genres (AGANINA, 2018, p.91). Meanwhile, the preservation of traditional artistic heritage is of great importance for understanding different cultures, their identities, their aesthetic roots, as well as concepts of beauty. One of the countries that are making efforts to preserve traditional arts at the state level is China (CHENG et al., 2016, p.157). In this country, there is a huge layer of traditions, including in painting, which have not yet been sufficiently studied in the scientific literature, but, undoubtedly, represent a significant part of the world cultural heritage (BELOZEROVA, 2015, p.4). At the same time, researchers of Chinese traditional painting note that it has deep philosophical and aesthetic foundations (LI et al., 2018, p.213). Traditional Chinese culture is based on three teachings: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, of which Confucianism plays the leading role (BOGADELINA, 2018, p.97). In orthodox Confucianism, its founders, Confucius and Mencius, viewed «humanity» (人性) as the highest spiritual need and explored the relationship between man and society (GE et al., 2020, p.203).

During the reign of the Tang dynasty (唐代), after the reform of the Sixth Patriarch of Ch’an Buddhism, Hui Neng, the practice of Buddhism completely changed (GE et al., 2020, p.204). The Buddhism philosophy is based on the doctrine of «the heart and nature of man», the main idea is that everything reasonable as a product of Buddha and the main emphasis is on achieving enlightenment (RUI, 2020, p.67). Although Taoism as a philosophy is inextricably linked with Taoism as a religion, Taoist philosophy pays much more attention to the explanation of ideas. The founders of Taoism Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu attributed the Tao (Way) to the highest truth (DONCHENKO, 2018, p.48). They considered the relationship between man and nature and put forward the idea of transition to another world. The Taoism aesthetics strives for «naturalness» (自然性) and «truthfulness» (真实性) and differs from the Confucian aesthetics based on Confucian moral norms - etiquette and education (DONCHENKO, 2018, p.49).

A feature of the Taoist science of beauty is the striving for action in a state of «non-action» (不采取行动) as a way for gaining immortality. Taoism opened up a wider space for freethinking, thereby contributing to the art development (WEI, 2020, p.67). The highest beauty is contained in nature, Tao must be perceived as an initial desire to return to nature and naturalness, therefore, the beauty of nature is the essence in Taoist aesthetics (SANAM, 2021, p.356). Speaking about the influence of Taoism on Chinese calligraphy and ink painting, one cannot fail to mention the rewriting of sacred Taoist texts (WEI; LIU, 2015, p.38). In the process of copying canonical texts, calligraphy and Taoist philosophy were closely intertwined and influenced each other. Originally, the sacred Taoist scriptures had to be accurately copied, the copyist of the texts had a perfect control under the brush (SOKOLOV-REMIZOV, 2017, p.594).

However, gradually, under the influence of famous calligraphy scholars and masters, the scribes requirements weakened, it was only necessary to have good calligraphy in order to obtain the right to write texts (SOKOLOV-REMIZOV, 2017, p.595). The main criteria for those wishing to rewrite sacred texts must be strong in calligraphy and be a «learned man» (SOKOLOV-REMIZOV, 2017, p.595). Through the copying process the masters not only improved their calligraphy skills, but also influenced the development of Taoist thought, thereby influencing the evolution of the theory of calligraphy and the creation for calligraphic works and – in the future, for ink paintings development (JUNG, 2019, p.81). One of the brightest representatives of Chinese traditional ink painting and calligraphy is Qi Baishi (1864-1957), famous all over the world. Qi Baishi was from a peasant family, but due to poor health, he could not do hard physical work. He learned woodcarving, and then began to master painting and calligraphy; first independently, studying the “Treatise on Mustard Garden Painting”, then together with teachers - Hu Qingyuan and Wang Kaiyun. When he was 40 years old, he went on a trip to the most picturesque places in China for the first time. At the age of 53, he moved from his village to Beijing, where he soon gained recognition in creative circles (PING, 2015, p.274).

Qi Baishi worked in such genres of painting as «Flowers and birds», «Insects and fish», «Mountains and waters», «Shrimps in Ink». Qi Baishi’s brush is expressive, the coloring of his paintings is bright and vivid, the depicted looks natural, simple and, at the same time, convincing. The ideas of his canvases come from a pure and kind heart. So, the incredible charm of nature, its beauty emanates from fish and shrimps, crabs and insects from the brush by Qi Baishi. The artist wrote in the «se-i» style, which, unlike the «gun-bi» style, focuses not on external similarity, but on conveying the idea, the objects’ essence. His favorite themes were images of shrimp, crabs, fish, frogs, insects and flowers.

