

Writing Emotions: The Convergence and Symbiosis of Calligraphy and Expressionist Printmaking

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Abstract:

In calligraphy and expressionist printmaking, the use of line and the expression of emotion are two of the key elements that make up both art forms. These two elements are also prerequisites for the written language that can be incorporated into expressionist printmaking. This paper will analyse the connection between calligraphy and Expressionist printmaking in terms of reproducing lines and expressing emotions, and will combine literature and case studies to provide an exhaustive analysis of the compatibility and symbiosis between calligraphy and Expressionist printmaking.

Keywords:

Calligraphy, Expressionist Prints; Line, Emotion

1. Introduction

Calligraphy is one of the traditional Chinese arts, a unique form of expression under the influence of the Chinese philosophy of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Expressionist prints originated in Europe after philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bergson re-analyzed the human spiritual world. The two art forms differ in terms of the reasons for their creation, the way they are expressed and the tools used to depict them, and furthermore, this represents a different way of perceiving the world for the Chinese and the Westerners. However, these products of one East and one West share common features in the use of line and the expression of emotion, which is one of the reasons why Expressionist prints were able to be developed after being introduced to China by Lu Xun in the 1930s. The two elements of line and emotional expression can be seen as the link between calligraphy and expressionist printmaking, and offer the possibility of incorporating the language of writing into printmaking, and a new direction for a new form of expressionist printmaking.

2. The Role of “Line” in Calligraphy and Expressionist Printmaking

Line has played an important role in painting since the earliest primitive brushstrokes. While the ancients would draw lines to trace the shape of objects and

thus record hunting scenes, later people began to resign themselves to recording scenes of life with lines and invented writing and painting. In *The Records of Famous Paintings Through the Ages*, the Chinese artist Zhang Yan Yuan (1963, 26-57) of the Tang dynasty suggests that "nothing is not a painting." Leonardo da Vinci (2003) once proposed that "when the sun shines in the sky on a wall, it reflects a shadow, and the line that surrounds this shadow is the first painting in the world." As can be seen, line is an essential constituent element in artwork, and artists need to use it when forming, lining up and outlining.

2.1. The presentation of line in calligraphy

Line is the most fundamental element of the calligraphic language and the main factor in the artistic expression of calligraphy. Calligraphy is written in Chinese characters which is a cultural communication tool made up of a combination of lines, so the process of writing Chinese characters is a continuous process of expressing meaning through lines. As opposed to painting, which depicts the physical beauty of things in a concrete and figurative way, calligraphy conveys the physical beauty of Chinese characters through dots and lines. Chinese characters contain lines of various forms such as dots, vertical lines, horizontal lines, curves, folds, etc. When these lines are combined with the brush, a writing instrument used to write Chinese characters, these lines take on a variety of variations in thickness, size, squareness and roundness with different sizes of brushes and different strengths of strokes, so that each line evolves into a unique form (Xie Jiahui, 2010). Calligraphy is sublimated into art in the process of writing Chinese characters. People create beauty in the using of Chinese characters, gradually turning them from words into symbols, from figurative into abstract, so that the writing of calligraphy forms art. For this reason, calligraphy is also known as the 'art of line' (Li Zehou, 2009). In this way, the display of calligraphy is based on the 'line', and the practice of calligraphy evolves from figurative Chinese characters to abstract symbols, from the art of the word to the art of the line (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The Complete Scroll of Four Stickers on Ancient Poems in Cursive Script, Zhang Xu, partial.

2.2. The presentation of line in expressionist prints

Expressionism was born at the end of the nineteenth century, when Western philosophy saw the emergence of Nietzsche and Bergson, among others, who reassessed the idea of the human spirit, and thus shifted attention from the material world to the spiritual world. It is an enduring style of art that is representative of the Nordic character, the term being a new coinage of German aesthetics popularised by Helvold Walden, editor of Berlin's *Storm* magazine, as opposed to Impressionism (Chang Yong, 2002). The art of Expressionism is close to the art of Dionysus, the god of wine. Nietzsche (2012) divides ancient art into two categories, that of Apollo, the god of the sun, and that of Dionysus, the god of wine. The art of Apollo, the god of

the sun, is the art of external sanity, order, rules and elegance, in line with the European classical art system that valued nature and ideal beauty, while the art of Dionysus, the god of wine, is the art of chaos and madness, representing the impulse of the world's will itself, with a certain universality that originates at the level of the human subconscious. The art style of Expressionism is characterised by vibrant colours, distorted bodies, improvised lines and a spontaneity in the painting process that emphasises spiritual feeling rather than rationalism.