Qi Baishi’s favorite style of calligraphy was «Zhuang», in which he relied on samples from the times of Qin and
Han. Qi Baishi is the author of traditional stamps engraved in the «Zhuang» style. In addition, he worked in the «Xinshu» calligraphy. At one time, the artist was a renowned professor at the Central Academy of Arts, Chairman of the Chinese Artists Society. Also, Qi Baishi is author and compiler of a number of literary works on painting, such as «Shrimps in ink». It is generally, it is accepted that Qi Baishi reached his mastery pinnacle precisely in the art of depicting shrimps (LIU et al., 2020, p.87]. An interesting fact is that only at the age of 55-60 the artist turns directly to living objects of nature, proceeding only classical painting. Prior to this period, Qi Bashi worked in the genre of «flowers and birds» only in the «Gunbi» style («careful, diligent brush»).

The great master painted shrimps often and a lot, but, according to the recollections of his contemporaries, the artist was upset that some see in him only masters of the shrimps’ image and nothing more. Once, Qi Baishi made the inscription: «I am already 78 years old, but I often hear people say that I can only draw shrimps. It is so unfair» (ZHI, 2019, p.217). Qi Baishi liked to portray not exotic sea shrimps, but ordinary river shrimps, which in China are called «shrimps with long legs». They are of two types - white and green. In the early period of his work, the artist often painted green, and later he liked to depict white shrimps, since their faded tone requires more sophistication in ink. River shrimp are relatively small in size. The «Little Green Shrimp» leaf (drawing on rice paper), created by an eighty-year-old master, is distinguished by its special grace. Qi Baishi, naturally, based on the shrimp image from the experience of traditional painting. Often, for example, Mink and Qing artists turned to this object, but they interpreted this leitmotif in an ornamental and rigid way. Only Chen Bantsiao, Zhu Da and Li Futang were considered by Qi Baishi were true masters in the art of shrimps depicting. Until the age of sixty, the artist limited himself only to studying samples of classical art, but did not strive for blind copying, tried to creatively rethink the generally accepted norms. On one of his scrolls, Qi Baishi wrote: «Zhu Xue-ge depicts shrimps, but they lack the spirit of antiquity and simplicity» (LIU et al., 2020, p.87).

When Qi Baishi moved to live in Beijing, he had the opportunity to study and observe his «favorite hero» in the rivers, lakes and ponds of the capital parks. Qi Baishi almost every day closely watched shrimps, trying to catch and convey to the originality of their movements, with each other, color changes in different water, the translucency of their bodies, various combinations of angles. In 1922, 5 years after Qi Baishi moved to Beijing, an exhibition of his works was held in Japan for the first time. He was so popular in society that in 1949, Qi Baishi was appointed to many honorary posts: in 1953 he became a Chairman of the Union Of Chinese Artists, and the next year he was elected to the National People’s Congress, the highest legislative body in China. In 1956, Qi Baishi was awarded the International Peace Prize, which was given to scientists and cultural figures for works that contribute to the consolidation of peace (ZHI, 2019, p.216). After his death in 1957, the fame and popularity of Qi Baishi did not subside: now he remains one of the most expensive artists not only in China, but throughout the world. In 2010 his works took 3rd place in the ranking of the best-selling artists after Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol, and in 2017 his work «12 Horizontal Scrolls» was sold at a Beijing auction for a record $ 140 million. He became the first Chinese artist whose work sold for over $ 100 million (WANG, 2015, p.187).

Despite the fairly extensive historiography of the topic, the beauty concept by Qi Baishi has not yet received proper coverage in the scientific literature. Although its individual interpretations are found in works by such authors as: Yinghui Wang, Jing Liu, Wen Hao, Xiaojuan Ning, Zhenghao Shi (2015), Yang Zhi (2019), Xinlu Liu, Yibo Liu, Zhaohui Wei (2020), Xiaomei Ping (2015), Shu Wei, Yiduo Liu (2015), Soonchul Jung, Taewon Choi, Yoon-Seok, Choln-Su, J ang J ae, Woo Kim (2019). At the same time, it is necessary to illuminate modern interpretations of the aesthetic concept more fully by Qi Baishi, since in modern Chinese painting many artists follow the patterns that the great master has developed.
METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research methodology includes the methods of the general scientific group (analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction), as well as methods of art history analysis: historical and logical; analogy method; method of formal comparison. With the help of these methods, four concepts common to all paintings by Qi Baishi were identified, which make up a holistic aesthetic idea. The research materials were 70 paintings written by Qi Baishi in the genres «Flowers and Birds» «Mountains and Water». Based on 30 paintings, the genre «Shrimps in Ink», actually created by Qi Baishi, was also analyzed. In total, the general sample of materials on the research topic was 100 paintings created by the artist and calligrapher Qi Baishi. The following elements are revealed in the works by Qi Baishi:

1. The concept of movement in space, which is associated with Taoism. The beauty of life is perceived through movement, dynamics, which contrasts with statics. This element was identified in 35 paintings in the «Mountains and Water» genre and in 30 paintings in the genre «Shrimp in Ink».

2. The concept of all living beings' equality, their a priori beauty as part of universal existence. This element is also associated with Taoism and is identified in 35 paintings of the «Flowers and Birds» genre and in 30 paintings of the «Shrimp in Ink» genre. In our opinion, these works represent a unique material for art history analysis, since in the paintings of this genre all the components of the concept of beauty are most fully expressed.

3. The concept of content that prevails over form, which is associated with Confucian ideas about the priority of spiritual perfection over bodily perfection. This element was identified in 35 paintings of the «Mountains and Water» genre, 35 paintings in the «Flowers and Birds» genre, and in 30 paintings in the «Shrimps in Ink» genre. In the works of these genres, the main component is movement in space, and in the paintings of the «Flowers and Birds» genre, the artist conveys the movement of birds in space together with a blurred perspective, which creates the effect of a vivid movement of wings.

Thanks to the identified elements, scientific generalizations were made regarding the stylistic expression of the concept of beauty in the works by Qi Baishi, as well as a comparative analysis of the interpretations, which are expressed in the works of contemporary art critics. To verify our theses, we conducted a survey among 3rd year students (150 people), the results of which were processed using the Neural Designer software, a tool for advanced statistical analysis. The study was conducted in February 2021.

RESULTS

In the 100 artist’s paintings, three main concepts were identified related to the implementation of the general beauty concept. At the same time, it was found that the third element - the predominance of content over form - is present in all 100 works, and thus is the dominant, central component in beauty concept by Qi Baishi. The analysis results as a percentage of three elements for three genres are presented in Figure 1.
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Figure 1. The ratio of three concepts of the idea of beauty in paintings by Qi Baishi in different genres (% compiled by the authors).

Source: Search data.

To implement the first concept, movement in space, the artist used specific ways to accentuate spatial information: his paintings, in contrast to the perspective familiar to Western painting, have a dynamic quality and cover a panoramic view of the visual scene (LIAO et al., n.d). These are the works of the artist in the genre «Mountains and Water». In the works of this genre, Qi Baishi used a diffuse perspective, which is a significant difference between Eastern and Western painting, in which the perspective is clearly focused. Qi Baishi never developed the concept of space as a measurable geometric object. On the contrary, it emphasizes the dynamic structure of human relations with the environment, even with the universe, regardless of accurate physical representations or correct imitation of objects. Thus, the artist, creating movement trajectories in scattered perspective, has created a unique conceptual framework of beauty, which is always focused on the aesthetic experience.

The second concept of the equality of all living beings is realized in the artist’s works as a spiritual orientation - to reach high limits of «the unity of heaven and man, the unity of nature and man», as a result - the color of each picture and the original perception of the world are formed. This aspect is especially evident in the examples of paintings of the genre, which was created by Qi Baishi - images of river shrimps in ink. In the formation of this concept in the artist’s works, some researchers see the influence of the ideas of Confucianism (DONCHENKO, 2019, p.47), Taoism (p.48), Zen Buddhism (GE et al., 2020, p.204). We believe that these ideas had a complex influence on the formation of a special spirituality in paintings by Qi Baishi. We can agree with such interpretations by researchers (GE et al., p.207) for the following reasons. Firstly, Confucianism, represented by its representatives Confucius and Meizu, stands for «harmonious consciousness» as the unity of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism (WEIJIA, 2020, p.68).