Both Expressionist prints and Expressionist painting are equally significant and have been instrumental in promoting Expressionist painting (Chang Yong, 2002). Printmaking is an art form that is both general and abstract, and the process of replacing the brush with a knife is a process of abstraction from the objective. The basic elements of the language of printmaking are point, line and surface, especially in woodblock and copperplate, where points and lines are organised into surfaces, resulting in different variations of black and white and grey relationships. In Dürer's 'Adam and Eve' (figure 2), for example, the author uses lines exclusively to form the light and dark relationships of the picture. Nevertheless, the young German artists were conscious of the need to liberate the spirit of the subject from the archaic rules of art, so that line and colour were fully liberated, gaining an independent sense of beauty and a new way of expression. The line is extracted from the thing and becomes a separate symbol, the line no longer exists as a contour line and its own artistry is developed, as in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (figure 3).



Figure 2. Adam and Eve, Dürer, 1504.



Figure 3. The Scream, Munch, 1895.

3. The Role of Emotional Expression in Calligraphy and Expressionist Printmaking

Emotional expression is another common denominator in the art of calligraphy and expressionist printmaking. Zong Baihua (1994) suggests, "Turning scenery into sentiment is the correct definition of the combination of reality and imagination in Chinese art." Traditional Chinese painting often uses the creative techniques of 'expressing emotion through scenery' and 'using objects to convey emotion' to express the artist's own emotions, and the art of calligraphy is no exception. Thus, traditional Chinese art never reproduces objective reality, but is an expression of nature or of one's own emotions. In contrast, Western art initially sought a rational and scientific beauty, the perfection of form and objective nature. After Impressionism, though, artists broke with tradition and sought variations in light and shadow. Subsequently, following the influence of scholars such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Expressionist artists began to lean towards the flow of emotion in the way they

expressed themselves, and began to focus on the feelings of the individual human mind.

3.1. Expressiveness in calligraphy

Among the calligraphic arts, running script and cursive script are arts based on Chinese characters but transcending the characters themselves. In both running and cursive writing, the sense of writing freezes the changes of emotion on a two-dimensional plane as it flows through time.

The calligrapher's mentality unfolds with the lines on the plane, long or short, thick or thin, each of which is a reflection of the calligrapher's emotions. Zong Baihua (1987, 124) also said of calligraphy, "Chinese calligraphy is an art that expresses personality and creates mood." The expression of emotion in calligraphy differs from other arts in that it can be divided into two levels: the expression of the process (dynamic) and the presentation of the result (static). The production of calligraphy is a one-time event, with an emphasis on immediacy. This is why the ancients used to say that drunken calligraphy is a way of giving vent to emotions through writing calligraphy. For instance, without the grief of a broken country and a broken family, there would be no Yan Zhenqing's 'Manuscript for the Sacrifice of Nephews'; without the pleasure of leisure, there would be no Wang Xizhi's 'Lanting Preface'. The modern Chinese aesthete Sun Guiting (2007) also refers in his Book of Calligraphy to 'the unbroken heart and hand, forgetting the rules of regularity'. The rhythm of emotion relies on the movement of the line to express itself, and the movement characteristics of the line are closely linked to the subconscious expression of the abstract form.

3.2. Expressiveness in expressionist prints

In comparison to traditional painting styles, Expressionism focuses on the existence of different individual minds and the natural flow of emotions. 'The Bridge Society' is one of the expressionist printmaking groups, which believes that 'painting is the art of expressing emotions on a flat surface' and emphasises the expression of subconscious instincts and the direct expression of emotions. (Changyong, 2002)

The war brought artists to a more profound understanding of human nature and life, for example, the female printmaker Kelehuizen's work shows a unique female sensibility towards mothers and children and an expressive portrayal of suffering such as war and death. The artists of 'the Bridge Society', such as Kirschner, Heckel and Schmitt-Rotruff, believed that "art is never a technique but an instinctive creation." Their works are full of simplified and distorted realities, thus expressing their inner feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Art no longer pursues the perfection of form and the beauty of reality, but rather focuses on the inspiration and perception of the moment and the expression of emotion. As Kandinsky (2003) says in *The Spirit in Art*, the key to a work of art is not its physical appearance, but its 'mood' and 'spiritual atmosphere', and the key to a painting is not the physical eye, but the 'mind's eye'.