Secondly, Taoism, as represented by Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, insists that people must transcend the reality of utilitarianism (DONCHENKO, 2019, p.53).

Thirdly, Zen Buddhism claims that people need to understand, perceive this world, its silence and its simplicity (LIU et al., 2017, p.14). The influence of these aesthetic ideas is clearly recorded by Qi Baishi in the «Flowers and Birds» genre, which are dominated by the inner impartial quality of the object and its outer harmonious beauty. The idea of Confucianism reveres the «beauty of harmony» and strives for «the goal, as it should be» (LI et al., 2018, p.212).
The third concept (the content, which prevails over form) is expressed in works by Qi Baishi through the idea of balance and measure. This concept is especially pronounced in his works in the genre of «Shrimps in ink». The aesthetic perception of Confucianism has a feature of «Zhong Yong» (the concept of Chinese philosophy), which in translation means «Middle and unchanging». Thus, Confucianism encourages restraint, opposes excessiveness, insists that «going too far is the same as not reaching» (LIAO et al., n.d).

Confucius personally advocated restraint in emotional expression as well as excessive sadness and joy. This idea is also reflected in Zen Buddhism and is expressed in the concept of «being in the now», which is based on a state of spiritual balance, without sharp emotional changes (DANG et al., 2019, p.14).

In order to test our thesis about the three main components in the concept of beauty in the works by Qi Baishi, we conducted a mini-survey for 3rd year students studying in the specialty «painting and graphics».

The survey involved 150 students (general sample). The students had to evaluate how fully, in percentage terms, the three beauty concepts were implemented in works by Qi Baishi. The results of the survey are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Students’ assessment of the three components ratio of beauty in the works by Qi Baishi (% compiled by the author using the Neural Designer program)

Source: Search data.

As shown in Figure 2, most of the students noted that the implementation of all three concepts is most fully expressed in the paintings of the «Shrimps in ink» genre. At the same time, 25 people out of 150 interviewed students noted that they had an interest in reading textbook «Shrimps in ink» by Qi Baishi. Also, 50 respondents noted that they would like to learn the technique of drawing with ink. This means that the study of the concept of beauty in traditional Chinese painting, using the examples by Qi Baishi’s paintings, can increase the motivation of students to study this direction in painting. We consider this result to be especially significant, since it allows us to conclude that traditional Chinese painting is interesting for students and increases their motivation to learn.

DISCUSSION

The theses of our research are partly confirmed in the works of such authors as Dang et al. (2017) and Soonchul Jung, Taewon Choi, Yoon-Seok, Choi-in-Su, Jang Jae, Woo Kim (2019). These authors state that the pursuit of harmony is a common goal of Chinese and Western aesthetic education, although both also have some
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The goal of harmonious thought of Chinese traditional aesthetic education is harmony between man and nature, man and society, harmony between object and object, harmony of external manifestation. Western mental characteristic is the subject and object of two points, uses judgment, inference to understand the objective world (LIAO et al., n.d.).

Secondly, the role of aesthetic education is played by various philosophical trends. Chinese culture in the aggregate is based on the philosophy of Confucianism, honors the appropriate ethics and morality, customs and foundations. Traditional aesthetic education in China is governed by Confucian aesthetic educational thought. Although Taoist aesthetic education of thought is also one of the important areas of Chinese traditional aesthetic education. But he cannot occupy the main step, and is always in a state of suppression.

The conceptualization of beauty with the help of the ideas of Taoism is considered in their works by such authors as Xiao Mei Ping (2015) and A.I. Donchenko (2019). In particular, in his article A.I. Donchenko confirms our thesis that in the works by Qi Baishi in the genre of «Shrimps in ink» the concept of beauty is expressed to the fullest and includes all three elements (movement, equality and content) to the maximum extent (DONCHENKO, 2019, p.49). The results of the study are also confirmed in the work by Dang Rui, Huijiao Tan, Gang Liu, Nan Wang, Dji Li, who claim that traditional Chinese painting is characterized by significant differences in perspective, focus and implementation of the idea of space (RUI, 2020, p.69).

The development of the «Shrimp in ink» genre is described in the work by Gang Liu, Nan Wang, Rui Dang, Jie Liu, Ye Yuan, who indicated the connection with the ideas of Taoism and Confucianism in the beauty concept implementation in the works by Qi Baishi (LIU et al., 2017, p.18). Some authors in their works argue that the development of calligraphy in China was influenced by the ideas of Zen Buddhism. In particular, this thesis is expressed in the works by such authors as Pin Liao, Chui Hu, Ling Yu (n.d.). This idea is fully confirmed in the results of our research.

The aesthetic form is a historical product of human aesthetic practice. There is a certain commonality between Chinese and Western aesthetic practices, but there are inevitably many internal differences as well. Differences in methods of practice in China and in the West make the Chinese and Western ways of thinking different. Ancient Chinese thinking is characteristic of the unity of heaven and man, mixing of subject and object, attaching great importance to experience, synthesis and common understanding (WANG, 2015, p.188). According to Shu Wei and Yiduo Liu (2015), the goal of the unity of heaven and man is the highest kingdom of life. Therefore, the Chinese pursue ideals and goals, and not a person's striving for understanding nature, social life, but a striving for the unity of the subject and object of feelings and experience, a person's striving for spiritual experience. This focus on discernment determines the way we think. The great influence exerted on the Chinese aesthetic culture makes the Chinese people express, comprehend, accept and appreciate beauty, pay attention to intuition and feelings. According to Xiao Mei Ping, the so-called «restrictions» have become an important feature of ancient Chinese aesthetic works (PING, 2015, p.275).

In the contrary to the Chinese way of thinking, Westerners are abstract thinking, the main characteristics of which are object and object, so that the human spirit and the outside world are opposite. Differences between the two ways of thinking play a potential role in shaping the aesthetic form of China and Western countries. The Western aesthetic form is used in the concept of analysis, the formation of the aesthetic form is divided first, and then strives for the unity of opposites. Generally speaking, the harmonious thought of Chinese traditional aesthetic education is aimed at mutual harmony of subject and object and emphasizes the aesthetic education of society. For thousands of years, the level of culture in the Celestial Empire has been formed, absorbing what is significant from the civilizations of other states, as a result of which much has changed in its form and content, but the main atmosphere remains unchanged and fully affects the ideas and actions of the Chinese themselves. However, due to differences in ideology, morals and way of thinking, regional factor, historical and cultural background, a different aesthetic culture and different methods of art education, as well as the creation of Chinese and Western art works, have formed. In his article S.N. Sokolov-Remizov (2015, p.594) notes that traditional Chinese painting can serve to increase motivation to learn and his opinion is also confirmed by the results of our survey among students. Thus, our results are confirmed by the works of other authors, which suggests the need for a more comprehensive study on the topic of traditional Chinese painting.
The research results allow us to draw the following conclusions. Through the implementation of three concepts in Qi Baishi’s painting, a holistic idea of beauty appears as a state of consciousness that perceives the world in its essence through a variety of forms. Therefore, in the field of attention of the artist were constantly such objects «insignificant» for postmodern Western art, as cicadas, grasshoppers, crabs and shrimps. No one from Western artists has devoted 40 years of his career to depicting shrimp or cicadas. For Qi Baishi, painting is the realization of beauty, and beauty is a daily, every minute spiritual practice that allows to draw the same object for many decades in a row, because, according to Buddhism, there real beauty is eternal (LIAO et al., n.d).

Developing interest in traditional Chinese artistic heritage among students studying painting and drawing increases motivation to study traditional Chinese arts. The theoretical significance of the work lies in the fact that the article examines the little-studied aspects of the concept of beauty in the works of the great Chinese artist Qi Baishi. The article also reveals the leading concepts that determined the general beauty concept on the basis of three philosophical and aesthetic teachings (Taoism, Confucianism and Zen Buddhism). A holistic study of Qi Baishi’s painting in three different genres («Mountains and Water», «Flowers and Birds» and «Shrimp in Ink») in its relationship with the sociocultural and philosophical context makes it possible for the main value dominants in the formation of the author's aesthetic concept of beauty, which is works by Qi Baishi.

The practical significance of the work lies in the fact that the results of the study are important for the subsequent art history and cultural studies of the art of China in the XX century. Research materials can be used for the university courses focused on the study of world art history; as a source study base for research in the field of art history, sociology of art, world art culture. Revealing the regularities of the influence of philosophical and aesthetic traditions on the development of the history of artistic culture can be used in the development of programs on cultural policy, in particular, for the development of special optional courses in Chinese ink painting for students of art history specialties and for students studying in the specialty «painting and graphics».

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