4. The Case of the Fusion of Calligraphy and Expressionist Printmaking

As mentioned earlier, the line and emotional element is the link between the art of calligraphy and expressionist printmaking, which requires a process of transfer, and so when drawing drafts, the artists draw in a manner similar to that of cursive calligraphy. It is true that calligraphy has had a widespread influence on Western abstract

representational painting, with European and American artists after the Second World War structuring calligraphy to meet creative demands. The relationship between abstract representational painting and calligraphy has been clearly theorised, with H·H·Arnason (1999) using the terms 'calligraphic style' and 'calligraphic abstraction' in *Modern Western Art* to describe the works loved by some artists. However, the Expressionist prints by Chinese artists have more of a Chinese-style aesthetic rather than a mere appropriation of calligraphic symbols, so in this sub-section only a few Chinese artists' works will be examined as case studies.

4.1. Zao Wou-ki

Zao Wou-ki's printmaking is a blend of his identity and gestures as a Chinese man. In his work, there is a unique abstract pictorial style by drawing on a fusion of Chinese ink and wash, as well as references to Chinese calligraphy. Zao Wou-ki has been fascinated by calligraphy since the age of six. At a young age, Zao Wou-ki understood that calligraphy that could express emotion was true art. In the course of his studies, Zao Wou-ki inherited his teacher Lin Fengmian's teaching idea of 'painting and calligraphy from the same source' (Lin Fengmian, 2014), viewing ancient pictographs as primitive abstract art and transforming the characters, human, animal and thunder patterns on Shang and Zhou bronzes into pictorial and visual creative symbols. H·H·Arnason (1999, 574) has commented that "Zao Wou-ki is an artist who uses the effect of light and shadow, but it is an entirely different but effect: the myriad tiny lines are reminiscent of, and often derived from, Chinese calligraphy." He cleverly introduces the imposing beauty of calligraphy into his prints through 'writing', the combination of large and small strokes reflecting his various moods at the time of creation. In *Tree of Life* (figure 4), as an example, Zao Wou-ki depicts the trees in a direct 'writing' style, using small brush strokes for the details and a cursive-like sense of movement. A combination of simple colours and dancing lines, the undulating and turning brushwork of calligraphy and the image of a tree in his works gives his works a unique sense of rhythm, no longer programmatic and prescriptive as in traditional printmaking, but revealing the beauty of rhythm and imagery in Chinese painting.



Figure 4. *The Tree of Life*, Zao Wou-ki, 1988.

4.2. A Ge

A Ge is one of the leading female artists in contemporary Chinese printmaking. She is rooted in classical Chinese culture and is constantly exploring forms of expression that suit the local Chinese consciousness. She has incorporated the aesthetic qualities of traditional Chinese painting into her prints, expressing her love. During a research trip to Europe in 1996, A Ge absorbed a wealth of knowledge from the Western art

world, but it also made her aware of the importance of national consciousness, and she was determined to draw from traditional Chinese art. for the Yi people and highlighting her national consciousness and ethnic identity. As Rembrandt (1983) says: "We live in Holland and we take our inspiration from what is familiar in our country, rather than looking for something from thousands of miles away." Since then, A Ge has brought calligraphic lines into her printmaking. Instead of sticking to fine carving, she incorporates her love for her nation and country into her creations, bringing together the mood and rhythm of the images and the expression of her emotions in the lines. In 'Spring Stepping' (figure 5), for example, the whole painting is made up of lines, each seemingly free and fluid, but drawn on by the artist after much deliberation. The sharp lines do not lose their expressive power because of the sharpness of the carving knife; on the contrary, they bring out the simplicity of the language of the prints, giving the images a sense of ethnicity and modernity. When we look back at Zhang Xu's cursive script (figure 1), we find similarities with A Ge's prints, where the lines are sometimes sharp, sometimes slow, sometimes long, sometimes short, and they intersperse to form the gentle Yi girl in the picture.



Figure 5. Stepping Out in Spring, A Ge, 2000.

4.3. Xu Zhongou

Xu Zhongou's woodcut prints are guided by the spirit of Chinese imagery aesthetics. He is committed to the heritage and transformation of Chinese imagery aesthetics in his work, and has made it his historical mission and responsibility to promote the development of modern Chinese art and culture. Carving and writing are two important elements in his work. Xu Zhongou uses a knife instead of a brush, moving the elements of bone, strength, rhythm, chapter and brushwork of calligraphy into black and white woodcuts, thus creating a new language of printmaking. This new language is a combination of traditional Chinese calligraphy and Western engraving techniques, a modernisation of traditional Chinese culture and art. Qi Baishi (2021) once stated that "painting is wonderful when it is between likeness and unlikeness; too much likeness is flattering, unlikeness is deceiving the world." Xu Zhongou's abstraction of visual objects places his prints between the likeness and the unlikeness, leaving the viewer with space to imagine. The element of line is an essential element in both calligraphic and printmaking art, and Xu Zhongou juxtaposes and reconstructs curves and straight lines through writing and expresses them through engraving, as in *Man-Made City - Building Market* (figure 6). "The 'city' and the 'internet' are real and virtual living spaces in contemporary life, and Xu Zhongou uses them as elements to declare the contemporaneity of printmaking (Yuan Lu, 2019). The lines of the handwriting are rendered through the carving of the knife, which gives the work a sense of continuity and staccato of the writing, as well as a sense of the knife marks made by the knife. At the same time, the horizontal and vertical interlacing, the lines

build up the urban scene of a modern building. Kandinsky (2017) suggests in *Point, Line and Surface* that "the line is the trajectory of the point in motion." and "The tension of the straight line, in its simplest form, reveals infinite movement potential." Lin Yutang (2010) also described: "Calligraphy is a symbol of speed and power, and dynamic beauty is at the heart of the art of calligraphy; dynamic characters give life to the whole piece." In Xu Zhongou's work, the sense of movement in the calligraphic lines reflects the busy, tense and fast-moving speed of modernity in the city, while at the same time suggesting the modernisation of China's development process.

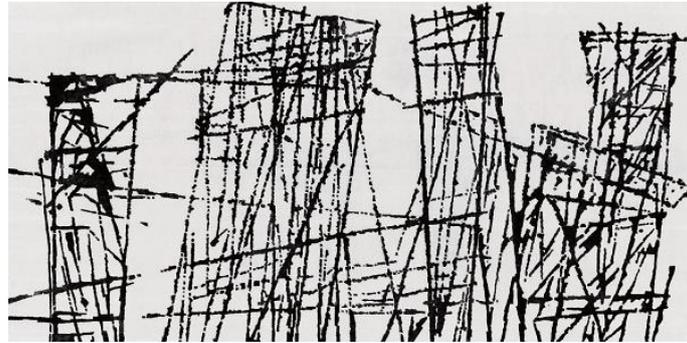


Figure 6. Man-made City - Property Market, Xu Zhongou, 2011.

The above-mentioned Chinese artists have used their unique strengths to incorporate Chinese calligraphy into their printmaking, transforming the brushwork and chapters of calligraphy into the knife and layout of printmaking, finding the best match between the 'brushwork' and the 'taste of printmaking' in the 'translation' of the knife to the brushwork. Post-World War II European and American abstract art did receive the influence of Chinese calligraphy, as Hector Reed (2015) says in *A Brief History of Modern Painting*: "A new movement of painting rose, one that was at least partly directly inspired by Chinese calligraphy. The full quality of beauty exists in a beautifully written character form." This is reflected in the work of artists such as Tapiés, Franz Kran and others, who draw abstract symbols through writing. Tapiés (1998) also argues that "artists who grew up around the various schools of abstract expression in particular, thanks to Chinese calligraphers, understood this language of emotion that comes about through the way they move their brushes." However, they only use writing to construct their abstract symbols, tending more towards abstract expression rather than applying a sense of writing to the depiction of concrete things.

5. Conclusions

The two elements of line and emotional expression are the link between calligraphic art and expressionist printmaking, and the bridge between Eastern and Western art. This paper illustrates the relationship between calligraphy and expressionist printmaking through an analysis of both line and emotional expression. In addition, the works of three Chinese artists are cited to demonstrate that the language of calligraphy can harmoniously coexist with expressionist printmaking and to broaden the language that printmaking is meant to have. At the same time, we hope to inspire more young artists to build on their own national characteristics and to find inspiration from tradition in order to highlight their own national characteristics and identity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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